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When Anti-Semitism Bowed to Sportsmanship

RUBINSTEIN AND THE CZAR'S POLICEMEN

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Résumé

Louis Rubinstein fut envoyé en Russie par le Canada pour représenter ce pays au championnat international de patinage qui devait se tenir à St. Petersbourg en Russie.

Lorsqu'il se rendit en Russie, il fut aux prises avec les autorités policières de Russie qui lui intimèrent l'ordre de quitter St. Pétersbourg immédiatement. L. Rubinstein déclara qu'en tant que représentant de son pays, il avait fait un long trajet pour disputer ce championnat et qu'il resterait donc jusqu'à la fin du championnat. En butte aux harcèlements répétés de la police d'U.R.S.S. L. Rubinstein eut recours à l'ambassadeur de Grande-Bretagne pour trouver l'assurance et l'immunité diplomatiques qu'il obtint étant sujet britannique.

Lorsque la police le convoqua à nouveau, elle lui remit son passeport mais barra la mention "sujet britannique" la remplaçant par "*L. Rubinstein Juif*", il sourit, empocha son passeport et disputa le championnat. Consacré à la fin des épreuves sportives champion international ayant soulevé l'admiration de tous, (Czar, police et autres personnalités) il se vit décerner une médaille du mérite par ses 3 juges accompagnés de l'ambassadeur de Grande-Bretagne, mais il se saisit de cette occasion pour déclarer ce qui suit: "J'attends le jour où des *L. Rubinstein Juifs* se verront accorder le droit d'accéder à des rencontres sportives en toute liberté. Alors, seulement nous montrerons ce que nous, *Juifs*

sommes capables de faire.” Cette réflexion de L. Rubinstein s’adressait surtout aux juges présents avec l’Ambassadeur qui lui avait déclaré que malgré l’immunité diplomatique dont il jouissait, il se faisait peu d’illusions sur la possibilité qu’aurait L. Rubinstein de disputer ce championnat.

Montreal of the 1880’s was very proud of its great figure-skating champion, Louis Rubinstein. Born in Montreal in 1861, Rubinstein participated in his first competition at the age of eighteen when he skated off to the championship of Montreal.

From that achievement he moved on to the Canadian championship in 1882 and to North American victory in 1885. Competing with such steady success, Louis Rubinstein sailed for Europe in January, 1890 to compete in the international tournament at St. Petersburg, Russia.

On his arrival, however, he encountered considerable difficulty. He was a Jew and unwelcome in Czarist Russia. When Rubinstein was summoned to police headquarters one of the members of the skating competition committee accompanied him. He explained that Rubinstein had come to Russia to compete in the international tournament. At this point the interpreter was ordered out of the room and a high Russian police official proceeded to question the Canadian skater in English.

“You are a Jew?”

“Yes,” Rubinstein replied, “and proud of it!”

“And what is your purpose here in Russia?”

“You know as well as I,” Rubinstein said sharply. “I’m here as a sportsman to represent Canada. I ask you to return my passport immediately.”

“Well, now, we’ll see about that, Mr. Rubinstein,” fumed the official. “For the time being you may go.”

Louis Rubinstein left police headquarters very much disturbed. Was this the treatment he should have expected when the Russian tournament officials invited him to compete? Surely the Russian authorities would set the matter right.

For the next two days Rubinstein practiced for the competition ahead. But on the second day, as he was getting the feel of the rink, he was hailed from the ice and summoned to police headquarters. Once again he was put through the Russian interrogation routine.

“Mr. Rubinstein you are hereby given twenty-four hours to get out of St. Petersburg,” the official said sharply. “This is final.”

“It is not final,” Rubinstein retorted. “I’ve come a long distance from Montreal. Furthermore, I am a British subject and I expect to be treated properly. I shall not leave St. Petersburg unless I’m carried bodily out of your city!”

Immediately Rubinstein made his way to the British Embassy where he was warmly received by Sir Robert Morier, the Ambassador. Rubinstein told Sir Robert what had happened and was told by the Ambassador that “a British subject, whether Jew or Gentile, who comes to Russia to take part in an international match will be allowed to stay. And if the British Embassy has even slight influence at the Czar’s court you will stay here, Mr. Rubinstein, until you compete.”

Rubinstein felt reassured as he left the British Embassy with a special letter of commendation and identification from the Ambassador. Now let the Russian police come after him. Another two days passed and Rubinstein went on with his skating practice. Then shortly after midnight of the third night Rubinstein was routed from his bed by two Russian policemen. Given a few minutes to dress, the riled Montreal sportsman was hustled off once more to St. Petersburg Police headquarters — for the third time.

Brought before an arrogant Russian official, Rubinstein was again questioned. Once more he stated his purpose in St. Petersburg. He was here to compete in the skating tournament. He then presented for the official’s consideration the letter of the British Ambassador.

“Well, you of noble birth,” said the official sarcastically in his halting English, “you are obviously under honorable protection and I congratulate you on your good fortune. But let it be clearly understood, Mr. Rubinstein. You are to get out of Russia immediately after the tournament’s close. Do we understand each other.”

“I do not wish to prolong my stay by one moment,” Rubinstein fired back in reply. “Let me get through with the tournament and I shall bid you a quick farewell.”

“The Russian official smiled with pleasure at Rubenstein’s discomfiture. Then taking from his desk the passport which had been taken from Rubinstein on his first appearance before the police, the official crossed out the words “British Subject” replacing it with the words, “L. Rubenstein, Jew.”

“You do me great honor,” Rubinstein said as he took the passport back. “And I in turn will show you and all your bigots just what L. Rubinstein, Jew, can do!”

Rubinstein participated in the figure-skating contests of the next several days, winning medal after medal in competition against representatives of Austria, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Russia and other countries.

Members of the Czar's household together with many high officials marvelled at Rubinstein's graceful artistry on the ice. He executed with grand precision his figure-eights, and his threes and rolls brought down appreciated applause. The judges were thoroughly impressed. Rubinstein was without a doubt a master performer.

Later in the afternoon on the final day of the tournament Rubinstein sat in a little wooden hut on the edge of the St. Petersburg open-air skating rink. Tomorrow he would leave the Czar's benighted domain and be a free Canadian once again. He wondered how he had managed so well when his nerves were jarred by the miserable treatment accorded him. But tomorrow he would be a free man, he consoled himself.

There was a knock on the door. In walked Sir Robert Morier accompanied by the three judges. Rubinstein rose to welcome them.

"Well, Rubenstein," said the British Ambassador, smiling, "I confess that I was beginning to doubt seriously that you were going to get a square show! I am delighted to inform you that you have gotten just that."

Each of the judges stepped forward one by one and pinned another medal on the flustered Rubinstein's jacket. The judges stepped back.

"Mr. Ambassador," spoke the new international champion with a tremor to in his voice, "would you tell these gentlemen that I thank them and that I look forward to the day when L. Rubinstein, Jew, and all his fellow Jews will be given a 'square show' in St. Petersburg and in all of Russia." Rubinstein paused. Then, looking wistfully at the medals he said to the Ambassador, "Your Excellency, when that day comes we'll give them our very best, too."