

# Fencing with death

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*Here's another article from my time as a journalist in Belgium, about an incident from World War Two. It was first published in January 2005 in the Brussels-based magazine The Bulletin.*

## Point of honour

In the midst of World War Two, an Olympic fencing champion faced down one of the Third Reich's most notorious figures in a bizarre duel of wits, as Jeremy Duns reports.

Of all the stories of heroism in World War Two, one of the strangest is that of Paul Anspach, the fencing champion who defied the Third Reich on a matter of principle.

Anspach was born in Brussels on April 1, 1882, of good stock: his uncle had been mayor of the city and his grandfather governor of the national bank. Paul, who qualified as a lawyer, was a keen footballer and tennis player until he discovered the sport that would dominate his life: fencing. After becoming national champion, the 26-year-old travelled to London for the 1908 Olympics, where his team won bronze. But it was at the Stockholm Games in 1912 that he secured his place in fencing history, winning gold medals in both the individual and team épée events.

Some fencing nations had not taken part in the Stockholm Games, because they applied slightly differing rules. Anspach (pictured below, third from left, with team-mates at a later Olympics) realised that for the sport to progress, it needed its own governing body: the fact that he was the best épée fencer in the world and spoke fluent French, German and English helped him make contacts across the continent, and in 1914 he became Secretary General of the newly-formed International Fencing Federation (FIE). Five years later, he and the Marquis de Chasseloup-Laubat set down the rules of the sport – their [document](#) remains the basis for all competitive fencing today.



Anspach competed in a further two Olympics, winning silvers in both, before deciding to concentrate on his law career and the administrative side of the sport. He rented a house in Brussels' Rue de la Victoire

and moved in with his second wife and their six children. In 1939, he was elected president of the FIE for a second time: his tenure was due to run until the end of 1940, but the war suspended the organisation's operations.

On May 27, 1940, Belgium surrendered to the Nazis. In the preceding days, several Germans had been murdered near Brussels, and the occupiers rounded up suspects, including Anspach, who was a military prosecutor. He was imprisoned for a week, and cleared of any involvement in the murders. However, his position as head of the FIE was noted and included in the report sent to Nazi Party headquarters in Berlin.

The report reached Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich. Head of the Sicherheitsdienst, the internal security section of the SS, Heydrich was widely considered Hitler's likely successor. He had won the Iron Cross for 60 flying missions, and was a brilliant swimmer, sailor, tennis-player, equestrian and concert-level violinist.



His greatest passion, however, was fencing. With its carefully controlled violence, elegant costumes and rigid code of honour, the sport appealed to many Nazis and fascists: Benito Mussolini and Oswald Mosley were also fanatical about it. Heydrich (pictured, top, at an SS fencing meet in 1939) was an outstanding saber fencer – but not quite good enough to make the German Olympic team, despite several attempts. When he realised he would not succeed at the highest level as an athlete, he turned his attention to the governing of the sport. As war raged across Europe, Heydrich was spending much of his time finagling to become president of the German Fencing Association. When he read the report on

Anspach, he saw the chance to grab a greater prize – and made his first move. He sent the Gestapo back to Rue de la Victoire.

The only person in the house was the nanny, Edith Neufeld: Anspach's wife, Marguerite, was visiting her mother in Aachen and the children were at school. Neufeld was a 22-year-old half-Jewish German who had fled Berlin for Brussels in 1937. "There were three or four of them," she says. "They were in plain clothes, but I recognised them from when they had arrested Monsieur Anspach the week before. Gestapo. They said they needed everything in the house to do with fencing. What could I do? They went into his study and took everything. Then they left.

As president of the FIE, Anspach was keeper of all the organisation's records, archives and diplomas. The entire collection was now transported to Berlin. On hearing of the theft, Anspach, still in prison, immediately wrote a letter to Hans von Tschammer und Osten, the Reich's sports minister, to demand that the files be returned. Von Tschammer und Osten sent a reassuring reply – but nothing happened.

In December, Heydrich achieved his ambition and became head of the German Fencing Association. This prompted his next move, which was to send the Gestapo back to Anspach, requesting that he come to Berlin. "His friends warned him not to accept any cigarettes Heydrich offered him," says Neufeld. "In case they were poisoned.

Anspach arrived in the German capital in the first week of February, 1941. He took a hamper to Neufeld's mother, who still lived in the city, and she drove him to the Kaiserhof, a luxury hotel that the Nazis were using as a base.

Anspach and Heydrich's meeting lasted several hours. The German argued that Berlin was a better home for the federation's documents, as the city was the communications centre of Europe, and pointed out that Anspach's tenure as president of the FIE should theoretically have expired two months previously. The Belgian replied that the federation's activities were in suspension because of the war, and that he would remain the leader until it was over, after which a new leader could be appointed. Heydrich parried by suggesting that Anspach do the decent thing and hand over the reins to him.

Not many people would dare say no to the Obergruppenführer's 'invitation', but Anspach did just that, and for good measure reiterated that the organisation's archives should be returned to him. Although Heydrich was one of the most powerful men in the Third Reich and could easily have had Anspach either imprisoned or executed, he agreed to let the Belgian return to Brussels, on the condition that he was accompanied by two SS officers. Why Heydrich did this is a mystery, but perhaps he was saving harsher measures as a last resort: if he could 'honourably' take over the fencing world, so much the better.

On February 17, one of the SS officers turned up at Anspach's house in Brussels, armed with a letter stating that he would relinquish his presidency of the FIE to Heydrich, and asking him to sign it. Anspach asked the SS officer for 24 hours to consider his reply. The next day, he wrote an extraordinary letter that is now in the Fencing Museum in Brussels. "As I am mandated by thirty-seven national fencing federations," Anspach wrote, "nothing can permit me to abdicate my powers to one affiliate."

Heydrich immediately counter-attacked, inviting the head of the Italian federation, Giulio Basletta, to Berlin. At a gala dinner on March 6, 1941, Heydrich told Basletta he thought it was time they took over the running of the FIE. In a letter written to FIE members after the war, Basletta claimed that he tried to counter Heydrich's proposal, but that his German had been too weak.

Heydrich then wrote to Anspach. "I agree with Giulio Basletta," he wrote, "that during the war it is I and he who will protect the FIE's interests. The question of the next presidency can be resolved after the war."

But once again, Anspach refused to give up his post, and cleverly used Heydrich's argument against him, pointing out that as he did not have any of the official documents of the federation, he was hardly in a position to hand over the reins. Heydrich did not reply, perhaps because he had more pressing matters to attend to: a month later, Hermann Goering authorised him to make preparations for the implementation of the 'final solution to the Jewish question'. Heydrich was responsible for everything from the mobile death squads to the transport of Jews to the camps. Ten months later, his car was ambushed by Czech agents in Prague, and he was assassinated.

After the war, Anspach bought the house in Rue de la Victoire, divorced Marguerite and married Edith Neufeld. She was 35 years younger than him, "but it never felt like that," she says. "We grew close as a result of what happened during the war. It's true that he could be sharp, but he never was with me. He was only ever kind."

Anspach tried to recover the federation's archives, but the building they were housed in had been burned to the ground during the war. He was re-elected president of the FIE, a post he held until 1948, and the organisation awarded him its highest honour, the Challenge Chevalier Feyerick, for 'defending the interest and prestige of the FIE during the war'. A servant stole his gold medal for the team épée, but the individual gold, his other Olympic medals and all his certificates are intact. Later on, Anspach became an Olympic referee, and at the age of 90 attended the 1972 Munich Olympics. He died, five months short of his 100th birthday, in 1981.

"He rarely spoke about what happened between himself and Heydrich," says Pierre Raes, curator of Brussels' fencing museum. "I think because he found it tragic that someone in the higher echelons of the fencing world was so dishonourable."

"It's very difficult to outlive him by so many years," says Edith Anspach, who inherited the house in Rue de la Victoire and is now 87 years old. "But he was an extraordinary man, and I have some magnificent memories."

Paul Anspach *was* an extraordinary man: in the most surreal but frightening contest of his life, he held his head high – and did his sport proud.

*With thanks to Edith Anspach and Pierre Raes.*

POSTED BY JEREMY DUNS