

# *What is a Sokol “Slet”?*

*Reprinted from “The Sokols and Their Endeavor” by Charles Bednar and Paul Sivak, 1948*

“The Slet are milestones in the life of the Sokol movement. They are periodic gymnastics festivals, surveys of what has been accomplished in the past working period and demonstrations of individual and collective achievement in the field of physical culture. To the Sokols, they are as significant as the Olympic games were to the ancient Hellenes.

The Slets are organized on a regional, national and international scale. The most significant and the most famous, however, are the international Sokol Slets, held every six years at Praha, Czechoslovakia (Prague, Czech Republic). The first slet was held in 1882, in celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Sokol organization, and was presided over and directed by Dr. Miroslav Tyrš. Every subsequent Slet reflected the amazing growth of the movement and the spreading of the Sokol idea far beyond the national frontiers of Czechoslovakia. This constant progress is probably best documented by the growing numbers of gymnasts participating in the various Slet events and in the growing number of countries represented. While the first Slet in 1882 was, more or less, a local affair with 720 gymnasts taking active part, the tenth Slet, held in 1938, was a significant international affair, with more than 250,000 gymnasts participating actively in the gymnastics displays – among them Sokols from all over the world. Transcending all man-made barriers – national, social and political – the Sokol Slets have become manifestations for international understanding and brotherhood.

No other aspect of the work of the Sokols could convey more clearly and effectively the substance of their endeavor than the magnificent display of mass calisthenics. Through symbolic mass movements, all classes of gymnasts – the children, junior and senior boys and girls, men and women – before thousands upon thousands of spectators demonstrate here the meaning of the Sokol idea of democratic gymnastic training. These mass calisthenics, in which thousands or even tens of thousands of gymnasts take part simultaneously, are true works of art; they are symphonies of movement, color, and rhythm, odes of joy of life and happiness. It is practically impossible to describe their effect upon the spectators, and to capture the enthusiasm and the spirit prevailing at the stadium during their performances.

The inspiring and deeply moving effect of well performed mass exercises is the product of thorough preparation, of countless hours of practice, of a will to succeed and not to be deterred by temporary lack of success. It is a product of free men united by a common ideal, who voluntarily subordinate part of their personal wishes and desires to the good of the whole. Regimentation could not produce such harmony; fear could not produce such inspiration.

The American Sokols not only participate in the international Sokol slets in Praha, Czechoslovakia but, organized in the American Sokol alliance, hold their national festivals every four years, usually in the city of Chicago. In addition to these national festivals, the individual organizations forming the Alliance – such as Slovak Gymnastics Union Sokol and the American Sokol Union – hold their own Slets every year in the center of the several Sokol districts.

It is at these Slets that the Sokols give a full account of themselves. It is at these Slets that the American public can best get acquainted with the nature of the work the Sokols are doing in the interest of their members, their communities and their nation.”