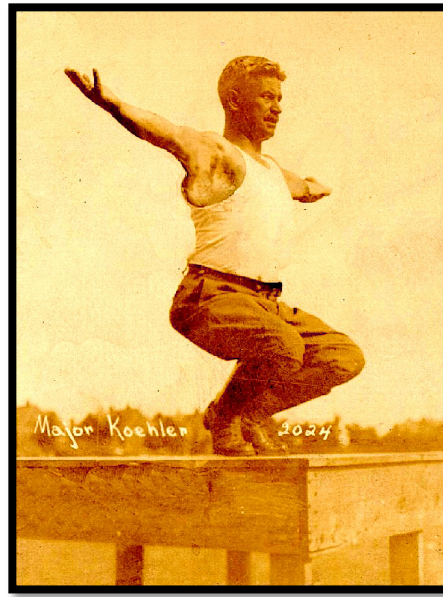
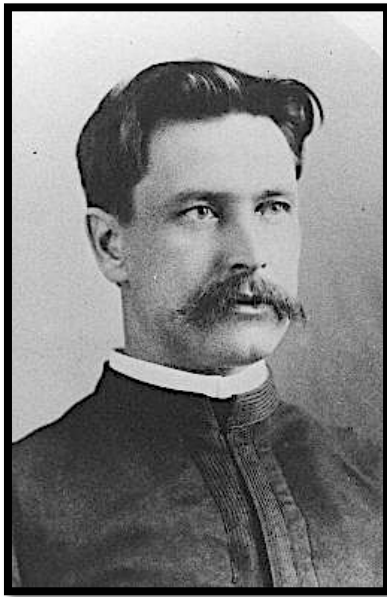


# A Conversation With LTC Herman J. Koehler & His Friends

By Ed Thomas, Ed.D.



Heaven's Gym #1 is located just inside the Pearly Gates, in the Old Section. Most new arrivals to the afterlife train further out in gyms that look much like ours here on earth. Old-timers like LTC Herman J. Koehler and his friends train at HG #1. It has many rooms. Ladders, ropes, traveling rings, trapezes, and other amazing devices hang from the walls and ceilings. Wrestlers, boxers and gymnasts fill the main floor. Above the door at the main entrance there is a quote by Rudyard Kipling:

"Nations have passed away and left no trace,  
and history gives the naked cause of it--  
one single, simple reason in all cases;  
they fell because their people were not fit."

Koehler is still in great shape as he prepares to celebrate his 140<sup>th</sup> birthday this year on December 14. Folks in Heaven are generally uninterested in our terrestrial adventures, but civility is still the standard there. If we listen carefully, they will speak.

**KOEHLER:** I understand that you are with the U.S. Army Physical Fitness School. Do you know who I am?

**THOMAS:** You were Master of the Sword at the United States Military Academy from 1885 until 1923, and you are certainly the "Father of Modern Army Physical Readiness Training."

**KOEHLER:** I died in 1927, but my system was losing ground when I retired in 1923. How do you still know of me?

**THOMAS:** Fragments of your work can still be found in archives at West Point, and you were the driving force behind the Army's first physical training manuals. Captain Robert Degan wrote about you in his Master of Science thesis in physical education

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at the University of Wisconsin in 1966. He was killed in Viet Nam a few years later.

**KOEHLER:** I know. He is here with us now.

**THOMAS:** What was the source of your unparalleled genius for Army physical training.

**KOEHLER:** I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1859. My parents were German and deeply involved in the Turnvereine, and I began training when I was a child.

**THOMAS:** What is the Turnvereine and where did it come from?

**KOEHLER:** During the early 19th Century, Germany was weak and divided into hundreds of independent sovereignties that were no match for Napoleon's mighty army. Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, the Father of German Gymnastics, was not yet 30 years of age when he rushed to help defend Prussia at the Battle of Jena in 1806. He arrived to witness overwhelming defeat, the loss of almost half of his beloved homeland, and its eventual occupation by 150,000 French. Jahn eventually inspired a system of physical training that transformed the nation. Here he comes now. Turnvater Jahn, this rookie wants to know about the Turner system of gymnastics.

**JAHN:** I was born in Prussia on August 11, 1778 and grew up longing for a good education. Unfortunately, the schools were decadent. I spent my youth as an outsider to the inertia, drinking, and fighting that dominated much of the academic environment. I spoke out against the decay and was dismissed from numerous universities. My real education came from wandering throughout the countryside and coming to love my troubled nation with a fervor that aroused all I met along the way. Between my retreat from Jena and the War of Liberation, which eventually led to the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo, I began teaching at Graue Kloster, a boys' school in Berlin. There I planted the seeds for a system of gymnastics that transformed German physical culture.

Gymnastics is not merely the means of augmenting physical powers, but a tool for achieving political goals as well. German freedom and strength revolved upon the youth of the state and, therefore, the supreme aim of physical education is to develop sturdy citizens possessing a love of their homeland and the aggregate strength to throw off the rule of the oppressor from either outside or inside the nation.

A wave of patriotism followed the defeat at Jena, and my call for action made me a national hero. By 1814, I was even receiving a government salary, and the Turnvereine Gymnastic Societies grew rapidly. I had inspired a nation of citizen-soldiers. After Germany was liberated, the Turners joined the call for more personal and political freedom. The government reacted. Many Germans had hoped that Napoleon's defeat would be followed by national unity under constitutional rule. Instead, the monarchs banned the Turnvereine.

I was eventually arrested and jailed. It took around five years for me to be free of

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charges. It all eventually led to a failed and bloody revolution in 1848. Thousands of Germany's best and brightest fled their homeland, and many chose America. I stayed behind in Germany and died a few years later in 1852.

**KOEHLER:** The first American Turnvereine opened in Cincinnati. Twenty-two Turner Societies were operating in the United States by 1851. Ten years later, the Turners, vehemently opposed to slavery, were among the first to volunteer as units in the Northern Army. Of an estimated 10,000 active Turners, approximately 6,000 enlisted. Many of them were lost in battle.

**THOMAS:** I have read that the Turners fought valiantly during the Civil War, and afterwards, many school districts eventually began to adopt the Turner physical education system. What role did you play?

**KOEHLER:** I studied in the Turnvereine throughout my youth and graduated in 1882 from the Milwaukee Normal School of Physical Training, a Turner school. My uncle, George Brosius, worked there. He fought bravely in the Civil War and later served as superintendent of Physical Training in the public schools of Milwaukee from 1875 to 1883. After graduating, I worked for a while teaching and building physical education programs in Wisconsin schools. In 1885, I was appointed Master of the Sword at West Point Military Academy.



**THOMAS:** An 1889 report to the Board of Visitors at the Military Academy in 1889 stated:

"We confess that it was exceedingly difficult to believe that the gymnastic exercise performed by the fourth class could be the result of only one year of practice under the instruction by Professor Koehler. The feats of agility were simply wonderful; they are valuable chiefly as evidence of sound, muscular, trained bodies. Professor Koehler is an accomplished teacher."

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How did you do that?

**KOEHLER:** My system had four main functions: To build the men up physically, to wake them up mentally, to fill them with enthusiasm, and to discipline them." I believe that mechanical proficiency through physical training is essential for self-reliance, courage, and personal discipline. I further argued that the discipline of the individual determines the discipline of the mass.

**THOMAS:** What is discipline?

**KOEHLER:** It is the voluntary, intelligent, coordinated and cheerful subordination of every individual in an equal degree with every other individual of the mass to which he belongs, and of which he is an interdependent and not an independent unit, through which the object of the mass can be attained. Discipline is behavior that makes punishment unnecessary. In order to be disciplined, a soldier must be committed to ideals larger than himself. The disciplinary value of military physical training should equal, if not surpass its purely physiological value.

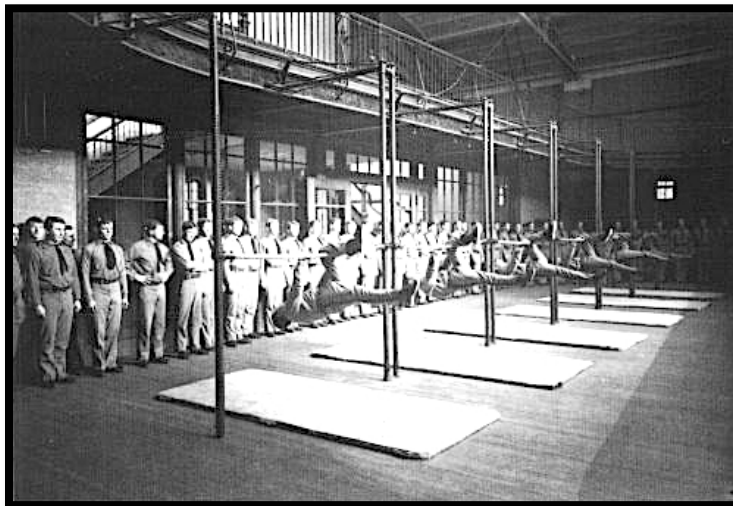
**THOMAS:** Did the Army ever fully embrace your ideas?

**KOEHLER:** No. In the early 1900s, sports and games gradually began to replace rational physical training. What is Army PRT like these days?

**THOMAS:** We could use a few guys like you.

**KOEHLER:** Stop by again sometime.

**THOMAS:** Thanks. I will.



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\*Conversion and digital graphics enhancement by Ron Jones, MS.