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# Selim Sirri Tarcan: a Pioneer in the Development of Physical Education and Sports in Turkey

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# Selim Sırrı Tarcan: a Pioneer in the Development of Physical Education and Sports in Turkey

## Authors' contribution:

- A) conception and design of the study
- B) acquisition of data
- C) analysis and interpretation of data
- D) manuscript preparation
- E) obtaining funding

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## ABSTRACT

Selim Sırrı Tarcan was one of the most important significant figures of modern physical education teacher education in Turkey. He played a crucial role in the organization of physical education and sports in schools and Olympic Games in Turkey. Tarcan served as a soldier, physical educator and director of the Turkish Grand National Assembly. Tarcan also wrote articles in the newspapers, held conferences on the radio and organized several meetings for spreading the physical education and sports for the purpose of public adoption. He held the first conference in the field in Istanbul when he returned from Sweden. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to explain contributions of Tarcan in four areas: his interest in physical education and sports, teacher preparation, contribution to formal, and informal education in Turkey.

## KEYWORDS

Selim Sırrı Tarcan, physical education, teacher preparation, Turkey

## Introduction

Selim Sırrı Tarcan who lived between 1874-1957 was one of the most significant figures of modern physical education teacher education in Turkey. Tarcan served as a soldier, physical educator and director of the Turkish Grand National Assembly as well. Tarcan also played an important role in the organization of physical education and sports, both in the Olympic Games and schools. He also developed physical education and sports both in formal and informal education in Turkey. His contribution will probably make a contribution to the studies on comparative education and sports history. It is very important to quote one of his statements. Tarcan in his book (*Beden Terbiyesi: Oyun-Cimnastik-Spor*) stated that

*“One should bear in mind that neither a morbid intellectual nor an illiterate wrestler may be of value and one should make effort for raising well thinking, good and hard working, skilled, well disciplined and sound people”* (Selim Sırrı Tarcan 1932).

Therefore, contributions of Tarcan to the following have been presented as topics of this study:

1. His interest in physical education and sports and his teaching,
2. Teacher preparation,
3. His contribution to education,
4. And to informal education.

### Selim Sırrı Tarcan's interest in physical education and sports

Tarcan attended Galatasaray Lisesi (Ecole Impérial de Galata Saray which offers education in French) in 1882 and participated in sports under the guidance of his teacher Faik Bey (Güven 1996). During his education at school, he received an award for his achievements in gymnastics, which delighted his mother. However, the moment she learned that he received this award for gymnastic activities, she cried:

*"I sent you to the school so as to make a man out of you, not to watch you climb up the ropes! Go away! I do not want such an award! I was delighted in vain!"* (Tarcan 1946, p. 11).

Despite the disappointment of his mother, it is observed that as a result of the book that he received as a result of the award and his admiration for Faik Bey, his passion for sports had grown stronger. In 1890 Tarcan left Galatasaray Lisesi and enrolled in Kara Kuvvetleri Teknik Subay Okulu (Technical Officer School of Land Forces) (Aşır 1950, p. 54). He graduated in 1896 and was appointed to İzmir, where he would serve his occupation and teach gymnastics courses in İzmir Lisesi (İzmir High School), Sanayi Mektebi, and a private school. In the meantime, his essays were published in the newspaper *Hizmet*. In 1901 when he was appointed to Istanbul as captain of the military, he went on to serve as a fencing and gymnastics teacher and taught physical education lessons in some other private schools as well. In May 1909, he was sent to the Higher Institute of Physical Education in Sweden for education (Tarcan 1946, pp. 44-45, Üzümeri, Dinçer and Kazancı 1956, p. 99, Fişek 1985, p. 87). When Tarcan returned to Turkey in the spring of 1910 after his studies, which took about one and a half years, it can well be said that he brought a wealth of new information and skills with him (Tarcan 1946, p. 46).



Photo 1. Selim Sırrı Tarcan during training

Right after returning from Sweden, Tarcan left the Armed Forces and focused on his freelance studies in physical education and sports. Later, on the 14<sup>th</sup> July, 1910 he received the following notification from Emrullah Efendi, the Director of National Education:

*"For you have been appointed to the Inspectorship of Physical Education in the Schools of Istanbul Province of the Ottoman Empire for 2000 Turkish kurus, you are expected in the Chamber so as to be commissioned"*.

Tarcan, who rushed into the Chamber expressed his gratitude but asked,

*"but sir, what is it that I am going to inspect? There are no gymnastics lessons in any of the high schools except for Galatasaray. In the girls' schools, the title of the lesson is not known, at all"*.

Emrullah Efendi responded:



Photo 2. Selim Sırrı Tarcan

*"Sir, you will serve as both the inspector and the founder. We have made innovations for the boys' schools. We have put physical education lessons in your schedule twice in a week. There you will give the lesson and train teachers. We will think of something for the girls' schools as well"* (Tarcan 1946, p.47).

It can be said that the first step was thus taken for the launch of physical education studies based on knowledge, skills and attitude. Tarcan who was teaching physical education lessons at the İstanbul Teacher Training College for Boys while serving as a director, also made the effort to train teachers in this field (Güven 1996).

Two approaches were adopted in the physical education lessons in the years 1916 and 1917, the first one of which is the "John Amaros Gymnastics", which was developed under the influence of the German Gymnastics and the

second is the “Swedish Gymnastics”, which was spread by “Pehr Henrik Ling” and adopted by Tarcan. Swedish Gymnastics includes health improving movements and is an easy and smooth system when compared to Amoros Gymnastics. Here the important point is that everybody can do it. In this respect it can be suggested that the view “sports for health’s sake” is adopted rather than “sports for performance”. However Faik Bey, one of the defendants of German Gymnastics describes Swedish Gymnastics as a woman thing (Bilge 1988, p. 48). On the other hand, Tarcan (!940, pp. 85-88) says that Swedish Gymnastics is a type of gymnastics which has an educational aspect based on physiology and anatomy and whose objective is to ensure body harmony and says that the physical education is organized in accordance with the interests and the abilities of the person. This approach involves the adoption of physical education and sports activities by the public. According to Tarcan, education involves teaching the society “*to stand up and walk erect*” (Bilge 1988, p. 55).

### Teacher training

As a result of the sociocultural structure of the period, men were dominant in the field of physical education and sports. However, Tarcan attempted to give short term training to female teachers working in the primary schools in Istanbul so as to send 100 of them to other schools with the thought that girls should also take part in the sports activities but Şeyhulislam (President of the Religious Affairs) of the time would not allow such. Later, women were also admitted to the courses offered for two hours in a week in the Moslem theological schools (Kandemir 1950, pp. 27-28, Aşır 1950, p. 68). In 1911 optional physical education lessons were included in the schedule of the first and second year of the high schools. “Physical Education and School Games” lesson was included in the schedule of the primary school in 1913 (Okan 1975, p. 8). While making effort to achieve these objectives, Tarcan was fighting against two opposite forces: *conservatism* and *defendants of the old gymnastics* (Aşır 1950, p. 68).

Tarcan also took part in “the First Team of Science” studies, which were suspended in 1921 and eventually carried out between the 15<sup>th</sup> July-15<sup>th</sup> August in 1923 (Yücel 1938, 1994, p. 21). The Article 5<sup>th</sup> of the studies of the team involves “Scouting and Physical Education”, During the determination of the application program, the issues involving the establishment of “The Principles of the Scouting Organization at High School and the Physical

Education Teacher Training College for Boys” were taken into account (Dağlı and Aktürk 1988, p. 16). With the incentive of Tarcan in 1926 the opening of a physical education school was considered. The building of the sports saloon nearby the Teacher Training College for Girls in Çapa, İstanbul was completed in 1927 and “Gymnastics Teachers Course” was opened which would offer theoretical and practical education for one year to the girls or boys in the term 1927-28. Tarcan was the manager of the courses and was also the teacher of some of them. Three teachers were invited from Sweden to teach these courses who were Mrs. Inge Nerman, Rangar Johnson and Suen Alexandeson. The lessons offered by the course were as follows: Theories and Practice of Physical Education, Physiology, Anatomy, Rough Movements, Public Health, Theoretical and Applied Sports Lessons. Persons who had previously taken physical education and sports training and were capable and diligent primary school teachers were admitted to the courses. The applicants who were successful in the vocational skill exam would be given theoretical and applied courses for 9 months. As a result of the exam taken among the graduates, some were selected for education abroad (Abalı 1974, p. 96). Tarcan wrote a book

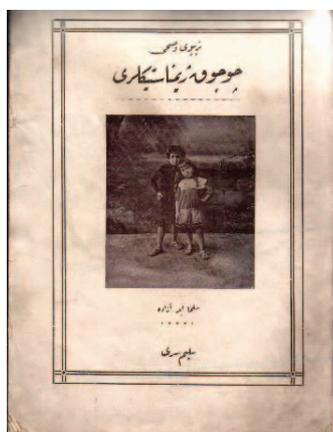


Photo 3. One of the early publications of Selim Sırrı Tarcan about physical education



Photo 4. One of the early publications of Selim Sırrı Tarcan about how to train a child

called “Physical Education Guide for Teachers” for the physical educators in the period when the courses in Çapa had not yet begun. Many were interested in this book. However, the approaches like

*“neither a morbid thinker nor an illiterate wrestler” and “the wrestler or the young boxer we appreciate should be capable of showing his mind while showing off his muscles”* showed the gift of the nature of sports and science (Karaküçük 1982, p. 150).

Tarcan (1939) also put forth some important opinions in offering and teaching physical education in universities. In this respect, he put forth the following view in the letter he wrote to Sadi Irmak:

*“I have written and talked a lot so as to draw attention of our university (Istanbul University) to physical education. Unfortunately, I haven’t got any positive or negative responses to what I’ve said or written so far. My voice has dissolved and is gone in the emptiness. In an essay I wrote in 1932 I suggested that it was the duty of the universities to guide people in physical education and sports ... It is universities which will find out the benefits and damages of sports, relieve any doubt, declare the results, inform the people about the dangers we are to face in big races and present the precautions to prevent the body from being injured”.*

The importance of the studies carried out in this field within the framework of vocational definitions can be much better understood in the following quotation from Tarcan (1936, p. 4):

*“Sports has accessed in a developmental stage today just like dental surgery and midwifery. As the civilization advances and the knowledge of the people expands, it is strongly believed that a tooth can only be taken out by a dentist who has been educated in the university, the child can be given birth by the help of a midwife who has graduated from the school and that the medicine given by ordinary people will bring hazard instead of well being. Sports is the same as well. All around the world specialists on sports have been raised”* (Karaküçük 1992, p. 145).

After the studies, the growing demand for physical educators and the intensive efforts made by Tarcan in national education, it was understood that this demand was a result of the deficiency of the state policy (Kasap 1992, pp. 407-414) and in 1932 “the Physical Education Department of Gazi Teaching School for Secondary Education” was opened (Yücel 1938, 1994, p. 83). The education period of the program was 3 years. The fact that the first teaching staff of the department consisted of the students of Tarcan is evidence of the continuous effectiveness of the process.

## Teaching

When we regard the definition of education, in a sense we are dealing with a conscious enculturation (Ertürk 1979). Tarcan (1933, p. 10) defines culture as *agriculture, heat, sowing seed into the treated land* and means – *in this respect, culture is developed in educated soil*. Tarcan, who explains intellectual and physical culture in this manner, emphasizes that during education one should move from known to the unknown and from easy to the difficult. Also, he says that physical education and sports activities will change in accordance with the age, humor, body and climate conditions (Tarcan 1932, p. 3). As for sports and movement, he says –

*“sports is a knife with a sharp end, it cuts the fingers of those, who do not know how to use it, into pieces. Movement is a sort of nourishment for the body. If less, it does not feed, if too much, it does harm”* (Tarcan, 1943, p. 18).

From these explanations it can be concluded that it is very important to do the activities of physical education and sports in a conscious and planned manner and for the sake of health. In line with these views Tarcan makes it clearer with the following:

*“sports is the literature of the physical education, physical education is a branch of public health, and gymnastics is the language of the physical education”* (Tarcan 1932, p. 150, 1943, p. 21).

One of the issues, the importance of which has been emphasized by Tarcan, is the village institutes. Tarcan, who wrote a book on this issue in 1933, indicated that the villagers would in general live mobile, however, due to the fact that this movement was not organized, they had a disorganized body structure, and the majority would become hunchbacked at an early age (Tarcan 1933, p. 2). He went on saying that (1933, p. 5)

*“So, what should the primary school teachers who are responsible for teaching physical education to the village children do? Let us try to find it out. First of all, the teacher should consider the region, the climate of the region, then humor of the villager, and then the nature of his daily works, and then his body shape so as to make up a program to make him healthy, well shaped, agile, skilled and careful. For instance, slowly educating repetitions and games requiring too much patience, increasing strength and giving harmony to the movements should be intensively used in a gymnastics program to be applied to a boy from the Black Sea region who always runs, who is agile, alert and always in a hurry in his movements... It should be born in mind that a perfect but nonfunctional gymnastics program would not provide benefit but cause damage. Because the purpose of the gymnastics is to give organization and shape to the body and to teach each body part to serve the function it is expected to do serve. The moral responsibility of the teachers who are to teach physical education to the village children is great. For this reason they have to pay great attention to whether the activities they make the children do and the gymnastics or the games they present are compatible with the requirements of the villagers or not; just like the doctor who pays great attention to both the content and the amount of the medicine he prescribes”.*

In this respect, when the views of Tarcan are taken into account it can be seen that they are equivalent with the basis for the modern program development approaches which determine program necessities through the analysis of the features of society, scope and the individual, objectives, content, teaching and teaching activities, test conditions, and feedback process (Oliva 1988, Harrison and Blackemore 1992, Sönmez 1996). Thinking in such a detailed manner and having written a book in the field under the hard conditions of the young Turkish Republic should be appreciated.

### **Informal Education**

It can be stated that the roles of Selim Sırrı Tarcan as a sports manager and organizer as well as a teacher, sportsman and writer were reflected both in the studies he carried out in the Olympic Committee and the activities he held. One of his initial activities in the field of education was the “Physical Education School” he opened on the 20<sup>th</sup> December 1908. Gymnastics, fencing, rapier, boxing, and marksmanship courses were included in the program for the school and the school went on performing its activities until April 1909 (Güven 1996). Tarcan opened up another school donated with special qualities in which the sports branches were taught with full consideration of the theoretical aspects such as anatomy, physiology and public health and that the individualistic capacities of the persons were taken into account. At the school where it was forbidden to discuss religion and politics, various physical exercises were taken up so as to bring in strength and educate the body organs of the males whose ages range between 7-60 (Fişek 1985, p. 88).

After the announcement of the Constitutional Monarchy Tarcan who got in touch with Pierre de Coubertin established the “National Olympics Association of the Ottomans”. Fişek comments were as follows for this development:

*“The Association for Preparations for the World Championship instead of the National Olympic Association, which was founded on the 25<sup>th</sup> June 1922, is the first national Olympics committee in the fullest sense ... its center was Istanbul, activity zone was the whole Turkey and its everything was Selim Sırrı Tarcan just as it was in the term 1908-1920”.*

It was well known that Tarcan played an important role in scouting as well as many other activities (Aşır 1950, p. 68). Tarcan, who also carried out studies on youth, organized “*Training Festivals*” on the 29<sup>th</sup> April 1916 in Kadıköy, İstanbul, similar to the National Festival of Youth and Sports today. Later, on the 18<sup>th</sup> November 1920 he organized a sports festival in the garden of the building of the Teacher Training College for Boys where he was working as a teacher, in Cağaloğlu, İstanbul (Fişek 1983, p. 338). Moreover, it is observed that the first gymnastic performance of the Republic was displayed on the 11<sup>th</sup> May 1928. Later, it was decided that the displays performed in May every year would be held on the 19<sup>th</sup> May from the academic year of 1936-1937 and beyond (Bilge 1989, p. 69). In the speech Tarcan delivered in the first ceremonies, he cited that gymnastics was a conscious education instrument of which its service goes beyond the skilled and the strong (Tarcan 1932, p. 430).

Tarcan also wrote articles in the newspapers, held conferences on the radio and organized several meetings for spreading the physical education and sports for the purpose of public adoption. He held the first conference in the field in İstanbul when he returned from Sweden. For this reason, he announced from the newspapers that he would hold a conference about the western civilizations. However, only 7 people attended the conference. He thought it over and went to the University. There, 15 people attended the conference. Next, following the view of the following French intellectual approach of “*pleasure and expression should be combined in the conferences,*” he announced that he would play Swedish airs in accompany with the flute. The result was positive. The hall was full. He himself said that he had told anecdotes as well as being accompanied with the flute in the series of conferences which took three months. As for the students of medicine, he did not address them in this manner but with the conference itself (Tarcan 1946, pp. 61-62). Another conference known to the field was held in Old Ankara. He talked about the education, school, health, physical beauty, open air, movement, nourishment and love of country in his address to about 100 people including 5 women only, 4 of which were in turban (Tarcan 1946, p. 53). He enabled the “*Sarı Zeybek*” dance, whose arrangement he made together with the music teachers, to follow a specific method and in the first gymnastics festival he played in the Teacher Training College where he worked as a manager for 3 years and in Paris where he went for the 1924 Olympic Games (Tarcan 1946, pp. 53-60).

Tarcan also published a magazine in the field called “*Education and Games*” when he returned from Sweden (Üzümeri, Dinçer and Kazancı 1956, p. 99). The magazine included not only the articles for physical educators and lessons but also the articles on sports for health’s sake.

The following quotation on the contribution of Tarcan in physical education and sports from Halit Ziya is rather interesting:

*“Selim Sırrı, who showed us the miracle of strength and exercise 30 years ago, is the man who woke up the indolent youth of the nation by holding and shaking their shoulders and formulated the religion of physical education which would turn it into a healthy, agile, strong and robust one. This man, who has never been reluctant or weary and has been the clergyman of this region since then, has never given up on studying and struggling”.*

Feridun (1950, p. 17) quotes the following from an American professor about the huge liveliness and energy of Tarcan: “*Rub off any day you did not smile from your life. It is a day which is not lived*”.

It is also apparent that Tarcan was open to changes. When he went to Sweden a professor asked:

*“You were a gymnastics teacher in your country. It is a great sacrifice to stand being a student after teaching for some time”.*

The response of Tarcan to that was as follows: “*I came here for I thought that there may be new things here that I can learn*” (Kandemir 1950, p. 26). It gives us clues about the fact that learning can not have an end to which extent it could be. Also, when he was asked for recommendations for the young people Tarcan would say (Aygen 1950, p. 52):

*“Pedagogist Dr. Filip Tisye says: It is not enough to be strong, the hit should be right. It is not enough either, if you hit the same spot again and again a nail can be driven. Look at the flood*

which cover the grassy plains completely, after a huge storm. You can not see a sign of it after a week. But the drops which fall on the same spot make a hole in the marble”.

The theme of this sentence is, find your own goal and specialize in your field.

In conclusion, it may not be sufficient to talk about so briefly about Tarcan who highlighted sports for health's sake in all his views and activities, enabled the Olympic Games to get organized, enabled physical education to become a profession in Turkey, struggled for the fact that this profession should be acquired through a university education, held conferences and organized activities so as to spread sports publicly and who was a writer and a member of the parliament at the same time. But the summary is just like a photograph. Photograph presents a subject, which can be explained in pages when written, in a better understood manner. With regards to that, this paper started with a quotation from Tarcan and it will be meaningful to end with his words:

“Sports has entirely become a field of study for medicine and pedagogy. It is not sufficient for a trainer to be successful technically in the field of sports he has specialized in. He should be familiar with the body and spirit language just like a doctor and a pedagogist. In the sports world, conventional phase has been closed and scientific phase has started” (Karaküçük 1992, p. 165).

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