

July 14, 2008

Phone Call From China Transformed '84 Games

By [LYNN ZINSER](#)

The call he will never forget came for Peter Ueberroth in the middle of the night on May 12, 1984, over a crackling phone line from Beijing. It carried the news he believed would determine the fate of the Olympics, not just the Games he was working to organize in Los Angeles that summer but all the ones beyond.

At the other end of the line was Charles Lee, the man he had sent to persuade the Chinese to send their team to the Olympics for the first time. Ueberroth, the leader of the Los Angeles organizing committee, was asking China to defy a Soviet Union-led boycott that was announced four days earlier. The Soviets said the boycott would keep 100 countries away from the '84 Games. If the Soviets succeeded, Ueberroth said flatly, "we were done."

Salvation came when Lee called and told Ueberroth, "They're coming."

As the world prepares for the Beijing Games in August, that moment is all but lost in the history of the Olympics, when the winds shifted and carried the Games away from a political bludgeon in the cold war to the combination of athletic and commercial success they have become since.

Ueberroth, now 70 and the chairman of the [United States Olympic Committee](#), will lead the American team into China with a deep sense of gratitude. He believes China saved the Olympics.

"When I got the phone call that they were coming, well, it still gets to me right now," Ueberroth said in a recent interview in his Newport Beach, Calif., office. "It changed the whole face of the Games."

Now, no matter what political issues arise — and with China there are many: human rights, Tibet, its relationship with the government of Sudan — large-scale boycotts are no longer part of the discussion. Political statements come in smaller forms: which heads of state will attend or stay home, whether athletes will speak out about their political views. Recently, President Bush announced he would attend the opening ceremony. Prime Minister [Gordon Brown](#) of Britain and Chancellor [Angela Merkel](#) of Germany have said they will not.

In 1984, the stakes were higher. The Soviets were recruiting countries to retaliate for the United States' decision to stay away from the 1980 Moscow Games, a boycott that 61 other countries joined. The Soviets announced on May 8, 1984, that their team would not come to Los Angeles because of fears for their athletes' safety, claiming they had agreements from 100 countries to do the same.

Ueberroth said he saw the list. At the top was China.

His response was to assemble a team of envoys who could appeal to officials in undecided countries and persuade them to come. Lee, a federal prosecutor in Los Angeles who is not Chinese but speaks fluent

Mandarin, took a small group to China. Ueberroth asked a woman on his staff, Agnes Mura, to lead a group to Romania; she had been born there. Ueberroth went to Cuba.

“People think of the Olympics as a corporate structure,” said Bob Ctvrtlik, who played for the United States volleyball team at the '84 Games and is now a member of the [International Olympic Committee](#). “It really is not. It relies on relationships. It relies on trust. It relies on people who can cut through cultural differences and find common ground. That was the brilliance of that program.”

Ueberroth was unable to sway [Fidel Castro](#) — he keeps a framed copy of a headline from an article in The Los Angeles Times that read, “Ueberroth Strikes Out in Cuba.” But Lee’s visit was a triumph, and Mura delivered the perhaps more stunning news later in May that tiny Romania would defy the Soviet boycott.

Mura, then 35, had escaped communist Romania when she was 19. Her job at the time was to organize volunteer translators for the Games. She said Ueberroth, learning of her background, tapped her on the shoulder one day and asked her to go to Romania. The semi-secret trip to her homeland terrified her.

After a few days of talks, with the group sequestered in a lakeside house outside Bucharest, the Romanians agreed in principle to attend the Games. With a few financial details to iron out — the Los Angeles organizing committee and the I.O.C. would each pay \$60,000 to defray the Romanians’ costs — Mura called Ueberroth.

“I said, ‘Agnes, I think they’re just being nice to you,’ ” Ueberroth said. “I thought the Soviets would crush them.”

Mura said she knew the magnitude of what Romania, then a country of about 23 million, was doing.

“We were very proud,” Mura said. “In three days we had accomplished a lot. One of the biggest concerns they had was security. There had been attacks at the Olympics before and because the Soviets’ argument was they wouldn’t feel safe in the U.S., the Romanians worried that the Soviets would stage an attack on them.”

When Mura returned, Ueberroth asked her to organize an extensive envoy program with hosts for every nation, who would be responsible for the teams’ well-being during the Games. Mura slept in the Olympic Village with the Romanian team, next door to its cherished star gymnast, Nadia Comaneci.

But Lee’s visit to China, Ueberroth believed, held the Games in the balance.

Lee, now 62 and retiring as a Superior Court Judge in Los Angeles, began studying Mandarin when he was in the [Navy](#) in the late 1960s and spent two years studying in Taiwan. His wife, Miranda, was born in China and grew up in Hong Kong.

When the 1984 Games were first being organized, Ueberroth became aware of Lee when Lee’s law firm worked on the organizing committee’s bylaws. When he needed someone fluent in Mandarin as an envoy, Ueberroth remembered Lee.

Lee visited China several times in the '70s and '80s and was fascinated by a country that had been closed to foreigners for so long. He said they were astounded with his language skills.

“At night, most places didn’t have electricity,” Lee said. “You got to the city from the airport by this one small road. There were very few Westerners there and very, very few Westerners who spoke Chinese. So I really enjoyed talking to people.

“Back then on the tours to China they took you to factories, like a light bulb factory. At night you’d go to a magic show and that was it.”

On his trip in May 1984, Lee said, he and his group were welcomed enthusiastically by the Chinese sports ministers in Beijing. After a series of meetings, the ministers told him China would come to the Games. Lee pressed them to give him a letter he could take back to Ueberroth.

“Initially when they said, ‘We’re coming,’ they believed since they said it, there’s no need for anything in writing,” Lee said. “I just kept asking and asking. Finally they very graciously gave me the letter, which was a fantastic thing.”

No one was happier than Ueberroth.

“It was a turning point in my life,” he said.

Only 14 countries boycotted the 1984 Games, which became a financial and political success. Ueberroth remembers the huge cheer the Chinese team received at the opening ceremony — the Romanians received one as well — at Los Angeles Coliseum. Lee remembers watching the Chinese team members as they experienced their first Olympics. When a few gymnasts asked to meet some American children, Lee brought them to play with his two daughters, then 4 and 2. He still cherishes the picture of that meeting. Lee was appointed the chef de mission of the United States team for the Beijing Games, serving as the leader of the American delegation.

Two years ago, when the U.S.O.C. signed a cooperation pact with the Chinese Olympic Committee, Ueberroth presented its chairman, Liu Peng, with a torch from the ’84 Games. Those involved said it was an emotional moment for both men. Beijing’s Games will be Ueberroth’s last as chairman.

Mura, who owns an executive management training firm, said she would watch the Beijing Games with a keen understanding of their significance, with China having come full circle as host after its key role in 1984.

“I know having lived in a communist country what it’s like to open your doors,” Mura said. “I can imagine what it will be like for those young people to see the world come to their capital for a celebration.

“For the people of Beijing, it is going to give them a feeling of connectedness that they started in ’84.”

It all started with news that reached Ueberroth in the middle of the night and stays with him still.

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)