

Demetrios Vikelas & Pierre de Coubertin

A PARTNERSHIP OF DESTINY

by David C. Young

Finally! I received your letter!" "Finally"; so begins the first item in the IOC's collection of the letters which Demetrios VIKELAS wrote to Baron Pierre de COUBERTIN. It is misdated by a whole year, to January 1894, because VIKELAS made that error which we make only one month a year; namely, to date our January documents to the previous year. The proper date, 1895, explains this letter's opening word and urgent tone. VIKELAS' and COUBERTIN'S lasting friendship during periods of sometimes powerful disagreement emerges best from this IOC collection of their correspondence.* VIKELAS starts this letter with the word "FINALLY!" because he had been waiting impatiently to hear from the baron for weeks, writing Paris time after time with pleas for help.

The 1896 Athens Olympics were scheduled to begin in little more than a year, but virtually no one, except VIKELAS for a few weeks in Athens, had taken any practical step to prepare for them. An earlier January 1895 letter began, "Again, the mailman came and no letter from you" So any letter which VIKELAS got from COUBERTIN was good news. But it brought him bad news, as well; namely, that COUBERTIN was getting married. VIKELAS saw that *there* was the cause of the baron's current neglect, and that he would be of little help to him or to the other Greeks in carrying out the plan which the two of them had formed together in Paris the summer before. VIKELAS' letter goes on:

"What a job you have given me! And you leave me with no help. Write me more. Your fiancée won't begrudge me that. She'll have pity on the poor mortal you made President. What a job! I can see why presidents resign."

That is what he said as IOC President. But at the same time, as a friend, VIKELAS was delighted to hear of COUBERTIN'S success in his personal life.

"What a good letter! I express my best wishes, and to your fiancée, as well. The good news ... will be published in tomorrow morning's newspaper, Asty."

This mixture of good news and bad, of joy mixed with worry and pain is typical of the relationship between these two Olympic giants over their years of friendship and professional dealings. What is really the earliest item in the collection of VIKELAS-to-COUBERTIN letters is dated June 19, 1894, the first day of the famous Paris Olympic Organizing Congress. It reads,

"Dear Baron de Coubertin: I did not see you after our session to tell you how touched I was by your proposal to start with Athens. I'm sorry that I could not support you more warmly."

This seems sure proof that COUBERTIN was the first one to propose Athens as the initial IOC host city, while VIKELAS at first balked at the idea. And the minutes of that meeting say the same, that COUBERTIN proposed Athens, but his motion failed for lack of a second. Although the majority of the delegates preferred London instead, COUBERTIN would hear no more of London; and he had the whole question tabled. But later that same day, VIKELAS thought



* "Correspondance, Pierre de Coubertin/Demetrius Vikelas, 1894-1905," bound volume (photocopies) of Vikelas' letters to Coubertin in the IOC Library, Lausanne. Specific page numbers of the letters mentioned in this paper will be found in Chapters 8-10 and 14 of my book about the modern revival: David C. Young, *The Modern Olympics: A Struggle for Revival*, Baltimore, 1996. Full documentation of all the other statements also appears in that book.

"more warmly" about the Athens idea, and there can be no question but that VIKELAS himself made the same Athens proposal four days later, at the final session, where it passed. So there were two separate proposals for Athens; first, COUBERTIN'S failed motion of June 19, 1894 and, second, VIKELAS' official and successful motion of June 23. So even if they had no joint plan to begin with, they ended up working in concert, promoting the same goal. Since both men resided permanently in Paris, and (as Mr. MORBACH has rightly stressed), in the same neighborhood, they easily met and worked out a strategy to go to Athens and work together to create an organizing committee. Crown Prince CONSTANTINE, who had himself tried to revive the Zappas Olympic series just two years before, had already pledged his support for this "Athens in 1896" project. But the plan did not go as expected. As it turned out, VIKELAS and COUBERTIN were never both in Athens at the same time - until they arrived the month that the Games began.

VIKELAS *did* go to Athens in the fall of 1894 to start the work. But in less than two weeks he had to leave to tend to his chronically ill wife, who was dying in Paris. COUBERTIN then soon went to Athens, but he stayed less than a month. He left thinking he had formed an organizing committee. But that committee disbanded before he ever got back to France. After his wife died, VIKELAS came back to Athens, a few weeks after COUBERTIN had left it. This time VIKELAS *did* form a committee, headed by the eager Crown Prince CONSTANTINE.

And he succeeded in rallying the Greek people behind the Olympic idea, even though the TRIKOÚPIS government was wholly opposed. But suddenly the government changed. Theodoros DELIYANNIS, TRIKOUPIS' replacement as Prime Minister, supported the Olympic idea, and the organizing committee began to make amazingly rapid progress.

That brings us again to January 1895, when VIKELAS got COUBERTIN'S wedding announcement in the letter which began my talk today. VIKELAS then got a second

letter from Paris, a brief reply to his urgent plea for help which I quoted at the start. VIKELAS had asked COUBERTIN to send invitations to British and continental athletic clubs, but the letter seemed to ignore such matters. It focused instead on the baron's fears that he, COUBERTIN, was not getting enough attention and credit from the Greeks. Although he declined to come to Greece, he repeatedly complained that the Greeks were ignoring him, even had a campaign "*to cut me out.*" VIKELAS sent him Greek newspapers to assure him that his name was indeed prominently displayed. Then VIKELAS, too, after a stay of less than two months, returned to his home in Paris. He was confident that the organizing committee could now carry out its charge without his presence, and he left it in the capable hands of its General Secretary, Timoleon PHILÍMON, the former mayor of Athens, and its president, Prince CONSTANTINE.

Back in Paris again, VIKELAS and COUBERTIN were still in contact with Athens. At one point, they were called upon to settle an eligibility dispute. The Greek poet, Constantinos MANOS, then a student at Oxford, was strongly influenced by the English elitist strict amateur rules he saw followed there. He sought to get the Athens organizing committee to ban all athletes of the major Greek athletic clubs from Olympic competition. Because clubs such as the *Panellenios* and *Ethnikos* Gymnastic Societies had salaried trainer-directors, Manos claimed that their members were not amateurs, therefore ineligible. PHILÍMON and the prince decided to consult COUBERTIN and VIKELAS about this messy affair. The first eligibility ruling ever issued by the IOC was handed down. All the athletes of all clubs would be eligible. So COUBERTIN and VIKELAS could unite in Paris to help with preparations in Athens. At the same time, they established one of the most notable and valuable features of our Olympics, that is, an emphasis on participation by all rather than elitism for a few.

The work of the organizing committee progressed amazingly well. There were no previous international Olympiads to look to as models, and few communications from foreign teams or sportsmen. But there was a great influx of good will and donations for the cause from Greeks both in Greece and abroad. It was the chance for Greece to show the world its sudden maturation, less than a century from virtual slavery to world focal point. Besides, Greeks in antiquity, then, and now have always been a people who loved sports and excellence. Even peasants in the villages sent to Athens what few drachmas they could afford to help fund the Games. But the greatest gift came in from Georgios AVEROFF of Greek Alexandria, a lump sum to restore the ancient Panathenaic stadium even beyond its ancient glory with the magnificent rows of marble seats one sees now.



Pierre de Coubertin and Demetrios Vikelas 1896
(Coubertin, Pierre de et al., *The Olympic Games in 1896*, Athens/London 1897, p. 95

VIKELAS returned to Athens on March 3, 1896. The next morning he went to the stadium. *"I saw it and I marveled,"* he wrote. COUBERTIN came three weeks later, less than two weeks before opening day. The Games would begin on Monday, April 6 - March 25 by the Greek Calendar, Greek Independence day, just as Panayiotis SOUTSOS had planned when he was the first person ever to propose the Olympic revival way back in 1835. The Sunday before that day was Easter Day; it was also the day for dedicating AVEROFF'S statue at the new stadium. COUBERTIN braved the pouring rain to lead the contingent of foreign dignitaries in the ceremony for AVEROFF.

Everyone knows about the great success of the 1896 games, so I make it no further part of my current story. But after the Games, before any one left the city, Prince CONSTANTINE held a very small, important meeting which both COUBERTIN and VIKELAS attended. The Crown Prince and the baron clashed over the site of future Olympic Games. CONSTANTINE and almost everyone else in the world by then - except COUBERTIN - wanted *all* subsequent international Olympics to be held in Greece. COUBERTIN wanted no more games *ever* by that name in Greece. There was talk about Olympics every two years, alternating between Athens and

The city of Ermopolis commissioned a bust to honour their outstanding citizen Demetrios Vikelas (Photo: A. Bijkerk, 2007)



other parts of the world. But there the terminology caused an impasse, COUBERTIN insisting that Greeks could not call their Games "Olympics"; but, if they must have them, they should call them "International Panathenaic Games".

Soon newspapers published reports of the meeting with CONSTANTINE. The *New York Times* announced that the next Olympic Games would be held in Athens in 1898. The *Times* of London said that, no matter what might happen with COUBERTIN and the movable Olympics, permanent Games called "Olympics" should be held in Athens. COUBERTIN was incensed, and sent an angry letter to the editor of each paper, saying that the Greeks denied him the credit that he was due; and that the success of *his* idea had caused them to want to take it and *"to monopolize it for their own profit"*. The Greeks, in turn, took offense at that accusation, probably most of all at the words "for profit". The baron attributed things to mercenary motives, while the Greeks cited the name and hallowed Olympic traditions of their distant ancestors and recent past. The newspapers and *kaphenia* bristled at COUBERTIN'S words. VIKELAS wrote COUBERTIN again, admitting that perhaps he might have done more to get more credit for the baron in Athens. But VIKELAS viewed their role together as part of a much bigger picture, their important partnership in producing a revival of the ancient Olympic Games, the first and second presidents of the IOC now seeking to carry on this magnificent project. I quote VIKELAS' words.

"Let's perform a mutual act of Christian charity. Let's not allow our irritability to impede in any way the progress of the work so well begun. For the rest, you know that I have always shouted above the roof-tops that there would not have been any international Olympic Games without Baron de Coubertin."

But VIKELAS then returned to the unpleasant topic, and defends the Greeks' insistence on calling their games "Olympics". He reminds COUBERTIN of the Zappas Olympic revival series, which resurrected the name "Olympics" in Greece long before the birth of the IOC.

But the baron was unconvinced and inflexible; he began to make even more biting accusations. *"I don't care what the newspapers say about me,"* he wrote to VIKELAS in mid-May, 1896.

"When it comes to ingratitude, Greece easily wins first prize. You all got your branch of olive. I am the only one whose name, if ever mentioned, was spoken only in secret. My wife is ill from the rudeness she received in Athens."

On remembering of the two first IOC presidents the Bank of Greece coined a 500 drachmas coin (Private Coll. A.W. Driegga)

In his reply VIKELAS admits, *"Your letter caused me much pain, I won't hide it. But not as much pain as those letters to the editors."*

COUBERTIN'S reply was still bitter; but like all the letters which the two sent to one another, it begins *"My dear Friend ..."* And at the close the baron insists *"I don't hold anything against you. I remain with boundless respect for your character and love for you as a person."* The next year, as they continued to spar over the question and name of the in-between Athens games, COUBERTIN wrote: *"I have already said to so many people when speaking of you, 'Vikelas, there is no more noble person in the whole world'".* A few years later, at VIKELAS'S urging, but against the very strong wishes of COUBERTIN, the IOC voted to have official IOC Olympics at Athens again in 1906. That vote caused a professional rift between the two good friends. Yet the very last of VIKELAS' letters to COUBERTIN, dated 1905, begins,

"Dear friend, what touches me above all in your good letter is that you always preserve your friendship with me, which means more to me than all these honorific titles."



And when VIKELAS died three years later COUBERTIN wrote of VIKELAS in the IOC journal:

"He was an author, and not a single careless word ever escaped from his pen. If one adds to that there never was anyone with a warmer heart, more noble intentions, more faithful devotion, then one may have an idea of the admirable ensemble of qualities, both public and personal, which made Monsieur Vikelas the model of a citizen and the model of a friend."

VIKELAS and COUBERTIN were two truly Olympian figures in the history of sport and culture. Look what that little June 19, 1894 note in which VIKELAS decided to support the baron "more warmly" - look what that has led to today, not only in Greece, but in Sydney, America, Europe, and now even Beijing! The first two IOC presidents sometimes became irritated with one another and their patriotism, their intense devotion to their respective fatherlands, sometimes led them to work at cross-purposes. Yet their friendship always remained as strong as ever. In fact, it seems that their deep personal affection for one another was one of the reasons they were able, against so many odds, to succeed so brilliantly in their project, and in their truly Olympian aims.



Commemorative medal of the Athletics Centre of the Municipality of Ermoupolis