

## Stamata Revithi, “Alias Melpomeni”

When the International Olympic Committee decided to accept the proposal - and wish - of French Academy member M. Breal to include the Marathon run as an event in the first modern Olympic Games, held in 1896 in Athens, nothing at the time suggested that this would become the supreme athletic event.

As soon as it was announced that the athletes would compete in the strenuous historic run from Marathon to Athens, a distance of 40 kilometres, the interest of the entire world was awoken, and particularly that of the Greeks. For, this event was associated with the legend of the Athenian soldier who ran back to Athens following the Battle of Marathon to declare, in his famous last words, “We won!”.

Many were those who tried, both abroad and locally, to participate in this event. One was a Greek woman, who insisted she be permitted to participate in the classic race, braving the strong negative reaction of the organizing committee at the time.

Her name was Stamata (or Stamatia) Revithi; she was born in Syros and ran unofficially on Saturday, 30 March 1896, the exhausting 40-kilometre distance with a timing of 5 1/2 hours.

She was a poor woman, approximately thirty years old, though she looked much older. She was blond, prematurely wrinkled, with large bones and big, clever eyes that sought an escape from her great misery. She lived in Piraeus and had a 17-month-old child. That Christmas, she had lost her elder child, aged seven.

As mentioned in a publication from the time, she decided to leave

by Athanasios Tarasouleas\*

Piraeus and travel to Athens to seek better fortune. She had no money, so she decided to go on foot with her baby in her arms. On the way she met a young traveller who was going the same way “on a jaunt”. The young man looked at her strangely and said:

- Where to, woman?

- To Athens, Revithi replied.

- Why on foot, with your baby in your arms?

- Where should I find the fare? I have no money, was her sad answer.

- Run in the Marathon, advised the traveller, giving her some money.

From that moment, it became her sole ambition to run the Marathon. She was strong, and was convinced that she could not only succeed but indeed surpass many men. Yet she was intimidated: how could she run as the only woman?

Her plan became known, and when she heard from discussions among the people that an American woman temporarily residing in Athens also wanted to run, she presented herself to the organizing committee, and vigorously requested that they permit her to run the Marathon.

The committee used the excuse that the deadline had expired, and that as a result they could not accept her. Stamata Revithi then decided to run alone.

On the evening of the great Marathon run, Thursday, 28 March, almost all the participants were gathered in the small village of Marathon. At the Trophy of Miltiades inn, seven runners who would be participating in the run the next day waited together. Among them was Stamata Revithi, who had come in a cart and camped at the location where the run would start.

She soon became “the famous marathon runner” whom all the journalists wanted to see and talk with.

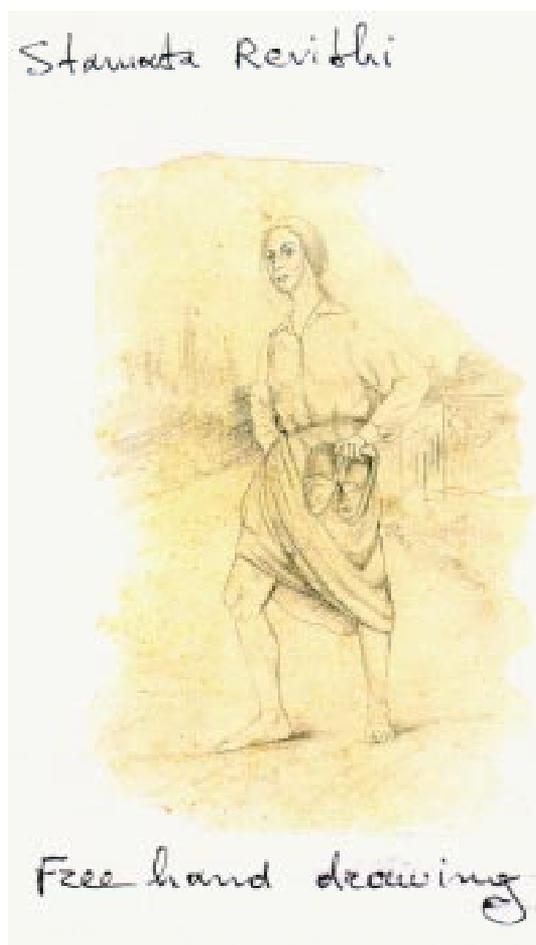
Even the village mayor, Mr Koutsoyannopoulos, extended his hospitality to her.

She was a vibrant, clever woman. Her eyes were shining when she answered the journalists’ questions:

- Will you run to Athens?

- I will compete. If the committee does not allow me to run with the other runners, I will follow behind.

- How long will it take you?



---

- Three and a half hours, she responded, and she immediately added:

- It may be even less. I saw in a dream that I had an apron full of gold and gilded sugared almonds! Who knows! My heart is in it, I suppose my feet will hold.

- I am afraid you may enter the Stadium when all the spectators have gone, teased a villager from Halandri who was also running the Marathon.

- Don't demean us women when you men have been demeaned by the Americans. snapped Revithi, and the runner was silenced.

Revithi said she would not eat the next day.

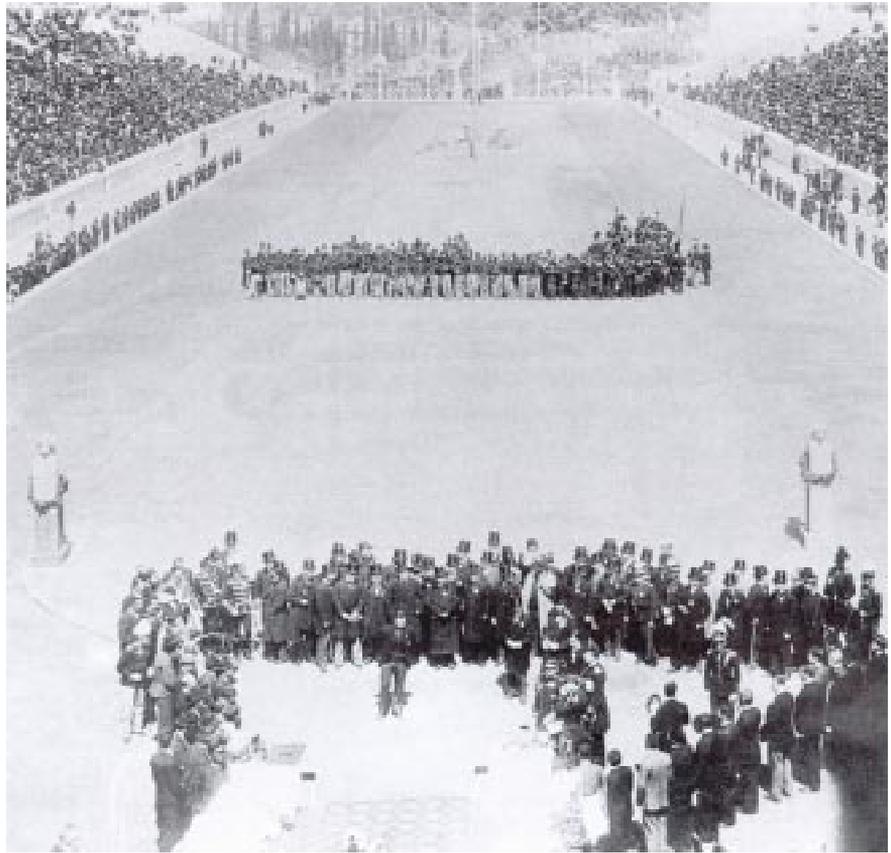
- Will you be able to hold out? asked the journalists.

- I will. So many nights I went without food while feeding my child! I had no bread to eat, I am poor.

Her sunken eyes had a wild look. She would run in her undergarment, lifted to her knees, with her hands at her waist. The people would be proud to see her. On the morning of Friday, 29 March 1896, Stamata Revithi asked the old priest of Marathon, Yanni Velioti, to read a prayer for her so that she would quickly reach the Stadium. The priest replied that he would be saying a prayer in the Church of Saint John. but only for the "official athletes".

In the end, Stamata Revithi did not join the male Marathon runners, following the suggestion of the committee, which had promised that she could compete the following Friday, together with a group of American women. That run, however, never took place.

Yet, on Saturday, 30 March 1896 at 8:00 a.m., Stamata Revithi was ready to run the Marathon alone. Before setting off, she recorded the time at which she started and this document was signed by the school master, the mayor and the magistrate of Marathon. She began in Marathon at 8:00 in the morning and "having run the entire route at a brisk pace" she arrived, perspiring and covered in dust.



*Opening Ceremony of the Olympic Games in Athens in 1896.*

at 1:30 p.m., at the "old shacks" (a location close to the present Evagelismos Hospital). There she met some officers, and asked them to sign the record, attesting to her time of arrival in Athens.

- Why did you run all that way and tire yourself? they asked.

- So that the king might award a position to my child. I am now going straight to Timoléon Philimon (the secretary general of the Greek Olympic Committee) to let him know how long it took me to run from Marathon, and tell him that whoever wishes may come to compete with me.

- Were you running quickly?

- You should have seen me! I stopped at various shops on the way. If I had run straight, I would have finished in three hours at the most. Now I'm going directly to Timoléon Philimon.

Having said that, she took up her shoes, which were falling apart, and barefoot she started on the way to Athens.

It can be concluded that Stamata Revithi unofficially completed the historic Marathon-Athens run during the first modern Olympic Games in 1896. From the research carried out concerning Stamata Revithi, who may also have used the name Melpomeni, we have discovered the following: the *Estia* newspaper of Saturday, 23 March 1896, refers to "the runner Mrs Revithi, the strange woman, who, having run a few days ago in the Marathon as a try-out, intends to compete the day after tomorrow. Today she came to our offices and said 'should my shoes hinder me, I will remove them on the way and continue barefoot'".

A journalist of that period refers to "the well-known marathon runner Mrs

---

Revithi”, so again we can conclude that Revithi ran the classic route of Marathon (quoted from *Estia* 23.03.1896 and *Asty* 30.03.1896). Moreover on 1 March 1896, a local newspaper indicated that a woman and her baby had registered to run the Marathon. Also the *Messageur d’Athènes* of 2 March 1896 wrote that “an active and determined woman made a trial run of the classic route early in March, without any stops except a momentary rest to eat a few oranges”. Unfortunately, the name of that woman is not mentioned anywhere. Much later, foreign sources confirmed that her name was Melpomeni, but all other evidence seems to indicate that this was in fact Stamata Revithi. How the name Melpomeni came about is not clear; perhaps Revithi had two names, or perhaps for reasons unknown she was attributed the name of the Muse Melpomeni.

Yet from the journalist’s description above, the unidentified woman’s characteristics are similar to Revithi’s, giving us further reason to believe that Stamata and Melpomeni were one and the same. The name Melpomeni is not mentioned in the press of that period, but the name Revithi appears many times (in the newspapers *Acropolis* 29.03 and 31.03, *Asty* 30.03 and 12.04, and *Estia* 23.03.1896).

The one unrefuted fact is that a Greek woman ran the Marathon unofficially on 30 March 1896, and her name was Stamata Revithi. Despite the reaction of the organizing committee and the unsupportive social environment of the period, this dynamic woman completed the Marathon in 5 hours and 30 minutes. The difficulty for women athletes at the time is echoed by the fact that a priest from Livadia, Spyros Matzakos, was also

prohibited from participating in the Marathon run, despite his repeated efforts. The *Estia* newspaper of 6 March 1896 informs us that not only was the athletic and speedy priest prohibited from competing, the Holy Synod instructed the Episcopal Commissary of Livadia to reprimand him as an example to others.

The unique achievement of the Greek female Marathon runner unfortunately did not meet with the international recognition it deserved. Much later, at the start of the new century, female athletics gradually emerged and the women’s athletic movement gained international recognition with surprising speed.

\*Member of the International Society of Olympic Historians (ISOH).