

THE FEMALE SPIRIDON LOUES

by Athanasios Tarasouleas

Some people may be interested in some forgotten facts of the 1896 Olympiad. It was reported at the time that a Greek woman attempted to run the Marathon on 29 March 1896 [10 April 1896 - Gregorian Calendar]. From newspapers of the period, I have been able to piece together information on this little-known fact. The newspaper *Acropoli* mentions the first Greek female marathon Stamata Revithi. Her efforts were also mentioned in *Asti*, *New Aristophanes*, and the New York paper, *Atlantida*. These papers' reports were used to complete a picture of the efforts of a Marathon pioneer.

Stamata came from Siro and lived in Piraeus. She had a child, just 17 months old. In Christmas 1895 she had lost her oldest child, who had been 7 years old. She was poor. She was thirty years old but looked much older. She was blonde, thin, with large eyes which pleaded for escape from her misery. It was reported that she tried to leave Piraeus to look for better luck in Athens. She had no money and tried to go to Athens by foot. This she did with her child in her arms.

On the road, she encountered a young runner from Athens who was running for pleasure. The surprised young man looked at her and asked, "Where are you going?"

"To Athens." replied the penniless Stamata.

"And why, by foot, with the child in your arms?"

"I can't buy a ticket, I haven't any money," she answered sadly.

"You should compete in the Marathon," the runner advised her while giving her some money with the invaluable advice.

From that moment the idea to run the Marathon stuck firmly in her mind. She was a good long distance runner and she strongly believed that she could beat many men. But she was a woman and she was shy. It was not proper for her to run unescorted.

On the eve of the Marathon run, Thursday 28 March, at the small village of Marathon, the "Trophy of Miltiadou" took place at the Inn at 4 PM. Seven runners had arrived and the race was to take place the next day. Among them was Stamata who had arrived by coach and had camped at the place where the race would start. She was the first that all the reporters wanted to see and interview. The mayor of the village, Mr. Koutsogiannopoulos, extended his hospitality to her.

She was very lively and quick-witted, her eyes gleaming as she answered the reporters questions.

"Are you going to run to Athens?"

"I am going to compete. What about you? If the committee doesn't let me compete I will go after them regardless."

"How long will it take you?"

"Three hours and 2/4," she answered, not wishing to say three and a half, and added, "Maybe quicker. I dreamed that they placed a golden prize in my lap. Who knows? My heart says I can do it as long as my legs will last."

"I am concerned that you'll get to the stadium when the crowds have left," teased a male runner from Chalandri.

"Don't insult us women. We have always been top women, while you men have been humiliated by the Americans," retorted Stamata and the runner did not say anymore.

“Stamata, if you will not eat anything tomorrow on the day of the race, will you survive?” asked the reporters.

“I’ll survive. For many nights I had nothing to eat and I was breast feeding my child. I had no bread to eat, I am poor,” her deep set eyes became aggressive. “She will run with her skirt raised to her knees and she will hide her hands at the middle. You will be proud of her when she reaches Athens from Marathon. It will be worth remembering.”

The morning of Friday, 29 March [10 April], Stamata asked the old priest of Marathon, Papagianni Velioti, to give her a blessing so that she could get to the stadium quickly. The priest said that he would only give his blessing at St. John to the officially recognized athletes.

In the end Stamata did not follow the runners of Marathon. She did not take part in the race after being pressured by the race committee. They had promised that she would compete with an American team in another race in Athens. She did not take part in that race either.

However, on Saturday, 30 March [11 April], at 8 AM, Stamata ran the Marathon course on her own. Before she started she thought it sensible for the teacher, the mayor and magistrate to witness the time she started and asked them to sign a hand-written report of the race. She ran the race at a steady pace and reached Parapigmata (the place where the Evangelismos Hospital stands today) at 1:30 PM [5½ hours] covered in sweat and dust from the road. There she met a few non-commissioned officers whom she asked to sign her hand-written report to certify her time of arrival in Athens.

“And why did you run such a long way to tire yourself,” they asked her.

“So that the King might give my child a position in the future. Now I’m going straight to Philimona (the General-Secretary of the Hellenic Olympic Committee) so that I can tell him how many hours it took me to run from Marathon and whoever wants can come to race against me.”

“Did you run strongly?”

“I stopped to look at some ships along the way. If I hadn’t stopped I would have gotten here in 3 hours. Now I’m going to Philimona.”

She took her wooden slippers in her hands and then ran barefoot from Parapigmata to Athens. The reports make it quite clear that Stamata Revithi completed the Marathon unofficially at the time of the First Olympic Games.

Here the trail of the first Greek woman to run the Marathon is lost. It is not known whether she met Philimona and if she found work. It must be emphasized that the days before the Marathon and the double triumph of Louis-Vasilakos would not wait for the time that history was brought to the present and that something of great importance to Greece and “the revival of athletics” and of the Olympic Games had been achieved. Stamata Revithi was lost in the dust of history.