

TWO WOMEN RAN THE MARATHON IN 1896

by Karl Lennartz

I read the article “The Female Spiridon Loues” by Athanasios Tarasouleas, whom I regard very highly. Unfortunately, he did not use all the known sources. As I was able to prove in 1984 (“Die erste Marathonläuferin - Melpomene” [“The first female marathon runners - Melpomene”] in *Condition* 15(2): 24-27, 1984.), there were two female marathon runners in 1896. This discovery was recently put to use by Noël Tamini (“Women always win in the Race,” in *Olympic Review*, 307: 204-208, 221, 1993.).

There are various sources and also discourses about the runners which are unknown to Tarasouleas. The first mention of them is in the supplement *Les Jeux Olympiques* of the *Messenger d'Athenes* of 14 March 1896 (2 March in the Julian calendar of the Greeks). This concerns a newspaper in French published in Athens which, between 8 February and 18 April 1896 in 15 supplements, contained many references to the preparations and to the Olympic Games of 1896 themselves. On 14 March under the heading, “A woman in the Marathon Race” it reads:

“On a parlé d'une femme qui s'est fait inscrire pour participer à la course de Marathon. Dans la course d'essai qu'elle a faite jeudi toute seule elle a mis quatre heures et demie pour parcourir l'espace (42 kilometres) qui sépare Marathon d'Athènes. Elle ne s'est arrêtée qu'une dixaine de minutes à moitié chemin pour sucer quelques oranges. C'est une femme du peuple aux traits prononcés, au temperament sec et nerveux.”

[“There was talk of a woman who had enrolled as a participant in the Marathon race. In the test run which she completed on her own on Thursday, she took 4½ hours to run the distance of 42 kilometres which separates Marathon from Athens. She stopped for about ten minutes half-way only to suck a few oranges. She is a woman of the people with marked features, of a tough and lively temperament.”]

According to this, the woman ran the distance from Marathon to Athens, supposedly on Sunday, 8 March, just as *Messenger d'Athenes* was reporting trial runs by Greek men. The news of these female marathon runners is then published word-for-word a few weeks later by the central European press - like many other pieces of Olympic information - by the German sports magazine *Sport im Bild* (2(13): 202, 1896), two days later by the Austrian *Allgemeine Sport-Zeitung* (35: 273, 1896). The chief editor of *Sport im Bild* was Kurt Dörry, a participant in the sprints in the 1896 Olympics, who mentions the event once again in an essay (“Von Athen bis Amsterdam” [“From Athens to Amsterdam”]), in *Der Leichtathlet* (4(42): 5, 1972).

The Hungarian founding member of the IOC, Franz Kemény, records the fact that she did not succeed in starting in his essay, “Die Bedeutung der olympischen Spiele für die körperliche Erziehung der Jugend” [“The significance of the Olympic Games for the physical education of young people”] in the *Zeitschrift für das Realschulwesen* (22(3/4): 20, 1896):

“In der That vollbrachte auch eine Dame, Fräulein Melpomene, den 40-km-Marathon-Lauf in 4½ Stunden und meldete sich zum Wettbewerbe, wurde jedoch von der Commission nicht zugelassen. Die *Akropolis* tadelt dieses Vorgehen, indem sie bemerkt, dass von den männlichen Concurrenten die Theilnahme gewiss niemand beanständet hätte.”

[“Indeed, a lady, Miss Melpomene, completed the 40 km. marathon race in 4½ hours and enrolled for the competition but was not permitted to run by the commission. The *Akropolis* criticized this action, stating that her participation would certainly not have been queried by the male competitors.”]

The name Melpomene is also confirmed by Alfred Hajós, two-time Olympic swim champion of 1896 and gold medalist in the architecture competition of the 1924 Olympics (“Erinnerungen eines Olympiasiegers” [“Memoirs of an Olympic Champion”], in *Olympisches Feuer*, 6(7): 19-20, 1956). However, he confuses the race at the beginning of March with the one 11 April about which Tarasouleas reports. Up until now I have unfortunately been unable to view the article in the *Akropolis*. Perhaps Tarasouleas could assist me with this.

In her lecture, “Women at the Olympics” at the 4th International Olympic Academy (*The International Olympic Academy*, pp. 108-109, Athens 1964.) the Hungarian sport historian Eva Földes described the story of Melpomene. She knew that the young woman had prepared for the race three weeks in advance. As I discovered during a conversation in 1989 with Ms. Földes, the Dean of the International Olympic Academy, Otto Szymiczek, had allowed her to see the article in the *Akropolis* in an Athens archive. However, she did not make a photocopy of it.

Stamata Revithi’s run has been mentioned recently in the biography *Spyros Loues* by Andreai Zankle, which appeared in 1972 in Athens on the occasion of Spiridon Loues’ 100th birthday. One chapter is headed, “A women runs Marathon,” and contains a copy of the article in the newspaper *Asti* from 12 April 1896. In 1979, Uriel Simri describes this event in *Women at the Olympic Games* (Netanya 1979, pp. 14-15) and finally, Volker Kluge describes it in his book *Meilenweit bis Marathon* (Berlin 1987, pp. 84-85). Kluge calls the woman “Stamasi Potrisi” (transcription error - ??). Simri and Kluge refer only to *Asti* whereas Tarasouleas names new sources in *Akropolis*, *New Aristophanes*, and *Atlantida* but unfortunately fails to include those dates.

From the available sources one can conclude at present the following:

- A young women named Melpomene wanted to run the race.
- She completed the distance in 4½ hours at the beginning of March.
- The newspaper *Akropolis* criticized the committee for not allowing her to run.
- The Olympic Marathon took place on 10 April [29 March] 1896.
- Stamata Revithi took 5½ hours to run the course on 11 April [30 March] 1896.
- The newspaper *Asti* and also *New Aristophanes* and *Atlantida* reported this on 12 April [31 March] 1896.