

# Georgios Averoff

## PATRON OF THE FIRST MODERN OLYMPIC STADIUM AND SPONSOR TO THE OLYMPIC MOVEMENT

by Wolfgang Decker & Karl Lennartz\*

Between the ISOH's board meeting and the attendance of the 7th International Session for Educators and Officials of Higher Institutes of Physical Education in the *International Olympic Academy* in Olympia from July 20 to 27 and the International Seminar on Sport, Nation and Nationalism by the ISHPES in Ljubljana from the 24th to the 27th of August 2006 we (that is Ingrid and Karl LENNARTZ) were on holiday with our camper in Northern Greece. One of the sights we visited was Metsovo, a little town in the mountains. We knew from the guidebook that this was the birthplace of Georgios Averoff. We wondered whether there would still be traces of him, so we were sent to the so-called *Averoff Pinacothèque*, a picture gallery sponsored generously by a foundation of the AVEROFF family. It houses, amongst other objects, three paintings showing the patron, one by Spiridon PROSALENTIS from 1874, one by Pavlos PROSALENTIS from 1888 and one by Konstantinos PATHENES from 1896. The gallery is rich in paintings from the time of the liberation wars, the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, amongst them works by Nikolaos GYZIS and Nikolaos LYTRAS. We also found a beautiful portrait by Georgios IAKOBIDES from 1915 showing Queen SOPHIA, whose husband CONSTANTINE was the secretary general of the organizing committee in 1896 and 1906. The king himself had been portrayed by Panos ARABANTINOS. We bought the museum catalogue by Demetris PAPASTAMOS, [*Pinakotheka Averof*, Metsovo 1991, Psychiko 1999] and Giolanta CHATZE [*Georgios Averoff. Von Metsovo nach Alexandria*, Psychiko 1999] In this richly illustrated volume there is a detailed biography of the first important Olympic sponsor.

Back home I showed the literature to my colleague Wolfgang DECKER, a declared expert on Greek history (ancient and modern), who has published a number of standard works in this field and who also speaks Modern Greek among many other languages. He was prepared to compose a biography of AVEROFF and to translate some bits from the book on AVEROFF.



Georgios Averoff. Oil Painting by Sp. Prosalentis (Salomou-Prokopiou, Alike (ed.), Athens 1896. I International Olympic Games, Athens 2004, p. 67)

### Financing of the Panathenian Stadium

While, when referring to the first Olympic Games, people always mention AVEROFF'S generous financial support for the building of the stadium, they rarely mention that the Games could probably not have taken place at all without his contribution. The Greek government objected to the Games because the country was basically insolvent and under European Supervision of Banking. COUBERTIN went to Greece and prepared several budgets in an act of near desperation, which revealed his helplessness. The first organizing committee sank into inaction. It was only the successful appeal for funds which made the Games possible. Georgios RHOMAS had the idea to send Timoleon PHILEMON,

the Secretary General of the Greek committee, to Alexandria in order to ask the rich businessman and patron, who lived there, for a donation. Crown Prince CONSTANTINE, the President of the organizing committee, supported the idea. By then, AVEROFF had already financed the building of the Polytechnicum and of the cadet school in Athens, and for the youth prison, the Gymnasion and the Lyceum in Alexandria he had provided handsome sums. He first accepted a sum of 500.000 gold drachmas for the marble interior of the Olympic

\* Translated into English by Javier Kolland

Stadium. AVEROFF'S contribution started things going. More renowned sponsors followed, and the idea of the first sport stamps and the approval of a lottery nearly rounded it all off: The Games could be held. Later the sales of commemorative medals and admission tickets ensued. But Averoff was cautious. In order to make sure that the money was only used for the building of the stadium, he required three people he could trust, A. PAPAGOS, Th. LYMPRITIS and Alex. AMPELAS, to form a kind of audit panel within the stadium committee.

The organizing committee knew how to reciprocate for AVEROFF'S contribution properly. The sculptor Georgios VROUTOS, professor for sculpture at the Polytechnicum, was commissioned to create a lifesize statue of AVEROFF made of pentelic marble. On April 5 (March 24, in Greece the Julian Calendar was used until 1923), the day before the Games started, a statue of AVEROFF was inaugurated at the entrance of the stadium under the eyes of all the visitors - however, only few of the teams were present. Secretary General PHILEMON, Crown Prince and President of the *Philhellenic Society of Athens*, whose patron was AVEROFF, gave the speeches. The chef-de-mission of the Hungarian team, Ferenc KÉMENY, laid a wreath for his team. A copy of the monument can be seen at the entrance of the cemetery near the stadium, where one can also find the tomb of the first IOC President Demetrios VIKELAS. When at the Games' opening ceremony CONSTANTINE gave a short speech for the king, he mentioned the "patriot and noble thinker" AVEROFF. The king followed his son's example at the closing banquet:

*"In like manner, I shall also express my and the people's thanks to the great benefactor of our fatherland, George Averoff, who has again, as he did in other occasions, donated generously for the rebuilding of the stadium, and who has proven to be a second Herodes Atticus and has, above all, contributed to the success of the venture. (cheerings for Averoff)."*

Due to the harsh winter the stadium could not be finished. Only the front six rows were made of pentelic marble. The rest was made of wood. In his will, AVEROFF, who died in 1899, donated more money for the complete construction, which was not accomplished until 1905. In 1906, the Second International Olympics took place in the same stadium as it still exists today.

It may safely be stated that in the beginnings of the Olympic movement Averoff played a role just as important as COUBERTIN. The baron had had the idea of holding international Olympic Games. AVEROFF'S financial contribution made it possible. This is why his biography, too, should be commented on in more detail.



**Averoff's Statue in Athens. During the most recent Olympic Games this was half hidden behind Athens 2004 banners (Photo: Th. Zawadzki, 2004)**

### His Biography

AVEROFF was born on the 15th of August 1818 in Metsovo, a big village on the mountains of Pindus, which are inhabited by Vlachs, whose main occupation was goat and sheep breeding at that time. Still today, the Vlachs also speak, apart from Greek, their own language with a Latin origin. In the year 1821 the Greek struggle for freedom began after centuries of foreign rule, which ended in 1832 with the founding of free Greece.

In 1840 AVEROFF went to Cairo, where his brother Anastasios had been working as a businessman for many years. The basis of Georgios AVEROFF'S riches was the return cargo of a date ship to Odessa, which chiefly consisted of gold threads, which, being used for the making of festive dresses on the occasion of the forthcoming wedding of the Pasha of Egypt, had a high market value.

When during the American Civil War from 1861 to 1865 the cotton trade with Europe stagnated, Georgios AVEROFF brought a substitute from Egypt, and thanks to the clever transactions of huge amounts of this much sought-after product he became an immensely rich businessman.

In the year 1885 he became the president of the Greek community in Alexandria, which was at that time the most important Greek community outside the home country. Foundations in Alexandria: Gymnasion, which bears the name of Georgios AVEROFF, lyceum, renovation of a Greek hospital.

AVEROFF died on the 15th of July 1899.

### Letter to Louis

Georgios Averoff took a great interest in the implementation of the first Olympic Games. The day after Spyros Louis' marathon victory he wrote him a fairly laudatory letter:

*Alexandria, 11/23 April 1896*

*Mr Louis,*

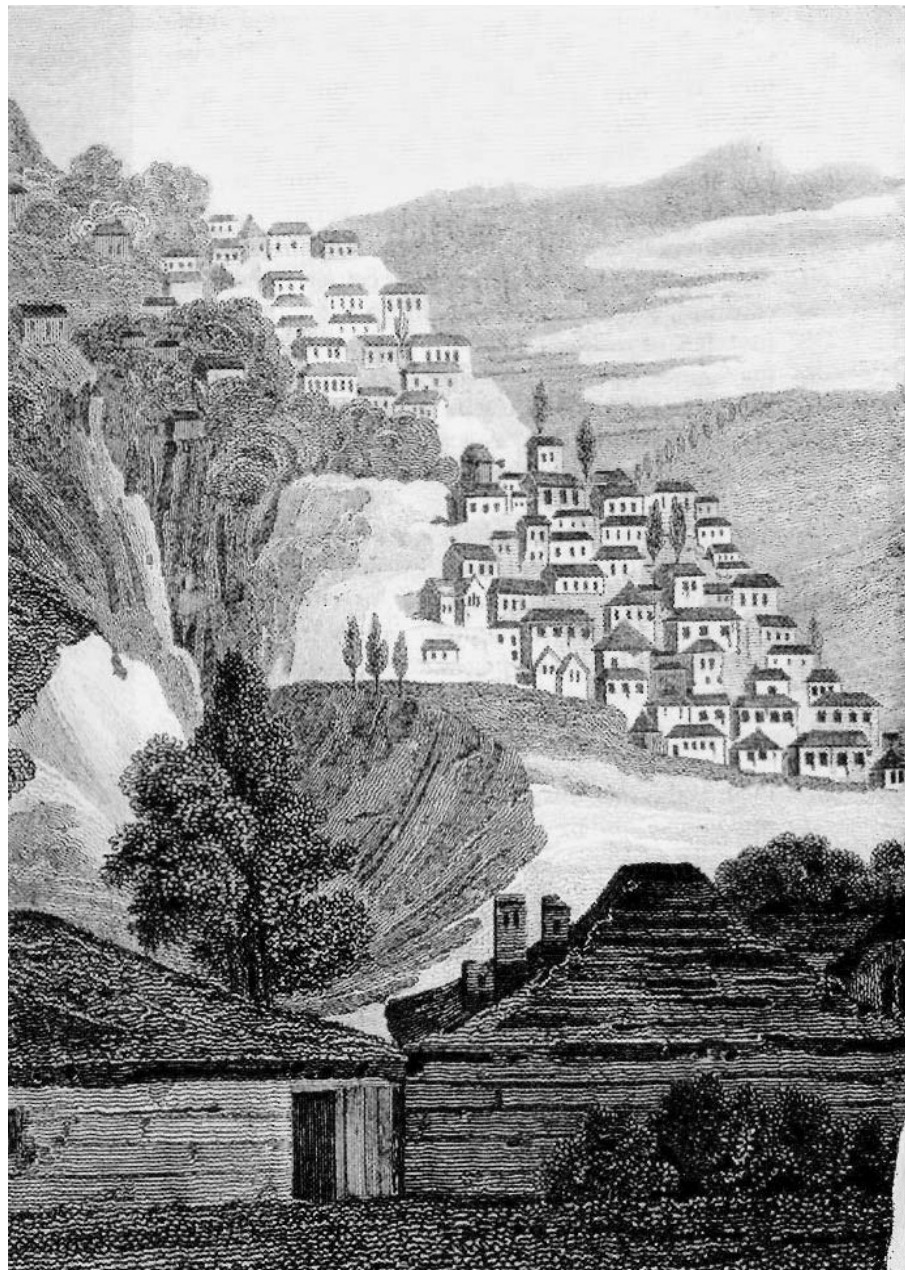
*I thank you with all my heart for the pleasant news which you wired me, the news about your victory in the marathon. While the revival of the Olympic Games represents a honorary tribute to ancient Greece, a cultural achievement for all mankind, contributing to the fraternization of the peoples, the marathon has an exclusively Greek significance. It commemorates the no-*

*ble struggles of the Greek people against the barbarians, the surprising victory of the Athenians over tens of thousands of Asian hordes.*

*This accounts for the emotion which made the Greeks' hearts beat faster, wherever they were scattered in the world. Wherever they are, they pursued the marathon runner in spirit, animated with the hope that a Greek might become the victor of this competition.*

*You attained this noble goal for the (Greek) people. Through your person the Greeks could be proud of their victory.*

*The noble Athenian Marathon fighter has found in you, who are also an Athenian, a worthy successor. Honour and glory and eternal tribute (to you) from the whole state.*



*While sharing the general joy and the cheering, I am also as a Greek proud of your noble achievement. With all my heart, I wish you a "We won" by wire, which may serve as a messenger of beautiful auspices for the Marathon of our fatherland, which, victorious after the fight, may fulfil our national dreams.*

*Yours,*

*G. Averoff*

### **His will**

AVEROFF documented his important role as a patron in his will, which he wrote four months before his death.

### **Testament:**

1. *Metsova*
  - a. free medicine for all inhabitants
  - b. dowry for destitute girls
  - c. donations for the poor at Christmas and Easter
  - d. maintenance of the schools, streets and [...] of Metsova and surroundings
  - e. founding of a public library
  - f. building of water conduits, bridges, wells, streets
  - g. renovation of the St. Paraskevi church
  
2. *Greek community in Alexandria*
  - a. estates,
  - b. high sums of money for the stabilization of the Greek community
  
3. *Foundations for the benefit of the Greek state*
  - a. destroyer (141 m long, 21 m wide, built in 1910, 10,000 tons, still anchored in Phalero)
  - b. replacement of the ship when out of use
  - c. [...] of the agricultural faculty in Larissa
  - d. completion of the marble interior of the Panathenian Stadium.
  - e. dramatics and numismatic contest "Averophilos" in the Odeion in Athens with prizes and scholarships for cathedral
  - f. accomplishment of the construction of the Metsovo Polytechnio (technical university) in Athens
  - g. distribution of prizes and scholarships for the best students of the academy of arts
  - h. foreign exchange scholarships for the best students
  - i. acquisition of precious works of art for the creation of a picture gallery in the Polytechnion under the name of "Averoff Pinacothèque". Handover of the 80 paintings from his house to the gallery.



**Metsovo - Georgios Averoff's home town**