

I Had the Cup of Spiridon Louis in my Hand

By Karl Lennartz



Victory ceremony on 15 April 1896 in the Athens Panathenaic Stadium, carried out by King George I. A table bearing the prizes can be seen in front of the Sphendone, the Royal Box. Next to the prizes for Spiridon Louis is the silver bowl presented by Prince George and awarded to the American triple jump winner James Connolly. Far right: the Bréal Cup before being auctioned at Christie's.

When Spiridon Louis won the Marathon at the first Olympic Games in 1896 in Athens, he received three prizes: the cup presented by Michel Bréal, a silver cup from King George I and an antique bowl from Ioannis Lambros, who acted as referee at the Games. In addition, his admirers presented him with a whole range of other gifts.

Probably the most welcome gift was that the parents of Helena Kontoi (d. 1935) gave their consent for him to marry their daughter. The farmer's daughter, who had the promise of a substantial dowry, was marrying a poor peasant who had become a popular hero through his Olympic Marathon victory.

After Louis' death, the King's Cup came into the possession of his son Ioannis (1900–1954). Volker Kluge saw it in 1975 at the home of his widow and grandchildren. His daughter-in-law Chrisula also owned Louis's winner's medal. But where is the King's Cup today? Its whereabouts today remain a mystery, nor do we know what has happened to the antique bowl.

What can be found out about the Marathon race and the Bréal cup, which was auctioned at *Christie's* as Lot 32 for £160,000 in April 2012 and sold for the astonishing sum of £541,250 (\$958,423)?

When the founding Olympic Congress at the Sorbonne in 1894 resolved to stage the first Games in 1896 in Athens,

Michel Bréal, who was a researcher into antiquity, wrote a letter to Pierre de Coubertin. The decisive part of this four-page document of 15 September 1894 ran: "As you are going to Athens, please see if a race can be organised from Marathon to the Pnyx [a hill in Athens on which the popular assemblies in antiquity took place]. That would have an antique character. If we knew the time the Greek warrior took, we could classify it as a record. For my part I would undertake to donate a 'Marathon Cup'."

As Bréal was aware of the Olympic "pecking order", he informed IOC President Demetrius Vikelas of his proposal.

Louis is invited to the Berlin Games

In 1934 the IOC met in Athens and agreed to Carl Diem's proposal to carry out a torch relay from Olympia to Berlin. An olive branch was to be passed from one man to the next. It quickly became clear that not much of the branch would reach its destination after 3200 km. It was agreed that instead of that a flame would be lit and carried by means of torches to Berlin. The branch would be transported by air.

After the lighting of the torch at the Altis in Olympia, Louis was supposed to be the first torchbearer, but that came to nothing. Was he unable to carry it because of his age?

According to Professor Liselotte Diem, whose husband Carl organised the Games, the Greek made an impression on her of being very old and overburdened. Thereupon he was invited by the Berlin Organising Committee as a guest of honour. Dressed in the traditional fustanella, he was first to march into the stadium at the opening of the Games at the head of the Greek team. Louis's great entrance followed the lighting of the Olympic Flame by the final German runner Fritz Schilgen.

The "original soundtrack" from the *Olympia-Zeitung* demonstrates best how a sporting legend was manipulated to reflect Nazi ideology: "Spiridon Louis separates himself from his Greek comrades. In his hand is the simple olive twig from the grove at Olympia. Forty years ago he won the first Marathon race. Today he brings the patron of the XI Games greetings from his homeland. Who can measure the greatness of the life of a sportsman, whose magnificent perfection we all share today! The 'Führer' rises, next to him his deputy, Reichsminister Dr. Frick and Field Marshall Blomberg. The Greek Marathon victor stands eye to eye with Adolf Hitler. A few words in greeting, the noble bow of a peasant, the pride on the countenance of Adolf Hitler. The most beautiful moment in the opening celebration is over ..."

The photos went round the world, and the dictator had his triumph – to be celebrated as the "prince of peace".

The myth of Spiridon Louis

At the time press and publicity created a great fuss about Louis. When it became known that the Organising Committee was going to invite him, some German journalists flew to Athens in early summer to interview him in his home village of Marousi. That had the advantage that we found out a lot more details about the 1896 Marathon race and the life of Spiridon Louis. In particular an article by C. W. Rudolph in the Magdeburg Sport-Telegramm proves today to be an important source.

Included in it are the many little stories "written by life": thus it could be learned that the inhabitants of the village collected money in 1936 for a richly embroidered fustanella so that Louis could appear well-dressed in Berlin.

As the Greek Olympic Committee could not expect him to fly, he travelled to Berlin by sleeper. Once arrived in Berlin, he did however have an aerial round trip over the city. That pleased him so much that he decided to fly back to Athens.

As rations for the journey he had taken along a small cask of retsina which was emptied by the time he got to Berlin. For that reason the German airline Lufthansa brought a second cask to him in Berlin. According the account of another episode he is supposed to have acquired a grey suit so as to walk through the city incognito. He did not enjoy constantly giving autographs.

Even in 1896 photos were being produced which supposedly depicted Louis. In the absence of the original, who was celebrating his part in Olympic history in Marousi with his family and friends, some clever photographers had used a double. Even after his death in 1940, further attempts were made to capitalise on his name. Thus, a type of wine was named after him, though this was forbidden by his family.



In 1955 the community collected money for a grave of honour into which the Olympic champion was to be re-interred. In connection with the ceremony a memorial race was organised from Marathon to Marousi. In 1963 a manufacturer commissioned a sculptor to produce a bust of Louis, which he donated to his birthplace. Initially it stood in the town hall, then in a sports hall, later at a crossroads and since 1977 behind the old town hall. In Marousi there is a Louis School, and the street in which his old house stood until 1990 is called Louis Way. Volker Kluge visited the sites commemorating Louis on three occasions – 1975, 1982 and 1997 – and found a tavern in Marousi that belonged to Georgios Louis, a grandson. Shortly before the 1982 European Athletics Championships the family, exploiting the sport and running boom, offered the winner's medal for sale. The Greek government acquired it and also produced commemorative gold coins bearing his portrait to mark the championships.

For a while, the medal was put on display at the new Olympic Stadium in Athens. By 1989 it had been hidden away in a drawer when the author asked to see it.

From my 1989 diary: visit to Louis's family

Over the last 40 years, distance running has enjoyed an upsurge in popularity and with it has come a greater interest in the memory of Louis. From February 1972 to June 1989 the running magazine *Spiridon* appeared in Switzerland in French. At the beginning of 1975 Ernst van Aaken and Manfred Steffny took over a German magazine bearing the title and Steffny continues to publish this monthly to this day. Everywhere in Western Europe Running clubs and organisations were founded

Besides the award from the French philologist Michel Bréal, Louis received a silver cup from the Greek King as well as an antique bowl, the latter donated by the judge Ioannis Lambros and showing the distance runners. To date, it has not been possible to find out where these trophies are.

throughout Western Europe using the name *Spiridon*. There are T-shirts and stickers with this name. In 1960, the Haitian post office issued a stamp which bore his portrait for the first time.

A street in the Olympiapark was named after him at the 1972 Games in Munich. The 2004 Olympic Stadium in Athens also bears his name.

In May 1989 the author took part in a session of the International Society for Sports History, and used the opportunity to visit a branch of the Louis family. Here is an extract from my diary:

"In Marousi – a very popular suburb – we stood around rather helplessly, Andreas Höfer from the Institute for Sports History of the Deutsche Sporthochschule in Cologne, Heiner Gillmeister, the well-known tennis historian, and I. The town hall was closed. We asked for directions to Louis's house of birth. Baffled head-shaking! An old lady who spoke a little broken English and French pulled us a few metres on into a sidestreet. We made out 'Louis Way' on the street sign. Then she showed us a tiny little hut, tiled and made of clay, which stood in a ramshackle fashion between three-storey houses: the birth house! Was that it?

In 1989 Karl Lennartz visited the descendants of the Olympic Marathon champion in Marousi, where he photographed the then ten-year-old great-grandson Manuel (right) with the Bréal Cup.



breath and my hands shook a little, now that I was literally at the source – *ad fontes*, as the historians say. The cup had of course acquired something of a patina and was slightly damaged at the base. It is about 25 cm in height. The inscription was clearly legible: 'Olympic Games 1896, Marathon race, donated by Michel Bréal'. But that was not all! Next Mrs. Louis brought out a big chest, in which were almost all the important documents about Louis like certificates, newspaper articles, invitations, commemorative medals, as well as the invitation to the Olympic Games of 1936 and even the entry tickets. She showed us two large carefully framed pictures: Louis running into the stadium and – let us not omit it – the photo in which Louis is handing over an olive twig to Hitler. The manipulation of a great sportsman by a dictator!

The Louis family were reluctant to let us go so quickly. We met the great-granddaughter and two further great-grandchildren; we had to visit the house and received something to drink and a snack. Greek hospitality in abundance! The youngest great-grandson, Manuel, is a slim lad of about ten. Andreas Höfer made the suggestion, certainly worth discussing, that if the Games were held in Athens in 1996 he should carry the torch on the last leg."

A few years later I spoke to the IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch about this. He encouraged me to fly to Athens and buy the Bréal cup for the Olympic Museum. He could not however tell me precisely how much I was permitted to offer. Perhaps I should have followed it up.

Now the family has had the cup auctioned. It went to the foundation of the rich shipbuilder family Niarchos, which intends to exhibit this most valuable trophy in Olympic history in a new building. I remain of the view that the cup belongs in the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, so that it is generally accessible. But at least it remains in Greece. ■



Our helper however took us a street farther on and shouted a few Greek words into a house. A woman of about seventy appeared, who however only understood Greek, and a very young and pretty black haired girl, who spoke very good English. This, as it turned out, was the great-granddaughter, Katharina Louis. She translated for the old lady, who was introduced to us as Eutychia Louis. She is the only surviving daughter-in-law of the 1896 Olympic champion. To start with the people who spoke to were a little monosyllabic. As time went on they realised our honest intentions and we were invited into the house. Suddenly Mrs. Louis took a plastic bag out of her cupboard and pulled out ... the old silver cup, presented by Michel Bréal. I caught my