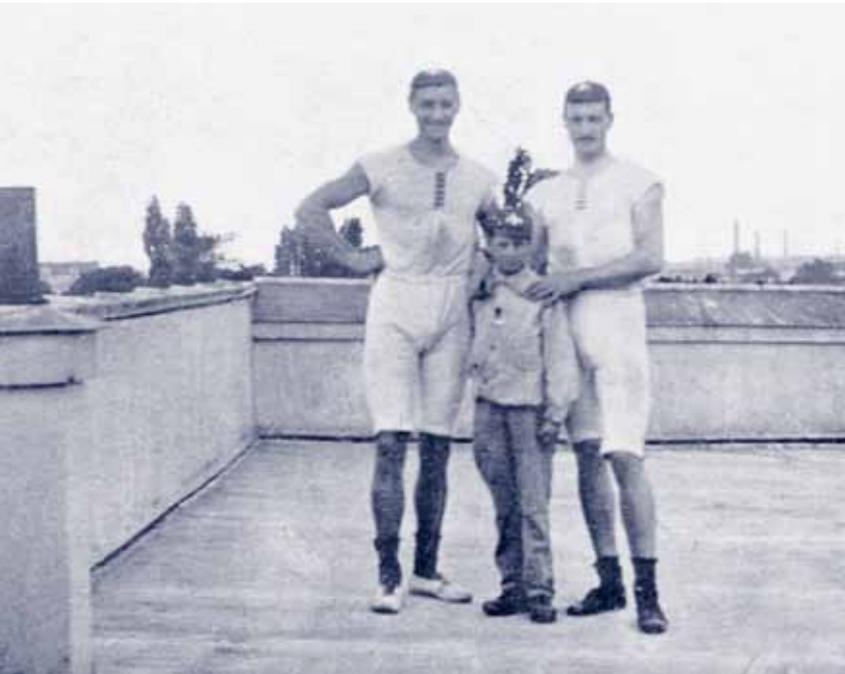


Was the “Unknown French Boy” in 1900 actually from Georgia?

By Paata Natsvlishvili



The Dutch oarsman François Brandt and Roelof Klein with their “gamin” who steered them to Olympic victory in 1900 in Paris.

Photo: Anthony Th. Bijkerk Archive

The photograph shows two Dutch rowers with a small coxswain between them. They are Olympic champions in 1900 in Paris. For a long time, the little boy has been considered the youngest Olympic competitor and has gone down in the annals as the “Unknown French boy”. To this day, no one has been able to establish his identity.

By the time I first saw this photograph, the Georgian Professor Rusudan Nikoladze was no longer alive. When I visited her in 1978, she had casually mentioned that her brother Giorgi had won a boat race in France as a young boy. I did not pay too much attention to this at the time. In fact we spoke more about their father, Niko, and I listened with bated breath to the stories she recounted.

Niko Nikoladze had been a renowned journalist and diplomat, as well as a political and public figure. His book *La Presse de Décadance*¹ has remained popular to this day along with his other works and essays published in Georgian, Russian, and French. For a number of years, he was editor-in-chief and publisher of several Georgian and Russian newspapers and magazines. He was also a member of the National Council and Parliament of the First Republic of Georgia,

which existed from 1918 to 1921. He had been co-founder of the Georgian Democratic Party and became its honorary chairman. He was also appointed member of the mission of the Georgian Republic to Western Europe.

His international outlook had been clear from the 1870s when he had proved instrumental in sending a number of talented Georgian women to Switzerland to further their studies at various universities. Amongst these was his future wife Olga Guramishvili. The pair had three children:

Rusudan (1884–1981) – professor at Tbilisi State University, head of the Chair of Non-organic and General Chemistry at the Polytechnic Institute of Georgia.

Giorgi (1888–1931) – mathematician, metallurgist, statesman, public figure, and outstanding athlete and sports organiser; professor at Tbilisi State University.

Tamar (1892–1939) – physiologist, professor at the Pedagogical Institute of Georgia, the first Georgian female athlete to participate in international sports competitions.

It was in the autumn of 1978 that I had got to know Rusudan Nikoladze through Aleksandre Sigua, a journalist and literary scholar. He had read my article about her brother Giorgi in the *Martve* sports magazine and telephoned me to say that he liked the piece and was struck by the title: “Professor in Shorts”. The first paragraph of that article read as follows:

Giorgi Nikoladze somewhat resembles the ancient demigods who were both scholars and poets, farm labourers and philosophers, warriors and Olympic champions.²

The words “Olympic champions” were used rather figuratively at the time, but now, 35 years later, they may well be more accurate than I realised at the time.

Soon after my article was published, I received a call from Aleksandre Sigua to say that Rusudan Nikoladze



Paata Natsvlishvili | *1952. Ph.D in Social Studies. Professor of Grigol Robakidze University (Tbilisi, Georgia). Member of ISOH, IFJ and AIPS. Founding Member of Georgian NOC. In 1989–1996 served as its Vice-President. Editor-in-Chief of *Olimpieli* (Olympian) – journal of Georgian NOC. He started his research in Olympic studies in 1979 and published number of books on the topic since then, monumental 5-volume edition of his Olympic writings among them.

had read it and was interested in meeting me. She told me that Giorgi had been a multitalented sportsman: mountain climber, gymnast, ice-skater, cyclist who had toured Europe, and the winner of a "boat" race in France when still a young boy. At the time, this did not strike me as anything out of the ordinary because she appeared to have listed the sporting interests and achievements with which I was already familiar. But I was later proved wrong.

He won a boat race in France when still a young boy! Rusudan Nikoladze spoke of this in such a matter of fact way because she deemed her brother's other accomplishments to be greater successes and far more noteworthy than that victory in France. As a result, she never gave any special emphasis to the 'boat' race.

Regrettably, I had not seen the photo at the time I spoke to her. It was only much later when the Georgian NOC was set up and I was appointed its Vice-President that I learnt more about the episode. But as time passed and as I became more familiar with the Olympic history, I began to associate those words with one of the most mysterious and unresolved episodes of the early Games.

A young boy won a boat race in France

ISOH president David Wallechinsky wrote about the coxed pairs event in the 1900 Olympics:

This event was the source of one of the modern Olympics' most enduring mysteries: Who is the youngest person ever to compete in the Olympics?

François Brandt and Roelof Klein had expected to win the championship with ease and were surprised when they were beaten by 8.6 seconds in their qualifying heat by the team of Martinet and Waleff. However, the reason for their loss was clear. Whereas the Dutch pair used a normal coxswain, Dr. Hermanus Brockmann, who weighed 60 kilograms (132 pounds), the French teams all used children as coxes. For the final, the Dutch decided that they would have to do the same. They found a local boy who had been discarded by the French because he was too heavy (33 kilograms – 72¾ pounds). After putting their new cox in their boat, Brandt and Klein found that he was too light to force the rudder underwater, so they attached a 5-kilo lead weight to the rudder. [...]

The young French cox stayed around long enough to be photographed with his new Dutch friends, but then he vanished into the city.³

The 1900 Games were the longest and most debated in modern history. They were held as part of the Paris World Exhibition and lasted some five and a half months. The term "Olympic Games" was replaced with "Concours nationaux et internationaux d'exercices physiques et de sports" (National and International



Competitions of Physical Exercises and Sports). Former ISOH President Bill Mallon gave this assessment of the Paris Games in his monograph:

The 1900 Olympics was poorly organized, almost chaotic. Years later, many of the competitors had no idea that they had actually competed in the Olympics.⁴

The World Exhibition completely engulfed the sports contests, now called the Games of the Second Olympiad. It has been a headache for the IOC and Olympic historians and statisticians with no remedy in sight. It has proved impossible to this day to definitively establish which of the sports events belonged to the Olympic programme and which did not.

The rowing competitions were held on the River Seine at the Bassin d'Asnières-Courbevoie on 25th and 26th August 1900. Representatives of eight countries took part in these. None of them had any idea that they were participating in the Olympic Games.

According to Mallon's researches, the coxed pairs final was held on 26th August 1900. Seven crews took part, five of whom were French, one Dutch and one Belgian. The eventual winners, the Dutch, were defeated in the three-boat heat by the French crew of the Société Nautique de la Marne but they nevertheless advanced to the final as runners up. The Dutchmen François Brandt and Roelof Klein along with cox Hermanus Brockmann made up their crew in the heat. In the final, however, they replaced Brockmann with the "Parisian" boy.

The names are known of all eight oarsmen in the four crews which contested the final. Of the four coxes, only the identity of one is known and even then the information is incomplete – Paoli, the cox of the third-placed crew from the Rowing Club Castillon. It is possible that he might have been Raoul Lucien Paoli, an athlete, wrestler, and rugby player, who is listed in Mallon's and Ture Widlund's 1912 book as a shot putter and wrestler.⁵ It is thought that he also took part in the athletics

The Nikoladze family: Niko and Olga with their children Rusudan, Giorgi and Tamar. Below: Giorgi Nikoladze as an ice-skater in St. Petersburg, ca. 1906.

Photo: Paata Natvlishvili Archive



competitions from 1920 to 1928. There is no proof of this. By the way, Raoul Lucien Paoli was born on 24th November 1887. On the day of the rowing final in 1900, he would have been 12 years and 276 days old.

A Dutch cox is exchanged

Let us return to the 1900 competition. Apart from the limited information about Paoli, nothing survives regarding the other three coxes who competed in the coxed pairs final with the exception of a rather faded photograph and the knowledge that they were all young boys. The "Dutch" cox, however, remains of particular significance for the history of the Olympic Games because, unlike his French counterparts, he won the final and secured the title of Olympic champion. Furthermore, it is the view of Olympic historians and statisticians, that he may be probably the youngest Olympic champion ever!



Final in the coxed pairs race held on 26th August 1900 in the Seine basin between Courbevoie and Asnières.

Photo: Anthony Th. Bijkerk Archive, La Vie au Grand Air

Former ISOH General Secretary Anthony Th. Bijkerk has dedicated more than half a century to resolving this conundrum, and while he was unable to establish the identity of the boy, he nevertheless managed to uncover quite a lot of information about him. He was the first to express reasonable doubt that the "unknown French boy" was not the youngest Olympic participant. It was also he who, in 1960, discovered the photograph. This was to become such a headache for so many researchers of the history of the Olympics.

Bijkerk wrote three articles on this subject in the *Journal of Olympic History*.⁶ In the first of these that appeared in 1997, he begins by citing Kamper and Mallon who estimate the coxswain's age at between 7 and 10.⁷ He assumes that they based this on the photograph showing a small boy standing between two Dutch giants. Bijkerk wrote that he would probably have been aged between 12 and 14. To support this, he refers to the memoirs of François Antoine Brandt published on the 50th anniversary of his Rowing Club.⁸ They carry

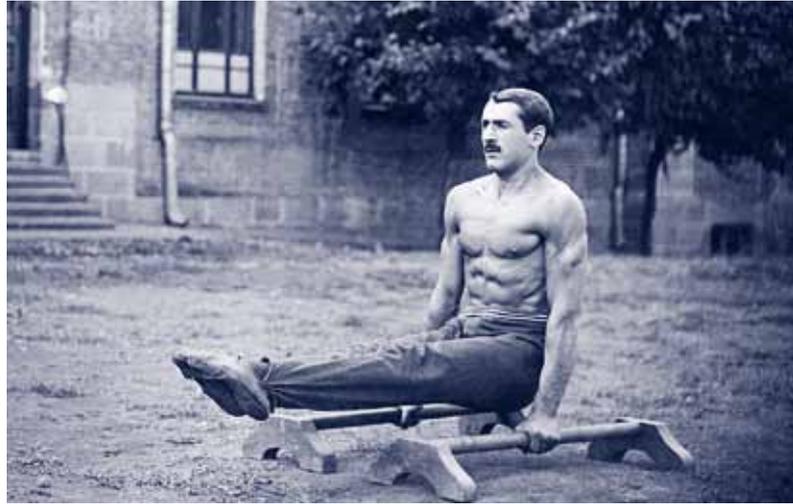
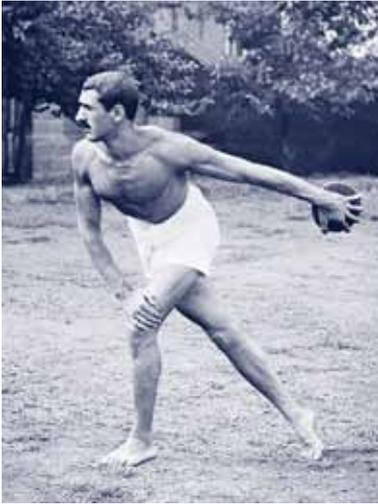
the photograph of the coxswain, who is mentioned in Brandt's article under the French designation "gamin" together with both rowers.

In his memoirs, Brandt reported with a tinge of sadness that, although better prepared and stronger than their opponents, they were beaten by several lengths in the semi-finals by the Société Nautique de la Marne. He believed that the reason for their defeat lay in the fact that the conditions of the race were unequal because the French rowers used children as coxes and replaced them as soon as their weight reached 25 kilos. The Dutch, on the other hand, had as their coxswain the experienced Dr. Hermanus Brockmann but he weighed 60 kilos. Brandt wrote that, as soon as they learned that they had got through to the final as the fastest losers, their trainer, Dr. R.J.Th. Meurer, discussed the weight issue with representatives of the Dutch Minerva Rowing Club and it was decided that they too should search for a boy as cox. Brandt and Klein found such a boy.



He weighed 33 kilos, but when he sat in the boat, the rudder remained above the surface of the water and so they had to add an additional 5-kilo lead weight to make it sink it to the required level. The boy had already had some experience as a cox, having practised with the rowers of the Société de la Basse-Seine.⁹

No matter when the Dutch found the boy – whether it was during the heats, the semi-finals, or on the day of the final – it is hard to imagine that they would not have ascertained at least his first name. He clearly did not disappear immediately after the race and stayed to have his photo taken with the crew. The fact that they used an additional weight leads us to suppose that they managed to hold a training session together and the fact that Brandt was unable or unwilling to recall the boy's name can give rise to various interpretations: For instance, that the boy was inexperienced, which would be a reason for not allowing him to participate in the race, although the Dutch needed to prove their advantage at any cost.



Who was Giorgi Nikoladze?

Provided that my thesis is true, that the boy was my compatriot Giorgi Nikoladze, it might be interesting to find out more about him.

He was born on 29th July 1888. It was his parents who had the greatest influence on him. They did not spare any effort in assisting him to develop his natural gifts to the maximum. In his native village of Didi Jikhaishi, Giorgi's mother raised him in a spartan manner. He was always ahead of his peers in running, gymnastics, weight throwing, swimming, and archery.

In 1898, he became a pupil of the Tbilisi First Gymnasium where he showed a keen interest in physics, mathematics, and gymnastics. At that time, the high school was renowned for gymnastics run by the famous Czech athlete, Anton Lukeš, follower of Miroslav Tyrš, founder of the "Sokol" gymnastics system. In 1899, Giorgi was already regularly taking part in schools' sports competitions. There then followed a lengthy period of travel. In 1900 together with his parents and sisters, he toured Europe, visiting Moscow, Berlin, Vienna, Geneva, and Paris.

We need to ascertain that:

1. Giorgi Nikoladze was between 7 and 12 years of age in 1900. On 26th August he would have been 12 years and 29 days old.
2. He was engaged in sports from his early childhood and was familiar with sitting in a boat. He showed a talent for sport from his early childhood. In Poti, where he grew up, he regularly sailed. Later on, his father set up a gymnastics room for him at home that was equipped with parallel bars and rings. In 1901, he and his sisters climbed the Tête du Géant peak in the Alps.
3. He resembled the "Parisian" boy depicted in the photograph. In the Nikoladze family museum in Didi Jikhaishi there are several photos of Giorgi. They are

rather poor in quality but were taken at roughly the time in question and seem to bear a certain likeness to the photo of the "Unknown French boy".

4. French was the second language used in the Nikoladze household so he was fluent in French from early childhood. It is very plausible therefore, that those at the event would take him for a "Parisian" boy
5. During the summer of 1900 he was in Paris. According to his sister's memoirs, the whole family stayed in Paris for three weeks. Although there is no mention of precise dates.

Why is a non-participant claimed to be an Olympic champion?

Although Kamper and Mallon mention the "Unknown French boy" in their book, they do not describe the crew as "mixed nationalities" but list the crew as "the Netherlands".¹⁰ Wallechinsky too mentions a "small French boy" in his early publications (1988, 1996), but he includes Brockmann's name along with those of Brandt and Klein when mentioning the winning crew.¹¹

Why it is not possible that whilst Niko Nikoladze was in Paris with his whole family in order to view the "miracles of the Paris Exhibition", they would also have attended the sports competitions? Undoubtedly they would have done so because Niko set great store by the physical development of his children and, therefore, would never have missed such an opportunity. It can be stated, almost with certainty, that the Nikoladze family were the first Georgians to have attended the Olympic Games.

Why is it not also possible that his young son, obsessed by sport, would have gone on his own to watch some sports event on that splendid Sunday (26th August)? The following year, in 1901, he led his sisters on a climbing expedition in the Alps and climbed one of the tallest peaks. This would suggest that as a youngster he was

already possessed of an independent nature and brave character.

It is not beyond the realms of possibility that he would have found himself in a rowing final? Particularly given that, on that day, there was no other sports competition taking place and the whole of Paris. There would have been posters throughout announcing the event. In the *Official Report*, it is stated clearly that 6000 posters were on display in Paris and its outskirts inviting people to attend the regatta.¹² A Dutch journalist wrote in the *Algemeen Handelsblad* newspaper at the time that the whole of Paris was talking about the regatta which, as he put it, would be “enshrined with golden letters in the history of aquatic sport”.¹³

It was therefore possible that Giorgi Nikoladze would have been among the multitude of Parisians who had read the posters and then crowded onto the banks of the River Seine to watch the race.

A case for forensic investigation: with the help of biometric data and a youthful photo of Giorgi Nikoladze, it would perhaps be possible to check the possible identity of the little coxswain.



Might he not also have gone to Courbevoie and Asnières on the city outskirts a few days before the race and made the acquaintance of his peers who were planning to go to the banks of the Seine in the hope that the rowers, thirsting for victory, would choose them as coxes?

Is it possible that the French rowers would have discarded Giorgi not on account of his weight but on account of his not being French?

Might one of the crews would have tested Giorgi's aptitude for coxing prior to the final and thus given him the opportunity to acquire some experience?

Why was it not possible that Brandt and Klein would have selected precisely him to cox their boat?

It would not stretch belief too far that Giorgi, a fluent French speaker, would have been considered a “Parisian” by the Dutchmen as well as by the others.

Why was it not possible that it could have been precisely him in that famous photograph which is still tormenting the minds of the historians of the Olympic Games?

All this was indeed a possibility! His everyday clothing suggests that unlike the young French coxes, he had little inkling of participating and took part unexpectedly in the competition.

Coxes rewarded with 700 francs

At the outset, before I delved more deeply into the annals of Olympic history, I wondered whether Giorgi Nikoladze would have been aware that he was participating in the Olympic Games. True, he did not tell anyone about it, but how is it that he did not retain the medal? After all, boys of his age consider even a small badge to be something special, never mind an Olympic medal, which they would treasure forever.

It was only later that I learned that no medals were awarded at the 1900 Games! Instead some winners – not all – received plaquettes which were, in fact, awards of the World Exhibition. Rowing was one of the sports that did not qualify for such medals.

In the *Official Report* is documented that the winners of the coxed pairs final received a prize representing a work of art valued at 600 francs.¹⁴ Anthony Th. Bijkerk traced that award to the family of Juliana Dominicus-Brandt, granddaughter of François Brandt. The prize represents a bronze figure of a singing woman; photos of the sculpture were published in the *Journal of Olympic History*, first in 1997 and later in 2014. The figure is 57.5 centimeters in height and weighs no less than 14 kilos. Presumably it was shared by the entire team and ended up with the Brandt family.

It is quite possible, however, that individual cash prizes were awarded to the winners. This was common practice during the 1900 Olympics. In fact, according to the *Official Report*, 700 francs were allocated to the coxes alone.¹⁵ And that Giorgi received a monetary prize was confirmed by former students of Rusudan Nikoladze, after I published my research in the Georgian magazine.¹⁶ Nowadays, they are eminent professors at the Polytechnic University of Georgia. This is what they recall of what Rusudan said on the subject:

During their stay in Paris, the ladies of the family received a very pleasant surprise from little Giorgi ... This 'tiny little kid' laughing hilariously, distributed souvenirs to his mother and sisters. Naturally, we started wondering how he was able to get the money for all that, and Giorgi announced with joyful pride that it was his prize and he had decided to please the family. We learned that Giorgi was the winner of a big boat race and, like the other winners, he also received a monetary prize.¹⁷

However, how is it that Giorgi's victory has never been mentioned anywhere? Why did Rusudan Nikoladze never write anything about the event? Why did Alexandre Sigua not know anything about this? Why did Giorgi himself never recall this episode from his childhood?

In fact, the Olympic Movement was not widely known in Russia at that time and still less so in Georgia which

had been annexed by the Tsarist Empire in 1810. To be sure a Participation Committee was constituted in distant St. Petersburg on 20th November 1898 under the leadership of the Russian IOC Member Alexey Butovsky, but in the end all efforts to send a team to Paris proved in vain.¹⁸ There were only a few Russians, mainly living in Paris, who finally took part in the Games. Not until 1912 was an official delegation sent to Stockholm.

For Giorgi Nikoladze and his generation, the Sokol Movement was considered far more important and so it was he who founded the Shevardeni Sports Society – the Georgian equivalent of Sokol. Although Giorgi was pioneer of Georgian sport, it came as little surprise that he never showed any interest in the Olympic Movement even though his short life spanned eight Olympics. At least we can find no trace of this anywhere.

From the 1900 *Official Report* we learned that the organisers were more interested in the names of the rowing clubs rather than in the names of the countries and the participating athletes. The report lists only the last names of the rowers and does not detail the coxwains. It seems that the coxes were not viewed as proper athletes, perhaps because of their somewhat passive role. At this time the performance of a cox was regarded rather dismissively, reflected in the fact that this task was handed over to children chosen more or less at random.

Many questions – but few answers

After hearing the story of the recruitment of the “Unknown French boy” as cox by Brandt and Klein, I asked myself many times why the Dutch would have risked employing a French boy given that their opponents in the final were three French crews. The “gamin” was small, but do not small boys also have a sense of national pride and patriotism?

Of course they do, and perhaps even more than adults who, in most cases, are driven by other motives. It is hardly likely that a French boy of 10 or 12 would have been keen to help foreigners defeat his own countrymen. Had the boy been French and familiar to the French rowers and still decided to cox the Dutch to victory after being rejected by his compatriots on account of his weight, it is likely that nobody would have forgiven him. He might even have been considered as a “traitor”. It is also hard to imagine that the Dutch would have seriously taken that risk. They were just lucky to have found a boy who was not French. Perhaps from today’s point of view we over estimate this viewpoint.

If my conclusions are correct, then it is time to give the little unknown boy a name. And this could only be Giorgi Nikoladze, who was neither French nor Parisian, but a Georgian. He would then have been 12 years and

29 days old and the youngest Olympic champion of all time. It should be added that for the reasons stated, Giorgi Nikoladze probably knew nothing of his good fortune. He died unexpectedly on 5th February 1931 after succumbing to pneumonia at the age of 43 years. Regrettably, he left no written memoirs.

* * *

This is a short version of my research which, since it was first published by the journal of the Georgian NOC *Olimpieli*, reprinted three times by the Sports Journalists Association of Georgia as a separate publication in Georgian and in English.¹⁹ In addition, it is included in the 5-volume edition of my Olympic writings – *Five Rings for Georgia*²⁰.

Its publication coincided with the fact the IOC database has replaced the wording “Unknown French Boy” and was replaced by Hermanus Brockmann as an Olympic champion despite the fact that he had participated together with Klein and Brandt in one race only, and they lost that race.

On 29th July 2016, my research was circulated to interested parties by the Sports Journalists Association of Georgia. Anthony Th. Bijkerk and others expressed their great interest in my research. I was unable to attend the ISOH Quadrennial Meeting on 4th August but still had a couple of interesting meetings in Rio. Volker Kluge suggested publishing my research in the *Journal*.

I am also obliged to Bill Mallon, who prompted Joshua Robinson of *The Wall Street Journal* to write about my research and duly published an article on 9th August. Robinson’s article was skeptical in tone and observed that the Natsvlivshvili paper has one flaw, that it may well be incorrect. He may certainly think so but it is surely a far greater error to declare Hermanus Brockmann the Olympic champion instead of the “Unknown French Boy”.



The Club Nautique de Lyon four which came second in one of the two finals, was also steered by an unknown boy.

Photo: La Vie au Grand Air

The coxswain of the successful Vesper Club Boat Philadelphia created a sensation in the eights. The 16 year old Louis G. Abell had fastened a megaphone to his mouth. Four years later in St. Louis he again steered the US boat to Olympic victory.

Photo: La Vie au Grand Air



He correctly notes that my story is based on an interview with Nikoladze's sister, who remembered him winning "a boat race in France". Why should this testimony not be admissible evidence? This not be a good enough evidence to prove the fact? In general, it seems to me that the word "verdict" is too categorical in this case. And I wonder what would be the reaction provided somebody stated with assurance that it is his great-grandfather pictured on this photo.

- 1 Published in Paris in 1874.
- 2 Paata Natsvlshvili. *Martve* magazine, No. 3, 1978. p. 63
- 3 David Wallechinsky, *The Complete Book of the Summer Olympics*, 2012 Edition, Little, Brown & Company (Canada)
- 4 Bill Mallon, *The 1900 Olympic Games*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, North Carolina, and London 1998, p. ix.
- 5 Bill Mallon/Ture Widlund, *The 1912 Olympic Games*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, North Carolina, and London 2002, p. 460-463.
- 6 *Journal of Olympic History*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1997, pp. 26-27; Vol. 9, No. 1, 2001, pp. 28-30; Vol. 23, No. 3, 2015, p. 34.
- 7 Erich Kamper/Bill Mallon, *Golden Book of the Olympic Games*, Vallardi & Associati, Milan 1992, p. 202.
- 8 *GEDENKBOEK VAN DE D.S.R.V. LAGA*, 1876-1926, Waltman Jr., Delft 1926.
- 9 An extensive presentation of the rowing competitions is given by Anthony Th. Bijkerk in his booklet *Nederlandse Deelnemers aan de Tweede Olympische Spelen Parijs 1900*, De Vrieseborch, Haarlem 2000, pp. 22-47. In that he quotes several times from the editions of the magazine *Nederlandsche Sport* von 1900.
- 10 *Golden Book*, p. 202.
- 11 *The Complete Book*, 1996, p. 562.
- 12 Concours internationaux d'exercices physiques et de sports, *RAPPORTS*, Paris 1901, Vol. II, p. 9. For inexplicable reasons the Official Report, p.11, mentions the result of the junior competition, won by Belgium (deux rameurs juniors), but not that of the seniors.
- 13 Alfred Gagnidze, Guram Kashakashvili. Recall on Paata Natsvlshvili's article "Unknown French Boy - Giorgi Nikoladze" in *Olimpieli*, 2014.
- 14 *RAPPORTS*, Vol. II, p. 5.
- 15 Ibid. However in the Official Report is stated that the prize should be an art object to the relevant monetary value. How that was treated in the case of several tax officials is unknown.
- 16 *Olimpieli* magazine, No. 2, 2013
- 17 Jurryt van de Vooren. www.sportgeschiedenis.nl/2012/07/10/roeiers-van-1900-wisten-niets-van-hun-olympische-titel.aspx
- 18 Minutes of the general meeting of the representatives of the St. Petersburg Clubs of Lovers of sport about the question of participation in the Olympic Games of 1900 in Paris, 20 20th November 1898.
- 19 Paata Natsvlshvili, "Unknown French Boy" *GIORGI NIKOLADZE*, Georgian Sports Journalist Association, Tbilisi 2016.
- 20 Vol. 2, 2014

Unfortunately there is no "Smoking Gun"

116 years on, the 1900 Paris Olympic Games still present us with a number of puzzles. At the time were billed as "World Exposition Competitions" and sometimes as "World Championships". They do not conform at all with our modern idea of Olympic festival.

The rowing provides us with one of the enduring mysteries. The names of the Dutch oarsmen who won the coxed pairs are no secret. But we do not know who steered the boat, although the boy who sat at the helm and who is known from the photo has a unique place in Olympic lore. He is thought to be the youngest Olympic champion in history. His age is thought to have been between seven and 14, and he has always been described as a French boy from Paris.

Paata Natsvlshvili, an ISOH member from Georgia, has reignited the discussion with his publication "Unknown French Boy" *GIORGI NIKOLADZE*. He has gathered a number of interesting facts which he believes he has solved the puzzle. In his view the boy is none other than his compatriot Giorgi Nikoladze.

In fact although Natsvlshvili has provided some interesting material to support his theory, the definitive proof is still lacking. He does indeed have access to biographical data and statements, which demonstrate that Nikoladze lived in Paris at that time and "won a boat race". But he cannot produce

a contemporary document or even a winner's prize. The "smoking gun" does not exist.

I think that Natsvlshvili is aware of the weakness of his argument, for doubts are appropriate. Only recently the name of the coxswain was given as "Marcel Depayet" in the book *Olympic games 1896-1972* (Bulatova/Bubka/Platonov, Kiev 2013). His existence is more than questionable. And other facts have not been taken into account until now. A report of the Olympic eights race in the German magazine *Sport im Bild* (No. 36, 1900, p. 465) made the following observation about the Dutch crew: "Their coxswain, a seven-year-old lad, weighed only 46 pounds [23 kg, VK], however he performed his task valiantly."

According to this quotation, which is authentic, but need not be accurate, Dr. Brockmann, until now listed as the bronze medal winner (on some websites and also as pairs Olympic champion) cannot have been the Dutch cox. It is more likely that the same "seven-year-old lad" was also called into action in this class as racing started two hours after the pairs race.

However other under-age coxswains can be seen in contemporary photographs. Once again their identities are unknown. Paata Natsvlshvili has certainly offered an interesting contribution, but the mystery remains to be solved.

Volker Kluge