

# THE 200TH BIRTHDAY

By Dr. Karl Lennartz

OF EVANGELOS ZAPPAS

**return from Greece fed with positive impressions, but nevertheless disappointed. On May 2nd in Athens the 200th birthday of Evangelos Zappas was commemorated. Who was Evangelos Zappas?**

He was a Greek merchant and patriot, living in Romania. In 1856 he made the proposal to the Greek foreign minister to renew the Olympic Games. He promised to pay the cost with his fortune. Instead, the Greek government asked him to finance a trade and agricultural exhibition, which should include marginal sportive competitions. Thus, it was hoped, the young, underdeveloped Greek state would be enabled to approach European Standard in the industrial domain. Zappas agreed; so in 1859, 1870, 1875 and 1888 four so called "Olympien" were held. At these events, the best performances in the fields of agriculture and trade as well as in the range of music, theatre and sports were awarded by prize money, medals and diplomas.

By financial means of the foundation a huge exhibition hall - the Zappeion - was build in 1888 in the centre of Athens; this was 23 years after the death of Zappas. Today it is still a very representative building. In 1896 the Zappeion was the location, where the fencing competitions of the first Olympic Games were held (a second time in 1906). Moreover, foreign athletes were housed in the Zappeion, the first Olympic village so to speak.



How did Greece commemorate the 200th birthday of Zappas? Anyone who expected a big celebration, organised by the Hellenic Olympic committee or by the organisation committee of the games of 2004, was thoroughly mistaken. It was a private-man, Georgis Dolianitis, who made the invitation, certainly a man highly respected in Olympic circles and universally known as a collector of Olympiaka. He probably owns the largest archives concerning the Zappas games. Dolianitis had invited several friendly colleges: Manfred Bergmann from Switzerland, the

Ukranian Oleg Vorontsov, who lives in Spain, the Italian Maurizio Tecardi, the Norwegian Halvor Kleppen and Roberto Gesto de Melo from Brasil.

The Cologne sport-historians Wolfgang Decker and Karl Lennartz responded to his call too. Together with Dolianitis -- on the occasion of the 100th year celebrations of the Olympic movement -- they had prepared an exhibition, shown in Cologne and Thessaloniki.

To a certain extent Dolianitis was in the tradition of Zappas, because he financed the flights as well as the lodging and stay of his guests. But why did the NOC and the OC leave this date unheeded? No one could understand it.

Imagine, at the German "Turnfest 2002" — 150 years after the death of Zappas -- not one representative of the "Deutscher Turnerbund" would at least say a few words concerning the "Turnvater"! On the occasion of this date one would have expected a ceremonial act in the Zappeion together with notable representatives from the domain of sports and politics, completed by a congress exploring



The Zappeion, above, and Evangelos Zappas, left (with thanks to Mr. Dolianitis)

pre-Olympic Games. But nothing of the sort happened.

In fact, it have been the Greek Olympic ideologists, who have accentuated up to now, that the modern Olympic movement had begun with the Olympien of Zappas, long before the age of Baron de Coubertin. Was it the scruples regarding the wardens of the holy grail in Lausanne, who might fear a scratch on Coubertin's memorial? The supreme representative of the IOC, president Juan Antonio Samaranch, himself, knew what was appropriate. He took the patronage of the celebrations and charged Dolianitis' colleague Bergman to address regards from the president of the IOC. The "oblivion" of this date probably was - once more - a question of authority

between persons in Athens, preparing the 2004 Olympic Games, or, what Samaranch had blamed two weeks before, one amongst plenty of other failures.

It was a decent celebration in a small hall of the Zappeion with about 80 guests, whom Dolianitis had invited. Dolianitis, who delivered a short speech, showed valuable exhibits of the Zappas games on 20 panels. Decker appreciated the historical significance of the Olympien.

And one important representative of the Greek sport-scene was present and spoke in the name of the Greek athletes: Ioannis Melissanidis, gold medal winner in floor exercises in Atlanta.