

A Forerunner of the Revival of the Olympic Games

by VICTOR BANCUIULESCO, OF BUCAREST

(See the restatement following this article.)

Down the centuries, in a world harassed by wars, the noble project of a peaceful competition could not fail to appeal to the imagination of every man. On different levels and at different times in history, archeologists, historians, pedagogues or professors have been seized to a greater or lesser degree with the idea of a revival of a sporting competition, long since disappeared, the example of which would awaken hope in the hearts of men. More than 1300 had elapsed since the last of the old Olympic Games, when Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Richard Chandler, Johann Cristoph Gutschmuths and Ernst Curtius revived the memory among their contemporaries in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Pierre de Coubertin is, however, the man who brought to reality, in a manner as well-earned as it is incontestable, the glorious title of reviver of the Olympic Games of the modern era. Without in any way trying to diminish the prestige — so well deserved — of the 'Father of the Olympic Games of Modern Times' we would like in this article to discuss one of the most active promoters of the Olympic Games, a man whose name is all too often omitted, even in writings exclusively devoted to the history of Olympics.

The man in question is Evangelhelie Zappa, who made his appearance on the historic stage of the Olympic Games more than thirty years before the memorable lecture given at the Sorbonne by the Baron de Coubertin. And it is not only manifested in the inspired words of romanticism, and by the glory of Ancient Greece, but by the plain facts, for the meetings of 1859 and 1870, now called 'pre-olympics', are the work of this man.

But who, in fact, was Evangelhelie Zappa? He was a Greek, living in Rumania, a grain merchant, (and not a Major in the Army as stated by Dr. F. Mezö in his *Sechzig Jahre Olympische Spiele*, page 19), and having besides very evident interests of a cultural kind. The philanthropic enterprises, which he had undertaken in this field, were considered by the Rumanian Government of the time as 'enlightened and patriotic intentions towards our country'.

In effect, in the course of the sixty-five years of his life, Evangelhelie Zappa (1800-1865) manifested a great deal of interest in the cultural matters of his adopted country, which leads us to believe that he was a man

of advanced ideas, a progressive. His donations served to found the Rumanian Academy, and the sum of 5,000 gold francs, which he gave in 1860, contributed to the development of a *Dictionary of the Rumanian Language*, under the auspices of this Academy.

But his most remarkable work, of which the echoes have reached all parts of the international world, was his design of organizing the first competitions which would tend to revive the traditional Games of his ancestors. Always anxious to favour the development of Greek art and culture, Zappa gave a large part of the fortune he possessed to the creation in Athens of an 'Olympic Foundation' of which the first aim was the revival of the Olympic Games according to modern conceptions.

The proposition that he made, as well as the large funds allocated for this purpose, (together with money left after his death), were accepted by the Greek Government, but the realization of the donor's ambition were not equal to those of his dreams. In this way, the first 'Panhellenic' Games took place in Athens in 1859, more in the streets of the city and on a public square, in the 'Place Louis', than in the old stadium built in ancient times by Herod Atticus. Here were squeezed in 20,000 spectators, who had come to see the competitions of Hop-Skip-and-Jump and of throwing the discus. Along the streets, where the races were taking place, — one race of 2 miles — chaos and confusion reigned. Before the King and Queen and many official and important people, the mounted police charges the crowd of spectators, trying to make room for the competitors, while even arresting several athletes, supposing them to be spectators. The entire were being inscribed right up to the very moment of the competitions. A blind man appeared before the officials, pretending to be a competitor, and taking advantage of the situation, he began to sing an ode, for which he was rewarded by the crowd. During the 2-mile race, one athlete fainted.

This state of affairs was not much better in 1870, when there were also wrestling competitions. Dr. Mezö contests the sporting value of these competitions, and also those of 1875, 1888 and 1889 which he mentions. Jean Dauven, (in the *Encyclopédie des Sports*, Larousse, page 523) estimates that they were simple trials which were quickly transformed into fairs. On the other hand, John

V. Grombach (*Olympic Cavalcade of Sports*, New York, page 7), without denying the picturesque and disorganized side of the Games and the small success of these trials initiated by Evangelie Zappa, thinks however that they were trials unjustly forgotten by History and that they formed the 'logical links between a sombre past and an uncertain future'.

Even so, without having been a success, these Games which were the prologue to the triumphal series of the modern Olympic Games, served to foster the idea of Olympics, for the awakened of a vivid interest far beyond the frontiers of Greece.

Evangelie Zappa and his design, which had its birth in Bucharest in Rumania, well merit a place in the Olympic Pantheon.