
The 8th April 1896



For some time, the eyes of the world have been focused on a 121-year-old woman who lives in the south of France.

Olympic Review wanted to ask Jeanne Calment, the oldest person in the world, what impressions or memories she had of the first modern Games of the Olympiad in Athens, held in 1896 on the initiative of her fellow countryman Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who was as famous then as she is today. I set off for Arles and its mistral winds on 1st March, passing through Marseilles, the port from which athletes, journalists and spectators sailed for Athens and the Olympic Games 100 years ago.

Throughout the journey, which brought me back to my Mediterranean roots, I felt both anxiety and excitement at the prospect of meeting the 121 year-old: Would she remember the Games in Athens? Was she interested in sport? and especially, Wouldn't she be tired after the dozens of interviews she had given in February alone?

Born on 21 February 1875 in the region of Arles, she met Van Gogh at 14 when he came to buy paints at her family's shop. During her lifetime, there have been 28 new French presidents. Now hard of hearing and nearly blind, Jeanne Calment nevertheless has a keen mind and sense of humour, and one is most struck by her eternal youthfulness. On her 120th birthday, she told a journalist who had asked her what she expected from life: "*Death.. and journalists*".

When I arrived at the Maison du Lac, a retirement home where Jeanne Calment has lived since 1985, Ms Laure Meusy, who is head nurse and friend to Mrs Calment and the 104 other residents, led me to the first floor where Mrs Calment,

by Sylvie Espagnac

looking tiny and frail, was resting in a large armchair. She was smartly dressed in a white blouse and pearl necklace. Her grey hair framed her face, which had been lined by the wrinkles of age. Accompanied by a journalist from a local radio station, I approached a woman who appeared to be serene, and who was at once very like and very different from the other residents. Laure Meusy in-



Jeanne Calment, at age 121.

trouced us, and bent close to Mrs Calment's ear to relay our questions.

Jeanne Calment will never forget the year 1896, and especially not the 8th of April, which was her wedding day: on the same day in Athens, Frenchman Léon Flameng won the 100 km cycle race. She does not remember Coubertin, but often heard about sport from her husband, who was a great enthusiast. And so she remembers their long bicycle rides and walks together. She might not recall the newspaper headlines of the times, but she was certainly familiar with the label on the box of chocolates which I brought for her. With the delight of a

child, Mrs Calment sampled the treat immediately. She described the gift poetically: "This heart-shaped chocolate will warm my heart". To a journalist who was preparing a special Women's Day programme, she replied that women today certainly have greater freedom than in the past. but were they happier?

With her remarkable memory and genial nature, Jeanne Calment has lived by the same motto all her life: never give up. She has always found the right words and deeds to deal with events in her

own life and in the lives of others. She has always managed to cope. She is a person who makes the most of every second of her life, who can find the silver lining of every cloud, and for whom life is what matters most of all. "I can't see, hear or walk very well, but everything is fine". Putting things into perspective is one of her secrets.

The fire of vitality has never left Jeanne Calment, and if she has lived so long, her doctors say, it is thanks to the love of life which she has always possessed: she has tasted all of life's pleasures, but never to excess. At 100, she was still cycling and running down the stairs. Every day after lunch. she would smoke a cigarette, eat some chocolates and drink a glass of port. If you ask her what she would change if she had it to do all over again, her answer is a reflection of her wisdom: "I would do the same again; I have had such a beautiful, marvellous life. And I still have many, many things to learn". The 30 minutes I spent with Jeanne Calment, "la Jeanne", as she is known in her region of Arles, will remain in my memory for ever. I shall never forget this great lesson in life from the grandmother who all children dream of having.