



28. DEMETRIOS VIKELAS

i. Introduction

Demetrios Vikelas was born at Hermoupolis on the island of Syros, Cyclades, 15th February 1835 and died in Athens 7th July 1908. His father was called Emmanuel Vikelas. D. Vikelas had always been proud of his father's hometown of Verria, in Macedonia, which he loved as his own hometown. His mother was called Smaragda, and came from a great Melas family, of Epirus. Both his parents' families had a trade, social and a literary tradition that D. Vikelas continued worthily. His mother had a very rare education, for that time, and was eager to mould her son's character.

His family name was written in Greek with Μπ, Μπικέλας, Bikelas or Μπεκέλας, Bekelas, until his father, Emmanuel Bikellas together with his own younger brother Constantine admitted the replacement of the two first Greek consonants Μπ by one consonant, Β, so their name was written Βικέλας, Vikelas. Nevertheless they kept the old writing of their name when they wrote it in Latin characters as Bikelas and in French Bikélas. Demetrios Vikelas continued that tradition, signing in Latin characters as Demetrius Bikelas.

From his very early age, his father's business often took him away from home, Hermoupolis on the island of Syros to Constantinople and Odessa. He was also a child of a poor health and that did not help him to have a constant and methodical education. Nevertheless his mother's incessant attendance, as well as his natural vein for study cultured his deep spirit to become useful to his home and to mankind.

At the age of 17 D. Vikelas left the island of Syros for London where he worked at his uncles' Melas enterprise, at first as a bookkeeper and later as a partner. His uncles as well as the larger trading circle appreciated his diligent, methodical and honest character. At the evening hours, the young man attended Botany at the University College.

D. Vikelas was a cordial patriot; he also had a conscientious feeling of global citizenship. He believed in the necessity of intercommunication, friendship and co-operation among the peoples. For this reason he traveled touring most of the European countries.

In London he met the Greek ambassador Spyridon Trikoupis, and his son Charilaos, who later became prime Minister of Greece. The acquaintance in London grew to close and genuine friendships. Those relations were the beginning of the Olympic ideals and were the first visionaries, who made the revival of the Olympic Games successful and sealed the history of modern Greece.

His hometown Hermoupolis honors D. Vikelas. His bust adorns the central square before the majestic Town Hall, an architectural palace by Ziller. In May 2000, honoring the first President of the International Olympic Committee, the Olympic Flame is touring the island of Syros, before it leaves for the long journey to Sydney, highlighting this radiant character of modern Greece. In 2004 the house of the first President of the International Olympic Committee, his hometown as well as the island of Syros excel the bright personality of D. Vikelas.

D. Vikelas died in Athens 7th July 1908. His patriotism embraced the whole Hellenism. He left his library to Herakleion municipality, on Crete Island and his icon collection to the Fine Art Museum. The beneficial activity he had found went on after his death.



To wind up, D. Vikelas' was born in 1835 at the all-powerful trade town of his time, as a child he was an authentic Greek character of Hermoupolis, as a teenager he gulped the Cycladic light, and assimilated the tendencies of his time from Syros, Constantinople and Odessa. In 1852 the 17-year-old young man began his successful trade career. He worked for twenty-four years before he moved to Paris, where he expanded his philological concept.

In 1895 he based himself in Athens among the Greek populace that he thinks: "...it is possibly, the best people in Europe". He offered generously his human and physical means during the thirteen last years of his life until, in the year of the IV Olympiad, in 1908, the Athenian earth embraces the Laureled Man with the ancient olive branch.

In 2001 there are 150 years after his first publication, the translation of "Esther" by Racine. His authentic ideas are still today inspiring and the Greek language of his memoir, "My Life" compose a model of the vivid narrative work of literature.

ii. D. Vikelas' Versatile Social Work

On 23rd July 1894, the International Athletic Congress in Paris, after three consecutive sessions, unanimously concluded to the holding of the I Olympiad in Athens in 1896. Demetrios Vikelas (1835-1908), who was the Greek delegate at the Congress in Paris, representing the 'Panhellenic Athletic Association', greatly contributed to the decision of the Congress. Among the members there had been the view that the Olympic Games should be inaugurated in 1900, and that the institution should begin during the Paris International fair.

D. Vikelas, being the president of the Section of the Committee that was discussing the subject, suggested that the I Olympiad should be held in Athens in 1896, in order to honor the country that gave birth to the Olympic Spirit. The American professor of the Princeton University, William M. Sloane, as well as many more Philhellene delegates cordially supported Demetrios Vikelas' proposal, while Pierre Frédy, Baron de Coubertin immediately accepted the idea, as in this way the II Olympiad in Paris 1900 should already have the experience of Athens 1896. There was no objection about the short period of two years for the preparation.

On the other hand the Hungarian delegates argued, as Hungary was celebrating that year the 1000 years of the Hungarian State, and would rather have the I Olympiad in Hungary. In the third session, the Congress accepted the intimation made by Pierre Frédy, Baron de Coubertin who considered it very important for the I Olympiad to be held in Greece, for the reasons of "Symbolism and Prestige" of the modern Olympiads.

Demetrios Vikelas had made his suggestion on his own initiative, not even having the authorization of the Panhellenic Athletic Association, which he represented; neither had he the encouragement of the Greek State, and he had not concealed the fact from the Congress. He also explained the capabilities of Athens saying: "we do not have the means to organize magnificent fetes, but our heart-felt welcome will substitute for our deficiency". "We are not going to offer any luxurious entertainment to our visitors, but we have to show them the monuments and the ancient ruins and we shall lead them to the places where the authentic ancient Games were held".

In Greece the public opinion and the Press welcomed the decision of the International Congress. Though there was a concern from the Greek Government, as the economical situation of the State was not in a condition to support the preparation of the I Olympiad.



From June 1895 Demetrios Vikelas was settled in Athens, as the first President of the International Olympic Committee helping the Organizing Committee with the preparation of the I Olympiad, in Athens 1896.

G. Dolianitis has characterized the first President of the International Olympic Committee, the “Olympian figure of the Paris Congress”, that by his international authority, his spontaneity and his disarming frankness obtained the unanimous wish of the delegates for the modern Olympiads in Athens. He worked for the realization of the delegates’ wish, with his ethos and deep trust in the Athens 1896 Olympic performance, that was a lifetime dream of every Greek citizen blessing the role of the very first president of I.O.C. that embodied the Olympic Idea. Without Demetrios Vikelas Athens would have never been elected the I Olympic City, and the future of the Olympic Games would have been undecided.

Demetrios Vikelas had been a distinguished thinker, a very good man of letters and a long-sighted genius. He was a real patriot and believed that the improvement of Greece, half a century after the Revolution of 1821, depended on the culture of the people.

He is among the pioneers of the neo-Hellenic prose. He wrote ingenious stories; his characters are the Greek simple men of his time. Some of his stories are “*Papa-Narcissus*”, “*The Raging*”, “*The Ugly Sister*”, “*Philippe Marthas*”, “*Why I Became a Lawyer*”, “*The Two Brothers*”, and his most famous, “*Loukis Laras*”. He published a collection of poems in Greek with the title: “*Stichoi*”. He spoke English, French, German and Italian. His hobbies were fencing, ridding and rowing.

His literature affected extensively the letters in Greece as well as the linguistics abroad. In January 1896, the French Minister of Education included D. Vikelas in the 15-member team committee to prepare the replacement of the Erasmus ancient Greek accent with the modern one. In 1879, in Paris he was elected a member of the 20-member Committee of the ‘Association for the Spread of the Greek Language’.

In Greece he founded the ‘Association for the Spread of the Beneficial Books’, the ‘Blinds’ Home’, the ‘Sebastopouleios School’. His social work was well continued after his death.

iii. Philippe Daryl

The French pedagogue and sportsman Philippe Daryl published his book “*Renaissance Physique, Paris 1888*”, where he writes praising the ancient Greek athletic ideal: “... the ancient Greek gymnasts knew how to train just a few Greeks, making them capable to stop the ardor of the millions of foes”... “They could win the naval battles with their oars and they built the live flesh of the young men, shaping the bodies of the wrestlers as handsome as the marbles of Pheidias”, “The perfect man was the one that with the same hand that he wrote Iphigenia, could also win the wreath at the Olympic Games”.

This French lover of Hellenism had also visualized yearly events in France after the ancient Greek Games by the time the Greek-French magazine, “*L’Orient*”, edited by N. Nicolaïdis, the essay by Chris Zappas, about the Olympic Games was brought out. At the same time, C. Zappas as the secretary of Constantine Zappas was in close touch with Demetrios Bikelas.