

THE 2004 ATHENS OLYMPIC GAMES

AT THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS CHAOS!

There was the agony of waiting for the Games to Begin!

Then came the Opening Ceremony, Friday the 13th of August 2004.

And there was light, magic, joy, pride, and ecstasy when the Games closed 17 days later without a glitch; without an accident, without terrorism! ΑΝΑΖΩΟΓΟΝΝΗΣΙΣ!

For me it was an epiphany.

JULY 2004: WAITING FOR THE GAMES TO BEGIN!

It is July 2004. I am in Crete. I cannot wait for the Games to begin! I feel as anxious for the start of the Games as the athletes who devoted their youth training daily for the chance to be selected by their country to participate in the biggest, the most sacred, and most glorious of all sport events in the world. A surprising [*in view of the negative press*] record of 16,000 athletes and trainers from a record of 202 nations will come to us. I say “us” because it really is a family undertaking that affects every Greek, whether working for the organizers or waiting, like me, for the Games to begin.

I get goose pimples thinking of the unique, once in lifetime, opportunity to be in Greece this Olympic year in the country where I was born. Greece is the country that gave birth to the Olympics 2,780 years ago, at a time when the rest of the world was in a **state of chaos**. I did not volunteer to help with the Olympics [*for logistical reasons*] but I feel that I must be a host to people that I know around the world. That is why I feel the urgency to put in writing my thoughts, as I want to take you in a nostalgic journey into history, to **revered sacred rites**, and into **time of epic deeds**.

In 2000, I watched with tears in my eyes the transferring of the Olympic Flag to the Greek delegation in Sydney. I happened to be in Singapore at the time. I recall seeing the Greek naiads circling the Flag inviting the Olympian Gods to return to their homeland from which they were banished in **363 AD** when Julian of Constantinople the last Greek-Roman-Byzantine non-Christian emperor died. In the Olympiads of Sydney in 2000, and in the 1996 Atlanta games, Greece made Olympic history with astonishing wins of gold medallions even in events that were the exclusive domain of some of the greatest athletes in the world!

PELOPONESSOS TOUR

But, I knew that I had to go to **Olympia** where it all began 2,780 years earlier with the astoundingly true, innovative slogan “**a sound mind in a sound body**”, the slogan that we, at the Greek Olympic Society of Columbus, decided to use as our axiom! I had hoped that by walking around the sacred ruins of Olympia, the spirit of the place would somehow comfort me and calm my anxieties. I could not go alone, though. I needed supporting friends to help me face the **seismic emotions**. Maro and I took with us 20 friends from Mexico and Spain plus Voula and Ilias Adamantidis. Ilias was the first president of the Greek Olympic Society, and a frequent companion to our trips to Mexico. Years earlier, all of us bonded to form *La Sociedad del Amistad* [*Friendship Society*] for people who have been to all these 3 ancient, culturally rich, Olympic countries: México [1968], Spain [1992].

[*I recommend highly the tour I am about to outline. In fact, in my mind, in the whole world, there is no better 2-to-3-day tour that is historically fascinating and yet extremely scenic as the tour below. Assemble your friends in Athens on a Friday; the day of the week is important; rent a microbus, engage a knowledgeable guide, and make sure the guide is a diploma holder not self-taught, and that she/he would do what you want your guests to see, how long to stay at a place, etc. Ilias and I met with the guide the day before and made sure he understood our requirements, and that we were the leaders of the tour not he. Use a reputable travel agency to make hotel reservations in Nafplio, Olympia, and Delphi. I am sure your grateful friends, like ours, would gladly share in the cost of the Peloponnesian Tour.*]

We met in Athens on a **Friday**. Saturday morning, we paid homage to the splendor that is **Parthenon** on the Acropolis. We crossed the majestic **Isthmus Canal** by Corinth, and had lunch while watching ships pass by [see *pic*]. In the afternoon, we walked cautiously through the giant cyclopean Lion Gates [*pic*] of the Palace of **Agamemnon** in Mykines [or Mycenae]. At night, we watched highlights of irreverent **Aristophanes**' comedies in



acoustically perfect **Epidaurus** Amphitheater [pic] where classical tragedies of the great masters Euripides, Aeschylus, Sophocles are performed on **weekends** during the summer. **Feidias** and **Praxiteles**, the genius architects of the Parthenon and of Olympia, went for medical attention at the next door Asclepius institute. Asclepius cured with his magic herbs many diseases, and even restored life to dying people. Next day, we toured briefly Nafplion [pic].

After a tour of majestic Nafplion, we ascended the mountain range that rises vertically above the Argos bay where Hercules [□□□□□□□] came to do penance for his sins by carrying out successfully each of the 12 "**mission impossible**" assignments given to him by King Eurytheus of Argos. The zigzag road up the peak has breathtaking vistas of sea and mountains. After by-passing Tripoli, we descended through the green mountains of central Peloponnesus onto Langadia for an unforgettable lunch. Langadia, like all the other nearby villages of **Arcadia** [Stemnitsa, the village of our K Synodinos, historic Dimitsana, remote Baltesiniko], is build-up the steep slopes of precipitous mountain; you get dizzy looking over the abyss below each house.

By late afternoon, we reached our main destination. **Olympia** is an inconspicuous, tranquil place below the confluence of 2 small mythical rivers. I wanted to alight the bus at once and run to the stadium where Hercules, the founder of the Olympic Games, and so many other heroes competed over the ages. [By the way, a Cypriot Greek from California has drawn up plans for a permanent site where the names of all the Olympians from the beginning onwards are inscribed for everyone to see. The names of the winners in ancient times are known because the winners were made famous throughout the world].

OLYMPIA

The tourist guide suggested that we start from the Museum, a very good idea, as you can see from the impressive statues we saw. We saw a model of the Temple of Dias [Zeus], which at its prime in the 5th century BC was considered one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world. One wonders how in this remote place, Feidias and Praxiteles, with no architectural nor sculpture references, could create out of **chaos** such perfectly harmonious art. Antonia Ferreira from Mexico, awed by the beauty of the statue of Hermes by Praxiteles [pic] whispered to me that it looked like that of Michael Angelo's "David" in Florence, Italy. She grinned and consented to my retort that there could not be a comparison since the latter was created **2,000** years later. By that time, the discovery of the writings of Aristotle, Plato, Herodotus, Pindar, and the works of the eminent Greek sculptures had engendered the **Renaissance Age** out of 10 dark centuries of **chaos** in Europe and the rest of the world for that matter.



I ran toward the Stadium, which one reaches after the Temple of Hera where the **Olympic Flame** is lit every four years sparked by the rays of God Helios [the Sun] and goes to the host country. It is truly amazing coincidence! In **2008-08-08 @ 8** PM [the Chinese consider **8** the luckiest number; for us Greeks, it is the number **13**], the Flame from Olympia will light up the opening ceremony in China. China, the **most populous** country in the world ever to host the Olympics will follow Greece, the **smallest nation** to undertake such a formidable challenge! Furthermore, what is most interesting for me is that these two ancient lands located on the opposite sides of the Globe gave birth, around the same period, to the **2 major, unique world cultures!**

[By the way, in 2004, the **Olympic Flame** traveled around the globe, to every city that ever held the Olympics, to all the continents including, for the first time, Africa, plus to every town, in 54 provinces of Greece, before the inauguration of the Olympic Games in Athens on **Friday 13** of August. It is rather overwhelming to think that almost all of the 11 million Greeks got to see the Olympic flame, an unprecedented but expensive exercise in democracy in the land that gave birth to both the **Olympics and to Democracy!** For those of us who got to touch the Olympic Flame [□□□□□] when it came by our village, it was a unique thrill, plus we enjoyed watching on TV every day the festivals of songs and dancing that went on in every city where the Flame overnighted around the Globe].

I slowed down as I passed through the tunnel that opens up to the Olympic Stadium. I bowed, as I do when I enter a church, tip toed over the west hill [see my shade in the pic] and sat down carefully so as not to crush a

blade of grass whose roots might have felt the footsteps of Hercules or Alexander the Great, or one of the Olympian Gods. I thought of Zeus who defeated here feral Kronos to become the Olympian God and of Apollo the God of light, of music, of poetry, of culture who won over his archrival Ares the God of War. Soon the rest of the group arrived. They too walked in with reverence, but after a time of contemplation, we ran races on the hallow grounds of the 776 BC Olympic Stadium, and had our pictures taken crowned with olive branch wreaths.

I insisted that we stay overnight in Olympia to make sure we absorb the nuances of the place. After dinner, we walked the main street of the village that was all tourist shops. I walked alone over to the railroad station built to receive a special guest, Adolph **Hitler**! Germany hosted the 1936 Olympics. **Jesse Owens**, an **Ohio State U.** athlete, won 4 gold metals, but Hitler refused to shake his hand because he was **black**. The mayor of the city of Olympia received Hitler at the station but refused to shake his hand, explaining to the Press that the reason for his breach of protocol was the fact that Hitler violated the basic **covenant of the Olympics** when he did not shake the hand of Jesse Owens. In 1941 when Germany occupied Greece, the first house to be burned down by the Nazi soldiers in the town of Olympia was that of the mayor who had refused to shake hands with Hitler 4 years earlier!

VICIOUS PROPAGANDA

I was perplexed about the **acrimonious** campaign against the Olympics in Greece from the press media plus corporations and countries that obviously had ulterior motives. At first, the media were writing constantly about every mishap and every delay in the erection of the facilities, taking bets that the Greeks would not have the venues ready for the opening on August 13. When all the experienced experts testified that Greece was definitely on schedule, the Press switched to security and **terrorist threats**. What threats? No specific threats had been noted by any intelligence service. I thought of the threats that were reported for the place and means of a terror attack in August 2001, but the 9/11 disaster a month later was not prevented! Or maybe it was of the "**security concerns**" type that the Soviet Union used as an excuse to boycott the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles? When everyone knew it was a **quid pro quo** for the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics ordered by President Carter because Russia had invaded Afghanistan. Oh, what price we have paid, are paying, and will pay for the colossal blunders that Super Powers make under the false belief that they know what is good for the rest of the world!

The **most profitable** but least secure Olympics since the notorious 1972 Munich Games were the **1996 Games in Atlanta**, USA. A week before the Games, a TWA jumbo plane crashed outside of New York with hundreds of passengers on its way to Paris after landing the contingent of the Greek athletes from Athens. A terrorist act was suspected, but was proven that the problem was a technical malfunction of the gas lines. President Clinton insisted that Atlanta Olympics not be canceled! A misguided "*Christian fundamentalist*" threw a bomb into celebrating crowds in Atlanta during the Games killing 1 and wounding 110! Still, the games went on unperturbed! While an innocent man was accused of the crime, the culprit threw another bomb at a bar frequented by gays. It took several years, despite the massive continuous hunt with all the resources of the FBI and hundreds of police units, to capture the real perpetrator of the **sacrilegious act** against humanity! Shouldn't Atlanta have focused more on security and less on profit? Could it prevent these terrorist acts? **I doubt it!**

At first, "they" [*not only the media but also representatives of some governments and of a core of multinational companies*] said the terrorists were inside Greece. So the Greek police caught them; put them on televised trial, and they are now incarcerated. Then "they" switched to international terrorists. So Greece spent \$1.2 billion dollars that a small country with no oil resources could ill afford. It was done to placate these bullies by buying equipment from firms that were feeding rumors to the press so they can get their products sold. Why are they still talking about safety in Greece? Every security and surveillance gadget the companies put up for sale for the sake of "security", Greece bought! This negative press has caused the number of tourists to go down 8% from the year 2003 instead of up. In Mykines, in Olympia, and even in Delphi, we were the only group visiting in the late afternoon, and most of the hotels and restaurants were empty. So I sought agonizing answers at the Oracle of Delphi.

DELPHI ORACLE PROPHECY

We sailed by the beautiful, the new **H.Trikoupis Bridge**, the longest cable-stayed bridge in the world, that connects Peloponessos with **Roumeli** of mainland Greece at Rio-Antirio. [*By the way, this marvel of engineering and art was awarded the coveted **Outstanding Civil Engineering Achievement Prize**, the **first time ever** that the Prize was awarded to a project outside the USA*]. We were on our way to Delphi, the "*think tank*" of the ancient world, where the **oracle Pythia** answered questions from the powerful and the humble about what the

future holds for them. Delphi is the “*navel of the world*”. First, we paid homage to the statue of the *Charioteer*, the prize possession of the Museum. We began the slow climb up the Temple of Apollo, to the Amphitheater, and up to the Olympic Stadium for the Pythian Games at the peak of mountain. From way up there, we caught our breath so we could look at the breath-taking vista of the Temple of Athena down below by the Gorge of Itea full of 4 million olive trees that are preserved since ancient times as a UN World Heritage Site.



We walked over to the cave where the priests used to receive questions for Pythia and bring back her enigmatic responses. I screamed the question “*How are the Olympics going to go?*” I heard my question echo through the cavernous gorge chasm. Surprisingly, a reply came: “*Cool!*” I turned around amused looking for the source of the echo. “*Cool?*” I asked! “*In the sweltering heat of August?*” “*Why were they scheduled for the hottest period of the year?*” “*Security*” was the reply! Alejandro Villalobos from Cuernavaca, Mexico, played a lot of tricks on me during the past ten years, so I charged him with the prank! He denied being the source of the echo. I did not investigate further! I believed the ORACLE!

AUGUST 2004: THE WAITING IS OVER; GREECE TRIUMPHS!

THE GAMES BEGAN AND FINISHED IN A SENSATIONAL WAY, AS PROMISED BY THE ORGANIZERS.

YES, AT THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS CHAOS, BUT AT THE END, THERE WAS HARMONY.

The 2004 Olympics were the “*coolest*” ever, and the best by those who monitor such events. But more importantly, they were the safest Olympics. A record number of billions of people around the world watched on uninterrupted TV both the Olympic and the ParOlympic Games.



Moreover, thanks to the 2004 Olympics, needed city beltways, beautiful metro mass transit subway systems, trams, new airports, environmentally friendly transport networks, and many other essential infrastructural conveniences were completed in Athens and at the other 4 Olympic cities, *Herakleion, Thessaloniki, Patra, and Volos*. Plus wide *ultramodern* expressway road network from Peloponessos in the South to Macedonia in the North and from Thrace in the East to Ipiros in the West were built, which could not ever be achieved, if it were not for the Olympic Games.

Athens, a city that gave us the *Golden Age* in the 5th Century BC after repulsing 2 Persian invasions, shined as a *global player* once more, for the **first time in 2400 years**. Having become a super power, Athens went into a long and dark decline when she embarked on a policy of brazen imperialism during the fateful **Peloponnesian War** around 400 BC. [*That period will be covered in our next issue of GE*].

My tennis pal James Fu, the press secretary of the former Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew congratulated me when I visited Singapore last November. He said in front of dignitaries: “*Paul, I always thought of Greece as an impoverished country. I changed my mind after watching the Opening Ceremony of the 2004 Olympics and I got a sense of the grandeur of your country. You should be very proud*”. [*Well, I personally had another good reason to be very proud. Haralampos Taiganides [pic], a nephew from my village of Polymylos in Makedonia, won a Bronze and 2 Gold Medals in swimming in the ParOlympics 2004*]. James Fu and a billion

people around the globe like me experienced an **epiphany** in August 2004. May the memory of the 2004 Olympics live forever!

So, I told myself to savor the historic year. The Olympics will never happen again in Greece, unless...!

Unless the International Olympic Committee in Geneva, Switzerland, puts aside embedded politics, ignores economic interests of the media, of the security-selling firms, and of prospective hosting cities, to accept what the Greeks have been proposing for decades that the Olympic Games be held **permanently in Greece forever and ever**, and onto the ages of ages!

FAT CHANCE!

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