



A Modern-Day... Lord Byron*

Jimmy Jamar and his “12 Hours for Greece Project”

In the midst of the Greek financial crisis and at a time when the negative criticism towards the Greek country and its people had become almost a general trend, Jimmy Jamar, head of the European Commission Representation in Belgium and a genuine philhellene himself, decided to take action.

In 2012, he established in Brussels “The 12 Hours for Greece Project,” a voluntary charity association aiming to collect funds to assist beneficiary organizations in Greece operating in the fields of education, health, and the fight against poverty.

During the three years of its operation, the association has collected over 35,000 euros and has successfully contributed to the cultural promotion of the country.

TeamBlue spoke with Mr. Jamar about his first acquaintance with Greece and his special bond with the country, “The 12 Hours for Greece Project,” as well as his latest book, *Letters to Byron*.

The following interview with Mr. Jamar, a native of Belgium, is presented verbatim.

Q. As a modern philhellene that you are, what does Greece mean to you?

A. Greece, I can say, is a very important part of my life. Since



45 years, as a traveler or in the framework of my work at the European Commission, I have been engaged in a sort of passionate relation with the country and its people, trying to understand its complexity, to get to know its culture and to grasp why, of all countries in the world, this specific little piece of earth has always inspired people, to an extent that they get mobilized – and in some occasions gave their lives - when it is attacked and criticized. This is what philhellenism is about!

I must add that I am married with a Greek woman, which has also broadened the relationship.

Q. What is the “12 hours for Greece”?

A. “12 Hours for Greece” is a charity project that I launched in 2012, in the middle of the crisis to try to help, through the organisation of cultural events in Belgium or elsewhere, associations in Greece operating in the areas of education and health. During the three all-day events conducted so far, we were able to help associations such as *To Hamogelo tou Paidiou* (the Smile of the Child), Médecins sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders), Make-a-Wish-Greece, ELEPAP (the Hellenic Association for Handicapped Children), and, more recently, the International Foundation for Greece, for a project entitled Fuel for Schools, aiming at purchasing fuel to heat schools in winter in the North of the country.

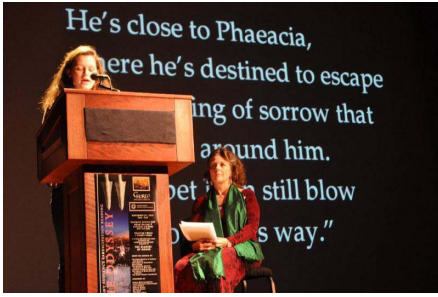


The provision of heating oil at a public school in Evros, northern Greece.

Q. Why did you feel the need to create such a project?

A. The criticism that I experienced around the Greek people in some European countries during the crisis of 2011-2012 triggered a need to do something concretely to try to change the opinion around Greece and to stop stereotypes. This feeling was never present in my own country, Belgium, where there has always been a strong feeling of sympathy towards Greece and its people.

But Brussels being the Capital of Europe, there was a strong symbolic value in launching the initiative from there.



Reading The Odyssey of Homer at an event of "The 12 Hours for Greece."

Q. The "12 hours for Greece" already counts 3 years of existence. How did the European people respond to it?

A. The answer was amazing, from the public and the media alike. In the three events, we gathered altogether over 5,000 people. There is a strong interest in Belgium regarding what is happening in Greece. We have a strong Greek community (20.000 people, with strong cultural traditions - 7 Greek theatre and 10 Greek dance groups!); we also have the international community; but it was really interesting to see how the Belgian population responded, and continues to do so.

Q. Are you satisfied with the results of your project?

A. Of course, even though I would like to gather even more money! There are many needs in Greece, and we must work on that. But the brand "12 Hours for Greece" is now well known, and I am optimistic that we will do even better in the future. 12 Hours is also a great network of friends with all the artists that have come : Lavrentis Machairitsas (three times), Dionysis Savvopoulos, Aleka Kanellidou, Panos Mouzourakis, Dimitra Papiou, Yiannis Zouganellis, Miltos Paschalidis, but also some great "classical" moments with fantastic artists such as the mezzo-soprano Alexandra Gravas, the young pianist Petros Bouras and the guitarist Panayotis Margaritis. We also had people like Georges Corraface who came several times from Paris. This has created a network of friends which we are very proud of. Remember that all this is a charity project and that most artists come on a voluntary basis!

Q: What's next on your agenda? Do you have any future plans or desirable collaborations to achieve regarding the "12 hours for Greece" project?

A. Yes! First of all, we are preparing a great concert on 27 Octo-

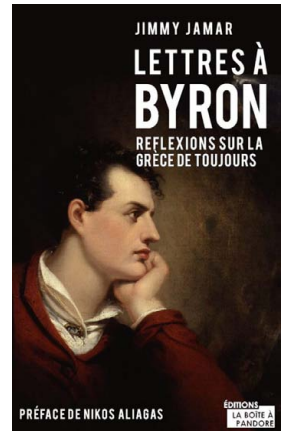
ber where we will bring to Brussels for the first time Kostas Ferris and his Café Aman – a charity evening devoted to Rebetiko.

We will also be launching in September a crowd-funding action for the Fuel for School project, where the aim will be to collect money and create twinnings between Greek schools in the North and municipalities, schools and associations in Belgium.

And finally, in 2017, we are preparing a “March for Europe”, linking Brussels to Athens – by foot (walking or running!) 3.500 km by 350 walkers, each doing 10 kilometers. The benefits, here again, will go to the Fuel for Schools project.

Q. You have recently published your book *Letters to Byron*. What is it about?

A. *The Letters* are the story of my relation with Greece. I wanted to find a way to explain to people who do not know Greece, the complexity, the beauty and the inventiveness of the country. You cannot judge a country if you don't know its history, and Greece since centuries – including the post Independence period - has grown through a great deal. This is what I tried to explain by addressing myself – very modestly – to the greatest Philhellene of the modern times.



Q. Would you say that Greece and simultaneously Europe need a new movement of ‘philhellenism’ right now?

A. I think first of all that European leaders need to revisit seriously the European project, starting from its values: the spectacle of division experienced around the Greek and the migration crises are very detrimental to the European cause. I think also that Greece has to put its act together by developing the structures of a modern state, implementing the reforms that it highly needs, starting with an efficient taxation system. The friends of Greece, the Philhellenes, will help wherever needed, but the main issue is about a political will, in Greece and elsewhere in Europe, to define a new vision together.

(*) Read the article in its entirety here: www.teamblue.eu/index.php/interviews/ngos/item/400-the-12-hours-for-greece-of-jimmy-jamar