

## NERVAL'S DIARY

### *Le voyageur enthousiaste observe ...*

*Kathmandu, Nepal, March 25–27, 1999*

It should have been an archival search in Slavonia, tracing the records of Carl Heitzmann (1836–1896), one of the two painter-physicians employed by Hebra for his atlas (1856–1876). Heitzmann was a founding member of the American Dermatological Association (ADA), the world's oldest national society, which is due in Vienna in July for its annual congress, only the second meeting in Europe in 123 years. Slavonia proved to be too close to Serbia and I left the thought, jumped aboard the direct flight and got here in less than 7 h, literally into a Shangri La (name of the hotel). Most suitably there is a James Hilton Suite and *Lost Horizon* is at every bedside.

The Society of Dermatologists, Venereologists and Leprologists of Nepal will stage the First South Asian Regional Conference of Dermatology here, in early October. I wanted to drop in before, wanted to make a Mount Everest 'air trek' as it is called and, possibly, visit Buddha's birth place in Lumbini Park. The latter I did not achieve due to lack of time, the other two objectives proved rewarding.

I visited the Teaching Hospital of Tribuvan University where there is an outpatient clinic and also a small in-bed facility and where I met two colleagues I knew from earlier conferences in India. I was invited to sit in for a half-morning, seeing patients, discussing diagnoses and therapies – always rewarding wherever it is. The date of the upcoming conference unfortunately overlaps with the Amsterdam Meeting of the European Academy which will probably keep me from coming back to Kathmandu at the time.

The 'air trek' is truly spectacular. It was an early morning flight with a small German-built Dornier 228 craft with window seats only: Shisha Pangma, Cho Oyu, Mount Everest, Lhotse, of the more than 8,000-meter peaks and Gaurishankar, Nuptse, Melungtse and a dozen other impressive peaks of slightly lesser altitude. A truly majestic and unforgettable sight. Reinhold Messner, whom I know from the slopes of Kilimanjaro, who climbed all 14 peaks with more than 8,000 m and alone, as much as (Dr.) Hans Tichy, who first climbed Cho Oyu some 40 years ago, also familiar to me, appeared before my mind. Personally I have seen, by now, 8 of those 14. And of the highest peaks of all continents only Aconcagua remains to come before my eyes – in 3 weeks' time, I hope.

Kathmandu, Bharatpur, Patan, the three historical capitals of the Kathmandu Valley are worth seeing, in particular their 'durbar' (literally 'throne') places. The smallest, in Patan, a city marked by four stupas in the four corners, related to famous King Ashoka (3rd century BC), impressed me most. The biggest durbar place, in the capital city, offers the most impressive mix of peoples of all creeds, animals, temples, food stalls, small shops, flags, sounds and smells. Friendly people all and everywhere and a considerable crowd of tourists. One would wish that ecology and local culture will be able to digest this onslaught.

I have been in India three times alone in the last 16 months and never been able to drop into Nepal. This time it held true. Forty-eight hours is little, almost a sacrilege, but I am happy with it and return with fondest memories one of which was very personal.

In Medical School in the fifties I had a classmate, O.P., a Nepali, who already held a doctorate in physics from England. He was a quiet, soft-spoken, kind person, small in stature and easily overlooked because of his unpretentious habits. After graduation I lost contact, just knew he worked somewhere in Vienna. About 10 years ago he died unexpectedly and left a fundus of some 10,000 books to the faculty. Since the Institute for the History of Medicine is keeper of 'the old book', they came under my care. Due to the fact that I knew the donor, I took care to look at every single one of the books, all acquired personally by him, among them some very fine volumes indeed. One, a special edition of Dante's *Commedia* with a 'commentario Scartazziniano' sits constantly on my shelf and I use it whenever I want to look up a certain verse or scene in the Inferno, Purgatory or Paradise. Sifting through this plethora of books, at the time, I found a handwritten curriculum vitae of Dr. O.P., in which he slightly embarrassed wrote that he didn't know when exactly he was born – a sign of his humble origins – and a fact which touched me deeply since, whenever I think of him.

Your bequest, dear Om, is constantly appreciated and the memory of your personality in my mind is, by now, enriched by fondest impressions from your native Nepal.

*à bientôt,*

*K.H., Vienna*