

NERVAL'S DIARY

Le voyageur enthousiaste observe ...

*Aboard KLM Flight 743 to Ecuador, July 25, 1999
(Jacobus maior, Santiago, Patron of Pilgrims)*

An Equatorial Stint

By the calendar, late July is a proper time to fly into South America: on the 16th it was 200 years since Alexander von Humboldt had first set foot on these shores (in Venezuela); the 23rd marked the anniversary of the death of one of my heroes, Pedro de Cieza de Leon, who died at the age of 34 years (in 1554, in Sevilla). The latter covered much of the highlands of Ecuador, Peru and Chile on foot, as a soldier, about a decade after the conquest, and gave the first extensive report in his *Cronica del Peru*. Of this report, there were two Spanish and several Italian editions still in the Cinquecento, a French one followed in 1709, complete English and German ones only in our days. In Quito and Cuenca (about where Tomebamba of old is to be located) I will directly be on his heels almost exactly 23 years after I first came into the altiplano, saw holy Cusco and cyclopic Sacsayhuaman. Atahualpa, the last Inca, strangled over in Cajamarca, Peru, came from the Tomebamba region, the birthplace of his mother. Cieza de Leon scribbled his report on several thousand sheets of parchment which he always carried on his back, faithful to his goal to let the world know what was left of the Inca culture. For me, as always, old acquaintances provide the chance to come as a dermatologist and a medicohistorian: today it is Prof. Claudio Arias Argudo, dermatologist and onetime dean of the medical faculty of the University of Cuenca, who stayed in Vienna many years ago, also the rector magnificus of this university and the president of the dermatological society. What a nice chance to be able to meet this 'trio célèbre'. Due to the routing of the plane I came in from the south (Guayaquil) where me made a first halt. This caused a further delay but eventually got us along another magnificent trio, the Chimborazo, the Cotopaxi and the Iliniza. The first is the peak most distant from the geometrical center of the earth (due to its equatorial location), the second is the highest active volcano, the third, a double peak.

Monday, July 26, and Tuesday, July 27. A tour through the city and a visit with the rector filled the first day. In the evening my medicohistorical lecture was held in the church nave of San Vincente de Paul which today serves as a meeting place for such occasions; it is stylish and full of ceremonial ambience. My topic concerned 'Anatomy in Vienna under Nazi rule 1938–1945', a project recently finished by a commission of the senate of our university. On Tuesday followed a speech before the dermatological community in a more profane setting, in the fashionable Oro Verde Hotel in Cuenca. Besides, I was taken to the Municipal Museum

where I met the director, an artist (painter), Eudoxia Estrella Ordonez, whose extraordinary water colors I could see. We felt instant sympathy to each other and I spent the better part of the morning in discussion. Finally I received replicas of a set of female faces of local people of different races, with an autograph each.

Wednesday, July 28, to Friday, July 30. The last day in Cuenca got me into the Cancer Hospital, the most modern and well-equipped medical facility in town, to meet the colleagues there and complete my visit of the city and the province of Azuay. I returned to Quito in the late afternoon to embark on other activities: (i) a touristic endeavor, namely to climb the Cotopaxi (5,897 m), on foot, not on bicycle, an effort I had not made since the late seventies and before I had my first severe accident; I failed and turned round; the weather was extremely bad, but my problem was my hip endoprosthesis; I just did not make it; so better turn back to the wheels; (ii) a search for the Jewish G. family, who had been forced to flee Austria before World War II and came to Ecuador.

I reached 'my' family by phone: the G. sisters (some of their baby outfit was given to my mother for myself in the mid thirties.) I spoke to the younger sister and met them both eventually on Friday afternoon, Erev Shabbath. I was very much moved for a series of reasons.

This family were the only Jews my parents had personal contact with and a family in which my mother taught music (piano) to the daughters. My father received a complimentary letter after the war, from here in Quito, by the parents of the two sisters. In my life I have encountered many victims of the Holocaust, their families, their progeny; during my years in Jerusalem, hundreds of times. But never have I met people with whom a personal relation had existed. I had been determined to look up this family or their progeny for a very long time. Finally I met the two elderly ladies as the son of the generation of perpetrators facing the children of the victims (and victims by themselves), after more than 60 years. History, in this instance a very personal history, catches up with itself. Whatever has been done then, by whomever, cannot be reverted, made 'good', be forgotten, forgiven. I desired this follow-up on the most personal level. And I was received with cordiality and became instantly happy about this meeting.

Saturday, July 31. Heading home via Amsterdam.

'A traveller without knowledge is a bird without wings.'
Sa'adi, Ghulistan

à bientôt,

K.H., Vienna

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