

# N E R V A L ' s      D I A R Y

## *Le voyageur enthousiaste observe ...*

*Hotel Obelisk, Istanbul, October 3, 1994*

Dear Reader,

This is a good occasion to meet our fictional narrator in person. He spent some time in this city exactly 150 years ago. 'Ville étrange que Constantinople! Splendeur et misères, larmes et joies; l'arbitraire plus qu'ailleurs, et aussi plus de liberté...' [1], he wrote. Byzanz of the Ancient Greek became Constantinople, eventually to change into Istanbul. Conquered by the Turks in 1453, today's name was mentioned already a century earlier by Ibn Battuta (1304–1377), the Marco Polo of Islam, to designate part of the city [2]. To the writer, a frequent visitor to Vienna's historic rival, the city is important also for medico-historical reasons: the 'Vienna' *Dioscurides* was donated here to Princess Anikia Iuliana who dedicated a church to the citizens in 512 A.D. This is one of the great treasures of the Austrian National Library, illustrating the pharmacopeia of those times. (Her relative A.M.T.S. Boethius, executed in 525, author of *De consolazione philosophiae*, is familiar to most of us.) The 'Anikia gens' was of oldest Roman nobility.

By today, the 'Sublime Porte' has collapsed, the Padishah, Sultan and Caliph, are gone – just as the emperor, and titular king of Jerusalem, in Vienna. The imperial aura, however, persists in either place. So what leads us here?

The Red Crescent, pendant to the Red Cross, celebrated the 120th anniversary of the death of its founder, Dr. K.E. Hammerschmidt alias Abdullah Bey – 135 years after Henri Dunant conceived of the idea of the Red Cross in the aftermath of the

Austro-Italo-French carnage at Magenta (June 4; note: magenta red) and Solferino (June 24, 1859). Besides that, the sesquicentennial of the death of Dr. K.A. Bernard from Vienna was commemorated. He was instrumental in the foundation of Istanbul's first Western style university (Galatasaray), modeled after the Vienna Military Medical School (1785), today the Institute of the History of Medicine, home of the author. No wonder we came here to participate in the festivities and the ceremonial opening of the academic year under the auspices of the head of State.

My own presentation concerned our fictional narrator Nerval who elaborated on the city and its inhabitants, contrasted by the description, in 1849, by Carl Ludwig Sigmund, head of the erstwhile department of syphilis, later department of dermatology II at our university. Interestingly, on his 6-month tour in 1849, Sigmund checked innumerable quarantine posts, along the Austro-Turkish border of the Balkans, in Egypt, the Terra Sancta and Turkey proper [3]. In consequence of his report, the century-old system of quarantine posts along the border was dismantled. It is an irony that we may face an 'airborne' epidemic of the plaque in our days.

- 1 Nerval G de (Jeanneret M, ed): *Voyage en Orient*, Paris, Flammarion, 1980, vol ii, p 159.
- 2 Defremery C, Sanguinetti BD (eds and transl): *Voyages d'Ibn Battuta*. Collection UNESCO (original ed 1854). Paris, Anthropos, 1979, vol ii, p 431.
- 3 Sigmund CL: *Privates Reisetagebuch, Februar–August 1849* (property of the family).

*à bientôt,*

*K.H., Vienna*