

# NERVAL'S DIARY

## *Le voyageur enthousiaste observe ...*

*Al-Bustan Hotel, Muscat, Oman, January 20, 1996;  
here: 1st of Ramadan 1416*

### رمضان مبارك

Happy Ramadan! Having come to the southeastern tip of the Arab peninsula, there is only the Yemen and Qatar left of all countries between Cairo and Samarkand, which I have not been to so far.

This sultanate of some 200,000 km<sup>2</sup> has been marvellously developed within the last 25 years. Excellent roads, disciplined drivers, bilingual road signs, gas stations at regular intervals, few but first-class hotels, public telephone booths in the remotest souks where international calls can be placed with phone cards available everywhere. An example how much can be done in a short time. Sure, many old structures were removed and cannot be visited any more, some monuments look a bit overrestored, but loving care has been demonstrated in reviving the original interior and the visitor is allowed to walk with shoes on fine carpets, and guns, daggers, vessels, etc. are on display, unguarded. One might hope that the expected surge in tourism will not spoil this atmosphere.

Coming in at the beginning of a weekend, i.e. Thursday morning, I had the opportunity to go up country on a trip driving between 3,000-metre-high peaks to the old cultural capital of Nizwa and beyond. Friday noon, time for the collective prayer in the mosque, I stood opposite at the top of the giant cannon-studded tower of the city, the blue-golden dome protruding into a cloudless sky, the muezzin's song in my ears. Catholic by upbringing, ecumenical by conviction, I joined in praying the Fatiha, the opening sura of the Quran. *Faith* can only be decisive, not the wording, and *אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֵל אֶחָד* and 'credo in unum deum' must be equivalent.

Desert areas alternate with oases with palm tree groves, ancient forts appear amidst rugged mountains of barren rock, color shades from deep purple to fancy blue, one range behind the other, a delight to the onlooker's

eye. A biblical landscape comparable to the Sinai at the opposite north-western end of the peninsula. There is no dermatology department and none for the history of medicine at Sultan Qaboos University. What a pity! Fortunately my friend and old acquaintance there is the head of surgery, doing transplantation surgery in the first place, and associated to a tissue typing laboratory which, itself, serves as a reference center for the Gulf area. PCR and protein sequencing are as familiar to the academic staff as anywhere in a modern university setting and are performed routinely. Many of the staff are Anglo-Saxon expatriates who have worked in their jobs for many a year. I had the chance to present my view on the influence of Islamic medicine on Western medicine, an interesting task before Mohammedans, also reminiscing about how much we owe to this contribution because Christianity did not care much about the ancient writings during the early centuries. A Canadian ethicist and erstwhile nephrologist addressed matters of his concern in a subsequent presentation at this private minisymposium. On a second occasion, I was able to refer to the Vienna School and its special relation to Islamic medicine thanks to Abraham Romeo Seligmann (1808–1892), alluded to in an earlier diary report. Austria · an-Nimsa in Arabic · is well known in the area and not mixed up with our big sister down under. In part, this is due to the fact that Empress Maria Theresa's thalers were legal tender in the region until about 30 years ago. Minted originally only in Austria, the rights had to be ceded for 50 years to both London and Rome as a condition of the peace treaty of Saint-Germain after World War I. Today, they fill the silversmiths' shelves and stands in the traditional markets. Sic transit gloria!

*à bientôt,*

*K.H., Vienna*