

N E R V A L ' s D I A R Y

Le voyageur enthousiaste observe...

Salzburg, at the Festival, July 30, 1996

Caravans of Dreams

Nightly the caravans of dreams

How they draw with their travelling sandals

The tracks of Destiny... [1]

On birthday occasions, the Jews convey to each other the wish 'and meah w-esrim',

עַד סָאָה וּפְעֻסִים

'may you live to 120 (years), adding to the legendary life span of Moses (Deuteronomy 34:7). The Chinese settle for half of this number, 60 years, this being the common denominator of the Decimal (the Ten Heavenly Stems), 天干, 'tiān gān', and the Duodecimal (the Twelve Earthly Branches) Cycles, 'dì zhī', 地支, spelled jiāzǐ, 甲子.

I have just passed the latter mark, reason enough for reflexions.

Helmut Hintner, professor and chairman of the Salzburg department of dermatology invited me to preside a seminar for his staff and to attend a chamber concert at the Salzburg Festival. A 'first' for me this festival, unbelievable as it may seem for an erstwhile musician, descendant of a family of musicians on my maternal side. Benjamin Schmidt, from Vienna with a Stradivari of 1707, and Lydia Smirnova, from Moscow, played Schubert, Stravinsky and Schumann. A fabulous performance.

I feel that I have lived one full century already and thousands of memories jam my mind. Terrible moments and exhilarating ones, success and failure, long hours and ever shorter years, the staccato of an emotional temper.

Gottfried Benn, dermatologist and poet, first banned by the Nazis, thereafter by the Allies, was allotted 70 years; my beloved and revered teacher Ernst Jirgal, another lyric, epigone of Rainer Maria Rilke and Georg Trakl, only made it to 51. Both died exactly 40 years ago (July 7 and August 18). Lines of poetry as well as chamber music, with a lyric of its own, evoke dreams of youth, maturity and age. Benn wrote: 'Only the lyric, the really great lyric knows that the word is real. Lyric poetry is olympic or derived from Lethe' [2].

Dermatology sharpens the eye, turns the mind and the senses to the integument, to Homer's ὀ χρώς, to τὸ δέρμα of the physicians, with all its beauty and ugliness, whiffs of fragrance and warmth of the YOU. Second to none of the organs in terms of a human, interpersonal dimension and of perception of the self. Never would I trade skin for another field of medicine, better to start it all over again.

Words of a dermatologic chauvinist indeed!

- 1 Jirgal E: Karawanen von Träumen (Caravans of Dreams), poem; in Nomadenabend. Munich, Drei Ulmen, 1989.
- 2 Benn G: Gesammelte Werke, ed 8. Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1994, vol 4, p 263.