

## K. Holubar

Institute for the History of Medicine,  
University of Vienna, Austria

## Une Lettre Persane

## Key Words

History of medicine · History of dermatology

In 1998 it will be 270 years that Montesquieu (1689-1755) came to Vienna where he was hosted by his countryman Eugène de Savoie (1663-1736), one of imperial Austria's greatest generals. Incidentally, the battle of Zenta, the scene of Eugène's decisive military triumph against the Ottomans, just had its tricentennial the other day (September 11). Being in Persia myself at the moment, it is tempting to draft a lettre persane with inverted addresses.

Usbek à son ami Rustan à Ispahan,  
reads the first of the letters, in Montesquieu's fictitious correspondence. Fittingly, this one should read

Karl à son ami Jean à Genève:  
Shiraz, le 6 octobre 1997

خوشا شیراز و وضع بی مثالش

'Hail Shiraz in thy beautiful surroundings', I quote Hafiz.

What brought me over? Not the Institute for Islamic Encyclopaedia as on some previous occasions. This time there is going to be a dermatological meeting in Teheran on October 8-10, to which I was invited (The Fourth International Congress of Dermatology and Dermatopathology, in collaboration with the Centre for Training and Research in Skin Diseases and Leprosy, organized by the Iranian Society of Dermatology). It looks as if I should be acting as a representative of German-speaking dermatology, as much as Edouard Grosshans represents the French, Amir H. Mehregan and Steven Emmet the American branch of the field, among others. Bound to the national carrier for various reasons, Austrian Airlines' schedule got me into the country one day ahead of time and will keep me one day longer. For this reason I cannot resist dropping into some of the classical places. Hafiz' (about 1324-1389) and Saadi's

tombs were a must, bearing the same captions on the marble slabs: 'O Thou who abidest although all things perish'.

انت الباقی و کل شیء هالك

To my surprise I detected a small error in Herman Bicknell's beautiful edition of Hafiz (London 1875; purchased in Teheran some years ago) namely, in the location of the verses on the marble slab of the poet's tomb, where right and left are mixed up, e.g.

ای دل غلام شاه جهان باش و شاه باش

('Obey the Shah of the whole world, and thus, O heart! a Shah be thou'; Bicknell's translation).

Once more I went to Persepolis and the regal graves at Naqsh-e-Rustam. I had the good fortune to run into a German group led by an iranologist who excelled in detailed explanations. Since I refer to the Shapur (I.) - Valerian relief of the 3rd century AD, annually in my medico-historical lectures, I considered myself very lucky at this point.

Back in Teheran the subsequent day, the congress was opened by Dr. Yahya Dowlati, president of the Iranian Society of Dermatologists and chairman of the meeting which had its venue at the Institut Pasteur. There was a balanced 3-day program, in English before lunch, in Persian in the afternoons. Amir Mehregan retold the exciting story of the Pinkus-Ehrlich families elaborating a whole century of fascinating discoveries. A second lecture was devoted to diseases of the oral mucosa. Steven Emmet from the University of California, San Diego, eloquent and humorous as ever, spoke on skin manifestations of AIDS, in a second lecture on psoriasis. Edouard Grosshans, of Strasbourg, France, nicely covered his favourite subjects of panniculitides and lipomas (2 lectures), Jean-

François Nicolas and his wife Dominique Kaiserlian, from Lyon, presented various aspects of contact sensitivity and tolerance. I myself commented on races, phototypes and clines, and medical terminology and doctors' speeches, respectively. Besides these there were several other contributions from Europe and the United States. The meeting was attended by 450 physicians, very many of them young. At the social level the Iranians displayed their warm and generous hospitality. Personally it brought me in contact with many colleagues again whom I knew from their stay in Austria (dermatologists) or from previous meetings on Islamic Medicine (medico-historians). Altogether, everything was orderly, informative and pleasant albeit without discussion.

After the end of the meeting I flew into Kerman for another 30-hour touristic stint. Three more magnificent mosques, the remote desert fortress of Bam and the idyllic sanctuary of Mahan were my targets. The latter holds the tomb of the local Sufi saint Shah Nematollah-e-Vely, who wrote, 'Kerman is the heart of the world'.

کرمان دل عالم است

The peaceful tranquillity of the place reminds me of the tomb of another Sufi, Shaikh Abdallah Ansari, in Gazargah near Herat in Afghanistan, inaccessible as it may be today.

A single foreign visitor is invariably asked about his origin, language and profession. Half a dozen persons approached me for advice and I gladly gave them the addresses of the nearest dermatologic specialists. Acne, naevi, cutaneous leishmaniasis, androgenetic alopecia, infertility, AIDS, etc. came under scrutiny in a more or less rudimentary discussion, in Fars Province and in Kerman. Eventually, on a full Airbus outside Kerman, a

doctor was sought for and I had to identify myself. Together with an Iranian colleague on board, we had to decide if the flight should start, having a very pale, hypotonic, leukemic child, obviously under or after systemic chemotherapy, on board. We thought it would be best to go ahead with the 70-min trip and have her put into the Teheran hospital where she was heading with her parents anyway. Happily this was achieved.

Friday, 10 October 1997, the muslim day of worship, fell on the same day as Erev Yom

Kippur ה'תשנ"ח 5758. Moreover, a Hafiz Tridium started one day before the anniversary of the poet's death (20 Mehr = 12 October, in 1389 AD = 767 A.H. solar, 797 A.H. lunar), and thereby nicely coincides with Columbus Day in the Western Hemisphere.

Heading home tonight I wish I were not alone in my oecumenical prayers incited by such intricacies of calendars. Trying to climb the spiritual ladder of da'at, hakhmah, binah (knowledge, wisdom, cognizance) in Talmudic terms, דעת חכמה בינה

and of pardakhat jismani, tariq, ma'arif, haqiqah, wasl (worldly achievements, path, knowledge, truth, union)

پرداخت جسمانی طریق معرفت حقیقه وصل

in Sufi qualitates, my hopes for interdenominational brotherhood are growing