

# EMPIRE OTTOMAN (CONSTANTINOPLE)

## Monnaies

Le système monétaire turc repose sur la Livre, dont la valeur intrinsèque est de fr. 22,725. On la prend généralement pour fr. 22,80 et il y a dans la circulation des demi-livres de fr. 11,40 et des quarts de livres de fr. 5,70. La livre turque se divise en 100 piastres; le piastre, qui est une petite pièce d'argent, vaut donc un peu plus de fr. 0,20. La piastre se subdivise en 40 paras. Il y a des pièces de 10 paras, de 5 paras et de 2 1/2 paras, ces dernières valent à peu près fr. 0,01 de notre monnaie. Il ne faut pas confondre les pièces de 10 et de 5 paras avec celles de 1 et de 2 piastres, qui ont les mêmes dimensions.

## Climat

D'une façon générale, la Turquie est considérée comme salubre. Le climat de Constantinople et de ses environs est tempéré, avec des perturbations fréquentes et souvent considérables, dues à la lutte des courants atmosphériques opposés.

L'hiver est généralement assez doux et ce n'est qu'en janvier, lorsque règne le vent du Nord, que la température descend à 2 ou 3 degrés sous zéro. Le vent du Sud, surtout fréquent au début de l'hiver, vaut à Constantinople des températures de 15 à 18 degrés au-dessus de zéro. La neige est rare et de courte durée. Toutefois, les mois de novembre, décembre, janvier, février et mars sont, par intermittence, très humides et produisent une impression désagréable de froid.

On passe sans transition de l'hiver aux journées plus chaudes du printemps qui est de courte durée.

L'été est caractérisé par l'absence presque complète de pluie et la prédominance des vents du Nord. Le maximum thermométrique atteint parfois 38 et 39 degrés centigrades mais un vent du Nord, appelé «Meltein», relativement froid, se précipitant des vastes surfaces de la Russie à travers la Mer Noire rafraîchit notablement l'atmosphère et purifie l'air. Les nuits sont généralement fraîches, elles nécessitent, surtout sur les rives du Bosphore, l'usage de vêtements assez chauds même à l'époque des canicules. La fin de l'été se manifeste généralement par des pluies qui surviennent régulièrement à la fin du mois d'août et durent plusieurs jours. Pendant la saison d'été, qui dure du mois de juin jusqu'à septembre, le séjour à la campagne (Bosphore, Mer de Marmara, les Des Princes) s'impose, à cause des fortes chaleurs, particulièrement sensibles à Péra et du manque de propreté de la ville. Malgré la poussière qui persiste dans les rues, l'automne est la saison la plus agréable de l'année, elle se prolonge jusqu'au mois de novembre. Les journées ne sont pas trop chaudes et les nuits agréablement fraîches. Il est à remarquer que le climat de Constantinople est assez déprimant et indigne à la longue sur les activités les plus tenaces. Pour échapper à ces effets déhilitants il est nécessaire de faire de temps en temps un voyage en Occident.

## Sécurité

Dans les villes, la sécurité est, en temps normal, aussi grande que dans les cités européennes. Dans les campagnes il y a encore du brigandage, mais il n'est guère à redouter que pour les gens riches, que les brigands capturent en vue d'une forte rançon.

## Langues

La langue officielle est le turc, mais elle est loin de prévaloir dans tout le pays; dans les îles de l'Archipel elle est en usage en grec, il en est de même en Égypte; cette langue est aussi en usage en Macédoine où l'on parle également le serbe et le bulgare.

## Coût de la vie

La langue française est assez répandue dans tous les centres de population peu éloignés de la mer.

Les objets d'alimentation que l'on se procurent autrefois à des conditions très avantageuses ont participé comme tous les articles de la vie courante, un mouvement de hausse générale des prix.

Malgré les efforts des autorités, la viande reste chère. Elle est de qualité médiocre et se vend avec les os, la graisse, les membranes, etc., ce qui rend le prix de la partie utilisable bien supérieur à celui qui est facturé. Le pain noir, qui est consommé par presque tout le monde, est généralement mauvais, à cause de sa cuisson très imparfaite et de la quantité d'eau, trop considérable qu'il contient. Il est rare que le pain pèse le poids pour lequel il est vendu, ce qui en augmente encore le prix.

Le poisson entrain autrefois pour une bonne part dans l'alimentation des classes pauvres, à présent, on ne le vend plus dans les rues; il se trouve guère qu'au marché, où il faut le payer des prix parfois exorbitants. L'échelle des prix (de 1 à 40 piastres l'ocque, c.-à-d. 1 kg. 28) est très variable, mais la moyenne se maintient relativement élevée.

Quant aux légumes, leur renchérissement atteint directement la masse de la population, car ils forment la base de l'alimentation. Ce qui se vendait il y a quelques années, 10 paras (1/4 de piastre) l'ocque, atteint aujourd'hui le prix de 1 à 1 1/2 piastre. Ils sont en général de qualité inférieure.

Le tableau suivant renseigne le coût à Constantinople, des articles d'alimentation et de première nécessité, presque tous de production nationale.

Ces prix auront sans aucun doute été majorés notablement durant ces derniers temps par suite de la guerre des Balkans.

Cette évaluation représente le minimum de ce que le consommateur, surtout s'il est étranger, est obligé de payer, après de longs marchandages avec les détaillants. Cette façon de discuter les prix de tous les articles qui achète devient une nécessité à laquelle l'étranger ne peut se soustraire, s'il veut ne pas dépasser des ressources moyennes.

Viandes de Boucherie :	Bœuf	7 piastres l'ocque (1k.28)
	Mouton	10 " "
	Agneau	9 " "
	Veau	9 " "
	Porc	10 à 12 piastres "
Volailles :	Poulet	3 à 7 " la pièce
	Dinde	20 à 25 " "
	Oie	15 " "
	Canard	8 " "
Pain	blanc	jusqu'à 2 " l'ocque
	noir	1 " 15 paras "
Beurre	indigène	40 à 50 " "
	de cuisine (de Suisse)	14 à 16 " le kilogramme de 100 grammes
Huile	1 <sup>re</sup> qualité	14 " l'ocque
	ordinaire (veulleuse)	10 " "
Sucres	Trieste	2 1/2 à 3 " le kilogramme
Oufs	fraîches	1 " les 2 ou 4 pièces (selon la saison)
Riz	d'Égypte	2 1/2 " l'ocque
	italien	2 " "
Lait	fraîs	2 " "
	caillé (yoghurt)	1 " le bol
Vin	indigène (médiocre)	2 à 2 1/2 " l'ocque
	français	2 à 2 1/2 " la bouteille (selon la marque)
Poisson		11 à 40 " l'ocque

Légumes frais (1)	courgettes	1 à 1 1/2 piastre	l'ocque
	haricots verts	2 à 3 piastres	"
	poireaux de terre indigènes	1 " "	"
	(Malte et France) 1 1/2 à 1 1/2	"	"
	aubergines	10 à 20 paras	la pièce
	choux	20 à 30 "	"
	artichauts	10 à 20 "	"
	petits pois	2 à 4 piastres	l'ocque
	choux fleurs	1 à 2 "	la pièce
	carottes	1 à 2 "	l'ocque

(1) Les prix indiqués sont ceux des marchés subsistants, dans les rues d'habitation moyennes; ils sont sensés coup plus élevés chez les marchands de légumes et de viande (carré).

Légumes secs	haricots (bonne qualité)	3 à 4 piastres	l'ocque
	petits pois	3 " "	"
Fruits	de choix (médiocre)	2 1/2 à 3 "	(prix habituels)
	de choix : poires	3 à 7 "	l'ocque
	pêches	3 " "	"
	poires d'Amassia	3 à 6 "	"
	raisin	4 " "	"
Combustibles	bois de chauffage :	20 à 45 "	le tébék (280 kg.) de poids officiel (selon la saison)
	à la campagne	20 à 30 "	"
Charbon	coke	30 "	(or) 100 ocques
	lignite	30 " (argent)	"
	pétrole (Baloum)	18 à 20 "	l'estagon (18,17 litres)
Savon de ménage	Crête	7 1/2 à 8 "	l'ocque

Il est à remarquer que ces prix sont ceux de Constantinople, en province ils sont un peu moins élevés.

## Logement

Les loyers sont très chers et constituent une lourde charge. Les logements — maisons ou appartements — en rapport avec les exigences d'un confort même relatif et d'une bonne hygiène sont rares, malgré la situation favorable de la ville. En général, les habitants de Constantinople dépendent pour se loger des sommes qui ne sont pas proportionnées à leurs revenus. Le fonctionnaire ou l'employé est obligé de consacrer à son loyer au moins le cinquième de ses appointements. A Péra, la location d'un petit appartement non meublé, coûte au minimum 100 fr. par mois, sans compter le service qui se paie à part. Les chambres meublées coûtent 2 à 3 livres turques (1 livre turque = fr. 22,80).

Le prix des chambres dans les hôtels de second ordre est de 15 à 40 piastres, avec pension à partir de 40 piastres.

La qualité de la nourriture dans les principaux restaurants de Péra est inférieure à celle des établissements similaires en Occident. On paie chez des portiers assez réduites, aussi faut-il évaluer la dépense nécessaire pour satisfaire un appétit moyen à une moyenne de 10 fr. par jour.

Certains établissements acceptent des clients en pension. Le prix de celle-ci (déjeuner et dîner varié de 75 à 105 fr. Un repas pris à part coûte 10 à 12 1/2 piastres.

Dans le quartier populaire de Galata un ouvrier étranger pourrait trouver à se loger à raison de 5 à 10 piastres par jour, en plus coucherait au moins de 4 à 5 piastres.

Aux prix pour la location de maisons ou d'appartements il faut ajouter la rétribution du concierge, la gratification au veilleur de nuit, le droit pour l'entretien et le balayage de la rue, la fourniture d'eau potable, etc.

## Habilllements

Les prix sont beaucoup plus chers qu'en Belgique. Les confections

pour hommes sont généralement à bon marché, mais de qualité inférieure.

Les petits tailleurs font payer un costume de 80 à 100 fr.; si on leur fournit l'étoffe, la façon se paye de 1 1/2 à 2 1/2 livres turques.

Les prix des grands tailleurs sont très élevés; un simple costume veston coûte 480 fr.

Il en est de même pour les maisons de modes et les tailleurs pour dames.

Une couturière travaillant chez les particuliers gagne de 10 à 20 piastres par jour, plus la nourriture.

Les chausseries valent en général, comme prix et comme qualité celles de Belgique. Pendant la mauvaise saison on utilise beaucoup de galoches, qui coûtent assez cher; prix moyen, 30 à 35 piastres.

Le tarif douanier prévoit sur tous les articles un droit uniforme de 11 %, ad valorem. Les armes à feu l'objet d'une réglementation spéciale; les fusils de chasse et les revolvers sont prohibés ainsi que la poudre et tous les explosifs.

Moyennant autorisation préalable on peut exporter des fusils de chasse et des cartouches vides; la vente de la poudre est un monopole du Ministère de la guerre.

## Régime douanier

Il est de l'intérêt des Belges qui se rendent à l'étranger d'annoncer leur départ à l'Administration communale de leur résidence en Belgique et de lui indiquer leur nouvelle adresse; cette administration pourra ainsi leur faire parvenir sans retard les communications qu'elle aurait à leur transmettre.

Il faut bien se réclamer à cette occasion, un certificat d'identité, un extrait de leur acte de naissance et, s'il y a lieu, un certificat de changement de résidence.

Outre ces pièces, il peut être utile, suivant les circonstances, qu'ils emportent avec eux :

Un extrait de leur acte de mariage ou leur livret de mariage; Un certificat de bonne vie et mœurs.

A leur arrivée à destination, les Belges feront bien de se présenter, munis des dites pièces un Consulat de Belgique dans le ressort duquel ils ont l'intention de se fixer et de réclamer leur inscription dans le registre matricule de ce Consulat.

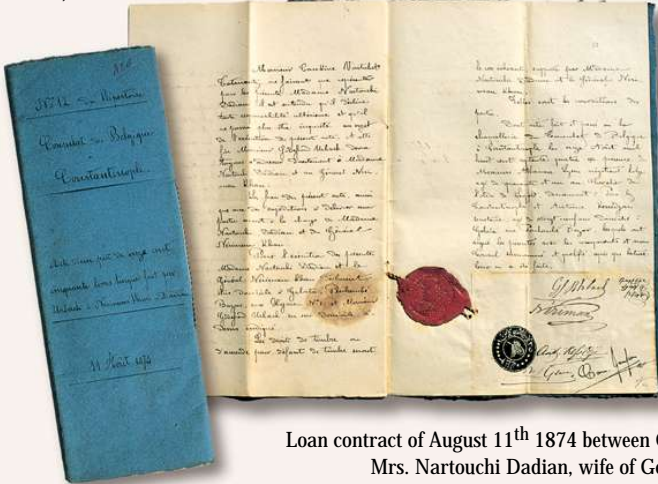
Cette inscription est nécessaire pour jouir des avantages résultant des capitulations.

## Consulat

Les personnes qui se rendent en Turquie, sont tenues de se munir d'un passeport, délivré par les autorités belges compétentes et visé par le Consulat de Turquie dans le ressort duquel résident ces personnes. Ce document est absolument indispensable.

Along the same lines, Envoy Moncheur also concluded his later reports with a warning that "one must dispose of solid financial means as the cost of settling, whether in grandeur or in modesty, is considerable, sometimes even ruinous".

It is therefore not all that surprising that the members of the Belgian community often belonged to the affluent category: Godefroid Urbach earned his life as a money-lender,



Loan contract of August 11<sup>th</sup> 1874 between Godefroid Urbach and Mrs. Nartouchi Dadian, wife of General Neriman Khan, aide-de-camps of His Majesty the Shah of Persia.

and also set up a shipyard for motorboats in Kalibdji Han,



Shipyards in the Golden Horn, Arsenal. Late 19<sup>th</sup> century postcard. Collection S. Kayserilolu

along the shores of the Golden Horn at Phanar; his son Pierre started farming in Fenerbahçe after earning an agronomy degree at Gembloux in 1895; Emile Degand

practised law and navigated his fellow countrymen through the intricate ways of Ottoman law.

It would however be very inadequate not to mention also Harold Parfitt, the "Chief of Scouting in Belgium". Parfitt was English by birth, but lived with his Belgian family in Uccle near Brussels. In 1912, soon after the scout movement was adopted in the Empire under impulse of the Galatasaray Sultani School, Parfitt was invited over from Brussels by the Ottoman government to establish a Turkish Scout Association and train scout leaders.



Harold Parfitt, in his outfit of Kalgai. Founder of the Turkish Scoutism, 1912. Picture provided by 'Scouts et Guides Pluralistes de Belgique, Brussels.

In November 1912, less than a month after the outbreak of the First Balkan War, Antoine Depage, Administrator of the Belgian Scout Movement, but above all a surgeon, came to Constantinople and volunteered to set up a makeshift hospital at the barracks of Tache-Kichla, where he performed emergency surgery, assisted by his wife Marie and their oldest son, Pierre. "Mrs. Depage and her nurses, their heads covered with white bonnets, (...) acted as guardian angels never to be erased from our memory", Dr. Jahoub witnessed in his "Blessures de la Guerre turco-balkanique" of 1913. Dr. Depage's Ambulance unit operated in close cooperation with the Belgian Red Cross, which also spent considerable efforts to provide humanitarian aid during the Balkan Wars.



We are honoured to transmit cargo documents for the bandages and items destined to the Ambulance of Dr. Depage, as forwarded by the Orient Express to Constantinople on the 10th of this month, accompanied by the nurse Miss Stuurman who shall join the Ambulance service...



Belgian << Ambulance >> in Constantinople, 1912.  
Antoine, Marie and Pierre Depage, Dr. Neumann.  
Picture provided by 'Scouts et Guides Pluralistes de Belgique, Brussels.

There was also the young Flora Cordier, who graciously kept her modest glove shop on the Grand Rue de Pera, until one fair day in the year 1874, the unlikely story unfolded of this young beauty from Hainaut, fancied by no other than the future Sultan Abdülhamid himself and eventually brought under his protection with the name of Fatma Hanım!

The new Sultan has only one wife, a modiste from Pera, a Belgian. He was in the habit of frequenting her shop, buying gloves, etc., and much admired her. One day he said 'Do you think you could marry me' and she replied 'Pourquoi non', and it was done. It was she who set him against Seraglio life and all that. In short a Roxelana. Will he be a Suleyman the Great?"

Those were, according to John Freely's account, the contents of Benjamin Disraeli's letter to Lord Salisbury, written just after Abdülhamid came to the throne, and based on information sent to the Prime Minister from the British Embassy.

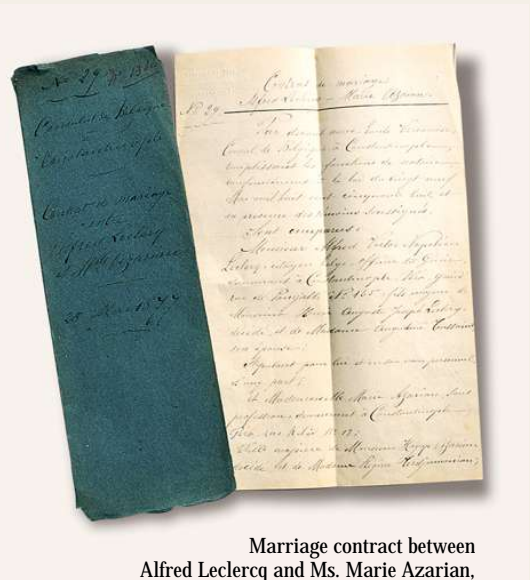
An article in the Belgian newspaper recalled several years later how Flora Cordier had found her way from her native village Strepv-Bracqueret to the far away Ottoman capital.

"Some years ago a young girl from Quaregnon (...) left for Paris where she took up work in an important fashion house, numbering among its regular customers also the ladies of the Sultan's Harem. It seems that these are rather difficult and sometimes request orders to be brought right to them at home, where they want to have the garments finished, modified or redone, according to their whims. One day, the young girl was chosen to deliver such an order and sent to Constantinople, never to come back. After one of her parents had passed away in Boussu, a heritage was left to her. To trace the girl back, a notice was published in one of Constantinople's newspapers, inviting her to contact the Belgian Embassy where an interesting message would be announced to her.

Two days later, one of the carriages of the Harem, escorted by eunuchs, halted in front of the embassy. A veiled woman stepped out and asked what she was wanted for..."

Indépendance belge, March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1891

Quite obviously, however, it was not all like Flora Cordier's 'Tales of 1001 Nights' among the Belgians in Constantinople. In fact, things were usually far more prosaic and down to earth. Along with Belgium solidly partaking in the Ottoman industrial modernisation, came also the flow of expatriates and experts, be it the service of the Sultan's administration or merely holding a private contract. These newcomers ended up being a substantial fraction of Constantinople's Belgian colony. Monsieur Boulvin was the director of the Société Impériale Ottomane, and held the switch to the lighting in the streets and homes of Kadi-keuy (Kadiköy) and Scutari (Üsküdar); Alfred Leclercq married Ms. Marie Azarian at the Belgian Consulate General in Constantinople in 1877, lived in the city's Pangalti area and, from 1884 onward, became Ottoman employee, second in command in the Sultan's Ministry of Public Works for a full quarter of a century; Joseph David headed and organised the capital city's cleaning services and when in 1913 he drowned while having an innocent swim in the Bosphorus, Governor Djemil Pasha made an immediate request to the Legation for Mr. David's urgent replacement by another Belgian official; monsieur Sterpin had signed a two year contract in 1909 to be Director General and turn the Imperial Post and Telegraph department into a smooth operation.



Marriage contract between Alfred Leclercq and Ms. Marie Azarian, concluded at the Consulate General of Belgium in Constantinople on May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1877

Légation de Belgique  
en Turquie.  
N<sup>o</sup> 398  
Mh

Constantinople, le 11 Juillet 1907

DIRECTION POLITIQUE  
N<sup>o</sup> 67  
du 14/15  
ENTRÉ LE 26 Juillet

Monsieur le Ministre,

J'ai été reçu hier en audience  
privée par S. M. T. le Sultan après d'avoir  
l'honneur de lui être présenté.

Après les courtoisies d'usage le  
Sultan m'a fait apprécier toute la satis-  
faction que les services de nos officiers belges  
suscitent pour la réorganisation de la gen-  
dermarie en Asie Mineure, ainsi que pour  
l'occupation de la poste de Directeur General de Post and Telegraph - the choice of the  
Government of the King would fall on the elite of our compatriots.  
The Sultan had his answer translated

à la suite de la conversation de ce jour, j'ai eu l'honneur  
de voir S. M. T. de très près, qui m'a fait apprécier la  
bienveillance avec laquelle il l'accueille.

Tout en exprimant à Monsieur le Ministre  
l'assurance de mon plus profond respect.

Faculté

Halid Zia Bey and Baron de Hübsch, who translated the conversation, were present in the audience.

Légation de Belgique  
en Turquie.  
N<sup>o</sup> 399  
Mh

Constantinople, le 16 Juin 1907

AFFAIRES ÉTRANGÈRES  
N<sup>o</sup> 209-20.014  
du 17/18

Monsieur le Ministre,

Dans mes rapports des 7 et 14 juin,  
respectivement nos 124 et 126, ainsi que dans  
mon télégramme de ce jour N<sup>o</sup> 398, j'ai eu  
l'honneur d'insister tout particulièrement sur le  
desir exprimé par S. M. T. de voir  
le poste de Directeur General de Post and  
Telegraph confié à un fonctionnaire de  
notre pays.

à la suite de la conversation de ce jour, j'ai eu l'honneur  
de voir S. M. T. de très près, qui m'a fait apprécier la  
bienveillance avec laquelle il l'accueille.

Tout en exprimant à Monsieur le Ministre  
l'assurance de mon plus profond respect.

Faculté

Yesterday I have been received in private audience by HRH the Sultan for the honour of being presented to him.

After the usual courtesies the Sultan has asked me to convey His full satisfaction with the services rendered by our Belgian officials .... While thanking the Sultan for His flattering appreciation, I have assured His Majesty that each time the Imperial Government would appeal to Belgium for the designation of men of expertise to Turkey, in order to render service to Him - and more particularly at this moment for the

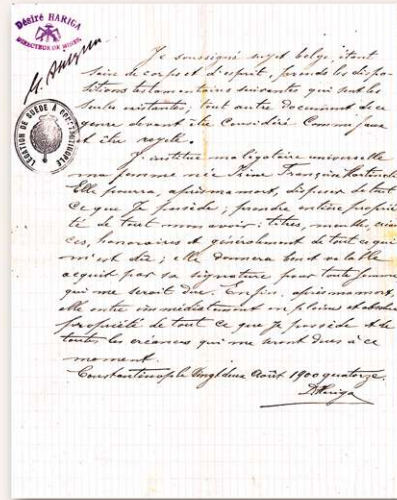
In my reports (...) I have insisted very specifically on the desire Rifaat Pasha had expressed to entrust the position of Director General of Post and Telegraph to a civil servant of first rank.

In the course of a dinner at my residence, I had a long conversation on this subject with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, revealing His Excellency's firm hope to find a compatriot of ours who possesses not only such a status of accomplishment as an official but also a personality occupying in Belgium itself a function of commanding leadership (...).

In the middle of the multiple rivalries taking place these days in Turkey among the Big Powers, the appointment of a Belgian to such elevated posts can only favourably influence our prestige and our future relations with the Ottoman Empire(...).

Furthermore, while a number of Ottoman students were sent off for higher education to Gembloux and Louvain, several Belgian academicians and scientists found their way into Constantinople's universities as well, particularly as from about 1905. The Belgian expertise Ottoman authorities sought to acquire was, quite understandably, often industry-related. A good example was Désiré Hariga, mining engineer and director.

One could also mention Albéric May and Edmond Dickmann, both engineers as well, the former specialised in railway construction and management, the latter in hydraulics and irrigation techniques. Both men were recruited by the Sublime Porte to teach in the capital and had their contracts renewed several times, on the explicit demand of the Imperial Ottoman Legation in Brussels.

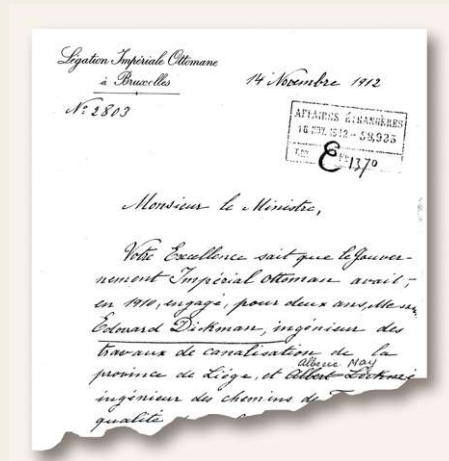


Letter of D. Hariga, written in Constantinople on August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1900. MFA Archives, Brussels

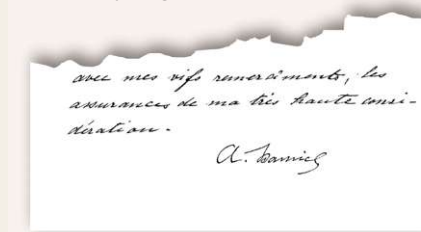
Your Excellency is aware that the Imperial Ottoman Government had in 1910 employed for a period of two years Mr E. Dickmann, engineer of canalisations for the Province of Liège, and Mr Albéric May, railway engineer, as teachers at the School of Civil Engineers of Constantinople (...).



Group picture of teaching staff at the Imperial School of Civil Engineers. Late 19<sup>th</sup> century Collection Engin Özendefl



Subject to the consent of the Royal Government, the Imperial Government has decided to renew the contract of Mr Dickmann and Mr May for another period of two years at the same conditions already agreed upon in the contract of recruitment.

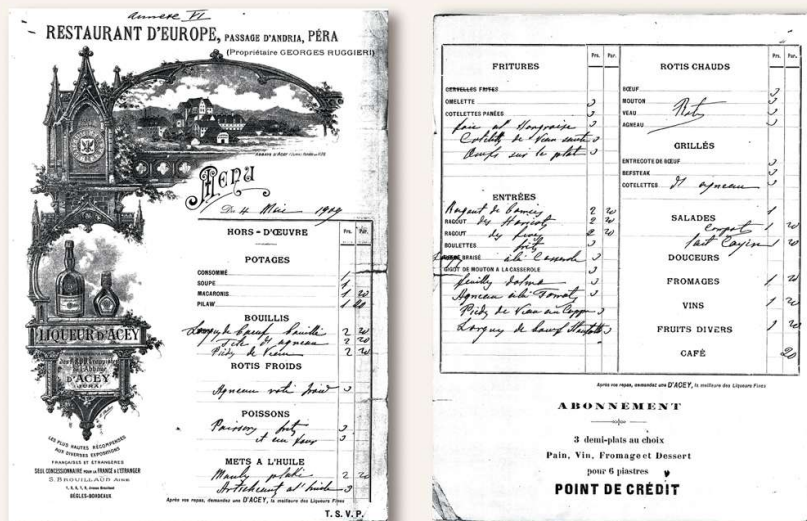


Then, there were also the less worldly aspects. In the multi-ethnic melting pot that the Ottoman capital was at that time, the catholic community to which many of the Belgians belonged, had no problem whatsoever practising their religion and have their children attend religion classes in a European language like French, Italian or German. Plenty of churches and catholic schools were spread all over town, on both sides of the Bosphorus. Initially they were operated by and for the ancient Levantine families of Constantinople, but later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century they flourished more and more as the spiritual anchorage of new immigrants and expatriates. There were even a number of Belgian priests who arrived and worked in Constantinople. Brother Edilbertus, born in Burdinne in 1847 as Eugène Bemelmans taught, in the schools of Saint Joseph, Kadi-keuy (Kadıköy) and Saint Michel, Pera between 1902 and his death two years later; Brother Mamilien, born in Liège in 1805 was considered less gifted for teaching in class, but shouldered with diligence Saint Michel School's management from 1845 to 1885, interrupting this long period of service only to perform similar duties in Smyrna (Izmir) between 1855 and 1863. Furthermore, between 1902 and 1913 the area of Louvain alone sent out six priests to Constantinople; and Cyril Van Overbergh, later Minister of State, seemed not the least bit struck to hear time and again, while on visit to Constantinople and surroundings in April 1897, the language of Gezelle (a 19<sup>th</sup> century poet from Bruges) (...), spoken by the headmaster of the Assumptionist Fathers.



# La Belle Epoque

Perceptions and impressions are different from person to person, of course. While Cyril Van Overbergh made his own elevated reflections on language and poetry, another Belgian traveller in the same year 1897, Juan Gilliodts, rather felt “powerless in expressing the beauty of the Golden Horn and Constantinople, triggering an enchantment that lingers on in one’s mind, never to let go”. When writing these lines, Gilliodts did not really think of the city’s geographical setting at the Golden Horn and the Bosphorus, neither of the brilliant palaces and mosques which adorn the city into its uniqueness. Gilliodts was not at all thinking of buildings and the like, but of people, of “the Sweet Waters of Europe where even the Turkish women gladly transgress for a moment the prohibition to be admired” and of his evenings at the “Théâtre de l’Odéon, the style of which reminds one of the Alcazar de Bruxelles”: the elegant flair of confidence and playful defiance, the spirit of ‘La Belle Epoque’. Gilliodts must also have been thinking of the delicate ladies with their rich long dresses, holding lace umbrellas to protect their white skin against the piercing sun rays, escorted by their high hatted husbands for a cup of coffee in George Ruggioni’s ‘Restaurant de l’Europe’ down in Pera’s ‘Passage d’Andria’ or, even better, in the Orient Bar of the Pera Palace.



Menu card of May 1909 at the Restaurant d'Europe, Pera  
MFA Archives, Brussels

Ah, the Pera Palace, quintessence of Constantinople’s Belle Epoque! The Pera Palace, along with the Therapia Summer Place, was about the most exclusive hotel



La Belle Époque : Georges Naegelmackers and friends at horse races.  
Archives Compagnie des Wagons-Lits © Wagons-Lits Diffusion, Paris

of Constantinople. In both these mundane meeting places, the Belgians, whether living in the city or merely on visit from Europe, felt quite at home. Indeed, both hotels belonged to their compatriot Georges Naegelmackers' "Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits et des Grands Express Européens". Consequently, the management of these hotels was partly in Belgian hands as well. It was allegedly also the Legation of Belgium which intervened with the Ottoman authorities when resistance arose against the plan to install electric lighting in the Pera Palace in 1899.



Entrance of the Pera Palace, built on initiative of Belgian entrepreneur Georges Naegelmackers in 1892.  
Collection S. Kayserilioğlu



Pera Palace, inside views. The celebrated Orient Bar and the reading room of the hotel  
Pera Palace Archives

## Belgium and the Orient Express

A banker and financier originating from Liège, Georges Naegelmackers, had his “Wagons-Lits” construct the Pera Palace in 1892 as an extension to his other big venture, the Orient Express: the legendary train travelling across Europe. Since 1883 the Orient Express had been bringing visitors and tourists from Ostend and Paris to the Ottoman capital, first via Varna (Bulgaria) and on by Black Sea steamer to Constantinople, then - from 1888 onward -



Orient Express approaching Constantinople. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century  
Archives Compagnie des Wagons-Lits © Wagons-Lits Diffusion, Paris

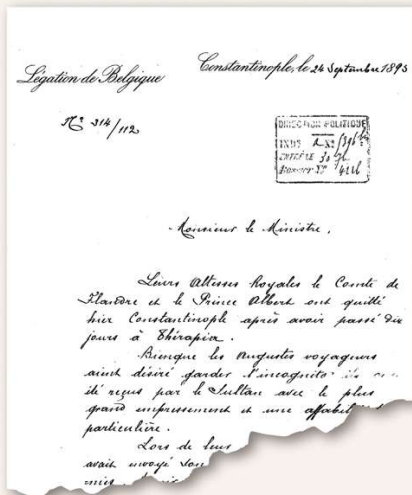
all the way by rail. Naegelmackers, visionary father of the European luxury trains, brought the Oriental dream to life for a great many. Graham Greene’s ‘Stamboul Train’ portrays the airy, somehow unreal life on board the Orient Express with unequalled eloquence: Coral Musker, a variety dancer boarding at Ostend after having taken the ferry from Dover and travelling all the way to Turkey to appear in an English show; Myatt, the business man on a delicate mission to admonish his double-dealing agent in Constantinople; ms. Warren, the nosy tabloid journalist watching her co-travellers for enjoyment and sensation; the mysterious Dr. Czinner faking to be a tourist by carrying around his Baedeker in the narrow train corridors, etc. And, of course, how could we forget this other great author, Agatha Christie’s creations, ms. Marple and Hercule Poirot, the phlegmatic detective who, by the way, was Belgian!

The Orient Express, making fiction and reality meet. The fiction of authors, looking for the exotic flavour of Oriental ingredients for their novels; the reality of the many travellers who revelled in the prospect of a voyage in full comfort to the palaces along the Bosphorus,

Front of a publicity folder of the Orient Express, early 20<sup>th</sup> century.  
Collection S. Kayserilio<sup>2</sup>lu



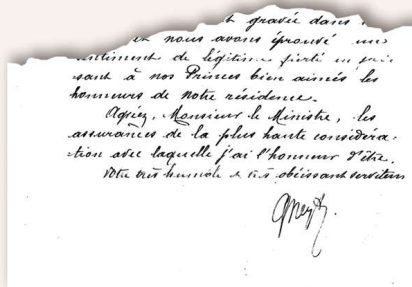
the grand mosques of Mimar Sinan and the majestic Aghia Sophia. Among those travelling on the Orient Express in its early years, were also quite a few Belgian personalities: Julien Van den Heuvel in 1886, shortly before becoming Minister of Justice, Prime Minister August Beernaert and his wife in 1889, the Lord Mayor of Brussels Karel Buls in 1892, Prince Philippe, Count of Flanders in 1895, accompanied by his 20 year old son and future King Albert I.



“Their Royal Highnesses the Count of Flanders and Prince Albert yesterday left Constantinople after having spent ten days at Therapia (Tarabya).

travellers had expressed their desire to remain incognito, they have promptly been received by the Sultan with particular affability. At their arrival, His Majesty had sent his Chief of Ceremonies, Munir Pasha, to the railway station to salute them. The next day, Their Royal Highnesses were solemnly received in audience and the following day they were invited for dinner, along with all Legation personnel ...

Their Royal Highnesses left on the Orient Express yesterday, destination Buda Pesht. Prince Louis de Battenberg travelled on board the same train, coming from Alexandria and going to Darmstadt ...”



## The Legation and the Community's Well-being

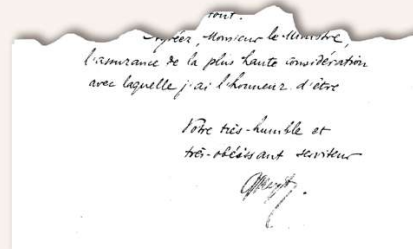
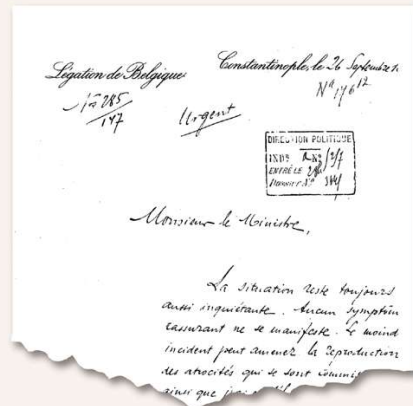
With the Orient Express bringing in a flow of Belgian visitors and with a resident community of numeric modesty but considerable social importance, the Belgian Legation felt the necessity to gear increasingly to modern day consular assistance and service, in addition to the traditional care for business and trade interests. Hence, the first contingency plans were drafted for the Belgians to feel safe and well taken care of by their diplomatic representation.

In 1896 for instance, the Envoy Georges Neyt went to great lengths indeed, proposing, like the English, a plan by which all Belgian citizens would, in case of an emergency, be brought into safety on board one of the packet-boats of Österreicher Lloyd.



Steamer of the Austrian Lloyd Company in the 1890s.  
Yıldız Saray Collection

With regard to our nationals, I am very embarrassed. We do not have, like the others, an Embassy or a Legation belonging to the State, where we can offer them asylum - let alone for a prolonged period of time. The rooms of the Chancery cannot possibly be used for shelter (...). Prudence and the weight of my responsibility force me to explain very clearly to all of them this situation, as well as the serious fear it causes to me. The Consul of England (...) has taken an extremely practical measure. ... I am asking you, Minister, to be authorised, in case of necessity, to act the same way. The Belgian colony in Constantinople and surroundings is currently composed of about thirty heads of family, representing approximately 150 persons in all.



If ever put into practice, Neyt's proposal for leasing a packet-boat would have implied a steep lease of 500 francs a day for the Belgian State. The proposal was accepted nonetheless in Brussels: one reckoned that such was the price the Belgian State would need to pay for not having taken up earlier demands from Baron de Borchgrave and others before him to acquire a Belgian Legation building, in like manner to what several other countries had done to serve their consular and economic interests in the Empire and its capital.

Nevertheless, matters were soon to change. With the Belgian government cautiously embarking on a policy of acquiring Embassy buildings abroad as from 1887, Constantinople was to be among the first five capitals where Belgium would actually house its diplomatic representation in its own State property. It all happened at the turn of the century. The calendar states "May 1900".

### The Year 1900 at a glance

- Global foreign trade amounts to 4.674 billion francs. Belgium ranks fifth among the world's major exporting nations, and first when considered per capita export performance.
- April 14<sup>th</sup>. The Universal Exhibition of Paris is officially inaugurated with the theme "A Century in Retrospect". Seven months later it closes the doors, after having drawn an unequalled fifty one million visitors, attracted by the technological innovations on display, electricity and film.
- May 20<sup>th</sup>. The Second Olympic Games of Modern Times take place in Paris. Belgium wins seven gold medals.
- July 2<sup>nd</sup>. Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin attempts to make his giant balloon fly at the Bodensee and succeeds in keeping it airborne for about twenty minutes.
- September 1<sup>st</sup>. Sultan Abdülhamid celebrates his reign of twenty five years with a majestic spectacle of fireworks over the Bosphorus.
- October 2<sup>nd</sup>. Prince Albert, son of the Count of Flanders and future King of the Belgians, marries the Bavarian Duchess Elisabeth von Wittelsbach. The Royal wedding takes place in Munich.



Turn of the century view of the Galata bridge and surroundings.  
Collection Engin Özendefl



Turn of the century view of the Galata bridge  
Collection S. Kayserilio²lu

# Pera, 1900

By Prof. Dr. Ethem Eldem

Pera, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was probably one of the strangest places of Europe. Visitors and residents alike viewed it with mixed feelings, ranging from fascination to disgust, and from envy to outright derision. What exactly Pera was, nobody really knew. It was a district and a street at the same time, or rather, a district limited to a street. Foreigners visiting Istanbul did not really come to see Pera, which would hardly satisfy their thirst for exoticism. The district was generally not even included in the guides of the time, except for a few remarks on the 'modern' facilities offered in the area. Demetrius Coufopoulos' Constantinople (London, 1899) was a case in point. Following his description of the streets of Constantinople as being "but little better than narrow, crooked, wretchedly-paved, and dirty alleys, teeming with mangy, snarling pariah dogs and garbage," the famous Grand'rue de Péra looked like a haven of security and comfort: "The principal street, where all the European shops are, is the Grande Rue de Péra, running through the heart of Pera near Galata Bridge to beyond the Taxim Assembly Gardens." Nearby, one could find a decent room in some



'La Belle Epoque': Levantines strolling in the 'Grande Rue de Péra'.  
Collection S. Kayserilio<sup>2</sup>lu

of the rare hotels of the city: The Pera Palace, of course, and the Bristol Hotel, the Hôtel de Londres, or, if one was not willing to pay as much as 20 to 25 francs, several second-class hotels, such as the Métropole, the Grande Bretagne, the Pesht and Continental... That was about it, though, and the implicit message was that Pera was not worth any description. It was, of course much more important to learn that the sultan of the time, Abdülhamid II, was "of a generous and kindly disposition, [...] one of the most hard-working energetic sultans Turkey had ever had," that "the average Turk [...] is noted for his indolence and apathy," and that "the Greeks [...] possess all the virtues and vices of their ancestors." Armed with such valuable information, the 'average' tourist could now discover the mysteries of the Orient that lay beyond the Golden Horn.



Viewed from this perspective, Pera had few, if any, redeeming qualities. It could hardly claim to be oriental enough to attract the interest of the Gertrude Bells and Pierre Lotis of the time. Apart from the already touristic attraction of the whirling dervishes at the Mevlevihane of Galata, there was very little it could offer in that respect. On the other hand, it was not western either, or, at least, enough to inspire any form of respect. Descriptions of the district were almost always tainted with irony and sarcasm, at the sight of a pathetic effort at imitating Europe. A few modest restaurants, second- or third-rate operettas performed at the théâtre des Petits-champs, shops offering the Parisian fashion of two or three seasons back, dogs squatting on the sidewalks, young dandies trying to impress the ladies with a few words of French... To the visiting foreigner, Pera had an air of mediocrity to it that reminded one of the most provincial towns of Europe. As capital of an empire, it definitely did not pass the test.

In many respects, this harsh and haughty assessment of the district was rather accurate. If Pera had one major weakness, it was its constant marginality and ambiguity. The district had never belonged to one system, to one culture. It had always lived and moved on the fringes. It was central and peripheral at the same time, owing its centrality to its power within the Ottoman system, and its marginality to that of the Empire within a more global setting. It had an eternal vocation to relativity, with a constant need to measure itself against both the West and the East, in an effort to emulate the one while dominating the other. The same phenomenon was reflected in its urban texture. Although it had become a major centre of the city, it was still located at one of its extremities, like an appendix rather than an integral part of the urban network.

Many factors were responsible for this dualism and this sense of immaturity. Pera, after all, was of a rather recent development. It was not really before the eighteenth century that the area had started to show a perceptible trend towards some form of urbanisation. Before that, known under the telling name of the *vigne di Peyra*, it had constituted a small, half-residential, half-agricultural suburb of the city of Galata, itself an appendix to the greater city of Istanbul. Nothing, in the context of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, allowed to foresee the future developments that would eventually turn this area into an alternative centre within the city. With a few foreign legations, a convent of dervishes and the palace of Galatasaray, used as a school and barracks for pages of the sultan, the area had an eclectic look that could hardly prefigure any of the future changes it would undergo.

It was, however, these foreign legations that provided the area with its momentum for a rapid transformation. Interestingly, the presence of these first embassies had contributed to a definition of the quarter in terms of foreignness, somewhat like the central parts of Galata, inhabited and used by foreign merchants. In that sense, the area was more a locus of exclusion from, than of inclusion into the city, a fact that would remain one of its underlying characteristics even in later centuries. The presence of foreign representatives, protected by their diplomatic status and by their relative isolation from the city, acted as an incentive for some of the wealthier members of the trading communities to escape the narrow and packed streets of Galata for the more spacious environment of the hills of Pera. The reason behind this gradual move was obvious: with the rapid development of foreign trade in the eighteenth century, Galata had started to show clear signs of saturation. For foreign merchants, however, there were few options of expansion within or without the walls of the ancient Genoese city. Squeezed in the central district of Bereketzade between growing Muslim communities advancing from Tophane and Kasimpasla, Pera, from the Tower up, was the only direction in which some of the pressure could be let. The presence of the embassies, already established on the heights of Pera, could only make it easier for these traders to take up residence in the area, leaving their stone warehouses behind them in Galata.

This gradual move helped determining rather early two of the major characteristics of the area. First, its status as a dominantly foreign neighbourhood, as implied by the presence of European diplomats and traders; second, its residential nature, as Galata became more and more exclusively reserved to the commercial interests and needs of the same community. However, what provided the new neighbourhood with a really new potential for growth was its capacity for a gradual attraction and absorption of an important local community, that of well-to-do non-Muslim subjects of the Empire, whose interests and affinities drew them closer to the European community. This, more than anything else, lay at the basis of Pera's growth into a separate entity within the city. The limited number of foreign diplomats and traders in the city would have hardly been sufficient to create such a momentum; but with a steady influx from the local population, the new neighbourhood was able to take off in an unprecedented way.

Who were these non-Muslims? What defined them most was, as suggested above, their degree of affinity to, and their common interests with the European community. Affinities were, first of all, of a religious and cultural nature. Local Catholics, especially of Italian origin, some of whose ancestry could be traced to the Genoese

and Venetian presence in Byzantine Constantinople, were perfect examples. So were Greek Catholics from the islands of the Aegean, whose immigration to Istanbul showed signs of a substantial increase in the eighteenth century. Armenian Catholics, too, should be counted, due to the rather recent development of their community, its close links with European — particularly French — religious orders and the risks of marginalisation they were exposed to at the hand of the dominant Gregorian community. Religion was a 'natural' catalyst, of course, especially in an Ottoman context where identity was often defined and perceived in terms of religion. But so were other forms of affinity, of a more complex and less traditional nature, linked to economic and political interests. Such incentives were extremely present behind the move of some Ottoman subjects to Pera, from the eighteenth century on. The increasing authority of foreign representatives in Istanbul, reflecting a growing control of the major European powers of the time over the Sublime Porte, had contributed to the creation of a haven of privilege and security around the embassies. Armed with the increasingly favourable capitulation treaties and filled with a sense of superiority derived from the weakening position of the Ottoman Empire in European politics, European ambassadors could now extend their protection to a number of Ottoman subjects through the institution of the *berat* or letter-patent. The beneficiaries of these documents — *beratlis* or *protégés*, as they were called — would obtain the same rights as foreigners under the capitulation: lower customs duties, exemption from the poll-tax, and even the possibility to escape from Ottoman jurisdiction. These advantages were tempting enough to those who had the means and connections to acquire them, inciting them to gravitate and eventually settle around the embassies and foreign quarters of Pera. For others, the move towards Pera was a first step in gaining a foothold on a land of opportunities.

No doubt, this process had a strong economic background to it. By approaching foreign powers through their ambassadors and representatives, well-to-do non-Muslims were securing for themselves a political support they could not obtain as easily from the Muslim ruling élite of the Empire. This support was essential to them in terms of guaranteeing their fortune from frequent political vicissitudes. As such, it was a precondition for a process of *embourgeoisement* which had been extremely limited until then. On the other hand, the extension of their privileges and protection to local traders was a convenient way for Europeans to curb their control over the market, by turning into 'partners' those who had, until recently, been their most feared rivals. This economic background was coupled with a cultural one, characterised by a two-way acculturation process. Constant exposure to the 'other,' continuous business relations, mixed marriages all contributed to the emergence of a rich culture of westernised Orientals and Levantinised Europeans.

However, if syncretism was the rule for everyday life, there is no denying that the European model proved powerful enough to force some of the local communities into a process of emulation, learning languages - especially French, adopting customs, following fashions, in short, living 'alla franca'. Pera soon became synonymous with a way of life, which, in many instances required that people turn their back on some of their traditions and adapt to a somewhat foreign culture.

The process was not without tensions. Non-Muslims often resented the occasional situation of subservience they were forced into, not to mention the outright opposition of certain conservative circles within the communities. The Europeans, on the other hand, had never really felt for the 'locals.' Late-eighteenth-century and early-twentieth-century travellers and observers never missed a chance to make fun of their alleged provincialism and opportunism. As role models, they often considered their imitators with arrogance and disdain, jealously setting barriers against any possible confusion between the two, any usurpation of their status of 'authentic' Westerners.

Surprisingly, there were fewer tensions with Muslims, if only because there were fewer contacts. The small world of Pera was foreign and marginal to them, and the reassuring feeling of being their own masters at home enabled them to view it as a locus of relative exoticism and eccentricity. In 1794, when asked to take action against Frenchmen who had paraded in the streets of Pera with revolutionary cockades on their hats, had not the reisulkuttab (foreign minister) simply remarked that these people could walk around the streets with baskets of grapes on their heads, for all he cared! The situation had been different when the same men had incited some janissaries to dance the Carmagnole around a tree of liberty planted in the garden of the French embassy, but only because they had caused Muslim officials to behave improperly. As long as such eccentricities were limited to foreigners and, to a certain extent, to non-Muslims, there could be no real harm. Pera, from the perspective of the Ottoman state, constituted a convenient locus of (self-) containment of a not so desirable 'other.'

Things started to change, however, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. With the growing power of Europe and the declared intention of the Empire to adopt a western model of development and re-organisation, Pera ceased to be as 'innocent' as it had been perceived until then. By then, the embassies of the great powers had become centres of alternative power that could no longer be dismissed as mere curiosity. Pera's social profile was changing rapidly, and so was its

architectural and urban outlook. The sparse residences lined along the main street and huddled around the diplomatic compounds of the embassies had gradually left their place to a dense urban texture that gradually pushed towards the North. Two major groups showed a particularly rapid growth: Greeks and foreigners. Greeks, who had always held a prominent position among the westernising sectors of the population, were literally conquering Pera, at a much higher pace than the two other major non-Muslim groups of the city, Armenians and Jews. In a similar way, throughout the nineteenth century, the city witnessed a formidable influx of foreigners, mostly from the West.

Of course, one could argue, the overall configuration of the district changed mostly in quantitative terms, with the already dominant elements of its population following parallel trends of development. However, there was a very important qualitative dimension to this development, that should not be overlooked. Numbers increased, but so did diversity, in terms of the social spectrum of the new comers. By and large, these new inhabitants of Pera, Greeks and foreigners alike, no longer belonged to an élite but represented a much wider social variety, down to a petty bourgeoisie and an urban proletariat. This diversity was further amplified in the case of foreigners by a widening spectrum of nationalities. 'Secondary' powers and new nations had joined the bandwagon and were gradually threatening to outnumber — if they hadn't already — the nationals of the 'great' powers. Belgians, Austrians, Italians, Hungarians, Russians, Poles were arriving every day, adding even more diversity to an already mixed society. Some nationalities were coming in marginal numbers from the fringes of the Empire. Serbians, Rumanians, and, most of all, Greeks-Hellenic citizens, that is - to whom Istanbul and the Empire were generally as familiar as home.

As a result of this diversification and democratisation, the general outlook of Pera changed radically. It grew in size, expanding along a dense network of back streets on both sides of the Grand'rue. It started conquering land, from cemeteries, from more traditional neighbourhoods, which were rapidly transformed



Grande rue de Péra and street lanterns, Late 19<sup>th</sup> century.  
Collection S. Kayserilio=lu

in the process. It changed its urban texture, with apartment houses, a novelty for the period. It experimented with self-management, setting up the first municipal organisation in Istanbul in the 1850s. It modernised, acquiring a new and modern infrastructure of pavements, sidewalks, streetcars, gas lighting. It developed a culture of its own, resulting from this intermingling of different nationalities, cultures and socio-economic backgrounds. Associations, clubs, beer halls, theatres, music halls, newspapers, libraries, bon marchés, sprang from everywhere, diffusing ideas, new and old, culture, high and low, tastes and fashions, good and bad. In short, it became a city in its own right, albeit small and provincial, where people lived and worked in an atmosphere of half - cosmopolitanism.

By the 1890s, the former enclave on the fringes of the Ottoman capital had grown into a city within the city, with over 200,000 inhabitants. Almost half of them were foreigners. Greeks probably represented a similar proportion, leaving a modest ten to twenty percent to Armenians, Jews and a very marginal Muslim population. Against the relative homogeneity of the Greek population - to which one might add a considerable Hellenic presence - foreigners were no longer as compact a group as they had been. French had become the lingua franca of the district, but so had Greek, too, albeit at a more popular level. Both communities had their specific ways of exercising social and symbolic power. Foreigners - especially communities of western European origin - had their embassies, their clubs, their political networking, and, still, their prestige as representatives of a victorious and self-confident West. Local communities may have kept a lower profile, but they nevertheless possessed an intense presence, especially in economic terms. Greeks, in particular, enjoyed a most impressive hold over the market: bankers, merchants, stockbrokers, but also grocers, shop owners, artisans, workers, street vendors, house maids, who controlled most of the daily and petty trade of the area. This dualism and potential tension found its way into the street and into the architectural language of Pera. Signs and advertisements generally used French and Greek, sometimes allowing some space for a translation into Turkish, as if not to forget completely where one was. Apartment houses and mansions went up, in diverse and eclectic styles, from neo-classical to art nouveau, bearing the name of their Greek, Armenian, or foreign owners. Imposing schools and churches, symbols of communal cohesion and success, were built all over the area, marking territory in the name of their community. The Greek example of the Zappion and Zographion schools, and, especially of the imposing church of Aghia Triada, dominating Taksim Square, was telling enough of the power and visibility of the district's dominant local element.

In this foreign and non-Muslim setting, little room was left for the Ottoman state, or for the Muslim population at large. Galatasaray, almost the only example of Muslim presence until the mid-nineteenth century, was soon transformed into the famous lycée, a monument to the westernist and pluralist commitments of the state.

A few remains of a past presence - fountains and mosques mostly located in the back streets - and the distant silhouette of the Taksim Barracks told a story of withdrawal and aloofness on behalf of the state, and of Muslims in general. Pera was so strongly associated with an 'alla franca' way of life, and was so profoundly marked by its foreignness, that it was altogether avoided by the Muslim population. Shopping, curiosity, business, entertainment attracted many a Turk, yet practically none of them would ever settle in this district of dubious political and cultural allegiances. A residence on the Bosphorus or a mansion in the old city were traditional choices which still corresponded to the expectations of most Ottoman statesmen and bureaucrats. When some of the members of the ruling élite would eventually break this tradition and fall for the attraction of new residential areas, Pera would still not be a legitimate and 'politically correct' destination; it would be avoided and shunted, as pashas and beys moved further North, towards the area of Niflantafı, Teftvikiye, or fiifli.

In fact, the same trend was soon to show also among certain sectors of Pera's growing population. The democratisation of the district had caused a phenomenon of saturation, whereby the Grand'rue had acquired its aspect - still preserved today - of a main street lined with almost uninterrupted rows of apartment buildings. Its residents had changed accordingly, from an élite profile to that of a middle class and petty bourgeoisie. Mansions had disappeared, replaced by apartments and stores, leaving the upper crust of the district with a frustrating feeling of assimilation into the urban masses. Examples of mansion-like structures - the equivalent of 'hôtels particuliers' - were limited to the long-established embassies and to rare cases of konaks, such as Abraham Paffa's. For those who wished to express their social distance from the increasingly plebeian Pera, two options were left: either to personalise, through decoration and architectural design, an otherwise unobtrusive element of a row of buildings - as in the case of Botter House - or to move toward new districts with more available space for ostentatious buildings. The second option seems to have been widely used from the 1870s and 1880s on, either by adopting the well - established local tradition of the yalı or sea - side residence on the Bosphorus, or by creating their own residential neighbourhoods in the periphery of the city, with Moda as its most characteristic example.

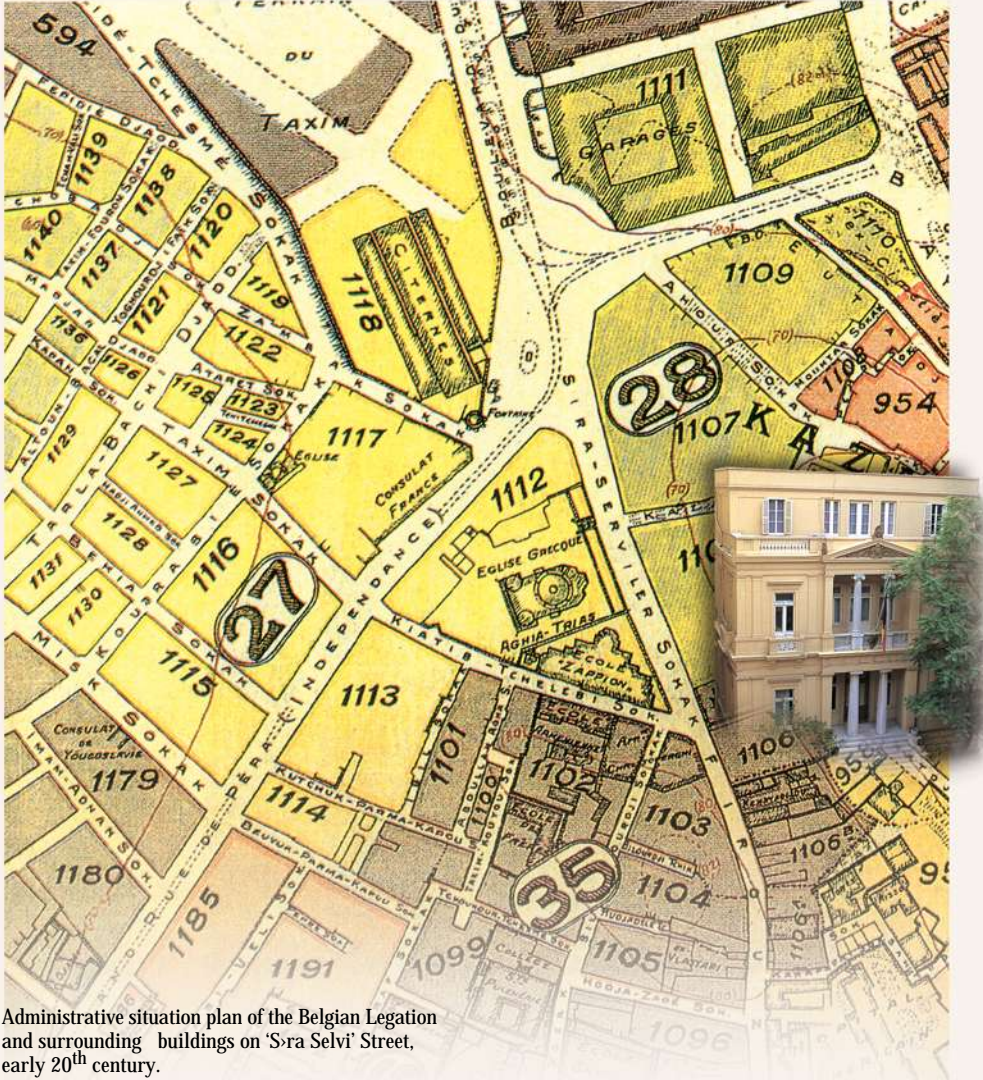
However, for those who wished to remain close to the new urban centre and still find ways to express their difference, the most obvious solution was to explore the possibilities of expansion beyond the Grand'rue, starting from Taksim Square. The districts of Harbiye, Niflantafl, and Tefvikiye perfectly served this purpose, offering sufficient space for an urban development of a more exclusive nature. However, the same ambitions could also be fulfilled within a much closer distance; the square itself, Sraselviler Street, and Ayas Pafia, gently sloping down toward the Palace of Dolmabahçe combined the advantage of a central situation with a still underdeveloped and malleable urban fabric. Prominent figures of the time were thus able to build real 'hotels particuliers': the Kabuli Pafia and Kebedgy Mansions on Sraselviler, or the residence of the general manager of the Ottoman Bank on Taksim Square were typical examples of this new trend. Not surprisingly, late comers of the diplomatic world followed suit. Unable to find appropriate space and accommodation within the overcrowded perimeter of the traditional 'quartier des ambassades' - extending along the main street between Galatasaray and Tunnel Square - they preferred to move away from 'central' Pera, toward the new and posh quarters around it. The German and Japanese legations on Ayas Pafia Street, the Belgian, Rumanian and Portuguese missions on Siraselviler Street signalled a new trend in the development of the 'European' quarters of the city.

By the turn of the century, the situation had more or less crystallised around these new and prestigious suburbs. This was only an intermediate step in the development of Pera, but a most decisive one, in that it had, by and large, set a model for further development well into the 1920s. What happened after that, though, is a totally different story, as the circumstances of the Great War and the reshuffling of culture, ethnicity and identity they would bring about were bound to transform Pera into a totally different world.



# “Le Palais de Belgique”, Anno 1900

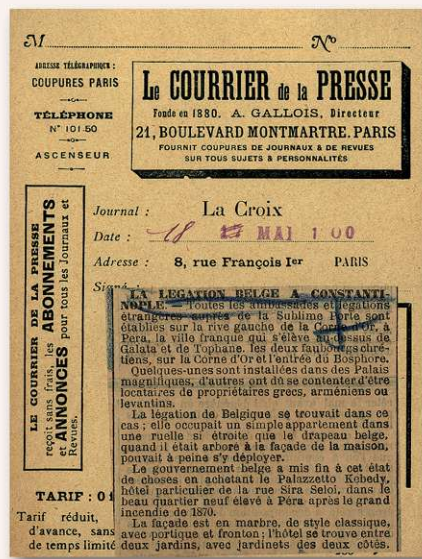
By Marc Van den Reeck



Administrative situation plan of the Belgian Legation and surrounding buildings on 'Sira Selvi' Street, early 20<sup>th</sup> century.  
Collection S. Kayserilioğlu

“Our legation at Constantinople is finally going to be lodged decently. Very soon it will occupy Kebedgy House, located in Sira Selvi Street in Pera. It was bought this week by the Belgian government at the price of 300.000 francs. It is a real palace, with a facade in white marble, a garden in the front and the rear, and a superb view on the Bosphorus.”

Indépendance Belge, May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1900



Clippings of Belgian newspapers announcing the purchase of the Belgian Legation building in May 1900 Archives of the Consulate General of Belgium in Istanbul

On May 18<sup>th</sup> 1900, the *Indépendance Belge* was only one of the numerous dailies carrying the news of the acquisition. No minor item indeed, for the reported purchase in Constantinople was one of the very first ones the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had ever made to house a diplomatic representation. It was in fact the fifth one. This, by the way, also fully underscores the prime importance the Belgian government at that time yielded to the Ottoman Empire and its capital.

The purchase by and large vindicated diplomats like Baron de Borchgrave and Neyt who, for years on end, had pointed out that their Legation in Constantinople needed more appropriate housing, befitting the prosperous state of relations of Belgium with both Ottoman authorities and business.

The announcement of the purchase was generally met very positively. The Belgian press recalled how poorly the Belgian Legation had been housed until then in the "rue des Postes", until today in existence as the narrow street leading up from *stiklal Caddesi* to the church of Saint Louis:

"All Embassies and foreign Legations accredited to the Sublime Porte are established on the left bank of the Golden Horn, in Pera, the Frankish agglomeration located on top of Galata and Tophane (...), on the junction of the Golden Horn and the Bosphorus. Some are installed in magnificent Palaces of their own, others have to content themselves with leases from Greek, Armenian or Levantine proprietors.

The Legation of Belgium was in this predicament: it occupied a small apartment in a street so narrow that the Belgian flag flying from the front of the house could hardly unfold.

The Belgian government has now put an end to this state of affairs! "

La Croix, May 18<sup>th</sup> 1900

Above all, however, it was the business community of industrial Belgium, active in Constantinople and throughout the Empire, which saw a clear interest in a more dignifying representation of their country in the Ottoman capital. Georges Montefiore Levi, Senator for the industrial city of Liège had already voiced this concern on the Senate floor in December 1892, drawing on his personal impressions from visits to Constantinople in 1889.

Eight years later, Senator Montefiore Levi reminded Foreign Affairs Minister de Favereau of this, on March 27<sup>th</sup> 1900, as the Senate was discussing his ministry's budget for the current year.

" Gentlemen, the Senate may recall that eight years ago I took the floor to demonstrate that there is a real necessity to lodge our representatives in foreign countries and, particularly in Constantinople, more adequately.

My motion then has been as successful as motions we make here usually are; that is to say, I received a very polite answer that my point was indeed founded, that something needed to be done, but nothing has been changed ever since."

Senator Montefiore Levi's complaint actually came somewhat late, at a moment when things had in fact already started moving at Foreign Affairs. The new Envoy Count Errembault de Dudzeele had arrived in Constantinople in April 1899, about a year before Montefiore Levi's reminder in the Senate, with a clear mission to find adequate housing for the Belgian Legation. In a hand written report dated June 29<sup>th</sup> 1902 Errembault de Dudzeele later recounted: " as soon as I arrived in Constantinople in April 1899 to take possession of my posting, I immediately told several people that I had been tasked to search a house fulfilling the necessary conditions for it to be purchased by the government of the King in view of transferring the Legation ".

Once the word spread in the city that the Belgian Legation was looking for appropriate housing in the neighbourhood of Pera, where most other Embassies and Legations

were concentrated, response was evidently rapid. Count Errebault de Dudzeele narrates the events as follows: “Mr. Albert Helbig immediately proposed to me the Kebedgy House, of which he claimed to know the owner, who asked 15.000 Turkish pounds, or 345.000 francs in payment. I went to inspect the house soon afterwards in the company of our above-mentioned compatriot. However, I found the house rather small, ill-distributed and very expensive. Several other brokers also offered their services to me and sent lists of houses for sale. On one of those lists the Kebedgy House was mentioned as well”.

Thus it was that Errebault de Dudzeele spent his first summer in Constantinople prospecting and visiting just about all houses of standard that were for sale in Pera. In the meantime he had taken up residence at the Therapia Summer Palace,



Therapia Summer Palace,  
late 19<sup>th</sup> century postcard.

the exclusive hotel along the Bosphorus, property of the Belgian banker Georges Naegelmackers’ “Wagons-Lits”. The Envoy’s first round of real estate prospecting came to an end when in September 1899 a Chief Engineer of the Ministry of Finance and Public Works, Charles Lagasse de Loch, was dispatched from Brussels for an in-depth technical evaluation of the various offers on the table.

When criticized by Senator Montefiore Levi during the budget discussions of March 1900, Foreign Affairs Minister de Favereau could readily counter allegations that no progress was being made in the housing issue for the Legation in Constantinople, by a simple reference to the mission where Mr. Lagasse had recently returned from.

"Nobody is more strongly convinced than myself of the necessity to provide our ministers with a good and pleasant installation, especially in the Orient, where the exterior appearance of things is of very particular importance. It is beyond discussion that Belgium has all interest in lodging its diplomatic representatives well: the prestige of the minister is certainly enhanced when his residence and his housekeeping reflect the wealth of the country he represents.

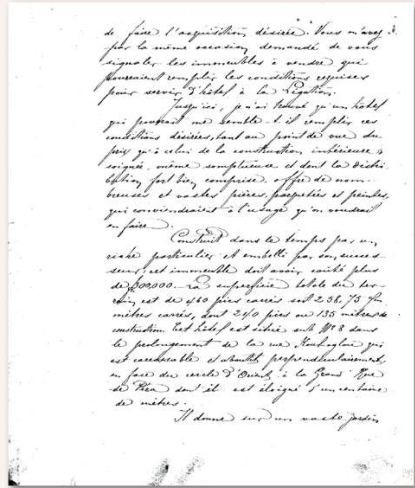
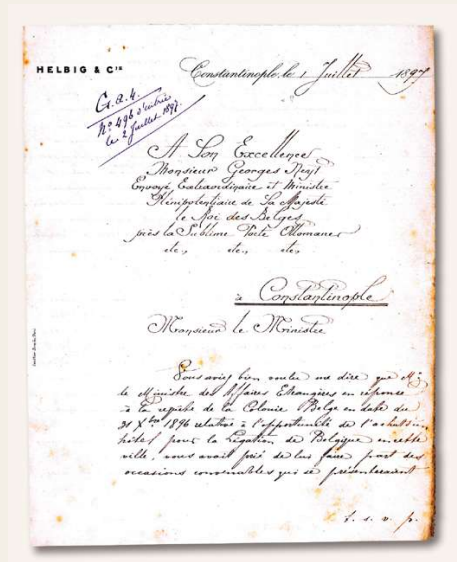
The Honourable M. Finet has been so kind to remind us that I had sent to Constantinople a senior official from the Department of Bridges and Roads, Mr. Lagasse, to report to me on this matter. He has spent a considerable amount of time in Constantinople studying the various possible solutions, ranging from acquisition to construction of a building. His report has reached me only recently and I shall examine it, gentlemen, with the firm resolve to find a solution. Circumstances may however at one particular moment in time not be very favourable to the acquisition of a building".

Agreeing with Senator Dupont who deemed it unwise to commit oneself to the construction of a brand new building in the far away Orient, without having any proper means of direct technical supervision, Minister de Favereau further specified his Administration's line of thinking:

" The building that we could buy at present and for which we would be asked to pay a considerable sum, might be sold within a few months under far more advantageous terms. I therefore do not believe that the government can right now pin itself down on a fixed deadline for the purchase."

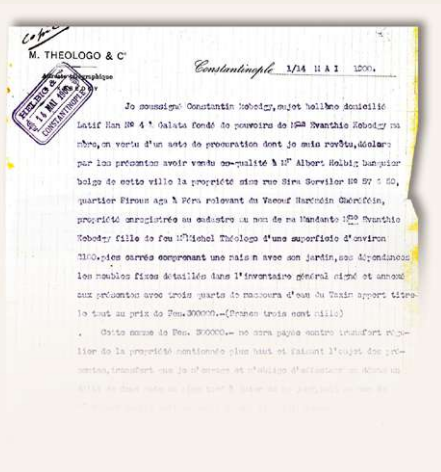
By these words the Minister was in fact explaining to the Senators that within the government there was now a clear, although not absolute preference to purchase rather than construct a Legation building in Pera, and that a specific deal was even under review already: Mr. Lagasse's mission report had looked rather favourably upon the Kebedgy House option, provided it would be possible to bargain the selling price down from the initially demanded 345.000 francs and that some extensions would be added to the building.

These encouraging signals from Brussels apparently came across quite clearly to both the Kebedgy family and Albert Helbig, the Belgian banker who acted as an



unofficial go-between. As a matter of fact, Errembault de Dudzele reported in retrospect that "shortly after my return from a vacation in April 1900, Albert Helbig approached me with a commitment to sell at 310.000 francs (...). New negotiations in which I had not personally been involved and of which I was not even informed until well after their conclusion, resulted in a further reduction of the price to 300.000 francs."

Brussels eagerly agreed to take the Kebedgy family up on this last price offer and bought the building. On May 14<sup>th</sup> 1900 the owners acknowledged the deal.



"I undersigned, Constantin Kebedgy, Hellenic citizen resident at Latif Han nr 4, Galata and invested with the powers of attorney by Mrs Evanthia Kebedgy, my mother, (...), hereby declare to have sold through the intervention of Mr Albert Helbig, Belgian banker in this city, the estate located at Sira Selvilier

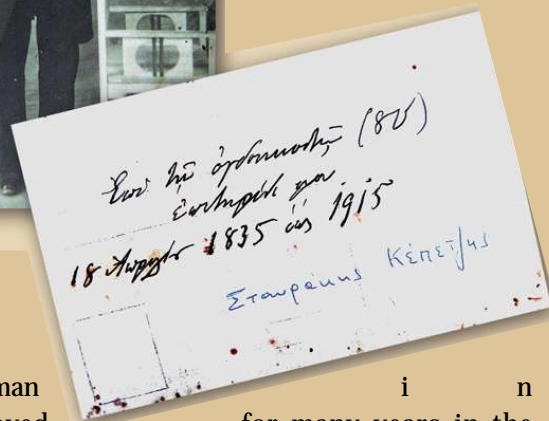
nr 57 and 59, quarter of Firouz Aga in Pera, depending on the Vacouf Heremein Cherefein, estate officially registered in the name of the mandator Mrs Evanthia Kebedgy, daughter of the late Mr Michail Theologou.

Constantinople, May 14<sup>th</sup> 1900

The Kebedgy's, from whom the Belgian government bought the Legation building, were a Greek family traced back in Constantinople to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and partly branched off to Molyvos on the Aegean island of Lesbos. Stavros Michail Kepetzis (eventually transcribed from Greek into Kebedgy ) was born in Molyvos in 1835,



Stavros Kepetzis or Kebedgy.  
Picture from the family  
albums of Dorothea Photiadi.



but settled as a young man in Constantinople, employed for many years in the Bank Theologou. Stavros eventually married the banker's daughter Evanthia Theologou and was thus propelled from a mere



status of employee into the position of major shareholder in his father-in-law's bank. Stavros fathered six children with Evanthia. One of them was Constantin, the very person who sold the family house on Sira Selviler street to Belgium, on behalf of his mother Evanthia.



Family tomb of Kebedgy and Theologou at the Balikli patriarchal graveyard.  
Photographed by T. Yumak, 2000.



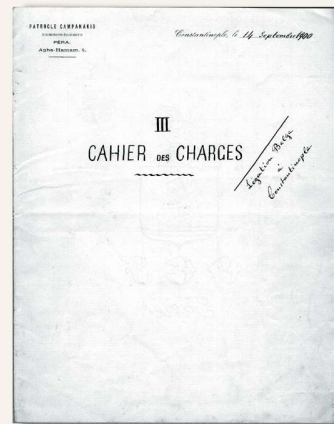




Born on the Greek Cycladic island of Andros in 1858, Patroclus Campanakis graduated in architecture from the Athens Polytechnical Institute. After postgraduate specialisation in Paris, Patroclus Campanakis established himself as an architect in Constantinople in 1885, where he worked for 37 years. During the early period of his architectural practice he enriched the city and its surrounding with several neo-classical creations. In his study on Agha Hamam St., 4 in Pera, Campanakis designed the Mnematakion Theatre opposite the Pera Palace, the Bank of Athens building, the Saint Georges orthodox church on the island of Kinali, at that time also named Antigone. Campanakis' loyal commitment to classical architecture was further guaranteed by his keen interest for archaeology, history and ancient philosophy, all culminating in 1892 in an internationally awarded essay he authored on Plato's Atlantis.

Lexicon Eleftheroudakis, book 7

Patroclus Campanakis was hired by the new Belgian owners of the estate on Sira Selviler street and went expeditiously to work. By September 1900 the architect had already submitted his detailed proposals, drawings and technical estimates for the extensions and alterations, which Kebedgy House would need to undergo. Campanakis wrote an accompanying letter to Errembault de Dudzeele.



Front page of the technical specifications for the building modifications, as outlined by architect Patroclus Campanakis in September 1900. Archives of the Consulate General of Belgium in Istanbul.

"From the present file His Excellency could notice that I have taken into consideration, on one hand, the needs warranted by H.E. the minister of Belgium in our city, for the comfort of the distinctive services and, on the other hand, the effect of harmony in matching the new construction with the existing one; my proposals remain however true to the good and legitimate views expressed by Your Excellency and Mr. Lagasse."

Constantinople, September 14<sup>th</sup>, 1900

A closer look at Campanakis' proposals brings to the fore several substantial alterations, that were indeed implemented shortly afterwards, turning Kebedgy House into the "Palais de Belgique" which present day inhabitants of Istanbul are familiar with.

"Specifications of works to be accomplished for the new construction, alterations and repairs of the Legation of Belgium in Constantinople.

The construction (...) shall be according to the style of the old house.... To the existing building a new construction of three floors shall be added:

- A ground floor, at the level of the garden and the kitchen cellar, for stables and all their annexes...
- A first floor, at the level of the kitchen, for the consular services...
- A second floor, at the level of the old building's ground floor and comprising a large dining room and a large reception space ..."

From these few specifications given by Patroclos Campanakis, it appears that a considerable structure was added to Kebedgy House, taking up part of the sloping garden in the rear. These additions reflected the functional needs of the Legation: halls for social entertainment were added, as was working space for the consular services; stables were built to take proper care of the horses, horse-pulled carriages at that time still being the main mode of private transport in the city. Apparently, considerable weight was given to this issue of stable construction, as Campanakis' plans were surprisingly specific, detailed and emphatic on the matter.

"The troughs of the horses shall be constructed in Galatz wood ...; the separations between the horses shall also consist of wooden walls equal to those in the saddling area and the depot".

These separations have of course long since disappeared, and the stables have been converted into spacious car garages. But the building is still nowadays accessed by cars through Campanakis' "passage from the house front to the stables".

For the interior decoration of the new reception hall and dining room, architect Campanakis brought forward a number of technical, financial and aesthetic arguments favouring the use of neo-classical style elements rather than the Louis XV and Louis XVI proposed by Mr. Lagasse.

"It would be desirable to have those two halls elaborated in proper relationship to the style of the entire house. Indeed, the elegant styles of Louis XV and Louis XVI proposed by monsieur Lagasse, need large wall panels, which we fail to have due to the numerous doors and windows, separated by columns. Moreover these interior columns will support heavy ceilings, whereas Louis XV and Louis XVI require densely ornamented walls and very light ceilings."

The three storey building of the Consulate General of Belgium has a classical facade, with balustrades separating the levels.

It rises around a central portico supported by two Doric style columns on the ground floor and two Ionic style columns on the first floor. The portico terminates in a triangular pediment with palmettes motives in the angles. In the centre of the pediment, the Belgian national emblem, with the Lion, is represented.

The rhythm of the facade is accentuated by relief elements: pilasters, window frames and balustrades.

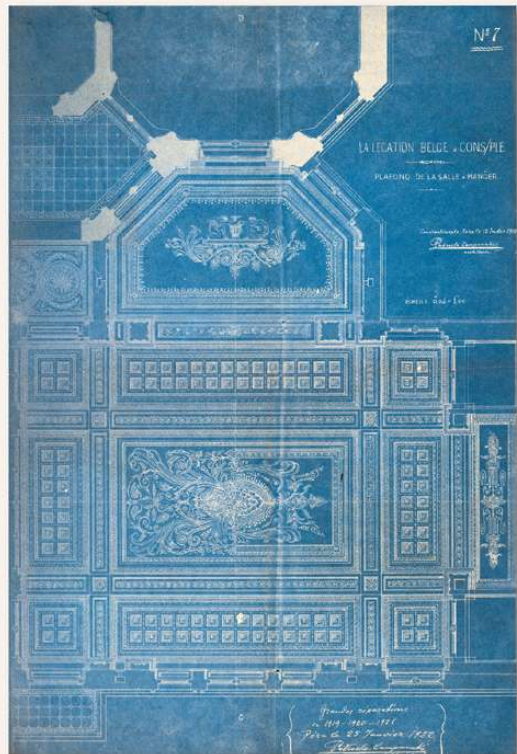


Patroclos Campanakis' advice in favour of a neo-classical decoration in harmony with the earlier part of the building, was wisely accepted by Brussels. Today's visitors of the reception halls in the "Palais de Belgique" can very well recognise architect Campanakis' specifications of September 1900:

Art.2 - The ceiling of the new inner porch shall be made in wooden squares, artistically ornamented in carton based stucco ...

Art. 3 - The ceilings of the two halls shall be made in caissons in Greek - Roman style with artistic adornments of the same style in carton based stucco and staff.

Blueprint of ceiling details in the salons, by architect Campanakis. Archives of the Consulate General of Belgium in Istanbul.

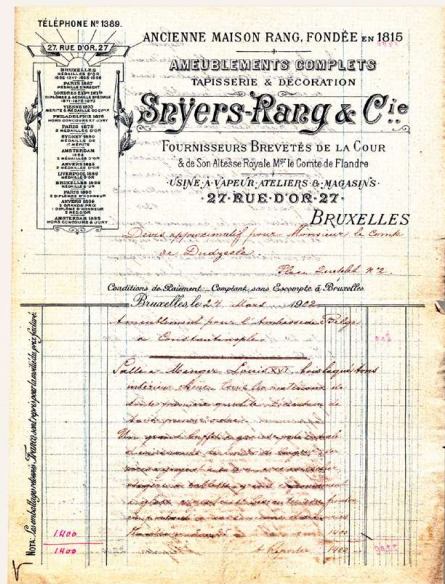
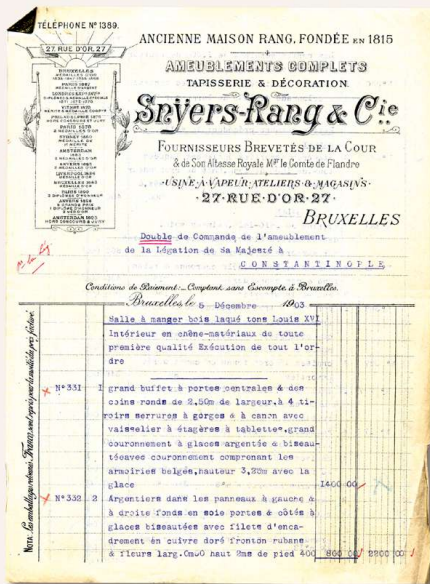


Art. 4 - All the walls of the two halls constituting pilasters or isolated columns shall be covered with pine wood and artistically ornamented in the same style as the ceilings, using carton based stucco and soft paste ....

Art. 5 - All cornices and raised embellishment features in the two halls shall be made in staff and artistically elaborated. "

Constantinople , Pera  
September 14<sup>th</sup> 1900

By 1904 all extensions and alterations to the former Kebedgy House had been accomplished, costing the Belgian State an additional 62.094 francs. On top of that, stately furniture, to a large extent still present in the building today, was imported from the Belgian House Snyers-Rang & C<sup>ie</sup>.



Invoice of Snyers-Rang Co, dated 1903, for the supply of the Legation's furniture. Archives of the Consulate General of Belgium in Istanbul.



Present day's views of the dining room at the Consulate General's residence, with the original 1903 furniture.  
 Photographed by T. Yumak, 2000



The rectangular dining room as well as the salon were added to the construction in 1900. They are representative of the neo-classical style with rich ornaments: panellings with garlands of fruit, flowers and leaves, palmettes, rosettes, ova, etc. Some of them are influenced by the rocaille style which was very appreciated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Istanbul. This decorative abundance contrasts with the sober ancient parts of the building.



This neo-classically influenced sideboard was imported from Belgium in 1903. The upper part including a mirror is set back from the main part and crowned by a segmental pediment. The Belgian emblem and motto are represented: two lions carry the Royal crown above the motto ' l'Union fait la Force '. Soberness of decoration is characteristic of this elegant piece of furniture.





Also local suppliers had their share in the building's interior improvements: costly upholstery and floor covering were purchased from Lazzaro Franco & Fils, in Pera, whereas central heating and state-of-the-art kitchen facilities were installed and taken care of by the companies of Franz Thamm and N. Deutsch.

Throughout a century of fast changing functional needs, the "Palais de Belgique" underwent, of course, further alteration and change. None of them, however, betrayed the harmonious magnificence of this 19<sup>th</sup> century architectural creation, lasting reminiscence of Constantinople's elegant "Belle Epoque", in which Belgium had a substantial place and a role, socially and economically. The "Palais de Belgique" became as from the year 1900 the natural and tangible culmination of Belgian involvement in the Ottoman capital, with a resident Belgian community of social and economic importance, with solid business links through trade and investment, with a regular flow of Belgian visitors coming to the city on the Orient Express and by steamers.



The ceiling is alternatively made of caissons punctuated by rosettes in some parts and panellings in other.



As a transition between the older and the recent part of the building, a small semi-circular salon opened by two pillars, leads to the 1900 salon. Door and window openings are surmounted by a rococo scrolled pediment with leaves surrounding a central cartouche. An acorn is placed on the top of this decorative element.

Since those days, conditions have of course radically changed. Constantinople, capital of the Ottoman Empire, has become Istanbul, the economic heart of the Turkish Republic; Belgian visitors come to see the historical sights of the city in much greater numbers, not riding the Orient Express but being flown into Atatürk Airport; trade and investment partnership between Belgium and Turkey has steadily grown and brought the two countries together with an intensity that not even a man like Georges Naegelmackers or other financiers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century could ever have dreamt of; a large Turkish community has happily settled in Belgium, adding a further dimension to mutual understanding and appreciation.

In all this, the "Palais de Belgique" has never ceased to play a role, as it houses until today the Belgian Consulate General, its well preserved neo-classical facade and its fine residence with elegant reception halls designed a century ago by Patroclos Campanakis, forcefully reminding us of a fact far too often unknown or omitted: the fact that in this historical yet dynamic city, Belgium goes a very long way back.



Details of stucco decoration illustrate the variety and abundance of rococo influenced ornamentation.