

# Belgium in the Ottoman Capital, From the Early Steps to 'la Belle Epoque'

The Centenary of "Le Palais de Belgique": 1900-2000



An Edition of the Consulate General of Belgium, Istanbul

An Edition of the Consulate General of Belgium, Istanbul, Turkey  
Istanbul, November 2000.

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On the cover: City map of the 1890s and facade of the Consulate General nowadays.

Cover designed by Emiel Hoorne.

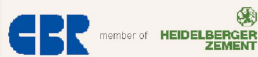
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Individual Contribution

**Liliane De Vries**

# Belgium in the Ottoman Capital, From the Early Steps to 'la Belle Epoque'

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"The disadvantage of men not knowing the past is that they do not know the present. History is a hill or a high point of vantage, from which alone men see the town in which they live or the age in which they are living."

"All I Survey" (1933)  
Gilbert Keith Chesterton, 1874-1936

## Preface

This book has been published to mark the centenary of Le Palais de Belgique, the neo-classical edifice that in 1900 became the home of the Belgian Legation in Constantinople, now known as Istanbul.

The book begins with an account of the first diplomatic and commercial contacts between Belgium and the Ottoman Empire, which were initiated within a year after the new Belgian State achieved independence in 1830. It then goes on to describe in detail the experiences of the various Belgian diplomats, businessmen, industrialists and travellers who came to Constantinople in the remaining years of the nineteenth century, during which time they played distinctive roles in the social life of the city as well as contributing significantly to the modernisation of the old Ottoman capital. The latter part of the book describes the acquisition and renovation of the building that came to be known as Le Palais de Belgique.

This monograph is a valuable and unique addition to the bibliography of Istanbul studies, particularly concerning the participation of Belgians in the life of the city during the latter years of the Ottoman Empire. Previous studies had been dominated by the histories of the major European powers in Constantinople, but the present work for the first time tells the fascinating story of the important part played by Belgium and its resident citizens in the life of the Turkish capital during the last and most colourful days of the Ottoman capital. The story is rich in details and vivid in its descriptions, evoking the presence of those Belgians who for a time made a new life for themselves here in late Ottoman Istanbul. The story of Flora Cordier, the young Belgian 'modiste' who briefly became the wife of the future Sultan Abdülhamid II, could easily be the subject of a best-selling novel, outlined in one of the many vignettes that appear in the pages that follow.

Dr. John Freely  
Professor of Physics,  
Bogaziçi University, Istanbul

## Introduction and Acknowledgements

Exactly a century ago, in the spring of the year 1900, the Belgian government decided to purchase the charming neo-classical building on Istanbul's Siraselviler Street, where our Consulate General is housed until today. We considered that this centenary offered a unique opportunity to put into focus the fact that Belgium goes a long way back in the city's rich history. Already from the early days after independence in 1830, our small but dynamic industrial country was seeking to foster links with the Ottoman capital. The beginning of a prosperous and spirited relationship between a new country and an old Empire, both confident about their assets and both in search of their role and place in contemporary Europe.

The purpose of the work at hand was to create a well documented, historically correct, yet easily readable digest, an evocation of how that relationship between Belgium and the Empire concretely developed through the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the glorious period of 'La Belle Epoque'. In pursuing this objective, we have deliberately focused on people: who were the actors on the Belgian side of the story? The diplomats of the Legation, the visitors, coming to the city by steamer and later by the Orient Express, the industrialists and expatriates, who eagerly helped spread Belgium's industrial revolution and modern technology.

Our initial plan was to produce a concise sixteen page leaflet, merely spelling out how the purchase of a worthy Belgian Legation building in 1900 had been the natural consequence of maturing and prospering human and commercial exchange between Belgium and the Ottoman Empire and its capital. As it turned out, you are now holding a publication of several times that number of pages. For, beyond the main beacons marking our historical path, we have in our research come across so many details and events, so many small, yet enlightening facts, and so rich a ground of stories and documents, that, as we proceeded, we gradually developed a genuine craving to share with you this broader image.

Still, our research has definitely not exhausted all sources, all documents and all facts at hand. With the present work we merely had in mind the evocation of an era, a real-life illustration that Belgium goes a long way back in this city, with many buildings, objects and memories still in existence as silent witnesses. It is within this limited and specific scope that we have studied and researched documents and records, and there is hence no doubt that much more needs

to be done to throw full light on this exciting subject of Belgian presence in the Ottoman capital in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

All proper names for persons and places used in the text, are factually derived from precise sources and historical references, and, consequently, do not contain any political signal nor call for any interpretation.

For having made this publication financially possible, we thank the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and International Co-operation, but we are also very grateful to our sponsors who have so graciously and generously supported us, conscious as they are that their day-to-day involvement in commercial exchange between Belgium and Turkey has a place of its own in the wider context of the history uniting our two countries. Be thus registered our special thanks to Beksa, Beta Intl., CBR, Galatasaray Holding, Puratos, Solvay, UCB, Umran Steel, Radel Elektronik, Fortis Bank and Med-Sante. Many thanks also to Liliane De Vries, who made an individual financial contribution as a token of her keen interest in our project.

A word of sincere recognition is due as well to those whose enthusiasm and intellectual curiosity resulted in irreplaceable contributions of substance. Professor Ethem Eldem of the Bosphorus University gave guidance and advice and framed our story on "Belgium in the Ottoman Capital" into a wider context with a very stimulating essay on social history of "Pera, 1900". We must also express thanks to Françoise Peemans, historian and archivist, who supplied us with quantities of priceless documents from the Foreign Ministry's archives in Brussels, Dorothea Photiadi in Mytilini who eagerly searched the records of her Kebedgy family and helped us clarify the origins of our building on Siraselviler Street, Delphine Laduron who added to our chapter about the 'Palais de Belgique' her valuable expertise in history of art. Brother Ange Michel, who spontaneously searched several school archives and came up with data so far unknown to us, Alain Bairanjan who acquainted us with the common ground of Belgian and Turkish Scoutism before and during the First Balkan War, Professor John Freely, who put forward some useful sources of his own research and showed a keen interest in our project, Governor of the Province of East Flanders, Prof. H. Balthazar, who supplemented our data on Léon Verhaeghe, François-Louis de Wasseige in Brussels who contributed to our work a variety of family items and, by doing so, made us realise how closely this history research relates to people and realities of the present day. Our publication would certainly not have been the same, had we not been helped by Engin Özendes and Sertaç Kayserilioğlu who so generously

gave access to their remarkable collections of 19<sup>th</sup> century photographs and postcards. Thanks also to the Stathakis Family, Cevat Bayındır from the Pera Palace and Georges Petridis for having provided photographic materials as well.

Let me also extend my thanks to some precious people from within the Consulate General, Claude Chabeau, Dirk Seye, Handan Öz, and my wife Annetta Karra, who all assisted in research, as well as Bruna Van Balen and my son Dimitri who helped out with the painstaking task of proof-reading. Furthermore, the Belgian graphic artist Emiel Hoorne, who volunteered to design the cover. We should also not forget the technical skill of Tayfun Yumak, who took care in a very generous way of the lay-out and printing, turning our texts and our pile of pictures and other documentation into a coherent, worthy publication.

Last but not least, tribute is due to the people, too numerous to list, whose curiosity was pleasantly awakened by our project, and who came forward with bits of information and useful hints. The spontaneous enthusiasm and eagerness displayed by all those people, have actually, in the end, been the most gratifying part of this undertaking. It is our sincere wish that a spark of this curiosity and interest for 'the Belgians in the history of Istanbul' may also come across to our readers, now and in the future.

Marc Van den Reeck  
Consul General of Belgium

Istanbul, November 15<sup>th</sup> 2000, King's Day



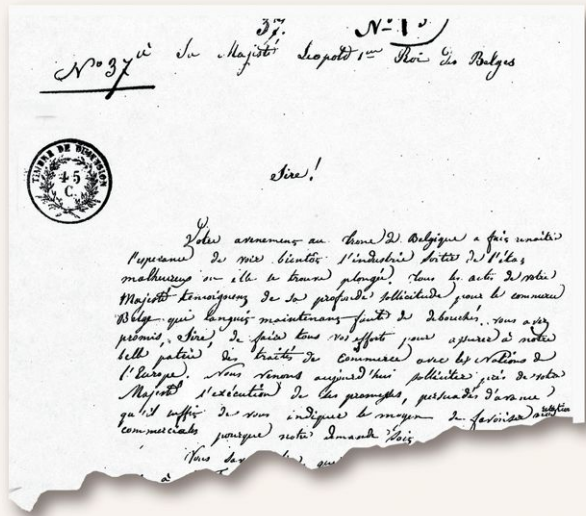
# Belgium in the Ottoman Capital, From the Early Steps to 'la Belle Epoque'

The Centenary of "Le Palais de Belgique": 1900-2000

By Marc Van den Reeck

## The Tale of a Young State and an Old Empire

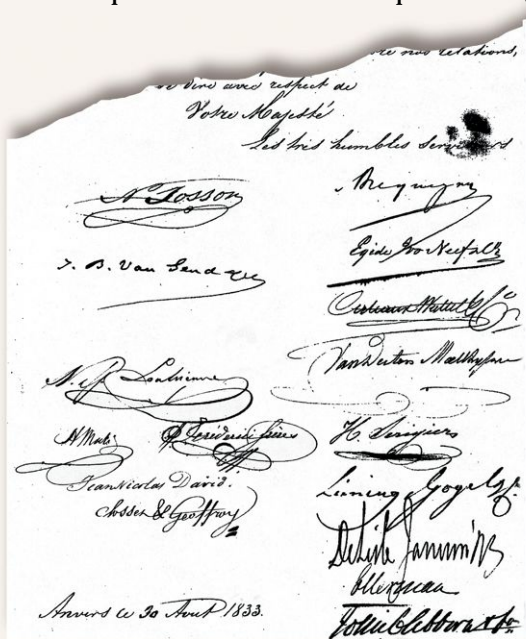
After independence in 1830, the new Belgian State immediately realised the importance of the Ottoman Empire in international affairs, politically and economically. The Empire, above all, held a considerable potential as a trading partner for the young industrial nation, constantly in search of new markets since the secession from Holland and her colonies. Belgian business circles viewed the Empire as a very promising market for exports on which their fast growing industries depended. Not much time was wasted: less than two months after Leopold I, had been enthroned as the first King of the Belgians on July 21<sup>st</sup> 1831, industrialists from Liège and Verviers conveyed a petition to His Majesty, urging his government to formalise relations with the Ottoman Empire and establish a Belgian consular representation in the capital.



Sire,

Your accession to the throne of Belgium has revived hopes to see the industry soon escape from the dire state in which it is plunged today. All actions undertaken by Your Majesty witness to His deeply rooted concern for the Belgian commerce, which struggles at present due to the lack of outlets. You have promised, Sire, to spend all possible efforts to secure for our beautiful country treaties of commerce with the Nations of Europe. Today we come and ask Your Majesty to carry out these promises (....)

Our commercial relations with Turkey have not suffered any setbacks from the revolution. The Ottoman Empire had no interest in preventing the foundation of a new Kingdom in the centre of Europe; but even if our links are well established, there are all the more reasons to secure to Belgians who trade with that country all the advantages of their position; the trade sector of our Nation must have representatives accredited by Your government to provide assurance against vexations that foreign powers or enemies of our prosperity might cause (...) Constantinople is one of the most important commercial cities of the Turkish Empire and we direct ourselves to Your Majesty to obtain the representation by a consul in that city. We take, Your Majesty, the liberty to enlighten Your choice. There is only one Belgian established in Constantinople. His name is Jean-Joseph Lemoine, born in Olne on the 25<sup>th</sup> pluviôse of the year 7 (February 13<sup>th</sup> 1799) (...). We believe, Sire, that it would be a true favour to Belgian commerce, should monsieur Lemoine be nominated Consul in Constantinople (...). Allow us furthermore to bring to Your Majesty's attention the fact that monsieur Lemoine may also be able to lead the Porte to recognition of our country's new direction.



Signatures of the petition to King Leopold I

Even with such enthusiastic resolve and genuine pressure at the basis, things did not always go that fast, back in the 1830s. International recognition proved indeed to be a rather lengthy process for the State of Belgium, established in the year 1830 in the core of industrialising Western Europe, delicately wedged between France, Germany and Holland. On the far away shores of the Bosphorus, Sultan Mahmud II took in fact seven years, until October 24<sup>th</sup> 1837, to put his signature under the decree recognising Belgian independence; it was however the starting sign for a prosperous and spirited relationship between a new country and an old Empire, both confident about their assets and both in search of their place in Europe.

When Ottoman recognition was finally attained in 1837, the same business lobbies from Liège and Verviers that had petitioned King Leopold I six years before and constituted the core of Belgian industrialisation, kept up pressure for their government to knot economic and commercial ties with the Empire. Thus it happened that in May 1838, less than a year after recognition, the Belgian Ambassador to Vienna, Count O'Sullivan de Grass de Séovaud, embarked on a subtle diplomatic mission to Constantinople, to negotiate a Treaty of Friendship and Commerce with the Sultan. Upon arrival in the Ottoman capital, O'Sullivan was received very cordially by the British and French resident ambassadors, who offered assistance to deal with the complicated ways of the Court. O'Sullivan chose, however, to act independently and actually managed to be received in audience by Mahmud II soon after arrival, on June 19<sup>th</sup>, accompanied by the full Belgian delegation, in exception to all standard protocol. Two days earlier the official Belgian presents for the Sultan had been brought to the palace by the dragoman, Mr. Lauxerrois, and a member of the Belgian delegation proper.

The presents were placed in the large reception hall and my brother-in-law made a drawing with the diagrapher of the big Sèvres vase recently offered by the King of France in exchange for a vase from Pergamon....

After two hours the gentlemen were advised that the Sultan wished to receive them. They found His Highness inspecting the presents. His Highness asked Mr. Lauxerrois for explanations how to use all those objects. His Majesty seemed to be very satisfied. The necessities case, the fountain and most particularly the parasol seemed to please Him immensely. The diagrapher retained His particular attention and a new drawing had already been made in His presence by Said Bey.

O'Sullivan de Grass, Therapia (Tarabya), June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1838

N<sup>o</sup> 17. N 194/38 Therapia le 18 Juin 1838  
au soir 8 1/2.

Monsieur le Chevalier,

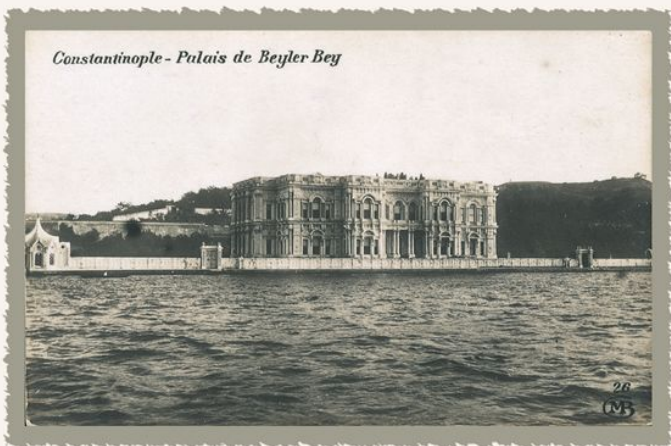
J'ai l'honneur de vous informer que  
c'est le 17 au matin que les présents destinés au Sultan  
ont été remis à son palais d'été  
par le dragoman et un membre de la délé-  
gation belge.

J'ai l'honneur de vous  
remercier de l'attention que vous m'avez  
portée et de vous assurer que  
je n'ai rien oublié de ce qui  
vous a été demandé. Je prie  
de croire, Monsieur le Chevalier,  
à l'assurance de ma haute  
et respectueuse considération.

Monsieur le Chevalier,

Votre très humble et très  
obéissant serviteur.  
O'Sullivan de Grass

Today at 11 o'clock we have gone to the Stavros Palace or Beiler Bey, where the Sultan lives during summer, on the Asian bank. The four persons of my delegation and m. Lauxerrois accompanied me in the Legation's caique which floated the Belgian flag and of which the eight rowers wore vests in our national colours. My men followed in caiques with three rowers each.



To honour us, a battalion of the Imperial Guard

Beyler Bey Palace, the Sultan's summer residence on the Bosphorus, where Ambassador O'Sullivan de Grass was received in audience on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1838.  
Collection S. Kayserlio=lu

stood armed at the Palace gate, in front of the disembarkation stage. I was received by Said Bey, first secretary of the Sultan ...

When the Sultan was ready to receive us, we all went to His Highness, who lives on the first floor of his Palace... I then pronounced the speech which I had communicated to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. I paused after each sentence allowing Reschid Pasha to translate for the Sultan and thus I could notice that His Highness looked very satisfied.



Ceremonial caiques ready for the crossing of the Bosphorus, from the European shore to Beyler Bey, the Sultan's summer palace  
Elaborated from a postcard in the Stathaki Collection

When I stopped speaking, the Sultan said a few words to Reschid Pasha, which His Excellency translated as follows: " The Emperor asks me to say to Your Excellency that He is very happy to see Belgium taking up its position among independent nations. He is also gratified to notice that Belgium wishes to tighten its links with the Ottoman Empire by a new Treaty of Friendship...." ...

Before leaving Reschid Pasha, I advised him that I was ready to submit the proposals I carried. His Excellency responded that He was ready as well to receive them and that Nourry Effendi, his first counsellor, would be tasked to study them. I have reasons to believe that Nourry Effendi will be seconded in this by the Prince of Samos.

O'Sullivan de Grass, Therapia (Tarabya), June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1838

On June 23<sup>rd</sup> the Belgian delegation submitted its proposals, drafted along the lines of similar treaties concluded in 1830 by Turkey with Tuscany and the United States. O'Sullivan's Treaty talks with Nourry Effendi advanced well and as soon as the negotiations were successfully concluded, ambassador O'Sullivan returned to his regular Austro-Hungarian assignment.

Once mutual ratification of the Treaty completed on October 14<sup>th</sup> 1838, the Belgian government swiftly decided to open a diplomatic mission, adding Constantinople to the list of the very first ten postings in the young country's network world-wide. In 1839 the first resident Head of Mission, Count Désiré Behr, arrived, marking the beginning of an era in which Belgium gradually acquired a significant role in the Ottoman capital's diplomatic and economic society life. A year later some adjustments and additions were made to the 1838 Treaty, which remained the basic formal platform of bilateral relations for decades to come.

In fact, Belgian interests lay mainly in the field of economy and trade. Internationally held to political neutrality and, being a young State, not directly involved as a player on the geopolitical chess board of the Great Powers, Belgian diplomacy could focus its attention on strengthening the country's industry through foreign trade and investment promotion. Indeed, in the decades following its establishment, the Belgian diplomatic mission in Constantinople played an active role in fostering ties between industrialists from back home, eager to reach out for new markets and investment opportunities, and the Ottoman Empire, that was embarking on the modernisation of its economic fibre.

In 1840-1841, Joseph Partoes, a Belgian living in Smyrna (Izmir) took on a mission ordered by the Belgian Foreign Minister, to survey into detail the potential for economic exchanges between Belgium and the Ottoman Empire. He travelled all across the Empire, came also to Constantinople, and concluded:

In my opinion (...) one must in the first place found a proper establishment in Constantinople, this most important trade centre of the Orient, of which imports increase every day and shall continue to increase, whatever the solutions to

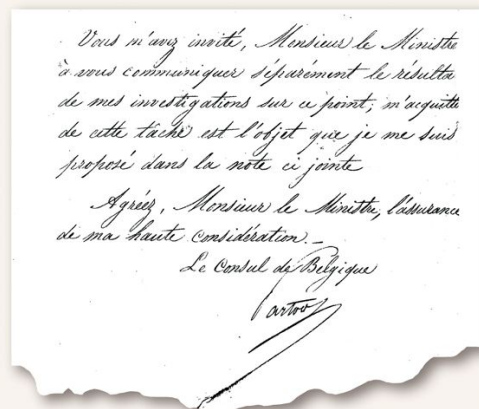


the undecided political questions may be, whatever the future may hold for the territories of the present Ottoman Empire.

I do not think that in the entire world there is a place combining so many conditions of success, offering so many advantages for the foundation of such an establishment...

Already now Constantinople absorbs a vast quantity of Belgian products; it is my belief without a doubt that this quantity could become even more considerable if there were, in Constantinople, a properly established Belgian house.

From the point of view of exports, Constantinople is of even greater importance to Belgium, the city being located at the mouth of the Black Sea, intensely linked by numerous steamers to Galatz and the ports on the Danube, to Odessa and the Crimean ports...



## Belgian Visitors and Merchants, Heralds of Industrial Revolution

In the capital city, Joseph Partoes got acquainted with a tiny group of Belgian business people who, from very early on, had noticed the rising economic importance of Constantinople and had come to settle in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, he met François Frédéricici, who was involved in linen sale, a certain Mr. Rectem who dealt in nails throughout the Levant, and monsieur Jean-Joseph Lemoine, “who enjoyed considerable credit in town, dealt in important business, has contributed to the sale of Belgian goods for very substantial sums, but who is unfortunately undergoing the effects of ageing at the very moment that he is involved in quite significant affairs.”

An early Belgian traveller from the city of Geraardsbergen, René Spitaels, visited Constantinople in the same period, around 1840. He also met and actually befriended ‘the most reputed Belgian in the City’, monsieur Lemoine. During his stay in Constantinople, Spitaels even became the guest of “this extraordinary Belgian”, who married into the Glavany, one of the oldest and most respected ‘Frankish’ families of the city. Spitaels was hence well placed to witness how the metropolis was gradually working towards Europeanisation “by laying the foundations of

industry, guided by the advice of, among others, a great Belgian merchant in Constantinople, J.J. Lemoine”. Lemoine lived in Pera, was the owner of considerable real estate in and around the city and, according to his last will, an important benefactor of the school and church communities of Saint Benoit in Kara-keuy (Karaköy) and Saint Antoine in Galata.

According to the Belgian Legation's records, a Belgian citizen Auguste Rubbers resided and worked in Constantinople as a manufacturer of surgical instruments. There he married in 1852 Ms. Henriette Baij, a young lady who also originated from his home city, Liège. Their son Auguste Henri, born ten years later, became an engineer and built his life in the Ottoman capital as well.

In 1855 yet another Belgian industrialist, Eugène Mélin, originating from Verviers, settled in Constantinople. Initially his task was merely to prospect the textiles market on behalf of his company, Houget & Teston, but eventually, recruited by the Sultan to run and restructure the Imperial Textile Mill, he settled down in the city for a full three years. Eugène Mélin diligently accomplished what he was recruited for, and even went on to set up a brand new carpet factory in town. After his return to Belgium in 1858, he first tried out industrial fez production for exports to Turkey, but proved far more successful in his later, more conventional undertakings, such as his involvement in dam building on the river Gileppe, near Spa.

The finest example of Belgian involvement in the Ottoman capital's early industrial development still visible today, is Feshane, on the shores of the Golden Horn. Feshane was initially established in 1834 in the Topkapi area as a factory of fez and European style cloths, items highly in demand in this period of modernisation and Tanzimat. A Belgian specialist Lambert Voisin from Battice, near Verviers, directed



Feshane textile factory. Inside view with machinery  
Late 19<sup>th</sup> century.  
Yıldız Saray Collection

Feshane's fulling process. In 1855 the Feshane factory was relocated to its present site on the South bank of the Golden Horn, where an 8000 square meter industrial building was erected. The building was entirely designed in Belgium, and the construction itself was also carried out with Belgian steel castings: the 750 steel columns still stand today and all carry the inscription of the company "Providence"



Original steel columns of the Feshane factory building, supplied around 1856 by the company << Providence >>, from Marchienne in Belgium.

Photographed by T. Yumak, 2000

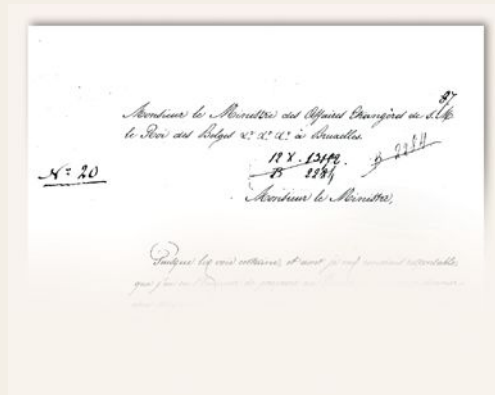
in "Marchienne, Belgique". Finished in 1856, the plant of Feshane is considered by industrial archeologists as one of the finest pieces of industrial architecture of its time in Europe, often compared to London's Crystal Palace in size and design. At its peak, Feshane employed 4000 people operating the steam powered textile machines, most of which were imported between 1843 and 1851 from Belgium.

## Steamers from Antwerp

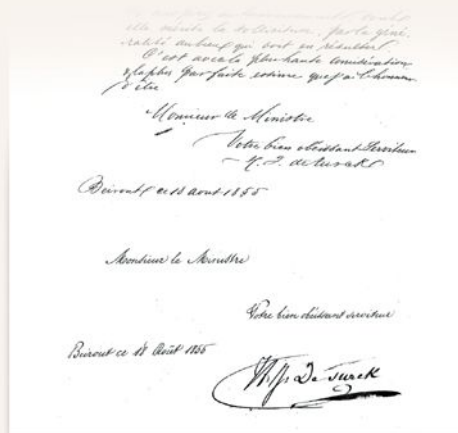
So far, trade exchange and the presence of Belgian business people in Constantinople had been rather limited in number. However, things really got 'under steam', one could say, from the 1850s on, when regular maritime links were established between Antwerp and the Ottoman capital and the Levant in general.

The idea of establishing direct maritime links between the Belgian port and Constantinople and destinations in the Levant, had already been alive since 1855, when Belgian business interests in the Ottoman capital and Beirut had thoroughly analysed the potential for the exploitation of such a shipping line.





... Steamer navigation to the Levant does no longer pertain these days to the undertakings by their novelty exposed to hazard and uncertainty and based on no positive facts of previous experience (...). A glance at the steamer navigation of Austria, France and England clarifies the issue (...). Observing the success of these [countries'] companies, the insignificant prejudice they cause to one another, the savings we could make on the enormous fuel and other costs charged to us by the Austrian and French companies, the shift of loading points which would result in improved relations between ports and, finally, the advantage of our production prices, induce me to formulate proposals (...). Our trade with Smyrna (Izmir) and Constantinople would by itself already suffice for the establishment of a line of steamer ships (...).



Anvers, le 5 Octobre 1855

Monsieur le Ministre,

J'ai l'honneur de vous proposer qu'un  
mouvement étendu de navigation de l'établissement d'une ligne  
de navigation, reliant à propos entre Anvers & le Levant  
Constantinople, Alexandrie avec d'autres facultatives à  
Southampton, Gibraltar, Malte, Syra, Messine, Smyra & Smirne  
je suis arrivé à la conviction de former, réaliser et protéger de  
l'intérêt national, utile pour notre Industrie Nationale & notre  
Commerce de Transit.

Cette ligne avait dessein pour le Service  
marchand, pour 5 ou 6 navires à vapeur à hélice ayant des ca-  
pacités de 1000 tonnes de force & une capacité pour 200 hommes de  
charge, de passages de 1<sup>re</sup> & 2<sup>e</sup> de 1<sup>re</sup> classe, entre les places  
des machines d'acier, à chaudières.

Dès la première année de l'opération  
le Service sera mené par un moyen de trois ou quatre na-  
vires la compagnie établie par le traité un service de quatre ou  
cinq navires de 5 navires, si l'intérêt de Commerce l'exige.

D'après les calculs de mes calculs  
Monsieur le Ministre, d'après ce service, chaque  
navire coûte 100,000 francs, le service sera de 1,000,000 francs  
par an, pour un service de 10 navires, payable comme suit.

Les 2/3 de la mise en activité du service une somme de  
600,000 francs. Les autres 400,000 francs seront payés sur les  
profits du service de la navigation à venir.

Monsieur le Ministre des Affaires Étrangères  
Bruxelles

I have the honour to bring to your attention that, having well studied the issue of establishing a regular steamer line between Antwerp and the Levant, Constantinople and Alexandria, with optional intermediate ports at Southampton, Gibraltar, Malta, Genoa, Messina, Syra and Smyrna (Izmir), I am now convinced that I can implement this project of eminent utility to our National Industry and our transit commerce...

En attendant l'honneur d'être favorisé  
d'une réponse favorable, je vous prie de me croire

Monsieur le Ministre  
Très respectueusement, dévoué serviteur  
Spilliaerd Caymax

The project of Spilliaerd Caymax did not materialise but in 1859 the company Van Vlissingen & Van Heel took up the idea of a shipping line linking Antwerp to Constantinople again and obtained a concession for that purpose from the Belgian authorities.

Leopold, King of the Belgians, to those present and to be, salute. We have decided and decree: Our Minister of Foreign Affairs is tasked to present to the Houses of Parliament the draft bill of law as follows:

First article.

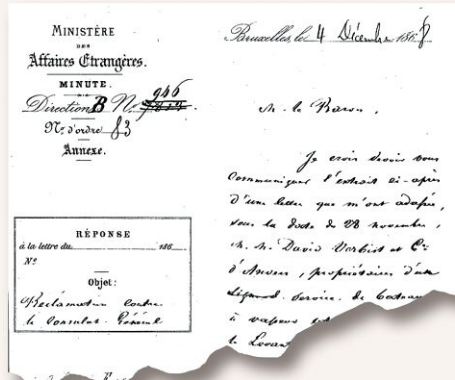
The convention concluded on January 28<sup>th</sup> 1859 between the Government on one side, and Mr. Van Vlissingen and Van Heel on the other side, to establish a regular steamer line between Belgium and the Levant, is approved.



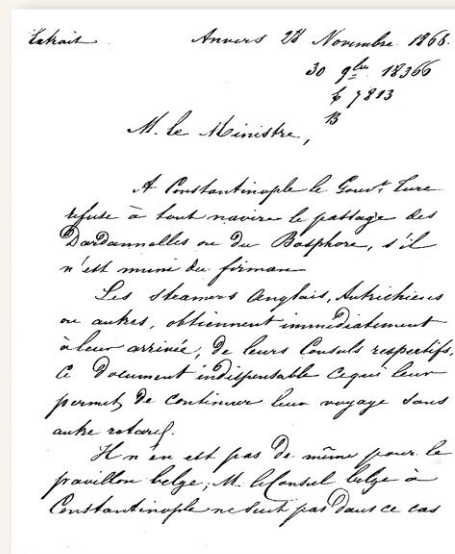
As maritime traffic gradually developed as from the late 1850s, trade and contact could now flow more directly and easily between Belgium and Constantinople and other East Mediterranean ports. Before long, the frequency of steamer traffic justified the establishment of Belgian vice-consulates in the Dardanelles, at Çanakkale and Gelibolu.

As today regular steamer navigation between Antwerp and the Levant has geared up under Belgian flag and that the foundation of a company for shipping between Belgium and Turkey raises expectations as to the development of our relations with the Orient, it is my duty to suggest the creation of a consular posting in Gallipoli (...). The location of Gallipoli at the mouth of the Sea of Marmara on a spot where the Belgian ships would probably have to moor if they incurred damage while in the area, seems to plead in this sence...

Legation, Constantinople, February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1859



I believe I should forward to you the extract hereunder of a letter sent to me on November 28<sup>th</sup> by the company David Verbist & Co. from Antwerp, owners of a steamer service between the port above and the Levant.



At Constantinople the Turkish Government refuses passage of any ship through the Dardanelles or the Bosphorus, if it has not been issued with a ferman. English, Austrian and other steamers obtain this crucial document immediately upon arrival (...). Captain Hunter of the steamer Fanny Davies made legitimate observations to our Consul that delays cause damage to the cargo, and that the daily operation cost of a ship under steam is about 1000 francs.



## A Royal Visit and a New Treaty


The year 1860 gave another boost, when the Duke of Brabant, the future King Leopold II, made an official visit to the Porte in Constantinople, as reflected in a number of dispatches sent by the Envoy, H. Solvyns.

Upon arrival in the port of Constantinople the Duke was saluted with twenty one cannon shots. As soon as the ship had come along shore, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and his colleague of Maritime Affairs came on board to welcome the Duke in the name of the Sultan. Next, the party travelled to the Palace of Dolmabahçe, where the Duke was received by the Padishah...

The Prince has stayed long enough in Constantinople to acquire a knowledge on people and things that can only be transferred to those who visit the country, as a compensation for their effort of travelling...

His Royal Highness has left the Bosphorus yesterday evening, April 30<sup>th</sup> at six thirty, on board the 'Banshee', a magnificent ship of the British navy put at the disposal of the Prince by Sir Henry Bulwer ...

Fuad Pasha, to whom the Prince presented on the day of his departure a magnificent tobacco box with a portrait, has expressed to me his deep recognition for such a token of high consideration....



Henry Solvyns

Belgium was now definitely on the map in the Sultan's mind and in the lofty circles of the Ottoman business society. Trade perspectives between Belgium and the Empire were mutually growing well. When from Ottoman side measures were taken to hike duties on all imports, regardless the country of origin, Belgium was among the Empire's trading partners who quickly engaged in negotiations to adjust the initial Treaty of 1838. As a result, within two years after the memorable visit of the Duke of Brabant, a new bilateral treaty on commerce and navigation came into force, replacing the initial one of 1838, confirming that all favours conceded by the Empire to a third country would automatically also apply to Belgium, and vice versa, and guaranteeing free and toll exempted passage through the Straits of both Belgian cargo and ships under Belgian flag. The new treaty came into force in 1862.

## Prosperity in Trade: From Steel Plates to Playing Cards

Early in the year 1866, Léon Verhaeghe, a diplomat on special mission to Constantinople and Athens to inform Ottoman and Greek authorities of the death of King Leopold I, reported while in the Ottoman capital:

“The Belgian industry participates in the supply of the market of Constantinople and one is justified to believe that favourable circumstances can add a considerable boost to this relationship. The main sectors of Belgian industry, of which the products are imported in Turkey, are refined sugar, plate glass, iron, ironware, nails, etc. The Belgian ships docking at Constantinople invariably carry these same commodities...

The Belgian merchant marine represents the following shares in overall traffic in the port of Constantinople: in 1856, 30 ships with 11.914 tons; in 1860, 38 ships with 18.694 tons; in 1865, 34 ships with 24.224 tons. In January of the current year 1866 three ships have arrived.”

A handwritten signature in black ink on a white background. The signature reads "Léon Verhaeghe" in a cursive script. The first letter 'L' is large and loops around the rest of the name. Below the name, there is a long, horizontal flourish that ends in a small hook.

From these and other indications which Verhaeghe provided, it appears that fluctuations in trade volumes were still quite common, but a clear pattern was henceforth developing: Ottoman sales to Belgium mainly consisted of cereals and, to a much lesser extent of wool, silk and carpets; Belgian exports were, to the contrary, becoming more diverse and less agriculture-related. The initially very important sales of refined sugar made way for glassware, crystal and textiles. Ottomans indulging into European modes of pastime, were discovering that nearly all playing cards for sale in Constantinople came from the city of Turnhout, in the North of Belgium. But, of course, it was the core of Belgian industry itself, such as steel, steel products and machinery that gradually set the pace of exchange, prospering and booming in particular as from the 1870s.

Apart from the thriving commercial ties, the rigorous Belgian policy of neutrality towards the various political disputes and conflicts involving the Ottoman Empire and the Great Powers, also earned the trust and high regard with which the Sultans surrounded Belgium and its Legation at Constantinople.

“The Turks shall always be happy to recognise a friend in the mission of Belgium, (They have so few of them among the diplomacy of Pera!) and especially a friend of earnest, candour and loyalty ... This situation often allows us to be of use to [them] in politics. Also, as the material needs of Turkey are immense and we can provide them with all of that, it is clear that we have great interest in doing so. In exchange for our production processes and our loyal assistance, Turkey shall have a preference to deal with Belgium for its needs related to industry, because she shall have nothing to fear from working with us (...), an advantage she cannot always obtain or safeguard at the hand of the great Powers.

Between Belgium and Turkey there is a vast analogy in position ...; we are neutral, a reason inspiring confidence and even preference; also, we are as advanced as all the other civilised Powers, a fact which is of interest to Turkey. One can therefore say that if there are any two countries which can be of service to one another, it must definitely be Belgium and Turkey. For the Legation of Belgium at Constantinople this results in an exceptional and fortunate position in defending the Belgian interests in Turkey...”

“Survey of observations on the Orient in its relations with  
Belgium”, A. Henry,  
Royal Archives of King Leopold I

## Belgian Witnesses, Experiencing the Subtle Blend of Orient and West

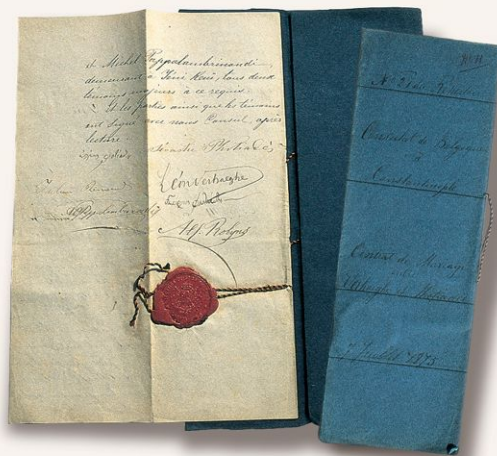
Accordingly, Brussels displayed appreciation for the Ottoman Empire as well. It acknowledged the considerable significance of the Porte by upgrading the Belgian diplomatic mission in Constantinople to top ranking, in 1870. Henceforth, the Legation was placed under the direction of an Extraordinary Envoy, and manned with three more diplomats, local staff and a dragoman, occupying a key role by his command of the Turkish language and his familiarity with Oriental protocol.

Constantinople had matured into a prestigious diplomatic posting and even among collaborators the Legation counted personalities belonging to quite important and influential Belgian families.

Léon Verhaeghe de Naeyer was such a person.

Born to a family of politicians, landowners and bankers from Ghent, Léon Verhaeghe

de Naeyer arrived in Constantinople as a Secretary of Legation in 1870, at the age of 31. Verhaeghe flourished in his new environment. Promoted to deputy head of mission within a year after his arrival, he was above all fascinated with the city, his city, which later in his memoirs 'Vingt ans d'étapes' he described as "le Paris de l'Orient": an affectionate reference to the unique blend of Oriental enchantment and tradition and the sophisticated flair of 19<sup>th</sup> century society life he encountered as a Westerner and a diplomat. A man of consistency, Verhaeghe developed the same type of fascination with Sévastie Vénérande Photiadès, a Greek Ottoman beauty born 19 years earlier in Constantinople. Their wedding took place in 1875.



Marriage contract between Léon Verhaeghe, age 36, and Ms. Sévastie Photiadès, dated July 7<sup>th</sup> 1875, and concluded by Alfred Robyns, Consul General of Belgium in Constantinople.

A few months after his marriage, Verhaeghe was posted to Lisbon, but two years later managed to return to his beloved Constantinople on diplomatic assignment, until he was called back to Belgium to become Provincial Governor for East Flanders in 1879.

Verhaeghe was not the only Belgian moved by the fascination that Constantinople so forcefully radiated onto her visitors. A fellow townsman of Verhaeghe, Alfred Bruneel, on a visit in the year 1867, was reportedly equally enthused.

In Constantinople, Alfred Bruneel saw and experienced just about all things of good taste the city had on offer. He tried out the Turkish baths and observed the dervishes entranced in their whirling dances, he assisted the prayers of the Sultan, on Fridays, and visited the glorious Byzantine churches and the imposing cemeteries of Scutari (Üsküdar) and Eyoub (Eyüp), he strolled in the European quarter of Pera, with its gas street lights, its Italian operas and its stately houses in solid brick; with amazement and curiosity he engraved into his eager traveller's mind the subtle blend of Oriental and Western impressions.



## A Legation of Top Ranking and Prestige

It was that same, generally sensed strange, puzzling amalgamation of Oriental tradition, protocol and habits with the cosmopolitan flair surrounding modern society and business life in the Ottoman capital of those days, that, more than anywhere else, imparted a pivotal role to the residing diplomatic missions. For instance, in the case of Belgium, one of the particularities reaching back to provisions of the 1838 Treaty of Friendship and Commerce, was that Belgian diplomats had judicial power over disputes among fellow countrymen and also played a role in all legal procedures, questionings and trials before Ottoman courts, whenever Belgian citizens were involved.

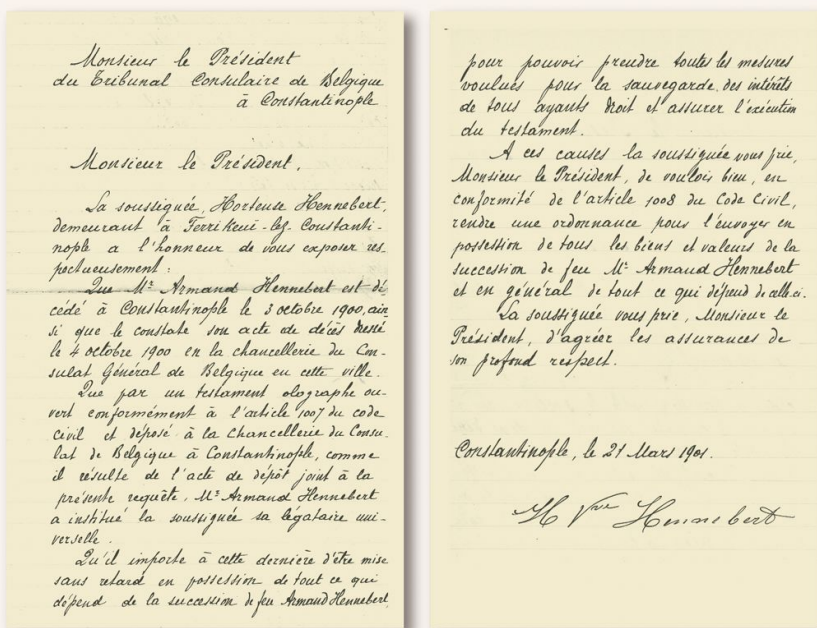
Treaty of August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1838, Balti Liman (Baltaliman) - article 8 – In the case of dispute or trial between subjects of the Sublime Porte and subjects of His Majesty the King of the Belgians, the parties shall not be heard, nor the cause judged, unless in the presence of the dragoman of Belgium ....

This and similar arrangements grew to major significance as from the 1870s, with both the Belgian community and business involvement in the city, and the Empire more generally, becoming more and more substantial. Obviously, the level of commercial intertwining between Belgians and Ottomans, originating from two different cultures, speaking different languages, attempting to bridge a continent's distance with the modest means of communication of that time, occasionally caused complications, legal disputes, misunderstandings on delivery or payment, etc. The Legation was invariably called to play a role in settling those differences.

The Foreign Ministry in Brussels had actually quite soon become conscious of this situation, as witnessed by an internal report of June 1872 reviewing the need to add to the Legation in Constantinople a “Chancelier-Consul” who would be able to technically direct and assist the Envoy in the practice of his judicial competence.

“It is the Belgian Tribunal that hears all disputes among Belgians and all disputes between Belgians and non-Ottoman foreigners in which the Belgian party is on the defending end.

As business of the Belgians in Constantinople is on the increase, trials too become more numerous and more important. It is consequently urgent to install at the head of the tribunal a man well grounded in judicial affairs (...).



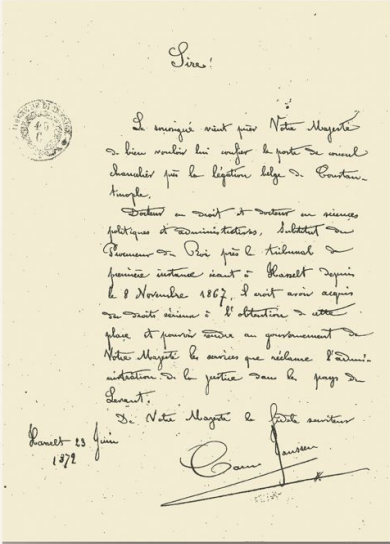
Letter sent by a Belgian citizen in the Ottoman capital to the President of the Belgian Consular Court.

The Appeal Court of Constantinople is composed of the head of the Legation who judges without assessors. It often occurs that the Minister has not received law education; even if he has followed a law course, he has hardly practised as a barrister (...). If, however, the Minister of the King had a jurist as a Chancellor, he could avail himself of the counsel of an obviously impartial adviser (...).

I now come to the organisation of the *tidjaret*. The *tidjaret* is a commercial tribunal which delivers justice according to a code based on principles only marginally different from legislation adopted in Western Europe. All commercial disputes between Ottomans and foreigners are heard by this tribunal. In such a case, it is composed, on equal footing, of standing judges appointed by the Sublime Porte and assessors designated by the Head of the involved foreign party's Legation. A dragoman of the Legation follows the court's deliberations and sees to it that the Tribunal does not deviate from the application of law (...). The assistance of the dragoman is indispensable in these affairs, as command of the Turkish language and familiarity with Oriental usage is required; however, very often the differences between the *tidjaret* and the dragoman on the verdict, or between the Sublime Porte and the Legation as to enforcement, are rooted in legal issues which cannot simply be elucidated through the mere practice of affairs"

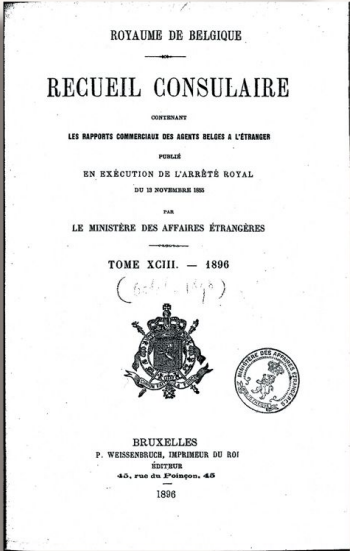
The point was apparently well taken, for already on August 23<sup>rd</sup> 1872 a Royal Decree appointed Camille Janssen as "Chancelier Consul" in Constantinople.

Janssen left the function of Substitute to the King's Attorney, which he had occupied in the city of Hasselt for the past five years, and set out for the Ottoman capital, being promised a respectable salary and cherishing the prospect of becoming the guarantor of legal security to Belgium's growing interests in the Empire. It appears Janssen managed matters to the satisfaction of Belgian business people and his Ottoman hosts alike, as in 1874 the Ottoman government bestowed upon him the title of Commander of the Osmanié, for his role as the Belgian representative in the Tonnage Commission of the Suez Canal.



As a further significant indication that Belgium had gradually acquired a respectable place in the Ottoman economy, one may point out that in 1881, when the International Council for the Ottoman Public Debt was established, the stake of Belgian banks, such as the Banque Centrale Anversoise, the Banque de Bruxelles and the Société générale de Belgique, accounted for not less than 7.2 % of the overall rescheduling portfolio, compared to much lower figures of major nations as Germany (4.78 %), Italy (2.6 %) and Austria-Hungary (0.96 %).

Quite logically, active prospection in view of Belgian exports and joint ventures was an ever more frequent occupation for the Legation. Detailed knowledge of local culture, adequate access to the Sultan's Palace and administration, and a solid network of trustworthy relations, all carefully developed and cultivated over decades of representation, positioned the Legation in Constantinople as a crucial instrument to promote Belgian trade and investment. Belgian diplomacy in the Ottoman capital supplied a multitude of economic information and hints to the Belgian business world. On a fairly regular basis reports from the mission in Constantinople were reflected in the 'Recueil consulaire', a state-of-the-art newsletter, at that time subscribed to by about the entire Belgian business world.



Front page of the << Recueil Consulaire >> Edition of TOME XCIII. - 1896  
MFA Archives, Brussels

Mediation and go-between assistance were key functions the Legation routinely fulfilled, not only in the economic field but in all conceivable areas of international endeavour. In a publication he issued in 1898, S.G. Marghetitch, then dragoman of the Belgian Legation, clearly intended to draw attention to the crucial importance of himself and his fellow dragomans for diplomatic missions in Constantinople, for the lesser and higher tasks alike. His remarks do, however, also shed light on the very particular situation in Constantinople, where foreign diplomats had to deal with an administration of Oriental etiquette and sensitivities they were not all that familiar with.



Business Card of S.G. Marghetitch, dragoman of the Belgian Legation Archives of the Consulate General of Belgium in Istanbul.

The institution of the dragoman goes back to the era of early regular relations between the Powers and the Ottoman government. Inevitable go-betweens (...), the dragomans were called to orient and enlighten their superiors on the habits, laws and institutions of the country, as well as on traditions of the Government of accreditation (...). All affairs of an Embassy or a Legation in Constantinople, treated with the local Authorities and regardless of their nature, be it political, administrative or judicial, are without exception entrusted to the dragomans.

Marghetitch, 1898, The functions of the dragomans of diplomatic and consular missions in Turkey

At the time Baron Emile de Borchgrave presented his credentials to Sultan Abdülhamid in May 1885, he undoubtedly took direction of a very prestigious and busy Legation. He complained however bitterly to Brussels for not being surrounded with material conditions in keeping with the distinction and esteem Belgium widely enjoyed in Ottoman society. That he did not have one of those old fashioned 'portantines' to be carried around town in the waggling and shaking dignity that many of his peers luxuriated in during their official outings, was maybe more of a relief than a frustration to Borchgrave. He did however have much stronger feelings about the reticence he and his predecessors had consistently encountered from headquarters, to purchase or construct a proper Embassy building. Since his arrival in the capital, Borchgrave had settled in a small side street of the Grand'Rue de Pera (Istiklal),







It is hardly a surprise that in the classy environment of “la petite maison Franchini” Borchgrave’s guests got carried away by the timeless charms of Constantinople: Georges Montefiore, the Senator for Liège who visited in 1889, or even Léon Verhaeghe de Naeyer, who was proven wrong for assuming that the city held no more secrets to him, after an Ottoman marriage and two tours of diplomatic duty a decade earlier.

Could it not have been just as well in today’s edition of “Le Journal d’Orient”, rather than sixty years earlier, in 1830, that the traveller from Antwerp, B. Rottiers, wrote the following lines: “In no other place on earth, Paris perhaps being the only exception, have converged so many scientists, artists, travellers and people of good taste; each embassy forms a limited circle chosen by the élite of the nation it represents”?

Undoubtedly, time had not stood still, not even on these timeless shores of the Bosphorus. For, now in the 1890s, hidden underneath the polished etiquette of high society, lay the harsh reality of an industrial struggle for markets, concessions and contracts. While sipping his exquisite Château Latour 1886, musing and overlooking from his elegant yali in Büyükdere the gentle flow of the Bosphorus, Borchgrave was very much aware of that reality! And so were his successors around the turn of the century.

## Belgian Expertise and Investment in Ottoman Infrastructure and Modernisation

In fact, as early as the 1860s Belgium had become one of the world’s leading industrial nations, heavily relying on sales abroad because of its limited domestic

market. Developing the Ottoman industrial economy was a shared interest of both the Ottomans themselves and industrial European countries like Belgium. It is unsurprising therefore, that around 1870, an engineer in mechanics from Liège, Count Zboinski, came all the way to Constantinople to produce Asia Minor's very first geological map for coal extraction. In particular from the 1880s onwards, interests seemed to match outstandingly between the Ottoman drive to modernise infrastructure and Belgium's globally renowned expertise in railway building, tramways, transport equipment in general, electricity grids and other types of public utilities. The Legation committed itself to make these opportunities for trade and investment more widely known in Belgian business circles. In October 1894, for instance, the "Recueil Consulaire" published a very substantial 200 page report from the Legation's dragoman Marghetich, on financial and commercial perspectives in the Ottoman railway sector.

The director of Cockerill, Adolphe Greiner himself travelled on the Orient Express to Constantinople in May 1890, hoping to carry off the Ottoman concession to construct the Samsun-Sivas railway. A Member of Parliament from Huy, and at the same time Board Member at Cockerill, Ferdinand Baron de Macar, threw his weight behind Greiner's negotiations and also came to lobby in Constantinople, in September of the same year. The efforts of Greiner and Macar proved successful, in spite of tough German and French competition, as in the course of 1891 the Porte conferred to Cockerill the railway concession not only between Samsun and Sivas, but over a much longer stretch, down to Alexandrette (Iskenderun), linking thus the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. The project was grand, but unfortunately never got beyond the drawing board. In the end, Belgian industry had to be content with only the concession for a mere 42 km railway between Mudanya and Bursa, granted to Georges Naegelmackers, a banker from Liège, also in 1891. The hunt for Ottoman railway concessions in the 1890s and its intricate political intrigues, proved to be well beyond the leverage power of Belgian companies, in the face of overwhelming French and German strategic jockeying.

Yet, pragmatic as they already were at that time, the Belgians managed to snatch an impressive number of subcontracts for railway construction throughout the Empire. So it happened that a steel mill like Aciéries d'Angleur got designated for the rail laying between Haifa and Damascus, about 1895; an accomplishment that opened the way for further Belgian subcontracting in other, even more prestigious undertakings. No small undertaking either, when Abdülhamid partly entrusted the Hedjaz railway to Mecca, his dream project that was to substantiate his prestige

as caliph, to Cockerill. Other Belgian companies got also involved: again, the Aciéries d'Angleur, along with newcomers on the Ottoman market like Ateliers de Construction de la Meuse and Beaume et Marpent, backed by the Banque de Charleroi. Several other steel-mills from the Liège and Charleroi area showed a keen interest in Ottoman railway construction as well, banking on their label of high quality steel at competitive prices. Together they actually managed to lodge Belgian industry into the comfort of acknowledged and undisputed partnership with the Ottomans and their often French project co-ordinators. The Belgian position in the Hedjaz railway project was further enhanced when, in 1902, the Ottoman authorities recruited several civil engineers , like Alfred Cailliau.



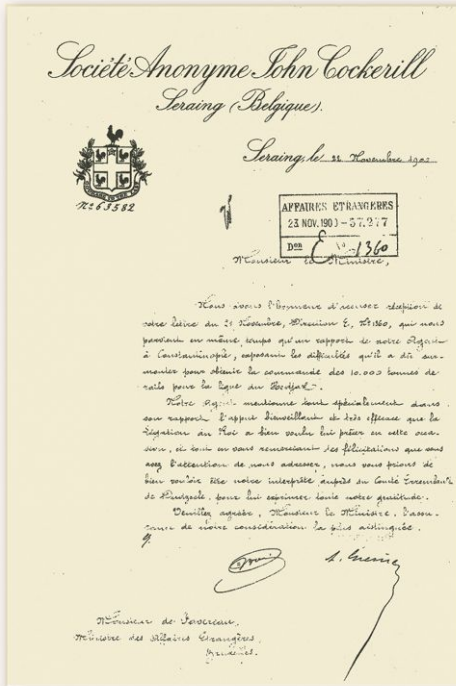
Construction Works of the Hedjaz Railways.  
Rail laying by local workers.  
Yıldız Saray Collection.

I am satisfied to inform you that the order placed with the Société John Cockerill of 10.000 tons of rails for the Hedjaz railway, has received Imperial sanction. Many intrigues have still taken place (...). It was again Izzet Bey, second secretary to the Sultan, who intervened with His Majesty, on request of Mr Marghetitch, and obtained the Decree to be signed. I have also been informed that the three locomotive tenders (...) have provisionally been assigned to the “Société Anonyme de Construction de la Meuse”. If these orders become definite as well, this will imply that all supplies tendered so far for this railway, will have been allotted to Belgian houses.



*Alfred Cailliau*



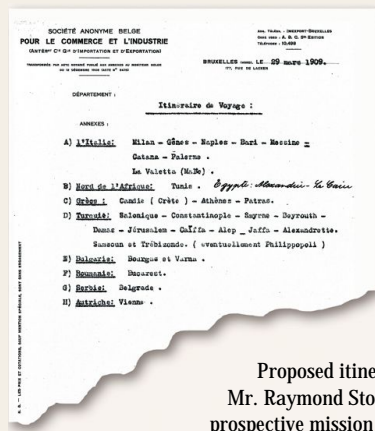
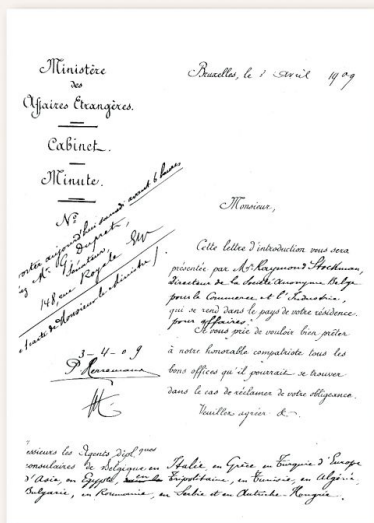


We are honoured to acknowledge receipt of your letter of November 21<sup>st</sup> which reached us simultaneously with a report from our Agent in Constantinople, describing the difficulties he had been forced to overcome to clinch the order of 10.000 tons of rails for the Hedjaz line. Our Agent very specifically mentions in his report the benevolent and very effective support the Legation of the King has so kindly provided on this occasion. While thanking you for the message of

congratulations you considerably forwarded to us, we kindly ask you to convey all our gratitude to Count Errembault de Dudzeele.

For the Belgian industry achieving such a position of prevalence, a lot of credit was definitely due as well to the network of consular missions, that expanded across Ottoman territories by fifteen more stations between 1886 and 1911. Belgium's proportionally dense consular network consisted of well beyond twenty postings, spread all over the Empire, and centrally managed by the Consulate General in Constantinople as from 1896. This dense network proved to be a particularly useful and important tool for the Belgian authorities to assist the ever increasing number of merchants and trade representatives travelling throughout the Ottoman Empire, in search of new markets and outlets. Prospective trips like the one undertaken in 1909 by Raymond Stockman, manager of the "Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce et l'Industrie" to all corners of the Empire, from Salonica to Constantinople, from Jerusalem to Aleppo and from Alexandrette (Iskenderun) to Trebizonde (Trabzon), could effectively count on active support from the consular network Belgium had put in place.

A real breakthrough for Belgian investment penetration in the modernising Ottoman economy came when Sultan Abdülhamid opened the way for gas and electricity supply in the urban areas of the capital. The Compagnie des Conduites d'Eau,



Proposed itinerary for Mr. Raymond Stockman's prospective mission in 1909

Letter of introduction from the Foreign Minister's Cabinet to Mr. Raymond Stockman

from Liège, was chosen in 1889 to supply the steel pipes for Constantinople's first gas distribution. By itself a lucrative business deal, it was above all the beginning of a deeply rooted association of Belgian industry with Constantinople's public utilities being brought to European standard. Several Belgian companies were among the protagonists in this endeavour.

In 1891 the "Société Impériale Ottomane d'Eclairage par le Gaz et l'Electricité (Kadi-keuy - Scutari)" [Kadiköy-Üsküdar] was established with exclusively Belgian capital from the Banque de Brabant, Union du Gaz and the Charbonnage de Mariemont et Bascoup. Some time later, in 1894, the Eclairage du Centre, subsidiary of the Empain financial group bought itself into the Société Impériale with a stake of 43%. The Belgian owned

Share of the << Société Impériale Ottomane d'Eclairage par le Gaz et l'Electricité >>, operating as from 1891 in Kad-köy and Üsküdar.



Société Impériale ran an operation of over 2000 street lights in the Asian sections of Constantinople, and supplied lighting and electric power to the military premises at Haydarpasha and the homes of some 1200 private subscribers.

A similar development had taken place on the European bank of the Bosphorus a few years earlier, in 1888, as the Banque de Bruxelles had acquired a forty year concession to build and operate the “Société pour l’Eclairage de la ville de Constantinople. Gaz de Stamboul”. The company was run by a Belgian manager, Mr. Francou, and provided electricity to the “quarters of Stamboul, including Eyoub and the surrounding villages of Makri-keuy and San Stefano” (Eyüp, Bakırköy and Yesilköy), as described in letter exchanges between the Brussels based company headquarters and Foreign Affairs, dated October 1906. By that time, the company had invested 200.000 Turkish Lira in a network and a production unit at Yedikule,



Gazhanesi, the gas production unit at Yedikule.  
Collection S. Kayserilioğlu

supplying gas to approximately 20.000 outlets and 4.000 street lanterns. The “Société” or otherwise also called “Gaz de Stamboul” performed quite well, as witnessed in successive annual reports of the Banque de Bruxelles to its shareholders:

“The Banque de Bruxelles has taken an important stake in the Société Ottomane pour l’Eclairage de la ville de Constantinople, aimed at exploiting the concession of Stamboul. The construction of the plant and the canalisation directed by one of the most competent engineers, are close to full completion and very soon we will be able to commence exploitation. Apart from contracts for lighting of public roads and official buildings, subscription demands for private installations are currently being received in sufficient numbers to foretell as from now the positive outcome of this enterprise.”

Annual Report Banque de Bruxelles, Year 1889, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1890.

“The Société has started regular exploitation since January 1892. This enterprise goes through some difficulties initially, as encountered by most gas plant operations, but its development seems nevertheless to be somewhat slower than usual. We hope, however, that the efforts of the Company to expand the use of gas as a source for lighting, heating and engine power, will result in a gradual increase of consumption, hereby boosting earnings, until now inferior to what had been anticipated.”

Annual Report Banque de Bruxelles, Year 1892, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1893.

“The evolution of progress of this enterprise has been maintained in the course of the past year; gas consumption is on the increase particularly thanks to the sector of heating. Non-fixed earning bonds shall yield 21 francs.”

Annual Report Banque de Bruxelles, Year 1897, April 28<sup>th</sup>, 1898.

“This enterprise has continued to develop; the number of subscribers is growing well. The installation of a thousand new lanterns for public lighting, which we have already reported to you last year, is now near full completion. Related expenditure is offset by the earnings from the two preceding years of exploitation, earmarked for this purpose on a special account. After deduction of a given amount of depreciation, the Société shall be capable of distributing earnings for the year 1900 at a rate of 25 francs per non-fixed earning bond.”



First lanterns on the Galata Bridge, as part of the network established by << Gaz de Stamboul >>. Collection S. Kayserilioglu

Annual Report Banque de Bruxelles, Year 1900, April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1901.

In the meantime, the sector of urban transport had also reached a new stage of development. In March 1907, the Belgian Envoy Errembault de Dudzeele emphasised how much potential lay ahead for Belgian companies partaking of the concession for the capital's tramways network, at that time still horse-pulled

and consisting of five planned lines throughout the city centre. In view of this grand scheme, the Envoy wanted the two Belgian interest groups already dominating the capital's power generation, 'Gaz de Stamboul' on the city's European bank and the Empain group on the Asian shore, to join forces and secure this important project of public utility investment for Belgian industry.

"A tenacious competition is currently taking place here, among the companies and financial groups of different nationalities, German, English, Austrian, Belgian and French...

I am being reassured that the "Belgians" were those who had made the most advantageous offers and I hear from various sides that they have the best chances to succeed. I am indeed aware of the fact that the group Empain-Urban on the one hand, and the 'Trust franco-belge de tramways et d'électricité' on the other hand, put conditions that provoke the jealousy of their competitors of other nationalities. I therefore express hopes that our compatriots will march together, in mutual understanding, for the deal is sufficiently important to secure to both sides a considerable share. And it is very much in this spirit that I deploy my action."

In spite of all these efforts the Legation had to be patient until 1911 to see a real Belgian business front develop. Yet, when it came about, it proved to be a very powerful and successful one: in 1911, the Banque de Bruxelles, the Belgian administered Sofina holding and Hungarian partners outwitted the rivalling French-German 'Union Ottomane' and were granted by the Sultan a monopoly over Constantinople's electricity generation and supply. This success was immediately consolidated in the creation of the "Société Ottomane d'Electricité (Constantinople)", mainly funded with Belgian capital. Within months, the Banque de Bruxelles and Sofina further tightened their grip on the rival Union Ottomane, by forcing it to participate in the so-called Consortium. This was a giant financial construction with control over just about everything related to utility and urban service development in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Constantinople. Through its major stake in this Consortium, Belgian capital led by Sofina became key not only to the city's electrification programme, but also to all significant projects of urban transport.

The plan to switch from horse-pulled to electricity powered tramways was put on the drawing board that same year, in 1911, and resulted in the inauguration

Inauguration of the electricity powered tramway network.  
Constantinople, 1913.  
Collection S. Kayserilio=lu





of the first electric tramway line in town two years later. The Consortium also comprehended the “Société du Tunnel”, operating the cable car system between Galata and Pera, still in use today,

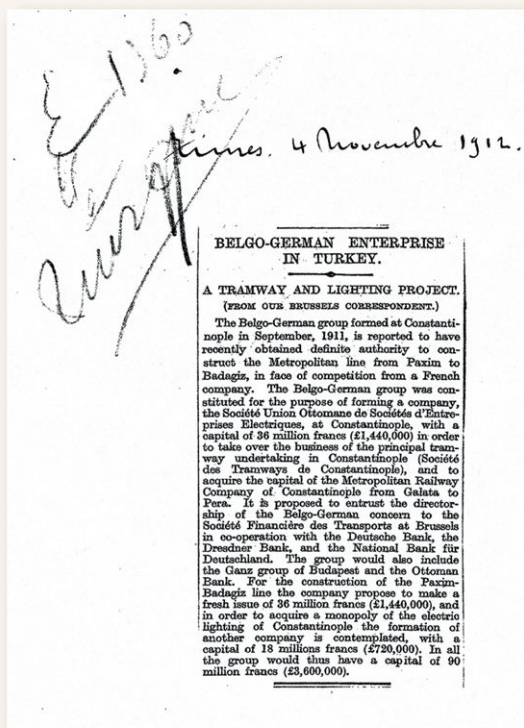


First electricity powered tramways in Constantinople, 1913. Collection S. Kayserilio=lu



Tickets for the electric tramway passage, value 40 para. 1913. Collection S. Kayserilio=lu

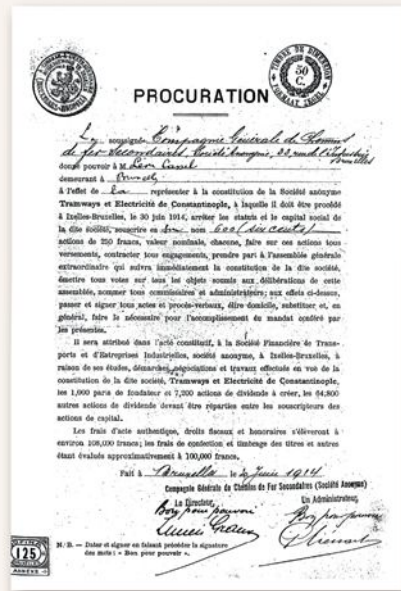
and the “Société Ottomane du Chemin de Fer Métropolitain”, which had obtained in 1912 a governmental concession to build “a metropolitan railway of approximately 7 km between Stamboul and Galata-Pera, passing underneath the Golden Horn”, as stated in financial company reports. These visionary plans to build an underground metro line were unfortunately marred by the outbreak of the Great War: on June 30<sup>th</sup> 1914, all parties in the Consortium of Constantinople gave their blessing to strengthen their powerful alliance in energy and public transport into a single mega-company, the Brussels based “Tramways et Electricité de Constantinople”, to be run on day to day basis by the Belgian group Sofina. War decided it was all not to be, however, for in a seemingly unrelated event, the Austro-Hungarian Crown Prince Ferdinand had been shot dead in Sarajevo, just two days before.



Article in the Times edition of November 12th, 1912. Archives of the Consulate General of Belgium in Istanbul.



Share of the << Tramways et Electricité de Constantinople >>, founded on June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1914 in Ixelles, Brussels.

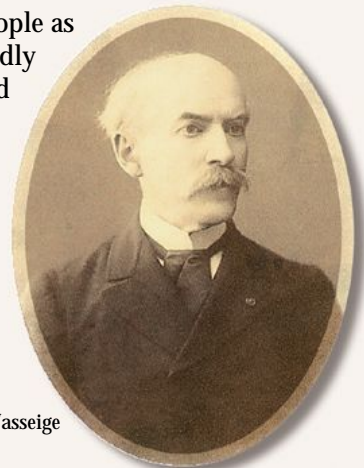


Procuration document, signed by shareholders of the newly founded << Tramways et Electricité de Constantinople >>, 1914 Archives De Doncker, Notary at Ixelles.

In a way, all those intriguing, complicated financial schemes aimed at grand investment projects, paid tribute to those people who had already been involved since the 1870s in the "Société de Tramways de Constantinople", the company that was later also to be part of the Consortium. Among these early participants, Belgian names also appeared such as Eugène Marlier, Josse Allard, and above all, Charles Helbig.

## The Belgians of Constantinople, Thriving and Feeling at Home

The Helbigs were one of the families of Belgian aristocrats and tradesmen who had been established in Constantinople as early as the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had rapidly become part of the city's high society and were linked to ancient Levantine merchant dynasties traced centuries back in the city's history. Charles Helbig senior had come from Liège to Constantinople in 1848 to represent the commercial interests of an industrialist from his home town, Clément Francotte. Helbig settled, gradually involved himself in trade and banking and eventually married into the Balzac family.



Portrait of Charles Helbig Sr. Helbig Family Collection, F-L de Wasseige

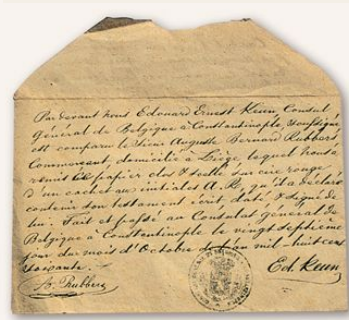


Helbig Han on Yazidji Street, Pera  
Helbig Family Collection,  
F-L de Wasseige.

The Helbig de Balzacs prospered, and established a trading company in 1860, registered as the "Société Belge d'Exportation" in Constantinople. The Helbigs also ventured into a variety of investments,

such as the early horse-pulled tramways of Constantinople, but were above all bankers. At the outbreak of the Great War, the Banque Helbig was an important and well-respected institution in Kara-keyu's (Karaköy).

It was people like Charles Helbig, and his sons Charles jr, Edmond and Albert that the traveller from Ghent, Alfred Bruneel was thinking of, when in 1867, he mentioned 'the pleasant society of the small colony of Belgians, presided over by a Smyrniote, Mr Keun, Consul General of Belgium, and his son'.



It was indeed a small world at that time, but the Belgian 'colony' was composed of notable and distinguished families, like the Helbig de Balzacs. Other, equally aristocratic and well-to-do Belgian houses, were the Coûteaux and the oldest one in town, the Frédéricis. François Frédérici had come in the 1830s to Constantinople as an agent for his family's linen factory in Verviers. In April 1841 Joseph Partoes, on mission in Constantinople, wrote to Foreign Affairs in Brussels: "monsieur Frédérici has declared to me that he has no intention of doing business on commission and that he shall limit his activity to the sale of the linen woven by his father in Verviers. Monsieur Frédérici is still a young man, but experienced in business, and is settled in a very favourable position thanks to his alliance with monsieur Lemoine and the Glavanys, one of the wealthiest and most considered families of Constantinople.





Glavany Han, Pera-Beyo=lu  
 Photographed by T. Yumak, 2000

" Enchanted by Constantinople, François Frédérici made it his home and founded one of the city's most prominent Belgian banker families. In the 1870s and 1880s he got also involved in shipping, with an agency situated in Pera's Glavany Han, taking care of the interests of several steamer lines between Western Europe, Constantinople and the Levant in general.

Charles-François Coûteaux had come in 1849 from Brussels and married Virginie Glavany, from the same Levantine family established in Constantinople since many centuries. Connected to the Glavany as well were the Maus, another Belgian family tree with roots in Constantinople since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Right into the pre-war period of Abdülhamid's modernisation, those families constituted Belgium's rock solid nucleus in the Ottoman capital's social and business



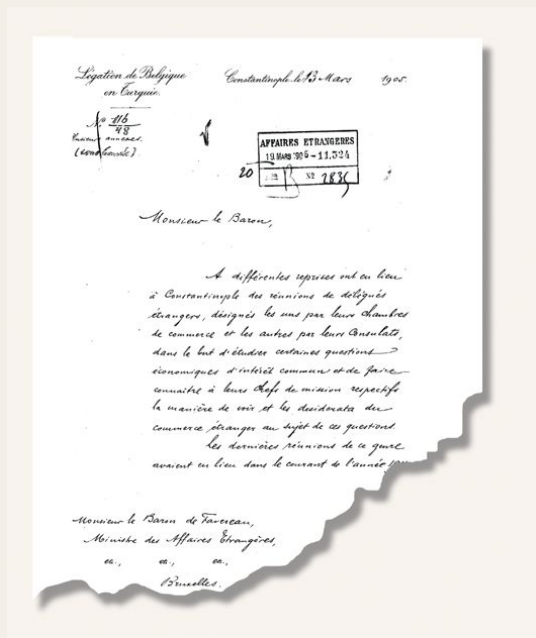
Poster, dated March 15<sup>th</sup> 1880,  
 advertising services of François Frédérici's  
 shipping agency in Glavany Han, number II.

life. From the ranks of the Helbigs, Coûteaux and Frédéricis the Belgian judges were drafted into the Mixed Commercial and Maritime Courts of Constantinople, the Tidjaret and the Bahrié respectively. And when in 1905 the 'Union Permanente des Délégués du Commerce Etranger', or the Standing Union of Foreign Trade Delegates was founded for the joint defence of international commercial interests in the Empire, no one else than members of the Coûteaux and Helbig families were chosen to represent Belgium.

On various occasions meetings have taken place in Constantinople among foreign delegates designated either by their chamber of commerce, or by their Consulates, in order to study certain economic questions of common interest and to inform their respective Heads of mission of their views and the needs of foreign trade.

The most recent meetings of this type have taken place in the course of 1904 in connection with the new stamp-duty law. The practical and useful results thus obtained have suggested the idea to create the "Standing Union of Foreign Trade Delegates". I had invited Mr. Faustin

Coûteaux and Albert Helbig to defend the Belgian interests. Our compatriots have recently forwarded a letter to me with the minutes of the first session, the statutes of the said assembly and the report of the first deliberations related to customs control, forbidden trademarks and emblems, and exaggerated costs of protest...



Around those aristocratic families, deeply rooted into the Ottoman capital's society life by business and marriage, a Belgian community gradually built up: merchants, expatriates, travellers, artists and priests; there were also the frequent newcomers who simply settled and tried to run one or other small business to sustain their fresh start in life, overwhelmed and bathing in excitement with the sights, colours and sounds of Constantinople's "Belle Epoque". "Constantinople is not a city, it is a world", wrote Octave Maus in 1881, during a visit he paid from Belgium to his expatriate family. That was definitely also the opinion of most Belgians living in the city on a more permanent basis.

The Belgians of Constantinople were about 200 in all, according to reports the Legation dispatched to Brussels on several occasions between the 1880s and the Great War. Apart from those 200, only a few dozen Belgian citizens were spread

in the Empire over Salonica, Smyrna (Izmir) and some areas in Syria. In 1912 the Belgian mission in Constantinople sent a list to Brussels with "all Belgians occupying a position in Constantinople, Salonica and Adrianople, as well as in Asian Turkey, either in public administration or in education or in private enterprise". The listing consisted of four densely written pages of names, many of them living away from the glamour of the capital's high society, yet important on their own merit and for their specific contributions to Belgian presence.

Just as an example one could mention Emile Cantraine, Frédéric Gaukema and Edmond Le Roy, business representatives; or John and Florent Berré, the former sustaining his family of five on the salary of a customs official, the latter an employee in the Pera Palace; Louis Turck, a mechanic, and Milles Gillaume, a watch maker; Ivan Maus, employed by the Imperial Ottoman Bank and married to Amélie; Félix De Kempeneer, principal of the 'Ecole Sainte Pulchérie'; Charles Kools earning his living as a masseur; Joseph Martin making saddles and carriages, and Achille Focan as the British Ambassador's gardener. Félix Smits living in San Stefano (Yeffilköy) with his wife, daughter Eléonore and son Etienne, and integrated well enough into local society to be nicknamed 'Mesut Bey'.



Félix Smits, alias << Mesut Bey >> and family. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century.  
Archives of the Consulate General of Belgium in Istanbul.

These names are merely excerpts from a much longer list, demonstrating how profoundly and very diversely the Belgians were integrated into the capital's every day life.

Life was not cheap in the capital. House rent in particular was often beyond reason, and even day-to-day expenses were high, especially for the 'petite bourgeoisie' and other Europeans who couldn't and wouldn't quite part completely with their Western needs and habits. A Belgian employee, Mr. Joris, earned 250 francs a month for his hard day's work selling Singer sewing machines in 1905; he was able to make ends meet only with great difficulty and would probably spend a fair part of his income on decent housing.

In 1910 the Belgian Envoy Moncheur sent a report that life in Constantinople was a firm fifty percent dearer than in Brussels. Responding to the needs of potential candidates to expatriation from Belgium to Constantinople, the Legation also produced a leaflet with practical guidelines for settling and day-to-day life in the city, providing indications about currency, climate, customs and administration, but above all, about the cost of living.

"... In spite of efforts on the side of the authorities, meat continues to be expensive. Quality is mediocre and the meat is sold with bones, fat, membranes, etc, further increasing the price of the useful parts...

Fish used to be an important staple in the poor classes' diet. Nowadays, it is no longer sold in the street; it can only be found in the market, where one is sometimes forced to pay exorbitant prices...

As to vegetables, their dearness affects directly the masses of population, for whom they are the main nutrient. What was sold a few years ago for 10 paras (1/4 piaster) an ocque, has now reached the price of 1 to 1<sup>1/2</sup> piasters....

Rents are also very costly and constitute a heavy burden (...). In general, the inhabitants of Constantinople spend sums on housing, beyond all proportion to their income (...). A civil servant or employee is forced to earmark at least a fifth of his income to rent. In Pera renting a small unfurnished flat costs a minimum of a hundred francs a month, excluding services to be paid separately (...).

In the popular neighbourhood of Galata a foreign labourer could put himself up for 5 to 10 piasters a day; a meal would cost him another 4 to 5 piasters...."