

Elmar Samsinger

A Prince Charming in Wonderland – Constantinople in May 1918



Timetable of the imperial journey

"With his good-natured but also caring facial expression, the glorious heir of the Fatih [Conquest], the Selim, the Kanuni, namely His Majesty the Sultan, appears, he greets those on all sides with his hand and his head movements. A gorgeous fairy, the young Empress Zita, surrounded by noble charm, is slowly approaching, as if emanating from a fairy tale world, a

steady, natural smile shows on her face, the big pearls of her necklace can only be seen with the dazzling white of her the smile with her visible teeth which are compared. Your toilet is classy, simple as always; on her hair curled by nature a tiara of star-like brilliants sparkle. To her left, the emperor in the uniform of a young Turkish officer walks with the three marshal stars on the epaulettes, Turkish medals on his chest, Ottoman love in his heart."



Emperor *Charles I*, Sultan *Mehmed V. Reşad*, Empress *Zita* (ÖNB)

Just a vacation! No war, no starving population, no dead at the front, no decisions - the Turkish newspaper *Atlibi* presents its readers with a cheerful Emperor *Charles* and *fairy-like* wife *Zita*, who gladly accepted the Sultan's invitation to the Golden Horn. On the way there the party visited *Ferdinand I*, the Bulgarian tsar. The Austrian imperial court procession then arrived in Constantinople on Pentecost Sunday, May 19, 1918, where the ruling couple and their large entourage stayed until May 21th. Sultan *Mehmet V. Reşad* had spared no expense in making the stay of the imperial ally in the First World War an unforgettable celebration.

To prepare for the arrival, the Austro-Hungarian Ambassador to Constantinople, *Johann Markgraf Palavicini*, and the Military Plenipotentiary FML *Joseph Pomiankowski* traveled to the very highest visitors. The emperor was expecting the top two representatives of the Danube monarchy on the Bosphorus in the elegant courtyard salon kiosks, where he had the visit program explained to him - including Turkish customs to be observed: "*It has been introduced in the Turkish army by regulations that the supervisor who takes the parade takes the soldiers along greeted the words 'Sabachynys haİR olsun, askerler'* (May your morning be blessed, soldiers), to which he replied with the historical call '*Tschok jachaa ...'* (live long)." Emperor *Charles* wanted to memorize this greeting, but failed, "*because he couldn't remember the Turkish words at all. Eventually he got impatient, gave up memorizing, and told me to go behind him and tell him the formula out loud.*"

Formal attire was ordered for the festive reception at Constantinople Sirkeci station, the state-sponsored Sultan's dinner and the farewell ceremony. In addition, the Emperor *Charles* traveled with his great entourage, since for the Turks only the great and powerful ruler who has many servants is all the more so - especially if these servants were generals and ministers. The Prussian king and German Emperor *Wilhelm II*, who had been waiting for the Sultan a few months earlier, had given this ostentation too little a thought. The German Emperor and his small suite also appeared in plain field grey and thus betrayed the theatrical colour effects attributed to the Orientals around the expected spectacle. The splendid red Hungarian marshal uniform with a white furattila and a sparkling diamond tie on the kalpak (fur hat) offered a completely different effect. *Charles* also cut a fine figure in the dark blue gala uniform of a k.u.k. Admirals. Silk sashes and a lot of shiny medals were part of the deliberately chosen staging.



Emperor *Charles I* and Empress *Zita* in the State *Caique* near the Topkapı Palace (ONB)

The reception that the general public gave to the high-ranking guests was therefore extremely enthusiastic; under a shower of flowers, the carriages went from the train station to the Sultan's Palace in open carriages. And from the point of view of the Turks, Emperor *Charles* was also a young hero: *"Those who see the Emperor of Austria immediately said: this is a soldier monarch, high-headed, young, lively, a strong ruler, he has eyes everyone who saw him at the train station was delighted with. It is a living symbol of the life force of the empire. Emperor Charles I was created by his age, his dynasty, his milieu, especially the trial of the world war that we are going through. [...] Emperor Charles came directly from the battlefield to the throne and moved into the coronation hall, a gentleman old and new in the full sense of the word, a serious, simple, noble, strong, experienced soldier, a caring father who is very precisely aware of the great fortunes whose guardian he is."* And Empress *Zita*

also made a *bella figura*. Her simple appearance in the midst of the jerky world of men "*had an impulsive effect on the Muslim world of women.*"

The sightseeing program of the imperial couple is documented by numerous photographs in the photo archive of the *Austrian National Library*, Hagia Sophia, the old seraglio, a Bosphorus trip with the Sultan's yacht, including a *chibuk* and coffee. In the process, the emperor in a flutilla skirt among the picturesque Janissary extras witnessed the change of history - military folklore instead of Turkish wars. The k.u.k. troop units at Taksimplatz, where the Emperor - in field grey - held the parade under the sounds of the Austrian hymn. *Charles I* was satisfied, thanked "*for the brilliant appearance of the troops and the exemplary execution of all orders*" and attached medals to numerous officers' breasts. The k.u.k. artillery, motor vehicle and medical units, equipped with tropical uniforms, which had marched to the Suez Canal together with Ottoman troops since 1915, were an expression of the brotherhood of arms in World War I.

The Emperor's encounter with the Austro-Hungarian colony of Constantinople in the *Palazzo di Venezia*, the embassy of the Danube monarchy on the Bosphorus, was less military, but in no way less patriotic. Here the imperial and royal consul solemnly emphasized that the joy of greeting the ruler in their midst arises from the "*dynastic and patriotic feelings that lie in the hearts of every member of the monarchy as an heirloom, and that neither time nor distance are able to influence.*" In German and Hungarian, the Emperor thanked - in marshal uniform - very warmly, whereupon the elites of the colony, personally introduced, paraded past: bankers and wholesalers, the general agent of *Austrian Lloyd*, president and chamber councilors of the Imperial and Royal Chamber of Commerce and Industry, President and General Councils of the I.R. Charity Society, medical director and director of the National Hospital and National School, the Superior from *St. Georg* college, Catholic dignitaries and board members of the Austro-Hungarian Jewish community. Officials, scientists and military personnel from the Habsburg monarchy in Ottoman service were also recognized with appreciative words, and above all the aged commander of the Constantinople fire brigade, division general *Graf Szechenyi Pascha*. When the imperial couple left the ballroom, there were stormy cheers and Eljen calls.

In the *Austrian Monthly Journal for the Orient*, the confidante, orientalist and prelate *Alois Musil* emphasized the great importance of the imperial journey in 1918: "*The printed word and newspapers encounter far less faith and trust here than with us; in the Orient the writer is considered to be closely related to the poet or even the slicer. Two leading personalities are only convinced of their mutual friendship when they visit each other personally. [...] If the people of the prince visited have intimately joined the visitor, the former cannot simply give up their friendship,*" the friendship is now rooted "*in the heart of the won people.*" The Sultan and Emperor hung on each other the highest decorations and appointed themselves mutually to the field marshal - the supplied uniform was another gem in Karl's well-stocked wardrobe.



Truppenparade – Janitscharen – auf der Sultansjacht (SA/ÖNB)

In contrast to the less than exhilarating echo of the Emperor's trip to the Orient in Viennese papers, the reports of the visit in Ottoman newspapers continued for weeks. And the benevolence shown to the couple of monarchs also spread to Austria-Hungary and its inhabitants: *“Let us not forget the nobility of the Austrian; the Nemtscheli is above all noble, is above all a gentleman; the Austrians are a noble people who have ruled entire nations for a long time and have shown their ability in the field of honour. Every nation has its own special characteristics, but the Austrian is primarily aristocratic by nature and the Habsburg dynasty is probably one of the noblest dynasties in the world due to tradition and organization as well as through historical education.”*

Six months later, Emperor *Charles* and Austria-Hungary were history, the noble people together with the newly founded republic on the way to an uncertain future, the large Austro-Hungarian colony on the Bosphorus scattered in all winds. And the friendly view of the Turkish media towards Austria a hundred years ago has changed.



The quotes come from Alois Musil, *“Our Imperial Couple in Sofia and Constantinople”* in the Austrian Monthly Journal for the Orient in 1918 and Joseph Pomiankowski, *“The Collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Memories of Turkey from the World War I”*, 1928. Reports from the Neue Freie Presse and

the Reichspost from May 1918 were also used. Contributions by the author in Austria in Istanbul I-III, edited by Rudolf Agstner (2010) and Elmar Samsinger (2010, 2017 and 2018).