

# 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.

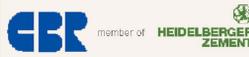
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Individual Contribution

**Liliane De Vries**

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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

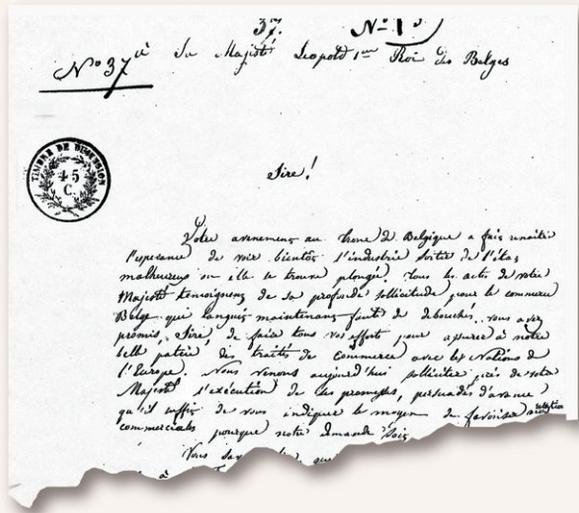
# Belgium in the Ottoman Capital, From the Early Steps to 'la Belle Epoque'

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

By Marc Van den Reeck

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

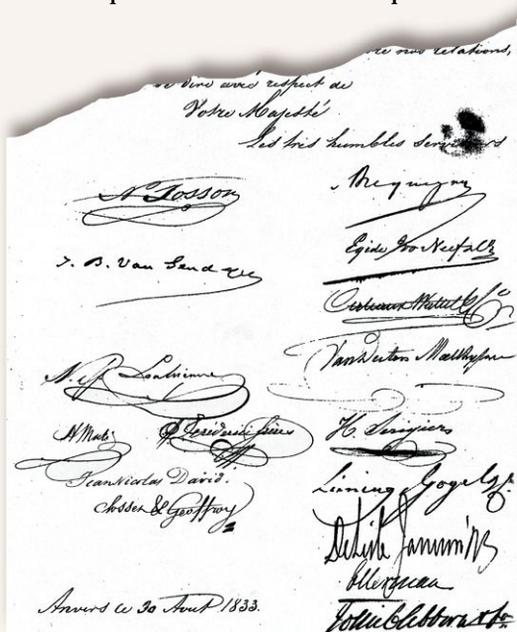
After independence in 1830, the new Belgian State immediately realised the importance of the Ottoman Empire in international affairs, politically and economically. The Empire, above all, held a considerable potential as a trading partner for the young industrial nation, constantly in search of new markets 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 Palais 3721.

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 apportés à son palais d'été  
par le dragoman qui est le Dragoman de  
Séovaud.

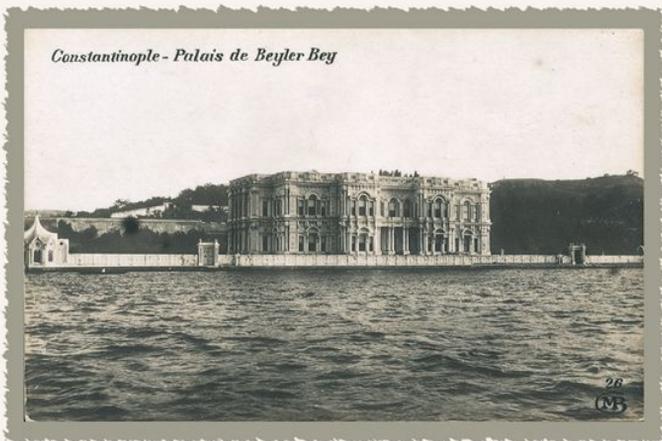
J'ai l'honneur de vous  
contenant aucune  
explication n'était possible à l'instrument, et personne  
n'a été dans la possibilité de me dire, quel pouvait  
être l'usage de cette nouvelle invention.

J'ai l'honneur de vous adresser  
plus haute considération,

Monsieur le Chevalier,

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

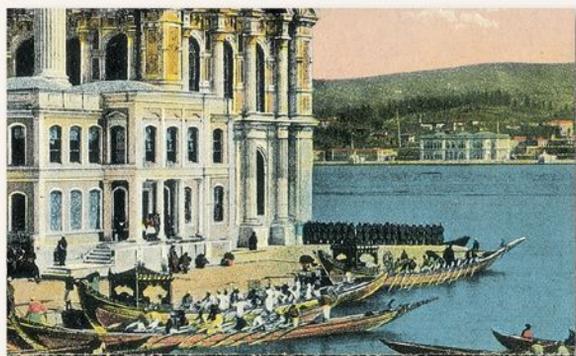
Today at 11 o'clock we have gone to the Stavros Palace or Beiler Bey, where the Sultan lives during summer, on the Asian bank. The four persons of my delegation and m. Lauxerrois accompanied me in the Legation's caique which floated the Belgian flag and of which the eight rowers wore vests in our national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

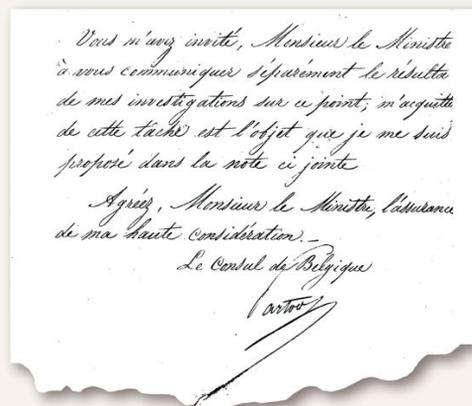
In my opinion (...) one must in the first place found a proper establishment in Constantinople, this most important trade centre of the Orient, of which imports increase every day and shall continue to increase, whatever the solutions to

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...



*Vous m'avez invité, Monsieur le Ministre à vous communiquer séparément le résultat de mes investigations sur ce point; en acquies de cette tâche est l'objet que je me suis proposé dans la note ci-jointe*

*Agrip, Monsieur le Ministre, l'assurance de ma haute considération.*

*Le Consul de Belgique*

*Carro*

## 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.

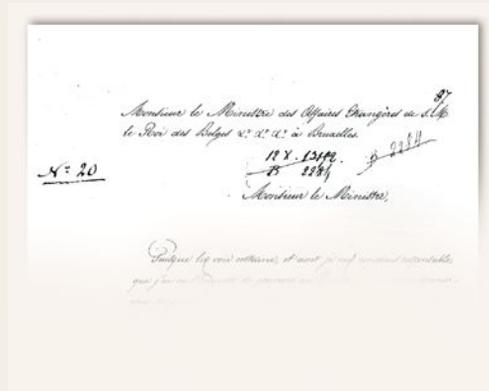
Photographed by T. Yumak, 2000

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 (...).





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.



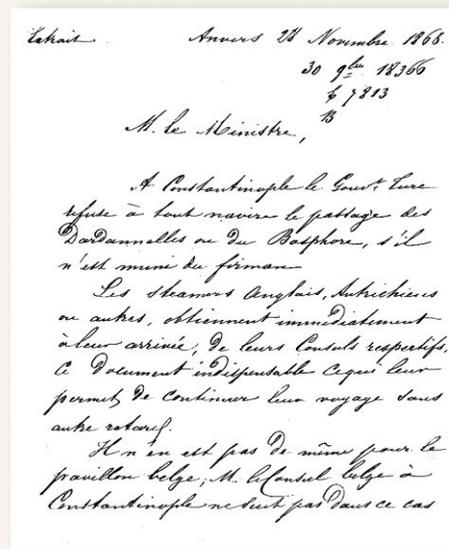
As maritime traffic gradually developed as from the late 1850s, trade and contact could now flow more directly and easily between Belgium and Constantinople and other East Mediterranean ports. Before long, the frequency of steamer traffic justified the establishment of Belgian vice-consulates in the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

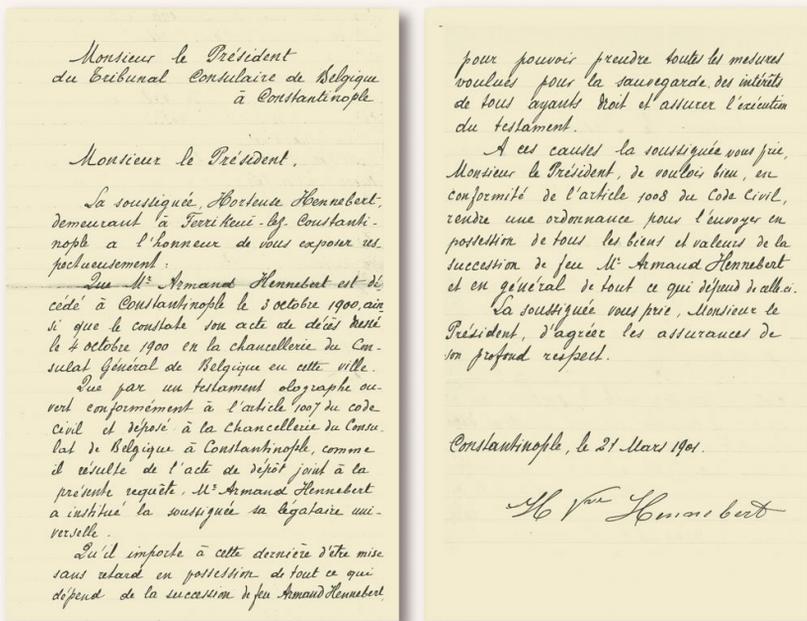
Treaty of August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1838, Balti Liman (Baltaliman) - article 8 – In the case of dispute or trial between subjects of the Sublime Porte and subjects of His Majesty the King of the Belgians, the parties shall not be heard, nor the cause judged, unless in the presence of the dragoman of Belgium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

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 (...).



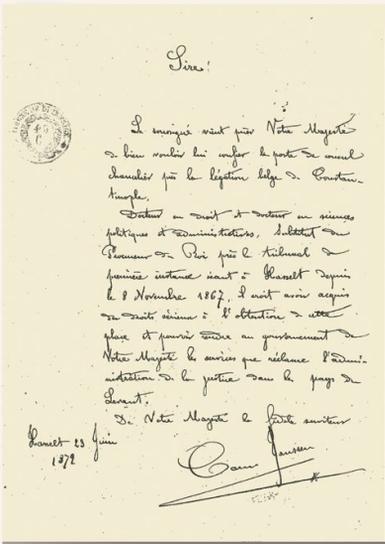
Letter sent by a Belgian citizen in the Ottoman capital to the President of the Belgian Consular Court.

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"

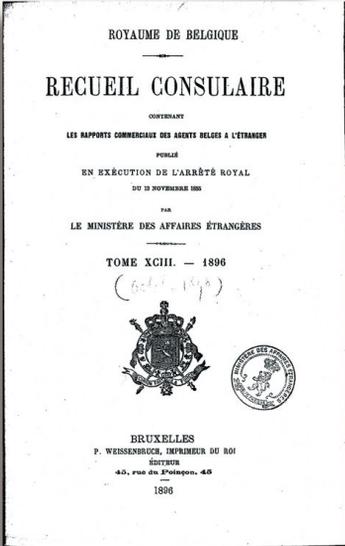
The point was apparently well taken, for already on August 23<sup>rd</sup> 1872 a Royal Decree appointed Camille Janssen as "Chancelier Consul" in Constantinople.

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),

at Koulouglou Sokak, 5. Borchgrave was however dissatisfied with this situation, anxious as he was to enhance Belgium's representation and visibility, in accordance with its influence in Constantinople's business and society life. Indeed, Borchgrave was, to say the least, a busy man, not only ably directing his staff in their day-to-day professional occupations, but also fostering ever so important social ties with both Ottoman elite and the constant stream of high ranking visitors from Belgium.

QUATRIÈME ANNÉE — N° 19 LE NUMÉRO : 10 CENTIMES SAMEDI 10 MAI 1914

# LE JOURNAL

## Diplomatique et Financier

### ÉCONOMIQUE & MONDAIN

|                    |                 |                                  |   |
|--------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|---|
| ABONNEMENTS :      |                 | N° d'adresse par écrit           | PUBLIQUÉ À FORFAIT                        |
| BELGIQUE . . . . . | fr. 8.50 par an | à 1 <sup>e</sup> DIRECTION       |   |
| ÉTRANGER . . . . . | fr. 7.50        | 20, rue Erasme Solvay, BRUXELLES | Les manuscrits envoyés ne sont pas rendus |

#### Le Baron de Borchgrave

L'Académie Royale de Belgique, le 17 mai, a désigné le baron de Borchgrave comme le candidat officiel pour la représentation à la commission des Académies d'Europe, d'Asie et de la Méditerranée, qui se réunira à Paris le 15 juin 1914. Le baron de Borchgrave, qui est à la tête de notre grande œuvre de diffusion de la culture belge, a été élu à la présidence de la commission le 17 mai 1914 — a reçu le diplôme de docteur en lettres de la même académie à Paris le 17 mai 1914.

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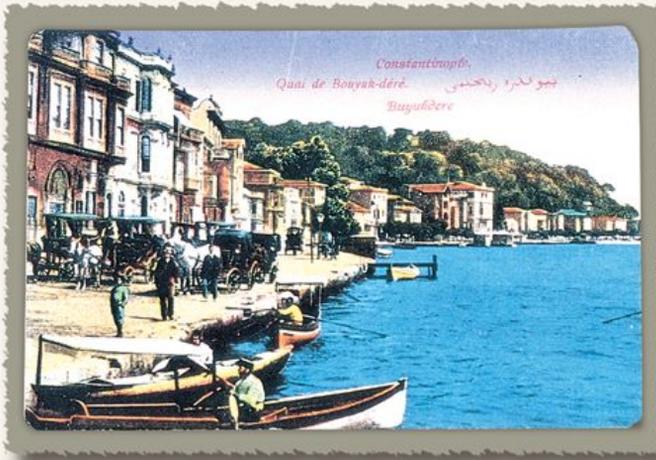
S. EX. LE BARON DE BORCHGRAVE  
Envoyé Extraordinaire et Ministre plénipotentiaire de S. M. le Roi des Belges  
Membre de l'Académie Royale de Belgique

Le baron de Borchgrave, en France, est à la tête de notre grande œuvre de diffusion de la culture belge, a été élu à la présidence de la commission le 17 mai 1914 — a reçu le diplôme de docteur en lettres de la même académie à Paris le 17 mai 1914.

With the Sultan and his entourage fleeing the summer heat of their downtown palaces and setting up Court on the rural shores of the Bosphorus, Borchgrave followed suit and rented a magnificent waterfront mansion, a yali at Büyükdere. The yali, mentioned in Chateaubriand's "Itinéraires", belonged to the Italian family Franchini, consuls for Venice in Cyprus in the 1770s, and subsequently established in Pera.



Waterfront at Büyükdere, where the yali of the Franchini family was situated, late 19th century postcard. Collection S. Kaysirilio=lu



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.

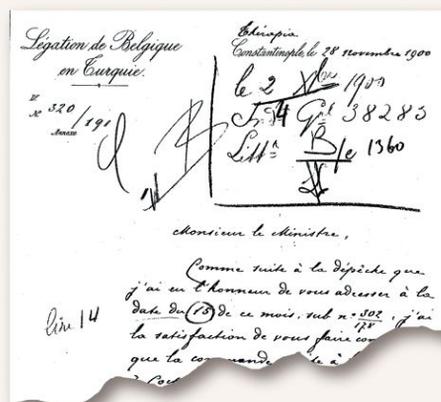
Yet, pragmatic as they already were at that time, the Belgians managed to snatch an impressive number of subcontracts for railway construction throughout the Empire. So it happened that a steel mill like Aciéries d'Angleur got designated for the rail laying between Haifa and Damascus, about 1895; an 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.

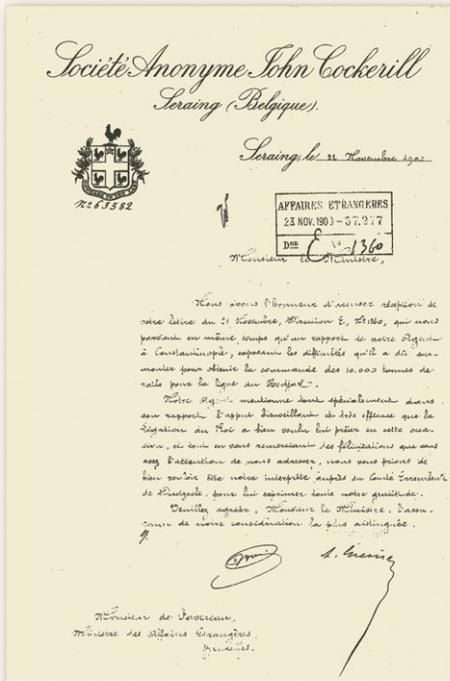


Construction Works of the Hedjaz Railways.  
 Rail laying by local workers.  
 Yildiz Saray Collection.

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*

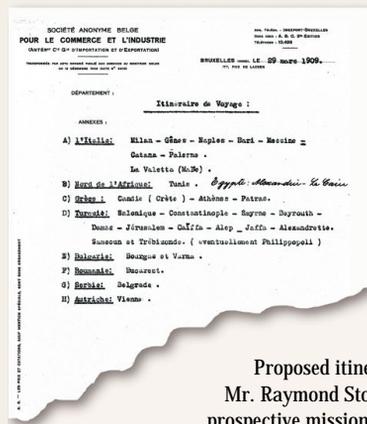
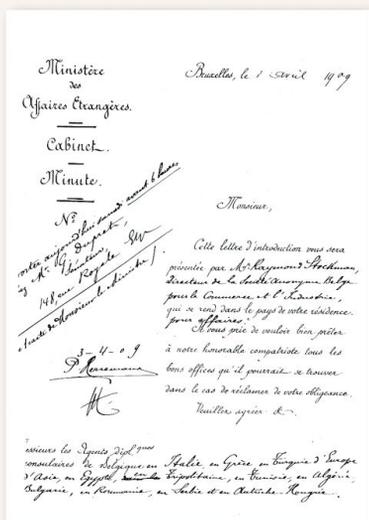


We are honoured to acknowledge receipt of your letter of November 21<sup>st</sup> which reached us simultaneously with a report from our Agent in Constantinople, describing the difficulties he had been forced to overcome to clinch the order of 10.000 tons of rails for the Hedjaz line. Our Agent very 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.

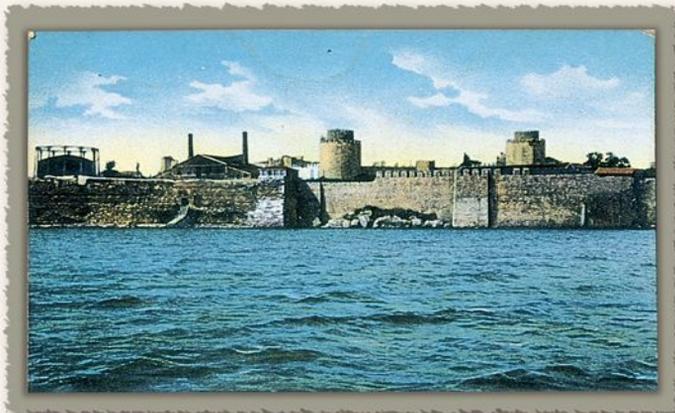
In 1891 the "Société Impériale Ottomane d'Eclairage par le Gaz et l'Electricité (Kadi-keuy - Scutari)" [Kadiköy-Üsküdar] was established with exclusively Belgian capital from the Banque de Brabant, Union du Gaz and the Charbonnage de Mariemont et Bascoup. Some time later, in 1894, the Eclairage du Centre, 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,

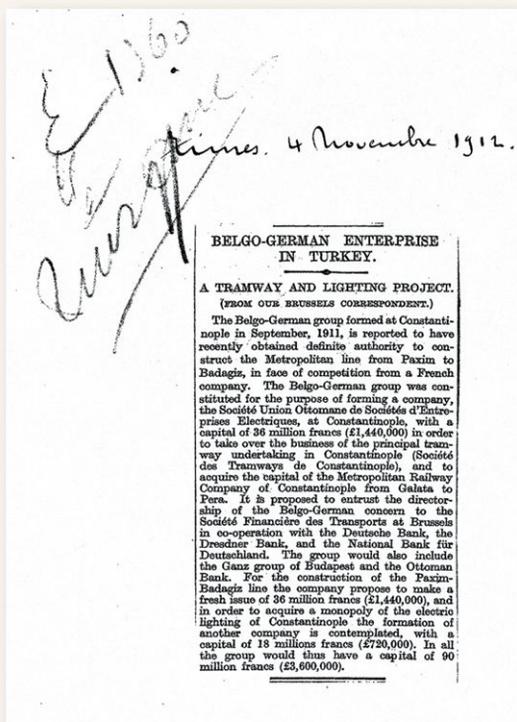


First electricity powered tramways in Constantinople, 1913. Collection S. Kayserilio=lu



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.

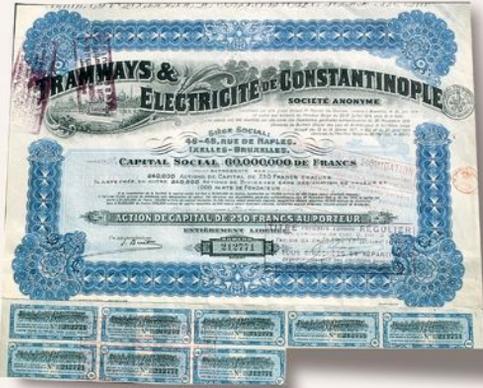


**BELGO-GERMAN ENTERPRISE IN TURKEY.**

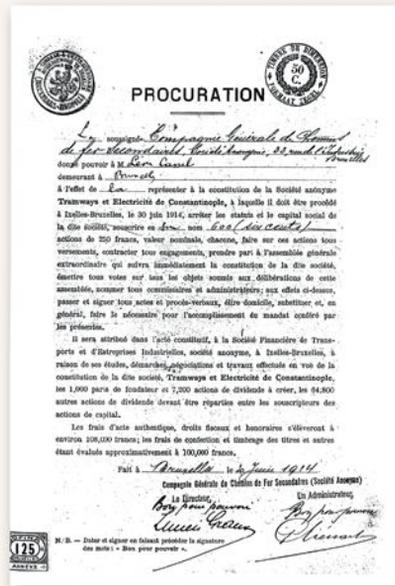
**A TRAMWAY AND LIGHTING PROJECT.**  
(FROM OUR BRUSSELS CORRESPONDENT.)

The Belgo-German group formed at Constantinople in September, 1911, is reported to have recently obtained definite authority to construct the Metropolitan line from Paxim to Badagiz, in face of competition from a French company. The Belgo-German group was constituted for the purpose of forming a company, the Société Union Ottomane de Sociétés d'Entreprises Electriques, at Constantinople, with a capital of 36 million francs (£1,440,000) in order to take over the business of the principal tramway undertaking in Constantinople (Société des Tramways de Constantinople), and to acquire the capital of the Metropolitan Railway Company of Constantinople from Galata to Pera. It is proposed to entrust the directorship of the Belgo-German concern to the Société Financière des Transports at Brussels in co-operation with the Deutsche Bank, the Dresdner Bank, and the National Bank für Deutschland. The group would also include the Ganz group of Budapest and the Ottoman Bank. For the construction of the Paxim-Badagiz line the company propose to make a fresh issue of 36 million francs (£1,440,000), and in order to acquire a monopoly of the electric lighting of Constantinople the formation of another company is contemplated, with a capital of 18 millions francs (£720,000). In all the group would thus have a capital of 90 million francs (£3,600,000).

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.

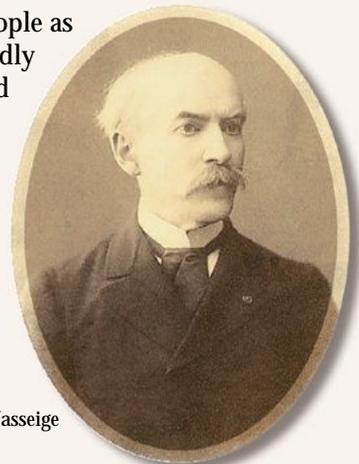


Procuration document, signed by shareholders of the newly founded << Tramways et Electricité de Constantinople >>, 1914 Archives De Doncker, Notary in Ixelles.

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

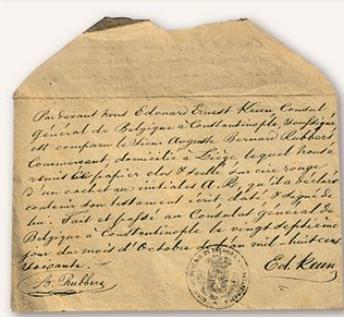


Helbig Han on Yazidji Street, Pera  
Helbig Family Collection,  
F-L de Wasseige.

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's 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

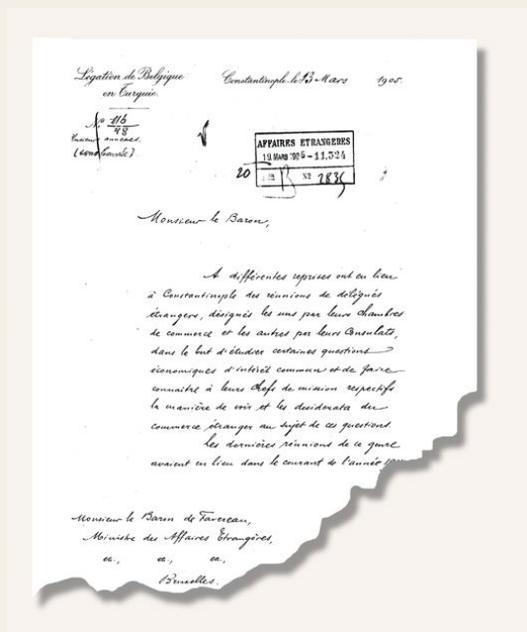


Poster, dated March 15<sup>th</sup> 1880,  
 advertising services of François Frédérici's  
 shipping agency in Glavany Han, number II.

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...."

# 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                    |
| Huile                  | 1 <sup>re</sup> qualité | 14 - - l'ocque                               |
|                        | ordinaire (veulleuse)   | 10 - - -                                     |
| Sucres                 | Trieste                 | 2 1/2 à 3 - - le kilogramme                  |
| Oufs                   | neufs                   | 1 - les 2 ou 4 pièces (selon la saison)      |
| Riz                    | d'Égypte                | 2 1/2 - - l'ocque                            |
|                        | italien                 | 2 - - -                                      |
| Lait                   | fraîs                   | 2 - - -                                      |
|                        | caillé (yohourt)        | 1 - - le bol                                 |
| Vin                    | indigène (mediocore)    | 2 à 2 1/2 - - l'ocque                        |
|                        | français                | 2 à 2 1/2 - - la bouteille (selon la marque) |
| Poisson                |                         | 1 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                 | 2 1/2 à 3 - - (prix habituels) | l'ocque                             |
|                 | de choix; poires         | 2 à 7 - -                      | -                                   |
|                 | 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 le marché) |
|                 | à la campagne            | 20 à 30 - -                    | -                                   |
| Charbon         | coke                     | 30 - - (or) 100 ocques         | -                                   |
|                 | lignite                  | 30 - - (argent) - -            | -                                   |
|                 | pétrole (Baloum)         | 18 à 20 - -                    | l'estagon (18 à 17 avec)            |
| 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 varie 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 valet de nuit, le droit pour l'entretien et le balayage de la rue, la fourniture d'un potable, etc.

## Habillements

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 12 à 2 1/2 livres turques. Les prix des grands tailleurs sont très élevés; un simple costume veston coûte 180 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 rappeler de 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 au 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.

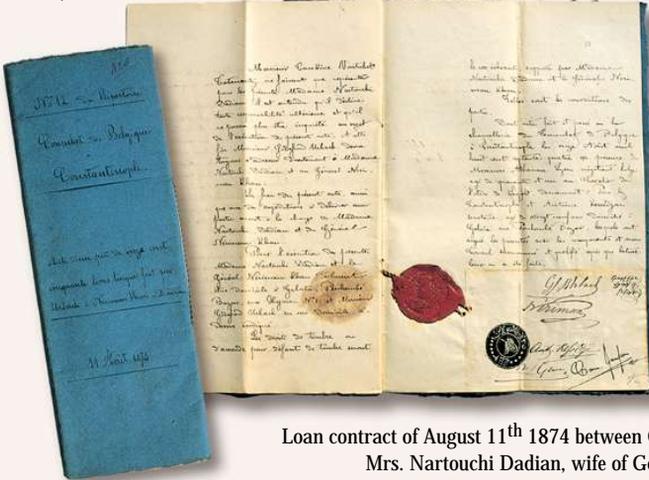
Cette inscription est nécessaire pour jouir des avantages résultant des capitulations.

## 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 Strepny-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.

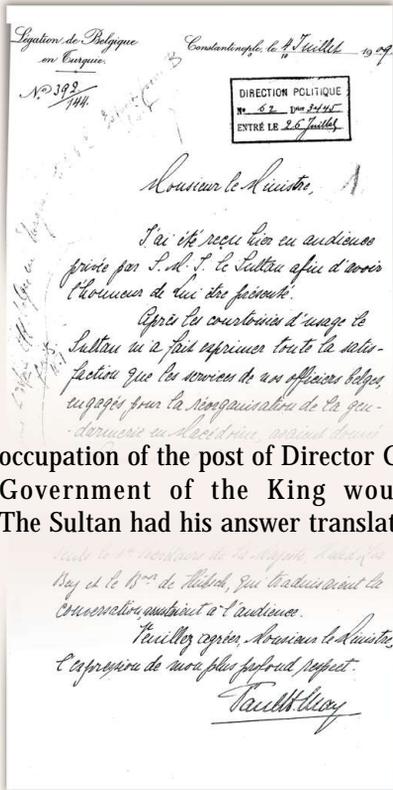
Two days later, one of the carriages of the Harem, escorted by eunuchs, halted in front of the embassy. A veiled woman stepped out and asked what she was wanted for..."

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



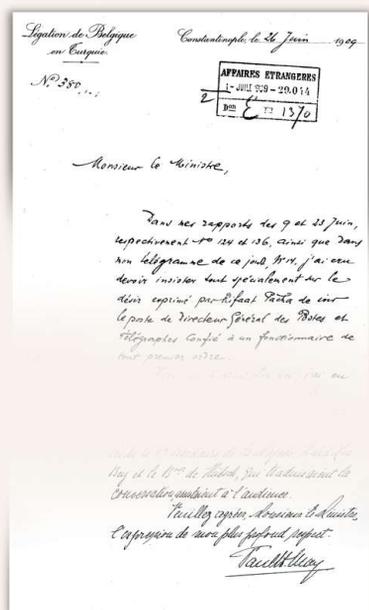
Yesterday I have been received in private audience by HRH the Sultan for the honour of being presented to him.

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

occupation of the post of Director General of 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

to me, stating that he was pleased to see this important position trusted to a Belgian, because "your country is reputed for the really capable and well instructed men it generates". Side-stepping the strict ceremonial of his predecessor, His Majesty did not wear a uniform and has received me without the numerous chancellors and aide-de-camps, whom Abdülhamid never failed to surround himself with. Only the first Secretary of His Majesty,

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



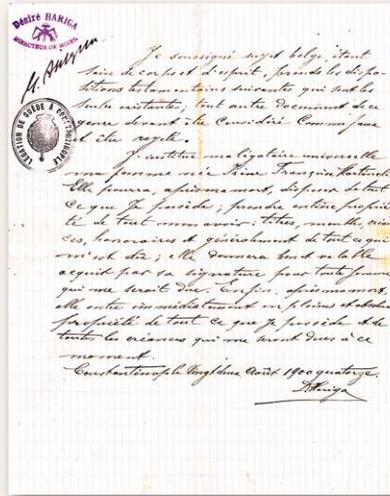
In my reports (...) I have insisted very specifically on the desire Rifaat Pasha had expressed to entrust the position of Director General of Post and Telegraph to a civil servant of first rank.

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.

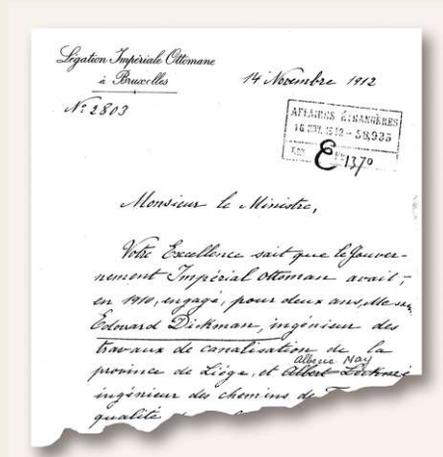


Letter of D. Hariga, written in Constantinople on August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1900. MFA Archives, Brussels

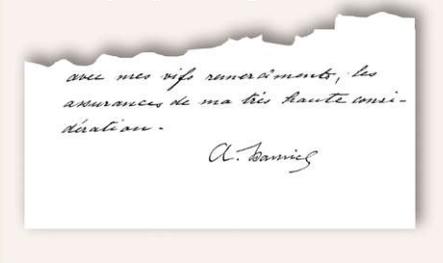
Your Excellency is aware that the Imperial Ottoman Government had in 1910 employed for a period of two years Mr E. Dickmann, engineer of canalisations for the Province of Liège, and Mr Albéric May, railway engineer, as teachers at the School of Civil Engineers of Constantinople (...).



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



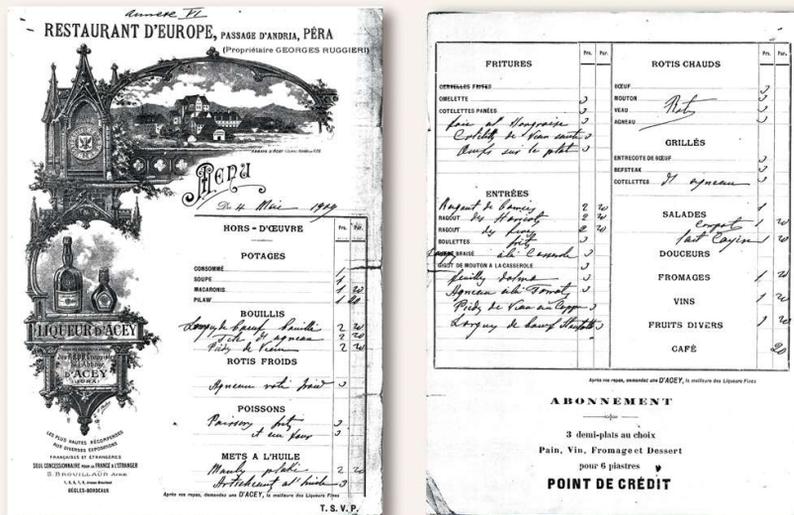
Subject to the consent of the Royal Government, the Imperial Government has decided to renew the contract of Mr Dickmann and Mr May for another period of two years at the same conditions already agreed upon in the contract of recruitment.



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 Epoque : 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 -

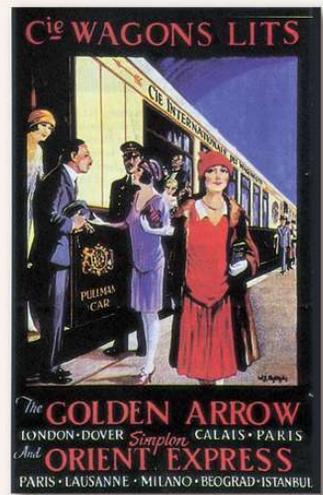


Orient Express approaching Constantinople. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century  
Archives Compagnie des Wagons-Lits © Wagons-Lits Diffusion, Paris

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



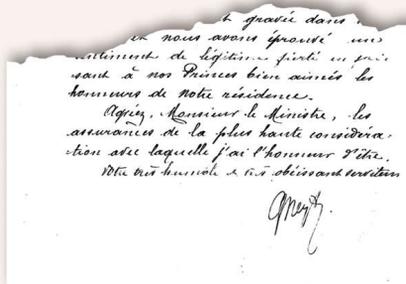
the grand mosques of Mimar Sinan and the majestic Aghia Sophia. Among those travelling on the Orient Express in its early years, were also quite a few Belgian personalities: Julien Van den Heuvel in 1886, shortly before becoming Minister of Justice, Prime Minister August Beernaert and his wife in 1889, 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

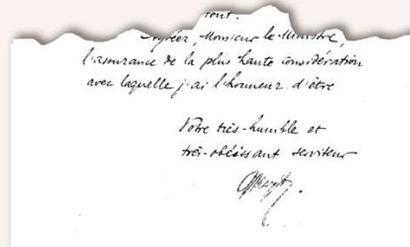
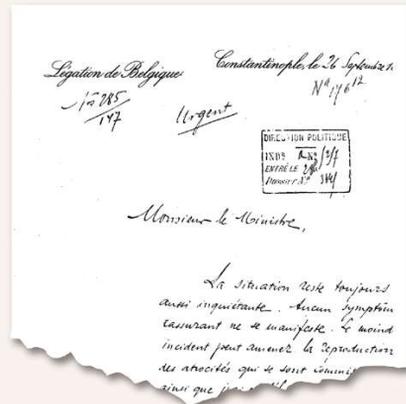
With the Orient Express bringing in a flow of Belgian visitors and with a resident community of numeric modesty but considerable social importance, the Belgian Legation felt the necessity to gear increasingly to modern day consular assistance and service, in addition to the traditional care for business 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 Österreicherischer 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. Kayserilioğlu

# 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 Niflantafl, Teftvikiye, or fiifli.

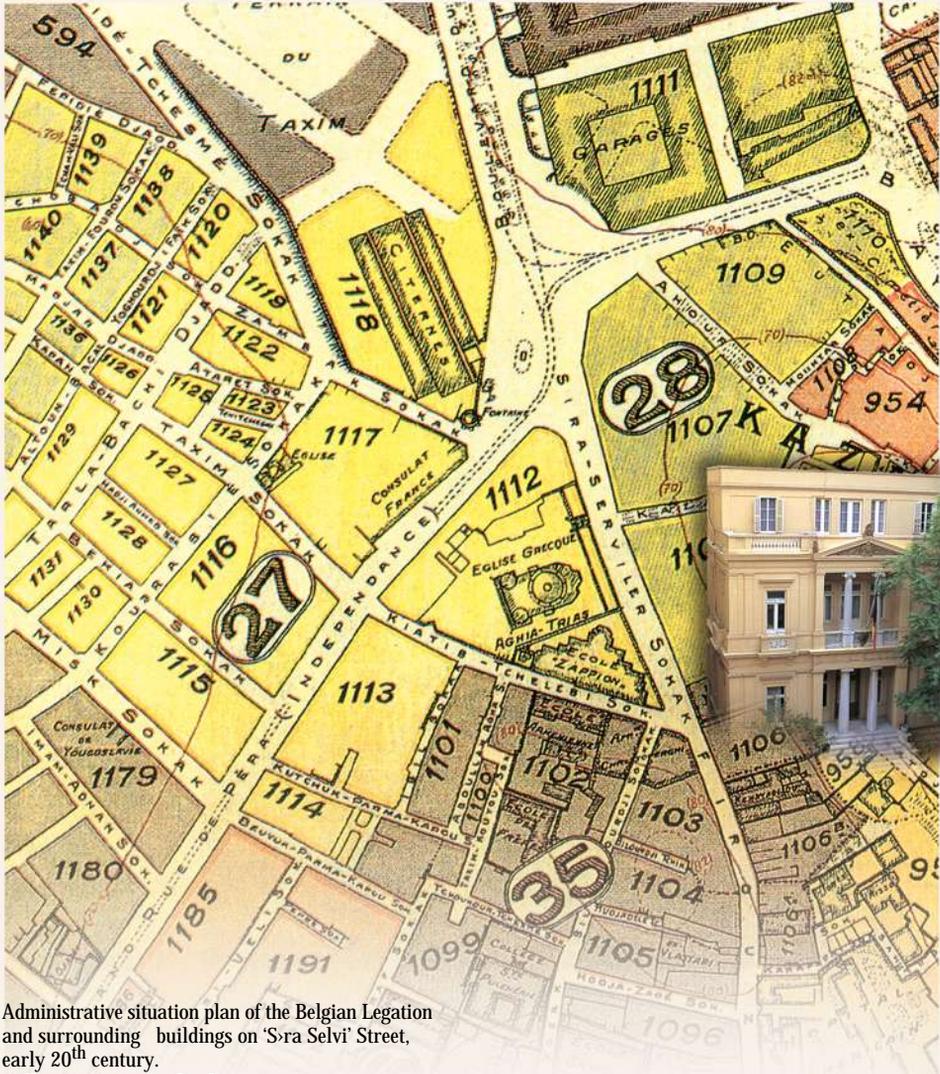
In fact, the same trend was soon to show also among certain sectors of Pera's growing population. The democratisation of the district had caused a phenomenon of saturation, whereby the Grand'rue had acquired its aspect - still preserved today - of a main street lined with almost uninterrupted rows of 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 yali 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

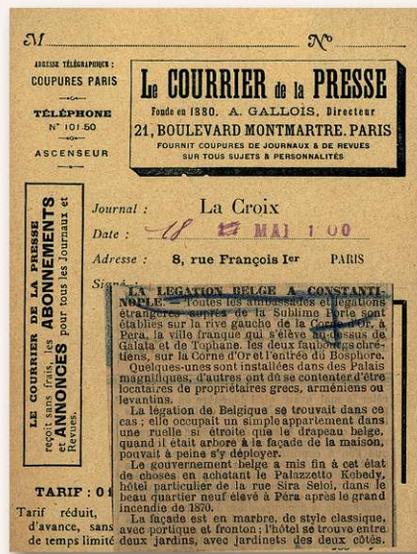
By Marc Van den Reeck



Administrative situation plan of the Belgian Legation and surrounding buildings on 'Sira Selvi' Street, early 20<sup>th</sup> century.  
Collection S. Kayserilio<sup>2</sup>lu

“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.

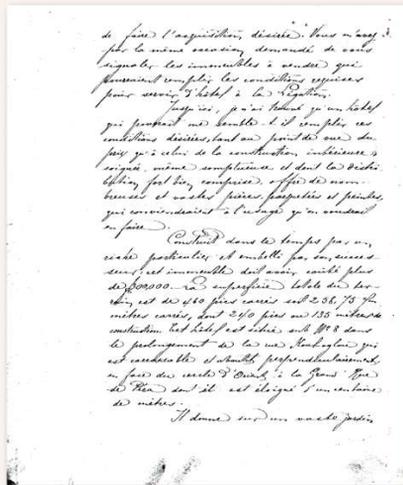
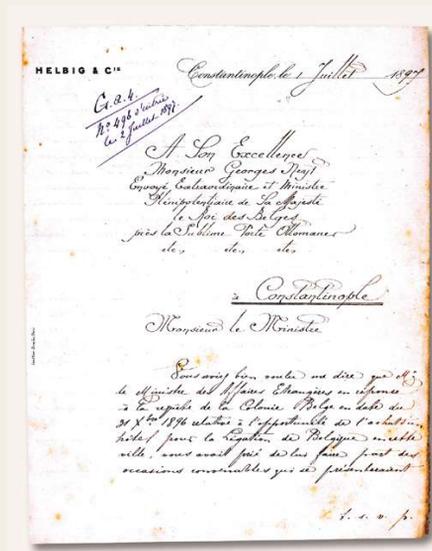
The Honourable M. Finet has been so kind to remind us that I had sent to Constantinople a senior official from the Department of Bridges and Roads, Mr. Lagasse, to report to me on this matter. He has spent a considerable amount of time in Constantinople studying the various possible solutions, ranging 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."

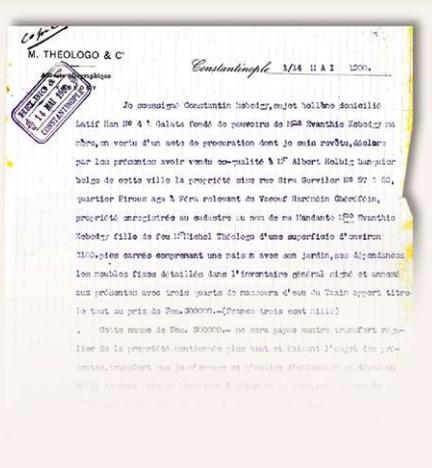
By these words the Minister was in fact explaining to the Senators that within the government there was now a clear, although not absolute preference to purchase rather than construct a Legation building in Pera, and that a specific deal was even under review already: Mr. Lagasse's mission report had 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

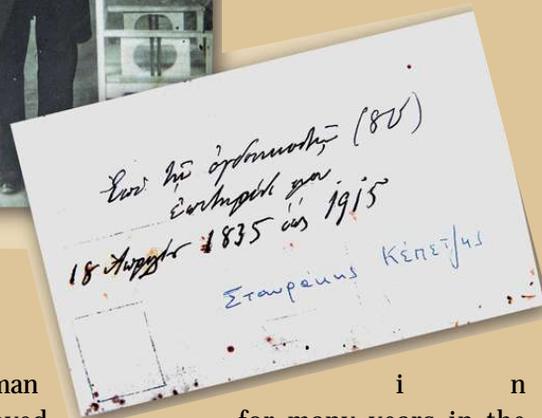
nr 57 and 59, quarter of Firouz Aga in Pera, depending on the Vacouf Heremein Cherefein, estate officially registered in the name of the mandator Mrs Evanthia Kebedgy, daughter of the late Mr Michail Theologou.

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.

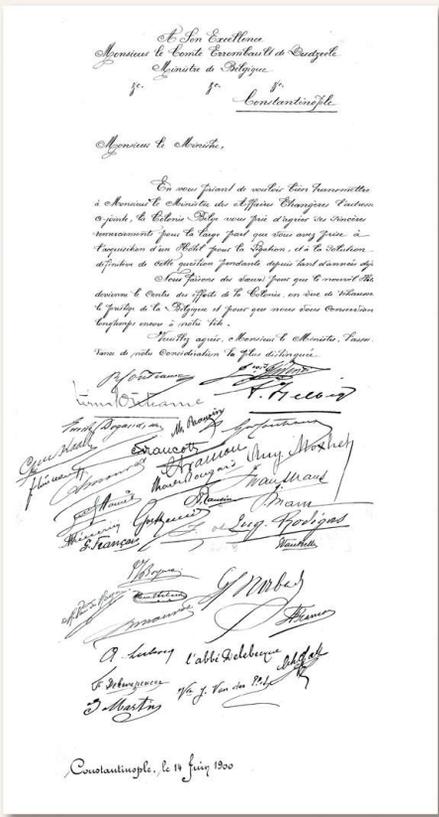
Stavros and Evanthia had built their private family home in the beautiful new quarter on the heights of Pera, several years after a major city fire in 1870 had devastated an extensive area in what is now known as Cihangir. Stavros and Evanthia, true to their Hellenic cultural roots, designed their mansion in the pure style of neo-classical architecture and decoration.

"Kebedgy House preceded by a garden, is a vast and modern building in very good shape; the facade is covered with white marble, in classical style with a colonnade and portico. The building stands entirely alone with lateral corridors on both sides and an extensive garden in the rear. From all floors one can enjoy a superb panoramic view over the Bosphorus."

Messenger de Bruxelles, May 1900

As soon as the news spread that Belgium had finally acquired a proper building in

the Pera area to house the Legation, the Belgian community of Constantinople wrote a letter of approval and appreciation to Count Errembault de Dudzeele. The letter was co-signed by dozens of Belgians who lived and worked in the city, expressing to the Envoy "sincere thanks for his role in the acquisition (...)" and in the conclusive solution to this issue that had been dragging on for so many years". They also expressed their expectation and commitment that "the new building would be made the centre of the community's efforts to enhance the prestige of Belgium".



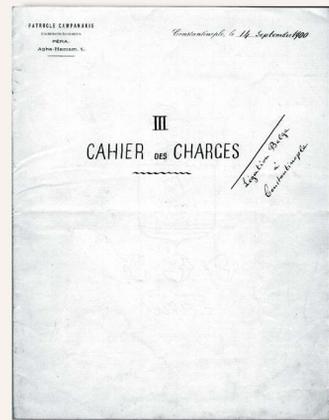
Signatures from the Belgian community of Constantinople expressing appreciation towards the Belgian government for the purchase of the Legation. MFA Archives, Brussels.



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.

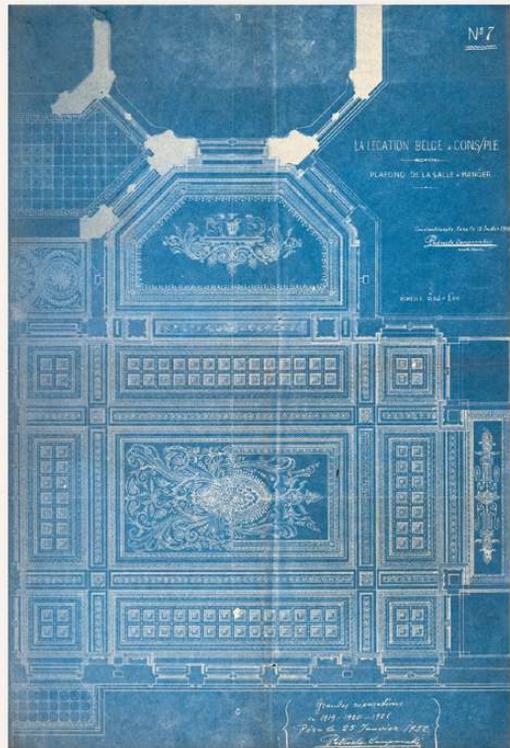


Patroclos Campanakis' advice in favour of a neo-classical decoration in harmony with the earlier part of the building, was wisely accepted by Brussels. Today's visitors of the reception halls in the "Palais de Belgique" can very well recognise architect Campanakis' specifications of September 1900:

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.

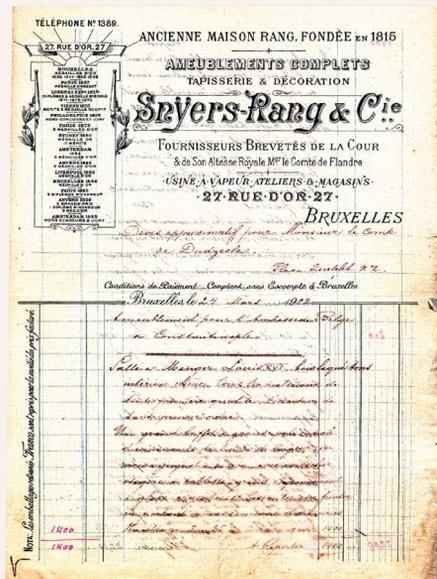
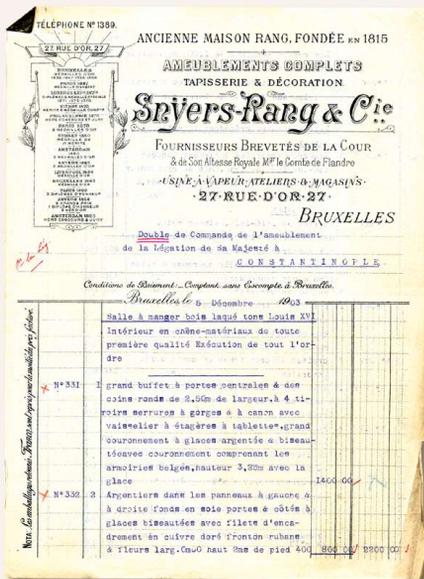


Art. 4 - All the walls of the two halls constituting pilasters or isolated columns shall be covered with pine wood and artistically ornamented in the same style as the ceilings, using carton based stucco and soft paste ....

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.

  
 بکراؤنڈن توتل باڈہ سنن  
**Franz Thamm**  
 FOURNISSEUR  
 de S. M. I. le Sultan  
 SEUL DÉPÔT DE LA FABRIQUE L & C. HARDTMUTH  
 PÈRA PLACE DU TUNNEL

CONSTANTINOPLE, le 190

Par Son Excellence le Baron de Mambour  
 Ministre et Représentant du Gouvernement Belge  
 à Constantinople, j'ai reçu votre contrat N° 135  
 (deux-vingt-cinq lires turques) comme déposé comptant  
 sur l'installation de chauffages à l'eau chaude  
 dans le Palais de la Légation de Belgique. J'ai  
 deux exemplaires pour un seul et même effet.  
 Constantinople, le 25 Mars 1910  


DEPART. DÉTAIL  
**CRETONNES STORES**  
 MAISON  
**Larrazo Franco Fils**  
 CONSTANTINOPLE  
 STAMBOUL, Rue Findjandjly yacouchoou N° 31.33.35.37  
 PÉRA, Grand Rue Passage d'Ipollite N° 2  
 GALATA, Rue Yusufzade N° 44 (face côté du Tunnel)

Grand dépôt d'étoffes pour l'ameublement

Constantinople, le 28 février 1910  
 Paris pour  
 pour gratifier l'ensemble  
 Tabac p. 100 g.  
 14 kg papier pelure  
 13 kg papier uni  
 12 kg papier papier  
 21 kg papier  
 10 kg papier  
 11 kg papier  
 14 kg papier

|    |    |     |     |
|----|----|-----|-----|
| 1  | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 2  | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 3  | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 4  | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 5  | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 6  | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 7  | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 8  | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 9  | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 10 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 11 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 12 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 13 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 14 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 15 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 16 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 17 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 18 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 19 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 20 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 21 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 22 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 23 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 24 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 25 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 26 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 27 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 28 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 29 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 30 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 31 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 32 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 33 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 34 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 35 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 36 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 37 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 38 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 39 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 40 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 41 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 42 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 43 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 44 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 45 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 46 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 47 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 48 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 49 | 10 | 100 | 100 |
| 50 | 10 | 100 | 100 |

N. DEUTSCH  
 ENTREPRENEUR DE TRAVAUX DE CONSTRUCTIONS  
 EN MÉTAL DE TOUS GENRES  
 Spécialité de Chauffage, Cuisines en fer, fonte et faïence.  
 GALATA, Perchembé Bazar, Serpos Han N° 8  
 CONSTANTINOPLE

Constantinople, le 5 Décembre 1908  
 Le gage de chauffage et des  
 Le gage de cheminée  
 Le gage et réparation des  
 fourneaux de la cuisine  
 Pour le gage de chauffage  
 N. Deutsch

|    |     |
|----|-----|
| 1  | 100 |
| 2  | 100 |
| 3  | 100 |
| 4  | 100 |
| 5  | 100 |
| 6  | 100 |
| 7  | 100 |
| 8  | 100 |
| 9  | 100 |
| 10 | 100 |
| 11 | 100 |
| 12 | 100 |
| 13 | 100 |
| 14 | 100 |
| 15 | 100 |
| 16 | 100 |
| 17 | 100 |
| 18 | 100 |
| 19 | 100 |
| 20 | 100 |
| 21 | 100 |
| 22 | 100 |
| 23 | 100 |
| 24 | 100 |
| 25 | 100 |
| 26 | 100 |
| 27 | 100 |
| 28 | 100 |
| 29 | 100 |
| 30 | 100 |
| 31 | 100 |
| 32 | 100 |
| 33 | 100 |
| 34 | 100 |
| 35 | 100 |
| 36 | 100 |
| 37 | 100 |
| 38 | 100 |
| 39 | 100 |
| 40 | 100 |
| 41 | 100 |
| 42 | 100 |
| 43 | 100 |
| 44 | 100 |
| 45 | 100 |
| 46 | 100 |
| 47 | 100 |
| 48 | 100 |
| 49 | 100 |
| 50 | 100 |

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.