

The Outsider

Hemingway / Atatürk

by Rich Carriero

Only an American would claim to know İstanbul on short acquaintance. *There is a tight-drawn, electric tension in Constantinople such as only people who live in a city that has never been invaded can imagine. Take the tension that comes when the pitcher steps into the box before the packed stands at the first game of the world series...*

In 1922, a 23-year-old journalist, covering the Greco-Turkish War for the Toronto Star, likened an ethnic and religious feud to a baseball game. Edward Said would have a field day (see Books). Could anyone so brash really get this city?

After watching aristocrats hurl infantry at machine guns during the first World War, Ernest Hemingway had come to view the ideals of the old order as a steaming pile of shit, and migrated to Paris where he could drink deep of French nihilism. Just as he settled in, a Turk with an aquiline face and marshal bearing raised an army and challenged the powers trying to carve up his country. Correspondent Hemingway caught the Orient Express and headed to İstanbul to write about a war.

His tale begins at a Paris train station with a drunken cabbie who flings his bag to the pavement, damaging the typewriter inside. A journalist cares only a little more for his typewriter than a mother does for her child, a Ford owner for his car, or a ball player for his right arm.

En route to Constantinople, Hemingway pontificates (in pencil) about life, war and the obnoxious Serb with whom he must share a car. *Say. Wattaya think I paid for this coat in Paris? Hundertnfifteen francs. Pretty good? Huh?* He describes to perfection Thracian meadows daubed in tones of green and gold unfurling past his window but fails to mention the cigarette smoke and body odor endemic to all Eastern European 'express' trains.

His early impressions of İstanbul are poetry, not journalism. They evoke all the shimmering brilliance of Yeats' Sailing to Byzantium.

Constantinople doesn't look like the movies. It does not look like the pictures, or the paintings, or anything. First your train comes winding

like a snake down the sun-baked, treeless, rolling plain to the sea. It rocks along the shore where kids are bathing and out across the blue water you see a big brown island and faintly beyond it bulks the brown coast of Asia.

In the station are a jam of porters, hotel runners, and Anglo-Levantine gentlemen in slightly soiled collars, badly soiled white trousers, garlicked breaths and hopeful manners who hope to be hired as interpreters.

Hemingway gets off at Sirkeci and eyes his new surroundings with the detachment of an anthropologist. The author epitomizes the Edwardian man of letters: crisp white shirts, suspenders, creased pants and a clean shave. His portrayal of İstanbul's grime betrays an obsession with dirty laundry:

Everything white in Constantinople is dirty white. When you see the color a white shirt gets in twelve hours you appreciate the color a white minaret gets in four hundred years.

Hemingway stays in the Büyüklondres Hotel. Built in 1892, it was one of the luxury palaces designed to meet the influx of foreign money after the construction of the Orient Express. All crystal chandeliers and gilded molding, it fits him perfectly. His room looks out over the Tarlabası hillside.

In the morning when you wake and see a mist over the Golden Horn with the minarets rising out of it slim and clean toward the sun and the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer in a voice that soars and dips like an aria from a Russian Opera, you have the magic of the East. When you look from the window into the mirror and discover your face is covered with a mass of minute red speckles from the latest insect that discovered you last night, you have the East.

He misses the real fighting. It was at the end of August when

Atatürk crushed the Greeks at Afyon and marched on Smyrna (İzmir), which degenerated into a horror show of fire and refugees. Hemingway arrives in October and simply collects stories while Kemal meets the allies at Mudanya to make peace. Unfortunately for our hero,

the press aren't invited.

So he interviews Hamid Bey, Atatürk's personal representative in the city, who promises there will be no massacre of Christians. He also takes the time to rant, at length, about a particularly officious Near East censor who butchered his cables to Toronto. Hemingway even remembers to take in the city.

In describing Turkish cuisine he comments how 'the fish are good' and yet how his jaw muscles are beginning to 'bulge like a bull dog' from eating tough Turkish beef. Of course it's difficult picturing Hemingway, who would prefer western bistros serving Porterhouse and mashed potatoes, eating in any back-alley lokanta. He ventures out into the night—probably for booze and hookers.

Before the sun rises in the morning you can walk through the black, smooth-worn streets of Constantinople and rats will scuttle out of your way, a few stray dogs nose at the garbage in the gutters, and a bar of light comes through the rack in a shutter letting our a streak of light and the sound of drunken laughing. That drunken laughing is the contrast to the muezzin's beautiful, minor, soaring, swaying call to prayer and the black slippery, smelly, offal-strewn streets of Constantinople in the early morning are the reality of the Magic of the East.

Rats and minarets, drunken laughter and the muezzin. Two ideals grapple throughout Hemingway's work: that daydream of bazaars, cigarette smoke and intrigue—The Orient—and the reality of the city—rotting garbage and all. Turkey doesn't fit his illusions. He went East seeking Suleiman the Magnificent but found Atatürk.

His later writings gush about his immersion in Cuban and Spanish culture with the enormous conceit of which only white men are capable (the natives could probably spot his beefy red face a mile away). In Turkey, he makes no such claims which means he didn't fit in and he knew it.

By the time he left he probably learned a bit of the local language and where the good fishing spots

are—nothing more.

After Mudanya Atatürk gave the Greeks time to withdraw beyond the Maritza. Hemingway followed to Adrianople (Edirne) to watch human beings forcibly relocated.

The main column crossing the Martiza River at Adrianople (Edirne) is twenty miles long. Twenty miles of carts drawn by cows, bullocks and muddy-flanked water buffalo, with exhausted, staggering men, women and children, blankets over their heads, walking blindly along in the rain beside their worldly goods.

Gone are the gauzy phrases of minarets rising like candles and garlicked halitosis. Hemingway respects the Greeks trudging through rain enough not to belabor them with adjectives. The Greco-Turkish War was Hemingway's first as a journalist. It shows. His dispatches are hardly the sharp declarative sentences of his masterworks—the 'electric tension' passage veers on the hyperbolic. The experience was, nonetheless, invaluable. Before

Constantinople his writing consisted of verbose witticisms about trout fishing and French aperitifs. After, his prose became increasingly clean and concise. In a year, he quit the Star and began work on the books that would make him Hemingway. In 1925 he adapted his observations on Turkey into the dark and sketchy vignettes of his first short story collection, *In Our Time*—most notably the opening piece, 'On the Quai at Smyrna,' a harrowing retelling of İzmir's fall.

Perhaps the gulf between Hemingway and İstanbul actually made for apt journalism. He was the product of a world that had undergone a Renaissance and an Enlightenment depicting, with the arrogance of a 20th-century westerner, a 13th-century world that had never heard of Locke or Montesquieu. He was a caricaturist, but a very good one, capturing the essentials in a few bold lines for an audience back home who would never come here anyway. As a foreigner the contrast made his job easy. His work screams smug outsider but he nailed this city—cold.