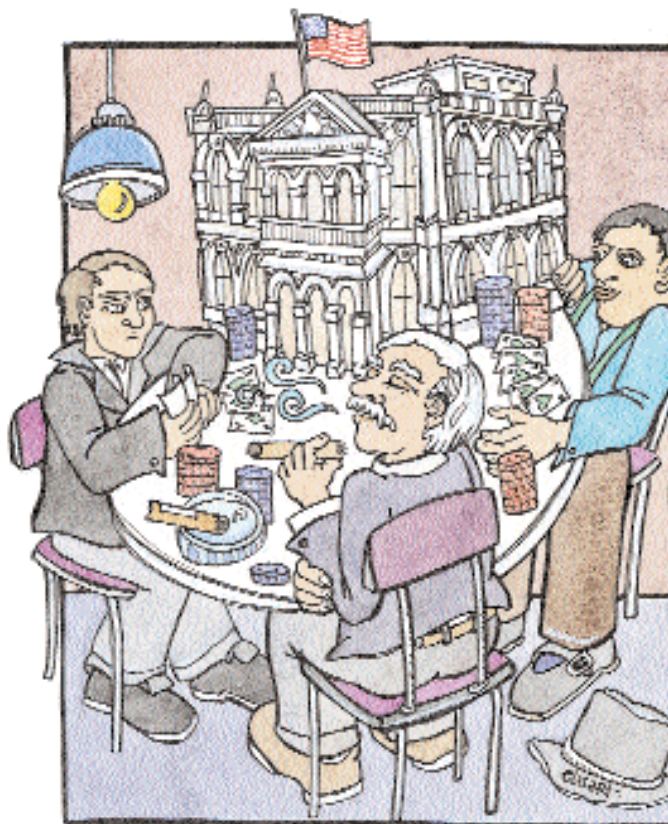


PALAZZO CORPI: A NATIONAL TREASURE



Elizabeth Scott

THIS MANSION'S ELEGANTLY-FRESCOED WALLS HOLD MORE THAN 100 YEARS OF AMERICAN DIPLOMATIC HISTORY, PEOPLED WITH RICHLY INTERESTING CHARACTERS AND EVENTS.

By THOMAS J. CAROLAN, JR.

Readers familiar with the Palazzo Corpi, scene of the ghost story in the *FSJ*'s July/August issue, will know it as the venerable jewel which for one hundred and twenty years — more than half of independent America's life — has sheltered the official U.S. presence in Istanbul. What many of them may not know is that, with a new, more secure consulate general facility now under construction, the future disposition of the Palazzo is uncertain. Some may also wonder why the Palazzo has yet to be included in the Secretary of State's Register of Culturally Significant Property, established in 2001. This state of affairs would not seem to be a very sensible way to treat

what constitutes, by any measure, an American national treasure.

Palazzo Corpi is situated in the old Genoese/Venetian and later European Quarter, in Istanbul's Beyoglu district, known in former times as Pera. The area contains a number of imposing edifices that served as embassies of the Great Powers prior to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. Some of those old buildings, which today house consulates general, are massive affairs, evocative of bygone splendor. A few others, less grand in size, are no less remarkable in terms of architecture and historical merit. One such is the Palazzo Corpi, whose classical facade bears the American eagle and crest embossed in stone, high over an imposing entrance. Palazzo Corpi boasts a long and honored place in U.S. relations with Ottoman and now Republican Turkey — serving as the U.S. legation and residence from 1882, as the U.S. embassy and residence after 1906, and as the U.S. consulate general since 1937.

Palazzo Corpi was the first U.S. government-owned diplomatic premises in Europe, and probably — with the exception of the former American Legation building at Tangier (now a museum) — in the entire world. Its walls hold not only the exotic mysteries of its original owner, but more than 100 years of American diplomatic history, peopled with famous names and many not-so-famous but richly interesting characters and events.

A Cultural Gem

In the year 1830, a young Genoese shipowner named Ignazio Corpi established himself at

Thomas J. Carolan, Jr. retired from the Foreign Service in 1994. His overseas postings during a 35-year career included Lebanon (twice), Persian Gulf/Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and Cyprus. Mr. Carolan served as consul general in Istanbul from 1988 to 1992. Should any readers wish to share their own memories or experiences regarding the Palazzo, he would be pleased to hear from them at tjcarolan@aol.com.

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Constantinople with his mother, sister and one or more brothers. Signor Corpi and his family prospered, becoming prominent in local charitable activities on behalf of indigent and elderly Latin Catholics. The Corpis were instrumental in building the local Italian hospital, which functions to this day. In 1873, Signor Corpi called the architect Giacomo Leoni from Italy, and charged him with building a palatial residence that would

bear the Corpi family's name. Georgio Stampa, another architect, who worked on the British and Persian embassies and other important buildings in Constantinople at that time, apparently also took part in Palazzo Corpi's construction. Most of the building materials were imported from Italy — doors and window frames of rosewood from Piemonte, and marble flooring and facings from Carrara. The ground-floor reception hall was remarkable for the beauty of frescoes representing mythological scenes, while frescoes over the grand stairway and Great Hall upstairs represented Bacchic and other classical subjects. To the magnificent frescoes were added finely etched glasswork, inlaid parquet floors, elegant fireplaces and other exquisite artistic/architectural features too numerous to mention.

All the frescoes were executed by Italian artists brought to Constantinople by the architect Leoni. Sadly, during a "renovation" in 1937, the walls and ceilings on the ground floor were plastered and/or painted over. Left untouched on the ceiling of the upstairs Great Hall, but vulnerable to annual accumulations of Istanbul grime, were depictions of Diana, Neptune, eight Muses, various Graces, Bacchantes and other mythological figures. These decorations remained largely hidden until 1992, when a series of expert restorations undertaken by post management with the cooperation of Turkish artisans and the Department's Office of Overseas Buildings Operations gradually returned them to their original splendor.

It is recorded that 99,000 Ottoman gold liras (about \$7 million in today's dollars) were expended on Palazzo Corpi's construction, which spanned the entire decade of the 1870s. The building was barely finished when

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Ignazio Corpi died, and the Palazzo was inherited by his nephews, who rented it to the American government starting in 1882. The circumstances under which the U.S. government assumed outright possession of Palazzo Corpi in 1907 make a fascinating and dramatic story in its own right.

A Rich History

The American legation at Constantinople was raised to embassy status in 1906, at a time when, with the exception of the legation at Tangier, acquired as a gift from the Sultan of Morocco in the 1790s, the United States did not own any real estate abroad. According to the State Department's official historian, this condition was viewed as ridiculous by the American ambassador, John G.A. Leishman. Using his personal funds, Leishman proceeded to purchase the property in 1907 for 28,000 Ottoman gold liras (equivalent to about \$2.5 million today) on the assumption that he would be reimbursed when he returned on leave to the U.S.

Upon arrival in Washington, he was taken aback to learn that Congress was in no particular mood to compensate him for this "personal expense."

According to a memoir written in 1948 by the late Harry Dwight, an English professor at Robert College and a longtime resident of Istanbul, Amb. Leishman rose to the occasion with a "stratagem." A wealthy steel magnate and former partner of Andrew Carnegie, with contacts and influence on Capitol Hill, the ambassador went to Washington and gave a great stag party, to which he invited the Speaker of the House, the members of committees of both Houses having to do with foreign affairs, and the key members of the House Appropriations Committee.

As Professor Dwight tells it, there were rich meats, unlimited quantities of first-class drinks and, finally, there was poker, which lasted deep into the night. After Mr. Leishman had lost conspicuous sums to certain potent gentlemen, he humorously suggested that they play for his embassy. If they won, he would pay for it. If he won,

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they would pay for it. They humorously agreed, highballs in hand. Leishman then began to play in earnest, neglecting his glass, and won. "The debt of honor was accordingly paid by Congress, not without protests from isolationists who had not attended Mr. Leishman's party," reports Dwight, "and the Constantinople Embassy was the first we acquired in Europe."

Palazzo Corpi thereby acquired the unique distinction of being the first and only U.S. diplomatic premises to be won in a poker game.

An office wing, with the word "Chancery" and the Great Seal of the United States emblazoned in stone over its front door, was added in 1910. In 1922, Americans in Constantinople dedicated a large bronze tablet, situated directly opposite the main gate to the

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consulate general compound, honoring Commodore David Porter, U.S.N. Porter was the first diplomatic representative of the U.S., who exchanged ratifications with the Reis Effendi of the first treaty between the U.S. and the Ottoman Empire on Oct. 3, 1831. An adjacent building, formerly the Constantinople Club, located across a street from the famed Pera Palas Hotel, was purchased in 1948. (Today it houses the con-

sular section, various administrative offices and those of other U.S. government agencies.) After Ankara's designation as capital of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the functions of the embassy were gradually transferred there. The last American ambassador resident in Istanbul, John Van A. MacMurray, moved definitively to Ankara in 1937.

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A Significant Property?

The Department of State holds title to over 150 foreign properties that are historically, architecturally or culturally significant to one degree or another. M/OBO's Cultural Resources Committee, formed in early 2001 to select which of those properties deserve inclusion in the Secretary of State's newly-created Register of Culturally Significant Property, meets periodically to consider nominations. The criteria are: designation or acknowledgement by a host government as a significant property; part of the United States' overseas heritage; association with a significant historical event or person; important architecture and/or association with an important architect; distinctive theme or assembly; unique object or visual feature; and archaeological site.

As Palazzo Corpi arguably meets at least six of

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Palazzo in historical, architectural or cultural significance. One hopes M/OBO will see fit to correct this situation in the not-too-distant future.

Sometime next year, the consulate general will move its offices to a new, modern and more secure facility being built on a hill overlooking the European shore of the Bosphorus. For now, the future disposition of Palazzo Corpi remains unclear. It should be reasonable to expect, however, that some use can be found that will respect the building's history, its cultural value and its longstanding service as a focal point for American diplomatic relations with Turkey. ■

these criteria, one might have expected that M/OBO would have selected it as a charter member of the Secretary's Register. Unaccountably, this did not happen, even though of the 12 overseas buildings placed in the Register so far, several cannot be said to rival the

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