

## Kitabiyat/Book Review

# *Life Narratives of the Family of Swedish Envoy Cosswa Anckarsvärd's Stay in Constantinople (1906-1920)*

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**SYLVIE MORET PETRINI**

Université de Lausanne  
Lozan Üniversitesi

(sylvie.moret-petrini@unil.ch), ORCID: 0000-0001-5639-1571

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The two autobiographical texts fortunately published in the fifth volume of the *Memoria* series, *Fontes minores ad Historiam Imperii Ottomancici Pertinentes* are quite different. The first one is the typescript lecture notes written by Maude Anckarsvärd (1880-1949), wife of the Swedish Envoy Cosswa Anckarsvärd in Constantinople. It focuses mainly on the political events that occurred when Maud was living there and was written to be read before an “unknow audience”, as indicated by Gustaf Almenberg, the editor of the text, and grandson of the writer. The text’s public destination undoubtedly influences its content. As does the retrospective nature of the

writing. Richard Wittmann, the editor of the *Memoria* series (p. 9) associates Maude's memoirs with the tradition of *hatırat*, life narratives produced by men in the Ottoman Empire that focus on the "individual's career and political or professional achievements" of the writer. In the case of Maude Anckarsvärd's text, the fact that it was written by a woman makes it particularly interesting even if Gustaf Almenberg points out that it probably was proofread, and perhaps even slightly altered, by the writer's husband.

These recollections, which cover the years 1906-1914, deal with the political events that took place in Istanbul when the writer lived there, and the people she met. She focuses on characters whose names are likely to arouse the interest of listeners: Sultan Abdülhamid II - their only meeting is recounted in detail - and his sons; Mehmed Said Halim Pacha, who served as Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire from 1913 to 1917, and all the diplomatic members in Istanbul (in particular the German ambassador, Adolf Marschall von Bieberstein, whose close proximity with the Sultan she insists on). Maude Anckarsvärd takes on the role of witness. Her membership of the diplomatic world reinforces the impression of distance between the events taking place around her and her position as a foreigner. She is present both at the heart of the events unfolding on her doorstep, yet also at a distance, as an observer who is determined not to take sides but to deal with the situation, and who knows what will happen to the people around her. In this respect, when she concludes her account of the meeting with the Sultan, she does so in such a way as to hint at his future destitution: "Abdulhamid was, however, no longer absolute master over his fortune, which was already being submitted to a certain control; in fact, his power was waning, and little did we realize that evening how soon it was to be broken forever" (p. 22). She also briefly evokes the situation of women in the Ottoman Empire, in the context of a deterioration linked to the growing influence of the Young Turks.

The second text published is the diary of a ten-year-old girl. It was written between January and March 1920 (in the Gregorian calendar - that means between December and February in the Rumi calendar), for a total of 64 days, by young Dagmar (1909-1975), daughter of Maude and Cosswa Anckarsvärd. Dagmar was not the only one in the family to write a diary, since her older sister, as she mentions, also had one, unfortunately now lost (as the editor points out, p. 10). This diary was certainly not intended

to be read outside the family circle and therefore belongs to a more authentic genre of text and which allows an overview of a life that appears to be less rewritten than in other life narratives, and in particular autobiographies.

This diary, published by *Memoria*, must be added to the still poor list of diaries written by young people of the past that have been kept, despite the fact that their number increases considerably from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. It allows us to hear the “voice” of historical actors who have long lacked visibility. As such, it is one of the particularly useful sources for renewing the history of childhood, while specialists are now calling for a history of childhood written from a ‘child’s point of view’, taking into account texts produced by the young people themselves (see Colin Heywood, *Childhood in Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 6 and Manon Pignot, « À hauteur d’enfant. Le défi historiographique des expériences de guerre enfantines et juvéniles », *L’Autre*, vol. 21, 2020, p. 142-150). Based on the diary of a young Dutchman, the important work carried out between 1990 and 2010 by Ruddolf Dekker and Arianne Baggerman, two pioneers in the study of youth egodocuments, has shown the interest of analysing a single autobiographical text, provided that it was deeply contextualised (A. Baggerman and R. Dekker, *Child of the Enlightenment. Revolutionary Europe. Reflected in a Boyhood Diary*, Brill, 2009). In their wake, other historians have studied series of young people’s diaries questioning for example child agency (Bruce Emily Claire, *Revolutions at Home: The Origin of Modern Childhood and the German Middle Class*, University of Massachusetts Press, 2021). As it appears, children’s diaries are currently the subject of a great deal of interest.

When Dagmar took up the pen, she was aware that she was living out her very last moments in Istanbul, the city where she was born. The diary opens with these words, which make it clear that the imminent departure is the motivation to write: “I pick up the pen just to write a few lines in order to depict the last things I did in the town of my birth that I have lived in since 1909 and will leave in 1920” (January 7<sup>th</sup>). If the family’s departure is set during the occupation by the allied forces from the end of the First World War until 1923, we don’t know why they leave. As the preparations for her departure began, the daily activities of young Dagmar continued: she took lessons, read with her sister, met friends, paid and received visits,

went to the theatre, attended the sermon and played. It is these activities that the diary talks about - in a rather brief style - adopting a form which is not far from the social diaries, that can be found in Europe, mainly in Protestant countries, as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The account follows the course of the day, focusing on the young woman's social activities and including the "extraordinary" events, such as the illness of members of the family or the death of acquaintances. Occasionally, she records what her parents are doing.

Harmony seems to reign within the family. In two months, young Dagmar mentions only two scenes which lightly break their peaceful life: an argument with her sister (January 17<sup>th</sup>) and her bad behavior with her teacher which earned her a reprimand from her mother (February 11<sup>th</sup>). About her writing practice, she is quite laconic. One entry shows the intervention of the older sister who tries to encourage her younger sister to keep her diary on a daily basis. Writing on her sister's behalf, she mischievously notes: "I have become too lazy to write in my diary so I don't think this will be full this year" (January 19<sup>th</sup>). However, Dagmar loves writing and is even working on a novel.

This diary takes place at the end of their life in Constantinople. Dagmar reveals that she is impatient to leave, just like her father, who, she writes, "says he is by now so tired of the people here so for him will probably be good to get some change" (January 22<sup>nd</sup>). It's only when the date of departure is announced that the young girl expresses a certain nostalgia, confiding that she regrets leaving, because of the climate and the beauty of the place. What do we learn about the political situation? Dagmar picks out events that illustrate the chaotic situation in Istanbul. Referring to the attempt by thieves to enter in the town, on 13 March, two days before departure, she notes that the leader of the gang, as she read in the newspaper, was only 10 years old. This inspired her to make the following comment, which sums up her awareness that the country is changing: "This is the condition Constantinople is in now" (March 13<sup>th</sup>). A day later, when she mentions that departure is definitively scheduled for the next day, she concludes her account with these words "Tomorrow we will leave" followed by "Hur-ray" (March 14<sup>th</sup>).

To make this text accessible to international readers, the editor has chosen to translate it into English (it was originally written in Swedish), while endeavouring to respect the young writer's vocabulary and syntax. For Maud's narrative, translation was not necessary because she has written in English (she was born in America). To introduce these writings, there are only a very brief preface followed by a short foreword. But both texts are meticulously annotated, with the series editor identifying the people mentioned and specifying the events evoked. We should also mention the number of photographs that have been added (of the writers, the members of their family, their surroundings and their texts), which echo the published texts in a very useful way.

As the editor points out, it is still quite rare to find two personal writings from the same family covering nearly the same period, allowing two voices to be heard on the same context or evoking similar events. Here, however, the comparative exercise has its limits, due to the different nature of the documents and their topics: while Maude, the mother, focuses on her recollections of public events, on the other side Dagmar puts emphasis on her daily life. The parallel publication of these two texts reveals the interest of their complementary nature.

Thus, the publication of these texts is to be welcomed for a number of reasons, one of the most important being to give visibility to two groups of individuals - in the interesting context of the downfall of the Ottoman Empire - that have long been forgotten by history: women and children.