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## ARMINIUS VÁMBÉRY AND ABDUL HAMID II

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Arminius Vámbéry first came to Istanbul in the 1850s, lived there for some years, and later used it as a base for his journeys in Central Asia. Fluent Turkish and ambition helped him to emerge from very modest beginnings to meetings and sometimes associations with prominent figures in Ottoman politics, including the Grand Vizir and other Vizirs during his time in Istanbul. One of his most significant achievements, after Abdul Hamid's accession to the throne in 1876, was to be received fairly often in audience by the Sultan and to confer with him on matters of state. These meetings occurred in the late 1870s, after which time Vámbéry occupied himself in Budapest, chiefly with his own research. Only after 1888, when trains started running between Budapest and Istanbul, did he make annual visits to the Ottoman capital, where he was regularly received by the Sultan. For his relations with Abdul Hamid we have one main source, Vámbéry's own account in many of his published works.

Vámbéry claimed that he was an adviser of sorts to Abdul Hamid. If we take his accounts at face value, it would seem that the Sultan honoured him with invitations to his table, and by personal and private audiences, often for several hours at a time. Vámbéry's fluent Turkish made the presence of a translator unnecessary (the Sultan did not know any other language). As Vámbéry reported in his publications, the Sultan was well aware of his interlocutor's Turcophile activities in the Austro-Hungarian empire and elsewhere and asked him to defend the Sultan's policies in the press abroad.

Vámbéry responded to the Sultan's wishes in his writings in his own characteristic way. To begin with, in his 1875 book *Der Islam im neunzehnten Jahrhundert*, he criticized the despotism of the Sultans who had preceded Abdul Hamid, thus enabling himself to show his appreciation of the latter afterwards. A year after Abdul Hamid's accession, Vámbéry published a characteristic article in the *Pester Lloyd* (later reprinted as a pamphlet), entitled "Ueber die Reformfähigkeit der Türkei." There he praised Abdul Hamid for granting his empire a constitution and encouraging parliamentarianism, which, he declared, greatly increased the Sultan's prestige in Europe.

A later instance shows how Vámbéry strove to improve Abdul Hamid's standing in Europe. First, in his *La Turquie d'aujourd'hui et d'avant quarante ans*, published in Paris in 1898, Vámbéry again praised the Sultan's reforms. While acknowledging that Abdul Hamid's rule was autocratic, he qualified this by writing: "Le sultan

Abdul-Hamid est incontestablement un des souverains les plus zélés et les plus infatigables qui aient régné en Turquie...le souverain actuel se distingue de ses prédécesseurs par l'intérêt qu'il porte à l'instruction publique, au progrès intellectuel de son peuple et au commerce."

Subsequently, in a long chapter entitled "My Intercourse with Sultan Abdul Hamid," appearing in 1904 in the second volume of his *The Story of My Struggles*, Vámbéry observed that his accusation that Abdul Hamid was autocratic had been taken with bad grace by the Sultan and his court, the subsequent praise of the Sultan not mitigating the general consternation. Vámbéry remarks in this chapter that his relations with the Sultan had begun to cool and, although he was still received by the Sultan several times in due course, their differing political views on foreign affairs adversely affected their formerly cordial relations. The Sultan was angered by Great Britain's occupation of Egypt and Cyprus and suspicious of its future territorial designs on his empire. Hence Abdul Hamid's rapprochement with Russia. Vámbéry, a dedicated partisan of Great Britain, refused to criticize its statesmanship in his writings, or to praise Russian policies, which he detested and denounced. This was unacceptable to the Sultan. As Vámbéry phrased it in the above chapter of *The Story of My Struggles*, "The Sultan expected of me unconditional approval of his political views... that was expecting a little too much."

Vámbéry claimed that the Sultan had previously "treated me as a confidential friend, talked with me about State concerns and the interests of the dynasty." Nevertheless, the visits to the palace did continue but on a less personal and less cordial level, probably as a result of Vámbéry's criticism. In the same chapter, Vámbéry wrote that the Sultan's "policy was partly of a purely personal nature, as with all Oriental despots; such policy, strictly conservative in tendency, was concerned with the maintenance of an absolutely despotic régime." These were harsh words, published in 1904, after the rupture with the Sultan. Nevertheless, Vámbéry graciously concluded the chapter by writing, "I have received from Sultan Abdul Hamid many tokens of his favour and kindness, and I owe him an everlasting debt of gratitude."

This feeling of gratitude did not prevent Vámbéry from continuing to express his criticism of Abdul Hamid in the following years, although he tempered his style somewhat. In 1906, when Vámbéry's relations with the Sultan were at an ebb, he wrote about Abdul Hamid in his *Westlicher Kultureinfluss im Osten*, "[Abdul Hamid] mit unerhörten Despotismus die Autokratie zu stärken suchte, und indem er alle Staatsgewalt an sich riss, das Land mit Spionen und Detektive anfüllte." To soften the effect of these accusations, Vámbéry added "Ja, diese Fehltritt ist um so mehr zu bedauern, als Sultan Abdul Hamid zu den begabtesten, eifrigsten und ermüdlichsten Fürsten gehört, die je in der Türkei regiert haben."

Some interesting information about Vámbéry and his connections with Abdul Hamid and the court can be gained from Herzl's diaries. Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), the founder of political Zionism and its acknowledged leader until his death, maintained close relations with Vámbéry over several years, asking his advice

and requesting his intervention with the highest Ottoman authorities — which Vámbéry agreed to undertake. Since 1897, Herzl was in contact, by correspondence, with various high Ottoman officials in Istanbul. Copies of letters to them and to Vámbéry are reproduced in Herzl's diaries, where he also recorded the presentation of his Zionist programmes to Istanbul, both directly and through the Ottoman ambassador in Berlin and various officials in Istanbul. Some of these letters were addressed to the Sultan from the newly founded World Zionist Organization, sent via intermediaries at Yıldız Palace and others. What Herzl sought, since 1897, was to obtain a personal audience with Abdul Hamid and ask him to permit a sizable Jewish immigration from Europe to Palestine, where the immigrants would form an authority subject to the Sultan and loyal to him. In exchange, Herzl intended to propose that Jewish financiers would procure a suitably large loan for the debt-ridden Ottoman Empire on much better terms than it was then getting — this through the agency of the newly-established Zionist bank called the Jewish Colonial Trust.

To set all this up, Herzl appealed to Vámbéry who had the reputation of an excellent standing at Yıldız — and boasted about it. According to Herzl's diaries, his meetings and correspondence with Vámbéry became more frequent from the middle of the year 1900. In what seems to be their first meeting, at least as recorded in the diaries, in Mühlbach on 16 June 1900, they had a lengthy discussion in which Herzl tried to persuade Vámbéry to set up an interview for him with Abdul Hamid. Vámbéry agreed on condition that he, Vámbéry, would be the translator at that meeting. A few days later, Vámbéry assured Herzl that he had written to the Sultan in the matter but was not certain whether the letter had been delivered to its destination — evidently Vámbéry had observed practices at the Ottoman court.

Shortly afterwards, on 2 July 1900, Herzl again attempted to persuade Vámbéry to set up an interview with the Sultan, using the argument that not only would he, Herzl, procure financial resources for the Ottoman Empire but also help in presenting Abdul Hamid, should he allow the Jews to enter the empire as refugees, as a benefactor to humanity, thus gaining the Sultan the admiration of the entire world. Herzl and Vámbéry continued to correspond in the early years of the twentieth century, with Vámbéry assuring Herzl that an interview with the Sultan would ultimately be set up, despite opposition from certain high Ottoman officials to foreign initiatives. It was these officials that Herzl had earlier been trying to persuade that the Sultan should grant a Charter for Jewish settlement in Palestine; he even offered, as a reward, the Zionist movement's undertaking the construction of the empire's railroads being planned at the time.

Finally, Vámbéry met Herzl in Budapest in May 1901 and informed him that Abdul Hamid was ready to grant him an audience on condition that Herzl should not mention Zionism. Herzl accordingly travelled to Istanbul, carrying Vámbéry's letters of introduction. After waiting several days he was received by Abdul Hamid on 17 May 1901. The atmosphere at the meeting was not favourable. The Sultan had decreed half a year earlier, in November 1900, that Jewish visits to Palestine ought

to be limited to three months. At the interview the Sultan declared his sympathy for the Jews but expressed his opposition to granting them a territorial authority status in Palestine; probably he feared the political results of such a move. The Sultan's officials had also warned him, most likely, that Herzl's first book was entitled *Der Judenstaat* and that it represented plans and intentions to create a political entity in Palestine.

Twelve days later Herzl met Vámbéry in Mühlbach to thank him. While Herzl continued to correspond with several high officials in Istanbul (and to visit there), he contacted Vámbéry more rarely and, after 3 May 1902 (that is, one year after the interview with Abdul Hamid and two years before Herzl's death) he ceased to consult Vámbéry, at least according to the *Tagebücher*. I do not know the reason for this. Perhaps Herzl grasped that not all Vámbéry's assertions were really reliable or that the chances of obtaining a Jewish territorial authority in Palestine were not within immediate reach. Anyway, later, in 1908, Herzl's successor as president of the World Zionist Organization, David Wolffsohn (1856-1914), again sought Vámbéry's counsel before applying for an audience with Abdul Hamid. This never materialized due to the Young Turk revolution.

To sum up, we know more precisely Vámbéry's own views about Abdul Hamid, his character and his court from the 34-page evaluation published in the 1909 London monthly *The Nineteenth Century and After*, entitled "Personal Recollections of Abdul Hamid II and his Court." This was printed after Abdul Hamid's deposition so that Vámbéry could write frankly without any reservations.

Basing himself on his own relations with Abdul Hamid, Vámbéry wrote of him as a person who "saw everywhere enemies; he suspected everywhere treason," despite the extraordinary measures taken for his security. Vámbéry claimed that he had "often tried to convince him of the groundlessness of his fears" but had failed in his attempts. In fact, Vámbéry argued, the Sultan's fears and pathological distrust had alienated many of his most reliable supporters, some of whom, being of common background, owed their careers to him. Their alienation increased, also, due to the Sultan's inciting of his officials against one another. Such moves often succeeded and mutual jealousy and intrigue reigned at the court, further downgrading Vámbéry's position with the Sultan and resulting in the cessation of his visits to the palace.

Continuing, Vámbéry characterized Abdul Hamid as "a bloodthirsty tyrant of the first order," "feared by all and loved by nobody" who had even forbidden the use of the word "Hürriyet" (Liberty) in the Turkish dictionaries. In so writing, Vámbéry's judgment conforms to that of many, possibly most, historians concerning Abdul Hamid's character. However, in what seem to be his last words on the deposed Sultan, Vámbéry tried hard to emphasize his impartiality by evaluating even-handedly, rather exaggeratedly, Abdul Hamid's vices and virtues. He unhesitatingly labelled him "one of the greatest tyrants and most gifted rulers who sat on the throne of Turkey" and summed up his estimate of Abdul Hamid as follows, "I never met a man the salient features of whose character were so contradictory, so uneven

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and disproportionate, as with Sultan Abdul Hamid. Benevolence and wickedness, generosity and meanness, cowardice and valour, shrewdness and ignorance, moderation and excess... have alternately found expression in his acts and words."

Armenius Vámbéry was not only a traveller and a scholar but a successful politician as well.

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- Of special relevance are Theodor Herzl's diaries (Tagebücher for 1900-1902) which reveal an aspect of Vámbéry's activities in Istanbul.