

JAMES RESTON'S BLOG

Saturday, February 23, 2008 3:29AM

FIRST DAY IN TURKEY

Posted By: James Reston

In my recent review of David Levering Lewis's new book ` , God's Crucible ` , I put a statement of his from the introduction up in lights: 'For the historian ` ,' he wrote, 'thinking about the present means thinking about the past in the present.' And so it will be for me on this journey to Turkey, north through the Balkans to Vienna. I have in hand the first draft of my new book, tentatively called THE GATES OF VIENNA which tells the epic tale of Suleyman the Magnificent in conflict with the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V in the age of Martin Luther.

I will be talking to scholars and writers and historians along the way. I'll be visiting the battlefields of this 16th century story like Mohacs in southern Hungary, the medieval fortress of Belgrade, the ramparts of Vienna itself. This is the normal historian's process in going beyond library research and seeking to 'feel' the ambiance of the places where the forces of Islam and Christianity came into conflict.

Beyond that, a main purpose of this trip is to define more precisely what the relevance of this ancient story is for the present day. This is a comfortable process for me. I've done it twice before with two works of medieval history.

On my first day in Turkey the local press is full of stories with historical elements. Kosovo has declared independence, and there is violence in the streets of Belgrade. I'll be there in 10 days. A columnist in the English language paper here in Istanbul celebrates the arrival of Europe's newest country. Kosovo, he points out, was the home of the composer of Turkey's national anthem. Kosovo is Turkey's baby brother, he says. 'Kosovo has been part of us for centuries since the day it was taken over by the Serbs yet was taken back by the Ottoman sultan after the Battle of Kosovo in 1389.' I doubt that the Serbian columnists are writing the story of their 'cradle of civilization' in the same way.

And there are these stories.

.More houses of Turkish 'guest workers' are burned in Germany. Here, people think a pattern is developing. Turks are again at the Gates of Vienna.

.Turkish tanks roll into northern Iraq. 'Just like the Turks,' a writer tells me. 'double standard.' Turks are all for Kosovo's independence, but not for the independence of the Kurds.

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JAMES RESTON'S BLOG

Sunday, February 24, 2008 2:19AM

Delicate Stomach

Posted By: James Reston

Yesterday I traveled up the Bosphorus to Koc University to see several Turkish scholars: a young, lively, Harvard-educated Ottoman specialist and a well-known professor of international relations. The university is only seven or eight years old, and it is set high on a series of hills overlooking the Black Sea. It was a long way to go for lunch, through horrendous traffic, but it was well worth it. From the Ottoman specialist, I received several important refinements to my story, and some good tips about the picture section of the book. And from the political scientist, confirmation of several points I had heard elsewhere.

On the question of Turkey's application to join the European Union (EU), she confirmed that indeed it was Austria that was the most vociferous in its opposition, and that indeed the historical past of the Turkish assaults on Vienna in the 16th and 17th centuries was an important element in the opposition. After Austria, came France with its immigration problem and of course, the Greek Cypriots, who still dispute the legitimacy of the Turkish side of their island. It seems to Turks, she said, that the rules for entry are constantly changing, that it was like shooting at a moving target. As one requirement was satisfied, new objections were getting raised, and additional demands were made. I thought, of course, about the Pope's

statement that Europe was at base a Christian continent. Consequently, the enthusiasm for joining Europe was on the decline here. The trend even has a name here, "euro-scepticism." This waning interest has a flip side of rising nationalism, and part of that movement is the embrace of the historical past. Reenactments of the Conquest of Constantinople in 1453 have become popular. But beyond the glories of the Ottoman Empire, ultranationalist politicians are harkening back to the symbols of the legendary exodus of Turkish tribes from Central Asia in the prehistoric dawn of this nation. According to legend a gray wolf led the tribes out of the Asian wilderness. Now one of the most reactionary parties here is called the Gray Wolf Party. It and other right-wing parties, she said, are attempting "to reorient the city of Istanbul and the culture symbolically with a return to the past." Historical romanticism goes hand in hand with Islamic fundamentalism.

And she confirmed, no surprise here, that the standing of America is at its lowest point ever. The peak of our favorable rating came in 1999 when Bill Clinton came here as a rock star right after the terrible earthquakes and sped to the ruins quicker than any Turkish politician to console the victims. Before 9/11, the approval rating was somewhere over 50%. Now it stands at 10%. Obama has caught on here already. "if he lives up to his promise," my friend from Koc said, "we could begin to have a civilized dialogue again." In the evening I went to dinner on the Asian side with Ragıp Karakolu, a writer and publisher, who faces trial in several months over the despicable Article 301 which criminalizes "anti-Turkish" writing. In the 1990s his ex-wife went to prison twice for challenging the official version of the Armenian genocide in the early 1990s. Now Ragıp faces the same charge. Wanly, he held onto the hope that Turkey is in a "transitional" period on the right to publish, but somehow I did not get the sense that he found his argument very persuasive.

We went to a popular restaurant on the Asian side of the city where Anatolian food is the specialty. Various spicy and quite interesting dishes came out in small pewter bowls. With my delicate stomach I paid mightily for the meal in the night.

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JAMES RESTON'S BLOG

Tuesday, February 26, 2008 11:54AM

The Pleasure of Being Cheated

Posted By: [James Reston](#)

Tags: [Turkey](#), [PEN Dispatches](#), [James Reston](#), [Cheated](#), [Dr. Halil Inalcik](#),

So I finally got cheated in Istanbul, but it was worth it.

Yesterday I was in Ankara, mainly to see Dr. Halil Inalcik, probably the foremost scholar of Ottoman history in the world. Now 92 years old, he is an inspiration. Having published many books before, he's still at it. He was described to be beforehand as a man still living in the 16th century. When I saw his cherubic face and reflective demeanor, I thought perhaps I'd like to go back to that time myself. It was a glorious conversation, full of many insights. The passion of his career, he said, has been to correct the biases of Western scholarship about the Eastern Mediterranean. He seemed to scratch at my attitudes right away to see what prejudices I might be harboring.

Then he sent me on a mission. I had told him that I was in the process of choosing photographs for the picture section of my book, but I was dissatisfied with the portraits I was finding in the Library of Congress. Because this book is "character-driven," the pictures inside must reveal the interesting sides of those characters. So many medieval portraits lack that essential quality; revealing nothing of the character behind a flat and dull mask. So Dr. Inalcik gave me the name and address of his publisher in Istanbul. The publisher runs an art bookshop below his office. "Go there," Inalcik said. "You will find what you need." Here was an invitation to my favorite kind of tourism: a hunt for a publisher in an obscure neighborhood in an exotic land with a specific purpose. And so this morning, after I genuflected in appreciation at the mausoleum of my principal character, Suleyman the Magnificent, at his fabulous mosque, I saw a cab, gave the driver the address, and off we sped across the Galotta Bridge to the old European section of the city in the Golden Horn. Fifteen minutes later, the cab stopped. The driver pointed up a narrow, pedestrian street. up there a few stores on your left, he said. The fare was 25 Turkish lire! That's the equivalent of the fare to the airport. I protested, but what to do? I asked for a receipt. Somehow, he had left his receipt book at home.

Of course, I found myself blocks away from the publisher, in a warren of confusing small streets. At least the crooked driver had put me out in the right general neighborhood. After 3 or 4 wrong turns and a score of inquiries, I finally came onto the EREN bookshop down a small alley. Upstairs in a cramped book-lined office, the publisher rose to the challenge. You can always tell a true book lover. And finally, he put forward a lovely portrait of Suleyman's favorite frn the harem, the passionate, manipulative, scheming, power-hungry, red-haired Ukrainian beauty named Roxelana. For such discoveries I will endure many wrong turns and even a few humiliations. Here's a few tips from an innocent in Istanbul. When you're walking by a shoe-shine guy on a bridge and he seems to have dropped his brush unwittingly. Don't retrieve it for him out of the goodness of your heart. It will cost you. I feel for that trick once but not the second time. And whatever you do, when you're near the carpet stores, don't say anything when a guy approaches you and says admiringly, "You look like a writer."

[3 Comments](#) | [Add a Comment](#)

3-2-08 11:09PM: Cakes said...

See! You're a natural! I love it. So perfect!

2-27-08 8:26AM: Russ Swenson said...

Jim,
Reading your message started my day in a very motivational manner.
I hope you don't mind Kari Lyn referring me to your blog.
Since we were both in Berlin at the same time, I thought you might enjoy my East Berlin/Istanbul story. Before the wall went up in Berlin, I spent most of my days bumming around East Berlin. I had a motorcycle and just enough German to be brave. I got lost many times but always managed with the help of the locals to find my way back to West Berlin. I can still remember some of their faces. I stumbled into cafes in the basement of ruined buildings. I bargained for a leather jacket in a store set up in a garage that hadn't been damaged by bombs. Reading your comments about old cities and dark alleys swept those memories back to me.
I learned quickly that filter tip Marlboros were a more powerful currency than East German Marks.
Thanks again Russ

2-26-08 5:01PM: sarene byrne said...

Jim
So glad the seriousness of your trip is going well and your are enjoying fascinating Istanbul. Just know that your pals in Mystic were also taken by a cabbie but only once! We made sure the meter was running when we entered the cab! The sellers in the markets are amazing. One said "I have been waiting to see you all day." Big smile!
All the best! Enjoy!
Tom and Sarene

JAMES RESTON'S BLOG

Thursday, February 28, 2008 3:18AM

Burning Issue: Head Scarves

Posted By: James Reston

Tags: [Turkey](#), [PEN Dispatches](#), [Head Scarves](#), [James Reston](#)

I have been thinking all week: what if the most important issue in a Hillary-Obama debate was.....head scarves! I've had more discussions about that question in these days in Turkey than any other. The place is obsessed with it. And the country is in chaos over it.

For many years in this 'secular republic' girls in schools and universities have not been allowed to cover their hair. It was the rule, the dress code (or no dress code). To do so was thought to be disruptive to education as a flaunting of a particular piety. Not sure if the ban covered turbans for the boys.

But in the past week the new Islamist government here passed a constitutional amendment to lift the ban. But girls with head gear were still barred at the gate. Why? Because a constitutional change is not a law, only a principle, and legislation is required to back the change up. So far supporting legislation has not passed. So what is a pious and modest girl to do? Chaos reigns, and everyone is talking about it.

I keep wondering where the women of Turkey are in this debate? The discussion seems to be carried on entirely by men in gray suits. Of course, I think women, especially university students, should be allowed to wear anything they want. I'm pro-choice.

The question here is whether young women are wearing the head scarf as an expression of modesty or to be exhibitionist. Last night I had dinner with a distinguished professor at an Istanbul University, and he thinks the latter. In general, he has been 'tolerant' of students in his classroom with head scarves, even though technically that violated his institution's dress code. When you make an issue of it, like asking the illegal student to leave the class, you get the very disruption the teacher wants to avoid, and, in many cases, the student seems to invite.

Walking around the Topkapi yesterday, I saw all kinds of scarves. They seem to draw attention to themselves. Some were drab on women who were, sorry to say, rather homely. Perhaps they were the modest and genuinely pious ones. Or maybe they were being secretly oppressed. Were they dressing so, because they wanted to, or because their fathers or husbands or boyfriends demanded it? Did this come from within, or from without? While it peaked my curiosity, I felt a little ashamed. The question is really none of my business.

But then there were other flashy head scarves, silk and colorful with interesting stylish designs. They were a fashion statement. They really caught my eye. Perhaps these were the exhibitionists. At the very least, these women got to have it both ways. I have nothing against a woman being modest and stylish at the same time.

My professor friend pointed out that there's a shop in downtown Istanbul that hawks "Modesty Fashion."

[4 Comments](#) | [Add a Comment](#)

3-22-09 2:16AM: Nick said...

Oh yeah? Cool, Salim.

2-14-09 4:30PM: Salim said...

Turkey has equal rules put on men Hazel.

3-14-08 2:58AM: Ed Kane said...

Jim Reston stated, in his piece on head scarves in Turkey: 'Not sure if the ban covered turbans for the boys.' Turban is the modern Turkish word for 'headscarf', the old word being sarik, and males never wore head scarves at any period in Ottoman/Turkish history. In 1925, Atatürk did ban the wearing of the fez, 'the curious tasseled headgear of the male Muslim', which was henceforth to be replaced by the European brimmed hat.

3-2-08 9:46PM: Hazel Koshy said...

With all due respect sir, it is certainly your business whether the scarved women you saw were forced to do do or not. It's everyone's business. Freedom of choice, freedom of personal expression is the barometer of humanity, and in order to preserve that, one must ask questions, and inquire. This is the only way to begin a necessary dialogue. Dialogue, discussion, conversation - these are tools that must force change, and it begins with a question.

JAMES RESTON'S BLOG

Saturday, March 1, 2008 1:10AM

A Night in Sofia

Posted By: [James Reston](#)

Tonight I spent the evening with a jolly group of exuberant Israeli film makers on the slopes of Mount Vitosh which, snow-covered, rises 6000 feet above the capital of Bulgaria. The venue was a typical Bulgarian restaurant with lots of double-time um-pa-pa music, plenty of heel-slapping dancing around the tables, and performers in short embroidered jackets and frilly skirts. And lots of booze. I'm again in a Christian country.

The interesting part was why these film makers have come to this out-of-the-way place. Cinema is suddenly a major industry here, started only 8 years ago from scratch. Now it has launched its first major Hollywood movie, Black Dalia with Brian di Palma, and there's talk of projects with Robert di Niro and Al Pacino. I have a producer friend back home, Ron Maxwell (Gods and Generals) who will shoot an epic about Joan of Arc here. At a 300 acre spread the industry has built sets of several blocks of New York City streets and several blocks of Baghdad including a market. They're betting that like the aftermath of Vietnam, once the Iraq War is over, a wave of interesting movies, depicting both sides of the conflict, will start, movies that go beyond the depiction of brave American soldiers under duress.

Amid the dancing and the clouds of cigar smoke, globaliztion has come to Bulgaria. Come here instead of Rumania or Moroooco, if you want to make a film about the mean streets of New York or Baghdad, they say. It will cost you about a fifth of what it costs to shoot in America. When they heard that I was working with Ron Howard on his film, Frost/Nixon, I got the royal treatment....but what Ron would get would be bigger. I can only imagine.

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JAMES RESTON'S BLOG

Sunday, March 2, 2008 5:33PM

Belgrade Anxieties

Posted By: [James Reston](#)

The yips began at the Bulgarian-Serbian border. As we inched toward the police booth, old paranoia from 40 years ago in Berlin took over. Would I be taken into a small room and interrogated about my views on Kosovo or on the 1999 American bombing of Nis and Belgrade? We made it through unharmed and unhumiliated. My bag full of books and, more important, my manuscript, was not strewn all over the tarmac. As we pulled out, my driver, Zoran, a strapping crew cut guy with bad teeth, laughed. What had the Serbian border cops said, I asked. Oh, you know, Americans are not so popular here now. "Yes," my protector had replied, "but this is a 10% friend." 10% was sufficient to get me through.

As we came close to Belgrade, Zoran boasted that he was a big fan of Red Star, the preeminent soccer team of Belgrade. Later today, Red Star would be playing the Partisans, their chief rival, but the game would be unique: no fans. Usually 70,000 fans watched this intense rivalry, but the authorities had banned the crowd. The chances for violence were too great. Serbs take their sport very seriously, Zoran said. and by the by, he said that the war that broke up Yugoslavia began in the soccer stadiums when the hooligans turned into para-military criminals.

Then he drove me by the American embassy with its charred front and broken windows from last week's protest over Kosovo....and by the relics of the American bombing in 1999 where our cruise missiles destroyed the army and police headquarters. These buildings have been left untouched as monuments of Serbian martyrdom and American aggression. "We have always loved Americans," he said, "but if anyone hassles you on this visit, just say: Kosovo is Serbia! and you'll be all right." And then he left me off at my hotel, Hotel Moscow. It's across the street from the shuttered MacDonalds whose windows were smashed and torched by soccer hooligans last week. "Have a nice stay," he said.

I, in turn, wished his team luck against the Partisans and hustled to my room. Red Star beat the Partisans 4-1.

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JAMES RESTON'S BLOG

[Monday, March 3, 2008 12:49PM](#)

Kosovo?

Posted By: [James Reston](#)

I'm sitting outside on a lovely warm afternoon at the oldest cafe in Belgrade (circa 1823) whose name is the perfect symbol of the current mood here about Kosovo. The cafe's name is "?" In my conversations with a few people who should know, the current attitude seems to be confusion. What is the future? Where is all this going? People do genuinely seem to be in shock. The easiest and most prevalent opinion is to blame everyone but themselves for the independence of the province everyone refers to as "the cradle of Serbian civilization."

But if you probe that opinion, you discover that the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 is not really the cradle it is claimed to be. (Macedonia which became independent in 1993 is as much so.) And the battle wasn't really a defeat that it is taking 600 years to redress, but actually a draw. If you ask about the occupation of the Ottoman Turks for all those centuries, you can get an acknowledgement that the Ottoman administration of the Balkan peninsula was actually pretty efficient and generally tolerant of diverse religions and local tradition, even if it did retard the progress of the occupied territory. If you ask about the romance over medieval history, you find it not to be the source of anger and disappointment after all, but more a figment of political rhetoric.

So a question mark defines my few days in Belgrade as well. This is scarcely the lion's den of

hooligans as it is sometimes portrayed (including by me a few days ago.), but a vibrant, interesting, sophisticated city with an intriguing history and culture and a magnificent walking park on a promontory where the Danube and Sava Rivers meet. This is the site of the medieval castle called Kalemegdan, the assault against which in 1521 by Suleyman I describe in the book. And on the commercial walking promenade there are quite a few long-legged beauties that resemble the world-class Serbian tennis stars.

But whether the country is headed toward openness or toward isolation as it wallows in its sense of victimhood and anger is a quandry. Even the keenest observers seem to rest their hope on the failure of Kosovo as a state. They seem to delight in the notion of a fragile cripple that becomes a drag on Europe and eventually such an annoyance that Europe will be only too glad to dump it back on Serbia. They predict increased tensions over the independence in the neighboring Balkan states. They distrust Russia's support and are angry about America's betrayal. Maybe in 10 or 20 years, consistent with the troubled history of this region, conditions will be ripe once again for Serbia, in revenge and righteousness, to take back its beloved province militarily, even if that province is now made up not of Serbs but 90% Albanians.

To that I can only answer with a "?" Perhaps in another few years of coming to grips with the reality of their situation, there will be another cafe nearby with the name "!"

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JAMES RESTON'S BLOG

Wednesday, March 5, 2008 3:58AM

Imaging Ancient Battlefields

Posted By: James Reston

We got underway bright and early, Vlada and I, heading north out of Belgrade into Voivodina, the breadbasket of Serbia, and pointing toward the battlefield of Mohacs in southern Hungary. Mile after mile of flat, rich, and boring farmland went by in what is called the Panonnian plain. At Novi Sad, the "Athens of Serbia," we tarried briefly, so I could see the great fortress of Petrovaradin which Suleyman had captured on his way to Mohacs and Budapest in 1526. Because the bastion commands high ground at a narrow bend in the river, it was called the Gibraltar of the Danube in medieval times. Annoyingly, modern times interrupted my reverie. From the heights I looked down on the four bridges that NATO planes had destroyed in 1999.

The Hungarian border seemed benign by comparison to my crossing into Serbia from Bulgaria a few days ago. Now it was Vlada who had a few yips. "They don't like us," he said, and ancient animosities did seem to be etched on the faces of the Hungarian border guards. On we pressed through the small towns of the southern Transdanubia---wine country, my guide book says---until we reached the river across from the town of Mohacs. A car ferry idled at river side, but we had no Hungarian money for the ferry fee, and no one spoke English or Serbian. Intrepid Vlada was undeterred, and never was I more glad for his company.

Finally, he came upon a rough looking Serb in a nearby cafe who changed a little money for us from his wad of cash and gave Vlada the lay of the land. The Croatian border was only a few miles away. "He's no little flower," Vlada said as we walked away. Stealing cars and taking them across the border is a "good business," he said.

Once across we headed for the battlefield south of the town. At the Battle of Mohacs on August 29, 1526, the king of Hungary, the majority of his nobility, and some 20,000 Hungarian soldiers were wiped out by Suleyman's juggernaut of 80,000 men. It is the central tragedy of Hungarian history, as burnished in the Hungarian mentality as the Battle of Kosovo is burned in the Serbian consciousness. When a person today has a bad turn of fortune, the way of consoling is to say, "More was lost at Mohacs."

There before me stretched the flat plain I know so well from the literature, and beyond, the terrace, some five miles long, upon which Suleyman's vast army first, terrifyingly, appeared. It was as I had imagined it, and I doubt that being there will change the way I have described it already. But this was an important moment of confirmation. I have it right. Only a writer can feel the true excitement of finally seeing and drinking in the actual landscape of an action that before only existed in his mind.

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JAMES RESTON'S BLOG

Saturday, March 8, 2008 2:34AM

Budapest Finds

Posted By: [James Reston](#)

People do judge books by their cover. So I have always paid attention to that part of the process. Happily, my last two experiences with historical works have been good ones: sumptuous covers in which I was able to provide the wizards of the art department with some good raw material. So I've been on a hunt in Istanbul and Belgrade for images that are cover-worthy.

Today in Budapest I hit pay dirt. This is a book about a clash of civilizations and religions, but since I espouse the great man theory of history, it's even more so about the principal protagonists. I need for mine to glower at one another on the cover, and their glowering needs to be alluring.

Until today, the images of Suleyman the Magnificent and the Hapsburg emperor, Charles V, that I have seen have been dull, flat, and uninteresting. But at the Hungarian National Museum, there suddenly, lurking behind the silver goblets and dusty pennants was the Sultan who destroyed Belgrade and Budapest and who, had he not faltered at Vienna, would have brought the dominion of Islam to the Rhine River. The portrait, by a student of Titian, is a profile of a thin, hawk-nosed conqueror with a massive beehive turban. It projects just the right feeling of menace and determination.

And then in the afternoon, I wandered through the warren of rooms in the fabulous Museum of Fine Arts here, an institution just as impressive as the National Gallery in Washington, with an endless supply of classics. Again I had a goal, to find a portrait of a silly woman named Maria of Hapsburg, a minor character in the story. I turned into a small room off the main corridor, and my eye caught a painting of a Renaissance figure, and there was the chin! the famous Hapsburg chin that so defined the Hapsburg monarchs. It was Charles V at his most intimate, looking a bit wan and wistful as any 19 year old should if he has just come to preside over an empire that stretches from Denmark to Hungary, Netherlands to Mexico, and whose job it would be to protect Christian Europe from the invasion of the Islamic sultan.

My story is a metaphor for today, of course. In Turkey's application to the European Union, in the European struggle with their immigration problems, and in a wider sense, America's struggle with the Islamic world, it appears to many that actually and figuratively the Turks are again at the gates of Vienna. "We defeated them twice before," an Austrian paper editorializes about the Turkey and EU. "We can do it again."

The difference between Suleyman's assault on Vienna and today is that now there are not two giants of history that can face off against one another on a book cover and take the reader on a romantic journey.

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JAMES RESTON'S BLOG

Sunday, March 9, 2008 12:44PM

My Birthday in Koszeg

Posted By: [James Reston](#)

Sometimes, no matter how much you read, and how many scholars you talk to, history just will not deliver up its secrets....until you make a real effort to go to the place of the action and look under the ancient stones. And so yesterday, I drove four hours from Budapest, through many small, rural towns in the western Transdanubia, with unpronounceable names like Celldomolk and Szombathely, to a tiny place on the Austrian-Hungarian border called Koszeg.

I came in the hope of solving a mystery. It was here in 1532, so the standard histories tell us, that the great army of Suleyman, with some 80,000 troops, was held up for three weeks by this little fortress, commanded by a brilliant Croatian and some 700 very able-bodied men. I could never believe it, and no books or scholarly explanations seemed to hold water for me.

So it would take the caretaker of the keep, a portly, jolly fellow named Zoltan Pocza, to trump all the books and professors. My translator was his wife who used to be the Russian teacher at the Koszeg school until Communism collapsed. Then there was no call for Russian and she switched to English. I told her that she might soon be switching back to Russian.

They proudly took me around the unprepossessing castle in a pouring rain. I have seen many more impressive ruins than this, and it was simply impossible to imagine tens of thousands of desperate and hungry soldiers who were unable to scramble over its walls. Then, back in Zoltan's cluttered, cozy office, he handed me a few things....a bottle of Koszeg wine to celebrate my birthday, some standard brochures, and a little monograph that had been published last year to mark the 475th anniversary of the siege of Koszeg. And that evening when I read it in my tiny hotel room (\$40 a night), all the answers tumbled out. Next stop: a rewrite.

Sometimes, even on your birthday, you have to travel a great distance to solve a mystery. In my little cell in the oldest hotel in Hungary, I slept well and felt well-feted.

[1 Comment](#) | [Add a Comment](#)

3-10-08 3:13PM: Erika Giles said...

I came to the PEN website to find information about doing translations and was delighted to see your post from Koszeg, Hungary. I was born in the town with the unpronounceable name, Szombathely, in 1948, and my family escaped two months later, as the country's borders were being sealed. I returned to my homeland for the first time in fall 2006. My husband and I spent a wonderful week in Szombathely exploring my roots, and one day we took a side trip to Koszeg, which we found to be a delightful place. The fortress you mention and the rest of the town, especially its main square with its pastel Baroque buildings and the Church of the Sacred Heart, were far more appealing in sunny, warm October weather than they must have been in the midst of a rainstorm. Still, it sounds like you made the best of it, and had a great birthday, anyway.

JAMES RESTON'S BLOG

[Monday, March 10, 2008 5:43PM](#)

Farewell from Vienna

Posted By: [James Reston](#)

And so this trip ends with a languid day in the Baroque National Library of Vienna. It is one of the great libraries of Europe, and one has the dizzy experience of reading beneath frescoes on the theme of war and peace, replete with gym-ready warriors, bare-breasted women, and chubby cherubs with their private parts covered with floating gossamer. More down to earth are the

muscular, marble statues and the wooden inlaid book shelves that contain the world's encyclopedias and the time-worn leather classics. You tiptoe along creaking herringbone floors, and squint at your pages under dim lights. I nearly ruined my eyes this way decades ago at Oxford. I was in my element.

I have always felt that when you are privileged enough to read in places like this that you have an obligation to do good work. I've been able to work in the Vatican Library in Rome and the Archive of the Indies in Seville, and most of all, under the dome at the Library of Congress in Washington. And so diligence was my command today, but I'm not sure I met my obligation. My mind was pointing toward home.

When the doors closed I went looking for the remnants of the siege of Vienna by the Turks in 1529. There are only three spots in this city of music and later kings. The most prominent is an tiny church called St. Reprecht which was built into the old walls that are now gone.

I was glad to see that the old church has a website.

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