

Palazzo Corpi

By Gillian Leavitt Mueller, gillianlm55@gmail.com ©

The American Embassy building, where Arthur Leavitt was ensconced from 1909 to 1917, has a most colorful history. It traces its origins to the Genoese shipowner, Ignazio Corpi, who in 1873 commissioned Italian architect Giacomo Leoni to build a magnificent residence for himself and his new bride. The rest of the decade and some 99,000 Ottoman gold liras (about \$11.6 million in 2022 values) were dedicated to constructing what Patricia Daunt, former British ambassadress and expert on the diplomatic houses of Istanbul, described as

...a Neoclassical monument to prosperity on the... western slopes of Pera. ...Leoni imported all the building materials from Italy—marble for the floors and mantelpieces from Carrara, rosewood for the window frames and doors from Piemonte—and a team of Italian painters were specially commissioned to cover the walls and ceilings, even those of the bathrooms, with frescoes of heroic and bacchanalian scenes.¹

According to retired American Foreign Service Officer, Thomas Carolan,

to the magnificent frescoes were added finely etched glasswork, inlaid parquet floors, elegant fireplaces and other exquisite artistic and architectural features too numerous to mention.²

When, in 1937, the building was converted to a consulate, the remains of the embassy staff removing to Ankara, the frescoes were inexplicably plastered or painted over. Yet, like the Byzantine mosaics at Hagia Sophia, it preserved them for another half century. A ceiling mural in the Great Hall was left exposed, but soon disappeared under layers of city soot. It depicted the Greek mythological characters of Neptune, Diana, the Muses and three Graces. When the artwork was rediscovered in 1992, the U.S. Department of State resolved to restore Palazzo Corpi to her original beauty. It took a decade, or as long as it had taken to build it.



Palazzo Corpi, Sobo House (2022)



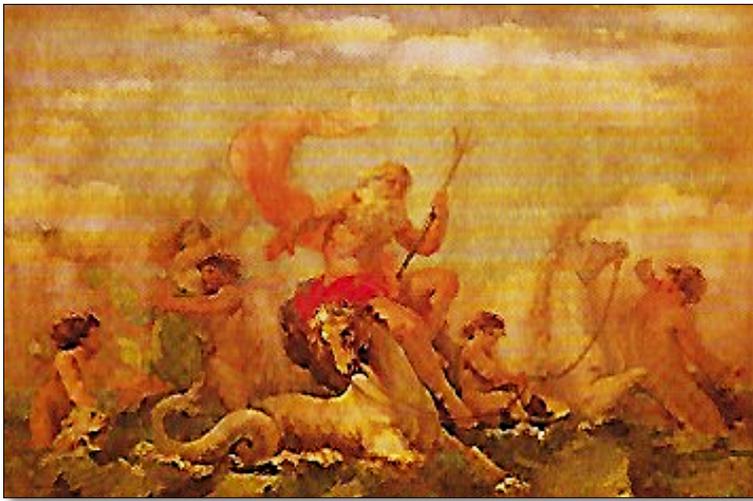
The American Embassy (1914)



Closeup of the American seal, added in 1910 (2022)

¹ Daunt (2017), p. 17

² Thomas J. Carolan Jr., writing for *The Foreign Service Journal*, <https://afsa.org/foreign-service-journal-november-2002>



Ceiling frescoes at the Palazzo Corpi



The property is distinguished for being America's first government-owned diplomatic facility in Europe, the second worldwide.¹ Most remarkable is how it was acquired in a poker game, or so it's alleged by author and journalist H.G. Dwight.

Harry, as the Bakers called him, descended from generations of American Missionaries in Constantinople. Like his chum, Arthur Baker, he was born and raised there and went to school at Robert College. Dwight later lived with the Bakers

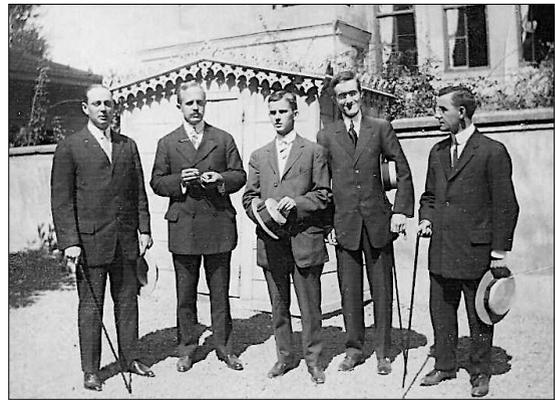
while writing his iconic *Constantinople, Old and New*. He was also best man at Arthur and Elsie Leavitt's wedding in 1912. Comparing his prose to that of Arthur Baker's and Arthur Leavitt's on the same subject, it became evident that he sometimes spiced his stories up with embellishments. Whether it was the case here, I can't say, but the Palazzo Corpi legend is this:

Before it was completed in 1882, a fortuneteller predicted that Ignazio Corpi would die once construction concluded. And sure enough, on the night of the palace's inauguration, he expired "in the

arms of a mistress, his cousin, a liaison that was considered scandalously incestuous,"² (quite aside from his new wife for whom he had built the palace).

Corpi left the property to his two nephews, who wrangled over whether to lease it or sell it, the option of moving into it apparently off the table, seemingly because of the scandal of his cousinly adulteries and an additional disgrace relating to his wife.

In the annals of the State Department, the building is steeped in intrigue. Foreign Service Officer Carolan tells us that Corpi's bride was Yasemin Hanum, "a stunning woman with olive skin, straight black hair, an aquiline nose, and clear green eyes." Local lore maintained that Yasemin's father had negotiated her marriage to Signor Corpi without her consent. But shortly after the wedding, she vanished without a trace, leaving all of Pera to wonder what had happened to her.

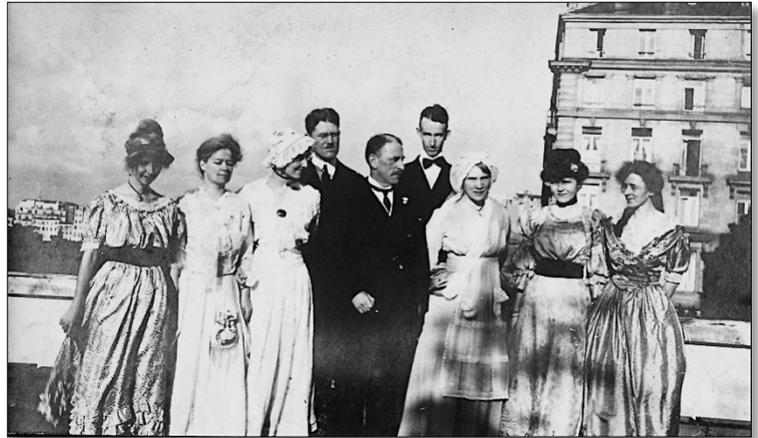


Arthur Leavitt (center) in the Embassy yard with (l-r) USS Scorpion Commander, Captain Buchanan; Third Secretary, Mr. Curtis; and Student Interpreters Louis Heck and John Binda to the right (1909)

¹ In the 1790s, the Moroccan Sultan gifted the American Legation property at Tangier to the U.S. Government.

² Daunt (2017), p. 18

Six months later, Ignazio was found dead by apparent suicide in one of the unfinished bedrooms on the main floor (no mention of his cousin/lover). Rumors flourished, one maintaining that Yasemin had eloped with her former lover, and that heartbroken, Signor Corpi had done himself in. Another said he cared little for Yasemin, but was distraught over the dishonor she'd brought on him and the family (still no mention of his cousin/lover).



Elsie Leavitt (third from left) next to Ambassador Morgenthau on the roof of the American Embassy with other Red Cross volunteers in the relief effort for the refugee crisis of the First Balkan War (1913)

A third tale explains that unbeknownst to her father, Yasemin had married her Turkish lover in secret, before she was forced to wed Corpi. On discovering the transgression after they wed, Corpi flew into a rage and murdered her, hiding her remains in the walls of the unfinished bedroom (in which he was found dead by suicide, with or without his cousin/lover). An even grislier version proposed that Yasemin was pregnant by her lover (or first husband, the Turk), when Ignazio murdered her (or she fled), inciting her grief-stricken and unsettled spirit to haunt the Palazzo Corpi forevermore, its State Department occupants attesting to the phenomenon over the years, always with the caveat that “nobody knew which tales were true and which were invented.”¹

Corpi’s nephews decided to lease the Palazzo Corpi to American Minister Lewis Wallace, whose status the Porte had recently upgraded to ‘Envoy Extraordinary, Minister Plenipotentiary’. Moving the Legation into the Palazzo Corpi was in keeping with the promotion. Fast forward to 1906, when Ambassador John Leishman petitioned for and succeeded in persuading Sultan Abdul Hamid II to raise the American Legation to full embassy status, and himself from Minister to ‘Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary’. This put the Embassy on a par with the European superpowers of Britain, France, Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary.



Faculty and students from the American College for Girls with Ambassador Morgenthau on the roof of the American Embassy (1914)

At the time, as mentioned, the U.S. Government owned no other diplomatic real estate in Europe. Neither did it have any desire to buy the Palazzo Corpi, though Leishman was adamant that it should. He argued that America could not hope to compete with the Great Powers of Europe in the Ottoman capital unless it resembled them too. Owning its own ridiculously lavish diplomatic premises was a

¹ Carlino (2002), “Encounter at Palazzo Corpi,” a fictional account of the legend written for *The Foreign Service Journal*.

necessary accoutrement to the appearance of being a world power—then a top American policy objective.

It was so, orientalist Philip Mansel clarifies, because of the great importance the Turks ascribed to

outward appearances, and because the rivalry between the Great Powers for influence at the Porte was always intense. ...In letters and dispatches [embassies] were called palaces—Palazzo di Venezia, Palais de France, the British Palace—for if in other capitals ambassadors lived like princes, in Constantinople they lived like kings.¹

Patricia Daunt agrees:

The ‘winter embassies’, so relished by the ambassadors and envoys to the Ottoman Porte..., were the grandest diplomatic buildings of any imperial capital in the world.... Extravagantly built, referred to as ‘palaces’, and once endowed with prisons, chapels and throne rooms, they stand [behind] high walls and fine gates in their own [luxurious gardens].²

Ambassador Leishman, wagering that Congress would come round to his way of thinking, took the unprecedented move of purchasing the property himself in 1907 for 28,000 gold lira (over \$4 million in 2022 values). He then waited for Congress to recognize his foresight and reimburse him, but Congress did not. It was neither interested nor persuaded by his arguments. Leishman was thus compelled to resort to tomfoolery, or so Harry Dwight would like us to believe. Here is the story, related by Carolan³:



View of the Golden Horn from the Palazzo Corpi (1914)

[Leishman], a wealthy steel magnate and former partner of Andrew Carnegie, with contacts and influence on Capitol Hill..., 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 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, they would pay for it. Highballs in hand, they humorously agreed. Neglecting his glass, Leishman then began to play in earnest, 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.⁴

Was it the disturbing rumors or simple circumstances that prevented Corpi’s nephews from moving into the building on their uncle’s death, and ultimately selling it to Leishman and the U.S. Government?

¹ Mansel (1996), p. 194

² Daunt (2017), pp. 11, 18

³ The original Dwight reference, a memoir, could not be located.

⁴ Carolan (2002)

And how is it that neither Arthur Leavitt nor his son John, both of whom had ties to the place, never mentioned a whiff of these stories? How is it that Harry Dwight's poker game never made it as far as Elsie (Baker) and Arthur Leavitt, who was Dwight's longtime confidant and best man at his wedding? I put this question to another retired Foreign Service Officer and family friend who replied,

In all my long involvement with Turkey—in Embassy Ankara and Consulate Adana in 1966-1968, and numerous TDY's [temporary duties] for the Department of State and the National War College, and visiting as a tourist many times, and my extensive reading about Turkey—I have never encountered these tales!

Was any of it true or was it another of Dwight's flamboyant fairytales?

In November 2003, one block away from the Palazzo Corpi, an Al Qaeda truck bomb obliterated the northeast corner of the British Consulate compound, instantly murdering the British Consul General and scores of embassy personnel and local bystanders. Intelligence reports indicated that the original target had been the American Consulate; that the British Consulate had been substituted because it was easier to attack at high speed due to the street configuration. An immediate consequence of this horrific episode was to relocate the American Consulate to a new, impenetrable-looking fortress outside the city. Then the question became, what to do with the Palazzo Corpi?



Plaque at the British Consulate commemorating those killed in the terrorist attack in November 2003

When I investigated in 2011, the building was empty and derelict. An armed Turkish guard in a military booth outside feigned protection against another car bomb assault. A window on the main floor was broken, the weather penetrating inside. Returning again in 2022, I was heartened to find it occupied by the London-based Soho House and buzzing with activity. Members only are allowed entry, but on explaining our interest my husband and I were invited inside to look around.



Renovated but empty (2011)

Soho, we were told, had done a fair amount of its own renovation to clean the place up. On a 50-year lease, the building is still owned by the U.S. Government. The street barrier has been replaced by cast iron gates, the wall now concealed under creeping vegetation. A garden café caps the rooftop, where many an official photograph used to be taken with the American ambassador. The garden has been rejuvenated and belies Istanbul's blistering summers and chronic drought. In Soho's custody, the Palazzo Corpi, an American National Treasure, is as exquisite today as it must have been on its completion in 1882 and so reminiscent of the grand, opulent, bygone days that the Bakers and Leavitts lived and personified.



Soho House, the Palazzo Corpi fully refurbished. The main floor features a bar, dining room, and several lounges

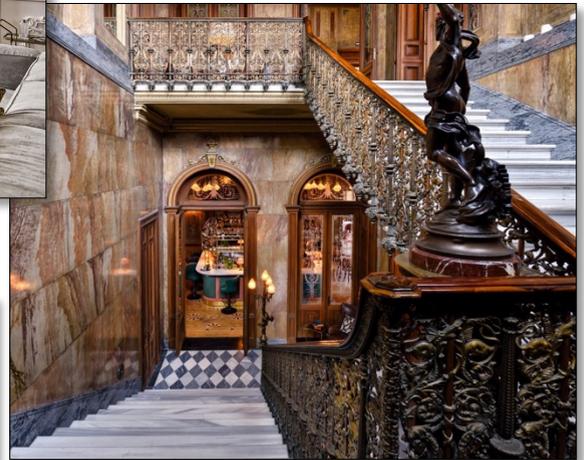




Top: Former office space, today a lounge; note the window view



Former and current apartment suite



Top, above: Marble staircase to the upper floor, with a Renaissance statuette lighting the way



Left: Rooftop terrace café

Resources

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U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian

Photographs

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