

Ambulance Station in Constantinople

One hundred years ago Count Jenő Karátsonyi (1861–1933), president of the Budapest Voluntary Ambulance Service (BVAS) suggested to the Turkish Embassy in Budapest the idea that the Hungarian ambulance service could found an ambulance station in Constantinople. At that time, there was no ambulance station in that city of one and half million inhabitants. János Pallavicini (1848–1941) ambassador of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, started the discussions with his Turkish colleagues. After getting a positive response, the BVAS sent a message to Constantinople and made contacts with Pasha Ödön Széchenyi (1839–1922), who had created the first professional fire station in Constantinople forty years earlier, in 1874.

Ödön Széchenyi was originally born in Pozsony, Hungary (present-day Bratislava, capital of Slovakia). His father, Count István Széchenyi (1791–1860), who had been called 'The greatest Hungarian' was a determined reform politician and public life leader in the Hungarian reform age. His son, Pasha Széchenyi, also had a genius sense for invention and organizing. In his homeland, he invented many technical, social and financial things, but perhaps the greatest of all his creations was the voluntary and the professional fire department created in Pest (the Hungarian capital city), 1870. He was honored and loved in Hungary and Europe, but his reputation was mainly known in Europe. Because of them the great inventor got a special award, the 'French honor order' from the French emperor, Napoleon III (1852–1870) in 1867. After he saw the fire disaster in Constantinople (1870), he decided to help Turkey organize a professional fire department, similar to the one in Pest.

The sultan, Abdülaziz I (1861-1876), respected Széchenyi due to his early works and achievements throughout Europe, so he entrusted him with organizing the project. Széchenyi moved to Constantinople in 1874. The new fire department was founded (1874) and commanded by him, as a part of the local military service. He was deeply revered in Turkey, so he was given the greatest state award, the Ozmanje-order from Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876-1909) in 1899.

After the BVAS had received permission for helping to organize the ambulance station, it sent its ambulance officers, led by ambulance doctor Dr. Richárd Fiala, to Constantinople in May 1911. Some days later, BVAS President Jenő Karátsonyi and Medical Director Dr. Aladár Kovách (1866-1922) followed them. Dr. Kovách was the immediate successor of Dr. Géza Kresz (1846-1901), founder of BVAS, the first modern ambulance organization in Hungary, established in 1887. Under Director Dr. Kovách's leadership, several new treatments, research, drugs, and vehicles were introduced for the first time in Hungary. These were continued in those times in the Europe. The Hungarian management was open-handed; thus, the new station was given a fully equipped ambulance horse-coach, ten stretchers, two chirurgic bags, one toxicology bag, and a special bag for burned patients. Furthermore, various transportation equipments were provided as well. The training went on for several weeks, during which Turkish doctors and firemen in the Taxim military barrack received instructions all day. Before the opening ceremony, Dr. Kovách conducted several rescue trainings with his Turkish colleagues to make sure they receive the necessary experience. He considered it very important that local ambulance workers be equipped with all the knowledge necessary to perform successful rescue operations in Constantinople.

The big day, the opening ceremony arrived soon, on May 13, 1911. The atmosphere was intense at the arrival of the high-ranking guests: the Turkish foreign and military ministers, the governor of Constantinople, officials of foreign embassies, public figures, doctors,

journalists, inhabitants, and members of the local Hungarian colony. The rescue presentation was successful; and at the end of the ceremony, Pasha Széchenyi was presented with Great Gold Medal Award of the BVAS by President Count Karátsonyi. The Pasha was fighting his tears while thanking the president. The pasha said: "This medal has ever so much value for me, because there are Hungarian words carved on its surface, it was given to me by a Hungarian, and it reminds me of my Hungarian homeland."

The new ambulance station was organized on military basis, as the local fire station. Its equipment was stored in the Taxim Barrack, while the station itself was situated in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy's Hospital. The patients were transported to the hospital's special admission department which was headed by Dr. Erlich, chief chirurgic, who previously held the same position in Vienna. Non-Austro-Hungarian patients were transported to other hospitals after receiving first-aid treatment. The ambulance workers were trained soldier-firefighters, who protected the city of fires and disasters, and performed the local inhabitants' life-saving.

The news of the success the new ambulance station created great sensations in both Turkey and Hungary. The Turkish Cabinet Office sent telegrams to the Austro-Hungarian king, Franz Joseph I (1848-1916), the crown prince, Franz Ferdinand (1863-1914), Archduke Joseph (1872-1962), who was protector of the BVAS, and also to the Hungarian Prime Minister, Károly Kuhen-Héderváry (1849-1918). Some days later, the Turkish emperor, Sultan Mehmed V (1909 – 1918) met the Hungarian delegation. On the same day, Crown Prince Yusuf Izzettin (1857-1916) met them, too.

The establishment of the first Constantinople ambulance station was a great success, which was a result of the teamwork of Turkish officers and Hungarian ambulance officers and doctors in 1911.

We owe our gratitude to our great ancestors.

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