

Letter from Suez, Giuseppe Morpurgo

By Matteo Caccia

The inauguration of the Suez Canal took place with a lavish ceremony, in the presence of European sovereigns and the most influential and prestigious figures of the time, on the 17th of November 1869.

This was a historic turning point for merchant shipping between the southern hemisphere and the Mediterranean: it was no longer necessary to circumnavigate Africa.

Trieste, the “trading centre of the Habsburg empire” was fully involved in the project, thanks to the drive of those men who sat in the highest seats of power in Assicurazioni Generali: Pasquale Revoltella, who became Vice President of the Universal Suez Canal Company, and Giuseppe Morpurgo, who succeeded Revoltella as Chairman of the Generali Management Committee and was director of the company for forty-eight years.

Morpurgo went personally to Suez to represent Trieste, the Chamber of Commerce (of which he was Vice-Chairman), and Generali.

These are the letters that Morpurgo wrote to his wife, Elisa Parente, and their children describing those places and days that were so memorable for him, as well as for Assicurazioni Generali, Trieste, and the whole world.

Constantinople – Tuesday 26 October 1869

My dears,

Until now I tired of those who said: “See Naples and die”. Now, faithful to my own impressions, I will say: “See the Bosphorus and die.” For as much as one has read, heard praised, and admired prints and photographs, it is all nothing when faced with reality! So, I can say nothing more but, since I was not given permission to bring you here, may you on some other occasion come to see whether I am exaggerating, and I dare to claim that you will say I am not.

The bustle of the city is dizzying, not even in Paris, à la sortie des spectacles, is there such a multitude of people dressed in every style, with the most eccentric costumes and the most voyants colours imaginable.

European monarchs and the most influential and prestigious figures of the time were present at the inauguration.

Constantinople – Friday 29 October 1869

At half past eight yesterday morning, at the head of five other Lloyd steamers, one French, one English, and many Turkish steamers, we all crossed the enchanting Bosphorus and I travelled for ten miles over the so greatly feared Black Sea, since it was then as placid as Lake Como. Then we met the Turkish Imperial Yacht, with His Majesty the Emperor,

Prokesch, Tegethoff and the ministers on board. His Majesty slowed down the steamer and greeted us three times with the Imperial Banner, considered a very high honour in the navy.

In Constantinople, Morpurgo was received by the Emperor Franz Joseph who thanked him for his presence in Suez, which lent prestige to the event.

Constantinople – Monday 1 November 1869

And so, I had the honour of being admitted to the Sovereign Audience in my capacity as Vice Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce. After His Majesty came to meet me and told me that he was very happy to see me in Constantinople, I told him that I thought myself lucky to be able to bow before him and pay him homage on behalf of the Chamber of Commerce, which is exceedingly grateful to His Imperial Majesty for having determined to embark on a journey that cannot fail to yield the most fruitful results; and that His Noble Presence, by contributing to the solemnity of the inauguration of the Suez Canal, will exert a very beneficial moral influence on trade relations between those countries and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy; and that Trieste, its main trading centre, being called among the first to profit from its advantages, in the name of the Chamber, I entreated His Imperial Majesty to favourably accept this expression of its deepest gratitude for his endorsement, willingly granting his high and precious benevolence.

Port Said – Tuesday 16 November 1869

This morning, we witnessed the arrival of Her Majesty the Empress. She wore a sailor's casquette, covered with a long blue veil, and was completely covered by a white cloak. We then went to attend a solemn religious ceremony I believe to be unique of its kind.

The Empress arrived on the arm of the Emperor of Austria, followed by the Viceroy with the Prince of Prussia and all the other princes present here. A magnificent sight.

Until the canal's inauguration day arrived at last.

68 ships left the port of Suez in the Red Sea for Port Said in the Mediterranean.

The great figures of the day travelled on the ships: the Emperor of Austria Franz Joseph, the royal prince of Prussia, and representatives of Europe's main ruling families. The builder of the canal, Frenchman Ferdinand de Lesseps, in the company of Empress Eugenia, travelled on the imperial yacht, flying the French flag, while the *Egyptian March*, composed for the occasion by Johann Strauss II, rang out in Egypt's still air.

Morpurgo wrote home directly from the boat he was sailing on.

Suez – Wednesday 17 November 1869

From the steamer on the Suez Canal!

In corner of the stern, which remained in the shade, covered by the body of another wooden warship, we witnessed a sight worthy of being painted, that I wish I had the talent to describe, I found it so picturesque. In a salon of the yacht, the Empress sat next to a large window, just over two metres above sea level, with two boats at her feet with the crews of the Spanish frigate, in one of which a hidalgo sang her Spanish songs while playing the mandolin.

The whole scene took place in the dark, on the sea immersed in stillness, and only the silhouette of the Empress was fully illuminated by the lamplight. It was a picture that I would like to own, reproduced by a good painter.

HISTORY

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 was a highly significant moment, revolutionising the map of travel and global traffic of the period.

The story is well known: the idea of connecting the Red Sea with the Mediterranean Sea, without having to circumnavigate the whole of Africa, had already been dreamt of by the Venetians as early as the sixteenth century, and then by the French in the Napoleonic era, and was finally realised in concrete terms by the Frenchman Ferdinand de Lesseps according to the original plans of Italian Luigi Negrelli, and inaugurated in 1869.

Lesseps formed a company in 1859 for the construction of the Suez Canal, jointly owned and supported by France and Austria, in an alliance that initially excluded England. Trieste's role in the events was covered by Pasquale Revoltella, an extremely important name in the city's history and economy: an entrepreneur, financier, town councillor, and stock exchange deputy, he invested his own capital in the enterprise, becoming Vice President of Lesseps's company.