

Panagiotis Lefakis (?-1940). The Blind Majestic Obstetrician Who Had Been Loved by the Ottomans

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Abstract

Sometimes, during an era of clashes, appears a man to promote humanism. Such a man was Panagiotis Lefakis who dedicated his life to treat the helpless inhabitants of Dedeagats (later Alexandroupolis) regardless of nationality and religion. With studies in Constantinople and Paris he practiced general medicine and obstetrics in Thrace. Lefakis, completely lost his eyesight by cause of retinal detachment but continued his work. With the help of his daughter Elli, he was the most preferable physician among the Muslims, as his blindness was an advantage due to cultural reasons. Muslim families felt secure as a blind man could not offend a Muslim female patient or a pregnant woman. His skills and temper helped him to achieve greatness and although he had been accused by his countrymen, the Ottoman authorities recognized his contribution.

Keywords: Alexandroupolis, Dedeagats, Thrace, Elli Manatou.

INTRODUCTION

Gynecological examination in Ottoman Empire was a practice established since the era of the medical evolution during the Golden Age of Caliphs [Figure 1A]. In some cases, female physicians were completely devoted into examining female patients due to cultural issues of the Empire [Figure 1B]. However, female physicians were performing operations in female bodies, while evidence of some female medical practice in the Ottoman Empire do exist, originally named as “tabibe” (meaning female physician) [1]. Furthermore, there was a long tradition of females practicing midwifery during the Ottoman reign and midwives appear in legal texts, palace archives and court records. Midwives were present on harem and attending procedures as witnesses to birth and related matters [2-3]. Three classes of midwives were being referred, i) those of the palace (saray-i hümayun ebese), ii) those of the noble (kibar ebese), and

iii) those of the common people (ahad-i nas ebese). There is a general perception that females had preferred to be treated at their residence by female physicians, midwives or healers. This predilection was only made for the protection of the female according to Muslim culture and did not signify any concept of underrating them. In need, male physicians, even non-Muslims, were allowed to treat female patients for a life to be saved. Progressively “ethno-gynecology” in Ottoman Empire moved towards a western type reforms. The Imperial Medical School of Istanbul reports male physicians, some non-Muslim, treating Muslim female patients at the school clinic [3].

Among those non-Muslim men who treated females in Ottoman Empire, was the Greek physician Panagiotis Lefakis, an obstetrician who practiced obstetrics and gynecology in Dedeagats (today Alexandroupolis, modern Greek territory).

Early years and life

Panagiotis Lefakis (?-1940) [Figure 2], son of Aristides Lefakis, who was a captain from the island of Andros, was a student of the High School in Chalkida city, where he was a classmate with prolific novelist Alexandros Papadiamantis (1851-1911). He continued his studies to become a physician initially in Constantinople and later in Paris, during the Russian-Turkish war in 1878. His first child, named Aristides after his grandfather, was born in Paris and studied mineralogy, Unfortunately, he had lost his life in the Black Sea when the ship he was traveling with, sank under unknown conditions. His second child, Katina, was born in 1883 in Alexandroupolis, which shows that the family had already settled in the city, where her daughters Elli and Cleio were also born [4]. Dedeagats was built in poor land full of marshes and villagers suffered by continuous infections [5]. Lefakis and his family were among the first parishioners from Greece, having a Hellenic citizenship to settle in Dedeagats [Figure 3 A-D] [4]. Lefakis is mentioned in the Trade Guides of the era, appearing in “L’ Indicateur Ottoman du Commerce” of the year 1881 in Dedeagats, meaning he had already established his private cabinet [6].



Figure 2. Panagiotis Lefakis, portrait, Archive of his great-grandson, Professor of Medicine Ioannis Tentas.

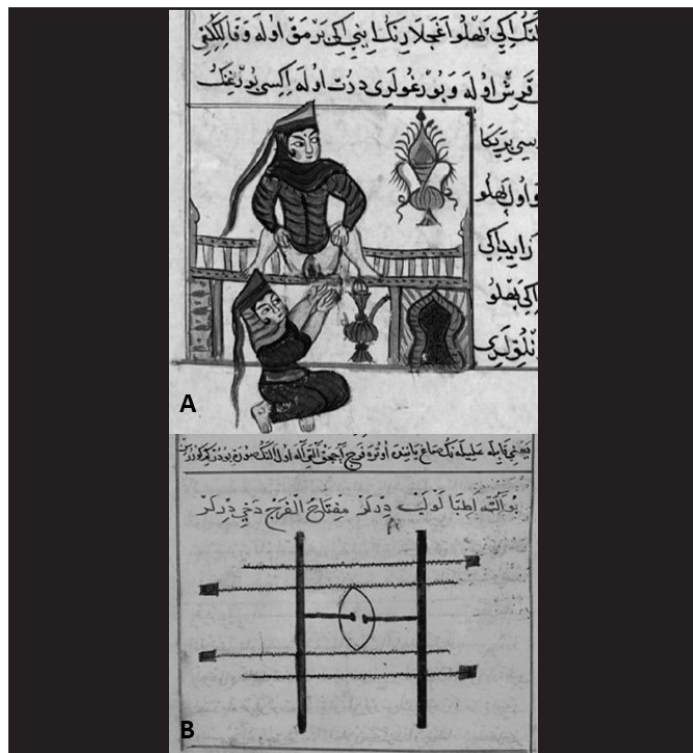


Figure 1. A. Depiction of a speculum, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Turc 693 f. 113r & B. Female gynecologist removes with the help of a speculum a fetus that died during labor. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Turc 693 f. 118v. Imperial Surgery, Şerafeddin Sabuncuoğlu (1385-1468), 1465.

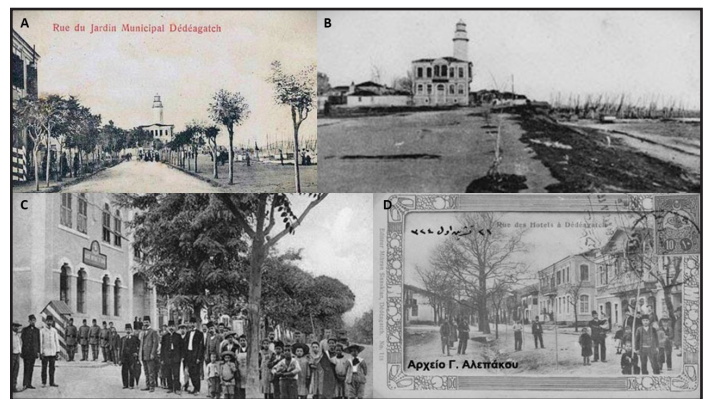


Figure 3. A. Municipality Garden street in Dedeagatch, B. The Lighthouse street, C. Inauguration of the Ottoman Imperial Bank in 1909 & D. The Hotels street. Photo-archive of George Alepakos.

In addition to being an excellent physician, he was also a great humanist. He lived in times of clashes, revolts and war but his home rendered to a treatment place for the afflicted regardless of nationality and religion [Figure 4 A-B]. In 1906, following the proposal of the Greek Consul Ion Dragoumis (1878-1920), he was decorated for his practice with the Silver Cross medal. On May 31, 1910 in the French newspaper “Le Temps”, in a text originated from the “Societe de medecine de Paris”, Lefakis’ scientific opinion was recorded. Lefakis sent for publication three cases of complete heterotaxy (Situs Inversus Totalis), describing the complete inversion of the viscera of the chest and abdomen. He noted that in malarial countries the hypertrophy of

the spleen may help physicians to diagnose the inversion of the visceral organs. Lefakis was one of the beloved physicians of the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Bishop of Smyrna, and later a Saint, Chrysostom (1867-1922) [7]. On February 17, 1911, he wrote a letter to Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos (1864-1936), to express his complaints about the behavior of the Vice-consul Apostolos Tserepis (who later attempted to assassinate Venizelos in Paris) and physician Georgios Papadopoulos, as they had denounced him to the Grand Vizier as a figure conspirator against the Empire [8]. The Ottomans rightfully neglected the accusations and Lefakis stayed and practiced obstetrics and general medicine in Dedeagats, where he died in July 17th of 1940 at an age of over 90 years [7].



Figure 4. **A.** The first house of the Greek physician Panagiotis Lefakis in Alexandroupolis, Photo-archive of Eleftherios Sindarakis & **B.** The two floor second house of Panagiotis Lefakis, later on Town Hall for the Bulgarians and then for the Greeks of the city of Alexandroupolis, Photo-archive of Athanasios Kritou.

Lefakis, completely lost his eyesight due to retinal detachment sometime in the year 1870, while he was still living in Paris during the siege of the city by the Prussians. However, it is of interest that his daughter Cleio also lost her eyesight by retinal

detachment signifying a potential genetic trait. Nevertheless, despite his blindness, Lefakis, wrote a number of books, medical and other. His most famous treatise was “The Fight against Alcoholism” (Greek: Ο Ανταλκοολικός Αγών) in 1931. Lefakis, was also a benefactor, donating his home to the Municipality of Alexandroupolis for the 4th Primary School to be built and named after him. He had also donated a piece of land where Alexandroupolis’ City Hall and offices of the Medical Association of Evros are housed today [4].

The snake folklore tale

Lefakis’ charismatic nature as a physician may be demonstrated by the following oral testimony of his great-grandson Ioannis Tentes, Professor of the School of Medicine of the Democritus University of Thrace in Greece. A mentally disturbed Greek peasant boy was brought by his parents to Lefakis. The boy was under the strong belief that he had swallowed a snake. For hours Lefakis had tried hard to convince him that such a thing could not have been happened. The only remaining solution to the problem was to improvise of a placebo trick. To that end, Lefakis gave the boy a number of pills made of flour powder, sugar and other non-curative ingredients to be taken daily for two weeks as the only possible effective treatment. In the meantime, Lefakis ordered his assistant to find him a snake. When the young boy returned upon completion of the regimen, Lefakis gave him an emetic containing grated chalk to drink. Naturally, the peasant boy suddenly started to vomit. While the boy was in a state of mess and vomiting hard in a basin, Lefakis craftily threw the snake in, as a standing proof that he was finally relieved of the physical cause of his torment. The boy left Lefakis’ house absolutely convinced that he was cured [7].

The obstetrician

Lefakis had practiced obstetrics in the city of Alexandroupolis, gaining high reputation for his skills. His fame resulted into requests for neighboring areas. Occasionally, he had to traveled to Soufli, Makri, Maronia, Ainos, and Samothrace and other neighboring places in order to help the locals. Lefakis’ blindness, a huge and immense misfortune for others, did not prevent him from practicing medicine. He was driven and guided from house to house to examine patients by his friend and assistant Nikolaos Kavourtzikis from Antheia and later on by his daughter and secretary Elli Manatou (Elli was married then to a lawyer named Konstantinos Manatos). Soon, Elli, started helping her father as a practical midwife. Surprisingly, his incapacity became a benefit among the Ottomans and especially among

the Turkish population. Turkish families felt protection and a kind of security and had all been choosing him to examine their wives and help them upon delivery, exactly because his contact offered the best possible discretion for he, a non Moslem practitioner, could not offend them. This fact alone, that he could not see them, provided an ethical advantage according to their cultural beliefs. Elli, for several years, was always invariably been stood in by his side, and her presence was an additional advantage for Lefakis, as her gender made her too, a favorite for the Turks [9-10].

Epilogue

Panagiotis Lefakis was a skillful obstetrician and humanist. He was blind but with a great desire to exercise his art. He had lived in times and lands of great turbulence. However, he had tried to keep the balance between Greece and the Ottoman Empire and always had a good medical practice for all, for both Christians and Muslims.

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