"THE LOST CYCLIST"

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By Mark Gavoor, Glenview IL, 31 August 2010
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The title, The Lost Cyclist, caught my attention and piqued my curiosity. What lost cyclist? So, I clicked on the link to get more details. When I got there, I read the following:

This fascinating account details the journey of Frank G. Lenz, a young man who set off from Pittsburgh in May 1892 to bike around the world atop a new "safety" bicycle, only to disappear mysteriously two years later in Turkey.

1892? Turkey? Now mere curiosity gave way to full-fledged interest. Two years later, would make Frank Lenz being lost in Turkey, Ottoman Turkey, around the time of the Hamidian massacre of the Armenians. A further internet search on Frank Lenz revealed that he was missing 90 miles east of Erzerum. This means the Lenz disappeared in the heart of Armenia around the time of the Hamidian massacres of 1895. There had to be an Armenian connection and component of this story. Being both a cyclist and Armenian, I had to go to the lecture. Plus Lincoln Square is a cool place in Chicago to hang out on a Friday evening.

The reading was at a quaint, eclectic, book store called the Book Cellar. It is a book store, espresso bar, and wine bar all rolled into one. It is the kind of charming place that Barnes and Noble stores try to emulate in their cookie cutter ambiance. They can only beat a place like the Book Cellar on price not charm.

The bookshop was packed. It is not a huge store, especially when compared to the large chain storefronts. There were forty to fifty people in attendance to hear David Herlihy speak. They probably sold about that many books and probably more than that number of beverages. It was a good evening for the bookstore and the author. It was also a very good evening for the audience. There were people in the audience listening to Herlihy wearing bike jerseys. So, it was a serious cycling audience.

The history that Herlihy unveiled was fascinating. It gave an amazing glimpse into the craze of the early days of bicycling when the big wheel or high wheeler was the road bike of choice and the transition to the safety bicycle, or road bikes where both front and back wheels were the same size, and the introduction of the pneumatic tire. This was a time when roads were not paved and bone crushing injuries occurred when “wheelmen” as they were known went flying over the handle bars. Clubs sprang up all over the country. Touring and racing became all the rage.

Frank Lenz was at the cutting edge of the cycling mania. He rode high wheelers. He raced. He rode on long distance tours with his cycling buddies from Pittsburgh. They rode from Pittsburgh to New York. They rode from Pittsburgh to New Orleans. This did this on the bone crushing high wheelers in a time when the roads were for the most part unpaved rutted dirt roads.

Frank Lenz excelled more in long distance touring than racing and sought to make his mark as such. He decided to tour the world and sought sponsorships from the popular adventuring magazines of the day. While he would be the third to cycle around the world, he decided to uniquely brand his tour in two ways. First, his tour would be longer than the other two. He would go from Pittsburgh to San Francisco, cycle in Hawaii, Japan, and then across China. He would go through India, Persia, Turkey to Istanbul, and then through Europe to France, England, and then end in New York. Second, he would carry a camera with him to document his progress and make his trip even more enticing to magazine sponsors. Lenz was a real camera buff and rigged mechanisms to snap photos of himself while riding. The camera was hardly compact but the state of the art “portable” Kodak of that era.

These early cyclists who toured the world were true adventurers. Just 120 years ago, foreign countries were truly different, truly foreign. Locals in many places had never seen a bicycle. They did not even know what bicycles were. They did not know because there was no world media, there were no phones of any kind, and people lived in isolated cultural clusters. Herlihy makes the point several times about rural Chinese peasants not trusting foreigners to the point of wanting to kill them. Besides the lack of paved roads and no easy means of communication, parts of the world were quite dangerous for bicyclists to be traversing alone as Frank Lenz sadly found out. He was

warned about avoiding China if at all possible. He was especially warned about not cycling through Turkey. He should have listened.

There was no more dangerous place than Eastern Turkey, or the Armenian highlands. It was the waning days of the Ottoman Empire. Armenians, a downtrodden class, were awakening and wanting more: more freedom and more self-determination. This was in no small part due to the missionaries who being unable to convert the Turks and Kurds focused instead on luring Armenians from orthodox Christianity whatever denomination of Protestant the missionary was representing. The struggle was approaching armed rebellion as the Armenians took over the Ottoman Bank in Istanbul and there was a rebellion in the Eastern Armenian town of Sassoun.

Abdul Hamid, the Sultan, the Sublime Porte, had an Armenian problem in the time his empire was crumbling. He was not fond of these Christian subjects. He sought to solve it by making life even more difficult for the Armenians. He organized the Kurdish tribes in militia units with the express goal of quelling any Armenian notions of revolution. This was the environment Frank Lenz cycled into in 1892.

Between the Persian border and Erzurum, Lenz disappeared. It took weeks before his sponsors and friends in the US even knew he was missing. It took months more before the editor of the sponsoring magazine would be embarrassed into sending someone a la Stanly searching for Livingston to find Lenz. The second part of the book is the story of Will Schatleben of Alton, IL in Turkey trying to uncover what happened to Lenz. Schatleben was the second to tour the world by bicycle along with his friend Thomas Allen. Schatleben and Allen were celebrities and had cycled recently from Constantinople to Peking. So, Schatleben knew the terrain, was eager to accept this new adventure to find Lenz, hopefully alive, and the magazine thought Schatleben would sell more magazines especially if he found Lenz alive.

Schatleben never did find Lenz nor his body. He was convinced that he was killed and robbed by a local Kurd brigand and his followers. He could not prove it though and was quite frustrated with Ottoman government dragging their feet, trying to blame the disappearance of Lenz on Armenians. Five Armenians were even arrested for the crime.

It was most interesting to read a third party view of the Armenian conditions east of Erzurum in those days. Schatleben reacted along clear religious lines favoring the down trodden and miserably treated Armenians over the ruling Kurds and Turks who were depicted just as Armenians of that generation would have. Schatleben expected more from Alexander Watkins Terrel the US Counsel to the court of Abdul Hamid. But, the US was no more influential over the Ottomans than they are over the Republic of Turkey today . Abdul Hamid assigned Shakir Pasha to escort Schatleben to Alashgerd and environs to get to the bottom of the Lenz affair. An Armenian priest of Chilkhani, Der Arsen, plays a roll. Schatleben was in Erzurum and witnessed the October 31, 1895 massacre of the Armenians there.

It must be noted that Schatleben spent time in Athens on his own cycling trip around the world. His Armenian connection began then when he met and became good friends with Serope A. Gurdjian who was one of the Armenians who participated in the takeover of the Ottoman Bank. I found this all simply fascinating.

There is no point in over explaining what Herlihy brilliantly recording and colored with his expert narrative. It is a very good, engaging, and informative read. This book is a wonderful glimpse into the world of the 1890s in the US, Europe, and what they called the Orient back then. It was a glimpse into the early days of cycling. The Armenian connection was unexpected and wonderful bonus for me.

Click here for the link to the June 21, 1895 New York Times article about the disappearance of Lenz.

See also from same author:

Our Last Name Is Gavoor