

## THIS BEAUTIFUL EARTH: PHOTO ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA THE STRAIT AT ISTANBUL

Over there, on the other shore, is Asia!” my wife said, pointing across the water. We stood at the edge of Europe. This was Istanbul, a city spanning both sides of the strait called the Bosphorus. Being there on the shore of the strait that divides two continents vividly reminded me of the reality of “one world.”

In this city travelers from Asia first encounter Europe, and it is here that travelers from Europe catch their first scent of exotic Asia.

I came to Istanbul in June 1992. It had been 30 years since my last visit. I had come from Cairo, a little more than a two-hour flight away. Hot red “fire flowers” had decorated the streets of Cairo, but cool-hued tulips greeted us at the airport in Istanbul. Going out into the city streets, the atmosphere that I so dearly remembered from 30 years before had not changed: magnificent Byzantine architecture; obelisks jutting into the Turkish-blue sky; the minarets of mosques; the city’s seven gentle hills overlooking the sea; the beauty of Arabic calligraphy, each an artwork in itself; mosaic murals and arabesques. Every scene was like a painting. Filling the air was the scent of spices and coffee, the aroma of barbequed lamb, the clamor of the bazaar.

There were many more cars and tall buildings than before. Suddenly, I noticed a group of people walking with large packages on their backs, and was told that they were on a shopping tour from neighboring Bulgaria. After the Eastern-European revolution of 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the flow of people in and out of Istanbul increased dramatically. They came from Eastern Europe to sell their wares, or to shop for goods in Turkey for sale back home.

The people are strong. To those who must struggle each day to make a living, national boundaries imposed by political powers may be no more than an impediment.

I arrived at my room, from which I had a view across the Bosphorus. The strait measures about two-thirds of a mile across on average. It is narrow enough to swim across. There is an old tale in these parts about a young man who so longed to be with his lover, who lived on the opposite shore, that each evening he would swim across the water to see her, and then back again. Where there is passion, distance is no object. No place is too far away. If so, then how wide can the “strait” that separates country from country, race from race, really be?

The building in the foreground just overlooking the strait is Dolmabahce Palace, once the residence of the Ottoman emperor. After the Turkish Revolution, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the fledgling country’s first president, moved the capital to Ankara. Whenever he came to Istanbul, however, he stayed at the palace. It was in a room at Dolmabahce Palace that he died on Nov. 10, 1938, at the age of 57. Since then, the hands of all of the clocks in the palace always point to 9:05, the time that morning of the president’s death.

President Ataturk once said, “Cherish old friends, and make new friends.” This expresses the heartfelt wish of the father of a nation — his wish that his country, which is surrounded by many neighbors, enjoy lasting peaceful relations. He was deeply aware of the dangers of being isolated from international politics. Japan, which he viewed as a model of modernization, to this day fits his description as “a country with no nearby friends.” This is a dangerous condition.

At the Grand Bazaar, endless row after row of shops form a virtual maze for shopping

tourists. Istanbul itself has come through a maze of several thousands of years of history. Once part of the Greek world, then a center of Christendom, it is today a hub of Islam. That history has created a mesmerizing multi-layered image. A thousand shades of cruelty and glory, a thousand faces of love and anguish—the thoughts and ideas of countless lives lived permeate every corner of the city like the scent of musk. A diverse array of people walks the streets: Arabs and Greeks, East Asians, Russians, Eastern Europeans; people with hair as dark as ebony, as red as a sunset, as blond as strands of pure gold. This city is the world.

What is race? Harvard professor Nur Yalman, himself a native of Turkey, has said that racial conflict is not a problem among races, but a problem among those in power. The powerful tend to fan the flames of enmity toward other races in order to garner support for themselves and their aims.

Where is the current of history headed?

Beneath the surface waters of the Bosphorus, there flows a deeper current. The water on the surface flows southward from the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara at about two-and-a-half to three-and-a-half miles per hour. Beneath this, however, from about 130 feet down, flows a gentler current in the exact opposite direction.

Amid the tumult of the century's end, the groundwork for a global human family may not yet be complete. Anxiety about the new era has given rise to a tendency to revert to and take refuge in that old tribal consciousness known as nationalism. Japan is seeing a particularly dangerous movement in that direction. Yet beneath this current of the times there flows a gentler, opposing current.

On the evening of the day we arrived, we were invited to attend the Istanbul International Art Festival. Gracing the opening of the event was a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

"Humanity, embrace!" How appropriate a song for this city! Afterward, we went outside to watch a fireworks display. Glowing bouquets of roses blossomed again and again over the night sky of Istanbul.

*Fifteen in a series*