

EDITORIAL

A literature reference on the 1918 Spanish flu outbreak

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The National Theatre of Greece at Agiou Konstantinou Street in Athens, Greece was designed in 1891 by the Austrian architect, Ernst Moritz Theodor Ziller (Serkowitz, 1837-Athens, 1923), and it was built between 1895 and 1901 (1). At the right of the main entrance of its Central Hall, inside the building, there is the statue of Gregorios Xenopoulos (Constantinople, 1867-Athens, 1951), a well-known Greek novelist, journalist and theatrical writer who originated from the island of Zakynthos in Greece (2,3). Gregorios Xenopoulos first became known with his novel entitled 'Man of the world' (Ο Άνθρωπος του κόσμου) in 1888. One of his most notable contributions was that during the whole first part of the last century, he was the Editor-in-Chief of the now-legendary Greek magazine for children entitled 'The Education of Children' (Η Διάπλασις των Παίδων). During this period, he was also the magazine's main author, where he was signing with different names, including the comical name of 'Ananias'.

Recently, we came across the October 6th, 1918 issue (4) of this magazine, where we detected a Gregorios Xenopoulos' reference on the 'Spanish' influenza pandemic performed almost at its beginning in Athens, Greece. Notably, Ananias, who was infected by influenza, begins his introduction of the issue with a joke, while later on he describes in detail the acute onset of his disease, his symptoms, as well as the management approaches used in 1918. The author could not even imagine the catastrophic effects of influenza the next few days, which devastated the population of the nearby Greek Aegean Sea island of Skyros in less than 30 days (5,6). His unique literature report follows, which has been translated into English:

'Athens, 6 October 1918.

As a child, I remember, I had laughed a lot with a joke about a conceited courtier of Louis XIV. One day, the King

asked him: -Do you speak Spanish Sir? – No, your Majesty! He responded. And immediately, he began to think: 'Why did He ask me about this? He probably may want to send me as an ambassador to Spain!... What a shame that I don't know the language of the 'hidalgos' and the bullfighters!... But, could I learn it? Of course! I could learn it, if I really wanted to!' And from this day, he began lessons to learn Spanish! For a Frenchman, this wasn't very difficult and after one month the conceited courtier was fluently speaking Spanish! -Your Majesty, he announced the news to his King, I have learnt Spanish! -Oh, really? Louis XIV answered him. So, then, you can... read the 'Don Quixote' from the original text! The auspicious ambassador was really surprised! I remember this joke again the days that 'Spanish' influenza visited Athens. And I said to my friend Azarias:

-Do you know Spanish?

-No, my Ananias, I don't.

-You should learn Spanish as soon as possible!

-But why?

-Firstly, because you will be able to study the 'Don Quixote' from the original text. And secondly, if Mrs. Influenza visits you, you will be able to get on with her; I have heard that Spanish is the only language that she speaks.

Azarias smiled without saying a word. But what happened was that before Mrs. Influenza visited him, she visited me. And then I realized that the advice that I gave to him should have been given to me. What a shame really that I don't know Spanish. As only if I could speak Spanish, I would be able to get on with this odd lady. The first thing that I would beg her would be not to invade so suddenly - she could understand me, if I could speak to her in her language. What a devil! Forty degrees of fever, suddenly, without any warning are not a joke! The invasion of forty crazy masqueraders in the saloon, during the carnival celebration, wouldn't increase the temperature as much as the invasion of this lady. Despite the fact that 'children' of Andalusia are warm and lively, in a foreign place, they should behave in a distinctive way... I would also beg her not to stay for so long! Forty days visit is performed not by the Armenian, but by the Spanish lady... As for forty days, I couldn't stand up on my legs, as during all these days I was obliged to entertain my crazy visitor... Hot drinks, quinine, suction cups, mustard plasters, foot washes, tonic regimes and so on... And as I didn't know Spanish, I couldn't even study, during the hours that Mrs. Influenza was letting me alone, the 'Don Quixote' from the original text!...

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