

From Tarsus to Tacoma...

The Remarkable Career of Professor Lyle Stanton Shelmidine

The following article is based on "Searching for Dr. Shelmidine" which is scheduled to be published in 2013 as a part of a special 125th anniversary issue of Arches, the alumni magazine of the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington.

It did not take long for those of us in Dr. Shelmidine's Middle Eastern History class at the University of Puget Sound to discover that he was an expert on the region. He had taught school in Turkey, travelled widely throughout the Middle East, and was fluent in Turkish as well as multiple dialects of Arabic. Stan Shelmidine was one of those professors you never forget. I can see and hear him as vividly today as when I studied under him more than fifty years ago.

Lyle Shelmidine, universally known to his friends and students - at least behind his back - as Stan, was a man of medium stature, prominent facial features, and dark complexion - the legacy of his mother's French Huguenot ancestors. His father's family came to America from Germany and England. Both families migrated to the newly created state of Iowa to take advantage of the free land being offered there prior to the American Civil War.

He was born in Spencer, Iowa, in 1906, the sixth of ten children. His father owned a clothing store and bought and sold farmland. His mother, grandmother, and three sisters were all teachers. Both parents were amateur musicians. He lived a normal, small-town boyhood among his numerous siblings. His greatest pleasures were music, baseball and public speaking. As a teenager, this latter skill led to his being asked to read the Sunday sermon to the congregation when the pastor of his local Congregational church went on vacation. He later remembered that his interest in the history and geography of the Middle East came from the pictures and maps of the Holy Land contained in a family Bible.

Graduating from Spencer High School in 1925, he was accepted at Iowa's tiny Grinnell College. Founded by Congregationalist missionaries in 1846, Grinnell was well-known for its teaching of a radical social gospel based on "the law of liberty" and the "ideal of service." Shelmidine fit right in. He served as president of the Liberal Club, summing up its purpose in a letter to the student newspaper. "The Liberal Club was formed with the purpose of attacking some of the self-satisfied mossback spirit which is found in many places on campus." He also played the cornet and during the summers led an orchestra that performed at nearby resorts.



In 1930 Shelmidine graduated from Grinnell with a dual major in history and philosophy. Within a month, in response to an earlier application, he received an appointment from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to be an instructor at the American College in Tarsus, Turkey. Founded in 1888 as St. Paul's Institute, the American College had, by the time Shelmidine arrived in August 1930, survived the First World War, a subsequent French occupation, the founding of the Turkish Republic and a state-sponsored repression of religious education. Fewer than fifty students were enrolled, but they included the sons of some of Turkey's most important families.

Writing home to his mother from Tarsus on November 12, 1930, he told her that with the exception of "one hike into the mountains... my teaching keeps me very busy. I have charge of the printing shop, referee some games, teach music, and study." He proudly told her that he had been invited to spend his first



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summer at the mountain retreat of Fahri Bey, the local leader of Turkey's ruling political party, a former general, and one of the founders of the Turkish Republic.

He became fluent in Turkish and during the next three summers he traveled to Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jerusalem, Syria, Trans Jordan, Iraq, Greece and Germany. In the summer of 1932 he embarked on a dangerous two-week horseback trip into the mountains of central Turkey, during which he visited historic ruins, ancient churches and mosques, and even troglodyte caves.

His passport and an unfinished, handwritten account of that trip, complete with drawings of what he had seen, are among his papers located in the Shelmidine Room at the Collins Memorial Library at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington. Among his papers there is the printed program from a poignant going-away party held in his honor at the American College that took place on May 24, 1934. Each of his

students signed the program and added a short sentiment in English. One wrote, "After seven year's long life, try to have a wife."

In August, Shelmidine returned to Spencer to get on with his life, if not to find a wife. Based on his experiences in Turkey and his travels throughout the region, he was able to obtain a graduate assistantship at the University of Iowa during 1935-1936 while he finished a Master's degree in history. The subject of his thesis was "The Reasons for Turkey's Entrance into the World War."

It was the bottom of the Great Depression; money was in scarce, and Shelmidine badly needed a job. He applied to several teacher placement agencies and to the American University in Beirut without success. Finally, in mid-August 1936, he was offered a one-year temporary position at the small and struggling College (now University) of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington as an instructor of history.

His temporary appointment at CPS became permanent, and in 1939 Shelmidine was promoted to assistant professor after obtaining his Ph.D. in history from the University of Iowa, presenting a dissertation entitled "Anglo-Turkish Relations: 1907-1914." He went on to take post-graduate courses at Princeton University in the summer of 1938, studying Arabic and Islam under the renowned Arabist and author, Phillip K. Hitti.

Always a keen observer of world affairs, Shelmidine carefully followed events in Turkey and the Middle East during the years leading up to World War II. Turkey remained neutral until August 1944, but after the Russian invasion of Bulgaria convinced her leaders of the future outcome of the war, she severed diplomatic and commercial relations with Germany and finally declared war on the Axis in February 1945. Until then, neutral Turkey (like Switzerland and Portugal) became a fertile battlefield of intrigue and espionage for thousands of spies and informants working for their competing intelligence services.



CPS Staff about 1933-34:
From top row, left to right: Ferit Alpiskender,
Mr. Shelmidine, Dr. Ali Tars; Grace Towner,
William Sage Woolworth, Pauline M. Woolworth,
Mr. Mendenhall; Hakkı Bey, Ahmet Aksoy.



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Against this backdrop, Shelmidine volunteered for the U.S. Navy in April 1942, receiving a commission as a lieutenant in the United States Naval Reserve on June 2 of that year. In August, he received orders to report to the naval training station at Quonset Point, Rhode Island, for eight weeks of basic officer training. He then attended a three-week basic naval intelligence course in New York City. Upon graduation, he was assigned to be "in sole charge of the Turkish Desk, Southern European Section of the Intelligence Branch of the Office of Naval Operations (ONI) in Washington, DC," where Shelmidine would work for the rest of 1943.

Created in the 1880s, the Office of Naval Intelligence was a underfunded and little-appreciated component of America's "battleship navy." Under an agreement dating back to the 1920s, ONI had responsibility for intelligence activities - such as they were - in Turkey, Greece and the Balkans. Its primary function was to collect, synthesize, and distribute information about foreign navies and their intentions from open sources and by intercepting and decrypting foreign naval codes and communications. They also obtained information through spies and paid informants. By 1943, ONI was still underfunded, understaffed, and underappreciated. It suffered from internal

dissension, revolving-door leadership, growing competition from competing intelligence entities and, after Pearl Harbor, a general crisis of confidence.

Turkey was hardly on ONI's radar screen. There was not even a naval attaché assigned to the American Embassy in Ankara until after the Germans invaded the Balkans in 1941. However, the prospect of Turkey joining or even cooperating with the Axis powers created a vital need to know what the Turks were thinking and doing and for that, trained linguists and Turkish specialists were required - of which the U.S. Navy had precious few.

In September 1943, ONI decided to send a special naval mission to Turkey. The commander of the mission was Captain Gail Morgan, USN, a 1916 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and a pioneer naval aviator. Morgan had commanded the Quonset Point Naval Air Station when Shelmidine was undergoing basic

training there but it is unknown if they knew each other at the time. Morgan was an interesting man - handsome, debonair, and sophisticated - who had already commanded several air squadrons, important naval air stations, and completed several postings at the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations. Once in Turkey, Morgan's duties were expanded to teach air tactics at Turkey's Naval War Academy. On October 22, he wrote to Admiral Ernest J. King, the U.S. Chief of Naval Operations, requesting that Stan Shelmidine be sent out to Ankara as his assistant.

Shelmidine, still running the Turkish desk at ONI, received his orders on January 8, 1944, to "proceed to Ankara, Turkey, and upon arrival report to the Naval Attaché, American Embassy, for temporary duty as Assistant to Instructor in Naval Air Tactics at the Naval War Academy and to proceed to such other places as may be necessary for a similar temporary duty." The orders made clear that the assignment was "in addition to your present duties," and were to extend until the completion of the "current academic year" at the academy which was expected to end in July.

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