

Letter from Professor Martin Silberberg to Dr. Ralph Smith

Panama, October 6th. 1936

BY the time this letter will reach you it will be already a little chilly in Halifax and the gay time of society events will not be far off. Meanwhile we feel somewhat relieved by the rainfalls, which started about a week ago after three weeks of sustainable heat and closeness. It is practically raining day and night, though not yet very heavily. The rains will increase however within the next six weeks, until we shall be over-satisfied.

Meanwhile we had opportunity to see some more of the country and to get in touch with more people. The country itself is most interesting, absolutely uncultivated, and the natives live positively under conditions we know only from movie pictures.

A drive into the interior is the most thrilling experience. On both sides of the permanent, very modern road, tower close jungles. Here and there we see a village, where people live in huts covered with palm leaves, cook in one single pot on an improvised stove consisting of three rocks, and live on rice, corn, bananas, cocoanuts and other tropical fruits, which by the way, are delicious. With every mile farther down the country with the gorgeous mountainous landscape one feels, however, the discrepancy between the country and the modern city of Panama, and the spontaneous question arises as to the justification of a large modern center in a wilderness like this; not to speak of the University and the Agricultural and Technical College, which are going to be opened before very long. After a while of careful watching events and men one realizes the old slogan "all that glitters is not gold", and behind that pretentious and glittering city is really nothing but the same primitive conditions. It elucidates only the fact that the boom in the city is unsound from the very bottom. As long as there was a reasonable president, everything looked still promising, at least to a certain extent. You know from your own experience what is happening, when the government changes. Just now they took my assistant from me, without whom I can hardly manage all the work, and wanted to give me one who is perfectly ignorant about pathology. We have a superintendent, who is not even a medical man, but a former cigar manufacturer. The chief surgeon of the hospital was appointed ambassador to Washington. His place was taken by a practitioner, who was settled in the city as ear, nose and eye specialist, though he never had a training even in this field, whereas the only urologist of the place was appointed postmaster general of the Republic . . . You will easily imagine, how far the interest in science goes, if there is any at all. There is very little amongst the doctors, not because they do not appreciate it, but because they find themselves in strong opposition to the university, conditions which are certainly not unknown to you. You also know the intermediate position of the pathologist. I am fighting hard to push my plans for a reasonable new organization of the pathological department. I am, perfectly willing to resign, if I do not succeed within the next few weeks.