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(PICTURE Ist map) My parents sent me to a nuns' school where my parents to get what they thought would be a proper education in the European tradition. And indeed, for the nuns, the history of the Middle East stopped at 1453, the year that the Ottoman Turks conquered Istanbul, then called Constantinople. Thus, when the biggest Christian city of Europe in those days was taken over by Muslims, in the nuns' eyes this part of the world just vanished into a black hole that was definitely not part of Europe.

So when I, in 1982, decided to study Turkish history and culture at a Dutch university (I wanted to do something exotic, and maybe do something that the nuns would have disapproved of) I had never heard of the Ottoman Empire. Even modern Turkey was a vague concept for me. In the first weeks of my study I was asked to poll people in the street on what they knew about Turkey. The most frequent answer was: 'Midnight Express'. This film, released in 1978, is based on the true story of an American young man. Billy Hayes was caught at Istanbul airport, trying to leave the country with his body packed with marihuana. The film shows his stay in a Turkish prison, which is depicted as a hell full of sadists. The real Billy Hayes came to Istanbul in 1996 after he was released from the American jail he was transferred to (in the film he escapes from the Istanbul jail), and said actually the Turkish prison had been a lot more humane than the American one. And director Alan Parker later apologized for painting such a gruesome picture of Turkey, but it tarnished Turkey's image abroad. Others whom I interviewed remembered the invasion of Cyprus of

1974, and my grandfather recalled 1915, when hundreds of thousands of Armenian citizens of the Ottoman Empire were murdered. Turkey, in short, was scary, backward, aggressive and cruel. It made little difference that it had repeatedly stated it wanted to belong to the West and adopt its universal human values.

The facts, indeed, seemed to contradict that mission. When I visited for the first time, in 1983, Turkey was under military rule. Three years before, the army had ended years of violent upheaval by taking power. Many believe the military let the flames of 1970s political violence burn, and perhaps even started some of the fiery disputes between left- and right-wing militants, in order to justify its own role as savior of the country. Such suspicions continue to this day. Big court cases are currently researching both past allegations of abuse of power, as well as much more recent allegations of military meddling in politics.

(PICTURE: soldiers) Back in 1983, I had never seen so many soldiers in my life. They were on every street corner with machine gun in hand and cartridge belt over their chest. The policemen too all had a gun on their swaying hips, but nobody –apart from me—seemed to take any notice. Despite those menacing first impressions I found the Turks to be extremely warm and friendly people, and quickly made friends here in Istanbul. When I was drinking a cup of tea with my new acquaintances on a terrace in Taksim Square, I innocently asked about the Kurds. The whole terrace ducked and I heard a loud ‘sshhh!’. The military had forbidden the use of that word, and many were tortured severely for defying the ban. The creation of a nation state where everyone would renounce their different origins and call himself a Turk, has been a high priority during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

We've come a long way from there. In September the High Education Board in Ankara granted permission to a university to set up a department for 'Living Languages in Turkey'. Which is a way to say Kurdish without offending anyone, like the ultra-nationalists. (PICTURE: baby girl) And recently a baby girl made the headlines because she was given the name 'Kurdistan' by her parents. Not only were the parents not thrown in jail, the authorities also accepted, albeit reluctantly, to register the name. Kurdish books are now freely available, theatre plays are staged in Kurdish, and on every street corner you can hear the language being spoken.

But I remember the days, a decade after my first visit, when I used to travel as a reporter in the Kurdish regions. Soldiers would search the luggage of everyone on the bus and rip the cassette out of the dashboard player, screaming at the driver if he had been playing forbidden music. I remember farmers who would beg me to come and see their village under siege by the army. They smuggled me in, and they cried while showing me their cattle, shot dead, their crops burnt on the field, and the fruit trees they had been forced to cut down at gunpoint. (PICTURE: caravan) I remember the caravans of people coming over the hills, fleeing their torched villages, squatting in the streets of towns, with nowhere to go. Or the mourning and pleas for justice of a father whose son wanted to be a writer, but was found murdered by death squads on the shore of a lake.

In those days I was married to a Turk. He was a very western person, who had spent years of his childhood in Paris and Geneva because his father was a diplomat, and studied at an arts academy in Italy. He knew more about European history than I did, was well-read in English and American literature,

and listened to jazz and classical music. (PICTURE: me on mountain top) But when I came back from my travels in the southeast of his own country and told him about the horrors I'd seen, he would not believe me. None of my friends here in Istanbul would. 'How come our own newspapers don't write about this?' they'd ask me, rightly. I had often heard from my colleagues in Kurdistan how the newsdesk at headquarters in Istanbul would change their stories. They would turn atrocities done by the army into crimes committed by the Kurdish rebels, the PKK. Not until much later, actually when the odds had turned and the army was starting to win the war, did Turkish newspapers sporadically report on what the army was really doing. By then, because of all the soldiers who were dying, public opinion had turned against the Kurds so much, that people sort of thought the Kurds deserved their fate.

My Turkish husband's best friend was a Kurd. He would often point that out to me as proof that Turks and Kurds were like brothers. That may have been true, but whenever his Kurdish friend would hesitantly talk about the pain of being denied one's identity, my husband would waive his words away. 'You don't even speak proper Kurdish. And why would you? Kurdish is the language of construction workers, not of educated folk,' he'd say.

(PICTURE: Ata) Like most of his fellow countrymen he saw the army as the one and only reliable force that would keep Turkey on its pro-Western course. He believed the army, under the inspiring leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, had founded the republic of Turkey. This modern, western state replaced the Ottoman Empire, which they viewed as backward, Islamic, and totalitarian. Ataturk and his army had wrenched the country from the hands of

the last Ottoman Sultan after World War I, a sultan who, worst of all, had cooperated with the European colonial powers trying to rip his country apart.

Like many Turks, my husband loved Western culture, but at the same time was extremely suspicious of the intentions of the West. In World War I the European Powers had delivered the final blow to the Ottoman Empire and carved up its territory amongst themselves. Ataturk and his forces only managed to reconquer part of this land. Like many, my Turkish husband believed that the ultimate goal of Europe is still to conquer Turkey, or at least to weaken Turkey continuously in order to control it. That is what he had learned and what the Turks are still being taught at school. So painstakingly my husband would explain to me, evening after evening, that what I had witnessed in the Kurdish areas was not the quest of a people demanding their rights, but a dirty game of superpowers. And if only they would stop meddling, Turkey would return to what he saw as the blissful state of the early republic.

(PICTURE: Islam) Likewise, he believed that during the Cold War America had supported the Islamic groups in Turkey. In fact, many people think that the West did this in order to counter the popularity of communism or pro-Soviet views. So again, for him the rise of Islamic political parties had little to do with the will of the people, but was all about weakening and controlling his country. He wholeheartedly supported any ban of such a party, undemocratic or not. I can assure you that also today most of the people who did not vote for Mr. Erdogan's AKP believe he is America's puppet. They fear that America wants to turn their country into a moderate Islamic state which can easily be trampled underfoot and used by Washington to control the Middle East.

Sadly, our marriage did not survive all these plots, even if we did not spend all of our time arguing. (PICTURE: Camels in Ist) In fact we spent a lot of time enjoying all that Istanbul and the west of the country had to offer. (Many people, including my husband, considered everything east of Ankara to be backward and uninteresting.) But even Istanbul was an exotic city back then, in the 90's. Its little alleys smelled of spices, of rotting vegetables, of diesel engines and fried fish. Often you'd see men with horse-carts navigating the traffic. Other men with little handcarts would sell illegally copied cassettes with oriental, whiny music or the deep voices of *arabesk* singers, the Turkish blues. (PICTURE: arabesk) My husband and our friends looked down on this music as being an unfortunate deviation from the path set out by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, indulged in by the common man. In those days, indeed, the state radio, with its mission to educate people, would ban *arabesk*. Private radio stations only began to emerge in the 1990s.

There were few restaurants, even though the Turks love their food. The country had not yet shaken off its poverty, caused by the loss of the empire less than a century before. There was one concert hall and a handful of cinema's. Apart from the Topkapi Palace there was hardly a museum that deserved the name. Bookshops were a rare sight. There were three or so private art galleries. And the year I moved here, 1989, there were exactly four high rise buildings and just one or two sets of traffic lights.

Like all over Istanbul every couple of months a truck would come to our apartment building and unload a huge pile of what looked like rubble on the pavement in front of our door. This was lignite coal for the heating of our building and hot water in the summer. Swinging his sledge hammer, our janitor

would spend days reducing these blocks of stone to burning-size chunks, which he or his wife would shove in the furnace next to their living quarters in the basement. In winter the air in the city was yellow and thick with the sour smell of brown coal.

I remember how thrilled I was when finally a real supermarket was opened. Before that I had to shop in little stores that never sold anything beyond basic supplies. And now this supermarket even offered some foreign products like filter coffee. There was real tightness, and not only in the shops. For example, my husband once nearly fainted when I kissed him in the street. He was mortified, not because he didn't love me, but openly showing affection was simply not done. Believe it or not, even laughing out loud in public was frowned upon.

(PICTURE: high rises) Compare that scarcity to now, when girls with their boyfriends can go to the cinema or roam the huge shopping malls one sees in every Turkish city, Everything you dream of is for sale. Istanbul alone has some 70 'megamalls' either built, under construction or in the planning stage. New bookshops, restaurants, and bars spring up like mushrooms in every city from the Iraqi border in the east to the Egean shore in the west. Every self-respecting rich family has established their own winery, or else opened a museum for modern or classical art. When I worked as a cultural attaché at the Netherlands Embassy in 1990 no foreign museum would trust the Turks with their collection. Now we've had exhibitions of Picasso, Rodin, Dalí, Chagall and Rembrandt, just to name a few. And interestingly enough these are no longer visited only by the westernised elite. Also amongst the more traditional population one can sense an enormous hunger for knowledge, for culture.

(PICTURE: Swim in Golden Horn) The old factories, storage depots, coal plants and tobacco warehouses along the waterfront here in Istanbul have made place for private universities, hotels, art centres or parks. The once so frequent power and water cuts hardly ever happen anymore. We heat our houses with natural gas, imported from neighboring countries like Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan, and can breathe the air again. The water of the Golden Horn used to stink so badly that a boat ride would make you sick. Now people are swimming there again, and international boat races are held there. Turkish designers are conquering the world, blending Ottoman grandeur with Anatolian village style. In clubs like Ghetto or Babylon, or at the many festivals, musicians and theatre bands from all over the world come to perform. (PICTURE: happy shop girl) Where the streets used to be dominated by people walking face down, shoulders drooped, now I see more and more raised heads and straight backs. The young people, at least the educated ones (and there's more and more of them), push out their chests while walking. There is a spring in their step. No longer do they view their Ottoman past as something to despise, as the generation of my ex-husband was taught to do, but they are proud of it.

(PICTURE: art) On another front writers, artists and filmmakers are playing a big role in breaking the taboos around the Armenian question, the Kurdish question, or the dishonorable way the Greek-orthodox were forced to abandon their home country, all in the name of creating a nation state. I used to be the representative of the PEN Committee for Writers in Prison. Every other month a publisher and I would go through a long list of writers who were in prison and decide who was entitled to a donation from PEN. The publisher himself and his wife went to prison several times because they published anything that challenged the official ideology, just because they believed people

should be free to inform themselves about all opinions. In 1994 their publishing house was even bombed by the state.

Today's Turkey is definitely a different country. So, nothing like that could happen anymore? Can we say Turkey has finally joined 'the free West'?

On the whole I'd say Turkey is closer than ever. The Turks themselves often compare their progress with the way the Ottoman military band used to march: two steps forward, one step back. (PICTURE: Hrants funeral) One such step back was obviously the murder of the Armenian editor-in-chief and founder of newspaper AGOS, less than three years ago. There is strong evidence that 'rogue elements' within the state had links to that crime – like so many before. On the other hand the astounding public outcry afterwards, is a big step forwards. (PICTURE: Hrants funeral 2) Also the fact that some people are currently on trial for being part of those same 'rogue elements' of the state is an encouraging development. They seem however to be like the many-headed dragon from Greek mythology: each time you cut off a head, two grow back.

This dragon consists of a network of people within the army, the bureaucracy, the judicial, the media, and the educational system who have been controlling the country for a long time. (PICTURE: Menderes hanged) By means of military take-overs or toppling governments, by banning political parties, or even political discussions at university and school, by indoctrination and manipulating public opinion they claim they keep Turkey on its pro-Western course. But by preventing the growth of a healthy democracy, they risk doing the opposite.

They're not without popular support, however. A year ago I did a story about freedom of expression for Dutch television. Many of the people I talked to believed that if everyone was allowed to say freely what they thought, the country would be wrapped in violence in no time. Many argue that these forces in the state may be dark, but at least they've kept the country together when the Kurds wanted to split it. And they're keeping this Islamic government in check, preventing it from showing its true colors and founding an Islamic Republic.

This government is determined to finally kill the dragon, but we'll have to wait and see if they can. Others have tried before. (PICTURE: Cat in Tarlabasi) But if they succeed a dark cloud will lift. Obviously not only the people in Turkey would benefit from that. A truly democratic Turkey would set an example for the whole region, and it would be a mighty ally for Europe and America.