

NORA ŞENİ

When only Turkish

would do

Translated from the French

by Josy Wilkinson

‘Ligo
nero
separakalo.’

It was a never-ending surprise to hear my mother’s foray into Greek asking for water at the same time as my father was ordering food in Turkish. Whenever she addressed a waiter or a salesgirl in a haberdashery shop she knew instinctively which language to use.

For me, a child growing up in a less and less cosmopolitan Istanbul, this intuition was as magic, or one of my mother’s varied talents. I took it for granted and was in no way surprised, as she was selecting some material in the darkened shops of Pera, that she’d make no effort to wheel and deal with the salesperson in Turkish. She’d list the sheet’s colours and qualities in French, continue in Greek or even occasionally in Judeo-Spanish *albei*. She never doubted for a second the other person’s ability to understand her. She was usually justified by the turn of events. They would find themselves, without a word being said, in world of eye contact, recognising mysterious signals which brought them closer together and quietly locked them in complicit isolation.

Because I took sensual pleasure in articulating precise and vigorous Turkish, I felt excluded and failed to understand that for my mother, burdened with her multiple Russian, Roumanian and Jewish origins, there was no pleasure in a language replete with ‘ch’ and ‘u’. My wonder at her instant ability to differentiate between who spoke what and came from where, would dissolve the moment I heard her broken Turkish. Her state of grace crumbled before me through her inability to use words properly. Her vocabulary was hesitant and stumbling. Her accent remained

unidentifiable. She didn't drag her 'ch' towards 's' like the Greeks, nor did she remove the dot from the 'i' like the Armenians or use sing song like the Jews. All the same, the problems she had using the language of the country she'd grow old in irritated and disturbed me. For the meantime, it was a relief when she landed squarely in any of the other languages of Pera, Moda or Fenerbahce, Istanbul's European districts and holiday resorts.

But the moment came when nothing but Turkish would do. One day, she said 'bleu' in French and no one understood her. Incapable of calling up the Turkish word for material, she left without ordering anything. She was aghast when people made no effort to understand her or when they showed no embarrassment at their ignorance of levantine languages. She didn't dare acknowledge the scorn this indifference masked. Far from accepting the importance attached to speaking correct Turkish for up-and-coming minorities, she remained entrenched in her fin de siècle Stamboulia world where those from different ethnic origins simply had to be at ease in French to show they belonged to proper society. The degree of fluency was measured by the time it took to emerge from the 'mahalle' or traditional neighbourhood where locals spoke their own language and had their own customs.

But why French when, two centuries before, in the embassies and salons of Pera, one was greeted in Italian? Even today, the Catholic churches in the quarter are in the hands of Italian priests. When, and how, did this slide towards French take place? I never really gave it much thought.

When in the 1960s the question whether to send children to Jesuit high school or American college arose, parents with commonsense chose English. French remained linked to the fantasy world of high culture and nostalgic traditions.

Once, early in the 1960s, fly-posters appeared overnight on walls with the furtive cry 'Citizen, speak Turkish!' They were removed almost immediately, never to be seen again. They came at a time when the vernacular map of the city was losing its dimensions, its linguistic variety. The poor neighbourhoods of Corne d'Or, Balat, Hasköy were being drained of Jews sucked by Israeli populist politics with its offers of housing and work. Greeks were also leaving and the haberdasher on the corner felt

rather isolated. As for me, I had fun sticking stubbornly and ostentatiously to French in the street and the dolmus (shared taxi). My hope was to provoke a 'Citizen, speak Turkish!' to which I would have retorted that I could teach Turkish to anyone. But that response never came, except from local kids who seized on the excuse to beard me. I have long since abandoned such enticements.

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