

ÖMER ERZEREN

Four Kurds of Beyoğlu

Translated by

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AHMET

The stench from the sewers

is worst in the basement. There's a bad smell in the rooms too. There are flies everywhere. The plaster is coming off the walls. The room is about twenty square metres. Tens of spikes are nailed on the walls. Mens' trousers, shirts and ripped plastic bags hang on the spikes. There are machine-made rugs, rolled mattresses and quilts, a propane gas stove and half a dozen shoe polish boxes strewn on the floor. A huge rubbish bin stands in the middle of the room. On the wall, a framed picture of a black tent, sheep, meadows, forests.

Nine adults share this room with their three children. "God bless my uncle. He brought me here to live with him." Ahmet was eight years old when he moved to Istanbul from a Kurdish village. Now he is nineteen. He still lives with his uncle in the same room. He pays eight million lira rent each month.

He found a job in Istanbul as a shoe-shine boy. "At first I was polishing both the shoes and the socks." Kaç- run away-was an early word in Turkish. The boys shout "Kaç" when they see the municipal authorities coming. If caught, their shoe-shine boxes are confiscated. A new one costs several days' work. "They've caught me at least fifty times in the last six years." Once, not only did they take his box but they beat him on his fingers with a baton at the police station because he spoke in Kurdish with his friends. His client was a policeman.

Now they are day labourers, working on construction sites.

But their troubles aren't over. One day a young man dressed in sports clothes took Ahmet and his friends in his car. They were to carry cement bags. When he heard them chatting in Kurdish he started screaming "Thieves! Murderers!" They were fired.

MEHMET

Dampness apart, this basement room doesn't smell too bad. On the left side of the small hall there is one room, on the right side of the hall hangs a green curtain. The hole in the floor behind the curtain is used as the toilet. They even have running water to wash hands and dishes. Mehmet lives here with his elder brother and his cousin.

His vest changed colour because of dirt. The interior is different from Ahmet's bachelor room. The walls are covered with the posters of singers, presents from a friend: Mahsun Kırmızıgül, İbrahim Tatlıse's "I am against oppression", Emel Sayın and Ballet Folklorico de Mexico (choreographer: Amalia Hernandez). There is also an erotic poster of a fat woman: Filiz from Sincan-Gulu gulu dance. The floor is covered with sacks. They sit on the mattresses. A string stretched from wall to wall serves as a clothesline.

Ahmet advises Mehmet: "Move from here before winter. Even chickens die here." However, he rented this place only four months ago. There are spots of mould on the walls. Only their "capital" is protected against damp. Goods to be sold on the barrows are placed on boxes to stop them getting damp. There are 30-40 kinds of capital: nail clippers, scissors, knives, electrical Turkish coffee pots, mouse traps, glue, extension leads, lighter fluid. Mehmet says that there is a good trade in glue and mouse traps among the street boys.

At about 10 am each day after breakfast (bread, eggs, olives) Mehmet goes to Taksim Square with his barrow. He returns home round midnight. He usually buys pilav with chick peas and drinking yoghurt at a cost of 100.000TL in the afternoons from other barrow boys to keep him going. Most days he makes three million lira. Half of this goes into his pocket as profit. But the worst thing that can happen is that his barrow is confiscated by the police, along with his goods. Three months ago ten million lira worth of goods was taken from him.

Mehmet is from a village with forty houses. He is sixteen years old but his identity card states he is twelve because his father lied to spare him military service. Mehmet's first work was in the cotton fields. "My apprenticeship is over in street barrow business," he says. Mehmet's elder brother Ismail has a factory job with social security benefits. He was going to find a job there for Mehmet, but it did not happen. Mehmet intends to obtain a primary school diploma by pulling strings and then get a driving licence. Drivers make good money. But he must be eighteen to have a driving licence.

There are things he cannot get used to in Istanbul. Like the water. "The tap water is poisonous. It is not like in the village. We even have to pay for the water." They also treat Kurds badly here in Istanbul. They beat up Mehmet at the police station. They called him a "faggot".

ISMAIL

He is fifteen years older than his fellow villagers. He does not understand why he has had to put up with so many troubles. In their home village they used to grow cotton, lentils and wheat. It was very beautiful in the old days. Ismail's family owned a flock of 200 sheep. Then a man called Turgut Özal came to power. A sheikh came from Mardin. Everybody in the village had a great respect for him. The man turned out to be a swindler. He took sheep, gold and the money from the village and went off with it. Ismail's father planned to buy a tractor and to arrange Ismail's brother's marriage with this money. "Because of the sheikh we were ruined. Then we came to Istanbul."

Over the years Ismail has worked very hard. He now owns two special barrows designed to sell cassettes equipped with their own rechargeable power supply, built-in speakers and glass sides. He rents a garage where charges the batteries overnight. He himself sells cassettes on one barrow; his paternal cousin has the other. He has contacts in the police force who take care of him. He and his wife were married by the imam. They will shortly have their marriage registered so their two children can get identity cards.

RAMAZAN

He met the others years ago. He had been working since he was a child. He does not remember the village near Mardin where he came from. There were sixteen houses there. He does remember that he used to shear the sheep. He last went there in 1988. "I prayed at the grave of my beloved father," he says. The village does not exist anymore. It was burnt down four years ago. His elder brother told Ramazan that the village became a forest.

Ramazan learned the stuffed mussels trade in Istanbul. He is good at it. He knows the best places to peddle his tray of stuffed mussels. Seven years of experience. Sometimes he sells four hundred portions a day. He knows every inch of Istanbul. He sells his mussels both on the European and the Asian side.

He buys mussels in sacks of 300. Together, Ramazan's family run a mussel-stuffing factory. Eleven people. They open up the mussels each evening and stuff them each morning. Ramazan is one of three brothers who sell the mussels from trays. He says, "The stuffed mussels business used to be much better; the costs are quite high now."

Ramazan's elder brother converts the family income into dollars. They have saved twelve thousand dollars in seven years. They are going to buy land in Istanbul. Ramazan does not gamble. He neither smokes nor drinks. He is twenty years old. He does not think about getting married yet. First he is going to save lots of money.

Ömer Erzeren, correspondent of the German daily *Die Tageszeitung*, he recently published: *Der lange Abschied von Atatürk* (The long farewell to Atatürk), Berlin-Zürich 1997.



The 125th vigil of "Saturday Mothers" in Galatasaray, October 1997.