

The Burning of Smyrna/ Izmir (1922) Revisited: Coming to Terms with the Past in the Present

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There are historical events, which, traumatic as they may be in and of themselves, become larger than life as they are inscribed onto the narrative of the nation. The burning of Izmir is such an event. Taking place in mid-September 1922, after the entry of Turkish forces into Greek-occupied Smyrna/ Izmir, the event has a different meaning in Greek and Turkish national history. In Greek national history, the burning of Izmir represents the loss of the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922) and the destruction of the vision of a Greek conquest (*megali idea*) of Asia Minor. The burning of Izmir is inseparably linked to the death of many thousands and the forced migration of over a million Greek Orthodox Ottoman subjects (*Rum*) from Turkey to Greece (Hirschon 2003). The burning of Izmir is much less marked in the Turkish national narrative in comparison with the “liberation” of Izmir from Greek occupation by the Turkish army on September 9, 1922. In fact, some observers have remarked upon the notable silence in the Turkish public sphere concerning this event (Millas 2003).

In this article, I revisit the burning of Izmir through the life history narrative of Gülfem Iren, an elderly Smyrniote/ Izmirian and witness to the burning of her native city. I show that as a member of a family of local notables, Iren moves between two different and contradictory narratives in telling her story. One narrative parallels the national narrative, while the other might be characterized as a local, Izmirian narrative that harks back to intercommunal relations in cosmopolitan Ottoman Izmir. I suggest that whereas the former prevailed in the past, the latter has come to dominate in the present. I argue that Iren’s life history narrative, coupled with the sheer weight of cultural production and debate on the recent past in Turkey suggest that Turkish society is at a turning point, at which not only society’s “others” but its very elites are coming to terms with the past and re-evaluating what it means to be Turkish.

Can the experience of “winners” in war be characterized as trauma?¹ As I show below, in the case of Izmirian Turks, trauma may stem from their experiences under the Greek occupation, a sense of shared urban identity with the “losers,” and guilt from the bloodshed that occurred during the Greco-Turkish War. The debate over Izmirian identity points to the contradictions of Turkish national

¹ The work of the German writer W.G. Sebald is a case in point, being as much about the suffering of Jews during World War II as about the suffering of the wandering German writer in exile (Sebald 1997).

identity, in so far as the native Muslims of Izmir had culturally more in common with their Christian (and Jewish) Izmirian neighbors than with the Muslim immigrants from former Ottoman domains who replaced them and became their compatriots in the Turkish Republic.

The Historical Context

Located on the western coast of Asia Minor, Izmir is one of the oldest urban settlements in the world. Incorporated into the Ottoman Empire in the 15th century, it remained a provincial town until the 17th century. Gradually, Izmir emerged as a cosmopolitan city of economic strength and cultural sophistication (Goffman 1999). Its population grew and diversified, including Greek Orthodox (*Rum*), Armenian, Jewish and Muslim Ottoman subjects as well as Europeans – Italians, French, English, Dutch, and Germans. Trade and industry were largely controlled by Levantines and native Christians, who benefited from the granting of trade privileges to Europeans and those under their protection. In the 19th century, Izmir became a regional power on the order of Salonica and Istanbul, also legendary port cities. In many ways, Izmir developed a cosmopolitan identity, which transcended the boundaries of particular ethno-religious communities (Kechriotis 2004). As the Ottoman Empire weakened, however, and the age of nationalism began to drive communities apart, a tragedy was in the making. The rise of Greek and Turkish nationalism and World War I sealed Ottoman Izmir's fate. In the rush to colonize the “sick man of Europe” Izmir was a great prize.

Following its defeat in World War I, Turkey was occupied by Great Britain, France and Italy. With the backing of the British, the Greek army occupied Izmir on May 15, 1919. As the Ottoman government in Istanbul acceded to the occupation of what remained of the Empire, a resistance movement emerged from within the military and bureaucratic elite. Mustafa Kemal, an officer in the Ottoman army, emerged as the leader of this movement. A National Assembly was called in the central Anatolian town of Ankara. It is from this base that the Turks would fight a battle on three fronts: against the Armenians in the east, the Greeks in the west, and the French in the south (Shaw and Shaw 1977, Zürcher 2004).

Izmir was occupied from 1919 to 1922. During this time, a protracted and bloody war was fought between the Turks and the Greeks on the western front. This was not only a fight against foreign occupation: it also took the form of internecine warfare as some native Christians, including Greek Orthodox (*Rum*) and Armenians joined the Greek army. After a series of battles, which took a heavy toll on both sides, the Turks managed to defeat the Greek army, entering Izmir on September 9, 1922.

It was several days afterwards, on the 13th of September when the Turkish army, including its leader Mustafa Kemal, had already entered the city that Izmir began to burn. This date has remained vague in Turkish collective memory,

allowing some to report erroneously that the fire occurred before the Greek retreat.

The circumstances in which the fire started remain a matter of contention. Once it had begun, the wind carried the flames in the direction of the famous *Frenk* or European neighborhood. By the time the fire had burned itself out several days later, this legendary neighborhood was completely destroyed. In the chaos that ensued, much violence took place. While those holding European passports were able to leave, Christian Ottoman subjects (Greek Orthodox and Armenians) tried desperately to escape while the Turkish army and local Turks settled their scores (Umar 1974).

Any discussion of the burning of Izmir inevitably raises the question of responsibility. Not surprisingly, the national narratives of Greece and Turkey raise no doubt about the culprit: according to the Greek (and Armenian) narrative, it was the Turks (Housepian 1998), and according to the Turkish narrative, it was the Greeks and/ or the Armenians who burned Izmir (Lowry 1988). A few sources, on the other hand, suggest that at the very least, Turkish inactivity played a part. Bilge Umar, an art historian and Izmirian, writes:

Turks and Armenians are equally to blame for this tragedy. All the sources show that the Greeks did not start the fire as they left the city. The fire was started by fanatic Armenians. The Turks did not try to stop the fire. (Umar 1974: 326)

This is how Lord Kinross, Atatürk's biographer, describes the event:

This internecine violence [between the Turks and Armenians] led, more or less by accident, to the outbreak of a catastrophic fire. Its origins were never satisfactorily explained. Kemal [Mustafa Kemal Atatürk] explained that it had been deliberately planned by an Armenian incendiary organization. Others accused the Turks themselves of deliberately starting the fire under the orders or at least with the connivance of Nur-ed-Din Pasha. (Kinross 1965: 324)

Falih Rifkî Atay, a journalist and contemporary of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk who was in Izmir at the time wrote in his memoirs:

Were the ones responsible for the fire simply the Armenian incendiaries, as we were told at the time? Many suggested that Nurettin Paşa [the Commander of the First Army and governor of Izmir] had much to do with it.

He significantly adds:

Why were we burning Izmir? Were we afraid that if the mansions, hotels and bars remained, we wouldn't be rid of the minorities? This is not simply an act of destruction. It has to do with a feeling of inferiority as well. It's as if any part that resembled Europe was fated to be Christian and foreign, and surely not ours. Would reducing the city to bare land be sufficient to protect its Turkishness? (Atay 1965: 324-5).

Atay suggests that the Turkish victors identified Izmir's cosmopolitanism with the native non-Muslims and resident foreigners, and strove to destroy the past in order to create a new, Turkish Izmir. But, where did native Izmirian (Muslim)

Turks stand? Was there not a cosmopolitan elite of Muslim background that shared an urban identity with the so-called *gavur*² Izmir?

The debate as to who burned Izmir continues up to the present. One of the aims of this paper is to muddy the waters further and to suggest that greater ambiguity enters the picture as one moves from national narratives to local narratives. Let me make it clear, however, that my goal is not to reach “the truth” about what happened in Izmir. Rather, I am interested in what narration of the event tells us about the relationship between history, memory and identity in the present. Using the case of the burning of Izmir, I suggest that a cosmopolitan Izmirian identity is re-emerging in Turkish (re-) constructions of the past in the age of globalization.

The Aftermath: Izmir Under the Turkish Republic

The Turkish Republic was established on October 29, 1923. Members of the Ottoman dynasty were forced to leave the country. A series of reforms established Turkey as a secular republic looking to the West as its model. The new Turkey necessitated a new history, which would establish the basis for a new Turkish identity. The population of Asia Minor was conceptualized in this narrative as a homogeneous population with shared values, a shared ethnic identity and a shared language. This had serious consequences for communities not defined as “Turkish” due to religious or ethnic background (Neyzi 2002).

Greece and Turkey agreed at Lausanne in 1923 that the Greek Orthodox population of Asia Minor (excepting Istanbul) would be exchanged with the Muslim population of Greece (excepting Western Thrace) (Hirschon 2003). Thus, the bad blood that had come between Christian and Muslim Ottoman subjects meant that families on both sides would be forced to leave their homeland, their property and their neighbors behind, resettling in what amounted to a foreign land—but which was constructed in the national narratives of the two countries as their homeland.

There was no room for ambiguity in either the Greek or the Turkish national narratives, which mirrored one another (Herzfeld 1986). Greece was transformed by the influx of refugees from Asia Minor. This encounter resulted in much suffering on the part of the refugees and in the rise of distinct cultural products such as music, novels and memoirs (Politis 1998). The Center of Asia Minor Studies in Athens recorded the recollections of refugees (Umar 2002, Millas 2001). To this day, Greeks with origins in Asia Minor maintain a distinct identity, as a recent highly acclaimed Greek film from 2003, *Politiki Kouzina* [“A Touch of Spice” directed by Tassos Boulmetis, though a literal translation of the title reads “Cuisine of the City” or “Political Cuisine”], shows.

² A pejorative term for non-Muslims.

In Turkey, it was the “liberation” of Izmir that was celebrated. The emphasis was on building a new, Turkish Izmir and on erasing the past. The fire zone was transformed in the 1930s with the construction of the Izmir fair grounds and a monument commemorating the liberation of the city by Mustafa Kemal (Kırlı 2002).

The Present: The Transformation of the Public Sphere

Following the military coup of 1980, a debate gradually emerged in the public sphere in Turkey about the history of the Republic in general, and about national, ethnic/religious and regional identity in particular. This was triggered by a number of factors, including the rise of Islamism, the rise of a Turkish and Kurdish diaspora in Europe, the conflict between the Turkish army and the Kurdish separatist movement PKK, the coming of age of a new generation known as the “post-80 generation,” the rise of a global media, negotiations on Turkey’s accession to the European Union, and postmodernist debates on identity (Bozdoğan and Kasaba 1997). The rediscovery of history in Turkish society in the post-1980 period suggests that the attempt by the Kemalist modernity project to construct a new identity has been constrained by the multicultural past of the Ottoman Empire. It also suggests that Turkey’s incorporation in the global economy and accompanying debates on cultural identities have created the conditions for the rise of nostalgia and a new interest in memory and history.

In the case of Izmir alone, in the last decade, historical studies, journalism, memoirs, novels and documentary films about the history of the city have proliferated. Some of these works represent the pre-Republican past in nostalgic terms, and focus on historical continuities. In a recent novel by Mehmet Coral (2003) for example, a Turkish man subjected to hypnosis in the course of psychoanalysis finds that he also has a Greek *persona*, and the novel tells the story of the tragedy of the Greco-Turkish war from a humanist perspective. Significantly, the novel is entitled, “Izmir: 13 September 1922” – a departure from the previous silencing of this event. Researchers who have translated the narratives of Greek refugees from Asia Minor from Greek into Turkish have underscored the importance for the Turkish public of hearing both sides (Umar 2002; Millas 2001). Cultural production in Turkey has become highly diversified, reflecting the charged debate on national identity.

Oral History

Today, few individuals remain alive who experienced the occupation of Izmir and its aftermath. Little research on the experience of either native Izmirians or immigrants existed in Turkey until recently. Recent studies, with few exceptions,

have been based on historical documents (Berber 1997), or take the form of fictionalized accounts (Yalçın 1998).

Oral history can make an important contribution to debates on recent historical events which are highly contentious and/ or about which the historical record remains largely silent (Butalia 2000). Oral history narratives speak to issues in the present even as they ostensibly focus on events in the past. Accounts of past events are always recounted in light of contemporary events and concerns. The subjective and presentist nature and narrative structure of oral history make it a useful means of studying how the past is understood, interpreted and experienced by subjects in the present (Portelli 1997). Oral historians have mined life history narratives to come to terms with the ambivalence, ambiguity, contradiction and lack of cohesion, which characterize subjective experience and its articulation in everyday life (Passerini 1999; Ochs and Capps 2001). While oral history has been viewed as providing an alternative to official/ national/ public narratives (Perks and Thomson 1998), as I show in the case below, the relationship between national and local narratives is a complex one, as oral history narratives often draw on a variety of sources.

While oral history began with a study of elites, it has since become better known as the study of “the people without history” (Wolf 1982), particularly the nation-state’s (or global economy’s) “others” presumed not to have a voice of their own (Perks and Thomson 1998).³ My own recent work has focused on oral histories of minorities in Turkey (Neyzi 2002). This research convinced me, however, of the need for oral history research on elites in order to better understand the process of construction of national identity in Turkey, which faces the danger of being taken for granted in the literature.

If oral history is to be characterized as a mixed genre (Portelli 1997), elite oral history is a mixed genre par excellence. As I show below, the oral history narratives of elites tend to include references to a multiplicity of sources.

Finding an Informant

I became interested in working on Izmir as a result of a series of meetings between Turkish and Greek academics from 1999 to 2001 at Sabancı University, Istanbul and Panteion University, Athens. The goal of these meetings was to use the case of the burning of Izmir as a means of investigating the construction of national narratives in Turkey and Greece.

Little previous oral history work has been conducted on this subject in Turkey. Few witnesses remain. I chose to interview an elderly informant from a promi-

³ This presumption and the complex power relationship between oral historians and their informants that it engenders has been addressed by many authors (Passerini 1997, Portelli 1991) and continues to pose a challenge to oral historians.

nent native family in Izmir. Gülfem Iren was born in 1915. I recorded conversations with Gülfem Iren over four meetings.⁴ My goal was to develop a long-term relationship with my informant and to see how she would speak of the burning of Izmir at different periods within the same interview and across different time periods. I aimed to contextualize the narrative of the event in the interviewee's life as well as in the period of narration.

Gülfem Iren was seven years old and about to enter second grade at the time of the burning of Izmir. She considers her experiences up to that age as among the most memorable (and traumatic) of her whole life. In speaking about her life, she would come back time and again to events she viewed as central to her childhood: the occupation of Izmir, the burning of the town of Manisa, the burning of Izmir and its aftermath.

In interviewing Gülfem Iren, I tried as much as possible not to intervene as she told me her life story her way. When I interviewed her, Gülfem Iren was at a stage in her life when she had retired from active life, and she spent much of her time thinking about and in a sense reliving her childhood in her imagination. Iren told me that although she had always been interested in the history of her family and of Izmir, she spoke little about it to anyone: 'It's the first time I speak at home about these things. There was no need.' She added, 'No one asked me for these stories with any curiosity.' At the same time, as a highly intelligent, articulate adult, Gülfem Iren remained engaged with the present. While unable to go out much, she followed the news, including recent debates in the media. She made a point of following publications on the history of her native city. Her reading included novels and memoirs of Turkish and Greek Izmirians. Her life story narrative invariably speaks to the Turkish present and its engagement with the past.

Gülfem Iren was also aware of and articulate about the ways in which her own feelings and beliefs changed over time. While speaking to me, she would often debate with herself, and the contradictions in her narrative became more and more apparent. Our conversation flowed in and out of, and became part of, the debate in contemporary Turkey about national identity. Iren shared books on Izmir with me. Eventually, she herself became moved not only to speak, but to write. At the age of 87, she decided to write her memoirs (Iren 2004).

As a person deeply interested in the history of her native city, Gülfem Iren realized the significance of her role as witness. Yet she was also aware of the complex relationship between history and memory. At one point in our conversation, for example, she said, 'I wonder if a stranger who doesn't know me listens to all this, would they think it was the fruit of the imagination or would they believe it to be the truth?'

⁴ I interviewed Gülfem Iren on April 11, 2001, August 8, 2001, August 17, 2001 and September 17, 2003.

Local Elites

On her father's side, Gülfem Iren belongs to the renowned Katipzade family. The family traces its lineage to a local magnate (*ayan*) executed by the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II at the beginning of the 19th century. It was Mahmut II who initiated the centralizing reforms aimed at wresting power from the hands of regional notables. The many heirlooms in Iren's possession include a genealogy that traces the Katipzade family back to their "murdered" ancestor. It is from this central event in her family history that Gülfem Iren's own relationship to the center of power, whether Ottoman or Republican, stems. According to Iren, the fact that his descent from a local notable is recorded in her father's birth certificate suggests the control over the ages maintained by the center over regional contenders for power. Today, the family maintains a foundation (*vakıf*) in Izmir established in Ottoman times, of which she is now the oldest member. According to Iren, what became the residence of the governor in the famous Konak area of Izmir was originally built for her forebears. Her family is mentioned in a history of the city (*Üç Izmir* 1992).

Iren tells an unusual story about the way her elder sister, a doctor, defied Mustafa Kemal when they met at a reception in Izmir. This anecdote is very unusual given the adulation of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Turkey:

My sister returned to Turkey in 1925. The War of Liberation had ended; Izmir lived with Atatürk. There was a reception in the governor's palace. The hat reform had just taken place. My sister wore a hat she brought from Europe. They were introduced. My sister sat inside in an armchair, with her back to the window. Strolling in the garden, Atatürk came to the window and said, "Lady doctor, take off your hat." Turning around, my sister said, "If that is an order, no." "No," he says, "It is not an order. It is a request to see your beautiful eyes." "Then I will" she says and she does.

On her mother's side, Iren belongs to another well-known Izmir family, the Sahipzade. As if speaking of the recent past, she casually says, 'My mother is *Selçuklu*'⁵. Originally from Erzurum, this family is said to have arrived in Izmir many generations before by way of the city of Afyon. Whereas her father's family, the Katipzade, were landowners who owned agricultural land, Gülfem Iren's mother's family were industrialists who owned urban real estate.⁶ Iren's great-grandfather Mustafa Efendi was a Muslim rentier and industrialist who owned land in the neighborhood later destroyed by the fire.⁷ Mustafa Efendi became extremely wealthy by establishing three factories in Izmir: a foundry, a

⁵ From the Seljukid Empire, 11-13th c., which predated the Ottomans in Asia Minor.

⁶ Frangakis-Syrett (1999) notes the lack of studies on the Muslim merchants of Ottoman Izmir. Partnerships such as that of Gülfem Iren's grandfather with local non-Muslims were not uncommon.

⁷ The existence of absentee Muslim landowners in the largely non-Muslim neighborhood destroyed by the fire is rarely noted.

factory that produced rose oil, and one which produced silk thread. Gülfem Iren says her mother gave her a candlestick produced in this foundry with the words, 'Keep and cherish this product of our bloodline.' Partners in this venture included the Khedive of Egypt and a Greek Orthodox (*Rum*) merchant from Izmir.

Iren spoke in detail of her maternal grandfather, Mehmet Şevki Bey, a fascinating man educated in a Jesuit university in France as well as at Al-Azhar in Cairo. Iren recounts how her grandfather, who earned the nickname "*Gavur Mehmet*" for his close relationship to Europeans, went to Al-Azhar in Cairo in order to be recognized as a learned man in the Muslim tradition (*ulema*). She says, 'I believe he tried to be a European with the Europeans, and a Muslim with the Muslims. You might call him a Muslim dandy. I imagine him as an unhappy man.' Iren's depiction suggests that her grandfather represented a new Muslim elite which emerged from the traditionally insular Muslim community into a new relationship with the non-Muslim bourgeoisie.

According to Iren, her father was the first person in the family to become a professional. Her father became a lawyer, her uncle a doctor. To be a professional rather than a bureaucrat or a landowner was new. This is how she describes her parents' life:

Izmir was a very modern place. My mother was covered in the Muslim neighborhood, but when they would go to the European neighborhood my father would say, "Please remove your veil." In Izmir there was a famous hotel of white marble called the Kramer Palace. Everyone would sit on the terrace in summer; there was music, a very snobbish setting. They would go there, drink beer together. My mother told me that my father would have her sit a little to the back with himself in front as if to give her some camouflage.

Iren's description shows that women's roles in the public sphere varied according to which neighborhood they inhabited: the Muslim or the *Frenk* (European) neighborhood. It also expresses the mixed feelings of the Ottoman male *vis-à-vis* this change.

Gülfem Iren was born into a comfortable, wealthy home in the suburban neighborhood of Karşıyaka dotted with the summer homes of Izmirians. This is where she was raised although the family was originally based in the Muslim neighborhood in the city proper. She remembers a large, close, extended family whose members distinguished themselves from others by a kind of feudal arrogance ('*azamet*'). When Gülfem was a child, for example, her mother did not allow her to bring schoolmates home. She remembers the household help:

Until my mother's time, each daughter would take her Circassian maid and black nanny with her into her new home at marriage. In our house, Vartyu [the Armenian seamstress] sewed me the most fashionable dresses until I was seven. The ones working inside were Muslim. But the others [the non-Muslim help], they were more knowledgeable.

Iren's family had its roots in the Muslim neighborhood, which was in the foothills of Izmir, separated from the European neighborhood located along the sea shore. Speaking of the city as a whole, Iren underscored its cosmopolitan character, which also shaped its Muslim population: 'They named Izmir "*Gavur* Izmir". In Izmir, Muslims lived within a Levantine world. My grandfather was educated at Al-Azhar in Egypt but he read books in English and French, played the piano, rode horses.' According to Iren, Izmir's cosmopolitanism is reflected in its dialect and cuisine: 'In the Izmirian dialect, nouns commonly derive from Greek, Italian or French. For example, an oval serving plate is known as *piyate*. A fork is *peron*, an apron, *prostela*. The cuisine of Izmir is mainly Greek and Armenian. My father spoke Greek well. During the occupation of Izmir, it saved his life.'

Iren makes a distinction between Izmir and Istanbul, the Ottoman capital. According to her, Izmir was more cosmopolitan and more autonomous. There is a tone of defiance to her words as she compares the two great cities:

We are really different because Izmir was a cosmopolitan place. It is not like Istanbul. Istanbul means the traditions of the Ottoman Empire. In Izmir, Muslims are within a Levantine lifestyle. So in Izmir, you do not kiss the hem of the Sultan's or the Pasha's robe. There is hand-shaking and doffing your hat.

The Occupation of Izmir (1919-1922)

Izmir was occupied by the Greek forces on May 15, 1919. A time of celebration for much of the Greek Orthodox (*Rum*) population, this was a time of mourning for the Muslim population. The violence perpetrated by the Greek Orthodox population collaborating with the occupying forces is well documented (Umar 1974). While very young at the time, Gülfem nevertheless has a few memories of the occupation period. One pleasant memory involves a visit to the European neighborhood. She remembers being allowed to choose earrings in a jewelry shop, and being served lunch in her father's law office in the same neighborhood.

Other memories are less pleasant. Gülfem vaguely remembers her father arriving home at the time of the occupation, when what saved him were his Greek Orthodox (*Rum*) friends and his command of the Greek language. At a time when 'the ones who wore the fez' were being shot in the streets, her father's Greek friends concealed him in their club, sending him home wearing a hat and accompanied by the club guard (*kavas*) whose blue uniform with gold stripes she still recalls.

Iren's anecdotes provide evidence of networks based on friendship, co-residence, occupation, lifestyle and shared language(s), which tied individuals from different ethnic-religious communities together.

There is also a scene she recalls in the marketplace in Karşıyaka where a man was killed with a bayonet for refusing to spit on a Turkish flag:

We got off the boat in Karşıyaka. There was a crowd in the marketplace. My mother held me by the hand. They were telling the Turk to spit on the Turkish flag. There was shouting and crowding and we couldn't get through and they killed the man for not spitting. I couldn't forget it for a very long time. There was a red flag on the ground and I remember the shirts with blue and white stripes the shopkeepers used to wear. I don't know who the Turk was. But I know they killed him.

Father's Death

Iren's father died during the occupation of Izmir. She was seven years old. It was in the spring of 1922, several months before the liberation. She was about to begin her second year in primary school. Her father traveled to the nearby town of Manisa, where the family owned agricultural land. It was necessary during the occupation to get a permit to travel by train. While able to obtain a permit to travel to Manisa by train, he was unable to get one to come back. Being forced to walk back through the mountains on foot, he became ill upon arrival, dying shortly thereafter of pneumonia. This early death was a terrible blow to the family. His wife was left at the age of forty with her children in an occupied city.

For Gülfem, the loss of her father was the beginning of a series of disasters linked to the occupation:

We could only live together until I was six and a half. That is why I still suffer from being fatherless. During holidays when everyone celebrated, I would cry. Sometimes I would hide behind a curtain or under a quilt, repeating to myself, "Father! Father!" and listening to the sound of my own voice.

She initially blamed the occupation for her father's death: 'When I was a child, they were my enemy. I used to say, "They killed my father." Later I said it was his fate, but I can never cover my loss.'

Trauma in Manisa

After her father's death, Gülfem's childhood was marked by a second disaster the family experienced on the verge of the Turkish victory. It was late August, the harvest time for grapes. Her father, who would have made the trip to the family properties, was dead. Her mother and aunt had no one to help them except their elderly father. Taking Gülfem, her aunt's two children and their black nanny along, the three adults traveled to Manisa. There is in Iren's possession a historic photo taken in the family garden for the permit they needed to travel by train. Anxiety clouds the faces of the adults in the frayed black and white photograph.

While at their estate outside Manisa, Gülfem's mother got an urgent message from her father to come into town. The Greek army was on the retreat, destroying everything in its wake. Trying without success to get a permit to travel back to Izmir (the train only carried the wounded from the battlefield), the

family stayed at the home of the Karaosmanoğlu family in Manisa, also a family of regional notables. During this time, they were robbed by a militia of Greek Orthodox (*Rum*) and Armenians. Gülfem recalls her fear as the bandits forced open the secret door to their hiding place – she claimed that the family had been betrayed by their Greek Orthodox (*Rum*) servants. She remembers the intruders destroying the Turkish flags that they were preparing in the hope of a Turkish victory. The whole town fled to the hills. It was here that they would remain ‘for three days and three nights.’

Gülfem says she never recalls Manisa without a shudder. At the time, she was ill, burning with malarial fever. She remembers her thirst, the taste of the brackish water she was forced to drink, the inedible paste women made to pass for bread. But most of all she remembers the fear. The families hiding in the hills above Manisa lived in fear of being massacred by the retreating Greek army:

After escaping the militia towards dawn, we climbed up a dry stream bed to hide in the hills. As we climbed, the city was burning, and we were lit by its light and warmed by its heat. It burned for three days and three nights. I saw the windowpanes of houses explode like bombs. Sacks of grapes stuck together, bubbling like jam. Dead cows and horses, balloons with their legs in the air. Ancient trees keeled over, their roots burning like logs. I did not forget these things. The heat, the hunger, the fear, the smell... After three days we saw the dust rise in the valley below. Turkish soldiers on horseback; we thought they were Greeks coming to kill us in the hills. I remember three soldiers carrying green and red flags. People kissed the hooves of their horses, crying “Our saviors have come.”

Once back in town, Gülfem’s grandfather asked the Turkish commander to give them protection. They traveled by ox cart among the soldiers on their way to Izmir. Iren has never forgotten this trip:

Coming from Manisa. Even today when I tell this story I am shivering. That same mountain road my father traveled on the year before. We left at dawn, arriving in Bornova [a suburb of Izmir] by evening. A trip we could make in twenty minutes today. Imagine the tableau: An ox cart, and inside it an old gentleman in Islamic headdress, two ladies, three children, and a black nanny. The road, strewn with goods, the corpses of humans, and animals. The smell. In the month of September, traveling through the mountains, our heads and mouths covered. I saw a crucified body in front of a burnt building. I don’t know if it was a man, woman or girl, but at that age I saw that crucifix.

The Burning of Izmir

When Izmir began to burn in mid-September, Iren remembers her grandfather taking the children to watch the fire:

It was a couple days after we arrived from Manisa. They said “Izmir is burning.” My grandfather took us three children. We went to the shore. All together, we watched the

city burn. Red flames arose out of the black-and-white smoke. My grandfather climbed upon a rock. He watched for a very long time. When he saw the fire cross over into our property, he climbed down. "Bless you" he said, "What can we do? That's gone now too." My grandfather patted our heads. "Thank God, we are alive" he said.

When I asked her how she had felt at the time, Iren replied:

I felt nothing. For I had lived it already. We burned in Manisa. People accepted the fire, they accepted the dying as well as the killing. I felt nothing. It was only afterwards that I realized what it meant. This was my childhood.

We do not know the "truthfulness" of Iren's account. I did find, however, that she told these stories in very similar ways in different conversations. She claimed that these traumatic experiences remained vivid in her imagination up to the present. She also mentioned that the family continued to speak of these events at home, which she claimed may have been another reason for her to retain her memory of them.

Responsibility

When I raised the question of responsibility, Gülfem Iren began to debate this issue with herself as well as with me: 'You are asking me who burnt Izmir. There are three answers. The Armenians burnt Izmir. The retreating Greeks burnt Izmir. The Turks burnt Izmir.'

After our first conversation, Iren consulted one of her oldest friends, an elderly lawyer also from a native Izmirian family. She reported back to me:

I told him, "There is a young lady who asked me a question, and I want your opinion, who burnt Izmir?" He said, "The Greeks." I said, "Are you sure? How did the fire begin?" He said, "There was an ammunition depot near the Armenian church."

Gülfem Iren told me that when she pressed her friend further, he said that a well-known lawyer of the time had given evidence concerning the arms depot near the Armenian church: 'He showed them the place, and they burnt it.' Iren told me that her friend seemed to regret having spoken, and she was unable to speak with him since he is now very ill. Continuing to debate with herself while talking to me, she asked: 'Did the Armenians torch that depot or did the Turks? I think it is possible that the Turks started the fire. Or if they didn't start it, they did nothing to stop it.' She added, speaking about the Izmirians in the aftermath of the war: 'And then, we didn't say afterwards, "The Greeks, the Armenians burned it." There is also that. So we must have been guilty. But I may be wrong.'

An anecdote Gülfem Iren tells about Mustafa Kemal ties into her narrative about the fire, emphasizing Turkish inactivity if not culpability. While expressing the usual –and very earnestly meant – adulation of persons of her generation for the man who liberated Izmir, she does more. She asks what Mustafa Kemal did – and didn't do – during the fire.

Gülfem İren suggests in her narrative that the liberators of İzmir, “outsiders” nevertheless, sat back while her city burned. In this section, she uses the present tense: note the short, hurried sentences which give an immediacy to her account:

İzmir has not burnt yet. The city is liberated. Atatürk arrives. The Kramer Hotel becomes his headquarters. Atatürk stays at the Kramer Palace for days. His future wife comes to take him to her family home. After Atatürk leaves, İzmir burns, and the Kramer Palace burns. They let it burn. Atatürk was there.

Intriguingly, on the other hand, İren then goes on to justify the Turks’ action: ‘They torched an arms cache, saying ‘this is the only way we will clean the dirt’. In her narrative, she keeps repeating this disturbing phrase: ‘cleaning (or cleansing) the dirt.’ [*pisliği temizlemek*]. İren says:

A great clean(s)ing took place, but were they right or wrong? They were right to some extent because the Ottoman Empire was crushed. It was easy for foreigners to pull pieces off a dying state. Where the fair is now thousands of Armenians and Greeks and Jews were living. That was the only way to clean the dirt. They did it to clean the place. To empty it because they were hiding and they had to search from door to door to find them. Clean(s)ing was necessary to establish the Turkish Republic. There was no other choice. You could not have such a cosmopolitan Republic.

İren then backtracks, acknowledging with equal fervour what has been lost:

I still ask myself whether this should have happened. If my father died because they did not give him a *laisse passer* [travel permit], many others died as well. In the old days, Muslims, Greeks, Armenians and Jews belonged to this land, and trusted in one another. This land belonged to them as much as it belonged to us. We say “it is our homeland,” yes, thank God for today, but it is as much theirs as it is ours.

Here, İren underscores the shared suffering and the former trust between individuals and the shared sense of belonging to place – the cosmopolitan city of İzmir.

Violence, Trauma and Silence

According to İren, when she was growing up, what amounted to a conspiracy of silence existed about the fire in İzmir. She asks herself now, why this silence? She suggests, in a brief and oblique aside, that pressure exerted by the military might be one reason that discussion of the fire was avoided at the time. Today, she feels that this silence needs to be confronted once and for all:

You know what makes me angry? No one is looking for the reasons behind this sad story. They covered it up. People felt like it was a good thing that it was cleaned up, but no one would talk. It shouldn’t have happened. Seventy-five years have gone by.

She tries to explain the reasons behind the silence:

They [the Turks] were finished, exhausted. They had no strength left, material or moral. They came to İzmir, but how? On their last legs. It was such a miracle, this 9th of

September. Nobody thought this victory would happen. When it happened, they were aghast, it was erased. That horror was suddenly erased. That fear was ended, a great joy took its place and they forgot what happened.

The fire is rarely mentioned in Turkish literature or Turkish history textbooks. Early Turkish narratives about the fire, in so far as they exist, are often narratives of joy, as the fire becomes linked to the liberation of Izmir (Gündüz 1928).

Speaking in the present, however, Iren remembers the horror and the violence and is able to empathize with the other side:

I saw their dead in the sea. It had happened before. In '19 it happened; the ones with the fez were thrown in. This time it was the ones who wore the hat. I saw the dead. The bay of Izmir was not cleaned for months. A huge fish gets caught in a fisherman's net, they pull it in, open its bowels and a bag of jewels falls out. We came back; we were home, but for months on end from in front of our door in Karşıyaka we would watch our soldiers pass with bayonets, in front of them desperate Greek men with their hair on end, their beards grown. They took them in a column, their hands tied and shot them in the mountains. Every evening. Not just a day or two but for months and months.

The Aftermath: Continuity or Rupture?

The national narrative focused on rupture. Speaking in the present, Iren focuses instead on continuities. She suggests that the cosmopolitan culture of Izmir survived for years:

Everything did not end right away. There are old habits, old relations, old ways of living that continued for a long time. The old population was very cosmopolitan. No one forgot that for a long time. The jokes half in Turkish half in Greek. And such liberty. Everyone would go out into the garden in the afternoon, drinks would be served, people would chat, some played backgammon, people laughed amongst the roses, the scent of jasmine...

She recalls with nostalgia:

My grandfather had a botanical garden. He had brought and planted trees from all over the world. Even after these calamities it was such a habit that every season hyacinth and tulip bulbs would be brought over from Holland. A day would come when all would bloom. And on that day, everyone would know, the Greek, the Armenian, the Jew, the Muslim, that in Mehmet Şevket Bey's house there is a flower exhibit. Friends and strangers would tour the house, and when ready to leave, they would be offered the juice of whatever fruit was in season. This is a tradition, and if you don't do these things you feel like a part of you is missing.

Iren speaks of etiquette, politesse, friendship, neighborliness, traditions, rituals, language and all the components that go into a shared urban culture.

At the time of our interview, Iren shared with me a copy of a novel by Kosmas Politis (1998 [1963]), a Greek writer of Smyrniote origin. She said:

I really found myself in this book. My childhood. I lived what he wrote about. For example children's games in the neighborhood, the words they used, the toys. I grew up

with them, I used them, I know. Because months and years went by, and old Izmir lived with all its traditions. It lived after its Greeks and Armenians had left, because there is always habit. For example, he speaks here of the streets in the fire zone. He says, "Fasula, Çikuta." He says, "Rose Street." I know. I didn't live there, but I know.

Here, Iren speaks no longer as a member of an ethnic-religious community, but as an individual member of a shared urban culture.

Although they were fellow Muslims and compatriots, native Izmirians kept the Muslim immigrants who had come to Izmir through the population exchange at arm's length for decades. Iren says:

For the people of Izmir the newcomers were very primitive. They were seen as outsiders. They didn't fit in, not for years. By and by there was mixing and mingling and a new generation emerged.

Iren makes clear here the difference in class and culture between Izmir's elites and the new immigrants. She shows that establishing a shared identity requires time. Most of all, a shared identity requires a shared history.

According to Iren, Izmir gradually lost its urban culture as its natives had known it. This is why, for her, who wasn't forced to leave, the city has nevertheless become a place in her imagination:

Izmir is very important for me. I don't feel this when I am in Izmir. I feel it when I am far away. Before the occupation, in the *Rum* Izmir in those days, the best of everything could be found. Even that which could not be found in Istanbul could be found in Izmir. Then a dead era began. Izmir lost its snobbery; it adjusted to the population that came and it stopped being Izmir in every way: in living, in taste, in conversation, in friendship. Everything was burnt, destroyed; all those knowledgeable people were gone. A bunch of peasants and shopkeepers had come, unfortunately that's what they were. They washed the fine furniture in the Greek houses with soap, they broke the colored crystal glass, they destroyed everything. It wasn't their fault; they didn't know, it wasn't the place for them. This was a calamity within a calamity. Fire, destruction, war, killing and then with their arrival, another war.

Here, Iren refers to her fellow citizens as enemies! She suggests that the city was destroyed not only by the fire but also by the administrators and residents who are outsiders. This attitude is very similar to contemporary attitudes in the city of Istanbul towards migrants from villages, which has resulted in nostalgia for the former, cosmopolitan Istanbul of Ottoman times. Despite the elitism of this particular approach, Turks are beginning to recognize the importance of shared history as the basis of identity.

What the Kemalists viewed as new, as modern, Izmirians experienced as regression: for they had already achieved a sense of a shared identity in the public sphere. For Iren, Ottoman Izmir was more developed, more evolved than Republican Izmir. The cosmopolitan past became the provincial present.

Ultimately, for Iren, her sense of identity comes from her family and the place where she has her roots: and this includes the others who feel the same—those who share a cosmopolitan Izmirian identity.

Conclusion

As I have shown in this paper, we find the splitting of Gülfem Iren's life story narrative into several, contradictory narratives. The dominant narrative is one in which Iren's allegiance is to the locality, the Izmir of her childhood and the cosmopolitan past. This makes her remember in a particular way and regret the war and the fire:

Should this have happened? I still think about that, for they had rights in this land as much as we did. Didn't their ancestors come from this land? We say it is our country, our land, yes, we are thankful, but it is theirs as well as ours.

At the same time, Iren identifies with the national narrative:

To establish the Turkish Republic this had to be done. Clean(s)ing was necessary. It was inevitable. You could not have such a cosmopolitan Republic.

While the two narratives that run side by side in Iren's story seem to contradict one another, they both belong to her. Like many Izmirians, and many Turks, she is caught between Turkish nationalism and a cosmopolitan identity based on the social relations that prevailed in urban centers such as Izmir, Istanbul and Salonica before the war forced everyone to take sides. Her life story narrative suggests that while the nationalist narrative may have dominated in the past, the cosmopolitan narrative is (re)emerging in the present, in dialogue with current debates in the public sphere concerning identity politics, globalization and the meaning of the past in Turkey.

Today, there is greater discussion than ever before in the public sphere about the past, whether viewed through the more comforting lens of nostalgia or through the more sobering lens of personal and collective trauma. The question of identity and its relationship to history is a deep wound in Turkish society, which requires a deep incision in order to heal. Facing the experienced past, rather than a comforting nostalgia, also means facing up to the violence perpetrated in this society in the twentieth century. In Izmir, what should not be forgotten is the human tragedy that was experienced by all, including a six-year-old girl, and that a beautiful city and way of life were lost forever.

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