Chapter five: Belonging

One of my favourite anecdotes that described the convivial – and, as I later found out, somewhat starry-eyed – sense of community in Tarlabaşı I wished to convey to outsiders was one told by cobbler Zeki Usta. The story began with a stranger that entered Bird Street on an unspecified late afternoon while a number of children were playing outside. The stranger – in different versions of the anecdote he was "a normal-looking middle-aged man" or "a suspicious-looking middle-aged man" – then tried to lead one of the children away, and when the child resisted, one of the trans* sex workers approached him to ask who he was. The man, pretending to be the child's relative, tried to walk away with the crying child, but the trans* woman – whose identity was never revealed in the cobbler's tale – insisted on knowing his credentials, and said that since she had never before seen him in their street, he could hardly be a close enough relative to walk away with the child. A mild commotion ensued. More trans* sex workers gathered around the man who started to get afraid and left, leaving the child in the care of the women. "See", Zeki Usta would say, "We are a tight community here. These transvestites [*travestiler*][1] saved that child. We keep an eye out for each other." I never found out if the story was actually true, but it illustrated a narrative I often heard in Tarlabaşı, by residents and non-resident critics of the planned demolitions: the neighbourhood, despite the "colourful" and very diverse mix of people, had been able to preserve what many Istanbul neighbourhoods had already lost – a sense of community.

By the time the master shoemaker, the last artisan on his street, shared this story with me, he had known me for several months; we had sat in his shop a couple of times, and I had interviewed him about his history as a craftsman in Tarlabaşı, his family business, and his ongoing court case challenging the pending threat of compulsory purchase. He knew that I, too, lived in Tarlabaşı and that I shared his appreciation of the familiarity and the sense of belonging in the neighbourhood. We both agreed that Tarlabaşı was being vilified unjustly, and he told me the story as a call to solidarity, as an example of something meaningful about the neighbourhood that he could trust me to grasp. This was also the anecdote that Zeki Usta told several people I visited Tarlabaşı with, other

1 Just like the trans* women themselves, most residents referred to trans* persons as transvestites [*travestiler*].

journalists, activists, researchers, friends and family. He would detail it in a joking manner to family and friends because he assumed that I had already brought them onto "our" side. However, he delivered the same anecdote with seriousness and didactic intent to journalists and researchers, relative newcomers in need of convincing–all the more urgent, as it was understood that they might be able to influence the course of the project. While his demeanour and tone changed depending on who he was talking to, he always told this story with the same goal in mind: wanting to prove what a close-knitted community his neighbourhood was in order to convince his interlocutors that Tarlabaşı was worth saving. The story Zeki Usta chose to tell outsiders is even more remarkable because he had witnessed, and presumably been a part of, the violent conflict with the trans* sex workers soliciting in his street that Müge had told me about. The local (informal) trans* brothel, and the teahouse next to it, used to share one entrance, which meant that customers of both businesses had to use the same door. Not surprisingly this became the source for neighbourhood conflict, but at no point did any of the angered parties think to involve the police. Instead, they decided to handle the conflict themselves. Müge was clear in that she believed the interactions between the local men and the trans* sex workers were largely based on fear and informed by hypocrisy, and Müge often derided Hakan and many of his regular (male) customers as "uptight AKP voters" and supporters of their conservative (and discriminatory) policies. However, and despite this, Müge also insisted to me and others how well she got along with Hakan, the local shop owners and the neighbours in her street, because theirs was a tight knit *mahalle* community–the same prized attribute of the neighbourhood Zeki drew attention to with his anecdote.

Zeki Usta was not necessarily very sympathetic towards the trans* community in Tarlabaşı. On a good day he was trans*obnoxious, and like Hakan and other non-trans* residents he routinely referred to his trans* neighbours in transphobic slurs. He believed that their presence and the visible sex work economy were part of the reason that Tarlabaşı suffered a bad reputation. And yet he thought that the anecdote of the trans* women saving the child was the best one to illustrate why Tarlabaşı was not only a neighbourhood worth saving, but also pleasant to live in. This begs the question why it was this story that he retold over and over, when surely there were many others that he, a Tarlabaşı artisan of almost forty years, could have chosen. And Zeki Usta insisted on it whenever I brought around someone new. He would invariably ask me: "Have you told your guests already about that time when the transvestites [*travestiler*] saved the child?" An uninformed outsider might not consider this anecdote to be a virtuous story about Tarlabaşı, a narrative that presented the neighbourhood as a place where a child might get kidnapped off the street, and where trans* women sex workers chased the prospective kidnapper off. It is interesting to dwell on the fact that Zeki Usta, himself not a trans* friendly person, chose and crafted this story into the perfect dramatic explanation of why Tarlabaşı was great, and what, in his eyes, it said about the vilified neighbourhood. A lot of understanding of what is considered a social virtue in a *mahalle* goes into why this is such a touching story that paints Tarlabaşı in a very different light than the mass of stigmatising narratives put forth by the media, the municipality, and the private developer *GAP Inşaat*. His anecdote wanted to prove that Tarlabaşı was a real *mahalle*. Other than any of the anonymous residential blocks and gated communities [*site*] that shot up all over the city, the Tarlabaşı he

described had maintained the familiarity, solidarity, and sense of belonging that fed so much nostalgia in the rapidly changing city.

In this chapter I discuss how anecdotes like the one put forth by Zeki Usta were part of a tactic to refute territorial stigmatisation by centring the neighbourhood around the narrative of it being a traditional *mahalle*, and therefore a place that had social virtue, and was not, like the dominant discourse alleged, a virtueless place.

When I first met Tarlabasi Association spokesperson Erdal Aybek, his first argument against the demolitions was the existence of strong social ties, diversity, and a deep sense of community in the neighbourhood.

> This is a very cosmopolitan place. There are Kurds, Turks, Armenians, Greeks, Arabs, Roma, African refugees, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Assyrians, people without a religion, transvestites, homosexuals. [...] If you look at the mosaic of religions in the project area, it is a real laboratory. [...] We all live here, tolerate each other. We are not at each other's throats. When [Beyoğlu mayor Ahmet] Misbah [Demircan] called us for the first project meeting in 2008 he tried to convince us to agree to it by saying: 'I will rescue you from the transvestites, they have taken over Tarlabaşı.' But we are content to live side by side. If the transvestites who live here will be sent to Fatih, or to Bağcılar, they will have many problems there.

At our first meeting, Erdal had made a point of taking me to Hakan's teahouse, located just around the corner from the association's office on Tarlabaşı Boulevard. It was part of the "tour" that he gave anyone interested to find out about the association's struggle to save Tarlabaşı, and most activists invested in stopping the urban renewal project picked up on his argument that the strong neighbourhood ties were an important reason that Tarlabaşı was not the hopeless case that the municipality pretended it to be. This claim is prone to sentimentalism and romanticisation, as is the idea of the *mahalle* as a space of unspoiled tradition. Sympathetic newspaper articles and media reports underlined the warmheartedness, the tolerance and the hospitality they believed to find in the neighbourhood, not seldomly to the point of well-meaning caricature.

Neighbourly relations in Tarlabaşı were certainly a lot more complicated than this, and the friendly co-existence of inter-ethnic and inter-religious groups, as well as of trans* and non-trans* residents was based on fragile ties of mutual need, constant re-negotiation, and sometimes, as the example of the trans* brothel next to the teahouse has shown, on a truce following a violent conflict. Stigmatised groups also frequently blamed each other for the bad reputation of the neighbourhood. However, while the picture of Tarlabaşı as a rare haven of tolerance, void of prejudice and bigotry, was a wishful effort to paint the endangered neighbourhood in a good light, it is true that conflicts between different communities almost never escalated, and that most residents described neighbourly ties as good. Bahar Sakızlıoğlu and Justus Uitermark (2014: 1373) describe "a 'live and let live' mentality and quotidian form of tolerance" that characterised the neighbourhood prior to evictions and allowed for marginalized groups to live in relative safety.

"All our neighbours are invited", neighbourhood wedding celebration

Photo by Jonathan Lewis

In the face of the constant vilification and the municipality's claim that Tarlabaşı was nothing more than a loose assemblage of relegated people and ruined buildings, void of any sense of community, the romanticised dismissal of everyday conflict and discrimination was just as much a form of stigma management as Zeki Usta's anecdote had been. Such narratives aimed to demonstrate that Tarlabaşı, presented as dangerously "different" in the dominant discourse, was in fact a positive example of cultural, ethnic and gender heterogeneity, "juxtaposed with the homogenising effect of the stigma" (Garbin and Millington 2012: 2075).

What is even more important than residents and activists glossing over the negative aspects of living with marginalised communities in Tarlabaşı, and what I would like to focus on here, is how residents expressed what they valued in the place where they lived. For this analysis it is irrelevant if the anecdotes and descriptions that people shared were factually true. It also does not matter if Zeki Usta had participated in the door blockade and the attempt to remove the trans* brothel years ago, or if the relationship with his trans* sex worker neighbours was sometimes strenuous, conflicted or even hypocritical. Erdal Aybek did sometimes express bigoted views about black Tarlabaşı residents, while at the same time lauding their presence as "proof" that the diversity in Tarlabaşı "worked". No social environment is without discord, without pain and struggle, but the way that people talk about their social situation can be analysed independently of that. When Zeki Usta told the story of the child snatcher and the trans* women who successfully interfered, he meant to impress on outsiders the strength of neighbourliness, of solidarity ties, and of the virtuousness of his neighbourhood. Tarlabaşı residents, in full acknowledgement of all the problems that did exist, tried to prove that their neighbourhood met the requirements for being a real *mahalle*, even if this happened in sometimes unconventional ways.

After the Easter service at the Syriac Orthodox church

Photo by Jonathan Lewis

Therefore, it is necessary to recognise that the way people talked about their stigmatised neighbourhood and which anecdotes they chose to convey – in full knowledge of what Tarlabaşı was – were "social facts" (Durkheim 1965), and therefore data in itself. Conversations about what they liked about their neighbourhood did not happen in a vacuum, but against the backdrop of looming evictions and the prospective destruction not only of people's physical homes, but also of their solidarity networks and their community, their *mahalle*. These narratives therefore focussed on reasons why the neighbourhood did not deserve to be destroyed. They challenged the municipality's argument that the planned demolitions aimed to improve Tarlabaşı and were done for the good of its inhabitants. Wacquant (2007: 69) alleges that territorial stigmatisation leads to "a dissolution of 'place', that is, the loss of a humanized, culturally familiar and socially filtered locale with which marginalized urban populations identify and in which they feel 'at home' and in relative security." Neighbourhoods that carry a spatial taint are no longer such places, but "spaces" void of community and intra-local solidarities that residents detest and seek to leave as soon as they are able (ibid.: 70). This is too rigid a statement for Tarlabaşı, where residents' relationship with their neighbourhood was not only more layered and complicated, but also more positive than that.

In this chapter I propose the notion that the traditional *mahalle* as a social concept is a social virtue attached to place, and that the point of Tarlabaşı being a real *mahalle* was being used by residents to argue against the stigma of Tarlabaşı as a virtueless neighbourhood. This was not merely a point of argument. The collectivity, the solidarity, and the mutual exchanges that people described and experienced were deeply virtuous social structures that are characteristic of the idea of a *mahalle* in Turkey. The recurring discourse of talking about Tarlabaşı as a *mahalle* weaved the neighbourhood into a larger narrative about Turkish modern urban life and Istanbul, and it positioned Tarlabaşı on

the virtuous side of that story. It staked a claim that Tarlabaşı, despite the intense stigma attached to it, was a place that one could feel and express belonging to.

First, I describe what a traditional *mahalle* signifies in the Turkish context, and why a *mahalle* is considered a socially virtuous place. I will then proceed to detail the basic accommodations of a social contract that those who are members of a *mahalle* have access to. Furthermore, I detail how the *mahalle* was both considered an ideal/alised place, and how *mahalle* networks foster a feeling of belonging in the city, for which I would like to introduce the term of "*mahallelik*" – *mahalle*-ness. And finally, I describe why the *mahalle* and its support networks were important for Tarlabaşı residents, and how the risk of displacement threatened these networks of socio-economic interdependence. In order to better illustrate this, I have chosen five nodes of these networks and will detail how they were connected to each other and their surroundings, in short, what *mahallelik* looked like "on the ground".

The mahalle

Often translated simply as "neighbourhood" and defined as the smallest administrative urban unit in the English language literature, the *mahalle* is much more than a spatial marker in the Turkish city. It is difficult to assign a *mahalle* to a single social category. In everyday discourse it is thought of as a space of familiarity, social closeness, and collective identity, but also as a moral territory of mutual control and oppression. As modus vivendi the traditional *mahalle* involves certain expectations and demands for those who live there, just as it offers close-knit social ties and support networks. In opposition to the *mahalle* as a geographical and administrative unit, the *mahalle* as a social concept does not have a clear physical shape or size. Instead, its boundaries are set by the everyday practices and itineraries of people and commerce.

Cem Behar (2003), in his examination of a traditional neighbourhood in 18th- and 19th-century Istanbul, argues that the Ottoman *mahalle* prescribed a close-knit hyper-local network of social relationships before it started to be used to outline an urban administrative unit, and that the sense of a shared *mahalle* identity was largely based on the upholding of morality and functioned as a collective defence mechanism. Similarly, Işik Tamdoğan-Abel (2000) argues that the everyday practices that create the collectivity of a contemporary *mahalle* are rooted in their historic socio-political organisation. Ottoman tax and criminal law operated on the basis of a *mahalle* being a legal person, which meant that if one member of the *mahalle* violated these laws, the entire *mahalle* was held responsible by the authorities. This legal framework facilitated and relied on the mutual surveillance and control of fellow residents' behaviour which strengthened the sense of a collective identity and explained the preoccupation with the collective reputation that is reflected in the cultural practices in a present-day *mahalle*. It also cemented the collective interest in settling intra-*mahalle* conflicts without involvement of the police or the authorities – similar to what Müge described in trans* sex workers' handling of the obstruction of their brothel – since this meant avoiding being collectively held responsible by outside institutions that might inflict material consequences on *mahalle* residents. While Behar claims that the traditional urban *mahalle* as a social category has all but van-

ished from the urban fabric of neoliberal Turkish cities, others argue that it remains relevant in today's everyday life and discourse as a "contested system of order" (Woźniak 2018: 80) and as a "cultural space of closeness and belonging" (Mills 2007: 339).

In her discussion of the Istanbul neighbourhood Kuzguncuk, Amy Mills (2007: 341) writes that it is the concept of "knowing" [*tanımak*] that defines a *mahalle*: "everyone 'knows' each other, or is 'known' in the neighborhood". Mills observes that these "bonds of 'knowing'" are produced through "neighbouring [*komşuluk*]", the (gendered) practice of frequent and reciprocal neighbourly visits, mostly amongst women, that link the inside of homes to the residential street, turning it into "an extension of private family life" (ibid.: 339). The idea of a neighbourhood embodied by the Turkish *mahalle* turns neighbours into extended family, "a 'we' particular to Turkish culture" (ibid.). The idea of the traditional *mahalle* feeds a "rich 'semiotic pool'. Innocence, unspoiledness, purity, warmth, intimacy, unbrokenness…all of these qualities are in this pool" ibid.: 339). The (imagined) ideal *mahalle* is a place of longing, of profound nostalgia and romanticisation, which is why "authentic" traditional neighbourhoods such as Kuzguncuk or Fener-Balat have become a popular backdrop in Turkish popular culture, and a primary location for rapid gentrification.

Neighbourhood cooperation

Photo by Jonathan Lewis

More generally, the familiarity of a *mahalle* is to a large part cultivated through "micro-publics" (Valentine 2008: 330–331) that residents incorporate into their daily routines and that include the frequentation of available social spaces, for example the barber shop, the teahouse, or the corner shop [*bakkal*], as well as neighbourhood socialisation on the street, at the weekly market, and festivities such as weddings. Regularly patronising the same local shops is also an important part of developing social bonds and trust in a *ma-*

halle. As a regular customer [*müdavim*], be it in a shop, a restaurant, an artisan workshop, or any other business, one will be treated courteously and with friendly familiarity and can be sure to get the choicest offers and best prices.[2] These loyalty ties are mutually beneficial, as it guarantees income for the business owner, and the – often crucial – possibility to buy items on credit for the customer.[3]

The image of vibrant collectivity is mirrored in traditional and contemporary Turkish forms of cultural expression. For example, in the traditional *Karagöz* shadow puppet theatre, the *mahalle* is represented by a single group of neighbours fixed under one umbrella (Mills 2007: 339). This character was used to show that, when rumours, gossip or news travelled through the community, it became known to the *mahalle* as a whole. In the TV show *Perihan Abla*, the first of the popular genre of "*mahalle dizileri*" (*mahalle* TV series) that began broadcasting in 1986, the problem of an individual resident is resolved by the collective effort of the entire *mahalle*. Solutions are proposed by the community, and plans devised and discussed in the street under the inclusion of all the neighbours (ibid.: 339–340).

For many Tarlabaşı residents, the sense of belonging to their *mahalle* meant being known and recognised in their community, being respected and greeted on the street [*merhabalaşmak*]. It was a place of real emotional value. Alev, who moved to Tarlabaşı in her early teens, described her experience of the neighbourhood in almost romantic terms:

> What is there not to love? Every street, every corner…I don't know. Not because it is in the heart of [the city], but because I grew up here, I spent my childhood here, I was able to have a childhood here. What I love most is that I have a friend at every corner, how we greet each other in the street, the warmheartedness…even if there are some rascals. [*laughs*] If you greet somebody, you'll get a warm greeting back. No matter how much Tarlabaşı is being vilified, Tarlabaşı is beautiful. […] And neighbourly relations are very good here. We all depend on each other. There is support…people are kind, you never feel like a stranger. Neighbours here are great neighbours! Tarlabaşı is beautiful, it just is.

Residents of all groups often spoke about the different ways in which they were connected to their neighbourhood. They described the length of time that they had lived in Tarlabaşı and the depth of detailed knowledge that they held about the area, its residents,

---

2 Once a customer is considered a *müdavim*, loyalty to the business in question is expected by the business owner, even if this might occasionally be to the customer's disadvantage. At the weekly vegetable market, I regularly had to forego better produce from a stand if the same items were sold at the tables where I was considered a regular. Similarly, getting "caught" by one's *bakkal* with a shopping bag filled with another shop's wares was, at the very least, awkward.

3 In corner shops [*bakkal*], especially in low-income neighbourhoods, the possibility to buy essential everyday items and food on credit are the only possibility for residents with a low and often irregular income to secure their subsistence. It is common that the items bought are written down and paid at the end of the month, or whenever money comes in. It is not unusual that the *bakkal* does not know every customer's name, and credit sheets will sometimes be marked with qualifiers such as "woman from red house at the corner". The important thing is that there is a trust relationship between the *bakkal* and customers that has developed over time.

and its recent history. Many said that their social and professional life was firmly embedded within the neighbourhood and its immediate environs.

Without any parks or playgrounds in Tarlabaşı, residents socialised in the street.[4] During the warmer months, women congregated on the outside stairs of their buildings and the stoop to drink tea, snack, and chat. They tended to (and shared) their chores as well: preparing food, doing needlework, soaping down and cleaning rugs, or washing and drying sheeps' wool used for the filling of bedding and pillows. Local business owners left doors open, and sometimes put chairs in front of their shops to engage with neighbours and passers-by. Some, like the second-hand furniture sellers on Tree Street, moved part of their wares onto the street to display them, turning couches and chairs on sale into impromptu outdoor seating. Men extended their social interactions to the men-only barbershop as well as to local teahouses. Trans* women frequented an otherwise all-male teahouse. These everyday interactions and micro-publics strengthened familiarity bonds and trust networks in Tarlabaşı, creating the *mahalle* that Alev praised.

It bears mentioning that the constant monitoring of *mahalle* spaces by its members is also an oppressive tool of social control. Turkish sociologist Şerif Mardin coined the term *mahalle baskısı* [neighbourhood or community pressure] to describe the intra-community policing of collective (religious) morals and conservative values in a *mahalle* (Çetin 2010). Non-conformance to *mahalle* norms and expectations can lead to shunning, shaming, or (verbal) reprimands (Çakır and Bozan 2009: 155). This equally important characteristic of a *mahalle* such as Tarlabaşı, as a space of mutual control, further defies Wacquant's claim that residents of a stigmatised neighbourhood commonly distance themselves from it.

A social contract

Following the birth of his two children in the mid-1980s, barber Halil Usta bought an apartment in a middle class *site* in a suburb on the Asian side of the city, because he did not want to raise a family in a "bad neighbourhood". However, he kept renting the barber shop he ran in Tarlabaşı, where he had lived for more than ten years and worked for over four decades. When we met, Halil Usta spent almost every day of every week in the neighbourhood, even Sundays and most official holidays, when the shop was (supposed to be) closed. He explained that he "did not feel at home" in his residential neighbourhood where he had by then lived for many years.

> No matter what problems I have for [working] in this place, I miss it a lot. When I have been away for ten days it feels like I have been away for a whole year. I moved to Bostancı in '86, but I don't know anyone in my building [there]. I don't know anyone where I live. That's how it is. You leave in the morning, and you come back in the evening. You use it like a hotel. The neighbours…we see each other on the stairs. In the mornings, we say 'good morning', in the evenings, we say 'good evening'. That's it. I don't

4 With the exception of Tree Street, most smaller streets in Tarlabaşı did not have any transit traffic and were mostly car-free.

> know who lives on which floor, and who they are. I am [in Tarlabaşı] all day. The family lives [in Bostancı], and business is here. [In Tarlabaşı], people greet everyone they meet, they pass the barber shop and say hello. People meet each other all the time and are together. […] In five years I have maybe talked to the *muhtar* [in Bostancı] five times. I know the *muhtar* [in Tarlabaşı] much better. My family asks me why I go to [Tarlabaşı] even on Sundays. I tell them: 'What am I supposed to do [in Bostancı]? Who do I know here? It's only one hour [when I take the ferry], I come here, there are people here that I have known for years. This is such a lively place. It's an amazing place.

The intimacy of *mahalle* life that Halil *Usta* experienced in Tarlabaşı is a social ideal that is anchored to place. As an intransitive virtue it cannot be moved from the neighbourhood it is connected to, even if one is part of that *mahalle*, which is why Halil *Usta* spent as much time in Tarlabaşı as he did. The modernity of the *site* that he talked about provided respectability and status, but it lacked the close social ties and the familiarity associated with a *mahalle*. Of course, he attached positive attributes to his residential complex in Bostancı – he described it as "very clean" [*tertemiz*], "safe" [*güvenli*] and "modern" [*modern*]. However, none of these attributes are considered to be the social virtues that characterise an (idealised, imagined) *mahalle*, such as warmth, hospitality, generosity, charity, or solidarity.

Murat, a Kurdish man who owned a small apartment building and a textile workshop in Tarlabaşı, expressed similar ambiguity about his *site* as Halil *Usta* had. Murat and his family had moved to the suburb of Başakşehir where they lived in a "clean and modern" apartment in one of the newly built tower blocks that were praised by the government as the future of urbanism in Turkey. He was proud of having, literally and figuratively, "moved up". However, he also said that the population density of large residential complexes, paired with the anonymity of these blocks, brought with it problems that he had never encountered in Tarlabaşı, where the familiarity between neighbours facilitated communication, and therefore could make it easier to sort out conflict and misunderstandings.

> When so many people live in such a small space, it's not always easy. One guy turns the radio up all the way, another turns the sound on the TV really high. In the evening when you come home from work, you're tired, but it's very loud in your flat, I can't stand that. It's more crowded, you get edgy. You want to take the elevator, but someone left the elevator door open again, you wait for the elevator for hours. I mean, there are many problems. […] People [in Tarlabaşı] are much closer to each other, they talk to each other if there are problems, but there you just don't.

As I have mentioned, the social virtuousness of a *mahalle* can be stifling and oppressive, and the social control exerted to maintain it has been investigated by scholars researching the *mahalle* (Tamdoğan-Abel 2002; Behar 2003; Mills 2007; Woźniak 2018). However, and maybe as the other side of the same coin, the familiarity ties of a traditional neighbourhood such as Tarlabaşı also offer access to basic accommodations of a social contract for those who are part of it.

Drying sheeps' wool for bedding

Photo by Jonathan Lewis.

The social contract I am referring to here does not concern the legitimacy of the authority of the state over the individual described in political philosophy, but the basic ability to accrue social capital for the social participation in a community. This social capital includes access to material support, like food, clothes, or even money, as well as the ability to receive credit at local businesses, such as the *bakkal*. It also includes close neighbourly relations, protection, cooperation, and, in the form of *torpil* [influence], access to work.[5] All these things are supplied by the community itself, not by institutions or outside agencies. Just as the neighbourhood familiarity and intimacy that Halil Usta praised, these accommodations of a social contract were anchored to the neighbourhood, intransitive, and could not be earned in Tarlabaşı and then taken away to a new place. Residents who had moved away from Tarlabaşı to a different neighbourhood described how they were unable to do certain things that the social capital accrued in their old neighbourhood had made possible and that they used to do in their old homes, for example display their Kurdish identity, do sex work, or clean and dry sheeps' wool on the street. Like Murat had, they said that the lack of a *mahalle* social network made the communication and conflict resolution with neighbours who might object to these activities and displays, more difficult. Even without the need to resolve neighbourhood discord or disagreements, people who had moved away said that they simply missed the easy contact and the everyday conversations with neighbours they had considered family. Other scholars who conducted research in Tarlabaşı made note of the common complaint that the evictions destroyed a certain personal "order" [*düzen*], built up over years of living in a neighbourhood (Ünsal 2013; Sakızlıoğlu 2014a).

5 "Torpil" might best be described as a (masculine) form of social capital. It includes the ability to secure advantages via "influence", often in the form of employment. It has negative connotations as nepotism.

Outside of Tarlabaşı, these forms of social capital were not only lost to many people but could not be accrued again at all. The ability to amass social capital for the social participation in a community is the one thing that marginalised people are denied. These accommodations of a social contract gave marginalised communities in Tarlabaşı access they would not, and did not, have anywhere else.

The *mahalle* as urban ideal/ism

When talking about positive aspects of Tarlabaşı to outsiders, many residents underlined the solidarity networks that provided various forms of support. I was often told that people would readily help each other out, that the doors were always open for neighbours and those in need. Cemile said:

> Whatever I have, I eat with my neighbours. If there is nothing, there is nothing for either of us. Isn't that right? [...] Our neighbours upstairs are not so well off. I give them a few things and tell the children to sell them so that their mother can cook some chicken. The children are happy about that. [...] I cried a lot when [my downstairs] neighbour died. I was screaming at the top of my lungs in the hospital in Okmeydanı, they were wondering if I was his sister. They told them that no, I was a neighbour, I cried even more than the sister, that's how sad I was. That was Esma's husband. He was such a good person, whenever he made some food, he shouted: Cemile Abla, come join us for eating, otherwise I will shout even louder! He shouted this from downstairs. I told him: Stop, everyone is going to hear you, it's three in the morning! He said he would keep shouting if I didn't come down to eat with them. At three in the morning, I would eat with them. He was like a son, that one.

Again, it is important to underline that these descriptions were very rosy, and that they glossed over existing rifts and conflicts between residents and different communities. In a neighbourhood like Tarlabaşı, where many people lived under precarious circumstances and in poverty, resources were sometimes too scarce to share. There were many residents, especially women who raised children in the neighbourhood, expressed their dislike of the dirt, the crime, and the dilapidation, and said that they would leave if they could. Discrimination, especially of the trans* community, existed.

However, I did witness many instances of neighbourly solidarity and charity, big and small. One case even made it into a national newspaper, the left leaning daily *Radikal* (Ince 2011b). Jirayr Zincirci, who was known as Jirayr Amca in Tree Street, was a 65-year-old Armenian man who had fallen on hard times. He shared a single ramshackle room with several cats, on the ground floor of the building where Alev and Cemile also lived. Otherwise without any means of his own, he could rely on his neighbours for support. Several of them, including all the women in his building and the barbers Halil and Necmi across the street, brought him food. He got free shaves and haircuts at their shop, and neighbours would give him leftovers to give to his cats. Alev said that he sometimes turned up at her door to ask for a cigarette, and that she gave him tea, or a little bit of money if she could spare any. By the time that evictions started, he had lived there for forty years. He had been a concierge in the building, and the previous owner had left the room to him,

unfortunately without giving him a title deed for it. That meant that he risked homelessness and losing the support network of his *mahalle* because of the Tarlabaşı renewal project. However, because of the newspaper article in *Radikal*, the subsequent pressure on authorities in social media, and the tireless engagement of Necmi Usta, the Beyoğlu Municipality offered Jirayr Amca a small apartment in the new development, and free temporary housing nearby until the planned apartments were finished. Elif Ince (2011c), the journalist who had initially reported on his case, wrote that Jirayr Amca was more worried about having to leave his *mahalle* and everyone he knew there than about his housing situation. His life, and that of his cats, depended on the trust and solidarity networks he had built there over many decades. Necmi Usta, who often spoke to me about Jirayr Amca, later told me that he refused to leave his room for many months, fearing that his cats that he was not allowed to take to his temporary apartment, would die without him.

The traces of the strong social network in the neighbourhood coloured many of the residents' anecdotes about Tarlabaşı. Second-hand furniture seller Maher told me the story of one of his Greek neighbours, an elderly woman who had passed away in her home:

> She would always go out to buy bread at the corner shop [*bakkal*]. Or lower a basket to ask someone on the street to do it for her. But when she wasn't seen for a day, everybody started to get worried. Everyone asked: 'Have you seen the [Greek lady]?' We went to her house, she didn't answer, so we broke down the door. We were worried! You know, we always hear how in other countries old people die alone and how nobody finds them for days, or even weeks! That would never happen here. Muslim, non-Muslim, Christian, it doesn't matter, we look after each other.

Such narratives of Tarlabaşı as a space of unquestioned tolerance and mutual acceptance were another aspect of how residents imagined their neighbourhood as an idealised *mahalle*, one where inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflict did not exist. Research in the neighbourhood of Kuzguncuk has shown that such descriptions serve to "obscure a contentious and traumatic minority history" (Mills 2006: 368). Romanticised narratives such as the one Maher told me did erase the violence that historically marginalised communities suffered in Turkey. However, in the context of Tarlabaşı and the looming evictions, this idealised frame of multi-ethnic tolerance can also be read as defiance against the dominant ideology of a unified, ethnonationalist Turkish identity, the "monolithic culture" imposed from above that excludes different identities as disorderly and corrosive of the Turkish nationalist project (Secor, 2004: 355), and, by extension, the planned state-led urban renewal project. By declaring the "right not to be classified forcibly into categories which have been determined by necessarily homogenising powers" (Garbin and Millington 2012: 2075) residents asserted their attachment to Tarlabaşı as a real *mahalle* despite the stigmatising discourse that framed the presence of the diverse communities there as threatening and dangerous.

Mahalle/lik as belonging

The various ways in which people develop emotional attachment to their places of residence, if and how they develop a sense of belonging, have caught the interest of social scientists from different disciplines, including sociologists, geographers, anthropologists and environmental psychologists (Pinkster 2016: 873). Scholars have developed a wide variety of conceptual approaches to analyse how people relate to a certain place, such as feeling at home, place attachment, sense of belonging and sense of place, with the spatial scale ranging from their own residential surroundings to the nation state and beyond (Morley 2001; Fenster 2005; Mee and Wright 2009; Antonsich 2010; Pinkster 2016).

However, instead of trying to make my observations fit into theoretical concepts from the English language literature I would like to contextualise the sense of belonging that Tarlabaşı residents expressed, and that cannot quite be captured by the aforementioned theoretical concepts. For how Tarlabaşı residents related to their neighbourhood, I would like to propose a Turkish word that is attached to a salient, tangible concept of the shared social virtue of place, and use the term "mahallelik" *(mahalle-ness)* as one that describes what belonging means in the Tarlabaşı context.[6]

Backgammon

Photo by Jonathan Lewis

Michel de Certeau, in his study of neighbourhood spaces in Paris, writes that a sense of belonging is created through daily practices that transform a place into a space of "accumulated attachment and sentiments of accumulated knowledge, memory, and inti-

6 The Turkish -lik is a suffix that forms abstract or collective nouns (from adjectives, nouns, numerals), similar to the English suffix -ness. Here it is meant to describe the quality or attribute of being a *mahalle*.

mate corporal experiences" (Fenster 2005: 243). Many Tarlabaşı residents justified their attachment to the neighbourhood in similar terms. Barber Necmi Usta had lived in Tarlabaşı for several years before moving to a nearby neighbourhood in 1999 following the devastating earthquake in Izmit. But like Halil Usta, he continued to work in the *mahalle* barbershop.

He was content with his apartment in an adjacent residential neighbourhood, which was also considered a traditional *mahalle*, but which had a more favourable reputation. However, this did not diminish his strong sense of belonging he had about Tarlabaşı, or his grief for losing the neighbourhood:

> I have been here for 25 years. it is difficult to leave. I came here from the village when I was ten years old, and I have been here for 25 years. I know everyone. [Tarlabaşı] is a part of me now. I visit other parts of Istanbul, I go to the [Princes'] Islands, I go here and there, but I always miss Tarlabaşı. There is something about this place. We all feel bitter inside for having to leave.

In Tarlabaşı, "daily examples of solidarity and small gestures of 'keeping an eye on each other'" (Ünsal 2013: 165) were an important part of how a sense of belonging was created through the *mahalle* network. Despite the widely shared discontent over the crime and the bad physical state of the housing stock, residents stressed that any solution to these issues, and any kind of renewal "should not cause displacements and disrupt working networks of solidarity" (ibid.: 168).

Contrary to Wacquant's (2010) claims that residents of a stigmatised neighbourhood will distance themselves from the area and their neighbours, deny any kind of belonging, and try to leave as soon as they are able, most Tarlabaşı residents I met rarely had an unambiguously negative experience nor were they desperate to move. Far from it, many people expressed an affection for their neighbourhood that was deeply rooted in their experience of *mahallelik* as a sense of belonging. Despite the constant and intensifying stream of media and state narratives of social abandonment, crime and desolation in the run-up to evictions, residents spoke of a vibrant, supportive community and of strong neighbourhood ties that they had built through social relations of everyday life, of solidarity networks, the establishment of businesses, and years of memories of living and working in Tarlabaşı. When given the opportunity to buy into social housing blocks in the newly built suburb of Kayabaşı, many residents said that they did not consider moving so far away from their old support networks, their neighbours, and work opportunities.

The importance of *mahalle/lik* for Tarlabaşı residents

For many residents, spatial belonging was prescribed by a lack of viable alternatives, their poverty, the necessity to access informal and low-skilled jobs available in the Beyoğlu service sector, by (relatively) cheap housing, or because Tarlabaşı provided relative safety for certain socio-demographic groups and marginalised communities, such as Kurds or trans* sex workers. However, as I aim to show here, this lack of viable alternatives transcended mere coping mechanisms. To people who were marginalised and excluded, in some cases violently and physically, from other Istanbul neighbourhoods, Tarlabaşı of-

fered not only an absence of exclusion, but a real sense of inclusion. Many Tarlabaşı residents described more than the ability to walk the streets without being physically or verbally assaulted. Instead, they went through the effort to describe that their belonging in Tarlabaşı was more than just a neutral state, that they were able to be part of a real *mahalle* there: they talked about relative physical safety, about economic inclusion, and access to basic accommodations of a social contract supplied by their community and their neighbours.

In her work on belonging in the low-income Nottingham neighbourhood of St Anns, anthropologist Lisa Mckenzie (2012: 459) shows that communities who are denied access to resources that make up various forms of social, economic, cultural and symbolic capital "do not simply passively accept their fate, but instead engage in a local system that finds value for themselves and their families in local networks and a shared cultural understanding" of how their neighbourhood, stigmatised by the dominant discourse, works. She notes that local solidarity networks might bind people living with social disadvantages together instead of only bridging those disadvantages. Therefore, these networks can have use-value to residents, even if this value is not recognised outside of the (stigmatised) community and is sometimes dismissed as a way of "mere coping". Mckenzie writes: "It may be the case that poor neighbourhoods have strong systems, resources, and social capital but these are not recognized because they have no relationships with the institutional capital which can be exchanged in wider society such as employment, as a route to becoming 'respectable'" (ibid.: 471). She adds that the spatial concentration of poor and marginalised communities within stigmatised neighbourhoods can therefore act as a buffer against said stigma, therefore increasing social capital locally (ibid.: 472).

Prior to the announcement of the urban renewal project, rents in Tarlabaşı were relatively affordable, and many places – municipal offices, banks, the post office, a large public hospital – could easily be reached on foot. In Istanbul, where public transport and taxi costs can quickly add up, this is important for those who do not own a car and who have to get by on a tight budget. Just as importantly, many residents' workplaces were at walking distance from their homes.

In addition to that, and counter to the dominant discourse that framed the neighbourhood as "chaotic", some residents found that the constant bustle, the diversity of people and businesses, and the informality made Tarlabaşı a better, and livelier, place than the more homogenous neighbourhoods that were praised as "modern", "clean", and "family-friendly". In their eyes, these districts were "too quiet" and "boring". The central location of Tarlabaşı was not only convenient from a financial, or professional, point of view, but it also meant that residents could take part in the 24/7 Beyoğlu economy. Baker Gökhan Usta explained:

> In Tarlabaşı, there are two days, two days in one! One lasts from morning to the evening, and the other from the evening to morning. Some guys run places that are open from evening to morning. There are guys who run bars, coffeehouses, and restaurants. You need clothes? You can find clothes. If you get sick, there are doctors right here. Right at your fingertips. If you want to buy something, no problem. If you feel like reading, you can go to a bookstore. You really can find anything you might want here. There's everything!

The geographical make-up of Tarlabaşı, as for many more traditional neighbourhoods where small shops and businesses are scattered throughout residential areas, facilitated shopping, especially for women. Cemile explained how she found this more difficult in a more "modern", more upscale neighbourhood:

> Sometimes I visit my daughter in Alibeyköy, and I don't like it there very much. My daughter asks me why and says that I have just grown used to the smell of Tarlabaşı…yes, probably! When I lower the basket from my balcony, I can get anything I want from the *bakkal* here. And [in Alibeyköy]? You can't even find bread there after six o'clock! There is no cornershop. You have to go all the way to the [centre] of Alibeyköy, to the supermarket. The market is there, and the supermarket. There is no shop where they live. But they have built very luxurious villas.

Bahar Sakızlıoğlu (2014a: 174) underlines the importance of social solidarity networks as a crucial channel for the exchange of information about where and how to apply for material support, such as government assistance, or the availability of cheap rental housing in the neighbourhood. However, Sakızlıoğlu also stresses that kinship ties and local solidarity networks that bolster, and sometimes substitute social welfare in Turkey, have been considerably weakened due to neoliberal policies (Sakızlıoğlu 2014a: 268, see also Kalaycıoğlu and Rittersberger-Tılıç 2002; Keyder 2005). This was certainly true for Tarlabaşı, and residents could not fully rely on these informal networks to alleviate poverty and hardship.[7] However, people who were part of the neighbourhood, who were "known" and part of the *mahalle*, could nevertheless count on neighbours to assist them with the provision of food or clothing if they fell on hard times or lacked the sufficient funds to provide for themselves and their families.

Residents were also able to turn to solidarity networks to rally support and charity in the case of bigger disasters elsewhere. Veysi, a recycling worker in his early 20s originally from the eastern, predominantly Kurdish city of Van, collected several truckloads of clothing, blankets and foodstuffs in the neighbourhood with the help of Tarlabaşı co-workers and neighbours after an earthquake had laid waste to his city in October of 2011.[8]

Since the familiarity of everyday *mahalle* life is partly created through the frequent patronage of local shops and businesses, these social relationships allowed for residents, people known to shop owners, to buy goods and pay for them later, which was a vital option for those who lived on low, insecure incomes. This way of doing business is impossible in neighbourhoods increasingly dominated by large supermarkets and more anonymous housing complexes, and equally difficult as a newcomer in a more traditional *mahalle*, especially as part of a minority community.

---

7 Bahar Sakızlıoğlu describes the increasing fragmentation of Tarlabaşı, mostly along class and ethnicity lines, that accelerated after 1980 with the implementation of neoliberal policies that led to the precarisation of labour, the criminalisation of informal labour such as the itinerant sale of goods, paper and metal recycling and sex work. This in turn resulted in the considerable limitation of opportunities to cope with poverty, increased destitution and therefore weaker solidarity networks (Sakızlıoğlu 2014a: 175).

8 On October 23, 2011, a severe earthquake killed 604 and injured 4,152 people. Due to the number of buildings that sustained damage, at least 60,000 people were left homeless.

Home delivery

Photo by Jonathan Lewis

It was also not uncommon that residents were afforded access to gainful employment through neighbourhood and kinship ties. For example, Alev had a job in a local textile workshop that she had found with the help of a relative who also lived in Tarlabaşı. Sometimes local kinship networks provided the basis for the set-up of a modest business. Recycling worker Veysi had pooled money with relatives from Tarlabaşı to rent a local depot in order to start a metal and recycling business with them and his brothers.

Networks of socio-economic interdependence

The overwhelming majority of project area residents were employed in low-skilled, insecure jobs in the Beyoğlu service sector, in construction, or local textile, leather, and metal workshops.[9] Close to one fourth of renewal area residents worked in semi-legal, informal and (increasingly) criminalised businesses, in metal and paper recycling, the sex economy, or as street vendors – all businesses that were possible in Tarlabaşı partly because they relied on the proximity to the Beyoğlu retail, service, and night time economies.

For many people on a low, insecure income without benefits or social security it was crucial to live within walking distance of their workplaces. Residents who lived and worked in Tarlabaşı, or who owned or ran a business there, were facing the double threat of losing both their home and workplace, and therefore their income. Several

9 According to the survey conducted on behalf of the Beyoğlu Municipality in 2008, 77 percent were employed in temporary, insecure jobs. Only 19 percent of those in employment had health insurance and retirement through their jobs. 29 percent were employed in the local service sector. Another 22 percent worked in construction or textile workshops (Kentsel A.Ş. 2008; Sakızlıoğlu 2014a: 173).

residents used their homes and basements to prepare, store, and sort food that they sold from mobile karts, such as vendors of filled mussels, of fruit and vegetables, or sandwiches, pastries, and puddings. The link between the informal labour and informal housing markets in Istanbul is strong, because "many workplaces on the ground floors of residential buildings are operated by the owners of these buildings or their family members" (Sakızlıoğlu 2014a: 175).

Moreover, local artisans felt a deep emotional connection to the neighbourhood. Many had had learned their trade there as children, either from their fathers or their, often Greek or Armenian, *Ustalar* through the traditional apprentice system (Ünlühısarcıklı 2001). Furthermore, artisan workshops, of which there were only a few left in the neighbourhood by the time the renewal project was announced, depended on "the osmotic relationship between the workshop and its surroundings" (Kaya et al. 2011: 64). A tight exchange network between suppliers, employees and customers, the overwhelming majority of whom were regulars, made moving an established business extremely difficult, if not impossible. Generally, Tarlabaşı business owners felt great pride in the small-scale, cordial atmosphere that characterised the local *mahalle* economy and that stood in stark contrast to the nearby commercial district around Taksim that was increasingly dominated by global chain stores, franchises, and supermarkets. In what follows I examine what *mahallelik* looked like "on the ground", and what residents were talking about when they praised their deeply stigmatised neighbourhood for its support and solidarity network that ultimately created their sense of belonging.

The bread baker [fırıncı]

Gökhan and his younger brother Burak took over the eight-storey building from their family's tenant, a Turkish bank, in 1990 and opened a bakery there in 1993. Both men had been born in Istanbul into a family of bakers originally from Camlihemşin on the Black Sea coast. Like many of his compatriots at the time, their great-grandfather had emigrated to learn the trade in Russia and returned to Turkey to open a bakery (Biryol 2007). His sons and grandsons continued the family business in various cities in Turkey before Gökhan and Burak opened the Tarlabaşı bakery they had been running without interruptions except for the time when they went to do their military service.

The actual bakery – an industrial-size oven for bread, a dough mixer and shelves to proof the dough and the raw loaves – was situated in the basement of the building. The ground floor held the shop for over-the-counter sales and a gallery where bags of flour were stored as well as a small office where Gökhan kept files, orders and bills and did all his administration. The ground floor was also the space where he and his employees sat down for breakfast and lunch. The main business of the bakery consisted of the sale of the yeasted white wheat loaves fashioned after French baguettes and sold all over the city, and, during the month of Ramadan, of the traditional flat *pide*. Weight, ingredients, and prices of these loaves and the *pide* are fixed by the state. Prior to the announcement of the renewal project, the bakery put out around 7,000 loaves a day, one third of which was sold to customers over the counter. The rest was delivered, in plastic crates by hand truck and on foot, to nearby restaurants, eateries and *bakkal* shops. However, with the start of

the project, and as residents and local businesses started to leave, the total output of the bakery dropped to around 2,500 loaves a day.

The project announcement had caught the two brothers unawares and in the wake of a large shop renovation that had been part of a Beyoğlu beautification campaign initiated by AKP mayor Demircan. Gökhan explained:

> That [renovation] put a large dent into our budget. The mayor gathered [the local bakers]. Back then nobody spoke of demolitions yet. He said that he would start controls of all the bakeries. Those days there was a lot of talk about bakeries in the city being dirty. He said that bakeries should be renovated, that he would make the rounds with cameras to show everyone how clean and nice Beyoğlu bakeries were. We spent almost 5,000 Lira back then. We put the oven downstairs, built the upstairs [gallery], fixed everything on this floor.

Both Gökhan, who was married with two small children, and his brother Burak lived in the building above the shop and rented out the remaining eight apartments, the money of which provided a comfortable extra income. By 2010, all but two of their tenants had left. Gökhan employed ten people in his bakery, all of whom lived in Tarlabaşı. As a business owner and their *Usta*, Gökhan felt the obligation to provide alternative employment for all of them once the bakery would be shut down. He hoped to be able to "arrange" [*ayarlamak*] jobs in nearby businesses for all of them, as he was well known in the neighbourhood and confident that his recommendation would open doors.

What Gökhan was about to lose was not only the material investment in the bakery, such as shop renovation, a new oven and modern machinery, but also the accumulation of social capital: the employ of local and reliable staff, the establishment of a distribution network, of suppliers, as well as loyal network of customers, both businesses and private residents who bought their bread at his shop.[10] For neighbourhood bakers [*mahalle fırıncılar*] like Gökhan and his brother, who had a more or less fixed network of customers in the vicinity of their shop and whom they were able to rely on for their monthly income, a move into another quarter, one where other, similar bread bakeries were already established was precarious at best, and impossible at worst.[11]

Gökhan had accrued this social capital through his long-standing participation in the neighbourhood community, an involvement that transcended the everyday commercial ties between him as a small businessman and his regular customers. Over the years he had built up the trust that his bread would be delivered on time and meet quality standards, and his customers, in turn, had earned the possibility to buy bread but to pay for

10 The bulk of the bakery's income came from nearby restaurants who bought crates of bread from Gökhan every day.

11 This was further complicated by the fact that bread prices were fixed by the authorities. In general, small businesses that were firmly embedded in a neighbourhood and dependent on a loyal, predominantly local clientele, such as bakeries, barbers, tea kitchens, or corner shops (*bakkal*), could not easily transfer to a new neighbourhood, where similar businesses had already established a customer and loyalty network.

it later [*veleziye*]. In low-income neighbourhoods, where people had to rely on bread as *the* substantial staple for any given meal, this option could be vital.[12]

It was also not uncommon for men who worked in nearby shops and workshops to heat up their lunch in Gökhan's oven. Women who did not have access to an oven at home sometimes asked him to cook a casserole, *lahmacun*[13], or other food that required one. Lunchtime usually brought a lull in bread baking, but the large oven was not allowed to cool down entirely in order to be ready for the pre-dinner bread run.[14] Burak, who was very interested in herbal remedies, ran a veritable little pharmacy from behind the bread counter. He swore that poppy seeds were the best medicine against light headaches, and often made teas for me when I was under the weather. Many local residents trusted him with advice on ills such as fatigue, small aches, a lack of appetite or digestive problems, and Burak regularly handed out teas and herbs, or advised people on where to get and how to take them.

Bakery

Photo by Jonathan Lewis

Gökhan was angry about the deal offered to him by the municipality, but he agreed to exchange the title deed for his eight-storey-building of more than 700 m² for an apart-

12 While bread is an important staple and accompaniment for all income groups, tomato paste [*salça*] or raw onion on dry bread constitutes a main meal for very poor people.

13 *Lahmacun* is a thin flatbread topped with minced meat, minced vegetables, and herbs including onions, garlic, tomatoes, red peppers, and parsley, flavoured with spices such as chili pepper and paprika, then baked like a pizza.

14 Neighbourhood bakeries in areas and villages where women bake their own bread but lack the access to an oven or the hot metal plate required to bake flat breads, commonly accept for residents to drop bowls with risen bread dough and bake it for them in exchange for a small fee, which is cheaper than having to buy ready-made bread from a bakery.

ment of 40m^2 and a shop of around 150m^2 at no extra cost for him. Furthermore, he was paid a monthly rental supplement of 2,800 TL for the duration of 30 months, the projected amount of time it would take for the new buildings to be finalised. However, when asked by a foreign housing rights researcher if he was content with the deal, Gökhan said that he was not: "They gave us very little. We are losing our work, we are losing our homes. We have a life set up here, and we will lose that, too." For him, the looming loss of familiarity ties and his place in the *mahalle* was irreplaceable:

> We invested a lot of work in this place, a lot of work. We gave years of our lives. When I walk from here just across the street, I exchange greetings with 500 people. We exchange greetings at every shop, we know everyone. We know who everyone is. Now we have to build a new life. We don't know anyone there. Everything starts from scratch.

The social capital that he and his brother had managed to accrue in Tarlabaşı over the years, and that firmly connected them to the neighbourhood, was at risk of being squandered by the looming demolitions.[15] In addition to that, the municipality had already announced that it would not renew businesses licenses for bakeries and most other artisan workshops inside the development project once that it was finished, because they were considered "dirty" and "not modern" enough for the upscale neighbourhood they aimed to establish.

The cobbler [kunduracı]

Zeki Usta, an ethnic Turk originally from Konya and in his 60s when we met, had been a cobbler for more than five decades by the time the renewal project was announced. He got his start in the profession when he was eight years old and an apprentice for a Greek Tarlabaşı family. His business was set up in a historical four-storey building that he had bought in a dilapidated state from an Armenian woman in the early 1980s and renovated. Close to Tarlabaşı Boulevard, it housed the workshop, a depot for the raw materials, shoes and extra tools, a small shop/showroom and, not unimportantly, a small apartment on the second floor that he could use if work hours required it, or for eating and taking a nap. Running the workshop together with his then 35-year-old son Sedat, Zeki Usta said that the business of quality handmade shoes was viable only because they did not have to pay rent for the building, and that renting out a similar-sized workshop would be impossible almost anywhere else in Beyoğlu.

Before the announcement of the urban renewal project in 2005, twenty people had been in the master cobbler's permanent employ, but by the time I met him, this number had shrunk to a small handful of three, sometimes four employees. The looming loss of his property and business had forced Zeki Usta to cut costs and decrease financial risk. At the height of success, dozens of customers, shoe sellers from various Istanbul neighbourhoods and other Turkish cities, had come to visit his place to order and buy the shoes Zeki had learned to make from his Greek master and from study trips to Italy, but now this

15 Gökhan fought his eviction in court for many months, while his shop and bakery remained open. However, he noticed a considerable drop in income during the time that residents moved away, and other local businesses closed down.

constant stream of visitors had dried up to a small trickle. He had a number of fixed customers who required a particular model or material, and who had frequented the shop for many years.

> Our customers come here because they know us. But for them to find out where our new place is, to come there will probably take, I would say, five to ten years. What will I do in these five to ten years? In order to make a living, that is a long time to have to wait. And in order to cover the cost [of moving, of rent], we will have to increase our customer base by at least two or three times as many. We have to earn *something*.

Hilal Usta, a shoemaker for 45 years who still worked with Zeki Usta and his son at the time, and the other few employees lived nearby and could walk to work, saving on commuting costs and time. An established network of shoemakers, leather traders and makers of metal ornaments used in clothing, bag and shoe making were all located in the immediate vicinity, which facilitated the exchange and sale of materials, of tools, and expertise. The short distances were crucial and cheap. Sedat explained:

> We don't make an enormous amount of money with these shoes anyway. And many people are involved! Each of the shoes that you see here went through the hands of maybe fifteen or twenty people all in all. Just the pieces of leather… [*holds up a large sheet of leather*] they come like this to the workshop. But this piece of leather has already passed through the hands of another fifteen people. That also means that one shoe feeds fifteen families. […] All these people will be unemployed.

Zeki Usta had also established deep social ties with the neighbourhood he lived and worked in: he spent many hours in Hakan's teahouse a few houses down, and the trans* sex workers who also lived and worked in Bird Street directed searching customers to his shop, and watched over it when it was closed. Sedat once told me, in somewhat of an extension of his father's anecdote above, that, when he had just come back from his military service and was unknown to the people in his father's street, a group of trans* sex workers almost beat him up when he tried to open the workshop, thinking that he was a burglar:

> Only when [one person] recognised me as Zeki Usta's son did they let me go. I was really scared! It's because everyone knows everyone here. This is a real *mahalle*, that is how it is. We also know who the real thieves and the drug dealers are, and they know who we are. That's why they don't harm us, or my customers.

In 2011, Zeki Usta was the last shoemaker on that side of Tarlabaşı Boulevard. Some of the workshops that used to supply parts he needed to make shoes had already left. A majority of the master craftsmen who used to work (and sometimes live) in Tarlabaşı – the carpenters, bag, belt and other shoemakers – had either stopped or left the neighbourhood to settle in one of the industrial parks that had been set up in the faraway suburbs. This was not an option for Zeki Usta because the entire production process of the shoes made in his workshop, all the way to their sale, was linked to an intricate system of labour and support that he had established in the vicinity of his Tarlabaşı workshop.

The barber [berber]

Halil Usta's barbershop was small. It fit only three chairs, one of which was never occupied since it was only him and his business partner Necmi Usta who worked in the shop. During the colder months his shop window was often fogged up by the steam rising from the ever-boiling teapot or the meal he was cooking on the camping gas stove for lunch. During the summer, Halil often sat on a stool outside the shop, smoking and interacting with neighbours and passers-by.

Halil, originally from the central Anatolian province of Kayseri, had arrived in Tarlabaşı in 1972. He had started his career as a teenage apprentice and opened a barber shop in the neighbourhood soon after. In those years, Tarlabaşı had been a centre of artisanship and small-scale industrial production. Halil recalled that he and Necmi often had to work for fifteen hours a day, and that for a while, there had been a third barber in order to keep up with the pressing demand of the local male workforce who wanted to maintain a neat appearance. Back then long lines outside the shop were a common occurrence – something that by 2010 happened only during the days immediately preceding religious holidays. With the migration of the wood, textile and leather workshops to the city's suburbs, business had begun to slow down and, with the announcement of the renewal project, had almost dried up completely. The two barbers sometimes reminisced that it would have been smarter to move their shop into one of these new industrial centres, that they had missed their chance to keep up with urban development and economic requirements. Despite that realisation, neither Halil nor Necmi ever seriously considered moving the shop to Merter, Ikitelli, or any other neighbourhood where sprawling factories and manufacturers promised a steady supply of customers.

Barber shop

Photo by Jonathan Lewis

Despite the increasing difficulties facing the barbers in Tarlabaşı, Necmi and Halil still served a significant number of loyal patrons, many of whom lived or worked in the neighbourhood. Some of their customers travelled long distances after moving away from Tarlabaşı, and not wanting to miss out on the excellent service of Halil's and Necmis's shop. There I also met Murat, the Kurdish textile workshop owner who had moved to Başakşehir, a high-rise suburb to the west of Istanbul, in 1987. Murat frequently crossed half the city to get a shave and a haircut. True, he owned a business in Tarlabaşı as well as a small apartment building that he rented out. While these ventures brought him to the neighbourhood at regular intervals, he could of course have frequented another barbershop, somewhere more conveniently located and closer to where he lived. Even though I was told that Halil Usta was renowned for his soft touch and smooth shave, he certainly was not the only possible option even for very demanding customers in a city awash in barbershops. However, Murat did not only come for his personal hygiene, but for the familiarity and the friendly banter. He once told me that no matter where Halil and Necmi would move their business following the demolition of the neighbourhood, he would come and find them.

Loyalty ties between customers and the owners of small businesses are an important part of what makes a *mahalle* and the network of social ties that runs through it. I once witnessed an interesting scene at Halil's shop. A customer, obviously a regular, came for a haircut. After he had sat down, Halil remarked that he had gotten his hair cut elsewhere. While this was done in jest and was accompanied by some friendly bickering, the customer also felt "caught" – a feeling he alleviated by fervently agreeing with Halil that whoever had cut his hair had done shoddy workmanship.

By the time I met Halil, he was officially retired, but like many men in Turkey continued to work to bolster his meagre pension check and, just as importantly, to nurture the deep relationships he had established with neighbours and friends in the *mahalle* over the years. A considerable number of men that frequented his shop in 2011 had gotten their haircuts there as little boys. The wall above the barbershop mirrors was covered with photographs of their numerous customers, passport photos and professional studio headshots, as well as a couple of pictures that displayed haircuts that Halil and Necmi had done and that they were especially proud of or thought of as funny. Both barbers had detailed knowledge of their customers' lives, they knew their children and grandchildren, were informed about their health, the state of their marriages, and their professional successes and failures. With the proliferation of hairdressers in Beyoğlu, many of whom were more modern than theirs, or offered very fast service and cut-throat prices, Halil and Necmi relied on their reputation as an excellent "neighbourhood barbershop" [*mahalle berberi*] with longstanding ties in the community to stay afloat. Necmi said:

> We are neighbourhood barbers. That's not just any quick thing. […] Customer relations…[they] don't just pass by and have a quick shave. We are now like the barbers of the family, that's how it is.

Halil underlined the importance of familiarity over style and appearance of the shop for his customers. He said that it was the convivial atmosphere and his detailed knowledge, accumulated over many years, about them, their tastes, and their conversational preferences that motivated their customers to stay loyal to his business. It was agreed that this,

maybe more even than the skill to wield a razor and scissors, was the core ability every *mahalle* barber needed to master (Toklucu 2015: 106).

> My shop is a bit old, it's not as modern as others. You might look inside and wonder: Is this an animal stable or a barber shop? [*laughs*] But our customers come here because they can find something that those shiny big barbers don't offer. They come for the warm, friendly atmosphere, for the conversations. As a barber, you need to know how to make conversation in the same way that you need to know how to cut somebody's hair. When you have known your customers as long as I have, you also know what they like to talk about, or if they don't want to talk at all.

Halil's small barber shop was an important fixture in the neighbourhood, and a point for the exchange of information in the *mahalle*, for example concerning the availability of rental apartments or jobs. Since Halil was reliable and always there, residents would leave their keys with him, and I often observed that he functioned as a sort of "neighbourhood telephone" and black board, transmitting messages from one person to another.

I met several of the people I later interviewed either in his shop, or via his customers. There were often neighbours who had just dropped by, or customers who had come a little early and were now waiting their turn (though having to wait in line became a rarer occurrence as time and the project progressed). Halil cooked lunch in his shop every day, delicious one-pot meals that he would prepare on a gas flame and that he shared with hungry customers and visiting (shop) neighbours, or journalists and researchers like me. During Ramadan, he cooked *iftar* meals, sometimes jointly with Ekin and Seray, the chicken döner restaurant owners a few doors down, even though they were Alevis and did not observe Ramadan. Halil had developed deep friendship ties with the couple who lived in the *gecekondu* suburb of Sultanbeyli on the Asian side of the city, but who owned a building on Halil's street. When Ekin retired[16], Halil joined them at their local *cemevi* for a feast of a sacrificial ram Ekin had bought to celebrate the occasion.[17]

Halil said that he felt at home in Tarlabaşı despite living in an apartment on the Asian side.

> I don't have a place here, but this is my neighbourhood, and it has been for many years. I am sad [that it is being demolished], even though I don't live here. I will not be able to see my friends as we used to, except maybe for a wedding, if everyone is free, every now and then. That will be it. For years we were together as a family, this will be over and that is what I am sad about.

Halil had developed a strong network of micro-publics over the years. When business was slow, as it was increasingly wont to be as the renewal project advanced and evictions picked up pace, he walked the few metres down to the teahouse in his street to play a

16 He also only retired on paper. While he did receive a pension check, he continued working in the restaurant together with his wife.

17 In neighbourhoods where Alevis were in the minority, as they were in Tarlabaşı, they sometimes faced discrimination and were shunned by some Sunni Turks who would refuse to even eat food from the hands of Alevis. The chicken döner restaurant worked well despite that, but the close relationship between Halil and Ekin's family was noteworthy.

few rounds of cards. Halil was a regular there, and he did not have any problem to either find co-players or join an already ongoing game. If an unexpected customer did show up, Halil would make him wait until the round was finished, since drop-out players were considered the losers of the game and therefore expected to pay for everyone's beverages (usually tea and Nescafé).

When eviction began and the first buildings were gutted, scavenged for metal and wood, Halil said he felt "orphaned". Despite having found a rental suitable for opening another barbershop further down the street (outside the renewal zone), Halil lost his enthusiasm for the job he had loved so much when his entire social network broke down around him. After Ekin had packed up his restaurant and left, Halil' Tarlabaşı visits became rarer. When the teahouse shut down, one of the last businesses to go, he stopped coming altogether, leaving most of the remaining business in the new shop to Necmi.

The trans* sex worker [seks işçisi]

Müge had lived and worked in Tarlabaşı for almost ten years when we met. She had moved to the neighbourhood after the violent evictions of trans* persons from Ülker Street in Cihangir (Selek 2001) and rented a two-bedroom apartment that she shared with her copper-red Persian cat named "Çapkın" (*Rake*). Her street was a cul-de-sac that housed the workshop of cobbler Zeki Usta, Hakan's small teahouse, a former Armenian school that was currently being refurbished by a separate developer, an informal brothel as well as the homes of several other residents. Except for the very occasional municipal or police vehicle, it was a pedestrian street which meant that there was room for a lot of interactional activity between residents. Importantly, the trans* women were able to solicit customers there without having to brave traffic.

Müge was able to work at home, but her best friend and "mentor" Gülay, a trans* sex worker then in her late 40s, rented a room in the informal brothel up the street. There, up to six women were able to share extra costs, exchange information about customers, and generally look out for each other. Müge and Gülay said that Tarlabaşı was one of the last places in Istanbul where they could live and work in relative physical safety. As a result of pervasive discrimination and the exclusion from almost all social spheres, the vast majority of trans* women had few, if any, other work opportunities in the city.[18] The same rigid cultural norms and deep societal prejudice could make it extremely difficult for trans* persons to rent a house in Istanbul, or any other Turkish metropolis.[19]

Müge paid 400 TL for her entrance-level flat and said that she was on good terms with her landlord, who did not object to her working at the house. But when he sold the building to the municipality, Müge was forced to think about alternatives.

---

18 Müge told me on various occasions that she would rather work in a different profession, but that this was impossible due to ubiquitous discrimination and ferociously anti-trans* prejudice in Turkish society.

19 In most cities it is impossible. The trans* and sex workers' rights group *Kırmızı Şemsiye* [Red Umbrella] lists inflated rents, arbitrary evictions and the sealing of trans* homes by the authorities on accusations of harbouring illegal brothels (without further proof than the presumption that all trans* women engage in sex work), as examples of how trans* persons' right to housing is routinely violated (see Ördek 2016).

She did not consider moving to the faraway suburb of Kayabaşı, where the municipality offered Tarlabaşı tenants priority purchase of a flat in one of the TOKI social housing high-rises.

> Why should I live anywhere else when I am so comfortable here? While I have a nice house and pay little rent? Why should I go and pay 700, 800 [TL] elsewhere? Look, if you live somewhere else, you have to pay for public transport, but here I don't have to pay for that. Here I have everything at my fingertips. Down this way there is the teahouse, that way is the cornershop [*points*]. Go that way, you'll get to the post office. Everything is here. That's why. But when you want to go to the post office in other neighbourhoods, you'll have to pay for the *dolmuş*[20] or a taxi. If you want to go to a restaurant, you have to pay for public transport. Here we are right in the [city] centre. I would make a loss otherwise. I would have to change busses twice to go to Kayabaşı, one-way, how much does that add up to every month? And it's not even safe there.

Müge and Çapkın

Photo by Jonathan Lewis

Another issue was that investment in flat ownership, with instalments sometimes running over decades, posed an important risk.[21] For sex workers like Müge, this risk was compounded by the lack of a guaranteed monthly income, and the absence of social

20 A *dolmuş* is a shared taxi that runs on fixed routes at a set price inside and between cities and towns.

21 In Turkey, even social housing offered and managed by the Housing Agency TOKI is only available to buy, not to rent. People on low and/or unstable incomes who are forced to move to such a TOKI settlement because of urban renewal-related evictions risk to default on their long-running mortgage payments, leaving them to scramble for different housing options or to lodge with relatives. This has happened in the majority Roma neighbourhood of Sulukule.

security or insurance of any kind. Health issues, misdemeanour fines and unexpected legal fees could have an unplanned and severe impact on the ability to pay the monthly rates. In addition to that, many trans* sex workers had to break ties with families and other previous solidarity networks and could therefore not fall back on them in case they had to default on their payments.

Nevertheless, Müge eyed the option of moving to Bahçeşehir, a middle class residential neighbourhood in the western suburbs, where she had even made a down payment on a flat in a gated community [*site*]. She argued that from Taksim, Bahçeşehir was easily reachable via public transport, which was important since Müge wanted (and had) to continue to work in Tarlabaşı. She knew that sex work would prove to be very difficult, if not dangerous, to do from an apartment in a residential complex. But this was not the only reason she hesitated.

> I won't be able to sit in front of my house [in my new neighbourhood]. But here I sit in front of my house, I go to the teahouse, all the shop owners know me. And they love me. There is no one who doesn't, they all love me, I know that. How do I know that? For example, when I leave my house, they keep an eye on it. When a stranger approaches, they ask him what he is doing there. Someone who does this loves me. Do you know what I mean? But there…it's a giant *site*. I'll be all alone there.

Despite the many problems in the neighbourhood and the prejudice that she sometimes faced from other residents, Müge said that Tarlabaşı had become a place where she felt at home.

> For better or for worse, I manage to fill my tummy here. Okay, maybe it's a disgusting place. Maybe it's falling down. Maybe the streets are smelly. There might be thieves, there might be this and that. But this is my home after all. It's where I get by, where I help my family get by. It's where I live, where I get up and where I sleep. It's where I open the window in the morning, where I wash my face and exchange greetings with other people. I won't be able to do that anywhere else. Maybe, in order to do that, I will need five or six years. One doesn't create a home like that in a couple of years. Because [people] increasingly live in [anonymous] housing blocks, in gated communities. Here you can ring anyone's doorbell and ask for a cup of cooking oil, for water, for salt, or for food. But in a *site* that's impossible.

In Tarlabaşı she felt a certain respite from the continuous struggle against different forms of discrimination that she faced everywhere (else) in the city. When asked how she would describe *komşuluk [*neighbourliness*]* in Tarlabaşı, Müge replied:

> It's very nice. If only it was like that everywhere. I get along well with the local shop owners, and they tolerate me. I can get credit [at the shops], I don't have any problems with them here. I can postpone the payment of my debts [*veleziye*]. I can tell them that I don't have money, I can even tell them to get lost if they pester me. If you can say that [to a shopkeeper], that means there is great familiarity between us. As for my neighbours, they bring me food when they have cooked something, they ask how I'm doing. And I'm a working woman [sex worker]. Is it right for a family woman to greet me in the street? If you ask most people, they'd say that it isn't. But here, when [a woman] walks past me,

> she asks: 'Mügecim, how are you sweetie? Do you have any worries, any problems?' They ask me how things are. I tell them: 'I am fine, *anneciğim*, what can I do, I get by.' I ask: 'Do you have any worries?' And I say that if she does have any, she should tell me, and she says that she will. That's how it is here. After all, I can buy on credit, when I am sad the people here console me and support me. They are helpful. I have no problems with the shopkeepers, the neighbours, the families. Because we are like relatives here now, that is how I could sum it up. We are like family. We have been around each other for a long time by now. I can ask [neighbours] for a handful of bulgur. No problem. I know they will always give it to me. If I say 'good day, *hayatım*' to a woman I don't even know she will smile, and [wish me well and success at my work]. If someone says this, that means they have accepted [me]. I mean, many of them are hypocrites. They say [have a good workday] to your face, but then turn around and gossip. [*laughs*].

Müge's entrance-level flat was only a few metres down from the corner where she waited for customers. The teahouse was frequented almost uniquely by regulars: local shopkeepers, artisans, workers, municipal cleaners, and the trans* sex workers from the brothel next door. Müge and Gülay both spent a considerable amount of their time there during the day, especially when it was cold or raining, if they needed a break, or to play a round of cards or *okey*[22] with the other guests during a lull in customers. Other trans* sex workers would make use of the place to rest and refresh their make-up, or to have a tea or Nescafé. The atmosphere in the teahouse was convivial and friendly. Hakan and the other men would refer to Müge affectionately as "my girl/daughter" [*kızım*] or "sweetie" [*canım*], and she seemed to be at ease with the jokes and sometimes teasing comments. She could also hold her own, and did not shy away from wisecracking, even if the pun was somewhat "slippery". There were few, if any other places in Istanbul that I knew of where trans* residents and non-trans* residents entertained such friendly ties, let alone played cards together. However, and as I have described earlier, what at first glance looked and felt like a tight neighbourhood community had required a lot of negotiations, emotional labour and, at times, physical violence, and still amounted to a somewhat uneasy truce that papered over the underlying tension and conflicts. As she describes above, Müge was ambivalent about her neighbours and the men in the teahouse. At times she accused them of hypocrisy, arguing that they were in fact transphobes who talked badly about her behind her back and who only tolerated the brothel because they had received "a good beating" ten years prior. However, she equally underlined the good relations that she had established in the neighbourhood and said that the men in her street loved her enough to keep an eye out for her and her home. It was this "certain level of familiarity" (Sakızlıoğlu 2014a: 184) that she was going to lose with the demolition of Tarlabaşı and her move into a suburban *site*.

Other than relative safety and acceptance, a diverse infrastructure had emerged around the illegal and semi-illegal sex trade in and around the wider Tarlabaşı and Taksim area. It included bars, music halls [*pavyon*], discos and hotels that allowed trans*

22 *Okey* is a popular tile-based game that is often played in coffeehouses/teahouses. While in theory it can be played by two or three players, it is usually played by four. It is very similar to the German game *Rummikub* as it requires the same set of boards and tiles, but it is played under a different set of rules.

sex workers to enter and to find and entertain possible customers. This network also encompassed a number of hairdressing salons and wig makers, tailors and cobblers that catered to a trans* clientele. I had been granted a seat off the side in one of these salons thanks to my friendship with the women in Bird Street. It was run by Ciğdem and her husband, an impossibly gaunt man who rarely spoke, and who, under the direction of his wife, was responsible for hair styles and wigs. Ciğdem tended to outfits and make-up, and was assisted by Kemal, a young man bedecked in tattoos, and her teenage daughter.

On Friday and Saturday nights the shop was usually packed. The usually harried owner, wielding fake nails, bottles of glitter and large make-up palettes, shouted commands to Kemal and her husband who was trying to efficiently rotate the use of their four chairs. Some customers – those that were good at it and could not afford the hairdresser's service each time – were allowed to do their own hair, makeup, and nails. The women also helped each other with hair clips, zippers, or putting on jewellery. Some used the computer in the shop to find customers on websites set up to arrange the exchange of sex against money. Here, too, the presence of colleagues made it easier to screen potential clients, as information about those that cheated on pay or were prone to use violence could be pooled and exchanged. Müge, who preferred subtle make-up and sober outfits, only made use of the hairdressers to sit and rest during the day, when business was slow.

Hairdresser, Saturday night

Photo by Jonathan Lewis

The fact that Tarlabaşı had a "spoiled" reputation and was, in the shared consciousness of the city, a trans* space, afforded a certain, if relative, safety for trans* people. The sizeable trans* presence in the neighbourhood gave rise to a trans* infrastructure and strengthened solidarity ties of the trans* community. The trans* women I got to know better during my fieldwork in Tarlabaşı had all, without exception, experienced discrim-

ination, and harassment in their everyday lives. All had lived through horrific violence, including sexual assault and police torture. The proximity to each other and the possibility to exchange information – on customers, police controls, safe and unsafe working locations – was therefore vitally important.

Trans* solidarity networks extended beyond Tarlabaşı. Several of the women, including Müge, regularly frequented the LGBTQ and sex workers' rights associations that were situated in the proximity of Taksim Square at the time, and could all be easily reached on foot.[23] These associations not only provided legal and health advice, but also organised marches, conferences and street protests around Taksim Square and on the main Istiklal Avenue. These extended trust networks gave trans* women, as Müge put it, a sense of increased agency: "There are many of us in Tarlabaşı. We are a community. We are strong here." She added that she felt trans* persons had more power to act in Beyoğlu than elsewhere in the city because they were many. She believed that the police refrained from all-out discrimination and violent abuse in Tarlabaşı because the government dreaded local trans* person's ability to organise legal street protests quickly.[24]

The (female) neighbours [kadın komşuları]

When I first met Alev, she was in her late twenties. Unmarried, she lived in a three-bedroom apartment in the building on Tree Street. She shared the place with her elderly parents, her older brother, his wife, and their two young daughters. Because Alev was working in a textile workshop in Tarlabaşı six days a week, the family had been able to afford comforts such as a washing machine that they kept in the entrance for reasons of space. Like many women in Tarlabaşı, Alev and her sister-in-law made their own bread. They baked the flat bread on an electric sheet metal oven [*sac*], a not inexpensive kitchen utensil that in cities had replaced the open flame and gas ovens used in rural homes. Since there was too little space in the kitchen and baking too messy to be done in any other room of the house, bread baking happened in the hallway. Done usually once a week, they moved the large bowl of dough and the *sac* there and set to work. Their front door always remained open then, and the baking spilled out into the shared staircase. It was common that Cemile or other female neighbours from the building joined them there. They would either help, make use of the oven (since they didn't necessarily own one themselves) and bake a few batches of bread, or take care of each other's children and grandchildren. It also was an opportunity to chat and keep each other company.

Over the years, the women had developed close friendships and a close-knit support network across the floors of their building in Tree Street. The doors of their apartments were always open, and the women (and their children) arrived unannounced in each other's homes to visit almost every day. In her work on gender and belonging in

23 Some of these NGOs, such as Lambda, had to move away from Beyoğlu since then.

24 By that time, the LGBTQ movement in Turkey had gained considerable traction. Despite the prevalent attitude of AKP politicians, especially following the election success of 2007, of opposing LGBTQ rights, groups such as Lambda were able to substantially increase LGBTQ visibility and solidarity with LGBTQ persons in Turkey. Somewhat counterintuitively, the conservative AKP and the queer movement in Turkey grew stronger at the same time, as the space for social movements had grown considerably, at least until 2011 (see Çetin and Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik 2016).

Kuzguncuk, Amy Mills (2007: 341) identifies such frequent neighbourly visits as a constitutive (and gendered) practice that creates and sustains *mahalle* life. She writes: "The responsibility of visiting frequently enough to demonstrate membership in the community and the ways of visiting with other women (talking, reading coffee fortunes, drinking tea, eating, helping prepare food or interacting with children, or keeping company while someone does chores) are important characteristics of *mahalle* life."

For these women, the most crucial neighbourhood community in Tarlabaşı was that of their own building. And while all of them had other relatives and friends in the area and visited them, the most frequent social calls were on the other women in the same house. Neighbourly activities in Tree Street included the sharing of childcare duties and household chores, but also crucial emotional and material support. The looming threat of displacement brought the women closer together.[25] Alev's downstairs neighbour Cemile, the only non-Kurdish woman in the building by the time I met them, spent many hours in Alev's company to discuss her fears of displacement, her marital problems, the mountain of debt that she and her husband Ramazan were facing, and the difficulties of finding another apartment.

Cemile's marriage had begun to deteriorate after Ramazan signed away their shared six-bedroom flat. She was stressed and angry over Ramazan's "idiocy", and he had started to become violent towards her during their increasingly frequent fights. The crucial support of her female neighbours helped her a lot, she told me later. Both Alev and Esma regularly took her in when Ramazan had again thrown her out of their shared house, and once even went to the project sales office to hold Fatih Bey and his colleagues accountable. The women blamed them for the abuse their neighbour Cemile now suffered at the hands of her husband. Cemile said:

> Go and ask Esma! The whole house went [to the sales office] and told them: you just come and see how badly Cemile Abla is being beaten up because of you. My husband even threw me out of the house. [*points*] He opened this door and threw me out. He said, leave, go wherever you want. Whose fault was that? Theirs!

Esma also offered to speak to the lawyer she had hired to claim her late husband's inheritance for her child when Cemile started to consider getting a divorce.

Most of the women had little or no say in what happened to their homes, because title deeds were in their husband's names. They were not being consulted by their families or the developer over alternatives and the options they had. Fikriye, a Kurdish woman in her thirties who shared a two-bedroom apartment with her husband, three small boys and a newborn baby girl lived on the top floor of the building in Tree Street. Her husband was working long hours as a porter [*hamal*] in the Istanbul neighbourhood of Eminönü[26],

25 This manifested also in political engagement. In the 2011 national elections Cemile, a long-time AKP voter, was swayed to cast her ballot in favour of the independent candidate, a well-known film director backed by the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). Alev, who was invested in the Kurdish struggle and interested in politics, had jokingly rallied for that candidate for months in front of Cemile, and praised him as "handsome". Cemile later told Alev that she had voted for "one of yours this year".

26 The historic district of Eminönü has been a centre of business and trade for centuries. Narrow paths and steep, often very crowded streets prevent lorries from passing through, which is why porters

and was therefore often alone at home with the children. The family was quite poor even for Tarlabaşı standards. Contrary to Alev, Fikriye did not work outside the home and was dependent on others, her husband, her relatives, and the charity of her neighbours. After the first families moved out of Tarlabaşı, the presence of drug dealers and non-resident sex workers on the streets increased, and a general feeling of insecurity worried those that had stayed behind. Because Fikriye was alone and did not dare to send her small boys to buy food from the cornershop after nightfall, Alev often did it for her, and generally kept an eye out for the other woman.

Staircase socialising

Photo by Jonathan Lewis

The women's local solidarity network had taken a first hit early in project negotiations. Two former (female) neighbours had sold their apartments early on during the negotiation stage and left the building, which was cause for reproach from the remaining women in Tree Street and who blamed them for their lack of neighbourly solidarity. I never met either of them. Cemile told me that one of these women had agreed to sell her apartment at the very first meeting with the municipal lawyers and *GAP Inşaat*. While she added that the woman "had wanted to leave anyway to be with her son in Eskişehir", it was clear that she resented her neighbour's decision because, she felt, it had weakened her own resolve. "They did not object to anything, never! That's why it all happened the way it did. Because they never objected to anything, we never even thought of [resisting] either." Alev was more direct. She blamed the two defecting neighbours for the eviction of all remaining residents in the building. "I swear, those people made a mistake. If we had all stuck together, they wouldn't have been able to do anything."

carry heavy loads (up to 200kg) on their backs. *Hamallık* is an extremely precarious occupation, as it does not provide any form of financial stability or social security.

Alev's outgoing personality, her resolute demeanour in the face of threats by the municipality and the *GAP Inşaat* lawyers and her decision to fight them in court led her other neighbours to seek her out when they wanted to talk about their fears and worries regarding the renewal project. Even though she was younger than all the other women, she was the one who often gave them advice.

Despite the closeness of the women to each other, the network that connected them was ultimately tethered to place and very fragile. After all of them had had to move out, and despite most of them finding at least temporary accommodation in the immediate neighbourhood that put all of them within walking distance from each other, mutual visits grew infrequent. And since they did not live in the same building anymore, the nightly chats and the sharing of chores ceased altogether.

Contrary to Wacquant's claim that residents will seek to exit a stigmatised neighbourhood as soon as they are able, many Tarlabaşı residents displayed a profound attachment to their *mahalle* based on a wide variety of reasons. Rather than distancing themselves from their deeply tainted neighbourhood, residents challenged the stream of negative representations of it (Kirkness 2014: 1289). They defied stigmatised aspects of Tarlabaşı through ideas of mutual care, solidarity, kinship ties and strong community relations (Nayak 2019: 936).

By describing Tarlabaşı as a real *mahalle*, a spatial qualifier that evokes socially virtuous traits that are not commonly associated with the "modern" neighbourhoods that are increasingly replacing them, residents insisted that Tarlabaşı, too, was in fact a virtuous place and worth saving. Despite the problems and tension that existed in Tarlabaşı as they do in any other neighbourhood, it was evident that people felt a strong connection to their *mahalle*. For many, these ties were born out of necessity and for a lack of alternatives. They were dependent on the relatively cheap rents, on the proximity to a large number of service jobs in Beyoğlu, and on the existence of minority group networks they could fall back on for support. However, as the above examples have shown, belonging in Tarlabaşı did not mean the mere absence of exclusion, but real inclusion and access to the basic accommodation of a social contract that is available to those who are members of a traditional *mahalle*. Many of the minority groups that had access to such crucial support struggled to find it elsewhere. Furthermore, Tarlabaşı was a place of memory for the many people who have lived in the neighbourhood for years, who were raised there, who found a home after experiencing the trauma of displacement, who established strong neighbourly ties, and who built a business there. Highlighting social relations of everyday life rescripts a neighbourhood as stigmatised as Tarlabaşı and challenges the stigmatising narrative. Such a portrayal speaks to the kind of deep ties and relations of mutual support and solidarity that can be found in a *mahalle* but are erased in outsider accounts and the negative frame put forth by project stakeholders and much of the media (see August 2014; Nayak 2017; Cairns 2018).