

Chapter six: Have you heard?

In 2006, the Beyoğlu Municipality convened a meeting with Tarlabası residents to discuss a possible regeneration of the neighbourhood financed by a World Bank loan. Municipal officials told attendees that property owners would be able to renovate their own properties with the help and guidance of municipal authorities and public institutions responsible for the preservation and upkeep of listed buildings. Residents were told that nobody would be displaced. For the most part, the community welcomed the idea, as people generally agreed that the housing stock in the neighbourhood was in dire need of repair. Furthermore, regulations and conservation norms concerning the renovation of listed buildings in Tarlabası had prevented house owners from investing in their properties, and several people had been slapped with fines for undertaking repairs without consulting officials and obtaining required permits.

Second-hand furniture seller Cemal, the 60-year-old Turkish man who had sold his five-storey Levantine building on Tree Street, recalled his initial excitement at the prospect of a neighbourhood upgrade: “We were not against the project. Tarlabası needed renovations. We were happy about the idea, and we thought that we would make gains from it.” However, for more than one year there were no further news about the proposed World Bank-financed regeneration project. But rumours began to circulate in the neighbourhood. Some property owners had received letters from the municipality and corporate lawyers that worked for a project developer, inviting them to engage in one-on-one talks. Were these sales negotiations? Would the World Bank regeneration project actually happen? But now there was talk of demolitions – was that true? Would people lose their homes after all? Some property owners, like the retired Turkish couple Cemile and Ramazan, were suddenly unsure of their plans to take on a considerable debt to undertake urgently needed home renovations. Furthermore, the media began to report on the Romani neighbourhood of Sulukule that was being evicted under contentious municipal renewal plans. Was Tarlabası in danger of suffering the same fate? Tarlabası residents were suddenly afraid that they, too, would receive meagre compensations and lose their homes and businesses. The municipality stalled and put to rest individual fears of displacement. Cemile proceeded to take out a loan, buy new PVC windows and a new balcony door, and hire painters and plasterers. At the same time the municipality tried to negotiate with some property owners, and it was one of their

private lawyers who was finally able to obtain hard information: the urban regeneration scheme was going to be implemented on the basis of a public-private partnership between the Beyoğlu Municipality and construction company *GAP İnşaat*, a subsidiary of Çalık Holding, a business conglomerate then under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's son-in-law Berat Albayrak (Ünsal 2013: 140). Upon receiving such alarming news, some property owners called for a meeting with the municipality, where they learned that the municipality had declared Tarlabası an urban renewal zone on the basis of Law No. 5366 back in 2006 and issued a tender behind their backs. Not they, but *GAP İnşaat*, who had already signed the contract, would redevelop Tarlabası. Some residents learned this, together with the rest of the Turkish public, from the media. Cemile had to obtain this information from the same municipal officials who had previously told her that no demolitions would take place. She was not the only one who later told me that the shock of the news had made her and her husband sick. In later conversations residents blamed at least two strokes and one death in Tarlabası on the distressing revelation that a large part of the neighbourhood would be destroyed, and everyone evicted.

Even after the public announcement of the Tarlabası renewal project, access to information for residents remained difficult. During the three months that the Tarlabası Association had a seat at the planning table, and therefore (limited) access to renewal proposals and strategies, there was somewhat more transparency. When association spokesman Erdal Aybek ran the consultation office on Tarlabası Boulevard, residents were able to find out who had already sold their buildings or homes, and who had not. However, most other reliable information was hard to come by. It became an even rarer commodity, and one that was more difficult to decipher when the association fell apart, and project stakeholders started to liaise with property owners individually. Just like Cemile, residents were given conflicting information from various – or the exact same – actors. In the same way that the materiality and content of the promotional material changed, information radically fluctuated over time, in tandem with radical shifts in the project and the general political and economic context.

This lack of information and transparency provided the perfect breeding ground for speculation and rumour. James Scott (1990: 144) writes that “rumour thrives most in situations in which events of vital importance to people’s interests are occurring and in which no reliable information or only ambiguous information is available.” Because the channels of reliable information were intentionally strangled or obscured by the municipality, residents had to rely on rumour to navigate the preparations for the project and base their decisions on whichever rumour seemed the most likely. Even data gleaned from sources like municipal press releases did not have more value than a rumour, because there was no single reliable channel of information. All little pieces of information delivered by whatever means, be it the municipality, the *muhtar*, a lawyer, or a conversation overheard somewhere, had the insecure, unreliable status of hearsay.

Rumours could be pessimistic and defeatist, and sometimes they could be reason for renewed hope that the project might stall or change to the advantage of residents. Some rumours centred on possible resistance, and others conspiratorially whispered of project stakeholders’ nefarious efforts to break it and make the neighbourhood look worse than it was. More often than not, rumours were confusing and paralysing, making residents second-guess their own decisions. In November 2011, when evictions and demolitions were

well underway, furniture seller Cemal told me that “someone from the municipality” had told him that stakeholders were lacking the funds to continue the project and might yet resort to asking people to renovate their individual homes, just as the municipality had initially suggested in the 2006 meeting. If true, these were not welcome news for Cemal. He had signed over his title deed early on during the negotiation phase and exchanged his building for two apartments in the new project. He was therefore dependent on the project to continue as planned. The “information” he received came from an individual municipal official he had randomly encountered in the street and was not more than a rumour, but Cemal had no way of knowing if it was credible. It contradicted media statements previously made by mayor Ahmet Misbah Demircan, and the information Cemal had been given in talks with the notorious deputy mayor Fatih Bey. Cemal was desperate to know when he would be able to access the two new apartments. By 2011 he had already spent years without being able to collect the rent from the tenants he had lost together with his property. The promised deadline for the official opening of the new development and the handover of apartments had long passed, and no new final date had been given to future owners. Anthropologist Jayaseelan Raj (2019: 53) underlines that it is irrelevant if rumours are accurate and based on “facts” because they have real life consequences. Cemal had to decide on how to react to the conflicting information he had received, but how? Should he act on the rumour he had heard on the street, for example by taking legal action, or by rallying fellow property owners who were in a similar situation? Or should he trust official channels of communication and dismiss this disquieting rumour as unlikely? The instability of available information stemmed partly from the uncertain accuracy of the information itself, but also from the unpredictability and unreliability of the source delivering it. After all, Cemal was given contradictory information from different people who nevertheless all worked for the municipality. Thinking of himself as a law-abiding citizen and a Turk who, if not entirely trusted, nevertheless respected the authorities, he was unsure if the word of a lower municipal official could be trusted over public statements made by the mayor himself. Then again, project stakeholders had not been open and transparent either and some of what the mayor had promised, like the microcredit for owners to renovate their own homes, had turned out to be untrue. Cemal’s Kurdish shop neighbour Maher dismissed either source as untrustworthy, as both were representatives of the Turkish state. Cemal was at a loss. What would be the most sensible decision?

Despite the fundamental impact that the planned urban renewal project would have on their lives, Tarlabası residents were given very little information on the planned procedures, the legal steps, or the timeline of the project. The municipality and the project developer fully exercised their power over the dissemination of information and peoples’ time in order to pressure them to leave. They made people wait, both for personal appointments and as a community as a whole. They deferred plans without explanation, leaving people to guess if this happened for a lack of funds or for political gain, for example prior to local and national elections. The municipality toyed with residents’ hopes and told them that they might not have to leave for a while, only to then rush parts of the project along unexpectedly (Sakızlıoğlu 2014b: 215). They also used elements of surprise to shock residents, for example by sending riot police and armoured vehicles for an eviction without clear prior announcement that the people in question would have to leave

that day. During the years of nerve-wrecking delays and project changes, people had to contend themselves with “anxious, powerless waiting” (ibid.).

Fencing in the renewal area



Photo by Jonathan Lewis

In the absence of meaningful information, they resorted to speculation and the circulation and interpretation of rumours in an attempt to make sense of the continued ambiguity. Anthropologist David Samper (2002) writes that rumours are more likely to develop when the need for news and reliable information is not, or not sufficiently, met. He defines a rumour as “unverified information that is constructed in order to explain uncertain, ambiguous events or intangible fears, anxieties, or perceived dangers. It emerges in situations where news and information is scarce” (ibid.: 4). It is not surprising that rumours fall on most fertile ground in life-threatening situations, such as war, epidemics, famine, or riots (Scott 1990: 144). The looming menace of displacement and the fear of losing one’s home, work, and social network presented a threatening situation for people living in Tarlaşaşı. In their seminal work on rumour, sociologists Gordon W. Allport and Leo J. Postman (1947) point out that, in situations of crisis and confusion, both the importance and the ambiguity of information increase considerably. The reasons for this initial ambiguity can vary. It can be caused by the absence of information as well as by a lack of clarity in the information someone receives, or by the fact that conflicting versions of information have been spread. It is also possible that the person receiving the information does not manage to comprehend it, for example because of the scientific complexity of the reported facts that may require expert knowledge (ibid.: 2).

In Tarlaşaşı, scraps of information, and clues scoured from direct or indirect interactions with the municipality or the developing company, from the media, from marketing materials, or simply hearsay, were eagerly interpreted and retold. Rumours, as

they travelled through the communication channels of the community, underwent small alterations, depending on who was retelling the “facts” and who was listening. Rumours were therefore a tool of sense-making during a time of growing and stressful uncertainty, a “tactic of the weak” (Scott 1985, 1990) that aimed to glean as much information as possible from their surroundings. In circumstances where people’s safety, livelihoods, and homes are potentially threatened, they have no other choice than to “keep their ears close to the ground” (Scott 1990: 144). The example of Cemal illustrates how Tarlabası residents were burdened with the task of interpretative labour, forcing them to constantly evaluate the sources of information and their trustworthiness. For that they had to rely on their personal history and their previous experiences. People decided if and to what extent they trusted a particular piece of information according to their own wishes and expectations, which in turn determined what they communicated to others. “As rumor travels it is altered in a fashion that brings it more closely into line with the hopes, fears, and worldview of those who hear it and retell it” (ibid.: 145).

In this chapter, I examine different forms and functions of rumour during the run-up to evictions and analyse how rumour interacted with territorial stigmatisation in Tarlabası. While the relation between rumours and violence (Kirsch 2002a; Samper 2002; Stewart and Strathern 2003; Bhavnani et al. 2009; Espeland 2011; Santos 2021.), as well as between rumour and stigma (Varas-Díaz et al. 2005; Zhu and Smith 2016; Bresnahan and Zhuang 2016; Kwesell and Jung 2019) have been extensively researched, the link between rumour, territorial stigmatisation, and the violence of eviction and displacement remains a gap in the literature. My fieldwork in Tarlabası has shown that rumour can provide explanations in that context.

Demolitions



Photo by Jonathan Lewis

The symbolic denigration of the neighbourhood was a constantly renewed process of undermining peoples' social and moral authority, denying them the access to some basic form of social contract, including the right to reliable information and transparency. The municipality's strategy of actively withholding or confusing reliable information had profound legal impacts and material consequences for residents, such as the denial of their rights to recourse, their right to institutional inclusion, and protection from a state in which they were citizens. While these forms of denigration took different shapes, they were all bound up in stigma and intentionally marginalising.

Being forced to rely on rumour was therefore both a material consequence and a mechanism of the neighbourhood stigmatisation. And as I have shown in chapter two, the invisibilisation of residents, which is causally linked to the withholding of information, was part of the stigmatisation process. In a way, the rumours, and the massive amount of interpretative labour that went into their assessment and interpretation, were part of peoples' tactics to cope with the material consequences of stigma. On the other hand, withholding of reliable information was part of the everyday work that agents of the state and the developers were doing to make the stigmatisation of the neighbourhood stick. In the following pages I aim to show how the lack of information and circulating rumours made it difficult for house owners and tenants to make sense of what was going to happen to their homes and their neighbourhood, and thus difficult to plan or take actions about how to deal with looming evictions.

Firstly, I will show how a certain rumour gained momentum in the neighbourhood, how it was interpreted by different people, and how, through a chance encounter, this specific rumour was put to rest. I will then elaborate on how residents, unable to verify the accuracy of the information they received, tried to analyse the channels of communication that the information was spread through, and how their own personal experiences influenced the way they might reach a conclusion of what to believe and act on. Following that I will give examples of rumours that created stronger solidarity ties in the run-up to evictions, as well as examples of rumours that weakened them. And finally, I want to show how residents used rumour to make sense of the stigmatisation and the discriminatory treatment they felt they were subjected to by the municipality.

The scope and life cycle of a rumour

In June 2010, Feyzullah Yetgin, then a board member of Çalık Holding and the CEO of its construction company *GAP İnşaat*, publicly said that 75 percent of all property owners in Tarlabası had reached an agreement with the municipality, and that demolitions were imminent. Yetgin argued that the majority legally necessary for the start of the project had thereby been reached. His statement was widely published in the mainstream media. Two months later, Beyoğlu mayor Ahmet Misbah Demircan claimed that 70 percent of property owners had sold their title deeds to the municipality, and that compulsory purchase proceedings had been launched for the remaining 30 percent (NTV 2010).

These statements created a wave of panicked rumours amongst residents who were still in dispute over their property, and amongst tenants who lacked the access to infor-

mation on when they would be evicted.¹ It is impossible to verify if the public claims made by Yetgin and Demircan were true at the time. Contradictory as they were in their chronology, they likely were not. The Tarlabası Association was adamant that the number of sold title deeds at the time was considerably lower. Furthermore, both men failed to mention that a considerable number of residents were still opposing their expropriations in court, and that the court case to stop the entire project, initiated by the Istanbul Chamber of Architects (TMMOB) in 2008, was ongoing. And both the executive and the mayor glossed over the threats, blackmail, and lies that had preceded a number of “agreements” made with residents. And even if their numbers were (close to) being accurate – and none of the residents had any means to verify this independently of the media reports – their statements clearly meant to inject fear into the neighbourhood and motivate property owners to sign over their title deeds by insinuating that sales negotiations would soon be replaced by legal expropriations.

It is just as impossible to determine if project stakeholders deliberately spread rumours in order to further their interests, but it is certain that they contributed to their spread. Intentionality in the rumour process is complex (Scott, 1985; Kapferer 1990; De Feyter 2015). Sophie De Feyter (2015: 291) underlines that “[e]ven if rumour-mongers are eyeing certain interests, this does not necessarily mean that a rumour was started by a particular actor with the deliberate intention to influence public opinion on a large scale”. Actors who are involved in spreading rumours are “profiteers”: while they might not be the authors of a certain rumour, they do have an interest in seeing the rumour spread in order to further their aims (ibid.: 297).

The above media statements were made during a time of growing uncertainty in the neighbourhood. The Tarlabası Association had succeeded to considerably delay the progress of the renewal project and to rally support from a number of local and international civil society organisations. During that time, *GAP İnşaat* and the municipality followed the strategy of approaching religious charitable trusts [*vakıflar*] and other larger institutions who owned property inside the renewal zone. Additionally, they made revised offers to some property owners, predominantly to those who owned large properties and properties in advantageous locations, in order to convince them to restart one-on-one negotiations. They also contacted individual property owners who were not members of the Tarlabası Association in the hope to persuade them (Ünsal 2013: 134). None of these efforts were made public, and none of them were transparent for residents. They were nevertheless aware of them, as bits and pieces of information travelled through the neighbourhood. This only increased the uncertainty and provided ample fodder for rumours of a growing number of property owners who were secretly attending negotiation meetings and selling their properties (ibid.: 135). Furthermore, the press announce-

1 It was common knowledge in Tarlabası at the time that project stakeholders were legally authorised to expropriate the remaining buildings if they came to an agreement with 75% of homeowners. However, originally there was no law that stated this. I was told by a fellow researcher that the law was later modified to legalise threats of and actual appropriations, but I have not been able to independently confirm this. Tarlabası residents believed this regulation to be law at the time, which drove the resulting panic. This is further proof of how incoherently and constantly the stakes, and, in this case, literal laws changed during the time residents had to interact with the project.

ments that more than 70 percent of properties had been sold were made at a time that the association's provision of information was faltering, as spokesman Erdal Aybek had left over disagreements with the board. That meant that residents had lost the option to verify which title deeds were still in the hands of their Tarlabası owners, and which title deeds had already been sold. Tenants had started to move out, fearful that they might find themselves homeless, which in turn put pressure on landlords unwilling to sell, as they were losing rental income without compensation or the possibility to find new tenants. In short, both *GAP İnşaat* CEO Yetgin and the Beyoğlu mayor exploited and fed into an already well-established rumour, which convinced some residents that it must be true.

Alev was one of the property owners who fought compulsory purchase of her family's apartment in court. The title deed of the three-bedroom flat was in her mother's name.² Since Alev's mother she did not understand or speak Turkish Alev accompanied their lawyer to the courthouse. One day after a hearing in January of 2011, Alev started a casual conversation with one of the project lawyers in the hallway. The tone of their conversation was pleasant, and Alev felt comfortable enough to complain about the pace of the Tarlabası cases being reviewed. In reply, the project lawyer accidentally told her that the property sales were not going as fast as the mayor had previously alleged. A few days later Alev retold the story in her home:

So the lawyer told me: 'We are three lawyers. I am in charge of [court cases for] one hundred houses. By myself.' So I said: There are three lawyers, that makes three hundred houses, if each lawyer is in charge of one hundred. But I thought half of Tarlabası has already been sold? So how is that possible? [...] Then [the lawyer] started to get nervous. I said: that's a nice number. If this is how it is, not many people have sold [their homes]. Most court cases are still ongoing then. [The lawyer] said: 'Yes, that's mostly the case.' Because [this information] had already slipped out of her mouth.

Alev was delighted when she told me about this encounter. She felt that she had gotten the better of the project lawyer in the courthouse. Even more importantly, she had finally received some tangible information. She judged the lawyer's blunder to be more reliable in part because she had the impression that the woman told her about the lagging sales by mistake. The fact that the developers and the municipality were still battling such a large number of cases in court was not meant for the ears of property owners who were resisting compulsory purchase. The lawyer's immediate discomfort following her slip of tongue suggested to Alev that this unintentional private comment was the truth, even though it contradicted stakeholders' previous claims that the necessary majority of property owners had already come to an agreement with the municipality. For Alev, this inconsistency was less surprising than it could have been. Her experience with Turkish state institutions and agents of the state had been almost entirely negative, and she did not trust the municipality or the pro-government developers to tell residents the truth and defend their best interests. It follows that when she got one of their lawyers to slip up in the courthouse corridor, she knew that she had succeeded to catch a glimpse of

2 Alev had worked hard to be able to buy the apartment for her family while still in her late teens. She told me that she had not wanted to put it in her father's name because her father was so "good-hearted" and would give away the apartment to help "the first relative in trouble who would ask".

the offstage, the hidden transcript (Scott 1990) that powerholders did not want Tarlabası residents to see. This knowledge strengthened her resolve to pursue legal steps against the municipality, and to follow through with a court case before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

Alev chose how to act based on her interaction with the project lawyer and on the interpretation of the information she received from her, even if this piece of information was still just rumour, and not an authoritative fact. Those never existed. For Alev, the rumour that more than 70 percent of property owners had come to an agreement with project stakeholders was therefore laid to rest. Despite the fact that the lawyer's information could not be independently confirmed and that it contradicted what the mayor and the project company had publicly claimed, Alev picked it up as a trustworthy piece of information, that aligned more closely with her hopes and her previous experiences with the Turkish state.

Traffic analysis

Neither Alev nor second-hand furniture seller Cemal had any way of verifying the information they received. In order to assess their response based on what they heard, be it in the corridors of a courthouse or during a random encounter on the street, they needed to consider the person who told them, and the circumstances under which the news had been delivered.

If people have no access to material fact of a piece of information, they make their determinations of factuality based on other aspects, such as the channel that the information moves along. This form of interpretative labour can be compared with “traffic analysis – an analytical practice more commonly associated with intelligence/espionage activities” (Clark 2016: 246). Traffic analysis is defined as “the process of intercepting and examining messages in order to deduce information from patterns in communication, which can be performed even when the messages are encrypted” (ibid.). Gretchen Pfeil (2012: 52) underlines that “traffic analysis becomes the privileged mode of interpretation precisely in those cases where other aspects of communication are obscured or occluded.”

This is what happened with the rumours in Tarlabası. People did not have access to information of where a rumour originated, and whether it was truly fact. However, it was possible to know who spread them and under which circumstances, and some sources were considered to be more reliable than others. The process that people based their reactions to rumours on were, to say the least, complicated. Whether someone sold their house could come down to the question of who was considered a credible source of information, and who was not.

The rumour that the legally required 75 percent of property owners had signed over their title deeds to project stakeholders had been delivered by senior officials and through the “serious” channels of mainstream media. And the stakes were high. Worries over possible disadvantageous expropriation agreements amongst property owners increased the pressure. Tenants were afraid that their landlords had sold their buildings without telling them, leaving them at the mercy of the municipality and the project

developer. Whispers of residents that this had happened to (and it *did* happen) further fuelled this fear. These fears accelerated the domino effect of them moving out, forcing a number of property owners to consider selling as their rental income vanished. However, at the same time the Tarlabası Association was still lobbying for fairer negotiations and more profitable deals. Residents often knew property owners, or tenants of property owners who were still deadlocked in legal disputes with project stakeholders over the sale of their title deeds. It was difficult for residents to decide whom to believe.

It is therefore no surprise that people tried to estimate the veracity of the mayor's and the GAP İnşaat CEO's statements from conversations with neighbours, landlords, shopkeepers or an occasionally passing low-level official. They tried to keep track of people who had moved out and observed which buildings had been abandoned. (However, since the knowledge of who was a tenant, and who held a title deed was often confined to their immediate surroundings and not known to each resident for the entire project area, this was in no way a reliable method to reach a conclusion.) Rumours about how many buildings had been sold were avidly exchanged. Knowing, at least approximately, how many people were still negotiating with the municipality was important to decide if further resistance was a good idea, or possibly detrimental to the final sales price of one's property. It is important to note that project stakeholders had an interest to fuel the belief that most property owners had reached an agreement, since they wanted to force doubters to follow suit and accept cheaper sales prices. GAP İnşaat representatives and municipality officials regularly threatened property owners with dropping sales prices should they be amongst the last to agree.

Having to rely on traffic analysis is in itself not that unusual. For example, one might do this during personal conflicts, or to assess the efficiency of a work meeting. However, in Tarlabası the stakes to come to the most accurate conclusion based on the analysis of communication channels and signs were incredibly high. Residents faced displacement, loss of income and their social network, and in many cases, being evicted from a house they owned without adequate compensation. People had to rely entirely on rumour, without any underlying layer of statutory fact that they could somehow find and compare. They had ample proof that everybody interested in the progress of the renewal project was lying to them: the municipality, the developer, the project lawyers, *zabıta* officers, and the media. Alev had been "lucky" in the courthouse and decided that it was to her and her family's advantage to appeal the low price the municipality had wanted to pay. Cemal, on the other hand, had more difficulties to discern the best possible action based on his conversation with a *zabıta* officer, as he was not only interested in the fast completion of the project, but also reluctant to flatly dismiss the words of the Beyoğlu mayor.

Interpretative labour

There was not only a lack of reliable facts, but the information that was made available was constantly changing. The project catalogues analysed in chapter three are an important example of that. Project deadlines had come and gone without any real progress and without explanation from the municipality. Most crucially, residents were largely kept

guessing as to when they would have to leave their homes and workplaces. There were multiple reasons for that. In some cases, tenants who lived or worked in buildings whose owners were locked in court disputes with the municipality had no way of knowing what the outcome of these court cases would be, and when they would come to an end. Tenants whose buildings had already been sold received eviction orders from the municipality but were also told by individual municipal officials that they could stay “until the start of demolitions”. They were not told, however, when that might be. Many tenants struggled to find new lodgings and had nowhere else to go. Property owners who opposed compulsory purchase orders had to depend on the slow, and often erratic, timeline of the courts. And even with ongoing court cases, such as the trial initiated by the Chamber of Architects, the municipality illegally pursued evictions, and later, demolitions.

Unverified scraps of information became rumours that residents had to weigh for their credibility in order to make a meaningful decision on how to react to it. In the same way that certain groups experienced stigma differently and depending on previous collective or individual experiences, all interpretative labour was informed by a person's personal history and previous experience, their relationship to the source of the rumour, their political affiliations, and their own expectations.

With the summer of 2010, the rumours of expropriations and the de facto dissolution of the Tarlabası Association, much of the talk in the neighbourhood centred on the question when evictions and demolitions of homes would *really* begin. Temporal markers like national elections, religious holidays, or the return to school in the fall were all feared possible starting points. These rumours were in turn fanned by project stakeholders. Again, people tried to guess the “right” course of action from conversations with neighbours, from things they had randomly overheard, and from events happening around them. Again, project stakeholders did not volunteer reliable information.

In January 2011, rumours on pending demolitions caused a renewed wave of fear in the neighbourhood. One evening, Cemile joined Alev and me to talk about the latest snippets of information they had heard.

- A: [cheerful] Girl, there will be demolitions in February, have you heard?
- C: That's what they're apparently saying in the association, I don't know about that.
- A: Who in the association said this? How can they start to demolish, half of the houses are still disputed in court! That would be illegal.
- C: Vallah, in the teahouse they say that there has been talk of it.
- A: But where do they know this from?
- C: I don't know either. I just got here. I haven't yet talked to my husband. [In the teahouse] they asked me what I was going to do, but I told them, look, now I'm really depressed, don't talk to me right now. That's how I left it. There's nothing we can do now.

Alev, had left the Tarlabası Association in 2011 and hired her own lawyer because she did not believe the association to be very effective or even trustworthy, which made her sceptical about all unverified information coming from that group. Alev wanted to exhaust all court instances in Turkey to be able to take her case to the European Court of Hu-

man Rights, because she was convinced that the project and the planned expropriations were unlawful. This was only possible if all instances of Turkish courts rejected her claim. Her belief that the dispute *would* go all the way to Strasbourg reflected her distrust in the Turkish judicial system and the state, whom she did not view as a reliable “provider of justice” (Biner 2012: 243). Despite her bad experiences with unjust laws, she did believe that “the law” as an abstract and “a normative order of potential social justice” (Eckert 2012: 152) would protect her against arbitrary illegal actions by the state. It is one reason why she dismissed the rumour of the February evictions. Julia Eckert (2012: 150–151), in her research on the “rumours of rights” in an Indian slum, demonstrates how law appears “as a site of hope, of a just world in which the poor would not lose out.” She shows that marginalised groups, despite their adverse experiences with the law as it was enacted by state institutions, place their hope in a “diffuse idea of law” (ibid.) that, in their opinion, will deliver (social) justice.

Alev’s hope to attain justice rested on the law (as an abstract), and less on political means such as demonstrations or protests, a phenomenon analysed under the term of “juridification”: “[P]eople demonstrate a startlingly persistent faith in ‘the law’, as evidenced by their ever-increasing recourse to legal means to settle conflicts” (Eckert et al. 2012: 5–6). While this may lead to depoliticization, it is a tactic that is increasingly being used by marginalised groups to hold the powerful to account. A detailed analysis of the perception, especially among the Kurdish population, of the European Court of Human Rights as an almost mythical institution that infallibly delivers justice is beyond the scope of this work. Suffice it here to say that the court was often mentioned as *the* place that would stand up to the Turkish authorities in the fight against evictions from Tarlaabaşı, and most often by members of the Kurdish community.

Cemile, on the other hand, reacted very differently to the rumour of pending evictions. Her family’s adverse experience with legal procedures, due to the way in which project stakeholders pressured her husband into signing away their title deed, had weakened her trust in the idea of “justice”. While her two adult children, both employed in white collar jobs, argued that their father’s signature had been coerced, rendering the contract null and void, the family lacked the economic and social capital to pursue legal action and never formally contested the agreement. Cemile said that she “did not know how” to pursue a court case, and that they “did not know anyone who could have pushed such an endeavour”, and, on another occasion, that she “did not want any money” and that she “simply didn’t see the point”. Despite having been property owners, Ramazan and Cemile had never been members of the Tarlaabaşı Association, because, she told me roughly a year after her eviction, she did not believe that the association would have been able to halt the project: “What could they do? The association did not serve any purpose. Everyone protested, but [the project stakeholders] kept saying: we will demolish this place.”

By January 2011, the precariousness of their situation was putting considerable strain on Cemile. She suffered from insomnia, anxiety, and chronic stress. Her marriage had deteriorated. This partly explained her morose reaction to the rumour she had heard in the teahouse. She told Alev and me what she had told her unknown interlocutor: that she was “depressed” [*moralım bozuk*] and therefore not willing to discuss the information she had received further. Though it was only based on hearsay and not more credible than

any of the other fearful estimations of when demolitions would begin, I sensed that it had significantly lowered her morale.

Furthermore, she was not reassured by Alev's comment that evictions before the conclusion of all court cases would be illegal, or that this would stop project stakeholders. Cemile did not believe in the justice of the Turkish court system, and unlike her younger neighbour, she also did not believe in any kind of abstract idea of The Law as a site of hope and possible opposition to *injustice*. This negative view of what The Law could or could not do for her partly stemmed from her family's recent encounter with actual lawyers who had abused legal tools in order to force her husband to sign the sales contract. A number of scholars have underlined the importance of past events and experiences for the production and spread of rumours (Kapferer 1990; Stewart and Strathern 2003; Greenhill and Oppenheim 2013; De Feyter 2015). Based on her recent history Cemile did not believe that any kind of justice system could protect her. Alev, on the other hand, had hired a lawyer, closely followed each judicial step, and was set on exhausting all legal avenues available to her because she was confident that justice and The Law, once freed from the confines of Turkish state discrimination, would prevail. For Cemile, an ethnic Turkish woman who had never had any legal troubles before, this was the first time that she was confronted with such lawlessness and injustice from the Turkish state, and she experienced this as a deep betrayal of her as a citizen. It made her hopeless and passive. Alev already knew what Turkish state institutions were capable of in terms of structural and physical violence. Her trust in a vague notion of the law was not anchored to the Turkish judicial system, but outside of Turkey, in the European Court of Human Rights, an institution she believed would protect her and her neighbour's rights and deliver (social) justice. She knew that in order to be able to litigate her case, she had to fight and exhaust all legal avenues in Turkey first. As one consequence of this, Cemile's reading of the situation had a paralysing effect on her solidarity with others, such as Alev, and her will to oppose the project.

Tenants: Between a rock and a hard place

Around the same time, the continuous delays of project key points and the resulting deferment of its completion fuelled rumours that the developer had vastly miscalculated costs and run out of money. A number of residents wondered if the renewal project might be postponed for a longer period of time, or if it might be shelved altogether. This was similar to what the *zabıta* officer had told Cemal. Starting in 2011, I noticed the circulation of rumours that alleged a fallout between GAP İnşaat and the Beyoğlu Municipality over financial matters. Whispers that neither party could agree on how to proceed fuelled hopes – I have to admit that I, too, was susceptible – that the demolitions might be stalled indefinitely. It was impossible to verify these claims. However, some tenants decided to stay put which put them at considerable risk. They partly based that decision on the rumours that evictions were far off, or would perhaps never materialise at all. Kurdish second-hand furniture seller Maher was the tenant of a small shop and the above flat where he lived with his wife and three children. He also rented a shop for his grown-up son in the vicinity of Tree Street. As the (alleged) dates of planned evictions neared, Ma-

her said that it was near impossible to find affordable spaces under similar conditions in the neighbourhood. His livelihood and that of his older son were tied to Tarlabası. While he was searching for alternatives, he decided to stay put despite receiving a string of eviction letters. The rumours that the project would be postponed were more convincing – and more manageable – to him than the municipal correspondence. Furthermore, these letters contradicted the messages and rumours he heard more and more often in his daily neighbourhood interactions.

I asked both the municipality and the company when they would start with the project, and they said: oh, it will take a very long time [*moves his arm in a gesture that illustrates this*]. At this rate it will take at least 20 years to demolish Tarlabası. Why? Look, it takes them one month to fix ten metres of asphalt on one street.³ Nothing is clear here. I heard that the municipality has pulled out [of the project] for a while. Some say that the company fired three different [subcontractors]. And they said we could stay in our houses until the bulldozers come. They said we can stay and that we don't have to pay rent until then, they said otherwise other people would come in and squat these buildings anyway. That's what I'll do. They said that they won't throw anyone out on the street. But then they throw them out and seal the doors to their houses! It's like a children's game. They said we can stay until they start to demolish, and afterwards we can fuck off and go wherever. I have received [eviction] letters, but I haven't signed anything. I didn't open them anymore. They want us to leave right away, but they haven't even started to demolish yet! They should come and buy all the houses, then they can put people out on the street and demolish all the houses! We can stay until they start to demolish, and that's a long time away.

Maheer's Kurdish landlord had sold his building to the developer in early 2010. This had left Maheer to renegotiate all further rental agreements with project officials and their lawyers. As a tenant he had next to no judicial recourse to appeal his pending eviction, or to demand compensation. In Turkey, housing legislation provides almost no protection for tenants against arbitrary rent increases or eviction, and existing regulations are rarely enforced by state institutions charged with their oversight. Few people rely on the justice system to settle rental disputes. Furthermore, written contracts are rare, which leaves tenants vulnerable to abuse by their landlords. In Tarlabası, rental agreements were frequently based on verbal negotiations. Housing arrangements with relatives or compatriots were based on kinship ties rather than legally binding contracts. Therefore, information and queries about money, the necessity of renovations or the sale of a building were based on kinship norms rather than on the less socially charged relationship between landlord and tenant. In the framework of the renewal project this could mean that details of the sales negotiations were not openly discussed between landlords and tenants who shared family or kinship ties, for reasons of propriety or custom. This of course added to tenants' uncertainty about if and when they would have to leave.

3 At the time of our conversation, the municipality was renewing the pavement on Tree Street, presumably to prepare for the passage of large construction vehicles. Work on the street proceeded very slowly, which caused anger amongst local residents who suffered from the disruption caused by the dirt and the noise.

Maher never received a written contract from his new, temporary landlords, but was initially told that he and his family would be able to stay without paying rent for at least another year. However, he soon began to receive ambiguous and conflicting information concerning his rental status. Official letters that set an eviction date for mid-summer of 2011 started to arrive. Yet in January 2011 Maher was told by civil servants touring the neighbourhood, somewhat randomly, that he should “leave right away”. A few weeks later a *zabıta* officer told him during a chat on the street that the renewal project was in fact far from nearing completion, and that he would be able to stay in his home and shop until “the arrival of the bulldozers”. The officer did not specify when that would happen, but implied that this would take a long time.

This left the burden of interpretative labour to Maher. It was impossible for him to know which of the conflicting messages he received was credible enough to act on. He was unable to distinguish inaccurate from accurate information if he ever came across it at all. He therefore based his decision on prior experiences and his hopes for the future (Scott 1985). One could argue that the official eviction letters were the most tangible piece of information he had and likely to be the most definite. However, Maher also knew that other official statements, for example the claim that no resident would be victimised or claims concerning the project timeline, had been false. Besides, he had nowhere else to go, which made the rumours about the delayed project at least more pleasant to believe.

Maher deployed a very limited arsenal of “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985) in order to strengthen the rumours of delay for himself: he did not open, or did not react to, official letters threatening eviction in the summer of 2011 – he dragged his feet as much as possible – and feigned a certain amount of ignorance despite the risk of being forcibly evicted. His banking on a scrap of unreliable information given to him by a *zabıta* officer on the street, a man he had a friendly relationship with and to whom he had often offered glasses of tea, over the official eviction letters of municipal lawyers was also informed by his deep distrust against Turkish state institutions. Since his forced displacement from their home village in Siirt, promises by the Turkish government to compensate him and his family for their losses and to restore a sense of justice had not materialised.⁴ His personal history and his identity as a Kurdish man shaped how he made meaning of the various rumours he had heard. Anthropologist Julia Eckert (2012: 154), in her research on how rumours of rights interpret, communicate, and shape legal norms and laws, underlines: “Rumours, more than any other kinds of knowledge and because of their particular uncertainty, are strongly shaped by fears and hopes, and thus on the one hand by norms of what should or could be, and on the other hand by social constructions of dangers and threat.” In Maher’s case, the deep distrust in the state and its institutions, paired with his precarious situation as a tenant who had nowhere else to go, led him to favour rumours relayed to him by a minor municipal official he had a prior relationship with over, in his eyes at least equally unreliable, written municipal orders of eviction.

4 Failures of the Turkish state to compensate victims of the violent conflict in the southeast have been well-documented (Ayata and Bilgin 2005; Kurban et al. 2007; Biner 2012).

Creating opposition

Rumours have been discussed in the context of insecurity and uncertainty, for their potential to instigate violence (Stoler 1992; Kirsch 2002a; Osborn 2008), to express collective fears (Kaler 2009; De Feyter 2015) and exacerbate social tensions (Stewart and Strathern 2003; Espeland 2011). However, they can also play an important part in fuelling hope. Scholars have shown that rumours can lead to more unity in a beleaguered community, and that they might encourage people to look for solutions. David Samper (2002: 17), drawing on the work of Ralph Rosnow, Gary Alan Fine and Tamotsu Shibutani, writes that rumours can “create cohesion in social groups”. His findings reveal that the exchange of stories that reflect collective worries and anxieties among members of a concerned public bring people together and strengthen community bonds, solidifying the social network. They might even lead to open defiance: “Rumors, shaped by the historically constituted experience of a community, allow people some measure of joint control over ambiguous, stressful situations; they affect the solidarity of a group, creating a public that can then participate in collective action. As counter-hegemonic discourse, rumors may lead to resistance” (ibid.: 2). Rumours might also stand at the beginning of hopeful action: “People act on rumours of possibilities, of opportunities; many a strategy, many a plan or endeavour is motivated by rumours of possibilities”. Economic investments, speculation or migrations to safety are all examples of how rumours motivated people to be optimistic about outcomes and take certain risks (Eckert 2012: 155).

In Tarlaabaşı, even if the municipality was able to capitalise on the existence of certain rumours, they were unable to control how they would play out on the ground. On 11 August 2010, the first day of Ramadan, the grassroots organisation “SOS Istanbul” held a public protest against the planned demolitions on Tarlaabaşı Boulevard. Around fifty people participated, including a handful of local reporters and non-resident activists. Three large banners bearing the three letters “S”, “O”, and “S” and the logo of the initiative were unveiled on building façades facing the street. The organisers read a press statement that called on “all concerned institutions and all attentive citizens to protest against this secretly and quietly conducted project”. There was no visible municipal or police presence.

On the morning of the same day a small number of construction workers and one mechanical digger moved into the neighbourhood to demolish the remaining shell of an abandoned house, a ruin really, on Old Fountain Street. It was the first municipality-led demolition in the renewal zone since the official announcement of the project in 2008. When returning home from the protest, some people noticed the ongoing construction work, but to my surprise, nobody was alarmed. (I, on the other hand, was shocked. For me it was a tangible sign that the project had really started.) People were mostly incensed that the AKP municipality would authorise such a measure on the first day of Ramadan. It was not entirely clear to me if they were upset because they saw it as a provocation nobody expected during the fasting month, or because the messy tear-down caused considerable dirt and noise.

A handful of residents inquired about what the construction workers were doing, but the all-Kurdish work crew somewhat timidly replied that they were not authorised to give out any information about the demolition, or about possible future demolitions in Tarlaabaşı. They unsuccessfully tried to prevent journalists, most of whom had been

at the protest, from taking photographs or video footage. While unable to gather any reliable information, several people loudly expressed their opinion about the ham-fisted demolition.

A few people suggested that it might be an attempt to intimidate locals on the day of the planned protest. One man, a resident whose name I did not know, was sure about it.

Who demolishes a house like this, with only four men? I work in construction as well. I know how this should be done. This is not how you're supposed to do it! This is them trying to put psychological pressure [on us], nothing else!

After this first demolition the rumour that the municipality had embarked on a form of “psychological warfare” quickly spread in Tarlaşaşı. A second bulldozing in the same street barely two weeks later had a similar effect, except that this time residents were not only unimpressed, but also angry because the shock waves caused by the heavy machinery had seriously endangered neighbouring buildings.

The tenants in these houses had not been notified by the municipality and were woken up by tremors that they at first mistook for an earthquake. It was unclear – and impossible for outsiders to know – if these demolitions were part of the renewal project or if they would have been undertaken in any case. What was important, however, was that many residents interpreted them as an attempt by the municipality to exert “psychological pressure” [*psikolojik baskı*] in order to make people nervous, enough to sell them their property without much dispute. This rumour was picked up by outside activists and lawyers of the Istanbul Chamber of Architects who were still locked in a court case against the Tarlaşaşı project. The plaintiffs then turned this particular rumour into a legal argument, an accusation of deliberate intimidation, and used in litigation proceedings (BIA Haber Merkezi 2010b).

Tarlaşaşı residents again had no way of knowing for sure if their assumptions were accurate. Previous false statements by the municipality and the developer, residents' prior experience of intimidation tactics and threats, either first-hand or told to them by neighbours and friends, influenced the way this particular rumour was generated, interpreted, and passed on. The demolition of the ruined buildings certainly did not cause the panic I had expected. It even strengthened some residents' resolve not to let themselves be intimidated and continue their legal battles against expropriation.

Violent resistance never occurred in the run-up to evictions. However, rumours about the possibility of riots circulated in the neighbourhood from the moment that I began my fieldwork in 2010. These rumours spread both inside and outside the neighbourhood. Outsiders' expectations of riots were largely based on the stigma-fuelled assumption that Tarlaşaşı was an inherently violent place, and its residents hostile to the Turkish state. As David Samper (2002: 5) states, rumours not only strengthen social and solidarity ties in the community where these rumours circulate, but they “become expressions of a community's collective anxieties and beliefs” as they circulate in a community. Most of these speculations centred on the neighbourhood's majority Kurdish

population, and the (stereotyped) presumption that any state activity would inevitably be met by violent opposition.⁵

Police disperse May Day protests with teargas



Photo by Jonathan Lewis

However, these rumours were not always framed as negative, and could also relay the hopes of the speaker for forceful pushback. Some Kurds in Tarlabaşı, people who had first-hand experience of excessive state violence, thought that the renewed threat of forced displacement *did* necessitate violent resistance, partly because they knew that unquestioned surrender would result in defeat. Research has shown that rumours can be strong indicators of the narrators' anxieties, prejudices, or aspirations, as well as the communities' collective unconscious (Allport and Postman 1947; Rosnow 1991; Samper 2002). This is why second-hand furniture seller Maher speculated, with no little certainty, that there would be riots and that Tarlabaşı would "turn into a warzone" if people would actually be evicted. (Violence as a resistance tactic was a disputed topic in Tarlabaşı. For example, a number of Tarlabaşı Association members were opposed to any protests that risked breaking the law or drawing a violent police reaction because it would "make them look like terrorists", a thinly veiled discriminatory insinuation that non-legal protest might make *all* Tarlabaşı residents "look like Kurds".)

5 Due to the fact that the pro-Kurdish, then Peace and Democracy Party (BDP, renamed as the Peoples' Democratic Party, HDP, in 2012) had its headquarters in Tarlabaşı, violent clashes that involved the police and Kurdish youth were not uncommon in the area. Media reports on street protests in the Taksim area, especially when they were related to the Kurdish political movement, often included the naming of "Tarlabaşı", anchoring the location as a centre for Kurdish political violence in the collective memory of the city.

Splitting solidarity

There were other macropolitical past events that impacted the production and spread of gossip and rumours in Tarlabası. In Turkey, corruption and nepotism in government institutions have been pervasive problems for many years, and corruption appears to have permeated all levels of government (Adaman 2011; Soyaltın 2017). A multitude of corruption scandals have been exposed and mediatised over the years, but rarely anyone has been held accountable. Rumour studies have shown that people who distrust the government are more prone to accept rumours that criticise the government, since rumour then activates and confirms pre-existing assumptions and prejudice rather than creating new ones (Allport and Postman 1947: 182). Since corruption amongst members of all levels of the government was expected by many people, the rumours of graft in the Beyoğlu administration took hold very easily. These allegations were bolstered by accusations of corruption in the media and by oppositional and civil society groups, who argued that the tender for the renewal of Tarlabası had not been organised openly and transparently, and was finally awarded to Çalık Holding, a company at the time under the leadership of Berak Albayrak, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's son-in-law.

Tarlabası residents who had moved to the neighbourhood before 1990, like Cemal, also remembered the construction of Tarlabası Boulevard between 1986 – 1988 under Bedrettin Dalan, the first mayor of Metropolitan Istanbul who had a reputation for being a dishonest and fraudulent politician, as well as fabulously corrupt. Despite widespread opposition from professional chambers as well as local and international organisations for the preservation of historical buildings, the plan was implemented under the auspice of “cleansing the area of prostitution and drugs” (Sakızlıoğlu 2014a: 166; Rüzgâr 2018). For many Tarlabası residents, this renewed threat of forced evictions and demolitions under a similar pretext was thus somewhat of a *déjà-vu*. Urban policy and re/development under Dalan, under whose leadership corruption, clientelism and nepotism flourished, and who had licensed numerous high-profile projects in areas that were either under protection or that were not slated for construction to companies with strong ties to the administration, became known as one of the most “corrupt” and “scandalous” within the history of Turkish urbanisation (Ünsal 2013).⁶

Knowledge of government corruption, dysfunctional courts, the lack of accountability for the misconduct of the police and the authorities, as well as knowledge of the brutality of other urban renewal projects in Istanbul heavily influenced much of the rumour production in Tarlabası. While optimistic interpretations of such rumours existed, a large part of the speculation about government misconduct in Tarlabası was negative. Such pessimistic takes had a detrimental effect on neighbourhood cohesion, solidarity ties, and the will to engage in any kind of resistance. One example were rumours about the eventual enlargement of the project zone to include neighbouring, previously untouched parts of Tarlabası. Kerem Usta, a musical instrument maker who owned the title deed for his workshop that lay just outside the designated renewal area, wondered if he would

6 Dalan infamously reacted to the threat of losing a court case over the demolition of 370 listed buildings with the comment: “I’ll demolish, and I’ll accept my punishment” (Rüzgâr 2018: 54).

have to leave his atelier, how much money he would be able to get from the municipality in terms of compensation, and whether he would be allowed to reopen a workshop if he was to agree to exchange the two title deeds of his atelier. (As all businesses had to rely on the municipality to grant operating licenses, it was easy for the authorities to keep them out of the renewal project, leaving small business owners in doubt about their future income. Unsurprisingly this led to considerable anxiety.) Kerem Usta, an ethnic Turk in his fifties whose grandfather had migrated to Istanbul from the Black Sea city of Giresun three generations ago, was not a very contentious person to begin with. His political views were much less anti-AKP than those of the other master carpenter employed in his atelier, whereas his younger brother, who also worked there, supported the AKP government. While he saw himself as a “leftist” in the vaguest sense, he was not politically active.⁷ He generally trusted the Turkish state, if not the current government, to protect deserving citizens. He certainly expressed his dismay over the pending forced displacement of old friends, such as barber Halil Usta, when we chatted about the renewal project. However, Kerem Usta also saw the planned revitalisation of Tarlabası as an opportunity to restore the neighbourhood to its former glory, a sentiment I will explore in more detail in chapter eight. He did not see political motives or betrayal in the municipality’s plans to renew the neighbourhood, partly because he was not yet personally affected.

However, the lack of reliable information had a negative impact on his ability to make plans for the future, which is why he paid attention to rumours and speculation, trying to assess if his shop was about to be included in future demolition plans. It was impossible for him to be sure. At some point, the municipality published a statement on its website claiming that the current version of the renewal project was only a “first step”, and that other parts of Tarlabası would be included in demolitions later on. They did not specify an exact area or a date when this was supposed to happen. The plans never materialised, and the announcement was later deleted without further comment. This insecurity affected the instrument maker’s solidarity with friends and neighbours who did live and work in the allocated renewal zone. Despite his awareness of the distress and anger his long-time friend, barber Halil Usta, felt at his pending eviction, Kerem Usta did not attend public protests or voice opposition vis-à-vis authority figures or in settings where he could not be sure if anyone present might report his discontent back to the municipality. After all, he had to be careful not to anger or alienate the authorities with whom he might have to negotiate a deal for his property in the future. The rumoured extension of the renewal project limited Kerem Usta in his ability to openly voice criticism, participate in protests, and to demonstrate solidarity with other Tarlabası residents.

There were other reasons that rumours either caused or widened existing fault lines between people impacted by the project. In the run-up to evictions, residents kept a keen

7 A lifelong Democratic Left Party [*Demokratik Sol Partisi* – DSP] supporter, he briefly became a member of the pro-Kurdish HDP in the run-up to the national elections on June 7, 2015, something he admitted to me in a gleeful conspiratorial whisper. He was thrilled when the co-leader of the party, Figen Yüksekdağ, showed up in his atelier to inquire after his work and take a selfie with him. However, his support for the HDP waned after the breakdown of the peace process following the June 2015 elections and the renewed, catastrophic violence in the southeast.

eye on what their neighbours, landlords or, in the case of business owners, what their customers were doing. They were eager to extract as much information as possible from their actions and comments since property sales or even the willingness alone to negotiate with project stakeholders could have an impact on their own situation. This led to a large number of rumours that dealt with levels of resistance and compliance of landlords or other property owners. Following the closure of the Tarlabası Association information office, suspicions over property sales increased and were eagerly exchanged. Barber Halil Usta rented his small shop on Tree Street from an entrepreneur whose family had migrated to Tarlabası from the Black Sea city of Tokat in the 1970s. That businessman, by 2010 the owner of a *simit*⁸ empire, had bought the entire apartment building for a relatively low price immediately after his arrival in Istanbul.

Inside the barber shop



Photo by Jonathan Lewis

In 2011, the sale of the building was still being disputed in court, because the landlord was not content with the amount of money offered for his property. This left a lot of guesswork to Halil Usta and his business partner Necmi Usta, since both wanted to avoid sudden eviction and were planning to reopen the barber shop in a new location close by. Halil explained:

[My landlord] has not sold the building yet. But he will! They will sell the building. When they offer him one million and two hundred thousand. Because he has been in

8 Simit is a circular bread dough pastry covered with sesame seeds that is very popular for breakfast or as a snack. Commonly sold from street carts, simit-selling fast-food chains and franchises have opened since the early 2000s in Turkey.

Istanbul for fifty years, and he has never even seen fifty thousand in one place. He'll sell it for sure. If it wasn't for this project, our [shop] would not even be worth two hundred thousand. That's the reality. It wouldn't be! That's why [our landlord] was able to buy it for thirty thousand years ago. In instalments. Only because of the project [prices went up]. [Erdal Aybek] fought a lot [for Tarlabası], at first. He came to the shop to talk. But he saw that everyone would sell once they'd see the money, every Tom, Dick, and Harry. [*Ahmet de verir, Mehmet de.*] [...] Our Cemal⁹, and the hardware shop owner as well... I asked Cemal: you own a place here, what are they giving you? 50,000, or 60,000. Ok, I say, now you fight against it. 50,000. If they'd give you a million, or two hundred thousand, will you sell? He says he would! Nobody cares about history here. [...] That's why... those that fight a lot now will get more money and leave. There is no more work, what are they supposed to do?

As a tenant Halil Usta had no legal recourse to fight his pending eviction. His landlord did not inform him about the ongoing court case against the Beyoğlu municipality that by then had been dragging on for more than a year, which meant that Halil Usta also lacked the necessary information to base any kind of business decisions on. He remained in the dark about a possible eviction date, when people and businesses around him started to move out of the neighbourhood. It was unlikely that he and Necmi Usta would receive any assistance from the municipality for moving the barber shop, but as the municipality did furnish movers and a lorry to some tenants in Tarlabası, he could not be sure of that either. In the meantime, and contrary to other tenants whose landlords had sold their property to the developer already, Halil still had to pay the full rent every month, a fact that he thought was an indicator of his landlord's love of money. If he was going to be paid royally for his property anyway, why did the businessman not at least lower or waive the rent? After all, his landlord knew that his business had almost trickled to a halt since the announcement of the renewal project in 2008. While Halil never directly accused his landlord of being greedy, he did say that he found the court dispute over a higher amount of compensation unjustified. After all, Halil Usta reasoned, the landlord had bought the building very cheaply and now took advantage of the renewal project to ask for a larger sum. It was impossible to independently verify how much different property owners had actually received, as such information was not freely shared, and amounts allegedly varied wildly. However, rumours about property sales prices and the fantastic sums that some owners had supposedly received were enthusiastically exchanged. Depending on the context and on who was involved in the conversation at the time, property owners who were suspected of having made a good deal were disparaged as greedy or praised as clever. Absentee landlords, such as the Tokat entrepreneur, were more often criticised for their excessive demands of compensation, as their ties to the neighbourhood were seen as built on money only, and not on their connection to the community. Halil Usta was certain that his landlord, just like other property owners, would eventually give in and sell, as long as he was paid enough for his building.

This distrust in the businesspeople who had cheaply bought up property in the neighbourhood in the 1970s and 1980s, and who now vied for a large profit on their invest-

9 Halil Usta is referring to second-hand furniture seller Cemal whose shop was in the same street.

ment also extended to the board of the Tarlabası Association. One evening Halil Usta and his shop neighbours Ekin and Seray, talked about ongoing negotiations and the association that Seray and Ekin were both members of. Halil, who did not own property in Tarlabası and thought that as a tenant he would not gain anything from a membership, was not. The conversation turned to the recent disputes between different factions of the association and the falling-out between the board and spokesman Erdal Aybek. Someone jokingly wondered if it had been the association president who might have driven Erdal “crazy”. It was clear that nobody in the room had much respect for the president, a property owner who did not live in Tarlabası and who owned several buildings on Tarlabası Boulevard. They were convinced that he was only after the money and would have dropped the association and everyone in it at the drop of a hat in exchange for a large enough sum from the developer. By then rumours circulated that the association president had already sold part of his property to the municipality and was now merely hoping to break off a larger piece of the profit for what remained. These rumours were fed by the public claim of Beyoğlu mayor Ahmet Misbah Demircan that of seven Tarlabası Association board members, four had already come to an agreement with the municipality. Demircan had told the press that those board members only “pretended to care” about cultural heritage, when they had really “asked for the construction of high rises behind closed doors in order to make a larger profit on their properties” (Birgün 2010). It later became clear that these claims were not unsubstantiated.

Rumours about sales and the greed of landlords were deeply divisive and led to distrust and the corrosion of solidarity ties in Tarlabası. I was told at numerous occasions and by different people that property owners might *say* they would resist, but that their claims were really a lie designed to keep face. Sometimes such cynical speculation extended to tenants, too. Halil Usta, for example, did not think that second-hand furniture seller Maher actually meant it when he said he would resist eviction:

Let's talk about the tenants. Maher across from us, those. So, they are “resisting” right now? They talk about injustice and politics. They talk and stuff, you know...if the municipality would tell them, here take one hundred thousand for every apartment that you rent, they'd also leave immediately.

Halil's speculation was moot since tenants were not offered any financial compensation by project agents for moving out. However, his comment illustrated how little faith he had in neighbourhood solidarity ties, which in turn had a profound impact on his will to participate in public protests:

If you ask me, Halil Ağbi¹⁰, will you participate in [a protest]? I won't. If you ask me why, I will tell you that I am a tenant here, so they won't give me anything. If the property owner sells, I will say: whatever, that doesn't concern me.

It was clear that rumours and speculation about residents' assumed self-interest, no matter how much they themselves said that they wanted to fight, had a detrimental impact on neighbourhood cohesion and therefore, joint opposition.

10 The word *ağbi* means “brother” and is commonly used to address a male interlocutor. It is an expression of friendly informality and/or familiarity.

Rumours of conspiracy

Tarlabaşı residents were aware that the municipality and the developer used the intense stigma that surrounded the neighbourhood in order to rally public support for the renewal project. As I have shown in chapter four, many believed that the Beyoğlu Municipality deliberately withheld services such as garbage disposal and policing in order to put pressure on residents and make the neighbourhood look worse than it was (See also Işeri 2008; Kuray 2008). It is no surprise that these suspicions fuelled rumours that project stakeholders were actually staging criminal acts and illegal activities in the neighbourhood to deepen the already existing intense stigma. The stories I heard reflected at how much residents distrusted the authorities. One of the most poignant anecdotes came from Burak, the younger brother of baker Gökhan Usta:

The taxi stopped [at the end of Tree Street] before turning [onto Tarlabaşı Boulevard]. A man came running and opened the door and snatched the purse of the woman inside. Can you believe it? Right here, during the day. He got away! Everyone was so stunned. The police station is right there, the municipality building is across the street. I am telling you, the municipality is behind this. They send all these thieves and criminals here to make us look bad. They send them here. Because of the project. They do this on purpose.

His claim that it was the municipality who had staged the purse snatching was significant because petty crime was common in Tarlabaşı. However, the mugging that Burak had witnessed had apparently been unusually audacious. It had been committed in broad daylight and in close proximity not only to various businesses and a busy bus stop, but also the local police station and across from the project sales office that the municipality was jointly running with *GAP İnşaat*.

While Burak, too, was under no illusion concerning the existence of crime in the neighbourhood, this particular mugging did not entirely align with his knowledge and his experiences of Tarlabaşı. In his eyes it was highly unlikely that any thief would risk mugging a taxi in close proximity to the police, and if he did, that he would not get caught. There was usually a high police presence on Tarlabaşı Boulevard, and local residents complained about the frequent ID checks and police harassment they were subjected to. Burak also said that he generally knew the local pickpockets and thieves at least from sight, and that he had never before seen the man who had robbed the taxi. This is why he interpreted the entire incident as one that had been staged by the municipality, an assumption that squared with many residents' beliefs that the municipality actively and intentionally tried to make Tarlabaşı look bad.

Neglect

Photo by Jonathan Lewis

I cannot know if the rumour that the municipality had sent the mugger to Tarlaşaşı originated with Burak or another eyewitness, as by the time we spoke the news of the incident had already made the rounds in the neighbourhood, and the claim that it had been orchestrated travelled with it. It is irrelevant to the discussion if residents' suspicions that the municipality deliberately encouraged crime to speed up the eviction process was true. The collective belief that they did was a social fact, whether it was "real" or not, with real effects in the social world of the neighbourhood. People made decisions based on that "fact". This does not imply that Tarlaşaşı residents believed that crime did not previously exist. Most agreed that petty crime and drug dealing were a problem in their neighbourhood, with the majority saying that they did not feel safe (Kentsel A.Ş. 2008). At the same time residents were aware that, while their neighbourhood was described as "dangerous" and "criminal", the authorities did little to deal with these issues.

With the announcement of the renewal project and the effort of project stakeholders to push residents out of the neighbourhood, they increasingly suspected that the municipality exploited social problems in order to make Tarlaşaşı look worse than it was. Marginalised groups who were frequently the target of discrimination and police violence, such as Kurds or the trans* community, were especially quick to believe rumours that the authorities intentionally pushed crime and ignored criminals, or, like Burak claimed, even entirely orchestrated illegal acts.

The municipality-sanctioned, gradual abandonment of an emptying, but still inhabited neighbourhood made people feel less safe on the streets (Sakızlıoğlu 2014b). An increasing number of people from outside Tarlaşaşı had begun to deal and use drugs on street corners and in deserted buildings, and a number of sex workers who were not part of the local sex economy had moved in and were solicitating in broad daylight and in

plain view of residents and passers-by. These women often consumed drugs and alcohol. Many residents were scandalised, and women who lived in Tarlabası were especially scared to walk past them. People could not make sense of the fact that both the police and the *zabita*, usually so quick to fine trans* women who lived and worked in Tarlabası, simply turned a blind eye to such blatantly illicit activity. Some residents were convinced that this was, again, a deliberate attempt by the municipality to smear their neighbourhood, and that the authorities not only let the sex workers peddle their trade on one of Beyoğlu's busiest thoroughfares, but that they had shipped in the sex workers themselves.

Sex worker in a ruined building on Tarlabası Boulevard



Photo by Jonathan Lewis

In late 2011, *GAP İnşaat* started to demolish the façades of most buildings lining Tarlabası Boulevard, further destroying the outward-facing exterior of the neighbourhood, in part to prevent squatting. However, it also added to the impression that Tarlabası was an abandoned, run-down slum while hundreds of people in fact still lived in the renewal zone. The construction company put down concrete slabs painted in bright yellow and bearing the brand logo of the renewal project, which lent the decrepit scenery behind them an air of officially branded endorsement. At the same time the developer hired a number of uniformed, private security guards to patrol the streets. These guards strictly prohibited all photographs and filming whenever they noticed someone doing it, but ignored sex workers, drug users, dealers, and scavengers, which provided more fertile ground for rumours that the neglect of security issues and street cleaning was deliberate and orchestrated by the authorities.¹¹

11 One time, a photographer and I had to run away from a private project security guard who wanted to confiscate my notebook and the photographer's camera because we had been looking at (and

Again, the veracity of these conspiratorial assumptions is of little importance to the discussion, as many believed such rumours to be fact. David Samper (2002: 5) argues that “[t]he individual’s ability to (re)shape the rumor multiple times transforms it into a collective representation of fears and anxieties.” One might also argue that this narrative was a form of stigma management. These rumours helped to make sense of the pervasive stigma that had been mobilised by project stakeholders in order to justify the evictions.

“Beware of the dog.” Tarlabası Boulevard in December 2011



Photo by Jonathan Lewis

In Tarlabası, territorial stigmatisation was deeply intertwined with project stakeholders withholding reliable information on the renewal project. Without access to this information, residents had to rely on rumours as a tactic to cope with the material consequences of the stigma, their invisibilisation, social isolation and exclusion. Rumours that circulate in a community starved of information can be read as collective interpretations of an ambiguous, or possibly dangerous situation in a moment of crisis. They can be a tool and a tactic to manage uncertainty. However, the interpretative step of determining how to decipher that rumour might vary, as different members of the group will differ on the credibility of sources, the reliability of communicative channels, and the motives of the involved actors. Previous personal experience as well as collective experiences play an important role in making those decisions. Therefore, rumours could be the cause for less cohesion and a break-down of solidarity in Tarlabası, both of which have a detrimental effect on resistance, be it as an organised group or as individuals. Even if rumours sometimes offered hope, this happened largely on an individual level and did not lead to more organised resistance. The analysis of the rumours in Tarlabası shows that residents were

taking pictures of) the construction site. The legal basis for his claim was unclear as we were on a public street, but we did not want to take any chances.

very critical of the way their neighbourhood was portrayed, and aware of the municipality's attempt to exploit existing crime and problems to advance the renewal project. In this context, rumours functioned as a form of symbolic opposition which shows that residents were conscious that the state weaponised the stigma.