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## "Sir, why do the nationalists think like this?"

Looking for a life in Turkey and Greece irrespective of ethnic boundaries

In this article, Dr. Hercules Millas tells about his personal experiences and that of his environment, that is to say his Greek family and Turkish friends, with the real or imagined animosity between Greeks and Turks. Born in Istanbul from Greek parents, Dr. Millas lived the first 30 years of his life as a Greek among Turks. Forced by circumstances, he then migrated to Greece, but retained in close contact with his Turkish friends and acquaintances. His studies on the images that Greeks have of Turks and vice versa, brought him renown and respect at both sides of the Aegean.

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## Introduction

“In the conversations of my childhood, especially those with my father, communicating opinions about Turks was a painful topic. I was born into a family of Constantinopolitan Greeks, Turkish citizens and members of the Greek community of Istanbul, known in Turkey as *Rum*. My father used to refer to the abstract category of the “Turks” in negative terms, frequently claiming that the Turks ‘hated us’ and ‘treated us unfairly’. On such occasions I would remind him of my Turkish classmates and friends, whom he himself liked too and I would argue that we had Turkish neighbours whom we, and indeed our whole family held in good regard. ‘You contradict yourself’, I used to argue, ‘you are guilty of exactly the same things that you condemn in our Turkish neighbours’.



“My father was born in 1900. He lived through the Balkan Wars, the Greek-Turkish war of 1919-1922 and the two World Wars, where Greece and Turkey were in different military camps. He was brought up in a period when nationalism was at its peak in both Greece and Turkey and he had been educated to think in nationalistic terms. I only came to understand him better after he passed away and after I completed some studies of my own on Greek-Turkish relations. Now I think that the term ‘contradiction’ was not significant to explain his attitudes. His identity and his understanding of politics were too complex to be accurately described in simple words.”<sup>1</sup>

In the concluding paragraphs of this article published last year in the journal *South European Society & Politics*, I tried to show that people who share a national identity perceive the Other on two levels. The abstract (imagined) Other is a stereotype with permanent negative characteristics, whereas the concrete Other (the one they actually meet) is mostly a normal person. The two however, are not perceived as a contradiction; they exist next to each other. Some writers for example, in their novels ‘imagine’ the Other almost always as negative (vicious, barbarian etc.) whereas in their memoirs talk only about nice people when they refer to the Other.<sup>2</sup> Construction and experience are in direct contradiction: “When [the authors] decide to reproduce the world in ‘a realistic’ manner they do not prioritise their personal experience (the particulars), but choose to represent reality in abstract and essentialist terms and as this fits better their ideology.”

<sup>1</sup> Millas, (Iraklis) Hercules, “Tourkokratia: History and the Image of Turks in Greek Literature”, *South European Society and Politics*, Volume 11, Number 1, March 2006, pp. 47-60.

<sup>2</sup> Published in Turkish and in Greek: A) - *Türk ve Yunan Romanlarında Öteki ve Kimlik* ("The Other and Identity in the Turkish and Greek Novel"), Istanbul: İletişim, 2005. B) - *Εικόνες Ελλήνων και Τούρκων - σχολικά βιβλία, ιστοριογραφία, λογοτεχνία και εθνικά στερεότυπα*, (*Images of Greeks and Turks - textbooks, historiography, literature and national stereotypes*), Athens: Alexandria, 2001. For a summary in English see: - "The Other and Nation-building - The Testimony of Greek and Turkish Novels, in *Representations of the Other's in the Mediterranean World and their Impact on the Region*, Edit. N. K. Burçoğlu / S. G. Miller, Istanbul, The Isis Press, 2004.



This was also the conclusion of my Ph.D. dissertation on the Turkish and Greek novels and the Other that appears in them.<sup>3</sup> I was satisfied with this explanation, until one day a student in one of my classes asked me a very simple question: "Sir, why do the nationalists think like this and why don't you?" I then realized that I had only described a situation but not explained it. Why am I different? Indeed, I was quite critical to nationalistic attitudes of the Greeks and of the Turks alike. Why me and only a few more people were on my little camp and not the majority? I am not sure I have a clear answer to this question but I will try to list some of the reasons I suspect and which may have 'helped' me being an 'antinationalist', in peace with the Other and distanced from both the Greek and the Turkish exclusive nationalist identity.

## My friends of childhood

All our 'special' characteristics are of course only relatively different from those of some others. Looking back at my childhood I realize that I was quite a disobedient and naughty boy. There may be two reasons for this: I might have been like that by birth (by nature) and/or my parents might have lost control and could not impose their will on me. The result was that my parents could not keep me at home as most of the other Greek families of our petit bourgeois milieu used to do in order to 'protect' their children. I would spend many hours playing in the streets with the other children of the vicinity: with Turks, Jews, Armenians, Levantines (Catholics) etc. Istanbul in those years was in a sense cosmopolitan. This early communication not only helped in coming to know the Other better but had two more consequences. First, I learned Turkish much better than the other Greek boys of my age and when I started primary school my Turkish was quite good. This made me feel more comfortable than my peers, who were challenged and threatened against the 'foreign' language and the Other.

Second, I came to see myself equal to the Other, not feeling distant, marginalized and different from the Other, especially the Turks. At the same time, Turkish (and probably as a consequence the 'Turks') was *the* problem of most of the young students of the Greek minority schools in Istanbul.

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Millas (age 14) second from right in white. Two are Greeks the rest are Turks.

<sup>3</sup> Millas, Hercules. "The Image of Greeks in Turkish Literature: Fiction and Memoirs", in *Oil on Fire?*, Studien zur Internationalen Schulbuchforschung, Schriftenreihe des Georg-Eckert-Instituts, Hannover: Verlag Hansche Buchhandlung, 1996.

## My friends in adulthood

After primary school most of the students of the Greek minority of Istanbul continued their studies in the Greek intermediary schools of the city. I happened to go to Robert College, an American college where most of the students were Turks. My Turkish improved further and over time I developed some still lasting friendships with Turks.

I sensed that some of the students discriminated me, making me feel that I was a minority member. However, there were the close friends who compensated these ill feelings. I suspect that my coming of age in a non-minority school environment also played a positive role: the Turkish teachers did not exercise on me the 'mission' of imposing 'Turkishness' as they used to do in the school with Greek students. I was left at my ease; I did not feel the nationalist pressure. Probably it was in this period that I concluded that there were all kinds of people within a 'nation'.

## My mother

My mother was a poorly educated woman, completely dedicated to her family and to my upbringing. I was a single child and my parents tried their best for me. Their choice to send me to Robert College proved right. I graduated from the prestigious university part of it. But I suspect she had an indirect influence on me too. My family was tied to the Greek Orthodox Church and that was my upbringing. However, my mother used to say that all religions are equally good and she often visited a catholic church which was very close to our house, Notre Dame de Lourdes in the Bomonti area. She had very good relations with our Armenian neighbors and she spoke Turkish much better than my father. She spoke French with her sisters, and that was something that annoyed me. I believed that she was snobbish. Few years before her death I found out she was not: one day my parents revealed to me that my grand mother who had died when she gave birth to my mother was a Catholic. I suspect that the use of French among the sisters, their 'European' manners, the all inclusive religious attitude and the absence of nationalist fervor of my mother originated from her knowledge that humans are more complex than the nationalist paradigm that shaped, for example, my father's worldview. On my part, I feel I was influenced by her feelings even though then I often thought she was somehow 'strange'.



*Millas with his mother in Istanbul.*

## Active as a socialist

All the above operated as unconscious influences. I probably needed a theoretical framework to justify my preferences and my place in the society. Born in 1940 I was in my twenties when the Marxist leftist movement swept Turkey in the 1960s. I became

active in the student organization of my university but even more so in the Turkish Workers Party (TIP), being the only ethnic Greek member in that political movement. My parents were very much worried for this choice of mine and my minority community could not explain my behavior, but my 'comrades' within the Turkish leftist movement treated me as their equal. I never felt an ethnic minority member in that 'internationalist' movement. It is not easy to probe deep inside me and reach the reasons that made me join this movement. But the idea that people did not have to be differentiated by lines of 'ethnicity' probably was one that fascinated me. I really needed to believe and hope for such a society.

The history of my family in Turkey was not a happy one. We faced the discriminatory fascist 'wealth tax' applied to all minority households in 1942 which forced almost all to deep poverty. We then experienced the riots of 6/7 September 1955, when thousands houses and shops of Greeks were destroyed and looted by the masses. My father was a merchant and a tailor and his shop was completely destroyed. We actually starved for a couple of years. In 1964 the Greeks with Greek nationality were forced to leave Turkey, being allowed to take with them only one piece of luggage, leaving behind all their money and property. My father and my mother left. I stayed behind. In the meanwhile there was the daily bullying by the masses.

I once read an article of an anthropologist who claimed that there are two kinds of people: the ones that can live with contradictions and the others who cannot cope with them. I feel I belong to the second (uneasy) group. I had either to accept the idea that the Turks hated us the Greeks and seek refuge to 'Greekness' - as most minority members did - or find another explanation to give a meaning to the existence of so many people and Turkish friends that I knew and that could not be included to this horrible group of the 'negative Turks'. Socialist paradigm helped since it perceived the 'us' and the 'Other' on an ideological basis and not on an ethnic one. Also the exemplary conduct of the Turkish friends operated in two directions: on one hand this positive experience reinforced my hopes and beliefs and kept me away from nationalistic explanations, and on the other my loyalty to them reinforced their anti-nationalist choice. I was lucky. It was a positive vicious circle and our existence had a reciprocal positive effect on both sides.



1 1963. *Vrienden van Millas. Van links naar rechts: Een Jood, een Armenier en twee Turken.*

## Other probable reasons

The above 'explanations' may not be the really genuine ones but only a rationalization of my choices. Maybe like Rousseau I only want to prove that "If I am not better, at least I am different". It is also possible that I was searching for a romantic adventure in dangerous areas. Or maybe I played the role of those naively good-willing persons who pay a heavy toll for helping human beings and who themselves never ask for help. The

human soul is an abyss! Maybe I could not face some hard truths and tried conciliatory approaches avoiding challenging confrontations. The most probable is that at least all the above played a certain role.

## Can we draw any conclusions?

When the time came to serve the army (obligatory of all Turkish citizens) I was deprived of my right to serve as an officer - all university graduates served with this capacity in those years. Actually I was not even supposed to 'serve' but only to take part in the track team of the army because I was a member of the Turkey's track team and a champion in the 100 meters. However, I was sent instead to a remote regiment as a simple soldier where I served under especially hard conditions. This treatment is known in Turkey as serving as 'sakıncalı', meaning 'with reservations', and it has been often applied (with the hypocritical pretext of failing a test) against persons not trusted. Returning after two years of this military experience, I faced another problem. I lost my job in a refinery where I was working as an engineer because of my double 'sins': I was a left-wing activist and a minority member. Because my wife and I already had our first son and we could not afford as a family to take more risks *vis-à-vis* an unpredictable state and society, we left Turkey for Greece.

However, I was not cut off from Turkey. I kept both my citizenship and my contacts. Many years afterwards I returned to teach Greek at Ankara University and to complete my Ph.D. degree in political science. I published many of my books there and I still write regularly in a Turkish newspaper. Those that know my story understood quite well why I left and why I kept my contacts. Now I have many more Turkish friends than in the old times, in addition to the many new Greek friends. There are many people however, both in Turkey and Greece that could not understand why I am not like the majority of the Turks and the Greeks - but this is their problem.

Still however, I am not sure if I answered the question "Why do the nationalists think like this?" This is not the only question on which I can't give a clear answer. "Do you feel like a Greek or like a Turk?" Quite often I have difficulty in answering because I have the feeling that they ask the wrong questions and they infer something I detest: they ask me to take part in their imagined ethnic controversy. I only know that the general categorization of 'the Turks' and 'the Greeks' has no meaning for me, except for having the citizenship of one (or both) of these states. I do not attribute general, all inclusive positive or negative characteristics to members of ethnic groups. Nations are composed of all kinds of people. We live in an age where, unfortunately, our perceptions and references are based on a nationalistic paradigm. People are not perceived outside the frame of the nation, and this means some general 'characteristics' are always automatically taken into account, whereas there are so many other 'identities' that can define the community or a person: age group, geography, religion, occupation, education, status, sex, ideology, hobby and so many others.

I mentioned 'my friends' quite often in this article. It is not a coincidence. It is with them that I associate myself the most. When I visit Istanbul it is them whom I want to see most; it is not the churches, the relatives, the old streets where I came of age, not even my school and the family grave. The friends, irrespective of their ethnic identity, are what is alive in me and tied to me. The rest is nostalgia of a past dream.

## Summary

Dr. Hercules Millas was born in Istanbul from Greek parents and lived the first 30 years of his life as a Greek among Turks. He then migrated to Greece, but retained in close contact with his Turkish friends and acquaintances. He started studying on the images that Greeks have of Turks and vice versa. He tried to show that people who share a national identity perceive the Other on two levels. The abstract (imagined) Other is a stereotype with permanent negative characteristics, whereas the concrete Other (the one they actually meet) is mostly a normal person. The two however, are normally not perceived as a contradiction; they exist next to each other.

Why he, however, was different from the majority of the Greeks and Turks (including his own father) in that he didn't make this distinction, but instead saw Turks and Greeks 'just' as human beings, irrespective of their ethnicity, remained unclear for himself, until one day somebody asked this specifically. Why was he on this little camp of 'anti-nationalists' and not the majority?

Already as a child, Hercules was different because he didn't stick to playing with Greek friends, but spend many hours in the streets with children of a variety of nationalities. This early communication not only helped in coming to know the Other better, but made him learn Turkish much better than the other Greek boys, and he came to see himself as equal to the Other, not feeling different from the Turks.

The same pattern can be seen in his further studies at Robert College, where most of the students were Turks. Hardly aware of the racism which existed, he stuck to his multi-ethnic friends. Probably it was in this period that he concluded that there were all kinds of people within a 'nation'.

His mother might have had an indirect influence in this as well: coming from a catholic family, but living in a Greek orthodox environment, her views and behaviour in this situation functioned as an example on him.

As an adult, Hercules turned towards radical socialism: an anti-nationalist theoretical framework to justify his preferences and place in society. He became active in a student organization but even more so in the Turkish Workers Party (TIP), being the only ethnic Greek member in that political movement. And although his minority community could not explain his behavior, his 'comrades' within the Turkish leftist movement treated him as their equal.

This all happened regardless of the fact that the history of his family in Turkey was one of regular discriminatory measures by the government and constant racism against the minorities by the masses. Because of this, his parents left for Greece, but he stayed behind, until after he had founded a family himself, for their sake he emigrated too.

Living in Greece now, he didn't start to hate the Turks however; he differentiated between the 'negative Turks' who made him leave Turkey, and his Turkish friends, who stayed good friends *because* he didn't choose the nationalist Greek standpoint. In doing this he might be called naive, searching for a romantic world in dangerous areas, or just trying to escape painful confrontations, but still he chooses not to choose in this imagined ethnic controversy. Regretting we still live in a world where our perceptions and references are based on a nationalistic paradigm, he decided for himself to step outside this mental framework and live by his own views.

## Biography

Hercules (Iraklis) Millas (Istanbul 1940) was brought up in Turkey and currently lives in Greece. In his youth he was a member of Turkey's track team. He has a Ph.D. degree in political science and a B.Sc. in Civil Engineering. In the years 1968-1985 he worked as a civil engineer in various countries. From 1990-1995 he contributed in establishing the Greek Literature Department at Ankara University and in the years 1999-2007 he taught Turkish Literature and History at several Greek universities (Macedonian, Aegean, Athens).

He translated twenty books, mostly Greek and Turkish poetry. Dr. Millas published ten books (in Turkish, Greek and English) and many articles on Greek-Turkish relations, focusing on interethnic perceptions, stereotypes and images.

He received the (Greek/Turkish) *Abdi Ipekci Peace Award* twice (1992, 2001), the *Dido Sotiriou Award of the Hellenic Authors Society* (2004) and the *Free Thinking award* of the *Publishers Association of Turkey* (2005).

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