

Presentation of H. Millas in the meeting "Settling Into Motion" (Türkiye’de Göç-Tarih ve Günümüz) organized by ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius and Goethe-Institut in Istanbul, 18th October 2010 (18:00).

Assessing Exodus from Istanbul: Do I feel being immigrant or expelled?

INTRODUCTION

I thank warmly the organizers for inviting me in this inspiring meeting. But mostly I thank them because by asking me to speak about migration, immigration and my own experience I was obliged to reconsider my own life, the adventure of my family and my relatives, to think about the experience of my friends and of my community, the Greeks of Istanbul. Most of them have migrated, some willingly, some under force; a small percentage of them are still in this city. I will speak about their story. Mostly, however, I will try to concentrate on two questions:

- a) what are the feelings of those who left or who stayed, and
- b) how is this issue of migration perceived and voiced by the parties involved.

Actually, migration is a relatively short-duration process; but its discourse lasts for many years. The related stories, the legends, the evaluations of the past events endure a few generations and form the basis of a new communal identity. These stories and/or myths of migration also play an important role in politics, especially if the migration has been somehow connected to political considerations. This is the case with the Greek community of Istanbul (which is not called Greek but “Rum” in Turkish – for political reasons).

To make a distinction between the actual facts and the myths, or between the events and what is commonly called “imagined” or “constructed” past is not easy. This is because myths play an important role in human history and in the lives of individuals. To try to devalue them by reminding their fictitious nature is in practice an unproductive effort. In other words, human beings operate according to what they believe; and they believe in myths to a great extent. The myths form their own reality; a fictitious reality, but all the same, real enough to determine developments. Actually personal and communal identities are mostly based, or at least heavily depend on what is being believed: myths and legends. And beliefs are normally nonnegotiable.

Naturally I am not exempt of this shortcoming: as an individual I am also susceptible to subjectivity. So, you have to judge my point of view with caution and, and if you prefer, with some degree of skepticism in order to be on the safe side. On the other hand, I have an advantage relative to many. I know that I am inclined to be prejudiced (many don’t); simply because I am like every other individual and due to my identity. (Think of identity as a point of view; an inner force that shows to each of us the outer world from a certain angle; so things appear differently to each person according to his/her identity.) Knowing this makes one much more careful, more ready to change one’s opinion, ready to listen to the “other” with a relatively more open mind, etc. I mean knowing your weaknesses makes you more reasonable and eventually stronger.

IMMIGRATION – AN ORDINARY PHENOMENON OF HUMAN HISTORY

Human history is characterized by population movements – by immigrations. It is generally accepted that homo sapiens moved from Africa to other part of the world about a million years ago; they still move. Most of these movements are enforced. Famine or drought, natural disasters, political fear or persecution, bullying and discrimination, lack of job opportunities and the like are called “push factors” that create the immigrants, the emigrés and the refugees. Slave trade, wars, massacres, ethnic cleansing and genocides, too, fall under the same category. The “pull factors” are conditions that attract immigrants: countries or areas with greater security, with better living conditions and/or job opportunities, with political and/or religious freedom, etc. are poles that attract immigrants.

The populations of the continents, especially of North and South America, Australia and Europe are the outcome of great immigrations. In this part of the world where we are this moment colonization played a determining role. Ancient Greeks, starting in 750’s BC and for 250 years colonized and settled in many places, as well as Istanbul, too; precisely, in the part of the city that is less than a kilometer from the point we are right now. The legendary leader Byzas from Megara (a district near Athens) built the city of Byzantium. Later the Romans, then the Ottomans ruled the city. The Turkic groups came to Anatolia mostly after the 11th century and captured the city after four centuries. Immigration in this city, in the sense of incoming and great capital of the East (of course “East” relative to Europe), was a point of attraction for many centuries. Immigration is of three main types: labor immigration, refugee migration, and urbanization. Istanbul experienced all three. People initially chose to get settled in Istanbul because it offered jobs as the capital of two great Empires: of the East Roman and later of the Ottoman Empire. The city hosted the Muslim refugees that escaped the atrocities and massacres in the Balkans after the fights of 1912-1914. It was in the later decades that Istanbul acquired its dense population due to urbanization. Some of its population also immigrated to other places in search for a better life. So the traffic of incoming and outgoing population in this city has been heavy.

THE STORY OF MY FAMILY

The story of my family that has to do with the part of “coming” to Istanbul suits to “labor immigration”. The “leaving” part of the story of my family is more complex: it reminds rather the refugee case! My father side, actually my grandfather, came from Andros, an island in the middle of the Aegean, in the 1880s. On my mother side, my other grandfather, came about the same years from Epiros, North Greece. They got married to wives from Marmara district (Aretsu/Darica) and Kefalonya (an island in West Greece), respectively.

I remember that when I was about six years old my father and my mother took me to Darica to see the house where my grandmother once used to live. My father was disappointed and shocked. The house had deteriorated and the first floor was changed into a stable where cows lived. It was probably inhabited by Turkish émigrés that had

come from Greece. Actually the Greeks of Turkey (except those who lived in Istanbul and in the two islands, Imroz and Tenedos (Gökçeada and Bozcaada today), were forced to leave Turkey in the years between 1915-1923, during the time Greece and Turkey were in war. The same applied for the Turks of Greece: they were sent to Turkey. This forced emigration was ratified later with a treaty and the operation was called “exchange of populations”. Legally it was supposed to be an exchange of Muslims and Christians; had this happened today we would have called it “bilateral ethnic cleansing based on mutual state agreement (gentlemen agreement)”

The story of the Greeks of Turkey (and all ethnic groups in all the Balkans) in the 20th century is approximately similar to this: their lives are linked to processes that are characterized by immigration, emigration and/or becoming refugees. The process started with the appearance of nation-states and nationalism in the Balkans and it still continues.

My family story is typical of a Greek family of modern Istanbul. At this point I should remind that the Greeks of Istanbul are definitely an autochthon population (in the sense that they were born here), but not necessarily, contrary to widespread conviction of many Greeks and Turks, the grandchildren of the Byzantine population that once had lived in the city from the time before the capture of the city by the Ottomans. The population of 1453 was enslaved, sold and expelled from the city after its capture. The modern Greeks of the city, in other words, are immigrants and “new comers”, even though some may have come hundreds years ago. (I will come back to this issue below.)

Istanbul, all through its history hosted simultaneously various religious and ethnic groups. A stroll in Beyoğlu and the presence of various Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches there, even today, will confirm this. Some claim that this city is (or once has been) a cosmopolitan capital; others, however, say that the various groups lived separately, in parallel lives within ethnic enclosures, rarely “living together”; and because of that the city has not been “cosmopolitan”, like New York, for example. The whole matter is one of how one defines the word “cosmopolitan”. I personally believe that making a distinction of terms such as “traditional multi-ethnic” societies and modern “cosmopolitan” ones is practical and helpful.

IMMIGRATION BEFORE AND AFTER NATIONALISM

The issue of immigration, all around the world and due to its unique history and population composition especially in this city, acquired a new dimension and meaning in the era of nationalism and nation states. In this modern era the “nations”, which formed a new group identity, thought about and analyzed their environment in a unique way. New concepts and new analytical theories – that of nationalism – started being used to explain the (ethnic) groups, their existence and their immigration. What is sad and disastrous for many, is that those “theories” actually became a new driving force for ethnic cleansing and expulsion. Nationalism reevaluated the past in a special way, and thereon things were not the same any more.

I mentioned above the issue of the Greeks of this city and to what extent they could be considered an autochthon population in Istanbul. This question was not an issue before the appearance of nation-states and nationalism. Also the tendency to legitimize sovereignty based on historical rights was unknown in the middle ages and until the 19th century. In our modern times the practice of legitimizing a group's right to exist by references to "historical rights" caused massacres, genocides, ethnic cleansing, bullying, discrimination, ethnic prejudice and naturally expelling populations, migrations and refugees.

Nationalism is a turning point in human history. It is unproductive and especially misleading to try to reach conclusions looking back to see what happened in history. Nationalism incurred a brake with the past – and with history. Nationalism has created its own history; more precisely each nation state created anew its own historical past and interpretation.

Can there ever be a relationship between the fact that a great Jews community from Spain was hosted in the Ottoman Empire in the 15th century and the problems some other Jews in Turkey faced in the 20th century? How can one associate the "privileges" that the Christian Orthodox population (the Rum millet) acquired in the 15th and 16th century with the climate which caused the population exchange four and five ages later?¹ The new situation is not related to the past; on the contrary is a new start completely ignoring the past.

Especially inter-ethnic relationships changed drastically after the appearance of nation-states. The relations between religious and/or ethnic groups in Istanbul before, say 1890 and after, especially after 1908, cannot be associated. They were completely different. When my grandfathers first came to this city were not seen by the state and the wider community the way my father was perceived. My grandfathers were only foreigners who came to make a living, my father was seen as

- a) the nationally "other", a representative of a nation (the Greeks)
- b) one who claimed historical rights on this city and
- c) endangering the welfare of the Muslim and Turkish population.

Of course, correspondingly, my grandfathers and my father perceived the Turkish community differently, too: as a different religious group the first; as a national enemy the other. With the domination of national understanding inter-ethnic relations became tense and were understood by all parties involved on a zero-sum game.²

¹ This kind of historical "associations" reveals the racist dimension of nationalism. The discourse of a supposedly positive attitude is based on the argument of an unchanging national character: "we (and by 'we' is meant a nation) have been positive in the past, so we should be accepted as positive today, too".

² At this point, you listeners should be especially careful, cautious! Because, I may be speaking as a Greek who imagines an "other", constructing an imagined enemy according to his phobias and his nationalistic myths. My theory may be exactly what I set to criticize: a nationalistic interpretation where the bad and the good are in confrontation. On my part, I believe that I am not so simplistic, because I use the same reasoning to explain the situation of the Turkish minority in Western Thrace, too. I try not to take sides. The issue is not which nation is better, but that nationalism has caused many tears.

THE USE OF IMMIGRATION BY THE NATIONALISTS, TURKS AND GREEKS

Nationalism not only caused much pain but also deprived us of the means to understand some situations and sort out some problems. Through state controlled education and systematic mass propaganda the nationalist way of thinking has been internalized by the masses. The past and the present are, thereon, evaluated accordingly. The citizens of each nation state have their special way of thinking which is in harmony with their national identity and ideology. In our days “truths” in these matters are as many as the nations are.

The dilemma that once I faced, for a very short period indeed, had been which national paradigm I was supposed to choose in order to approach

- a) the issue of minorities,
- b) their rights,
- c) their past and present,
- d) the past which naturally includes their migrations, too.

I am convinced now that without a clear and determined position vis-à-vis nationalism and national interpretations, sound studies are not possible. I try to stick to the anti-nationalist paradigm – to the extent this is possible in this era of nation states.

What is feasible and very easy is to narrate stories that are welcomed in one nation but not acceptable, even strongly refuted as outrageous fabrication by the other. Actually analysts face a serious shortcoming when they set out to study phenomena which, partly at least are created and recreated by themselves. These analysts are the agents who keep alive an imagined past. Ironically quite often a study of a phenomenon – e.g., a study on the ill-treatment of the minorities and their eventual immigration – may initiate and trigger a new ill-treatment. Nationalist historians fight against historical texts related to old events, rather than about the causes of an old event. This may be the case with immigration, too. Present-day people may be fighting not on how to stop immigration or cure its wounds, but on the interpretation of a past event.³

In our time of nation-states the issue of immigration, refugees etc., is usually handled with a basic concern: how to protect the reputation of our state and our nation. Of course, this concern demonstrates an indirect effort to protect the reputation of the ethnically perceived self. The claimed and advertised “truth” at the end of the day serves the nation as a whole. This type of analysts do not work in this direction consciously; they operate automatically and unconsciously, with the best of intentions. And mostly they refer to the past to prove their arguments; they speak of a golden age where things were very good. This golden age is seen either as an era where the “other” had not appeared yet; or the “other” did not object and did accept his fate; or as an idealized society which actually never existed.

I do not prefer to refer to the time before the nation states when I deal with modern times. Nationalism is a demarcation so determining that old references appear only as an effort to hide the present situation.

³ To pronounce the vicious circle bluntly, imagine a torturer who sets out to study how to stop the widespread torture!

MY FEELINGS AS A MEMBER OF A MINORITY

I understand that I am invited to speak on my personal experience on immigration. With all these mentioned above in mind, what can I say about my personal experience of immigration? As you have already noticed I am more concerned with issues like,

- a) how nations perceive and present the past and the immigrations of the past,
- b) how nationalism operates exaggerating or silencing events,
- c) how prejudices are formed and operate,
- d) why nationalists behave the way they do than the migration itself.

Indeed I feel that my leaving Istanbul and choosing Athens as my permanent place of living is a minor decision with no great importance. I could have gone to Izmir or Adana finding a good job there or preferring the climate. In other words, there are no strong feelings associated with this move, this change of address or this “immigration” if you prefer.

When I left Turkey in 1971 both countries were under military reigns which prevailed after coups. My intentions were to find a job elsewhere, in Italy precisely, to provide for my family. But I failed to find a job there and I found a Greek company which asked me to work in Bahrain. I found myself established in Athens. Life was much easier there relative to Turkey and we stayed.

Contrary to many analysts who claim that the Greeks of Istanbul left because of ill treatment by the authorities, by the wider community or due to the riots of 1955 or the expelling of 1964, I believe that these explanations are not conclusive. Even worse, ill treatment existed for decades before, too. I remind the climate in 1923, when hundreds of thousands of Greeks were forced to leave Anatolia, some by the method of forced exchange of populations but mostly due to massacres and/or threat of massacre. Terror and fear reigned among the Greeks that time. They did not leave Istanbul though. In 1942 the Tax of Wealth (Varlık Vergisi) was a racist, economically disastrous and psychologically traumatic experience. The minority members did not leave either.

My understanding is that the Greeks of Istanbul left under two simultaneous forces: the push forces and the pull forces. Greece until the decade of 1960 was economically inferior to Turkey. It is after those years that it became apparent that it could provide better living conditions to its new immigrants. The Greeks of Istanbul, paradoxically, left when the oppression started to diminish. When I voiced this view about twenty years ago, a Turkish journalist wrote in enthusiasm that “Millas said (he meant “confessed”!) that the Greeks left because they were looking for better economic conditions and not due to ill-treatment!” On the other hand some Greek nationalists blamed me that I tried to defend the Turks and ignore the suffering of the Greeks of Istanbul.

These reactions to what I had clearly stated are good examples of nationalistic prejudice and approach which I mentioned above. The nationalists of both sides try to use the event of migration (or other events in the past) either in order to praise their nation or criticize the “other” nation. They rarely discuss the issue; mostly they are for

or against an event. This is one reason I am inclined on my part to deconstruct the discourses related to past events, rather than talking of the past. In addition to that, I highly suspect that, almost all of us speak about the past to prove something of the present – we were positive/we are positive or the “other” was negative/ is negative. Maybe this is the explanation why we are so preoccupied with the past: for the nationalists it concerns our daily private life and our reputation.

This does not mean that I have no grievances, bad memories and traumas for the period I lived in Istanbul as a minority member. But I want to make it as clear as possible what my complaints precisely are. It is not the Tax on Wealth, not the riots of 1955, the expulsions of 1964, which all three one after the other seriously affected and ruined my family life. These I consider, however, the natural consequence of an understanding which is still predominant in this society: the impossibility of accepting as equal citizen a person who is not a Muslim and racially not of Turkish origin. These incidents, riots, taxes etc., as tragic as they may be, are not *the* problem but a consequence of the problem.

The unhappy incidents could be viewed as an unfortunate isolated past and could be accepted, excused and forgotten. But what is not possible to overlook is the lack of the basic democratic right, the right of being equal as a citizen. This equality appears only on paper – I mean it is in the constitution – and it is pompously and continuously advertised. This hypocritical situation was experienced, at least by me, as a daily insult.

I experienced this discrimination various times and at different fields of my life.

- a) In the streets where I played with my peers (I heard being addressed as *giaour*/infidel),
- b) in my youth during my sport life (declared second in a race which I won, so that the other runner, the “really” Turkish one would take part in the national Turkish team),
- c) in the army (when I served as simple soldier and not as a sergeant as all who had studied in universities used to) and
- d) in the company (TPAO) where I worked (where I was terminated together with a Jew employee, because “those were the orders from Ankara”, as I was unofficially told).
- e) I felt it watching my father desperately trying to face all kinds of injustice and bullying (in 1942, 1955, 1964).

Of course I have to remind the other side of my life, too. Whenever I raised my voice against oppression I found behind me some people who were on my side. I did not mention this before, but I think it is self-understood: I have around me in Turkey a group of people who I perceive as my closest to me. Some are my friends from the time we went to the same school; the majority are people who do not share the hysteria of nationalism. With them I feel at home, not only in Turkey but everywhere in the world. I believe I owe my sanity to them; without them I could have chosen the nationalist paradigm.

THE PERCEPTION OF AN EXODUS

There is not only injustice in nationalistic practices, but there is nationalist taste even in cases where justice was done. And because of that there is not a lasting peace and democratic settlement. Sometimes positive initiatives are taken by nationalist agents; these decisions are contradictory, limited and ephemeral. Half accepted minority rights is one example. Being employed in some civil services but not in all is another example. Presenting applied human rights as a magnanimity that makes the minority member feel as a beggar is another example. Nationalism is widespread and dominant in the majority and the minority alike. Only the minority suffers most because they normally are the ones who are weaker, the defeated - expecting the day to come even.⁴

Because of all these my experience is one of anger. Directed not to individuals, not to the nations or the ethnic groups, but to the nationalists. To be more precise, I am not really angry for what they are, but I feel an indignation for their inability to see the dead-end of their choice. Nationalism is a lose-lose game (not even a zero sum!) When nations end up being supposedly victorious they actually are in the phase where they have paved the road for more nationalism and more unhappiness. The victorious wars are ended up in brain washing the population: the superior us, the historical negative other. These are stereotypes that we inherited as a legacy of our national victories.

So when I consider my leaving Istanbul for good and migrating to another country, what actually counts is not the leaving part. I know that millions of Turkish citizens left their country looking for a better fate. The case of the minorities, and myself to be more precise, is different. Not my leaving but my staying part was traumatic. Interestingly this came to my consciousness when I started living in Greece. Nobody discriminated me and ill treated me because of my name or my origin.

But more important nobody wrote and spoke in favor of me, trying to defend or to protect me or to prove that I deserve equal rights. (Protect me against whom? Equal right with who? – The need of such questions is a traumatic experience.) There was no need for that. Whereas in Turkey I experienced a feeling of humiliation when – surely good willing – some Turkish citizens tried to be on my side and protect me, as if I was a secondary citizen who needed tutelage. Their move actually confirmed and daily reminded my inferior status.

So, I do not feel as an immigrant but as expelled and even refugee without technically being one! A strange feeling, indeed! To be seen as the “other” is indeed a strange feeling...

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⁴ The parties involved in national controversies or in what sometimes called “national issues” are the states and their citizens. Minorities however, naturally, are involved in these controversies, too. They also use the discourse of “historical rights”, they have a say as who is right and who is wrong as ethnic entities, they are bearers of one sided historical interpretations, they silence or exaggerate their role or the role of the “other” as they please, etc. Not only the “nationalists” of the majority but their counterparts of the minority also cultivate the dominant paradigm.