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Still under hypnosis, against each other

At the fully occupied movie hall, my elderly cousin -- a member of the tiny Turkish minority in the Western Thrace region of Greece, a bilingual businessman based in the town of Komotini/Gümülcine -- leaned over and whispered a story into my ear.

He had some time ago visited Athens for business. He met a Greek acquaintance, who proposed going to his home to pick up his wife before eating out somewhere. They arrived at the apartment and he was asked to wait while they prepared to go out. As he sat alone in the living room, a small boy opened the door just slightly and peeped at him. He did it several times, without saying a word. Later, he heard from his friend that the boy, to whom his friend had earlier said, "We have a Turkish guest in the apartment" went back to him and said, "Dad, I looked and looked, but could not see any Turk!"

We had gathered the other night for a special event of a rare kind in Komotini -- a documentary. The subject was just as it was somewhat summarized to me: how profound and how internalized the fear, suspicion, mistrust and hatred between Turks and Greeks are, despite the fact that the two countries have not fought each other for 90 years. But relations on the political and social level have always remained tense. Individuals on both sides remain stuck on clichés, myths, lies, fabricated historic episodes and enjoy the blame game against the "the other." Their identities are built, often, on an internal world of fiction.

The crowd on Monday night at the movie hall, a mix of the two ethnicities, was gathered to watch an acclaimed and powerful documentary on this touchy subject. Directed by Nefin Dinç, a Turkish academic, (known also for the work called "Rebetiko: The Song of Two Cities") the movie presents the narratives of two small villages on both sides of the Aegean: Birgi (near İzmir) in Turkey and Dimistana (Peloponnese) in Greece. Both villages had a historic place in the liberation wars of

1821 and 1922. The irony of history is that both countries achieved “nation building” by rising up against the other.

Dinç some years ago discussed the idea of the documentary “The Other Town” (Öteki Kasaba) with Hercules Millas, a Turkish-Greek scholar, and they decided to proceed, financing the project themselves. Dinç had, of course, the perfect choice in Millas as presenter. A member of the Greek minority (from Ankara), Millas (who writes also for Zaman in Turkish) is arguably the sharpest observer and critic of the Turkish and Greek mindset. His book titled “Do’s and Don’ts for Better Greek-Turkish Relations” is an unrivalled classic in the subject.

They spent a long time in the two villages. The footage amounted to 80 hours. Their aim was to, without any intimidation, bring to the surface the clichés and negative images of the “other.” They did use their language skills but did not immediately ask questions that have to do with perceptions. “If we had directly asked if there were any problems, they would easily deny them,” Millas told the audience.

What we see in the 45-minute-long movie is deeply rooted prejudices, at times funny, at times worrisome, endorsed by completely outdated nationalist rituals involving schoolchildren, reciting poetry inciting mutual hatred, waving flags and singing military marches; local and religious figures repeating nationalist jargon in mesmerizing robotic talk, all sorts of myths. What comes through is a history which from childhood keeps individuals from both nations in a state of hypnosis from which they have a very hard time waking up.

As one amateur Turkish local historian disturbingly tells Millas, “If we had killed them, I do not care, it is the job of their historians, not mine.” Or, as a local administrator in Dimistana starts stumbling, speaking in tongues when Millas confronts him about the myth of “secret schools” (where Greek nationalists allegedly taught children enmity towards the Ottomans).

The magic of the movie lies in its clear “distance.” It refuses to take sides; its attempts at remaining fair are seen throughout. That is perhaps why it attracts applause and triggers discussions. It was also what happened in Komotini. Millas and Dinç received thanks for their bluntness, not for falling into romanticism. They point out an open wound and seek solutions within family upbringing and education. The destination for the pair’s next documentary is Cyprus.