

By H. Millas in the Conference "Not the Least Among Many: The Greeks at Robert College", Istanbul, Boğaziçi University, 19 November 2005.

A 'Rum' in Robert College in the Years 1955-1965

The 'Rum' of the title is me, of course. I joined Robert College (Robert Academy preparatory class) after my primary education at a Greek minority school, Feriköy Rum İlkokulu, at an age of fifteen, as a young boy. I was older than the other students because the Greek primary schools had six grades and not five like the Turkish primary schools. I graduated from the University after eleven years, as a civil engineer, already a married man. Robert College was the environment where I came of age. I formed my personality which marked the rest of my life in this school; and by the word 'personality' I try to express entities of human beings which are usually characterized with the words identity, basic ethical values, political world view, philosophical attitude *vis-à-vis* our environment and our fellow men, etc. Today I will try to speak about this experience of mine. Not so much 'the Greeks at Robert College' but the influence of Robert College on a Greek.

Is it ever possible for anybody to speak about himself objectively? I will leave this question unanswered because anyhow I do not believe in 'objectivity' on any opinion in general. We are all doomed to be personalities with a personal history which marks our opinions and judgments. Today I will speak of my *perception* of my experience in Robert College.

An ethical and esthetic dimension

One of my teachers that I remember from my first years in Robert College is Turan Bey (Çağlarca). The first days in class when I spoke in Turkish he sensed from my accent that I was 'different' and he asked me my name. I said Millas, which was not distinctive enough to disclose my ethnic identity. So he asked me my first name. I said Herkül, which was not enough either. He then looked at me perplexed and he asked the name of my father. I said 'I am a Rum' (Rum'um!). My father's name was Nikos and I would have been identified anyhow. So I had decided to end this uneasy situation with the confession. In short, I knew that I was somehow different from the beginning. I still remember however, that Turan Bey blushed and he said that

he did not mean to ask 'that' (Ben bunu sormak istemedim). But I was confident that he was curious to find out my ethnicity. In time I liked Turan Bey very much and I especially appreciated that he had blushed when I decoded his question.

But what did 'Rum' mean those years? The title of today's conference is 'The Greeks at Robert College', but when this is translated into Turkish the tendency is to speak of 'Rums at Robert College'. There is not a word in English which corresponds to 'Rum'. It was inconceivable to call myself a 'Yunan' because I was a minority member which was not officially identified with the nation of the neighboring state of Greece/Yunanistan. I was taught in primary school that I was a Turkish national, a member of the Turkish Republic with equal rights and obligations with the rest of its citizens. If questioned I would answer that I was a Turk and if further questioned I would add that I was a Rum, too – even though I knew that the situation was a little more complex. Rum still today means an Orthodox Christian connected to the Patriarchate of Istanbul (not necessarily a believer) and (not necessarily) a Greek speaking person. The Greek minority of Istanbul, as it is the case with many such groups, identified itself by the way it was perceived and treated by the 'majority' rather than by some objective criteria. Even the Greek language of the Rums in Turkish is called Rumca and not Yunanca, even though 'Rumca' is almost identical with the language spoken in Greece. [\[1\]](#) That is to say, I speak specifically of *these* Greeks, and of the years 1955-1965 only.

Allow me to narrate what I remember of those early years in Robert College. There are some incidents and images that are of some importance because their being engraved (imprinted) in my memory shows that they had a great influence on me. I remember my American teacher of mathematics in early Orta Okul period. He managed to convince us – I am unable to remember how – that it was more important to remain honest than to get a good grade in a test. After a few weeks with him he would give us the test questions and he would leave the class. And we did not cheat (we did not copy / kopya çekmiyorduk, as we used to say). After many years I tried to do the same when I taught Turkish at the Aegean University in Rhodes. In a final exam I left the class, went to the cafeteria bought a sandwich and a Coke and returned to the class. I still believe that my students had not cheated in this short interval because I had talked to them - somehow like my early American teacher.

I remember another teacher explaining to the class, upon the complaints of some boarder students that they had been fed with the 'leftovers', that the food that remains in the saucepan is not leftover, that it should not be thrown away but can and should be heated and served the next day. Our English was not so good yet, so he had drawn a saucepan on the blackboard, he had shown the plates with the real leftovers and he made it clear what he meant with untouched food. I felt he was right. This picture is still vivid in my mind and at home we do not throw food away.

I remember how in those early years of my youth we used to visit the houses of some of our American teachers who would organize parties for us. In one case the girl friend of the teacher was there too. And we teenagers were very much impressed. The Turkish teachers and some of the few Armenian and Greek teachers never allowed such an intimacy between themselves and their students. I think that this kind of a socialization was my first and strongest experience of democratic equality among citizens. Respect had nothing to do with awesome and distanced superiority.

We played football with our teachers. I ran in the field days with them. On the '77 day' we made all kind of jokes with them. They did not preach to us what equality, democratic attitude and respect to the Other were, they practiced them and they demonstrated them. I did not only hear about these notions, I experienced them. I wonder if this is still the same in this school today.

I tried to show what I meant when I said that some ethical values had been transmitted to me: Honesty to a degree that in Greece and in Turkey would be considered naiveté, skepticism for excess luxury or a somewhat ascetic way of lifestyle, equality and respect among members of any community. It was not the well equipped laboratories, the rich library, the wide gym and the modern curriculum and the teaching methods that made the big difference of studying at Robert College at that time. All these naturally were of importance. However, it was actually the staff which was composed of members that came from another country, quite different if not better than Turkey, and that they believed that they had a mission. Many years later a Greek (not a Rum) friend that watched me operate in life pointed out to me that I had tendencies of what Weber described as 'Protestant ethic'. It was then that I became conscious of my experience in this school and of its great positive influence on me. [\[2\]](#)

A political dimension

No two persons are alike and my case, as all cases that have to do with an individual is in a sense unique, even though it may also represent an element that composes a generality. Generalities however, are constructions that serve a purpose – of somebody or of a group. Why do we discuss the *Greeks* today? How do we perceive the Greeks of Robert College *today*?
Who are
we
who speak of
them
? These are few questions that come

now

to my mind but they did not come to my mind 40-50 years ago.

In 1964, when I was at the university I was for a while the president of Kültürel Organizasyon Komitesi (KOK-Cultural Organizational Committee), a section of the Student Union of this school. Among our activities which mostly were political and heavily influenced by the leftist agenda of those years, we also carried out a short study about the history of our school and especially the social and ethnic background of the students, covering the whole period of the school, from 1860s to 1960. We studied the registration lists of the students for every ten years checking the names and professions of the parents. We ended up with a social profile of the students.

Unfortunately I do not have this study; it was never published and I lost it as I moved from one house to the next. What I remember is that the students until the years of Young Turks, but especially until the years that the modern Turkish Republic was established were mostly Christians, especially Bulgarians, Armenians and Greeks. The Muslims were a minority. Their fathers were merchants, doctors, shopkeepers, in short people that economically were doing well. The situation changed drastically after 1923 and the Muslim/Turkish students became the majority. In my time there were many students who were studying with scholarship; they had come from various places of Anatolia and their fathers were not rich.

I wonder how the Greek students of the 19th century identified themselves. Did they consider themselves as Ottomans, as Greeks (in the sense of Yunan), as Rums or as Orthodox Christians? Did they use combinations of these? I can not say. But I can speak of my time and of myself.

Running through the year book of 1965, Record of 65 as it was named, I ended up with the following. The Greek students in that year at the University were 20 in total. They composed 5% of the students of the School of Engineering and 3.4% of the other two schools combined: the School of Business Administration and Economics and the School of Sciences and Languages. The average is 4.5% of the total. The corresponding percentages for other non-Muslim students, namely Armenians and Jews were as follows: 44 students in total, 12% in the engineering and 6.3% in the other schools; 10% in average. The Greeks and the non-Muslims still presented a 'normal' and a somewhat high analogy, if their proportion to the total population of Istanbul was taken into consideration (approximately 3% for the Greeks and something of this order for Armenians and Jews).

However, what was of interest was the low percentage of the Greeks in the extra-curriculum activities of the school. When the members of clubs and councils such as tourism, philatelist or Student unions etc., are considered, the participation of the Greeks in these are as low as 2%. We notice seven Greeks participating in these activities, out of which four are in the Photography Club where they compose the majority of the club. If this 'Greek club' is excluded, the integration of the Greeks in the associations of extra-curriculum activities drops to about 1%. In other words the Greeks in the years 1965 did not compose a very active group in the school.

This is the way I remember them too. I use the word *them* and not *us* because back in the 60s I felt and behaved somehow differently. I did not identify myself wholeheartedly with *them*

. I felt I was more integrated to my environment, to the school and my immediate surrounding than they were. I still have a vivid image in my memory of the Greek students on the campus of the university, in front of Albert Long Hall. They were walking five or six of them as a group. The picture had struck me. I felt that something did not look right. That is the reason I still remember this moment after forty years. They were a group of Greeks, whereas I did not operate at that time as a member of a Greek group. My closest friends were Uğur Aker, Osman Ulagay, Osman Birder, Ali Taygun, Tarık Okyay, Tosun Terzioğlu and others, of course. There were friends from the Orta School, from the Academy. There were no Greeks among my closest friends even though I socialized with them too; probably because I did not select friends based on ethnicity but closeness had developed naturally among classmates.

I propose a distinction in order to explain a phenomenon. Among the Greek students of the 1960s there were two categories at the university part of Robert College: Those who had joined the school after they had completed a Greek Lise and those who came from the Orta and Lise of Robert College. The late comers showed signs of a closed community. They were not wholly integrated to the environment. They experienced a kind of ghetto psychology in a school which had two distinctive characteristics. It was American from the academic point of view and Turkish from the students' point of view. I felt at ease with both because I had a long period of adjustment. Furthermore, my association with both had started when I was very young.

Much later, trying to understand the influence of Robert College on me, on my choices in life and my group identity I came to the conclusion that it was decisive. This school had provided me with notions and secured the reflexes needed to be integrated to the wider Turkish environment. To be more precise, it provided a cosmopolitan framework that later enabled me to adjust myself to any new environment. Lately I read an article of an anthropologist, Ulf Hannerz (in *Global Culture: nationalism, globalization and modernism*), who classifies human beings into cosmopolitans and locals. The second seem to be more tied to tradition, closest to their familiar environment and more conservative. The cosmopolitans are, as the term implies too, more open to the Others. I believe this is one of the most important aspects that Robert

College has granted to me, to a Greek of the 1960s.

Paradoxically, this cosmopolitanism made this Greek a very good and active Turkish citizen. It was the American school, not the Turkish state that made a good Turkish citizen out of me. In those years I was very active within the Turkish community, or to word the phenomenon more precisely, within *my greater community* which happened to be Turkish. It could have been anything..., I would have adapted myself to it. Later when I moved to Greece, it was as easy for me to act as a regular member of this new environment. It is of interest to note that it was the Rums of Istanbul, who had isolated themselves from the wider Turkish environment that when they moved to Greece they still could not get integrated to the new Greek environment and they formed their small minority groups with their clubs and newspapers, segregating themselves as they did back in Turkey.

Robert College with its cosmopolitan and democratic education and atmosphere secured what the Turkish state did not manage. This may sound surprising to some but it was the open society that secures the good and loyal citizen. When I was still a student I was in the varsity team of Turkey as a runner representing Turkey, an active member of Turkish Workers Party (TIP) and a member of the Student Council. In other words I was a citizen that participated in social affairs. I was the only Greek that had an active participation in the leftist movement of the country. I remember that the Greek community of Istanbul never appreciated, but even more interesting, never understood my motives of my participation in this 'Turkish' enterprise. They were, at least those years, quite isolated in their cultural and social ghetto.

My integration with and my participation in the social environment was the end result of an understanding that was closely connected to basic democratic principles of equality and responsibility that were inspired in this school. Integration went hand in hand with the preservation of my ethnic and cultural identity. My identity as a minority member was also secured and respected in Robert College. To be a Christian, for example, was the most natural thing, since our teachers, that is to say the most respected men and women were in most cases of a different religion. Respect to multiculturalism was the normal approach. All these can be covered under a general title: tolerance. All differences were tolerated: philosophical, religious, ideological differences and diversity in general were not seen as a challenge and threat. Understanding for the Other was what was taught to us from the first day.

Most of these were absent in the wider Turkish community and outside the campus. Out there, there was the discrimination of the minorities, the mistrust and the suspicion *vis-à-vis* the Other; and some unhappy events that my family had faced. When I graduated and faced the 'Turkish reality', and especially the practices of the state, I had to take some decisions and reconsider

the situation. The eleven years of my education however, helped me not to retreat back to an understanding of a minority group that was closed in itself. I believe that I am still a cosmopolitan. Not in the sense that it is used in general in the Turkish society, e.i, in a pejorative sense, (ulusal özelliği yitirmiş kişi / one who lost his national character) but as a positive quality.

In those old good days – because for old people all past days are good and nostalgic anyhow – I profited a lot from Robert College as a Greek. I had a wonderful time, too. I enjoyed athletics, the activities in the student union, some friendships that I did not manage to make again to that extent in the years that followed. I fell in love in this school and I am still married to Evy, a Greek graduate of Robert College, too. I want to believe that it was this school that saved me from becoming a nationalist, too. At least its role in this direction was of some importance for me.

As a conclusion – even though I do not like conclusions since they always limit the richness of the details – I would like to remind some distinctions.

1. By ‘Greeks’ at Robert College one may mean different things:

- a) Members of the Greek nation (Yunan)
- b) Grecophone and/or Christian Turkish citizens (Rum)

2. By ‘student’ one may mean:

- a) Any student that studied for any period of time in this school
- b) Students that came of age in this school

3- By 'education' one may mean:

a) Obtaining a training in a profession and/or skill

b) A worldview or a style in facing the world.

4- Finally, citizenship goes hand in hand with acceptance of alterity, the Other. Otherwise, if a state does not accomplish that, one may end up with subjects not citizens.

All the above distinctions are vivid in my mind when I speak of the 'Greeks of Robert College'.

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See also:

[- "Sir, why do the nationalists think like this?", an article published in Donau in wich Dr. Hercules Millas tells about his personal expiriences.](#)

[- Asessing Exodus from Istanbul: Do I feel being immigrant or expelled?](#)

[1] Actually modern Greece has accepted the dialect of Istanbul and Peloponnese as its official

language.

[2] When I sent this paper to my brother-in-law Dimitri Gutas who studied and now teaches at Yale and is also a graduate of Robert Academy, he wrote back and said that when he first entered Yale one of his professors had said to him that he seems to be mixture of somebody with Protestant ethic and characteristics of Zorba the Greek. As for myself, I feel distanced from Zorba who is quite dramatic and sentimental to my taste since I feel – this is my self-image- I am inclined to common sense. I would say I carry along with my Protestant ethic something of Nasrettin Hoca.