TURKEY: THE LOST GENERATION

Zafer Şenocak

He was referred to simply as “Hodscha.” I saw him for the first time at the Turkish table in the cafeteria at the University of Munich. He was a haggard man, with dark eyes and a three-day beard, surrounded by attentive, patient listeners. He was too old to be a “professional student.” He spoke slowly and so quietly that one had to concentrate to hear him in the loud cafeteria. As far as I could follow, he was speaking about the emergence of socialism in Afghanistan. My communist phase was behind me, and I could no longer get excited about that sort of thing, even if it was presented with the fervor of a whirling dervish. It was the first time I saw some of the people in his circle. Had he brought them along? A fellow student whispered to me that he had stood next to Mahir Çayan.

Mahir Çayan? Wasn’t he the student leader who had been shot by the army in 1972? Cayan was more that that. He was the head of the Turkish student movement—a well-read, quick-witted young man with a head full of ideals. How to construct a more just system in Turkey, how to break the hold of the oligarchy and establish a people’s democracy—these were questions that preoccupied not only him but an entire generation that paid more dearly for these seditious thoughts than those of a similar persuasion in other countries.

1968 was an important year in Turkey, too, and as in the rest of Europe, students took to the streets. But the state’s reaction in Turkey was more severe and repressive; many of the old “68ers” migrated to Germany. The resurgence of Islam in Turkey began as a reaction to the leftist students; one of the central figures among the era’s right-wing students is Abdullah Gül, the current president of Turkey. The people didn’t want a people’s democracy. In 1971, there was a military coup. The students were imprisoned, tortured, and broken; three of them were hanged.

A heated atmosphere on the streets

1968: My father is publishing a conservative political periodical in Istanbul. He is staunchly anti-communist. The mood is heated. His office is in the Old City, directly opposite the student union.
dominated by right-wing youth. The big mosques are not far, and the university is also just a short walk away. The streets are piled with sandbags. The police, wearing armor, look like Martians. There are demonstrations in the streets every day. The leftist students like to march in front of the right-wing student union. Will they be able to occupy the building? Stones are thrown; windowpanes shatter. My father’s office is in an old building; it is in a large room with a bay window. I am seven years old, and for hours on end I sit there in suspense at the window, watching the events unfold.

Turkey is a NATO member and opposes the communist students. Tensions run high. Turkey is a poor, underdeveloped country. The differences between the rich and the poor are overwhelming. The “simple” people in the country have been told for generations that poverty and wealth are God-given. One must resign oneself to one’s destiny. But Turkey has begun to undergo industrialization. The population is moving to the cities in search of work. For the leftist students, the conditions are decidedly revolutionary. The works of Marx and Lenin are extremely significant. Mao is also popular. Marcuse is meaningless.

**Driven by Vulgar Marxism**

Turkey’s 1968 is guided by Vulgar Marxism. Relations are strained and the climate rough. Communists, members of the Worker’s Party, sit in parliament for the first time, having been elected in 1965. They don’t refer to themselves as such. Communism is forbidden. Communist thinking is punishable by a minimum of five years in prison. Turkey is, however, a practicing democracy. The 1961 constitution is based on that of West Germany—a strict separation of powers, a constitutional court. But the situation in Turkey is more reminiscent of South American countries than of West Germany.

Communist Turkey is an illusion. In the Cold War, no weight can be shifted without triggering an international crisis. The world is rigidly divided into camps. The Russians are allowed to march on Prague, and Turkey will accordingly remain part of the West. It is a superpower deal that goes above the heads of the people. Turkey is a cornerstone of NATO, a stronghold against communism. Industry is still too precarious. Conservative traditions and values are still dominant in the countryside. Turkish farmers are not waiting for salvation. When “anarchists” (as the leftist student cadre is called) appear, the farmers go straight to the police. The anarchists are
godless and engage in free love, or so it is said. They have no morals or decency; they trample all over the holy Koran. The state should make short order of them.

**Resistance is quickly overcome**

It is not difficult for the regime to suppress the student revolt after the military coup in 1971. The resistance is quickly overcome. A state of emergency is declared across the country. The courts are controlled by the military. The elected government is deposed. The military appoints an emergency government. The violent atmosphere, however, continues into the 1970s and brings the country to the brink of civil war within a few years. Left-wing and right-wing students wage war against one another. Every day, there are new dead and injured to report.

The events of the 1970s remain unresolved to this day. They served as a pretext for the next military coup in 1980. This coup is the most severe Turkey has experienced. It brings the nation to its knees. Turkey is made fit for globalization. Above all, it is important that labor remain cheap. Turkey should be integrated into the global market. Foreign capital needs to flow into the country. The traces of the military’s authoritarian rule are still felt today: an undemocratic constitution and an atmosphere in which the very notion of politics has become taboo. All this has prevented Turkey from undergoing a comprehensive, lasting democratization up to the present.

**Coup forces intellectuals into exile**

The coup in 1980 drives many Turkish intellectuals and student leaders abroad, into exile. Before this, they had increasingly shaped Turkish culture. Many publishing houses had been founded in the 1970s and 1980s by “68ers.” Production had not been limited to political literature; international literature had been translated, and, above all, so-called progressive authors from around the world had been discovered. In South American literature, for example, authors like Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel García Márquez had become popular. But
after the military coup, all books are banned. There are book burnings. Nâzim Hikmet’s poetry once again disappears from bookstore shelves. Many left-leaning poets are no longer allowed to publish.

A large number go to Germany, where many Turks already reside. They do not all just sit in cafeterias, as Hodscha did, who always willingly answered all of our questions about the conditions in “those days” with a certain tinge of pride in his soft voice. Many of those who were politically active then become involved in cultural circles, publish periodicals, establish small libraries, and hold seminars. A rivalry arises between the mosque circles and the small cultural centers of the Turkish Left in Germany.

The decade of German asylum

I do some of my first readings at these Turkish leftist centers; my poetry is classified as too middle class. I write in German. Most listeners do not understand German. I notice how alien these people have become to me, how alien and distant Turkey is. But my translations of Turkish folk poetry are well received. The Turkish folk poets of the past decades are seen as progressive. They resisted the rule of the sultan and opposed conservative Muslim theologians.

In the 1980s, Germany becomes a center for Turkish communists. In Turkey, prisons are overflowing with them and their sympathizers, and more than a few of them end up on the gallows. In Germany, however, even the Evangelische Studentengemeinde [Protestant Student Association] worries about the persecuted. It is not that people are interested in Turkish communists’ way of thinking; it is enough that the Turkish state is persecuting them. It is the decade of German asylum. Germans’ naïveté is convenient for Turks who are not prepared to critically evaluate their own past.

Relentless ideological warfare

Was the Turkish revolt of 1968 an emancipation movement at all? Or, to put it differently, was it not controlled by self-appointed “leaders” with macho allure who had long since lost touch with reality? Without question, Turkey was a repressive state. But the opponents of that state, splitting like sects into countless factions, thought and behaved no less oppressively. They could not abide contradictions; even differing interpretations of the Marxist worldview did not lead to open discussions but to spiteful ideological battles.
The worldview of the revolutionaries did not call gender relations into question, not even in regard to violence. This is probably the greatest difference between the German and the Turkish generations of 1968. The latter preferred to assemble brigades over communes. Joie de vivre and humor eluded them. Private life was not revolutionized. It simply did not exist. A revolutionary who wanted to be taken seriously did not fall in love.

**Leftist sects enamored of themselves**

The Turkish student movement did not give rise to the “Greens,” but rather to many leftist sects enamored of themselves, which trumped one another in their lack of meaning. It is not the groups in this movement that deserve respect but the many individuals whose engagement, self-discipline, and courage to think critically distinguished them from the masses. These individuals make sure that the legacy of the Turkish revolt is not entirely forgotten. In Germany, the central question for the Left was how a society could be changed, how living conditions for people could be improved; it was called the “the march through the institutions.” In Turkey, there was no such march. Only the military marched.

In the meantime, the battle between the leftists and the mosque circles in Germany has been lost. Many of the people who were culturally active in the 1980s have withdrawn from public life. They are politically disillusioned, perhaps broken. Some of them run restaurants and concern themselves (at least!) primarily with their personal well-being. They are no longer role models for the young. The mosque groups, conversely, have become well organized and attract the youth.

**The silence of the 1968 generation**

The situation for Turks in Germany perfectly reflects the situation in Turkey. After the military eradicated the leftist movement, undermined labor unions, and prohibited political activity at high schools, a network of religious groups spread across the country. Many of them were illegal but not as loud and rebellious as the leftists. Mystical orders, Muslim self-awareness groups, and self-styled gurus of the Islamic way of life have increasingly become important cultural forces. Independent thinkers are isolated and marginalized. Turkey is recalling its Muslim identity. The only opposing force worth mentioning is the tendency towards the world of consumption, the day-to-day culture of globalization.
The silence of the generation of 1968 about this development is remarkable. Vulgar Marxist paradigms lead us no further. Taking action against this “reactionary” development seems futile. The collapse of totalitarian socialism left a great deal of bitterness but did not lead to critical self-reflection.

The garish colors of the ideologues

But in the 1980s, as we democratically minded Turks fought in Germany and Turkey against the Turkish state, people like Hodscha were still authorities, living (and surviving) exemplars of resistance, of hope for better times. Hodscha spoke French well but not a word of German. He did not want to learn German. He wanted to return to Turkey and once again take up the fight against the oligarchy. He could summon only a tired smile for German comrades who strove to achieve political influence and recognition in parliament. He saw parliamentary democracy only as a playground for the spoiled middle class. This middle class, merely masquerading in Germany as democratic, was showing its true face in Turkey.

Weren’t Germany and Turkey allies? Yet how did he explain the fact that Germany offered him asylum? He simply ignored such questions. Revolutionaries gladly push aside such questions because they disrupt their ideological worldview. The revolution cannot tolerate gray areas but demands clarity. But that is roughly comparable to attempting to lighten a photograph of deepest winter by overexposing it. The print is always a failure.

Ideologues have always disturbed me. I have always seen them as enemies of poetry. For poetry is borne of shades of gray, of the voices between the lines, of the nuances of color. Ideologues, on the other hand, always require sharp pictures, garish colors, resolutions of words’ secrets and ambiguities. I let Hodscha speak, but I never read him one of my poems.

* An earlier version of this article was published in the Goethe-Institut’s cultural magazine, Fikrun wa Fann.

Zafer Şenocak was born in Ankara in 1961, grew up in Istanbul and Munich, and currently lives in Berlin. He is one of the most prominent authors of Turkish heritage in Germany and writes in German and Turkish.