



Ethnologia Europaea

Journal of European Ethnology

37:1-2 2007

Museum Tusulanum Press

Ethnologia Europaea

Journal of European Ethnology

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- Main editorial address for manuscripts Professor Orvar Löfgren
Department of European Ethnology
Finnsgatan 8
SE-223 62 Lund, Sweden
Phone +46 46-222 04 58 Fax +46 46-222 42 05
E-mail orvar.lofgren@etn.lu.se
- Professor Regina Bendix
Institut für Kulturanthropologie/Europäische Ethnologie
Friedländer Weg 2
D-37085 Göttingen, Germany
Phone +49 551-39 53 51 Fax +49 551-39 22 32
E-mail rbendix@gwdg.de
- Editorial assistant Magdalena Tellenbach Uttman, PhD
Järnvägsgatan 16
SE-240 30 Marieholm, Sweden
E-mail magdalena.tellenbach@uttman.com
- For prices and subscription details please see www.mtp.dk
- Subscription address Museum Tusulanum Press
University of Copenhagen
Njalsgade 126
DK-2300 Copenhagen S
Phone +45 35 32 91 09 Fax +45 35 32 91 13
E-mail order@mtp.dk Internet www.mtp.dk
- Bank IBAN: DK10 5202 0001 5151 08
BIC: AMBKDKKK

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Generations and Transnational Homes

Nazim goes:

By

Magnus Berg

E-article

In

Ethnologia Europaea
Journal of European Ethnology
Volume 37:1–2

2008

Museum Tusulanum Press
University of Copenhagen

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Copyright © 2008 Museum Tusulanum Press

ISBN 978 87 635 0985 5

ISSN 1604 3030

IN

Ethnologia Europaea

Journal of European Ethnology 37: 1-2

E-journal

Copyright © 2008 Museum Tusulanum Press

ISBN 978 87 635 0981 7

ISSN 1604 3030

Unaltered version in pdf-format of:

Copyright © 2007 Ethnologia Europaea, Copenhagen

Printed in Sweden by Grahns Tryckeri AB, Lund 2007

Cover and layout Pernille Sys Hansen

Cover photos Pernille Sys Hansen and Robert Lau

Photos Susanne Ewert, page 6

Richard Wilk, pages 16, 34, 44, 50, 70

ISBN 978 87 635 0885 8

ISSN 0425 4597

This journal is published with the support of the Nordic board
for periodicals in the humanities and social sciences.

Museum Tusulanum Press

University of Copenhagen

Njalsgade 126

DK-2300 Copenhagen S

www.mtp.dk

GENERATIONS AND TRANSNATIONAL HOMES

Nazim goes:

(Magnus Berg

The first time we met, we didn't actually see each other. Two colleagues and I had carried out a series of interviews among young descendants of immigrants in Sweden's second largest city, Gothenburg, focussing on their housing and living preferences. Nazim had been interviewed, but not by me. When the report was completed, we published a press release in which we stated, among many other things, that a majority of the "Swedish-Turkish" group pointed out the benefits entailed in living closely together alongside their countrymen in Biskopsgården in Gothenburg. Biskopsgården is a suburb to Gothenburg, built in the 1970s; the majority of its inhabitants has an immigrant background.

Nazim was (and probably still is) a strong opponent of the Turkish local geographical concentration; he could not accept this reading. This came to the attention of the local media. And hence, shortly after I had said some brief words about our study, Nazim came forward with the message that we were wrong as far as the Turkish group was concerned. In a suburb section of the local paper – partly aimed at inhabitants in Biskopsgården – Nazim and my indirect contact expanded. The paper presented the study on a full spread. I described the research on the left hand page, and Nazim stated that we were wrong about the Turkish group on the right hand page.

I gave Nazim a call. We agreed to meet at my department. The atmosphere was tense. My colleagues and I tried to explain our report, Nazim and one (or was it two?) of his friends stressed that we didn't know

very much about Turkish conditions in Gothenburg and that it was fatal to write about them the way we had. The tension made it impossible for us to agree, but after a few hours of discussion, we nevertheless reached a state of mutual respect. We buried the hatchet. We shook hands. All this must have happened in 1989.

Later on, when I started working on my doctoral thesis in ethnology – concerning young people in Gothenburg with a Turkish background – I once again contacted Nazim. He promised to act as informant and he helped me to get in touch with others. We collaborated a great deal in this way and little by little we began to regard each other as friends.

When I eventually left for fieldwork in Turkey, Nazim acted as one of my hosts. He and his wife Derya took care of me and helped me a lot. Most of all they helped me in a rather dramatic series of events which were not divulged in my thesis, but the support was such that I will be forever grateful.

I visited Nazim and his family in Cihanbeyli. The entire family and several other families I worked with for my thesis were born there. Cihanbeyli is a small peasant town in the Konya province in central Anatolia. The chief town of the province is Konya, the ancient town where the Sufi Jalal ad-Din ar-Rumi – Mevlana – founded his dervish order in the thirteenth century, when a Seljuk dynasty was in residence there (a historical circumstance with close to no importance whatsoever in my research there).

During the second half of the 1960's, there was

massive emigration from Cihanbeyli and other small places in the Konya province to Sweden. Swedish employment authorities and companies ran recruiting campaigns in Turkey at that time. While these campaigns largely failed, migration nonetheless took place in a semi-spontaneous "chain emigration". Turkish men who had been employed by, for instance, Volvo in Gothenburg, recommended that old friends follow. These recommendations were usually preceded by assurances from the plant's foremen that work was available for anyone interested.

None of these male Turkish migrants had the intention of staying abroad for a long time. This is probably why the men accepted what were by Swedish standards very poor living arrangements, such as the old working-class section of the city, called Gamlestan, where Nazim's father lived. Gamlestan at that time was a neglected area with antiquated and run-down buildings: a slum, some said. Today, this area has been cleaned up and has been renovated and is much more expensive to live in.

My relationship with Nazim expanded to our respective families. One summer, it must have been in 1993, my family visited Nazim's family in Istanbul and Ayvalık by the Aegean Sea. We continue to meet, though not often, barely once a year. But now and again we see each other and all the signs indicate that we enjoy each other's company.)

"No, I don't think my dad and his friends went to Sweden for the money. Life in rural Turkey wasn't that hopeless towards the end of the sixties. Most families had their own farms which provided a pretty good living. Obviously, it wasn't like rural Sweden of today, or even Turkey of today. But many people had, for example, tractors and some had combine-harvesters. Cars weren't uncommon either. There were actually a few Volvos. But life in Cihanbeyli was simple. You didn't have refrigerators, you used earth cellars.

By the way, would you like something to drink? Coffee, tea, beer, wine?"

"Okay, I'll have a coffee too."

"No, but think about it. Dad and his friends were

young then. At that age you seldom plan far ahead. It wasn't a question of making lots of money to invest in farming or something like that. It was rather a question of adventure. Getting away from Cihanbeyli and experiencing something completely different. These guys had hardly been outside the village. I guess they had been to Konya at one time or another. But Ankara? Istanbul? Europe?! No, no, those places were beyond their horizon. So, naturally, when young village men started moving to Sweden and Europe and to jobs in industry, that became a great temptation.

Jobs were dead easy to find in Sweden and Gothenburg. Mainly at Volvo. They worked hard, but probably had a lot of time for partying. In spite of this, life here wasn't exactly happy then. They didn't know the language, they thought the food tasted like crap, they lived in crowded, unmodern flats. Usually, several men shared small flats in run-down houses, which have now been torn down. But, because of that, they were also able to save some money and my dad sent some of his to my granddad in Cihanbeyli. He kept doing that until my granddad died."

"When he came to Gothenburg in 1968 he wasn't going to stay for very long. It didn't exactly turn out that way. Instead, my mother, me, my brother and my two sisters came to Gothenburg already in 1970. I was perhaps eleven then. You know that they didn't keep track of when children were born in the Turkish countryside back then. But we usually say that I was born in 1959.

We cried. Me and my mum and my brother and sisters sat in an unmodern bedsit in Gamlestan and cried. For years. We missed our home in Cihanbeyli and we didn't understand much of the things around us in Sweden. The thing we understood the least was the food. Hardly any of the stuff we found in the shops was good for cooking anything tasty or good and the meals we had in school were unbelievably stale and tasteless. Thank God, that's changed now in Sweden, but at the time that staleness was something that made us aware of how far away we were from what we felt we belonged to.

For five years we didn't have enough money for visiting Turkey. Dad's wages had to sustain a fam-

ily of six people, and he sent some of the money to granddad and grandma. We kept in touch with the people back home through letters and by sending gifts with Gothenburg Turks who could afford going home on holiday.

When we came to Sweden, dad promised us that we were moving back to Cihanbeyli in five years. Nothing came of it. Or rather, something. In 1975 we started going to Turkey for our holidays.”

Derya comes up to our table. “How are you doing, guys? I’ve made you some fresh coffee. But Nazim, don’t forget that we have new customers coming in at around three. You have to be done with the interview by then.”

“Better do what the old lady says, huh? Thanks for the coffee.”

“So, where were we? Did I tell you that my dad already had a house in Cihanbeyli before we moved to Sweden? My granddad bought the lot next to his and he built a house there in the early sixties. It was at our disposal. Some of dad’s earnings went into decorating the house. He did it gradually, as he was able to put away money for it. That’s where we stayed during our holidays. That’s also where we had the circumcision party for Yunus and Inan and for my brother’s two boys. You were there then! Magnus found that a strange affair, haha! That was a first for you!

But, anyway, that’s where mum and dad live now since dad retired. But they often come to Gothenburg to visit. It’s funny – now it’s almost the other way around, now dad prefers living in Cihanbeyli and mum in Gothenburg. She wants to be in close contact with her grandchildren, anyway.”

“Derya’s family is from Istanbul. But we were neighbours in Gothenburg, in the Turkish colony at Biskopsgården. Derya and I were pretty unusual. We chose each other ourselves, out of love, without the interference of our families. Our parents did know each other a little and Derya’s mum and dad respected me, so they soon accepted the fact that we wanted to get married.

Derya didn’t know a thing about Cihanbeyli. That’s where she put on a pair of şalvar trousers for the first time in her life. She does that every time we go there now. But she doesn’t mind. She sees it as a bit of a laugh.

Once we were married, we started visiting Istanbul too, of course, on holiday. That was a new experience for me, naturally. But what became more important was that we started visiting a summer house that belonged to Derya’s sister’s family in Tekirdağ by Lake Marmara. People from Istanbul often spend their holidays in that area. Back then, we spent one week of our holiday in Cihanbeyli, one week in Istanbul and two weeks in Tekirdağ.”

“Now, Magnus, there is something else that I have to try to explain. Something that started already when I was in school in my early teens. There was a teacher there who started to take an interest in me. I guess he thought I had certain potential that I wasn’t using. He, and the headmaster too, actually, started motivating me into gathering knowledge and making something useful of it. They got me started on reading a lot, mostly novels. I also went with this teacher on a two-week trip to Leningrad. That’s what they called it back then, you know. All this made me realise that the world is a much bigger place than Cihanbeyli and a suburban area in Gothenburg. And it also got me thinking that there was no force of nature telling me to stay a traditional suburban Turk, or whatever, forever and ever.

This got me very motivated in high school and also made me take a few semesters at university. But most of all, it meant that I became very eager to learn things about the world and wanted to try to see the bigger picture. I was interested in politics and literature. I think that all this in its turn made me want to see other places besides Cihanbeyli. These summer weeks in Tekirdağ were probably the first step in that direction.”

“In 1990 we bought the house in Ayvalık by the Aegean Sea. My brother and his family also bought one. I think you could call it a kind of break with Cihanbeyli, which, I suppose, started already when

we got married, but had now extended. One reason for this was that my parents didn't like Ayvalık. They viewed it as a place of sin where women wore bikinis and men walked around without their shirts on. As you know, there is a great difference between how people live on the Konya plain, inland, and at the coast. And, of course, mum and dad were a bit upset that we spent so little time in Cihanbeyli. We only really made short social calls. The rest of our holidays were spent in Ayvalık. We weren't ashamed of it. Instead, we thought we were worth the good life with the sea, the sun and peace and quiet. We've always worked very hard, and on top of that I've been a soccer coach and a youth leader. We would never be able to keep up that tempo if we didn't get a few weeks' relaxation every year.

And now we have the flat in Antalya too ..."

"Oh, haven't I told you about that? You see, Derya and I bought a flat in Antalya last year. A cousin of mine gave us the tip. It's a small, simple flat, pretty far away from the tourist areas. That's the way we want it. We want to get away from the drinking and fooling around. The climate is different by the Mediterranean and the idea was that there should always be a place that was warm enough to go to when we are able to take some time off. You know, we can't take for granted getting away during the summer. That's our high season. That's the way it is when you have a restaurant in the city centre."

"Where do we get the money? Well, from two sources, I suppose. Primarily, it comes from the work we do in our restaurants. First there was the hot-dog stand. You never saw that, as I recall. We made enough from that place to be able to buy the pizzeria. Then we got the opportunity to take over the staff restaurant at the foundry. We didn't only sell lunch to the foundry staff, we also delivered lunches to a few other workplaces nearby. When there was talk about the foundry closing and being torn down, we had made enough money to buy the restaurant in the square not far away. Were you ever there? Anyway, a few years later we were contacted by some people who really wanted that place. We made a very good

deal when we sold it. After that we actually took six months off and just relaxed. Maybe that was a stupid thing to do, haha, because it was hard to go back to work again. But, of course, we had to. We bought this place. It's in the heart of the city and you really have to say that it's doing well. It certainly requires a lot of work. We work at least ten hours a day. But lately we've started taking weekends off. Then it's usually Yunus and Inan who run things, together with the employees. They're grown now, twenty-five and twenty-three years old, and can easily manage the responsibility.

So, through hard work we have been able to acquire bigger and more profitable restaurants and save some money. This also means that we have old, well-established and well-working connections with the bank. We know each other well, me and our bank in Gothenburg. So, there has never been any problem getting loans when we've needed them. They know we're realistic and take care of our bills.

Through this we have had money to put on summer accommodation, among other things. But we have also – that's the other thing – made great real estate deals. That's probably been more pure luck than financial thinking. We've just happened to sell when prices were up and been able to buy new housing comparatively cheap. That money has also gone into our accommodation in Turkey and, of course, the cabin in Mora."

"What?! You didn't know about that? Honestly! I'm sure we talked about it last time Anneli and you were at our place. Ask Anneli, she'll tell you!

But this is how it happened. The foundry had a cabin in Mora for its staff. I've always thought that just because you're Turkish you shouldn't avoid doing what Swedes and others do. It's simple: skiing and skating is fun and good for you. That's why we and our children have learnt how to do it. We've been there every winter for the last eighteen years now. Two years ago we found out that there were lots for sale and that the local council very much wanted 'immigrants' to live there. We went for it and now they're building a house for us."

“Well, of course we can enjoy a lot more privileges than mum and dad could. When you think about it, there’s another thing that’s important when it comes to economics. Back then, there was one pay, dad’s, which was supposed to sustain six people. Now there are five of us who all make money and also work in the same company, the fifth one being Yunus’s wife, Ema. To a certain extent we all have a shared economy. This applies, for example, to our holiday living. We all own Ayvalık, Antalya and Mora together and we all have access to it. This way we have much more money to spend. And speaking of that, Derya and I have helped finance a house for Yunus and Ema very close to our own house here in Gothenburg.”

“Yes, that’s right. We’ve talked about it. In two years we’re going to... well, not stop working entirely, but at least slow down. We’re thinking about it. Then Inan, Yunus and Ema will take over the restaurant. Then, of course, it’ll be nice for Derya and me to be able to choose between Gothenburg, Ayvalık and Antalya. And Mora, of course. But we’ll see. We haven’t decided yet.”

“Cihanbeyli? Well, first of all, Yunus and Inan don’t really have a connection with Cihanbeyli at all. They know that it is where I was born. That’s where their circumcision party was held and where Yunus and Ema were married. I suppose it was much more strange for Ema than for Derya when she put on şalvar trousers there for the first time. Ema is Swedish-Bosnian, you know. Yunus and Inan don’t stay in touch with our relatives in Cihanbeyli except, of

course, for granddad and grandma. They don’t feel at home in Cihanbeyli. I suppose they could manage one week, but that’s all. But when granddad and grandma are gone – then I think their ties to Cihanbeyli will be cut for good.

Myself? No, I don’t like it very much there either. My ties to Cihanbeyli are probably primarily nostalgic. Cihanbeyli is a place that remind me of things from my childhood. I had four or five close friends there back then and we stay in touch. But they have all left Cihanbeyli. To Istanbul, Ankara and so on. Cihanbeyli means something to me, something that is difficult to define, but it’s not strong enough to make me want to spend my entire holiday there.”

Derya, from a distance, but distinct: “Nazim, you really have to come now! We have an order for two kebabs and one shellfish pasta.”

“Coming! We’re done here, aren’t we, Magnus? You got what you wanted?”

“Good. See you. Stop by when you’re in the neighbourhood. Give my love to the family.

Derya, did you say *two* kebabs?”

Magnus Berg is Ethnologist and Professor of Ethnicity at the Department of Social and Welfare Studies (ISV), Linköping University, Campus Norrköping. His writings have most been about different perspectives on the multicultural society, including issues like nationalism, migration, racism and orientalism.

(magnus.berg@isv.liu.se)

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