

# Most of my childhood was spent in Laleli,

a close-knit neighbourhood roughly rectangular in shape, just 200 metres by 500, on the Byzantine Mese, the main street leading from the palace to the city gate opening toward Thrace and Europe, and only a kilometre from the palace – well within the radius of the 'walking-city'. Close to the markets, the waterfront, the Sublime Porte and the university, Laleli has been inhabited since Byzantine times. From the second decade of this century it was on the busy tramcar route which traversed the old peninsula.

Laleli was a residential neighbourhood favoured by office workers, university teachers and tradesmen. As with most of Istanbul, the area was often ravaged by fires. It was, in fact, one of the first districts in the old city to shift to more fire-resistant building materials. After the great fire of 1911 brick-and-mortar townhouses tended to replace wooden houses. During the inter-war period some of the larger wooden houses were converted to multi-unit apartment buildings and their gardens built on. By 1950 there were very few houses or empty lots left.

A typical building had five storeys, with two apartments on each floor. Facing the street was the entrance, a modest lobby and a central stairwell to the upper floors. Apartments were designed around a hall equipped with stove (unlike the new part of the city, there was no central heating). On the street side would be the living room and drawing room, and on the back, with a balcony overlooking the garden, the bedrooms. Kitchen and the bathroom were rudimentary, in the mode of pre-war Europe

before American plumbing set the standard.

There was no air between the buildings; these were small city blocks following a grid. There was usually a garden in the back, however, with mature trees from its earlier incarnation, for the joint use of the tenants, onto which opened a hovel of two rooms where the concierge (kapici) lived. The kapici was, in fact, a family of early immigrants who cleaned the building, did much of the daily shopping for tenants, and most importantly, carried wood and coal from the sheds in the garden (one for each family) to the flats. The wife or the daughters could also be hired as cleaners. In fact, in those days before mass immigration, a large number of rural immigrants (mostly from the nearer Black Sea areas) were in domestic service. In retrospect, it's surprising how many families of modest means inhabiting Laleli had live-in servants despite lack of space.

Laleli in the immediate post-1945 era was a profoundly local world. Households had limited incomes but respectable lifestyles where men caught public transport to work in the morning, and returned at a reasonable hour. Many women also worked: of the ten flats in my building five were households where women had jobs in government offices or as school teachers. Neighbours visited each other during the day, but also in the evening when men returned from work. Usually a child knocked on a neighbour's door with message that his or her parents would be over for coffee "If you are available". Refusal was hardly an option.

By the early 1950s streets were tarmaced but there were very few cars on the road. Residents and shopkeepers knew each other well; on each street there was a small grocery store, a butcher and perhaps a haberdashery. Bakeries were everywhere, and each household had its favourite. Household kitchens rarely contained an oven, so dishes were taken to the bakery during off-peak hours. Aksaray Pazari was the nearby permanent market where fresh produce, fish, and dry goods were purchased daily. Refrigerators were a rarity.

Children, who played out when they could, walked to a primary school ten minutes away and a secondary school that was slightly farther. As a child I remember excursions outside the neighbourhood as rare events. One would take the tram to

Beyoğlu or Taksim Square for a special occasion, a distance of no more than five kilometres. Shopping trips to the old Bazaar, and the textile district below it (both within a two-kilometre radius) were more common, but still happened perhaps twice a month.

Change invaded this peaceful suburban scene in the shape of Menderes, a populist politician and prime minister between 1950 and 1960. His term ended abruptly when he was executed by the military following a coup, but he remained an object of lasting mass adulation. Immigration into Istanbul, the beginnings of import-substituting industrialisation and social upheaval had already begun to disturb the balance, but Menderes with his penchant for urban engineering, was the chosen expediter. He was particularly fond of cars and large boulevards, and had little regard for public transport. Between 1955 and 1958 he imposed his personal stamp on Istanbul by demolishing large swathes of old neighbourhoods to build six-lane roads, redesigning squares for swift flow of traffic and, most drastically, getting rid of the old trams. In quick succession both Aksaray and Bayezit, the squares that frame Laleli, were converted into traffic circles devoid of character; the main axis identified with the tram was taken over by cars and buses; Aksaray's market was demolished along with the Greek neighbourhood south of it with its narrow streets and nineteenth-century single-family houses. A shore road cut through settlements to the south of Laleli.

In September 1955, just as Menderes was starting to reconstruct Istanbul, a government-instigated crowd – in reaction to the bombing in Salonica of “Ataturk's house”, according to the official story – destroyed and pillaged Greek property, demolishing shops and burning churches. (Sparks from one church two blocks to the south reached our back balcony). As it turned out, the events of 5-6 September, as they came to be known, concealed a more determined assault in the name of urban planning with roads cutting through densely-packed Christian areas of the city. For the old city, the second half of the 1950s spelled the end of ethnic coexistence. The number of Greeks (those declaring their mother-tongue as Greek in the census) declined from 65,000 to 35,000 between 1955 and 1965 (from 5.2 per cent to 2 per cent of Istanbul's population), after which non-Muslims living in the old city became a rarity.

While Istanbul's population increased from 1.3 million in 1955 to 1.5 million in 1960, its car population doubled, from 17,000 to 35,000. As traffic increased, cars found their way into the smaller roads, challenging the ease and intimacy of street life. New shops opened in competition to the familiar suppliers.

Laleli, easily accessible and cheap, was an obvious target for change. Landlords, stuck with tenants whose salaries could no longer keep up with inflation, were more than willing to sell. The long-time residents whose incomes had kept pace were also anxious to escape the old neighbourhoods to centrally-heated flats in new middle-class districts. Berman's imperative for the Bronx began to operate in Laleli. Families who could not get out were early examples stable-income earners who went down in the world from 1960.

Alongside this, Laleli's physical change reflected the encroachment of the global into the local economy in a disconcertingly direct manner. At first it was private cars. The Turkish elite, persuaded by development projects to give up statist models, began to opt for private initiatives and individual needs. American life-styles and consumption patterns came to dominate.

The neglect and then destruction of public transport was one aspect. Although cars were not produced locally until the 1970s (they were imported exclusively from the US in the 1950s and increasingly from Europe in the 1960s) the automotive sector played a crucial role. Roads were built, petrol stations opened and, most importantly, there was a huge development of spare parts and car-repair shops. Many a fortune was made through importing and retailing of spare parts. Laleli was in the front line: for some years from the mid-1960s, it had numbers of used-car showrooms and spare-part shops. Associated traffic clogged the streets and effectively put an end to the closed and intimate lifestyle of the previous era.

Rental values pushed the next stage. Laleli was within walking distance of the old city – the palace, the principal mosques, and the old covered bazaar. It was close to the university and a number of decent, inexpensive restaurants. As Istanbul was gradually put on the tourist map, Laleli attracted

hotel entrepreneurs. Older apartment buildings were rebuilt and converted to modest hotels of up to 50 rooms, incorporating the erstwhile gardens in the process. The clientele were the sort who carried a copy of Frommer's guide in a duffle bag – and the neighbourhood began to reflect their needs. Gift shops, restaurants, rudimentary night clubs and discos opened.

Then, quite unexpectedly, something happened which was to provide a huge new source revenue.

The oil crisis was both boon and bane for Laleli. Around the time that five-star hotels in London were invaded by rich Arab patrons Istanbul became a magnet for the less wealthy and more budget-conscious tourists from the newly-rich countries of the Middle East. At the time, Turkey's relations with its Middle East neighbours were at an all-time high. Arab capital flowed in (mostly to commercial property and the financial sector) because the civil war in Lebanon had virtually eliminated Beirut's role. Trade relations grew and Turkish contracting firms undertook dozens of large projects in Libya and the Gulf. All this brought the Arabs to Istanbul, and a new wave of hotels and shops was aimed at an Arab clientele. Laleli became its centre during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Although tourism was the dominant interest, there was also significant trade-especially in gold, jewellery and silk. Merchants learned Arabic and contracted jewelers and textile manufacturers to produce for Middle Eastern tastes. Signs on shops and hotels were now in Arabic. Restaurants and pastry shops expanded and began to employ migrants from south-eastern Anatolia whose cuisine is similar to Arab tastes. Night clubs multiplied, offering entertainment unavailable in Arab countries. Newspaper accounts of drunken brawls, fights between locals and tourists, painted a picture of prostitution and drugs.

A peak was reached in the early 1980s, by which time the transformation of Laleli was complete. The neighbourhood was now entirely commercial; its population, dominated by migrants from the southeast, acquired a reputation for toughness; its name symbolised cheap and nasty goods and services – the sort of place you expect to find in any self-respecting world city. Then the oil bubble burst. But as Arab tourists dwindled and the neighbourhood was about to revert to its earlier role of small and

inexpensive hotels, world events prepared a new opportunity.

It is not often that a district reinvents itself as effectively as Laleli did in the years following the passing of the Arab tourist wave. By the mid-1990s, Laleli with its less than two dozen small city blocks was said to account for between five and ten billion dollars worth of "informal" exports. The neighbourhood accommodated several thousand small outlets with street shopfronts, as well as entire buildings with retail space on each floor. All available space, except for the hotels, was subdivided and turned into shops. This time the signs were in Russian, and shopkeepers and hotel receptionists were fluent in Russian, Romanian, Polish, and Bulgarian - for the new tourists, the *shop-turisty* in Russian and those engaging in suitcase-trading, *valiz ticareti* in Turkish, were East Europeans, Russians, Moldovans, Ukrainians and others of ex-Soviet origin.

The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was greeted with much enthusiasm in Turkey. Already in 1990 a Black Sea Cooperation Agreement was signed with the distant aim of creating a trade bloc among the littoral countries of the Euxine. The Turkish government dreamt of Istanbul emerging as a natural command centre of the region, providing financial and other high-value added services. For a few years there appeared to be some justification to this aspiration despite Russian opposition; but mired in instability, the government never garnered sufficient political will to carry the project through.

Instead, events prepared Istanbul to regain its age-old position as the centre of transit trade, organised at the market level and on a small scale, successful in spite of the political structure. The trade opened up around the time of glasnost. Starting on an informal, small scale, tourists would arrive in buses and fill their plastic sacks and suitcases with textiles which they would then sell in retail markets back home. Gradually, however, there was considerable concentration: big traders who regularly made the trip (some every two weeks) spent large amounts, travelled in planes chartered for the purpose, and had their purchases air-freighted. Transactions were in cash. When these merchants returned to Moscow they sold their wares wholesale in a special market organised for the purpose.

This trade is informal in name only. Although it probably accounts for a third of Turkey's formal exports, the authorities on both sides find it expedient to treat it as "suitcase-trading". In other words, the goods are registered as wares bought by tourists during a visit, and are thus exempt from customs declaration.

Laleli continued to provide the hotels and the restaurants and the night clubs; especially during the early years there was a lively prostitution trade. In time, hotels became tied into the suitcase trade. Merchants make their deals as part of a package: the hotels where they stay become temporary warehouses. Turkish shopkeepers are allied with manufacturers who can supply whatever is desired within a few days. Each merchant in Laleli is connected to workshops in other parts of Istanbul where dozens of workers produce clothes for a predominantly female clientele. The market is textiles and to a lesser extent leather goods. Buildings are converted to malls where dozens of shops exhibit what is on offer; only the relatively less accessible upper floors remain "residential", often housing single men who work in the district. Mainly Kurdish *hammals* wait in the corners to haul large bundles of textiles to nearby *kargo* shops; dozens of small stalls sell packing material with which to make the bundles.

In its new guise, Laleli has come to resemble an overblown reincarnation of the bazaar, of which there were many in imperial Istanbul. It specialises in a few goods, its principal trades are wholesale, its contacts and customers are stable and they can be counted on to return. There are also *hans* and *caravanserails* in the area to provide associated services. The silk-road analogy applies in more ways than one. In a world where states are losing their ability to restrict and regulate cross-border commerce, there has been a return to "informal" arrangements whose main virtue is the avoidance of paperwork and official controls. Laleli is reborn as a very successful terminus of a new route in global commerce. It is no longer a neighbourhood; it has become a regional marketplace.

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