

Ask me and I'll tell you.

Of course I live in Cihangir. It's an up-and-down district, but so what? I chose to live here. I could be living elsewhere in a solid late nineteenth century house instead of camping out in a jerry-built early 1970s block with its clandestine top storey, its leaking pipes and suspicious smells.

Below walls whose graffiti proclaims Garbage Throwers are Donkeys, rotten food leaks from plastic bags; opposite middle-class apartments daubed with slogans reading The Infidel State is Doomed are found the small, ramshackle homes of the poor. A long flight of steps leads to the businessmen's stamping ground, Susam Bar, while three streets away Bilsak 5. Kat Bar is the haunt of marginal hetero and homosexual intellectuals. Narrow streets with cars parked on either side lead to the main road plagued by stray animals. That's my Cihangir. I chose it.

When middle-class, middle-aged former schoolmates who have climbed their respective career ladders to fame and fortune-acquiring a few kilos on the way – hear my explanations, they politely point out the wonderful views. To them this is a neighbourhood with nothing else going for it. I shrug off their implicit scorn. Friends might join the chorus and marvel at the view from my window, whose panorama stretches from Ottoman's Topkapı Palace to the Genoese Galata Tower, from the Byzantine Maiden's Tower to the Princes Islands, and from the Bosphorus to the Sea of Marmara.

I, however, prefer to switch to an account of how the homosexuals and transvestites who lived here until a few years ago were chased out by the police under the protection of former

president (and before that general) Kenan Evren. (For some reason I remember the more recent forced exodus of Africans only after my litany is over.) I describe how these people were dragged away by their hair and feet from their flats in late night raids to be tortured in custody, and a few days later set free without being charged. The police moved in again and again after fresh complaints by local residents or at the whim of Beyoğlu Police Department. I heard the screams for myself.

Perhaps there's no need for me to tell them that the name of the street was changed even before the transvestites were expelled. But I don't forget to add that Sormagir Sokak, Enter Without Asking Street, has now been renamed Baükurt Sokak, Chief Wolf Street. (I no longer point out the honesty of the one, and the intimidating symbolism of the other, but I remind everyone about Sormagir Sokak, whether they know it or not.)

Sometimes I ask passersbys for directions to Sormagir Street. History should never be forgotten. Sormagir has now been purged of transvestites and prostitutes. Local residents seem pleased. I noticed last year that Sormagir had become greener, cleaner and neater. Everywhere were pretty flowers, small trees and bushes. The road was spotlessly clean. I was astonished. It was as if, having joined forces to expel those making a living from their marginal identities, the community was trying to rationalise this act and sweep it under the carpet. I love the plants and the shade cast by the small trees, the violets and geraniums in window baskets, and the oleanders brightening odd corners, but I'm careful not to tell those who live there how I feel. I do not want them to be proud of what they have done.

CENTRE OF THE WORLD

A cosmic place. I hardly need say that Cihangir is in Istanbul. Just as Manhattan or the Champs-Elysses need no explanation. (Sadly, like all earthlings, I think I live at the centre of the world, and assume that everyone knows about it. In fact it would be better if they did not). Westerners - not tourists, but other curious types - invariably pass through here. The drop-outs and nonconformists dream of buying a flat here, or at least renting one, unaware of the fate that awaits them.

This is a cosmopolitan neighbourhood. How can I put it?

There are hardly any Levantines left, but the various Europeans who come and go tend to make up for their absence. In its heyday middle and lower middle class Levantines must have lived here. The streets have none of the splendour of the nearby İstiklâl Caddesi. That was clearly the preserve of grander folks. Now İstiklâl Caddesi is enjoying a renaissance, reversing its decline since the late 1960s, those with money are buying flats there. Publishers are investing in nineteenth century buildings and having them lavishly restored (which means that despite their complaints about books not selling well and there being no money in books, the situation is not that desperate). In comparison Cihangir seems definitely second best.

But the age of enlightenment began before İstiklâl, that is before Beyoğlu. The first drop-outs, a set of revolutionaries who had escaped imprisonment, settled here around the end of the 1970s, or perhaps following the coup of 12 September 1980. When everyone had told their friends and relations about how agreeable, how empty (then) this area was, the revolutionaries rapidly moved in. In their wake came journalists, writers and artists of moderate means. At one time the joke "It will be easy for them to round us all up" was on everyone's lips.

They did not round us all up, but long after that joke was stale a group of young revolutionaries was swept off one night into police cells. The sirens sounded until the small hours. One youth was killed. They said he was a militant. Who knows who he was? But he was a young man and there is a 99.9 Per cent probability that he had done no harm to anyone.

Nobody believes rumours about militants and hideouts any longer. They said that the Africans were involved in drug trafficking before they were driven out. Until last year cheerful types from Tanzania, Nigeria, Sudan, the Congo, and other African countries, dressed in colourful clothes and speaking in musical tones, had inhabited Cihangir for a number of years. They were young, at most early middle-aged. My two Kurdish journalist friends who lived in the same apartment building as four Africans weren't left in peace, either. Perhaps because they lived on Sormagir Street the police searched the flat of first one and then the other in the course of their raids. They found nothing, but left them feeling apprehensive. The raids were

repeated. The Kurdish journalists were forced to seek political asylum in Europe. The unwanted Africans were taken into custody in installments by the Foreigners Police Division and then deported. So most of them are no longer around. The Africans and the Kurds were colourful, and the state dislikes colour.

But let me finish telling you about Cihangir's renaissance. Refuse still adorns the vacant lots yet the moneyed middle class has got its eye on the place. A couple of buildings on each street are being renovated, or under the guise of renovation making way for huge apartment blocks at least twice as large as the original building. I hope that one day they will not drive us out under police escort to the roll of drums.

I said cosmopolitan. The Girls Domestic Science School at the end of my road has been there for years. It's next to the nineteenth century mosque, and I never understood exactly the significance of that until at the end of the school year I went to see an exhibition of handicrafts there. Besides sewing and embroidery the young girls learn the Koran. They all wear headscarves. However avantgarde and bohemian Cihangir might appear (both at once somehow), this home to people of all kinds also has space for "domestic science", which has its own devotees. The daughters of the fishing net repairers, hammock makers and janitors, of families living in the tiny one and two roomed cottages and the two storey squatter houses on the hill, study here after leaving primary school. For the few years Beyoğlu Municipality has had a Welfare Party mayor and as far as I have been able to tell he, like every mayor before him, hasn't been able to resist shaping the area to suit his own ambitions.

For example, the forgotten historic ruins (probably Byzantine) on the hill leading down to Tophane are being brought back to life as a "mosque restoration project". Around the corner and a little ahead you find feminists, women living alone, cinema actresses, as well as writers, artists and poets of every sex, including the in-between ones.

AN OBLIQUE LINK

How to describe it? The best thing is to start with a small cross-section having an oblique link with life. Over half of the

apartments in my building are occupied by young French or Italian teachers. They change every one or two years, returning home after a spell at the former missionary schools of St Benoit, the Italian High School or St Pulcherie, to be replaced by another compatriot. From time to time poverty-stricken French students doing their doctorates in the fine arts or history arrive. They have trouble paying the monthly apartment rent or the plumber. The Turkish contingent is in a minority, but one of the most colourful characters in the building is not a "foreigner", but a "local" lady who in addition to the two dogs in her flat feeds stray dogs and cats, who is prepared to fight with her neighbours and municipal inspectors on their behalf, who lambasts drivers who run over cats or dogs in the strongest language, who when her charges fall ill takes them to the veterinary surgery on the same street for treatment, who has a loud voice, stout figure and kind heart, but nevertheless is the object of rumour and therefore disturbs some people. When they came to collect signatures to have her evicted, I asked what the difference was between this and the treatment meted out to the Jews in Germany during the Second World War, and so got out of signing.

It was a crude comparison, I know, but under those conditions it was the best I could do. If I had confronted them straight on I would have had been ostracised for undermining the building's community spirit. I am against banishing people from their homes or villagers from their villages, as is now happening to the Kurds. In my opinion everyone should be able to live where they want. Where they want might be Dargeçit, or even the White House, the Elysée Palace, Number 10 Downing Street, or Çankaya Köşk. Even if the latter examples have the potential for upsetting the status quo, the same situation does not obtain for Sormagir Sokak where the transvestites lived, the Kurdish villages, or my building from which they wished to evict the animal-loving lady.

Apart from the Italian and French teachers and the animal-loving lady, one drop-out, one university student, one building contractor, one secretary and one retired policeman live in my building. The most crowded apartment, by far, is number ...occupied by a Kurdish family from Elazığ. There three, no four, generations live in a flat similar in size to the one where I live on

my own, leading a happy and generally peaceful life apart from the occasional raised voice. The most charismatic member of the family is a kindly, affectionate middle-aged father (of some wealth it appears). His sons and daughters-in-law, grandchildren and mother lived there too. I have never calculated their number precisely, because I have never seen them all together as I pass in and out, and despite numerous invitations have never found the occasion to visit them. However, all the street knows that they have changed cars seven or eight times since coming to live here.

Three buildings up the street is an apartment block occupied by American civil servants employed at the US Consulate. Security guards stand on duty outside 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. This is rather disagreeable, but we have put up with it willy-nilly for the past five years. One of the occupants is thought to be very important, a CIA agent according to a professor who lives nearby. It is naturally the grandest building on the street, slightly pretentious with its wooden boarding, hanging chains and rows of geraniums in pots.

Five buildings along is the primary school where if you wish you can sing along to the Independence March every morning, and adjoining it, beside the steps, is the single-roomed house of a couple who make a living selling boiled corn on the cob. Next door is a two-storey building occupied by a pleasant woman journalist, then on the corner a thin white-haired lady of around 65 who sits at a more humble window with her cat.

SMASHED WINDOWS AND ARIAS

I'm not complaining. I like it actually. Or to be more accurate, confusion suits me. It helps conceal my own confusion from prying eyes. In neighbourhoods where life flows monotonously, and in towns where everyone leads a "normal" existence, is there room for shrouded lives? In Cihangir even people's working hours are not normal. You can never tell who works when or how much they earn. Civil servants are not much in evidence. Although some might dismiss the neighbourhood as nothing but a garbage tip, and others as one long hill, its proximity to the city centre and places of cultural creativity, the number of attractive, if not splendid, nineteenth century buildings of various sizes, the many middle and low income

writers, artists, photographers, and journalists of all ages, the handful of remaining transvestites walking their dogs in the afternoons, the young glue sniffers living in the historic ruins amongst old hidden walls and trees, protected from the state and municipality by the dogs, the idiosyncratic people of all kinds who call this home, the many upholsterers in their tiny basement workshops and locksmiths on every other street (which says something about the area), and the quantity of animal lovers with pets of all kinds from cats and dogs to budgerigars and tortoises, give me a sense of contentment. Despite the youths who broke my car window with a large stone wrapped in a towel to get at my bag, only to discover not the expected hoard but my swimsuit, since the departure of the transvestites, apart from the opera singer who occasionally gets carried away and sings arias at inappropriate times of night, I walk home through silent streets.

SYMBOL OF WORLD CHAOS

In one respect Cihangir is the symbol of Istanbul's history and change. The districts taken over by the Turks since the establishment of the Republic have witnessed the milestones of this history: the ideology of Turkish cultural identity which swept the country in the 1930s and was transformed in time into a literal Turkish takeover, the exile to Aşkale of those who could not pay the Wealth Tax introduced in 1942 during the Second War, the riots of 6 and 7 September 1955, the destruction of historic buildings and areas, and the exile of local Hellenic Greeks in 1964. I think of the wholesale demolition of Tarlabası, home to lower and middle income members of the Hellenic Greek community in the 1980s, to make way for a bypass marked the end of that era. Then the Motherland Party mayor, the engineer Bedrettin Dalan, said that he was going to demolish that "infidel district" and increase examples of Islamic architecture.

I am still surprised to come across a couple of women ("madams" or "madamas" as the Turks refer to non-Muslim women) speaking Greek at the Cihangir bus stop. Because none live here any more. Since the turn of the century their numbers have steadily declined. In 1924, when Istanbul's population was one million, there were 280,000 Hellenic Greeks. Today there are no more than 2,500, while Istanbul's population has risen to

ten million. According to official figures there are 26,000 Jews, over 95 Per cent of whom live in Istanbul. The Armenians total 60,000, less than ten per cent of whom live outside Istanbul. The enforced migration of 1915, during which huge numbers died and only a small proportion survived, while many of the remainder died in exile at Der Zor near Damascus, meant that no Armenians remained in eastern or southeastern Turkey. Those that did stay converted to Islam. Some Muslim families took in Armenian children to save them from the massacre, adopted them and brought them up as Muslims.

Like Cihangir, Istanbul has always provided refuge for outsiders who can usually pursue their lives amid the chaos and confusion without attracting attention. The oppression and persecution carried out in distant towns and villages could not be repeated here. And the eyes of the West were focused on the government. Whatever. I do not know all the reasons, but little has changed. Now that Kurds are fleeing the war in the areas where a state of emergency holds, hounded intellectuals, and opponents of the government policy in the southeast are again taking refuge in Istanbul. Here, despite everything, they are harassed to a lesser extent by the security forces. Currently the most numerous ethnic group in Istanbul is probably the Kurds (it is not possible to count ethnic Turks, because everyone, Turkish and non-Turkish, thinks they are Turkish). There are lots of them, a million, possibly three million. No one knows for certain. A large proportion of the Kurds are Alevi. Some of the Alevis are well off, others live in poorer districts, for instance the now notorious Gazi Osman Paşa district. They are a politically aware and well-organised group.

Most Kurds cannot afford to live in the city centre, but instead are found in the outer suburbs and learn about Istanbul from an hour's bus drive away. They get the scent of Istanbul from far-off districts such as Bağcılar, Esenyurt and Kartal. They work, if they can get jobs that is, in places in between. Even in our neighbourhood one comes across itinerant Kurdish vegetable and fruit sellers, and Kurdish waiters in cheap restaurants. Getting to know those who work in factories and in workplaces which do not register their employees for social security, is a little more difficult. You do not find many of them around here.

But I come across Kurds in civil movements, in the Human Rights Association, and at peace meetings. I have made friends with some. We visit one another at home, and to a degree I keep up with them the traditional relations between friends and neighbours which I seem not to manage with old friends. I am surprised myself about this, because normally I do not invite many people home. I am too busy with the complications of my working life to offer traditional hospitality. Sadly, I tend to accept invitations rather than extend them. But sometimes I long for guests. Since the oldfashioned bayram visiting no longer exists there are not many opportunities left for that kind of friendship. And where at one time people used to go to friends for dinner, now they prefer restaurants. But if your life is disorganised and your earnings uncertain, that is rarely an option. So with my Kurdish friends I keep up the old-style visiting at home. I still go to them more often than they come to me, but it does not matter. In that way I have first hand news of all the pressing problems facing the Kurds, of those living in the emergency zone, of police persecution and raids in Istanbul, of arbitrary arrests and torture. The homes of my Turkish journalist friends in Bağcılar have been raided time after time. Some of them were lucky enough to be out, so the rest of the household were rounded up and then released straight away, while others remained in custody for months. The charges were always trumped up. All this depresses me greatly of course, transforming city life, which can be pleasant and friendly, into a string of tense, menacing disasters.

VOICE OF CONSCIENCE

Moreover, since I am regarded as a member of the ruling classes, my conscience is weighed down by an even greater load. It is not possible to be everywhere, to participate in every opposition initiative, or leap onto every peace train. That takes too much time and costs too much. But the weight of conscience often makes me feel obliged to. When I fail in this, I face the problem of, for instance, how to justify myself to my Kurdish friends, or how to prove my position, for example, that our ways of life are equal. Sometimes the risk of action is extremely high. For instance, going to the emergency zone. When a group of people go for a specific reason there are sure to be problems.

Police and troops will corner passengers and ask where they have come from and where they are going to. They then forbid us to take that route. The argument will suddenly get serious, and the gendarmes will drag someone they have picked out, someone whose face they know well from various peace demonstrations perhaps, such as Şanar Yurdatapan, into custody. I will intervene and shout "You can't take them away", and so on.

It is not possible to live at such intensity for long. The body may be willing, but the spirit rebels. So when I am invited to such affairs, I go once and the next three times suggest that others go instead, suddenly preferring the weight of conscience to that of the body.

Recently my younger brother came to visit. He hates cheap fish restaurants, and misses the cafés of Paris wherever he goes. To please him I took him to a couple of places I don't usually eat in. He does not approve of the work I do, or of the subjects I write about. He has always viewed my life with misgiving. To avoid recriminations I did not tell him what I was writing about. We went to an expensive fish restaurant on the Bosphorus. Everything was wonderful. Elegant middle-class businessmen and their attractive wives were dining with their friends. German, French and British people were conversing with their Turkish business colleagues. Wine and rakı was being liberally consumed. Then he looked, and saw lobsters in a bed of large green leaves in an enormous basket approaching one of the tables.

"No one seems aware of the war," he said fiercely. "No one cares about it. You can work as hard as you like. It is a waste of time. You are working in vain." I looked at the tables, the people, the ostentatious prosperity, and I could not reply. I find no response to justify myself. I could not conceive how the war going on in a "far-off" land, in the emergency zone and in northern Iraq, could end until people here became aware of it.

The number of people prepared to oppose war in Turkey, a huge country with a population of 65 million, is not more than three or four million, not counting the 15 or 20 million Kurds. Yet, according to the Parliamentary Migration Committee, around half a million people have been forced to migrate from their villages. Some 2,300 Kurdish villages and hamlets have been evacuated by the security forces. During a war lasting 13 years,

3,000 unsolved murders have been committed, and 9,000 people have gone missing. The number of those subjected to torture cannot even be counted exactly because the victims are frightened to notify non-governmental organisations about it. In August 1997 alone 18 people complained to the Human Rights Association about torture.

OBLIGATORY TURKS

Knowing precisely who are Turks in Istanbul, or how many there are, distinguishing the ethnic Turks from the rest, is extremely difficult. Indeed impossible. For one thing there is no physical difference. And for another it has been state policy since the 1930s to persuade people that everyone living within the boundaries of the Turkish Republic is a Turk. The Laz are Turks according to this policy, the Circassians, Kurds, Alevis, Yezidis, Syrian Orthodox, gipsies, everyone is Turkish. Everyone must be Turkish. Only those who are not Muslims may exempt themselves. Armenians, for example, can more easily say that they are Armenian, and the Greeks that they are Greeks or Hellenes (of course, this does not mean that the admission does not have its price, but anyway). Jews prefer to speak of themselves as Turkish Jews. At a showing of a documentary film about the Jews of Istanbul ("If I Forget You Istanbul"), a middle-aged woman said to me, "Please do not refer to us as Jews. I am Turkish, and proud of it. When I go to Europe I declare with head erect that I am a Turk." But I must add that another younger Jewish woman did not agree, and objected strongly to this remark.

So no one attempts to estimate how many Turks there are in Istanbul. According to one study there are 47 different ethnic communities in Turkey, ranging from gipsies to Chaldeans, from Italian Catholics to Shiite Alevis, from Christian Arabs to Hemşin Armenians, from Turkish Turks to Turkish Jews. It does not take a clairvoyant to guess that small or large communities live in Istanbul as ostensible Turks, but since 1965 population censuses have not asked people to which ethnic group they belong. The state is not keen on differences of colour, ethnic origin and culture. Only in recent years has the curtain shrouding ethnicity been torn down in Turkey. Although article 312/2 of the Turkish

Penal Code has not been rescinded, when the issue is discussed on an academic plane, and if no examples from Turkey are quoted, it is possible to avoid legal ramifications. But to mention the matter in the state of emergency is interpreted as "provoking racialism" and the person accused of speaking or writing about it finds himself charged under this article, which states that "A person who openly provokes rancour and enmity among the people on the basis of distinctions of class, race, religion, sect or region, shall be sentenced to between one and three years imprisonment and a fine of between 9,000 and 16,000 lira. If this provocation is carried out in such a way as to endanger public security, the sentence imposed shall be increased by between one third and one half."

ETERNAL MOURNING

Perhaps you have not yet woken up to it. This is a place which attracts, on the one hand, and repels, on the other. This district (city) with its cosmopolitan pretensions actually has little tolerance of great disparities and radical aberrations. Beware. Like Vivaldi's concertos it prefers small fluctuations compatible with itself, fluctuations which it regards as orderly. It cannot endure uncontrolled exuberance, passions and flagrant differences, it cannot tolerate true radicals. Istanbul is better than the Turkish average, just as Cihangir is more tolerant than Istanbul as a whole. Like Turkey, which welcomes migrants only if they come from western Europe, like the 1934 Migration Act, Cihangir takes to heart only those it imitates, fighting to keep out those it has experienced, those it would rather leave behind.

But don't expect too much. If you come here and fall in love or something like that you will stick around. They won't warn you when the time has come to leave. They will have you out the door before you can gather up your possessions. Before you find yourself in eternal mourning, remember that I warned you. I choose to live here!

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