

“Oral History and Memory Studies in Turkey”

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Introduction

Itself a relatively new interdisciplinary field, oral history and memory studies is a fledgling research area in Turkey. This provides a contrast with history, a well-established, hegemonic discipline historically allied with the state. While many academics in the field of oral history and memory studies outside Turkey were trained in history, and through their work challenged and transformed traditional historiography, in Turkey, practitioners of oral history tend to come from other disciplines such as folklore, anthropology, sociology, literature and women's studies. As a new field, oral history and memory studies is weakly institutionalized in academe: few universities offer courses in oral history and/or memory studies, usually on the initiative of individual academics based in other programs. In recent years, though, with the rise of identity politics and widespread debate in the media on national history, academics as well as NGO's, informal groups and individuals are turning to oral history as a means of rediscovering and reinterpreting the past.

In this chapter, I briefly review the history of oral history and memory studies in Turkey, and provide a case study to show that this methodology and interdisciplinary field has the potential to change the way the recent past is studied and represented both within academe and in society as a whole.

The Rise of Oral History

Oral history is defined as spoken memories about the past recorded by oral historians in a dialogue with individuals providing testimony. Oral history often examines events and experiences not recorded (or differently recorded) by written history, and shows that historical events may be alternately interpreted by individuals who embody the past in the present (Portelli 2001). Over time, oral history developed into the wider interdisciplinary field of memory studies, which studies memory with or without recourse to oral history interviewing *per se* (Hodgkin and Radstone 2006).

Key to the rise of oral history was the development of mobile voice recording devices and a perspective that valued the experience and viewpoint of the ordinary person. In the U.S., a landmark event was the decision in the 1940s of historian Allan Nevins of Columbia University to record interviews with individuals who knew past presidents of the United States. Nevins felt that, with the advent of new technology, information that previously would have been sent by letter was transmitted over the telephone, no longer being available as a source for historians. Nevins realized that individuals who had known past presidents were key historical sources themselves, and set about interviewing them. Allan Nevins' research led to the creation of the Columbia University Oral History Research Office, one of the first oral history programs in the world, with one of the largest collections of oral history interviews (Columbia University Oral History Research Office).

Oral history also developed rapidly in the U.K., particularly in the years following world war two. It was particularly those on the left, and/or feminists, who became dissatisfied with

traditional history's ability to convey the experience of the powerless and marginal, including the working class, women, minorities, and immigrants. As traditional history was based on written documents in archives, social history, including women's history, required a fine-toothed comb to trace the silenced experience of the non-literate or not-so-literate (Steedman 2007). Oral history interviews made it possible to fill in the gaps of a historiographical tradition which overwhelmingly represented the experience of upper class white men (Chamberlain 2009).

Oral history was used in particular to study the Holocaust, the numerous genocides of the 20th century, and recent violence and trauma in diverse contexts including Latin America, South Africa, Ireland, India, and Africa (Rogers and Leydesdorff 2004, Robben 2005, Das 2007). Early practitioners celebrated oral history as a means of giving voice to the silenced or subaltern, and oral history methodology resembled anthropological fieldwork in providing a bottom-up view of society. It also demonstrated a particular focus on the subject, on emotions and on the senses. Yet it soon became evident that oral history was no panacea. Methodological dilemmas, particularly concerning power relations between the researcher and the subject(s), led to discussions of ethics and reflexivity. Similar methodological and epistemological debates took place in feminist studies and anthropology. The methodological and theoretical questions raised by oral history research led to the emergence of the field of memory studies, which moved beyond oral history interviewing to develop its own theoretical tools and was enriched by discussions in history, psychiatry, literature, anthropology, sociology, and women's studies. Memory studies is not limited to oral history interviewing: memory is studied in media as diverse as oral tradition, material culture, art, film, photography, letters, fiction, autobiography, architecture, ritual, performance, and popular culture. Recent textbooks on memory studies and a new journal of the same name are signs of a field that is rapidly coming into its own (Rossington and Whitehead 2007, Hoskins et al. 2008).

Given its interest in everyday life and the ordinary person, and its history of political commitment, oral history tends to have one foot inside and one foot outside academe. While oral history and memory studies is taught in many universities, it tends to be associated with interdisciplinary institutes or programs that bridge traditional disciplines. In addition, oral history methodology tends to be readily practiced outside the academe, by associations, groups, networks or individuals, with or without the support of public funds (International Oral History Association).

The Development of Oral History in Turkish Academia

Oral history's introduction to Turkey was as late as the 1990s. Is it a coincidence that practically all academics working in the field of oral history and memory studies in Turkey are non-historians and women? A key figure is folklorist and oral historian Arzu Öztürkmen. Receiving her doctorate in folklore from Pennsylvania University in 1990, Arzu Öztürkmen became possibly the sole oral historian to be based in a history department in Turkey. Since the early 1990s, she has offered undergraduate and graduate courses in oral history at Boğaziçi University. As a member of the International Oral History Association Council, Arzu Öztürkmen played an important role in making Istanbul the venue for the XIth International Conference of the International Oral History Association in 2000. In her work, Öztürkmen focuses on the linkages between oral tradition, folklore, performance and oral history (Öztürkmen 2003). Historically, research on oral tradition formed part of the Republican state's nation-building process. However, the development of folklore as a field

was curtailed when key researchers were marginalized from the system (Öztürkmen 2005). Orality remains an important means of cultural transmission in Turkey in the 21st century, deserving further research.¹ An emerging area of research is Kurdish oral tradition. The lack of recognition of the Kurdish language by the Turkish state throughout the 20th century led to a heightened consciousness about language, oral tradition, music and performance (Kevirbiri 2005, Kızılkaya 2000).

Oral history plays a central role in the reevaluation of recent history on the basis of personal memories. In Turkey, national history taught in schools excludes many events experienced by the peoples of the country. In addition, historical events that do form part of the national canon may be recounted and interpreted differently by individuals. There is a gap between individuals' experiences at home and within communities and at school or through the media, which, until recently, was controlled by the state. Fear remains an important factor leading parents to choose not to transmit their experiences to their children. In other cases, individuals may be raised to live in parallel worlds, or parallel contexts, each of which may be associated with different narratives. This results in complex, divided subjectivities and a convoluted, tortured and often traumatic relationship to the past.

The coup of 12 September 1980 was a major watershed in Turkish history. Despite (or because) of the political repression, and under the impact of global trends, there was a turn to cultural and subjective identities. The emergence of private media opened up new channels of communication in the public sphere. Beginning in the 1980s, and continuing into the present, Turkish society turned to its recent past, furiously debating national history. History has acquired tremendous significance for the present (and future), as contemporary issues are discussed in relationship to the past and the past in relation to the present. The country is increasingly divided into conflicting groups whose differences vis-a-vis contemporary issues are linked to different interpretations of the past.

Interest in the recent past has meant that particular historical events have come under renewed scrutiny in the present. These include the Armenian genocide of 1915, the "War of Independence" (1919-1923), the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey in 1923, the attacks against Jews in Thrace in 1934, the massacre of the Alevi/Kurds of Dersim in the 1930s (known as Dersim '38), the conscription of non-Muslim soldiers into labor battalions during world war two, the pogroms against non-Muslims on 6-7 September 1955, the 1960, 1971, and 1980 military coups, the massacre of Alevis in Maraş in 1978, the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state from 1984, the Marmara earthquake of 1999, and the murder of Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in 2007, among others.

It is no coincidence that many events that were omitted from national history and sometimes from transmission within families were violent, traumatic events associated with conflict between communities which marked Turkish society irreparably even (or because of) through silence. Trauma studies constitutes an important subfield of oral history and memory studies, and theoreticians continue to debate whether traumatic memory constitutes a distinct form of memory (Radstone 2005). While there is a specialized literature on the Holocaust and genocide, research on violence and trauma in Turkey from a memory studies approach is relatively new. Several factors have precipitated research in this long taboo area. Hrant Dink's murder in 2007, along with several nations' decision to recognize the Armenian genocide, has led to widespread debate on and interest in the history and memory (and postmemory) of 1915. The experience of the Marmara earthquake of 1999 in which thousands died, resulted in

widespread NGO activity and made trauma an ordinary experience for many. The emergence of the PKK and the ongoing violent conflict between Kurdish guerillas and the Turkish military touches the lives of millions as soldiers and civilians are killed, thousands are forcefully displaced, and conscripts and volunteers on both sides and their families are traumatized.

Oral history research in Turkey in recent years has tended to focus on a number of key themes or topics. These include women's experiences (Durakbaşı and İlyasoğlu 2001, Çakır 2006, Bora 2005, Akal 2003), the experiences of elites educated in republican institutions (Tan 2007, Özyürek 2006, Akşit 2005), migration (Dinç n.d. ed.), the urban experience (Şenol Cantek 2003), urban poverty (Erdoğan 2002) and ethnic/religious identity, including Islamist (İlyasoğlu 1994), Alevi (Neyzi 2002), and Kurdish (Çağlayan 2007, Özgen 2003) identity. Few and far between are studies carried out in rural settings (Hart 2007, Candan 2007).

Whereas early work tended to rely on oral history interviewing, the 2000s evidenced the emergence of memory studies. In 2003, sociologist Meltem Ahıska organized a workshop at Boğaziçi University at which Andreas Huyssen, an important figure in the field of memory studies, was keynote speaker (Ahıska and Kolluoğlu 2003). Meltem Ahıska has made an important contribution to memory studies through her discussion of the concept of occidentalism (Ahıska 2006). According to Ahıska, the lack of value accorded to archives in republican Turkey is no mere oversight but derives from a deep sense of unease with the past. Esra Özyürek and Yael Navaro-Yashin, anthropologists teaching in the US and the UK respectively, have also contributed to research on memory studies in Turkey. Esra Özyürek showed how the early republican period was represented differently by secularists and Islamists vying for political power, and how republican iconography such as Atatürk's photographs and statist rituals such as commemoration of the establishment of the republic, were privatized and commodified (Özyürek 2006). Navaro-Yashin showed how Atatürk is mythologized in popular culture, continuing to live on in the Turkish psyche as a kind of sacred ancestor (Navaro-Yashin 2002). Current research on memory studies in Turkey is expanding to encompass new topics such as fiction, architecture, monuments, commemoration, museum and heritage studies (Neyzi f.c.).

To date, oral history and memory studies remains weakly institutionalized in Turkish universities. Courses, in so far as they are available, are offered by a small number of academics based in a variety of disciplines. Sabancı University, a relatively new private university structured on the basis of interdisciplinary degree programs, has incorporated oral history and memory studies into its undergraduate and graduate curriculum (Sabancı University Cultural Studies Program). An oral history archive and oral history website were created to archive and showcase the oral history research of students (Sabancı University Oral History Website).

Currently, many students from Turkey are studying in graduate programs in the U.S., Canada and the U.K., and growing interest in the recent past suggests that research on memory in Turkey will increase in the near future. It is to be hoped that this will lead to the establishment of oral history and memory studies teaching programs and research institutes, greater collaboration between oral historians and historians, more courses on oral history and memory studies in history programs, and a more interdisciplinary and reflexive approach to historiography in history departments in Turkey.

Oral History in the Public Sphere in Turkey

Since the 1980s, with the expansion of the public sphere, the media, NGO's, private institutes, networks and individuals have begun to use the term "oral history" to refer to a wide variety of projects concerned with memories of the recent past. The History Foundation played a seminal role in introducing the term "oral history" to Turkey. An NGO founded in 1991 by a group of intellectuals, including academics based in universities, the History Foundation expressed among its planned activities oral history, history education, local history, cultural heritage management and publishing. Its aims vis-a-vis oral history included oral history research, the creation of an oral history archive, organizing oral history workshops and publishing books on oral history (The History Foundation).

In 1993, the History Foundation invited Paul Thompson, the renowned UK oral historian, to its first oral history workshop. Many other workshops followed, including training workshops carried out in different locations in Turkey. In 1993, with the support of the Ministry of Culture, the Foundation initiated its first oral history project. For this project, key witnesses to the early years of the Turkish republic were interviewed on videotape. In 1998, to commemorate the 75. anniversary of the republic, a series of documentary films titled "Memories of the Republic" were produced. Other oral history projects initiated by the History Foundation include "Voices from a Silent Past" (on Turkey's African heritage), "A Thousand Witnesses to History" (on memories of the elderly), "People's Views from Mardin" (on memories of the people of Mardin in Southeastern Turkey), and "Memories of Istanbul/Mediterranean Voices" (on the transformation of Istanbul neighborhoods). Many additional oral history interviews were carried out as part of regional history or institutional history projects.

The History Foundation also published books on oral history, beginning with a Turkish translation of Paul Thompson's *The Voice of the Past* (Thompson 1999). Other books followed (Neyzi 1999a, Danacıođlu 2001, İlyasođlu and Kayacan 2006, Böke 2006). The History Foundation played a key role in putting oral history on the map in Turkey. However, because the Foundation is an NGO that depends for its maintenance on a number of short-term projects, these tend to be carried out relatively fast, usually by volunteers rather than professionals. There is often little time or funding available to sufficiently prepare for, transcribe, index and analyze interviews, disseminate results or evaluate projects. Despite its enthusiasm, given that oral history is such a new and unfamiliar field in Turkey, the History Foundation may have unwittingly done some harm to the field through the way it has represented oral history. It is particularly unfortunate that few trained historians associated with the Foundation are involved in oral history projects, which frequently rely on the labor of young, and usually female, volunteers.

Istanbul University Women's Issues Research Center (İstanbul Üniversitesi Kadın Sorunları Araştırma Merkezi) and the Women's Library and Information Center Foundation (Kadın Eserleri Kütüphanesi ve Bilgi Merkezi Vakfı) are two other institutions that helped introduce oral history in Turkey. In 1995, The Women's Library organized a workshop and brought together a group of women who carried out a pilot project and who worked as a group to discuss key issues such as the rights and responsibilities of interviewees and interviewers, power issues, ethics and reflexivity (Öztürkmen 2001/2). As Öztürkmen points out, such a necessary focus on the research process would be rarely found among the many projects titled "oral history" in the public sphere thereafter.

In the post 1980 period, with the expansion of private media and the emergence of new, privately funded museums and art and cultural centers, journalists, documentary filmmakers and museum professionals also became interested in oral history. For example, the documentary filmmakers' association (BSB) organized and took part in oral history training workshops, and many filmmakers in this network consider their work as a form of oral history (Belgesel Sinemacılar Birliği, Balay and Ocak 2006). Another institution which purports to use oral history is the Mithat Alam Film Center at Boğaziçi University. The Center interviews significant personalities in the history of Turkish cinema, making their work available in DVD format (Mithat Alam Film Merkezi). The Boğaziçi Performance Arts Group is another NGO that relies on oral history interviewing in the course of its performative work (Boğaziçi Gösteri Sanatları Topluluğu).

Oral history is also used in museums. Meltem Ahıska and Zafer Yenal, both from Boğaziçi University, used personal narratives as a means of organizing exhibitions on the topics of human rights and changing personal identities respectively (Ahıska and Yenal 2004, Ahıska and Yenal 2005). In an intriguing case of personal initiative, Hakan Gürüney, a private individual, created the Bozcaada Local History Museum in the island of Tenedos in the northern Aegean. The museum's activities include oral history interviews with elderly residents of Bozcaada, and the tapes of the interviews and their transcripts are archived in the museum (Bozcaada Müzesi).

Among the many NGO's and informal networks that emerged in Turkey in the post 1980 period, an important subsection had their roots in the leftist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Among these, the Turkish Social History Research Foundation (TÜSTAV) has been particularly active in archiving its own history. For example, autobiographies of key participants in the movement are published in a book series titled "The Yellow Notebooks." An experimental book in this series, *The Konca Correspondence*, for example, incorporates the autobiographical writings individuals formerly imprisoned in the Konca military prison in Istanbul shared with one another through an internet group (Karataş et al. 2005).

Since the 1990s, many NGO's, groups and informal networks have organized on the basis of cultural identities. Alevi, Kurdish, Assyrian, Laz, Circassian, Pomak, African, Armenian, Jewish, Greek-Orthodox, Muslim are among the many ethnic/religious/linguistic identities that are in the process of being rediscovered in the public sphere in the present. In the course of this rediscovery, many groups turn to oral history. However, while many NGO's and informal groups make claims about doing oral history research, few have disseminated their results. On the other hand, given their commitment to researching the Kurdish experience, an informal network known as "The Middle East History Academy Collective," has produced two books. This group used interviews with family members to narrate the stories of Kurdish fighters who died in the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish military (ODTAK 2006). The group also interviewed families who experienced forced migration as a result of this conflict (Dinç n.d. ed.).

One of the differences between academic research and projects carried out by NGO's, the media, or informal groups in the public sphere, is that the latter tend to equate oral history with interviewing and transcription. The results of much non-academic oral history work, in so far as it is available, tends to be in the form of transcribed interviews, usually prefaced by a brief introduction. Academic publications, on the other hand, particularly in the field of memory studies, tend to be more analytical, including lengthy discussions of theoretical and methodological issues, using the research material to make an argument contextualized within

a wider literature. With such an approach, transcripts come to be viewed vis-a-vis a methodological and theoretical minefield across which the researcher/author must venture at her/his peril. Concern with “mere” content is replaced by a focus on complex issues of representation, construction, interpretation and meaning. The authority of the researcher/writer to represent the viewpoint of the narrator(s) is problematized, the text resembling an ethnography in so far as the researcher/author is as much the subject as the subject the author or collaborator. Having said this, academic work in oral history and memory studies in Turkey has a long way to go. This is due to the lack of academic oral history programs, the lack of an organization or association representing oral history in the public sphere, the distancing of the history establishment from oral history, the misrepresentation and misperception of oral history as a kind of seat-of-the-pants conversation-making rather than a professional field requiring training, and the subsequent unavailability of courses, training workshops and reference materials in Turkish for those interested in carrying out professional research in oral history.

From Ethnography to Oral History: A Personal Journey

As a means of illustrating the value of oral history in providing a(n often alternate) means of approaching the past, I would like to discuss briefly how I discovered oral history, and provide a case study based on my own research. I became interested in the recent past, and its relationship to the present, during the course of my dissertation research among the Yörük (pastoral nomads) of Southern Turkey (Neyzi 1991). My impetus for working in the countryside was to explore what was unfamiliar to me—what *was* familiar was the cosmopolitan heritage of the Ottoman Empire and the urban middle class culture of republican elites (Neyzi 1999b). Although the problem I had set myself concerned the adaptation of transhumant pastoralists to intensive agriculture and tourism as new forms of livelihood, I found that I could not solve this puzzle without going farther back in time. It was the narratives my interlocutors told about the exploits of their parents and grandparents (and my sense that this differed considerably from official history—though my informants felt no compunction in using the latter when it suited their purposes) that provided the key to understanding my informants’ behavior, interpretations and emotions in the present. It was during the latter end of 18 months’ fieldwork that I began to tape the lifestories of informants, whose dialect differed considerably from my own Istanbul Turkish. Transcripts of these conversations would largely guide the thesis I eventually wrote.

As a trained anthropologist affiliated with a cultural studies program, I currently teach anthropology, oral history, and memory studies. In fact, I view oral history interviewing as a form of ethnographic research (Neyzi 1999a). Over the last two decades, my research has focused on Turkish nationalism, cultural identity and subjectivity. I have conducted lifestory interviews with individuals from a variety of ethnic/religious/linguistic backgrounds, disseminating the results of my research in media ranging from Turkish newspapers, video documentaries, popular books in Turkish, and academic articles in English and Turkish. Rather than focus on one particular group, I have chosen to interview members of different communities as a means of better understanding the way subjects experience Turkish nationalism and the state. The identities I have become most familiar with include Sabbateanism, Turkish Jewish identity, Alevi/Kurdish identity and Arab/Christian identity. Over time, I have become increasingly interested in the question of subjectivity in its own right.

My work gradually led to a study of Turkish national identity from within. I am currently completing a research project on the oral history of a neighborhood in Istanbul. This neighborhood, Teşvikiye, was established in the late 19th century by decree of the Ottoman Sultan. The neighborhood became identified with a Turkish Muslim bourgeoisie in the course of the transition to the Turkish Republic. For this project, I am interviewing three generations of neighborhood residents. I am interested in how neighborhood identity is defined, and how the neighborhood has changed—and is perceived to have changed—since the turn of the twentieth century. I am as interested in the history of the neighborhood as in its accelerated transformation in the present; for it has become a showcase for Istanbul's new image as a global metropolis. Today, economic, social and cultural inequality and conflict characterize everyday life in the neighborhood, where the economic and cultural elite ironically perceive themselves as living under siege (Neyzi 2007).

Building on an interest in generational identity (Neyzi 2001), I am currently planning a new project on childhood and youth. Oral history tends to be associated with the elderly: it is assumed that it is the elderly who have built up a fount of experience and who remember the historical events historians are interested in. But why not apply the methodology of oral history to the study of childhood and youth? We know by now that memories tell us as much about the present as the past. In the 21st century, we tend to be more preoccupied with the past than with the future (Huyssen 2003). In the field of anthropology, childhood and youth studies is experiencing a revival (Durham 2008). Given that much of the population of Turkey is under age 25, it is crucial to understand the ways children and youth construct the past. This can provide significant clues to how they experience the present and will shape the future. For this project, I plan to conduct oral history interviews with young people from diverse cultural and class backgrounds—and with disadvantaged young people in particular—in metropolises, rural areas, and the diaspora. My aim is to explore the subjectivities of children and young people in and from Turkey through their memories and representations of the past.

A Case Study: Why Oral History?

In this section, I would like to present a case study in order to discuss the ways oral history can contribute to understanding the recent past. In the late 1990s, an interdisciplinary network of scholars from Greece and Turkey came together with the aim of studying our “shared history”. The peoples of Greece and Turkey had lived together under the Ottoman Empire, but nationalism rent them apart. Greek and Turkish national histories interpret the same events in bipolar, mirror-image fashion (Özkırımlı and Sofos 2008). The group decided to study an important event in the recent history of the two countries to compare how it was narrated in national history and remembered and represented in the present. Because of its significance in the international literature, and differential treatment in the national histories of the two nations, the event chosen was the burning of Smyrna/Izmir in September 1922. This event, which sealed the “Asia Minor catastrophe,” as it is known in Greek history, played a central role in the construction of modern Greek national identity. On the other hand, while symbolizing the “liberation” of the city of Izmir, this event tended to be downplayed, if not forgotten, in modern Turkish history (Kırlı 2005)

The task the oral historians in the group set themselves was to interview ordinary Greeks and Turks who were old enough to have experienced this event to see how they remembered and narrated this period (Neyzi 2008). According to Greek (and Armenian) history, it was the Turks who burned Smyrna/Izmir. The Turks, on the other hand, blamed the Greeks and/or the Armenians. How would ordinary individuals remember? Would this event be central to Greek

lifestory narratives? Would it be underplayed/discounted in Turkish narratives? To what extent would lifestory narratives conform to/diverge from national chronology and official ideology? Were alternate accounts available, and if so, how were they reconciled /conflicted with national history?

We also wanted to know how contemporary events and issues influenced the way our informants remembered and represented the past. Was the rapprochement between Greece and Turkey, and nostalgic memories of the cosmopolitan heritage of the Ottoman Empire, changing understandings and representations of the histories and identities of Greece and Turkey, viewed for so long in bipolar terms?

I would like to briefly discuss the findings of my research. During 2001-2003, I recorded four lengthy oral history interviews with Gülfem İren, one of the few Turkish Smyrniotes/İzmirians old enough to remember the burning of Smyrna/İzmir. Born in 1915, Gülfem İren was 7 years old in 1922. Today, she is 94 years old. During my interview with her, she stated that although she was very young, the trauma of the burning of Smyrna/İzmir (and the prior burning of the town of Manisa, which she also experienced) resulted in the engraving of the experience in her mind as if it was an image. İren also said that as she is now aged and physically infirm—but strong in mind—she spends most of her days remembering and reliving the past, particularly the days of her childhood.

My life history interview with Gülfem İren did not begin with or even focus on the burning of İzmir, the event I was interested in. Rather, I chose to let İren tell me the story of her life in the order and way of her choosing. Over the course of several meetings, I got to know the main contours of her life and the events and themes that she considered significant to her life. It turned out that the burning of İzmir—and perhaps even more, the earlier burning of Manisa, were among these.

Gülfem İren belongs to a family native to İzmir, and her forebears were local landlords and powerholders who both collaborated with and rebelled against the Ottomans. At the same time, as urban elites, the family shared a history with the diverse inhabitants of the city that included Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities. Most important in her account—and highly relevant to my research—was how these relationships were affected when nationalisms began set neighbors against one another.

Gülfem İren was raised in a period of transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic. Through her mother and many older siblings (her father died when she was young), she learned about the traditions of İzmir, including the relationship between neighbors of different cultural backgrounds. Attending Republican schools, she also learnt the history of İzmir's "liberation." The juxtaposition of these different contexts and narratives is what made her lifestory narrative of particular value. For example, when I first asked Gülfem İren who burnt İzmir, she automatically replied, "the Greeks." When I came back to the subject later, she began to debate with herself, and with the few surviving acquaintances from her age cohort. When we spoke about the aftermath of the burning of İzmir, and her years growing up, she spoke of the "necessity" of the burning of İzmir. She said: "You could not have such a cosmopolitan Republic." At the same time, comparing her world as a young girl with that of her elder siblings when they were of the same age, she decried the loss of an older, cosmopolitan İzmir. In this context, the term "cosmopolitan" acquired a different, more positive connotation. She spoke with nostalgia of the everyday life of the "knowledgeable" people of İzmir, the Armenians, Greek Orthodox, the Levantines, the Jews. When the issue of

responsibility for the fire came up, she also spoke differently in different contexts. When speaking as a citizen of the new Republic, she blamed the Greek invaders of İzmir—and the native Christians for collaborating with the invaders. Speaking as a native İzmirian, on the other hand, she mourned the loss of the beautiful city of the past and blamed the Republican leaders—themselves outsiders to İzmir—suggesting that if they had not actually burnt the city, that they had done nothing to stop the fire once it had begun as a result of the fighting between the Muslims and Christians.

My experience interviewing Gülfem İren raises a number of key issues concerning oral history. First of all, doing oral history does not amount to delegitimizing national or official history and simply replacing it with an alternate, subaltern account. Ordinary people are tremendously influenced by such macro discourses, and tend to internalize and incorporate them in their accounts. At the same time, individuals and communities also develop their own syncretic accounts of the past, which may differ, conflict with, and coexist with hegemonic accounts. This is why the contexts within which narratives are recounted are central, and a strength of oral history is its ability to shed light on the contexts within which narratives are shaped.

Concerning the history of the burning of Smyrna, what I learned from interviewing Gülfem İren is that, as might be expected given our knowledge of recent history, the burning of İzmir was not much talked about in Turkey in the aftermath. When the event was talked about, particularly in the public sphere, the national narrative predominated: “it was the Greeks/Armenians that did it.” Gülfem İren suggested, in a rather guarded way even after all these years, that there was silencing about the event, possibly due to fear of the state—the former soldiers of the Greco-Turkish War then administering the city. She also suggested that while the natives of İzmir celebrated the liberation, they also saw their liberators as outsiders, just as they did the rulers that came before them. Although she initially repeated the usual “the Greeks/Armenians did it” line, Gülfem İren, once she began to debate the issue with herself, with her few surviving age-mates, and myself, actually stated that the administration of the time, and the governor of İzmir in particular, was responsible for the fire, directly or indirectly. She suggested that if the administration did not start the fire, that they were probably guilty of letting it burn itself out, as a handy means of getting rid of the Greeks and the local Christians that they saw as outsiders and traitors who had no place in the Turkish nationalist project. The degree of silencing involved in Gülfem İren’s narrative has no doubt to do with the widespread violence between Christians and Muslims and the bloodletting that occurred at the end of Turkey’s “War of Independence” that made the Turks, first victims, then perpetrators, to want to forget their suffering, and subsequently their guilt, for what they made others suffer. It is, in a nutshell, the story of modern Turkey—and remains so. Unfortunately, today’s internecine violence between Turks and Kurds is a repeat performance in contemporary disguise.

An important aspect of oral history interviewing concerns the relationship between the past and the present. Oral history illuminates not only the past but also the present. For example, at the time I was interviewing Gülfem İren, Turkey society was beginning to reevaluate its relationship with Greece. The rediscovery of the recent past in Turkey resulted in a discourse of nostalgia, particularly concerning the cosmopolitan life of metropolises such as İstanbul and İzmir. As an avid follower of the media, Gülfem İren was affected by this process. For example, she shared with me novels and memoirs written by Greek authors of Smyrniote origin that Turkish publishers were beginning to translate and publish. My sense is that her

present-day experience was beginning to soften the edges of the nationalist narrative that she grew up with, though the latter still shaped her account in particular contexts.

I hope to have demonstrated that oral history can make an important contribution to the study of the recent past as well the present. It is impossible to interview documents, yet it is possible to ask a living person about their motivations, feelings, senses, dreams and hopes. I was not only able to ask Gülfem İren to tell me the story of her life, to find out which events and aspects of her life she deemed important enough to speak to me about, but I was also able to ask “why”? As in ethnography, in oral history, it is possible to view our subjects as not only subjects but theoreticians in their own right. I was able to discuss with Gülfem İren not only what happened, but how she viewed the history of İzmir and why she thought/felt the way she did. And this interaction, and this process, showed that there was no simple answer to the question of “what happened in Smryna?” Let me add that my own identity, and my relationship to Gülfem İren, also played a role in the story she told, for it was out of our relationship and dialogue that her history of İzmir was shaped.

Conclusion

As I hope my case study has demonstrated, it is important not to view the fields of oral history and history as incompatible or even opposed: they are similar in many ways and also different. Oral history relies on history in going about its work. Oral history is also a major means of studying recent history. On the other hand, unlike history, oral history is also about, and studies, the present. An oral history approach can also complicate the way we understand history, particularly at the subjective level, and how it should be studied.

An important means of remedying the misperception and misrepresentation of oral history in the public sphere is to produce high quality original research and to make accessible work on oral history in the international literature in Turkish. The History Foundation initiated this important work. İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, the publishing house of İş Bank, is in the process of launching a new book series on memory studies. The series will publish new research on Turkey, translations of classics and of pathbreaking new studies.

On January 31-February 1, 2009, Garanti Bank’s Ottoman Bank Museum and Research Center, an important cultural center in Istanbul, is offering a training workshop in oral history. To date, interest in the workshop has been overwhelming: over 200 persons, of diverse backgrounds and interests, from all over Turkey, have applied to take part. The workshop will be followed by regular meetings to support oral history research groups. The goal is to enable professional oral history research, to create an oral history archive, and to disseminate results in the form of exhibits, websites, and books. The Ottoman Bank Museum and Research Center also plans to initiate its own oral history project on urban memory of Istanbul as part of Istanbul 2010: Cultural Capital of Europe. It is to be hoped that this new venture will open the way for additional activities and further collaboration between academic institutions and centers, networks and individuals interested in oral history.

Oral history and memory studies is a newly emerging field in Turkey. From an academic standpoint, recent Turkish history awaits further study from a memory studies perspective. The country’s tortured relationship with its past makes it a particularly challenging context within which to study recent history. At the same time, oral history research can contribute to debates on history in the public sphere, and Turkey’s democratization process. Many conflicts and impasses of the present have their roots in the past and in perceptions and representations

of the past. If Turkish society is able to come to terms with its taboos about the past, to face its fears, and to reexamine its present in terms of its experienced and remembered past, it may have the chance of building a more democratic, participatory society.

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¹ For an intriguing case of the relationship between literacy and orality in contemporary Turkey, see Schick f.c.