

No Homeland, Despite Language and Passport: Germans of Turkish Origin as “Foreigners” (2018)

Abstract

In his 2018 book *Der ewige Gast* [*The Eternal Guest*], German journalist Can Mery tells the story of his father, Tosun Mery. As the prospective heir to a successful company, the elder Mery first arrived in Germany from Istanbul in 1958 to study German. He married a German, acquired German citizenship, and spent numerous years working for German companies, both in Germany and abroad. Years passed, but Tosun Mery never felt accepted as German—if anything, he perceived a growing distance between himself and his adopted country over time.

Source

Disappointment in Love

[...] It was only during my conversations with Tosun for this book that it became clear to me that my father is a prime example of how the wounded pride of many German Turks pushed them into Erdoğan’s wide-open arms.

For decades, neither the various German governments nor the governments in Ankara paid attention to the Turks in Germany. From the German standpoint, guest workers [*Gastarbeiter*] were “fellow citizens” with a sell-by date who would soon leave the country. The elite educated “white Turks” in Turkish cities, in contrast, looked down on the uneducated “black Turks” from Anatolia who sought their fortune in *Almanya*. The guest workers and their families were discriminated against in Germany and mocked in their former homeland as *Almancilar*, German returnees who were no longer proper Turks. Their voices and their votes literally did not count: In Germany they were not allowed to vote as long as they did not hold German citizenship. In order to vote in Turkish elections, they had to travel to Turkey, which few of them did. Erdoğan recognized their latent, slumbering potential and knew that he was especially popular among Turks in Germany; like most of them, he came from humble circumstances. He was only too happy to fill the vacuum left by the German and Turkish governments.

For example, Erdoğan saw to it that Turks would be able to vote absentee from other countries starting in 2014. Since then, Turks living abroad have acquired considerable political clout: In 2017, nearly three million of them were registered to vote for the constitutional referendum, representing some 5 percent of all eligible Turkish voters. Turks in Germany made up the largest group: More than 1.4 million of them were on the lists of the Turkish electoral commission.

Erdoğan gives Turks in Germany the feeling that he is there for them. He came to Germany several times and spoke to large crowds of enthusiastic compatriots. In Cologne, he assured them that his government would always be on their side and take care of their problems. “In every country on earth, our citizens, the Turks, can live with their heads held high,” he told around 15,000 cheering listeners. “Thank God, Turkish citizens can carry their passports with pride nowadays.”

[...] Tosun speaks for many German Turks when he says: “Erdoğan gave me back my pride.”

I think a lot of Germans fail to understand how badly wounded the pride of German Turks has been. You don’t

necessarily need a skinhead attack to make people feel less valued. Statements like those made by Thilo Sarrazin, author of the controversial bestseller *Deutschland schafft sich ab* [*Germany is doing away with Itself*], former board member of the Bundesbank and onetime SPD politician, are more than enough. In September 2009 he told the cultural magazine *Lettre International* that a large number of Arabs and Turks in Germany “have no useful function, except in the fruit and vegetable trade.” Or take the comments by Nikolaus Fest, former deputy editor-in-chief of the *Bild am Sonntag* newspaper and now an AfD politician, who in March 2017 fumed in his blog that “Arab, Turkish, or African kids” don’t make way for elderly people on the street. “All of them are loud, aggressive, arrogant, unwilling to exercise the most basic courtesy, and entirely lacking in social intelligence. These people are not simple, they are primitive and malicious. Here, Max Frisch’s statement that we called for guest workers but got people might need to be revised to: We called for guest workers but got riffraff.”

[...] No matter what subject we began discussing at the dinner table, we always ended up at some point with Erdoğan, and the debate always got heated. When Tosun argued with me he drew a line between “us” and “you,” with “us” being humiliated Turks, as whose representative he saw himself, and “you” being the arrogant Germans he believed I represented. Dinner frequently ended with an oppressive atmosphere, and during the short journey home my wife and I would swear to avoid talking politics with Tosun in future—a promise that we nearly always broke at the next dinner.

[...]

My father [...] still criticizes the “Erdoğan bashing” that became fashionable in Germany even before he provided any real reason for it. “It began with snide remarks about the Sultan of the Bosphorus,” says Tosun. “If I ever were to have become 100% Turkish, it wouldn’t have been when I returned to Turkey, but rather when the German media started attacking Erdoğan. I think I frequently defended Erdoğan out of defiance. This constant badmouthing often caused me to take his side, although I knew better. I always asked myself, how can they trample our pride like that?”

[...]

For Tosun, the constitutional reform introducing Erdoğan’s presidential system was the last straw. “What they are establishing can scarcely be reversed,” my father says. “I hoped the whole time that things wouldn’t be so bad. At my age, I won’t live to see a free and happy Turkey anymore. That makes me so sad.” Tosun emphasizes that he doesn’t mean to equate conditions in present-day Turkey with those in Nazi Germany, but he also says: “I believe that Germans who lived through the Third Reich and believed in Hitler at first must have been just as disappointed and sad as I am now.” However, if they had read *Mein Kampf*, then Germans in those days could have known what was facing them. No one could have foreseen Erdoğan’s development, though. “He was even voted European of the year, after all.”

Tosun says that his pride was broken a second time by this disappointment. “But criticism from Germany still bothers me. I have to struggle internally not to take Erdoğan’s side, despite being disinclined to defend him. But it is simply hard for me to believe that a significant majority in Germany wants to defend the wellbeing of Turks or democratic values in Turkey. And when Germany is the third-largest weapons exporter, I really cannot understand all this talk about human rights. It makes me angry that a people that doesn’t put its own house in order is constantly trying to teach us a lesson.”

During such discussions I usually mention that just because Germany is not perfect it does not automatically make German criticisms unjustified. I usually automatically reject Tosun’s accusation that Germany is arrogant as a

typical Turkish preconception. But many people, not just Turks, share Tosun's opinion on this point. An April 2017 article in the US magazine *Foreign Policy* was entitled "Germany Has an Arrogance Problem." The author noted "Germans increasingly believe that they, and they alone, know best"—whether it was a matter of refugee, economic, or energy policy. "In German the phenomenon is summed up in one word: *Besserwisserei*, a know-it-all attitude."

Tosun is not the only one; it annoys me, too, when all Turks, both in Turkey and Germany, are blamed for Erdoğan's behavior. [...]

[...] I also believe that German Turks who are convinced that Turkey is a better country should consider why they don't live there then. And I also have a problem when people who enjoy the advantages of a democracy vote to introduce an authoritarian system in another country, the effects of which they will not experience. What especially irks me is when Turks, from the safety of Germany, call for the death penalty, which they themselves will never have to fear. On the other hand, it is also easy to fall into the double standard trap on this topic: I recently told a colleague that I didn't want my daughter to grow up in a country where people are executed. He asked whether that would be a criterium for me if I lived with my family in the USA rather than Turkey. The honest answer is: No, it wouldn't be. During one of our discussions Tosun said: "I'm in favor of Turks in Germany being allowed to think that the death penalty is okay too. That isn't my opinion. But can we punish people for their thoughts?"

The call for "Turks Out" collides with the fact that hundreds of thousands of these Turks are now Germans. The debate about dual citizenship is a long running one in Germany. A 2000 reform stated that children born here to foreign parents automatically also received German citizenship alongside their parents' nationality under certain conditions. This regulation also applied retroactively to children of foreign citizens born between 1990 and the enactment of the reform, if they applied for it. Dual citizens who became Germans by virtue of birth were required to choose one of their two passports before their 21st birthday, however. A further reform in 2014 abolished the obligation to choose. Since then it has been possible to hold both nationalities permanently.

[...]

Tosun is convinced: "A person can love more than one country." My father says that he feels like he is living in a *menage-à-trois*, which in his case has become a long-term but complicated relationship. "I love Turkey, but I love Germany too." Turkey a bit more, but that doesn't mean I don't love Germany," says my father. Sure, he complains about Germany sometimes. "But that is probably out of disappointed love."

Source: Can Meray, *Der ewige Gast. Wie mein türkischer Vater versuchte, Deutscher zu werden.* © 2018 Karl Blessing Verlag, Munich, in the Random House Group, GmbH. [pp. 285–90, 295–8, 302].

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