

A Visit to the Heartland: Letter from Erzurum

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The name Erzurum has been with me for as long as I can remember. In the summer of 1957 my parents, my grandmother, and I drove from Germany to Iran in a tiny two-door car, and we passed through Sivas and Erzurum. I was only three and have no memory of the place, but it would come up in family conversation every now and then. Ten years later, my parents and I again drove from Germany to Iran, and once more we passed through Erzurum, but we did not stop as we drove from Trabzon to Tabriz in one day. Later in life, as I became a historian of Iran, I learned about the Treaties of Erzurum, which put an end to centuries of hostility between the Ottoman Empire and Iran. In other words, Erzurum is a city about which I have been mildly curious for most of my life. And so it happened that when I decided to complement my visit to liberal Eskişehir with a trip to a conservative city in eastern Anatolia, I chose Erzurum.

Waiting for my flight at Sabiha Gökçen Airport on the Asian side of Istanbul, I noticed that the display panel at the gate showed the temperature in Erzurum to be 4 C., or 39 F. It was hot in Istanbul and I was wearing a short-sleeved shirt. My rucksack contained nothing warmer than a light sweater. I had no hotel reservation. Would I have to run through the streets of Erzurum shivering, desperate for shelter? My flight was delayed a bit, so I began to make contingency plans. Leave the next morning for the Black Sea coast? Get a taxi to drive me to a shopping mall to buy winter clothes? I braced myself for wintry temperatures when I left the aircraft upon arrival, but to my great relief I found the weather to be pleasantly mild. Obviously, the display panel had malfunctioned.

It was nine o'clock when I got to the information desk at the airport. The woman behind the counter spoke good English. It transpired that Erzurum has one five-star hotel, but it is located at some distance from the city and caters to the winter sports crowd. She wrote down the names of three downtown hotels for me, recommending that I try the Dilaver first. And that is where my taxi driver took me. I wondered about the name, since *delāvar* means “courageous” in Persian, but later I found out that it is a first name in Turkish.



The Dilaver Hotel in Erzurum

The Dilaver was not exactly bustling with activity, and exuded the faded charm of a hotel that had been the city's best and most modern a few decades ago, but had not kept up with the times. The price I was offered was 20 % below the one advertised at the front desk – tourism can't have been booming. As I scanned the lobby while the receptionist photocopied my passport, I had a flashback to Goa, where twenty years earlier I had criss-crossed the capital Panjim for traces of the Portuguese language, and found what I was looking for only on the bathroom doors of a faded 1950s hotel, where the words *Senhores* and *Senhoras* had escaped delusitanization.

Discreetly tucked away in a corner of the Dilaver's lobby was a bar, its counters decorated with fruit made of wax:



The Bar at the Dilaver Hotel

I wondered whether drinks in Erzurum had gone the way of the Portuguese language in Panjim and retreated to the private realm, both victims of the seizure of power by the former underlings.

As I entered the elevator to go to my room on the fourth floor, I was joined by a couple. She was very scantily dressed by local standards and wore heavy make-up, which astonished me, given Erzurum's reputation. They asked me something, and I said *türkçe bilmiyorum*, "I don't speak Turkish." So the man asked in English: "where are you from?" I said America. He smiled, extended his hand, and said: "we are from Iran." I was not in the mood for people-to-people diplomacy and told them in Persian that I was Iranian too, whereupon I arrived on the fourth floor and I took leave of them.

I felt a bit peckish and after settling in I left the hotel to find something to eat. The streets were full of people, the numerous restaurants full of patrons visibly enjoying each other's company. The vast majority of women were covered, but I saw no face masks that evening. Saudi tourists have obviously not discovered Erzurum yet – unlike Trabzon, which is teeming with real estate agencies

and currency exchange offices that advertise their services in Arabic. I opted for some dried nuts, and resolved to have a real meal on the morrow.

Breakfast, and I thought that was exactly the right word for the first meal of the day during Ramadan, was served on the last floor of the hotel. The bread was not the usual insipid white bread of Istanbul, nor did it resemble the loaves sold in Turkish stores in Germany. It resembled more the flat bread known as “Afghan” in the United States and as *barbari* (not a contradiction, for the Hezaras of Afghanistan are known as *barbari* in Iranian Khorasan) in Iran. Also available was a sort of soup made with yoghurt, which reminded me of an *āsh-e māst* I had had in Ardabil in 1997. Ardabil is, of course, much closer to Erzurum than Istanbul is. The propinquity to Iran was also evident in that all other guests were Iranian. I ran into the couple I had met in the elevator, and he volunteered that, given the bad opinion Americans have of Iranians, he had wanted to contribute his share to change that impression when he extended his hand to me the night before. I assured him that Americans by and large do not have a negative opinion of Iranians, as memory of the hostage affair has faded among younger people. Then I asked whether he had come on a direct flight from Tehran. No: they were from Tabriz, in northwestern Iran, and they had taken their car north to Azerbaijan and Georgia, and had entered Turkey from Georgia, and were now on their way home. These are just about the only countries Iranians can visit without a visa. I wished them a safe return.

Around ten o’clock I left the hotel to explore the city. Erzurum is known for its architectural treasures dating back to the eleventh through fourteenth centuries, and I was eager to visit them. In Turkey one is used to Ottoman monuments, and so visiting pre-Ottoman sites, something I had first experienced in Konya about a decade ago, is always a thrill. As I set out, I found the streets strangely deserted; there was no trace of last night’s bustling humanity. Stores, cafés, and restaurants were open, their owners sitting languidly next to the entrance, but they were all empty. When Ramadan falls in the summer months, fasting from dawn to dusk is trying, and so most people were at work or at home.

Before I started my systematic visits, I needed a guidebook and a map, so I went to the tourist office. It was housed in a modern building whose function was signaled in Turkish, English, Russian, Persian, Arabic, and Bosnian. Nobody spoke English, and I was politely asked to take a seat in the office of the director of the office, who was sitting behind a large desk. Soon a man came in who asked me what I was looking for. I told him, and he brought me a nice guide book and a map. I asked a few further questions, but he did not understand me and so I thanked them all in Turkish and left.



The Tourist Office in Erzurum

On the way back I noticed that the same beautifying impulse that one sees in more prosperous parts of Turkey is at work here too. An underpass was decorated, for no apparent reason (something of which I always approve!) with silhouettes of elephants. They managed to turn a banal underpass into Erzurum's famous *Fil Geçti Köprüsü*, "Elephant Crossing Bridge."



An underpass in Erzurum

Somehow the expression *horror vacui* came to my mind. While these elephants strike one as perhaps a tad too cute, I prefer them to graffiti-covered raw concrete.

It was lunchtime, and I began to look for a place to eat. To be sure, cafés and restaurants were open, but somehow it did not feel right to be served by men who would not eat themselves. At this point I came across a gigantic ultramodern mall which housed a number of fast-food restaurants:



A mall in Erzurum

I went up to the last floor, which was a food court. Here I had a choice between Popeye's, Domino's Pizza, Burger King, McDonald's, and any number of cafés modelled after Pete's and Caffè Nero. Young men and women, the latter all uncovered, were having lunch, smoking hookas, or drinking coffee. It appeared to me that I had stumbled upon the last bastion of secularism in downtown Erzurum. No one spoke English, there were no English menus, but I managed to have a nice meal.

I wondered who had provided the investment for this mall? Certainly not Kemalist school teachers of the old type, or university professors. Most probably, the money had been put up by the famed Anatolian entrepreneurs who are the backbone of the AKP. Does the fact that their investment enables the city's non-observant minority to have lunch during Ramadan bother them, I wondered? Probably not: if money can be made, it will be made. I thought of Daniel Bell's discussion of the cultural contradictions of capitalism and considered the idea that the very existence of places like this mall (not the only one in Erzurum, by the way) might be an impetus for secularization, but then I thought of how in the United States business acumen and cosmopolitan consumption patterns can go hand-in-hand with the most retrograde religious conservatism imaginable. After all, the numerous Mormons in Las Vegas staff the city's entertainment centers although they disapprove of gambling and drinking themselves. So why should the same combination of religious conservatism and commercial liberalism not take root here?

On my way home, I visited only the Atatürk House, which contains a few photos and maps pertaining to the Erzurum Congress of 1919, which was one of the founding moments of the Turkish Republic.



Atatürk House, Erzurum

My afternoon nap that day lasted longer than anticipated, and around nine o'clock I left the hotel to try the local speciality, *çağ kebab*, at a restaurant my friend Oya had recommended. But it lay a bit outside the immediate downtown area, and by the time I arrived it was closing down. I went back in the direction of my hotel, and before long saw a restaurant in which a number of unveiled women were smoking. Exercising secularist solidarity, I went in and was politely received by the *mâitre d* and seated, but then he conducted me to the back of the restaurant, and told me with a chuckle that the only thing he could serve me was breakfast, which had already been prepared for next morning. I laughed and left. I had not gone far yet when he ran after me, shouting: "friend, friend." I turned around, and he pointed at the neighboring eatery, which was still serving food. I ended up having my *çağ kebab*, also known as "horizontal döner":



Çağ Kebab

The next day, I resolved to see the old Seljuk sites. It was only a short walk to the ancient Rüstem Paşa caravanserai, which has been turned into a shopping center. The shops sell nothing but jewelry, especially jewelry made with Erzurum's black "Oltu" stone, but there was a pleasantly landscaped courtyard where I sat down to take in the architecture:



Rüstem Paşa caravanserai

On the second floor I found an antique shop that had a traditional Erzurum women's garment on display:



Women's garment

I had seen a few peasant women wearing it, and decided that I needed one for my textile collection. But this one was not on sale. *Tant mieux*, I thought to myself, thinking of my bursting closets, and walked to the Citadel:



Citadel of Erzurum

The citadel is being restored, and I could not enter the grounds behind the walls. From the citadel, which is on top of a hill, one has a good view of the city and its surroundings. To the south I noticed a quadrangle of trees on a hill side, and wondered whether this area, whose green clashed with that of

its surroundings in a most inartistic manner, resulted from afforestation or the deforestation of the lands around it.

Around the citadel houses have been torn down to create a park, except for a few that city planners must have judged to have architectural value. The park is, again, carefully designed, and I rather liked the shape of the benches, which I interpret as a laudable attempt at aesthetic originality:



Erzurum Citadel Park

From the park it was a very short walk to the most stunning monument of Erzurum, the thirteenth-century Twin Minaret Madrasa, Çifte Minareli Medrese:



The Twin Minaret Madrasa

I will leave a description of this building's extraordinary features to guidebooks, and draw attention to only one sculpted panel that caught my eye:



A double-headed eagle on a madrasa

Erzurum had been part of the Byzantine Empire until roughly two centuries before the madrasa was built, and so I interpreted the double-headed eagle as a remnant of that legacy, perpetuated by the presumably Christian (Erzurum had large Greek and Armenian populations back then) stone masons who carved the panels. It reminded me of Hindu elements on Indian mosques and the Inca motifs I had admired a few years earlier on the façade of the Jesuit church in Arequipa, Peru:



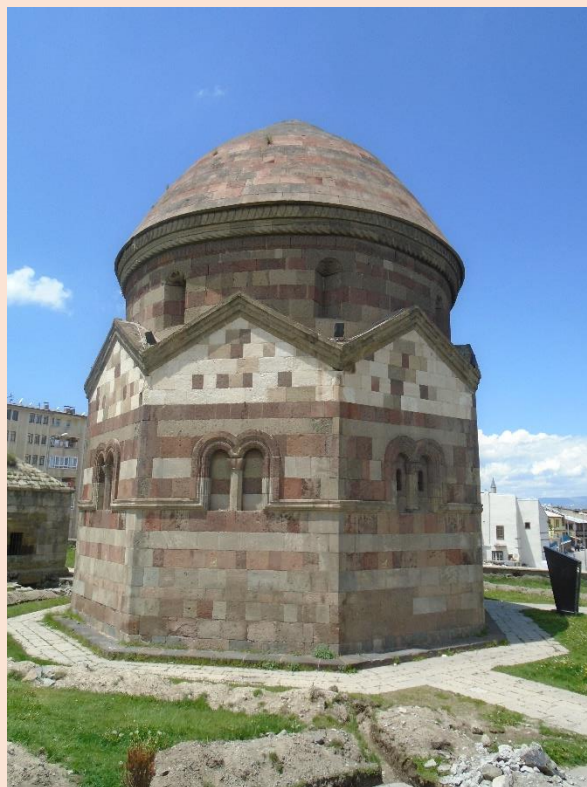
The Compañía Church, Arequipa

My guidebook, however, insisted that the double-headed eagle is an ancient Turkish symbol from Central Asia. *Allāhu a'lam...*

Close to the madrasa I finally found what subconsciously I had been looking for: an antique store that sold old textiles. Oh Joy, Oh Rapture! The owner invited me in, and I asked him whether he spoke English. Yes, he said, but his German was better. How had he learned his German? He was a Kurd who had had to flee after the 1980 coup. Germany granted him political asylum, and he stayed there until 1985, when he returned to take over his father's shop. The first thing he told me was: "*In islamischen Ländern gibt es keine, wie sagt man, adalet.*" "*Gerechtigkeit,*" I reminded him, and he confirmed that what he had meant was that in Islamic countries there is no justice. Scandinavia, he said, had justice, South America some, but Turkey none at all. He wanted me to know that he was a Muslim and said his prayers too, but he prayed for all of humanity, not just Muslims. Unfortunately, he concluded, only 5 % of people in Erzurum thought like him.

In a pile of neatly folded textiles I found a beautifully preserved specimen of the peasant women's veil, and immediately bought it. He showed me other things, including Kurdish wall hangings and rugs made with goat's hair, but I exercised self-control. I asked how business was. Bad, he said, tourists don't come to Erzurum anymore. Why would they, he added, when the government was constantly insulting everybody? I made no attempt at bargaining and even bought an old apron from the Black Sea coast in the last minute. I hope the National Textile Museum in Washington will want them after I'm gone!

From the store I went to a closed-off site known as the Three Tombs, Üç Gumbetler. There are actually four of them, but the littlest one does not seem to count. The largest one, the burial place of Emir Saltuk, is a magnificent building indeed:



The Mausoleum of Emir Saltuk

By now it was almost noon, and so, with my textiles safely stowed away in a bag, I ambled towards what looked like a covered wooden bazaar. In it two caf  s were indeed open, but, again, I felt uneasy eating in public. To my surprise I found a tourist office of the municipality of Tabriz:



Tourist Office of the City of Tabriz

It was closed, but the mere fact that a municipality in Iran has enough authority to open an office abroad filled me with joy. I hope they are successful in encouraging Turks to visit Iran.

Thirsty and hungry, I then visited Erzurum's oldest mosque, the Ulu Cami. My guidebook told me little about it, and so what I remember above all is the most stylish shoe racks I have ever seen in a mosque:



Shoe racks in the Ulu Cami

From the Ulu Mosque it is a short walk to the Lala Mustafa Paşa mosque, but it was prayer time and I did not go in. Instead, I immediately went to the lovely Yakutiye Madrasa, an early fourteenth-century building. It now houses an ethnographic museum, and one of the guides gave me a free tour in English.



The Yakutiye Madrasa

The exhibits displayed the usual mix of costumes, jewelry, cooking implements, and musical instruments. But what was conspicuous by its absence was any evidence that Erzurum had been a

multi-ethnic and religiously diverse city before World War I. Had Greeks and Armenians not had any material culture? Come to think of it, in my strolls I had not seen (and would not see later) any churches. Such a mono-ethnic and mono-religious recasting of the past is of course wrong both morally and factually, but it can be encountered even in presumably pluralist Western European democracies. A contemporary visitor to Riga and Tallinn who is ignorant of Baltic history will not be told that the beautiful houses that form the basis of Latvia's and Estonia's tourist industry were built by the local Germans, who were the dominant urban population of these lands for centuries and had to leave only as late as 1940 as a result of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. Nor will a casual visitor to Vilnius learn that what is now Lithuania's capital was an ethnically Polish city until 1945. When I visited Slovenia in 2014, at the castle of Ljubljana a film about "the history of Slovenia" turned out to be about the history of the Slovenes, and the fact that Slovenia's second city, Maribor, had been 80 % German-speaking until 1918 was not deemed worth mentioning. Only in allegedly "nationalist" Croatia did I find an honest admission in a museum in Split that in the nineteenth century a considerable number of Dalmatians considered themselves Italians. Interestingly enough, the ethnographic museum in Essaouira, Morocco, contained a number of displays of Jewish objects when I visited in 2012. Why pluralism is so hard to admit, even in the past, is beyond me. In English, the words "National History Museum" allows for this evil conflation of country and ethnicity, as "nation" denotes both in English, but in German *Landesgeschichte* (history of the land, including all its ethnic and religious communities) and *Volksgeschichte* (history of a particular ethnic community), are distinguished, with the former having a much more progressive flavor than the latter, which reeks of narrow-minded ethnocentricity. End of editorial.

At long last it was time for lunch. I went back to the food court in the mall, sat down in a café, and ordered an omelet. I waited and waited, other patrons who had come after me were served, but I did not get my omelet. When I protested, a waiter told a long story in Turkish, which of course I did not understand. I paid for my drink and left, with the waiter nodding approvingly. Famished, I went to a supermarket and bought myself cookies and chocolate. I called it a day and went back to my hotel to sleep and reflect.

I had seen all the medieval monuments on the 7th, so on my last day I resolved to see the newer parts of Erzurum, to get a feel for how the Republic had affected the urban landscape. I started with the Archaeological Museum. My guidebook said it contained not only objects from ancient times, but also displays of Armenian atrocities against Turks in and after World War I. I was reminded of a Pierre Benoit novel in which the French protagonist goes to Anatolia to document Turkish atrocities and only finds evidence of Armenian atrocities against Turks, and so I looked forward to see how this view of history had been staged. However, the museum was closed. Still riled by my lunchtime misadventures on the day before, I bought chocolate and cookies and ate them on the street, to show all these fasting bigots what's what, and when I was full, I stumbled across a nice Italian restaurant full of people having lunch. I had not noticed it earlier because its windows had been covered with posters. "Serves you right," my super-ego whispered to my id, but my ego level-headedly made a note of the place to return for dinner.

In the afternoon I first visited the Congress of Erzurum Building, where the founders of the Turkish Republic met in 1919:



Congress of Erzurum Building

It is beautifully maintained and one can still see the benches on which the delegates sat during the deliberations. Needless to say, it is nowhere mentioned that the building was originally an Armenian College, built in 1881 by the rich merchant Mkrtich Sanasarian.

I then went to the railway station. I found the square in front of it beautifully landscaped and well maintained:



Children of all ages, including this author, are treated to some nifty life-size toys:



At the Erzurum Railway Station

In front of the railway station I turned to the west. I soon came across a beautifully maintained park, where children were playing:



On the day before, I had read a *New York Times* article about the city of Prescott in northern England, which said that due to budget cuts the city could no longer afford its three public parks and had to sell one to developers. I wondered whether one can tell if a country is rising or declining by looking at the state of its public parks. I have never been to China, but I have a hunch Chinese parks are in better shape than America's. Why does a country need high *growth* rates for its parks to *maintain* their quality? I did not understand economics at university and do not expect to make sense of it now.

Beyond the park I walked through a few neighborhoods where average folks lived. On one street, the drab buildings had been enlivened by coats of paint in different colors:



A street in northern Erzurum

Next I came to a brand-new mosque, built right next to a Migros supermarket.



Mosque and Supermarket

Two things struck me. First, the utter lack of inventiveness in the design of mosques. New ones are going up everywhere in Turkey, but they all seem to hark back to Ottoman models. This is not conservatism, this is pure cultural stagnation. Here in Erzurum they could at least have the decency to build Seljuk mosques! Second, the juxtaposition between a minaret and the name “Migros.” Migros is a supermarket chain founded in Switzerland, but in Switzerland one could never see such a constellation of buildings, as the constitution of Switzerland forbids the buildings of minarets. What if Turkey had amended its constitution to forbid Migros supermarkets, I thought? An idle speculation, I learned later that day when I consulted Wikipedia, because the Turkish Migros company is totally independent of the Swiss one.

From this incongruous ensemble of faith and commerce, I ventured into the very recent peripheral parts of Erzurum. The development is so recent, that some of the streets shown on my map did not exist yet, as I found out after much going back and forth to find them. The buildings on the two sides of the wide Necip Fazıl Kısakürek Avenue reminded me most of Germany’s postwar architecture, when housing had to be built quickly for millions of people who had lost their homes to Allied bombs or invading Soviet armies:



New housing on Necip Fazıl Kısakürek Cd.

My sense that the presence of large numbers of Turks in Germany must have a feedback effect on Turkey itself, including the poorer parts of Anatolia where most Turks in Germany are from, was strengthened when I saw this advertisement for a real estate company:



A real estate company

The ideal house promised customers looks much more German than Anatolian, doesn't it? When I saw this ad, I remembered a conversation I had a few months ago with a Turkish acquaintance who hails from a small town in eastern Turkey. He had just come back to the States from a visit to Germany, and told me he had felt more at home in Germany than in the United States. I would have expected the opposite: in a country with a strong national culture like Germany and a pronounced sense of public goods embedded in and informed by that culture, it is much more difficult for a foreigner to integrate than in the United States, where public goods are minimal and society pretty much leaves individuals alone as long as they obey the law. But walking through average neighborhoods of Erzurum, a city with the reputation of being conservative and located in one of the poorer parts of Turkey, I began to see his point:

Even Erzurum *feels* more like a European city than like either a Middle Eastern or a North American one. The buildings on both sides of a street are roughly the same size. Streets have well maintained and reasonably clean sidewalks which people use to go shopping or run errands on foot. This sidewalk, for instance, is clearly that of a prosperous First World country:



Sidewalk on Hastaneler Cd.

Public transportation is being constantly expanded and improved. Public spaces abound, and normal people use them. What's more, municipal authorities have an aesthetic sensibility and try to render these public spaces more attractive. In other words, there is less of a bifurcation between the urban and the urbane than in the United States or the Third World.

As I kept looking at my map to find my way back to the hotel, I noticed that Erzurum is well endowed with winter sports facilities. There is an ice-hockey stadium and, would you believe it, a curling stadium. At first I suspected that these edifices might be aspirational, like some of the streets I had just been looking for, but later that evening I checked and found that they do exist. In fact, Erzurum is already a major winter sports destination, and the city is planning to make a bid for the 2026 winter Olympics. So eager are they, that they have even managed to turn that most typical of all Turkish summer sports, wrestling, into a winter sport, *kar güreş*, "snow wrestling":



Kar Güreş in Erzurum

Let me close with a few general impressions about Erzurum and its *genius loci*. As I had expected, I saw far more men on the streets than women, and the latter were overwhelmingly covered. But, interestingly, more men than elsewhere I have seen in Turkey cover their heads too, and quite a few wear old-fashioned skull caps:



Occasionally one finds young men donning stylish black “Chechen” caps that look like a shorter version of the Malaysian *songkok*, which is shaped like a truncated cone. Was this because of Ramadan? Because peasants have moved to the city? Because men have become more conservative? Because conservative men no longer feel a need to hide their convictions? Because young men are tired of baseball caps? Who knows! One thing is clear: the politics of headgear did not fade away with the abolition of the fez in 1925.

Continuing in the cephalic vein, another puzzling thing I noticed was the sheer number of men’s barber shops in Erzurum. Every street seems to have three or four of them. Not a city for hipsters, clearly. Finally, I was quite astonished by the way men greet each other. Elsewhere in Turkey, I have seen men kiss each other on both cheeks, as is also customary in Tehran, Beirut, and Buenos Aires. In Erzurum, however, I found men and youth of all ages touching each other’s foreheads at the outer end of the eyebrows (right side to right side, left side to left side) while locked in a hand shake. I was later told this practice originated with the MHP nationalists and then caught on more generally. But why in Erzurum? Or is it a regional phenomenon?

Clearly, I found confirmation for the often-heard assertion that Erzurum is a very conservative city. This, however, does not mean that it is not changing. Modern consumption patterns are taking root, nay, have already taken root, as are modern ways of organizing the city and the services it provides. None of this presages an inevitable move towards a more liberal attitude to life, however: Italian fascism and German Nazism were resolutely modern too.

In Erzurum people vote solidly for conservative candidates: in the presidential election that took place a few weeks after I left, Erdoğan took 72 % of the vote. But one of the candidates the AKP put up for parliament was an unveiled woman: Fazilet Dağcı Çıglık is a native of Erzurum, has a degree from the Zurich University of Applied Sciences, and according to her website speaks a number of

foreign languages. They also put up another woman, one Zehra Taşkesenlioğlu, who is a graduate of a number of Turkish universities and is covered.



Two AKP candidates in Erzurum

Erzurum has six seats in parliament, and so every party put up a list of six candidates ranked 1 to 6. The AKP won four of the six seats. Zehra Taşkesenlioğlu was second on the list and got therefore elected; Fazilet Dağcı Çıgık was sixth and stayed out of parliament. That just about sums up the ambiguities of conservatism in Erzurum.