

The Happiest City in Turkey: Letter from Eskişehir

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A few years ago I attended a talk in which the Turkish city of Eskişehir featured prominently. The speaker showed us how the municipal authorities had restored buildings and rebuilt bridges, turning the city into a visually pleasant place, thereby making it an attractive place to live. And a few months ago I read an article which said that the people of Eskişehir are the happiest in Turkey. So when I learnt that the city is now connected to Istanbul by a bullet train, I decided to go and see for myself.

Getting to the train terminal was a bit time-consuming but not difficult. For the time being the bullet train's Istanbul terminal is located at Pendik, about 25 kilometers east of the city's core. I took the tram from Sultanahmet to Sirkeci, thence the Marmaray train to Ayrılık Çeşmesi. Here I changed to the Metro, getting off at the Pendik station, where taxis were waiting to take passengers to the train station. Istanbul-Eskişehir ticket cost less than \$ 10.00!

The bullet train is Siemens-built, and there are plans to extend the network to all the major Turkish cities. The ride was pleasant. At times the speed was an unremarkable 60 km/h, but I have no complaints, since building tracks straight enough for very high velocities would have wreaked havoc on the very beautiful hilly landscape south-east of Istanbul. (Coming back from Eskişehir two days later, the train accelerated from stand-still to 250 km/h in a mere five minutes.)



Figure 1: A YHT train at the Eskişehir station

At the station in Eskişehir I hailed a taxi and told the driver to take me to the *merkez*, where I could find an *otel*. He understood, and within a few minutes I found myself in an area known as Adalar, “the islands.” The first hotel I looked at was the one I chose, the Ada Life Otel. Three stars, full comfort, for 175 TL a night: 38 \$. No one spoke English at the reception, but we communicated perfectly with goodwill as our common idiom.



Figure 2: The Ada Life Hotel in Eskişehir

This price included a copious breakfast buffet that included more types of cheese than I had ever seen on one table in Turkey:



Figure 3: Breakfast buffet at the Ada Life Otel

In my travels it has happened very rarely that a place forward to visiting which I have been looking has actually exceeded my expectations. Usually I am slightly disappointed, but Eskişehir was an exception. When Mayor Yılmaz Büyükerşen started his transformation of the city, the river was polluted and its banks ugly. Purification stations now clean the waters to the point where one can see fish swimming close to the surface. The banks are covered with grass, inviting passers-by to sit down and unwind:



Figure 4: The River Porsuk

Gondolas propelled by punters ferry visitors around:



Figure 5: Punting on a gondola

And there are flowers everywhere, especially on the railings of the numerous bridges:

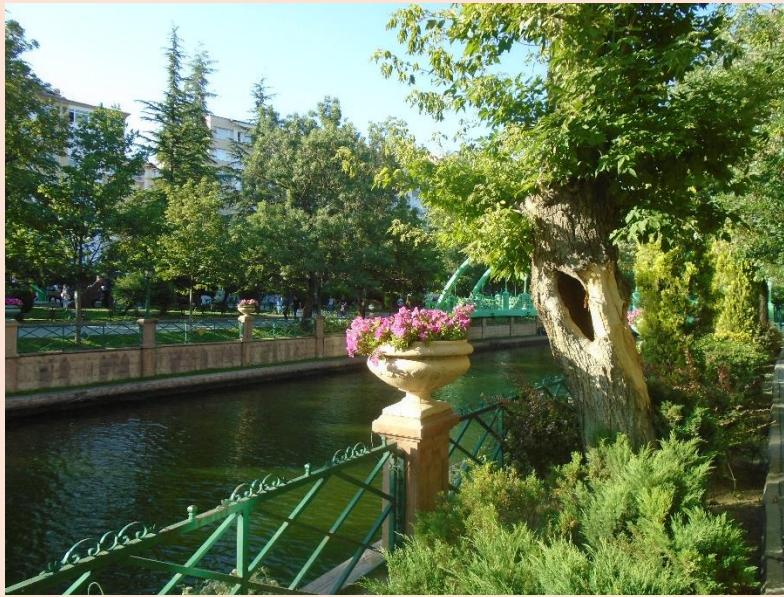


Figure 6: Flower pots on railings

The banks of the river are lined with cafés. The city has two major universities with a combined student population of about 100,000, and many of these could be found drinking tea, smoking, chatting, flirting. The fact that it was the middle of Ramadan seemed to inhibit very few.



Figure 7: Cafés

What I liked most, was that, unlike in my home town of Cambridge, where the very few cafés we have are filled with lonely people sitting staring at their laptops, here cafés are still what they were meant to be: public spaces of sociability. I found patrons playing dominoes, cards, and backgammon; very few were glued to their smartphones, none had a laptop.

As part of the urban renovation, the city has installed an x-shaped network of tram lines, with carriages that make our own Green Line, even its newest trains, look decidedly dowdy:



Figure 8: a *tramway*

When I started walking around, I noticed that a lot of statues had been placed here and there to enliven the cityscape. Some are whimsical:



Figure 9: A sidewalk

But most are tacky and look very provincial – and for some reason they are all painted in a shining bronze color:



Figure 10: Public art at an intersection

While I cannot pretend to find these figures beautiful, I do salute the impulse to beautify public spaces and provide the passers-by with something to arouse their curiosity. In the United States the inclination would more often than not be to cover the area with asphalt and turn it into a parking lot.

I had read somewhere that Eskişehir has an opera house (and a professional symphony orchestra), and so I decided to seek it out, even though the season had ended and I would probably not manage to get in. I found the buildings to be pleasantly located in a well-maintained park, and I was once again reminded of how much of a hicktown Boston, a city without a dedicated opera house or even a professional resident opera company, is – in spite of its large population of presumably sophisticated academics.



Figure 11: The Opera House

On my second day I decided to go to the old town, where houses have been renovated and painted in bold colors to attract tourists. On the way, I discovered an embodiment of one of my urbanistic fantasies: a structure that is pleasant to look at, but utterly useless. As a teenager, I spent many English classes in high school drawing buildings that had no purpose or monuments that commemorated nothing – my anti-utilitarianism goes back a long time. The point being that a city needs landmarks to punctuate its tissue of residential and commercial buildings, for without landmarks it is not more than the sum total of these buildings and has no personality of its own. It is this view that renders American suburbs so irredeemably depressing for me – one can walk for miles without coming across a pub, a beer garden, or a sculpted fountain into whose basin you can throw a penny. And if a town does not have any landmarks because it is recent and has no medieval churches or mosques of which to boast, landmarks should be created to provide optic relief from the monotony of modern (sub)urban sprawl. End of editorial. Here in Eskişehir, as I was walking in the direction of the old town, I suddenly came across what looked like an overpass – except that it did not pass over anything in particular:



Figure 12: Overpass

Its top, the horizontal part, was covered, and contained a few display cases with samples of local artwork and handicrafts – all invented traditions, as far as I could tell.



Figure 13: Local art work

Where trees had been in the way, room had been made for them, creating a delightfully unexpected and unexpectedly delightful twist:



Figure 13: An opening in the bridge

One of the new art forms patronized by the authorities is glass blowing, and to highlight it, the entire length of the structure and its continuation on the sidewalk was incrustated with pieces of glass, every piece unique:

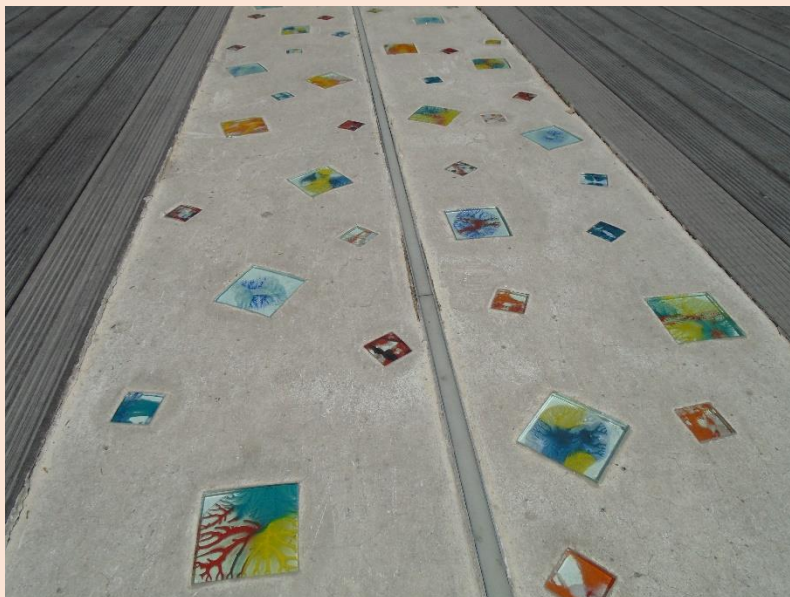


Figure 14: Sidewalk with pieces of glass

What was as remarkable as the municipality's preoccupation with beautifying the city was the absence of vandalism. No graffiti disfigured the statues, bridges, and structures; people are obviously too proud of their city to deface it – although I fear that will change when people come to take their city for granted. Equally agreeable was the cleanliness: sidewalks and green spaces were spic and span, and I saw a number of street sweepers, men and women, hard at work keeping it that way.

Finally, I reached the old town. The houses are indeed beautiful, and they have been restored tastefully. The trouble is that it is a lifeless quarter for the most part. Almost every house is a hotel, gallery, or home to a cultural institution; shops are too numerous and all sell the same mass-produced trinkets for undiscerning tourists. This of course is a global curse; I have encountered it in Dubrovnik, the La Boca quarter of Buenos Aires, central Riga, and Woodstock, Vermont. To save a town from decay, it is turned into a picturesque backdrop for selfies. Here are two photos (figures 15 and 16).



Within the old town there are a number of museums. They contain nothing extraordinary, but the spaces are pleasant, with tree-shaded benches that invite the traveler to rest and take in the harmony of the built environment. For some reason Crimean Tatars feature prominently in the streetscape of the old town, perhaps a sizable number of refugees from Russia settled here at one point. I decided to have lunch at a Crimean café, and before I could ask for a menu the waitress brought me a Crimean speciality called *çibörek* and a cup of *ayran*.



Figure 17: Çibörek

It was dripping with fat and filled with minced meat. I did not care for it much and could only eat four of the five that constituted the *porsiyon*.

As I tried to walk home to the Adalar area, I noticed that many streets had been cordoned off by the police. At one end of a square people were let into a closed-off area, and since the atmosphere was easygoing rather than tense, I joined the line, was checked desultorily by a policeman at the barrier, and found myself at a political rally: elections are scheduled for June 24. Electoral fever is running high in the country, even though the ruling party has seen to it that it dominates the airwaves and that the leader of one of the opposition parties has to run his campaign from jail. It took me a few seconds to realize that this electoral meeting was organized by the new İyi party, a split-off from the nationalist MHP, which has been more or less swallowed by the ruling AKP. What is remarkable about this party is that it was founded by a woman, Meral Akşener. She has a PhD in history, was minister of the interior, and gained a certain popularity as deputy speaker of parliament when she ordered unruly male deputies around like a stern but ultimately forgiving school teacher. In other words, she does not owe her political career to a father's, brother's, or husband's prominence. After a while she came on stage. The people clapped enthusiastically, and proceedings were relayed to a big screen.



Figure 18: İyi party rally in Eskişehir

The rally began with a strange ritual whose meaning escaped me: Akşener greeted the people in the front rows, and they gave her shawls of various designs and colors. She collected a whole pile of them, and then handed most of them to an aide. A few she threw around her neck, and one or two she held in her left hand. With her right hand she held a microphone into which she spoke fluently and passionately for about an hour. Quite a performance; she certainly knew how to hold the crowd's attention. The only words I understood were *referandum* and *demokrasi*, but it seemed that she also criticized the new presidential system that is being inaugurated on election-day. My late dissertation adviser would have been happy about the last point! The mostly male audience cheered ceaselessly, and here and there someone raised his arm into the air and gave the old MHP sign: outstretched index finger and pinky, symbolizing the wolf, the totemic animal of Turkish nationalism:



Figure 19: The Nationalist hand symbol

As an ardent anti-nationalist, I am not sure I would like her program if I knew more about it, but I seek consolation in the fact that she started out as a member of the True Path party, a center right party standing for a somewhat watered-down version of Kemalism with which I could live, were I a Turk; perhaps she joined the MHP only because the True Path party disappeared in the early 2000s. Be this as it may, the strongest (and truly heart-warming) impression I took away from the rally was that of middle-aged and elderly provincial men calling for a woman to be president, repeatedly shouting *Cumhurbaşkanı Meral Akşener*, a slogan made more memorable by the serendipitous fact that both of its moieties consist of first a disyllabic and then a trisyllabic term, making it eminently chantable.

This election rally was an opportunity for me to connect with politics. I do not like apprehending a country through its politics, and am always annoyed when people I meet abroad start asking me about the American president, either the present thug or the previous gentleman, or even enjoin me to tell him this or that. Turkey's political situation has been very ugly for some time now. I was in Trabzon the day after the failed coup of July 2016, and my hotel being located next to AKP headquarters, I felt I was witnessing the beginning of fascist rule. Among the flag-waving zealots who clamored for *demokasi*, a truly Orwellian spectacle given the anti-democratic proclivities of their leader, two were brandishing the black flag of ISIS. In the meantime tens of thousands have been arrested, 5,000 academics have lost their jobs, the press has been muzzled, and the Istanbul Gay Pride parade has been called off by the police for the second time in a row. A Turkish friend has told me that universities and institutes in and around Berlin have become a refuge for so many Turkish academics that comparisons are being made with the 1930s, when Turkey welcomed many Germans fleeing the Nazi seizure of power. But witnessing the current electoral campaign leads me to think that there is still some life left in Turkish democracy. The opposition parties have ganged up against the ruling party, and even the paleo-Islamist Saadet (Felicity) party has joined the Kemalist CHP and the new İyi party in an alliance, arguing that at this point ideological disagreements matter less than the weakening of the rule of law and the separation of powers, crony capitalism, and corruption. The ruling party may try to rig the election, but if it does, there will probably be blood. Still, I think it will retain power. But I said the same about Malaysia a few weeks ago.

The travails of democracy in Turkey do not affect the flavor of my favorite *karadut* sorbet, the pleasure of listening to amateur folk musicians on an intercontinental ferry trip in Istanbul, or the beauty of eleventh-century Seljuk architecture in Anatolia. And the vast majority of the people with whom I come into contact are as affable and helpful as ever. To all those who avoid going to a country because of its politics, be it Iran, Cuba, or, alas, the United States, I say: "get a life." The only countries I avoid are those where the crime rate is too high for a traveler to stroll about aimlessly, and that only because I have neither a driver's license nor the means to have myself driven around.

To return to my travel account: back in my hotel room I suddenly heard choirs singing *balehuya*, *balehuya*. I immediately wrote to a colleague who has studied Christian missionaries in Turkey, and he confirmed that in Eskişehir missionaries rent hotel rooms in the Adalar area. Many of the converts are Iranians, some of whom convert only so as to obtain political asylum in the West.

On my third and last day, I decided to take one more walk before heading for the railway station. I am glad I did, because I discovered the traditional art form of the city, which is carving meerschaum. It seems that the purest and most easy-to-engrave meerschaum deposits are found near

Eskişehir, and the city's artisans have been fashioning pipes for centuries. (As it happens, I had seen one less than a fortnight earlier at the Sherlock Holmes Museum in Meiringen.) Some of them are quite elaborate, and I wonder whether they are ever used for smoking:



Figure 20: A meerschaum pipe from Eskişehir

I have no use for pipes, so I purchased a little minimally carved box for the *wunderkabinett* at Tÿ Aur. Then I went to my hotel, picked up my rucksack, promised the staff that I would tell the world about their excellent hotel, and walked to the station, where I had to wait a mere 30 minutes for the next train.

I should like to end with a few general observations about Eskişehir. It is a city without any major attractions that has pulled itself up by its bootstraps thanks to an energetic and imaginative mayor who, to my knowledge, is not affiliated with any political party. Observers of Turkey sometimes divide it in two: there is Istanbul and the Aegean and Mediterranean coast, with an exclave around Ankara, which is progressive, while the rest of Anatolia, including the Black Sea coast, is conservative. Eskişehir does not fit this binary. I saw far fewer covered women than in some of the Istanbul neighborhoods I know, including Sultanahmet where I always stay. I did not see any men in long jackets with a turban on their head, and I saw only one woman wearing a black abaya. Cafés and restaurants were full of people at noon in the middle of Ramadan. Quite a few people were walking their dogs, including a covered woman. And: Eskişehir is not on the coast, it is a suburb of neither Istanbul nor Ankara nor Izmir, and it attracts very few foreign tourists. In fact, very very few people understand English, and none of the restaurants I went to had an English menu. The people of Eskişehir speak Turkish, the buskers play Turkish instruments and the singers sing joyful Turkish songs, restaurants and cafés serve Turkish food. And yet, the amenities of modern civilization are everywhere. The city's new neighborhoods look thoroughly European, and are certainly much more clean and well-groomed than any place in southern Italy that I have visited. This does not mean that people are *westernized*, a term I intensely dislike because it suggests that somewhere there is a

westernizer who causes people to be alienated from their “true” self. The modernity I witness every day in Turkey’s outlying areas is entirely home-grown. True, Eskişehir is an exception, but the fact that the state tolerates it, or better, that the state has no choice but to tolerate it, speaks volumes about the progress of modernity in Turkey. It is often said that people (“people”!) are sending their children abroad, buying apartments in Europe, think of moving. That is undoubtedly true for those you can afford it. But these fortunate members of the secular elite are not the only modern Turks: modernity has a popular base in Turkey. Eskişehir is full of modern people who could not leave even if they wanted to, and I doubt many of them even want to. If they did, why do polls show they are the happiest people in Turkey? Modern Turks, a category that includes more Muslim believers than we think, are everywhere, and they are there to stay, whatever the ultimate vision of the country’s current leadership. Taken as a whole, Turkey is not about to become an obscurantist place – it is far too diverse for that. Ziya Gökalp’s dream of transferring Turkish *culture* from Islamic *civilization* to European *civilization* is being realized, one individual at a time, all the conservative brain-washing in state schools notwithstanding. But few people seem to notice, so preoccupied are they with the political situation.

As I wrote this, I realized that my generalizations were based on a very narrow base, namely a city of 700,000, 100,000 of whom are students. I have heard Istanbulites speak of the people of the Anatolian hinterland in terms that they themselves would immediately call “Orientalist” if used by foreigners in reference to Turkey as a whole, and so I decided that, to balance my positive impressions of Eskişehir, my next trip would take me to Erzurum – a conservative city par excellence. Stay tuned.