

RESISTING EVICTION: SULUKULE ROMA IN SEARCH OF RIGHT TO SPACE AND PLACE

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Following the fall of the socialist bloc in the early 1990s, as a decade of upheaval of the lifestyle to which they had become accustomed awaited the Roma in Eastern and Central Europe,¹ their historic counterparts in Sulukule, İstanbul, were faced with the grim prospect of long-term unemployment due to the closing of their famous Entertainment Houses (Eğlence Evleri) by the Metropolitan Municipality.² Nearly two decades later, still struggling with the results of that uncalled for and disastrous event – which led to almost universal unemployment, poverty, undernourishment, and the de-education of the children in the area – the Sulukule Roma now have to prepare for a second major calamity, coming again from the Municipality,³ which intends to throw them out of the ancestral homes they have lived in over the centuries.

It is this current and latter part of Romani life in the cosmopolitan, historical city of İstanbul on which this article focuses. We aim to describe and analyze how a specific gentrification process in a historically significant Romani neighborhood, Sulukule, İstanbul is handled by the Municipality, how the decision is impacting the residents,

current discussions and heated debates going on among residents in the neighborhood, as well as the residents, NGOs, the Municipality, and academics from Turkey and the United Kingdom, and the fashion in which the historically silent and oppressed Roma here, are on the way to becoming vocal, organizing, resisting citizens challenging the local administrators in this particular decision.

Since the full-fledged introduction of the market economy in the 1980s in Turkey, the appearance and the social topography of urban space has begun to change, particularly in the rapidly growing metropolis of İstanbul,⁴ which is host to 400,000 newcomers from rural areas every year! These processes of rapid urbanization put insurmountable demands on the resources of the city from water, energy, public transportation to housing. Simultaneously, the up-and-coming middle classes and nouveaux riche have started looking for new property to inhabit, as well as to invest in.

Social struggles of the kind emerging at the local level, as in Sulukule, in the form of conflicts over public and private space, are not novel. Such transformation of socio-spatial environments leads to a deepening of social divisions and a re-hierarchization of space. These “wars of position” (to use a Gramscian term⁵) to hegemonize the physical expression of the city, currently being attempted by the moderate Islamic municipalities, is in the direction of reviving a mythical “Ottoman past” and an Islamic ethos, and dovetails with major structural changes in the economy to harmonize it with the global trend toward neo-liberalism and dictates of the International Monetary Fund for credit loans. The implementation of these policies has met with a great deal of skepticism and critique from well-known architects, intellectuals, and those city inhabitants directly involved who are not sufficiently empowered to change the tide of

Authors’ note: We started this research in October of 2005 with three academics, including Dr. Sevgi Uçan-Çubukçu from the Political Science Department of the İstanbul University, in addition to the writers. We have already, individually, submitted four papers to international conferences and workshops, and the research, as well as the writing of joint and/or individual papers based on it, still goes on.

¹ Martin Kovats, for instance, points out that “living conditions and life chances of most Roma people in the post-communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, have actually undergone dramatic and ongoing decline” (2003:1).

² Then run by Saadettin Tantan of the Motherland Party.

³ This time run by the dentist Mustafa Demir of the Justice and Development Party (JDP). The JDP has been in power in Turkey from 2002 through the writing of this article in 2007.

⁴ For further discussion on this see: Çağlar Keyder, 2000.

⁵ Gramsci, Antonio 1999 (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and tr. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, New York, International Publishers.

events. Potuoğlu-Cook refers to this as a “recycling project” and “neo-Ottomania, a classed ... self-Orientalism particular to the post 1980s Turkish free-market modernity” (2006: 634). According to her, over the course of the last two decades, neo-Ottomania has found expression in the local and global circulation of material objects, discourses, and urban spaces.

What is happening in Sulukule today can perhaps be partly explained in this idiom. Though the primary aim of the Municipality was to drive out its Romani residents (“to clean the place up,” as former İstanbul mayor and current Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan dictated it) the building of Ottoman-style housing to replace the loss came as an afterthought⁶ designed to placate the upheaval of public conscience at the eviction of an ethnic community from its historical space and place.

Our discussion here will cover various aspects of gentrification in İstanbul as it impinges on our main concern, Sulukule and its Romani residents, and will be followed by a brief history of the neighborhood to show how it is interwoven with Romani culture, tradition, and life. We will also pay significant attention to how disempowered Roma are forming associations, leaving their passive, “do-nothing”, “have no power” approach to oppose, talk back to the Municipality and make declarations to the press.

Gentrification and the plight of the Roma

The restructuring of metropolitan place has become a global trend over the past decades. Uzun suggests that not only local but also global forces impact urban development projects.¹⁰ Among these our main concern here is gentrification, whose most essential characteristic has been defined as “the physical upgrading of low status residential neighborhoods in inner cities and displacement of low-income residents by wealthier upper class newcomers” (Badyina and Golubchikov, 2005: 113). Many argue that it is an inexact term.⁷ In the past it has been used variously to imply “back to the city,” “urban reinvasion,” “central city revitalization and revival,” “reinvestment,” “renovation,” “neighborhood renewal,” “the rediscovery of city

neighborhoods,” and “incumbent upgrading,” all of which have somewhat different implications. Gentrification connotes both spontaneous local development as well as laws and policies imposed by the government in renewing old residential areas. It obviously has a class dimension, given that with renewal, housing prices rise, and old residents usually have to relinquish their living quarters to wealthier groups in the city. As a Brookings Institution report points out, “higher income households replace lower income residents of a neighborhood, changing the essential character and flavor of that neighborhood” (Kennedy and Leonard, 2001). Hence, “gentrification has been construed as both destroyer and savior in the regeneration of run-down areas, yet it is clear,” as Ergun argues, “that it is not simply one or the other” (2004: 392).

In Eastern and Central Europe, the underlying mechanism of post-socialist gentrification has been explained by the “rent gap.” In Turkey too, the current push toward “renovation,” “regeneration,” and the uprooting of formerly historical neighborhoods is explained by many urban planners and economists as due to the high differential between the expected income that “renewal” is supposed to bring and the income that it offers presently. Centrally located land property creates immense profits in a capitalist economy in growing metropolises, which is no doubt true of İstanbul.

More to the point for us is the imminence of “involuntary displacement”: the most significant aspect of gentrification from the vantage point of human life is the pressure it puts on the lower-class poor and sometimes peripheral minority ethnic groups, for abrupt and aggressive self-removal to make room for the up-and-coming rich. Hence according to Atkinson and Bridge (2004), gentrification suggests particular power relationships and struggle for urban space, which are in many respects are similar to those of colonialism.

The literature on gentrification emphasizes the relationship between governmental policy and city renewal. It has been observed that gentrification is not solely a consequence of natural phenomena and market forces, but also the result of government policy shaped by strong pro-development interests in the private sector.⁸ Considering the gentrification process in İstanbul, Ergun argues that “there was no direct impact from

⁶ Only one year later were such plans drawn up.

¹⁰ For further discussion on this see C. Nil Uzun, 2007.

⁷ See for example: Myrin A. Levine, 2004.

⁸ See for example, Smith & Williams, 1986.

governments and municipalities excluding Balat” (2004: 403). The current situation of Sulukule and nearby places along the coast of Golden Horn in İstanbul, however, show that the opposite is also possible. Rumor has it that the current Prime Minister, formerly mayor of İstanbul, Tayyip Erdoğan, pointing his hand in the direction of Sulukule is to have ordered the mayors of the metropolitan Municipality and Fatih, “to clean this place up.”

Ergun (2004) notes that the process of gentrification in İstanbul first began in the 1980s, outside the city center on the Asian side of the Bosphorous, in the district of Kuzguncuk. Later it took place again in the 1990s in the Beyoğlu area, which had been neglected since the early 1970s. Starting at the turn of the century, the processes of gentrification were also observed in the İstanbul historical peninsula around the vicinity of the Golden Horn. According to Uzun (2006: 38) the continuity of the renewal process has been assured by the rising new middle class and investors, much in line with what is happening elsewhere in the world, particularly in Eastern and Central Europe. Şen also confirms that gentrification in İstanbul is important from the perspective of deterritorialization and class polarization in metropolitan space (2005:156).

In June of 2005, a law⁹ was passed by the parliament in Turkey to the effect that “dilapidated areas” and “zones of degeneration” of historical and cultural heritage would be protected by “renewal.”¹⁰ As a result, in this context, the thousand-year-old neighborhood of Sulukule would be demolished and the 3,500 Roma living there for several centuries along the historical Byzantine city walls be evicted, possibly to make room for middle-class occupants and “Ottoman-style housing,” deemed proper by the Islamically oriented Fatih Municipality, of which Sulukule is a part. The renewal plan of Sulukule “extends over three avenues and ten streets, including 22 registered historical sites, 17 of which are examples of civilian architecture and five ‘historical monuments.’”¹¹ It will involve the demolition of at least 571 predominantly Roma

houses, with the implication that at least 571 Roma families will be dislocated, most of them families with four or more children.¹² Among these are 250 tenant families who currently own nothing and thus will receive nothing. Such major transformation – labeled as “renewal” or “regeneration” by official sources – is referred to as “gentrification” in the social-science literature.

The case of Sulukule

According to a German journalist living in İstanbul:

the Roma of Sulukule learned only from the press that in three months’ time their quarter would cease to exist. Proprietors of small real estate are to be expropriated, and allotted new living space, say the Municipality and TOKİ [Toplu Konut İdaresi], the [Social Housing Administration]. The Roma have no say in the entire plan as TOKİ alone commands all the assets. The company assigns the value of the Roma houses, it is in charge for the procedure of expropriation, and it [also] assesses the price of the destined new abodes in Taşoluk, a new developed quarter on the fringes of the city ... two hours away [by public transport].¹³

The implementation of the law did not start until about a year later, when inhabitants in Sulukule were sent notices informing them of the impending demolition of their houses, as well as asking them to come to the Municipality in groups for more information.

Gathered in the Municipality in small groups of 20 to 25, the mayor of Fatih told them that they had two choices: either they could relocate permanently, or they could relocate temporarily, and return only when the Social Housing Administration finished construction of their new house. In the latter case they would have to pay in monthly installments for the new house minus what the Municipality would give them for the

⁹ Law no. 5366, entitled the Law on Protection and Lively Use of Deprived Historical and Cultural Heritage After Renewal.

¹⁰ www.fatih.bel.tr (“Yenileme Projeleri,” Fatih Municipality, Renewal Projects)

¹¹ www.fatih.bel.tr (“Yenileme Projeleri,” Fatih Municipality (Renewal Projects)

¹² In many cases, extended families live together in one- to two-room homes.

¹³ Günter Seufert, Turkey’s Romanies, 2006. Available online at <http://www.migrationeducation.org/27.1.html?&rid=25&cHash=1bb2c3f87c>.

price of their old, demolished house. Or, if unable to pay the installments for the new house, they would have to relocate permanently to Taşoluk,¹⁴ where monthly installments would be lower. In any case they would have to pay for rent or for the cost of the new property. The tenants, on the other hand, would get nothing, since they owned no property in the first place; they would simply be evicted onto the streets.

Families in neither of these categories were happy with this arrangement. Those in the first group asked, with some irony, “why should we pay for the house we already own?” while those in the second group claimed that their life and life in Sulukule in general was based upon mutual help and reciprocity, characteristics which would be absent in any new neighborhood to which they would have to move and without such solidarity and reciprocal help, they claimed, they would be unable to live, since the majority were unemployed or had no regular income. In any case, former examples of eviction and forced relocation, for instance, a decade ago to Taşoluk, Sarıgöl and Taşlıtarla had not produced the desired results predicted by the Municipality: the former Sulukule Roma there have now been reduced to selling drugs, as Mr. S. (himself awaiting a second eviction there) explained to us. He also explained that Roma did not have a secure existence anywhere in this city, for the Municipality was now also forcing them to vacate the homes to which they had been relocated 15 to 20 years ago. He did not understand the rationale for the upcoming eviction, except, of course, “for the drug selling,” of which he certainly was not a part of;¹⁵ nor did he know where he would go this time.

Indeed, as observers we have noticed that there is constant borrowing of all sorts of household items, goods, food, and money among Sulukule Roma. Even the tiny grocery shops (nearly one in every other street) are part and parcel of this circle of solidarity. They sell food items on loan (to be paid sometime in the future, hopefully by the end of the month) and often times

give freebie biscuits, sandwiches, and drinks to hungry children. They even break up tea, coffee and flour packages so they can be sold in smaller quantities to make life easier for those impoverished Roma who can only pay in very small amounts. Since on days when it is not cool, and does not rain or snow, life mostly takes place on the streets, rather than inside homes; families living particularly on the same streets know of each others’ needs, good and bad times and are there to help one another, come hell or high water. They are also there to help each other with sick family members, to pay for the doctor, or to take them to the hospital if need be. Women especially can be found sitting in front of their homes, chatting with neighbors while the children play in front of their eyes, or run around the street from one house to another, phenomena that endure despite the fact that there is also a lot of talk going on behind each others’ backs. It is not unusual for family and friends to split up only to come together in the not-so-distant future. Such occasions of “no communication,” they say, “should never last beyond the time it takes for your headscarf to dry, otherwise all relations will cease until the seas run dry.”

Barany points out that this kind of community solidarity may develop as the result of numerous factors. He writes, “mobilization is often promoted, for instance, by prejudicial state policies in housing, welfare, education, and taxation. If labor markets are segregated by ethnicity, ethnic solidarity increases in tandem with the propensity of disadvantaged ethnic groups to mobilize” (2002: 280).

Methodology

Our research in Sulukule started towards the end of 2005, a couple of weeks after news of its impending demolition, and the relocation of Romani families, was announced in the news media. Academics from different social science disciplines deciding to work in the area, we looked at various aspects of the prevailing socio-economic life, and culture as well as trying to understand their perceptions of the impending demolition. We conducted in-depth interviews with a variety of residents, former dancers, singers, and current relatively well-known musicians, former performers, owners of the traditional Entertainment Houses, local merchants, shop owners, etc. We also interviewed urban planners responsible for drawing up plans for the “renewal,” architects opposed to the law or the

¹⁴ Taşoluk is close to a mining area newly built for habitation, and lies approximately one-and-a half hours away from the city center and Sulukule. Currently a group of Alevites live there and the Sulukule Roma think that it would be difficult for them to coexist with the Alevites.

¹⁵ We know this to be true since we have known Mr. S for a long time; he has attended many of the meeting of Sulukuleans in solidarity.

renewal, and top-level officers in the Municipality. Our methodology involved participant observation and informal focus group discussions. At the beginning we mostly talked to men since they were more available in the public sphere than women and youth. Only several months into our fieldwork were we able to talk to some women and younger people. Unlike residents of other marginal areas in the city, the Sulukuleans were not very welcoming of our presence, and extremely suspicious of what we were trying to do, possibly identifying us with agents of the government, police or the Municipality, all of which had harassed them in the past. A year on, however, relations became much more congenial, their trust in us grew and we were somewhat instrumental in facilitating the foundation of the third time ever of an NGO in Sulukule called Association for the Advancement of Romani Culture and Solidarity for the protection of the historical neighborhood.

A brief history of Sulukule

Sulukule is one of the first ever Romani settlements in this part of the world, according to some Romani historians.¹⁶ Some claim that it is nearly one thousand years old. Marsh places it in the 12th century, while Sulukule Roma themselves say that they arrived there with the conquering armies of Fatih Sultan Mehmet in the middle of the 15th century. In any case, Romani habitation here, along the historical city walls of Edirnekapı, formally known as Neslişah and Hatice Sultan neighborhoods, has lasted for at least several hundred years. Some inhabitants here have pointed out to us that during wars in the Ottoman era, the Sultan required that Roma be taken inside the walls to help in the war effort, while during peace times they would be located outside the city walls, back in their shacks. Hence the lives of the Roma were not so much under their own control as that of the Ottoman Sultan and were forced to fit the ebb and flow of the times. In addition, according to Marushiakova and Popov, “the process of reform in the Ottoman Empire [starting in the early 19th century] also affected the Gypsies. While changes were being proposed there were attempts at regulating the civil status of the Gypsies in order to bring them closer to that of the other subjects of the Empire... [However, none of these turned out to be successful]” (2001:57). Many Roma today, on the other hand, remember “outside of the walls” as places where their mothers, fathers, and other relatives grew wonderfully diverse vegetables that

were later sold to demanding city dwellers. Especially famous was Romani lettuce, considered the queen of all the greenery produced here. İstanbulites flocked to Sulukule to buy it. In fact, during the summer months, whole families would move outside the city walls, and set up flimsy tents and sleep, eat and carry on all their activities here, while also tending their gardens. It is likely that this replaced “the epoch of war/peace settlements” during Ottoman rule.

Ana Oprüşan points out that “Roma identities, and often times, settlements are occupationally based” (2006: 165). Hence Sulukule Roma are known for their music and dance and through their Entertainment Houses. Sulukule gained a special fame in this regard, which distinguished it from other Romani districts in İstanbul where inhabitants engaged in basketry, metal work, horse-raising, or flower-selling. According to Marsh, the Roma of Sulukule became known in the entertainment sector of the Ottoman Empire starting in the 17th century as musicians, dancers, fortune-tellers, acrobats and illusionists (2006a). In the 19th century their identification with the Ottoman entertainment sector was to such an extent that Romani performers were slated to be taken to the world fairs as part of the Ottoman team. Such prospects, however, did not last long, for the devout Muslim, Sultan Abdülhamit laid aside any such plans (2006a).

Since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the Roma of Sulukule continued the 19th century tradition of managing Entertainment Houses (Akçura, 2007). These were small, informal “listen-watch, eat and drink” places, where you could rent the entire house, a hall, or a room to have belly dancers and musicians perform just for you and your friends or family while being served food and alcohol (Akçura, 2007). These houses were connected through intricate labyrinths to the owners’ actual one floored-houses,¹⁷ and there was constant back and forth between the two “homes” for service and performances.

¹⁶ See for example Adrian Marsh, 2006a.

¹⁷ One day, one of the owners was kind enough to show us one of his Entertainment Houses, something normally never done. Now it is rented by a large extended family for a monthly rent of approximately 15-20 US dollars, but even so most families under the same condition are unable to pay and the owners let them stay on anyway.

The Entertainment Houses, however, were under constant threat from the city and police authorities and were targeted on grounds of “moral degeneracy,” an accusation totally denied by the performers and owners. Women have told us, in fact, that mothers of the belly dancers would be waiting just outside the performance room, with large coats, to cover their daughter after the performance and take them back home immediately to prevent any potential offers from male customers.

Although Sulukuleans claim that the 1950s through the 1990s were a good time for them, a major part of the traditional neighborhood was torn down to make room for two big highways during the late 1950s and 1960s.¹⁸ Many lost their homes, and Entertainment Houses along with their vegetable gardens, and for a while it seemed like Sulukule was no more. Roma, evicted from the houses along the city walls, had to fend for themselves and find refuge in the larger city, though some were transported to Taşoluk and Sarıgöl. Those who had made some money singing, dancing and playing various instruments bought relatively expansive properties in different parts of the city, cutting off their ties with the area, while the less advantaged group moved into empty houses inside Neslişah and Hatice Sultan neighborhoods. Still others opted to live in houses of families in the same vicinity if and when invited to do so. Eventually, little by little, life returned to “normal” and people started working in the famous Entertainment Houses, and going to parties in middle- and upper-class homes in the city center when invited to do so for a good fee, once more.

Traditional Sulukule musicians and the former owners of Entertainment Houses today are nostalgically “nationalistic” about the past, and wish to have their previous working and living conditions restored. The more famous ones among the musicians also travel a quite a bit, particularly in Europe and the United States, and to some extent elsewhere in Turkey. They emphasize that during the so-called golden age of Sulukule, everybody in the neighborhood was happy, had a job and lived in much better conditions than today. One musician says,

then the whole community was together. Our community was destroyed when our business through which we earned our bread was taken away from us.

¹⁸ Vatan and Millet avenues.

As a result many people are suffering today economically and psychologically.

There are about 50 musicians left in Sulukule but most of them neither have regular jobs nor earn enough money to survive.

Some Sulukuleans claim that the military coup of September 12, 1980 in Turkey did not effect them much and that neither their parochial nor outside¹⁹ entertaining suffered on account of it. Later, in the mid-1990s, a mayor of the Motherland Party, Saadettin Tantan, decided the Entertainment Houses were “getting out of hand,” upon rumors that there was petty robbery, drug trafficking and prostitution in the larger neighborhood, though not in the Entertainment Houses as such. Together with the police chief, the infamous Süleyman Ulusoy, or Hortumcu Süleyman²⁰ as he was otherwise known to the wider community and his team of police, Roma were beaten on the streets and tortured in the police headquarters, and their private Entertainment Houses in the area were closed down. The local musicians and dancers were forbidden to practice their art in the vicinity and the Entertainment Houses denounced illegal once more.

Around the same time, in the 1990s, the civil war in southeastern Anatolian caused a major influx of migrants from the villages there into western Turkey, especially to the metropolitan centers such as Adana, Mersin, İzmir, and, İstanbul. A mixed population of Kurds and Roma from these areas moved into İstanbul and several of these extended families, the very impoverished and unemployed, took refuge in the hallowed Entertainment Houses along the historical Byzantine city walls in Sulukule. This led to an even more negative image of the Roma in the public sphere as “lawless petty criminals” exhibiting them as culprits for the progression of illegality in the famous historical district. In fact, many of the older residents of Sulukule tried to explain to us that in the “good old days” such lawlessness was never a part of the neighborhood

¹⁹ Sulukule musicians and dancers were also invited to dance and sing in middle- and upper-class homes in the city which they went as a performing group.

²⁰ Süleyman the Hose, because he beat those in custody with a hose. See Aytaç, 2007, unpublished ms.

and that the Entertainment Houses functioned smoothly by offering “nightly entertainment of music and dance strictly and nothing else besides” to middle- and upper-class Istanbulites. This created a large by-service sector for cooks, barmen, taxi drivers, waiters, liquor sellers, grocery shops, etc. in addition to the main group of performers, musicians,²¹ singers, and dancers.

On the edge of existence

Roma have been an underclass in Anatolia since the Ottoman times. Up until the end of 2006, the 1934 Settlement Law was in effect in the Republic of Turkey, which forbid the entrance of immigrant Roma into Turkey from anywhere in the world. The law also forestalled the granting of citizenship to “foreign” Roma, together with “anarchists, spies, and those who do not belong to the Turkish culture.” In addition, Article 134, Paragraph 9.5 of the Police Service Regulations describes Roma in general in as “prone to commit crimes” and classifies the whole group as a “security risk.” These two legal statements are in effect a useful indicator of the socio-cultural and political status of the Roma in Turkey. They are and have been considered at best “second class citizens,” if not the underdog, subject to bullying, harassment and oppression by the police, discrimination by the state bureaucracy and marginalization by the public at large. It is safe to say that no other group in Turkey since the foundation of the Republic has faced the disempowerment and the impoverization that Roma have.

Today, the situation of Roma can, at best, be characterized as double-edged. On the one hand, at a European level, the year 2006 was declared “Year of the Roma” and brought them to the forefront in European eyes and public space, as well as in Turkey. Even the Fulbright Agency decided to grant fellowships for studying the anthropology of Romani rights within the European Union. Many activities were held involving Roma, including symposia and conferences that depicted their plight. On the other hand, such activities made even more obvious the fact of the status of Roma as an underclass-underdog, leading a peripheral existence in many European countries, subject to various forms of police harassment on an almost daily basis. For

instance, in İstanbul, in the first three months of the year 2007, three big Romani neighborhoods were raided by the police due to petty robbery and small-scale drug selling. Individuals were beaten and dragged out of their homes to police headquarters; this was all justified to the media and the public by stressing the stereotypes of Roma as thieves and criminals. In addition, the neighborhoods were closed to travel by police barricades so the “usual suspects” could not get out and the Romani rebellion incipient upon this raid and repression not spread to the city at large.

A minority of Roma in these residential areas may eke out a subsistence-level existence from selling drugs, and other criminal acts, hence such districts are subject to frequent police harassment. Yılmaz argues that

police oppression in Roma neighborhoods is not likely to produce the desired effect of cleansing the area of criminal organization, since the Roma here are simply agents of larger drug trafficking and mafia groups. As long as the official and non-official discrimination against the Roma continues, such pressure from the police is only going to provoke more anger and unmanageable criminality. (Unpublished ms.: n.d.).

According to a World Bank report,

poverty among Roma is complex and multidimensional, and is related to a broad range of factors, including poor health and educational status, limited chances in the labor market as well discrimination and unique aspects of the social organization of the Roma society, which together contribute to their exclusion (2000: v).

From this and other reports, it appears then, that the social status of the Roma in Turkey are not much different from their counterparts elsewhere in the world, except that, as one would expect from a dictum found in all basic sociology textbooks, “being poor in a low income country is much worse than being poor in a middle or high income country.”²²

Unlike the more vocal groups here (such as the Kurds), Turkish Roma themselves – very

²¹ For the importance of Sulukule musicians in İstanbul and Roma music in general, see Melih Duygulu, 2006.

²² See for example: Macionis and Plummer, 2005.

conscious of their lack of status, prestige and money, and the absence of solidarity and affinity with the rest of society – have inadvertently stayed in the background, becoming, unfortunately, a part of what marginalized them in the first place. We have heard from young Sulukuleans and one of the local headmen, that many young Roma do not even possess identity cards which are crucial to simple existence in Turkey and that they do not dare go beyond the confines of their neighborhood for a lifetime.

A united front?

Marushiakova and Popov (2006) referring to Bulgaria point out that the “Roma issue” has become increasingly topical, and many foundations and NGOs have launched programs and supportive projects that are oriented towards Romani communities, in addition to organizations by the Roma themselves. Parallel with other Roma in East European countries, upon the announcement by the Municipality of the coming forced dislocation in Sulukule, a few of the younger musicians, a former owner of one of the Entertainment Houses and his extended family got together to establish an association to resist demolition of the historical neighborhood. This time solidarity would be for the protection of the community of Sulukule rather than helping individuals in need. They also stressed the importance of their culture, the head of the association, Mr. Pündük said, “No matter what they do, we will never forgo our culture. We have been living here for centuries. Our ancestors are buried here. We grew up, went to school and got married here. We have a beautiful culture and will never give it up.” Others, particularly some famous musicians, among them Mr. Şener, for instance, pointed out to the historical importance of Sulukule culture and commented: “no matter what part of the world I travel to, I will always come back Sulukule to join my relatives and ancestors. I love Sulukule.” A retired shoemaker, on the other hand, described his sentiment as “I am in love with Sulukule,” a statement which sounded strange even to our Turkish ears. Most of the time however, such enthusiastic endorsement of the neighborhood, accompanied statements by those who had metamorphosed into an Islamic identity and attire, that presently Sulukule had become “degenerate” and “dirty” and needed to be “cleaned up.” Hence there was a split in the community with regard to the plans of the Fatih Municipality for “renewal.” For others, however,

more at peace with being Romani, the love affair with the neighborhood and culture, a longing for the wonderful times past when the Entertainment Houses were open and everyone had a basic minimum assured income was their model of the “good future.”

Those nouveaux riche and the Islamically oriented residents of the neighborhood, who viewed the present Sulukule as “filthy and amoral,” could not wait to see the older parts of the neighborhood inhabited by Roma destroyed. It turned out, however, that in some of these cases, the impending demolition did not include the individuals’ own house or apartment building. Some, like the small grill owner Mr. M., found the opposite to be the case in their particular situation and, eventually joined the opposition of the new Sulukule Association. In spite of divisions in the community concerning its “moral status” and mutual likes and dislikes of families, Sulukuleans in general and in the past year or so developed what has been called “intra-community solidarity”²³ of at least a group of residents when their very existence in this historical site became threatened.

In the process of negotiations with the local Municipality, those on the side of the Association and others who had joined them in the process, like the grocery-shop owner, Islamically oriented Mr. Asim, tried to explain to the mayor that this renewal process should not be so drastic as to stamp out traditional Romani culture, but just the opposite: it should try to enhance and assure the survival and enrichment of the old traditions, particularly the revival of the Entertainment Houses. Many of the Romani residents believed that they could and should continue to stay in the neighborhood, and that everyone would be perfectly legal and good citizens of the Republic if they had regular jobs based primarily in the entertainment industry like old times.

The intentions of the local Municipality, however, were quite different: they hoped that the Entertainment Houses would never be opened, that the Romani musicians, singers and dancers, and the accompanying service sector would be totally driven out of the neighborhood and Sulukule acquire “new, impeccable morals based on Islam and the tourism industry.” In fact, one of the mottos of the local Municipality in this operation

²³ Mischek calls this “the first level of identity construction,” basing his argument on Marushiakova and Popov, 2006, p.158.

is ironically to build small “Ottoman-Style” housing. This “historical revival,” according to the Municipality, would also include the main avenue (Kaleboyu caddesi) by the city walls and its immediate vicinity where other tourist attractions would be constructed, totally overlooking the fact that the Romani Entertainment Houses would be the greatest tourist attraction of all.

In the beginning, the Municipality disregarded the wishes and the demands of Sulukulean Roma and forced them, as many Romani residents put it, to “buy the houses they already own,” and left those who do not own but rent their homes to go homeless, which in turn would fulfill the Municipality’s aim of cleansing Sulukule of its Romani residents. As one of the Romani leaders protesting the demolition in Sulukule described it, “this is a renewal not of the housing so much as of the residents.”²⁴ By the late summer in 2006 news came that some of the “prospective houses” were already sold to interested parties such as journalists, civil servants working in the local and metropolitan municipalities, and a few private companies. The realization of this strategy of the Municipality would further reinforce the “othering” of Sulukule Roma and eventually contribute to even greater “exclusion-poverty vicious circle”, except, perhaps, for a few musicians who are famous not only in İstanbul but in the rest of Turkey, as well as in some European countries.

On July 13, 2006, the new Sulukule association held a press conference along the famous city walls voicing their opposition, which they declared to the national press in Turkey in front of TV cameras. Women, who rarely share the public space with men, came in front of the cameras with their babies to voice their destitution, anger and opposition to the Municipality plans. Young girls shouted in unison, “if you do not raise your voice now, it will be your turn the next time.” And last but not the least they repeatedly asked us, on every visit, to intervene on their behalf, to find them lawyers, architects and talk the Municipality out of their plans. Occasionally we got caught in the tide, and found ourselves attending some of the informal meetings of the potential association in teahouses or trying to convince our lawyer friends

to take power of attorney of the association or individual Sulukuleans to sue the Municipality.

What the Sulukuleans wanted from the Municipality was a sustainable improvement and an amelioration of their living standards, not the razing of their homes. Although in general a subdued and repressed group afraid of raising their voices to any authority, now in the throes of being evicted by force they demanded their rights and shouted them out loud to us as researchers, but also to the curious journalists and members of the Municipality. Normally afraid of speaking in front of any microphone or a tape, many, especially women, were very vocal in voicing their outrage to their eviction. Many first pleaded then argued with the local mayor in meetings held at the Municipality, some left the meeting in anger, shouting at the authorities, saying they had been fooled by the Municipality more than once. “How can I pay for a house when I cannot even feed my family?” shouted one man while a women living on an incredibly small retirement income asked if the mayor would like to exchange places with her. The most dispossessed of all families in Sulukule, living on the margins of the margin, at least at that time felt they had nothing to lose, though they were not so eager to join to newly forming association. Many men, on the other hand, stood by Mr. Pündük (the head of the association) more formally as a member of the new association read the statement of the Roma residents of Sulukule opposing the demolition.

Houses along the historical Kaleboyu avenue, mostly former Entertainment Houses, now rented out to very poor Roma, some who came as migrants from areas in the Southeast in the early 1990s, have not been able to pay their rents. Owners, Mr. Pündük among them, explained to us that they have given up collecting monthly rents, and when the Municipality cut the running water in these houses because the tenants could not pay even the monthly water bills, they helped the residents carry water from the public fountain on the main avenue.

When the Municipality saw the great interest the district provoked in İstanbul among the intelligentsia – as well as in Europe²⁵ – it became slightly more responsive to the demands of the residents. Though it continued to bargain to buy

²⁴Mr. Pündük, head of the new local Romani association, implying that the Roma would be evicted out of their traditional homes by force.

²⁵ A variety of people from Eastern European universities came to visit the area as well as top-level representatives of the European Roma Rights Centre.

some of the houses from their backs, it professed to have altered its plans slightly to include a cultural centre where music and dance would be taught to the residents, which can only be a minimal part of what the traditional Romani residents there want. On May 17, 2007, a roundtable meeting on Sulukule brought together the stakeholders, local and İstanbul NGOs, a UN reporter from the commission on forced evictions, academics, and students from Turkey and the University of College, London, held by the “İstanbul, World City 2010” Commission. In the presence of all these people, the advisor to the mayor, Mustafa Çiftçi, said “we will negotiate and do this project together.” However, a pilot research on site, two weeks later, conducted by the Accessible Life Association showed that some home owners, without the knowledge of their tenants, had already negotiated with the Municipality and sold 102 of the 120 houses (immediately awaiting demolition) in Sulukule, to journalists, bureaucrats in the Municipality, some private companies and related persons.

The association along with the aid of some NGOs in İstanbul took the Municipality’s renewal plan to court and is currently awaiting its decision. We brought documentary filmmakers to the neighborhood to get them interested in the fight of Sulukuleans for right to their traditional place and space.²⁶ Painters came to encourage women to draw pictures of their neighborhood while they also narrated their life story. Such minor informal interventions eventually took a larger turn, when several NGOs dealing with Roma, minorities, and human settlements, and a chamber of architects decided to collaborate with the Sulukule Roma to conduct a long festival, called “40 days and 40 nights in Sulukule.”²⁷ Such events would include concerts by local Romani musicians, painting exhibitions, panel discussions and conferences on the streets in Sulukule or in the universities and one film festival showing Turkish and European films made about Roma.

Conclusion

Being an İstanbulite carries special associations and assumed privileges in the eyes of

most people living in Turkey: being sophisticated, cool, educated, well-informed, open to change, global, degenerate, knowing the taste of worldly pleasures as well as sorrows, being modern and postmodern simultaneously, and, finally, being close to the West and/or Europe, in spirit, as well as in physical distance.

Sometimes referred to as “the first international minority in Europe” (Asseo, 2004, 144), Roma, whose population in the city of İstanbul is not insignificant, yet proportionately quite small compared to other ethnic groups, are not considered in conjunction with any of the positive notions about İstanbulites in the eyes of the public. Being the underclass and the underdog in this city as well as elsewhere in the country, their ways of life, culture, and social relations are (ironically) seen as being both tangential to the cosmopolitan metropolis as well as a simultaneous threat to “civilized, globalized” city life. This, in spite of the fact that the majority live at the margins of the margin, can rarely, if ever, make their voices heard. Though in the past decade several Romani associations were established in Turkey, none of these included any members of the Sulukule Roma community whose second ever association was closed down along with their Entertainment Houses back in the 1990s.

As a sequel to that, like Diogenes, Sulukuleans had not asked to be seen or heard, but just to be left alone. They knew that as new mayors and city administrators come and go, they will make ambitious Hausmannesque plans for the city, and that they were likely to be seen as a nuisance to “clean, civilized, orderly urban way of life.” Thus Romani neighborhoods were demolished to make room for big freeways or small highways, to build skyscrapers for global companies, or to settle the newly rising middle classes or even to “enrich the touristic potential” of the city. In recent history of the past 70 to 100 years or so, the Roma in Sulukule were never asked for their opinion of what they thought of plans directly concerning them.

The Roma in Eastern and Central Europe may be recuperating slightly since their economic downfall in the 1990s; the Roma in Sulukule, however, are still awaiting their life sentence: Either they will be thrown out of their current homes, most of them onto the streets, or they will get to keep the houses they already own or rent. The first means a metaphoric “death sentence,” for who can live on the streets, feed their stomachs and look after their children simultaneously? The

²⁶ Though we were not able to persuade the more well-known film makers to make a documentary, eventually amateur documentaries were made and circulated through YouTube (April 2007).

²⁷ A traditional and mythic time period for certain festivals and ritual entertainments in Anatolia.

second decision, on the other hand, will mean more of the same, in other words, the continuation of the old life on the brink of existence.

As we have pointed out and research conducted in already gentrified areas in İstanbul has shown “renewal and amelioration” of urban services benefits a certain class of society and a small group of people contributing to increasing and deepening of inequalities (Şen, 2005: 106). Gentrification generally supported by urban planners and administrators as being the savior of the inner city, run-down neighborhoods, which are thus “cleansed” of poor and peripheral groups, in fact, has the consequence of reproducing and increasing marginalization of the dislocated groups.

The latest “renewal” and “regeneration” project for Sulukule presented, on the one hand, a catastrophic threat to the residents, but it also had the unintentional consequence of bringing at least some members of the community together, the planting of the seeds for a new local organization, bringing İstanbul and European NGOs to Sulukule and last but not the least, for the first time in many years gave Roma residents here a sense of empowerment. It also gave them a chance to communicate with journalists, intellectuals, activists, and lawyers from different parts of the world and come to question the “destiny” imposed upon them by the authorities. *Ceteris paribus*, if they can hold unto life in their historical neighborhood, **they** believe there is still hope. The sense of togetherness, chains and circles of reciprocal help, and the cognizance of having fought for their historic place of belonging should also give them a greater awareness of citizenship rights.

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