Return to Izmir

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Five years to the week after I had first arrived in Izmir to teach, I returned there. Both the city and I had changed in that interval. Some of the ancient ways of Izmir seemed to have disappeared. Boy ragpickers, bent under huge loads of scavenged materials, had once fought viciously with other boys to protect their territories – but I never saw those fights in 1976. Twice I saw women driving cars. The tight martial law had been eased, the curfew lifted, the soldiers on street corners now smoked idly.

I had married the young Greek man I had met in 1971 in Izmir. After Thanos and I were married in Argos on the Peloponnese, UMUC (that is, Joe Arden) sent us together to my assignments in Scotland and Germany. From there our futures diverged. He went to chef school; I worked on my dissertation; eventually we divorced. Needing work, missing my old job, I decided to return to Europe and discovered that my first assignment would be Izmir.

This time I stayed put at the Kordon Hotel on the waterfront that served as the BOQ. (I am guessing it is rubble today.) The view was picturesque, but untreated sewage went straight into the bay. To see the same scenes of this very far-off place five years later – while still in my twenties -- unnerved me. I was divorced and I was all-but-dissertation, and both designations were bothering me when I first arrived. But it was in this year of courses, beginning in Izmir, that I really grasped the themes that I committed to teaching over decades to come.

I had a student in my English composition class who was launching himself into college with trepidation. In response to an assignment about a challenge, he wrote about his high school experience in his hometown in South Carolina. Happy in his segregated high school, he found himself having to board a bus with a dozen other African American eleventh graders for a court-mandated integration of the white high school. Everything he'd looked forward to, especially in sports, was spoiled; he was shunned in his new school, he wrote, and worst of all were his cruel teachers. He'd barely graduated. Now he was an airman. He concluded by observing that the Air Force too seemed full of racial prejudice.

I held a kind of office hours at a table in the corner of the lounge and bar in the hotel. It was not ideal, but evenings suited students' work schedules. I met this student there at the Kordon Hotel, even though he was an airman, not an officer. I had met with a dozen other students there also, at a table by the door, to explain my critiques and offer suggestions. It was this student, the only person of color in my class, who was asked to leave the premises by an aggressive major with a Texas accent who'd had too much to drink.

I gave up my "office hours" site altogether and made do with written encouragement and a few moments after class. I trust that my student found a way to negotiate a hard world and to keep nurturing his own talents. I could see he had made a commitment to his future. I made a new effort with myself. The anxieties I arrived with began to seem irrelevant. I had plenty of work to do. I remembered the satisfying conversations I had had in Germany in 1972 with Gastarbeiters, since then I spoke more Turkish than German, and I found a friend, Nilgen, to tutor me. At that great distance from my old life, both the past and the future seemed out of my hands. I was pushed into the present, with its good effects.

Over time, teaching American history, I observed many issues of race relations in the classroom, particularly in the police forces I taught for several years. I gravitated to teaching recent American history courses both in person and then online. In each class I asked for an investigation of civil rights issues in a town of the student's choosing, running from the sixties up through the present. Many local histories edited out controversy or concluded their story shortly after their founding. Students had to search and to interview people to find the story of what was often a dramatic and fraught era. My conviction that history is a good teacher was confirmed time and again, as I read the accounts of housing issues and school closings.

I found the books for my first upper-level course, taught in 1973 in Zweibrucken, and on my bookmark torn from a yellow pad I had written my goals for a writing assignment, another one I stayed with for the decades I was with Maryland. I asked that each student interview a veteran of a war. Of course, many of the students were themselves veterans, usually of the Vietnam War. It was not difficult there to find veterans of Korea, nor even of World War II. My goals for the assignment were to develop interviewing skills of earnest listening and open-ended questions, to create an essay around a theme, and to incorporate their interview into the historical context. I received many hours of moving reading over the years. If stateside students said they did not know any veterans, I suggested a visit to Walter Reed.

These two writing assignments had in common the history that is in plain sight that most of us are passing by unawares. The subjects of racism and of the sacrifices entailed by war emerged as key themes in American history out of my classes as a gypsy scholar, but also I developed the conviction that history-seeking can be taught, by practicing both empathy and detachment. Probably the challenging police classes put these principles to the test most, yet

one of the most gratifying classes I ever taught was to Vietnam veterans on the Montgomery County police force called “Writing About Vietnam,” in the 1980s.

A last comment about my years working in Europe – I developed a taste for being responsible for encouraging others, and for delving into cultures, trying to understand how they worked. These tastes emphatically set the tone of the jobs I took, and they made me into the kind of historian I am. Today that’s how I spend my time, in research and writing, with hope for more travel in the future. It’s been a pleasure to think back to the early days – thanks for the opportunity!