

Kreuzberg is

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It must be a favorite in-house joke for the Germans, although it doesn't make much sense to me. I frequently meet Germans who ask me "guess, which city in Europe has the highest number of Turks living in it after Istanbul?" The first time I heard this, I replied "Edirne", the biggest city in Thrace. A German friend looked at me in despair. I was supposed to say Berlin. Berlin? Yes. The capital of Germany that has a Turkish population of over 200,000 persons, with one of its neighborhoods, Kreuzberg, dubbed "little Istanbul", a long time ago.

I myself, as an Istanbul -ok, let's say this in German too- *eine Istanbulerin*, would never even think of calling Kreuzberg little Istanbul. Given the make-up of its people, their mentality and their style of urban life, I would rather call Kreuzberg "little Anatolia". When I make this observation, I do not want to judge it as better or worse than (my) Istanbul; it is just different. Simply different.

Do you already think I am much too picky in my preferences, in terms of expressing myself? But I really believe that when speaking of Kreuzberg one must be hypersensitive. The place is like a double-edged knife, as most Turks would let



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you know. And the most undesirable position for me, your humble author of these lines, is to be considered on the side of the anti-Kreuzberg crowd. Oh, yes, I am not exaggerating, there are anti-Kreuzberg people, and you

find them everywhere. Really, everywhere. Anna, a German Kreuzberger, told me a story once: Last year during her visit to Izmir, the nice city on the Aegean-coast, she met a German family who had settled down there. You know how it is when you are abroad, even if it is for holidays. When you meet people from back home you consider this a gift, you warm up to them.

You start talking. So Anna started talking as well. A few minutes later, the woman asked her where she lived in Berlin. "In Kreuzberg" she answered: The woman was shocked. "Kreuzberg? But, the *abschaum* live there." You don't need to look up the meaning of the word. As a Kreuzberg-lover myself and although I am not crazy about doing it, I will grudgingly translate it for you. It means: Dregs.

Last year, my husband and I went to a farewell-party at a friend's friend's house in "east" Berlin. Although the wall has fallen down, everybody in "west" Berlin still calls the other part "east" and those who live there are *Ausländer*, foreigners. But we are *Ausländer*, too. And as *Ausländer*, foreigners I mean, it is dangerous, sometimes even fatal for us to go to east Berlin, the *Ausländer*-inhabited part of the city. I mean, we

in Germany_

don't go east unless we have to. Sure you heard of the brutal skinhead attacks in the east. Anyway, the party was thrown by a very good friend of mine, a Korean girl, who was returning to Korea for good after having finished her studies here. You see, we really had to go. There we met easterners who asked us where we lived. Upon hearing our answer, one of them said, "it must be exciting to be living in Kreuzberg, it is full of action there. Every 1st of May I watch in the news how these guys over there fight with the police in Kreuzberg." And he added that he has never been to Kreuzberg although he is a Berliner. Not even once.

I should also add that what I call the anti-Kreuzberg crowd are not all Germans. There are plenty of Turks as well among them. They are those Turks who live in other parts of town in order to "protect their children from the Kreuzberger children and to make them learn German". These people come once a week to Kreuzberg, just to do their shopping and then go back immediately. They all come because the best groceries in town are in Kreuzberg where you find whatever you fancy; Gemlik-olives, feta-cheese, cabbage-pickle, and the butchers sell *halal* meat.



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Kreuzberg but the wonderful Turkish cuisine is represented here with just the "döner-kebab" which you can buy in a sandwich for 2 Euro. In some restaurants, they serve other kinds of kebabs, like "Adana", hot minced-meat sticks, and "shish", spicy meat pieces. But you will not find the specialties of our more refined cuisine such as "*zeytinyağlı enginar*", (artichokes prepared

with olive-oil) or "*patlıcan dolması*" (aubergines filled with a spicy meat-onion and rice mix).

Speaking of Turkish cuisine in Berlin I must draw the reader's attention to a so-called "esnaf lokantası" (shopkeepers' restaurant), "Demirel's", a restaurant that does not serve alcohol and that is open only at day-time on the Görlitzer Bahnhof. Located near the Görlitzer subway-station, this restaurant serves well prepared but primitive Turkish food at a reasonable price, but you don't get any cold dishes prepared with olive-oil.

No wonder the doctor's offices are filled with Turkish patients in and around Kreuzberg and almost more than half of the Turkish people are over-weight. A friend of mine from Ankara came to visit us a few months ago. Seeing those Turks on the streets, he said, "if they remained in Anatolia,

they wouldn't be such ugly fatsos." I think this is right in one sense: The *Gastarbeiter* generation came here to earn as much as they can in as short a period of time as possible and go back. Their aspirations being limited to a new tractor or a piece of land in the village, they barely spent money on healthy food or chic clothes. Thirty years later they found themselves settled down in Germany instead of sitting at the driver's seat of a brand-new tractor, tilling their land. But the habits of many decades can not be shed from one day to the other. Therefore, they still eat cheap margarine, home made white-flour baked delicacies and tinned food and save money. They don't save for a rainy day, either. They save to buy expensive cars to show them off to uncles or mothers during summer vacations in the motherland. They save to buy apartments in the suburbs of the big cities in Turkey. As I already said, old habits die hard and the first generation is stuck with them.

But this arrogance of motherland Turks, like my friend from Ankara, towards the immigrant Turks here makes me as sick as the huge car of an immigrant cleaning-lady. Almost three years ago, when I was visiting a German language-course I met a Japanese in one of the classes. At break-time, she asked me if I was Turkish. "Yes," I said. "Did you come recently?" "Yes." "To study here?" "Yes." "I see." It was now my turn to ask what she did see. "You are different from the other Turks here in Berlin: you don't wear a headscarf, you



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are tall and your skin is white." I said, "so are the Turks actually. They are all different from each other". "My Turkish friend Banu, who also came to Germany to study, said that the Turks here, the immigrants I mean, are different, because the ones who had immigrated were the poorest, uneducated and the unemployed ones in Turkey."

You may think that what Banu said to her Japanese friend is part of the truth, or even the truth itself, but if you live in Kreuzberg long enough you start to recognize how harmful it is not to distinguish between persons, not to notice the differences, the nuances in

fact, among these immigrants. It is true that with their gray headscarves, brown-mantels, black-moustaches, thick, and short bodies, penguin-like walks they almost seem to be identical at first glance. Yet they are not. If you take the time to get to know them, you start hearing their mostly dramatic stories and learn to understand their odd language.

Before telling you one of these tragic stories, I better explain what I call "odd language". Having migrated from the rural regions of Turkey in the late 60s, many immigrants did not know how to use some words or expressions that we use in daily-urban-Turkish like, "to make an appointment" or "contraceptive pills". They heard them for the first time in Germany, so in some cases mixed them with Turkish: *krank'a çıkmak* (be on sick-leave), *Vertrag yapmak* (sign a contract), *Termin yapmak* (to make an appointment) are beautiful examples of this phenomenon. In some other cases they borrowed words from German and used them while speaking Turkish: Dill (dill), Schwester (nurse), Soße (sauce), Eis (ice-cream), Pille (contraceptive pills) or U-Bahn (subway).

Döndü, a retired first generation immigrant woman, spoke to me using these words. She was the neighbor of a friend. I don't remember why but one evening we went to her apartment. Döndü made us dough-rolls with spinach and we had tea together. You know how the Mediterranean folks are; they become sincere friends within hours. It didn't take long with Döndü either. She started telling us how she's been trying to keep her head above

water after 40 years of work in factories. Her pension wasn't enough. "But certainly you have investments in Turkey: apartments, houses maybe. You have, don't you?" said I. "My husband took everything I owned, divorced me and married a younger woman." Although she was talking about hard facts of her own life she did not seem to get upset. Her attitude tickled my curiosity. "But how?" "He let me sign some papers, took the apartments in Istanbul, a house in our village and divorced me. All with those papers." "Then why did you sign them?" "I am illiterate, girl. I didn't know what was written on them." Döndü tried to learn to read and write, "but," she says "after working 8 hours a day, it was impossible. I was so tired, and the children were home all alone. Their father was always at a Men's Café playing cards." She couldn't learn German either, which causes further problems for her.

According to Federal records there are 4 million illiterates in Germany, and there is now a real effort to bring this to an end. Nurcan, a second-generation social worker, is working with illiterate women from Turkey. She visits them in their places three days a week, two hours each day and tries to teach them how to read and write. She also accompanies them if they have to go to administrative offices, where they need a translator. Yet, Nurcan is not satisfied with the results. "They don't even try. Instead, they tell me their problems with their husbands or mother-in-laws. They never do their homework, and they don't concentrate. I visit them at their homes,



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but their homes are not the best places to hold class. We barely start studying and the baby begins to cry or the older one comes home from school. I know that we don't have an alternative. If it was a proper course taught outside their places, say at a school, they wouldn't come."

Somebody once said that half of the Turks are social workers and the other half are in need of one. This is a coarse joke, and has nothing to do with reality. Not any more at least. You see more and more nameplates of lawyers, doctors, architects and engineers on the streets of Kreuzberg with Turkish names. They are just a tiny minority

among others but they are there. And what about the moustached owner of the small döner kebab stand at the corner? He may be stinking of grease, but that has become his wife's problem. He's got cash and a lot of it

too. The döner-industry, with stands, restaurants and döner-factories all over Germany, has a turnover of EURO 1.8 billion a year (1996 data). 200 Tons of döner kebab are sold daily in Germany, 25 Tons in Berlin alone. No wonder many private phone-companies and beyond them German-Telecom have Turkish info-lines and the biggest car-companies are advertising in small, local-Turkish tv-channels.

Henceforth the immigrants, at least some of them, have spending-power. And our latest success story here in Kreuzberg has something to do with our spending power: the waiters and waitresses at Café Bateau Ivre at Heinrich-Platz were unwilling to serve us, the Turks, for reasons that nobody knew. We realized it last summer, when we had to wait for hours to get a cup of coffee, while the Germans were getting their orders in minutes. What these waiters and waitresses didn't know was that, the café-going Turks are like a clan and the news spread quickly. We boycotted the café! It didn't take long. Now, among the German-papers at Café Bateau you find a Turkish-daily. Everyday. And we are served as fast as the others.

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