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# Remembering Smyrna/Izmir

## *Shared History, Shared Trauma*

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This article uses the oral history narrative of an elderly Smyrniote/Izmirian woman born in 1915 to interpret memories of war and violence in the context of contemporary debates on history, memory and identity in the public sphere in Turkey. In narrating the occupation and burning of Izmir and the aftermath of the Greco-Turkish war, Gülfem Iren makes recourse to two different and seemingly contradictory discourses: the Turkish nationalist discourse, which attempts to account for the violence, including its silencing afterwards; and a local Izmirian discourse, which empathizes with the losers, those forced into exile—or worse—as a result of the war. The emphasis on the Izmirian discourse in the narrative demonstrates the joint effects of nostalgic cultural representations of the past and acrimonious and increasingly divisive debates on the history of the establishment of the Turkish Republic in Turkey today.

### INTRODUCTION

In this article, I analyze the oral history narrative of a Smyrniote/Izmirian woman born in 1915 who witnessed as a child events central to the establishment of modern Turkey—the symbolic meaning of which continues to resonate in the present—including the occupation and burning of Smyrna/Izmir and the lesser-known burning of Manisa. In contrast with the complex and contradictory ways these events were experienced by individuals, there is no room for ambiguity in their depiction in Greek or Turkish national history, which mirror one another.<sup>1</sup> While the Asia Minor “disaster” is mourned in Greece, it is the “liberation” of Izmir that is commemorated in Turkey.<sup>2</sup>

The memories of Gülfem Kaatçılar Iren are of historical value as few individuals of her generation and background remain alive today. Analyzing the ways Iren remembers the past in the present also contributes to contemporary debates on history, memory and identity in Turkey. As I show below, Gülfem Iren's narrative includes two seemingly contradictory discourses. One is Turkish nationalist discourse, which Iren refers to in order to account for the violence perpetrated in Izmir, including the silencing of its memory. The other is an Izmirian discourse, which allows her to remember the shared history and trauma experienced by the natives of the city, and to make a plea for taking responsibility for the wrongs committed in the past.

Turkish nationalism has its origins in the late Ottoman period, when continual defeat in war and loss of territory resulted in a sense of victimhood and fear of colonization. As the Ottoman Empire fell apart, the ruling Committee of Union and Progress strove to build a new basis for belonging based on an imagined Turkic ethnic identity, the Turkish language and Muslim origin.<sup>3</sup> During the late nineteenth century, the loss of Ottoman provinces resulted in a flood of Muslim refugees into Asia Minor.<sup>4</sup> The ideology of Turkish nationalism redefined Ottoman Christian and Jewish subjects as outsiders, and the ruling elite planned to settle Muslim immigrants on the property of Ottoman Christians, whose so-called relocation (*tehcir*) would be justified vis-à-vis the threat of Armenian nationalism.<sup>5</sup> At the end of World War I, what remained of the Ottoman Empire was occupied by the Allies. With the support of the British, the Greek army invaded Izmir in 1919. It was the resistance initiated by the charismatic Mustafa Kemal, an official in the Ottoman army, who defied both the Ottoman Sultan and the Europeans, that would turn the tide. After a long and bloody battle, the *Kuvayi Milliye* (nationalist forces) won the war on several fronts: against the Greeks in the west, the Russians and Armenians in the east, and the French in the south. This was not only a fight against foreign occupation: it also took the form of internecine warfare. Christian Ottoman subjects were caught between communities to which they belonged by residence and citizenship and those to which they belonged by faith. While mobilized by the Ottoman army, some deserted to join the forces fighting the Ottomans.<sup>6</sup>

Although Mustafa Kemal's forces won the battle against colonization, the sense of inferiority vis-à-vis Europeans could not be easily overcome.

The Turkish Republic, established in 1923, necessitated a new national history. The population now resident in Asia Minor—many of whom were recent immigrants—was conceptualized as a homogeneous group with a shared history, ethnic/religious identity and language.<sup>7</sup> The Greek and Turkish state agreed to a population exchange in which the remaining Greek-Orthodox population of Asia Minor would be exchanged with Muslims from Greece.<sup>8</sup> In fact, an ideology predicated on faith was not enough to compensate for the loss of one's native land and way of life, and immigrants in both Greece and Turkey felt like and were treated as outsiders for generations.<sup>9</sup> Under the Turkish Republic, most members of remaining Christian and Jewish communities were either forced or felt compelled to leave due to a variety of discriminatory policies and actions.<sup>10</sup> The modernist project of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was enforced in ways that left little room for opposition. Resistance, whether originating from within the ruling elite, the religious right, the Kurds or the left, was crushed. Despite the turn to multiparty politics in the 1950s, democracy was curtailed by several military coups, most recently on September 12, 1980. Since the emergence of an armed struggle for Kurdish independence in the early 1980s, Turkish nationalism has been challenged—and redefined—by Kurdish nationalism, an ideology that developed in part as a reaction to the Turkish state policy of assimilation.<sup>11</sup>

Since the 1980s, Turkey's incorporation into the circuits of global capital has been accompanied by a new discourse of the self and the emergence of identity politics.<sup>12</sup> The rediscovery of silenced ethnic and religious identities influenced by the experiences of immigrants and refugees from Turkey in Europe, the violence between the Turkish state and the Kurdish nationalist movement (with its heavy toll on fighters and civilians, both physical and emotional), Turkish-Greek rapprochement, the debate over Turkey's application for entry into the European Union, the electoral success of the religious right, increasing tension between the ruling Islamists and the secularists dominating the army, state bureaucracy and the urban educated middle class, and the rise of private and powerful mass media, are among the factors that have resulted in a highly politicized and emotional debate in the public sphere on the history of the establishment of the Turkish Republic and the bases of belonging in Turkey.<sup>13</sup>

I believe that this debate accounts in part for the predominance of the Izmirian discourse in Gülfem İren's narrative. How to explain

these seemingly contradictory discourses in Iren's narrative? These two discourses—the Izmirian and the nationalist—coexist because they together frame her identity. Iren attended public schools in the new Turkish Republic and imbibed Kemalist values which were at their height during her youth. But she also grew up with stories about the past told by her mother, grandfather and elder sister. She was surrounded by family heirlooms and socialized with members of her extended family and other bourgeois families, including the remaining families of European descent. Most importantly, the context in which Iren remembered the past, a present marked by soul-searching about identity and nostalgia for an imagined cosmopolitan past, just as the historical skeletons in Turkey's closet were beginning to spill out, resulted in a particular emphasis on the Izmirian discourse in her narrative.

Gülfem Iren's oral history narrative suggests that Turkey is at a crossroads. On the one hand, preexisting divisions and conflicts in society are becoming more apparent and even potentially irreconcilable. On the other hand, the necessity of confronting and discussing these differences in the public sphere has pushed society's insufficient democratic institutions to their limit. Memory studies can make an important contribution to research on post-Ottoman domains by reminding us that the historical legacy of countries like Turkey rests on nationalist violence perpetrated by states whose subjects have inherited a rich cultural habitus that continues to find expression within families, in everyday life, and interpersonal networks.

#### THE LIFE-HISTORY NARRATIVE OF GÜLFEM KAATÇILAR IREN

##### Origins

Gülfem Kaatçılar Iren was born in 1915. The last child of a large family, she grew up with stories of her family's illustrious days in better times. I met her through a mutual acquaintance, and she was eager to share her knowledge of Izmir with me. Despite her increasing physical frailty, Iren remains lucid and articulate, and, through extensive conversations over four meetings between 2001 and 2003, she recounted her life story, focusing in particular on her childhood and girlhood memories.<sup>14</sup> As a consequence

of our work together, she decided to write her autobiography, which she published at the age of 89.<sup>15</sup>

Gülfem Iren's family story needs to be understood in the context of Izmir in the nineteenth century, when this port city dominated the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>16</sup> Its population included families of European descent (*Levanten*), Muslims, Greek Orthodox (*Rum*), Armenians and Jews, among others. In the late Ottoman period, Izmir developed an urban identity which transcended the boundaries of its various ethnic-religious communities.<sup>17</sup> Iren describes a shared habitus:

They named Izmir “*Gavur Izmir*.”<sup>18</sup> In Izmir, Muslims lived within a *Levanten* world. My grandfather was educated in Al-Azhar in Egypt but he read books in English and French, played the piano, rode horses. In the Izmirian dialect, nouns commonly derive from Greek, Italian or French. For example, an oval serving plate is known as *piyate*. A fork is *peron*, an apron, *prostela*. The cuisine of Izmir is mainly Greek and Armenian.

Iren makes a distinction between Izmir and Istanbul, the Ottoman capital. According to her, Izmir was more *alafranga* (Frenchified) and more autonomous. There is a tone of defiance in her voice as she compares the two great cities:

We are really different because Izmir was a cosmopolitan place. It is not like Istanbul. Istanbul means the traditions of the Ottoman Empire. In Izmir, Muslims are within a *Levanten* lifestyle. So in Izmir, you do not kiss the hem of the Sultan or the Pasha. There is hand-shaking and doffing your hat.

On her father's side, Iren belongs to the locally renowned Katipzade family. Today, she is the oldest member of a foundation (*vakıf*) established by her family in Ottoman times. She claims that the building now used as the residence of the governor in the Konak area was built for her forebears. Her family is mentioned in histories of the city.<sup>19</sup> The Katipzade family descends from a local magnate (*ayan*) executed by Sultan Mahmud II at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was Mahmud II who initiated the centralizing reforms aimed at wresting power from the hands

of regional notables. The many heirlooms in Iren's possession include a genealogy that traces the Katipzade family back to their murdered ancestor. It is from this central event in her family's history that Gülfem Iren's own relationship to the center of power, whether Ottoman or Republican, stems. According to Iren, the fact that his descent from this notable was recorded in her father's birth certificate suggests the control maintained by the state over provincial elites over generations. She makes it clear in her narrative that her kin had a regional identity independent of—and sometimes in conflict with—the capital.

Iren tells one of the most unusual stories I have heard about Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk). Iren's elder sister was educated in Europe and became one of the first women doctors of her generation. Iren, who was very close to her sister, recounts the encounter between her haughty sister and the savior of Izmir:

My sister returned to Turkey in 1925. The war of liberation had ended, Izmir lived with Atatürk. There was a reception at the governor's palace. The hat reform had just taken place.<sup>20</sup> My sister wore a hat she brought from Europe. They were introduced. My sister sat in an armchair, with her back to the window. Strolling in the garden, Atatürk came to the window and said, "Lady doctor, take off your hat." Turning around, my sister said, "If that is an order, no." "No," he says, "It is not an order. It is a request to see your beautiful eyes." "Then I will," she says and she does.

At a time when Mustafa Kemal was adulated and feared in equal measure, such behavior was surely unheard of. This incident demonstrates the ambivalent relationship of provincial elites with the central authority.

On her mother's side, Iren belongs to another well-known Izmirian family, the Sahipzade. As if speaking of the recent past, she casually states, "My mother is *Selçuklu*."<sup>21</sup> Originally from Erzurum in Eastern Anatolia, this family is said to have arrived in Izmir many generations ago by way of the city of Afyon in Western Anatolia. Whereas her father's family, the Katipzade, owned agricultural land, her mother's family were merchants and industrialists who also owned real estate. Iren's great-grandfather Mustafa Efendi owned land in the neighborhood destroyed by the fire.<sup>22</sup> Mustafa Efendi became wealthy by establishing three factories in Izmir:

a foundry, a factory that produced rose oil and one that produced silk thread. According to Iren, her mother gave her a candlestick produced in this foundry with the words, “Keep and cherish this product of our bloodline.” She claimed that partners in this venture included the Khedive of Egypt and a Greek Orthodox (*Rum*) merchant from Izmir.<sup>23</sup>

Iren spoke in detail about her maternal grandfather, Mehmet Şevki Bey, a fascinating man educated in a Jesuit school in France as well as at Al-Azhar in Cairo. Iren recounts how her grandfather, who earned the nickname “*Gavur Mehmet*” for his close relationship with Europeans, went to Al-Azhar in order to be recognized as a learned man in the Muslim tradition (*ulema*). She showed me the religious teacher’s headdress (*sarik*) that he used to wear above a European suit. Her description brings to mind the late Ottoman elite trying to find its way in a new world: “I believe he tried to be a European with the Europeans, and a Muslim with the Muslims. You might call him a Muslim dandy. I imagine him as an unhappy man.”

According to Iren, it was only in her father’s generation that members of the family took up professions. Her father became a lawyer, her uncle a doctor. This is how she describes her parents’ life:

Izmir was a very modern place. My mother was covered in the Muslim neighborhood, but when they went to the European neighborhood my father would say, “Please remove your veil.” There was a famous hotel of white marble called the Kramer Palace. Everyone would sit on the terrace in summer, there was music; a very snobbish setting. They would go there, drink beer together. My mother told me that my father would have her sit a little to the back with himself in front as if to give her some camouflage.

Women have historically symbolized Ottoman (and later Turkish) society’s attitudes toward societal change.<sup>24</sup> Iren’s description shows how women’s dress and behavior varied substantially by context, and that educated Ottoman men both promoted and expressed ambivalence about the visibility of Muslim women in the public sphere.



The occupation of Izmir (1919–22)

It is in occupied Izmir that Gülfem Iren formed her early memories. She was born into a comfortable, wealthy home in the suburban neighborhood of Karşıyaka dotted with summer residences. The family's home base was in the Muslim neighborhood in the city proper. Yet the fortunes of the family changed dramatically during the course of the occupation, the Greco-Turkish war, the burning of Izmir and its aftermath. During the war, most of the men in the family were mobilized, leaving the elderly, the women and the children to fend for themselves.<sup>25</sup>

As she was very young, Gülfem has few, brief memories of the occupation. One pleasant memory involves a visit to the European neighborhood. She remembers being allowed to choose earrings in a jewelry shop and being served lunch in her father's law office. Other memories are less pleasant. There is a scene she recalls in the marketplace in Karşıyaka where a man was killed with a bayonet for refusing to spit on the flag:

We got off the boat in Karşıyaka. There was a crowd in the marketplace. My mother held me by the hand. They were telling the Turk to spit on the flag. There was shouting and crowding and we couldn't get through and they killed the man for not spitting. I couldn't forget it for a very long time. There was a red flag on the ground and I remember the blue-and-white striped shirts the shopkeepers used to wear. I don't know who the Turk was. But I know they killed him.

Gülfem vaguely remembers her father arriving home at the time of the occupation, when what saved him were his local Greek (*Rum*) friends and his command of the Greek language: "My father spoke Greek well. When the Greeks arrived, it saved his life." At a time when "the ones who wore the fez" were being shot in the streets, her father's friends concealed him in their club, sending him home wearing a hat and accompanied by the club guard (*kavas*) whose blue uniform with gold stripes she still recalls. Such anecdotes provide evidence of networks based on friendship, co-residence, occupation, lifestyle and language which tied individuals from different communities to one another.

Two traumatic events marked İren's memory prior to the burning of İzmir: the death of her father during the occupation, and the burning of the town of Manisa by the retreating Greeks.

İren's father died before she was seven years old. It was in the spring of 1922, at a time when heavy fighting continued in Western Anatolia; fighting that would soon determine the outcome of the war. İren's father had traveled to Manisa where the family owned land. The occupation authorities required a permit (*laissez-passer*) for travel by train. Forced to walk back through the mountains on foot, her father became ill upon arrival, dying shortly thereafter of pneumonia. This early death was a terrible blow to the family. His wife was left at the age of forty with her children, her elderly father, her sister and her sister's children in an occupied city. During the course of our conversations, Gülfem reiterated again and again the sorrow she still felt for the loss of her father:

We could only live together until I was six and a half. That is why I still suffer from being fatherless. During holidays when everyone celebrated, I would cry. Sometimes I would hide behind a curtain or under a quilt, repeating to myself, "Father! Father!," listening to the sound of my own voice.

She initially blamed the occupying forces for her father's death: "When I was a child, they were my enemy. I used to say, 'They killed my father.' Later I said it was his fate, but I can never come to terms with my loss."

After her father's death, Gülfem's childhood was marked by a second disaster. It was late August, harvest time for grapes. Her father, who would have made the trip to the family properties, was dead. Her mother and aunt had no one to help them except their elderly father. Taking Gülfem, her aunt's two children and their black nanny along, the three adults traveled to Manisa.<sup>26</sup> There is in İren's possession a historic photo taken in the family garden for the permit they needed to travel by train. Anxiety clouds the faces of the adults in the frayed black-and-white photograph.

While at their estate outside Manisa, Gülfem's mother got an urgent message from her father to come back into town. The Greek army was on the retreat, destroying everything in its wake. Trying without success to get a permit to travel back to İzmir (the train only carried the wounded from the battlefield), the family stayed at the home of the Karaosmanoğlu

family, regional notables to whom they were related by marriage. During this time, the Karaosmanoğlu mansion was robbed by a local militia. Gülfem recalls how the bandits forced open the secret door behind which the women and children huddled in fear, and suggests that it was the Karaosmanoğlu family's Greek or Armenian servants that had betrayed their hiding place. She remembers the intruders destroying the flags the family was sewing in preparation for a hoped-for victory. As Manisa was torched by the Greeks, the townspeople fled to the hills. It was here that they would remain "for three days and three nights."<sup>27</sup>

Gülfem says she never recalls Manisa without a shudder. At the time, she was ill, burning with malarial fever. She remembers her thirst, the taste of the brackish water she was forced to drink, the inedible paste women made to pass for bread. But most of all she remembers the fear. The families hiding in the hills above Manisa lived in fear of being massacred:

After escaping the militia towards dawn, we climbed up a dry stream bed to hide in the hills. As we climbed, the city was burning, and we were lit by its light and warmed by its heat. It burned for three days and three nights. I saw the windowpanes of houses explode like bombs. Sacks of grapes stuck together, bubbling like jam. Dead cows and horses, balloons with their legs in the air. Ancient trees keeled over, their roots burning like logs. I did not forget these things. The heat, the hunger, the fear, the smell. After three days we saw the dust rise in the valley below. Turkish soldiers on horseback; we thought they were Greeks come to kill us in the hills. I remember three soldiers carrying green and red flags. People kissed the hooves of their horses, crying "Our saviors have come."

Once back in Manisa, Gülfem's grandfather asked the commander to give them protection on the way to Izmir. They traveled by ox cart among the soldiers. Iren has never forgotten this trip:

Coming from Manisa. Even today when I tell this story I am shivering. That same mountain road my father traveled on a year ago. We left at dawn, arriving in Bornova [a suburb of Izmir] by evening. A trip we could make in twenty minutes today. Imagine the tableau: An ox cart, and inside it an old gentleman in Islamic

headdress, two ladies, three children, and a black nanny. The road, strewn with goods, the corpses of humans and animals. The smell. In the month of September, traveling through the mountains, our heads and mouths covered. I saw a crucified body in front of a burnt building. I don't know if it was man, woman or girl, but at that age I saw that body.

The family was relieved to make it back home alive. However, Gülfem Iren told me that her cousin was terribly affected by the experience, and never quite recovered, dying young from mental illness. Gülfem too never forgot Manisa, but believes her strong ties to her mother and elder sister gave her the strength to overcome this trauma. It was soon after the family made it back to Izmir that, against all odds, and after a series of battles which took a heavy toll on both sides, the *Kuvayi Milliye* managed to defeat the Greeks, entering the city on September 9, 1922. When Mustafa Kemal arrived, he was given a hero's welcome.

#### The burning of Izmir

It was several days afterwards, on September 13, that Izmir began to burn. The circumstances in which the fire started remain a matter of contention. The wind carried the flames in the direction of the famous *Frenk* (European) part of town. By the time the fire had burned itself out several days later, this legendary neighborhood was completely destroyed. In the chaos that ensued, much violence took place. While those holding European passports were able to leave, Christian Ottoman subjects tried desperately to escape while the British watched and local Muslims settled their scores.<sup>28</sup>

Iren remembers her grandfather taking the children to watch the fire from across the bay in Karşıyaka:

It was a couple days after we arrived from Manisa. They said, "Izmir is burning." My grandfather took us three children. We went to the shore. All together, we watched the city burn. Red flames arose out of the black-and-white smoke. My grandfather climbed upon a rock. He watched for a very long time. When he saw the fire cross over into our property, he climbed down. "Bless you," he said, "What

can we do? That's gone now too." My grandfather patted our heads. "Thank God we are alive," he said.

When I asked her how she had felt at the time, Iren replied: "I felt nothing. For I had lived it already. We burned in Manisa. People accepted the fire, they accepted the dying as well as the killing. I felt nothing. It was only afterwards that I realized what it meant. This was my childhood." When the question of responsibility came up in our conversation, Gülfem Iren began to debate the issue with herself as well as with me: "You are asking me who burnt Izmir. There are three answers. The Armenians burnt Izmir. The retreating Greeks burnt Izmir. The Turks burnt Izmir."

The national histories of Greece and Turkey raise no doubt about the culprit: according to Greek (and Armenian) history, it was the Turks, and, according to Turkish history, it was the Greeks and/or the Armenians who burned Izmir.<sup>29</sup> One unusual local source, on the other hand, suggests that, at the very least, Turkish inactivity played a part. Bilge Umar, an art historian and Izmirian, writes: "Turks and Armenians are equally to blame for this tragedy. All the sources show that the Greeks did not start the fire as they left the city. The fire was started by fanatical Armenians. The Turks did not try to stop the fire."<sup>30</sup>

This is how Lord Kinross, Atatürk's biographer, describes the event:

This internecine violence [between the Turks and Armenians] led, more or less by accident, to the outbreak of a catastrophic fire. Its origins were never satisfactorily explained. Kemal [Mustafa Kemal Atatürk] explained that it had been deliberately planned by an Armenian incendiary organization. Others accused the Turks themselves of deliberately starting the fire under the orders or at least with the connivance of Nur-ed-Din Pasha [the commander of the First Army and governor of Izmir].<sup>31</sup>

Falih Rifki Atay, a journalist close to Mustafa Kemal who was in Izmir at the time, wrote in his memoirs: "Were the ones responsible for the fire simply the Armenian incendiaries, as we were told at the time? Many suggested that Nurettin Paşa had much to do with it." He significantly adds:

Why were we burning Izmir? Were we afraid that if the mansions, hotels and bars remained, we wouldn't be rid of the minorities? This is not simply an act of destruction. It has to do with a feeling of inferiority as well. It's as if any part that resembled Europe was fated to be Christian and foreign, and surely not ours. Would reducing the city to bare land be sufficient to protect its Turkishness?<sup>32</sup>

Atay suggests that the victors identified Izmir's cosmopolitanism with non-Muslims and strove to destroy the city in order to create a new, Turkish Izmir.<sup>33</sup> But where did native Izmirians stand?

After our first conversation, Iren consulted one of her oldest friends, an elderly lawyer also from a native Izmirian family. She reported back to me: "I told him, 'There is a young lady who asked me a question, and I want your opinion, who burnt Izmir?' He said, 'The Greeks.' I said, 'Are you sure? How did the fire begin?' He said, 'There was an ammunition depot near the Armenian church.'" She told me that when she pressed her friend further, he said that a well-known lawyer at the time had given evidence concerning the arms depot near the Armenian church: "He showed them the place, and they burnt it." Iren told me also that her friend seemed to regret having spoken, and she was unable to speak with him again since he has since died. Continuing to debate with herself while talking to me, she asked: "Did the Armenians torch that depot or did the Turks? I think it is possible that the Turks started the fire. Or if they didn't start it, they did nothing to stop it." She added, referring to the silence of Izmirians in the aftermath: "And then, we didn't say afterwards, 'The Greeks, the Armenians burned it.' There is also that. So we must have been guilty. But I may be wrong."

According to Iren, when she was growing up, what amounted to a conspiracy of silence existed about the fire in Izmir. In Turkish national history taught in schools, the emphasis was on building a new, Turkish Izmir and erasing the past.<sup>34</sup> She also suggested, in a brief and oblique aside, that pressure exerted by the military at the time might have been one reason why discussion of the fire was avoided. An anecdote Iren tells about Mustafa Kemal ties into her narrative about the fire, emphasizing Turkish inactivity if not culpability. While expressing the usual adulation of persons of her generation for the man who saved the country, she also asks what Mustafa Kemal did—and didn't do—during the fire. Gülfem

Iren suggests that the liberators of Izmir, outsiders nevertheless, sat back while her city burned. In this section of the narrative, she uses the present tense: note the short, hurried sentences which give an immediacy to her account:

Izmir has not burnt yet. The city is liberated. Atatürk arrives. The Kramer Hotel becomes his headquarters. Atatürk stays at the Kramer Palace for days. His future wife comes to take him to her family home. After Atatürk leaves, Izmir burns, and the Kramer Palace burns. They let it burn. Atatürk was there.

### The aftermath

The surviving population of Izmir inherited a ravaged city. Gülfem Iren remembers the fear she felt walking through the desolate fire zone on her way to school, expecting any moment to be accosted by the derelicts who made these ruins their home. Unlike her siblings, who were educated in Europe, she attended public schools in Izmir. The family lived in much reduced circumstances through the rental and sale of what remained of their estate.

Izmir was also transformed demographically as many Muslim men had died in the war, leaving behind the elderly, women and children. Many Greeks, Armenians and Jews had also died, and those who survived, left. What replaced this native population were Muslim immigrants from rural areas of the Balkans, the Aegean islands and Anatolia. Much of this population, like the Greeks, Armenians and Jews of Izmir, had lost their homes. They felt like strangers and were disparaged by the natives, particularly due to their peasant origins:

For the people of Izmir the newcomers were very primitive. They were seen as outsiders. They didn't fit in, not for years. Before the occupation, in the *Rum* [Greek] Izmir in those days the best of everything could be found. Even that which could not be found in Istanbul could be found in Izmir. Then a dead era began. Izmir lost its snobbery, it adjusted to the population that came and it stopped being Izmir in every way: in living, in taste, in conversation, in

friendship. Everything was burnt, destroyed, all those knowledgeable people were gone. A bunch of peasants and shopkeepers had come, unfortunately that's what they were. They washed the fine furniture in the Greek houses with soap, they broke the colored crystal glass, they destroyed everything. It wasn't their fault, they didn't know, it wasn't the place for them.

Gülfem Iren suggests that her family resented the fact that the immigrants were granted land whereas part of theirs was confiscated when the Kültürpark was built on the fire zone.<sup>35</sup>

Iren describes a large, close, extended network of kin who distinguished themselves from others by a kind of feudal arrogance (*azamet*). She remembers that when she was a child, her mother did not allow her to bring schoolmates home, and that social activities centered around the extended family. The household help was increasingly recruited from the Muslim immigrants:

Until my mother's time, each daughter would take her Circassian maid and black nanny with her to her new home at marriage. In our house, Vartyu [the Armenian seamstress] sewed me the most fashionable dresses until I was seven. The ones working inside were Muslim. But the others [the non-Muslim help], they were more knowledgeable.

As the youngest, Gülfem heard stories from her mother and elder siblings about their family's past, was surrounded by heirlooms transmitted over generations, and everyday life changed slowly. Today, she remembers with nostalgia:

Everything did not end right away. There are old habits, old relations, old ways of living that continued for a long time. The old population was very cosmopolitan. No one forgot that for a long time. The jokes half in Turkish half in Greek. And such liberty. Everyone would go out into the garden in the afternoon, drinks would be served, people would chat, some played backgammon, people laughed amongst the roses, the scent of jasmine. My grandfather had a botanical garden. He had brought and planted trees from all over the world. Even after



these calamities it was such a habit that in the season hyacinth and tulip bulbs would be brought over from Holland. A day would come when all would bloom. And on that day, everyone would know, the Greek, the Armenian, the Jew, the Muslim, that in Mehmet Şevket Bey's house there is a flower show. Friends and strangers would tour the house, and when ready to leave, they would be offered the juice of whatever fruit was in season. This is a tradition, and if you don't do these things you feel like a part of you is missing.

During our conversation, Iren referred to a novel by Kosmas Politis, a Greek writer of Smyrniote origin, which she urged me to read:<sup>36</sup>

I really found myself in this book. My childhood. I lived what he wrote about. For example, children's games in the neighborhood. The words they used, the toys. I grew up with them, I used them, I know. Because months and years went by, and old Izmir lived with all its traditions. It lived after its Greeks and Armenians left, because there is always habit. For example, he speaks here of the streets in the fire zone. He says, "Fasula, Çikuta." He says, "Rose Street." I know. I didn't live there, but I know.

Two discourses

In speaking of the fire and the violence, Iren goes back and forth between two discourses. The first discourse, a nationalist one, justifies what happened. In her narrative, Iren repeats from time to time the disturbing phrase "pisliği temizlemek" (cleaning or cleansing the dirt):<sup>37</sup>

They torched an arms cache, saying "this is the only way to clean the dirt." A great cleaning took place, but were they right or wrong? They were right to some extent because the Ottoman Empire was crushed. It was easy for foreigners to pull pieces off a dying state. Where the fair [Kültürpark] is now thousands of Armenians and Greeks and Jews were living. That was the only way to clean the dirt. They did it to clean the place. To empty it because they were hiding and they had to search from door to door to find them. Cleaning

was necessary to establish the Turkish Republic. There was no other choice. You could not have such a cosmopolitan Republic.

Such a discourse of dirt—matter out of place—is common to nationalist narratives.<sup>38</sup> The desperation and defensiveness of the Ottomans on the verge of colonization for whom violence became justified as a means to achieve sovereignty can be clearly felt in this passage. In nationalist discourse, cosmopolitanism acquires a negative connotation, in this case associated with non-Muslims categorized as outsiders. This usage contrasts with the positive connotations of the term in much of Iren's narrative.

Iren accounts for why the past was forgotten by emphasizing the trauma experienced by the soldiers whose victory was wholly unpredictable:

They were finished, exhausted. They had no strength left, material or moral. They came to Izmir, but how? On their last legs. It was such a miracle, this ninth of September. Nobody thought this victory would happen. When it happened, they were shocked, it was erased. That horror was suddenly erased. That fear was ended, a great joy took its place and they forgot what happened.

A second, Izmirian discourse, on the other hand, acknowledges the shared history of the city's natives:

I still ask myself whether this should have happened. If my father died because they did not give him a *laissez-passer*, many others died as well. In the old days, Muslims, Greeks, Armenians and Jews belonged to this land, and trusted in one another. This land belonged to them as much as it belonged to us. We say, "it is our homeland," yes, thank God for today, but it is as much theirs as it is ours.

Realizing that she could have been in their place, Iren empathizes with the losers:

I saw their dead in the sea. It had happened before. In '19 it happened, the ones with the fez were thrown in. This time [1922] it was the ones who wore the hat. I saw the dead. The bay of Izmir

was not cleaned for months. A huge fish gets caught in a fisherman's net, they pull it in, open its bowels and a bag of jewels falls out. *We* came back, *we* were home but for months on end from our door in Karşıyaka we watched our soldiers pass with bayonets, leading desperate Greek men with their hair on end, their beards grown. They took them in a column, their hands tied behind, and then shot them in the mountains. Every evening. Not just a day or two but for months and months.

Iren is able to empathize with both the winners and the losers by focusing on the trauma experienced by all Izmirians during this period of internecine violence, including herself. Speaking in the present, Iren challenges the silence about the past:

You know what makes me angry? No one is looking for the reasons behind this sad story. They covered it up. People felt like it was a good thing that it was cleaned up but no one would talk. It shouldn't have happened. Seventy-five years have gone by.

It is significant that Gülfem Iren describes the encounter between the natives and the immigrants as “another war”: “This was a calamity within a calamity. Fire, destruction, war, killing, and then with their arrival, another war.” This shows the disjuncture between Turkish nationalism, according to which people of Muslim origin belonged together, and lived experience, which made it possible for Izmirians to share an attachment to a city and way of life. It is not surprising therefore that Iren says: “Izmir is very important to me. But I don't feel this when I am in Izmir. I feel it when I am far away.” Even though Gülfem Iren was not forced to leave, she feels that she too lost her city, which became a place in her imagination. She defines herself today largely vis-à-vis her family and the place where she has her roots—which includes those who share her memories of Izmir regardless of where they may be living today.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I analyzed the oral history narrative of Gülfem Kaatçılar İren, an Izmirian woman born in 1915. I focused in particular on İren's account, as remembered in the 2000s, of the occupation of Izmir, the Greco-Turkish war, the burning of Izmir and Manisa and the aftermath. The way memory works constitutes a challenge to the linear temporality of national history, as memory narratives evoke a multiplicity of times, in this case Izmir of the 1920s, the late Ottoman period and Turkey at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Today, the generation that remembers the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic has largely passed away. It is unfortunate that no systematic oral history archive was created in Turkey in the twentieth century. Obstacles remain in the way of such a project today. Whereas history is a well-established field, oral history is not institutionalized in universities in Turkey. While a critical history and social science is emerging, Turkish laws still curtail freedom of expression. This lack of freedom of expression, and the accompanying censorship and self-censorship, are particularly inhibiting for oral history, as memory work specializes in the articulation of silenced experiences and interpretations that may differ from the singular truth of national history.

Through my reading of the oral history narrative of Gülfem Kaatçılar İren, I hope to have shown that the field of memory studies is imperative not only for voicing multiple histories but also for contributing to understanding the present—a present that, in Turkey, continues to deal with an unacknowledged past through recourse to violence.

## NOTES

1. Umut Özkırmılı and Sypros A. Sofos, *Tormented by History: Nationalism in Greece and Turkey* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2008).

2. Biray Kolluoğlu Kırılı, "Forgetting the Smyrna Fire," *History Workshop Journal* 60, no. 1 (Autumn 2005): 25–44. Izmir's ancient name, Smyrna, continues to be used to refer to the city in Greece, including by its former inhabitants and their descendants.

3. Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, rev. ed. (1997; London: I.B. Tauris, 2004).

4. Ebru Boyar, *Ottomans, Turks and the Balkans: Empire Lost, Relations Altered* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007).
5. Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility*, trans. Paul Bessemer (New York: Metropolitan, 2006).
6. Erik J. Zürcher, ed., *Arming the State: Military Conscription in the Middle East and Central Asia, 1775-1925* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999).
7. Büşra Ersanlı Behar, *Iktidar ve Tarih: Türkiye’de Resmi Tarih Tezinin Oluşumu, 1929–1937* (Power and history: The construction of the official history thesis in Turkey, 1929–1937) (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2003).
8. Renée Hirschon, ed., *Crossing the Aegean: An Appraisal of the 1923 Compulsory Population Exchange Between Greece and Turkey* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2003).
9. İlay Örs, “Beyond the Greek and Turkish Dichotomy: The Rum Polites of Istanbul and Athens,” *South European Society & Politics* 11, no.1 (2006): 79–94.
10. Rıfat Bali, *Bir Türkleştirme Serüveni (1923–1945): Cumhuriyet Yıllarında Türkiye Yahudileri* (A Turkification adventure: Turkey’s Jews during the Republic) (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1999).
11. Soner Çağaptay, *Islam, Secularism and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who Is a Turk?* (London: Routledge, 2006).
12. Deniz Kandiyoti and Ayşe Saktanber, eds., *Fragments of Culture: The Everyday of Modern Turkey* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).
13. Hans-Lukas Kieser, ed., *Turkey Beyond Nationalism: Towards Post-Nationalist Identities* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006).
14. I recorded interviews with Gülfem İren at her home on August 8 and 17, 2001, April 11, 2002, and September 17, 2003. I continue to visit her and to discuss my work with her.
15. Gülfem Kaatçılar İren, *Anılarım* (My memoirs) (Istanbul: Ali Rıza Baskan Güzel Sanatlar Matbaası, 2004).
16. Daniel Goffman, “Izmir: From Village to Colonial Port City,” in Edhem Eldem, Daniel Goffman and Bruce Masters, *The Ottoman City between East and West: Aleppo, Izmir, and Istanbul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 79–135; Elena Frangakis-Syrett, “The Making of an Ottoman Port: The Quay of Izmir in the Nineteenth Century,” *The Journal of Transport History* 22, no. 1 (2001): 23–46.
17. Vangelis Kechriotis, “The Experience of a Greek-Orthodox Population in a Shifting Urban Landscape: Smyrna 1904–1911,” paper presented at Second Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting/Workshop on the Ethnic Break-up of the Ottoman Empire, Florence, March 21–25, 2004.
18. *Gavur*, a derogatory term for non-Muslims, was commonly used to refer to the city of Izmir.

19. Şahin Beygu, ed., *Üç İzmir* (The three Izmir) (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1992).

20. Islamic headdress was replaced by the European-style hat on November 25, 1925.

21. From the Seljukid Empire, 11–13th c., which predated the Ottomans in Asia Minor.

22. The fact that Muslim families owned land in the *Frenk* neighborhood is rarely noted.

23. Frangakis-Syrett notes the lack of research on Muslim merchants in Ottoman Izmir. Elena Frangakis-Syrett, “The Economic Activities of Ottoman and Western Communities in Eighteenth-Century Izmir,” *Oriente Moderno* 18, n.s., no. 1 (1999): 11–26.

24. Nilüfer Göle, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

25. For accounts of Izmir during the occupation, see Engin Berber, *Sancılı Yıllar: İzmir 1918–1922* (The painful years: Izmir 1918–1922) (Ankara: Ayraç Yayınları, 1997); and Bilge Umar, *İzmir’de Yunanlıların Son Günleri* (The last days of the Greeks in Izmir) (Ankara: Bilgi Yayınları, 1974).

26. It was common at the time for brides of elite families to bring African servants into their new households, in the manner of domestic slaves used in the Ottoman palace. See Y. Hakan Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise, 1800–1909* (London and New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996).

27. For a history of the war in Manisa, see Teoman Ergül, *Kurtuluş Savaşında Manisa* (Manisa in the War of Independence) (Ankara: Kebikeç Yayınları, 2007).

28. Berber, *Sancılı Yıllar*.

29. Marjorie Housepian Dobkin, *Smyrna 1922: The Destruction of a City* (1972; New York: Newmark Press, 1998); Heath Lowry, “Turkish History: On Whose Sources Will It Be Based?” *Osmanlı Araştırmaları* 9 (1988): 13.

30. Umar, *İzmir’de Yunanlıların Son Günleri*, 327.

31. Lord Kinross, *Atatürk: The Rebirth of a Nation* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1965), 324.

32. Falih Rıfki Atay, *Çankaya* (1968; Istanbul: Bateş 1998), 324–25. Nureddin Paşa was notorious for his use of violence against Christians in the 1920s. He was also responsible for the lynching of the leader of the Greek Orthodox Church in Izmir in 1922. See Umar, *İzmir’de Yunanlıların Son Günleri*, 316.

33. This attitude is identical to that of the Committee of the Union of Progress toward Ottoman Armenians, which led to the genocide of 1915.

34. Kırılı, “Forgetting the Smyrna Fire.”

35. In 1936, the Izmir Kültürpark (a fair and grounds of the annual Izmir International Fair) replaced the fire zone, built to commemorate the liberation of Izmir and celebrate Turkish national identity. Biray Kolluoğlu-Kırlı, “The Play of Memory, Counter-Memory: Building Izmir on Smyrna’s Ashes,” *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no. 26 (Spring 2002): 1–28.

36. Kosmas Politis, *Yitik Kentin Kırk Yılı* (Forty years of a lost city) (1963; Istanbul: Belge Yayınları, 1994). The fact that Greek authors’ works are becoming widely available in Turkish is a sign of the changing times.

37. *Temizlik* (cleaning) is commonly used to refer to killing in Turkish.

38. Yannis Hamilakis, *The Nation and Its Ruins: Antiquity, Archaeology, and National Imagination in Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).