

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KWC-27

The Lure of Unearned Income

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Dear Peter,

The hope of getting something for nothing, or next to nothing, burns brightly in the human soul. Turkish men seem to be particularly obsessed with this often destructive mirage.

Take the case of the National Lottery, or Milli Piyango, as it is known in Turkish. Men, and sometimes women, selling lottery tickets are ubiquitous on the streets of urban Turkey. They walk around in distinctive white caps with black visors holding the brightly-colored lottery tickets displayed on cardboard or on pinwheels constructed of thin wire (you spin the wheel to enhance the role of fate in your ticket selection). Also popular is the government-run Spor Tote (literally, "Sport Pools") which allows Turks to bet legally on the week's upcoming soccer matches.

These two games do a thriving business in Turkey. Milli Piyango, for example, took in 28 billion Turkish Lira (TL), or roughly \$60 million, last year. The government says it invests most of these revenues in worthy social projects, such as rehabilitation for handicapped children.

Turkey's success with Milli Piyango has attracted some international attention. At its November 1983 convention in Bangkok, the World State Lotteries Union elected Milli Piyango director Cevat Kani Uner as its new president. The Turkish press gave Mr. Uner's elevation a good bit of publicity, commending him for his efficient administration of the lottery.

Yet, gambling could be considered rather un-Islamic behavior, right? Mr. Uner does seem to be concerned about that angle. After the convention in Bangkok, he held a press conference and insisted that the national lottery was not a form of gambling. "If it was," he said, with interesting logic, "the state would not allow it."

Some of Turkey's 105,000 registered coffee houses are used by men who play cards for money, although this is technically illegal. While I was in the Central Anatolian town of Sariođlan in October, I noticed that three of the town's seven coffee houses had been shut down by the police for violation of the gambling laws.

The shabbier parts of Istanbul are noted for an even more proletarian form of gambling. Young men stand on street corners jiggling bags filled with hundreds of colored buttons. The customer who pays his few cents sticks his hand in the bag and pulls out a

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button. If it's a certain color or size, he wins a pack of cigarettes or some other small prize.

Such is the Turkish craze for games of chance that some enterprising entrepreneurs have managed to turn simple market transactions into forms of gambling. One day, I was walking through the main bazaar of Bursa, a city of western Anatolia. My attention was caught by a group of men gathered in a large circle. In the center of the circle, I found a mustachioed man in a gray sweater and gray cap standing next to a red Opel of 1960s vintage. He had placed a rug on the car's hood and covered it with various items -- glassware sets, ballpoint pens, battery-powered space robots, belts, and miniature flashlights.

While keeping up a rapid-fire repartee, his sales pitch, the man proceeded to distribute from a large box sticks of chocolate for 100 TL (about 20 cents) each. The men buying the chocolates opened the wrappers carefully. If they found nothing, they popped the chocolate into their mouths with a good-humored shrug. But other men waved small cards that had been concealed inside their chocolate wrappers; they usually received ballpoint pens or miniature flashlights. But I noticed that after each box of chocolates had been sold and the individual chocolates examined, there was always someone who made off with a glassware set or space robot -- one of the "big" prizes. This encouraged other people to try the game when the man distributed another box of chocolates.

It seemed a great way to sell large quantities of chocolates to people who ordinarily wouldn't be tempted to buy lots of chocolate. But as I walked away, I wondered who was going to clean up the ever-growing pile of chocolate wrappers littering the street.

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In Turkish villages, the lure of unearned income, or easy money, can take a very odd form -- the search for buried treasure. It's not surprising, if you think about it. Anatolia has been the site of rich civilizations for millenia. Hittites, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, and Ottoman Turks -- they all left ruins of great cities. And sometimes, particularly in royal tombs, they left gold in the ground as well. Villagers who live near these ancient sites can be expected to do some illegal prospecting from time to time.

In August, the Turkish newspapers carried a sensational story about the discovery of a Biblical manuscript thought to be 1,900 years old. The manuscript is said to be the Bible of Barnabus, written on papyrus in the Aramaic-Syriac language; this version of the Bible was declared heretical by the Council of Nicaea in 325. According to the press reports, some villagers near Hakkari in eastern Turkey had discovered the Bible and other early Christian artifacts in a cave. The men were caught with the items at the nearby border attempting to smuggle them into Syria.

The events of the early 20th century added a new twist to this situation. In 1915, most of Anatolia's Armenian population left Turkey, deported by the Ottoman government during World War I. The country's Greek people left in 1923 during a



The village of Gölcük in Thrace. The inhabitants of this village believe there is "gold in them thar hills," left behind by the Greeks when they departed the area in the early 1920s.

population exchange between Greece and Turkey. In both cases, these people often had to leave in a hurry. What valuables they could not sell or take with them they buried in the ground. Both Armenians and Greeks expected to return someday and retrieve their treasures.

The Turkish people remaining in these villages, generally poorer than the departing Christians, were left with the nagging suspicion that they were sitting on fantastic wealth — if they could only find it.

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The village of Gölcük (pop. 800) is located in Thrace, or European Turkey, about 10 km northwest of Şarköy, a small resort town on the Sea of Marmara. It was originally inhabited by Greek people. But beginning in 1923, the Greeks began leaving, to be replaced by Turks coming from the Salonica (now Thessaloniki) area of Greece. In 1935, a group of Turkish people from Bulgaria arrived as well. This created a problem because the Salonica Turks had expected to return to Greece and had not bothered to stake out claims to the best land in the area. The government had to mediate the ensuing land disputes.

Çetin Kaya, 25, belongs to one of the Turkish families that came from Salonica. He now lives and works in Istanbul -- he is a clerk in a government bureaucracy -- but returns to Gölcük from time to time to visit his family. His father Nebi farms and raises sheep and goats. One evening at the family house, Çetin told me and my interpreter Ihsan about

the buried treasure in Gölçük.

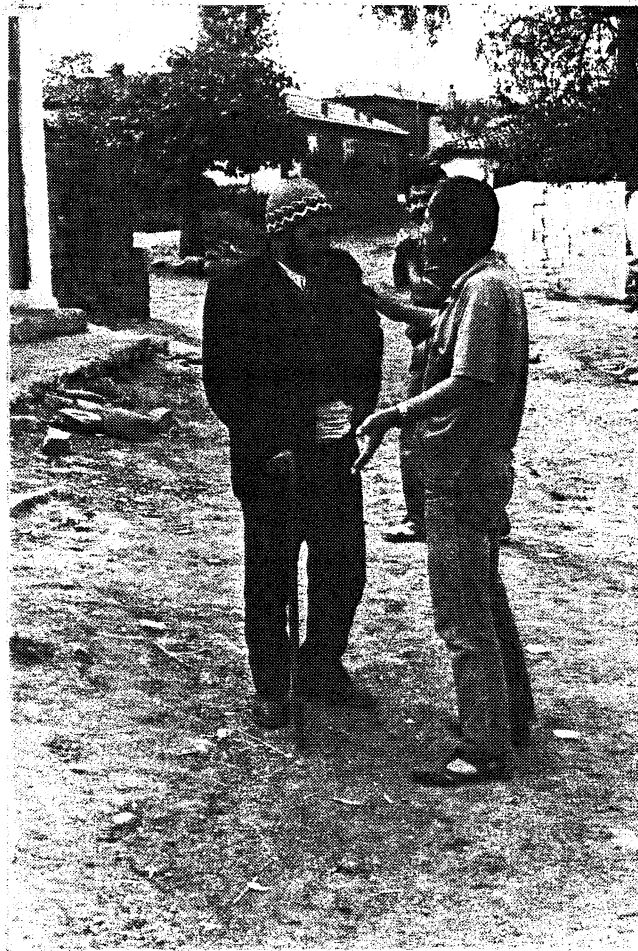
Greek tourists occasionally appear in the village "to check on their buried treasure," he said. For example, in 1982, a woman and her two sons visited Gölçük. The woman said she had come "to show her sons where she had lived and the fields her family used to farm." But the villagers are convinced she also came to look for her family's buried treasure, said Çetin.

The villagers are well aware that these Greeks can be tricky. "Those who come here looking for gold sometimes don't say they are looking for gold," said Çetin. "Or, sometimes, they find one person here and tell him the marks on the ground where they have buried the treasure. But in fact, those marks are false. Later, they come and dig secretly in other areas and find the treasure."

Two inhabitants of the village are rumored to have actually found some of this Greek treasure, although nobody knows for sure. One of the men now lives in Tekirdağ, a nearby city, where he is "a bit rich." The other man still lives in the village. He had been orphaned when young, but now "his living standard is over the usual village level and he owns a shop in the village, a coffee house, and some land."

My interpreter İhsan, who knows Çetin quite well, understands how Çetin and the other villagers think in these matters. He explained to me that the villagers use buried treasure stories as a way of explaining how a villager with poor prospects, in this case, an orphan, can rise above his neighbors and become wealthy. İhsan attended high school in nearby Şarkey and said buried treasure stories are common to this part of Thrace. In fact, a thriving market in treasure maps exists.

"Searching for treasure is a kind of illness here," said İhsan. "A man who buys a treasure map is warned that it might be false, but there is always a small hope in his mind. Since the map costs only a small amount, he buys it. It's like Milli Piyango."



Çetin Kaya, at right, talking to a neighbor in Gölçük. Since he now works in Istanbul, Çetin no longer dresses like a villager, even when he returns to Gölçük to visit his family.

In Güzel Köy (pop. 300) and Kayabağ (pop. 650), two villages of Central Anatolia located 20 km northeast of Kayseri, the people think they are sitting on Armenian treasure. Before World War I, the two villages, which are almost contiguous to each other, contained a large Armenian population.

The Armenians were forced to leave in 1915 (see my KWC-26). "Some of the Armenians took their treasures with them," said Ahmet Alkaya, 68, a retired hoca, or religious teacher, from Güzel Köy. "Some tried to hide their treasures in wells, others tried to hide them under rocks. They left certain marks where they put their treasures. When they were allowed to come to Turkey as tourists, after the democracy" -- a reference to the 1923 republic -- "they came here and lived in our homes for months. But in their last few days here, they tried to get their treasures. We later saw some holes in the ground."

The inhabitants of these two villages have also felt the lure of ancient gold. About 15 km to the west, they can see a hill topped with black stones; they call it "the Black Hill" and believe it conceals the tomb of some ancient king. I have never visited the Black Hill but I am aware that several tumuli, marking the sites of tombs belonging to ancient Greek kings, are scattered about the Kayseri area.

"Our ancestors said there was a gold plow under the Black Hill," said Emir Tuncer, 80, of Kayabağ. "But now, we are realistic; we don't believe it."

They certainly used to believe it, though. Emir's 75-year-old brother Mustafa said his grandfather once "tried to pull the stones away from the Black Hill. But he began from the top; it was a mistake. If he had tried to get in from the side, he would have found the king's tomb. I wonder where the ancient people got such large stones."

Mustafa's wife Firdes added that her uncle also had attempted some excavation on the Black Hill, "but the government stopped him."

"We were told that an engaged couple put all those stones up there to cover the hill," said Mustafa. "We used to believe that when we were children. We were only six or seven years old then. It was a symbolic story to show us that if two hands can come together, and if two people really believe in each other, then nothing is too difficult."

I asked the Tuncers if the villagers still tell these stories about the Black Hill to their children. Amidst laughter, denials came from the assembled family members. "We don't tell that story anymore," said the father of my interpreter Mahmut, who is related to the Tuncers. "Today's children are 'television children.' Their heads are so full of television tales that they won't listen to the old stories."

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Ancient gold is the big thing in Sarioglan, a town of 3,500 people located 65 km northeast of Kayseri.

I was sitting in a Sarioglan coffee house one evening with my interpreter Mustafa. A large man with a boil on his cheek and wearing a red plaid shirt with a pin-striped

suit -- a real lout -- began discussing two Germans who were then staying in Karaozu, a village 10 km to the north. The Germans, a man and a woman, had informed the locals they had come to study their religion. Karaozu is inhabited by Alevis, a Shiite sect, while most Turks are Sunni Muslims.

The man from Sariođlan found this suspicious. He claimed the woman's accent was "'not real German'" -- he had been to Germany and said he knew the difference. It was his opinion that the Germans were actually searching for buried treasure. Mustafa told me later that this fellow had also hinted to the people at the table that I was in Sariođlan on the same potentially lucrative mission.

Mustafa, who teaches French at the Sariođlan high school, said he has noticed an increase in buried treasure rumors recently. "'I'm astonished,'" he said. "'This tittle-tattle has become much.'"

Later that evening, we talked in Mustafa's house with his 19-year-old friend Soner Osman, who works as a butcher. Soner has lived all his life in Sariođlan and knows its people well. He talked about one local man who used to be poor, but has now become rich and built himself a new house. Nobody knows for sure, but the neighbors suspect this man had found some buried gold.

Soner also said that treasure maps are occasionally sold in Sariođlan. Mustafa added that somebody from Istanbul sent such a map to one of his friends. "'Three of my friends are now looking for a cave with gold, but haven't found it yet.'" Soner had heard of a man from a nearby village, a retired government employee, "'who goes wherever he hears there is gold.'"

A couple of years ago, some men in the village of Lalebelli, near Kayseri, actually did uncover some ancient gold while plowing their fields; the government bought the antiques from them. Soner was convinced gold could be found in Sariođlan as well. "'If we obtain metal detectors, we can find this gold,'" he said. Mustafa added that someone in Sariođlan once asked him -- because he was university-educated, his opinions are respected -- "'if it's possible to make a machine to find gold.'"

In the quest for buried treasure, some men really get down to business. Soner had heard from some friends about a Sariođlan man who attempted to dig up some buried treasure using a bulldozer. As the mighty machine approached an Islamic holy site, it suddenly broke down. "'It was near the tomb of a holy man -- that's why it stopped,'" said Soner.

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Some people refuse to follow the Siren's song. In the town of Incesu (pop. 7,000), located 30 km west of Kayseri, I talked with farmer Mehmet Sahli, 62.

"'Do you have any buried treasure stories in Incesu?'"

I asked him. He seemed puzzled by the question. Through my interpreter Fevzy, I explained that I had heard buried treasure stories in several other Turkish villages. "Do you have any stories like that in Incesu?" I asked again. "Yok" -- no -- he said flatly. "We can find our gold by working."

Sincerely,

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