INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

PAR-2

Antiquities

American Research Institute in Turkey
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Serencebey
Beşiktaş İstanbul
TURKEY

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Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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Dear Peter,

Eleven years ago, when I made a brief foray into Turkey to tour the ancient sites along the Aegean coast, I had the distinct impression at first that I had entered a time warp. Wherever I looked on the streets of Izmir, there were 1956 and 1957 Chevrolets, Fords, Pontiacs, Oldsmobiles, and Plymouths--not to mention the cars older than that. In August, 1973, Anatolia was a graveyard for aging American automobiles, and I presume that European Turkey was so then also. I remember asking someone about the problem of spare parts. When these were impossible to find, he replied, the Turks simply fashioned them by hand. In any case, he added, the automobiles of yesteryear were far sturdier and far less difficult to repair than are the technological marvels which pour off the assembly lines today.

In the last decade, I regret to have to report, the old jalopies bit the dust, one by one, and were replaced--but not by American makes. The streets are now filled with Fiats, Renaults, Volkswagens, Datsuns, and Toyotas of recent manufacture, and the Turks even produce a small car--called the Anadolou--at least partially their own. To be sure, the sightseer strolling along the cobblestone streets of Istanbul will still from time to time encounter a relic of the great age of Detroit resting up on the sidewalk against a building or lumbering along like some tired, antediluvian giant. But by now most of these memorable beasts have gone the way of the dinosaur. Horses pulling carts bulging with produce or flowers are hardly less common.

Of the few old American cars that remain, quite a number are used as taxis. Among these survivors, the ones originally built to serve as limousines generally outlast their fellows. These tend to travel established routes in the fashion of the multitude of minibuses which scurry about the city. For the ancient limousines still used in this way, the Turks aptly employ the term dolmuş--which is derivative from a verb meaning "to fill" or "to stuff." After travelling a goodly distance in such a vehicle, one comes

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to understand why so evocative a name was coined in the first place and also why it stuck. The dolmuş rarely departs from its main base before there is a passenger snugly ensconced in every seat.

I must confess that, when watching an old dolmuş make its way along the road, I sometimes feel a twinge of sadness. These reminders of bygone days live on here, but, in a few years, they will be gone themselves. In the meantime, however, there is a bonanza waiting in Turkey for any American interested in purchasing antique cars abroad for the market back home. When I spoke with a driver about this possibility, he offered to sell me his ancient DeSoto for eight hundred thousand lira--which is to say, a bit under two thousand dollars.

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The old American cars are, of course, far less ancient than many of the buildings one finds them parked up against. Some of the Turkish baths, for example, were built right after Mehmet the Conquer took Constantinople from the Byzantine Greeks in 1453, and they have been in continuous use ever since. Embedded in the walls of one such hamam (now sadly fallen into disuse and disrepair), you can see fragments of marble sculpture from a triumphal arch erected in early Byzantine times to commemorate the conquests and victories of the Emperor Theodosius.

These remnants of the Theodosian arch are useful reminders that the city had a great history long before the Turks came. They may even cause the alert passer-by to recall that there were public baths here and elsewhere in the Mediteranean region from very early times. In fact, the Turkish bath is not peculiarly Turkish at all. In its architecture, in the practices associated with it, and in its social function, the hamam differs not a whit from the ancient Roman bath. If an archaeologist were to take a sounding in one of the older baths, he might well discover that it had been in operation centuries before the Turks were considered a threat.

Before it became common to have plumbing in houses and apartments, there were many more baths in the city of Istanbul than there are today. The aqueducts brought water in from the Belgrade Forest up the Bosphorus, and this water was then piped from Taksim Square in Beyoglu to every hamam within the city. In Ottoman times, the Islamic stricture that cleanliness is a part of godliness was taken with great seriousness; so, the Stambouli Turks (men and women alike) quite often stopped off at the neighborhood hamam to doff the dust.

The Turks are no less concerned with cleanliness today, but they tend to shower or bathe at home just like their neighbors to the West. So, now, the hamam, as an institution, is no longer central to Turkish life. But it does live on. In Istanbul alone, some seventy to eighty baths survive, and they do a brisk business. The more expensive ones, which are quite often the oldest of the baths, thrive on the tourist trade. But there are many, less splendid places which depend almost entirely on local support.

I visited one such hamam last week at the invitation of a Turkish friend and brought another American along. After the experience, we both understood

the appeal. The place we went to is located in old Stamboul just outside the Covered Bazaar. Upon entering this particular hamam, the client is invited to exchange his shoes for plastic slippers, to take a towel, and to enter a cubicle equipped with a bed. There, he removes his clothes and drapes the towel about his waist. He then exchanges the plastic slippers for wooden clogs before entering the steam rooms. Each steam room is a circular affair equipped with marble basins which can be filled with hot or cold water; in the center lies the göbek--"the navel"--a circular stone platform heated from below. After he has stretched out on it, the client soon loses all sense of time. The atmosphere is languid, and the muscles gradually relax. Then, if he wishes, the visitor can have the kind of massage that he will not soon forget.

At least at the cheaper places, the masseurs are not professionals. Generally, they are big, burly, and extremely strong Anatolian peasants who come to the city for two and three months at a time to supplement the income they eke out from working the land. During their sojourn in Istanbul, they actually live in the bath--in dormitories upstairs. They take their meals there in common and only rarely go out. Often, they are on duty from 6:30 in the morning until 9:00 or 10:00 at night. If our client so requests, one of these sturdy fellows will work him over in a thoroughgoing way. At the end of a session, he may feel as if he has had a complete work-out.

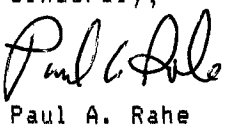
But it does not end there. When the massage is finished, the bathman conducts his charge to one of the marble basins, splashes him with hot water, and sets to work with a rubber or silk glove called a kese. With this instrument, he rubs his client nearly raw, rolling off the dirt which has emerged from the man's pores and removing whatever dead skin there may be. In the meantime, he renews the massage, jerking the visitor this way and that, eliminating whatever tension may remain in the man's body. Finally, he lathers the man's hair and body, slops hot water all over him until the dirt, the dead skin, and the soap are gone, and leaves him an inert lump of flesh intent on little else but regaining his consciousness and composure.

At this point, our client betakes himself by a side corridor back to the cubicle where he locked up his clothes. On the way, he exchanges his towel (now completely soaked) for three dry towels--one for his hair, a second for his shoulders, and the third for his waist. Ensconced in his cubicle, he can sip tea or sahlep (a hot, slightly sweet beverage made from the roots of certain mysterious plants and consumed in great quantities by Turks in the winter months), relax, and even doze for a time before slipping back into his clothes and returning--completely refreshed--to the hustle and bustle of the city outside.

The regimen for the women is, I am told, far less rigorous than that for the men; and, at least in some Turkish baths, the attendants bring oranges and other citrus fruits to the women reclining on the göbek. The mixture of the sweet smell of the fruit with the steam wafting from below is, so my informant claims, an added inducement to go off to the hamam. The attendants in the women's section sometimes sing bawdy songs and belly dance, and their clients may themselves join in. In less urbane environments, when a young girl is about to marry, her female relatives and friends take her off for a celebratory day at the hamam.

As an institution, the hamam is clearly in decline, but I doubt whether this relic from ancient Rome will follow the 1956 and 1957 Chevrolets, Fords, Pontiacs, Oldsmobiles, and Plymouths of Turkey into oblivion. Even now, it is not uncommon for a middle-class Turk to go to the baths every ten days or so. At least in this regard, the American contribution to the modern civilization of Anatolia and its immediate neighborhood may be more ephemeral than its inheritance from the ancient world.

Sincerely,



Paul A. Rahe

Received in Hanover 1/2/85