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Rowing Through Byzantium and Further Initiatory Misadventures Among Young Turks

ISTANBUL, Turkey

August 1998

By Whitney Mason

Dear Peter:

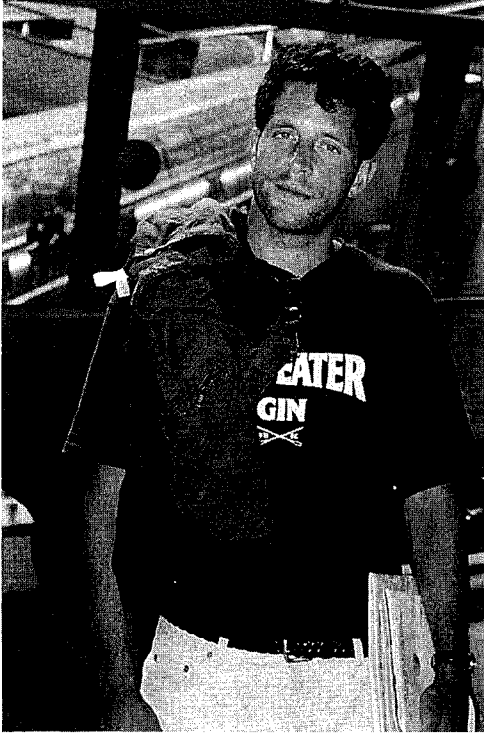
The taxi raced across the Golden Horn and up the Bosphorus toward the Turkish language course beginning at nine o'clock at Turkey's most prestigious academic institution, Bogazici University. I'd arrived from Paris at one in the morning and sat talking with a friend on the roof of a pension next to the Blue Mosque until after the day's first call to prayer sometime around four thirty in the morning. I was still a bit giddy with sleeplessness as the taxi took a left up the steep, tree-lined driveway of the university. Having paid the nearly two million-lira fare and deposited two months' worth of luggage in the office of the Turkish-For-Foreigners program, I followed a student's directions to the Sports Committee office in the basement of a stone building across the central quadrangle. The green-grass lawns and the ivy stubbornly clinging to the buildings attested to a world-class sprinkler system and Yankee grit: Bogazici began life in 1864 as Robert College, the creation of New England Protestants and the first American college overseas.

The fortress-like structures offered a cool refuge from the Mediterranean sun. I found the Sports Committee in the basement of a building that reminded me of Timberline ski lodge in Oregon. A pale, handsome young man, his hair slicked back with gel, was sitting behind a desk talking animatedly into a telephone. "Merhaba," I said when he'd hung up. "I'm looking for the rowing team."

"My name is Ibo and I'm the captain of the rowing team," he said, with all the flourish of a Rotarian.

I told Ibo that I'd been rowing for over 15 years in school, college and clubs around the world and that I hoped to row with the university club while studying Turkish during the summer. "You'll be very welcome," he answered with a suave smile. "We will begin practicing next Tuesday afternoon. Meet us at the steps in front of the arts and sciences building at six o'clock in the evening."

After that, we were supposed to meet every evening at six to board the minibus that took us to practice on Ali Bey Koy Baraj, a reservoir half an hour from school. There wasn't a single day, though, when everyone showed up on time. Ordinarily, after waiting for half an hour or so, we would take our time, dropping by one dorm to pick up rowers who hadn't deigned to walk to the meeting place. Then we'd stop at a second dorm so that two boys who refused



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

"Turkey is one of the United States' most important allies and, potentially, a constructive source of liberal inspiration throughout the Middle East and the entire Islamic world," said Whitney Mason in his application for an Institute fellowship. "Today, however, Turkey's commitments to Europe and to secularism, as well as its own political harmony and economic development, are being undermined by a variety of mounting demographic, social and political pressures..."

"I am fascinated by Turkey for all these reasons, but especially for one other: The Turkish Republic was conceived in bloodshed in 1923 and dedicated to the proposition that a citizen may pay allegiance both to Allah and to a secular state... Today Turkey is engaged on many fronts in conflicts testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. In a world increasingly menaced by the rise of religious fundamentalism and xenophobic nationalism, the outcome of this test has implications well beyond Turkey itself."

But first, you have to learn Turkish. To do so, Whit enrolled in an intensive, pre-fellowship summer course at Bogazici University (formerly Roberts College) in Istanbul. As an initial immersion in Turkish and Turkish life, it turned out to be unbeatable. In this, his first newsletter, he provides an informal account of some of his experiences on the Bosphorus. As you read it, he plans to begin his fellowship — and married life to an Australian management consultant, Amanda Wilson — at the turn of the New Year.

to carry their workout clothes with them could change. There were further stops for snacks and gas and drinking water and by the time we got on the water, it was generally pushing eight o'clock.

One day I start to lose my temper, asking people whether they didn't recognize that wasting people's time was a profound expression of disrespect. "Of course we feel that," says Ferit, a student of tourism management. "We accept people being late because we're made to feel that individual human beings are worthless."

"That's a pretty heavy explanation," I say. "Do you mean it?"

"Yes, I *know* it," says Ferit. "I see on the news how people who get in traffic accidents die just because the ambulance doesn't come on time and when it does arrive, the medics often don't even use a stretcher to transport the hurt person, they just carry him like a sack of flour. And I see it in hospitals, where people who are really in pain are forced to wait for hours before being seen."

(Ferhat, a Turkish urologist who has just gone to New York to do a six-month residency, echoes the same impression. Doctors in government hospitals are allowed to see patients on a private basis and this is where they make nearly all their money. Ferat's monthly salary is

about \$350 a month, while a busy private practice could earn ten times that.)

"Many Turks have a lot of individual initiative but their expectations of group activities are self-fulfillingly low," says an American friend of mine who has lived in Ankara for two years and is marrying a Turkish musician. Among the rowers, for instance, personal bonds are robust but they are all bilateral and subject to the volatility of youthful egoism and, to use their own phrase, "Mediterranean passion." The *esprit de corps* of the team as a whole, meanwhile, is miserable. In fact, there is no "corps."

Ferhat echoes David's view: "Everyone here has his own work that's most important to him and only after that's finished would he think that maybe he can come rowing."

The consequence of Turks' disdain for compromise is captured in an aphorism: "*Nerede chokluk, orada bokluk.*" ("Where there are many, there is shit.") The truth of this in many aspects of daily life is the most important thing I have learned about Turkey in my first two months here and Turkish friends have agreed that it is key to understanding the country. Clearly, it has much to do with the uneven success of Turkish democracy.

Certainly the most hair-raising illustration of the

Turks' group dynamics is the life-and-death struggle that is driving. As soon as someone slips behind the wheel, every second suddenly becomes precious while contempt for life that Ferit talked about asserts itself with a vengeance. No risk is too great if it promises to get a Turkish driver to his destination a moment earlier. At 50 miles an hour in the city, a taxi will ride the bumper of a bus in order to be prepared to race around it at the first break in opposing traffic.

This hell-bent driving takes a heavy toll. There are a small number of vehicles on the roads, but last year there were over 3,000 traffic fatalities.

One day I comment to Doruk on the insanity of Istanbul drivers. "It's courage," he responds matter-of-factly.

"It's stupidity," I shoot back. "Courage is different. Courage is when you've calculated the risk and decided that what's at stake is worth it."

"Hmm. In Turkish we use 'courage' to mean not thinking about something before you do it."

The government has tried to combat drivers' lethal mindset with billboards urging people to "Kill the Traffic Monster" (*Trafik Canavar* = Traffic Monster). Inside You". Unfortunately the message seems to have backfired. Friends tell me the "*Trafik Canavar*" campaign has reinforced Turks' traditional fatalism regarding safety — and the concomitant refusal to accept responsibility for accidents. This fatalism is evident in Turks' nearly universal contempt for seatbelts. Before rocketing into the melee, many taxi drivers have actually gone out of their way to tell me NOT to bother wearing my seatbelt. (I respond "*Yashamayı seviyorum*" - "I love living.")

Despite such perverse attitudes toward one another's time and safety, in other aspects of life Turks often seem to embody the mutual respect that is an ideal of Islamic societies. In addressing one another, for instance, sometimes in addition to a person's first name, Turks nearly always use a word designating their relationship. On the day before the Bosphorus race, for instance, Refik, an arrogant economics professor and the team's business manager, ordered me to call him "hojam." Refik is an economics professor who spent nearly 20 years working for the World Bank and I suspect he returned to Turkey largely because the West wasn't authoritarian enough for his liking. "If we go out for drinks sometime later you can call me by my first name again, but at least until the race you have to show me respect as the coach."

After telling Refik "I'd be happy to call you 'hojam', Hojam," I ask Mert, a warm, gregarious graduate of Bogazici's marketing department, what the word means.

He explains that although in Arabic and in old Ottoman usage *hojam* had meant "teacher", nowadays it indicates a much broader respect.

"Maybe you've noticed that the guys at the kebab place near campus call the students 'hojam'?" said Mert. I frown at this apparent fawning respect for book learning and Mert tells me that students call waiters *hojam* back. "It basically means that you respect the person and recognize that there are things you could learn from them," he explains.

On another day Zorlu, a muscular, moody economics student who happens to be the only guy I know who often actually stands with his hip to the side like Michelangelo's "David", tells me it was important to him to show Mert respect by calling him "Abi", meaning "big brother." At 26, Mert met already the air of a big-hearted *pater famiglia* and besides, he'd taught Zorlu how to row.

Turks also attach a great importance to their actual families. In common with other Mediterranean cultures, children generally continue living with their parents until they have a specific reason to get a place of their own, which normally means marriage. At least for the privileged kids at Bogazici, few other reasons seem sufficiently compelling. One of the more mature rowers, Tolga, is studying economics and would like to get an MBA in the States. But as he was giving me a ride home one night in the new Alfa Romeo his dad had given him, Tolga explained that he couldn't see how he could ever leave his parents' house before he married, much less the country. "They just wouldn't understand," says Tolga. "They'd think it must mean that I don't love them as much as they want me to."

As is perhaps always the case in hierarchical societies rooted in such traditional family structures, Turks tend to avoid confrontation. One consequence that surprised me is that the guys on the team are always talking behind one another's back. Though they are all close friends, spending their evenings together and kissing each other hello and good-bye, I've heard every one of the rowers putting down most of the others.

Another apparent consequence of the avoidance of open conflict despite the inevitable conflicts of wills is a situational attitude toward honesty. Much to my dismay and discomfort, I became the subject — and I suppose I have to admit, a reluctant accomplice — in a lie between two of the coaches. A couple of days before the Bosphorus race Refik told me I had to win a place in the boat by getting a good time in a 2,000-meter test on a rowing machine, or ergometer. I had been practicing every day for three weeks and this was the first I'd heard about having to do something other than row well to earn a place. Because the ergometer rewards brute strength

rather than technique and I had not been on an "erg" for several years, this test had me worried. The rowers told me that Refik liked the objectivity of ergometer results because he knew nothing about rowing and so wasn't able to assess people's performance on the water. One rower said he might also be looking for an excuse not to let me in the race, so he could use instead a student who would be available at the end of August for a more important race against Oxford and Cambridge.

The next day I dutifully went to the field house where another coach, Mehmet Hojam, was waiting for me. I knew little of Mehmet except that he had rowed on the Turkish National Team, had great technique, came from a wealthy family and taught physical education at the university. The afternoon was hot and we rolled one of the machines across the basketball court toward some open doors in order to catch a bit of breeze. Mehmet conveyed to me that he thought it was foolish for Refik to force the most experienced rower on the team to prove himself in this crude way.

I took this message as generic encouragement and sat down intending to finish the 2,000-meter piece as fast as I possibly could. After a short warm-up I told Mehmet I was ready. We set up the ergometer's computer to show my stroke rate, total meters, time elapsed and my 500-meter splits. To finish in under seven minutes, which I regarded as minimal, the split for each stroke should be 1:45 or under.

Feeling unnerved by the prospect of losing my place in the boat through a disappointing performance, I took off at a blistering pace. The split for the first twenty strokes was under 1:35. Then, instead of slowing down after this strong start, my agitation carried me on at this pace for a couple of minutes. If I could sustain such a pace, I could qualify for the U.S. Olympic Team.

Well, surprise surprise, I'm not about to tell you I have to give up the fellowship to begin training for Sydney. At around 800 meters I realized I'd gone out too hard. I quit rowing and told Mehmet that I was fine but that I'd made a mistake and needed to start over. "*Yarin yapacagim*," replied Mehmet. ("We'll do it tomorrow.") When I protested that I'd be fine today, he repeated that we'd do it tomorrow and that I should just take it easy. When he saw my dismay, Mehmet repeated that with my good technique I had nothing to worry about. He then explained, using Turkish, gestures and notes, that I should plan to row at a relaxed pace, finishing the 2,000

meters in around 7:30. He would then tell Refik that I'd done it in 6:58.

I felt shocked. (Much as the Marxist historian CLR James writes about his feelings in his classic on West Indian cricket, *Beyond A Boundary*, when he first heard about game-fixing in American baseball.) In my years of doing sports in the U.S. and abroad, I don't remember a coach being dishonest. (Though as the blood-doping scandals plaguing this year's Tour de France illustrate, such things do happen even in the cradle of the enlightenment.) At the same time I felt relieved that my place in the boat was assured. I rationalized my acquiescence in the lie with the thought that I had come to observe Turkish society, not to foist my values on it, and that my first priority had to be getting in the boat and thereby getting the story.

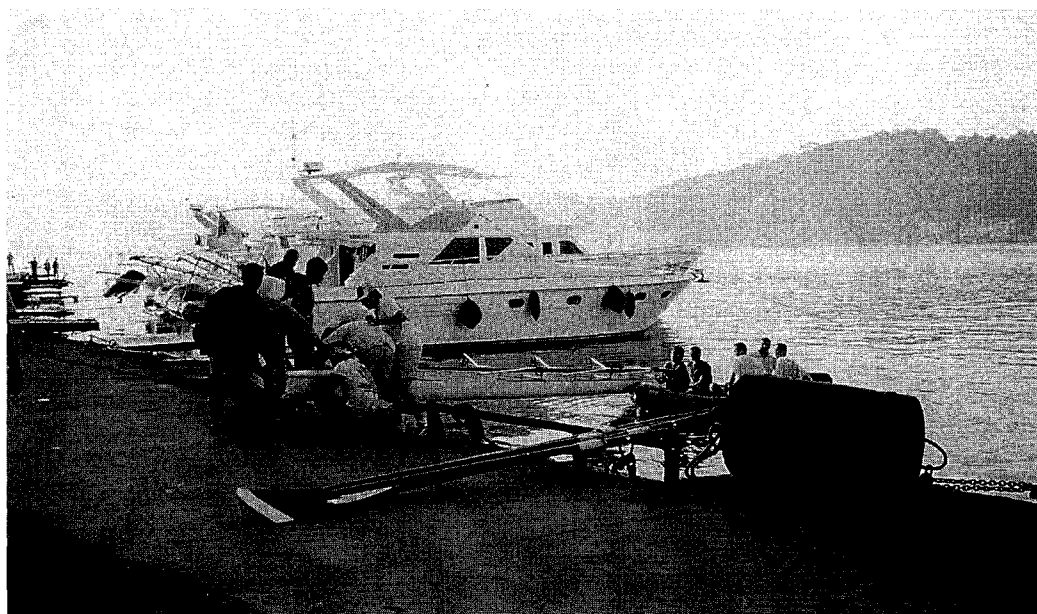
The next day I rowed at a relaxed pace for 1,500 meters, with Mehmet telling me I was doing beautifully and NOT to push myself. When I realized that I had plenty of energy left, I increased the pace and finished in 7:10. I immediately regretted going along with Mehmet's plan, well intentioned though it may have been. Not the least reason was that without this corrupt fall-back I felt that I could easily have finished in 6:58. In the event, Mert was watching and Mehmet asked him to pass on the false time to Refik. The most uncomfortable

moment came later that afternoon when we met for practice and I saw Mert passing this falsehood along not only to Refik, of course, but to all my teammates.

I comforted myself with the thought that this sort of dishonesty was normal in Turkey, that no one would expect anything different. In a book called *In a Woman's Voice*, I recalled, a psychologist named Carol Gilligan had looked at why women fare much worse on tests of moral development. She found that women's downfall was attaching less importance than American men to abstract principles and more to maintaining relationships. Perhaps, I thought in this moment of self-serving generosity, the Turks' attitude toward honesty should be thought of not as craven but as feminine?

This suggestion may surprise readers who have heard of Turks' reputation for machismo. Though Turkish machismo certainly exists, it assumes odd forms. Mert calls the aloe gel I use to soothe my sunburn a "cosmetic" while I find myself viscerally disdainful of the common practice among rowers here of using gloves and Band-Aids to protect their hands from blistering. There were other surprises. One day I noticed a tube of exfoliating

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*Executing our specialty:
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cream with a picture of a hairless bare-chested man on the side. My roommates Yelhan and Serder use such products to supplement the shaving of both their underarms and their pubic hair. They tell me that nearly all men in Turkey shave these areas occasionally, particularly in the summer. (Many Turkish men are also openly vain in a way few Americans would be, in bathrooms and at the weight room, for instance, openly staring at themselves in the mirror.)

The sense in which Turkey is truly macho is that, apart from sex, most Turkish men seem to have little interest in women. It's not that women are teased or put down as they might be by American chauvinists. They are just ignored. Turkish boys remind me of dogs, who in the presence of a crowd of humans and just one other dog have eyes for no one but their fellow canine. Two or three girls would often come to practice in small boats, and while the boys were decent to them, in the minibus on the way to the lake they were conspicuously ignored. The horse-play tended toward the vulgar. Any time we passed a young woman all the lads would yell out "Pompa!," which has something to do with "pumping." The refrain was usually initiated by Doruk, a lanky 21-year-old whose virginity was a frequent topic of conversation.

Another pastime on the bus was getting me to repeat crude phrases. The favorite, and the only one I really mastered was the following:

"Gul nerede?" (Where's the lake?) they would ask. And waving my hand in a tired old-world gesture I would answer: "Taa ebesinin umunda!" (As far as a midwife's, er, private parts.)

After 20 minutes on the freeway, we take a right into

the village of Ali Bey Koy. The road turns to dirt as it winds downhill through ranks of Soviet-style cinderblock apartment blocks, all of them apparently occupied but none of them finished. Raggedy children play along the road while women in headscarves and long skirts trudge up and down the hill carrying bundles and water jugs.

One day on the way to practice I ask loudly whether Ali Bey Koy was considered a "*varosh*," or slum. Doruk told me yes, Ali Bey Koy is definitely a *varosh* but that I shouldn't say this loudly because a former rector at Bogazici University had built employee housing in the area and many workers, including our driver, now lived here.

Such sensitivity to the poor, unfortunately, is all too rare. There is a widespread view among Bogazici students that many apparently poor people have actually become rich through squatting and having the government grant them the land, on which they then built apartment blocks. Indeed, many Bogazici students seem convinced that only a small minority of Istanbulites are poor and of those who seem poor, many are country people who have actually become rich but cling to the low standard of living to which they're accustomed.

Returning to Turkey after six years in New York, Selin Tunc, the daughter of one of Turkey's most famous composers, is amazed by the isolation of Turkey's elite. Baris Peker is a case in point. After a "career" as a poet, about 15 years ago Baris turned to film, which one day he came to the university to discuss. I ask him to comment on the problem of Turkish artists, who are usually rich, secular and divide their time between Istanbul and the posh resort of Bodrum, being isolated from the much of their society, which remains rural, uneducated and traditional

if not outright religious. Baris tells me with undisguised irritation that there is no such problem, and if there were, it would be the fault of the government's intentionally divisive policies. Says Selin: "They're too isolated even to know how isolated they are."

"I hate this country," says Doruk, a bright and self-absorbed only child from Izmir who's studying mechanical engineering. His dreams of later getting an MBA in the U.S. have just been scuttled by his parents' costly divorce. The first time I met him he off-handedly mentioned that the crew race on the Bosphorus would cost billions of Turkish lira. When I looked dismayed, he explained: "That's the opportunity cost to the government. Closing the Strait for a couple of hours costs a small fortune."

"People have no guts or imagination. Everyone thinks like some little government worker. For instance, if you ask a guard for permission to drive your car through some government parking lot, he'll automatically tell you no. But if you don't ask him and just do it, he'll never expend the energy to do anything about it. I love capitalism," Doruk continues. "It's more honest than any other system: if you pay you play and that's it. That's the way it actually works everywhere, but most people pretend otherwise."

Another rower, Zorlu, tells me the children of the rich generally don't go to Bogazici because they're not motivated enough to get in. (Only the top 200 test-takers in each subject are accepted each year.) B.U. students come from the middle class, upper-middle and some from the lower-middle, though Zorlu says the line between these classes has been blurring recently as former symbols of being rich — a cell phone and a car — have become commonplace. Zorlu tells me that simple people, like those in his hometown of Samsun, have no understanding of politics and will vote for whichever party promises more handouts. (Never mind that of the richest families in Turkey many amassed their wealth thanks to corrupt contracts from the government of Turgut Ozal.)

(On the way to the final practice before the race, Doruk was amused to see that I was wearing a tank top. "You'll be an *amele*," he guffawed.

"A what?" I said.

"An *amele* - a worker," he said, with his finger tracing the soon-to-be sunburn lines of the tank top over my shoulders.

Unless most laborers in Turkey look like the subjects

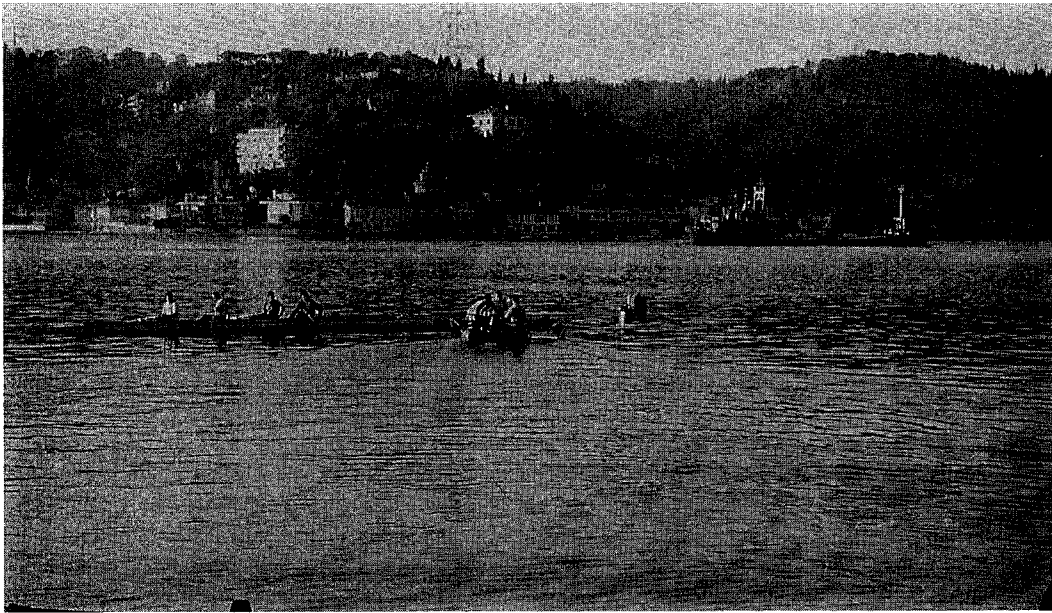
of radiation experiments, Doruk was off the mark. After over two hours under a fierce midday sun the burn on my arms, shoulders and thighs was just a hair away from blistering. After two days a few burnt patches did actually suppurate. The boys urged me to apply yogurt as soon as I got home. As soon as I entered the apartment Yelhan's mom put a bowl of yogurt in the freezer and saw to it that I'd covered myself in the blessedly cool stuff before going to bed.)

At the bottom of the hill below Ali Bey Koy we enter a belt of land that hasn't yet been developed. Here the potholes are big enough to wreck a car and we pass flocks of sheep and cows tended by solitary men. Recep, a Marlboro man who is nominally our head, tells me that Ali Bey Koy is dangerous because members of *Dev Genc* (Revolutionary Youth) are on the prowl here. The final leg of this daily odyssey takes us up a steep hill to a gatehouse guarded by employees of the Government Water Service, who the rowers say are always drunk. From the gate we wind our way through pine trees, emerging high enough on the ridge to have a panoramic view of the lake, reminiscent of the California approach to Lake Tahoe. Finally we roll down a dirt road to a handful of shells at the water's edge and an old shipping container where our other gear is kept.

After everyone leisurely changes into rowing clothes and carries oars down to the dock, we pick up the shell. Something about carrying the boat seems to remind people of driving: as soon as it's on our shoulders the lads act as if we're in a race to get the boat down the hill, which is covered with gravel, and is slippery, and onto the dock, which is made up of two rectangles joined at their corners so that the longest edge from which a boat can be launched can accommodate only half an eight at a time.

When we have a coach it is usually a fitness nut named Fatih ("Conqueror") whom the boys call by the affectionate term "*abi*" ("big bother"). Fatih Abi is full of enthusiasm and is appreciated all around for being a good sort. Unfortunately, he seems to understand little of rowing. When Fatih is running the practice he either has us warm up for the entire six-kilometer length of the lake, which wears out our arms while teaching us nothing — or alternatively, we skip warming up altogether. Mehmet understands rowing, but is lazy and keeps the practices very short and says little while he's there. Then there's Recep, who is regarded as a master technician but never came to practice except to pick the boat for the Bosphorus race. The reason Recep spurns his anxious charges, as he's told me a couple of times, is that they

"The reason Recep spurns his anxious charges, as he's told me a couple of times, is that they don't know how to row."



All aboard

don't know how to row. (And of course they don't know how to row because no one has ever taken the trouble to teach them.)

Doruk, who is physically by far the biggest guy on the crew, and the most intense, shares Recep's frustrations with his peers' ineptitude. Unfortunately, he thinks his rowing is in a different class from theirs, which it isn't. Disdaining to practice with his teammates, Doruk trains every day in a single. Amazingly to me, his conviction of his own superiority isn't shaken when in his first sculling race he flips over and fails to finish.

My favorite part of every practice is rowing under a beautiful aqueduct built in the 16th Century by Sinan, Chief Architect of Suleyman the Magnificent. Ironically, 500 years ago this beautiful structure carried fresh drinking water to the capital. Today, none of Istanbul's tap water, including the water of Ali Bey Koy Baraj, is potable.

One afternoon the guys are unusually subdued. "Did you hear about the explosion in the Spice Bazaar?" they ask me. Seven people were killed, over a hundred injured, a lot of them kids. Though the police call the explosion an accident, the boys are all sure it's caused by a PKK bomb. "What kind of people are these?" they say disgustedly.

Mert says he loves the books of Turkey's most famous novelist, Yeshar Kemal, but can't stand his politics. The problem, Mert says, is that Kemal, like most Turkish intellectuals, is sympathetic to Kurdish nationalism. "There's no difference between Turks and Kurds, we've always been together," says Mert. "I have plenty of

Kurdish friends and they have every opportunity I have. The only reason for the problem in the Southeast is that there are a few people who want to wreck the country who are being supported by Turkey's enemies, like Greece and Syria."

Zorlu adds that torture in prisons is appropriate. "The people who are tortured deserve it because they are trying to destroy our Republic."

Zorlu, like virtually all the educated and secular Turks I met this summer, is a great admirer of Kemal Ataturk. One day in the minibus when I was in the midst of a soliloquy about there being a fine line between Ataturk as an inspiration and as an excuse for complacency, Zorlu interrupted me: "Ataturk's the best, fuck the rest."

Everyone joins in signing Ataturk's praises. Someone recalls that before the battle of Gallipoli, where some half-a-million men died, he said: "I am not asking you to come and fight, I'm asking you to come and die."

(If I were a Turk still looking forward to military service, I'm not sure this would be my favorite Ataturk line. Then again, all of these guys will find ways to evade the 18-month conscription faced by their less-privileged compatriots. Happily, there are more inspiring choices. In 1934 Ataturk heard there were British, Australians and New Zealanders visiting the site of the battle in which some half -million men died. "Those heroes who shed their blood and lost their lives," he wrote to the visitors, "are now lying in the soil of a friendly country. Therefor rest in peace. There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehmets to us, where they lie side by side here in this country of ours. You, the mothers who sent their

sons from faraway countries, wipe away your tears. Your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land, they have become our sons as well.”)

The rowers are indignant that Ataturk didn't top *Time* magazine's poll of the century's one hundred greatest people.

What is extraordinary to me about Ataturk's legacy is that even well-educated young people identify all that is progressive in Turkish society with this one individual. Sitting in a cafe, Bungu, the daughter of a famous actor, gazes at a picture of Ataturk on the wall and *à propos* of nothing, says, “I love Ataturk.” When Selin and I express our amazement at this spontaneous pronouncement, Bungu explains that she loves him because she can't imagine wearing a veil and observing the other Islamic practices that prevailed before the republican revolution and do still today in traditional communities. “I couldn't live like those people,” Bungu says, wrinkling her nose. “So I feel I owe my whole life to Ataturk.”

(One of my roommates, Serder, tells me one evening, “Turks don't think.” He elaborates that given a number of choices, they just choose one and identify with it completely and uncritically. A corollary of this is that Turks love clichés, that refuge of the empty-headed as surely as patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels.)

I ask my friend Ferhat about the fact that Ataturk died of cirrhosis of the liver, thinking that as a urologist he might criticize Ataturk for bringing the condition on himself through excessive drinking. Ferhat replies that Ataturk's doctor, a Frenchman, warned him that his condition was very dangerous and that if he didn't stay in

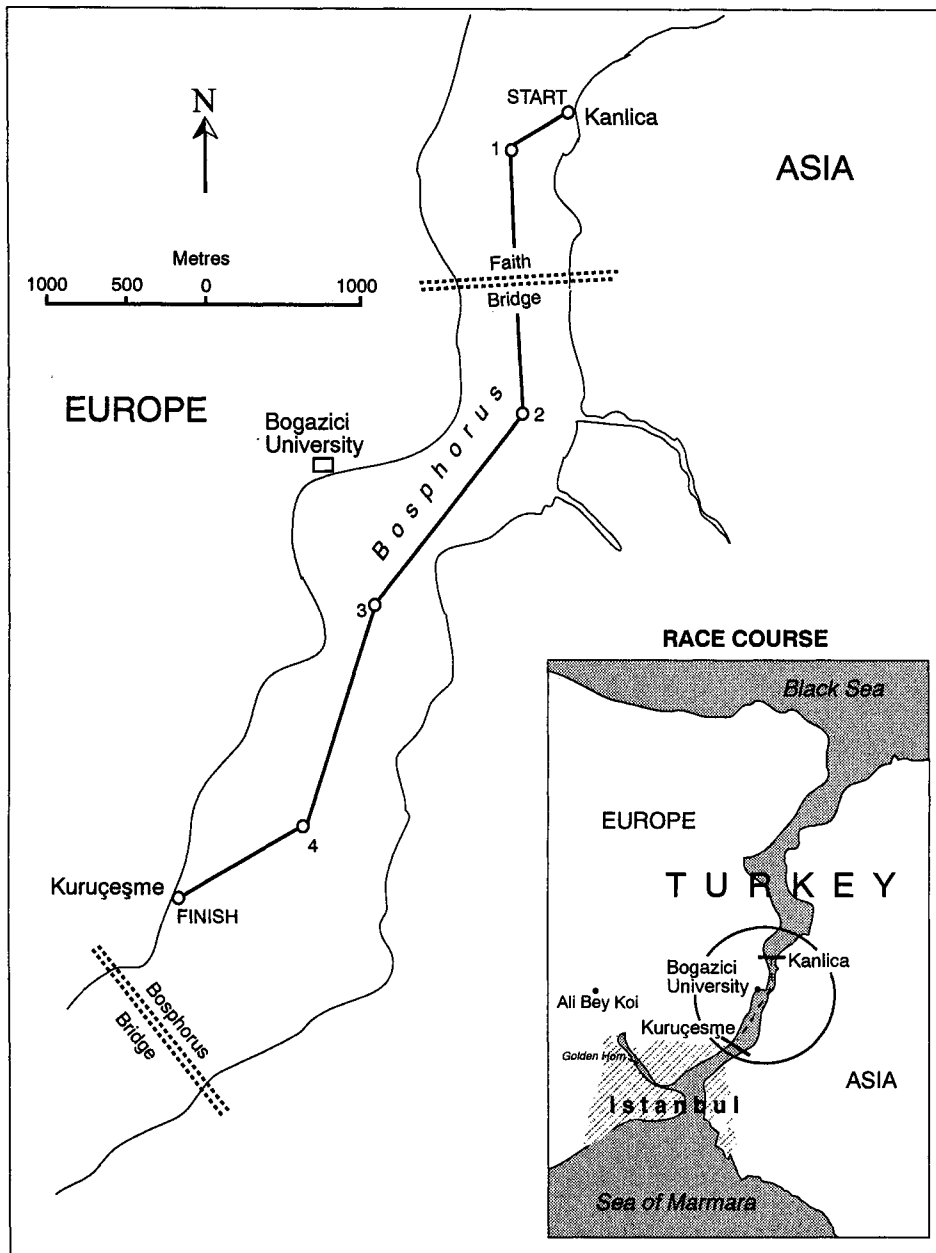
bed he would die very soon. “But this was just when Turkey was concluding the treaty with Syria that secured the [Mediterranean Province of] Hatay, so even though he knew it might cost him his life, Ataturk went to the conference and worked until he was exhausted and died. So I love him even more for being willing to do that for his country.”

(Nearly everyone who has seen pictures of Kemal Ataturk, which includes everyone who has set foot in Turkey, agrees that he was quite a handsome man. Yet for some reason that eludes me; whatever ministry is in charge of disseminating his likeness often seems to choose the most unflattering pictures of him. Yelhan's photo of him, in a place of honor on a sideboard next to the “dining room” table, shows Ataturk looking tough in his military uniform and a high Russian-commissar-style hat of black karakul lamb's wool. This is one of the less theatrical and more attractive of the portraits you see around. Perhaps the most common one shows Ataturk in evening dress glowering at the camera, his blue eyes beneath preternaturally arched brows ablaze with a disturbingly messianic intensity — exactly the way I picture the dapper devil in Bulgakhov's *The Master and Margarita*.)

The night before the race I begin to feel a bit daunted by the distance we're going to race. That evening I walk from the university to my apartment in Ortakoy, a little less than the length of the course, and it takes an hour. Consulting a guidebook I find that descriptive notes on the stretch of the Bosphorus we'll be covering, from the world's third longest to the second longest suspension bridge, takes up six pages. On a map of the Strait on a scale big enough to extend to the Black Sea in the north and the Sea of Marmara in the south, the course is big-



Napping before the race (Recep is second from the right, Refik third)



ger than two finger widths, the shape of each shore clearly discernible.

The boat we're going to use for the race is a beautiful new Italian shell bought with money that for some reason the Ministry of Youth and Sports gave to the crew last year. It is stored in a poorly designed field house, with ill-fitting skylights through which nonregulation direct sunlight dapples the basketball court. (Refik tells me that when you see such flagrant irregularities in construction you can be sure that the explanation is a payoff somewhere in the contracting process.)

We load the shell onto a truck normally used to haul the university's garbage and instead of taking time to

lash it down, four of us jump in back to hold it in place during the trip down to the shore where we'll store it overnight. The guy next to me, Erkan, is one of the ones always posing and admiring his own physique, and is about to move to Northern Cyprus to be with his fiancée. As we're trundling down the hill in the shadow of the Rumeli Hisaru, the fort Mehmet the Conqueror built to cut Constantinople off from resupply by sea before taking the City in 1453, Erkan tells the other guys holding the boat to be quiet. Then he turns his head and says "Salaam Eleyikum." We're passing a graveyard, he explains, and need to pay our respects to the dead.

The only other hint of "religion" was when the coach told us to do a five-stroke racing start, then do ten strokes



*Fenerbahce
smiling at the
award ceremony*

with "all the power God has given us." Inevitably, in the midst of our sprint, a couple of the guys yelled out "Allahu Akbar!"

On the morning of the race we meet at the university at six, and after plenty of yelling by Refik and acrobatics by us, we manage to lower the shell off the bank of the Bosphorus and into the water some six feet below. The water is wonderfully calm as we row up to the Naval College near the start on the Asian side. All around are watermelon rinds, cigarette packets and empty raki bottles, the flotsam and jetsam of an emphatically secular Saturday night.

The race itself proves to be more of a struggle to stay afloat than a speed contest. A wind is whipping the sea, and pleasure boats out to watch stir up treacherous cross-currents. After a mediocre start we splash around chaotically for a couple dozen strokes as we get our first taste of trying to row at full tilt through white caps. Just as we are beginning to find a rhythm, a guy from Sarajevo, Senat, catches a bad crab that bends his rigger and forces us to stop for probably 30 seconds.

If it hadn't been for that mishap, we probably would have come in third out of seven. As it was we finished fourth, only because another boat foundered altogether. Prevented by the waves from applying any power to the oars and helped by the swift current, we were hardly sweating by the time we crossed the finish line 4,000 meters closer to the Sea of Marmara.

After hauling the shells out of the water, we ambled down to a quay crowded with rowers, spectators and swimmers who had just finished a race across the Strait for the award ceremony. The winner of our race was the

Fenerbahce club, which like the second-place crew, Galata Saray, is owned by one of the top two football clubs of Turkey. (Fenerbahce is an Asian neighborhood on the Sea of Marmara whose name literally means "Lighthouse Garden." Galata Saray is Turkey's oldest and most prestigious boys' prep school, which in Turkey is known as a "college.") Fenerbahce look like great rowers, tall, muscular and exuding self-confidence. While at six feet I am the second tallest guy on the Bogazici crew, there are only two rowers from the Fenerbahce eight who are as small as I. They *should* be impressive: they are recruited from clubs all over the country and, I'm told, are actually paid a small monthly stipend. This October they'll fly to Boston to compete in the Head of the Charles Race.

After taking the boat out of the water, disassembling it, loading it onto the garbage truck and rolling it down the shore back to campus, we all dived into the pool in our blue and white one-piece racing suits.

For a while after the race, life with the crew passed fairly quietly. A couple of us would show up at our meeting place on campus at 5 p.m.; others would saunter in within the next half-hour or so and by 7:30 we'd have some boat out on Ali Bey Koy. Meanwhile, Refik told me that Recep had told him that my technique was "almost perfect" and that they wanted to fly Amanda Wilson, my fiancée, stranded in New York City during my stay at B.U., and me from London to Istanbul and put us up in a hotel on the Bosphorus for the big race against Oxford and Cambridge.

One evening I was writing e-mails in the computer room reserved for the Sports Committee with Doruk sitting across from me. I saw that he'd sent me an e-mail

note and I opened it. It began with a report on a small regatta the guys had rowed in the previous weekend, congratulated me on being invited to row in the big race, then dropped a little bomb: "I think maybe you lied about your ergometer score." The foul had come home to roost.

I wrote Doruk a response offering the same rationale for acquiescing in the lie that I've offered above, then walked over to him to talk about it. He didn't let me off the hook easily. "You know in Turkey we lie and cheat about everything. I do it myself — I cheat on my girlfriend, I'm betraying Zorlu by not supporting his campaign to be captain," Doruk said. "But I wanted rowing to be one part of life that was different, that was honest." I told him that I agreed with him completely, assured him that I never would have thought of lying myself and promised that I'd come clean with Refik the next day.

Refik was less surprised and more gracious than I'd expected. He told me that he and Recep knew that Mehmet lied and that they never took any of the scores he reported very seriously. (In any case, he said, Recep had already decided that he wanted me in the boat regardless of my erg score.)

Refik offered two historical explanations for the low standard of honesty in Anatolia. In Ottoman times tax collectors were allowed to keep whatever they could collect above a certain minimum, so they squeezed the peas-

ants mercilessly. Under this pressure the peasants became adept and hiding and prevaricating. A parallel influence was universal conscription into the Ottomans' very active army. Because the mortality rate was high, families would go to extraordinary lengths to help their sons evade military service.

Deep-seated as it is, Refik argues that this tradition of venality is changing. Turkish industry is becoming more competitive and work practices are conforming more to European standards. Unfortunately, says Refik, the elite represented by Bogazici students is lagging behind this trend rather than leading it.

"As for Mehmet," he said, "I've come to accept that it's too late for him to change. He not only lies to me, he often asks the rowers to tell me he's attended practice when he hasn't. I don't appreciate this but it's what I expect from people who rowed on the national team. Their coach was a Bulgarian who had all the rowers using illegal blood-doping. So this is the culture he comes from..."

With this tête-a-tête we close a rich but frustrating and messy chapter and open what I hope will be a stainless new one, culminating in a respectable performance against Oxford and Cambridge on the Golden Horn on August 29. What actually happened I will report in my next installment. □

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INSTITUTE FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

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[EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Shelly Renae Browning. A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia and the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology.

[SOUTH ASIA]

Chenoa Egawa. An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle.

[THE AMERICAS]

Paige Evans. A playwright and former Literary Manager of the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City, Paige is looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts. With a History/Literature B.A. from Harvard, she has served as counselor at the Buckhorn Children's Center in Buckhorn, Kentucky (1983-84), as Arts Editor of the International Courier in Rome, Italy (1985-86), and as an adjunct professor teaching a course in Contemporary American Playwrights at New York University. She joined the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1990.

[THE AMERICAS]

Whitney Mason. A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called *The Siberian Review* in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the *Vladivostok News* and wrote for *Asiaweek* magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam.

[EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Marc Michaelson. A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research."

[sub-SAHARA]

Jean Benoît Nadeau. A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoît studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization."

[EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Susan Sterner. A staff photographer for the Associated Press in Los Angeles, Susan received her B.A. in International Studies and Cultural Anthropology at Emory University and a Master's in Latin American Studies at Vanderbilt. AP gave her a wide-ranging beat, with assignments in Haiti, Mexico and along the U.S.-Mexican border; in 1998 she was a co-nominee for a Pulitzer Prize for a series on child labor. Her fellowship topic: the lives and status of Brazilian women.

[THE AMERICAS]

Tyrone Turner. A photojournalist (Black Star) whose work has appeared in many U.S. newspapers and magazines, Tyrone holds a Master's degree in Government and Latin American politics from Georgetown University and has produced international photo-essays on such topics as Rwandan genocide and mining in Indonesia (the latter nominated for a Pulitzer). As an ICWA Fellow he is writing and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings.

[THE AMERICAS]

Daniel B. Wright. A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duiyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andraea, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California.

[EAST ASIA]

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EUROPE/RUSSIA

Whitney Mason is an Institute Fellow studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam.

Races With Wolves

ISTANBUL, Turkey

October 1998

By Whitney Mason

After the abortive rowing race on the Bosphorus (see WM-1), the heat wave that guaranteed my shirt would be saturated with sweat by the time I sat down in Turkish class at nine each morning came into full force. By the time we met for practice at five in the afternoon, the atmosphere on Bogazici University's hilltop campus had the heavy, soporific feel of a plantation in America's Deep South. After summer classes ended, the chatter of students was replaced by the drowsy buzzing of bees. But while the heat and the quiet lulled us into a Mediterranean torpor, the crew was supposed to be moving into high gear in the buildup to the annual race against Oxford and Cambridge held on the Golden Horn, the long inlet that slices into Istanbul, in late August. But the guys were sluggish and surly and relations between the rowers and the coaches moved toward open hostility.

Refik, the irascible economics professor and team autocrat, told me that he and Recep, the aloof head coach, despaired of the talent on the team. (Recep was so disgusted by the rowers' technique that he would not deign to coach them. His contempt, obviously, was self-fulfilling; but my repeated attempts to get him to see this were unavailing.) Yet somehow, he told me in his cool, cavernous office, they had to find a way to coax a respectable performance from the crew in the race against the British. Most of the team's budget came not from the university but from the Ministry of Youth and Sports, Refik explained, and the Minister himself would be at the Golden Horn to watch the race against the British crews. If Bogazici did well, the Minister would give the team enough money to live like pashas for the next year; if not, he would turn off the tap and the team would be bankrupt. So: our inspiration came not from some naïve abstraction such as a determination to honor the school but from the need to wheedle money out of an official. I was bemused to learn that our little team seemed to be following in the tradition of crass sycophancy that had contributed so much to the ruination of the Ottoman empire."

Since I had already told Refik that at the time of the Oxford-Cambridge Race I'd be with my fiancée Amanda Wilson in France, for some time it wasn't clear whether I'd be allowed to continue rowing. Then one day in early August Refik called me into his office for a serious heart-to-heart. Recep, he said, had told him that my technique was "nearly perfect" and they needed me in the boat. If he provided two round-trip plane tickets to Istanbul from London, paid for the train from Paris to London, and put Amanda and me up in a hotel on the Bosphorus, would I come back for just three days and row in the race? After e-mails and phone talk with Amanda, I said we would. Refik, it seemed, was honoring another late Ottoman