

Postrestant
Merkez Postanesi
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COFFEE AND CULTURE -- A STIMULATING BREW?

by

Kenneth W. Cline

It was rather like tilting at windmills. But Mr. Ali Paşa Aksu, chairman of the Turkish Coffee House Owners Federation, sounded serious. Beginning in January, the federation will embark upon a five-year project to install small paperback libraries in at least 80,000 of the country's 105,000 registered coffee houses, he announced early in November. According to Mr. Aksu, the federation wants to turn the coffee houses "into cultural centers, and not just places where pensioners and the unemployed sit down to play cards and watch video shows."

Although popular in other Middle Eastern countries, the coffee house as sacred male sanctuary has achieved its highest level of development in Turkey, where at least one can be found in every village and urban neighborhood. Turkish men have a seemingly irresistible urge to slip away from their wives and families to seek male comraderie in poker, backgammon and chitchat. It was rather unlikely they would develop a craze for intellectual self-improvement as well.

If the men were willing to read, says Mr. Gıyasettin Bingöl, 26, brother of an Istanbul coffee house owner, "they would go to libraries." Mr. Bingöl, a muscular, square-jawed young man, believes his customers want to "give themselves a mental rest." Playing cards serves that purpose just fine, he says, a glance taking in the smoke-filled room.

Mr. Bingöl fears that solitary bookworms will spend less money than boisterous card players, but other owners seem to feel differently. According to Mr. Aksu, the federation has been considering this project for the last 10 years. "Many young people go to coffee houses," he explains. "Some of them don't have enough money to buy books and we thought the libraries would give them a good opportunity to learn about Turkey and the world."

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports began looking at the idea four years ago. This year, it finally decided to allocate

Kenneth Cline is a Village Reporting Fellow of the Institute studying rural life in Turkey

\$930,000 to the federation to implement the plan. It does seem that the education ministry, under the leadership of Mr. Vehbi Dincerler since the Özal government came to power last November, has lately acquired a zeal for cultural reform. During last May's televised National Sports Day, Mr. Dincerler forced female gymnastic students to wear baggy shorts instead of their customary tights.

The coffee house owners won't have to spend any of their own money on the libraries and it might be some time before they see any books. Mr. Bingöl has yet to receive any information about the program from either the federation or the ministry. Indications are that newly-built coffee houses will be most affected at first. Yet already, the education ministry has made a small beginning.

Under a pilot project, two of Istanbul's 12,000 registered coffee houses have received books. One of the two belongs to Mr. Celal Altunel, 41, a former public school teacher (of Turkish literature, appropriately enough). Three months ago, the ministry sent Mr. Altunel a stack of some 50 paperback books, which he dutifully placed in a glass-enclosed cabinet near the entrance to his coffee house. Being university-educated and of a thoughtful disposition, Mr. Altunel hopes some of his customers will actually make use of the service.

If Mr. Altunel's customers don't, there's not much hope for the rest. Mr. Altunel's coffee house was selected for the pilot project because it is located in Istanbul's Sultanahmet district just around the corner from the municipal courthouse. With lawyers and judges dropping by to sip tea and glance at a newspaper, his clientele is more sophisticated than most. Twice a month, the ministry sends someone by to see if the books are being used. Not much, admits Mr. Altunel, but adds, "at least, it's better than not having any books at all."

It could be that the selection in Mr. Altunel's cabinet lacks appeal. For light entertainment, the ministry provided translations of Tom Sawyer and Robin Hood. More relevant to Turkish culture but a bit on the dry side are the numerous informational books, including religious commentaries, biographies of Atatürk, and a stolid volume entitled Practical Agricultural Methods. Surely only the most erudite pensioner would be interested in Today's Turkish Alphabets.

Even lurid pulp fiction might not provoke a stampede to Mr. Altunel's cabinet (the education ministry would never provide it anyway). The first Koranic injunction is igra (read), but most Turks never picked up the habit, although the Turkish republic has made enormous progress increasing literacy since its founding in 1923. In 1927, the year of the first republican census, only 10 percent of the population could read; today, the figure is 74 percent. But it is still rare to see a Turk reading anything more substantial than his daily newspaper. Except for Cumhuriyet (The Republic) and Tercuman (The Interpreter), Turkey's nine major dailies emphasize photos and cartoons over text.

The most extreme example of this tendency, Tan (Dawn), is also the most popular paper in Turkey and the one seen most often in coffee houses, particularly those catering to the working class.

Tan's daily circulation of 713,500 tops that of the other dailies, leaving Tercuman in fifth place (150,700) and Cumhuriyet -- considered the country's best paper -- in seventh (94,200). Price has something to do with Tan's popularity; it sells for five cents an issue, compared to 12 cents for the other dailies. But what really sells Tan is sensationalized (often entirely fabricated) news and eye-catching photos of semi-nude women. During the summer, Tan photographers scoured the Turkish beaches looking for topless female tourists. With winter coming on, they've had to look for other subjects to titillate their readers. A recent front page photo featured a buxom woman in a short, revealing slip tied to a chair with her head tilted upward in a look of dazed horror. According to the caption, which provided as much text as Tan usually allows, "She likes to make love after being beaten."

Despite some strict Islamic customs that continue to affect relations between men and women in this country, Turkish men have an insatiable appetite for this type of entertainment. As long as Tan is around and selling for 5 cents a copy, the customers in Mr. Altunel's coffee house are unlikely to spend much time reading the books in the cabinet. "The newspaper owners know our men are fond of naked women pictures," says Mr. Altunel. But, he adds, at least the men read Tan in the coffee houses and "don't take it back to their homes."