

Farewell to Mehmet Genç

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On 16 March 2021 Mehmet Genç, one of Turkey's greatest historians and an exceptional thinker, passed away. He had been diagnosed with an aggressive form of lung cancer two years previously.

I met him through the Greek translation of his study on revenue leasing annually (*iltizam*) and lifelong basis (*malikâne*). Vassilis Panagiotopoulos had included it in a book he published in 1980. A volume containing papers delivered by historians who had taken part in the Symposium on the industrial revolution in the Balkans, organised by the Association International des Études du Sud-Est Européen and held in Hamburg in March 1976.¹

After the fall of the junta, Greek historiography, influenced by its Western counterpart, sought new ways of interpreting modern times. It attempted to approach new fields of historical studies and topics as yet unknown in the country. During this precursor phase, concurrent with the first steps being made towards

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1 Mehmet Genç, "Συγκριτική μελέτη των στοιχείων της ισόβιας εκμίσθωσης προσόδων και του όγκου των εμπορικών και βιοτεχνικών δραστηριοτήτων στην Οθωμανική αυτοκρατορία κατά το δεύτερο μισό του 18^{ου} αιώνα" [A comparative study of the data on lifelong revenue leasing and the extent of commercial and artisanal activities in the Ottoman Empire during the second half of the 18th century], in the volume *Εκσυγχρονισμός και βιομηχανική επανάσταση στα Βαλκάνια τον 19ο αιώνα* [Modernisation and industrial revolution in the 19th-century Balkans], (Athens: Themelio, 1980), pp. 278-315.

new horizons both in methodology and themes, studies by both older and younger foreign historians touching on modern times and raising issues concerning economic and social history began to be presented to the Greek readership. They were interested in locating the time and causes of the economic and social changes in the Ottoman Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean: changes in agricultural production, the decline in cottage industries, the reasons for the low level of capital accumulation, etc.

Mehmet Genç's paper was, for me, the most interesting of all the studies in the volume, primarily due to the way he addressed the issues in his topic. From the beginning, he clearly set out the *point* of his research. As I would discover later, his manner of laying everything out clearly and presenting the principal question of an issue at the beginning distinguished him in his written and oral language. Mehmet Genç's study, like some others, played an essential role in the approach I chose during the preparation of my thesis, which I started in 1980. What he wrote in his introduction was crucial for me: *To what extent do the records of the Ottoman financial authorities correspond to real economic life? If this doesn't exist, can we construct it? How large would the percentage error be in this case?*²

Forty years have passed since then, and there are still only a few people who have understood this. Concerning these and other rigidities and hysteresis in a large section of Turkish historiographical production, Mehmet would sadly say, "So what if almost 2,000 historians specialising in the Ottoman era have left Turkish universities in recent decades". He had counted from official data the number of Ottomanists in Turkey. Well, I never, Mehmetcim!!

We met in the summer of 1987 or 1988, and of course, where else!! In the old Ottoman archives, there in the beautiful neighbourhood of Sultanahmet, alongside Hagia Sophia, the Blue Mosque, the Basilica Cistern, the Archaeological Museum, Gülhane Park, and in the background the Topkapı Palace. I no longer remember the exact date. I do remember, though, that Halil Sahillioğlu made the introductions. From the first moment, I felt I had known Mehmet for years. We bonded in a close friendship that lasted over thirty years.

His daily presence at the Archives, like that of Halil Sahillioğlu, helped me enormously. To these two outstanding historians from Turkey, I owe my

2 It was precisely on this question that I built the working hypothesis for processing data from the first *Tapu Tabrir* from Eğriboz/Evia (1474) which was the subject of my thesis that I defended in Paris in 1983.

knowledge of archives, my acquaintance with Ottoman material. I felt more comfortable though with Mehmet, perhaps because he was younger, and it was no coincidence that we spoke to each other in the second person singular from the first moment. After our daily research in the Ottoman Archives, our conversations, accompanied by tea and *simit*s beneath the shady plane trees in Sultanahmet, were for me my real, fundamental training in Turkish studies. Our circle was often widened by Linda Darling, Amy Singer, Ariel Salzman, Neşe Erim and other Turks and foreigners who arrived in Istanbul each summer, as I had, from various parts to work Ottoman Archive. Later on, Fehmi Yılmaz permanently joined our meetings, staying faithfully by his mentor's side until his final hours.

Mehmet and I found we had mutual friends: Mete Tunçay and his circle from the periodical *Toplum ve Tarih*, Murat Belge, Fahri Aral, the people from the Librairie de Péra at Tunel, the booksellers at Beyazıt Meydanı and Sahaflar Çarşısı, the book bazaar, whom he had known for a long time and me since 1985, from the search for Karamanlidika books. Countless times we wandered together through these places, meeting friends and acquaintances, chatting about new and old books, about intellectuals, both alive and dead, the political situation, music, art. Tea, coffee, cigarettes, countless cigarettes accompanied our academic *muhabbet*. Mehmet was an inexhaustible source of knowledge that he had acquired with considerable effort and anguish, but he always gave generously. But what I appreciated about him, apart from the low profile he kept when talking about topics he was an expert, was that he always accompanied his opinion with a question mark when asked for it. A wise man! And something else. I never heard him make comments about anyone, even in cases when he probably should have criticised. At such moments he chose parables and anecdotes, let him understand who can. Because he also had another rare gift, he combined oriental wisdom with phlegmatic Western humour.

Mehmet was not the kind of teacher who would take you by the hand to initiate you, to start with you from scratch. Somehow you had to meet him halfway. He was an excellent speaker who expressed himself clearly, perfectly understandable by all as he was very knowledgeable about the things he spoke of. He opened wide our view of history. He made reference to many books when he spoke, proof of his considerable resources and preparation. As far as I know, he was the first academic to begin a series of popularized lectures/lessons in various cultural centres in Istanbul and on television, leaving the most favourable impressions. He was always willing to share the knowledge he had acquired over 60 years by

working systematically and endlessly in archives and libraries to form a picture of the economy in the Ottoman Empire over time. He researched the establishment and operation of the economic system built over the centuries by the Ottomans and revealed the changes it had undergone from the dynamics of external and internal factors. I was delighted to learn that the first volume containing the texts of some of his speeches in which various aspects of the Ottoman economy are examined recently released in 2020, during the days of hard lockdown. Most of these speeches had been organised in collaboration with his old colleague Erol Özvar, who saw their publication.³ Together they also published the enormous work on the budgets of the Ottoman state, one of the most reliable sources for studying the Empire's revenue and expenditure. A tool for those wishing to explore the relationship between fiscal performance, institutional changes, and economic relations in the Ottoman state.⁴

Mehmet Genç spent his whole life in the University. He started out as an assistant to Ömer Lütfi Barkan when he decided to give up his career as a senior administrative official to become a historian and study the Ottoman Empire's economic history. He had studied Political Science at Ankara University. It is certainly no coincidence that he chose to begin his postgraduate studies alongside Ö. L. Barkan, a pioneering historian, who, influenced by the Annales School, had introduced demography, statistical methods, and new topics into research on the Ottoman history, working with archival material. Mehmet stayed at the Institute of Economic History, founded by Barkan, from 1965 to 1982, working alongside a generation of outstanding historians such as Halil Sahillioğlu, Cengiz Orhonlu, Lütfi Güçer, and Mübahat Küçüköğlü. On leaving there, he taught at the Universities of Istanbul and Marmara, at the Polytechnic, the University of Bilgi, and until very recently, before he fell ill, at the University of Şehir, all Universities in Istanbul. It was clear, though, that he did not belong to what is known as the academic world, despite working there all his life. He remained outside of the rules governing the academic *milieu*. He never defended his thesis, even though he worked on it for years. When once asked about this in an interview, he said that he could not submit a text that would simply describe a situation. He had not yet reached the point of interpretation, of explaining the topics he had

3 Mehmet Genç and Erol Özvar, *Osmanlı Ekonomisine Dair Konuşmalar-I*, (Istanbul: Ötüken Neşriyat A.Ş., 2020).

4 *Osmanlı Maliyesi: Kurumlar ve Bütçeler*, eds. Mehmet Genç and Erol Özvar, 2 v., (Istanbul: Osmanlı Bankası Arşiv ve Araştırma Merkezi, 2006).

tackled. So he continued to work systematically on it and, choosing to strive for his goal, he was left out of the academic hierarchy, of which he could very easily have been part. Few people, very few, make such tough decisions.

Mehmet Genç always set the bar very high. He struggled to reach it and he did. Proof of this was the book he published in which he presented the results of his research on a range of topics that had preoccupied him for decades.⁵ It is a collection of essays in which the paradoxes of the Ottoman economic system are interpreted by creating a work model for the state's role in development. For Mehmet, the Ottoman world view was characterized by three main principles: provisionism, fiscalism, and traditionalism. Provisionism was the policy of maintaining a steady supply of goods and services to citizens, which had to be cheap, plentiful, and good quality. Fiscalism was the policy of maximizing the Empire's revenue through a tax system. Finally, traditionalism was the tendency to maintain as far as possible the status quo in the structure and operation of the empire by preserving elements of a previous administrative and economic model before adopting essential changes. These three policies created the reference framework of the Ottoman economic system, guiding the policy of the empire.⁶

Mehmet's entire life was defined by his interests, an exceptionally difficult choice for his own life and that of his family. It was impossible, though, for him to do otherwise. His commitment lay elsewhere. He was, by nature, a true intellectual. Free, unconventional, primarily brave as the road and the manner in which he chose to follow it were extremely hard. He is aptly described by the title of the introduction to his book: "*Hac yolunda bir karınca*" (An ant on a pilgrimage).⁷

The conditions of his life were anything but ideal and did not allow him the luxury of devoting himself to the pursuit of the knowledge he aspired to acquire.

5 Mehmet Genç, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda Devlet ve Ekonomi*, (Istanbul: Ötüken Yayınları, 2000).

6 A brief, highly concise, presentation of his interpretative form of the Ottoman financial system is included in the entry "Economy and Economic Policy" in the *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, (eds.) Gabor Agoston and Bruce Masters, (New York: Facts on File, 2009), pp. 192-195.

7 The story is as follows: An ant set out on a pilgrimage. Those around him asked: *What are you doing, how will you get to Mecca?* And he replied: *If I do not manage to get there, at least I will die on the road to Mecca.* Mehmet reached his goal. That was enough for him as he didn't care about any other title.

The seventh and last child of a poor rural family from a small mountain village in Artvin on the Black Sea, he succeeded in becoming the historian Mehmet Genç, with a significant contribution to the field of Ottoman Studies, not only within Turkey but on an international scale too. Respected by all. An oligographer, a man of few works which were though unsurpassed in value. The path he chose in his youth and his first works revealed that here was a historian seeking to understand the mechanisms governing the structure and operation of the Ottoman Empire over time, to integrate and observe its role in a global form. He searched for the answers to the questions surrounding these issues in the considerable volume of the Ottoman archive. He has left an extensive archive with notes and processed material to accompany the photocopies he collected and filed according to the subject.

Mehmet, the hard-working ant. Files and files on the *mukata'as* from oil and soap in Morea and Crete, on the renting of the salt-pans, a series of files on customs duties in Thessaloniki, Istanbul, Smyrna. I mention just some of what I remember seeing in very recent years, as he always generously offered me his hugely extensive material for my own studies. Notes in the margins of photocopies, on sheets of paper and cards that formed small sub-sections to be included in the special thematic folders.⁸ Legible notes in the careful writing he learnt as a pupil at the excellent Haydarpaşa High School. He always spoke with love and gratitude about the school that changed his life and opened up opportunities for a poor village boy. I hope that his archive will ultimately be integrated along with his valuable library into the Research Centre planned to be founded in his name

8 In the introduction to his book, he vividly describes the difficult conditions under which he and every researcher had to work in the Başbakanlık Arşivi in the old days which today seem mythical. We had to copy pages and pages of Ottoman documents as no photocopies were given or the number allowed to be given was extremely limited, a situation that lasted until the beginning of the new century. Conditions today in which the researcher has access to digitized files and in many cases to archival units without the need for his physical presence at the Archive are far removed. Modernization created a new *status quo* in Ottoman Studies with undoubtedly many positive aspects, as it made it easier for the researcher to access material thus saving valuable time. There are also though negative aspects, those resulting from the superficial use of valuable documentation, when its role is unfortunately limited, and not in just a few cases, to showing the supposed, “research effort made” and the verification of the “scientific” recognition of an opus. This is the category of Ottomanists who limit their research to the electronic catalogue cards in the archive when writing their studies. And to imitate, as far as I can, Mehmet’s matter-of-fact style, I would say that they choose the ostrich’s tactic of hiding its head in the sand and believing it can’t be seen.

at Marmara University. Albeit late, his contribution to the science of history has been recognized. He should have worked in such a research centre. He would have contributed infinitely more and, above all, would have had a much easier life.

He stayed away from the positivist view that questions and answers spring up on their own from the study of the material. On the contrary, he showed that nothing is waiting for you in a source. You find it only if you ask the question first. And Mehmet had many questions, and he was capable of finding their answers. Questions are, of course, created when the brain is nurtured, exercised when it constantly receives stimuli. And Mehmet Genç had an obsessive bibliophilia (nothing to do with a collector's mentality) that ranged from literature, philosophy, critical theory, contemporary political and economic analyses, and a host of others outside the narrow confines of the *métier*. He was a scientist with the comprehensive knowledge of those who no longer exist. He built strong foundations from early on, which with youthful enthusiasm, he constantly made sure were enriched and renewed. I was amazed when many years ago I saw at his house the entire series of *History and Theory* journals from 1960, that is, from the time the journal first came out. He had become a subscriber as, at that time, the journal could not be found in any library in Turkey.

Mehmet found reading an exercise and a pleasure. He believed that literature cultivates the soul, broadens the mind, and claimed that it has healing powers. As a twenty-year-old locked up in a sanatorium for six months with tuberculosis, he read almost all the classical literature. "Gogol, Tolstoy, Shakespeare, and Dostoevsky helped me stay alive," he used to say. It was to them he resorted when diagnosed with lung cancer. They were his refuge. He reread them all from the beginning. "I discovered things I had not noticed before," he said. In this second phase, he watched an opera online each day from the Metropolitan Opera of New York. Because Mehmet Genç was also a passionate music lover in the way that only a lover of "*Logos*" can be. And it is no coincidence that he was a Wagnerian. He had a profound knowledge of Wagner's works and those of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, with whom Richard Wagner was associated. From him, I learnt Wagner's wise saying, "Never look at the trombones; it only encourages them." More than a few times though, he appeared to forget it.

Mehmet Genç was an intellectual in the most literal sense of the term. An extraordinary narrator, amazingly good at discussing topics of world culture, and

FAREWELL TO MEHMET GENÇ

above all, a generous, faithful friend. A gentle, kind person. A remarkable character. I feel very lucky to have had him in my life and because he honoured me for more than thirty years with his friendship, love, and discreet consideration. I owe him infinite things. Nothing can fill the gap he has left.

What our profession owes to *Usta* Mehmet, that great master, is immeasurable.

May this enlightened man rest eternally in the light.

Nur içinde yatsın.