



The Secret Solitude in a Soulful City by Vedica Kant -04.02.2013

The plot of land across the road from the Cevahir shopping mall in Istanbul's Şişli neighbourhood is marked by high walls topped with barbed wire. In the daily hustle and bustle of shoppers that surround the area it is easy, expected even, for the casual passer-by to pay little attention to the whitewashed walls. I passed them almost every day on the way to work but like many others, I never really wondered what was behind those walls. And then one day, drinking coffee on the second floor of a Starbucks that worked as a vantage point overlooking those high walls, I realised I was looking into two large Christian cemeteries. Closer inspection revealed that seemingly-permanently locked gates led to a Greek Orthodox and Armenian Catholic cemetery. These cemeteries, in sight but out of mind, are an interesting and important reminder of the many communities that used to make up Istanbul's population.

Istanbul is dotted with cemeteries. Some are vast and visible. The neighbourhood of Eyüp on the Golden Horn, for example, is characterised by the endless tombstones that mark the hillside. Others are a stealthier. Historically Istanbul has had large populations of Jews, Greeks, Armenians, Bulgarians, European expatriates, even Dönme, crypto-Jews who openly practiced Islam but secretly adhered to Judaism. Though these groups might have diminished in presence and societal influence over the city today, they do make their presence felt through the space that is often dedicated to their memorials. It is probably fair to say that most of the Christian minorities of the present-day Turkish Republic have not been easily or fairly accommodated into the modern Turkish state. There have been tensions with the Greeks, tensions over the Armenian issue continue, and the Jews - who used to be the most accepted of the non-Muslim minorities - face increasing and startling anti-Semitism. These problems are even felt by the physical reminders of these communities in the city. The places of worship are more often than not out-of-bounds for outsiders and, I discovered, so are the cemeteries. This is hardly surprising. There have been attacks on non-Muslim places of worship in the past. Wanton, rowdy, nationalist elements have often desecrated tombstones on cemeteries, which have led to Istanbul's minorities closing their doors more tightly than ever.

The Jewish cemeteries I knew of – one in Hasköy, another in Kuzguncuk – were in neighbourhoods that also had synagogues. The synagogues were closed, the cemeteries sequestered, if not because of actual physical boundaries then because they seem to have been rendered unsafe by shady, glue-sniffing youth itching to cause trouble. Efforts to get into Greek cemeteries were always met by a standard question, “do you have relatives buried here?” When I replied no, I was told that I would have to get permission from the Patriarchate to even have a look. The gatekeeper at the Armenian Catholic cemetery told me to come back the next day. The next day he told me to come back the day after. This ritual continued till he was satisfied that I was a serious visitor, a real history student as I claimed as opposed to someone who wanted to get in to cause trouble. The ferocious roaming Kangals that usually guard the property were tied up and I was allowed to have a look around. Cemeteries that are now maintained by foreign diplomatic missions are easier to get in to, but even at the Feriköy Catholic cemetery the guard seemed sceptical of anyone who wanted to go in. “It's not a park to roam around,” he snorted. We were allowed to go in with a warning. “Just this once. I don't want to see you back here wanting another tour of the place.”

The fact that I am from India has always been a topic of conversation with taxi drivers and shopkeepers in Istanbul. You don't bury your dead there, they often say, almost accusingly. We don't, and while there are cemeteries in India they are not as prominent as they are in largely Muslim and Christian countries. The idea of recreating or imagining a life looking at a tombstone feels a bit odd, but the cemeteries also seemed to me to be an important archive of sorts.

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Often generations of families are buried side by side, some prominent and some not. You get a slow sense of where people came from and how much of a melting pot Istanbul has always been. In the Dönme cemetery, entire sections seem dedicated to people from Thessaloniki and Sofia. The Feriköy Catholic and Protestant cemeteries seem to offer vignettes of adventurous lives, such as an engineer born in Manchester who died young in Istanbul. What was that journey like? An enamelled photograph on the tomb is a common sight – the rules banning imagery do not apply here – and is a clear distinction of the religious faith of the deceased. Often birth years even for these non-Muslims are noted according to the hijri calendar, giving the odd sense that some people had lived for some six centuries but also serving as a reminder of the impact of even the smaller social reforms the republic embarked upon.

In an Istanbul that has grown, become more crowded, and less green the cemeteries often act as an oasis. At the Armenian cemetery in Şişli, surrounded by trees and with hardly any bodyaround, I could have forgotten I was in Istanbul at all. The sound of the traffic and endless pedestrian march that were just outside the cemetery walls dimmed to a whisper. But these private oases sit on absolutely prime land in a city that is hungry for more construction sites. Whether they will continue to be eternal resting spots is open question. Some of the cemeteries that survive today have incorporated tombs that were moved when public works and infrastructural projects came in their way. Hopefully the ones that exist, quietly, today will continue to stay put. ✿

