

Sait T.

"The selfishness of Europeans troubles me."



Sait T., m., born in Erzincan in Turkey in 1949, in Switzerland since 1975

Where did you grow up?

I was born in a mountain village in Anatolia in the province of Erzincan. I stayed there until my fifth year of school. At 12 I went to the town of Erzincan to the sixth-year school, and then to the grammar school. However, I had to leave the school because my family, although they were among the better off in the village, couldn't raise the necessary means.

My father died in a hunting accident when I was a year and a half old. When I was five, my mother remarried and moved away with her husband. She left me and my nine-year-old sister in the care of my uncle and my grandmother. My uncle was like a father to me, and his two daughters were like my sisters. And my grandmother was father, mother, grandfather and grandmother all in one person. We all lived in a house with two big rooms. We three children slept in one with our grandmother, and my uncle and his wife slept in the other. In the storey under us we kept the animals: cows, oxen, a horse and a mule. In that way they gave us some warmth.

The whole village of about 80 families was poor. If I got a pair of rubber boots, I felt lucky. Everybody was equal, even though you might have a bit more or less. Everyone was confronted with the same situation: hard work in summer so as to provide something for the winter. At some places there was meat once or twice a month, at others none. As children, though, we hardly noticed this distinction. The village was like a family, everybody knew everyone else. I could go in and out of all the neighbours' houses at any time.

How did social differences show?

Because everybody's houses were open, you knew exactly what someone had or didn't have. My family was able to buy cloth for my clothes, while a poor family would use the cloth from hand-me-downs. We drank from glasses, while a poor family used copper beakers. A better-off family could invite perhaps ten people from other villages to a wedding, while a poor one had perhaps just one. But although there was this difference, people didn't keep each other at a distance, and we'd help each other out with butter and cheese other things.

Why was your family better of than the others?

We had a lot of land, which I and my cousin have now inherited. I've never cared about the land, and it's been left unused. One day maybe I'll build a house in European style on a hill with 10,000 square metres of land.

If you stay at home on a visit today, how do people look at you? Are you still the son of a wealthy family for them?

No, I'm myself. I mix with everyone. I was in the village for three days last summer. I visited the poorest, the oldest and the youngest. I met between 150 and 200 people at a wedding, including old friends, and it made me really happy. I was accepted as I am. Perhaps some believe that, because I live in Europe, I must be rich. Sometimes I explain that I have to work just the same, and that you don't just pick up money from the street in Europe, but have to work very hard for it.

Did you have to do farmwork as a child?

Yes, of course. All the children had to help, as well as the oxen, the horse and the mule – animals and people together! We had no machines; oxen and horses were used for ploughing and transporting the harvest. But I never enjoyed working, for instance mowing and other farmwork, although I was always on the side of the workers. And I never liked our mountains either. In summer we had to go up to cut hay and bring it down. It was a five-hour journey. My uncle would harness two horses to the cart at four in the morning. Even though I wasn't at school age yet, I had to drive the cart home through the woods. I was frightened of the wild animals, the bears and the wolves. So I hated the mountains: and here in Switzerland I love them.

We produced everything ourselves, and were self-supporting: wheat, and all kinds of vegetables, such as tomatoes, cucumbers, courgettes and pumpkins. A portion would be dried for winter. On holidays there would sometimes be honey that relatives would bring

from other villages. How that tasted! We didn't know about toys. We did everything ourselves, and we were happy like that.

How did your grandmother prepare you for life?

“Be righteous!” she said to me. “Don't lie and don't steal. Be good to people.” Everything else wasn't important to her. Also, the adults really didn't have time for us children. We were just there and had to look after ourselves.

There was no contraception either. When I advised my sister, who already had seven children, to get the doctor to prescribe the pill for her, she got angry, because she didn't want to go against God's will. But otherwise we Alevitic Kurds aren't so religious. There was no mosque and no khodja (i.e., religious teacher) in our village. As a child I wasn't very religious. We had a three-day fast every year, during which no water could be drunk. As a fourteen-year-old, I liked it, because it was a short fast and because after the three days the boys could wish for which of the village girls should bring them their water. And then amongst us Alevites there was also a twelve-day fast, in which no water could be drunk either. That wasn't for me.

Were boys and girls raised separately?

Amongst us, girls and boys grew up together, no problem. Sexual relations were forbidden though, as in Europe. When I was thirteen, my family wanted me to marry, because we were shorthanded for the work at home. When it went as far as that, I just disappeared. They tried again when I was fifteen and sixteen and after military service. But it became clearer and clearer that this was a decision I wanted to make for myself. It would be me who married this woman and not my relatives. I stood against tradition and broke taboos. My relatives thought I was out of line, but it was all forgotten over time.

Did you get into disputes with others?

Our village and twenty others in the province of Erzincan belonged to a great landowner who was the rector of a technical university in Istanbul. At that time there was a lot of pressure on the landowner to sell his land. So he offered his land for sale very cheaply, because he feared otherwise to lose all his land. That was when irregularities happened. Some folks in the village who had connections with the landowner paid him for pastures that in fact didn't belong to him at all, but were part of the village commons. I was about eighteen years old at the time and, along with the other youths and two older men, campaigned against the sale of our common lands.

What were you like as a youngster?

Bone idle. I didn't want to work, I just wanted to have money to spend and to dress well. That was all. When I was seventeen or eighteen, I began to wonder what was going on around me, what was happening in the world. Why are there rich and poor? Why are there differences between people? This was at the end of the sixties. I looked for people of like mind and began to read, for instance the books Jack London wrote about the labour movement in the USA, and Gorki's "The Mother". I was living in shared houses with students in Istanbul. Lots of issues were discussed and argued over there. I became a member of a political organisation and distributed leaflets and propaganda material, which as forbidden, naturally. Then I was called up for military service. Afterwards I went to Istanbul and ran a teahouse.

Why did you go to Europe?

People had always said that it was so free in Europe. I was curious and wanted to know how it really was. In 1973 I left the business with a friend and went to Anatolia to get my savings, about 6,000 marks, and then waited for a good opportunity to travel to Germany. My cousin lived in Leverkusen, near Cologne. She spent her holidays with us and I asked her if I could go with her when she went back to Germany. She said yes, and we drove by car to Cologne. Since I had money I didn't want to work but to get to know the Europeans. However, my cousin and her husband, who came from a very poor farming family and didn't know much about the world, lived all alone, so I had no contact whatsoever with Germans. After two months I'd had enough of this confinement and told my cousin's husband: "I feel like I'm in prison here, I want to leave and get to know Europe!" He retorted: "But you're here to earn money. You're not normal."

How did you come to Switzerland?

Since I had a friend in Zurich I decided in January 1975 to go to Switzerland. I can still remember the Mandarin café at Stadelhoferplatz, where lots of Turks used to come and where I arranged to meet my friend. The only German sentence I knew was "*Eine Tasse Kaffee, bitte*" – "a cup of coffee, please". I said this to the waitress, but she didn't understand me. My friend corrected me: "here you have to say '*Café crème, bitte*' ". That was how I got my first coffee in Switzerland.

I lived with my friend and another fellow who came from a neighbouring village and had a room near Limmatplatz in District 5. Three or four of us lived at his place. I was here as an illegal tourist. Then I got to know a young woman who was studying at the teacher training college. We fell in love, and so I was caught in Switzerland. After a while my savings were all spent. I had to decide either to go back to Turkey or to stay and look for a

way of earning money. My friend found some illegal work for me, on Engstligennalp ob Adelboden for the winter season of 1975/6. My boss there was as strict as an army general. She paid me 900 francs per month, and for that I had to work as kitchen help for fourteen hours a day. After I left the job, it took three people to do the same work. During my time in the Berner Oberland I learned German intensively. I'd found myself some books in Zurich. After just three months I'd made great progress. Once I could converse a bit with the people up there and spring was coming, I asked my boss, unsuccessfully, for a rise in wages. I went back to Zurich, where I lived with a new girlfriend for nearly two years. She wanted to marry me. I told her that life with me in Anatolia would probably be difficult. At home at that time we didn't even have a toilet; you had to do your business behind the house. "You have to get to know my homeland first, then perhaps I'll go back", I said to her. "Fine", she said, and so we went to Anatolia. It didn't persuade her, however, and later on we split up.

After that I worked as a waiter. I earned a lot and spent a lot too. I also helped out my countrymen with small sums. In those days we had a lot of solidarity. I worked for four years as a waiter, without a work permit, until I got married. In 1979 the police picked me up off the street when they asked to see my permit. Since I'd come into contact with the police several times before as a result of my illegal work, they first held me on remand for twenty days and then sent me back to Istanbul on a plane. We got married a bit later. I got my permit as a result of this marriage, and so came back. My first legal job was at Brown Boveri in Oerlikon. We moved to Lucerne, because my wife had a publican's license. I worked during the day as a waiter in a restaurant – not my wife's – and at a nightclub at night. After a year we moved back to Zurich, and I worked at the Jelmoli department store, firstly as a warehouseman and later as a trained decorator. That was a great time. When our daughter was born, I had to earn more. Through connections I got a job as a caretaker in a private bank. I did that for three years, then I gave it up, because I didn't like it. Now I've worked for nine years as a caretaker in a larger property. I have to look after the technical equipment, and supervise the cleaning staff, and do some of the cleaning myself. The money's not bad.

What options do you have now?

I could, for instance, go self-employed. I'm good with my hands. But it's very difficult to start up in business these days. The place where I work at the moment suits me very well. I earn good money, I'm free to organise my working time myself, and I feel accepted by most of the people there. In six years, when my daughter's twenty, I'd like to go back to Turkey. And since I'm now a Swiss citizen, I could go back and forth. Of course, I'd support my daughter if she wanted to study or attend another school. That way I could maintain contact with my friends here in Switzerland.

Now you've come to know the Europeans, what image do you have of them?

The Europeans have succeeded in giving everyone equal rights, even if it doesn't work perfectly everywhere and all of the time. But materialism has become much more pronounced here, and it is mainly the selfishness that goes with it that disturbs me. In addition, in Switzerland the country looks very democratic from the outside, but it isn't always quite so on the inside. In 1975 I saw how the Swiss army fired smoke bombs at the people of Jura because they were campaigning to have their own canton. I mentioned this in a discussion with an educated Swiss once, upon which he retorted that such a thing could not happen in Switzerland. Then I said to him that if he had felt such pain at first hand he would also react. He was on the point of beating me up. I said: "Look, you've reached the limits of your tolerance already. You're a PhD and I'm a simple worker, and yet you want to beat me up for telling the truth."

Have you experienced xenophobia in Switzerland?

Only once. I went into a restaurant and all the tables were occupied. There was just one free seat at a table where two old men were sitting. I asked them if I could sit there, and they answered yes, certainly. I sat down, and then one of the pair began to speak badly of foreigners, and in such a way that I could hear. So I said to him: "If I'm disturbing you, I'll sit somewhere else." "No, no", he said, but then he carried on. I was the only foreigner in the restaurant. The other guests started to become aware of the verbal abuse. I said to the provocateur, "I don't know you, and you don't know me, but I'm the only foreigner here. Why are you talking like this?" Then he became aggressive, and other customers had to stop him from being abusive to me any more. After that incident I really felt like an unwelcome foreigner. But apart from that, I've had no difficulties. I'm open and can speak to anyone, and I've collected experience in handling all kinds of people in my many years in the restaurant business.

Are you politically active these days?

I'm active in a Turkish association. We organise events, help migrants in need, and do translations. I also campaign for foreigners living here to have the right to vote, at least at local level. I've been living and working here for twenty years, my wife and my daughter are Swiss citizens, yet I as a foreigner am not allowed to vote, have nothing to say. I pay my taxes, I'm an upright citizen, an honest immigrant worker, and I have no rights. I'd like to participate in the society I live in and help to shape it, in a political sense too. Doner kebabs and Turkish folklore are very welcome in Switzerland, but we as people are not accepted as fellow citizens. Human rights are spoken of so often in Europe, but it's necessary to actually practise them too.

What brings immigrants to Switzerland?

The whole of the Swiss population is made up of foreigners. Switzerland comprises four peoples: Italians, Germans, French, and Rhaeto-romans. If other peoples come here, then it's a cultural enrichment for Switzerland. My child, for instance, is half Turkish and half Swiss, a marvellous mixture. She's very popular and successful in school, and all the children envy her. I'm proud as a father, but I also think it's an enrichment that a child of mixed background can bring something to society. I'll raise her to bring something good to society. For instance, so that she can be considerate, so that she doesn't reject people on the basis of their origins. People don't come to Switzerland simply of their own accord, they have their reasons. Often people come from countries that have been so exploited that they must leave, because they don't have anything left. For example, Africa was one of the world's important oxygen-producing regions. The western countries have exploited its forests and its natural resources so badly that nothing is left any more, and the people there are starving. When these people now come to the west we have to accept them. They lived before in forests or had fertile lands, they didn't have much but they were happy, and now they come to us, who have exploited them, because they now have to find another way of living.

What's your daily life like in Switzerland?

We've lived in this flat since 1984. From 1980 to 1984 we lived in Oberglatt, in the same area. I feel fine here, it's very sociable, I don't have any problems with the neighbours, and I even have friendly contact with some of them. My daughter very much likes going to school here. I haven't become involved in any associations yet. Until one and a half years ago I was still a foreigner. I also didn't bother with membership in any association because my social life is in Zurich, and I have a fairly demanding job, and finally I also have my family. There are also Swiss people who are needy, but at least they have a command of the language. Many foreigners can't speak any German. So in Zurich through our association I help other foreigners sort out their problems. Recently a family from southeast Anatolia asked me if I could help them because their son was having problems at school, and if I could come to speak to the teacher. We met the teacher and I acted as interpreter. By the end everyone was happy. The teacher even asked me if I would be available to help in similar cases in the future. But I also help Swiss people when they need it. To years ago a colleague came to me in despair because he'd been made redundant. He was over 60, and ill. I told him there were ways and means to help yourself. "You're ill", I told him, "so go to the doctor and have an examination made". "I'll have to have an operation", he said. "So have the operation", I replied, "they can't just throw you out. Then you'll be occupied with this operation for half a year, then there's convalescence, and in the end you have a right to unemployment benefit." He was

Nigg, Heinz (Hrsg.) (1999) Da und fort. Leben in zwei Welten. Interviews, Berichte und Dokumente zur Immigration und Binnenwanderung in der Schweiz. Zürich: Limmat Verlag

desperate, but he followed my advice and he was successful. Today he's retired, and every time we meet he shows me his gratitude. He also saw that a foreigner could help him too, and for this reason he can no longer be opposed to foreigners on principle.

Nigg, Heinz (1999) Here and away. Living in two worlds. Zurich: www.migrant.ch
Translation: Simon Milligan



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