

Mükerrem G.

"How can people integrate themselves when limits are set around them?"



Mükerrem G., f., born in Ankara in Turkey in 1965, in Switzerland since 1984

How did you live in Turkey?

I was born in Ankara, where I grew up and went to school. I have four siblings, and then my father married again and had two children with the second wife. I'm the third eldest. We had four bedrooms, a big living room and a big kitchen. We children had to help in the household: washing, cooking, and cleaning. I didn't get on particularly well with my stepmother. My father worked as a cook. He is retired now and has moved to Istanbul, where I also have a sister and a brother. My father still works as a temporary assistant, whenever he has the opportunity.

My parents are quite normal people. They're neither political nor very religious. They only fast during Ramadan. My uncle, in contrast, is very religious. When he came on a visit he'd always kick up a fuss because my sisters and I didn't wear headscarves. My father would go along with him, but as soon as my uncle left we could live normally again.

When I read books as a child - I'd get them from my brother - they were mostly unrealistic love stories. We also had a television, but there was only one channel with Turkish films and music. As a child I was only interested in cartoons, for instance "Heidi". The first cinema film I saw was also a love story. I had to cry because the couple couldn't get together. In the intermission there were sunflower and pumpkin seeds instead of popcorn. There was also cola.

I really liked going to school: five years of primary school and three years after that. I felt freer there than at home. During the summer holidays, which lasted three months, we sometimes went to my father's parents in the country to help them with the work. They lived in a little village. It was beautiful there. We were free the whole day. We could play

in the water, we had lots of friends and could stay out longer than in the city, where you had to be home by a particular time. I never noticed any danger, but our parents were careful.

After school I wanted to become a teacher or a nurse, but my parents were opposed to my studying. Even in the elementary school there were often political confrontations between left and right. My father, my mother or my brother most often had to collect me from school, and so they were against my going to the grammar school, where political confrontations were on the timetable. So I applied secretly. My neighbour gave me her signature. But my father found out, and that was the end of my dream. I was happy enough to have done it, but I couldn't fight so well yet, unfortunately. So I did an evening course in needlework.

My parents wanted me to marry a cousin of mine. I wasn't happy with that at all, and so I started thinking for the first time about going away. When I was seventeen I went away to Istanbul for a year, and then I came back to Ankara. A former schoolfriend of mine knew that her brother in Switzerland was looking for a wife. He was a political refugee and worked as a kitchen help in a restaurant. She sent him a photo of me. He wrote to me, and we developed a friendship through letters. We decided to get married. My husband's parents paid us a visit to give their consent. My parents were shocked at first, but they consented when they could see how determined I was.

We arranged a kind of picnic at my in-law's place. They gave me a ring. My brother-in-law stood in for the wedding photo, because my husband was in Switzerland. I actually didn't want to wear a wedding dress. But my parents and in-laws insisted on it, because they said that when I was with my husband in Switzerland they wouldn't be able to take part in the wedding. So I had a wedding without a husband.

How did you come to Switzerland?

I can well remember the day I came from Ankara to Switzerland to live with my husband. I'd left my family because I didn't feel happy with them, but what awaited me was a complete unknown. I had so many questions in my mind: what will I do if it doesn't work out? I can't and won't go back to my parents. They had accepted rather than truly supported my marriage. But because I'd got to know my husband's parents and sister very well, I was reasonably confident. I arrived at the bus station in Zurich. My husband and I knew from each other what we'd be wearing that day. I was still busy with my suitcase when someone suddenly tapped me on the shoulder and made me jump. There he was! Together with his friends, who he'd brought with him, we went to a café. Then we went to his place.

It took at least a year until we were used to each other and had got to know each other. Although I didn't know the country or the man, I felt more at ease. I only answered when he asked me something, and I usually agreed if he made a suggestion. We didn't make any big plans. He advised me to take a German course. After a couple of months I was pregnant. I was against the pill, because I was of the opinion that it could reduce fertility. Then the child came, we moved, and, until the child was two years old, I worked one day a week at Migros as a shop assistant. After four years we decided to have another child.

How did you make contact with people in Switzerland?

My husband already had a circle of friends, and I was brought into that - that was the Turkish association. I also got to know a Turkish woman who worked for the youth welfare office and ran various courses for foreign women: German, sewing, and cooking. I got to know a lot of women there.

How did you get on with the Swiss?

What was difficult for me was that I had to deal with a new country, a new language and my husband at the same time. So I had to see how I could manage all that. I often felt alone. In my neighbourhood in Zurich-Seebach there was an aviary. Every day I'd spend a couple of hours there and watch the birds. I sat quietly on a bench and waited. The same people would come by again and again, mostly old people, and I'd exchange a couple of words with them. They asked me where I came from and why I was sitting there. That helped me. Sometimes they would even correct my sentences. I never had bad experiences with Swiss people.

I only had a spot of bother when I started work as a shop assistant and still didn't speak much German. If I said I was Turkish, I'd get the answer "impossible, you're not wearing any headscarf". Or they'd speak Italian or Spanish with me, because they thought I was Italian or Spanish. Nobody thought that I could be Turkish.

You've been in Switzerland for fourteen years now. How do you feel?

It's all gone so quickly! I feel now that I'm Turkish and Swiss, but I think I can fulfil myself better here in Switzerland. I was so young, nineteen, when I came here. I've undergone a lot of decisive experiences here.

In Turkey I enjoy the spontaneous contact between people that is missing here in Switzerland. If you move somewhere, you feel even lonelier because then you don't know anyone. In Turkey it's easier to get to know people. The people are warm; when they laugh, they don't only laugh with their mouths, but with their eyes too. Also, I don't know get to know anyone in the new neighbourhood because I don't have any time. In the mornings I'm

busy with the housework: seeing the children off to school, cooking, and shopping, and in the afternoons I'm at work. At our last place we got to know the other parents through the school, but here it hasn't gone so far. I spend most of my leisure time with Turkish people, and at the weekend we're mostly together with Turkish people. I tend to meet my Swiss acquaintances out somewhere for a coffee. But I don't restrict myself just to the company of my fellow Turks, my door is open to Swiss people too. So it's not a big problem for me.

Will you stay here or move back to Turkey?

At the moment I wouldn't like to move back to Turkey at all because of the current political mood. As well as that, you have to plan your return very carefully, because you have to start again from scratch. I've found all my friends here in Switzerland. And for the children, who are nine and thirteen now, it'd be difficult, because they speak German better than they do Turkish. If they went to an ordinary school in Turkey, they wouldn't have the same opportunities as here; or you'd have to send them to an expensive private school so that they got a good education. In the ordinary schools there are sixty or seventy children in a class, and here in Switzerland there are about twenty. In such large classes the children don't learn anything like enough! The older son wants to stay here; he feels in the middle between Turkey and Switzerland; I don't really know about the younger son.

My husband would really like to go back. If I said to him that we were packing tomorrow, he'd be there in an instant. He'd just drop everything and go. But such a step needs to be carefully considered and prepared, and you really have to feel happy with it. At the moment I feel fine here.

Do you think your husband will settle in here and feel more at home?

That's another thing you have to want for yourself. He's determined to go back. If he doesn't adjust himself to the possibility of staying here in Switzerland, there's nothing you can do about it. And that's how we go on from year to year. I'd like my children to get a good education here. I'd also like to get some education, perhaps in the sociocultural field, as a youth worker, for instance.

Where do you work at the moment?

I work thirty hours a week as a cashier at IKEA. I'm very happy there, because I'm working in a good team. They're people from all sorts of countries.

How are you accepted as a Turkish woman?

If you work in retail, you see a lot. I had a customer in Migros who always paid with a handful of small change. Then she used to wait until it had all been counted and put in the till. She wanted to be one hundred percent sure that I didn't steal any of it. One time I said to her: "you're always watching me. Do you think I'd pocket anything?" She said: "no, I just want to be sure that my money makes it into the till". After that I always used to joke with her by asking her, laughing, if she had the feeling that the money wouldn't make it into the till, and whether she'd like to help cover the loss. Then she stopped watching me like that.

One time there were three of us, all foreigners, at the tills, and a regular customer lost her rag about something and called us all "*huren Ausländer*" (roughly, "foreign whores"). Because a colleague was working in the office with a dirty apron, she backed that up by calling us "dirty, filthy foreigners". I came over and I was shocked. My colleague spoke very poor German, so I pulled out my apron, so that she would have to confront me. Still in a rage, she shouted at me: "these stupid foreigners, see how they look, like pigs! Look at these filthy aprons!" I said to her: "what you've just said is against the law, I can have you in court for that". "No", she said "I live here, I'm Swiss". "Yes", I retorted, "and I'm Turkish, but still I can tell you that you're not allowed to speak like that!" Then she wanted me to apologise to her. "No", I said, "I'd rather quit than apologise to you. It's you who should apologise to me!" later on she came to me and apologised for what she'd said, that it had been a mistake. I was a good Turk, I looked fine, but these others that wore headscarves Then I felt shocked again, of course.

What do you think of the Swiss policy on foreigners?

I don't know exactly how many foreigners are living here in Switzerland. But I think a lot of politics is made with foreigners. Lots of Swiss believe that they can't find jobs because there are too many foreigners here and that they will work for less. Firstly, the foreigners here shouldn't be allowed to work for less than Swiss people, and secondly, the companies shouldn't move their factories to third world countries and so increase unemployment in Switzerland.

When I came to Switzerland in 1985 the debate about foreigners hadn't yet become so heated. Now in certain districts in the canton of Zurich it is being discussed whether foreign and Swiss children shouldn't be sent to separate schools. I think it's unfair that children who have been born here and live here have to go to their own school just because they have foreign parents. One can certainly not expect that these children will then integrate here.

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

How could foreign and Swiss people's live together here in Switzerland be improved?

The foreigners must be given voting rights too. If you can't take part in political life, then you're only half a person. We're not just a workforce! I'd like to speak for other people, especially those who can't defend themselves, who can't express themselves very well. And that requires voting rights. Also, the division of foreigners into those with A, B and C permits causes problems. How can people integrate themselves when limits are set around them and when they have no future? We have to find solutions for this.

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



Except where otherwise noted, this site is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/>