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HAGOP MINTZURI AND THE COSMOPOLITAN MEMORY OF ISTANBUL

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**EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, FLORENCE**  
**ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES**  
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## **Abstract**

This article explores notions of cosmopolitanism in the work of the Armenian-Turkish author Hagop Mintzuri (1886-1978). First of all, this theme is present in the author's autobiography describing his youth in late Ottoman Istanbul in the milieu of migrant workers. The autobiography shows the diversity in this milieu as well as the solidarity among the workers and craftsmen, which overarches religious and ethnic boundaries. The kind of cosmopolitanism Mintzuri is describing is itself a reproduction of the situation in the author's home region, Eastern Anatolia, the setting of most of the other stories that make up his work. In both contexts the description of cosmopolitan lifestyles and attitudes in late Ottoman times stand in stark contrast to the situation that the author lived through in republican Turkey. Only in recent times his work and vision has been re-discovered, a condition being its translation from the Armenian to modern Turkish. The article discusses the reasons for and the problems going along with this rediscovery.

## **Keywords**

Ottoman Empire, Istanbul, Eastern Anatolia, cosmopolitanism, migration





## Introduction\*

In recent decades cosmopolitanism has been rediscovered as an utopian recipe for shaping the cultural and political future of the globalising world. At the same time, historical scholarship, too, has started to investigate the meaning of what has been historically described as cosmopolitanism and which historical settings may be legitimately called cosmopolitan from a contemporary perspective. As a basic typology, it is possible to think of different stages ranging from a minimal to a maximal conception. On a most basic level, to be called cosmopolitan a place has to be characterised by a certain degree of diversity among its inhabitants. Moreover, often these inhabitants are able to use the languages and cultural and moral codes of the other groups inhabiting the place. A yet higher stage of cosmopolitanism implies that such interactions of cultural border crossings are attached with a positive value and are made into a veritable lifestyle by the true cosmopolitan.<sup>1</sup>

Historians have found realisations of these different degrees of the cosmopolitan/cosmopolitanism especially in such settings as port or trading cities that brought together people from different places and walks of life. One important focus of research has been on the cities of the Mediterranean and the Levant with their old maritime connections and the mixing of various groups.<sup>2</sup> Particularly the rich trading elites of nineteenth century Alexandria, Smyrna and Beirut have inspired the historical imagination. These elites from different communal backgrounds but united in a high bourgeois culture and by business interests were styled the archetypical cosmopolitans of nineteenth-century Mediterranean port cities.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, non-elite groups that constituted much of the diversity not only of port cities, but of all cities in the Ottoman Empire have rarely been connected to cosmopolitanism. There has been some effort to recover from the sources the sociabilities and practices of surviving and living together of such groups as migrants, workers, seamen, prostitutes or entertainers.<sup>4</sup> It remains an open question in what ways these groups made the places they lived in more cosmopolitan and what cosmopolitan practices or forms of cosmopolitanism as a conscious way of seeing their world can be attributed to them.

This article will investigate such questions regarding late Ottoman Istanbul, which, because of its diversity of populations, frequently has been described as a cosmopolitan city par excellence. In the focus will be the Turkish-Armenian author Hagop Mintzuri (1886-1978).<sup>5</sup> Although his work never

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\* This paper was originally presented at the Ninth Mediterranean Research Meeting, Florence – Montecatini Terme, 12-15 March 2008, in workshop 14: 'Everyday Cosmopolitanism: Living Together through Communal Divide'.

1 M. Fuhrmann: 'Meeresanrainer – Weltbürger? Zum Verhältnis von hafentstädtischer Gesellschaft und Kosmopolitismus', in: *Comparativ* 17 (2007), 12-26, p. 15-6.

2 Cf. the papers of the Ottoman Urban Studies Seminar 2007/8 at ZMO, Berlin ([http://www.zmo.de/veranstaltungen/2007/Poster\\_Ottoman\\_ZMO.pdf](http://www.zmo.de/veranstaltungen/2007/Poster_Ottoman_ZMO.pdf)); also H. Driessen: 'Mediterranean port cities: Cosmopolitanism reconsidered', in: *History and Anthropology* 16 (2005), 129-141; D. Schwara: 'Rediscovering the Levant: A Heterogeneous Structure as a Homogeneous Historical Region', in: *European Review of History* 10 (2003), 233-51.

3 L.T. Fawaz: *Merchants and Migrants in Nineteenth-Century Beirut*, Cambridge MA.: HUP 1983; Ç. Keyder/Y.E. Özveren/D. Quataert: 'Port-Cities in the Ottoman Empire', in: *Review* 16 (1993), 519-58; R. Ilbert: *Alexandrie. 1830-1930*, Cairo 1996.

4 F. Georgeon: 'Présentation', in: *ibid./P. Dumont (eds.): Vivre dans l'empire ottoman. Sociabilités et relations intercommunitaires (XVIIIe – XXe siècles)*, Paris 1997, 5-20 and E. Rogan (ed.): *Outside In. On the Margins of the Modern Middle East*, London: Tauris 2002.

5 The textual basis of this paper are four volumes of Turkish translations of Mintzuri's stories: 1. *Kapandı Kirve Kapıları*, Nurhan Büyük Kürkciyan (transl.), Istanbul: Aras 2001, which offers a selection from *Gabuyd Luys* (Blue Light), 1958; 2. *Armidan. Fırat'ın Öte Yarı* (Armidan. The Other Side of the Euphrates), Silva Kuyumcuyan (transl.), Istanbul: Aras 1996 and 3. *Atina Tuzun Var Mı?* (Atina, Do You have Salt?), Silva Kuyumcuyan (transl.), Istanbul: Aras 2000 (both are

mentions the term ‘cosmopolitanism’ as such, it offers insight into cosmopolitan practices and discourses on cosmopolitanism from various angles. Around the turn of the last century, like thousands of other Armenians, Mintzuri, then still called Hagop Demirciyan, left his home village in Anatolia and started working with his grandfather, his father and his uncles in a bakery in the Ottoman capital. There he was able to complete his education, developed a taste for literature and later became a writer himself. In most of his stories he acts as a chronicler of life in the late Ottoman era. His portrayal of the milieu of small shopkeepers, craftsmen and migrant workers from the provinces is a unique source on the sociability of the working population in Istanbul at the turn of the last century. However, it is not only and not mainly this milieu that he describes. In fact, the greater part of his oeuvre deals with life in his home village in Anatolia. In the first two parts of this article I will explore notions of cosmopolitanism in Mintzuri’s stories in connection with these two main settings, the city and the countryside.

Apart from its value as a historical source, Mintzuri’s work also has a strong memorial character. Almost all of his stories were published only after the Second World War; his depictions of late Ottoman Istanbul were his last pieces, completed only in the 1970s shortly before his death. By then the times and places he describes were long gone. His home village with its inhabitants and his family was destroyed in the extermination of the Ottoman Armenian communities in 1915; and Istanbul, where he survived the war, had also changed considerably. How did this influence the depiction of late Ottoman society? As in so many writings on cosmopolitanism, obviously nostalgia plays an important role here. In recent decades and after the death of its author, Mintzuri’s writings have been popularised in Turkey by way of their translation from the Armenian original into Turkish. They are part of a larger discourse that takes a critical stance towards the reshaping of Turkey along nationalist lines since the founding of the Republic, recalling the cosmopolitan past, mainly of cities such as Istanbul and Izmir. However, as the article aims to show at the same time, this discourse is shaping the past according to its own needs.

## **Istanbul: City of Migrants**

Hagop Mintzuri’s stories and autobiographical accounts conjure up a very special image of Istanbul, the place where the author migrated as a boy of twelve years to work alongside his family and where he also completed his schooling. He and his family participated in a very old economic arrangement that brought men from the provinces temporarily to work in Ottoman cities while their families stayed in their home villages. Periodically, after having earned enough money after some years’ work, they would return to their families before setting out again.

From the age of twenty to sixty for forty years our fathers came home only one in five years. Our mothers spent altogether ten years with their husbands, while they were widows for thirty years. Why? To send money home from Istanbul. Well, that’s how we became bakers.<sup>6</sup>

Mintzuri’s literary work clearly reveals this particular form of life lived in two different spheres. While Armudan, the Anatolian village north of the Euphrates the family hails from, signifies ‘home’, Istanbul is ‘abroad’ (*gurbet*). The author’s description of his own life in the city as well as some other stories that turn around *gurbet*<sup>7</sup> draw much of their narrative drive and esprit from pointing out the stark differences between the two places as they are experienced by those who have to go abroad, the *gurbetçis* (or *pandukhts* as they are called in Armenian). In fact, Mintzuri describes two opposite worlds that seem to exist in different places and times. Compared with the inland villages of Anatolia with their specific climate and landscape, Istanbul, a city surrounded by water, is a strange place for

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translated from the Armenian *Armudan*, 1966); 4. *İstanbul Anıları* (Memories of Istanbul), Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı 1993, a translation from *Değer Ur Yes Yeğer Yem* (Places Where I lived), 1984.

6 *İstanbul*, 109.

7 ‘Nonik Mama’nın oğlunun dükkanı’, *Armudan*, 89-95.

migrants like Hagop. Not only geography but also basic things like food and drink are different. Especially one staple of Istanbul cuisine, olives and olive oil, prove inedible for the migrants from the east. In turn, their dishes look strange to the townspeople, like Hagop's Turkish and Armenian classmates who marvel at the meals he brings to eat during lunch break.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, in contrast to the traditional, almost medieval ways of life in the village, the city is a modern place. Signs of this modernity, like tramways, steamships, department stores, beer gardens – another new taste that Hagop cannot enjoy –, warehouses etc. are described through the eyes of the newcomer, i.e., the author as a boy at the age of twelve. Istanbul is also a centre of power where Hagop witnesses the sultan's regular visits to Sinan Paşa mosque close to the bakery. He also meets the imperial officers and officials on the street and delivers bread to their houses.

It is a special blow against this superior image of the imperial capital that here almost nobody, not even the highest officials, seem to be able to read or write. Hagop, the boor from the provinces, does read and write not only Armenian, but also Ottoman Turkish as well as French. In several instances, this ability saves Hagop and lets him stand out among his own people, to whom he renders useful services in writing certificates of debt as well as personal letters. But the seemingly superior Istanbulites are also impressed by his writing skills.

As much as it is depicted as a modern city, Istanbul is also described as a city marked by the diversity of its inhabitants and their cultures. Besides the Turkish population there are quarters that are predominantly Greek (causing even the street vendors to change their language) and those which are Jewish, whose inhabitants behave in different ways, speak different languages and celebrate different holidays.<sup>9</sup> Labour migrants like Hagop and his relatives add to the picture. On the small street that houses the bakery Hagop's family is running, other migrant workers are also to be found: Albanians, Karamanlis, Turks, Kurds and Macedonians, who are operating different businesses. In the small harbour of Beşiktaş, other groups like Kurdish or Armenian porters or Azeri donkey drivers can be encountered. Moreover, in Mintzuri's accounts we meet foreign soldiers, e.g. the Albanian and Arab guard of the sultan, or the students of the Aşiret Mektebi, the school for the sons of Kurdish and Arab notables from the provinces. There are also all sorts of beggars, cripples and lunatics from all over the empire who try to get by on the streets of Istanbul. What emerges is the picture of a place where almost everybody comes from someplace else, but where different communities and classes live peacefully together as in a colourful mosaic. People have their prejudices, as one of Hagop's colleagues displays against the Jews.<sup>10</sup> But in Mintzuri's account there is almost no mention of any serious sort of conflict.

In this setting, Mintzuri's descriptions are a most valuable source of information about the milieu of labour migrants and especially the world of Armenian bakers and their problems making a living in the capital. Like other trades and professions that were mainly run by labour migrants from the provinces, bread production in nineteenth-century Istanbul was dominated by one community. Registers of shopkeepers show that more than eighty percent of all millers and bakers in two districts along the Golden Horn and the Bosphorus were Armenians. Of these, almost all migrated to the capital from a well-defined region in Eastern Anatolia, its centre being the town of Eğin surrounded by the districts of Karahisar, Kuruçay – the location of Armudan, Hagop's home village – and Erzurum.<sup>11</sup>

According to information to be gathered from some of Mintzuri's stories, still in the late nineteenth century some of the richest mill and bakery owners in Istanbul, like the Yelbakyan, Nahabetyan and

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8 *Istanbul*, 52-3, 95-97.

9 *Ibid.*, 54, 60-1.

10 *Ibid.*, 65.

11 C. Kırılı: 'A Profile of the Labor Force in Early Nineteenth-Century Istanbul', in: *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60 (2001), 125-40, p. 137; on Aleppo cf. V.L. Shemmassian, 'The Sasun Pandukhts in Nineteenth-Century Aleppo', in R.G. Hovannisian (ed.): *Armenian Baghesh/Bitlis and Taron/Mush*, Costa Mesa: Mazda 2001, 175-190.

Arhanyan families, originated in this part of Anatolia and in the village of Armudan in particular.<sup>12</sup> The Demirciyan family operated on a lower level of this sector, renting and running a single bakery and barely surviving on the meagre return from the enterprise.

Other groups dominated other professions in nineteenth-century Istanbul: island Greeks specialised in rowing, Bulgarians were gardeners, Greeks owned grocery shops etc. However, this system was much more complicated than the ‘ethnic division of labour’ as it has been imagined in older scholarship. Despite the domination of one group in one trade, co-operation with others was always necessary. The Demirciyan bakery offers an example of this mechanism. It employed several people other than the immediate family members; these worked in the production process or delivering the bread to the homes of their customers. Two came from Armudan, two other Armenians from villages of the nearby Karahisar district. However, there was also a group of Albanians working with them. Unfortunately Mintzuri’s account gives no information why these two groups teamed up in the first place. Probably the Albanians had a claim for delivering the bread to a certain district that was attached to the bakery and they could not be bought out. In any case, there was no reason to do so, because co-operation seems to have been without problems.

Rather than ethnic or religious communities, it was regional networks centred on villages or small towns that, out of economic necessity, acquired a dominant position in certain branches of the labour market. These networks sustained migrants in the city and allowed them to survive by relying on people from their small town or village when looking for a job in the city or a place to stay or a guarantor if they had to deal with the authorities. While most of these regional networks that determined a migrant’s profession and, in some cases, his place of residence in the city are still unknown, some have been tracked by studying nineteenth-century population records and other sources on the various populations of the capital.<sup>13</sup>

Considering the overwhelming importance of these regional networks for the labour migrants’ survival, it comes as no surprise that they also made their appearance in Mintzuri’s descriptions to the degree that they shaped the family’s stay in Istanbul. However, what is more important is that Mintzuri’s account also gives a feeling for the ethical framework governing these networks. For a start, Mintzuri hints at a general feeling of solidarity and belonging among migrants: “They were not from our side. However, wherever we migrants (*gurbetçiler*) were and met each other we became friends quickly.”<sup>14</sup> More naturally, however, there was a special bond with the people of one’s home region. The special relation to people from the same region was enshrined in the everyday concept of *hemşerilik* (the quality of being a fellow countryman, a *Landsmann*); like family and kin, people coming from the same town, village or region (*hemşeri*) were the main actors in migrants’ networks. While social relations within professional networks demanded honesty and concrete mutual assistance, *hemşerilik* called for a general benevolence toward the other in a way overarching specific networks. Prima facie, determining who was a fellow countryman and who was not was a question of geography. However, the way the characters of Mintzuri’s stories use the term, it becomes clear that there were also other factors involved that point to an universalist ethical dimension of the concept as its users understood it. Different from the common geographical understanding of the concept, Mintzuri’s own understanding of *hemşerilik* is much broader and deeper and hinges on his life experience and his philosophical outlook as an author. It is my thesis that *hemşerilik* in this understanding carries many notions of cosmopolitanism in the strong sense of the word. In the following, I would like to elaborate on this by giving examples from Mintzuri’s stories.

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12 ‘Altın Yağdı Yelbakyan’ın Düğününde’, *Atina*, 23-8; ‘Emirgan’daki fırın gitti’, *Armudan*, 68-72.

13 C. Behar: *A Neighborhood in Ottoman Istanbul. Fruit Vendors and Civil Servants in the Kasap İlyas Mahalle*, Albany: SUNY 2003, C. Kırılı: ‘A Profile on the Labor Force’; F. Riedler: ‘Wanderarbeiter (*bekar*) im Istanbul des 19. Jahrhunderts: Zwischen Marginalität und Normalität’, in: Bettler, *Prostituierte, Paria: Randgruppen in asiatischen Gesellschaften*, Anja Pistor-Hatam, Antje Richter (eds.), Hamburg: EB-Verlag 2008, 143-58.

14 *İstanbul*, 118.

Mintzuri, who never fails to mention the geographical origin of the people Hagop meets on the street, works or studies with, always stresses whether somebody is to be considered a *hemşeri*, i.e. from the larger region along the upper Euphrates, i.e., the districts of Kemah, Kuruçay, Eğin and Kara Hisar. Of course these are first of all the Armenian fellow workers at the bakery and other bakers, millers and dealers of grain and fodder who are part of the Demirciyans' professional network. Other professionals, too, are included, provided they come from the region, like the network of coffeehouse owners from the district of Kemah on the Euphrates. At least three of them are mentioned in Mintzuri's account: Musa Çavuş in Beşiktaş and Sebuğ Efendi and Zovikyan in Arnavutköy, of whom at least one is a Muslim and not an Armenian.<sup>15</sup> As other examples confirm, *hemşerilik* and the basic obligation of benevolence it entails do not stop at religious and ethnic boundaries, but overarch them. In Istanbul, migrants belonging to different ethnic communities shared the experience of *gurbet*. The people from the upper Euphrates region could recognize each other by the way they dressed. Throughout the account of Ottoman Istanbul, Mintzuri introduces the reader to the different attires worn by the shopkeepers, their apprentices and workers in the bakery and the surrounding shops in Beşiktaş as an important marker of communal belonging. If someone modifies the attire of his community, like the coffeeshop owner Musa Çavuş who wears a yellow turban, this is worth mentioning, too.<sup>16</sup> Another form of modification is the adoption of European clothes – at the turn of the twentieth century still not very widespread in the immigrant milieu –, i.e. dark trousers and jacket in contrast to the colourful local clothes. This costume has no marker of a local identity, but often some local pieces like socks or vests are worn under the European clothes, as also Hagop and his father and uncles do.<sup>17</sup>

Likewise, migrants are recognizable by their languages and the degree to which they speak Turkish. Some of them know only their native language, and newcomers from the east like Hagop himself can be spotted by their accent and their strange vocabulary.<sup>18</sup>

Folk songs are another cultural feature that defines certain regional communities. Additionally, many of these songs have the *gurbet* experience as their topic. As the author explains, they exist in the different languages of the different communities as well as in two versions, one for the women staying at home, one for the men who have gone abroad. While sweeping the floor after class, the Turkish caretaker of the middle school in Beşiktaş that is close to the Demirciyan bakery sings such a song typical of the upper Euphrates region, reminding all migrants of their common fate.<sup>19</sup> However, in Mintzuri's stories fellow countrymen also do appear under more unlikely circumstances. *Hemşerilik* is not restricted to the immediate milieu of shopkeepers, artisans and workers. For example, the officer of the vice squad who stops Hagop and some of his friends in front of a Galata brothel turns out to be from Eğin. Hagop is able to impress the police officer with a specimen of his good Ottoman handwriting that he produces from his schoolbag. The officer lets the kids go without giving notice to their school director.<sup>20</sup>

In another example, the gap of status, wealth and age *hemşerilik* has to bridge is even bigger. One day on his way to school, a route that passes by one of the sultan's palaces, Hagop is called inside by a servant. Hacı Bey, one of the palace officials, has learned about his talent in writing Ottoman. In front of a small party, Hagop is praised somewhat patronisingly as an example of an educated Easterner and a loyal Armenian and, as a reward, is offered some locum. The Turkish official, Hacı Bey, was born in the region and thus calls Hagop, the Armenian pupil, a *hemşeri*. As a remark on the side, he

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15 Ibid., 84, 106.

16 Ibid., 8.

17 Ibid., 30.

18 Ibid., 56-7.

19 Ibid., 74. 'Kozana söyleyin bu yıl akmasın/Akıp akıp yüreğimi yakmasın./Benden selam edin nazlı beldeye./Bu yıl da gelemem yola bakmasın.'

20 Ibid., 86-7.

acknowledges that his own ancestors probably had once been Armenians, too, before they converted to Islam. While the use of the title *hemşeri* displays a mocking undertone because of the stark differences between the two parties, this last remark nonetheless makes Hacı Bey worthy to use it. It is not the possibility of a kinship tie, but rather, I would argue, his light-hearted admission of the fluidity of communal identities that makes Mintzuri insert it into his account.<sup>21</sup>

There are other examples of this special ethical content of *hemşerilik* that carries notions of a particular understanding of cosmopolitanism. Describing the other shops on the street of the Demirciyan bakery, Mintzuri mentions the broom maker Mustafa Ağa, a Turk from a village near Harput, whom he considers a *hemşeri*, although his hometown is over one hundred miles or four days travel away. Rather than the geographical closeness, it is his origin from the plural world of Eastern Anatolia and his knowledge of and closeness to Armenians that makes him a fellow countryman. Born in Hüseyinik, a principally Armenian village, Mustafa acts on the values of this plural world when he protects the bakery against attacks during the urban unrest and anti-Armenian riots in 1896. This example of courage and solidarity is the only time Mintzuri's account mentions conflict or competition between the different communities of the capital.<sup>22</sup>

If this is not an over-interpretation, *hemşerilik* in these last examples has a strong cosmopolitan component. Rather than resting on purely geographical or religious definitions, it demands the endorsement of pluralism and the readiness to cross community borders, as the people from East Anatolia are ready to do in Mintzuri's descriptions. I will examine the original context of this philosophy, Mintzuri's Eastern Anatolian home, more closely in the next section.

## The Plural World of Eastern Anatolia

The bulk of Mintzuri's stories portray life in Armudan, the village near the Euphrates in the district (*kaza*) of Kuruçay in the province (*vilayet*) of Erzerum, where he spent his youth. His extended family, his neighbours, the other villagers and those of the five or six neighbouring Armenian villages form the main cast of these stories. On the one hand, these stories are very community-centred in explaining general features of Armenian rural society in Eastern Anatolia at the turn of the twentieth century. This almost ethnographic quality, on the other hand, is balanced by the description of individuals, their character and their little adventures.

Although the Armenian community of Armudan is at the centre of this work, Mintzuri's stories give abundant examples of their rootedness in Eastern Anatolian society in general. Apart from the other Armenian villages of the region, also (Sunni) Kurdish, (Zaza) Alevite/Kızılbaş and Turkish villages are regarded as neighbours. There are also groups mentioned in Mintzuri's universe that stand between these four communities and add to the diversity and plurality of the picture. Two examples are the Poşa, a group of gypsies with close relations to the Armenian communities, and the Zozik, a group of Kurds with Armenian roots. The existence of these groups points to the fact that this kind of diversity had a centuries-old tradition in the region and created communities with a mixed background.

Although characters in Mintzuri's stories usually are ascribed a fixed identity belonging to one of these communities, some of the markers of this identity can be used variably. On a most basic level this relates to clothes. Principally these are ethnically coded according to their form and cut, their fabric, colour and decoration. However, especially men from the village, adopt them according to fashion, personal taste, age etc. Women, representing the core of the village community, seem to have been more restricted in this matter.<sup>23</sup>

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21 Ibid., 59-60.

22 Ibid., 7.

23 'Bizim Köyün Kilisesi', *Atina*, 18.

Another way of marking identity is by language. Apart from their mother tongue there seems to exist a common knowledge of Turkish that, however, is pronounced in a special way that makes people from the East recognize each other.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, many of the characters in Mintzuri's stories know a language other than that of their original community. For example, Eyüp, a Turk from a neighbouring village, speaks Armenian very well, because he grew up among Armenians and (as the author expressly mentions) not because he is a convert as some of the villagers assume.<sup>25</sup> Likewise Emine, a Turkish girl who grew up in Armudan and played with the Armenian children before she was married off to a Turkish village.<sup>26</sup> In turn, one Armenian bride is reputed to know only Kurdish, because she grew up among Kurds.<sup>27</sup> In another instance, a Kurdish farmer is mentioned who works for one of Mintzuri's relatives and also speaks Armenian.<sup>28</sup>

In many of these cases the knowledge among the communities, the ability to speak each other's languages, brings a material advantage. However, the knowledge of languages often also implies an affection for its speakers, especially if one grew up among them and has friends from the other group. This knowledge of other communities can be very trivial. Hagop, who is invited to a Turkish house, explains:

I knew what there would be to eat in our Turkish villages in Kuruçay or Kemah in winter, what they would eat, what they would bring us. Necessarily soup and pumpkin. Because it was not the milking season there could be no yoghurt. But pumpkin or pilaf with pumpkin or pumpkin fried with onions. However, a special dish that was offered in honour of the guests was fried with a lot of oil or dried raisins or mulberries, necessarily.<sup>29</sup>

In its triviality this knowledge gives an impression of the kind of sociability that produces such knowledge.

An extreme example where the knowledge of the other offers the possibility to play with identities is offered in a story of a local Muslim traveller who gets lost on his way home. Just before sunset he is able to reach an Armenian village and, to be sure of the hospitality of its inhabitants, feigns to be an Armenian. He is cordially invited to the home of two elderly people, is offered food and a bed. At night by chance he overhears a conversation among his hosts who are doubting that he was an Armenian after all. It was his all too perfect knowledge of the Armenian language, the manners and religious habits, the way to say prayers at the dinner table that aroused their suspicion (but by no means their hostility).<sup>30</sup>

While usually the different communities are stable, at least one story shows that it was also possible to cross these borders.<sup>31</sup> A case in point is a character called Misak, a young Armenian who, eloping with his Armenian girlfriend against the will of her parents, found refuge among the Kurds of his region around the town of Divriği. There he worked as a dealer of old clothes and also became famous for his ability to play the *keman* (a sort of lyre or fiddle) and sing at weddings and other parties. It was such an occasion when the narrator first met him while passing the area. Five years later, after the death of his wife, Misak had moved to another village, working as a shepherd for a Kurdish Agha. His boss has given him a new wife thus "making him a Kurd" as he remarks jokingly. The narrator asserts that, in terms of his dress, his language and customs, Misak has integrated into his new community, even adopting the Kurdish custom of sleeping naked.

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24 'Benim memleketimin Türkçesi', *Armudan*, 33-37.

25 'Say Ki Bu Yıl Dut Olmadı!', *Atina*, 48.

26 'Eyüp Ağa', *Kapandı*, 108.

27 'Hınkların evi', *Armudan*, 104.

28 *İstanbul*, 133.

29 'Eyüp Ağa', *Kapandı*, 107.

30 'Bu adam Ermeni değil', *Armudan*, 46-51.

31 'Divrikli Misak', *Kapandı*, 49-60.

This integration is to be permanent, as the course of the story shows. The next time we meet Misak again is twenty years later, probably during the 1930s, and out of the familiar context of Ottoman Anatolia. The author/narrator, who is working at a bakery in Pangaltı, a quarter in the north of Istanbul, is sitting in a workers' cafe frequented by *gurbetçis* from the east. A young Kurdish worker from a nearby construction site is playing a familiar tune on his *keman*. It turns out that he is Misak's son, and his father is alive and well. A couple of weeks later Misak himself turns up in Istanbul to visit his old friend bringing honey, butter, cream and fresh chard. The narrator asks his friends all kinds of questions regarding their home region:

Do you still sow the clover field? Is the mill across from the poplar grove still turning? Did you also pass by my village and are the small church and the tree in front of it on the opposite hill still standing? And do the people from Şafak with their herds still stay in the caves along the banks of our river? To all of these questions he [Misak] said again and again: "Come, I shall accompany you."

All these inquiries about people, buildings and agriculture are only seemingly innocent. As much as an example of the fluidity of identities, the story becomes an expression of the break in the continuity of life in Anatolia before and after the First World War. The character Misak is someone who overarches this break, survives it mainly because he had become a Kurd. The narrator of the story does not want to go back to this region, which has changed so dramatically. In the next section I will try to explain the central importance of this issue for Mintzuri's work of in general and how it shaped his literary description of both of this worlds, Istanbul and the village.

## Memories of Lost Worlds

Hagop Demirciyan's home, the village of Armudan, vanished before it became the centre of Mintzuri's work. In June 1915 its inhabitants were forcefully evacuated by the Ottoman army and died or were killed on their way to the gathering places of Armenian civilians in the Syrian desert. In his characterisation of rural life, Mintzuri frequently claims that it is the houses that carry the memory and history of a family, not the individuals who live there. With the destruction of the whole village society, this situation has changed completely. Hagop Demirciyan, who had returned from Istanbul to his village in 1906 when he received a letter from his mother that a bride had been found for him, was saved only by chance from the extermination of the communities of Armenians in Eastern and South Eastern Anatolia. Until the outbreak of the world war, he led a life as a teacher-farmer. In summer he worked the family's gardens and fields, in winter he taught the children in a nearby village. He was overtaken by events when he went for a medical operation to Istanbul, missed his boat home by twenty-five minutes and was drafted as a soldier into a work battalion like most of the non-Muslim subjects of the sultan. During the First World War, he worked in an army bakery in Istanbul. After the war he stayed on and became a fodder dealer in the tradition of the people of his region. Until old age he worked in several jobs, barely earning enough money to survive with his second wife and family.<sup>32</sup> Mintzuri claims that it is these tragic events that made him, interested in literature before, a real writer.

In the difficult years I was in Istanbul. I did not like Istanbul, but Istanbul saved me. Later, where could I go? There was no home and no people... I was a 'hostage' (*'rehine'*) here and survived until today. In my country I did not write. Only two, three pieces, that was all. That was good. I had not found myself. It was later that I found myself.<sup>33</sup>

It is on the basis of this statement that the production and publication of his work have to be understood. With two exceptions, all of Mintzuri's stories were written after the First World War and most of them when he was already in his sixties and later. Many of them first appeared in the Armenian press of Istanbul before some were collected in books. The village stories taken as the basis of this article first appeared in two books in 1958 and 1966. The account of the author's life in Istanbul

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32 *Istanbul*, 127-34.

33 *Ibid.*, 139.



is a collection of articles that were written and published in the seventies and were collected in a book with the Armenian title *Places Where I Lived* only after Mintzuri's death. Apart from his stories the author wrote only one short novel and a play.

The literary recreation of the lost world of his village and its inhabitants as opposed to the author's bleak life in Istanbul is offered as one of the author's key concerns: "to show them [the villagers] more colourful and more true than they were."<sup>34</sup> Consequently, his stories are rather vignettes of village life than conventional short stories; their characters are taken from among his relatives, people from his village or surrounding villages he knew, lived with, worked with and talked to, sometimes acting under their real names in the stories. What is important in these vignettes is the fullness of life, the character of the people, the food they eat, the work they do etc. Descriptions are a basic component of this literature, which has an ethnographic character to give the background setting, as the author admits.<sup>35</sup> Territoriality is another important element of these descriptions. The landscape of fields, pastures, gardens as well as the heaths, deserts and mountains that belong to Armudan; the ways of the peasants from the village to the fields up in the mountains and the gardens down by the river are evoked in detail in almost every story.

Clearly Mintzuri stands in the tradition of an Armenian regionalist literature,<sup>36</sup> but in some points he also differs from his literary role models such as Hirimiyan (1820-1907), Srvandztiants (1840-92), Tlgadintsi (1860-1915) and Zartaryan (1874-1915). In the second half of the nineteenth century, Istanbul intellectuals, ethnographers and philologists started to collect songs and poems from the Anatolian provinces and described peasant life and material culture. They were worried that this world would just disappear as a consequence of mass migration to the big cities. Provincial life also became a topic for journalism, with political intentions as far as the rigorous censorship of the Ottoman press allowed, but more often with an ethnographic and reforming approach. A literary school that began to form towards the end of the century tried to use literature on the provinces to gain access to the spirit of the Armenian people as is was represented most authentically by the Anatolian peasant, not mixed with and adapted to other communities as the Armenians of Constantinople were. This spirit was to be found in "both the soil and the water of the land, the most minute detail of the living community, to its style of dress to other aspects of his life – dwelling places, occupations, ways of judgement and impressions."<sup>37</sup>

Like Mintzuri, many authors of this school had worked as teachers in the eastern provinces. The author admired Ardaşes Harutyunyan and Rupen Zartaryan, whom he met in 1914 and who complimented him on one of his early stories.<sup>38</sup> The literary influence is reflected in Mintzuri's use of dialect, the ethnographic quality of his literature and his rejection of the city where migrants like him were forced to live.

Certain common traits of provincial literature became obsolete after the physical destruction of the world they ventured to describe. This can be seen in Mintzuri's work as well as in that of other Armenian authors of his generation who mainly wrote in American exile.<sup>39</sup> After 1915 there was little room for critique or humour in the nostalgic picture this literature tried to paint. In Mintzuri's work, this is reflected in the near absence of politics that would presuppose the possibility to change or form the future of village society.

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34 Ibid., 159.

35 Ibid., 159.

36 K. Beledian, 'From Image to Loss: The Writers of Kharpert and Provincial Literature', in R.G. Hovannisian (ed.): *Armenian Tsopk/Kharpert*, Costa Mesa: Mazda 2002, 239-72; R. Peroomian, 'The Heritage of Van Provincial Literature', in R.G. Hovannisian (ed.): *Armenian Van/Vasporakan*, Costa Mesa: Mazda 2000, 133-52.

37 Zartarian, 1911, as quoted in K. Beledian, 'From Image to Loss', 257.

38 *Istanbul*, 130-1.

39 Like Vahe Haig, Peniamin Noorigian, Hamasdegh, Vahan Totovents, cf. K. Beledian, 'From Image to Loss', 266-72.

One consequence of this is the absence of conflict in Mintzuri's descriptions of village life. None of the region's experience with war, famine or political upheaval, which the villagers must have discussed (if these events did not affect the village community directly), play a significant role. The imprisonment of a rich mill owner from Armudan, because of his alleged association with the Armenian nationalist guerrilla in the 1890s, is mentioned in passing.<sup>40</sup>

Contrary to this, Mintzuri acts out his nostalgia as a static, almost timeless picture of village society. This nostalgia, however, is not sweet at all, but allows for the depiction of the hard life and the medieval mores. This also renders obsolete the question of the identity of an Armenian nation. Instead there is room for the universalising notions of cosmopolitanism that have been pointed to above. As for other Armenian writers from his generation, the destruction of this world is a taboo also for Mintzuri. The events of deportation and death are never fictionalised and they are questioned or reproached only indirectly. As Mintzuri relates, Hagop did not want to talk about the fate of his village when in the 1940s by chance he encountered a Turkish school friend who enquired after his family. As he remarks, the only thing he would have to expect would have been condolences.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, when after decades he meets his old friend Misak in Istanbul and is invited to come with him to the East, he declines. With the people who lived there dead or departed, the world he knew is gone. As an outward sign of this, even the names of the places were changed: Armudan has become Armutlu, Eğin has become Kemaliye, as Mintzuri critically remarks in several places.

Also the second part of Mintzuri's life-world, late Ottoman Istanbul as he describes it in his accounts, no longer exists at the time the author writes. But in contrast to the village, which ceased to exist all of a sudden, the author continued to live in Istanbul and witnessed a change much more subtle but no less radical than in the case of Armudan.

Unlike the village that remains 'home' even after its destruction, the author's relationship to Istanbul is ambivalent. Before the war, Istanbul was the place that kept the family away from home, the husbands away from their wives and children, their fields and gardens; but it has no more to offer than work without ever succeeding. In contrast to the nineteenth-century ethnographers who became interested in provincial life, this is Mintzuri's own experience. He is very clear about what drives his family as well as other migrants to the city: money. The peasants are rich, they have everything they need, but they need money to pay their taxes. Since there is no market for their products they have to go abroad to work for money.<sup>42</sup>

Istanbul is therefore also the place of class differences. There are rich and poor people; and Mintzuri, until the end of his life, will belong to the poor ones. Poverty becomes a habitus that the author carries with a certain pride, because it contrasts nicely with the richness of the inner world of the writer, the philosopher, the artist. In a little poetic essay found in the posthumously published account on his life in Istanbul, Mintzuri develops this self-understanding and identity as an author and as a human being.<sup>43</sup> Like the owl of Minerva, the artist comes too late and cannot change the course of events. All that remains is to describe the world and bring forward his opinion on how the world should be. This is a world more human than the modern, industrialised one with its stress on material goods.

Mintzuri represents such a world not only in his village stories, but also in his account of his years at school and as an apprentice in late Ottoman Istanbul. The stress on the pluralism of ethnic and religious groups, languages spoken in the streets and dresses worn gives his narrative an almost orientalist feeling, were it not for its quality of being written from such a peculiar perspective and without the racial and class bias of such accounts. This quality makes more sense in contrast to the

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40 'Altın Yağdı Yelbakyan'ın Dügününde', *Atina*, 27-8.

41 *İstanbul*, 76.

42 *Ibid.*, 109.

43 'Bizler', *ibid.*, 147-50.

reality of the republican Istanbul that Mintzuri witnessed during his time as a ‘hostage’ after he could not return ‘home’ any more.

During and after the war, Istanbul, which was occupied by the Entente for several years, became a haven for non-Muslim inhabitants whose presence and rights were later guaranteed by the treaty of Lausanne. Immediately after the war, the new republican regime even tried to relocate its non-Muslim citizens to the old capital from Anatolia, which was to become the focal point of the new Turkish nation. Consequently, the plural character of Istanbul increased. However, during the 1920s the minority communities came under ever greater economic and political pressure. First of all, a massive campaign to Turkify the economy of the city pushed thousands of Greek, Armenian and Jewish clerks out of their jobs in banks, shipping agencies and insurance companies, and their jobs were given to ethnic Turks. This campaign peaked in the 1940s with the introduction of a discriminating Wealth Tax (*Varlık Vergisi*) that ruined many non-Muslim business- and craftsmen. Moreover, the minorities had to submit to a policy of cultural Turkification. In a campaign called ‘Fellow citizen, speak Turkish!’ all languages other than Turkish were banned from the public sphere. While Istanbul remained a cosmopolitan and plural place, its surface was polished to reflect the new national-Turkish culture. Differences were to be made invisible, although they remained a stigma especially for the members of the minorities. In the 1940s, a Turkish school friend and a neighbour tried to find a better job for Hagop Demirciyan, whose fodder business was going under. Both failed for unknown reasons.<sup>44</sup> Due to the constant economic and political pressure that erupted sporadically in pogroms as in 1955, the minority communities dwindled away, becoming a *quantité négligable* in today’s Istanbul.

While the minorities were suspected of being non-Turkish, the nationalist regime stamped all the other Ottoman cultures as non-modern. In a series of laws, Ottoman clothes, script and language were ‘reformed’, i.e. homogenised and Europeanised. In the course of the language reform, Turkish towns and villages, particularly in the east, also got new names. The new nation state was to become radically different from the old empire that Mintzuri describes so colourfully. In the east, the drawn-out passage from multi-ethnic empire to nation state that was at the root of the ethnic cleansing of the Armenian communities continues to produce violence. In 1938, the Dersim, the region lying across the river from Armudan, witnessed the suppression of the last Kurdish-Alevi rebellions against the policies hinted at above. It is interesting that Mintzuri chose his pen name from the mountain range Munzur, which defines the northern border of the Dersim towards the Euphrates and that fills the horizon if one looks southwards from Armudan. This choice of name may or may not have a political meaning. In any case it derived from one of the natural symbols of a region that was distinguished (or, in the eyes of any nationalist politician, stained) by a high degree of ethnic plurality. Istanbul that, at first, was neglected for the new capital Ankara was also transformed. In the sixties, the city was rediscovered and underwent a wave of infrastructural measures that consisted mainly in ramming axial boulevards through the urban fabric to facilitate traffic. The city again became attractive for migrants from Eastern Turkey as a rapid industrialisation set in. This migration, however, had greater dimensions than that of the nineteenth-century and transformed Istanbul into the mega-city that it is today.

More so than the fate of the village, which remains a taboo to which neither the author Mintzuri nor the protagonist Hagop wants to refer, the author comments on this transformation of Istanbul. Istanbul, a strange place for young Hagop, a place of being a ‘hostage’ after the destruction of home, acquires more and more traits of the kind of modernity that Mintzuri dismisses as ephemeral to life. The nostalgic descriptions that we investigated above are often triggered by voids in the topography of the city. For the building of the Barbaros boulevard, the bakery and the other shops Mintzuri described were destroyed. Of the whole ensemble, only the mosque remained. Not only houses and quarters, but also the communities that lived there disappeared:

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44 *Ibid.*, 75-8.

Time or, if you want, history has assimilated and swallowed everything I told you. Are there still houses in Beşiktaş' Pasha quarter where Greek is spoken? Has history not exchanged them? [...] Did they not scatter the Jews in Ortaköy? Do they still observe their shabbat? Do they clog the road from their synagogues to the doors of the Orthodox churches? Did they change dress? Do they still look like a desert tribe with the robes and skullcaps of their forefathers? Did Kömüryan Yervant Efendi's house in Portukal Mikayel Pasha street remain? Was it not torn down?<sup>45</sup>

This is one of the rare instances in which Mintzuri is quite outspoken about loss (albeit in the form of rhetorical questions). In general, his account of late Ottoman Istanbul, like the village stories, tries not to compare the past with the present to give suggestions for the creation of the future. However, the stark difference between then and now can be read as a silent hint to re-investigate the loss of Istanbul's plurality and cosmopolitanism in the Republican era. I like to end by exploring this issue on the backdrop of a discourse in contemporary Turkey that tries to salvage and remember its plural past.

### Cosmopolitanism Discourses

Until 1993, when the posthumously published book *Places Where I Lived* was translated into Turkish under the title *Istanbul Memoires (İstanbul Anıları. 1897-1940)*, Mintzuri had a very limited readership among the inhabitants of the place where he had spent most of his life. The translation was published by the History Endowment (Tarih Vakfı) that a group of liberal historians had founded at the beginning of the nineties to promote a new, more democratic, open and professional historiography. The aim of this non-governmental association was to overcome the limitations of the official Kemalist state historiography that the military coup of 1980 had boosted.

In several ways, Mintzuri's book fits with the program for a new history that the History Endowment promotes. First of all, it is the example of a 'voice from below' and can serve as a source for a new social history of Istanbul. Consequently it was marketed as a document (*belgesel*) and adorned with late nineteenth-century black-and-white photographs that show some of the places and types of workers Mintzuri's account describes. All of this plays down the literary character of the book. Moreover, it nicely complements the History Endowment's project of the *Istanbul Encyclopaedia (Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi)* that was successful in professionalising and modernising the local history of the city. This encyclopaedia brings to an end an abortive project by Reşad Ekrem Koçu (1905-75), who, in the 1960s, tried with a team of friends to shoulder a similar task, including in the city's historiography groups and places left out in official works. These were all kinds of marginals, among them provincial workers and labour migrants, as well as the minority communities of Istanbul.<sup>46</sup>

Secondly, Mintzuri's work is put in the context of the re-evaluation of Turkish-Armenian relations, as the foreword of the book and statements by other historians show. His description of peaceful co-existence offers an alternative conception to that of nationalist historiography.<sup>47</sup> It remains to be seen whether and how Mintzuri's work can also be integrated into a revision of the events of 1915 that is still in the offing. Since it offers only a gaping void on that topic, it will be difficult. It may prove more helpful to the general reappraisal of the history Istanbul's minority communities that a new school of Turkish historians has taken on.<sup>48</sup> Part of the endeavour of this school is the revision of nationalist historiography regarding the republican era and the depiction of the hardships of the minority

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45 Ibid., 74.

46 O. Pamuk: *İstanbul. Hatıralar ve Şehir*, Istanbul: YKY, 144-63.

47 F.M. Göçek: 'Reconstructing the Turkish Historiography on the Armenian Massacres and Deaths of 1915', in: R. Hovannisian (ed.): *Looking Backward, Moving Forward*, Edison, N.J.: Transaction 2003, 209-230, p. 210.

48 S. Doğan/K. Tomenendal: 'The adoption and reception of non-Muslim minorities in Istanbul in Turkish historiography', in: U. Tischler (ed.): *From 'milieu de mémoire' to 'lieu de mémoire'. The cultural memory of Istanbul in the 20th century*, Munich: Meidenbauer 2006, 214-43.

communities. It also entails a revision of the historiographies of the minority communities themselves that has sometimes endorsed the republican version of their history. This has been aptly demonstrated regarding the Turkish Jews.<sup>49</sup> Through its contrasts, omissions and voids, as pointed to above, Mintzuri's account of Istanbul life perhaps could be connected very fruitfully to this discussion.

The reappraisal of Istanbul's past plurality and cosmopolitanism that started as a critical venture by independent Turkish scholars has meanwhile spilled into popular culture, losing much of its critical potential. In its worst form of expression, cosmopolitanism has become a marketing and tourism factor. In the district of Beyoğlu, the architectural remnants of the nineteenth century serve as shopping malls and restaurants that are given pseudo-Levantine names. The plural past of some residential quarters is used as an attraction for middle-class house buyers. Elements of history that do not fit these aims are not mentioned.<sup>50</sup>

In contrast to this, Mintzuri's cosmopolitanism relates to communities that endorse pluralism and share this with other groups that are not necessarily the rich bourgeois who left the architectural remains that have become so fashionable in the early twenty-first century. If one sought his kind of cosmopolitanism in contemporary Istanbul, one would have to go to the migrants in the recently build gecekondus. Or, to do justice to Istanbul's claim to world city status, one would have to go to the inner city slums where refugees from Africa await passage to Europe.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, Mintzuri's pluralism is not strictly bound to an urban environment. On the contrary, the situation he describes in the Ottoman Istanbul of his youth seems like a copy of the situation in his home region that also inspires the ethics to be practiced in both contexts. This suggests the possibility of an original type of rural cosmopolitanism as described in his stories.

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49 R.N. Bali: 'The alternative way to come to terms with the past', in: U. Tischler (ed.): *Milieu de mémoire*, 101-10; *ibid.*: *Cumhuriyet Yıllarında Türkiye Yahudileri*, 2 vols., Istanbul: İletişim 1993 and 2003.

50 B.J. Komins: 'Depopulated Cosmopolitan. The Cultures of Integration, Concealment, and Evacuation in Istanbul', in: *Comparative Literature Studies* 39 (2002), 360-85; M. Fuhrmann: 'Vom stadtpolitischen Umgang mit dem Erbe der Europäisierung in Istanbul, Izmir und Thessaloniki', in: U. Tischler/I. Zelepos (eds.): *Bilderwelten – Weltbilder. Die Gegenwart der Vergangenheit in postosmanischen Metropolen Südosteuropas*, Wien (2008); A. Mills: 'Boundaries of the Nation in the Space of the Urban. Landscape and Social Memory in Istanbul', in: *Cultural Geographies* 13 (2006), 367-94.

51 K. Özdil: 'Creating New Spaces, Claiming Rights. West African Immigrants in Istanbul', in: F. Eckardt/K. Wildner (eds.): *Public Istanbul. Spaces and Spheres of the Urban*, Bielefeld: transcript 2008, 279-98.