

Upgraded Turkish Prison Quality Praised by New Inmates

by Lorna Salzman

After a study and survey of the make-up of Turkish prisoners, it was determined that only 0.1% of them had a high school education, and of these, only 0.001 possessed a higher degree from a university. This study came twenty years after several complaints were received from former prisoners about the unspeakable and unacceptable conditions of their imprisonment and their unsuccessful petition to the government to take steps to improve the intellectual make-up of the prison population.

“The biases against people with half or whole brains indicates a lack of commitment to the diversity of the Turkish population,” said one former prisoner, a poet who served five years for writing a poem no one could understand. Another former inmate, a professional chef, served two years for making an error in his recipe for Turkish Delight. A designer served one year for designing a Turkish towel and having it manufactured using Egyptian cotton. A famous opera director got five years for presenting Mozart’s opera, *Abduction from the Seraglio*, which was set in Turkey and showed dishonorable intentions of a Turkish pasha towards a European woman (Even worse: the pasha eventually apologizes and defers to western morals.)

All of these educated prisoners were housed in separate parts of the prison, and thus their daily contacts were with uneducated workers and peasants, with discussions about bad food, X-rated videos, raising sheep and the price of marijuana. The artists and intellectuals tried vainly to

introduce topics such as whether the Hagia Sofia should be reconsecrated as a mosque, the political conditions on Cyprus involving Greeks and Turks, immigration from Syria and elsewhere, and why Istanbul had no symphony orchestra.

But then they got good news: because the prisons were overcrowded, Pres. Erdogan had no place to put the two hundred thousand new prisoners he had arrested after the failed coup, comprised of police, the military, journalists, newspaper publishers, filmmakers, teachers, scholars and university students, all of whom his administration indicted for "sedition." "The threat posed by these seditionists to public security is too grave to allow them to continue their work, so we are removing the present prison population and sending them home in order to make room for people who irresponsibly continue to think, speak and write," said Erdogan.

The felicitous result of installing a new prison population was that intellectuals, scholars, artists and media people are now surrounded by others like them.

The level of discourse and debate changed overnight along with a sense of acceptance and even appreciation for the government's policies. Said one professor of language: "My god, I was at my wits' end. I was sure that I would become traumatized and lose my mind. Now Erdogan has finally done something truly admirable. My new perspective on being in prison for the rest of my life has given me hope that at least my brain will continue to function, though I have to say that I am not so optimistic about the safety of the food. But there are always trade-offs."