



TURKISH KALEIDOSCOPE

FRACTURED LIVES IN A TIME OF VIOLENCE

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ART BY ERGÜN GÜNDÜZ

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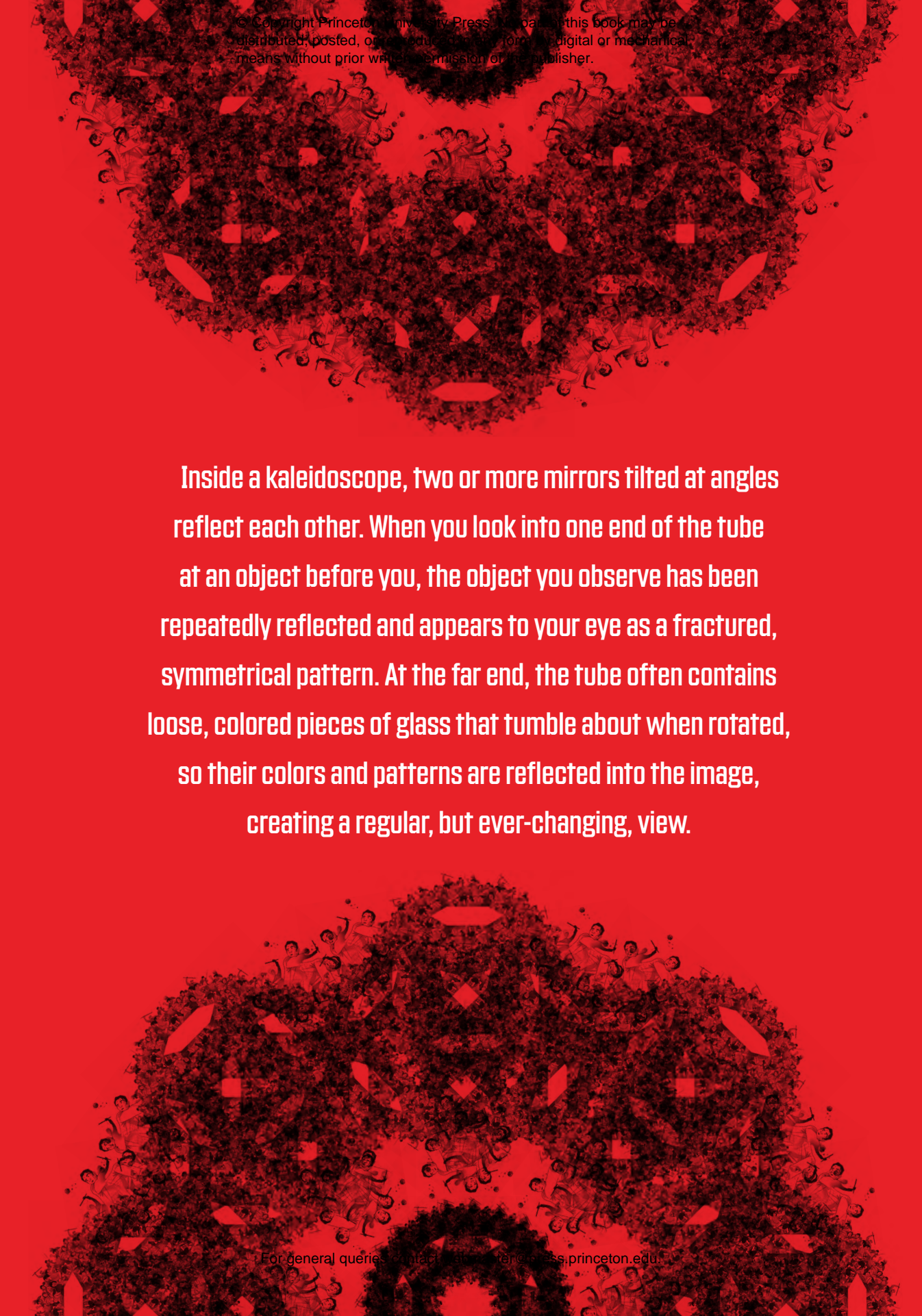
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Inside a kaleidoscope, two or more mirrors tilted at angles reflect each other. When you look into one end of the tube at an object before you, the object you observe has been repeatedly reflected and appears to your eye as a fractured, symmetrical pattern. At the far end, the tube often contains loose, colored pieces of glass that tumble about when rotated, so their colors and patterns are reflected into the image, creating a regular, but ever-changing, view.

INTRODUCTION

In 1975, I traveled from the East Coast of the United States to Turkey's capital city, Ankara, to begin studying at Hacettepe University for a master's degree in social psychology. I was interested in cross-cultural psychology and the university had an impressive program. With the help of a few friends, I settled in to study and learn the language. In those pre-Internet days, I had no idea that the country (and my university) was embroiled in what might be called a civil war. I learned quickly enough. In the simple everyday act of attending class, I encountered armored personnel carriers, bullets, bombs, and other dangers. Between 1976 and 1980, five thousand civilians were killed in street violence. By the time I left in 1978, the polarization and fury of street violence between groups professing "leftist" and "rightist" views had enveloped nearly the entire country and affected young and old. The violence accompanied tremendous economic hardship and political dysfunction. For most of that decade, no political party had an absolute majority, so the country was governed by a series of unstable coalitions. Whenever the coalition cards were shuffled, the parties that came out on top rewarded themselves with cabinet posts and ministries that they colonized by replacing thousands of civil servants with party loyalists. Before long, another set of parties aligned themselves at the top and did the same. In this kaleidoscope of ideologically opposed coalition governments, each ministry operated against the others at all levels of society, so that a change in ideological leadership at the ministry level would result in a wholesale swap from leftist to rightist and back again in every linked institution. When the Ministry of Education was occupied by rightists, leftist teachers were replaced or attacked and the men who brought tea to university offices suddenly began to carry clubs and intimidate leftist students. Political participation, willing or unwilling, was widespread, drawing in people of all ages and in every corner of the country. Urban neighborhoods were controlled by one group or another and marked with graffiti and posters that identified their territory. Before long, there were parallel police forces and parallel governments; even the army was split.

The left-right axis of polarization infected not only Turkey but many other countries during this period. The Cold War was a battle for global supremacy between the Soviet Union and the United States using proxies, countries that they tried to influence. The left/right dualism, however, is misleading. Communism came in Sovietic, Albanian, Maoist, and Cuban flavors; there were different types of socialism, and other even narrower splinter positions, groups that had split over personal affronts,

matters of honor, or simply disagreement about how to interpret a line in *The Communist Manifesto*. By 1980, there were more than fifty leftist groups operating in Turkey. The consequences were serious as groups often dueled in the streets with guns and other weapons. The right was divided between Turanist nationalists who believed Turks had a common ancestry in Central Asia, symbolized by a wolf, and by Islamist nationalists who foregrounded Islamic identity and Turkish blood. However, these beliefs overlapped and, despite some internal disputes, the wrath of rightist groups focused firmly on the left. Many Alevis, a large Muslim minority whose rituals and beliefs differ substantially from those of majority Sunni Muslims, were associated with the left. This made them particular targets of rightist bombings and drive-by shootings.

During this period, Turkey experienced massive migration as peasants looked for jobs in the factories springing up around the cities. Peasants and workers built illegal houses on public or unused land until almost a third of Turkey's major cities consisted of such squatter areas. These migrants tended to be conservative in lifestyle, though their level of religious piety varied. The left tried to organize them, but they gravitated to the political right. Turks with a secular lifestyle, ranging from factory workers and artisans to educated elites, tended toward the political left. Many would have liked to remain in a political middle, but this was no longer an option. With the possible exception of the bohemians, these seemingly opposed populations still had a great deal in common, including a basic conservatism about women's proper role in society, respect for authority that expressed itself both in family life and hierarchies of political organization, and strong nationalist beliefs, including veneration of the country's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and a belief in Kemalist principles. Atatürk was one of the heroes of Turkey's War of Independence from occupying European powers in World War I and Turkey's first president. In his own autocratic way, he pushed through many Westernizing reforms and gave Turkey a parliament.

In 1973, an international oil crisis raised prices beyond what Turkey was able to pay, leading to shortages and strikes. An international arms embargo in 1975 in response to Turkey's invasion of Cyprus pushed Turkey's economy over the edge. At first, imported goods like coffee and medicines disappeared from the market. Then local basics, like cooking oil, began to disappear from grocery shelves. Fuel was not available to truck coal from the mines to the cities, leaving people to burn their furniture to keep warm. Electricity and water were supplied only a few hours a day. As the kaleidoscope of political coalitions spun ineffectively in parliament, the Turkish military readied a takeover. The coup d'état in 1980 replaced street violence with the more efficient violence of the state that brutally repressed activists, particularly on the left, though rightists also were rounded up. More than two hundred thousand people were arrested, many were tortured, some were executed. Hundreds of thousands of others were stripped of their citizenship, blacklisted, or simply disappeared. Those who could, fled abroad.

In 1983, the army allowed new elections. A civilian government came to power that prioritized economic reforms and opened Turkey to the global market. New consumer products and hopes for upward mobility gripped Turkey's population and the extreme polarization and violent turn in the 1970s were largely repressed. People wanted to forget, though their experiences were transmitted to the next generation in indirect ways. The military presented itself as the protector of Kemalism, that is, the secular society and parliamentary government envisioned by Atatürk, but in the

1980s, it also began to promote Islam as the glue that could challenge the appeal of communism and heal the rifts in society. The newly elected government introduced compulsory religious education and increased the public role of religion. Still, beneath the gleaming new society, a steady drumbeat of violence persisted, most visibly in the fight between the Turkish state and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), a revolutionary socialist organization that has survived to the present day. It has roots in the leftist movement of the late 1970s and then, in the 1980s, began an armed insurgency to establish a separate Kurdish state and to safeguard the rights of Turkey's Kurdish population. More than forty thousand people have been killed in decades of conflict between the PKK and the state, most of them Kurds.

Today, Turkey is again experiencing extreme polarization, though the social and political context and labels identifying opposing "sides" differ from the 1970s. Since the early Republic, women wearing headscarves were banned from the civil service, parliament, hospitals, and many other kinds of employment and, for a time, from attending university. People with a conservative lifestyle felt left out of the secular Kemalist national project and supported new Islamist political parties that promised to give them a place at the table. The election of the AKP (Justice and Development Party) in 2002 under its charismatic leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, seemed at first to promise a table big enough for everyone.

Other doors to conservative success were opened by Hizmet, the Islamic community surrounding the preacher Fethullah Gülen, which operated schools and businesses, funded civic activities, and filled positions in the civil service. In 2015, the government designated Hizmet as a terror organization with the acronym FETÖ (Fethullahist Terrorist Organization), accusing it of setting up a parallel state within Turkey, and began to arrest anyone with links to the community. The government believed FETÖ was behind a failed coup attempt in 2016. Since then, the accusation of being FETÖ or PKK (or, implausibly, both) has become generic for "terrorist" and resulted in tens of thousands of people in all walks of life being fired from their positions, detained, or imprisoned. The government encouraged citizens to denounce to the police anyone they suspected of supporting either group.

Mutual suspicion and distrust reached a fever pitch. Everyone claimed a bitterly defended side, but the boundaries between "us" and "them" were constantly moving. In 2017, voters approved a referendum to replace Turkey's parliamentary system with a new constellation of power that revolved around a strong presidency rather than parliament. The following year, Erdoğan was voted in as president under this new system and fully gathered in the reins of power. By 2019, though, fractures in the ruling party started to appear as several prominent former supporters of the president stepped forward to start their own political parties.

Given this background, I thought the story behind Turkey's polarization in the 1970s might be important for understanding today's dynamics. I began this project because I saw that, after four decades of near silence (with the exception of Cold War-themed ideological analyses and a handful of memoirs), the 1970s were suddenly being recast in Turkish popular media and incorporated into television series, sometimes in ways that I didn't recognize. In 2012, two generals who led the 1980 coup were brought to trial and the court heard testimony by the victims of the coup, but their stories began where the 1970s left off. If a social history of the period leading up to the coup is to be written, I thought it should reflect the voices and experiences of ordinary people as much as movement leaders, and those on the

right as well as the left. This book lays out the personal motivations and actions of a variety of ordinary people who were directly or indirectly involved in the rightist and leftist activism that ensnared a large part of the population in the 1970s. Some of the scenes in this book are from my own experience, but most of the stories are inspired by dozens of interviews I carried out in Turkey in 2014 with a wide variety of people who participated in the fury of that period.

In the interviews, certain themes emerged, regardless of the ideological position (left or right), gender, social class, ethnic or religious affiliation, or rural/urban characteristics of the speaker. For instance, people joined political groups for many different reasons, not all of them political. When they joined a group, every aspect of their lives was controlled by an autocratic leader. There was no room for complexity or personal choice. A person's political affiliation could even be read from their clothing and shape of their facial hair. Women were expected to be asexual soldiers, but also to bring the tea. There was a lack of trust in individuals and no tolerance whatsoever for thinking or behaving differently. Agreement with and obedience to the leader were paramount.

Despite such intense conformity within rigidly autocratic hierarchies, I was struck by the tendency for Turkish political life at the time, as now, to polarize and fracture into violently antagonistic groups and sides. Members of the left, in particular, carried out violent acts against competing leftist groups, even if they were ideologically similar. Those who abandoned their group were considered traitors and met with intense hatred. Their own group might send an assassin to kill them. At the microlevel, people's stories show that, within the suffocating embrace of group membership, a variety of motivations and experiences led people to rethink their affiliation to a particular person or position, despite the risk.

Why a graphic novel? When doing the interviews, I had no specific agenda and allowed myself to be surprised by people's stories and motivations. People's memories of the time were vivid and often they seemed to relive their experiences in the telling. It occurred to me that academic analysis flattened these stories as it folded them into discussions of abstract issues, like factionalism. Perhaps I could make the same points by allowing people to tell their stories themselves in graphic form and thereby retain the nuances and contradictions of history as it is lived. We can analyze data and build models to try to explain the origins of factionalism and descent into political violence, but the reality always involves complexities of real actors negotiating cultural, social, and historical pressures. A graphic novel explains the same things in a more subtle way by embedding them within highly evocative life experiences, personal turning points, and coming-of-age stories. In order to produce an engaging dramatic narrative, I had to create composite characters, merge their stories, and fictionalize their relationships, making this a work of graphic fiction based on true stories. Although I've written both scholarly books and novels, this was a new and unfamiliar endeavor. The success of this project depended greatly on the talented artist Ergün Gündüz, who was sensitive to these nuances, could evoke Turkey in the 1970s, and had the patience of a dervish. After reading my first lengthy text, he explained kindly, "I can't draw what's in people's heads," then taught me to write what is essentially a screenplay for a graphic book. I flew regularly to Istanbul and we would sit for many hours at a stretch, going over every word and deciding whether and how it would be drawn, inserted into a speech bubble, or omitted. In this way, the book before you took shape over many

iterations, countless hours of mulling over words and images, and always a concern to be faithful to the original telling.

This book doesn't give an ideological or event-driven analysis but rather asks more universal questions about what causes people to sacrifice their lives, health, and sometimes families for a cause or for an autocratic leader, to engage in violent acts, and then to endanger themselves further by splitting off from that cause or leader. What effect, if any, do their actions have on their society, on their own lives and those of their children? From the vantage point of people on the ground, these questions take on a universal quality that speaks to other contexts and other people beyond Turkey and beyond the 1970s.

"There are stories that open many veins."

INTERVIEWEE 1

"Anything can happen to anyone at any time."

INTERVIEWEE 2

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INCOMPLETE GLOSSARY OF FACTIONS AND PARTIES

FETÖ: Fethullahist Terrorist Organization

ON THE RIGHT

AKP: Justice and Development Party

Gray Wolves: Idealist Hearths

MHP: Nationalist Movement Party

POL-BIR: The Police Union

ÜGB: Idealist Youth Union

ON THE LEFT

DAZ: Revolutionary Morality Police

Dev-Genç: Revolutionary Youth Federation of Turkey

Dev-Sol: Revolutionary Left

Dev-Yol: Revolutionary Path

DHKP-C: Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front

DISK: Revolutionary Workers' Trade Unions Confederation

DÖB: Revolutionary Students Union

GSB: Young Socialists Union

IGD: Progressive Youth Association

IKD: Progressive Women's Association

PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party

POL-DER: The Police Association

SGB: Socialist Youth Union

SIP: Socialist Workers Party

TDK: Revolutionary Women's Union of Turkey

THKO: People's Liberation Army of Turkey

THKP: People's Liberation Party of Turkey

THKP-C: People's Liberation Party/Front of Turkey

TIHKP: Revolutionary Workers' and Peasants' Party of Turkey

TIP: Turkish Workers Party

TKP: Turkish Communist Party

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Rightists referred to themselves as idealists (*ülküçü*). The left called them fascists. Leftists were self-defined revolutionaries (*devrimciler*). The right called them communists.

MAIN CHARACTERS



Faruk,
Rightist



Nuray,
Leftist



Yunus,
Leftist



Orhan,
Rightist

THEIR CHILDREN



Ebru,
Faruk's daughter



Eylem,
daughter of
Nuray & Yunus



Alp,
Orhan's son



Miray,
Orhan's
daughter

SECONDARY CHARACTERS



Bilge,
Nuray's sister



Feride,
Nuray's friend



Fikret,
Nuray's brother



Gül,
Bilge's friend

PERIPHERAL CHARACTERS



Ali,
bakery worker



Metin,
Fikret's friend



Mustafa,
leader of
Yunus's
leftist group



Mehmet,
electrical shop
owner



Sedef,
Yunus's
great aunt



The factory
owner



Yunus's
uncle

TURKISH KALEIDOSCOPE

REFLECTIONS

Faruk



FARUK WAS BORN IN ERZURUM, THE YOUNGEST OF THREE CHILDREN. HIS FATHER WAS A TINSMITH WHO OWNED A SHOP IN THE BAZAAR. BOTH OF HIS PARENTS WERE RELIGIOUS AND CONSERVATIVE IN THEIR VALUES AND LIFESTYLE. FOR FARUK, THAT MEANT THEY BELIEVED IN THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY, RESPECTFUL BEHAVIOR, KINDNESS, AND PRAYER. FARUK WAS DEEPLY IMPRESSED BY HIS FATHER, WHO OPENED THE DOOR TO HIS SHOP EVERY DAY WITH A PRAYER, THEN RECEIVED FORMAL GREETINGS FROM THE OTHER SHOPKEEPERS. THE FAMILY BELIEVED IN THE GREATNESS OF THE TURKISH NATION, A NATION OF WARRIORS WHO BEAT BACK EVERY THREAT BY OUTSIDERS. FARUK'S ELDER BROTHER BECAME A COMMANDO AND FARUK WISHED TO DO THE SAME, BUT HIS FATHER WANTED HIM TO TAKE OVER THE SHOP, MARRY, AND GIVE HIM GRANDSONS. AS A DUTIFUL SON, FARUK WOULDN'T DISOBEY HIS FATHER, BUT HE WAS ABLE TO SIDESTEP HIS FATHER'S PLAN BY WINNING A PLACE AT HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY TO STUDY MEDICINE. THERE HE LIVED HIS DREAM OF BEING A WARRIOR FOR THE NATION BY JOINING THE GRAY WOLVES YOUTH GROUP AND FIGHTING COMMUNISTS. HE BECAME BEST FRIENDS WITH ORHAN, ANOTHER STUDENT FROM ERZURUM.

Nuray



WHEN NURAY WAS BORN, HER FATHER HAD QUIT HIS JOB AT A FACTORY AND MOVED HIS FAMILY BACK TO HIS FATHER'S VILLAGE TO HELP HIM WORK THE LAND. SHE HAD TWO OLDER SIBLINGS, BILGE AND FIKRET, WHO BOTH LEFT TO STUDY IN ISTANBUL. TO MAKE SURE THAT NURAY HAD A CHANCE AT A GOOD EDUCATION, THE FAMILY MOVED TO THE CITY OF ESKİŞEHİR, WHERE HER FATHER FOUND WORK. IN HIGH SCHOOL, HER TEACHERS GAVE HER BOOKS ABOUT OPPRESSION AND REVOLUTION. SHE IDOLIZED BILGE'S FRIEND GÜL, A UNION ORGANIZER. ALONG WITH ANOTHER STUDENT, YUNUS, NURAY BECAME INVOLVED IN A LEFTIST ORGANIZATION, KEEPING IT SECRET FROM HER PARENTS. SHE DID WELL ENOUGH ON THE NATIONAL ENTRANCE EXAMINATION TO STUDY MEDICINE AT HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY IN THE CAPITAL CITY OF ANKARA. HER EXPERIENCES THERE MADE HER MORE AND MORE SKEPTICAL ABOUT THE LEFTIST CAUSE. IN THE DORMITORY, SHE BEFRIENDED FERIDE, A YOUNG WOMAN FROM ADANA WHO WAS ALSO STUDYING MEDICINE.

REFLECTIONS

Yunus



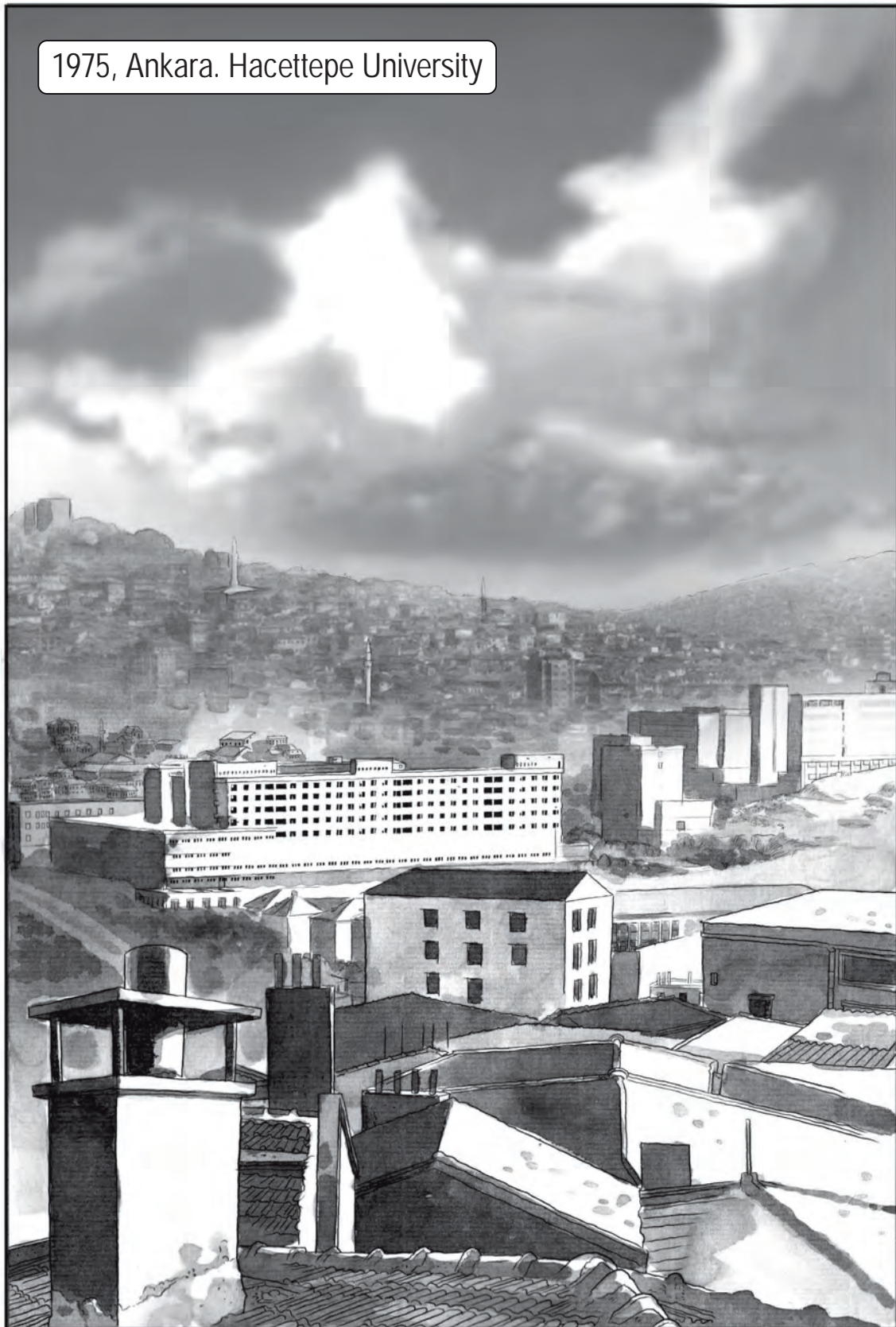
YUNUS'S FAMILY IN ESKİŞEHİR HAD FALLEN ON HARD TIMES WHEN HIS FATHER, A TEACHER, WAS IMPRISONED. HIS MOTHER EARNED MONEY BY STITCHING AND SEWING. YUNUS HELPED NEIGHBORS WITH THE HARVEST IN RETURN FOR FOOD. HE MADE FRIENDS EASILY, BOTH IN ESKİŞEHİR AND WHEN HE WENT TO ANKARA TO STUDY, WHERE HE KEPT IN TOUCH WITH NURAY. AT HOME, YUNUS HAD ACCESS TO HIS FATHER'S MANY BOOKS AND HIS READING LED HIM TO BECOME A MARXIST. THE SUMMER BEFORE HE STARTED MEDICAL SCHOOL AT HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY, HE STAYED WITH HIS WEALTHY GREAT-AUNT SEDEF IN ANKARA. HER SON, YUNUS'S UNCLE, HAD JUST RETURNED FROM YEARS WORKING IN FRANCE. EVEN THOUGH YUNUS WAS DEEPLY COMMITTED TO THE LEFTIST CAUSE, HIS CONVERSATIONS WITH HIS UNCLE AND THE BOOKS HE GAVE YUNUS TO READ MADE HIM RECONSIDER WHAT TURKEY REALLY NEEDED.

Orhan



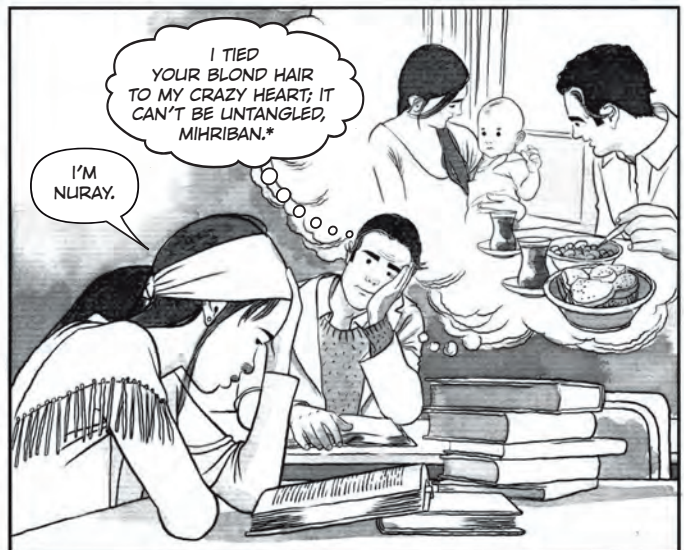
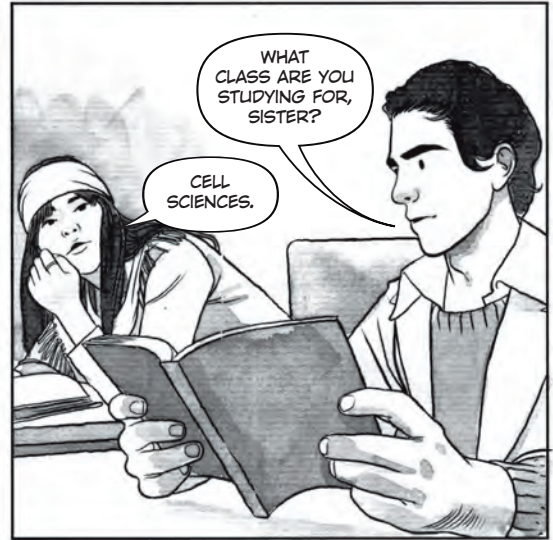
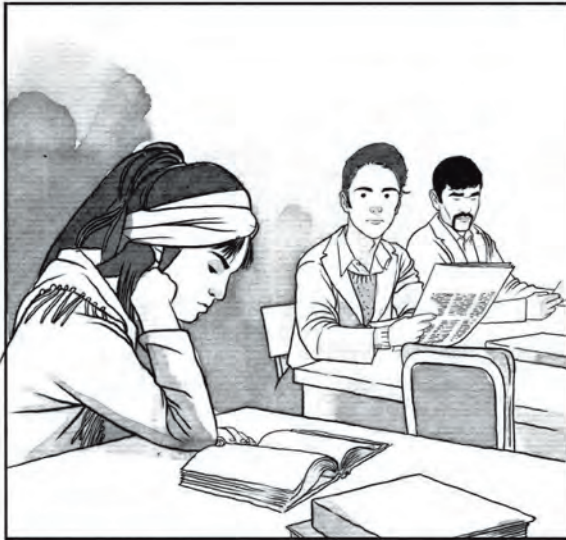
ORHAN WAS A SHY YOUNG MAN FROM A CONSERVATIVE FAMILY IN ERZURUM. HIS FATHER MANAGED A SMALL FRUIT AND VEGETABLE SHOP. HE HAD TWO SISTERS. HIS MOTHER FINISHED THIRD GRADE BUT WANTED HER DAUGHTERS TO DO BETTER. HIS FAMILY WASN'T PARTICULARLY RELIGIOUS BUT HELD STRONGLY TO TRADITIONAL VALUES. ORHAN'S IDEAL VISION OF HIMSELF WAS AS A PHYSICIAN DOING GOOD IN THE WORLD, MARRIED TO A WOMAN HE LOVED, AND WITH CHILDREN OF HIS OWN. HE CONSIDERED HIMSELF TO BE A NATIONALIST IN THAT HE FELT HE BELONGED TO A NATIONAL COMMUNITY THAT CARED FOR AND PROTECTED ALL ITS CITIZENS, NO MATTER WHO THEY WERE. HE WAS NOT IN THE LEAST INTERESTED IN IDEOLOGY OR VIOLENCE; HE JUST WANTED TO FINISH HIS EDUCATION. HIS FRIEND FARUK, THOUGHT HIM NAİVE AND TRIED TO ENGAGE HIM IN A LARGER CAUSE.

1975, Ankara. Hacettepe University





Orhan THE ROMANTIC



* MIHRIBAN: FOLK SONG ABOUT A ROMANTIC ANATOLIAN YOUTH WHO PUT TRADITIONAL VALUES AND FAMILY ABOVE HIS OWN DESIRES. HE LOVED MIHRIBAN BUT WAS TOO SHY TO TELL HER. SHE WENT TO MARRIAGE WITH SOMEONE ELSE.