



From Esfahan to Ephesus

Nanny de Vries

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Historian and archaeologist Nanny de Vries travels old Persia's Royal roads, and paints a fascinating picture of the people she meets on her way, exploring their strong bonds with the once so powerful Persian empire.

Iranian and Turkish residents from all walks of life share their dreams, motivations, and actions with the author.

Their stories reveal the world behind the Islamic Republic of Iran, and behind Ataturk's and the AK Party's Turkey.

A world wherein old Persia's rich cultural traditions are still fully present.

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BACK VIA THE BOSPHORUS

Somewhat helplessly we look around for an empty table in the shade. All we need right now is the view over the water, enjoying a cup of tea. Twenty four hours of partying takes its toll. A group of people at a table near the edge of the outdoor cafe wave to us. They had put three tables together and point to two empty chairs. Gratefully we walk towards them and join the party. So, even in the centre of Istanbul a *misafir* will be given a hospitable welcome.

Originally, the word *misafir* referred to a welcome guest or a traveller, two concepts that mean one and the same thing according to the time-honoured traditions of the nomads. *Misafir* derives from the Persian word *mosafer*, which has the same meaning. It is quite remarkable that the Turkish language has retained a large number of Persian words. In 1928, Kemal Atatürk, not entirely satisfied with introducing Western style writing, tried very hard to eliminate all Arabic and Persian words, at that time abundant in the Turkish language. As we have noticed, his project was not completely successful. According to the Turks themselves *misafir* simply means guest, whereas the Iranians maintain that *mosafer* means traveller or passenger. Both these meanings are found in the Farsi word *mosaferkhane* and the Turkish *misafirhane*, meaning a guesthouse for travellers.

Feeling ill at ease, we smile at the men, women and children we have joined. All in all, we are sitting here princely in the teagarden at the very place of the ancient acropolis, where in 1453, Mehmet II the Conqueror decided to build a palace. In bygone days the Gülhane Parkı formed part of the Topkapı palace's gardens, though nowadays it is a park for Istanbul residents and visitors. To the left we have the Golden Horn and the Galata bridge. Right in front of us we enjoy the wonderful view of the Bosphorus. On the other side is the Asiatic part with Üsküdar and Haydarpaşa. From the nostalgic station at the southern point of Haydarpaşa we took the train to Ankara and continued by bus to Malatya. That is where, in the older days, upon arrival with the Orient Express at the Sirkeci-station, still situated in Europe, one had to transfer to the Anatolian railways. It is only four weeks since we were sitting alongside the water in the outdoor cafe in front of the Haydarpaşa station, having arrived too early for the train.

Yesterday we returned to Istanbul by bus across the Fatih Sultan Köprüsü. At the place where this bridge spans the narrowest area of the Bosphorus, Darius built a ponton bridge for the army in the year 513 BC. In Sultanahmet we rushed into a small hotel, after which we mingled with the crowds in this old part of the city to celebrate the end of Ramadan. The streets are still very crowded. A continuous mass of people, pouring out of the ferries, move forward to the Aya Sofia and the Blue Mosque in the old centre. It seems that all the people of Istanbul, wearing their best clothes, have come to Sultanahmet for the week-end to celebrate Şeker Bayramı, the Sugar Festival. The children are licking candy floss. Clusters of small balloons, attached to sticks, are carried by the little ones. All the green areas and open spots in the public gardens around the mosques are covered with small rugs where people sit together, large families, groups of friends, young and old all mixed. People are milling about in between the stalls and stands set up especially for this week-end's Sugar Festival. The mini restaurants at the Balık Pazarı, 'the fish market' along the wharf, are all filled up. On the 12th of October, exactly on the day we arrived at Istanbul by bus, the festivities started and we were stuck in a long traffic jam. Actually, we feel that we do not deserve to be at this Sugar Festival, since we have not strictly adhered to the rules of the Islamic fasting. But, because we are considered to be classified as travellers, we were allowed to have some food and drink, just like the infirm, pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers. Once again, after so many times, smiling at each other, a woman wearing a silvery grey headscarf takes the plunge: "*where you from?*" We say that we are Dutch and that we have travelled through Iran and Turkey. They are all amazed, but interested to hear about our experiences. Osman, the husband of the woman that asked the first question, is an elderly man. Just like the younger ones' his English is quite good. He tells us that they are from the Asian quarter Üsküdar, that he is an optician and that he runs his own business.

Next week his eldest son will go to London to study at the School of Economics. He should have started his studies at an earlier date, but he decided to help his parents with the renovation of their house, which they wanted to finish before the Sugar Festival. Both his elder sisters are married. The baby is Yesim's, the second daughter. The two younger children of the optician are still at school. The other couple comes from Şile, by the Black Sea, located at 35 kilometres from Istanbul. The wife, a younger sister of the optician, wears a colourful floral patterned headscarf. Four of their six children have come along with her and her husband.

The optician's wife, Havva, wants us to give our opinion on the Iranian people. As it turned out more favourable than she had expected she says: "But how come you Dutch like the Iranians so much? Are they not much more different from you than we Turks are? Also, I don't understand why Turkey has not been admitted to the European Community, whereas Bulgaria and Romania, countries less developed than we are, have been admitted."

"Well, as far as we are concerned Turkey could be admitted right away. We are anyway in favour of a more intense European involvement with the Iranian people and the populations of other Middle Eastern countries."

"Turkish membership would really improve human rights" Osman reacts spontaneously. "Simply because the European Community excluded us, our own politicians have a hold over us. They take advantage of the fact that we feel humiliated. As simple, homely Turks we preserve our dignity. We do not want Europe to make all sorts of demands on us. Once we become members of the European Community the Turkish people would feel supported. Then Turkey would have to set out a new course and pursue a more humanitarian policy. The same would count for Iran, where the people's opinion about human rights differs immensely from the government's, if I am to believe your story. The people inside Iran must be given the opportunity to free themselves from a violent regime. Whether the Iranians are being cut off from the outside world by their own leaders, or the world is excluding Turkey because of their leaders, in both cases the people will become embittered. Should the European Community admit Turkey as a member, people's self-confidence would increase in strength and they would force the government to make more democratic adjustments. Also the Southeast-Turkey issue,

which now constitutes a continuous explosive threat both to Turkey and its neighbours Iran and Iraq, would come nearer to a solution. The average Turk's dream is for Turkey to become a full member of the European Community, thereby forming part of the world. Only then will the people of Europe and the Middle East, including Iran, get closer to each other."

"I think you all are a bit naïve" Adnan, the future London student, puts forward. "The more favourable feelings of the Turkish people as regards the Asian countries have increased, but that does not count for Iran. Statistics show that they have decreased from 45 to 30 per cent, whereas their enthusiasm for the European Community has dampened even more. Only 30 per cent of the Turks are well disposed towards the European Community. But in any case the Turks do not discriminate between Iranians and Europeans. As for public favour it is a level score."

Havva thinks this is beyond a joke and cuts short this discussion. "*Let us smile!* Why not look at the solidarity and tolerance people show each other during Ramadan. Especially today we should not forget about that!" Addressing herself directly to us she says "During Ramadan the *mufti* of Istanbul always invites the Armenian and Greek Orthodox leaders for a joint iftar. And Kimse Yok Mu (a kind of travelling food bank project to aid the poor) distributed more than one million food parcels in Turkey, and another eight hundred thousand across the borders. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Yes, in Istanbul and Western Turkey people get on very well" her sister in law in the floral patterned headscarf adds. "However, do the Dutch know that at the Sugar Festival's eve a bomb exploded in Diyarbakır and that during the last twenty years in Southeast Turkey about forty thousand terrorists (meaning the PKK-militants) have been killed or taken prisoner? Last month Erkut Babacan, the Minister of Foreign Affairs' 21 year old nephew, was killed by terrorists. The poor boy was assaulted at night while at his post at Bitlis! You'd better not go there again for the time being." Her husband warns: "Travelling to East-Turkey will become extremely dangerous. Recently the main road from Diyarbakır to the border had to be closed because a load of explosives had to be deactivated. They even had to get rid of the mayor of Diyarbakır because of drug trafficking and contacts with terrorists. Who knows how many more Kurdish politicians cannot be trusted? Were you not scared en route?"

Jan, jokingly trying to dismiss the matter says: "We were lucky that our driver always had an apotropaic eye hanging inside his bus or his car".

"I'm sure that has had its time" Adnan says teasingly. "Mark my words: whether Turkey remains secular or becomes an Islamic state, either way the politicians will find an excuse to ban the eye that averts all evil. Or do you happen to believe that those posies, little toy bears or female idols that are dangling from the rear-view mirror will protect you by then?"

We all laugh heartily and for quite a while we talk about this, that and the other.

Then suddenly Havva remarks, apparently because she saw a group of Kurds walking along the quayside: "More and more peasants are arriving, turning the town into a mess".

Then the eldest daughter of the optician interferes. "Oh mum, this kind of moaning leads nowhere. They are just nice people".

"Without the South-East Turks flocking in", adds Adnan, backing up his sister in his own cynical way, "the economy would collapse. They are cheap labour. And after all they did a good job renovating the house, did they not mummy dear?".

"Don't talk to me of the renovation" his mother says, making puffing noises "I'm still worn out after all the cleaning the day before yesterday".

"Well, now that is a very strange custom" the teenage daughter says. "Why must everyone clean the house on the eve of Şeker Bayrami of all days?"

Her mother shrugs her shoulders. "I would certainly have liked to give the cleaning job to one of those jobless immigrants from the south east. There again, they did want to charge quite a lot".

"*Be patient, mummy,*" Adnan exclaims. "As you get to know them better they will give you a discount year after year". The young adults look around, sniggering. And mother gives her favourite a reproachful look.

Osman wants to say a few words before the family has to leave. "It was very interesting meeting you. Had we not made a previous arrangement to visit some friends, I would have invited you this evening. On your next visit you really must come and visit us. Our door will always be open for you, just as it will be for your friends, irrespective of their religion or their culture. To quote our poet Rumi: "I am not a Christian, a Jew or a Muslim, not a Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi or Zen, I do not belong to any religion or cultural system, I am not from the East nor the West". We wish you a safe flight home and good health to you, your children and grandchildren. Allaha ısmarladık (farewell; literally: We have commended you to God)".

After these parting words we exchange addresses and wish each other a fond farewell. We all shake hands, except for the two mothers who say goodbye with a friendly nod to Jan and a pinch on my cheek. "*Güle güle* (farewell, or leave with a smile)," we escort them out Turkish style.

When the tea server has separated the tables he comes back with the umpteenth silver-coloured teapot, which he leaves on our table. So we help ourselves to another cup of tea. Gradually the hum of voices around us becomes less and less. There are even a few empty tables. A cool, gentle wind coming from the water rustles the leaves. We look at each other. That was it. One more night before the grandchildren will cheerily welcome us back, waving their drawings. Most probably the oldest one will once again shout: "Grandma, I've written a book about a dog. Would you like to read it?". It will be nice to be back home. But when we cast a last glance over the water of the Bosphorus, in this twilight, it seems that the far side of Asia is still very close. We feel a strong yearning to cross the water. What has got into us? Have we become Eurasians?