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Letter from Istanbul: Artistic ambitions meet fundamentalist traditions

By Judy Stone
Special to the Examiner

MY SIGNPOSTS in the ancient city that spans the mystical East and the materialistic West were more intriguing than any travel books. Reading Fodor's to crash-comprehend the old civilizations of Hittites and Hatti, the Selsuks and the Sultans from Selim I and II to Suleyman I and II modulated my brain to whirling dervish dimensions. It was easier to understand the feminist historical perspectives in two books that unwittingly shed an ironic light on new fundamentalist issues shaking Turkey today.

"Harem — The World Behind the Veil," by the San Francisco Turkish-American writer Alev Lytle Croutier, whose grandmother grew up in such secluded quarters, made me wonder just how many steps backward kerchief-wearing Islamic women now want to go. Would they really want to retreat to the era before 1924 when Kemal Ataturk established the secular Turkish Republic, guaranteed the rights of women and encouraged them to abandon the veil? Guneli Gun's "On the Road to

Baghdad" has a heroine who changes sex, marries a woman and a man while traveling in time from 16th-century Ottoman Istanbul to eight-century Baghdad, and tells lusty Scheherazade-like tales that stem from the Arabic world that designates "those charming creatures bound to serve worthy male souls in Paradise," but the author prefers to think her liberated heroine's name was derived from *hur*, which means free.

Freedom from American culture appeared to be on the minds of thousands of shouting, banner-waving Islamic fundamentalists when they recently demonstrated outside the Marmara Hotel, starting guests at the 10th annual Istanbul International Film Festival. The demonstrators had rushed to Taksim Square when they heard false media reports of a chemical warfare attack on Gorzude, Yugoslavia, that allegedly killed 5,000 Muslims. The crowd was protesting America's failure to intervene in that conflict.

Hulya Ukanasi, the film festival's chic director, was critical of the media ruckus and the riotous behind the demonstration. It was cause for concern because the March municipal elections had placed fundamentalist Welfare Party mayors into office in Istanbul, Ankara and small towns in eastern and southeastern Turkey. Nearly everyone involved in the Turkish cultural scene was worried about future projects. They were already feeling financial constraints because of a 60 percent devaluation of the Turkish lira in three months, when the exchange rate for \$1 changed from 14,000 lira to 80,000 lira.

There's no telling how inflation and the fundamentalists will affect plans to make a cultural center out of the theater-studded Beograd district, a popular hang-out for gays and prostitutes. Once known as the Fern district, it attracted the notice of writers as diverse as Pierre Loti,

Théophile Gautier, Graham Greene and Agatha Christie. Even that area elected a fundamentalist administrative mayor, defesting a famous leftist actor.

Beoglu's bohemia was freely portrayed in the Turkish film "The Night, Angel and Our Children," in which a transvestite tries to console a prostitute after her discovery that the man she loves is carrying on a homosexual affair. The entry reminded me of two gay-themed films that played last year: "White-If You Come Back," which portrayed the friendship between a dwarf working as a barman and a transvestite, and "Walking After Midnight," which dramatized a lesbian romance that develops between a divorced doctor and a



Istanbul today is a complicated, compelling mix of cultures and attitudes.

sex object. Under Ataturk's law, they couldn't wear scarves in government offices, state institutions or universities because it was seen as a political act.

"Kemalists" are still adamant about keeping that law, she observed. "The reaction against modernism is endemic to Middle East Islamic culture. The Welfare Party's anti-Western attitudes represent modernism gone amok. It is a very confusing issue. There are constant discussions about where women can go, what they can wear, whether there should be separate buses for men and women.

"The political tension between Europe and Islam also exists in Turkish traditional arts. They have a hard time flowing because there is lots of pressure to bring artists into the modern cultural world. As a result neither European nor Turkish traditions become realized."

Rosie Boyd, an American who has been studying calligraphy and illuminated painting here for the last five years, dislikes the rigid fundamentalist attitudes that insist everyone should think the way they do. However, one of her teachers, Hikmet Bantugul, is less concerned about their influence. A master in the art of marbling, he taught at an international marblers' conference at Fort Mason in 1992. His small, inexpensive guest house at No. 8 Sulhanmahal has a gallery and sales room displaying the colorful, innovative marbling he has learned. He uses a female body form to be used as a

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