

# Istanbul September/October 2002

## A journey to understand why thousands of political prisoners were prepared to starve themselves to death in Turkish prisons

*David Green*

The moment you're born  
they plant around you  
mills that grind lies  
lies to last you a lifetime

**'A Sad State of Freedom', Nazim Hikmet**

During twenty years of political activity I have come to the conclusion that if we are serious about radical and eventual change then we must do it where we are, at our base: the community we live in and our workplace. That means speaking out against the injustices and poverty around us.<sup>1</sup> For a long time I have criticised those who put all their energies into struggles in far off countries. I have viewed many as latter day missionaries and dismissed them as middle class do-gooders, finding causes in other people's struggles while failing to see the issues and struggles around them. For these personal reasons, it was with great reluctance that I became involved in the struggle against the F-type solitary confinement cells in Turkish prisons.

As an activist, initially I knew little about the situation in Turkey other than it being an extremely repressive country<sup>2</sup> and of the atrocious treatment of the Kurdish population.<sup>3</sup> During the bombing of Belgrade I had developed a friendship with a Kurdish asylum seeker here in Liverpool, but due to language difficulties it was often difficult to comprehend his politics. He had managed to convey certain things, though: he had been tortured, (held over Istanbul Bridge by the police, amongst other things). Later, I understood he had been part of the Leftist struggle which included both Turks and Kurds fighting for self-determination for everyone.

On the morning of 19th December 2000 he arrived at my house, upset and angry, and asked if our group, 'People Not Profit', could help. Previously, he had told me about the hunger strikes in Turkish prisons against the forcing of political prisoners into the 'coffin cells' or isolation units, and that the prison guards continually attacked them seeking to quash their protest. This time though the Turkish state's actions were more extreme. In the cynically titled 'Life Saving Operation', 20 prisons were raided by state forces and the prisoners attacked. Hundreds had been injured and 30 political prisoners (6 women and 24 men) massacred through shootings, gassing and even by being set on fire. That afternoon people from our group and from the Turkish/Kurdish community protested in Liverpool city centre. We held placards and gave out leaflets to shoppers calling on them to protest by phoning and faxing the Turkish Government and Embassies. But even then, to me, an activist half my life, Turkey still seemed a long way away and someone trying to convey to me through basic English the shocking reality about what had happened in Turkey in the early hours of that morning did not have a shocking effect, largely because I could not comprehend the full horror of the situation.

"They suddenly opened fire and threw bombs. The barricade that they talk about was two wardrobes. Six women were burnt alive in the same dormitory in one night."

**Ebru Dincer, survivor of December 19th attack who ended up with 3rd degree burns to face and body.**

Following December 19th I heard the occasional story about the situation in Turkey and attempted to search the internet for information but there was little coverage in English, and then it was mainly sloganeering. Moreover, it was hard to see the human side of the story

or the people involved. And so the hunger strike continued, and it still seemed a long way away. Only when I began to meet more Turkish and Kurdish people arriving in Liverpool did it begin to sink in. You can often presume you are aware of certain political realities and ensuing struggles by reading about them, but actually understanding and really knowing is different; behind the slogans there are human beings, people with their own histories, their own pain and humiliations and their own spirit of resistance.

"But this kind of freedom  
Is a sad affair under the stars"

**Nazim Hikmet**

I received a *Guardian* article (2/04/02) about the death of Meryem Altun, a young woman born in Turkey who had been a community worker in London, who, frustrated and angry at what was happening in Turkey, decided to join her comrades. She was arrested on her return to Turkey, immediately sent to prison and became the 50th woman to die in the hunger strike.

Soon after, I saw two excellent documentary films made by the Turkish film maker Metin Yegin, 'After' and 'Lifehouse'. We decided that to raise awareness of the hunger strikes we would develop a multi-media project using the poetry of Nazim Hikmet set to music<sup>4</sup> and produce a film using images from life in Turkey and from the hunger strikers themselves. We wanted to avoid using slogans, clichés and terminology which people can't understand or relate too, and instead present a very human story. Over the following months we researched and developed the project, 'The Lemon Seed'<sup>5</sup>, which was presented to a local audience who were both shocked and moved by what they saw.

Today is Sunday  
Today, for the first time  
they took me out into the sun  
and for the first time in my life  
I looked at the sky  
amazed that it was so far  
and so blue  
and so wide

**'Today is Sunday', Nazim Hikmet**

Researching 'The Lemon Seed' gave me a deeper understanding of the struggle. I read survivors' testimonies, searched through thousands of images, stories, interviews and much footage, looking for an overall understanding. I discovered horror, naked brutality and a viciousness inflicted by people, that I found difficult to understand. But I also discovered that those on the receiving end of this viciousness were not broken people, destroyed by the brutality of state officials, police and soldiers, or by months on hunger strikes; instead I found courageous people whose stories moved me to tears, who evoked inspiration through their tales, their humour and their great resilience. These people, in their hundreds, possibly thousands, labelled as 'terrorists' by a murderous state had suffered torture to the extreme, seen their close friends burnt and murdered, watched their loved ones die of starvation, yet the state could not destroy their spirit. I can only imagine this resilience. With all this in mind my Turkish friends suggested I visit Istanbul. A month later, camcorder in hand, I was on a plane flying there, still with my 'do-gooder' reservations.

A Turkish friend, who had travelled over a few days earlier, met me and over the next few days I experienced the warmth and generosity of her friends and family. I had yet to visit the supporters and the survivors of the hunger strike, a number of whom had now been released<sup>6</sup> and had established a live-in project called the Lifehouse where they could support each other back to health.

You may proclaim that one must live  
not as a tool, a number or a link  
but as a human being —  
then at once they handcuff your wrists.  
You are free to be arrested, imprisoned  
and even hanged

**'A Sad State of Freedom', Nazim Hikmet**

First I visited the *Bureau of the Alinteri* newspaper, a strong supporter of the hunger strikers. Istanbul is a massive place and it took two hours to get there. At the *Bureau*, to my surprise, I was met by six very friendly women, all between the ages of twenty and thirty, who ran the paper. We sat around in a circle, and my friend translated our conversations. All of the women were awaiting trial; they had all been accused of working on a 'communist' newspaper and were expecting a prison term. These women, though, not only took it all in their stride, but made jokes about it. The conversation was free and easy: they said there was very little else the Turkish state could do to the revolutionary movement, apart from killing them all. I was shown some artwork by an imprisoned comrade of theirs, and asked my opinion on whether I understood it, and what it said to me. I was shown around the office but most of their equipment had been confiscated by the police so they were running everything on two computers. They showed me their website and a site where their comrade was displaying his art work—in spite of the consequences. Throughout our conversations, despite our political differences, I was treated as an equal and they were genuinely interested in my opinion. The work these women were and are doing takes great courage, commitment and concern.

"Well after the December 19th massacre, we were dragged to the F-type cells. After we entered Tekirdag F-Type Prison, hundreds of Guards guards and soldiers attacked us. It was terrible; most of us had been on hunger strike. I can't even describe it, you wouldn't believe it. They tortured us, beat us, besides that they strip-searched us; some were raped with truncheons."

**Mustafa Yasar**

We were then to visit the Lifehouse, the self-help project for survivors of the hunger strike. Again, it took about two hours to get there across the urban sprawl and chaos of Istanbul. It was in an anonymous apartment building similar to all the others, with a grey door set in amongst a number of shops. We were greeted by two very friendly women, Hulya and Naila who welcomed us into the smoke filled parlour where there were about six people. Amongst them, Cafer was a tall, slim, quiet man whose co-ordination and memory had been affected by his 69 days on hunger strike in the prison struggle of 1996. He walked slowly to maintain balance, and his head continually bobbed too and fro. And Omer, whom I'd heard had been affected the most,

both physically and psychologically, was unable to maintain co-ordination and had to keep an up-to-date diary because he had lost his short term memory.

“I’d lived through 7 seven years of this, in 7 seven years you can experience all kinds of things, torture, both physical, psychological, and molestation.”

#### Hulya Turuk

After all the initial introductions of Who? What? Where? Why? everybody relaxed and there was an array of banter with people laughing. They told me they were used to visitors. A group of Italian doctors had just spent three weeks at the Lifehouse making a film about Wernicke-Korsokoff, a hardly known disease. Many of the survivors of the hunger strike were suffering from this disease and it had also been found in survivors of the Nazi concentration camps, partly caused, it’s believed, by severe vitamin deficiency.

I was not initially aware that almost everyone in the room had been on hunger strike. Most looked physically unaffected, but actually half of them were suffering from the symptoms of Wernicke-Korsokoff—a mixture of balance and memory loss. Mustafa Yasar—a small, stocky, friendly man in his 40s—asked me if I had been there before, he thought he remembered me from the previous day. This was a common problem of Wernicke-Korsokoff. After so long on hunger strike, the mind and the memory plays back on you during real time; images from the past appear before you and the present seems like the past. Mustafa had done over 250 days on hunger strike.<sup>7</sup>

“We tried everything to oppose the F-types, but after December 19th we had no choice. The only way we could resist was to offer up our bodies, we had nothing else.”

#### Hulya Turuk

“Three years my trial lasted. In 1999 I lived through the Ulucar massacre, 10 ten friends died there. Then I was forced into Burdur prison, in this operation they snapped my arms, and then six months later there was the December 19th attack.”

#### Baris

My friend left me alone at the Lifehouse when Baris, a former student at the Middle Eastern University arrived, as he was able to translate for me. Baris had been on hunger strike for 211 days, though showed no physical or mental signs of it. He was typical in many ways of the Turkish political situation. He had been arrested for being a member of an illegal organisation, the TIKB, and sentenced to 17 years in prison. He was found guilty in a court with no jury, served 6 six years before going on hunger strike, and then on the point of death was released for 6 six months, like many others. We spoke all day into the early morning and continued the next day well into the afternoon. I felt comfortable enough to ask him highly personal questions. He said he hated the term often used to describe the Turkish hunger strike, ‘The Death Fast’. It was a ‘life fast’ he said, a demand to live. The reason he stayed alive for so long was that he loved life so much. Baris, like the others, said the authorities had given him very little choice but to go on hunger strike—otherwise the isolation cells would kill them. When forced into the F-Type prisons they would not be able to mix and be with friends, and they would be at the mercy of the authorities and the prison guards. It took me to visit the Lifehouse and talk, for a long time, with the survivors themselves to really understand what the hunger strike was about. It was the ultimate or the final form of resistance when there was nothing left. It was either that or silence and death.

I discovered many things at the Lifehouse, the most obvious being that you cannot truly understand a situation from afar, and that it is difficult to take a word by word political analysis from one country and apply it to another. Turkey is culturally different in many ways to the UK, thus the people are also culturally different, there is much more emphasis on social rather than individual activities. When you apply these general facts to political prisoners, apart from their obvious fear of physical torture—which everybody in the Lifehouse had experienced; Mustafa also witnessed his friends tortured to death—their biggest fear was of being alone



Cafer in 1996 hunger strike.

and they saw isolation, followed by alienation as the most terrifying form of torture.

I left Baris asleep when I was leaving the Lifehouse. I knew he was worn out and wasn’t as well as he looked. I spent part of the afternoon with my friend and Omer, who apologised for his silence during my visit but I knew he could remember very little. We sat in his room while he read his diaries to us, reiterating that, although he was suffering from Wernicke-Korsokoff, he was not a child and was trying his best to do things independently. Metin, the doctor who seemed the more serious of the group, had explained to me why the Lifehouse was so important to the survivors. He talked about one hunger striker who arrived there in a bad state. He couldn’t walk and couldn’t remember who anyone was. But after a few months surrounded by friends, his health began to greatly improve. He then decided to visit his family who treated him like a helpless child and patronised him. Added to this he visited a doctor who told him he would never walk again and shouldn’t even try. “How does that make someone feel? We know Wernicke-Korsokoff is a neurological problem”, Metin explained, “and we know that with exercise he will walk again, but in that situation we had to start all over again.” Metin emphasised that very few people knew about the disease and that there was hardly any medical literature on it. He himself was suffering from it after being on hunger strike for 210 days. Nearly everyone at the Lifehouse had made massive progress, and this had been brought about by encouragement, self-belief and a certain amount of autonomy in a supportive atmosphere.

My love!

In your last letter you say,

“My head is aching  
my heart is stunned”

“If they hang you  
if I lose you,”

you say

“I cannot live”

#### ‘Letter to My Wife’, Nazim Hikmet

As the day progressed the rota changed; a number of people left and others arrived. When Ozlem—a small, black-haired woman in her mid-twenties—left, I suggested she come to Liverpool sometime—she had told someone earlier that she always wanted to learn English. They all laughed, with Naile saying, “If only she could leave the country.”

I knew they were struggling financially to keep the Lifehouse going. Most of the people there were too ill to work, and probably couldn’t because of their legal restrictions. The movement that supported them was economically overwhelmed, and there was no way their families could keep them. Added to the rent, fuel and food was the expense of the B1 vitamin tablets the survivors needed to aid their recovery. We brought fundraising money over but knew that wouldn’t last long.

We caught a bus towards Taksim Square where the famous Saturday Mothers used to gather (the mothers of the disappeared) before they were brutally attacked and forced off the streets by the police. Did the Turkish regime think that people would suddenly forget that their loved ones had disappeared? Or would forget that they had a son or daughter beaten, tortured, raped, murdered or on hunger strike in prison? I thought of the ordinary people at the Lifehouse, who, because they had dared to question the tyrannical system under which they were living under, had found themselves in extraordinary circumstances. They were a strange mixture: Mustafa had been a textile worker who joined the union; Cafer had worked in a show factory; Hulya, a stu-

dent involved in a campaign for free education, not unlike the people in our group in Liverpool. I also realised how disconnected their struggle was from the political scene throughout the rest of Europe—in fact very few people knew about what had been happening in Turkey.

I was brought to research the Turkish prison struggle through reading about people, what their pain was and what was in their hearts and minds, not because of slogans. The major aim of this article is to present a testament of my experience of being involved in politics, relating that to the struggle for justice in Turkey and to the people I met there. And to my friend who accompanied me who shall remain nameless for her own safety. We have many commonalities and their struggle must also become our struggle. The one direct solidarity we can show is in revealing and distributing information on the truth of their struggle.

#### References

Nazim Hikmet, Selected Poems, 1967, Cape Editions.

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#### Notes

1. I am of course talking from a country where we are not yet thrown into prison for expressing such opinions, though admittedly we now face many other isolatory measures, such as dismissal or exclusion.
2. Turkey was described by Amnesty International in 1998 as having the worst human rights record in the world.
3. Chomsky has pointed out that the real reason for NATO bombing Yugoslavia in 1999 was not what Milosevic and the Serbs were doing to the Kosovan Albanians, but rather, amongst other things, that they were potential opponents of the economic plans of the West. If NATO and the politicians driving them were really interested in stopping human rights abuses and opposing ethnic cleansing, then why didn’t they mention Turkey’s human rights atrocities against the Kurds, with some 15,000 people murdered and thousands of villages destroyed over a 15 year period? Of course, Turkey is not only a strategic member of NATO but is friendly to the economic plans of the West.
4. Nazim Hikmet was not only Turkey’s most celebrated poet but as a communist he spent a considerable time in prison for his political convictions.
5. The title ‘The Lemon Seed’ was based on a story told by the survivors of the December 19th prison attack. They hid lemon seeds in their clothing after spending hours being dragged through the mud before being thrown back into prison cells. They managed to scrape the mud off their clothes, potted it and grew lemon plants from the seeds.
6. In Turkey there is a law stating that when a prisoner is seriously ill they can be released so that their family can look after them. This law was used by lawyers representing the hunger strikers, getting many of them released for a six-month period. The government was also sensitive to the bad publicity it was receiving on account of so many hunger strikers dying.
7. In November, 1992, Remzi Basalak, Saban Budak and Mustafa Yasar were arrested by the police in Adana. Saban Budak was killed on the spot. A few hours later, Remzi Basalak and Mustafa Yasar were shown to the press, heavily tortured. Remzi Basalak told the journalists that he was tortured and he cursed the police. The press was immediately removed. Remzi Basalak was tortured again and murdered.

There was a trial against 14 officers at the First and Second Criminal Court in Ankara after Mustafa Yasar declared he could recognise the murderers of Remzi Basalak and said he wanted to testify as a witness. However, he was not allowed. The post-mortem reports state that Remzi Basalak “died of cerebral haemorrhage”. As in other trials, Saban Budak’s clothes were never found again. For appearances only, officers were put on patrol duty. But as always, the trial will end in acquittals.