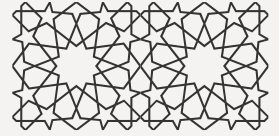


Oriental Journeys



Spring 1981: The colorful dressed women of Harran in Mesopotamia fill bags with chaff from the wheat harvest and store it in the peculiar pyramid-shaped granaries above their huts as animal feed and as an additive for manufacturing clay bricks to build houses.



Forty to fifty years ago, I repeatedly traveled to the Middle and Near East. At that time, it was becoming increasingly and rapidly darkened and like a wildfire, misfortune and violence came over this part of the world - 1978 the Red Army in Afghanistan, 1979 the mullahs in Persia, while on Turkish streets it was not unusual for twenty or thirty people to lose their lives in political unrest on a single day. Then in 1980 came General Evren's military coup and the subsequent purges by paramilitary commandos who combed the country for insurgents and political opponents. Meanwhile, the Iran-Iraq war broke out.

The picture above was taken in those very days near the border triangle where Iraq, Syria and Turkey meet in northern Mesopotamia. What the two men in uniform are holding in their hands is the West German Heckler & Koch G3 rapid-fire weapon - and that between the two of them is my then twenty-eight-year-old little self.

This area at that time was as explosive as the crater of Mount Etna: one of the three questions I was asked most frequently, apart from those about my origins and religion, was about my weapon, because only a life-weary fool would have walked around here unprotected.



Next to the legendary Mount Ararat, the ruins of a Kurdish prince's palace are crumbling. Where wealth and splendor once reigned, the shepherds' goats and sheep were now protected at night from the prowling brown bears.

A few kilometers ahead, the Armenian SSR in what was then the Soviet Union and a few steps behind me, the border with Persia, where the Shah had just fled and the Revolutionary Guards were getting rid of their enemies with countless public executions.

Many fled over the mountains here and came across the first Eastern Anatolian settlement in the small town of Doğubayazıt below. Most of the inhabitants had left their houses and, like me, spent the night in the open to give the often injured and traumatized refugees a place to stay during their onward journey to the west.



Like a genre painting by an old master: Visiting the Turkmen tribal sage in the Bolkar Dağları (snow-rich mountains), to whom I paid my respects and presented a small gift, just to experience afterward the greatest hospitality of his nomadic people.

As I climbed up to the stony mountain desert, I met his son on a camel, who then led me to his aged father. There, his people moved around on their yayla, the barren mountain pastures, with their cattle and lived in tents or in simple stone huts made from a masonry enclosure, which they covered with a goat's hair tarpaulin.

Days later, as I continued my march, the whole tribe gathered to bid me farewell and the son of the wise man, who called himself İsa Balcı (Jesus the Beekeeper), accompanied me to the tribal border, where he commended me to the care and protection of Allah, as the neighbors were evil people and could do me harm. From them, I learned later that I probably enjoyed the exceptional protection of Allah, as the people I came from were evil and could have done me harm.

But I knew that I would be indebted to all these extremely hospitable mountain nomads for the rest of my life.



İsa Balci, Jesus the Beekeeper, poses with his camel and his sons in front of my camera, while in the background members of his Turkmen tribe watch curiously from their barren stone huts. Very few of them had ever seen a photo camera and the story went that I could see gold under the ground with this gadget.





A few hours' walk to the east, with the "evil neighbors": the shy little daughter of Ali Mustafa Orçun, who shared his homely yurt and all the rest with me.



As a guest of the Kurdish leader of the nomads in Munzur Mountains, who allowed me to take his picture here together with his four daughters, his son and his wife, who always looked down humbly in my presence.

The horned ram as a symbol of power could not be missing. These fat-tailed sheep, which are kept here in Asia, carry up to ten kilograms of fat in their thick tails as a reserve for the very harsh winter. The products made from sheep's and goat's milk were then stored in the cool, white yurts and usually sold down in the settlements in winter.

The nomads, however, preferred to live in the black Arab tents woven from goat's wool, which are cool during the day, warm at night and waterproof when it rains.

The Kurdish uprising had just begun, as a result of which many of these nomads were killed or expelled, as I learned from my correspondence with them over the next few years.



The cooler, white Turkmen yurts were mainly used by the mountain nomads to store food made from goats and sheep's milk, the sale of which in the settlements down in the valleys provided the nomads with a modest income.

On the tripods made of poles seen in the picture, the nomad women before dawn hung goat skins filled with sour sheep's milk yoghurt, water, salt and rennet and shook them long and hard to prepare ayran, a sour and very refreshing drink that tasted delicious in the heat of the day. The slightly permeable goat skins were always moist on the outside, which means that the contents remained cool even at high ambient temperatures due to constant evaporation.





Besides keeping livestock, the mountain nomads usually also devoted themselves to beekeeping, as an astonishing number of flowers appear in the rocky deserts during summer months. Here, for example, the Ruthenian globe thistle in Munzur Mountains (*Echinops ritro* ssp. *ruthenicus*, Asteraceae), which has found its way into our European gardens as an ornamental plant due to its beauty and whose nectar scent attracts a wide range of different insects. Another beauty in the Munzur Mountains, which also reached us as ornamental plant, is the striking, creeping and succulent cylindrical spurge (*Euphorbia myrsinites*, Euphorbiaceae), in the picture below still without flowers.





It was during the time of the Middle Pharaonic Empire that the arch-father of the Jews, Christians and Muslims, Abraham, following the will of his Lord, traveled from his homeland Ur in Chaldea in southern Mesopotamia to Canaan in order to found his Israelite nation there. On the way, however, he stopped in the north of the Mesopotamian plain in a place called Harran and settled there for years before moving on. But Terah, his father, who was traveling with him, died in Harran at the age of 205 (Genesis 11:31).

Some four thousand years later, in spring of 1981, I myself stood in this clay hut village with Luther's Bible as my travel guide and looked after Abraham's children. But the village now bore the name Altınbaşak, ear of gold, and the peasants had just driven quantities of these from the surrounding fields to the village on wagons and poured them onto the threshing floors.

The flat cakes piled up behind the children are animal dung used as fuel, as there are no trees growing in the vast Mesopotamian lowlands.



At the threshing floors, peasants standing on wooden sledges pulled by horses drove around in circles on the mown grain so that it could be threshed out and then winnowed with large shovels in the Mesopotamian wind, which carried the chaff away from the grain.

The remaining chaff was then filled into bags by the colorfully dressed women of Harran and stored as animal feed in the strange pyramid-shaped granaries above their huts (see picture at the beginning).

There was nothing to suggest that I was not two millennia before Christ, but two millennia after, and I would hardly have been surprised if Abraham, his wife Sarah and nephew Lot had turned the next corner.

But this idyll was deceptive. Western arrogance and greed for power, black gold and money, together with Eastern religious fanaticism, brought death and devastation to this region, where today thousands of tents with countless uprooted refugees stand.

But what might have become of Abraham's innocent children?

