

SULUKULE

Urban Renewal or Ethnic Relocation?

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I. BACKGROUND

The Sulukule neighbourhood in Istanbul lies right next to and within the old Byzantine Theodosian land walls.

It is mostly inhabited by around 3,000 Rroma, or roughly 80% of the local population, who live in small single courtyard houses dating back to the Ottoman times.¹ The Rroma presence in this quarter is older than the Ottoman conquest of the region, as the first Ottoman tax registers dating from the early 16th century already mention Rroma in Istanbul around this place.

Rroma arrived in what is now the Balkan, mostly in present day Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Southern Bulgaria and of course Constantinople at the beginning of the 10th century, when the Byzantine deported a large part of the Armenian population following their victory on the Paulicians. The name of the Rroma in many languages (Tsigan, Zigeuner) is actually derived from the name of Athinganoi, a heretical sect from Asia Minor to whom some Paulicians were assimilated by the Byzantine.

Rroma in the Balkan, contrary to the mostly Western European stereotypes were always sedentary. The Ottoman Tax registers cite 22,000 Rroma families in Rumelia, the European part of their Empire, out of which only 11 were nomadic. Rroma were already well integrated in the Byzantine times, and this integration actually continued throughout the Ottoman times. They held all sorts of jobs, from judge, lawyer, farmer, blacksmith, baker, etc. but also musicians.

While they certainly were not discriminated in the Ottoman times, they nevertheless had to pay the higher Christian tax rate, even when they converted to the Moslem religion, something that most of them did during this period.

Many Rroma actually worked for the Ottoman army as skilled smiths, for a large part of the cannons that enabled the Ottoman to conquer most of the Balkan were made by Rroma, as sabre makers, and of course also as musicians. In Constantinople and later Stanbul, Rroma were registers as working to a large extent in the entertainment business, as musicians, but also as owner of restaurants, and even as providers of horses to the Sultan.

II. THE CURRENT SITUATION

1. Urban Renewal

In 2005, the Turkish Council of Ministers designated Sulukule as a Urban Renewal Area. The implementation of this urban renewal project lies under the auspices of the Fatih and Istanbul municipal authority together with TOKI, the mass housing authority of the Turkish state.² The aim of the project is to gentrify the neighbourhood, replacing the small houses by larger ones, opening a hotel, a shopping mall, as well as an underground parking and a green zone next to the

¹ Numbers do vary. 3,000 is the low estimate. High estimates range up to 5,500 people.

² Unesco World Heritage, June 2008: Historic Areas of Istanbul (Turkey), p. 17.

Theodosian Walls.³ The rationale for this urban renewal project is a classic one. On the one hand, the insalubrious state of the houses is cited as an argument for the necessity for this project, on the other, some rather more spurious arguments, such as the fact that these houses, some of which are several centuries old, are a danger to their inhabitants in case of an earthquake.⁴ Knowing the current building record of new housing projects (see the impact of the last earthquake in the region), one cannot but ask whether these new projects will be safer...

The current inhabitants are to be relocated to outside of the city limits in Taşoluk, around forty kilometres west of the centre of Istanbul, in large apartment blocks. This new settlement is currently not connected to the public transportation system.

Owners of the houses are supposed to receive a price of ca. 500 Lira per sq. metre, a price that lies far below the current value of land within the centre of Istanbul. In neighbouring quarters, the current running price is between 2-3 times higher. Once renovated, the square metre is expected to cost between 4 and 5 times the offered price.⁵ In addition, this money is not paid up front, but will be paid over the next several years.

Tenants are not offered much, except for a place in the new settlement outside of the city. The rent they currently pay is around 50-100 Lira per month, and in the new place put at their disposal (but not yet completed) they will have to pay ca. 300 to 500 Lira per month. This is meant to be an instalment on the ownership of the flat, over a 15 years period.⁶ In addition, in order to go to work, for many of them are musicians working in the centre of town, they will need a transportation pass, costing well over 100 Lira.

Statistics on income give numbers that are not in line with the required payments in the new neighbourhood. According to the Sulukule Platform, 45% of the people living there earn less than 500 Lira per month.⁷ This de facto means that they will not be able to pay the fees for their new flats, much less even the transportation costs to insure their further living.

It has to be said that the low income of the Roma in Sulukule is a newer fact. Until the 1990's, most of them earned a good income from their work in the various restaurants and cafes. The closure of these houses has meant that a lot of the residents lost their single source of income.

To complicate matters, many Roma do not have proper property deeds. Some of the papers they have date from the Ottoman times, some have nothing, except the fact that their grand father and his parents actually lived there. This means that many of the actual owners will effectively receive nothing.

³ Unesco World Heritage, June 2008: Historic Areas of Istanbul (Turkey), p. 17.

⁴ See for example <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav010408.shtml>

⁵ Sulukule Unesco Report 2008, p. 36.

⁶ Sulukule Unesco Report 2008, p. 36.

⁷ Sulukule Unesco Report 2008, p. 40.

This, together with the delayed payments for the property has given rise to a business whereby speculators “buy” houses at a discounted rate but paying up front and making the difference with the state.

2. The Current Situation

In spite of protests both at grassroots level within the community but also at NGO level, and in spite of criticism in the Unesco report on Istanbul, the Fatih is still pressing ahead with this project.⁸ The water supply has been turned off early July, meaning that the living conditions are more than difficult for the inhabitants.

Several houses, especially along the Theodosian walls have already been demolished. That they do not really care of the inhabitants becomes clear when one knows that they destroyed a house with the inhabitants still inside!⁹

Grassroots organisations such as the Sulukule Plaform¹⁰, the main group defending the Rroma there, have launched a petition against the demolition and resettlement of the inhabitants of this quarter. Still without any effects. Letters have been written to Erdogan, appealing for his intervention, but the municipality and the government seem intend on cleaning the quarter, regardless of the impact on public opinion.

III. LAND GRAB, GENTRIFICATION, OR CLEANSING?

One can ask whether this project is a pure urban renewal and gentrification project, pure land grab by speculators bound to make a substantial profit, or whether this project has a more politically driven agenda, as suggested by various NGOs.

Turkey is not alien to forced resettlement. The history of present day Turkey is full of them, be it in the Southeast where Turks are being moved amongst the local Arabic population to change the ethnic balance to the various issues in the Kurdish areas of the country.¹¹ In all cases, TOKI is involved, actively engaged in the construction of the new settlements. As such, it can be considered an arm of the state.

The municipalities of Fatih and greater Istanbul are in the hands of the ruling party, the conservative and Islamic AKP, and, in the last few years, they have been actively promoting housing projects aimed at the rising (and AKP friendly) new middle class.

Regardless of the core reason for the “renewal” of the Sulukule quarter, the facts remain: It is mostly Rroma who will be relocated, and they will be sent far outside of the city. While this is not de facto an ethnic cleansing action, the relocated Rroma will be deprived of their source of

⁸ See for example <http://www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=75344>

⁹ See <http://www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=107874>

¹⁰ <http://www.sulukulegunlugu.blogspot.com/>

¹¹ Bearing in mind that the extent of present day Kurdistan is largely a consequence of Turkish policies, for many of the current Kurdish regions were formerly Armenian until the aftermath of World War One.

income, as they will not longer be able to work as they used to, they have few chances of finding other work, as there is a strong discrimination in Turkey against Cengene (Gypsies).

There could be other ways of improving the situation in this quarter. That Sulukule is in need of improvement cannot be denied. But a renovation, especially when it touches the historical heart of a city should not be a land grab. It should be done with respect of the people who live there, their involvement, and with respect of the century old traditions that go together with living in one of the most essential and alas sometimes unrecognised European city.

IV. THE CONSEQUENCES

While many in Europe say that there is a Rroma problem, we have long said that Europe has a problem. Not the Rroma. The fact is that there are 8 to 12 Millions of them in Europe, and that if they are forced out by actions such as the one in Sulukule, if they have no other choice, they will move. And there, Europe has an issue.

The ethnic and cultural diversity of the Polis, better known nowadays as Istanbul will after nearly two thousand years finally vanish. The over 80 different languages that used to be spoken there, the diversity and the bridge between Western Europe and the rest of the world will finally vanish. A pity if one thinks that without this city and without this bridge, Europe would not be what it is today. Rroma belong to Istanbul. In fact, it is this city that created their identity. Removing them from the centre, removing other minorities from the city is just not right.

For Sulukule is not the only project that is being undertaken. There are many other neighbourhoods, for example Tarlabası and other Mahale whose fate also lies in the balance. We can only hope that in view of the 2010 deadline where Istanbul becomes the cultural capital, its heritage has not vanished. One cannot but ask whether the current majority party of the AKP wants to leave its imprint in the fabric of the economic capital of the country, especially in view of the current difficulties.¹²

This project is neither in the sense of the preservation of the old Istanbul, as justly criticised by the Unesco nor in the sense of integration. The old quarter will be replaced by modern buildings, the original inhabitants will be gone and will have no real future. They are bound to end up as new pariahs.

¹² There are currently discussions about the actual legality of the party in Turkey due to its Islamic roots.