

**Mine Göğüş Tan, Özlem Şahin, Mustafa Sever, Aksu Bora,
Cumhuriyet'te Çocuklar, İstanbul: Boğaziçi Üniversitesi
Yayınevi, 2007**

Melis Süloş

We were in fifth grade when the Republic was proclaimed. The dean spoke about something, we didn't understand. Finally, he said that from then on we would shout "long live the Republic" instead of "long live the Sultan". For a while we looked at each other wondering what kind of a person this "Republic" was, and then we shouted; "long live the Republic!" That's how the republican regime started for us (87).

The book *Cumhuriyet'te Çocuklar (They Were Children in the Republic)* is the outcome of an oral history project between the years 1997-1999 at Ankara University under the direction of Mine Göğüş Tan. As a part of a requirement for two courses, "History of Childhood" and "Children in Social History," Tan instructed each of her students to interview four people who had been children in the early republican era. The subjects were - preferably- over the age of 80, and a total of one hundred and fifteen people were interviewed, with the questions selected by Tan.

The book consists of four sections, and an extensive appendix on the questionnaires used in the interview process. The first section "Eksenler" (Axes) summarizes the main themes of the history of childhood in the early republican era under the following subtitles: "Childhood", "Poverty and the Absence of a Father", "War and Occupation", "Child Labor", "Early Marriages", "Games and Toys", "Education", "Discipline", "Courses", "Celebrations" and "the Perception of the 'Republic.'" The second section of the book is composed of fifty two untouched scripts of the interviews and forms the heart of the book (348 pages). The third section focuses on the experiences of the interviewers, and the final section, "Mutfaktan," (From the Kitchen) informs us about the process of interviewing, the methodology and the selection of informants. One of the most interesting parts of the book is the appendix, which provides a selection of the questionnaires which were used in the project, as well as some brief information about each interviewee. Although the aim of the interviews was to compile information on different aspects of the system of education in the early republican era, the outcome turned out to be a combination of complex narratives that shed light on various aspects of childhood outside the public education system through the late 1920's and 1930's.

The book acts as a primary account that documents the perception of the official state ideology and politics of the early republican era. The theatricality of the republican iconography and children's perception of the republican ideology seems to be more interesting than the republican ideology itself. What makes this book "special" is the nature of the oral history, which, in Alessandro Portelli's famous words, "tells us less about events than about their meanings".

The narratives in *Cumhuriyet'te Çocuklar* demonstrate the reconfiguration of the past with present evidence. One can follow the close relation between memory and national myth throughout the entire book. For instance, most of the interviewees remember the Tenth Anniversary Anthem more than anything else. The reason for this is the time at which the interviews occurred; that is to say, in 1998, during the 75th Anniversary of the Turkish Republic. Tenth Anniversary Anthem, which could be frequently heard in these days, helped to recreate the memories. The striking "75th anniversary effect" on the narratives resulted in unplanned questions about the celebrations.

In a similar manner, memories that are still painful seem to be reconstructed according to present identities. For instance, the interviewees narrated the loss of their fathers in a nationalist tone: their fathers were not "dead" but "martyred". Martyrdom could actually relieve their pains and make the story of growing up without a father more acceptable, both in their own minds and in the public perception. Similarly, stories of rapid westernization demonstrate a tendency to reconfigure memories according to what is publicly appreciated. Much of the content of the memories revolved around the "sudden westernization" and the expulsion of what belonged to the ancient regime. Haluk Tatarağası's memory exemplifies this concept: "My mother threw her headscarf away immediately and wore a hat; it was very good that it was adopted so quickly" (189). These anecdotes carry the strong influence of national myths.

The collected narratives actually demonstrate how the interviewees perceived both the national myths and the official iconography. The oral narratives usually focused on the theatrical aspects of specific events like the Tenth Anniversary celebrations, or else on specific moments like "seeing Atatürk". The memories of those who participated in the celebrations of national holidays focused mainly on the material objects and theatrical aspects of the celebrations. Most of the interviewees do not remember the ideology behind the symbols, but they do remember the symbols themselves. For instance, Melahat Gözek who was fascinated by her mother's dress (44), and Ali Haydar Caner who had difficulty in figuring out what his father's odd suit was (198), seem to be highly influenced by the iconography of modernization and westernization. However, their parents' odd yet

fascinating dresses did not symbolize the processes of modernization or westernization for them; indeed they were just interested in the material aspect of these reforms.

Similarly, in cases where the interviewees remembered the theatrical aspect of the celebrations, they, in fact, remembered what amazed them in these celebrations. Some remembered a giant model of an airplane (198), some remembered “angels” (young female students) (317) and some remembered a long parade of merchants and artisans (186). On the other hand, when they explained *the meaning* of that day, they repeated what was taught to them (64). In this respect, most of the narratives repeated the official state ideology of the 1930s, which are still with us to a certain extent. Therefore one can also conclude that these narratives show the active process of the creation of memories.

While the book provides interesting anecdotes, it apparently fails to provide an alternative approach which looks beyond the discourse of the official history. The study fails at the level of the questions posed to the interviewees, most of which remained *clichés*. Although there are narratives showing different perceptions of the state iconography, such as the dictatorship of the 1920s and 30s, the failure of the peasantry, the inadequacy of education in the villages and the religiosity of the regime, the interviewees did choose to remain within the framework of their questions. On the other hand, this limitation probably aimed to keep the planned framework and focus on the system of education in the early republican era.

However, the narratives which do not directly answer the interviewer’s questions, seem more interesting, since they can include information about some invisible aspects of the Republican regime. For instance, some narratives show the undeniable discrepancy in the quality of education, schools, and teachers in rural villages versus those in urban environments. The peasant narratives demonstrate that the villages remained ‘untouched’ by the early republican reforms. For the children living in villages the new republican regime did not mean much. For the rest of the children, “Republic”, “war of independence”, “victory”, “end of the occupation”, “Atatürk”, and “reforms”, *all* meant the *same* thing. Secondly, the memories demonstrate that religious education and Islamic practices were still an important part of general education in late 1920’s and 1930’s, as opposed to the image of ‘secular education’ introduced by the early republican elites. Thirdly, some narratives challenge the classical image of the Republic, which is that it brought “the spring”. Some other narratives show the despotic side of the Republican regime. The memory of İhsan Atıkan, for example, who saw the dead corpse of an old man, lying on street, and marked with the number of the act which led to his execution (238),

illustrates that the Republic did not always mean happiness, reforms and glory, but could also mean fear and dictatorship.

Most of the narratives glorify the Republic and personify it in the national leader Atatürk. The most interesting narratives are the ones around "seeing Atatürk". The number of people who experienced a visual encounter with the mythical figure is astonishing; a majority of the interviewees claimed to have approached him in some way. Although some of these memories may be the products of children's imagination, they still show the success of the new iconography, which was centered on a cult of personality. Some of these narratives show an effort to personify the "legendary hero" (219, 287). Making physical connections, like kissing his hand, or trying to imitate him by wearing the same kind of coats, can actually be interpreted as ways to identify themselves with the "hero". The narratives are all highly romanticized, mythologized, and historicized stories linking Atatürk directly with the child (the interviewee) and isolating him from his military and political carrier.

Cumhuriyet'te Çocuklar offers a rich collection of oral evidence illuminating many aspects of the history of childhood, such as education, religion, child labor, early marriages, plays, social and psychological effects of wars, and demonstrates children's perception of the early Republican iconography.

Melis Süloş is an MA student in the Department of History at Boğaziçi University.