Writing for an Age of Migration, Diaspora, Exile

Aziz Nazmi Shakir-Tash

Panel: An Age of Migration, Diaspora, Exile
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The paper presented here consists of two introductions: the first will suggest general meanings of the terms migration, diaspora and exile; the second introduction, a historical one, is aimed at relating a couple of events that took place in my late childhood and early teenage years and a final commentary trying to reveal the Bulgarian Turk writers’ and my own response to the mentioned events. The introductions lack originality, but it is not my own, but history’s fault. As you know, history is fond of repeating itself. In other words, modern times constantly plagiarize the past.

No doubt, writing about migration, diaspora and exile is more than popular. A short glimpse at the results corresponding to the mentioned terms in a Google search shows that the number of web-sites containing the word migration is 85,900,000; diaspora, 15,800,000; and the last but not least, exile, 24,000,000. Surely when this text and texts by my colleagues Tom Dreyer, Ksenia Golubovich and Verena Tay find their places in the International Writing Program’s site, the numbers cited above will “drastically” increase.

Writing about these and related topics again and again seems quite normal when we keep in mind the fact that the Age of Leaving a Place to Live in Another Place began long before writing was invented. As a matter of fact, historical migration of human populations begins with the movement of Homo erectus out of Africa across Eurasia about a million years ago. Ever since this process was honed to perfection by Homo sapiens, it has become a non-stop hit in mankind’s history and gained throughout the ages and civilizations a number of variations, two of which are diaspora and exile.

The term diaspora (in Ancient Greek, διασπορά – “a scattering or sowing of seeds”) is used (without capitalization) to refer to any people or ethnic population who are forced or induced to leave their traditional homelands, the dispersal of such people, and the ensuing developments in their culture. The probable origin of the word is the Septuagint version of Deuteronomy 28:25, where Jews are addressed with the following verse: “thou shalt be dispersion in all kingdoms of the earth.”

As for exile, it can refer to a form of punishment. It means to be away from one’s home (i.e. city, state or country) while being explicitly refused permission to return and/or being threatened by prison or death upon return. It is common to distinguish between internal exile, i.e., forced resettlement within the country of residence, and external exile, deportation outside the country of residence. Exile can also be a self-imposed departure from one’s homeland. Self-exile is often practiced as form of protest or to avoid persecution.

As you can see, all three terms, migration, diaspora and exile, are strongly related and almost always associated with force applied upon human individuals or masses. My brief paper is dedicated to the contemporary Bulgarian Turk writers who were forcibly taught what migration, diaspora and exile meant, and also to the texts they never wrote, because of the mentioned practice.

At this point I’ll make a second introduction. This time it will describe two closely connected events known as “The Revival Process” and “The Big Excursion”, which took place in Bulgaria from 1984 to 1990. The reasons behind the events differ, based on who is offering the reasons: the instigators, the researchers or the victims (and I will not discuss them here), but the recitation of the objective facts accompanying the Revival Process and the massive exodus of Bulgarian Turks in the summer of 1989 is as follows:
In the winter of 1984/85, high officials from the major echelon of the Bulgarian Communist Party ordered the renaming of the Bulgarian citizens of Turkish origin who at that time numbered (according to different estimations) between one and two million. In other words, Bulgarian Turks composed approximately one-sixth of the total population and, therefore, were considered a major threat to the majority that was decreasing due to low birth rates. The Bulgarian Ministry of Internal Affairs used its full capacity over a relatively short period of three months to change all Muslim names from Arabic, Persian and Turkish origin to Christian or Slavic ones. The areas populated with ethnic Turks were surrounded by the army and the militia, telephone connections cut off, identity papers confiscated. People were compelled to sign declarations saying that they did not have any relatives in Turkey, did not want to emigrate and last, but not least, that they had changed their names voluntarily. The renaming process was followed by a long list of prohibitions: mainly, citizens were not to speak, listen to or write in Turkish, to wear traditional Turkish or Muslim clothing or execute any other activity expressing a Turkish or Muslim identity. Those Turks who openly protested the ongoing campaign were imprisoned or exiled. Unfortunately, during the peaceful demonstrations held throughout the country there were also a number of demonstrators killed or wounded. In the following four years, huge amounts of propaganda covering all spheres of everyday life in Bulgaria proclaimed that the ex-Turks are actually ex-Bulgarians, who during “the five-century Ottoman yoke” were forced to accept Islam and forget their Bulgarian origin and mother-tongue.

In early 1989, the status quo was disturbed by a massive peaceful protest which included hunger strikes and daily letters addressed to the ruling Communist Party. The authorities responded with administrative sanctions and internal displacements. In May 1989, social and political tensions soared. The Ministry of Internal Affairs started to distribute application forms for international passports, implying that Bulgarian Turks (who, as you may remember, had just four years earlier signed declarations proclaiming they did not want to emigrate) should leave the country. The next step for a Bulgarian government aiming to get rid of the Turks was to open the Turkish border to those who wanted to visit the neighboring country “for an excursion.” State and Communist Party leader Todor Zhivkov declared that Turkey should prove its democracy by opening the borders to Bulgarian citizens. The Turks’ exodus began in early June, and by the end of August 370,000 people had immigrated to Turkey.

Actually the history of this problem stretches back to the proclamation of Bulgaria as an independent state after the collapse of Ottoman rule in the Balkans. The policy of sending masses of Rumelian Turks (a euphemism for Turks from the Balkans) to Turkey was practiced by both the bourgeois and communist regimes of Bulgaria from 1878 until the late 1960’s. But application of that model became counterintuitive at the beginning of the 1980’s when Bulgaria proved to be the country with the lowest birth-rate and smallest population among its socialist neighbors.

The mass departure was perceived by the international community as an act of ethnic cleansing and put Bulgaria in an extremely difficult diplomatic situation. However, in November, 1989, soon after the flow of refugees had begun to decrease, the communist regime came to an end and Bulgaria followed the example of Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia by reconstructing political pluralism and a free economic market. One of the first laws adopted by the new government provided possibilities for the ethnic Turks who had been forced to change their original names during the 1984 campaign to retrieve them. Most of them did.

What was the impact of the so-called Revival Process that triggered the Big Excursion that included the Bulgarian Turk writers? As I’m quickly running out of time and space for today’s presentation, I’ll point my observations only at two major groups of writers, who reacted in rather different ways to the events.
The representatives of the first group, who flirted with the Communist Party long before the Process took place, seemed pleased to become “equals” with the rest of their colleagues and adopted Christian-Slavonic names that (according to them) sounded very poetic and usually had nothing in common with their former names. Most of the “mortal” Turks at that time did their best to keep at least the first letters of their names – in that way their initials typically remained unchanged. Those who were really lucky managed to exchange their Turkish family names for another from the same origin. This was possible in cases when the newly chosen name—despite its Turkish origin—was considered traditionally Bulgarian because it was so common and, of course, in cases in which the officer in charge was unaware of the etymology of the chosen name.

The mentioned conformist writers who metaphorically migrated to the ruling class accepted the official line of the Revival Process and became active parts of the propaganda machine. They started emitting low-quality texts published in the local newspapers and magazines aimed at an audience of “new Bulgarians,” a term for revived Turks. (Another vulgar version of the same phrase wittily read: “the newly-circumcised Bulgarians.”) By propagandizing in a public forum, the conformist writers lost their reputation as authors dealing with literature. Even their books published before the events—whether they were written in Turkish or Bulgarian—began to lose their aesthetic weight, because in newly-shaped conditions they were reread and interpreted in accordance with their authors’ new vocation. The mentioned authors developed complexes and began losing their writing skills rapidly. During the Big Excursion they remained in Bulgaria, mainly because they feared their readers who had been forced to leave for Turkey. At that point they had deprived themselves of their own lebensraum: the ruling class they had preferred as a destination for their migration had gone, and gone without taking them along.

The second major group of authors possessed a much stronger Turkish self-consciousness and when the renaming process reached them, they felt deprived not only of their names, but also of their basic professional tool, namely the right to write in their mother tongue, a practice officially prohibited. All newspapers and magazines published in Turkish followed the renaming pattern and were transformed into Bulgarian press organs and subsequently used as daily, weekly and monthly propaganda materials. The Bulgarian Turk authors who worked before as editors, correspondents and editors in those organs or simply submitted their writings for publication lost their jobs and the public forums that hosted their talents. And thus they chose to migrate into their souls. Those who refused to do so, those who openly revolted against the anti-democratic situation found themselves in prisons for political crimes. The most notorious of those prisons was situated on a Danube island called “Belene.” One might expect that the writers who closed their windows to the world would start writing apocryphal texts inspired by the hard conditions, but their books published in the 90’s (when the obstacles forbidding the use of Turkish and the publishing of narratives describing the Revival Process were removed) showed clearly that few of them tried to leave behind something worth reading.

In the eve of the Big Excursion the Bulgarian authorities made a special selection of the most “dangerous” members of the Turkish intelligentsia and hurried to force them into exile, mainly by sending them by air to Germany. The list of those forced into exile mentioned only a few masters of words. But with the start of the massive exodus to Turkey, most of the authors who had previously migrated into their souls emerged and left for their “ancient homeland.” There, some of them formed circles aimed at preserving their Balkan authenticity. Others started to work as translators. But the largest group became lost among the population of 70 million and the social problems that they faced.

Both the authors who tried to integrate themselves into Bulgarian society, remaining in their native land and milieu, and those who circumstance forced to leave, were similarly unable to preserve their authenticity. From
this point on, it was the younger generation of Bulgarian Turk writers who began the process of regaining all that was lost during and because of the Revival Process.

And finally, what were my responses? Or, in other words, what were the responses of a future writer representing this younger generation?

When my original name was erased from the school register and replaced by a name my mother would never use to call her son, I was 11. I was exiled from my name—maybe the only thing I possessed—to a no-man’s land I had never heard of. The only official document that demanded my new name was my school report. The only time I had to fill in the name column myself, I wrote above my artificial name the original one by using the Arabic letters I had learned from grandpa during my summer holidays. The name columns of my notebooks usually remained empty or inhabited only by the number corresponding to my name in the register: 3, 23 or 24. I won’t forget how once, when I had lost my school-bag, the police failed to find the owner of the bag that was delivered to them by a bus driver because they couldn’t find any names. Only numbers: the revival process had transformed my name into a simple mathematical expression. Using even and odd numbers instead of names was my first quiet protest. The teachers who supported me followed my example and started to call me by my number: “Number 3, come to the blackboard!”

I gave my second silent protest when my history teacher called me to the blackboard and asked for my relatives’ new names… I guess the author of this special kind of torture was not the beautiful teacher herself, because the same story happened in some of my older brother’s lessons, too.

And here is the most important of my reactions to the Revival Process that determined my future as a homo scribus: I started writing poems in English criticizing some of my tormentor-teachers. My English, as you can imagine, was not perfect, but this was my childish reaction towards the “language of those who had changed our names.” My next step in literature was to translate a poem written by Ivan Vazov: the patriarch of contemporary Bulgarian literature. Our school was named after him and my translation won a book-prize during a competition held as a part of the school’s Patron’s Festival. The chairman of the jury invited me to his literary circle, where I wrote my first poem in Bulgarian. I was 15. I signed the poem with my original name, and by doing this I put an end to my exile. I was back from the no-man’s land. It was then that I realized why the majority of Bulgarian Turk authors had stopped writing. When an author is deprived of his name, his writings are in a sort of exile and, even worse, most of them remain unwritten, because the author refuses to relate them to a name he doesn’t want to recognize as his. A year later I had my name back officially, but I went on responding to the Revival Process, because I knew that the damage it left behind could not be easily repaired.

One of the best ways to respond to such a process was to try to explain both sides: that of the Bulgarians and that of the Turks, that they shouldn’t fear each other. Obviously one of the most meaningful methods for achieving that goal was to introduce the two cultures to each other, which meant that there was a great need for hard-working mediators ready to devote their translating skills to the mentioned idea. Maybe I’m not working hard enough, but since then I have begun to translate key books from Turkish into Bulgarian and vice versa. I hope my translations are good enough that they do not feel exiled as I did a dozen of years ago. My latest reaction to the Revival Process was my book “A Sky at 33” which includes poems written in both languages. I keep responding…