

Telling our Stories, Finding our Roots: Exeter's Multi-coloured History

Interview transcript

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Date of interview: 06.02.2013
Location of interview: Dinosaur Café, Turkish Meze Bar, 5 New North Road, Exeter
Transcriber: Di Cooper

Brief personal introduction of interviewers

Can I ask you, where you were born, quickly about growing up and why you decided to come to Britain?

I was born in Turkey in the province of Van - border to Iran. Then for reason of safety of family we moved to Izmir on west coast of Turkey, very far away from each other. Living in Izmir until 1990, being four family members I barely lived, on my own work also my brothers' and sisters' work. Involved in politics. Not ordinary politics but left-wing politics which was illegal in Turkey so until 1992, three military coups happened in Turkey and the third one made me run away.

OK

I didn't come direct to Exeter, I did come to London. Asked for asylum, applied for asylum, after 4 and half years from 1992 until late 1997 my asylum [was] accepted and then I was in London until 2000, then I came to Exeter.

Why I came to Exeter? Actually there was no plan, only the thing was that I wanted to get out of London with my wife and one daughter. We were looking for an opportunity, as soon as we found it we came to Exeter.

Why did you want to get out of London?

Because in London I was working in many places which were really very tiring, exhausting I can say. And after that exhausting work, was taking me long hours to come home, and in the morning to go to work, stressful life and so on, actually. London is a nice place to be but not for working.

Nice place to visit but you wouldn't want to live there. [laughter] So you came to Exeter, was that, did you have the café straight away?

Yes, I said we were looking for an opportunity. One of my friends was here before me, he had come to Exeter, we were communicating all the time. He said he had found a place which we can do something there and we came here and saw the place and that was it. Took us to a several place, places that we now love and then decided to stay here. Immediately after that we moved here in Exeter

What were your first impressions of Exeter, after Izmir and London?

First of all, what I have noticed is the people's faces actually. It was so relaxed, I thought so. Yeah, people were really not in a hurry, relaxed faces. When they were talking they were not angry with anything. It was good actually Whereas in London that was not the case, when I was asking for a place from somebody, it was as if I was asking for money [laughter]. First of all they did not have time to answer and may be they were exhausted or, it was very stressful living there actually and also expensive. The rent was expensive, the living was expensive. But there was something, after I came

stayed here, I realized that London was better place in respect of foreigners. Tell you, I wouldn't think that I am a foreigner actually, there, because everybody was or as long as I was concerned, everybody was Exeter is not like that actually. I'm not saying that it is not welcoming, Exeter is really, comparing to somewhere else which I have experienced. It's really very multi-cultural minded, if not physically but I feel that.

*So Lale would have been about 10 or 11 when you came to Exeter?
She went to school in Exeter?*

She went to school, fifth year, yes, she was in fifth year or sixth, fifth year. In London she was in sixth, she was supposed to finish the Primary School, but here she went another year in order to finish the Primary.

Which Primary School was that?

St Sidwells.

And then to, which Secondary?

She went to church school which is, what was its name?

St Peter's?

Yes

How was that, 'cause she must have been one of a very small number of girls of Turkish origin at St Peter's?

Yeah, when she was in Primary School and about to finish it... Because of our business, we had some relations with teachers who were telling us what the situation was in this school. So we found out that St Peter's is the best place to go. And then I heard that there are some conditions to be met before to enroll there. And I think I remembered that we talked to somebody at the school and saying that we want her to be in that school but we don't meet the requirements, what is going to be? And they said, well it is not that difficult actually. Yeah, that was it, then we sent her there.

She was fine when she was there?

Well, maybe she was fine, but we were not. Actually she always felt that she was in an environment that was not the same as the environment she used to have in London, which was very multicultural. Maybe that was why she was not interested any more in her lessons, or. She was really bored or always... Indifferent.

Alienated?

Maybe you could say that, yeah.

'Cause that.. what you are saying that is she had a very clear sense of herself as being Turkish,

Yes

And that collided with the dominant culture of the school? Did you and Ayşe feel the same way about living in a city which was, you said it, not very multicultural in its faces, even if it was multicultural in its head?

Actually, we haven't been treated or... in any bad way actually, we hadn't got any experience in that way, except of being accepted and even treated like their won in the city. This may be because we were in the centre of the university and the college and our customers were from there, educated, and maybe that was why we didn't experience any bad thing. But we always thought that our daughter is in a clash of cultures and when she was coming at home we were Turkish, but when she was at school or outside with her English friends, she had the feeling that she must be English otherwise, and that was our dilemma with her. I remember once we had discussed, and even go further than discussion. She asked us to stay over when she went to a birthday party and we were not ready for that. The reason was because we didn't know her friends, we didn't know the family that she wanted to stay over. Then she said, well I have to, because all my friends staying over, and I have to. And in first and second and third time, we thought okay, she has to actually. And she stayed over.

I'm guessing that was quite difficult for you.

It was very difficult, really difficult. Because at that time we were thinking that every evil with teenagers was coming from that background, from that over staying and we don't know what they do, do they drink, do they use drugs, do they... what they do? That was a scary one for us, very scary one, because it was the height of the teenagers' problems time actually, or at least in the papers, in the television, was showing lots of different aspects of the teenagers' life, and it was scary really. At the end she had become one, a teenager that, who scared us really. I can't blame on the school she was in but the whole atmosphere in England maybe, and in the part of it, Exeter, the same actually made her that teenager which was not really neither our culture, nor in our dreams. Yeah, it was really very bad time.

[Recording suspended due to external noise]

...as nightmare really

Would you say that you and Ayşe had had, you felt that Lale had one foot in Turkey and one foot in Exeter? She's not quite sure which foot she's got the biggest weight on? And I wonder whether you felt similar to that, or whether you have always been very clear where you are?

I must say I was clear really, because being in a different country I have accepted all the conditions actually, from the time when I ran away from Turkey, I knew that there is a new life, new experiences. For me it was not that difficult actually. Maybe it is because, from year 9, myself I had been refugee in my own country actually. I left when I was 9, not even 9, 8, it was horrible. I went to Izmir, I did have friends in Van, where I was born, then came to Izmir, started or tried to make new friends, it was not easy actually [drilling noise] so for me being in England, or any other country, it was not that difficult. And also my mind was busy with something else actually, rather than "am I okay am I comfortable or not", because I know that all over the world everybody is not comfortable as I am not.

So, if I said to you, how would you describe yourself? What would you say, if someone said to Anita, 'How would you describe yourself, I am guessing, there would be a hyphen in there somewhere. How would you describe yourself?

As.. didn't understand.

If someone said to me, what are you, I think I would with a bit of reluctance, say British. Friends of mine...

Alright, yeah. I lost my identity actually, I don't believe any more in that sort of identity, being Turkish, being Kurdish, being English. I don't see any sense in it actually, except well I'm a citizen in any place actually.

So what, you'd you say that you have a political identity, rather than an ethnic, a political identity?

I do believe in that, yes.

I wonder whether that made it easier for you?

Definitely, yes, definitely yes, otherwise it could have been difficult really because when you think about it, you have lived all your life, at least most of your life, in one country, and made so much friends, families, relations, and suddenly you are becoming nobody. Well, I have studied in Turkey, when I came here, I was like... I haven't even learnt how to read and write. That was the difficult part actually. I remember when I was in London in college, to learn English, I had discussed with one of my teachers that they don't have to teach us how to go to the library. It was very humiliating actually. Okay we don't speak English, but we do know something about life, about living or about handling a fork or a knife or, but this was really difficult part of it, but again, I can say my political side I made it easy to overcome it. [drilling noise]

And in saying that the library is on a certain floor on the right side, go straight they were saying that, one thing and try to teach me to go there, is another difficult thing.

Is that British cultural imperialism?

[laughter] I don't know really, is it British culture, maybe.

When you see someone who doesn't speak your language, that shouldn't mean that he doesn't live, or he doesn't have any experience. The only thing he doesn't do, or can not do, is to express it in English, nothing more actually. And I was finding it very difficult to bear, in the college. Apart from the college, it was difficult to make myself understood in that time in English, my English. It was very difficult, really, people don't seem to try to understand you. If you are not saying it in proper English, proper pronunciation, [laughter].

Would you say that was different in Exeter?

Yes, that was different, of course, I should add that when I came to Exeter I was better English speaker [drilling noise]. So, I can say I was better English speaker, may be that was the reason I didn't experience that Sometimes when we are working some people, I have met, were like that again, but didn't make any difference in my opinion. Generally I can say that people are better understanding, better

Thinking about... having been a regular visitor to your premises for a few years now, I have noticed how the place has developed, and I was wondering whether the gradual arrival of Turkish food closer and closer to the centre of the menu, was a cunning strategy, that you and Ayşe arrived at twelve years ago, to say that we shall start them off with a few little bits around the edges, then gradually we will move the egg and chips out of the way. Was that a strategy or did that just happen?

It was, not a strategy actually. When we have decided to come to Exeter and do this business, I went and get some training. And the training was about a greasy spoon café. I learned a lot of things about that, in the opinion that we will open a greasy spoon café because of the workers, and we will have it open until 2 or 3 o'clock in the afternoon and then close and go home. That was the idea, but when we came and opened the café we started to do that, with no success. Obviously we immediately understood that there is no potential as it was in London so while we thinking, 'what can we do?' we thought it might be good idea while doing that, maybe we can't do business, while we are waiting, and doing that we can produce some Turkish, and by the time we can make it recognized actually. That was from the beginning, it was not a strategy. No! [laughter] Life is teaching me

That's interesting. From the beginning I thought it was a conspiracy the two of you had worked out, to seduce us all into eating Turkish food.

No. Not really. I wish it was like that, because we almost lost two three years that way, until we came to the conclusion that okay we are carrying on with Turkish stuff. It was very difficult time.

When you first started the business, you have to source things from wholesalers and stuff like that? Did you have any resistance from them, or was that easy?

No, it was easy actually.

It was just business. Okay,

Yeah.

Can you see yourself staying in Exeter? If things changed dramatically in Turkey, and in Syria, Iran, and Iraq, would you think 'I'll go back, go home'?

Actually, half of my mind, says that I should back, and the other, 'No, no, stay here, retire here.' Because every year we try to go to Turkey, before four or five years, we were thinking okay we should go this time, and see for the environmental suitability, that if we go back, what we can do, where we can stay. And every time, we go I notice that the degree of wanting is lessened, less much less, today I can say that I go and stay there. This is because I started to feel myself foreigner in Turkey as well.

Is that because you left in 1992, so there's, in your head, there is a place called Turkey in 1992, then when you go back,

It's changed a lot

there's been that big, Turkey has moved on, and you haven't been there. So when you go do you think 'I'm going back to Turkey, or do you think I am going home, or do you think 'I am going on holiday?'

I think it is not home any more for me, it's not. I very much believe that it is not home any more, but I would go back actually. I would, I would want to go back, for one reason that is politics. Otherwise there is no meaning actually for me there is no meaning, other than going for tourist reason.

So, Exeter is home now?

Yes. We can say

Just Exeter or the rest of Devon?

Well, the rest of Devon wherever it is my address actually.

I wonder whether you have been for walks on the Moor, or out for a fishing trip? All those things that people in Devon do?

Well, I think as long as I am in Exeter, and if I have time, and opportunity I can go anywhere. That's why I am saying this is home. But in Turkey I can't say that, comparing Exeter to Turkey I can't comfortably say that that is my home.

So, when people like David Cameron or Nigel Farage, talk about the British culture, and Cameron last year 'multiculturalism is dead', how do you feel about that?

It is quite familiar. In my opinion, when you look to the world from very very narrow line, then you can say that, multiculturalism is dead, and not only in England, in Turkey as well, this is what the people say: multiculturalism is dead, why are you living altogether, and you experiencing all sorts of different cultures and language. Again you can say that multiculturalism is dead, in my opinion, the understanding of multiculturalism should be re-defined, What is multiculturalism? Is it a chaos? Is it to grab one another's opportunities? Is it fight against the other's rights? That is not the case, Multiculturalism should be re-defined again. We are living in it. The thing is that how we can make it easier and happier. That is the problem. Nobody seems, from the power, they don't seem to take it that way.

What would be your answer to that problem?

My answer is to make it easier for the different cultures and different people to live side by side, to explore everything together, and help each other to make their life easier, whatever it is the way actually. It wouldn't make you lose anything.

No.

When I came to England there was a help provided to me actually, it was really very good, and imagine one person coming here with his family, with luggage, small luggage, nothing else, and some organizations are helping you and that made me think, okay, I should provide something to make this organization better for the newcomers as well as for the citizens of this country to provide it for everybody, and after 3 or 4 months I started working actually.

Mmm.

Contributing towards it, it was my happiest way of doing that actually. I didn't say that "why should I work", I should work so that I can help that organization to make it easier for the newcomers.

Abdullah, Do you know what was the name of that organization?

That was the London Council. That was, that gave me accommodation and there was one, I don't know if it still exists free soliciting, I don't remember.

I think it is much harder now for people coming here, than it was 20 years ago,

Definitely much harder.

Yeah

Last question, then we shall see if Anita has any questions. We ask everyone if they have a message to give to the people working on the project, and to the people who are looking at the website. This is your chance to say. Your thing.

Okay. People who are living here but they have come from somewhere else, we should know that they don't come just because they want to, just because they want to see different country, or different stuff. They have to. First of all, we should know this, they have to. If not England, somewhere else. And second thing, nobody, I think nobody thinks that "okay the conditions in this country, or country A is better than country C, so I must go to country B or A". They don't do this kind of plans or anything. The opportunity makes them come here, that's all. In the very day when they had to go somewhere else, whatever the condition is, then they use that condition. So if you know this you wouldn't say 'oh England because has got a very good social life, that's why they are coming here' That is not true. It's not right actually. One should put oneself in place of the newcomer, what he can do, and how he can do, or she can do, then they will see that that condition makes them come here. From then on, if we understand the reason why and how then we can sort the problems out. Quite easily actually. It's not that difficult, the only thing that is difficult, is to see them a burden on the social life, on the political life, on the economic life, whereas if it can be organized, it could be a very, very rich source of easiness, very, very good source of happiness for everybody.

Abdullah, thank you very much, that was great

Thank you, thank you very much

End of Interview