



THE PIERRE LOTI COFFEE-HOUSE ON THE EYÜP HILLS

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She was born in Gümülcene. During her childhood she had the opportunity to become very familiar with the regional life and colorful clothing of the local people of the Aegean region (Türkmen and Yörük). She studied under the famous artist, Nuri İyem, and joined in group exhibits. During her trips abroad she was highly affected by the costume museums and cafes she saw there. In 1964 she restored the Pierre Loti in a fashion that accords with old Turkish coffeehouse traditions. In the course of writing travel articles she began to collect women's traditional headdresses. In time this collection has been transformed into a very valuable cultural treasury of life artifacts from the 16th and 17th centuries. A metal coin was minted portraying the head of bride in traditional headdress. She has presented papers at national and international conferences. Besides the published books and articles she has written, she has also received many awards. She continues to lead a multi-faceted life.

Have you ever been to the Pierre Loti Coffeehouse on the hills of Eyüp? Better still, have you ever watched the sun setting from there? Seeing how the waters of the Golden Horn get a golden tinge towards evening is a unique experience. The sun lights up the water with its last rays and then prepares to retire for the night. In addition to this, the mystical atmosphere of the coffeehouse, the unique view from up there, the divine atmosphere that permeates everything have all made a deep impression upon artists, writers and poets.

In days of yore, the navy officer Pierre Loti felt the peace of mind instilled by this view and frequently came up here to repeat the experience, going as far as passing the whole night under the starry sky on a straw mat, whenever there was a full moon. To be able to share this pleasure, whenever he had foreign guests, he used to have their graceful wives mount a donkey and go up to the coffeehouse, the position of which afforded the best view. Inevitably his guests were always more than satisfied by this excursion. Pierre Loti is the one who introduced the Istanbul of those days, its life and culture, to the West by means of his novel *Aziyade*. What is more important, during the Turkish War of Independence, he wrote enthusiastic articles for the European press, supporting Atatürk's struggle. That is why this coffeehouse was later named after him. For all these reasons, visitors to Istanbul are keen on going to this place.

I had been impressed by the coffeehouses of Vienna and Paris during my stay in Europe. Just as it had been in the case of the Ottoman Empire in the past, these coffeehouses were the cultural centers of Europe. It was there that the dailies were read, that learned conversations were held, and that letters were written. It was in those coffeehouses that famous writers, painters and artists met. Pleasant places with courteous and smiling waitresses in spotless uniforms... The cozy atmosphere permeated by the fragrant smell of coffee, instilled a new *joie de vivre* in one's spirit.

It was on a nice spring day, when I had just

come back with such sentiments that we decided to go up to the Pierre Loti Coffeehouse to enjoy a cup of coffee with the view of the Golden Horn at our feet. Unfortunately

time had not been kind to the Pierre Loti Coffeehouse with the result that it had turned into a ruin. The surrounding Ottoman cemetery with its tombstones, venerable old trees, old wooden houses covered in ivy, dervish lodge, mausolea, fountains, open air prayer spaces and stone flagged roads, seemed to reflect the desolation of the coffeehouse. I could not prevent myself from falling under the spell of this melancholic atmosphere. In the cemetery there were two Europeans painting the view. The state of ruin in which the coffeehouse found itself meant that all the tourists looking at the view of the Golden Horn, taking pictures and just wandering around, not only could not drink a decent cup of Turkish coffee, but did not even have a places to sit and rest. An old man with blisters on his hands was distributing tea like yellow water on an old, moldy tin coffee tray, all the paint of which had peeled off. I accepted a glass of tea, but did not have the courage to drink it. It was at this point that I got curious as to the state of the interior of the building. Getting up I approached a man who was sitting, feet extended in the most relaxed attitude, near the entrance of the building and asked him if I could go in. "Go in and see for yourself lady," he said with an ironical tone.

With the first step inside I landed in a puddle of water that had collected just inside the door and splashed my leg with a muddy liquid. The surprises were not finished. As I turned I saw near the door a counter over which a tin water can and a plastic basin, in which the tea glasses were washed, had been



Illustration 1. Süheyl Ünver (sketch) *Benim Gözümde İstanbul*, İBB Yayınları



Illustration 2. Sabiha Tansuğ with Süheyl Ünver



Illustration 3. Pierre Loti discovered the cafe, and it was named for him (Eyüp Municipal Archives)

placed. It was the water from this operation that had collected near the door under a concrete tile, with the result that the legs of those unfortunate enough to step on it were splashed.

The interior was full of rickety chairs and tables. The walls had got yellow with all the tobacco smoke, the window-frames were in an advanced stage of decay and the wooden ceiling was about to collapse... The painting on the walls having peeled off, the wooden boards of the wall had become visible. As for the ring upon which the tea was made, it was even worse—a gas ring on a concrete surface. Over the gas ring there was an aluminium samovar with a black tea pot and when I say black I refer to the incrustations of dirt covering it. Further on there was a secluded corner where a sheep had been tied. Near it a tin gas canister, which apparently was being used as a toilet. It seems that whenever it filled up it was emptied outside so that everything could just flow downhill. The young man, who managed the place, told me about all this as if it was perfectly normal with only a slight hint of irony. It was him who told me also about the mice cavorting in every nook and cranny... Getting out of there before being sick was all that I could do.

Illustration 4. Scene from the Cafe

Illustration 5. Historic Pierre Loti Cafe



In short the coffeehouse was utterly ruined—no running water, no waste water disposal pipes, no toilet, no hygiene, no clean drinking water, no cup of coffee, no tea, no nothing. The only thing present was a single bulb hanging from the ceiling. I said to myself that that was my light of hope... the hope of being able to restore the place and to be able to offer a cup of frothy Turkish coffee to the guests. It was then and there that I decided that I would take over the management of the coffeehouse, whatever it took...

The day after, following the dictate of my heart, I dressed modestly and taking along an architect friend of my husband's, I went straight to the wooden house near the coffeehouse. The

woman who owned the coffeehouse chased away the cats and made some space for me on the low sofa...

There were all kinds of cats. The old fashioned family, which had lived in Istanbul for generations, consisted of a mother, a daughter and the husband of the daughter. I told them about my intentions of renting the coffeehouse and they accepted my offer. They told me to talk to the present manager, adding that if he accepted they would not have anything against my taking over. We said good-bye and I went straight to the coffeehouse. I told the man, who managed the coffeehouse amidst all the dirt, about my ideas. He accepted, adding that he would consent to leave the place upon payment of a sum of money, which we agreed upon.

The day after, I rented the coffeehouse for an eight-year period... with the manager not believing the fortune that had befallen him. The owners were just as happy, having been able to buy a lot of gold bracelets for the lady of the house, with the money I paid them. It seems that the money I paid them would have been enough to buy the coffeehouse, not just rent it. Anyway my priority was to put an end as soon as possible to the miserable state in which the place found itself. As soon I could, I started having the place cleaned up and repaired...

In this venture of mine I was supported by all my artist women friends, chief among whom I must mention Alim Karamürsel, my family, my friends, my colleagues at the Academy, the press and writers. I drove all over town organizing things. I wrote for various permissions to the city administration, to the water utility, to the directorate of cemeteries, to the postal administration and to the directorate for city parks. I went to the Bedesten section of the Covered Bazaar, to various antique dealers and to carpenters to get the pieces of furniture and accessories I needed for the coffeehouse and took them to Eyüp. It was my luck that I found two elderly carpenters, who having worked at the Palace knew about old wooden architectural details and furniture. These two carpenters

restored the coffeehouse just in the way it was supposed to be.

The wooden partitions, shelves, windows, colored glass-panes, frames, ceiling, door, *sedirs* (low divans), external wooden architectural details, pergola and railings, were all done from scratch on the basis of old engravings. Some of the pieces were obtained from demolished old wood houses. The chimney hood and samovar were made in "yellow brass," in imitation of old pieces and were decorated with an Ottoman carnation pattern. In addition to this, copper and brass coffee-pots of all sizes, coffee trays with and without handles, round metal trays, big coffee cups, blue or white and red saucers for coffee cups and tea glasses, Paşabahçe brand gold leaf decorated tea cups, samovars, *nargiles* (water pipes) and porcelain tea pots were all ranged around the tea and coffee making stove.

All the above-mentioned pieces were the typical accessories of a Turkish Coffeehouse and were readily available in shops. This was not very strange if one considers that they were part of a surviving tradition.

We bought old mirrors, intricately decorated wooden shelves for corners, still more shelves, lamp pedestals, mother of pearl coffee-tables and braziers with which to decorate the interior of the building. Everything was polished and put in the most suitable place. Also more mundane needs of the newly decorated coffeehouse were not neglected. Near the coffeehouse there was a single room shack, with no toilet and with no running water, in which a family with two or three children lived. This shack was also purchased, restored and connected to the coffeehouse. This was the second related investment and thanks to this adjacent building, which was decorated with flowers, we could expand the sitting space. We had the water utility connect us to the city water distribution grid. The neighboring houses were also connected to the pipes so that they could use it for their cleaning needs. The postal administration provided us with a phone line. A postal box was hung on the tree in front of the build-

ing. A special Pierre Loti stamp was made. Pamphlets describing the coffeehouse were printed in both Turkish and French. Road signs were hung in the neighborhood to facilitate arrivals. Books by Pierre Loti were collected and placed on a bookshelf. Old photographs were hung on the walls. Alim Karamürsel sculpted a bust of Pierre Loti and this work was placed on a base just outside the coffeehouse. Unfortunately, in later years, this bust, which was a veritable artistic masterpiece, was stolen and never found again... Only the base remained to remind us of it. The walls of the surrounding cemetery at Gümüşsuyu around the coffee house were repaired. Upon request we had also the wooden police station of the neighborhood restored. While all this activity was proceeding, the city administration enlarged the road between Taşlı Tarla and the coffeehouse. Everybody was so happy that the road had been enlarged and repaired that a rumor began to circulate, according to which, the lady who had had one road repaired, could repeat the same feat for all the roads of the surrounding area.

All this work was completed in as short a time span as five months. The fire for making coffee was once more alight with coal. As soon as we were once more ready to make well-steeped tea, frothy coffee with medium, plenty or no sugar, we inaugurated the coffeehouse in the presence of a select group of distinguished guests. Young girls and boys in national cos-



Illustration 6. Poster advertising the Cafe. (Halid Efendi, grandfather of the current proprietor, Nedim)



Illustration 7. Bust of Pierre Loti outside the Cafe



Illustration 8. Photograph used to advertize the Pierre Loti Cafe

tumes offered blood-red tea in gold decorated glasses on shiny new trays, frothy coffee in big cups, Turkish delight sweets, *simits* (ring-shaped bread covered with sesame seeds), *kâğıt helva* (thin wafers) and cookies. That day I felt both the happiness and the weariness resulting from all my work...

Thus the respect due to Turkish Coffee and to Pierre Loti, friend of the Turks, finally shown. The inauguration of the coffeehouse was widely covered by the press, with the consequence that we were swamped with tourists. There were days when buses were lined all along the road up to Taşlı Tarla. It was becoming well nigh impossible to provide coffee and tea to such crowds. Both the building itself and the surrounding sitting spaces of the coffeehouse were filled with people. Those were the days when even "Bosphorus tours" were a rarity. That is why all guides used to take their groups to our coffeehouse. The authenticity of the establishment, the elegance of the glasses and cups, the order and cleanliness of the facilities, the flowers, all contributed to the guests being impressed with what they saw.

The young girls and boys serving the customers were all dressed in traditional costumes. In the eyes of the tourists the place was a kind of museum and that is why it very quickly was included in all guides. Notwithstanding all this, the prices were set at the level of a common neighborhood coffeehouse. With the confidence gained by our success we bravely went to Ankara to try and get a tourist establishment license from the Ministry of Tourism. Up to then no coffeehouse had been granted a tourist establishment license; nevertheless the Ministry

Illustration 9. Pierre Loti Cafe, interior (Eyüp Municipal Archives)



granted such a license to the Pierre Loti Coffeehouse, on the basis of a special law. Thanks to this, we could finally adjust our prices.

Many foreign and Turkish films were

shot on location at Pierre Loti. A lot of celebrities passed through that coffeehouse. It had become the meeting place of artists and writers. Once a week minstrels with their simple string instruments assembled and sung their odes or folk dance shows were held. Sunday was the day of the traditional Karagöz shadow theatre shows. On that day even the foreigners working in Istanbul used to take their children in big groups to Pierre Loti. Poetry days were held with the participation of famous poets like Nedret Güvenç or Özdemir Asaf.

We used to offer coffee, tea or other beverages free of charge to our friends, to famous writers or journalists and to official guests and their assistants. The President of the Republic, Fahri Korutürk, who was from Eyüp, would come to the cemetery every year to pay his respects to his dead relatives, after which he never failed to visit the coffeehouse, where he drank a frothy coffee with medium sugar. We received a request from a friend to visit the coffee house... In mid May 1973 I was supposed to go and pick up the late Şevket Süreyya Bey, who had come to Istanbul from Ankara, from the Londra Hotel in Tepebaşı and to bring him to the Pierre Loti coffeehouse... We took a taxi and we were passing through Söğütözü, Şevket Bey was visibly suffering, as he saw the derelict conditions in which that district had fallen. He said, "Seeing this has saddened me, but I am happy that I have come. Recently a scholar from Europe showed me documentation concerning the villas, the flower gardens, the forests and leisure resorts, which once existed along the Golden Horn and told me all about life in these places in those days..."

By the time we reached Pierre Loti, Şevket Bey was saddened and pensive. He sat under a quince tree in a position, which afforded him a view of the Golden Horn and we gave him a coffee with medium sugar. As he sat there sipping slowly his coffee and smelling the quince tree in bloom, he turned towards me and said, "You are showing how this place can be improved and modernized without ruining its original

atmosphere, how everything can be restored without losing the old architecture and without pouring concrete all over the place. You are like a candle lighting this place. Sabiha, I had not realized that your life was so difficult.”

For years I struggled to prevent Pierre Loti from being demolished and being replaced with a concrete building. Many people, both in Turkey and outside it, supported my struggle. The Pierre Loti Association in France, Reşid Saffet Atabinen founder of the Turkish Touring Club and Çelik Gülersoy were in favor of my idea of preserving the coffeehouse as it was.

An article by Prof. Dr. Süheyl Ünver, who was also a loyal customer of the coffeehouse, appeared on *Hür Düşünce*, dated 19th May 1966, with the title “Should we demolish it or restore it?”

“Have you been to Istanbul? Yes I have. Have you been to Eyüp Sultan? Yes I have. Have you gone up to Gümüşsuyu? No I haven’t. In such cases one would have said that the respondent had not really been to Istanbul, because it was only from up there that one could really see Istanbul. Anybody who has actually been there will confirm what I am saying. There are few places that afford such a nice view of Istanbul. It seems that the area on which the coffeehouse stands is going to be nationalized and a bigger and concrete coffeehouse is going to be built in its place. This is unacceptable. Can an idea be axed? Some can. Rarely have I seen ideas that were worse than this project.”

Now, after so many years have gone by, we have all seen how the Istanbul Metropolitan City Administration and the Eyüp City Administration have nationalized the area surrounding the coffeehouse and faithfully restored the old buildings in it. We could say in a way which the candle that was lit in 1964 had lit up also its surroundings.

Yes. The Pierre Loti Coffeehouse and the hill on which it stands are like an embodiment of the myth surrounding this place. This location has a mysterious atmosphere that seems to

be hidden behind a veil of fog. If you want to truly feel the mystic atmosphere of the place, you should take the road that begins from near the Eyüp Mosque and slowly walk up through the cemetery, taking in the view as you do so, until you reach the Pierre Loti Coffeehouse. If you are lucky and the *lodos* (south-west wind) is blowing, the whooshing sound of the cypresses swaying in the wind and the reverberation of this sound will make your whole body tingle with a divine emotion. You will ascend, perfectly conscious of the mystery of life and death. True connoisseurs of Istanbul, who were aware of this experience, would come expressly on the days when the *lodos* was blowing, walk through the cemetery and then sit at the coffeehouse for hours. If you climb up the hill on such a day and see the view of the Golden Horn, in all its majesty, you will realize that Istanbul is a divine city.

As you sit at the Pierre Loti Coffeehouse sipping your coffee, you will notice the beauty of the nature, the masterpieces of Byzantine and Ottoman architecture and all the other places of historic importance. You will come to the conclusion that this city is an amalgamation of civilizations, empires, heroes, dreams, ambitions, faiths, richness, art, love, desires and the ups and downs of life. You will also agree fully with the European name of “Golden Horn.”

Nowadays an expanded and restored version of the Pierre Loti Coffeehouse is continuing with the Turkish coffee tradition. May God bless them and endow them with the necessary strength. I have seen Nedim grow up since he was three years old and he used to play with soda bottle caps. He later became a waiter and was trained on the job as a true purveyor of Turkish coffee. He has always taken great care of the fruit of the labor of Sabiha his “elder sister,” including all the many accessories. The Pierre Loti Coffeehouse, which was restored in 1964, is ready to go on serving its customers also in the 21st century.



Illustration 10. Student wearing national costume, serving coffee at the Pierre Loti Cafe.