

# A Turkish-German Writer on Ways to Overcome the German-Turkish Divide (August 22/23, 1998)

## Abstract

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Turkish-German writer Zafer Şenocak reflects on the strength of Turkish identity in Germany and suggests ways to make the Federal Republic more hospitable to immigrants. He also encourages new citizens to move away from (pro-Turkish) nationalism in order to become more open to German values and customs.

## Source

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### But the Heart Still Beats Turkish

*Nowhere do Turks feel closer to their new German homeland than in Berlin. Here in the city on the Spree you can eat döner kebab<sup>[1]</sup> to your heart's content and sample a taste of the Turkish lifestyle as well. Nonetheless, Turks in Germany are still not truly accepted. The German-Turkish elective affinity continues to suffer from a lack of intercultural competence. A programmatic look at migration.*

Where do Turks in Germany feel at home today? There is no single answer to this question. Of the two million Turks in Germany, about 200,000 have become naturalized German citizens by now. This number will double, perhaps even triple, in the coming years.

But for many, a German passport is nothing more than a document pulled from one's pocket at the border. According to a Chinese proverb, "patriotism is the love of the good things we ate in our childhood." German cuisine hasn't had it easy alongside its Turkish counterpart. In their hearts, most Turks in Germany – even in the third generation – remain Turks.

Even after forty years of continuous immigration, Germany still clings to the illusion that it's not an immigration country, that the multicultural society is a condition that one can magically vanish with a few pithy slogans. Politicians have failed to develop mechanisms to shape the immigration process in a way that is acceptable to the majority of Germans.

People are often left alone when it comes to dealing with the effects of immigration. This situation promotes xenophobia, nourishes irrational fears and prejudice. The kind of consciousness-raising work that would make the phenomenon of immigration perceptible as a German reality is missing from the cultural sphere. German theater, German film and literature do not adequately reflect the changes that have been brought about by the presence of millions of people of foreign descent in Germany. Immigrants have not yet become part of German culture.

Germans and Turks in Germany have come closer to each other than people think. All the problems that are currently associated with the failure of multicultural society have to do with this closeness and with the realization that this closeness is not necessarily accompanied by the disappearance and assimilation of all that is foreign.

Here in Berlin the number of applications for naturalization is particularly high. And nowhere do Turks feel closer to their new German homeland than in Berlin. They experienced many of this city's historic hours, helped shaped the city, supported it.

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Berlin Senator for Internal Affairs Jörg Schönbohm[2] sees the situation very differently, however. He speaks of ghettos, of districts populated mostly by foreigners and the need to “dry them out.” In these “quarters,” he says, you have the feeling you are no longer in Germany. The senator claims to support cultural diversity.

In his mind, however, a multicultural society is a form of coexistence in which cultures dissolve. Similar arguments are also used by Turkish fundamentalists who see the purity of their culture threatened in Germany.

The survival of communities in the future will depend on their intercultural competence. This is based on an emotional and intellectual ability to make room for others in one’s own home, so to speak, and to control and ward off fears associated with this sort of rearrangement. This competence is lacking in Germany.

The primary task of the intellectual and political elite in Germany must be to develop ideas and models that strengthen intercultural competence in German society.

First of all, one widespread fear needs to be dispelled: Building up intercultural competence does not lead to the collapse of communities. Accepting that other cultures have equal value does not mean abandoning one’s own.

Only he who truly knows the worth of his Own culture can negotiate with the Other. It is high time for Germans to develop more confidence in their Own culture. Confidence of this sort does not express itself in the defamation of the Other but rather in the exemplary attractiveness of one’s Own views and values.

The following is an attempt to introduce a five-step model, a kind of collection of materials on migration that can be used to design a program for a modern, open-minded Germany.

### **First: Acknowledge Reality**

In Germany the immigration question has been dragged along for decades but never dealt with. In the meantime, it has assumed the character of a chronic inflammation that plagues anyone who feels any sort of pain. The presence of 7.5 million residents of foreign descent has created certain realities in this country, and these realities must be the departure point for any thoughts about the future.

The German nation-state will be a state with citizens of diverse heritage. An ethnically and culturally homogeneous Germany does not exist. Together with other peoples, the German people must build a modern nation whose identity is not solely defined by archaic ancestral rituals.

### **Second: Build Consensus**

No question splits German society into two camps like that of immigration. This split in society must be overcome. Without some form of societal consensus on Germany’s multiethnic character, it will be impossible to solve a single problem that has resulted from decades of immigration.

### **Third: Regulate to Build Trust**

In Germany, trust is created almost exclusively through legislation. Therefore an immigration law is unavoidable. It is the only way to counter the population’s fears that the floodgates are open and an invasion of Germany is imminent.

### **Four: Increase Sex Appeal**

Germany has to become more attractive. This country has a lot to offer in the way of things that attract

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people of different origins and forge long-term bonds. Businesses play a key role in this. Over the past decades, the German economy has integrated millions of people of the most diverse backgrounds into the labor process. A tremendous achievement – one that nobody mentions today, but one from which all participants profited.

### **Five: From a State Based on Ancestry to a Civil Society**

The integration of foreigners can only succeed if the mythical force of a feeling of community derived solely from common ancestry is countered with institutional alternatives. Institutions can offer possibilities for identification. In contrast to myths, they appeal to the rational side of people. A civil society cannot exist without strong institutions. And in the long run only a civil society can bring together people of diverse backgrounds in a polity. Membership in German society can no longer be determined solely on ethnic grounds. A state based on ancestry has no future. It is based on myths. And no intercultural competence can be acquired through myths alone.

These steps, of course, also present challenges for the immigrants. Up to now, they have concentrated on demands, above all on those pertaining to citizenship and, to a lesser extent, cultural and educational policies. These demands need to be accompanied more by conceptual considerations, by well-thought-out and lived intentions of integration. The umbilical cord connecting German Turks to Turkey has yet to be cut.

Here, Turkish patriotism increasingly serves as an obstacle to integration. Instead of a diffuse Turkish or Kurdish patriotism on German soil, Turks in Germany would be well-advised to develop a cosmopolitanism with universal aspirations, a cosmopolitanism that could turn them into an avant-garde within civil society in Germany. The prerequisites for this definitely exist.

German Turks who belong to the generation born and raised here live primarily in Germany's major cities. Cities such as Frankfurt, Cologne, Hamburg, and Berlin are cultural centers that offer their residents all kinds of possibilities to partake of global culture and develop a cosmopolitan lease on life.

As expected, the cosmopolitan urban elite has intercultural competence. It is well educated and economically successful. Such a German-Turkish elite does indeed exist in Germany. But it is largely ignored when discussion turns to Turks in Germany. Then the focus shifts above all to the losers, the so-called *Kanaks*.

The German-Turkish elite needs to express itself more clearly; it needs to engage with Germany and German issues and form its own organizations – ones that do not swim in the wake of Turkish patriotism.

Questions of national identity are complex in Germany and cannot be discussed calmly. There are fears, feelings of guilt, and repressed aggressions that have grown over the course of history, and they cannot be ignored if we want to resolve the problems of the present. In Germany the concept of the past is overshadowed by the experience of the Holocaust.

It is remarkable that German history is largely left out of the debates on multiculturalism – by Germans and immigrants alike. The German-Turkish affairs of today cannot and should not be a continuation of the German-Jewish history of yesterday. Still, our visions must be confronted by a look to the past.

The German-Turkish encounter, but also other encounters between peoples – ones that result from migration and thus result in the interlacing of peoples, in peoples living alongside and with each other in close quarters – cannot be thought through any further without a clarification of the historical backdrop. Nationalism is based on the glorification of one's own history.

If nationalism's grip on the peoples of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to be loosened, glorifying [*verklären*] one's

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own history must be replaced by explaining it [*erklären*]. Hopefully, this will lead to some of the clarifying [*klären*] that the German language smuggled into the word for explaining [*erklären*].

## NOTES

[1] <sup>ⓧ</sup> Turkish fast food made of lamb, beef, or chicken, roasted on a spit – eds.

[2] <sup>ⓧ</sup> A conservative CDU politician – eds.

Source: Zafer Şenocak, “Aber das Herz schlägt noch türkisch”, *die tageszeitung (taz)*, August 22/23, 1998.

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