

A Turkish Store in Kreuzberg Signals Progress in Integration (March 2005)

Abstract

A reporter describes how a Turkish newspaper store in Berlin's Kreuzberg neighborhood became successful only after its owner started catering to the needs of his German clientele. The author views the small store as a model of pragmatic integration.

Source

Tacettin Akgül's Store

At first there were only cigarettes. Cigarettes and newspapers. And illustrated magazines. *Spiegel*, *Stern*, and *Superillu*. A large pile of *BZ*, two smaller piles of *Morgenpost* and *Tagesspiegel*, two even smaller piles of *Berliner* and *Die Zeit*. And then also *taz*. Two or three copies. That was enough to cover the demand for dailies on this street.

This is Eylauer Straße, gray even on this sunny day and soiled by dogs, situated at the edge of Kreuzberg just before the bridge to Schöneberg. A nameless street, known to no one except a few residents and the mailman, not to the taxi driver and not to the most ardent Kreuzberg patriots. Restaurants that opened up here quickly closed down again; hair salons, bakers, let alone delicatessen shops, have hardly a chance of survival on this street. Only Holst am Kreuzberg, the Hertha soccer club bar, with the slot machines, the bad music, and the five characters at the bar is still hanging on. And the small newsstand. You can sell newspapers and cigarettes anywhere.

But newspapers and cigarettes can also be had at the other end of the short street, and that's why Tacettin Akgül did what so many of his countrymen had done before him: he drove to the fruit market, bought fruits and vegetables, and draped apples, pears, and tomatoes in the most picturesque manner possible next to the door to his shop. Perhaps it was the bland 1950s building across the street, or the lot next door, which has lain empty since the war, or all the dogshit, which didn't go so well with the vegetables; perhaps it was the fact that soon thereafter, two hundred meters down, a competitor opened up his doors and sold apples and pears for only half of what Mr. Akgül was asking: Aldi.^[1] Had he offered his apricots, "the best apricots ever eaten in Berlin," in Bergmannstraße,^[2] there probably wouldn't have been a single one left. Even at a price of 3 Euro. On Eylauer Straße, however, even Berlin's best apricot didn't stand a chance.

And so he came up with something else. Cleared away the fruit crates and set up a refrigerator with butter, gouda, milk, *Mettwurst* sausage, ham, and yogurt. Stocked a shelf full of noodles and tomato paste, jams and Nutella. You know, the kind of stuff that the people on Eylauer Straße eat. And the people on Eylauer Straße were nearly all Germans. With five-liter buckets of Turkish yogurt, garlic sausages, and flatbread, Mr. Akgül would have quickly gone out of business on Eylauer Straße.

But it is not only the selection of goods that is German. The tone in Mr. Akgül's small store is also German. It is the defiant humor of the Berlin pensioners with their sayings, the charmingly brash style of those who buy canned beer, the complaining and critical tone of those who are now somehow living "from support" and are still here on this street. They all have much to tell, and since hardly anyone still listens to them other than the baker, the newspaper vendor, and the tavern keeper, Mr. Akgül also talks. He

talks, no matter whether he's selling a book of matches or a case of champagne. He prefers to laugh, make jokes. What else can he do if he doesn't want to be glum? "Three hundred sixty Euro," he says and pushes the pack of Camels toward the customer.

"Three hundred sixty" says his son, too; and like his father, he also has to scratch his head when he adds things up. And yet Cihan Akgül skipped eighth grade; Cihan even got into the Lessing Gymnasium a long time ago, and they don't take just anyone there, certainly not every Turk. They took him; in two years he'll graduate. Nonetheless, in the afternoons he is often still in his father's shop, makes the same stupid jokes, because stupid jokes are the best ones, anyhow, and makes a math mistake because his eyes had just followed someone who passed by the window. But for every mistake he immediately comes up with a perfect excuse. That bespeaks someone who is learning something in school.

"Next year Cihan won't be in the store anymore," says the father. "He's going to get his *Abitur*." You sense the pride, even though Tacettin Akgül says it matter-of-factly while organizing the newspapers. He's been here for 25 years now; he has three children. But he hasn't learned much German. Barely the headlines. He knows just enough to plunge into Germany's bold-print life. "Gysi's in hospital, did you read that?" Or: "Möllemann's parachute didn't open." Or: "The Germans have too little sex. It says so right here!" A newspaper vendor, says Tacettin Akgül, "is something like a news vendor. In the old days they used to announce news from the tower." So you see, newspaper vendors are always up-to-date.

The only time Tacettin and his son weren't the first ones to know something was when the Americans discovered Saddam Hussein in a hole in the ground. A customer came with the latest news. "Really?," Cihan asked and at first didn't want to believe it. After all, most of what's said between the newspapers and the grocery shelves shouldn't be taken so seriously. Then he said: "That's good. This guy dragged our religion into the dirt!" Even though Cihan isn't a religious or a stern person. Actually, he's always smiling. Like his father. Or Özgür, the cousin who also helps out sometimes. Or the friends of the two, who hang out with them in the store in the evening. Sitting next to the refrigerator, rocking on a chair, downing some kind of energy drink and explaining to the customers why Becks is no longer available in cans. The young man gives a short lecture on the connection between the deposit on cans and the economy and predicts that it won't be long before Becks is sold in cans again.

In the evenings there is generally someone around to talk to. The father is only alone in the mornings. Then everyone comes in in a hurry to get papers, cigarettes, Nutella, and of course the fresh rolls. They're better than the ones from the baker around the corner. You see, Mr. Akgül's wife bakes them. In the new bakery that the Akgüls bought at the other end of the street. Now they have a store, the bakery, and three children. Every morning at five or six she sends the first rolls over to the newspaper store right away. That makes the pensioners happy, the old early birds who can't wait until seven or eight.

That's how they live on Eylauer Street, the Germans with the Turkish store. They live with each other. Not next to each other. Not on Bergmannstraße, not on Oranienstraße, but of all places on the small, triangular Eylauer Straße! Without parallel. From five in the morning until late at night, midnight. In the newspaper store.

NOTES

[1] [☒] Aldi is a popular discount grocery store chain based in Germany – eds.

[2] ^{☒☒} Bergmannstraße is a major shopping street in Kreuzberg – eds.

Source: Peter Lachmann, "Tacettin Akgül's Shop", *Kreuzberger Chronik*, March 2005, edition 65.

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