

Review: *Streets of Memory*

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Amy Mills. *Streets of Memory: Landscape, Tolerance, and National Identity in Istanbul*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010. 308 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8203-3574-2.

In *Streets of Memory* geographer Amy Mills uses oral history to explore relationships among place, personal and collective identities, nationalism, and the Turkish state in Istanbul. The paradox she explores stems from a widely disseminated turn-of-the-21st-century Turkish discourse that praises and values multi-religious cosmopolitanism, portraying it as a legacy of Istanbul's Ottoman past, with selected Istanbul landscapes used to demonstrate this legacy. Yet the religious minorities themselves are almost entirely absent, both from the discourse and from neighborhoods that they dominated as recently as the 1960s. The cosmopolitanism discourse, and the memory-production associated with it, is almost entirely a Turkish-Muslim affair. So, Mills asks, what does this discourse mean? Who generates it and why? What does it illuminate and what does it obfuscate? Whose voices are heard, and whose are silenced? And how do these ideas of cosmopolitanism relate to debates around Turkish national identity?

One neighborhood in particular features prominently in contemporary representations of Istanbul's cosmopolitanism. Called Kuzguncuk, it was originally a village on the Asian side of the Bosphorus that became part of Istanbul's urban fabric during the last Ottoman decades (late 19th and early 20th centuries). Kuzguncuk boasts two synagogues, an Armenian church, two (Greek) Orthodox churches, and a mosque. In addition there are cemeteries pertaining to Orthodox Christians, to Jews, and to Muslims on the peripheries of the neighborhood's historic core. In recent decades Kuzguncuk's relatively unspoiled streetscape made it a popular site for on-location filming of Turkish television serials that evoke the "good old days" of closely-knit urban neighborhoods, in contrast to the crowding and hyper-urbanization that have transformed Istanbul and other major cities since the 1970s.



Restored houses in Kuzguncuk.¹

¹ All photos courtesy of author Amy Mills.



Restored houses in Kuzguncuk.

Mills lived as a participant-observer in Kuzguncuk during the early 2000s and interviewed residents present and past. Her first contacts were among Kuzguncuk's relatively new stratum of urban professionals, who have moved there from other parts of Istanbul. They have been at the forefront of public efforts to preserve or protect historic landscapes and streetscapes, and to propagate an image of Kuzguncuk as emblematic of Istanbul's cosmopolitan heritage and multiethnic landscape. Yet Mills discovered that these urban professionals had few ties to Kuzguncuk's older residents. The urban professionals' work and socialization patterns were markedly different from those of longer time residents. Old-fashioned ties of solidarity, Mills discovered, depend on the presence of women who remain in and around the neighborhood taking care of daily household business. Moreover, the kind of neighborliness that Kuzguncuk's stay-at-home women cultivate has a different (i.e., more intrusive) standard of privacy than that preferred by the recently arrived professionals. So, Mills asks, if the professionals represent a relatively small yet highly visible group of newcomers, what does the neighborhood mean or represent to the larger, non-professional and more settled population?

She noticed that this older population share a nostalgia for the "good old days" when Christians and Jews were part of life in the quarter, but unlike the professionals who deal in abstractions and images (e.g., of the mosque next to the Armenian church), the older population told her anecdotes about individual Christian and Jewish ex-neighbors and their families. They would point out which shops and houses had belonged to Christian and Jewish owners. For the most part these informants expressed regret at the passing of those days.

Already, therefore, Mills had discovered two distinct discourses regarding the neighborhood (which today is almost entirely Muslim and ethnically Turkish). Whereas the gentrifying professionals presented Kuzguncuk as an example of a cosmopolitanism to which they aspired (a perspective that positions them in opposition to culturally Islamizing trends in Turkey today), the older residents saw Kuzguncuk's multiethnic past as emblematic of a time before the rapid urbanization of recent decades changed the appearance and threatened the social cohesion of the neighborhood.

Yet what of the (mostly vanished) Christian and Jewish residents? In the 1920s and 1930s Kuzguncuk's population was majority non-Muslim. Using interviews, Mills seeks out personal memories of Christians and Jews. These include the relatively few and now elderly Christians and Jews who once lived or who still live in the neighborhood, plus their descendants who now reside elsewhere including outside of Turkey. Of the three non-Muslim communities, Mills gives Jews the most thorough coverage followed by Orthodox Christians. Armenian perspectives are absent. This variation reflects Mills's access to informants and their openness to her. Members of a Kuzguncuk neighborhood association in Israel were particularly helpful. Her Jewish and Christian informants speak of another Kuzguncuk: one in which they had good neighborly relations with Muslims, to be sure; but one in which the Turkification policies of the state underscored Christians' and Jews' vulnerability as second-class citizens. At various points the Turkish authorities sanctioned violence or punitive economic measures against its Christian and Jewish citizens, as the government asserted the primary position of ethnic Turks in the old Ottoman imperial capital.



On the left is Aya Panteleimon, the Greek church in Kuzguncuk.



Entrance to synagogue, Kuzguncuk.

So Christians and Jews remembering Kuzguncuk of the mid-20th century portray an environment where they and their neighborhood were viewed as anti-national anomalies. The Turkish nation-state was in the process of self-definition, and Christians and Jews did not fit the template. Good relations with their Muslim neighbors could not overcome these larger pressures. The older, more settled community of Kuzguncuk Muslims whom Mills got to know had themselves been “newcomers” from the Black Sea region in the 1940s and 1950s. Some of these, her Christian and Jewish informants say or imply, benefited from or even participated in Turkish government efforts to suppress or to dispossess them. So for most of her Christian and Jewish informants, Kuzguncuk was the site or locale of their de-nationalization in 20th-century Turkey.



Bostan (orchard/garden) in Kuzguncuk.



Protest signs outside the Kuzguncuk *bostan*: “We won't give up our garden! They are going to build a private school on our garden!”²

There is much more to *Streets of Memory* than this short review can recount, including Mills’s discussion of how a discourse of “tolerance” (toward religious minorities) has served to strengthen and to reify the ethno-religious Turkish national project. Students of oral history will benefit from her demonstration of how such history enriches, modifies and challenges analyses based mainly on published materials. This book demonstrates how oral history illuminates social dimensions and perspectives that may not be accessible any other way. As well, *Streets of Memory* contributes to a wider conversation around how identities are formed and articulated in national(-ist) contexts, including uses of nostalgia and tropes of inter-confessional or inter-ethnic harmony. The book is written in an accessible way and it could be used in an undergraduate classroom.

² The “bostan struggle” (discussed by Mills in her book) is a campaign to preserve a formerly Greek-owned orchard/garden (*bostan*) from development by private interests friendly to Turkey's current ruling party. Author Amy Mills notes, “There's been an approval for an illegal development project, and they have fought it, but a final ruling will come soon that is expected to defend the development. They will be ready with media when it happens but they are exhausted from the long term battle.”