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Panayiota Mini

The disruption of Cretan Muslim life in *My Grandfather's People* (2011): the trauma of displacement and the acquisition of understanding

Abstract

This article examines Çagan Irmak's narrative film *My Grandfather's People* (*Dedemin İnsanları*, 2011), a Turkish production that centers on an elderly Cretan Muslim who was forced to leave Crete as a small boy and migrate to Turkey in 1923, as part of the compulsory population exchange between Turkey and Greece. After situating the film's production in the context of rapprochement and civic cooperation between Turkey and Greece after the 1990s, the article focuses on the way in which Irmak presents the mass exodus of Cretan Muslims from their native island in 1923 and the effects of that disruption on the migrants' lives. By examining the way in which the plot unfolds, and similarities among characters and narrative situations, the paper argues that in *My Grandfather's People* the forced displacement of Muslims from Crete in 1923 functions as a disruptive historical event that brings to the fore a wide range of traumatic experiences across cultures and people: the loss of one's home, friends, and language; the feeling of dislocation in subsequent settlements; tensions and conflicts in interpersonal and interfamily relationships; a persistent sense of uprootedness; and lifelong, heart-wrenching nostalgia. At the same time, the film proposes ways of dealing with such tragic discontinuities, if not on the level of politics at least on that of interpersonal contact, thus constituting a tale promoting open-mindedness, tolerance, and mutual understanding.

Keywords: Cretan Muslims, migrants in cinema, Turkish cinema, Çagan Irmak, population exchange, Greek-Turkish rapprochement

In 1923, ten years after its formal union with Greece, the island of Crete underwent one of the most consequential social and political experiences in its 20th century history: a population exchange, in which about 24,000 Cretan Muslims (Andriotis 2004, 85) left Crete and relocated to Turkey. At the same time, a somewhat higher number of Christian Orthodox Greeks from Turkey started a new life in Crete.[1] This exchange was part of the 1923 Greek-Turkish population exchange, a provision of the Lausanne Convention (also known as the Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations) of 30 January 1923, later included in the Treaty

1 According to official Greek censuses, there were 28,821 refugees in Crete in 1923. By 1928 the number had risen to 32,671 (*Apografi prosfigon 1923-2022*, 89-90). It should be noted that the "1923 exchange" continued well into and even beyond 1924.

of Lausanne (24 July 1923). The Lausanne Convention directly affected more than 1.5 million people: about 1.2 million Orthodox Christians from Anatolia and 360,000 Muslims from Greece.[2] According to the convention, "As from the 1st May, 1923, there shall take place a compulsory exchange of Turkish nationals of the Greek Orthodox religion established in Turkish territory, and of Greek nationals of the Moslem religion established in Greek territory" (Article 1). Emigrants would lose the nationality of the country they were leaving and acquire that of their destination country (Article 7). In addition, they were barred from returning to Turkey or Greece "without the authorization of the Turkish Government or of the Greek Government respectively" (Article 1).[3]

The 1923 population exchange between Greece and Turkey and its repercussions over generations are at the core of several recent Turkish and Greek films. Feature-length productions include the Turkish films *Dedemin Insanlari* (*My Grandfather's People*, 2011, Cağan Irmak), *Kardes Nereye: Mübadele* (*Where Are You Going Bro? The Exchange*, 2011, Ömer Asan), and *Evdeki Yabancılar* (*Strangers in the House*, 2012, Ulas Gunes Kacargil and Dilek Keser),[4] and the Greek titles *Το ταξίδι* (*The Journey*, 2000, Maria Mavrikou) and *Από τις δυο πλευρές του Αιγαίου: Διωγμός και ανταλλαγή πληθυσμών, Τουρκία-Ελλάδα 1922-1924* (*From Both Sides* of the *Aegean: Expulsion and Exchange of Populations, Turkey-Greece, 1922-1924*, 2012, Maria Iliou). The two Greek films are documentaries covering the experiences of Cretan Muslims.[5]

A Cretan Muslim is also the protagonist in Irmak's drama *My Grandfather's People*,[6] a well-made film of classical structure intended to appeal to viewers' emotions through its poignant story, neat plot twists, and affective music. In undertaking a textual analysis of Irmak's film, this article discusses the way in which the director conceives of the Cretan Muslims' mass exodus from Greece in 1923 and its effects on people's lives. In *My Grandfather's People*, the forced displacement brings to the fore a range of traumatic experiences: the loss of one's home, friends, and language; tensions in interpersonal and interfamily relationships; and heartbreaking lifelong nostalgia. At the same time, the plot and the similarities across characters and narrative situations construct a lesson in overcoming prejudice and intolerance, accepting the *other*, and dealing with life's tragic discontinuities, if not on the political level at least on the level of interpersonal contact. The production of such messages through a film focusing on a Cretan Muslim was

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2 Hirschon 2003, 14. Other sources give a higher total of 2 million people (1.5 million Orthodox Christians and 500,000 Muslims). It is rather difficult to estimate the exact number, since the Lausanne Convention retroactively included in the exchange all those who "had been obliged to immigrate or had immigrated" since 18 October 1912 (Article 3), the start of the First Balkan War.

3 The text of the Lausanne Convention in its original French language and in English translation is included in Société des Nations 1925, 75-87.

4 Other recent Turkish films about people's relocations in a Turkish-Greek context, without having the 1923 exchange at their core, are *Bulutları Beklerken* (*Waiting for the Clouds*, 2003, Yeşim Ustaoğlu) and *Rüzgarlar* (*Winds*, 2013, Selim Evci). For a joint discussion of *Waiting for the Clouds*, *My Grandfather's People*, and *Where Are You Going Bro? The Exchange*, see Mini 2024.

5 For a comparison of the two films, see Dendramis 2022.

6 *My Grandfather's People* is, to my knowledge, the first Turkish feature-length narrative film to have a Cretan Muslim as its main protagonist. An earlier, well-known Turkish cultural product on the experiences of a Cretan Muslim was Ahmet Yorulmaz's novel *Savaşın Çocukları: Girit'ten Sonra Ayvalık* (*Children of War: After Crete*, Ayvalık, 1997). See Brody 2021. In 2005, this novel was translated into Greek (Yorulmaz 2005).

feasible thanks to developments in Turkish society and in Greek-Turkish relations during the late 20th-early 21st centuries, which we will briefly examine.

The Film's Production Context

For many decades after 1923, Turkish official discourse remained silent on the trauma of the thousands of Muslim emigrants. The population exchange of 1923 coincided with the birth of modern Turkey, in which the ideology and rhetoric of a unified, homogenous Turkish nation prevailed and the distinctive identity of the emigrants was forced into oblivion.[7] In the second half of the 1990s, however, a series of factors made it possible for their (mostly third generation) descendants to discuss the origins of the 1923 exchangees (Alpan 2012, 229). The social and constitutional changes towards democratization in Turkey, brought about by its efforts to join the European Union, created conditions that allowed "previously unavailable perspectives on history to be discussed," while contemporary national conflicts encouraged reflection on similar cases from the past (Köksal 2017, xvi-xxiii). Furthermore, the development of information technology made researching and tracking of family origins easier for the third generation than it had previously been (Alpan 2012, 230).[8]

In addition, after the 1990s, Greek-Turkish rapprochement and civic cooperation grew.[9] The spirit of friendship and cooperation between the two countries became especially evident after 1999, when a deadly earthquake hit Turkey, and had a positive impact on film matters (Mini 2017, 62). It was in this context that film productions on Greek-Turkish relations and encounters of the past appeared, including *My Grandfather's People*. Irmak's film is itself the product of a third-generation Cretan Muslim. One of Turkey's most popular directors,[10] Irmak is the grandson of a Muslim who left Rethymno, Crete, in 1923 as a child. His grandfather yearned to visit his homeland, but could not, and finally hanged himself in despair (Doumanis 2011). To make the last part of the film, which takes place in Crete, Irmak traveled to his grandfather's home region and cooperated with the Cretan production company Indigo View, located in the town of Chania. As Irmak stated in an interview, "the film in essence refers to the friendship between Greeks and Turks," and described filming in Crete as follows: "Everything is too intense for me. I feel I know the people, the places, everything."[11] In addition, one of the films Irmak has singled out for its depiction of the close relationship between Greeks and Turks and had an influence on *My Grandfather's People* is Tassos Boulmetis's *Πολίτικη κουζίνα* (*A Touch of Spice*, 2003), another

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7 Alpan 2012. For the varying Greek discourses on the identity of those who emigrated from Turkey to Greece at the time, see James 2001; Alpan 2012, 204-206.

8 For the factors that have contributed to the younger generations' increased interest in their origins since the 1990s in Turkey, see also Nerantzaki 2023. Nerantzaki's research specifically focuses on the descendants of Cretan Muslims.

9 On Turkish-Greek relations of the time, see Iğsiz 2008, 451-487; Birden and Rumelili 2009, 321-330; Alpan 2012, 230; Köksal 2017, xv-xvi.

10 Irmak has established a reputation in both cinema and television. His work is best known for commenting on political and social issues through traditional narrative forms close to melodrama. Dönmez-Colin 2014, 321-323. For a detailed, illuminating discussion of Irmak's films, see also Raw 2017, 89-112.

11 Doumanis 2011. The film's last part was not shot in Rethymno (the grandfather's birthplace), but in the Cretan village of Fres, where several Greek and foreign films have been shot thanks to its convenient topography. For the filming of *My Grandfather's People* in Crete, see Komi, Mini, Tsagarakis 2021.

testament to Greek-Turkish rapprochement in the early 21st century. A Greek-Turkish-French co-production, *A Touch of Spice* also focused on a grandfather figure: a Greek who resided in Turkey and remained there after the "September events" of 1955 and the subsequent mass emigration of ethnic Greeks from Istanbul to Greece.[12]

My Grandfather's People: A Tale of Tolerance and Mutual Understanding

The story of *My Grandfather's People* mostly unfolds during the 1970s and centers on the title character, the grandfather, Mehmet (Çetin Tekindor). As a small boy in 1923, Mehmet had been forced to leave his home in Rethymno along with thousands of other Muslims and migrate to Turkey. For the rest of his life, he longs to return to Crete and see his home again. Despite this lifelong yearning, he dies without fulfilling his dream. The film ends about twenty years after Mehmet's death, when his grandson Ozan (Ushan Çakir) embarks on the trip that his grandfather had not been allowed to take and visits his grandfather's birthplace.

In the film, the 1923 compulsory exodus of Muslims from Crete is dramatized through flash-backs illustrating the grandfather's memories. The flashbacks last about eleven minutes. At a dinner with his family and friends, the old man claims, "Some things just cannot be forgotten. For example, the place of your birth, even the places you remember just barely when you have grown up a bit." He then narrates (Fig. 1):[13]

> I remember a white house in Crete, in the town of Rethymno. You could hear the sea from far off (…). I can still hear the sound from way back then. There was also a tavern in the distance. We could hear the noise at night. A girl would sing. I have no idea if the tavern is still there or not… Anyway. The rooms were all whitewashed and the whole place smelled wonderfully of the sea. Always hot. A bright yellow heat. The cicadas would chirp constantly.

As Mehmet speaks, Irmak begins alternating between him in the present and brief scenes in the past depicting him in happy moments (Fig. 2-3). When the grandfather mentions 1923 and the exchange, the images of the past become darker and the characters look sad and concerned. Both Mehmet's narration and Irmak's filming reflect the grief felt by the Muslims as they are forced from their homes, carrying a few belongings and symbolic objects with them, such as the lemon tree sapling that Mehmet's mother, Fatma (Ezgi Mola), takes from their yard.[14] Irmak's reconstruction of 1923 relays the trauma of being separated from friends and neighbors and the odyssey from Crete to Turkey, during which some people, including Mehmet's baby brother, fall sick and die (Fig. 4-5).

Fig. 1. The grandfather (Çetin Tekindor) narrating his experiences of 1923.

12 For Irmak's appraisal of *A Touch of Spice*, see Kiziridou 2015, 24. Due to their similarities, *A Touch of Spice* and *My Grandfather's People* have been discussed together in essays and research projects. See, for instance, Levent 2016; Tsibiridou 2016; Basci 2023.

13 All the images in this article are screenshots from *My Grandfather's People* (production companies: Ay Yapim and Most Production) taken by the author and used under fair use standards.

14 "It was as if she was taking the house with her, too," Mehmet explains.

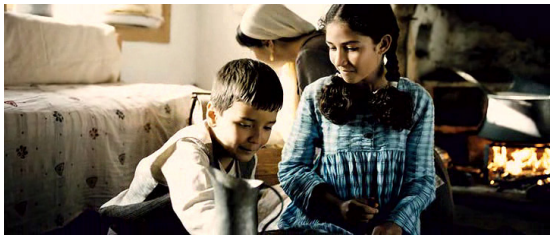


Fig. 2-3. Mehmet and his family in happy moments on Crete before the population exchange.

Furthermore, it depicts the sanitary procedures that the emigrants are forced to undergo upon arriving in Turkey (Fig. 6). Apart from this information, which evokes the actual conditions of the 1923 exchange, Irmak stresses two further issues: uprootedness and intolerance.


Fig. 4-5. Irmak's reconstruction of the odyssey of the Muslims from Crete to Turkey in 1923.

Fig. 6. Irmak's reconstruction of the sanitary procedures that the emigrants underwent in Turkey.

Coupled with the pain of nostalgia and loss, a sense of uprootedness permeates the entire film, as it is the theme of the grandfather's life. He has spent all of his years in Turkey wanting to go back to Crete – to return, in other words, to the origins of his existence. From the coast where he now lives, he casts bottles containing information about himself into the Aegean Sea. The grandfather hopes that someday someone will find one of them and contact him. He also tries to visit Crete, but his efforts are constantly thwarted by political upheavals: the Turkish invasion of Cyprus and the Turkish military coup of 1980. So strong is Mehmet's desire to return to Crete that he eventually disappears into the sea (apparently taking his own life), as if making his last literal and metaphorical effort to transcend the border between Turkey and Crete. This sense of uprootedness and loss is also expressed through his use of language. Mehmet cannot help sporadically uttering some Greek words (e.g. "Ηρθαμε" / "We arrived," "Ελα εδώ!" / "Come here!"). Close to the film's end, as he becomes enraged at the inhumane politics of the military regime, he curses them in Greek ("Άι στο διάβολο! Που να σε πάρει ο διάβολος!" / "Damn you! Go to Hell!"), as if his instincts are more eloquently expressed in his mother tongue. At the


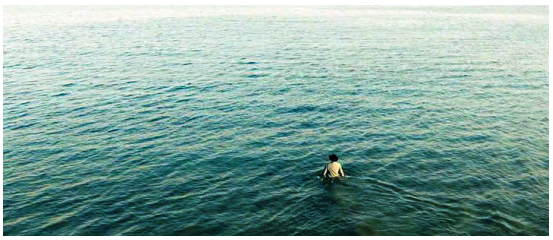

Fig. 7-8. The grandfather hums a Greek song and walks into the Aegean Sea, apparently taking his own life.

end of his life, as he enters the sea, he hums a Greek song, connecting his life's end to its origins through language (Fig. 7-8).[15]

In parallel to nostalgia, Irmak stresses the notions of tolerance and intolerance. During the flashbacks to the 1923 exodus of the Muslims, the director incorporates the reactions of the Cretans to the Muslims. A Greek woman expresses sincere compassion for her Muslim neighbors. Her husband, however, curses at them and wants them out of his country ("Go to hell Turks! Get out of our soil!") (Fig. 9-10). He insists that Turks can never be friends with Greeks. "Turks should thank God that we haven't killed them," he says. The Muslims' confrontation with intolerance continues after the exchange; upon arrival in Turkey, they find themselves in a country where they do not feel welcome and whose language they do not understand. As Mehmet comments in present time, "Over there we were the spawn of the Turk, and here we were Greek infidels."

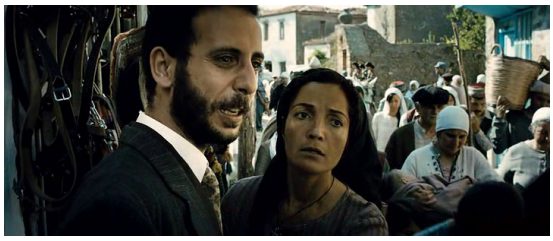


Fig. 9-10. A Greek man curses at the Cretan Muslims, while his wife expresses compassion to Mehmet's mother.

Irmak constructs the narrative in *My Grandfather's People* around overcoming prejudice and creating acceptance of the other. To do so, the film recounts a series of similar situations, spreading the drama of the old man among different people. In addition, a central role is given to Mehmet's grandson, Ozan (Durukan Çelikkaya), a boy of around eight, who adores his grandfather but loathes his foreign roots. Ozan is a typical young patriot. Brought up during a period of pronounced nationalism, he is used to saluting soldiers whenever he sees them (Fig. 11). He is excessively proud to be a Turk, keeps crying "I'm Turk!" and is intolerant of minorities. He secretly collects and breaks the bottles Mehmet drops into the Aegean, and

15 The song, "Γιαλό-γιαλό" ("The Shore, The Shore"), is a traditional serenade from the Ionian islands. The lyrics refer to both going and coming to a seashore and remembering some words.

Fig. 11. Ozan (Durukan Çelikkaya) saluting some Turkish soldiers.

Fig. 12. Tahsin (Hakan Arkal), the immigrant boy.

feels ashamed because some people consider his grandfather an infidel. The film unfolds as a series of life lessons Ozan learns from Mehmet on how to respect people of different national backgrounds and lifestyles and how to overcome hatred.

Thus, next to the grandfather, we see a string of characters who could be termed *others*, people who do not belong to a majority and so are ridiculed and marginalized by the conservative community. These include, first and foremost, a foreign boy, Tahsin (Hakan Arkal) (Fig. 12), whom the grandfather takes on as a shop apprentice. We are not told what Tahsin's origins are; his nationality is not important.[16] What matters is that he functions as a replica of the grandfather as a child. Tahsin belongs to a group of foreign students who are assaulted by Ozan and his classmates while playing war early on in the film. One of Ozan's classmates yells, "Shove off out of our neighborhood," a phrase echoing the one uttered by the Greek man against the grandfather's family in Crete in 1923. In another scene, the Turkish boys including Ozan dress up as warriors and attack the neighborhood where the immigrants live, shouting "War!", obviously replaying situations that go at least as far back as the early 1920s (Fig. 13). Nationalist adults encourage the native boys to be violent against the foreigners, urging them to smash the windows of their houses and sexually harass the girls. Contrary to such reactions, the grandfather's deeds teach Ozan not only to accept but to love Tahsin. Indeed, at the end of the film, Ozan has matured. On the first day of the new school year, he heads to school accompanied by Tahsin and his younger sister, who has found what she calls a second brother in Ozan, a person to hold hands with (Fig. 14). One object that Mehmet uses midway through the plot to open up Ozan's consciousness is a handmade kaleidoscope, which seems to unlock the film's message. When there is nothing more than small pieces of plain white paper in the instrument, one sees virtually nothing. But

Fig. 13. Turkish boys, including Ozan, attack the neighborhood where the immigrants live.

Fig. 14. On the first day of the new school year, Tahsin's sister holds Ozan's hand.

16 Basci (2023, 691) identifies Tahsin, as well as the rest of the film's migrants, as Kurdish.

Fig. 15. Ozan's kindness to Perouset (Hümeyra) is rewarded with a kiss.

Fig. 16. Ertzan (Mehmet Ali Kaptanlar) and Haktan (Yigit Ari) leave the grandfather's house holding hands.

once different colored objects are inserted, one can see shapes resembling flowers. Uniformity lacks interest and appeal. Difference creates variety and beauty.

Another minority character in the film is the eccentric Perouset (Hümeyra). She is perpetually waiting for her fiancée, who has been killed for his political beliefs. At some point in the film, Ozan directs almost lethal cruelty against her. Earlier, responding to Ozan's question, "How did she go mad?" Mehmet says, "She's not crazy; she has a different way of thinking." For Ozan, gaining maturity will involve coming to appreciate Perouset's way of thinking, and learning to express kindness and love to her, which is eventually rewarded with a friendly kiss (Fig. 15). Another atypical character is the beggar (Ünal Silver). His unusual physique and clothes make him scary to young Ozan, who gradually understands that people's meanness is to blame for the man's confused state of mind. The film also hints at an appreciation of homosexual people. Ertzan (Mehmet Ali Kaptanlar) endures the homophobic ridicule of some men, but finds support from the grandfather, who accepts him and his partner Haktan (Yigit Ari) among his family and friends (Fig. 16).[17]

Obviously, Irmak stresses the sense of loss and intolerance the grandfather suffered from as a small boy in Crete and Turkey, as they are experiences that do not disappear along with the historical event. They reemerge throughout history, touching various peoples and communities. The film reminds us that we need to be open to listening to other people's stories and appreciating the notion of brotherhood despite nationality, language differences, or way of life. This stance prevails towards the film's end as Ozan, now a young man, travels to Crete and meets Eleonora Theodoraki (Eirini Inglesi), the owner of his grandfather's house in Rethymno. "This is your house," the Greek woman tells Ozan. She shows him pictures of his grandfather as a child; at that moment, the song "Γκιουλμπαχάρ" ("Gülbahar") starts playing from a nearby tavern.

Just before the end of the film, Eleonora and Ozan throw a bottle into the sea. As they do, "Gülbahar" again begins to play in the background. Containing mostly Greek verses intermingled with Turkish and Arabic words, the song hints at a felicitous mixing of all three cultures. In fact, the title of this well-known Greek song by Vassilis Tsitsanis (1915-1984) is a Turkish female

17 Due to these characters, *My Grandfather's People* has been included and discussed in Özmen, Parlayandemir and Çöteli 2017, 481. In one scene, Ertzan and Haktan leave the grandfather's house holding hands. In some online uploads of *My Grandfather's People*, this physical contact between the two men is edited out, a cut suggesting the persistence of intolerance.

name meaning "spring rose."[18] As the song continues and the closing credits roll, we move to photographs of real people, beginning with Irmak's actual grandfather, Mehmet Yavas, upon whose life the director based his story and to whose memory the film is dedicated.

In *My Grandfather's People*, the year 1923 marks a time of tension and disruption for many people, including thousands of Cretan Muslims who were forced from their homeland. In the retelling of the events by Irmak, a third-generation Cretan Muslim, this traumatic period becomes a master class in open-mindedness, tolerance, and mutual understanding. Starting from a tragic historical event that uprooted millions of people in Turkey and Greece, the plot and making of *My Grandfather's People* argue for the potential to overcome trauma through personal effort and thoughtfulness, despite obstacles often created by prejudiced individuals and policies.

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18 The lyrics of the refrain are: "Γιαραμπίμ το γιαχαμπί/Γιαραμπίμ το γιαχαβάχ/Αχ λουλούδι μου, Γκιούλμπαχαρ/Αράπ χαβάς/γιαβάς γιαβάς/Μου το 'χες πει με φιλιά/σαν σε κρατούσα αγκαλιά." In addition to Γκιούλμπαχαρ/Gülbahar, "χαβάς" and "γιαβάς γιαβάς" ("havası" and "yavaş yavaş") are Turkish words. "Γιαραμπίμ" and "γιαχαμπί" ("Ya Rabbim" and "ya habi(bi)") are Arabic; and "γιαχαβάχ"/"Ya havah" pseudo-Arabic.

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