

Istanbul Court Hearing, Nov 24, 2005

Dear Jane and Sara,

I do hope you are well, and that all is well as can be in the office. I have just returned from Istanbul, and have sent by fax a participants' list. I take it for granted that Eugène has been in touch about general reports, and obviously Sara's report on the development of Ragip Zarakolou's trial is up-to-date. I thought you might like an observer's view of the proceedings...?

The trial was an experience for the participant public, mainly bussed to the district court-house by ever-efficient organiser Sanar. The main court of justice hall was like any other, undecorated concrete floors and corridors and mini-cup tea service all around. Half-an-hour after designated time the case was called, and we filed into a fairly small room, maybe 8x9 m square, dominated by the main desk, behind which a stout middle-aged lady unsmilingly resided. On her right hand side, behind a low desk, the robed prosecutor read slowly through the offensive parts of the book; on the left, the two lawyers for the defence placed one paper after another before the judge to be stamped and registered.

Upstanding in front of the judge, an elderly gentleman, white curly hair and likewise beard, incredibly mild though serious throughout, Ragip faced the proceedings unflinchingly but probably without high expectations. Both judge and prosecutor raised an eyebrow when some twenty obviously onlookers crammed into the room, together with say ten journalists, standing room only. The prosecutor's gaze swept unconcernedly over this group, identifying without trouble that half of them obviously understood nothing at all of the proceedings, and to his mind without saying belonged to the 'rent-a-crowd'-category. The stern thin-faced bailiff made himself wordlessly understood when he told one of our number to quit chewing gum, and was evidently not going to tolerate anyone even burping.

Some twenty minutes maybe, the separate parties reading their pleadings, the prosecutor reading aloud from the 90-year-old offensive texts, the judge shuffling files, stamping them for the record and following strict procedure slow-motion through the set process. Ragip read out his final statement, then had it duly filed too. Before the proceedings, Sanar had underlined that if seated, in no circumstances were we to relax and cross our legs – which would immediately been taken as a sign of gross disrespect. Few were seated anyway. But exactly when Ragip read his statement, the prosecutor, in a smooth confident way relaxed in his seat, stared at the judge - and crossed his legs.

The judge said something, folded her papers, the session concluded, and we all filed out immediately asking what had happened. Which is illustrated by a few snapshots taken before a policeman politely informed us that this was not permitted.

Impressions large and small, an overflowing signal system of unspoken information floating around what was said and how, and little to raise the hearts of those believing in the values of either PEN or the Age of Enlightenment – except the civil courage by the Ragip and like-minded colleagues. Eminently worthy of the support of those more lucky by birth or abode.

Yours always

Terry