

## STUDENT GOES TO PRISON – TURKEY 1968

“Stop! What you want?” That was about the limit of his English and I didn’t speak Turkish - well, just the numbers and some greetings hastily learned on the way – but between us it was enough to get me into jail. And 1968, ten years before *Midnight Express*, was not the best of times to be inside Istanbul’s Central Prison.

It was summer, the end of our second year in College, and Anthony and I, both reading classics, had teamed up with Girton classicist Barbara to travel third class from Victoria Station to Istanbul on what we romantically called *The Orient Express* – in fact train, Channel ferry and then two more trains, all the way for four days and three nights. Two others, one from College and one from Girton, were to do the same trip a few days later and then join us at the far end. Third class meant a compartment for six people; and sleeping, we decided, meant two on the floor, two on the benches, and two in the luggage racks, thankfully then solid iron. I’m 6’2” and in the event was hugely grateful to my tent, unrolled from the rucksack, for providing a little cushioning ‘on the rack’.

So we were three. Then there was an alarmingly large Yugoslav woman who, frankly, needed two seats. And fortunately just one more, who turned out to be a lady in her early 20s from, we seem to remember, the north of England; and she was travelling alone. That wasn’t good: the Western media (then just newspapers, radio and TV) made it clear that Turkey was not a place for a woman to visit alone. Aware of that, we strong masculine chaps were naturally determined to protect our Cambridge womenfolk during the trip and earn their undying admiration; but seriously, it was worrying. We had planned to look at Istanbul, then cross the country diagonally south-eastwards via Konya by bus, and then work our way back through the classical sites along the southern and western coasts; but we had no idea about her. Eventually she told us.

She – let’s call her Kate – was an office worker. She had received a rough handwritten letter from her boyfriend, a long-distance lorry driver, saying he’d delivered his cargo to Istanbul and had then got into a fight in a bar. Someone had been knifed; he had been arrested; and he was in prison. Kate had resigned and had set off to try to find him. She had no idea where he was but she didn’t care – she was in love, she was desperate, and she was determined. Admiration all round, mixed with not a little consternation; but at least we had time to consider it as we trundled through Europe.

The journey was fascinating. It was the Cold War and once through Winston’s Iron Curtain the trains were locked, armed guards patrolled the narrow corridors, our papers were checked time and again, and all we could do was catch glimpses through the windows of life in those - to us excited 20-year-olds – alien and mysterious worlds. I remember seeing women in smocks and headscarves reaping in the fields, with the domes of Sofia’s churches as a backdrop – a timeless mediaeval sight.

What to do however? Four weeks and very limited cash meant we were relying on buses, places to pitch our tents, cheap rooms to rent and, we hoped, more or less friendly help; but our only real resources were maps and guide books augmented by our youthfully optimistic

and Micawberesque belief that ‘Something will turn up’ – which didn’t answer our worries about Kate at all.

Perhaps the four days were a blessing. We had time to explore a mixture of conscience, worry, a sense of duty, and frankly fear that a man was incarcerated and a woman embroiled in possibly uncontrollable controversy. Heroes we were not, but we felt we had to do something.

Arrival in Istanbul saw us pitching tents in a field somewhere in the suburbs, thence to the city centre with no idea how many prisons there were or, in fact, whether he was still in the city at all. No internet! No phones! Just ambling and asking and hoping, in a strange country. As it happened, on that first day we found ourselves in the Blue Mosque area and were told that the central prison was behind it. It was a start.

Yours truly was chosen to march manfully and with faux bravado up to the prison doors to accost the guards – but of course they very firmly accosted me, fingers on triggers, with the blunt dialogue above. I can’t exactly remember the way it all went but finally an officer was called; I managed to explain our quest; and I asked to be allowed to go inside. Amazingly he agreed, so in I went.

Blackness, unholy noise, and smells. From the bright summer sunshine into a tomb of cages. Deep darkness relieved only by naked lightbulbs suspended from the ceiling. Once the eyes had settled I was led by a guard along the walkways, neatly geometric between cages filled with men: men shouting, men groaning, men crying, men standing, men crouching, men silent, men trying to sleep. The din was dreadful. All I could do as I was taken round was to shout out the name of the Englishman and hope that if he was in the prison he might hear above the uproar. And suddenly someone shouted back. There he was. It was a heart-stopping moment. Having had no idea where he was – he could have been anywhere in Turkey – we’d found him at the first attempt.

He screamed at me: “Are you the ambassador? Get me out! Get me out!”, and more. He said he thought he had been there for six months. No one had visited. As far as he was concerned no one even knew he was there. The guard allowed us to talk through the bars of the cage once he had pushed to the front. I told him we were just British students. I said his girlfriend was outside. At that point he fell on his knees and wept. He said that before he had been imprisoned he had managed to scribble a message on a piece of paper, had given a guard money and the UK address, and had asked him to put it in an envelope and post it. He had no idea if he’d done that. As far as he was concerned he could be in prison for life, unknown to the outside world. Mine was the first English voice he had heard, and he begged for help. All I could do was promise that we would do our best.

So out into the dazzling daylight to tell the others that we’d found him, first time round. Shock, delight, excitement, Kate’s overwhelming emotion – but what next? Back to the tents, and the next day off to find the British consulate. We knew they’d sort it out.

So that’s what we did: the following morning we were at the consulate eager to tell the story and to get Our Men in Istanbul (only men then, probably) on the case, to put some

process around it, to ensure that he was protected and if possible to extricate him from that hell-hole.

They were not interested. As far as they were concerned this was an embarrassment: UK-Turkish relations were at a sensitive point; we had to understand and respect Turkish ways; no one wanted to rock boats; goodwill meant not challenging how things worked out there, at least for the moment; best to leave it alone.

Perhaps you can appreciate our anger and disgust, and remember just how much emotion and outrage 20-year-olds can wield! This was not right. We had found him. This man desperately needed help. We couldn't ignore it and nor could they. Again, we're not exactly sure of the words we used but after a while they clearly started listening, perhaps realising that media stories of incarcerated Brits plus supine diplomats could harm HMG and its 'relations' more than them holding to their passive stance. So they promised 'to do something' and we had to be content with that.

Then there was the question of Kate: we had done what we could and now we felt we had to start our real holiday, so what of her? The men in suits said they'd look after her; and we had to accept that also.

So that was it. All that remained was for us to give our addresses to a hugely relieved and grateful young woman and to ask her to let us know what happened. She promised to do that, so the next day we were at Sirkeci Station to meet our other two Cantab friends off the train, and the five of us set off on what proved to be a terrific journey around that amazing country.

We never heard anything. Half a century on, we still wonder.

David Peace  
Classics, 1966-69