

A Conversation with Roger and Ida Gilodo

Roger: My grandfather and grandmother were living in Tashkent [formerly part of the Soviet Union]. My grandfather was a capitalist in the cotton business. When the Bolshevik Revolution began in 1917, because he was a capitalist, one his friends arrived in the evening and said to him, "You'd better run; they're coming to get you." The day after he escaped, revolutionaries put a gun in my grandmother's mouth, threatening, "We will count to five and if you don't tell us where your husband is, we will blow your head off." . . . When they understood that she really didn't know, they didn't hear from my grandfather for three years. Three years later, they hear the news from Baku, Azerbaijan, announcing that my grandfather was there. They (my grandfather and father) had crossed the border and settled in Adana, in Çukurova, the epicentre of cotton production. My father and grandfather opened and ran a cotton factory there. . . The situation had changed after that because they were subjected to Wealth Tax. Since my grandfather was an affluent man, they demanded a large amount of money from him, which forced him to sell the factory and yet still go into debt. . . After this, they left for Istanbul. I spent my childhood in Adana but I was born in Istanbul. This is the story from my father's side.

Ida: I don't have such a thrilling story. My parents were both born in Turkey. My father is an Ashkenazi, meaning, a German Jew, coming from that period. My mother was Sephardic. My grandmother used to live with us at home; they used to talk Ladino amongst themselves. By gaining familiarity with the sounds, I also learned this language at home.

Roger: Then we, both of our families, settled in Istanbul. We met there. We got married in Istanbul and later, I went to the army. I chose Kilis for my military service.¹ Life was hard in Kilis, too. Ida came with me. Right at the border . . . there were smugglers, smuggling this and that. We were transferred to Gaziantep as a favour and stayed there for two years.² Later, we decided to go to Israel after I finished my military service. We lived in Israel from 1970 to 1975. I was also in the army there. But after that, I got tired of being called into the army all the time. Then we applied for immigration to Canada. It took about a year and then we came here, and we had a chance. We came here towards the end of 1975. There was a recession here in North America in 1974. When 1975 ended, there was a boom. We arrived in Canada in November of 1975, right?

Ida: November 1975, yes.

Roger: After that, I found three jobs in ten days and started working at one. It was a cable TV company. Later, we were transferred to Vancouver, and then we were transferred back here (to Toronto) three years later. Around that time, Rogers [the

company] bought the company I was working for. And I worked for this company and for Rogers for twenty years. In the meantime, Ida also worked.

Ida: I started to work in a translation company, but the company *topu atmak* [went belly up], in other words, it went bankrupt.

Roger: Ida is an only child. I have a sister who lives in New York. After a while, my parents moved to New York. . . We arrived and lived in Vancouver for three years. In the meantime, we had children. One was born in Israel and the other was born in Toronto. One of them lives in Vancouver now. We have two grandchildren in Vancouver and the other two live here. We are very close to the ones living here; we are constantly in touch.

Övgü: Which languages do you speak?

Roger: Ida and I speak Turkish with one other.

Ida: We speak a very bad Turkish by adding some English words, though (laughs).

Roger: They told us when we came here, “Don’t expect a good life like in Israel. It’s going to be hard; that’s just the beginning,” *falan filan* [and so on and so on]. But as I said, there was a boom. There was a Canadian man I was working with in Israel at that time. He had joined another company and he offered me a job. And as I said, I found a job in ten days. Ida also started working. So we didn’t face that much difficulty.

Ida: And there was no harm or benefit to being Sephardic. We were not regarded from that perspective, were we?

Roger: Yes, yes [agreeing].

Ida: There are many organizations that help newcomers. We never went to any of them. We took care of ourselves and we were lucky. We started our life by buying one table, four chairs and two beds.

Övgü: Why did you decide to move to Israel?

Ida: Frankly, we went there because we couldn’t see a future in Turkey.

Roger: Also, the military service was difficult because there were smugglers at the border in Kilis and so on. Every day we were hearing gunshots.

Ida: There was smuggling in Kilis. There was no antisemitism. Our names were pronounced as Roger and Ida, with the Turkish pronunciation. We never wore headscarves. We got along very well with our neighbours. I would visit at a neighbour's house because I didn't have anything to do. Later, I gave English lessons to the smugglers' children to pass time.

Övgü: What kind of memories do you have with respect to your experiences in Israel, Turkey and Canada?

Ida: I mean I still miss the food, the sea, Burgazada. . .³ I have not forgotten. So, there is a longing but my longing turned toward to the past, to my youth. If I go now, I feel like I'll probably be very disappointed. Indeed, we lived well in Israel, too, but the political situation was complicated there. We said, "Let's go find a peaceful country." We applied to Canada and came here. And it was a very good decision. We have not seen antisemitism here.

Roger: We are not that religious.

Ida: No, we are not religious. We call all our friends "TIC," meaning Turkey, Israel and Canada.

We felt good in Israel, too. Actually, one of our daughters was born there. We felt very close to everyone. We learned the language. We made a lot of Israeli friends. While the political situation was becoming intense, we said, "Let's go to a place where the politics won't pose any problems." We used to listen to the news three times a day in Israel. When we arrived in Canada, we turned on the local channel to see what was going on in the world and the first news was that someone had resigned. We said to ourselves, "What a beautiful country we came to [laughs]. If this is the most important news, we are in a wonderland." And indeed, it has been a very good country for us in a way.

Övgü: What does being Canadian mean to you?

Ida: Does it correspond to "How happy is the one who says, 'I'm a Turk?'"⁴ [We all laugh.]

Roger: We were lucky. I have progressed very well in my career.

Ida: Mine was fine, too. I can tell you something about being Canadian. We are both passionate about sports. We watch basketball and we also have the Blue Jays' uniforms. . . [At this point, Roger stands up and shows the Toronto Blue Jays t-shirt he's wearing.] And whenever "Canada" is said, something happens in me. I mean, I cannot

stay completely cold. I think we totally fit into the culture of this place, more than our other friends do, if I'm not mistaken. I feel quite Canadian but my "Turkishness" is not completely gone, my "Israeliness" is not completely gone. There's this complexity. . . I even see myself in Nişantaşı sometimes, in my dreams, but I speak English and I have a Hebrew friend. . .⁵ There is something left from everywhere . . . from every country. . . People don't forget. So, I don't know. . . I can never forget that island, for me, Istanbul means Burgazada.

Roger: We speak Turkish here with most of our friends.

Övgü: Is being Canadian an identity that carries all these multiple identities?

Ida: Probably. . . There's no such thing as a true Canadian, anyway. Maybe our children are. . . Afterall, if you weren't born and raised here, you carry the culture of the place you came from. Most of our friends are Jews from Turkey.

Övgü: Why is that?

Ida: Language means a lot. Language and sense of humour. . . It's the trick of *leb demeden leblebiyi anlamak*, [which can be translated as "understanding what the other is going to say before they end their sentence" or "being able to read someone's thoughts?"]

Övgü: I'm thinking of how to translate *leb demeden leblebiyi anlamak* right now. [We all laugh]

Roger: Büyükbabam ve büyükannem Taşkent'te yaşıyorlardı. Büyükbabam pamuk işinde kapitalist idi ve ne zamanki Bolşevikler ihtilal yaptılar 1917'de ona bir arkadaşını akşam gelmiş demiş ki "Sen kaç çünkü seni almaya geliyorlar" bir kapitalist olduğu için. O da kaçmış ertesi gün gelmişler; büyükannemin ağzına bir tabanca koymuşlar ve demişler ki "beşe kadar sayacağız ve hani neyse eğer bilmezsen kafanı patlatacağız." . . . Neyse bunlar da anlamışlar ki hakikaten bilmiyor bir üç sene duymamışlar büyükbabamdan. Üç sene sonra Bakü'den, Azerbaycan'dan haber gelmiş büyükbabam orada diye oraya gitmişler. Sınırı geçip Türkiye'ye girmişler ve Adana'ya yerleşmişler, Çukurova'da ve orası da pamuk merkezidi ve babam, büyükbabam orada bir pamuk fabrikası açtılar, işlettiler . . . Neyse ondan sonra durum değişti çünkü Varlık vergisine tabii oldular ve büyükbabam da zengin olduğu için müthiş bir para istediler. Borca girdi şu bu, fabrikasını satmak zorunda kaldı. Neyse ondan sonra İstanbul'a vardılar. Ben de çocukluğumu Adana'da geçirdim gerçi İstanbul'da doğdum. Bu babamın tarafının hikayesi.

Ida: Benim öyle heyecanlı bir hikayem yok. Benim annem babam da ikisi de Türkiye’de doğdu. Babam Aşkenazi’dir, yani Alman Yahudi’si, o dönemden gelme. Annem de Sefarad. Evde büyükannem bizimle otururdu; Ladino konuşurlardı aralarında. Ben de o şekilde kulak dolgunluğu öğrenmiş oldum.

Roger: Fazla dindar değiliz biz.

Ida: Yok, dindar değiliz. Bütün arkadaşlarımız TİK olarak geçiyor. Türkiye, İsrail, Kanada. İsrail’de de iyi hissettik kendimizi aslında bir kızımız orada doğdu. Herkese çok yakın hissettik, lisani öğrendik. Bir sürü İsraili dostlarımız oldu filan. Ondan sonra işte politik durum karışınca dedik “öyle bir yere gidelim ki politika şey olmasın.” İsrail’de günde üç kere haber dinlerdik. Hatta buraya yeni geldiğimizde bir kere yerel kanalı açmışız neler oluyor dünyada diye ve ilk haber bilmem ne istifa etti. Aman dedik “ne güzel memlekete geldik biz [kahkaha]. En önemli haber buysa biz şahane bir yerdeyiz.” Ve hakikaten de çok iyi bir memleket oldu bizim için bir bakıma.

Övgü: Kanadalı olmak sizin için ne anlama geliyor?

Ida: Bu “Ne mutlu Türk’üm diyene!” nin karşılığı mı oluyor? [Hep birlikte kahkaha]

Roger: Şansımız oldu, kariyer bakımından çok ilerledim.

Ida: Benimki de iyi oldu. Kanadalı olmakla ilgili şunu söyleyebilirim. İkimiz de spora meraklıyız. Hem basketbolu seyrettik hem Blue Jays’ların uniformalarını şurada . . . [Bu sırada Roger ayağa kalkar ve giydiği Toronto Blue Jays tişörtünü gösterir.] Ve ne zamanki “Kanada” söyleniyor bir şeyler oluyor. Böyle yani tamamen soğuk kalamıyorum. Tamamen buranın kültürüne uyduk sanıyorum diğer arkadaşlarımızdan daha fazla yanılmıyorsam... Kendimi baya Kanadalı hissediyorum ama “Türklük” tamamen gitmedi, “İsrailcilik” tam gitmedi. Böyle bir karışıklık... Hatta ve hatta rüyalarımda bazen kendimi Nişantaşı’nda görüyorum fakat İngilizce konuşuyorum ve İbranice bir dostum var filan... Yani diyorum ki her bakımdan, her bir şeyden bir şeyler kalmış... her memleketten... İnsan unutmuyor yani ne bileyim ben... O aday ben katiyen unutamıyorum zaten benim için İstanbul Burgazada demek.

1
A city in south-central Turkey, close to Syria.

2
A city in south-eastern Turkey.

3
An island in the sea of Marmara in Turkey.

4
This is the mantra when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, used while he was delivering his speech for the tenth anniversary of the Republic.

5
A neighbourhood in Istanbul.