

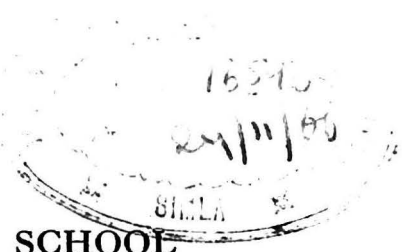
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ANATOLIAN SCHOOL

EARLY in 1950 there was published in Istanbul a small book of 140 pages* which had the unusual good fortune of going through three editions in four months. The author, still in his teens, is one of the thousands of Turkish peasant boys and girls who are passing through the village institutes and going out as teachers in the village schools under the Government's ambitious programme, which calls for two thousand new schools a year for five years. The book consists of a hundred or so sketches giving this young man's experiences and observations during his first year of teaching in a village of about 700 inhabitants. The village is unnamed, but is situated in the vicinity of Nevşehir, south of Ankara.

The importance of the book is that here, perhaps for the first time, the Anatolian peasant writes his own story. Yet Mahmut Makal is no longer quite the peasant, save in his ability to endure primitive living conditions. His schooling has implanted in him an ideal, a fervour which his fellow-villagers do not share. Between himself and the community (his own home included) there is misunderstanding and opposition, mounting in times of excitement to antagonism. His book shows the struggle to be largely between the secular outlook which he and his school represent and the traditional religious outlook of the villagers.

No foreigner living in that village—and the term "foreigner" would have to include any city-bred Turk—could have observed the community as closely and naturally as does the author. He touches on many aspects of their life—husbandry, architecture, nourishment, finance, religion, superstitions, vital statistics. Naturally his school and the struggle to maintain existence on that barren soil in that harsh climate form the main themes of his observations. One can judge that this was a particularly hard year of frost and drought in a village poorer than the average. But if the bleakness, poverty and ignorance which he depicts are not entirely typical, they are shared in greater or less degree in a majority of villages.

The author does not hesitate to pile sorrow upon sorrow in a way which makes the Western reader wonder whether the incidents are not selected chiefly to feed the fires of self-pity. In these matters the Oriental convention is much more accommodating than is the stiff-upper-lip tradition of the West. In the Turkish original the simple directness of the narration gives the book an extraordinary vividness which tends to awaken lively sympathy both for the village and for this very youthful missionary of the Turkish Republic. The following review attempts to quote only incidents which bear more or less directly on his life as teacher.

He tells how he himself had finished primary school and completed two years in the next stage before discovering that story books, magazines and newspapers existed. Then, with every page of this new literature, so different from the school textbooks which he learned by rote, he found

* "Bizim Köy," "Our Village," by Bay Mahmut Makal Caddesi 80/1, Istanbul. Price, 100 kuruş.



fairy-tale worlds opening before him. He subscribed to one or two periodicals, after which waiting for the new month to begin was like an illness. The post came infrequently to his village, and his periodicals were delivered to the school office, to be distributed only when the headmaster happened to think of it—usually after two or three posts had accumulated. To look through the office window at those bundles of new magazines and papers lying there untouched made him almost ill with longing. But the headmaster's reply to his complaints was: "You look to your lessons, young man. What do you want with newspapers?" In their final year the headmaster prohibited any reading but that of the prescribed lesson books. Young Mahmut felt as though he were starving to death. But when he got to the Village Institute at Ivriz he found a library of hundreds of books.

On graduation from the Institute he was appointed to a new school in a village distant some ten hours on foot from his home. In September, 1947, he went to register the pupils and open the school. He found nothing but four walls of mud bricks which had been standing without roof, exposed to the weather for two years. Once before the village had been galvanized into building a school, which had never been completed, and had finally melted away without ever coming into use. So Mahmut was compelled to appropriate a portion of the mosque for his school. Finding their mosque invaded, the villagers were aroused to activity and hurriedly roofed the school with reeds, matting and anything that came to hand.

"Getting into the mosque was not easy," says Mahmut. "The preacher resisted with all his might, saying: 'I won't open my mosque to a *giaour* [infidel] school.' In this all the village was with him. A bit more and we'd have had a rebellion; but the district school supervisor was very popular and his good words won them over.

"After a couple of months in the mosque we were able to move the pupils to the partly covered school. There was no blackboard, no equipment, not even benches. Each child brought a sheepskin to spread on the mud floor. Thus we studied.

"Nor was it enough to open school. The parents still had to be persuaded to send their children, for the law on compulsory school attendance meant nothing to them. 'What good will my child get from schooling?' they would argue. 'Allah never lets his creatures starve. Let the boy learn to follow a yoke of oxen and mind his own business, as his father did before him. Teach him just enough for his soldiering and to write a bit of a letter for us. More than that is a sin.'

"In their first year those children learned to read even newspapers. And I am convinced that some day the villages themselves will find the cure for their ignorance and illiteracy."

But what of the old religious schools abolished by law for the past quarter of a century?

"It was ten o'clock on Monday, but not ten pupils had appeared. 'Sir,' these said, 'they went to Sergeant Isa's school for their morning lesson. We have had ours; they'll be along soon.'

"I stood stupefied. Who was this Sergeant Isa who had opened a

school? For days my head had been buzzing with the gossip. Every year Nejati Khoja or his son, Kelesh Khoja, used to teach the children. But this year Nejati Khoja had taken to his bed and Sergeant Isa had aspired to his throne. Mullah Mehmet had at once put at his disposal the very room which he had stoutly refused when we begged it for our school.

"In time I won back the pupils whom he had led astray, and so influenced them that attendance is now fair. There are still a few who go early to the other school and then come to me, after having their morning instruction, which consists of memorizing passages from the Koran.

"A week later something must have alarmed Mullah Mehmet, for he ordered the school to leave his house at once. The village elders gathered and agreed that Hussein Agha's old stable would do. The animals were driven out and the children brought in! There Sergeant Isa holds forth, and children—mostly girls—sheepskin in hand, are to be seen crowding in.

"One day with two of my pupils I went to visit Sergeant Isa's class. As we approached we heard one voice shouting and others reciting. When I pushed open the door the Sergeant rose and invited me to share his mat. Before us were seventy or eighty children squatting on their sheepskins, laughing, shoving and shouting. Two girls had babies in their laps, which they rocked as they memorized prayers. Parents are quite ready to entrust their girls to this school, but not to ours. With all my pleading we managed to register only four girls—and these never appeared.

"How I succeeded in sitting through the next quarter of an hour I scarcely know. The children were sitting in manure, for the stable had not been touched. Manure dust swam in the beams of light, and everything was indescribably filthy.

"Every Thursday 'Friday gifts' are showered on the Khoja—tobacco, cigarettes, dish upon dish of boiled wheat, dried beans, or wheat by measure. The mat or pillow on which the Khoja sits is brought from their homes by the children in turns. Whosoever's ear the Khoja tweaks must next day bring the pillow. These details I learned from my pupils.

"By bombarding the Ministry of Public Instruction and our inspector with appeals, while putting every possible pressure on the village council, I at last obtained an order for the collection of school rates in arrears and the spending of whatever was collected on the school building and its equipment. School rates constitute a supplementary tax on the village. Now it only remained to collect this debt and buy windows, a stove and school benches. The headman had accepted the necessity of doing this and was no longer making difficulties.

"We sent out the town crier, but not one individual brought in his due. So we sent the night-watchman from door to door. Some of the folk ran from their homes, some were taken suddenly ill, the majority gave a blank refusal.

"The village budget showed an appropriation for school purposes of Turkish £650 [about £83 sterling], but of this not one farthing was available. If the money was to be collected it had evidently to be done by me. So, accompanied by the clerk and council, I set out to sequester the counter-value of their debt, for scarcely anyone had paid his school rate since 1944, and even the least indebted owed over Turkish £30 [£3.16.0

sterling]. At the first house the people ran indoors and bolted the door in our faces. Some of the council were for breaking down the door, but we passed on. By this time the whole street had gone into hiding behind locked doors. A few were ashamed to hide, but these begged for a day or two of grace to settle their debt. By the end of the day we had made out one solitary receipt for Turkish £4.00 [10s.]. Nor had we sequestered any goods, since we had met only locked doors. For that matter, what was there worth seizing.

"The council was under such pressure that they did not dare let the matter go by default, as they had done in years past. They called in the county gendarmerie to carry off by force whatever they found in the houses. So a mass of sacking, rags, pots and pans, quilts and tatters of carpet were heaped in the house of the village watchman. Now, I suppose, we must make our benches out of copper pots and upholster them with the rags and sacking!

"Scarcely ten people in the village go by their own proper name; the others are all known by nicknames. These only are used, and in time the real name is forgotten, even by the person himself. The young people know their elders only by their nicknames, and the older generation do not know the names of the young folk. Often the nickname of the grandfather becomes the family name of his grandchildren. If I try to learn a child's real name from his grandparents, often they cannot answer without long thought. Nor is the real name much good when I do discover it, since the child answers only to his nickname.

"Shortened forms and diminutives are another source of confusion. Our village swarms with Hassiks. After much trouble I discovered that Hassik is a corruption of both Hassan and Hussein.

"One day I arrived at a neighbouring village shortly after a heavy rainstorm had left pools of muddy water in front of the school. One of the pupils lay down to drink from this muddy water. Evidently this was forbidden, for I heard another pupil call out: 'Horruk is drinking; I'm going to tell teacher.' Later I asked the master if Horruk was the name in which this child was registered. 'In this village there is no registry of births,' my friend replied, 'so I put down whatever name they themselves use.'

"Near our school are three houses scattered on the hillside a little below and apart from the village. In each are from three to five children who, in their habits and outlook, are much behind those who live in the village proper. With much trouble I got the three children living in one of these houses so accustomed to me that they would come running whenever I signalled that I had sweets for them. But I never got them to speak more than a word or two. Even in the winter cold they wore nothing but a thin cotton gown over a cotton singlet. From head to foot they were a mass of dirt and grease. Several times I took soap and water to their faces, hands and feet, and cut their wild nails. Then one day the father came to me very timidly. 'Sir,' he said, 'hear my petition. Don't get these children used to coming here. Chase them off. Please don't be

spoil them with sweets and such. If they lose their innocence their morals will break down and the kids will go bad on my hands.'

"I need a school clock, but in this place, where time is measured by the hill shadows, who will listen to me? Simple people who can scarcely accept the need for a blackboard and benches will certainly resist the extravagance of a clock. 'This is just too much,' they say. 'We have got along with Allah's perfect timepiece ever since the days of Noah. Isn't it good enough for this infidel school?'

"Since coming to this village I take my baths in Sergeant Gani's stable, for I have no means of getting to the town, where there is a bath of sorts. But don't suppose that I bathe. I can do no more than loosen a little of the top layer of dirt. As there is no stove in the house, they set a crock of water near the fire, where, after a good many hours, it grows barely tepid. With this I wash as I can in a frosty stable. While I pour this lukewarm water over me, icy drops are coming through the roof. How the stock survives in this frigid place is more than I can understand.

"This is my case; what of the pupils? 'How many of you live in unheated houses?' Every hand goes up. 'How many have a place for washing?' Only one child responds, and he is rather well-to-do, having spent half his life in towns.

"When I say 'bread,' forget the city loaves and think instead of a large, thin cardboard disc. In this village they make it even worse than is done in my home village. Despite its thinness, the centre is often a rubbery dough that will not tear. But with what trouble is it made! My guess is that the labour of bread-making shortens the lives of the women by half. In autumn in some villages they work night and day for weeks, piling up sheets of bread enough to last till spring. Before each meal they take the necessary sheets from the pile and sprinkle these with water to soften and make them flexible. My home village is relatively modern; each day's supply is fresh made. Long before daybreak the women get up to knead the dough, and before the men are up and about this has been rolled into sheets and cooked on a heated disc of sheet-iron. Woe to the woman who should be a bit late with her bread! Not only will her man give her a good beating, but her name will be held in derision throughout the community.

"Here my sack of flour is with Sergeant Gani, where they make bread about once a fortnight. On the first day, when it is fresh, I can eat five or six sheets. But soon they dry and turn to slate. An hour before a meal I sprinkle some with water and wrap them in the tablecloth to soften. When they are stale I can down only two or three in a day. Once it took me over fifty days to eat what they had cooked for me. Sergeant Gani was worried and said to me: 'Man, in your place I'd be dead of hunger. You don't half try, that's what's wrong. One book should be enough for anybody. But you have piled book on book and give yourself to them instead of to bread.' To this his brother added philosophically: 'If city bread lies in your stomach one hour, ours lies five. This is a good thing, otherwise we would be scraping the bottom of our flour-bin by mid-winter.'

"Notice the dull eyes and sallow cheeks of my children. Their heads seem too heavy for their necks, they answer dully; healthy children are not like this. Three times during the year, in October, January and April, I noted what each child had eaten that day, in order to observe their nourishment in the three seasons. I give below the answers of the second class, in which there are 31 pupils. On October 9, after the first lesson, I asked what they had had for breakfast. Twenty-one had come hungry without a bite of any sort, 10 had had a twist of bread (of the sort described above). Two days later I asked in the afternoon. All 31 had had bread with watermelon slices. My second inquiry was on the afternoon of January 20. Of my 55 pupils, 4 had had soup only that midday, 6 had had pilaf of cracked wheat [*bulgur*], 16 had had bread only, 4 had warmed up the previous day's pilaf, 5 had dipped their bread in grape molasses, 11 had eaten raw onion dipped in salt with their bread, 2 had found no one at home and had returned to school hungry, and 7 had been given dry bread only after they had cried for it.

"Spring came, when all the extras had been consumed, and some had not even flour. As far back as February Gouja Dervish had come to the end of his flour stock and the village took up a collection for him. Now almost all have the same meals: morning, pilaf mixed with wild herbs and grasses, to collect which all the womenfolk roam the hills from dawn to dark; noon, bread and herbs; evening, pilaf and herbs. On the morning of April 1, 12 pupils came hungry, 11 had breakfasted on bread only, 7 on pilaf with herbs. At noon the same day all 30 had bread with herbs.

"In the first reader is a sentence, 'Daddy, buy me some honey.' Of my 56 pupils, only one had ever seen honey, and he was from another village. The others pressed me with questions: 'Teacher, tell us about honey. Is it like a horse, or more like a lamb?'

"If it is not about religion a book or article or discourse is of no value in the eyes of the villagers. Oh yes, they will listen to anything that is read aloud, will show interest and express opinions. But when it is ended they slap on this expression: 'All this is no good. Nowadays we have to listen to this sort of thing. But the other—ah! that's the real thing.'

"The half-dozen books I have managed to assemble bulk up in their eyes like a mountain. 'He's crazy,' says one, 'plain crazy. Not one of the books he reads is any good to religion.' 'Haven't you any pity for your eyes?' asks another. 'If you must spend your eyesight, why not spend it on useful religious books? There are some in the Roman letters, you know.' And another: 'Here you are, all by yourself, with no one to disturb you. Why don't you perform your ablutions and daily prayers and pay your debt to Allah instead of wearing out your brains on books and papers? You're a good sort and we like you. Put yourself right with Allah as you are with us.'

"When my father came for a visit they got at him in the village guest-room and he came down on me with their bees buzzing under his cap. 'Look here,' he said, 'either you begin to go to the mosque, or I am disowning you to-day. And another thing, you're going to stop reading those infidel books of yours. With all the world trying to be faithful

Muslim, are you alone going in opposition and serving unbelief, you crazy idiot? You should just hear what they are saying in the village about you. One look at a man, and they can tell just what he's trying to hide in his guts.'

"Don't just make a face and say, 'Muck!' At daybreak, when the shepherds take the cattle out to pasture, and at evening when they return, every girl and woman in the village, basket or tin in hand, rushes out into the dusty roads to gather manure. Some even collect the precious stuff in their aprons. Whatever they can bring home they knead and fashion into round cakes, which they plaster on the walls to dry. Then they stack them in the house, and these dried dung cakes are their only fuel. Of this kneaded dung they also shape vessels in which to store grain and other cereals. These vessels they dry carefully in some spot where the poultry cannot damage them.

"We kept school going till February let loose on us unprecedented storms and bitter cold. Only one or two of my children coming from well-to-do families—that is, families owning more than a single yoke of oxen—still had dung cakes for fuel. If I should ask them to bring one cake a day for the school, would their parents consent? Yet what was I to do, fighting alone against the merciless winter? 'Well, it's a battle, and you only die once,' I would tell myself. 'If I survive, a hero; if I die, a martyr.' It was then I learned the value of hope. If I had not warmed my heart with hope in that bitter cold I could not have kept on my feet for a single day. During February and March, while winter was on us with all its force, I burned not more than twenty dung cakes in my stove. These I got from the villagers to cook with. To light these I used up all the precious books and papers I possessed. Need I say that a dung fire burning for an hour or two had no effect on the temperature of the room? Indeed, the open air often seemed less bitter.

"We were gathered in Sergeant Gani's room. It was February 21 and a blizzard such as I had never seen was raging in the streets. Those who had gone to the mosque for the afternoon prayer had returned, and all of us were passing the time complaining and grouching.

"Suddenly the door opened and there entered a well-dressed young man carrying a valise. The collar of his overcoat was turned up and fastened together with a safety-pin. In his free hand he held the handkerchief which he had unbound from his head as he entered. He was a complete stranger to us all, but it was evident that he was stiff with cold, so two young men helped him off with coat and cap and shook off the snow. Then they removed his shoes, and he came forward and took his seat beside me. There was not a sound in the room. While admiring the smartness of his appearance, I was feeling ashamed of my own. I was completely the villager—face creased and sunken, eyes bloodshot, beard a week's growth. My trousers were covered with patches sewed on with my own hand. Though the overcoat which I had managed to buy for Turkish £28.00 [£3.12.0 sterling] still hid the rents in my jacket, it, too, was nearly finished. Sergeant Gani broke the silence with a word of welcome, and the young man gave us his story.

"I am from Kirshehir, and have just finished the *hafiz** course at Kayseri. Hearing of a very worthy *khoja* at Konya, I disregarded snow and cold and set forth to profit by his teaching. Arrived there, I found that he had died. My funds were spent and my relations with my father are not cordial enough to ask him for help. But they took me to the busiest mosque in Konya, where I chanted the Koran so effectively that the assembly was fairly licking my lips.' (At these words his hearers bit their lips and began to regard him with sudden interest. In their eyes the little Hafiz was growing by leaps and bounds.) 'They collected Turkish £80 [£10.8.0 sterling] and gave it me. With 60 I had this coat made; the remainder was not enough to get me home. But they referred me to the village next to yours, where another 50 or 60 liras was collected. See, I have a letter of recommendation to you all from Mehmet Effendi (leader of their sect). But in that village was a rascal, a school-teacher. 'Give him nothing,' he tried to tell them. So there was a bit of a scrap, and they threw him out and sent him where he belonged.' What else can you expect from those useless sons of — Please God you don't have to put up with one of those fellows here.'

"All eyes were fixed on me as I sat there beside him, and he understood. What could I do but swallow the insult, for snow-blocked roads and black ignorance shut me in. But my head throbbed and a demon prodded me incessantly: 'Don't swallow this insult. In this village you are the representative of Atatürk's revolution. It is for you to tear out this tongue which has been extended against the teachers' army.' Yes, but what can a solitary individual do against these forces of reaction? Though I racked my brains and tormented my heart, I could find no useful way of intervening.

"Meanwhile the young man continued: 'The village didn't want me to leave. "Stay here till spring; we will be your flock and collect for you whatever you need," they said. Still, I wouldn't stay, so they collected and sold 150 or 200 kilos of wheat and put the money in my pocket. You are the good folk on whom I am really counting. Mehmet Effendi promised you would look after me better than anyone. So now get busy.'

"One would think that this youth had a piece of the devil's hoof in his pocket. Since morning these villagers had been shivering and groaning over their lot. But now they were carried up on a wave of excitement. Some pressed his hand, others kissed and embraced him. 'Stay here,' they begged. 'What can you find elsewhere that we will not gather with our own hands and lay at your feet?'

"But the Hafiz insisted that he must be on his way in the morning and ordered them to collect his due and appoint the men who would guide him to the next village. 'Nothing easier; we'll carry you there on our shoulders,' they answered.

"I asked a few questions of this youth, who gave his age as twenty, and when I began to press him a little his face darkened. Here he was robbing the village, speaking evil of those who really serve the country, yet all the village sided with him. 'Get out, get out,' they said to me.

* Hafiz—one who has memorized the Koran.

'You don't know enough to clean this man's boots. You go to your books; here is a real man!'

"It was time for the evening prayer, so we all rose and went out together. Jelal, the local head of their sect, came running through the storm and caught the Hafiz by the arm. 'Don't leave us, ever,' he panted. 'We'll do everything for you. You will make our village famous. We'll give our children to you and send that teacher packing.'

"The word ran like fire through the town, nor did they fail to add that the teacher had spoken disrespectfully to the Hafiz. My pupils were quickly turned against me and attached to the Hafiz. Once they had kissed his hand they ran hot-foot to the mosque, those very children who would everywhere greet me and hurry to my side. Now they would not look me in the face. I stood alone in the storm, while behind me some of the men were talking of setting on me and driving me out.

"About noon the next day Sergeant Gani sent his boy to my bitter room with some sheets of fresh bread and a cake of fuel. 'They shouted and sang hymns till daylight, my teacher,' said the boy. 'When they came out from the mosque they took up a collection for the Hafiz, and the whole community accompanied him beyond the village boundaries.'

"The magazines and books which I collect with such difficulty remind me now and then of life, but I have never found the means to create about me a little gaiety, a bit of movement. I thought for a while of a gramophone, but nothing came of it. Then a comrade suggested a crystal-set wireless with earphones, which would be cheaper than a gramophone. From a friend in Ankara I learned that such a set could be had for Turkish £42.00 [£58.0 sterling]. At first I was very happy, thinking this sum could be managed, but after seven months I had not been able to scrape even this amount together, so I had to give up this notion also.

"Sergeant Isa, the religious teacher, doesn't believe in the wireless. 'Don't try to tell me that in our own village we can hear the call to prayer given in Cairo. Just think of all the noises there are in the world from dawn to dark. Why doesn't your wireless catch and bring them all to us?' I explain till my tongue gives out. 'Someone hides under that box to make those noises and fool the people,' he insists. Many in the village side with Sergeant Isa.

"Whenever I visit the town I pledge my next quarter's salary to the grocer. Cigarettes and drink do not interest me, but with even this saving I return to the village empty-handed, without having been able to afford one or two magazines or a few sweets for the children.

"All my life I have never once had in my pockets what could really be called money. Whatever reached my hand was so quickly exchanged that it never got as far as my pockets.

"On Sundays, or sometimes when school has to be dismissed because of the winter cold, I take a book or magazine to the village guest-room and read aloud. Gradually I have got the men accustomed to expressing their opinions on what they hear read. If the subject is one which they can all readily understand, they are delighted. If it describes village life, they listen in mingled astonishment and pleasure, their astonishment being

that such everyday things should be in print on paper. I began with the short articles in the bulletins of the village institutes, and trained my hearers to listen and pay attention. They grew so fond of it that now they gather and send for me, so that I have often to leave my other work. Though my voice gets tired, I forget this, as I share their pleasure and feel that they are learning.

"From the 15th to the 20th of April it rained incessantly for five days. The water poured through the school roof as through a sieve and collected in a large pool on the mud floor. A piece of the wall collapsed, so that I sent the children home and set about saving my few belongings from the waters.

"Our school was built five years ago and resembles more than anything else a playhouse, such as children might build. One glance at the irregular foundation-stones, no bigger than one's fist, is enough to show how indifferently it was built. These stones were set in mud, not mortar, and the whole structure was so shaky that we could never keep the door-frame and window in place.

"My mother became ill, for which reason I went home for the week-end. On my return there it was! The whole front of the school, from door to corner, had collapsed. 'It was the rain,' they said. Now what are we to do? Repairs are out of the question, for the foundations are worthless. A new building is hardly to be thought of. It's a toss-up whether I should laugh, or cry, or stand and beat my breast. Tell me, friends, what am I to do?"

And there in front of his tumble-down school we take leave of Mahmut Makal and his village, only adding that this was not the end, as his book shows him returning after a hard summer in his father's harvest fields.



