

# My Istanbul

By Shamsur Rahman Faruqi

Qustuntuniya...A word, name, a place, a city. It has lived in my consciousness since when I was a child and didn't perhaps quite know what the name Qustuntunia stood for in our history, the history of the world of Muslims, the history of the world. The word reverberated in my soul, a living, organic power in a large jungle of new words that I kept exploring every day. Words that I heard in older people's conversations, or nowhere in particular, but they came to me confidently, like guests sure of a lavish, even respectful welcome, someone alien but bringer of good things perhaps. I learnt perhaps from my father that Qustuntuniya was the ancient name of a City whose real name was Istanbul. It was in an Urdu novel about the Ottomans that I read as a twelve-year-old-seeker after all knowledge, that I learnt that Istanbul was also *baab-i aali* whose English/French meaning I learnt much later to be *sublime porte*. But Qustutuniya retained a special puissance for me. It rang loud and beautiful like the the sound of the huge copper orb that did duty as my school bell whose edges were rough but whose middle on both sides was beaten to a burnished gold due to the rhythmic mallet-strokes of my school's bell-ringer.

The year was 1943, and the city was Azamgarh, a big-looking-to-me but actually a small town in the present-day state of Uttar Pradesh of India that I heard the school bell for the first time as an eight-year old. The school was left behind in the journey of years but the magic of the bell, and of the name Qustuntuniya that somehow symbolized the bell, remained. In the nineteen-twenties and thirties there was a spate of cheap Urdu novels depicting the exploits of *Ghazi* Mustapha Kemal Ata Turk, *Ghazi* Ismet Enunu, and their small band of intrepid warriors who fought on the one hand against the spies and the cruel cohort of the secret police of the Sultan Abdelhamit and also against the wiles and guiles of the western politicians who were at war with each other but were united in their aim of dismembering the Ottoman empire and also destroying the entity of Turkey as a nation.

My heart went out to the *Ghazis* when I read those novels but I also regretted in a not unsubtle way the passing of the Caliphate. Be that as it may, but my Istanbul was intact. It wasn't overrun by the boots of the westerner who had loved to describe Turkey as the sick man of Europe. The *Ghazis* had saved it for me. The word Istanbul may not have had the electric guitar-like boom and reverberation, but it was home to my *Ghazis*, and it was successor to my dreaded and loved Qustuntuniya which reminded me of my school-bell, my school days,

and the of the Ottomans. Somehow the rhythm of *Ottoman* seemed to coincide in my brain with *Qustuntuniya* just as *Ghazi* stood for me for those unknown but honoured soldiers who fought in the seventh century at *Rum*, one of whom was Eyup Ansari, the Prophet's beloved companion, who is buried at what is now known plainly as *Eyup* and from where I could see the Black Sea stretching beyond my mind's eye when I visited Eyup in 1995.

Later, when the world's geography and history became somewhat clearer to me, I came to understand more of the marvel that is the Bosphoros, the narrow, but blue, how so blue river-like sea that separates Istanbul from Istanbul, Europe from Asia. In the the dirty yellow paper novels of my early boyhood I used to read of the Haggia Sofia, often described as the Aya Sofia Mosque. But little did I know of the wonder of the high ceiling, almost beyond the reach of the eye, of the oreil windows that seemed to prevent the light from coming in rather than let the light enter and illumine some of the vast interior that seemed so full of the mystery of esoteric knowledge. But nothing, not even Francis Robinson's description, had prepared me for the four minarets that Sinan Pasha had hung so miraculously upon the Haggia Sofia with such imaginative precision and mathematical balance that they seemed to have grown up with that ancient pile.

All that I knew of the Suleymanieh mosque was its seven minarets, so slim and so strong that they seemed to have been cast almost from the steel which had been used by my Indian Emperor Asoka in the 3rd century BCE to inscribe upon them religious and secular edicts throughout the the length and breadth of the country. In fact, one stood right in the middle of my city of Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh, six hundred kilometres sout-east of Delhi. Uncorroded, untamed by wind and weather, unshaken by storm and rain, the Asokan pillar stands testimony to the victory of mind over matter, of matter over the elements. The minarets of the Suleymanieh seemed to me to be of the same class, as if stone had fossilized and assumed the properties of steel. In the American Museum of Natural History I saw huge slabs of agate and amethyst that were wood millions of years of ago and in the 12<sup>th</sup> century Fort of Bidar in South India I saw steel cannon balls lying in the open and turning to stone as the centuries rolled gently away over them. The minarets of the Suleymanieh haven't needed millions of years to look like pencils of solid steel, as if time has foreshortened itself by some inner force exerted upon it by the millions upon million of times that the Name of God has been said in it.

In the Suleimaniyeh I met a personable young man who was perhaps a junior Imam and who was delighted to receive a friendly visitor from *Hindistan*. He spoke to me warmly in fluent, Qur'anic Arabic while I whose Arabic is barely minimal tried to get an occasional *shukran* (thanks) or *na'am* (yes) edgeways. We parted at the best of terms but the memory that most lingered in my mind was that of the Imam's podium rising almost up to the incredibly high ceiling.

Istanbul had evolved into my consciousness over the decades before we visited there in 1995. It was the city of the Ottomans, but it was also a city on whose shore somewhere nearby a Homer had read or declaimed his poem to a rapt audience, a city where aspiring orators from ancient Rome came to learn the art of public oratory. It was also the city of pottery of incredible blue and green hues and one of my most cherished possessions today is a set of cups of hues bright-and-dull, so striking that they wouldn't have been out of place in the collection of the Iranian emperor Jamshid who possessed a goblet in which he could see the whole world at will. The covered bazaar, big as a city, where I bought it would have been a jewel even in the crown of Shahjahan's Delhi.

The people of Istanbul are most courteous, notwithstanding the fact that our English was little understood there, and my marginal French too wasn't much use. I found that German would have served better, had I had some German. Once I and my wife disembarked the vaporetto at a place that I was confident was Uskudar, on the Asian side of the city, where our hotel was. I found to my confusion that despite the mosque and the street formations and the lights being entirely similar, we were in some place else. Turning into the street where our hotel was, I found that the hotel was mysteriously not there. But there were friendly people aplenty who told me in reasonable English that I should take a taxi to go to Uskudar across the water. They found us a taxi at the kerb who took us across a huge bridge, silent at that hour, and then through quiet lanes and bylanes that reminded me of Old Delhi, though not of the nineties, but of the early sixties when one could see familiar faces and hear snatches of familiar conversations while driving slowly through the backstreets of Shahjahanabad at night. Conversation with our taxi driver was impossible, but in his quietly humming motor coursing swiftly over the moonlit bridge, we felt quite safe and uncheated. In due course he deposited us right at the steps that led up to the street to our hotel and I swear I couldn't distinguish at all between it and the one which we had left the best part of an hour ago.

Many years later, reading that overpowering book *Istanbul* by that towering genius Orhan Pamuk, I felt that he saw Istanbul as a semi-dilapidated, semi-tragic, semi-westernized giant that was groping for its place in the modern world. My best memory of Istanbul is of a lunch in the Tope Kapi Museum high over the water whose waves danced incessantly telling us of the ancient Greek and Roman galleys, Western men of war, Ottoman warships that had lived and died upon that water but some of whose blood, and wisdom, and poetry, and philosophy had remained on the mainland for ever.

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