

Transcript of the episode of Privacy Studies Podcast: Privacy and Death in the Urban Spaces of Izmir: Urban Interventions toward Cemeteries in the 19th and 20th Centuries – Presentation by Selvihan Kurt (İstanbul Technical University, Turkey)

Hello, my name is Felicia Fricke and I am Natacha Klein Käfer, and you are listening to the Privacy Studies Podcast.

This season of the Privacy Studies Podcast follows the discussions of the symposium *PRIVACY AND DEATH: Past and Present*, which took place at the University of Copenhagen and online between October 12th and 13th, 2023. This event aimed to bring to the fore the discussions of what kind of privacy, if any, we have given to our dead in different cultural and historical contexts. We will hear presentations by historians, archaeologists, sociologists, and other experts.

Transcriptions of the episodes can be found on the Centre for Privacy Studies' website.

In today's episode, we will hear the presentation 'Privacy and Death in the Urban Spaces of Izmir: Urban Interventions toward Cemeteries in the 19th and 20th Centuries', by Selvihan Kurt, Istanbul Technical University, Turkey.

Thank you for the introduction and being here, listening to me and other speakers. So, our panel is focusing on modern engagement with death. My presentation today and my research interests in general, on the other hand, brings death and urban modernization together. And cemeteries as a spatial dimension of death, where death and urban studies intersect, is the subject of my presentation. And the spatial dimension of death became a hot topic when cemeteries had become the grounds for the urban project, or when cemeteries had become unmounted spaces, because the dead was no more desired to be in the modern cities, for mostly public health concerns. Graves are the final resting places and a part of privacy of the dead, since they protect the dead body. The spatial modernization projects and removing or moving the cemeteries entirely, or sometimes just a few graves, makes the urban projects also entangled into the discussions about the privacy of the dead.

Especially in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries, removing cemeteries and the privacy of their owner were widely discussed and became a concern in urban modernization discussions. However, today I'm moving a little bit to the East, Mediterranean Sea to discuss how these urban modernization discussions related to public health, modernization, sacred burial places in the western coast of the Ottoman lands, Izmir, affected the cemetery landscape in the city. I will focus on Izmir as a case study of a 19th century port city, which integrated into the world economy and its urban outlook, took its share from the booming economy and population. Well, Izmir was one of the harbor cities of the Ottoman Empire on the western coast, where the agricultural products of the Aegean region and the European merchants meet, and where the economy of the Aegean regions opens its door to Europe. The city experienced a significant urban and economic growth, especially in the 19th century, as a result of its integration to the world economy. This lively economic environment brought many ethnic religious groups to the city, in addition to the European traders, which eventually resulted in a constantly growing and cramped city. Between 1860 and 1880, the commercial city was complemented with two railway lines, connecting it to the inner land and a modern harbor. Needless to add, the international cargo traffic was a vital part of the commerce in the city, and the frequently recurring outbreaks were terrorizing the city, as it was the case in many crowded European cities.

Every outbreak resulting in mass casualties and killing of workforce was a threat to the business flow in the city. It was an unavoidable reaction of the state to take some caution to prevent outbreaks. For instance, a lazaretto was built on the shore, and obligatory guarantees were implemented on the arriving cargo ships. Burial grounds were naturally targeted and blamed for such calamities, and before coming to such interventions and their impact on the privacy of the dead, the existing state of the cemeteries must be a little bit explored. While cemeteries in Izmir and dead, of course, had always kept their privacy to a certain degree. First of all, there had never been a mass burial practice among the non of the religious groups in the city. Especially in the Islamic burial custom, the dignity of death and tributing the deceased in the cemetery space was a big issue. And still is. Since early years of Islam, the teachings of Prophet Muhammad and first generations of his followers teach providing single graves for each believer, and there were some incidences of joint graves during the wartime, but even those were separated later. In addition, visiting the deceased loved ones was also a quite common and recommended practice since the early years of Islam. In Izmir, before the 19th century, Muslim cemeteries were already part of the daily life, where people visit their deceased family members and friends. In addition to the visits, and maybe more peculiarly for the modern viewers, the presence of the dead was not taught as an unwanted element in the social life of Izmir and Ottoman Lands. Especially in the 19th century travelogues, the cemetery and the nearby green areas were narrated as colourful grounds of social life in Izmir, where people from all ethnic and religious groups and social classes socialize and have picnics sometimes. Especially the Muslim cemeteries around the Caravan Bridge was mentioned in various travelogues, and some oriental painters also depicted this area in their paintings. The Caravan Bridge area was also the area where the camel caravans unloaded their cargoes and went through the customs process. And the area was also full of coffee houses, which brought an ongoing flood of people and goods and created a lively social life in the area. What amazed such travellers is the people's close relation with the dead and dead still becoming a part of daily life without spooking the living. The first intervention for the cemeteries, sorry, the first intervention towards the cemeteries of Izmir was prohibiting intramural burials in 1865 as a precaution for preventing outbreaks. This prohibition was actually targeting the Christian burial sites that these blue dots you see scattered in this red city centre area. And in the churchyards, they were buried mostly. And because the Muslim cemeteries, these black dots on the western and eastern outskirts of the city, and the Jewish cemeteries, the single green dots on the western outskirts of the city, were already in extramural area while the Christians were using churchyards scattered mostly in the city centre.

At this point, it's hardly possible to consider this an intervention as a threat to the privacy of the dead bodies in such cemeteries, because the existing bodies were dug up and some of them still lay in the same place to this day. But each religious group of the Christians were provided with a new burial place in the extramural area. The aim was keeping the dead bodies away from the people and water sources. And finally, an approximately 11,000 square meter land was bought by the state for the use of English, Dutch and Prussian residents and the Protestant Ottomans. They were allowed to divide the land as they wished. Two decades later, urban expansion targeted the cemeteries on the outskirts of the city, which was as destructive as public health concerns. In 1885, a refugee neighbourhood was built on a piece of land on the Jewish cemetery. The community objected to this decision, but their objection revealed that they already expanded their religious borders and trespassed on the state land. At the end of the serious investigations they had to settle with half of the land they claimed, and they were ordered to surround their cemetery land with walls to prevent future disputes. The remaining part became the ground for a new arsenal and a refugee neighbourhood. The Jewish

cemetery was retargeted again at the beginning of the 20th century, along with the Muslim cemetery, as a victim of the personal agenda of the governor, who was a representative of the modernization vision of the Committee of Union and Progress. The governor Rahmi Bey targeted both cemeteries in order to build a public cultural complex, which was composed of a school building, a library and a museum building, and a public park in this area. In order to understand the impact of his vision, his background and political agenda must be dwelled on a little bit. Rahmi Bey was one of the top members and an influential figure of the Committee of Union and Progress. The Committee of Union and Progress, later the Union and Progress Party, was a revolutionary organization and a political party active between 1889 and 1926 in the Ottoman Empire and later Turkey. The party was formed by the military officials and a variety of officials coming from different professional backgrounds. However, what they have in common was their educational background in Western countries and their strong belief in the modernization of the state. Their influence in the governing positions had many aspects which is beyond the scope of this presentation, but Rahmi Bey unsurprisingly had his ambitious vision of leaving his mark in the city with vast building projects. He was desiring to build a building complex consisting of a school building, a library, a museum, and again considering his progressive vision such a complex, such a building complex parallels with his plan of making his mark. Rahmi Bey's project had this vision of creating a modern park by removing the cemeteries. The building expenses were already significantly high, but the lack of clean slates in the already-habited city was making this an unfeasible project. Because finding an empty ground for building this project meant putting up with demolishing expenses and Rahmi Bey pointed out the Jewish and Muslim cemeteries on the western outskirts of the city to avoid such expenses.

In 1885, additional burials were already forbidden in this part of the cemeteries because the city was expanded already until the borders of cemeteries. But the older ones were not disturbed and kept lying in the same place until Rahmi Bey targeted this area. In the targeted area, there were cemeteries of common people but also the tomb of an important religious figure for the Muslim community and the plan was protested by both groups. However, Rahmi Bey's progressive vision of giving a cultural complex to the city along with a recreational site was also consisting a quite top-down fashion in which he saw the state authority as a decisive force for the public good. Especially the tomb was the subject of discussion and his argument that he had a vision in his dream, the buried religious figure, the person in the tomb, Bahri Baba, told Rahmi Bey that he was feeling disturbed by all the people trespassing around him. And that transferring his grave would bless him with some pieces. We cannot tell to what extent this dream narration convinced the public opinion, but no matter what, the graves were transferred away and the area was turned into a public park which survived to this day. When the day came to physically transfer the body, Rahmi Bey was present at the event along with high officials in order to prevent people from any violent protests. Breaking of World War I, made it impossible to complete the project and the museum had never been built. Rahmi Bey was dismissed in 1918 before the city was taken over by the Greek forces. Although the dismissal gave some hope to the Jewish community to take back their burial grounds, the damage was already done and they kept burying their dead in the new cemetery in the Kemer region and they registered the land in the name of a community member.

In 1919, the Greek army took control of the city and stayed in the city until 1922. When Turkish army ended the World War I by taking back the city. During their presence in the city, the Greek administration was convinced that they were permanently there and should reclaim the Hellenistic heritage of the region. The uncompleted museum project was in the agenda of the Greek

administration and they used Rahmi Bey's building complex area for planning a museum and a university campus. The school building which was currently housing refugees was evacuated and used as the museum. In order to physically expand the building, the remaining tombstones from the former Jewish cemetery was used as building material. Some of the tombstones were still visible in the walls of the building which is currently being used as a school building.

In 1922, the city became the place where World War I ends for Turkey and the city was taken back by the Turkish army and following that a great fire burned the city to the ground which was also clear the ground for rebuilding the city in a modern fashion. The rebuilding project and its meaning in the agenda of nationalizing the city is beyond the scope of this presentation but an ambitious city planning vision was introduced in collaboration with the French city planners.

In 1926, a new municipality law put the cemetery lands in the jurisdiction of the municipalities in addition to making municipalities the main responsible actors for urban hygiene. Behcet Uz, the mayor during the 1930s, gradually but decisively, turned the Muslim cemeteries into greeneries.

The privacy of the digging individual graves for each dead body were the invention of the 19th century Europe. The dead body and the burial grounds were both dignified and attacked at the same time. The privacy of that was invented and heavily violated at the same time in Europe in the 19th century. The cemeteries were attacked because of the practice of mass burial in the churches were abandoned as a result of public health concerns and existing bodies were dug out plus transferred from the church and reburied in the rural cemeteries. In Paris, the mortuary remains were also turned into a spectacle in the underground catacombs. The new cemetery understanding, on the other hand, suggested a more private burial practice where each dead body had a single grave and the burial grounds were designed as also public recreational sites rather than burial pits in the churchyards.

In Izmir, the narrative of privacy of dead had a much more distinct plot, first of all, the concept of individual graves were not a recent invention of the 19th century but rather ongoing practice, especially for the Muslim community. Using burial grounds also as public recreational sites was a pre-modern concept rather than modern in the Ottoman lands for all communities. However, modernization and re-approaching the concept of that excluded cemeteries from the interim rural areas as a result of both urban expansion and public health concerns.

It might be secure to say that while in Europe the privacy of dead was a quite modern concept which came with the rural cemeteries, but in the Izmir and Ottoman lands, in general, the cemetery lands had already settled with grounds where being dead did not mean losing privacy and having a single grave was the standard state. Similarly, the idea of using burial grounds as public spaces was also not a recent invention for the Ottoman cities. In modern times, the privacy was violated when the intramural burial practices were not considered as appropriate from the point of public health concerns and the city kept expanding on the cemeteries in the outskirts of the city. The relocating of the cemeteries in both cases violated the privacy. Thank you for listening.

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Thank you so much for listening.