

THE INTERSECTION OF DIFFERENT WORLDS: A TURKISH FULBRIGHTER'S EXPERIENCES IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

I was a Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence at Chatham University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 2010-11. During my visiting period, I taught modern Turkish history while introducing Turkish culture and controversial issues in my country to the Chatham community. These experiences allowed me to grow as an academic and give back to the students and faculty of my host institution.

Keywords: year of Turkey • Chatham University • internationalization • tolerance



BACKGROUND

Fulbright grants represent some of the most prestigious scholarship and academic support programs in the world. Those who earn the Fulbright awards undoubtedly improve themselves academically and enjoy tremendous benefits. I worked as a Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence at Chatham University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 2010-11. In this essay, I discuss the invaluable contributions of the Fulbright program to my personal development.

I earned my BA degree from the History Department of Boğaziçi University (Istanbul) in 1998. Subsequently, I completed my MA studies in the Department of National Security at Gebze Institute of Technology (Kocaeli) in 2001. During my internship in 2002 at the Assembly of Turkish-American Associations, a prominent Turkish lobby in the US, I met assembly members in Washington DC who had come to America through Fulbright programs. Additionally, I came across advertisements promoting Fulbright grants on our university's bulletin boards. After I obtained my PhD degree in history from Marmara University (Istanbul) in 2008 while I was concurrently working as a research assistant at Gebze Institute of Technology, I expressed my intention to apply for a Fulbright Postdoctoral Fellowship to our dean. Fortunately, he encouraged me to pursue it, citing the example of another Fulbright grantee at our university. However, I learned that applying for the postdoctoral grant would take more time. Ms. Ülkü, a staff member at the Istanbul Fulbright office, recommended that I apply for the Scholar-in-Residence Program. Accordingly, I prepared the necessary documents, including a prospective syllabus, and was informed that I had received the fellowship. While I had prior experience traveling abroad, including visits to

the Balkan countries and two trips to the United States, this time, I would be staying in a foreign country for an extended period with teaching and academic and social responsibilities. I anticipated numerous challenges but recognized that I needed to push beyond my boundaries to explore a new world and engage with new people and cultures.

FULBRIGHT SCHOLAR-IN-RESIDENCE 2010-2011

I worked at Chatham University in Pittsburgh as part of the Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence program in the 2010-2011 academic year. The University was formerly a women's college. Later, it was turned into a small institution where both undergraduate and graduate education programs were offered. Pittsburgh, one of the oldest cities in the US, used to be a center of the steel industry. Now it has become a cathedral of learning with higher education institutions, such as Carnegie Mellon, Pittsburgh, and Duquesne.

“Global Focus,” a program within the History and International Relations departments at Chatham centers on a country every year. This program declared the 2010-11 academic year as the “Year of Turkey.” I participated in numerous Global Focus events and took every opportunity to provide information about Turkish culture. The “Year of Turkey” events included seminars on Turkish history, a symposium on Turkish-Armenian relations, Turkish music performances and film screenings, a Republic Day celebration, and giving an honorary degree to the Turkish Ambassador to Washington, Namık Tan. There were also demonstrations of marbling art, ney (an end-blown flute made of reed) improvisation, calligraphy practices, and a whirling dervish ceremony. Turkish dishes, coffee, and baklava were served, giving the Chatham community opportunities to taste these delicacies. In addition, I was supposed to assist in the educational and social activities as a Turkish visiting scholar. Accordingly, I attended several undergraduate and graduate courses as a guest professor. The topics I touched upon included marriage in Turkish culture, the role of women in Turkey, Turkish food culture, and Turkish foreign policy.

Leading up to the opening convocation of the university, I realized that both faculty members and university staff did not know much about Turkey. Therefore, in my speech on the opening day, I underlined some basic information that Turkey has been a NATO ally of the US for more than half a century, is a parliamentary democracy and a secular republic. I also emphasized that Turkey's European Union accession negotiations were underway and that the country serves as a bridge between Eastern and Western civilizations. Significantly, the early 2000s marked Turkey's rise to prominence both globally and regionally. During this period, Turkey was elected as a temporary member of the UN Security Council. One of the deputy secretary generals

of NATO had become the Turkish ambassador. The general secretary of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation was also a Turkish scholar. At a time when the “clash of civilizations” was a hot topic, Turkey demonstrated the best example of how Islam and democracy can work together.

THE IMPACT OF MY FULBRIGHT EXPERIENCE

The Fulbright experience significantly advanced my academic development. Upon my return to Turkey, I attained the title of associate professor and received early tenure. Shortly thereafter, I was appointed as the head of my department. I also had the opportunity to lecture Turkish officers undergoing staff officer training at the War Academy Colleges. Additionally, I maintained contact with another Chatham University faculty member, Tompson Makahamadze, who was also a Fulbrighter. He had completed his PhD at the George Mason University Center for Conflict Analysis and Resolution. With Tompson’s assistance, Dr. Sandole, a professor at GMU, invited me to his institution as a visiting professor. My connection with Chatham continued. I arranged Dr. Jean Jacques Sene (director of the Global Focus Program), and his students’ meeting with the Turkish Ambassador, Ali Rıza Özcoşkun, during their trip to Gambia.

As a sociocultural impact, the Fulbright program has internationalized me. Being a Turkish Muslim, I worked in a distant place with a different dominant civilization, engaging in sincere communication with individuals from various backgrounds. We fostered a positive rapport with students and scholars from the Far East, the Indian subcontinent, and the African continent. An illustrative instance occurred in 2011 when Japan experienced an earthquake. In response, a charity campaign was initiated to aid the Japanese people, and I lent my support to this initiative. Similarly, upon my return to Istanbul, I hosted the president and accompanying delegation of the Assembly of Turkish-American Associations. We collectively visited the Yıldız Palace Museum, a residence of the sultans during the final years of the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, on a separate occasion, a group of Chatham students came to Turkey, and we convened in Istanbul’s historical peninsula. In the subsequent years, we organized a seminar about Turkey for visiting Fulbright scholars to Turkey.

Secondly, during my Fulbright period, I came to appreciate the significance of tolerance and dialogue in fostering communication and interaction between societies. I encountered fellow Fulbrighters from diverse backgrounds, including Bulgaria, Norway, and Italy, and our engaging conversations and shared moments were truly enriching. In a particularly memorable instance, an American-Jewish Fulbrighter warmly hosted me, treating me to dishes specific to Mediterranean cuisine. In gratitude, I reciprocated with a music CD featuring compositions by Ottoman Jewish composers. Similarly, the head of my department and several other academics extended invitations for

special occasions. In return, I invited faculty members, university staff, and students to a Turkish restaurant in Pittsburgh, where we collectively savored the diverse flavors of Turkish cuisine. These experiences left a profound and positive impact on me.

Thirdly, I saw that our prejudices can be eliminated. Turks and Armenians were strongly prejudiced against each other, due to the controversial events experienced in the last years

Thanks to Fulbright, I saw that our prejudices can be eliminated.

of the Ottoman Empire, especially in the First World War. I realized how sensitive it was to talk about tragic inter-communal events, and learned the importance of empathy. I developed a very cordial dialogue with Armenian-Americans I met at Chatham University. Indeed, I heard a Chatham student of Armenian descent wanted to protest against me on the opening day of the university. Yet, after having a sincere conversation in my office, she reported her contentment to the Global Focus Program director. I extended an invitation to the Calians, an Armenian-American couple, to a “Year of Turkey” event, which they graciously attended. Later, they hosted a birthday celebration for me at their residence, where I presented them with a music CD featuring the Ottoman Armenian composers. In fact, Armenians and Turks, share a common history and geography over millennia. Rather than focusing on the sad events of the last century, one should concentrate on the shared values of our past and hopes for the future. Peace and tranquility are in the common interests of both the peoples and neighboring states of Turkey and Armenia.

Finally, I would like to emphasize the role of representing both your country and the Fulbright program as a Fulbrighter. These hold significant importance because these occasions provide an opportunity to underscore the prestige of being a Fulbright scholar. For instance, I attended a dinner at the residence of Dr. Esther Barazzone, the university’s president, where I engaged in a fascinating historical conversation with one of the US ambassadors who had served in Bulgaria. Similarly, I had the chance to meet Namık Tan, the Turkish Ambassador to Washington at the time. He was conferred an honorary degree by Chatham University. It was a moment where I felt I represented my country. Indeed, as a Fulbrighter, I also represent the Council for International Exchange of Scholars (CIES), my host university, my country, and my home institution. Through these, Fulbright programs not only contribute to the academic development of individuals but also contribute to a more peaceful world.

NOTES

1. For more information about the Global Focus Program: <https://www.chatham.edu/academics/international-programs/global-focus-program.html>.
2. For an example event of the Global Focus Program: <https://www.chatham.edu/events/details.cfm?eventID=6101>
3. Karakoç, E. “An Experience Regarding Communication with the Armenian Diaspora in America”. Retrieved From <https://turksandarmenians.marmara.edu.tr/en/an-experience-regarding-communication-with-the-armenian-diaspora-in-america/>



Dr. Karakoç and Turkish Ambassador Namık Tan with a group of Chatham students during the honorary degree program

BIOGRAPHY

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