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The Birth of a Leader – Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

Translated by Muhittin Hasan Uncular



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The Birth of a Leader –

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

Hüseyin Besli/ Ömer Özbay. – Paperback

(Translated by Muhittin Hasan Uncular from the Turkish original
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From Rize to Kasımpaşa

“Mountain ranges lie behind us and just in front of us the Black Sea. Son, we are stuck here in this narrow land. That’s why we easily get angry and frustrated.” In the shortest way the famous Kemancha master, Koca Dayı, depicts the spiritual mood of the people of the Black Sea. How well he evokes these easy-going, passionate people, quick to anger and forgive, rarely holding a grudge, quick-witted and hard-working. Erdoğan is from Rize. A child of the Black Sea, he is just such a man. His father Ahmet Erdoğan did not remain in the region that Koca Dayı describes. In 1918, when he was just fifteen, he left İstanbul and moved to relatives in Zonguldak. After working there for four years, he moved back to İstanbul. When his father died, as a fourteen-year-old youth Erdoğan had to start work. Before leaving Rize, his elders married Ahmet Erdoğan to a woman with two kids, saying that since he was going to a foreign place it would be a good idea. This marriage at such a young age lasted for thirty one years. In 1952, Ahmet Erdoğan divorced his first wife, who had given him two sons, and married his second wife, Tenzile. The first child from this marriage was Tayyip Erdoğan, born 25 February 1954. Four years later their second child Mustafa was born. Ahmet had a

longed-for baby girl exactly eight years after Mustafa's birth, at the age of sixty-three.

Ahmet Erdoğan had started to work in 1925 as a captain in the coast guard and when he retired in 1968 he had worked there for forty-three years. He was a pious, devout seaman. In 1958, even when on pilgrimage, he did not leave behind his passion for the sea, choosing to travel by ship. He was as loyal as he was religious and he never forgot his hometown, which he had left at such an early age. Mustafa Erdoğan remembers those days as a time when anyone coming from Rize would be welcome in their home. "In the 1930s and 40s those coming from Rize to İstanbul in the hope of finding a job, often started out working on boats. After my father and mother married and moved to a better house, they started to play host to their townspeople. I recall so well my parents putting up people looking for work and those with a court case or hospital appointment. They all used to stay at our house. Almost every night we had guests staying with us.

Ahmet Erdoğan, having been living in the district of Tophane, after marrying Tenzile moved to a house in Sinanpaşa where he resided for twenty-two years. Later, he came to own two flats which he had acquired by giving the land bought with his retirement pension as a bonus to the contractor. Mustafa Erdoğan explains that "my elder brother and I lived in one of the flats and the other housed my parents and sister. In 1978, when my elder brother married, I moved in with my parents and my elder brother took over what had been our flat." Even if their father has misgivings about his younger son, who could be wayward, he had no doubt that his elder son Tayyip Erdoğan would attend school and become an important man.

When Erdoğan was in primary school, the principal of the school called his father and told him to keep his son at school for as long as possible. He won a scholarship to board at the Religious Vocational High School (İmam Hatip Lisesi) after graduating from primary school. In a short time he became one of their most outstanding students, participating in all school activities. He read poetry well and he was also in the football team and played volleyball. The school debating team relied on him. In contrast to students coming from Anatolia,

he was essentially from İstanbul and had all the merits that this city gives to a young man.

Thinking that it would provide a more disciplined atmosphere, his father wanted him to be a boarder. He was free at weekends, but instead of spending time at home, he went out to work. Spending most of the money he earned from selling water and Turkish bagels on books, he soon had a considerable library even while he was still at secondary school. Mustafa Erdoğan comments that his brother prized books by Serdengeçti, Necip Fazıl and Akif's Safahat and that he also used to read the Russian Classics and especially Tolstoy.

After the Religious Vocational High School (İmam Hatip Lisesi) from which he graduated in 1973, he was registered to Eyüp High School. In order to be eligible to take the university entrance exam he had to take extra subjects at high school, which he passed with little difficulty. In the university entrance exam which he took the same year, he gained entrance to the Aksaray School of Economics and Commercial Sciences. In 1981 he graduated from this school, which later became part of Marmara University and was renamed the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences.

*

The passion for football that had started at primary school, grew as he continued to develop his skills. During that time Erdoğan attracted attention for his agility on the football field and accepted an offer to transfer to Camialtı Sport Club for a thousand liras. His friends called him İmam Beckenbaur because his style of play resembled the famous footballer Beckenbaur. In 1975 he was transferred to the İETT, the İstanbul Public Transport Authority, where he was permanently employed and was also making his living playing football. His father Ahmet Erdoğan thought his interest in football was a transitory enthusiasm and seemed to be unaware of his growing professional standing. However, when he learned about the transfer bid by Eskişehirspor he lost his temper, complaining that he wanted his son to attend school and learn to be a good man, but that he was wasting his time with football. He did not allow him to accept the offer.

Erdoğan, years later admitted to a journalist, “I lost many opportunities like this because of my father”. One of the opportunities, and perhaps the most important one, was a bid from Fenerbahçe. In 1976 the İstanbul amateur football league final matches were being played in the Vefa Stadium. The performance of Erdoğan, the front row forward in the İETT team, caught the attention of the technical director of Fenerbahçe Football Club, Toma Kaleperovic. Kaleperovic made an offer to the İETT for Erdoğan and requested an immediate transfer.

When the transfer bid from Fenerbahçe was made, even though Erdoğan was over the moon, he asked for two days to consider the offer, thinking his father might be an obstacle. When he saw that his efforts to convince his father were in vain, he had to refuse the bid that would have completely changed his life and brought him into a completely different sphere. During the football adventure he did not abandon his political career. At the start of his university career he continued his work with both the National Turkish Student Union (MTTB) and kept up with activities in the youth branch of the National Salvation Party (MSP). He was at the outset of the apprenticeship of his political career. In 1976 when he was elected chairman of the Beyoğlu Youth Branch of the MSP, he knew that he had started out on an irreversible path and that politics would hold a very important place in the rest of his life.

Soon he realized there was something missing from his life, despite the football and politics. He was 23 years old and single. Then, one evening at a meeting of the party in 1977, a pair of gentle eyes met his, that seemed to be watching him with admiration, and he gathered that soon enough there would no longer be anything missing. It was a defining moment, a feeling he had never felt before, falling in love for the first time. Even if Erdoğan had difficulties in admitting it to himself, this was an instance of love at first sight, and the young lady’s name, for who he suddenly felt the deepest affection, was Emine Gülbaran. She was then the vice president of the foundation of Idealist Women, which she had founded with Şule Yüksel in Üsküdar. As her friends relate, “besides being very sensitive she was self-controlled yet

energetic and a person determined to do what she set out to do. She also used to read the Quran.”

Erdoğan lost little time in grasping the opportunity that destiny had offered. On 4 July 1978 they were married. They had four children, Ahmet Burak, Necmeddin Bilal, Esra and Sümeyye. Emine was well aware who she had agreed to wed, and when she accepted Erdoğan’s proposal, she said in an interview later that “every woman wants her husband to be at home with the kids, but although I wanted this too, I always supported his sense of duty. In my prayers, I wanted to marry someone who was devoted to his work.” Erdoğan, in a political life full of troubles, has never had to worry about the welfare of his children, and this is primarily down to Emine Erdoğan. Reinforcing this view, Sibel Eraslan who initiated the female branches of the Justice and Development Party in İstanbul, makes one of the most important comments to help us appreciate some of Emine’s merits that she often modestly hides from view:

“When Erdoğan was in prison, Emine continued his work. Once she made a speech to calm down party followers, gathered at a wedding hall in Çekmeköy. The hall was completely full and the owner of the hall warned us that the building was about to collapse. The balcony balustrades and the banisters were broken. Erdoğan’s imprisonment for unjust reasons caused great indignation, and everyone who heard Emine’s words left in tears. She had written her own speech and it was very passionate. Her voice was trembling with emotion when she said, ‘these days will pass, good days are waiting for us.’ She calmed everyone down. Her endurance was unbelievable. She was so strong and confident, like an Amazon in a veil. She is a woman who wholly supports our work, not just the wife of a leader but someone who has the heart and soul of a leader herself.”

*

In the Ottoman archives the historian Cezmi Yurtseven found that the family roots of Erdoğan go back to the XVIIth century. His ancestor Bakatoğlu Memiş had lived in Dumankaya village in Rize and was one of its founders. He