

Story 885 1964 Tape 2)

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Clerical Politics Among Some Hocas<sup>1</sup>

After I had been attending a medrese<sup>2</sup> for a while, I reached the conclusion one day that by turning some of the pages of my black-bound books, I could gather enough material to preach to a congregation. I went to the island of Araplar, just offshore from Erdek.<sup>3</sup> When I arrived on the island, I found two other hocas were also there, but this did not disturb me, for there were people on the island from Sultan Ahmet Medrese,<sup>4</sup> where I had been educated.

These people welcomed me when I reached the island, one of the other hocas who was there, quite an old man with a long beard, asked me, "Have you a letter of recommendation

<sup>1</sup> A hoca is a Moslem priest

<sup>2</sup> A medrese was a theological seminary, usually attached to a large mosque.

<sup>3</sup> Erdek is a kaza town on the Sea of Marmara. It has grown in recent years into a large summer resort.

<sup>4</sup> This is a reference to the theological seminary attached to the Sultan Ahmet Mosque, better known to foreigners as the "Blue Mosque," in Istanbul.

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 from the Seyhül Islam."<sup>5</sup> It was necessary to have such a letter in order to preach

"No, I don't, but I did not come here to preach but to visit friends on this island during Ramazan."<sup>6</sup>

"No, I don't believe you. You clearly must have come here to preach. Why else would anyone come here? You want to deprive me of my subsistence."<sup>7</sup> In fact, he was so upset about my presence there that he complained about me to the kadi<sup>8</sup> of Erdek, and it was not long before the chief clerk of the court in Erdek appeared on Araplar to speak with the

<sup>5</sup> The Şeyhül Islam was the highest religious figure in the government after the sultan, who had assumed the title of Caliph for all Islam.

<sup>6</sup> Ramazan is the holy month of fasting in Islam. It is also a time of increased prayers and other religious activity.

<sup>7</sup> The old hoca is clearly referring to cer, the former custom of theological students of making money by serving as itinerant preachers and prayer leaders during the time of Rajab, Shaban, and especially Ramazan. Students were said to "go out for cer." It was both a way of subsidizing theology students and of bringing to remote villages additional clergy to help make Ramazan observances impressive. Some tiny villages could not afford to have a full-time hoca, and in such cases a theological student was a most welcome guest for Ramazan.

<sup>8</sup> A judge of Moslem canon law and the chief Ottoman official in a kaza.

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muhtar<sup>9</sup> of the village where I was staying.

He said to the muhtar, "It has been reported that such-and-such a hoca has arrived here to preach without a license from the Şeyhül Islam. It is required that he be sent away lest he deprive the two rightful hocas of their subsistence."

The muhtar replied, "This man came here to preach and to conduct a service in our mosque. This is entirely between us and him, and it is not your concern. We shall see to it that all three are satisfied with their earnings here

But the old hoca still insisted that I had to go. This annoyed the muhtar, and he finally silenced the old man by saying, "If you do not like the arrangement we have made, then you go!"

Anyway, all three of us stayed, and we took turns being the hoca mainly responsible for the day's religious activity. It seemed no time before the month of Ramazan was over and the Şeker Bayram<sup>10</sup> had arrived.

There is an island called Avşa near the one we were on and just after the three of us hocas had broken the fast, a

<sup>9</sup> The muhtar is the head man of a village or city mahalle. He is the only elected official that villagers come into contact with in most cases.

<sup>10</sup> Şeker Bayram means Sweetmeat Holiday. It is a three-day period following Ramazan; during this holiday, friends and relatives visit each other, and the guests are always served a confection of some kind.

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man came to see the three of us from that island. This man greeted us, "Selâmünaleyküm!"

"Aleykümselâm!"<sup>11</sup>

"Feridim Bey from the island of Avşa<sup>12</sup> sends you his greetings and asks that one of you hocas come over to Avşa to conduct a bayram service and deliver the bayram sermon.

I suggested to the old man that he might like to go. He said, "Oh, no! This village has 150 families while that village on Avşa has only thirty families. By remaining here you would receive all the benefits of working in a large community while I would be going to a much smaller community. You go!"

"All right, I shall go!" Arising, I adjusted my turban and left.

<sup>11</sup> The traditional greeting between Moslem strangers: May peace be unto you/ And may peace be unto you too.

<sup>12</sup> Avşa is actually one of the larger islands in that section of the Sea of Marmara.