

Requiem for Sulukule

Sinan Gökçen¹

IN MEMORIAM: Except for six homes under legal dispute, the final homes in Europe's oldest Romani settlement, Sulukule of Istanbul, Turkey, were razed to the ground in April and May 2009. Sulukule's approximately 3,400 impoverished residents, who are overwhelmingly Romani, are now scattered around Istanbul.

Despite fervent international campaigning to save the community, Sulukule's destruction is

the final result of an urban gentrification project. Istanbul's Fatih Municipality conceptualised the urban renovation project to destroy Sulukule, allegedly in preparation for Istanbul's position as a European Capital of Culture in 2010. The municipality's plan was "to clear off" the area of rundown buildings and to erect brand new condominiums in the "Ottoman style".² Since 2006 consecutive waves of demolition have caused almost all of the long-time inhabitants of the quarter to flee.³



The teams from Fatih Municipality bulldozed the remaining buildings in Sulukule on 13 and 14 May 2009, despite local and international efforts to convince the municipal authorities to cancel the urban renovation project and negotiate an alternative plan to save the historical character of the oldest Romani neighbourhood in Europe.

PHOTO CREDIT: NEŞE OZAN

¹ Sinan Gökçen is the ERRC Information Officer and Turkey Consultant.

² "Eski Roman yeni Osmanlı 21 çeşit mimariyle Sulukule (Sulukule with old Romani new Ottoman style architecture)", *Star Daily*, 9 January 2008, <http://www.stargazete.com/guncel/eski-roman-yeni-osmanli-21-cesit-mimariyle-sulukule-81891.htm> (accessed: 9 July 2009).

³ As of 27 July 2009, only 16 buildings were left untouched in Sulukule. Ten are registered as historical assets and are under protection. Owners of the other six houses have pending court cases against Fatih Municipality regarding the expropriation of their property.

It is especially ironic that Sulukule was home to its Romani community for at least 550 years. With documents dating from Byzantine times chronicling it as a Romani district, Sulukule had an invaluable cultural and historical heritage. Yet the Prime Minister of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan labelled Sulukule as “hideous” in a speech where he praised the Fatih Municipality’s renovation project.⁴ While it is true that Sulukule desperately needed a renovation plan to rehabilitate its aging buildings as a precaution against earthquake hazards and as a facelift for this centrally located historic place to polish its status as an attractive part of the city heritage, no such intention was at stake. Moreover, a well-framed plan aiming to revamp the neighbourhood would also enable the residents of the community to better their much deprived situation.

Sulukule had been the target of police raids for more than a decade. Yet as poor as it was, the district was a cultural centre with numerous entertainment houses presenting belly dance shows and was far from a constant crime scene. Nevertheless, Fatih Municipality neglected to consider rehabilitation plans that addressed the poverty of its inhabitants, plans that would provide Sulukule’s inhabitants with educational opportunities to acquire vocational skills while renovating its ailing houses. Not only one but several of these types of plans were devised by local and international city planning and architectural academic centres. Such projects were created at the personal initiative of the designers, free of charge, for the sole sake of preserving Sulukule. However, because Sulukule is centrally located in Istanbul near major historical and commercial sites, the regenerated area will generate huge profits as prime real estate.

It is interesting to note that there were several campaigns – on an unprecedented, local to international scale – to save Sulukule. The European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) was one of the first international organisations to become actively involved in efforts to preserve Sulukule, reacting as soon as the planning for the aforementioned urban renovation project began. ERRC representatives visited Fatih Municipality in 2006 and attempted to persuade local officials to protect the original character of the quarter and not to displace its residents. The ERRC

also sent letters of concern to the Prime Minister of Turkey, the Mayor of Fatih and other relevant authorities to remind them of Turkey’s obligations under domestic and international law. On 31 December 2007, the ERRC initiated litigation before the Istanbul 10 Administrative Court, requesting immediate suspension of the demolition campaign in Sulukule and cancelation of Fatih Municipality’s renovation project. This case is still pending.

Local human rights activists have worked wonders in attracting and keeping local and international interest in the plight of Sulukule. The story ran in various international newspapers, along with features in numerous print, broadcast and online sources. Many locally and internationally famous Romani and non-Romani artists and celebrities visited Sulukule and pledged solidarity with its residents. The European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, United Nations bodies like UNESCO, UN Habitat, UN Human Rights Commission as well as the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (US Helsinki Commission) cautioned and pressured the Turkish government to halt implementation of the urban renovation project that would ultimately destroy Sulukule’s historical and cultural character. All of this has proved to be in vain and Sulukule has been transformed beyond recognition into a building site for prime real estate development.

Fatih Municipality could still do right by its former residents if it provided adequate compensation for the harms thus suffered, scrapped the existing project and implemented a regeneration plan which serves the needs of the residents.

For now, Sulukule is a beautiful memory that belongs to a joyful past. Perhaps this poem by Langston Hughes is the best epitaph for Sulukule:

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up, Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags, like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

⁴ “Erdoğan: Sulukule’yi ucube halden kurtaracağız (Erdoğan: We will save Sulukule from its hideousness)”, *NTVMSNBC*, 20 March 2008, <http://arsiv.ntvmsnbc.com/news/439760.asp> (accessed: 9 July 2009).