



VINTAGE

THE BRIDGE

GEERT MAK

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About the Book

Istanbul's Galata Bridge has spanned the Golden Horn since the sixth century AD, connecting the old city with the more Western districts to the north. But the bridge is a city in itself, peopled by merchants and petty thieves, tourists and fishermen, and at the same time a reflection of Turkey as the link between Asia and Europe. Geert Mak introduces us to the cigarette vendors and the best pickpockets in Europe, to the pride of the cobbler and the tea-seller's homesickness, and interweaves their stories with vignettes illuminating the extraordinary history of Istanbul and Turkey. Charming and learned, *The Bridge* is a delightful book from the author of the acclaimed international bestseller *In Europe*.

About the Author

Geert Mak is a journalist and historian, and one of The Netherlands' bestselling writers; his prizewinning books include *Amsterdam*, *Jorwerd* and the acclaimed *In Europe: Travels Through the Twentieth Century*.

ALSO BY GEERT MAK

Jorwerd: the Death of the Village in Late Twentieth-Century Europe

Amsterdam: a Brief Life of the City

In Europe: Travels Through the Twentieth Century

The Bridge

A Journey Between Orient and Occident

Geert Mak

Translated from the Dutch by Sam Garrett

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

On the bridge you don't make friends, from the bridge you watch and see.

Said Faik

I

ON THE BRIDGE, everything is done in millions. ‘Yesterday I caught twenty million worth, nothing but sardines.’ ‘Three million for the best picture you’ve ever had taken!’ ‘Two cups of tea, that’s half a million, thank you.’ ‘I’ve been here since the crack of dawn, only four million, when’s the money going to start crossing the bridge again?’ ‘Real Chanel, five million!’

The high voice of the lottery-ticket girl echoes down the arcade: ‘Who’s going for a hundred billion? Who will it be?’ The shop window behind her is full of Zeus Super, Kral 2005 Magnum and Blue Compact pistols, to say nothing of the ladies’ handguns, the elegant Geax en Class-minis; ten easy instalments of twenty-five million apiece put the power over life and death straight into your handbag.

The bridge offers everything anyone could want: combs, orthopaedic sandals, cigarettes, dancing dolls, Gucci bags and Rolexes for no more than, say, twenty million, Nokias of dubious provenance, umbrellas decorated with flowering fields, shaving brushes, condoms and crawling mechanical infantrymen who squeeze off a round every ten seconds. A million comes to about fifty euro cents, it’s outdated coinage really, one of those hysterically inflating currencies from the last century. But the bridge has an exchange rate all of its own. And the fish are thrown in for free, a gift for being here. There are always dozens of rods jutting over the railing. Today is the day for fat sardines. For some strange reason huge schools of them are moiling about beneath the bridge – but next week all you’ll reel in will be the odd fingerling. A determined-looking woman pulls up one sardine after another as the private boats and rusty tugs go growling beneath the bridge, and the pavement shakes and shimmies with the passing of the trams. She

used to be a nurse, then she retired, now she does something with computers. She's been fishing here every day for the last ten years; within a couple of hours she will have caught dinner for the whole family. 'This is my way of meditating.' She lights a cigarette, hands me the huge casting rod. 'Try it, it's relaxing.' In the distance the tankers go shuffling by, the red bulk carriers heading from the Crimea to Europe, the white American cruise liners.

In the same way that other parts of the world have a dozen or more words for rain, snow or fog, this city knows at least thirty varieties of wind, and the fishermen have named them all. When the Pleasant Storm, the Storm of the Blackbirds or the Storm of the Cuckoos comes blowing in from the west, the spring will be mild and dry. Easterly winds with their morning mist, like the Storm of Fish, provide relief from the heat of summer and bring rain all year round. The Black Wind – which comes from the east as well, but only in winter – powders the city with snow. Now everyone is braced for the spring storms, the Storm of the Swallow and the Storm of Swans. The tourist season has started. They've planted three million tulips, everywhere you look there are tulips, even atop the bridge's control booths they stand swaying in the cold wind, fat plastic bubbles of red and yellow.

For the moment, however, all the weather still comes from the Black Sea, it's the Boreas that is blowing and showers fall incessantly. The fishermen have decked themselves out in sheets of plastic, worn tarpaulins and old fertiliser bags. The ferries putter back and forth in the greyness, gulls dive past, shiny black umbrellas go trundling across the bridge, its far end hidden behind a foggy white wall. The sonorous motors of the *Professor Aykut Barka* and the *Mehmet Ahif Ersoy* are idling along the northern quay, greasy black smoke shoots from their stacks, an abrupt turn of the rudder and the two ferries are off. On the TV screens in the cafés beneath the bridge tropical fish swim back and forth the livelong day. This is the only company one has today.

The entire populace of the bridge has retreated to the tunnels at either end. The side closest to the old city smells, as always, of fried

fish, but there isn't a customer in sight. Rowdy with boredom this morning, the young cigarette vendors are kicking up their heels. Their insults are aimed at the foreigners or any other fool who happens to pass by. The perfume vendor has taken refuge in the lee of an old retaining wall. He's one of those fellows you sometimes see in a suit jacket many sizes too large for him, its pockets filled with fakes, one of the characters you try to avoid while crossing the bridge, but with whom you fall into conversation anyway because it's raining and there's nothing else to do.

He talks about his village, he probably never talks about anything else. 'It was built up against the mountainside; twelve houses, some goats, sheep, a few potato patches, a beanfield for the army, sometimes tomatoes for the market in town, we squeaked by.' At the age of seven it was time for him to go to work, herding sheep in summer, gathering firewood until the first snow fell. 'We didn't have toys. We played with stones.'

His village no longer exists, all the families have moved away, it's even been deleted from the official records. The families grew too large to support – there were sometimes as many as ten or fifteen people living in one house – the village couldn't feed so many mouths. 'One winter night – I'll never forget this – the village was besieged by a pack of wolves; they tore apart about twenty sheep. After that everyone left. What else could we do?'

The perfume vendor doesn't know what became of those twelve families. Most went to Europe, of course, one of them even went to Holland. He himself had gone to the city and found odd jobs: in a shooting gallery, a restaurant, a barber shop. He sold bottled water, fruit, fish, socks and wristwatches. He was married, divorced, now he has a room in a boarding house and lives for the rare Sunday afternoons when he and his young son walk the city together. The bridge is his destiny, there's nothing anyone can do about that. 'My family couldn't send me to school, they were too poor, it was that simple. I can pay my bills, I make ends meet, but I'm on my own, that's all.'

Lately, more than ever before, he has been spending his nights in that village of twelve houses; he hears the morning sounds – the