

## A Coal Miner's Life during the Late Ottoman Empire

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### *Abstract*

This is a translation of a truly extraordinary and rare historical document—a transcribed narrative of a coal miner who began to work in the coal fields of the Anatolian Black Sea coast during the late 19th century. To date, no comparable tale of an Ottoman worker's life has come to light. This annotated document offers a rich and vivid look into the life of underground miners of the late Ottoman Empire. It vibrantly illustrates the connections between village and mine, the power of village headmen, and the nature of labor recruitment. And, it details work inside the mines. The account should be of considerable value to labor historians in every field not only for its descriptions but for the comparative perspective which it facilitates.

### *Editors' Introduction*

The following extraordinary document should be of considerable general interest to social and labor historians in all fields. This memoir of the coal miner called Ethem Çavuş is unique (so far) in Ottoman historical studies as the only first hand account of any length from an Ottoman worker of any kind. Recorded not later than 1935–6, when he was sixty years old, this memoir chronicles the life of a young boy who began work in the mines, carrying out coal in baskets, and gradually rising in the ranks over the decades to finally achieve the respected position of foreman (*çavuş*).<sup>1</sup>

Ethem Çavuş was born in a mountain village amid the coal fields of Zonguldak while profound changes were sweeping the region. These coal deposits are located eastward along the Black Sea coast, not far from Istanbul and, c. 1900, extended on an east-west plane some two hundred kilometers east-west and thirty kilometers on a north-south axis. Discovered in the late 1820s, coal production was stimulated through Ottoman state initiatives that needed coal for warships and various state factories, foundries and arsenals. Private entrepreneurs operated under license to the state, for a long time under restrictive conditions. Dating from at least 1849, the state established a distinctive mining district that began to evolve its own particular administrative features, including a mining superintendent as the ranking state official. The mines, yielding coal of a quality

that compared favorably to the better Newcastle grades, are located in a very rugged region, on or quite near the coast.

By the time of Ethem Çavuş's birth in c. 1875, annual output had hardly reached 100,000 tons. At the outset of World War One—which forms the terminal date for most of the events in this memoir—he was a middle-aged man working in coal fields that annually produced 900,000 tons. Thus, during his years as an Ottoman subject, overall coal output rose nearly tenfold (and would continue to increase after 1923, with the formation of the Turkish Republic).<sup>2</sup> Some mines remained tiny, but the scale of most operations increased considerably over the period, especially after a French-capitalized company entered the field in the 1890s, as Ethem Çavuş, then entering his mature years, so vividly reports. This company thereafter accounted for at least three-quarters of all coal produced in the region.<sup>3</sup>

Labor shortages remained a chronic problem for mine operations throughout the Ottoman era. In an effort to resolve this shortage, the Ottoman state, in 1867, promulgated the Dilaver Pasha regulations (named after their initiator, a mine superintendent) that offered protections to workers regarding working hours and housing. The narrative of Ethem Çavuş contextualizes these provisions and makes clear the continuing brutal reality of miners' lives after their enactment. The 1867 regulations gave a monopoly of mine work to the residents of the fourteen administrative districts in and adjacent to the coal fields. To put a finer point on it, males between thirteen and fifty years of age were compelled to provide mine labor of every sort inside the mine—twelve days in the mines and twelve days back in the village, with three days allotted for travel time. In exchange, they were paid wages and exempted from service in the Ottoman military forces. It seems worthwhile to note that wage work rather than piece rates prevailed, at least until the 1890s, when the latter were introduced by the French corporation. All those subject to compulsory work inside the mines were villagers. In a distinctive turn of events, workers in the region developed an identity as villager-miners, as we see in Ethem Çavuş's comments. This dual identity persists down to the present day.<sup>4</sup> Gendarmes and, when necessary, regular military personnel stood behind the regulations compelling mine work. To supervise enforcement of the rules and bring labor to the mines, the central state bolstered the power of the village headmen, enabling them to force villagers to work. These headmen selected the workers, handed out their pay, and punished deserters and fugitives. The social gap between fellow villagers—headman and mine worker—is strikingly illustrated below.

How can we use this memoir? It certainly is a wonderful description of mine life. Overall, accuracy seems most assured when the author is discussing day-to-day events, such as mine work, sleeping arrangements, food preparations, and his relationship to village authorities. His descriptions of the dead and dying ring painfully true, as do his reports of accidents and solidarity among miners at the time of accidents. The discussions of pit gas fires and "suicide jobs" done by workers are particularly powerful. His assertions are never contradicted by the available external evidence, and, on a number of points, his statements are cor-

roborated by outside sources. Perhaps the most striking example of this is his detailed description of a conflict in August 1897 between workers imported from the Balkans and locals, one that ended in bloodshed and the arrival of imperial troops from the capital. This account is confirmed in specific detail by Ottoman archival documents, which I coincidentally unearthed and reported many years ago.<sup>5</sup>

The document also reflects the actual building of identities and why blurring between identities might occur. Rather stridently at one point, he insists on his solidarity with other workers as workers, while elsewhere he points to his villager-miner identity. The memoir concretely demonstrates how fortnightly returns to the village and subjection to village authority both at home and in the mines would have reinforced ties to the community. At the same time, it shows how work experiences inside the mines promoted common ties to workers from other villages and thus broader bonds of community beyond the village.

We can also use this memoir as a prism through which to view labor-state relations in the first decades of the Turkish Republic. At a number of points in the narrative, Ethem Çavuş digresses from his descriptions to insert himself into contemporary (1930s) debates in Turkish politics. Here he is imposing on his Ottoman experiences a set of Turkish nationalist values that came into being after the formation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. It is not likely, in our opinion, that such views were common among coal miners in the 1890s and early twentieth century. Notable is his discussion of the French company (see “What is Piece Work” below) that dominated mining in the region after 1896. His reference to the company is quite strong; he calls it a “leech” on the nation, a presence that from the 1890s drained out resources. A bit later, he celebrates the news (c. 1936) that the Turkish state was completing negotiations that brought the French company mines under national ownership. Now, he says, “we” will profit from our nation’s natural resources. In these remarks about the company, he is presenting views then current among state officials and in many Turkish intellectual circles. His rhetoric is also consistent with that employed by writers actively promoting workers’ and miners’ causes in the early Turkish republic.<sup>6</sup>

There are at least two ways to understand his participation in this nationalist discourse. The first is to insist that he was a dupe in the hands of these officials and intellectuals, brainwashed by them into abandoning his own values as a worker or villager-miner and subordinating himself to their nationalist agenda. The second path seems more productive, and is consistent with the findings of Egyptian and other labor historians:<sup>7</sup> namely, that by using the language of the emergent Turkish state, Ethem Çavuş was building alliances with official and intellectual circles to support the coal miners. These memoirs appear in a context of prolonged state repression of the coal miners dating back to the Ottoman period. In its early years, the Turkish state both continued the anti-labor policies of the Ottoman era and enacted additional legislation that “brought drastic limitations to labor organizations and movements.”<sup>8</sup> Further laws to control workers were promulgated in 1929, 1933, and 1936. The miners, for their part, launched widespread strikes regularly during the Ottoman imperial and Turk-

ish republican periods, before and after World War One, for example, in 1908, 1913, and 1925. On the last date, more than 12,000 coal-field workers struck. In this context Ethem Çavuş prepared his memoir that, we believe, should be examined as a document seeking to sustain workers' rights.

*Preface by Aydın Karahasan*

The following memoir belongs to a “mine wolf,” who began working in mines eighty years ago and spent fifty years below.

This old mine wolf, Ethem Çavuş, passed away a long time ago. People like his son Muharrem Yemelek, who is chief miner now, and [those] of similar kind are carrying the flag now. Muharrem Yemelek had been present during the conversations when his father told about some phases of life in the mines.

I had published some of the fragments from the conversations I had with Ethem Çavuş. His son was also present during some of these conversations.

Publishing all of these memories in labor newspapers, I believe, is an opportunity to commemorate Ethem Çavuş and people like him.

Ethem Çavuş once asked me, “One day you will turn these memoirs into a book and publish, won't you?”

That time I told him, “yes.” I say “yes” today, too. The difference is that the “yes” for him was a promise, [whereas] the “yes” today is [a] materialization of that “yes” I told him. For this reason, I am full of satisfaction in executing a duty.

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*Working and Living Conditions in the Coal Field in the Past:  
A Memoir by Ethem Çavuş, as Recorded by Aydın Karahasan*

I was fourteen when I came to the mines. At that time there were the Dilaver Pasha regulations. The mines under the operation of the navy were worked by workers who were recruited just like Janissaries. The village headmen would assemble the kids and organize wrestling matches. Then he would choose the kids who were able to carry thirty-okka baskets [slightly more than thirty-eight kilograms] loaded with black stones on their back and put them on pay lists. At the beginning of each month he would order, “OK, you, go to mine X.” You had to go. Otherwise, a navy sergeant would come with two armed gendarmes and take you to the mines. On the way you would be beaten up. On top of that, you had to perform slave labor during the second rotation while your friends went back to the village.

As I said previously, the village boys who were able [to] carry thirty-okka black stones on their backs would be separated into two groups. While the first rotation of workers came back to the village after performing their compulsory labor for twelve days, the second rotation of workers would leave the village to replace the first.

I'll never forget. The first time I came to work in the mines was one of the

coldest days in the winter. I mean it; it was very cold. We descended from Comaklar village in Devrek district to Zonguldak. Everywhere was covered by snow; because of the blizzard you couldn't see the hand in front of your face.

The village headmen gathered us in the village hall. We were seven kids; the oldest was fifteen years old. We were joining the second rotation of workers heading to the mines. The village headmen said: "[K]ids . . . You are young men now. The Beylik mines are waiting for you. Obey your foremen. Do not let us down . . .

We put on our rawhide sandals and snowshoes, packed our food, and got on the road. We did, but our hearts were beating heavily as we were wondering whether we would come back home healthy and find it as we left it. Would they beat us at the mines? I began to have a strange feeling. While walking, I was watching other kids. If one of them tries to run away, I will do the same. Some childhood!

On entering the first Beylik mine, we performed a ceremony. Then we followed the foreman, walking [while] bent forwards and carrying oil-burning lamps. As the mines had been recently put into operation, they were not as deep as today. There were no modern methods to mine coal below sea level. For this reason, we were constantly mining the coal veins that were close to the surface.

We passed the main tunnel and reached the galleries. There were piles of coal on both sides of the galleries that were mined by the hewers in the evening. The foreman gave each of us a basket pronouncing the *bismillah* [Muslim prayer] formula. Another master worker began to fill our basket, again pronouncing the formula; we began to carry coal to the main tunnel.

We were called novices until we went back and forth from the village for a couple of times.

As months passed, each of us had become an excellent basket carrier and knew every nook and cranny of the underground. We were carrying the coal mined by the undercuts of the hewer on our backs in the evening to the main tunnel; there, we loaded it on the cars running on wooden rails.

At those times the concept of [fixed] working hours did not exist. We started to work very early in the morning and left it at sunset. Roosters were giving the signal to start the work. But we were surprised that those roosters around the mines crowed before the morning light. Later we found out that they were made to crow earlier by a candle lit in front of their cages.

As soon as the roosters crowed, the gang bosses would give a blow, with whips made wet in water, on the bottoms of our feet, which were inflamed by the toxic waters in the mines, in the meantime yelling at us, "Wake up, move . . ." Many times we ended up below without even grabbing a loaf of corn bread that we were to warm up on the thin iron plate over the fire.

It is strange that I witnessed the first accident, not in the mines, but on the surface while I was outside. At those times, the employers did not provide shelter for the workers. Each work gang built one from this and that, and covered it with mud, thus creating a shelter during the period of rotation they worked in the mines.

I was able to find accommodation in one of these shelters. We would lay on the ground, place a piece of wood under our heads, and wait for the roosters to crow by the candle light.

Those novice workers who could not build a shelter like the one I stayed in had to make one by digging out the slope of a hill, creating a place like a cave. And they stayed in these caves during the night.

One night, we were [a]wakened by loud cries. We ran outside. One of these shelters had caved in. Eroded soil and rocks closed its entrance. Sixteen workers were buried alive in it. We were able to save thirteen, but failed to do so for three of them.

Thus I witnessed the first mine accident not below but on surface. I still feel sorry for those three young men.

A Greek mine operator by the name of Rombaki was operating the present Uzulmez mines.<sup>9</sup> I experienced the first mine accident there while I was a basket carrier.

Eventually we experienced many similar accidents and became indifferent to them. I do not exactly know why—either because I was very young and inexperienced or because it was the first deadly accident—but it is this one that left a deep mark in my memory.

As the method employed in mining was primitive, the mines were not in the shape of proper pits as they are currently. It was impossible to mine deep down using the equipment available during those times. Because of this situation, there weren't pit gas explosions. Deaths were caused by cave-ins. In one of those shafts in the Rombaki mine where I was [a] basket carrier, they were pulling down the supports. This was not an easy task. Shafts where no coal remained were abandoned. Before this, the supports erected to protect the workers were pulled down. The coal on the left and right sides as well as on the ceiling of the galleries—which were 2.5 meters in height—thus poured in. It was inevitable that these places were very unstable and would collapse upon those working there. And that's what happened.

Pulling down supports was easy and produced lots of coal; this method was profitable for the mine operators but was troublesome for the workers, as it would invite the death angel.

The first accident I witnessed took place while they were taking down the supports.

Two young hewers remained in the space behind the cave-in. The space in which they were trapped was very small, whereas the cave-in was too large. It was certain that the air pocket was not going to be enough, even if we cleared the cave-in and reached them. And it happened as we expected, my dear sir.

Their calls for help became weaker and weaker after [several] hours. After sixteen hours, their desperate struggle was over.

These two hewers were taken out in two days. Oh my God! What a terrible view it was. One of them was lying face down. He had bitten the sharp tip of his pickax. His eyes popped out of his head, [and] his facial muscles were tight.

The other was lying on his side facing the wall. He had a sharp piece of iron

pole on his lap. Just like his friend, he had bitten it. His mouth was filled with cracked teeth. Both of their faces were covered with a crust of mud formed by blood and coal dust. It was hard to remove the pickax and the iron pole from their hands. They had grabbed them very tight just before they breathed for the last time in their first grave.

We six children were horrified because of this accident. Therefore that night we ran away from the mine and set out for the village . . .

### *Tin and Red Fabric Instead of a Daily Wage*

For the first time I received the return of my labor in cash from the Gurci Company while I worked as basket carrier, assistant to a hewer, as well as wagon driver. Until that time, we were not paid cash either in the state- or merchant-operated mines.

We worked in state-operated mines in return for the tax debts we owed. The Mine Ministry was located in [the town of] Ereğli at that time. Grammar Hasan Pasha<sup>10</sup> then was Superintendent of Mines. Bills of exchange were sent from Ereğli and were held by the treasurer against the money owed as tax debts. In the meantime, the tax debts of [the] village headman and his associates, of course, were paid from this "Hasan Pasha" bill of exchange.

In the merchant-operated mines, they paid us in things like American broad fabric, red-rose printed fabric, tin, etc., instead of money. But when we tried to sell these, for instance, some tin given to us with a value of twenty piasters, we could hardly find anyone who would offer even half that price in the market. Sometimes, they would not let us go to the villages if the second shift of workers was delayed in coming to the mines for some reason. As if their delay was our fault, we had to work until our replacements would arrive, without any daily wages, I mean without being paid in tin and printed fabric, but only a loaf of corn bread.

The Gurci mine was in Kozlu. It was making payments to workers completely in cash at the end of month. Because of this, workers began to come to the mines of this company in huge numbers. It was worth it to see the mine when workers were to be hired at the end of the month. About 2,000 workers showed up in front of the mine for 400 jobs, and they gave innumerable presents to the foremen and gang bosses. After a few attempts that had ended without success, I had given up looking for employment that was paid in cash. [But] my late father came from the village like a God-sent figure. A basket of [prized] Safranbolu grapes that he presented to the foreman made me one of the happy workers making six piasters daily, one of those who was paid at least partly in cash.

The numbers of workers coming to the mine were so numerous that the daily wages were reduced dramatically. Then the company posted warnings, stating that there was pit gas in that mine. The blood money of a worker was set at the equivalent of one day's pay. Those who accepted the terms were welcomed to work.

I was a wagon driver in pit number seventeen of this company. I worked

hard for six weeks without leaving for the village, and I made twelve gold *mecidiye* coins.

That's twelve gold [coins]. I was from a poor village family. There is no need to be ashamed, but I had never seen a single gold coin, never mind twelve of them in the same place.

Who would have been able to keep me in the mine after all? . . . I was ready to go the village. I purchased presents: a fez and pipe stem each for my father and brother; fabrics for my old grandmother, mother, and sisters to make dresses; and things that I don't remember. I spent less than two gold for the things I purchased.

I set out for the village while putting the [remaining] ten gold [coins] in my knitted money bag that I was carrying in my chest. I was feeling as wealthy as the wealthiest mine operators of the time—such Mabeynci Ragib Agha, Uncu Ahmet Efendi, Mest Oğlu Haci Memiş, Kılıçcı Hasan Agha, Ahmet Ali Agha, Ahmet Ismail Agha, and Mustafa Çavuş Agha.

I reached the village. My parents were not at home. Only my grandmother, who lost her sight, was there. She recognized me from my voice. I kissed her hand, and placed ten golden *mecidiyes* in her palm. I gave the presents to my brother and sisters.

My father was in prison because he had failed to pay his taxes. That was the reason he was not at home. My mother had gone to beg and have my father released. I went to the village hall at once.

The imam, village headman, and elders were sitting in a row. In the corner was the tax collector, who was constantly turning his black covered notebook.

In those days, nobody my age would have dared to enter the village hall at random. I entered the hall. I was shy, and my head was bent forward. Then I went down on my knees. Gendarme Hasan Agha whispered, "Your uncle and father are in prison."

I raised my head. My father was not around. My mother was sad and standing there, holding the copper cooking utensil she brought from her father's home.

I understood the situation. My mother shined and brought the copper utensil to save my father. But it seemed that she had failed to convince the tax collector.

The tax collector saw me and said angrily, "Get up and leave . . ." Then he cursed. "Be aware of your turn and then sit," he ordered.

Think about it. My father was in prison next to the room we were in. My mother was standing, holding the copper utensil she had brought from her father's home.

I was mad, leave aside that I was young and impatient. I raised my head and dared to say, "What is the matter, Agha?"

That was not appropriate in those days under those circumstances. The tax collector cursed once more and said, "Eat shit. Pay your father's and uncle's debt and then talk."

I was not able to hold myself. I remembered the ten gold that made me adventurous to the extent that I would even challenge and talk back to the wealth-

iest mine operators. The words came out of my mouth: "You, you eat shit. How much is it? Tell me and get your money."

Everybody was surprised. The tax collector was enraged. "Are you talking to me?," he was asking constantly. He did not expect such a response from me. Surprised, he even forgot how to curse.

Anyway, they filled a paper as big as a sheet with charges pressed against me. I was accused of insulting an official on duty.

At that time, there were no lamps in the village halls. The room was illuminated by pine wood. A designated person stood next to the fireplace, and held the pine wood for light. Once the tax collector stopped writing down the charges pressed against me, they called to that person for lampblack for seals. The village *aghas* and elders pulled out their seals, competing with each other to blacken their seals and impress their seals on the report the tax collector had prepared. Well, they had to. He was the tax collector, the god of the village.

In the middle of this, they did not forget to make me pay my father's and uncle's debt that they owed in taxes. My uncle's was five piasters, [and] my father's [was] six.

Luckily, there was an experienced, good-hearted chief of rural police. Next day, they told him what happened. Gendarme Hasan Agha gave testimony on what took place. He told [the official] that they had cursed my parents in front of me.

The official found me innocent. He took away the seals from the village headman and from members of the village council. He also had the tax collector sent elsewhere.

I always think of both Hasan Agha and the official. If they had not been there, I might have spent many years in prison for insulting an official on duty.

### *A Pit Gas Explosion Would Be Disastrous*

I experienced a pit gas explosion while I was working for the Gurci Company, where I was also paid in cash for the first time.

At the coal transfer point inside the mines, I was maneuvering the wagons. One day I was able to touch the back of one hewer assistant to the ground while we were wrestling during a break. My foreman had noticed this. Despite my young age, I was promoted to heavy tasks such as wagon driver!

When the pit explosion took place, I was maneuvering the car. I was able to save myself from one of the notable disasters in the history of the coal field because of this occupation.

A powerful explosion took place during the late working hours. The whole mine was shaken. I found myself in the water channel on the ground due to a kick I felt on my back. There was someone else who ended up in the same channel. I fell face down in the channel and felt a slight burn on my back. After the explosion, the person behind me said, "Do not be afraid, Ethem. 'Fire breath' exploded. Thank God we are safe."

That was my uncle, whose voice became weaker because of the horror and

joy he felt at the same time. He pulled me out of the channel. As a matter of fact, he had been passing by behind me. His lamp had burned out, and he was going to go to have it lighted again.

Since he knew that once an explosion takes place, it would be followed by a wave of flames that would sweep throughout the whole mine, he had given me a kick on my back and pushed me into the water channel. Then he jumped in the same channel himself. The pain on my back was because of the burns I suffered from the blaze, which swept gently over my back and swept away. It had turned the back of my shirt into ashes.

The whole mine stopped. It took many days to repair the damage done by the explosion, clearing away cave-ins, etc. I also worked during this [time]. As the cave-ins were being cleared off, we were coming face to face with the horrifying impact of the explosion.

All the corpses pulled out were as black as coal. There was not trace of faces, eyes, hair, and beards. All were disfigured. Corpses were impossible to identify. Rails were being rolled around the mineshafts like rope. Cars made of thick iron sheets were torn into pieces like toys.

The more we dug out, the more the number of deaths increased. The corpses uncovered after [a] few days of the incident were swollen. During the explosion, some of the mules were torn into pieces along with the cars. Their pieces were hanging on the mine supports.

There was no news from the workers exposed to the first blow of the enraged blaze that broke out below. Eventually, pieces of these poor workers were found here and there, on the walls, supports, and ceiling—a few heads, arms, and legs, that's all.

This was a scene that was hard to believe unless one witnessed it himself.

As the days passed, the number of deaths was growing. The damage by the fire-breath was tremendous. There were huge cave-ins in many places. The sad part was showing up as we were clearing off the cave-ins. Most of the workers died of toxic gas that filled the mine after the explosion. Some of the workers froze, one of their hands holding their pickaxes, another on the coal vein. One of the repairmen still held his ax striking one of the mine supports. He was standing as if he were alive, holding his ax. Two brothers working in the same location were laying [sic] on the ground, embracing each other. Probably they were saying goodbye to each other for the last time, and death came while they were hugging each other, so that they fell on the ground just like that. They were two strong men.

This accident horrified me. I decided not to work in the mine anymore, whatever the cost was. I returned to the village at the beginning of the month.

Sixty-seven workers and thirteen mules perished as a result of this accident.

*The Gurci Company Paid Not a Single Penny to the Families  
that Lost One of Their Members in the Accident*

I was afraid because of this “fire breath” accident, which took the lives of sixty-seven workers all at once. I tried by every means, such as faking illness, not to

go to this pit when we were drafted into the mines. This company was paying the workers in cash right away. This was not something that was done in those days. Yet, although I was desperate for the money, I was afraid of that fire breath pit.

The Gurci Company had not paid a single piaster to the families of the workers who were killed in the accident. Paying compensation was not known at those times. Only funeral expenses were paid—of course, only for those in one piece.

Besides those who were killed, there were many injured. Since the mine had neither hospital nor doctor, the injured were sent back to their villages on mule-back. The mine regulations of the time cared about us that much.

I did not go to that fire breath pit. I managed to find employment in another pit operated by the Gurci Company, which immediately paid in cash. It was the Ihsaniye mine.

There was also pit gas in the Ihsaniye mine. As they say, “those who burned their mouth while drinking milk ate yogurt after they blew.” The “fire breath” had scared us so much that while working we always felt that soon many thunderbolts would break out in the mine and hit us. . . .

Very primitive methods were used to clear pit gas in the mines. Pit gas was cleared by suicide workers who were paid nine piasters daily, while [other] workers were paid six piasters. They were the ones who arranged to detect the pit gas.

In order to avoid pit gas concentration in the mine, burning lamps were left in suspected locations during the night. There were not any safety lamps like those used presently. These lamps burned pit gas slowly during the night, preventing its concentration in the pit.

In the suspected pits where it was not possible to leave burning lamps during the nights, the pit gas detection workers were sent, those suicidal ones I mentioned above. Their job was very crucial and dangerous. Before they set off for the work, they wore wet sacks on their back and took the necessary precautions to protect their faces and hands. Then they took a long stick and used it as a torch to detect and get rid of the pit gas in the mine before other workers went below. By checking the ceilings and walls with the torches, these suicide workers got rid of any pit gas concentration while it was in a small quantity in the mine. Sometimes the gas concentration turned out to be more than expected. In these cases, the explosion would be stronger, and workers saved their lives by laying on the ground face down. As their heads and backs were covered by wet sacks, these workers warded off these explosions with minor injuries. Nevertheless, as I remember, the workers who were killed during this dangerous task were quite numerous.

Currently it is possible to avoid “fire-breath” danger, thanks to the safety lamps and the equipment that measures the concentration of pit gas. It is possible, yet we are not short of “fire-breath” accidents.

The ninth day I was in the Ihsaniye mine, a huge cave-in took place. The place of the cave-in was more than twenty meters. It was impossible to keep on working. As we were working, the soil was flowing in twenty times faster than we could clear out. Those who worked in the mines knew how it was to clear the cave-in. No matter how much I say, it still would be unbelievable.

Finally, the cave-in was cleared. [It was] cleared, but it took away the lives of six workers. Two of them were my age, from my village. Both of them had made a last attempt to escape from the dungeon they were stuck in. They were able to go four meters in a tunnel they made by using their hands.

This is the most horrific accident I recall in my childhood. I still remember the fingers of these two young men broken while they were making a way to escape. . . .

I ended up back in the village again. Neither the village headman nor the possibility of being beaten by the leather belts of the naval soldiers made me go to the Ihsaniye mine.

*“What is Your Name?” “Ercep”*<sup>11</sup>

Do not work if you do not want to. I explained our circumstances. Because we are poor, my father cannot bring home enough food and make a living as [a] mule driver, carrying this and that.

The twelve-day compulsory labor brought a lot of strange changes that affected not only us but also all of the neighboring villagers in the vicinity of the Zonguldak mines. We were not mere peasants who worked the land and lived on farming. Neither were we mine workers making an essential contribution to the village economy.<sup>12</sup>

Despite all these things, as I said, do not work if you don’t want to. Land was not cultivated regularly. The mouths to feed are numerous. It is time to pay taxes to Father State and the tax collector is following you, holding his black covered book.

I went back to the mines, visualizing my friends who gave their lives in the tunnel where they were [were] stuck, their faces blood-covered. You know, people got killed in the pits they went into. Death comes at unexpected moments in unimaginable circumstances. Despite all these [dangers], we put our trust in God’s hand and went below. It’s like this at the beginning. Eventually humans turn into robots: no feeling, no thinking, nothing. They tell you to go down, and you go. They tell you to dig, [and] you dig. Your feelings towards your comrades working in the same place change, too. While the corpses were carried nearby, you look at them because of curiosity, not because you are scared or feel sorry for them. You wonder how he was injured, where the stones hit them, etc. . . . [They were] simple curiosities.

It had been twelve days since we went below. All of us were joyful. We had forgotten the tiresome days we spent hundreds of meters below, the pain inflicted by the slaps and kicks of our foreman. It was end of the month. Lord and master the accountant was to come and give us our money the next day.

But nothing happened next day. Three days . . . nothing. It had been a week, no news.

We could not go to the village since we were not paid. Since we could not return to the village, we had to work for the mine owner for one loaf of corn bread per worker. No daily wages.

On the eighth day, there was some news about the money. But where is it? Because the [mine] director was on leave, he did not endorse the bank check.

Finally, we were to get our money. Everything was prepared. The clerk, Mehdi Efendi, affirmed this. The expected signs of payday began to be visible. First, the village *aghas* came from the distant villages and tied their horses in the yard. The tax collector took his position opposite the pay window. Peddlers, meatball (*köfte*) sellers, spinach-corn pastry sellers, all were in front of the mine. Finally, the accountant of the mine opened the window to make payments, and began to ask:

“What is your name?”

“Ercep.”

“Here: one, two, etc.”

“Efendi, this money is short.”

“Go away, it should be right.”

“Boss, please, my village is far from here. Give exactly what I earned, then I will go.”

“I said leave. Is there nobody out there to take this guy away?”

“Raise your objections if you can, and tell him that the money is short because he had embezzled it.”

After being paid along with being cursed and pushed around, we had to pay the *aghas* our debts that had accumulated because of the seed and animals we bought from them. Then we would be able to take a deep breath.

Many times we were left with no money after paying our debts, and could not go to the village, leave aside eating a morsel of meatballs or spinach-corn pastry. I do not know why—either because we were young or we were stupid—we did not feel too sad about all these things. We joked around while making plans about the money we would be earning during the second part of the twelve-day rotation.

Once the day was over, we ate our corn bread cooked on the iron sheet over the fire. Then we would expose our feet to the fire in the middle and talk until the bed time. Sometimes we would play an instrument from our Comaklar village and sing, crying out to suppress the pain under our feet, the pain caused by toxic gas.

Boy, boy  
Embrace me. . . .  
My arm is your pillow  
My hair is cover  
What a beautiful boy  
Embrace me

### *Every Pit Has a Specter*

In every pit in Zonguldak, there is an dark specter<sup>13</sup> that scares mineworkers even today.

Many workers saw this specter, and passed out or were slapped by it. All of these [workers] swear that they have seen this specter or sometimes were being kicked and slapped by it.

I cannot dare to tell, for I might sound ridiculous. I am one of those who not only saw but also was kicked in the back by this specter.

This specter that made the mine a scared [sic] place had a routine habit. It always appears in abandoned galleries and pits and in dead-end vent holes. It always hunts you when you're alone. If you are two workers together, it does not come to you.

Now you will understand where my story of the specter—which roams in the darkest corners of the mine like a demon of hell—comes from.

One day I was on my way to the vent hole. There was a dark road, two hundred meters in length, between the place [where] we were working and the opened vent hole. I was moving while holding a lamp that could illuminate no further than two steps. It was very quiet. Further down, the phosphor of mushrooms growing on the old mine supports is shining like thousands of eyes in the dark. Sometimes, I feel cold water drips on the back of my neck. I am shivering. At every moment somewhere, a far away mine support is moving. Each move makes a noise in the gallery that grows bigger and bigger with echoes. I am a little bit further than half of the way.

How it happened, I don't know really; all of a sudden, something hit my head, like a beetle. I saw stars. I became dizzy, and I rested myself on one of the side supports so as not to fall down. The specter was in front of me. It was holding a short stick. With its other hand it was showing the way, asking me to go back.

I found myself back where we were working, and I pulled myself together thanks to cold water splashed to my face along with slaps. The foreman was asking, "What happened, Ethem?" I told him. He nodded. Then he whispered, "Never come to the mine without taking ablution."<sup>14</sup>

I was talking to myself. If I had not seen the specter, what would I make out of the lump in my forehead?

Next day three of my friends and I, just for the sake of curiosity, went to the place where I saw the specter. When we raised our lamps, looking higher, we saw [that] one of the beams in the ceiling was hanging, broken in the middle. I satisfied my curiosity. I must have hit my forehead against this beam while I was walking faster as I was scared. The rest, the specter with a stick, was pure imagination.

Still, I am not sure that the specter is a product of imagination.

Some people take it as a good sign when it is heard that the specter is seen. My encounter with it was an exceptional case.

We were working on a vein about seven or eight meters thick in the Kerpiçlik mine. We began to hear noises, and for many days could not figure out its origins. We were hearing pickax noises. The noises, which were weak and unrecognizable, became more clear.

One of the most qualified foremen of the time, Kazancıoğlu Selim Çavuş

from Beycuma, satisfied our curiosity: "Opposite to you, there is the Gurci mine. They are digging a tunnel in this direction. The noises you have been hearing are coming from their pickaxes."

The next day, we were hearing the pickaxes more clearly. As they use explosives to mine coal, we do the same. They support the galleries, [and] we do the same.

The afternoon of that day, we began to exchange words with the workers on the other side. The following day, we even began to make jokes with these friends despite the fact that we had not seen their faces.

Finally, the coal curtain between them and us became thinner and thinner as we kept on digging, and towards the evening the pickaxes from both sides met in the air. As we made the hole a little bit larger, we saw the workers whom we [had] befriended without seeing their faces. We passed onto their side, [and] they passed onto our side: "Peace be with you."

*Towards Morning, the Pit Grumbled, Water Exploded Out,  
and a Young Man was Carried Away*

My first position as a foreman was in Kilimli at the Makine [Machine] vein. I was finally a foreman, after working as a basket carrier, door keeper, *saçci*,<sup>15</sup> horse keeper, repairman, hewer assistant, and hewer. It might look like nothing to you, but it is not easy for a mineworker to become a foreman.

Anyway, it was, I think, Tuesday. My heart is broken and my mind is all mixed up. We are digging upwards in a place five meters in height with ten workers. In other words, we are mining coal from the bottom upwards, like a half pit. Despite all my efforts, I cannot get rid of the sadness in my heart. I am still thinking about the tragic results of the accident that took place in the morning.

There is Cormanlar village. It's three days on foot to our mine. A young kid came to the mine that morning from that village. He had brought some food to his brother. They had said goodbye to each other. They had eaten together in the mine. His brother had left the place to resume work. He went a little bit further. At that moment, a cave-in took place. One of the beams on the ceiling loosened and the ceiling collapsed on the boy.

We dragged out the older one, but we failed to save the younger one, who cried out and died saying, "Brother, brother, don't leave me here."

While we were digging upwards, the smell of moldiness was getting heavier. I took a sample of mud and smelled it. Water that has been sitting in a place for a long time has a peculiar smell. That was the smell.

There might have been a gallery on top of us that had been worked and abandoned years ago. Water veins must have been uncovered while working in this gallery. It was likely that the water filled the gallery over time, turning it into a cistern.

I stopped the workers at once, and I sent a message to our chief foreman from Montenegro. He and the engineer had a look at it. Engineer Simo said, "There is nothing here."

There are the ones in charge. They made the nightshift work despite the danger. In the nightshift, may God's mercy [be] on him, there was a foreman, Nippi Osman. The next day, he explained as follows: "After midnight, the pit grumbled. It grumbled again. As people began to run away, the water burst forth. Those who managed to run away were safe, but there were six workers [left] behind."

Once there is an accident in the mines, there is no distinction between the night and day shift. Everybody goes to work. I also rushed into the mine on hearing about the accident. Is it possible to go into the gallery where the water broke out? Water as large as a huge plane tree trunk is running from the entrance of the gallery. We went through the back vent hole. I called:

"Boys!"

"We are here, Ethem Çavuş."

"How many of you [are] there?"

"Five."

There were six workers who were trapped by the water. One of them was not there. The water quieted towards morning. Five workers were able to survive in a gallery out of the water's way, clinging on ceiling supports. A basket-carrier kid was not among them. We searched every corner of the mine. He was not anywhere.

When I got out of the mine it was almost morning. I walked to the stream bank to wash my hands and face, which were all black. While I was washing my face, my eyes caught something. I looked at it carefully. It was a pair of soles washed clean by the stream waters. I grabbed the feet, and pulled out a kid's corpse that was buried in the mud upside down. This was the corpse of the child worker who was swept [away] by the water that had burst forth in the gallery.

A pair of soles washed clean by stream water was the first present of the rising sun that day.

*The Face Licked By Pit Gas Looks Like Neither a Smallpox  
nor a Syphilis Scar*

I am a foreman in the Acente vein. We are pulling down mine supports. My eyes are sensitive to pit gas. That day my eyes burned a lot, and they became watery. Our chief foreman, named Sava, was from Montenegro. On the basis of my years of experience, I informed him about the present danger. He did not take this into consideration. He did not listen, but towards evening, an explosion occurred in the same place, killing one and injuring five workers.

I always say, those who die, die. How about those who remain behind? If you only knew how it looks when pit gas burns a place. A face burned by fire breath does not look like one deformed by smallpox or syphilis. It is very hard to describe.

Two days later, another pit gas explosion took place at this ill-omened place, and my dear brother also was burnt in this accident. While I was talking to the

mine engineer, fire breath broke out with a tremendous noise. We were rolling on the ground, forced there by the winds of fire breath. A little later, news came; my brother was among those who were burnt. I ran as fast as I could. The scene was terrible. Those hit first by the flames that broke out like a volcano had turned into coal. Those who were a little bit far from the center of the fire were only swept over by the flames. My brother was among them and was begging constantly, "Throw me into the sea. There is no hope from me; for God's sake, throw me into the sea."

Pit gas burns have some peculiar characteristics. If the burn is slight, it does not cause pain while you are in the mine. But once you come out, and it is exposed to the air, it is like doomsday.

I noticed this myself once when I was burned in the Acente veins.

While I was inspecting a pit support alone, a flame gushed out of the lamp and a mass of fire rolled over my head. I found myself on the ground.

This was a minor explosion. It had swept over me. I got up and walked calmly in order not to cause any panic among the workers. I did not know it but smoke was coming from my back. When one of the workers pointed out the smoke, I said: "It's nothing. Don't worry guys."

When I came to the vent hole, I began to feel pain in my face. I was going crazy because of it. A handful of my full mustache, eyebrows, and hair was coming out each time I held them. I lost my hair, beard, eyebrows in three days. My head was bare.

### *A Lot of Fuss for a Pitcher of Water*

"The Company has come, the Company has come."

We are informed that the French Company made a capital investment in the field, news that was whispered from ear to ear in the pit. The Company has come. It is welcome. Does this company pay us "in cash"? Then there is no problem. But the other side of the coin was not like we expected. We found out later what this company was like, as it gave us one instead of five, made us work ten times harder, and destroyed us.

Those who come to a court as a witness to prove the exact age of a person take certain events as a landmark to prove the concerned person's age. That is how I remember the time when the Ereğli Company with French capital came to the field, sticking like a leech, and began to suck out the profits.

A Greek by the name of Yanko was the person who planted the seed of French capital for the French to exploit the Zonguldak coal reserves. At the time, he was the architect of the Naval Ministry.

That seed of capital was very profitable. It created an extensive source of richness that kept on growing while filling foreign coffers.

The French Company first took the concession to build a port, then the railroads, using this Greek architect as its agent. Then followed the concession to mine the field.

The Company started to build the port [at Zonguldak]. The stones used

to build the artificial harbor were obtained from the marketplace where large apartment buildings stand today. The workers employed in the construction were from Montenegro and Bosnia, wearing stout jackets, sharp pointed shoes, and carrying pistols. There was only one fountain in the market place, and it was under the monopoly of the Montenegrins.

One day [in August 1897], a Turkish boy filling his pitcher with water was harassed by the Montenegrins.

The echoed noises of the slaps were followed by gunshots.

In an hour, the incident grew in such a way that the marketplace turned into a bloody battlefield. Mineworkers, grabbing their sticks and pickaxes, came to the market place. The Montenegrin stone masons reached for their silver ornamented pistols, took position behind the stones, and began to shoot those who were flooding into the marketplace.

While the rest of the small town was divided into two fronts because of this incident, the situation in the marketplace got worse. Each side was raiding each others' homes and barracks. Many workers were falling down, either shot by pistols or [falling] from heavy blows struck by a piece of lumber. Shops and taverns were turned into slaughterhouses as a result of the fighting.

On the fifth day of fighting, a warship appeared off the shores of Zonguldak as the Bosnians and Montenegrins were losing ground. This was a gunboat, which pointed its guns towards Zonguldak.

The gunboat *Mosul*, coming from Istanbul, anchored off the shores of Zonguldak. Then soldiers were dispatched. Under the command of a captain, the battalion was acting carefully. As soon as they landed, the soldiers took their positions.

The situation was very critical. It was likely that a sound of an accidental gunshot would be responded to by the soldiers immediately, which would cause more casualties. Thanks to God, the captain in charge knew what he was doing. He took care of everything. He did, but there were those evil Capitulations.<sup>16</sup> Thus, we even had to submit ourselves to the Montenegrins. And because of the Capitulations, the guilty were picked from among us, although in fact the Montenegrins were the guilty ones. The famous worker foremen—Veysel Çavuş, Imam Çavuş, and Ali Çavuş—ended up [in] Bolu prison.

### *What is Piece Work in the Mines?*

I am one of the oldest workers in these mines, which have been dug one by one. I have been mining for fifty years. I thank God for letting me stay alive until this day.

The state bought the Company, which was financed by the French. [Negotiations formally concluded in 1937.] The meaning of this is as follows: The wealth of this country is not going to be exploited for this or that capital, but by this country itself. We will be the ones who will benefit from our natural resources, not the others.

After it took over railroads and pits, the Ereğli Company began to pay us

daily cash wages because of its inexperience in the field. Daily wages was something pleasant for us.

Although they were cutting our pay for various reasons, we knew how much we worked, and estimated the amount of money we would get. But after some time, the company began to practice the pay-by-the-load method.

The company, which found this practice more beneficial to its needs, told the worker: "Finish the job I give you, and [then you] deserve your daily wage."

As a matter of fact workers resorted to a variety of methods to earn their wages paid-by-the-load. This practice had drastic outcomes for the workers, as they were working to their utmost capability with a lot of sacrifice to finish the job that was calculated in all details. In addition, they learned how to cheat.

Workers began to steal coal from the most dangerous places in order to fill the quota and earn their wages promised by the per-load-payment method. The company was paying six piasters for coal and one piaster for "coal-dust." By this practice, the more work done in a shorter time, the more money was earned.

Because of this practice, which aimed at exploiting the labor to the highest degree, many workers jeopardized themselves to earn money and many of them were killed.

Some people say the Ereğli Company brought technology to the field. This statement might be true to a certain degree. However, bringing technology was not for the sake of our dark eyes, but for the extensive exploitation of the "black diamond" and for filling the foreign coffers that drained resources from Zonguldak.

Before the Company came to the field, there occurred many accidents, not because of technical problems, but due to the fact that coal veins had just started being exploited. The accidents were generally caused by cave-ins. We were able to prevent pit gas explosions by using primitive methods. For instance, we were clearing pit gas by wearing wet sacks, then holding a long stick that was made into a torch, detecting pit gas in the coal galleries at the expense of our lives.

The Ereğli Company credited for bringing technology brought technological problems to the field along with the technology. And the sons of this land paid for their policies aimed at reducing labor and management costs to extract more coal by their blood.

As an old mine worker, I have seen many injustices. It is hard to tell all of them. It is not necessary to go into detail if I tell you that they were committed by the chiefs of foreign companies who did not have any feelings in their hearts, and who ordered us to mine coal in places where the danger of death was five times greater.

As I said, the per-load payment method put into practice by the company forced the workers to cheat. As they had a hard time filling the quota by working at a regular pace, and as it was beyond their capability, the workers began to abuse the labor of others by stealing coal. The most tragic side of the per-load payment [method] was that the value of their life became cheaper in the workers' own minds. In order to fulfill the requirements of this method, the workers

began to “steal” coal from the galleries that were ready to collapse. As these galleries were hosting the death angel, many of the workers were killed.

Sometimes, impossible tasks were required to protect the interests of the Company despite the serious dangers. When they were done, workers earned their wages. But when any of them ended with a deadly accident, then it was the dead workers who were held responsible. The Company was held responsible only for technical failures. In cases when a deadly accident took place due to technical failures, the Company quickly brought in repairmen and fixed everything that would be considered as technical failures before the government authorities came to investigate. And then false witnesses would be arranged.<sup>17</sup>

We even made up unimaginable stories to avoid preparation of a report pointing out technical failures, many times with an ambition of earning [a] few piasters.

Make up stories if you want. This is a labor struggle. What could we have done against that large company anyway?

### *Women Workers in the Coal Pits*

The Karamanyan mine was in the Asma region of the Ereğli Company in those times.

I had been to a flood accident in that mine. We became indifferent to the accidents over time, but this one was one of those which left a deep mark in my memory because six of those who were killed were children; the oldest one was fourteen. Those babies, who were of school age, were drowned.

Before I proceed to tell you about women working in the mines, let me tell you how forty-one workers were killed because of a bad decision made by the managers of the Ereğli Company, showing their utmost negligence and the worth of human life in their eyes. One day, one of the compressors of the Company that brought technology to the field was broken. Once air ventilation stops, carbon monoxide concentrated in the pit. Experienced foremen reported it to the mine engineer: “Boss, let’s stop work.”

He did not have any patience to hear anything but increasing production, and he never learned Turkish. His answer was “No.”

Orders were orders. Work continued. But forty-one workers were killed by carbon monoxide that day.

Many women worked in the coal fields. Among some of these famous ones are, for instance, Adali Sultan, Topcu Emine, Kirdikacti Zulfuye. But all of the women just mentioned worked on [the] surface, and none of them are as famous as Gulsum Hatun.

Gulsum Hatun was Hacı Memiş’s wife. Hacı Memiş had become rich through his manipulation of Mining Exploration Licenses once upon a time.

Gulsum Hatun lit her lamp before twilight, placed her food on her belt, took her miner’s stick, and went to the mine pronouncing the *bismillah* prayer formula.

One day Gulsum Hatun was lost in the mine. They looked for her but she

was not found. The next day, an underground worker in a dead-end gallery heard Gulsum Hatun's voice: "Save me, boys."

They run. Her voice was coming from a large hole opened in the floor of a dead-end gallery. They fetched a rope. Gulsum Hatun was saved, half dead and half alive.

Apparently, she was working in a gallery that was on the top of another one that was exploited in the past. The floor got thinner as coal was mined, then it collapsed. Gulsum Hatun had fallen into the abandoned gallery and passed out.

Gulsum sister the great. Mother of mining.

### *It is Not a Good Idea to Have Other Things on Your Mind in the Mines*

During the war [World War One], we were working with Germans. I was a strong young man, like my son Muharrem, who currently works in Gelik Mine as head foreman. (Muharrem Yemelek, Ethem Çavuş's son, was then chief miner in Kilimli.) This was youth. I am in love with a Greek beauty. I am impatient and looking forward to leaving work as soon as possible. It is not something to be ashamed of. As I said, I was young and my mind was preoccupied with love.

I managed to take care of things and got on the way to reach my sweetheart. I took the dead-end way to the vent hole, not the main way. This way was dangerous because it had not been repaired for many years. In each step I took, the mine supports holding the huge mountain were moving. I was walking in haste, holding a lamp and thinking about the moment I would meet my sweetheart.

At that moment, one of the mine supports broke, making a huge noise. I was about to raise my lamp and look at the ceiling. All of a sudden I found myself under rocks, coal and mine supports that had broken away from the ceiling.

I saved many workers from underneath the cave-ins. But until that time, I had never been in a similar situation. The fear of death had frozen my feelings and I had passed out.

I opened my eyes, hearing pickaxe noises and shouts. There was a tremendous effort to save me. I began to identify the voices of those I knew one by one.

"Crazy Ethem is dead."

"It is impossible that he would be alive after ten hours."

As I said, I had been to many accidents and came out alive. The situation I was in was nothing like any of those. You envision your wife, home, mother, kids, one by one.

Death. A horrible thing. It becomes more horrific once it comes to you below, trapped in your first grave alive.

I carefully moved. Thus I was able to take my head out. I called to my friends who were working to save me: "I am not dead yet. I am here."

Voices full of joy were raised from the other side. Shovels and pickaxes began to work regularly. My friends were working at their utmost energy.

At some point, pickaxe and shovel noises stopped. I figured out that they

were working with their hands for fear that pickaxes and shovels would cause new cave-ins.

“Be calm, Ethem, a little bit more effort.”

Finally, a hand grabbed my leg. The rubble pressing against my sides was cleared and I was pulled out forcefully. I fell into the laps of Turkish and German friends, half dead.

The village headman had written the names of seven children, including mine, on the “organization” register when he chose them to send to the mines after wrestling matches. Five of those were killed in the mine pits. We are two of those who are still alive.

What was I saying? I guess because we encountered each other very often, death gets used to us.

What were we talking about? Oh, yes. Remember, it is not a good idea to have other things on your mind in the mines. This is a suggestion to the new ones.

### *We Found Skeletons with Fezzes*

The week I started to work as head foreman in the Kilimli mines were the most unfortunate days of my life as a mineworker. Three accidents caused by explosives plus the tragedy of leaving a worker alive under a cave-in took place in the seven days of that week. Was it because of me? Did I bring bad luck? I don't think so. After all, I had encountered joys, not sorrow, each time I went to another mine. My experiences showed this.

There was a chief engineer in the Ereğli Company famous for bringing bad luck: Monsieur Jiro. This person, who was called Jiro the Bearded to distinguish him from a younger engineer with the same name, was good at bringing bad luck. Experience showed this many times. In each pit that he came to inspect, there had been a deadly accident or at least [a] minor injury.

Two days after this Jiro the Bearded came to the mine, we sacrificed eight workers in three explosion accidents. An Italian worker's head was separated from his body when the dynamite he was placing exploded while he tried to fix a fuse with his teeth. Same day, in another pit, six workers were torn into pieces by explosives. I never forgot. The body parts of these workers, collected from the ceiling and walls, did not even fill a small basket. Strange, is it not? Next day another accidental explosion occurred. A worker who was taking dynamite to his master was torn into pieces when the dynamite he was carrying ignited. Nothing was found of this kid's body except a kneecap.

I have seen many things during my life as a mineworker. Three times we ran into skeletons among the coal piles while we were working. In the past, I was told, some workers were left underneath cave-ins. Two of these skeletons had fezzes, their clothes turned into ashes. One of the corpses was found in such a way that, due to the lack of air, the coal layers had preserved him just like a can of food. Poor guy had grabbed his pickaxe and remained just like that for many years.

One day, one of our boys from Devrek district was stuck in a cave-in. We

could not save him despite our best efforts. Twenty of the workers who were trying to save him were endangered twice. We did everything, but could not succeed in saving him at all.

I was working in the team formed to save him. But as it became clear that it was not possible to save him, I could not bear it anymore. I closed my ears and ran away so as not to hear his call for help. I was informed that he stopped calling for help after a day. I went back, wondering if he was alive. We knocked on the supports and pipes, [but there was] no response. I had witnessed another exceptional incident in my life as a mineworker.

They brought a religious teacher to the mine. He and several others who came along—including a prayer reciter and the person receiving alms on behalf of the dead—movingly read for him. They opened their palms to heaven and prayed. The religious teacher asked what did we think of the deceased, asking us to [ritually] confirm his good qualities. And he signaled for us to disperse. Then, one hundred meters underground, he began the final rites, stomping his feet on the floor.

We closed that area with a wall. We were not able to work there for a month.

My last workplace was in the Asma pits of the Ereğli Company. This Company had hired an engineer in Europe. They ordered me to vacate the house I was living in for fifteen years so that this new engineer could move in. That was a very insulting order. I was a worker who provided his labor below for many years. They basically were telling me that I was not worthy of that home, to make room for the engineer who was “ordered” from Europe. Despite all the years I spent, I said OK. A friend whom I knew closely for many years was living in a house that was designated for me to move into. He was the head of a household with a lot of kids. I did not feel comfortable with the situation. I objected and as I did, they said that there was no work for me.

Is there really no work for us, my son? We prognosticated. We are the wolves of the land. We are workers, workers. We know about these pits better than those engineers “ordered” from Europe.

A week later I quit; I found another job in the Kilimli mines with a higher salary. I worked there for some time. One morning while I was getting ready to go to work, my son Muharrem stood in front of me and said: “Father, the pit you are working is not safe. A couple days ago, it took the lives of nine workers. Look, you are the only one who remained alive among those who started to work at the same time with you. So, quit now. I’ll take care of you as long as I am alive. We need your breath.”

My eyes filled with tears. In order to not to cry in front of my son, I went to another room, and I cried. What can I say? My son’s words made me cry.

We spent many years below. An old proverb says: “Those who take care of the lodge eat the soup.” We, on the other hand, got a kick on our back instead of being rewarded. If I had chosen to become an apprentice in a grocery store, my master would make me a journeyman, then make me own a store. But now!

Now, I am asking myself:

Thank God, the Ereğli Company is leaving the field. But what is going to

happen to us? What is going to be done about labor and the body that served below for many years?

And again I tell myself:

Whatever happens, happens. At least, the Company is getting out of the field. . . .

*Appendix. Editors' Comment: Saving Coal Mining Memory*

In June 1998, on Donald Quataert's second visit to the coal mining center of Zonguldak, a mining engineer named Fevzi Engin presented him with the typed manuscript translated above. According to information provided at the time and corroborated by notes in the typescript itself, this memoir—"I Gave Fifty Years of My Life to the Underground"—records the life of the coal miner Ethem Çavuş during the late Ottoman period. This information also asserts that the memoir manuscript was prepared in c. 1974–1976 by A.K., Aydın Karahasan, the son of a well-known labor leader (Ömer Karahasan), in collaboration with Muharrem Yemelek, the son of Ethem Çavuş (who was deceased by that time). As indicated in their preface to the manuscript, the two sons sought to fulfill an obligation to the dead miner to publish the memoirs in book form.

On receiving the manuscript, we believed it to be unpublished and set out preparing it for publication. This notion was mistaken and the story was even more fascinating than we had imagined. For the story of this manuscript turns out to be the quest by several different persons close to Ethem Çavuş to preserve the memory of this Ottoman miner, a memory once recorded but then effectively lost.

In the course of research for the translation, we at first found several brief references to Ethem Çavuş in the published literature. In 1945, Ahmet Naim (1904–1967), a well-known modern Turkish writer and activist on coal miners, serially published (in a small Turkish journal) stories about life underground. In general, these stories centered on Naim's travels to the mines in conversation with coal miners. Prominently featured was Ethem Çavuş, then already retired. These stories, although containing some echoes of the Ottoman past with audible traces of Ethem's memoirs, were rooted in the present day of the Turkish Republic and vividly depicted life inside the mines during those years.<sup>18</sup>

In 1970, Sina Çıladır, a prominent mining labor writer and son of Ahmet Naim, published a fascinating account of the Zonguldak coal fields. Therein, he briefly quoted a dozen lines that are identical to those in the memoir typescript. Çıladır's cited source for these quotes was a work, different from the one discussed above, prepared by his father.<sup>19</sup> This source was none other than the memoirs of Ethem Çavuş, first prepared and published by Ahmet Naim in a newspaper and then in a similarly undated brochure entitled, "Forty-five Years Underground."<sup>20</sup> Çıladır added that he himself intended to republish these memoirs, contained in the brochure in his possession. In a 1977 book, Çıladır quoted from the Ethem Çavuş memoirs somewhat more extensively, and he repeated his intention to republish these memoirs separately.<sup>21</sup>

Following the leads provided by Çıladır's comments on the undated

brochure prepared by his father, we finally found an undated pamphlet of the same name at the Hoover Institution, an extraordinary repository of Ottoman and Turkish labor materials. Cataloging at the Hoover attributed the pamphlet to Ahmet Naim (Çıladır), cited as the author not the editor.<sup>22</sup> Beginning the comparison between the typed manuscript obtained in Zonguldak and the published pamphlet from the Hoover Institution, we assumed that the former chronologically preceded the latter. After all, historians are biased in favor of believing that when both a written manuscript and a published version of the same work exist, the former likely predates the latter. On comparing the two texts, however, the error of our assumption immediately became apparent. The pamphlet in fact predates the typescript by twenty-five to thirty years. The pamphlet (hereafter Text A), printed sometime between the mid- to late-1940s and later 1950s, contains nearly one hundred percent of the text of the typed manuscript (hereafter Text B), prepared in the mid-1970s.

The differences between the texts are as follows. Ethem Çavuş in Text A is sixty years old (there are several photographs of him), but in Text B he is long dead. The Turkish vocabulary in Text A is the older form; in Text B, a number of words have been edited and presented in their more modern form. For example, *amele* is the term for worker commonly used in the Ottoman and early republican periods, while *işçi* replaced it later on. In a few places, Text B replaces the names of banks and places to make them intelligible to a reader in the 1970s. And, most significantly, the memoir typed in Text B is interspersed in Text A with occasionally extensive editorial remarks by Naim. For example, Naim in Text A observes Ethem as he approaches the interview table and remarks on his appearance. Or, in a lengthy aside, Naim takes the reader of Text A into the mines for a tour, quite similar in manner to the 1945 pamphlet noted above.

So it becomes clear that the typed manuscript was in fact published in its entirety, with a few minor differences (plus Naim's editorial remarks), decades before the two sons prepared the typescript. Why, then, republish it here? There are several reasons. First, to the best of our knowledge and as stated above, there is no other miner (or for that matter worker) memoir from the Ottoman period. The richness of this document seems to demand its translation into a language that makes it accessible to the wider audience of labor historians. Second, we have not been able to find another copy of the published brochure, either in the databases of libraries in the United States and Western Europe or those in Turkey. The Hoover Institution copy so far is unique.

It is clear that the pamphlet, when it was first printed, had very limited circulation. It almost certainly was published in Ereğli, the twentieth-century center of the coal fields and the seat of activism for both Naim and his son, but it quickly disappeared from view.

So in the early 1970s, three sons of men famous in the Zonguldak coal fields—Muharrem Yemelek (son of Ethem Çavuş), the labor leader Aydın Karahasan (son of Ömer), and Sina Çıladır (son of Ahmet Naim)—all sought to recover the memory of this Ottoman miner. The first two may not have known that it had already been printed; they might have been working from an original

manuscript that formed the basis of the Naim account. Çıladır, for his part, knew of the brochure and of its obscurity and similarly worked to bring these lost memories to light. Separately they worked to recover a view into the Ottoman coal mining past that had been lost. This publication continues their efforts.

## NOTES

1. Sina Çıladır, *Zonguldak hazasında emperyalizm, 1848–1940* (Ankara, 1970), 11, states that Ethem Çavuş began work in the 1870s. This date conflicts with other information, including a statement in Sina Çıladır, *Zonguldak havzasında işçi hareketlerinin tarihi, 1848–1940* (Ankara, 1977), 13, that the memoirs cover the period 1890–1935. This latter dating is consistent with the internal evidence offered in the memoir. Also see Donald Quataert, “The Creation of a Labor Force: Villages and Coal Mines in the Ottoman Empire during the 1870s” (forthcoming).

2. Ahmet Ali Özen, *Türkiye kömür ekonomisi tarihi* (Istanbul, 1955), 26; Ahmet Naim, *Zonguldak Havzası (Uzun Mehmetten Bugüne kadar)* (Istanbul, 1934); and Donald Quataert, *Social Disintegration and Popular Resistance in the Ottoman Empire* (New York, 1983), 44–54.

3. There are some details in Quataert, *Social Disintegration*.

4. Erol Kahveci, “The Miners of Zonguldak,” in *Work and Occupation in Modern Turkey*, ed. Erol Kahveci, Nadir Sugur, and Theo Nichols (London, 1996), 191–4.

5. Compare the details in “A Lot of Fuss for a Pitcher of Water” with Quataert, *Social Disintegration*, 58–9. It is possible that a local newspaper reported the event and Ethem Çavuş used that account in constructing his narrative. The question of Ethem Çavuş’s literacy is not certain at this time. It is possible that the memoir is his oral testimony as recorded by Ahmet Naim. See the appendix above and n. 22 below.

6. For example, Naim, Çıladır, and Özen.

7. John Chalcraft, “The Striking Cabbies of Cairo and Other Stories: Crafts and Guilds in Egypt, 1863–1914,” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2001). Also see Zachary Lockman, “Imagining the Working-Class: Culture, Nationalism and Class Formation in Egypt, 1899–1914,” *Poetics Today* 15 (1994):157–90.

8. Erdal Yavuz, “The State of the Industrial Workforce, 1923–1940,” in *Workers and the Working Class in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic, 1839–1950*, ed. Donald Quataert and Erik J. Zürcher (London, 1995), 99–102.

9. In the version edited by Ahmet Naim, he states that the mine was then operated by the İş Bank. See the appendix above and n. 22 below.

10. So named because he spoke English well.

11. The word Ercep is a play on words, a mocking of the local accent that makes the proper name Recep sound like Ercep in the local dialect.

12. Here he is discussing the identity of the Zonguldak workers as villager-miners.

13. In the original, the word translated here as specter is *Arab*, which has a connotation of dark or black.

14. The implication here is that he had sexual intercourse before coming to work and had not cleansed himself. Therefore, he was ritually unclean and exposed to the dangers of evil forces in the mine.

15. An attendant at a coal transfer point.

16. The capitulations were agreements that gave foreigners in the Ottoman Empire special privileges and rights. Here is another example of Ethem Çavuş employing a nationalist discourse.

17. Donald Quataert is presently studying the mining inspectors’ reports on accidents and conditions within the mines.

18. Ahmet Naim, *Bir Yudum Soluk* (Ereğli, 1985), 1–43. The remainder of the work, pp. 44–77, focuses on other miners and on literary sources for mining history. The first printing of this work in book form reportedly occurred in 1971, which would coincide with the appearance of the first book by his son, Sina Çıladır, in 1970.

19. Çıladır, *Zonguldak hazasında emperyalizm*, 11–12, 16, 39–40.

20. *Ibid.*, 11, n. 13.

21. Çıladır, *Zonguldak havzasında isci hareketlerinin tarihi*, which the author correctly

states is a vastly revised and expanded version of his 1970 book. References to the memoir are on p. 31 and notes therein; also on pp. 43, n.\*; p. 60, n.\*; p. 86, n.\*; and pp. 90–1, which repeat the quotations cited in Çıladı, *Zonguldak hazasında emperyalizm*, 39–40. On pp. 131–2, he quotes Ethem Çavuş on the matter of piecework, a text that is not in the 1970 work.

22. Ahmet Naim, *Yer altında kırk beş sene* (n.p., n.d.), cataloged as Ahmet Naim (Çıladı). Only rarely have I seen Naim referred to by the surname Çıladı, which he adopted as a result of legislation during the Turkish Republican era.