

Story 1954 (1970 Tape 18)

Narrator: Behçet Mahir, odacı at Atatürk University by day, storyteller by night in local coffeehouses; 61

Location: Erzurum, capital of Erzurum Province

Date: 1970

Initiation of a Poet¹

As you know, a mill wheel cannot be turned by water brought to it in buckets. A steady stream of water (a river or creek) is needed to run the mill. I am like that. My recitals are empowered by a steady force. I am a human being with my own share of faults—not so much sins as shortcomings. Once I begin speaking into the microphone, Allah gives me the inspiration to continue. I have told into a microphone many things which I had not previously thought about. Educated people realize that I am illiterate, that I can neither read nor write, but because of my illiteracy, I have developed a better memory

¹This is purportedly an autobiography of the youth of the narrator. It may well be just that, but there is no doubt that much of what he reports about himself echoes a tradition among Turkish poets and minstrels. If Behçet Efendi had (or thought he had) the experiences he recounts below, they may well have been prompted by tradition. This was the way it was supposed to happen—and so it did. One might also defend his sincerity by saying that the initiation occurred in a dream—where almost anything can happen. In his “Turkish Folk Stories About the Lives of Minstrels” (*JAF*, LXV, 1965, 331-339) İlhan Başgöz makes only a passing reference, in a footnote, to the minstrel’s initiation.

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than most of them have. Some of them cannot even remember what they had for dinner the night before. Some of the things I tell in my recitals were not [consciously] known to me before that moment, but many other things that I speak about had been in my memory for a long time.² And I also remember things I have said earlier. As soon as they were spoken, they went straight to my heart, and as a result I shall remember them until the end of my life. Once I have said something I do not forget it.³

Now I shall begin talking about my life, and you may ask me any questions about it that you wish to ask. I was a simple boy who grew up in a family that had very little. One night when I was thirteen years old, I had a dream. In that dream I was approached by three old dervishes and a very tall man with a sharply pointed beard. I knew little about life then, and so almost everything I saw in that dream was new to me. As they came toward me, there was one dervish walking on the right side of the tall man, one on his left side, and one behind him.

²Most of Behçet Efendi's taped recitals before this point had occurred in the 1960s. Efendi was once an honorific appended to the names of distinguished men. After the founding of the Turkish Republic, however, its prestige eroded, and today it is used only in addressing servants and children. Out of respect for Behçet Mahir, almost everyone addressed the late storyteller as Behçet Efendi.

³This statement is corroborated to a certain extent by Mahir's repetition of incidents, given interpolated stories, and formulaic expressions throughout the whole corpus of his work.

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The tall man was carrying a saz.⁴ Judging from that musical instrument alone, I said to one of the dervishes, "I do not know this tall man, but he looks to me like a wandering minstrel."

The dervish answered, "He is indeed a wandering minstrel, and he comes from Semikale village of Narman kaza in Erzurum Province. He is called Sümmani Father.⁵ Look at him closely so that you can recognize him later." Turning then to Sümmani Father, that dervish said, "Give the saz and your talent to this boy."

The tall man responded, "I may give my saz and my talent to him, but first we must sit down and discuss this matter."

After we had been sitting together for awhile, he handed the saz to me. At that point I awakened. Looking around me, I could see no dervishes or tall man there in the room with me. A sharp pain swept through my body. I arose and walked about in my room for a short while. I was careful not to awaken my mother and sister. I had recently begun smoking, and now I lighted a cigarette. It made me feel nauseated, however, and so I snuffed it out and lay down again in my

⁴The most popular instrument of folk singers, poets, and minstrels. It is a 3-stringed instrument. At an earlier time it was called a kopuz.

⁵Sümmani (1860-1915), often considered to have been eastern Turkey's most eminent minstrel (âşık) during the early years of the 20th century. Although he was still alive during Mahir's early childhood, Mahir saw him only in his dream.

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bed. (That was on the 12th of August [1922].) I fell asleep again, and soon the same three dervishes reappeared and said to me, “Alas, you did not receive all of Sümmâni’s talent because you woke up too soon. You got part of his talent, the part which enabled him to be a minstrel. Wait for 39 years, and then in the 40th year we shall return and transfer Sümmâni’s talent to some lucky person. We shall come and call you. Wait for 39 years, and in the 40th we shall return.”

I woke up again and realized that it was much later. Within me was a feeling of confidence that I could learn to play the saz. I began training under an instructor to play that instrument. Soon afterwards I took my saz and traveled around this part of Turkey as a minstrel.

Near the Gürün Kapı mosque in Erzurum was the Âşık Coffeehouse [Wandering Minstrel Coffeehouse]. It was there that the âşık Hafız⁶ Muğdat used to perform frequently. (He has been dead for some time.) I used to go there and listen to him.

One night as I was sleeping, the three dervishes appeared to me in a dream once more. Taking me by the hand, they led me to a house which had three steps leading up to the large front door. After they had knocked on that door, it swung open, and all of us entered. The place was painted inside to look like a school. “Sit down,” said one of the

⁶One who has memorized verbatim the entire Koran is honored by having the title hafız prefixed to his name.

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dervishes. After I was seated, he took from the left a copy of the Koran and from the right an alphabet book. Handing me the Koran, he ordered me to start reading it. To my amazement, I did begin to read it. But right then I was awakened by my mother's calling to me. The dervishes disappeared as I woke up.

I felt a great ache in my body. To my mother I said, "I wish that you had died before you could come here and wake me up, for in my dream I was being taught how to read by an old dervish!"

There were in our neighborhood people who knew how to interpret dreams, and so I went to them for help in understanding what had happened to me. I told my dream to a few of them, but they warned me, "Do not reveal this dream to others!"

As nights passed, I had a second and a third dream during which I was learning to read. But on the fourth night when the dervish came to take me to the school again, he did not hold my hand. As soon as we had entered the school building, the dervish said to me, "May you be struck blind! Why did you tell other people about this? By doing so, you have lost much!" Saying this, he slapped my face hard. The pain from that blow awakened me. Both my eyes were burning. I was crying, and tears were running down my face.

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Hearing my loud crying, my mother came to me at once. She asked, "What happened to you, son? Why are you crying? What is wrong?"

I answered, "I have no idea what happened to me, Mother." But then I told her what had occurred in my dreams of the past three nights and how I had been struck by the dervish.

For three months after that I was unable to see the sunlight or to do any work. I did not even leave the house during that time. At the end of the third month Nuri Hoca⁷ asked his adopted son, Dursun, "Have you seen Behçet lately? Where has he been?"

Dursun answered, "Behçet has become blind. He is so completely blind that he is unable to see even the sunlight or to leave his home."

"Is what I am hearing true? If it is, then go to Behçet's home, take his hand, and lead him here." He came and found me sitting on the first step of the stairway leading up to our door. I could see nothing, as if I were in a completely dark dungeon. He took me to Nuri Hoca's house, but when Nuri Hoca saw my condition, he at once led me to Hakkı Hoca, a man who made amulets and charms. He had as much special power as any witch did. He was very successful in

⁷A hoca is a Muslim preacher and religious leader of a small community.

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using this power to help people, and he was well known in our area. —In that time everything was much cheaper than it is now—so much so that people did not buy meat by the kilo but by the okka,⁸ and an okka cost only ten kuruş.⁹ Melted butter cost only thirty-five kuruş per okka, and the tea we are now drinking would then have cost only a few paras. You can see now how cheap things were in those times.¹⁰

Anyway, Nuri Hoca took me to Hakkı Hoca and said, “What can we do to take care of this person? How can we help him?” I could not see them, but I could hear everything that they said.

Hakkı Hoca said, “He was given his present unfortunate condition by Allah. How can we protect him from Allah? Allah was

⁸An older unit of weight, the okka was 1,282 grams (2.8 pounds) as opposed to a kilo, which is 1,000 grams (2.2 pounds).

⁹The para was formerly the smallest monetary unit. There were 40 paras to the kuruş and 100 kuruş to the Turkish lira. By mid-20th century, devaluation of Turkish money had eliminated from use the para, and by the 1970s the kuruş also fell out of circulation. When the lira was devaluated to the worth of 10¢ (U.S.), both para and kuruş coins became collectors’ items. Now (1997) a dollar equals 170,000 Turkish liras.

¹⁰In almost all his tales Behçet Mahir inserts interpolated stories and observations that occur to him. Usually these are supportive of the main theme or at least applicable to something in the narrative. Sometimes, as here, the comments are quite gratuitous and seem totally irrelevant. What triggered his remarks here about past and present prices? Was it a bill for the tea that he and the rest of us were drinking?

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going to give him a fortune, but he did not know how to receive it. Now I do not know how to help him.” At that time there was a certain Hacı¹¹ İbrahim, and while Nuri Hoca and Hakkı Hoca were talking, this hacı knocked on the door. Hakkı Hoca said, “Come in and listen to what Nuri Hoca is telling me.”

Nuri Hoca said to Hacı İbrahim, “Behçet became blind, so blind that he cannot see a thing. How can we find a remedy for his problem?”

But Hacı İbrahim already knew all about Behçet’s situation. He said, “Allah was going to give him some special talent, but Behçet was so ignorant that he went about telling other people of this, and as a result, he lost a great opportunity.”

But Nuri Hoca insisted on getting some help for me from Hakkı Hoca and Hacı İbrahim. Then Hakkı Hoca and Hacı İbrahim each took one of my hands and recited something, after which they blew¹² their words toward my face. They then said to me, “If you

¹¹Hacı means pilgrim. When it precedes someone’s name, it indicates that that person has completed a pilgrimage to Mecca, the holy city of Islam.

¹²For centuries saints, clergymen, dervishes, and other spiritual leaders have recited intercessory prayers, spoken healing incantations, and uttered various forms of word magic which they then blew toward victims of disease, misfortune, and evil people. There was widespread belief in the efficacy of this treatment. Not surprisingly, charlatans exploited this faith and charged high prices for pretending to provide

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should have any dream when you are sleeping, do not tell anybody about it. Whatever you may see in your dream you should keep to yourself. Do not tell it to your mother or to your neighbors."

I said to them, "I promise that I shall not."

They then said to Nuri Hoca, "Let us take him to his home, Nuri." Nuri Hoca took me by the hand and led me home. Even though things were cheap in those days, we could afford to buy almost nothing. Often my mother, my sister, and I had nothing to eat but dry bread. But on that same day that I had been brought home by Nuri Hoca, we were plentifully supplied with food. It was a great surprise.

A porter came to our door and asked, "Is this the home of Behçet Mahir?"

"Yes," my mother answered.

The porter then gave us a large basket filled with food. It included all kinds of food—fruit, vegetables, and meat. He then said, "Hakkı Hoca sent this to you."

After I had fallen asleep that night I had a dream in which a man approached me and said, "Allah was about to give you a wonderful gift, but because you did not act properly concerning that gift, you lost the opportunity to receive it. Now your life depends upon

such help. By the 20th century this exploitation was so widespread that one of the Kemalist Reforms of the 1920s-1930s outlawed all "blowers."

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what Mesud¹³ can do for you. Now you must go to the grave of Mesud, stand by his headstone, and say to him, 'I have been sent to you. Your mercy is limitless. Please forgive me! I was a fool and behaved stupidly, but you are very forgiving and generous.' Weep as you speak and rub your face against his tombstone, but do not say anything else."

I called my mother and said, "Mother, please help me change my clothes and get out of the house, because I have to go somewhere."

My mother asked, "Where do you want to go? Let me help you and take you there."

"No, I do not want to be accompanied. I must go alone. No one should follow me to the place I am going."

My mother answered, "But, my son, you are blind! You cannot see where you are going!"

"Yes, I am blind," I said, "but still I shall go by myself."

After I had changed my clothes, I began walking. Soon I came to a military base. Soldiers were walking everywhere. Inside the base there was a large fountain, and I could hear its water splashing. I asked a soldier how I should go in order to get to Martyrs' Street. That

¹³In some tapings of his "autobiography" Behçet Efendi seems to pronounce this name Maksud.

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soldier said to some other soldiers who were on duty then, "This boy is blind. Take him by the hand and lead him where he wants to go."

One of the soldiers led me to the beginning of Martyrs' Street. "This street is straight, and I am capable of finding my way now." The soldier departed, and I continued alone. I had no idea how far I walked before I heard a voice saying, "Where are you going, my son?"

From his voice I recognized the person as Recep Usta. I said, "Recep, can you take me to the Murat Paşa Mosque?"

Recep Usta said, "I am going there myself. Come along with me."

We had just about reached the mosque when the ezan¹⁴ was sounded. Taking off our shoes and holding them, we entered the mosque and participated in the morning prayer service. As we left afterwards, Recep Usta asked, "Where are you going now? Let me take you to whatever place that is."

said, "Please take me as far as the Elephant Bridge and then turn back. I can find my way from there."

"But exactly where are you going?" asked Recep Usta. "Tell me so that I can take you right there."

I finally told him, "I am going to the grave of Mesud Efendi."

¹⁴The ezan is the call to prayer. It is sung from a minaret a few minutes before each of the five daily Muslim prayer services.

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Recep Usta said, "Well, that is fine. Let me take you there."

"No, I must go by myself. I have been told that I should go there alone." Recep Usta took me to the Elephant Bridge. I crossed the bridge, but he turned around and went back the way we had come. The district where I was going is today known as Havuzbaşı, and there is a statue of Atatürk standing in it. But in the old days it was a cemetery. I walked for some distance, but because I could not see, I walked right through the cemetery and some distance beyond it.

Villagers used to bring ayran¹⁵ to the city and sell it along the streets. One of those ayran sellers saw me and asked me what I was doing there. I told him that I was looking for Mesud Efendi's grave. Upon hearing this, he said, "Poor blind boy, you are some distance from that grave." He then walked with me to show me where that grave was. I asked him to leave me after we had reached the grave, for I needed to be there alone. He then said, "Very well. I shall stand aside until you have finished whatever you are going to do at the grave. Then I shall return to help you find your way home."

"No, thank you," I said. "You must leave me. I really need to be completely alone." After he had left, I stood before the tombstone of Mesud. I knew that I was really at the right place because I could

¹⁵Ayran is a mixture of yoghurt and cold water. It is a very popular drink in Turkey.

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feel the heat of the candles burning there.¹⁶ Crying with the anguish of a thirteen-year-old boy, I said, "I made a great mistake. I talked to others about a special dream I had had. Now I have been sent here to visit you. You are a very merciful person. For the love of Allah, forgive me." No one can know how much pain I suffered in all of the 366 veins¹⁷ in my body as I spoke these words and rubbed my face against the tombstone. The very moment touched that stone my eyes began to feel different. When I opened them, I was able to see everything that is to be seen on this earth. I had gone to that cemetery blind, but returned from it with my vision restored. When I discovered that I could see again, I kissed the soil and rolled upon the ground in gratitude and joy.

Then I could hardly wait to get home to tell my mother and my sister, "I can see!"

I started walking home. When I reached the Elephant Bridge, discovered that Hakkı Hoca and Hacı İbrahim were standing upon it. They said, "Pass between us as you cross the bridge, but do not under

¹⁶Mesud was considered a saint by the people of Erzurum. Candles are kept burning constantly at his grave.

¹⁷Behçet Mahir believed that there were 366 blood vessels in the human body and that these "veins" were both the controllers and gauges of vitality. He mentions them frequently in his stories. Until shortly before his death (1988) he always insisted on standing while narrating so that his 366 "veins" could "vibrate freely."

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any circumstances look back!” Following their order, I walked straight home without looking behind me even once.

When I reached home, my mother and all of our neighbors were very pleased by my recovery of my eyesight. There are still some old people here who knew about my blindness for three months. They were eyewitnesses of what had happened to me when I was still a child.¹⁸

[This is the end of Behçet’s account of his initiation into minstrelsy and storytelling. There follows a 300-word passage of anticlimax. Behçet Efendi had been told by the dervishes of his youthful dream sequence that they would return to him again after 39 years to give him a further gift. In the anticlimax they do return but only to give him advice about handling the marital problems of his delinquent daughter.]

¹⁸Behçet Mahir was not a bit reluctant to talk about his life to anyone interested in hearing about it. There are other taped versions of this autobiographical account; they are not all exactly the same. The present version, for example, differs in several respects from the one taped a decade later by Ahmet Uysal for his biographical article on Mahir. See Uysal, Ahmet, “The Making of a Turkish Folk Narrator: Behçet Mahir of Erzurum,” *International Folklore Review*, 3 (1983), 26-31. See Notes for this tale in *Archive Notes*, VII, for a copy of the Uysal article.