

Story 1961 (1992 Tape 4)

Narrator: Leyla Özdemir, 25

Location: Kırklareli, capital of
Kırklareli Province (a
Black Sea or Laz
province)

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Laz¹ Sign Language Misunderstood

At the school attended by Temel,² the chemistry teacher was examining all of the students orally. The teacher called upon the students one by one and asked each of them a question.

When Temel's turn came, the chemistry teacher asked him, "Temel, what is the specific gravity of mercury?" Temel stood up and looked very serious, as if he were trying to remember the answer, but he had studied so little that he knew almost nothing about chemistry. Temel looked around, seeking help from the other pupils. He wanted

¹The word Laz referred originally to an ethnic minority living primarily in Trabzon and Rize provinces, along the extreme eastern part of the Turkish Black Sea coast. More recently the word has come to be applied to any resident of the entire Turkish Black Sea coast. In the Turkish oral tradition Laz people are stereotyped as being stupid or inept. This stereotype (like most others) is unjustifiable, for Lazes are, of course, much like other people.

²In tales about the stereotyped Laz as dummer or fool, the male characters usually have one or another of five or six very common Laz names. Temel is the name used most often, with Dursun in second place. Thus if either of these names occurs in a folktale, the audience knows at once that it is a Laz tale.

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some clue or reminder that would enable him to provide the correct answer.

A friend of Temel's at the back of the room saw his difficulty and tried to help him. Since he could not speak out loud to Temel, this friend decided to communicate with him by means of sign language. He realized that it would be difficult to signal the precise answer, 13.5, but he decided to signal 14 with his fingers, hoping that that would be close enough to satisfy the teacher. He therefore held up both his hands, showing 10 fingers. Then he held up 4 fingers of one hand, making a total of 14.

Temel was pleased to receive this help. Looking very thoughtful, he said to the teacher, "Mercury has a specific gravity of 2 spans and 4 fingers."³

³A hand span is the distance between the tip of the thumb and the little finger. In English measurement a span is 9 inches, but this fact is not a relevant factor here.