

An Interview with Pelin Demireli, Neşe Ozan and İlhan Sayın about Their Solidarity Work with Sulukule Residents

Balca Ergener, Asena Günal, Erden Kosova

In November 2005, Istanbul's historical Sulukule neighborhood (that is, Neslişah and Hatice Sultan districts) was declared Area of Renovation under the Law No. 5366 (Law on the Renovation and Reuse of Dilapidated Historical and Cultural Immovable Assets). Since then, the neighborhood has been subjected to numerous questionable policies and has largely been demolished. The Sulukule Project, practically an urban exile campaign, resulted in the expulsion of impoverished Roma people from their habitat through an extensive use of state power, whereas their former properties made certain individuals rich. As such, one of the oldest known Roma settlements was demolished to be replaced with villas, boutique hotels and shopping malls, and its inhabitants were victimized. The former tenants in the neighborhood were driven to Taşoluk, at 40 km to the city center, and cut off from their habitat and livelihood. Eventually all of the families sent to Taşoluk had to sell their new houses and move back to near Sulukule, since they could not afford the credit installments. Majority of the house owners, for their part, had to sell their ownership certificates to third parties. Finally those who neither had a certificate, nor could prove their tenant status, were thrown to the street. Sulukule became one of the symbols of urban transformation; despite resistance, international pressure and all the solution-finding efforts, urban injustice could not be avoided. Numerous NGOs, independent activists, academics, university students and volunteers sided with the Roma of Sulukule in this process. Together with Neşe Ozan, Pelin Demireli and İlhan Sayın, who continue to show solidarity with the people of Sulukule after its demolition, we have discussed working with an impoverished community victim of urban transformation, the needs of the community, its relations to the state, the state's view of them, and the shared experiences of production.

Erden Kosova: When did you start to work in Sulukule?

Neşe Ozan: My first visit was in 2007, when the neighborhood was still there and the demolition was just beginning.

Pelin Demireli: I went there first in May 2008 for supervising children's school studies, and when large-scale demolition was already taking place.

İlhan Sayın: I started to work there after the demolition was completed, on the occasion of the workshops at the school...

Neşe Ozan: Around 2008-2009.

Erden Kosova: If I am not mistaken, later on, you got together and started working in a common space.

Neşe Ozan: In April 2010, Sulukule Gönüllüleri Derneği [Sulukule Volunteers Association] was established, and we continued our efforts there. In fact, the last round of demolitions was completed in May 2008. It was almost two years later that the association was established. In the aftermath of the demolition, most inhabitants were still around, scattered outside the demolition area and we couldn't just take leave. We continued our efforts.

Asena Günal: Do you recall your first visit?

Neşe Ozan: In Sulukule, the turning point was the year 2005. When I had visited in 2007, they had razed a couple of houses to the ground, here and there, as if pulling out teeth from the jaw. I visited the neighborhood when in a gathering a friend of mine active over there said, "We need support; we could use your help if you've got the time."

Pelin Demireli: I was participating in the gatherings of the platform and receiving their news via e-mail. They said that they needed more people for supervising children's studies, and that's how I joined in. However, I realized that for this you needed to be well-educated in math, Turkish, etc. and decided that it would be better for me not to get involved in it. That's how we launched the cooking workshop. Nalan (Yırtmaç) was organizing a caricature drawing workshop at the time.

İlhan Sayın: I was in the clay workshop.

Pelin Demireli: We were already friends, and we soon came to collaborate there.

Neşe Ozan: And that's where I met you guys.

Asena Günal: As far as I can figure out, prior to your visit you did not have plans for organizing workshops, and the initiative was more or less shaped there, in practice...

İlhan Sayın: Exactly, things started to take shape during the process.

Pelin Demireli: If you are an outsider participating in those meetings, you cannot immediately have a firm grasp of what's going on. It was only later that I was truly involved. I was about to give up, saying, I cannot help children with their studies, it's best if I don't start at all, maybe I can contribute in some other fashion... Then a man grasped me by the arm and said "Our kids earned enough points from the exam to start the Anatolian¹ High School, but they demand a 500 TL tuition fee." We thought "How come!", and started thinking together with David (Arribas Cubero) of Sulukule Activists about what we could do. So my first contact was with that family. Then I went to the school to ask about the tuition fee. I collected money from here and there in the last minute, and paid 200 TL, saying that the rest would follow... Then I paid a visit to the Provincial Directorate of National Education: It turned out that the so-called tuition fee was indeed totally illegal. The officials made an immediate phone call and warned the managers of the local school that they had to protect the children in question and even cover their expenses. Well, the 200 TL was gone, yet still we had managed to get four children enrolled –and that without any extra expenses such as uniforms and toolkits. Now, all four of them are in school. I have learned that the school once again asks for tuition fees this year, albeit at a lower rate.

Erden Kosova: I remember you said in a previous conversation that the governorship indeed has certain funds for such socially disadvantaged people; however, these are hard to access, the population does not know about them, they do not demand it or the resources are not channeled in the correct fashion...

Pelin Demireli: Indeed, everything flows from the center to the periphery, rather than the other way around. As such, parents of school children do not even think of visiting the Provincial Directorate of National Education in Sultanahmet. Actually it is not illogical, because you should normally be visiting the local official in your neighborhood or district, rather than making the journey to the city center on every occasion. It is virtually impossible for those on the periphery to access the material or immaterial resources that I have been talking about.

Erden Kosova: In any case, the state mechanism is pretty much programmed to select, eliminate and exclude on a social basis.

Pelin Demireli: Actually, even the banks tend to reject these people. We had secured for them assistance payments. They were supposed to go to the bank and simply draw it, that is, everything was ready and they had right to that money. However, the security guards did not let them in. We had to intervene even in such a simple matter.

Asena Günal: Now, the municipality that provides assistance is also the one responsible for the demolition of people's houses, right? It distributes coal, foodstuff, etc., isn't it?

Neşe Ozan: They sometimes give out foodstuff, but the municipality has razed their habitat to the ground and is not concerned about the rest. In other words, it treats Roma exactly the same way it treats other poor people. I think provision of assistance, too, completely depends on political inclinations. For example, in education, there is what you call conditional cash support.

¹ Anatolian High School is the name given to high schools in Turkey that admit students based on their score in a nationwide exam and usually provide education in a foreign language.

People meeting certain criteria can apply for it and receive a monthly payment of 30-35 TL. Nonetheless, we participated in a meeting by the Directorate of National Education and learned that in the eastern and southeastern provinces of Turkey people can receive a monthly assistance of 250 TL per child. The school managers told us about it.

Asena Günal: Conditional cash transfer is a World Bank project and is implemented via the Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundation. For instance, it covers the vaccination costs of children aged between 0-6; for those over 6 years, it pays -if I am not mistaken- 30 TL for each child on condition that they attend school regularly. Could you be talking about some other scheme? Is it the state that pays for it?

Neşe Ozan: It is the state that pays, on condition that every single one of the children attends school. In the said region, the Kurdish provinces that is, the schooling rate is low, particularly among girls –this is a fact. We can go on and think that this is a *bona fide* attempt to promote schooling, nevertheless the schooling rate in Istanbul's Roma neighborhoods is even lower than that in the Kurdish provinces. In Sulukule the rate of illiteracy stands at 31%. Can you imagine that?! It is just ten minutes on foot to the nearest prefecture. So, the question is, why isn't the incentive in the Kurdish region extended to these districts, too? We woke up to the situation in the National Education meeting I mentioned above and demanded the same assistance for the Roma. As a result, they allocated a monthly payment of 100 TL for 40 children and 150 TL for high school students, for over 8 months.

Pelin Demireli: Still short of the 250 TL.

Asena Günal: Are the families informed about these?

Pelin Demireli: Even the teachers, the school managers, and the officials at the District Directorate of National Education are not informed...

Neşe Ozan: Since there are too many people in need of assistance, the general tendency in public agencies is to hush things up. They do inform those in a desperate situation, but if you think about it, how can you decide as to who is really in need and who is not! Teachers do not even visit the houses of the impoverished. They might or might not greet them on the street. They make rather unsound decisions based on hearsay, or on the way somebody is dressed.

Pelin Demireli: They make payments according to certain criteria; however, in the case of the Green Card² for example, we see that there are virtually no palpable criteria. You might very well get a Green Card without meeting the requirements, or might not get it even if you fully meet them! It is totally up to the official in charge.

Neşe Ozan: In the case of the Green Card and social assistance, they check via the land registry, whether the applicant has any property. Some applicants turn out to be proprietors –but no one asks what kind of a house it is, or what proportion of the real estate belongs to the person in question. For example, one such elder lady from the hood was denied the Green Card, on account of the fact that she had real estate. Indeed she holds 1 in 480 shares of a certain property. It would not even occur to her to write a petition outlining this fact and she cannot do this on her own. We learned about it, met with the deputy governor and resolved the matter. There is no other way. And then, when another similar situation comes up, don't expect the bureaucracy to solve the problem automatically this time. That is, there is no progress in terms of rights. You will again have to show the same effort for that second case. In other words, we make no headway. Just imagine the amount of time and energy wasted.

Asena Günal: I think, although you first went there with certain ideas, you have encountered different needs and you have found yourself playing a different role.

² Green Cards are issued to those who do not have social security and can prove that they are below a certain poverty line so that they can receive healthcare.

Neşe Ozan: Exactly. We tried to draw on our given education and accumulated knowledge to reach out to the people in need, and share our knowledge with the locals.

Erden Kosova: Then there is the fact that, you are stronger since your position and background is more reliable. Maybe if the people from the neighborhood went to these authorities by themselves, they would not be taken seriously.

Pelin Demireli: That is an important factor, but information is the key. I learned a lot in the Sulukule process, such as what can you achieve at the Directorate of National Education, what are your rights, etc... I mean, even I did not know my rights, none of us really do. Not even a university degree guarantees that. For example rent increase is a concern for all. If you do not know your rights in that matter, anyone including the landowner and lawyers can deceive you. I think that is where efforts concerning children should be concentrated. As you know, children constantly tend to ask "Why?" We suppress those questions and on the way to adulthood we get accustomed to not asking. When someone asserts an idea with confidence, you tend to take it for granted. I had to visit the Directorate of National Education at least five times on behalf of the children, before learning what was exactly required. How could I have known about the tuition fees for vocational high schools? I had to learn that through first-hand experience. If you lack that knowledge, you are obliged to believe what the others say, and cannot question them. In consequence, you get into a bind and waste too much energy, which forces you to give up after some time. How could you expect these people to leave their children alone at home for numerous visits to the Directorate of National Education... Who will pay for the bus fare? They can only go to nearby places on foot...

Erden Kosova: So, whenever a certain need came up, you achieved certain results. I guess than many people must have come to you with further demands as regards contacts with the authorities...

Pelin Demireli: Their needs are endless. Their houses have been demolished and there is a very urgent need for housing. Numerous further needs come up like in a chain reaction. Many children cannot go to the school simply because their address changes constantly and they are not registered. The so-called E-School system still does not recognize certain streets and accordingly the parents living on those streets cannot enroll their children in school. What are they to do? No one cares! You can supposedly access everything online but you simply cannot get your children enrolled in school.

Asena Günal: The tuition fee is a serious disincentive, a factor of exclusion. The Ministry of National Education practically ignores the matter; it does not allocate sufficient funds for schools and the schools are left on their own to meet all expenses from electricity to janitors' salaries.

Pelin Demireli: Why would the school management ask for money from parents, and not from the central administration?

Asena Günal: In a similar vein, hospitals charge patients rather than asking the Ministry of Health for funds... What we witness is the withdrawal of the state from every area.

İlhan Sayın: In the beginning of every school year, it is explicitly declared that no tuition fee is to be collected, but nothing changes in practice...

Asena Günal: According to one study, school tuition is one significant reason for student absenteeism. Tuition fees and lunch money can be serious deterrents. The Social Policy Forum of Boğaziçi University has suggested that the state should provide free lunch in primary schools of impoverished neighborhoods. Only then can schools become accessible for those children – otherwise the chances are slim.

Erden Kosova: What do the inhabitants think about these? Following the demolition, was there a tendency to not send the children to the school?

Pelin Demireli: I can say that everyone I met is keen to send their children to the school even though they themselves haven't been able to go to school. However, after their third visit to the National Education they simply go "enough is enough" or when the school keeps asking for more and more money, they are discouraged and send their children to work. But scholarships and conditional cash transfer does motivate them. Otherwise, why would they keep their children from going to the school! I know but a single kid who dropped out of high school, and believe me, he had valid reasons...

Neşe Ozan: He fell in such utter poverty that he had to quit.

Pelin Demireli: That family was cut off from the neighborhood. They were really having a tough time, because they were hemmed in by the blocks of TOKİ [Housing Development Administration of Turkey] on one side, and the ancient land walls on the other... The mother was obliged to take care of everything, such that she finally quit urging his son to attend school and preferred him to work. Of course he couldn't find a proper job. He worked somewhere but didn't receive his salary, which was a meager 50 TL per week anyway. Indeed it was this kind of material hardship that urged us to start our efforts with women.

Neşe Ozan: Before going on to our work with women, we should also mention the problem of people without identity cards. Issuing identity cards for undocumented individuals was our toughest challenge and we couldn't succeed. This issue is also closely related to the agenda of the women's movement. Say, a woman is officially married to a man, but then she has a child with some other man. The newborn is registered under the surname of her official husband, not the biological father.

Erden Kosova: The biological father has to establish paternity, that is...

Pelin Demireli: On the other hand, if the man begets a child from a woman other than her wife, say he is married to Ayşe but has a child with Fatma, than he can establish paternity for Fatma's newborn! In other words, the man's marriage poses no problems, but a married woman is finished for good!

Neşe Ozan: She has got no chance. For instance, a woman was married to a foreigner for money, so that the guy could obtain residence permit. Thus neither the man nor the marriage was real. Meanwhile the woman had a relation with another man and gave birth. The woman and the biological father could not establish paternity for the child.

Erden Kosova: Because the official husband has to give his consent in writ, right?

Neşe Ozan: Even that isn't enough, the man and the foreigner must divorce. The child of a married woman is considered to be the offspring of his official husband.

Pelin Demireli: Plus, even after divorce, the ex-husband is still considered to be the father of a child born in the first 300 days, that is, 9 months and 10 days. Thus a virtually non-existing man is declared the official father. You have got to get in touch with that man. You go to the bar association, hire a lawyer free of charge, file a lawsuit, and then the man must show up and declare that he is not the father to these kids. Even that doesn't do the trick, you need to produce DNA tests which cost vast sums like 3000-5000 TL... One family has three such kids.

Neşe Ozan: The real, biological father is there saying, these are my children, I have taken care of them -but to no avail. The woman says, I have given birth to them and this man is their true father; the children call them mom and dad; but the state couldn't care less.

Erden Kosova: How much do these arranged marriages bring to the women?

Neşe Ozan: We know of one such marriage in exchange for 100 dollars; but it is real difficult to annul the marriage. Then there are weird problems related to identity records, caused by

incorrect or deficient data entry. For instance, one woman got married 19 years ago and then divorced. Then she had another marriage which also ended in divorce. She goes to the prefecture to apply for social assistance, and it turns out that her first divorce has not been recorded; she is technically still married to that first guy and is denied assistance money on account that there is someone who can take care of her. The woman cannot be expected to keep the divorce decree for 19 years, to show it on such an occasion. Plus, the divorce was filed in some other city, not Istanbul. Now she has got to go there to find the official resolution and then file a lawsuit again... Simply unbelievable!

Pelin Demireli: Another example: One high school student had lost his identity card and we went to the civil registration office to issue a new ID. However, according to the official residence record, he is living with his father, not his mother. I said "What more do you want? Here is his mother; must the father also come all this way? The mother is here, and the father is registered in the residence record. Will you keep us from getting this boy enrolled in school, due to an omission in your records?"

Asena Günal: In such cases when the Roma themselves demand their rights, they are usually denied, and not even taken seriously. Technically identity and residence records are supposed to bring all such information together in a centralized, electronic database.

Pelin Demireli: But, like Neşe said, even the teachers don't know where these families live. Since I had taken a couple of children I knew to the school on registration day, the teacher gave me a list saying, "These children did not come, could you go and find them?" So I am the one who is supposed to wander the streets and fetch them.

Asena Günal: You are expected to deliver social services...

Balca Ergener: They talk about centralization, but you are denied a simple ID card; technically you do not exist...

Asena Günal: Did the inhabitants of Sulukule start telling you about their needs on your first visit right away, or was their first reaction "Who are you people?" Did you go through a process of building trust?

Neşe Ozan: We went there and joined an ongoing campaign. Most of the locals did not know what to do and were in a desperate situation. Of course not all of the inhabitants were in the same situation, it isn't so. Indeed some people profited from the demolition. It would be more correct to see it as a process yielding winners and losers. A small group of landowners with numerous houses benefited handsomely. However it was a true catastrophe for small property owners, for instance retired people who had nothing but their home and pension to fall back on. What is a 65- or 75-year-old supposed to do? Then there was the problem of properties shared among numerous individuals, which triggered rows inside families. And let's not forget the tenants. It used to be possible there to get a roof above your head for just 50 to 100 TL per month. On the other hand there is a group of jackals, shall we say, who intermediated in real-estate sales and worked for the rentier. They became rich on commission fees. This group immediately came to terms with the municipality officials. That's what always happens in such cases. They worked together hand in glove! Maybe they already had had connections previous to the demolition.

Indeed Sulukule comprises two separate neighborhoods: Neslişah Sultan and Hatice Sultan. The more impoverished Neslişah Sultan was where the Roma were concentrated. The other neighborhood, closer to Edirnekapi, was mixed and relatively wealthier. It housed a large number of people from Amasya and Siirt, who are not Roma. Judging by how property changed hands in this whole process, one can say that the wealthy dwellers of Hatice Sultan came to absorb the habitat of the poor.

Erden Kosova: When you say “absorb,” do you mean that they caused the poor to lose their property and be pushed out?

Neşe Ozan: Basically, yes. All of this will become clearer in time. I am just sharing with you my personal observations.

Asena Günal: Didn’t Hatice Sultan undergo demolition?

Neşe Ozan: Yes there was demolition in that quarter, too.

Asena Günal: So the people from Siirt and Amasya were not spared.

Neşe Ozan: Of course, their houses were also demolished, but remember, they are a wealthier bunch. And they knew how to grasp the first opportunities to arise... They delved in the process and got hold of other people’s properties.

Pelin Demireli: Property owners are deemed to be right holders. A right holder can purchase someone else’s property at a cheap price in the first six months. The property prices are now 5 times higher. The value of the real estate increased in folds.

Neşe Ozan: What did the poor property owners do? They couldn’t be part of the urban transformation game and sold their properties to the first bidder at a price slightly above that offered by the municipality. Say, the municipality offered 50 and they sold it for 70. Most of these first buyers were the wealthy lot from Hatice Sultan. It is my impression that at least one part of that bunch absorbed the property of the poor through such transactions. I can’t claim that this is true for every case, since I lack the data; but I did observe this general tendency.

Asena Günal: Consequently, the houses were demolished and everyone was sent packing to the TOKİ blocks in Taşoluk.

Neşe Ozan: No, only the tenants had the right to an apartment in Taşoluk, not the property owners.

Asena Günal: I have read that all those sent to the TOKİ blocks returned to around Sulukule in time.

Neşe Ozan: Yes, especially to Karagümruk.

Pelin Demireli: The area is hemmed in by the land walls and the municipal pool, etc. So what’s left is a half-moon shaped lot.

Asena Günal: How could they find a house in the environs? It must have been rather difficult, with the relatively higher rents, I guess?

Neşe Ozan: At least three times that in the old neighborhood. They change houses frequently, sometimes leaving behind rent unpaid.

Pelin Demireli: Taşoluk is a case all by itself. We visited the boarding school over there to see whether the children could be sent there for one semester. It took us five hours to get there, without any stopover. Imagine how far away it is. Besides, there is no life, no job opportunities around –it’s a ghost town. It is in the heart of the forest, on top of a hill, close to the Black Sea, with clean air. May be great if you are retired, but no work to be found anywhere!

İlhan Sayın: Not even a retired person could survive there. It is an isolated hilltop, there is nothing around.

Pelin Demireli: Then there is the financial aspect. The natural gas bill, the doorman's pay, plus the credit installments for the apartment... It is not as if those houses were granted for free. That's another prevalent misconception. On the contrary, the houses cost around 100,000 TL. It would be much better for them if they could purchase a house in the old neighborhood, which was cheaper.

Asena Günal: I remember the ceremonies when they were given their proprietorship certificates.

Neşe Ozan: They were indebted.

Erden Kosova: How can they get rid of that debt? Or can they?

Neşe Ozan: They hand over the contract with the bank. Normally, in other TOKİ housing schemes, you can hand over the contract only after a specific period of time, not in the first year, anyhow. However the game had been fixed so well, the run of events was so well planned, that no such clause had been placed in the contracts with the inhabitants of Sulukule –the contract could be transferred as soon as the house was received. Thus, some of them signed the contract, and had to transfer it even before the houses were ready; whereas, some tried to settle in the TOKİ houses a couple of months later... They couldn't hold on for more than seven or eight months though. Of course, the transfer sum varied according to the date of transfer. The first people to give up transferred their contracts in exchange for a mere 4.000-10.000 TL. Those who tried to stay for longer eventually did so in return for 25.000-30.000. Later on, at least some of them returned to the environs of the neighborhood.

Pelin Demireli: What else could they have done but transfer? Your house has been demolished, and your promised new house is still not finished; some are to be delivered in two years. Where are you supposed to live for two years? Some children tried to make use of the rubbles left from the demolition to construct shabby houses or huts, thinking they might move in there in the future. People were put in such a desperate situation. The urban legend goes "They were given free housing, but they didn't like it"; even the people living close to the neighborhood believe that. Once again, disinformation comes up as a critical issue.

Neşe Ozan: All these events need to be examined. A second round of profiteering took place in Taşoluk. For instance, who purchased these houses in such a profitable manner? Of course the payment conditions are really tough on the tenants, simply because the household income is very low, they are very poor. However, the payments can be afforded by members of the lower middle classes. A family with an income of, say, 2000 TL can hold on and finish paying the credit installments. It isn't such a bad investment either. Indeed you get to own a house by paying only 300 TL per month for fifteen years.

Erden Kosova: I think all this process was run by well-organized interest groups. Coming back to the founding of your space... How did you decide to launch activities oriented to women –as a result of the economic hardships faced by those coming back, or were there other urgent needs or issues at play?

Pelin Demireli: We always wanted to do this. When we were working with children we also wanted to get together with the women and unemployed men in the hood. Indeed many inhabitants take up home-based work for a number of companies. However, only after delving in their lives did we come to grasp the intense exploitation of home-based labor.

Asena Günal: What kind of work do they do at home?

Pelin Demireli: Making parcel boxes out of cardboard, attaching evil-eye beads to pins, and other domestic work. It turns out they are paid just 10 TL a day in the parcel business. The whole family works for close to 24 hours, at least 12 hours, and most of the time they don't even receive the 10 TL. The situation is worse than China, in other words. We didn't have a well-thought-out plan, it was all pretty much incidental. David was studying handicrafts at Mimar Sinan University.

Wandering around Küçük Ayasofya district in Sultanahmet, he came across a small workshop for hand printed scarves. He went in and talked to the owner, who, seeing our interest in the issue, offered training the women. Then we and the women started to learn the craft gradually. Later we launched production and started considering establishing a workshop.

İlhan Sayın: Veliye Özdemir Martı's print scarf workshop follows the classical Anatolian tradition. She trained us in the workshop. I joined in later on.

Neşe Ozan: We are much indebted to her.

Pelin Demireli: She dreams that one day one of her students from the workshop will become a master, in the classical print scarf tradition. Well, time will tell.

I wasn't there when it all began, Neşe and David were. It was they who organized the workshop. The workshop was established jointly with the women, that is, we are all part of the staff. All decisions are taken together, including such issues as the division of labor, pricing, and the distribution of the proceeds. We manufacture printed shawls, bags etc. and the production systems comprises the stages of print, dyeing, ironing and packaging. Prior to setting the final sale price we first determine the pay for every task, say 1.5 TL for prints, 2.5 for dyeing, and 1 TL for ironing. The result is a production line where skilled and unskilled women, and even children can work... All of us, including me, have utter confidence in the system. We are all partners and we are all producers.

Asena Günal: Did you organize the sales network through acquaintances?

Neşe Ozan: We made the best of every opportunity. For example, on New Year's Eve, the daily *Hürriyet* sent our shawls as gifts to its clients. The ad agency Rafineri designs products for us as part of its social responsibility efforts. For example they came up with the idea of manufacturing embroidery inspired by the renowned Turkish singer Orhan Gencebay and even held an exhibition of these.

İlhan Sayın: We received help from our friends for the marketing of the shawls or the provision of designs. One friend of ours had provided us pictures of the Ahtamar Church in Van, and I transformed them into graphic designs to be employed on scarves.

Neşe Ozan: Many artists gave us support. İlhan, Nalan, Çağla, and other names from among our friends... The support was considerable.

Many things need to be sorted out: Putting the children in school, issuing Green Cards or IDs, providing doctor's prescriptions... The main question that bothered us was as follows: Outsiders cannot assume all such responsibilities for the rest of their lives; so, how can we empower these people via solidarity?

Erden Kosova: The creation of self-sufficiency...

Neşe Ozan: I find it crucial. Avoiding the formation of relations of domination, of fraud among them, and encouraging solidarity... Our work with the children was fruitful, simply great; how can we make possible long lasting achievements with the adults, too? We constantly asked ourselves this question while we were there. Our work with the women overlaps with such a pursuit. We can't know where this effort will end up, maybe it can reach a totally unforeseen level –with a little bit of luck. But if you ask me, what really counts is for every such activity to turn into an experience of democracy –for them and for ourselves. Even at such a small, modest scale, it is crucial. They must become a self-sustaining community, forging ahead with internal solidarity rather than with funds granted from the outside. Once they become self-sustaining, they can establish a school for their children, build an arts center, you name it...

We tried to make this clear from the start: Since many people are in need of jobs and the number of jobs is limited, we must give priority to the most needy. But, how shall we decide on who is the most needy? If our decision to this effect gets a positive reception from the community, then it means we are in the right track. Because, they know each other's situation very well. Such a decision is correct if no one objects. Secondly, it is crucial for them to do each other favors without waiting for anything in return. If we work in the neighborhood long hours, day after day, without any compensation, then they should also be able to do so.

Pelin Demireli: Of course; they are each other's neighbors, friends, and acquaintances. They need to ask themselves, where is my neighbor gone, is she OK, might she be sick, what happened to her house, etc.? This has become a very urgent need after the demolition of the neighborhood. In the past, such relations used to be tighter.

İlhan Sayın: Last year, the women had stopped visiting each other. Now they have once again started organizing get-togethers.

Neşe Ozan: Or say, we are doing a scarf printing workshop with a group. All of a sudden, another group of women, who are not in the workshop that day, show up to serve us lunch and tea. It is very important that they demonstrate such friendship and solidarity. Thirdly, everything is transparent and everyone knows how much the others make. They have a clear idea of how much they gain and how much the others gain. Fourthly, like Pelin said, we planned the job like a manufacturing line. The women are trained in the workshop and work at home, in groups. Due to the division of labor, every stage of production is dependent on the previous stage, and affects the next one. As such, quality became everybody's common concern, embraced by the whole community.

Pelin Demireli: For instance, say that 100 shawls proceed in the production line, but it turns out that there are problems in print, knitting, dyeing, etc., which translates into a loss of 20%. Once people observe such problems, they pay more attention to what they do. Because, if someone makes a mistake in 10 out of 100 shawls, those who are next in the production line stand to lose.

Asena Günal: It is very interesting that further problems have not come up in relations concerning money.

Neşe Ozan: Some people were offended, saying "Why didn't you include me in the print job," "why didn't you invite me today?" etc., but in general people understood that we see everyone as equals and we don't favor anyone in particular. Therefore, fortunately, all such problems are avoided for the time being.

Pelin Demireli: Since we have a limited experience of such a work process, it took time and experience to settle certain things. All right, I had started out with total belief and persuasion, but the actual workings had to be sorted out in practice. We share the proceeds without paying anything to intermediaries. We don't have a boss, an employer, or a coordinator.

Neşe Ozan: In home-based work in general, contractors bring work from a factory; the work passes through the hands of a number of intermediaries before reaching the actual producer. At every stage there are parasites who ask for their cut. The producer is thus left with a very small share of the pie...

Asena Günal: I guess home-based work, especially piecework, continues in the community. Are you doing any work in this respect? The unionization or association of home-based workers is a hot topic these days. It could be good to inform them about these developments.

Neşe Ozan: This is our train of thought: We must stop mourning a demolished neighborhood, and enhance this working group that we have established. A new life is being created here and we have to jointly cater for the needs of this new life. What comes next must be a more participative process, since there is a difference between being present from the start, and joining in later.

There are a number of new participants. I believe that if we can create the conditions for systematic work, our numbers can easily increase from 30 to 50, and why not, even to 100.

Pelin Demireli: What's more, we are really having a great time together. At first, making money was people's sole concern, but later on they started having a good time, because, say, there is no designated cigarette break, all you have to do is just get out and puff one. If we start feeling hungry, we stop work and sit down at the table. There are no fixed hours, no card punching...

Neşe Ozan: I believe the breaks are even more important, since that's when the women share their experiences, talk about husbands, etc.

Asena Günal: Do you have plans for work involving the men, too?

Neşe Ozan: I always talk about working with "adults." Women need to be given the priority, sure, but it shouldn't be limited to them—I would like to include the men, too.

Pelin Demireli: For instance, while delivering the shawls the buyers mentioned producing shoes. We talked with a couple of people, but the general reaction was negative. We had visited the Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu workshop to learn about dyeing work. There we saw men doing the dyeing, that is, the local men can join in our work if they feel like it.

Asena Günal: Aren't they willing to join in? Or is it that you haven't invited them?

Neşe Ozan: A bit of both, actually. We didn't have the chance to prepare the ground for that. But I hope that we can try to establish a similar system with men and youth as soon as possible.

Asena Günal: Going back to talking about the husbands during the breaks, I imagine that naturally you discuss problems specific to women, right? I am sure that some of these women are victims of domestic violence. Did any of them stand up for their rights? What you do comes very close to what feminists are trying to do, such as capacity building, establishing solidarity and a democratic mechanism...

Pelin Demireli: Honestly, I learned all about it in Sulukule. Beforehand I wasn't so close to feminism. Now the conditions oblige me to become a feminist: from the IDs of children to the quality of the home-based work... How can one not take a stance against such problems?

Neşe Ozan: I witnessed a number of cases of violence against women. We directed some of our friends to the Mor Çatı ["Purple Roof" Women's Shelter Foundation] —we didn't have an alternative—, but just as it happens in many other cases, the women couldn't make up their mind and continue, some of them could not even go to the initial meeting. We are really groping our way through darkness, learning through trial and error.

Pelin Demireli: The women are not the sole victims of violence. Children are also frequently beaten up. In such cases, we try to nourish dialogue. Since our focus is on solidarity, we make the women feel that in case they don't stand up against it and defend themselves, their children and their acquaintances, we can't do it for them. They are pretty much aware of this. I don't consider myself as some expert who can alter their behavior. Since I am no expert, I go "This is where I stand, it is great if we can collaborate, if not, too bad."

Erden Kosova: Could it be that you found it easier to work with children and women in the first place, in terms of communication?

Neşe Ozan: In fact, as we witnessed the trauma experienced by the children, we gradually decided to start working with the children. Then, we came to realize that working with the children naturally entails a communication with the mothers.

Erden Kosova: What did the work with children consist of?

Neşe Ozan: In 2007, a number of activities were conducted with the kids in the hood, in houses and coffeehouses. One winter, we brought the children to the workshops at Bilgi University on the weekends. Then we thought about carrying out something in the neighborhood. We took an abandoned shop and jointly established a space for children. The result was something like the house made of confectionary in the Hansel and Gretel story. It was painted in beautiful colors; the children just loved it. There were painting, clay, caricature and rhythm workshops.

İlhan Sayın: I wasn't there. I joined later on, during the activity in the schools.

Neşe Ozan: Some reading and writing, then of course geography lessons... The Chamber of Urban Planners paid a visit and delivered a fun lesson in geography; then, an introduction to English –a bit of everything you can think of. Later on, we started utilizing the whole neighborhood as workshop space. During one summer we worked among the ruins of the land walls, or beside a garden wall, or in Sezer's lot... Then they played open air games in Uncle Asım's garden, conducted a clay workshop and a kite workshop... Then there was the circus workshop, which lasted one month. I guess it must have been a very interesting experience for the kids. I think we managed to awaken in them the feeling that learning can be great fun.

Pelin Demireli: Then İlhan Koman's sailboat Hulda arrived, and they conducted great workshops with the kids. They were giving guided tours on the boat and holding workshops at the same time. Besides, in such groups the children frequently asked us questions like "Were you successful at school?" Normally the children don't have similar examples in the neighborhood. Because all children go to school, they are also motivated to do so. They want to do what their peers do and socialize in the same fashion. The kids of the hood share the same experiences, but once they get out of the premises –and they have to– they immediately realize what's going on. And it is their most natural right; they want to be a part of it.

Erden Kosova: Can you work with women and children simultaneously?

İlhan Sayın: I work solely with women. Anyhow, we can't spare more than one or two days; and there is no time left for the children. But we have a reading room in the premises and the children go in and out while their mothers are there.

Balca Ergener: And you also help the children in their school studies?

Pelin Demireli: We support them in their schoolwork –in our joint space or in the houses. We have a library and the children can borrow, read and return the books.

Balca Ergener: I was wondering about Nalan's Voltron³ pattern used on the print scarves. Do they like it? I think it's closely related to the events in the neighborhood in a way, right?

Nalan Yırtmaç: There, we used photographs from not Sulukule, but the Fener-Balat district. You must have a better idea of how they see Voltron, as I haven't worked much among the women.

Pelin Demireli: One day, I had taken an old bed sheet to the workshop, saying we could use it to try patterns. They went "Let's print the Voltron on it." I guess they like that pattern. All decisions are taken jointly. Say, we decide to produce a table cloth, we decide on the pattern to use and where to place it... Since the capital invested is very limited, we have a margin for trial and error. That's an advantage.

Neşe Ozan: I think that business has a future. They are yet to come up with their own dyeing techniques and designs. This is just the beginning. We just recently started adapting Voltron to serigraphy.

³ A pattern made from an artwork by Nalan Yırtmaç titled "Yıkılan mahallelerin, yerinden edilenlerin gücü adına!" [By the power of demolished neighborhoods and displaced people!] (2010).

İlhan Sayın: Yes, this is only the beginning. The production process is more or less settled, but women can do a lot more. My only worry is, will they be able to continue on their own, once we are not there?

Neşe Ozan: That's the main concern. They must continue the business and avoid any relations of supremacy. Otherwise, if some start dominating the others, it means that all our efforts were in vain; we might as well forget all that we have worked for.

Erden Kosova: It is not only the ultimate result that counts; tons of experience has accumulated on the way. Even if the designated ideal cannot be achieved, there was a lot experienced during the process. The present scheme may eventually dissolve; still it will leave traces among the people.

Translated from Turkish by Barış Yıldırım