A WHO Official Is Surprised by the Turkey's Tuberculosis Control Policies (1968)

Source reference:
S.P.B. [Saim Polat Bengiserp (?)], «Dr. Mahler Türkiye'de» [Dr. Mahler is in Turkey], *Yaşamak Yolu* 378-379 (March–April 1968), p. 13.

Source:
Dr Mahler, head of the World Health Organization's tuberculosis department, has been in Turkey for a few days... He is witnessing how tuberculosis is being combated on the ground. Dr Mahler was welcomed by his Turkish colleague Hamdi Açan at Ankara's Esenboğa airport. All the way from the airport to the town, Dr Açan, who is the General Director of Tuberculosis Control at the Ministry of Health, explained the work being done to the foreign guest. The entire city was combed, district by district, street by street, house by house. There was not a single person who had not been vaccinated with the BCG. Those who had not and those who did not turn up for control were forced to come.
Hamdi Açan talked and talked and talked... Finally, Dr Mahler said: 'Please excuse me! I won't believe what you are saying without having examined it on the ground, because I did not expect such actions in Turkey'.
Hamdi Açan replied: 'Well! Would you make a bet with me on this? For example, a meal?' Dr Mahler agreed and Hamdi Açan had to prove his point.
The car started making stops along the road. They called the children they saw and looked at their shoulders. On their shoulders they all bore the scar of the BCG vaccination. One, two, three, five ... Dr. Mahler finally said: 'That's it! You've won! But I am the real winner. It is ra re to see such exemplary work anywhere in the world!'

Blurb:
This source is a short article published in *Yaşamak Yolu* (literally 'Path to life' or 'Way of life'). *Yaşamak Yolu* was the newspaper of the İstanbul tuberculosis (TB) league, one of the most powerful and active associations in the sanitary domain in Turkey, created in 1927[1]. Published between 1929 and 1975, this newspaper was, according to the doctors who ran it, a way to educate the 'common people' about TB and make them change their behavior to combat it[2]. As lots of short news given in *Yaşamak Yolu*, the article is signed 'S.P.B.', which stands most probably for Dr. Saim Polat Bengiserp, a regular contributor to the newspaper. This short article thus reunites the three main actors of TB control in Turkey: the State - as Dr Açan was the General Director of TB Control at the Ministry of Health; international organizations - especially the World Health Organization (WHO) with Dr. Mahler; and the TB leagues.

The short article recounts the story of an WHO official who arrived in Turkey and realized how effective the country's tuberculosis policies were, especially the vaccination policies with the BCG ('Bacillus Calmette-Guérin' TB vaccine). The anecdote was published in Turkish, in a newspaper aimed at Turkish readers, who mostly received it for free as members of the İstanbul TB league or other institutions. The article thus used the story and the words of a foreign (here, Danish) actor for a discourse of success actually destinated to a domestic Turkish audience. The report written by the head of the WHO TB service and one of his

[1] GÖKÇE, Tevfik İsmail. *İstanbul Verem Savaşı Derneği Kuruluş Gelişim ve Çalışmalar 1927-1971 [Foundation, Development and Actvities of the İstanbul Tuberculosis Association, 1927-1971]*, İstanbul: s.n., 1972.
[2] İLIKAN, Ceren Gülser. 'A Sanitary Journal for Common People: Yasamak Yolu' *in* İLKILIÇ, İlhan, Hakan ERTIN, Rainer BRÖMER*, et al.* (eds.). *Health, Culture and the Human Body. Epidemiology, Ethics and History of Medicine. Perspectives from Turkey and Central Europe*. İstanbul: BETIM, 2014, p. 299-311.

colleagues after this one-week visit to Turkey in Spring 1968, while generally positive about the fight against TB in Turkey and vaccination in particular, was more nuanced about the situation in the country than this highly laudatory anecdote might suggest[3]. Rather than a perfect recounting of an event, this article uses a process sometimes present in the writing of Turkish TB specialists: the mediatization by a foreign (often Western European) gaze of the vision of Turkey by its public health specialists. Turkey is presented here as a backward country from which little can be expected, yet which, thanks to the efforts of its government, its people and its associations, has achieved success in the fight against tuberculosis. This specific story recounted several times in various contexts[4], allowed to present Turkey as a model country for TB control. It took place in a narrative that began to unfold at the end of the 1960s: that of a "Turkish miracle" in the fight against TB. This "miracle" subsumes the "cooperation" of the people with the State[5], even in areas and among populations that seemed the most furthered from the Welfare State, such as remote villages and the *gecekondu* (urban areas of informal dwelling). However, this 'cooperation' was also based on coercion: 'those who did not turn up for control were forced to come', says the article[6].

The text ends with the idea that the 'victory' for Turkey is also a victory for the WHO. In this story, Turkey appeared as an exemplary follower of the WHO model, fighting TB according to the international organization's standards and guidelines. Mahler was a major advocate of a 'social medicine' based on simpler, affordable solutions such as mass vaccination rather than more complex clinical solutions. In the 1950s, he worked for the WHO on BCG campaign in India and was soon to become the Director-General of the organization (1973-1988), where he developed a 'primary health care strategy'[7]. Turkey was an important country in the global TB control landscape, as İstanbul welcomed the first WHO TB control center in the early 1950s and initiated a large campaign of BCG vaccination with the WHO and the UNICEF[8].

In the late 1960s, TB was no longer considered as an interesting nor important health issue anymore[9] even if it was still a major threat for most countries in the world. Nevertheless, TB control appeared as a place to affirm Turkey as a country as successful as the most 'developed' ones and a leader for the Middle East and the 'developing' world, and Turkey as a model country for massive vaccination campaigns advocated by the WHO.

Source selected, translated, and annotated by Léa Delmaire.

---

[3] MAHLER, H. and M. ARHIRII, *Rapport sur une visite en Turquie, 1-6 avril 1968 [Report on a visit to Turkey, 1-6 April 1968]*. 1968. WHO Library, TURQUIE 0013 / PNUD (TA) 53-60 UNICEF

[4] As in a report in French in the journal of the International Union Against Tuberculosis, where the object of the bet is 'a sumptuous kebab'. ALBERT, Pierre. « Turquie 70 » [Turkey 70], *T.* July 1970, 24, p. 5.

[5] DELMAIRE, Léa, '"Le grand miracle turc'. Problématisation et politiques de la tuberculose en Turquie (1945-1975)' ["The Great Turkish Miracle": The Problematisation and Politics of Tuberculosis in Turkey (1945-1975)'], PhD thesis in history, Sciences Po, Paris, 2024, esp. p. 745-752.

[6] See also DELMAIRE, Léa. "Locating the Health Hazard, Surveilling the Gecekondu: The Tuberculosis-Control Pilot Area of Zeytinburnu, Istanbul (1961–1963)", *Centaurus*. 2023, 65:1 , p. 153-186.

[7] BRIMNES, Niels. "Negotiating social medicine in a postcolonial context: Halfdan Mahler in India 1951–61", *Medical History*. 2023, 67:1. p. 5-22.

[8] BERTHET, Étienne, *Dix-Huit Mois de Lutte Antituberculeuse En Turquie - Eighteen Months of Antituberculosis Fight in Turkey,* İstanbul: İstanbul Tuberculosis League, 1952

[9] KEHR, Janina and Flurin CONDRAU. "Recurring Revolutions? Tuberculosis Treatments in the Era of Antibiotics" in GREENE, Jeremy A., Flurin CONDRAU and Elizabeth SIEGEL WATKINS (eds.). *Therapeutic Revolutions. Pharmaceuticals and Social Change in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016, p. 136.