



Photo © Archive of Hande Birkalan-Gedik

## Mehmet İlhan Başgöz (1921-2021)

Emeritus Prof. Dr. Mehmet İlhan Başgöz, the doyen of Turkish folklore, author of numerous books and articles, translator, writer, and mentor, passed away on April 13, 2021, in Ankara-Turkey at the age of 100.

Although officially his birthday is registered as 1923, the year of the foundation of the Turkish Republic, he was born in Gemerek, an Anatolian town in Sivas, Central-Eastern Turkey “during the barley harvesting season of 1921,” as he always repeated when he is asked about his biography. Başgöz was proud of his father Hasan, who was a village schoolteacher, and his mother Zeycan Hanım, who came from the Cadoğlu Turkoman tribe.

Başgöz worked closely with Pertev Naili Boratav at the Ankara University’s Faculty of Languages, History and Geography. He received his Ph.D. in folklore in 1949 under the supervision of Necmettin Halil Onan because Pertev Naili Boratav was no longer able to work in the department. Başgöz completed his dissertation titled *Biografik Türk Halk Hikâyeleri: Kahramanları, Teşekkürleri, Saz Sairlerinin Eserleri İle Münasebeti* (Biographical Folk Narratives: Their Characters, Compositions, and the Relationships to the Folk Poets) in 1949. The same year, the Department of Turkish Folklore and Folk Literature was closed because of heightening racism, which accelerated in the 1940s.

Accused of communicating “socialist” ideas, İlhan Başgöz, too, lost his job as an assistant at the department. With a freshly obtained doctoral degree at hand, worked as a high-school literature teacher for two years. He spent several months in prison.

Başgöz obtained a Ford Foundation grant and moved to the USA and started to work at the University of California-Los Angeles (1961-1963) and at the University of California-Berkeley

(1963-1965). As a result, he published *Educational Problems of Turkey* (with Howard Wilson) in 1968. But already, before coming to the US, he had published widely on genres of oral tradition as early as 1947.

Joining the Indiana University in 1965 at the Program of Uralic and Altaic Studies, İlhan Başgöz, the Hoca of Turkish folklore, set up the Turkish Studies Department in 1975 under the Program of Uralic-Altaic Studies (today, Central Eurasian Studies); conducted academic activities collaboratively with the (then) Folklore Institute (today Department of Folklore) where he also held positions, first as a fellow, then as a professor; and at the Near Eastern Studies. Until his retirement in 1997, he had actively worked and supported the activities of Turkish Studies world-wide. After his retirement, he moved back to Turkey. He started lecturing at Bilkent University-Ankara, Yüzüncü Yıl University-Van, and Middle East Technical University-Ankara; and living between two continents. He got in touch with the Turkish officials and the Republic of Turkey sent an ambulance plane, which transported him to his native Turkey at the beginning of 2021, because as he had been complaining that he was not properly taken care of in the US.

Surviving the racist-1940s in Turkey, Başgöz committed himself to the lifestyle of the Turkish cultural and political reforms. He belonged to a generation of scholars, working towards the development of a modern intellectual arena in Turkey. His mission, in folklore studies in particular, and Turkish Studies in the United States in general, aimed at educating a diverse audience who was interested in the cultures in Turkey. Working on the traditional folk narratives and publishing widely on the topic, since his doctoral achievement, his Opus Magnum was *Hikâye: Turkish Folk Romance as Performance Art* (2008), which presented eye-witness accounts along with sound analyses of Anatolian performative art. His work was informed by the fact that he had arrived at a very significant moment when American folklorists emphasized the role of “individual” in their definition of folklore, aiming to rid the negative connotations of “tradition,” a term which the author embraced. For that matter, he was a true intermittent of folklore theories and field-collected texts between Turkey and the US—a traveler himself, who also made the theory travel both ways.

Başgöz received several awards from the USA and Turkey, including the Guggenheim Fellowship (1973), which is given to scholars due to their exceptional capacity in the arts. He became a Fellow of the American Folklore Society (1983). He received the Gold Medal of Distinguished Literary and Scholarly Achievement of the Turkish Writers Union (*Edebiyatçılar Birliği*) (1996), followed by another—yet belated—award from his native Turkey: The Distinguished Service Certificate from the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Turkey, as well as the Gold Medal for Nasreddin Hoca Research from the Nasreddin Hoca Society in Turkey (1999). Other awards included the Superior Service Award of the Ministry of Culture in 1997, the Hacı Bektaş Peace and Friendship Award (2000), and the Turkish Academy of Science Award (2004). In 2019, he received Indiana University’s Bicentennial Medal, for his eminent contributions to the university.

Başgöz was a well-versed speaker, who brought charm and uniqueness to his stories—in the classroom or outside, he had relied on his strong memory when he referred to the events, peoples, and places. As a scholar on the rich narrative tradition in Turkey, he talked—or rather performed his stories—like the folk-poets, the *aşıks*, or like Nasreddin Hoca, the iconic figure of the Anatolian jocular tradition. And like Hoca Nasreddin, he had claimed in the title of his book, *I Hoca Nasreddin, never shall I Die* (1998).

**Hande Birkalan-Gedik**  
Frankfurt am Main, 18 April 2021