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Chapter 7

Women on the Halkevi Stage

In this chapter I attempt to read a number of complaint and petition letters in relation to the presence and participation of women in the Halkevi activities. More specifically put, our reading of the corpus of complaint letters will focus on gender issues in relation to the People's Houses in an attempt to study the meeting of the regime's high-modernist discourse and policies on women with wider society's perceptions and practices in relation to women.

One of the targets of the reform project was the Turkish woman. The place of women in the 'new' Turkish society was quite different and novel in comparison to what can be considered as their culturally prescribed role. Women were to become more visible in the public sphere. They were given equal civil rights with men, they were supposed to be educated and work together with men, vote and get elected, but at the same time continue to perform their 'traditional' duties as mothers and wives. The People's Houses were the locus wherein and by the activities of which the position of women in this new Turkish society was going to be realized. Women were given the privilege and at the same time duty to be members of the Houses, give lectures to mixed audiences, act on stage, play and enjoy music, socialize with men in 'family meetings', concerts, cinema and theatrical plays, dance with men in festivals and parties, visit villages and participate in various courses as both instructors and students. These practices, especially in provincial towns where such habits had not been witnessed before, were quite novel. Being openly contradictory to the established beliefs regarding the role of women in society, one can reasonably expect to encounter a number of conflicting views and reactions towards them, from overtly opposing to accommodating. In accordance with their interests and beliefs, as well as those of their social environment, people could openly refuse or embrace, (attempt to) avoid when possible or even (try to) 'turn' these novelties to something more familiar and socially less provocative, 'domesticating' them one might say. Such contradictory to or challenging the official discourse on the 'women's issue' opinions are not explicitly to be expressed in the normative sources on the Halkevleri, namely the Party and government publications, not unreasonably if we consider their propagative nature and function. In an attempt to overcome this lacuna in the official sources, this chapter attempts a reading of the complaint and petition letters sent to the Party headquarter.

In Chapter 2 we have dealt with the participation of women in the People's Houses, the local Party structures and other local associations of the provincial towns of Kayseri and Balıkesir. Our sources for both towns indicate that first of all the numbers of women Halkevi members and executive were disproportionately low compared to male members. Secondly, we have identified that the majority of the very few female participants were

schoolteachers. This female group of members exhibited two characteristics. Firstly they were probably the only female state employees in the provinces and, secondly, a part of them, the larger if we might guess, was composed of non-local women appointed to the provinces usually from larger cities, such as Istanbul or Ankara. Finally, a few of the female Halkevi and Party members were the wives, daughters and sisters of mostly non-local state employees and local Party bosses, although the vast majority of the female members of local urban elites was absent from the Halkevi and Party registers.

I have also argued that the choice of local elite members to enlist their women into Party or Halkevi structures was an intentional move. The same can also be argued for the opposite stance, i.e. keeping them away from the local public life. In the first exceptional case scenario, the expected addressee of such a decision, or rather the audience of such a performance was the Party superiors. Such an open and personal act of adherence to their 'ideals' and policies was expected to generate their positive reaction when asked or needed, as we have seen with the case of Mamurhan Özsan's petition letter. A denunciation letter against Mamurhan's husband on the other hand indicates the reasons behind the opposite choice, i.e. to keep the female family members outside the Halkevi and Party public spectrum. In that letter, the complainant attacked Naci Özsan because "his wife was considered of 'low morals' among the people". This accusation gives us a clue about the reasoning behind the decision of most local Party bosses and members alike not to promote their women to the local public life either in the Halkevi or the Party structures. More specifically, I refer to the possible and probable discrediting such an act might entail for the 'liberating husbands' in the eyes of the local society whose value system assigned women to the segregated sphere of the family and the house and to their men the obligation to safeguard their honour and protect their own manly self-esteem. Thus, publicly and openly 'emancipating' their wives and daughters to earn the high Party's approval was a dangerous move for local elites that could possibly damage their standing in the local society and among the local population and politics.⁵⁵⁰

Already with these attributes that were stemming from and coupled with wider society's attitudes and perceptions on women we have a clear indication of the resistance and opposition to the regime's and the Halkevi's policies in relation to women and the ongoing struggle and tension produced upon the implementation, or, to use De Certeau's term, upon the 'consumption' of the Halkevi's women-related policies and activities at the local level. The study of this secondary production, the 'consumption' by social actors of a number of Halkevi activities that involved women is, thus, the primary target of the following.

⁵⁵⁰ In Develi, a small town near Kayseri, while all male family members had adopted an outward 'western' outlook, most urban Party elites were keeping their wives and daughters segregated because they did not want to hurt their honour (*şerefine halel getirmek*). Ayşe Güneş Ayata, *CHP Örgüt ve İdeoloji* (Ankara: Gündoğan, 1992), p. 185.

Women and Theatre

Although our corpus of letters deals with a variety of subjects, certain themes predominate. Immorality is probably one of the mostly popular charges pressed against Halkevi and Party figures. Accusations of immorality are mostly related to the presence, absence and activities of women in the Houses. The Halkevi theatre stage⁵⁵¹ is a privileged site to study the attitudes, ideas and reactions towards the presence of women in the Houses. The majority of letters referring – even vaguely – to women is related, one way or another, to theatre, either visiting theatrical groups or the Houses' own groups.

The People's Houses' stage

The Party regarded theatre as a powerful educational and propaganda means to disseminate its reforms. Apart from its value as an artistic form, theatre was perceived as one of the most important means for the development of what the sources of the period call *Halk Terbiyesi*, the transmission of reforms one can argue in a more general sense.⁵⁵² This importance is definitely due to the theatre's direct impact on the audiences, especially in largely illiterate societies. Similar arguments were raised with regards to cinema and radio in relation to 'Popular education'.⁵⁵³ This was also true for radio and cinema. It was then the regime's explicit intention to popularize theatre and use the stage as a medium to transmit its reforms and ideas to the populace. In that sense, instead of "literary virtue", most of the Halkevi plays relied "on the emotional merit of one or more men dying for their country and the survivors waving the flag just before the final curtain", to use a revealing quote of an eye witness.⁵⁵⁴ The creation of a specific Halkevi Section that would "organize a theatrical group composed of both women and men",⁵⁵⁵ "make the Houses lively and energetic, help to cover the theatrical needs in towns and cities, accustom the youth to speak openly and beautifully, educate good orators [and] be of useful advice for the society and region (*Memleket ve cemiyet için faydalı telkinlerde bulunmak*) underscores the significance theatre had for the regime.⁵⁵⁶

⁵⁵¹ On the Halkevi Theatre stage see Nurhan Karadağ, *Halkevleri tiyatro çalışmaları* (Ankara: T.C. Kültür Bakanlığı, 1998) and Eyal Ari, "The People's houses and the Theatre in Turkey", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 40, No 4, (2004).

⁵⁵² On *Halk Terbiyesi* see Introduction.

⁵⁵³ Hamit Zübeyr Koşay, *Halk Terbiyesi* (Ankara: Köy Hocası Matbaası, 1931), and his own "Halk terbiyesi Vasıtaları", *Ülkü*, No 2, (March, 1933).

⁵⁵⁴ Donald Webster, *The Turkey of Atatürk. Social Process in the Turkish Reformation* (New York, 1939), pp. 188-9.

⁵⁵⁵ *Cumhuriyet Halk Fırkası Halkevlerin Talimatnamesi* (Ankara, 1932), p. 11.

⁵⁵⁶ *C.H.P. Halkevleri çalışma talimatnamesi* (Ankara: Zevbamat, 1940), p. 13-4.

CHP commissioned⁵⁵⁷ the writing, organized play writing competitions⁵⁵⁸ and published a series of theatrical plays for use by the People's Houses. The Party also issued a catalogue of plays⁵⁵⁹ appropriate for the Halkevi stage⁵⁶⁰ and even promoted theatrical groups to perform in the People's Houses.⁵⁶¹ Plays not included in the list had to be approved by the General Secretary.⁵⁶² Most important, men were forbidden to play women's roles.⁵⁶³ This created a real problem for the Halkevi officials. It was a common secret that women volunteers willing to take part in Halkevi plays and put themselves and their bodies on stage in front of the local public were rare.⁵⁶⁴ In view of this issue, the Party explicitly asked for plays with a handful of female characters. According to the conditions of the 1938/9 Halkevi theatre play competition, the theatrical plays to be submitted had to have few female roles. The conditions for the 1941 competition stated that the plays should contain three female roles at the most. Before trying to contemplate on the reasons for this refusal, let us see how the Party attempted to resolve this issue.

In need of women: pressure, refusal, evasion and enticement

Faced with women's refusal to act on stage, the Party and State applied official and unofficial pressure and in many cases local Party and Halkevi officials lured women's participation offering some kind of salary or a job, in direct contrast to the logic of the Halkevi bylaws, according to which participation in the Halkevi activities was considered voluntarily and not in return for money.

In a report by the Party Inspector Dr. Hasan Vasıf Somyürek, the chairman of the Manisa House is accused of using two men to play female roles in a

⁵⁵⁷ Vahap Kabahasanoğlu, *Faruk Nafiz Çamlıbel* (İstanbul: Toker yayınları, 1979), p. 16.

⁵⁵⁸ Karadağ, *Halkevleri tiyatro çalışmaları*, pp. 109 – 12.

⁵⁵⁹ Kenan Olgun, *Yöresel Kalkınmada Adapazarı Halkevi* (İstanbul: Değişim Yayınları, 2008), p. 66; Karadağ, *Halkevleri tiyatro çalışmaları*, p. 103.

⁵⁶⁰ In a dispatch to the Houses in 1934 Saffet Ziya of the Genel Secretariat asked the Houses' executive members not to perform any play that had not been previously approved by the Party. *Cumhuriyet Halk Fırkası Katibiumumluğunun Fırka Teşkilatına Umumi Tebligatı, İkinci Kanun 1934' ten Haziran 1934 sonuna kadar*, Vol. 4, (Ankara: Hakimiyeti Milliye Matbaası, 1934), p. 30.

⁵⁶¹ According to a communication of the General Secretariat of the CHP to 29 Houses the theatrical group or Atıf Kaptan and his wife Fatma Leman "will arrive at your House to stage theatrical plays of the repertoire given below." The communiqué was sent in 26/9/1946 and defined the allocation of the profit to the House and the percentage to be given to the group. Contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/7.39.22.

⁵⁶² *Cumhuriyet Halk Fırkası Halkevlerin Talimatnamesi*, article 38.

⁵⁶³ *CHP Halkevleri Çalışma Talimatnamesi* (Ankara: Zerbamat, 1940), p. 14. In the 1932 bylaws this is not explicitly prohibited, but implied, one can argue, since this is the only part of the text that both 'men and women' are referred to together and required to form the House's theatrical group.

⁵⁶⁴ Karadağ, *Halkevleri tiyatro çalışmaları*, p. 109 – 110.

Halkevi play because two women teachers abandoned the rehearsals.⁵⁶⁵ The lack of women willing to take part in the Halkevi theatre experiment was a common secret, something Halkevi chairmen were mentioning in the letters to the Party, either as an excuse for the bad performance of their House's stage, or as reason for the Party and/or state's intervention, mostly by pressing the female teachers to 'go on stage'.⁵⁶⁶

Given the importance the Party placed on theatre and the participation of women in theatrical events, various methods were employed to overcome the ubiquitous lack of women volunteers. Instructions were sent by the Party to local Party structures and Halkevleri requesting the cooperation of teachers.⁵⁶⁷ The Education Minister issued a dispatch strongly recommending teachers to participate in the Halkevi activities.⁵⁶⁸ The regime's aim was to have teachers and in general civil servants form the nucleus of the People's Houses. In that respect autonomous teachers' associations were under pressure by Party and/or state to close down and join in mass in the Halkevleri.⁵⁶⁹ Another form of pressure on women schoolteachers was to make them sign an official paper registering their refusal to take part in the House's theatre plays.

Although it has been recommended to them to play the female roles in the theatre plays to be staged in the Halkevleri, the women teachers informed that they would not be able to accept. I respectfully submit a signed document (...) I inform you that I won't be able to accept (Signature). I cannot accept (Signature). I won't be able to accept (Signature). I feel uncomfortable. I won't be able to accept (Signature). I won't be able to accept (Signature).⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁶⁵ Letter of Kütahya Bölgesi Müfettişi sent to CHP in 7/5/1943 from Manisa contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/840.323.1.

⁵⁶⁶ Some examples: 23/11/1939 letter of Party inspector of Bolu Area Karaca in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/828.271.3; 25/7/1934 letter of Karahisar Halkevi chairman to CHP and 10/7/1934 to local district officer (*kaymakam*) on the refusal of local women teachers to take part in the Halkevi theatre in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/833.293.1; letter of İzmir CHP chairman (1/11/1935) to CHF mentioning the teachers' indifference towards the Halkevi activities, especially theatre in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/836.303.1.

⁵⁶⁷ For an example see dispatches No 83 (28/6/1932), 66 (7/3/1932) and 67 (25/5/1932) in *CHF katibiumumiliğinin Fırka Teşkilatına umumi Tebligatından Halkevlerini alakadar eden kısmı Ağustos 1931den Kanunuevvel 1932 nihayetine kadar*, Vol. 1, (Ankara: Hakimiyeti Milliye Matbaası, 1933), pp. 56, 46 and 48 respectively.

⁵⁶⁸ *Cumhuriyet Halk Fırkası katibiumumiliğinden Fırka Teşkilatına umumi Tebligatı Mayıs 1931den Birinci Kanun 1932 nihayetine kadar*, Vol. 1, (Ankara: Hakimiyeti Milliye Matbaası, 1933), p. 92.

⁵⁶⁹ Yahya Akyüz, *Türkiye'de öğretmenlerin toplumsal değişimdeki etkileri 1848 - 1940* (Ankara: Doğan Basımevi, 1978), p. 251.

⁵⁷⁰ Letter from İskilip *Maarif memurluğu* (local Director of Education) to *Kaymakamlık* (Office of the sub district governor), 11/11/1941, where five women teachers were put to sign their refusal. In **BCA CHP**, 490.1/831.280.2. A similar case took place in Bergama in late 1935. Letter (18/10/1935) of Bergama Halkevi chairman and the minutes of a meeting (10/10/1935) with 9 teachers in the Halkevi where their refusal to act on stage was discussed. Contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/836.303.1.

This paper was usually sent to their superior, usually the local Department of Education, the Ministry of Education, or the District Governor. It was presumably expected to intimidate those refusing to participate and act as a warning for the rest. Another example comes from Denizli, where an overzealous Vali was after the female schoolteachers who were sceptical about 'coming on stage'. Both Arman Hürrem in his memoirs⁵⁷¹ and the files concerning the Halkevi of Denizli in the archive demonstrate the unwillingness of female teachers to take part in the Halkevi theatre stage as well as the Vali's insistence and pressure.⁵⁷²

Another letter to the CHP by the chairman of the Karahisar Halkevi suggests that a struggle was taking place within the under-pressure group of women schoolteachers.

Because of the lack of women members of our House's Theatre Section we could not stage any plays. As a result of the efforts made in order to ensure that women, which form a part of our social cause, take an active role in [social] life, Mrs Necdet Yazıcıoğlu and Mrs Fatma in order to overcome this destitution, have put their selves forward with great self-sacrifice and, in order to be an example to other young women by eliminating this obstacle, they have registered in our Theatre Section, staged 'Hedef' with great success and promised to participate in all the plays our House is going to stage. [...]

In opposition to the pleads we have made for many years to the women teachers, who are supposed to be the initiators of everything, to take part in our plays, I heard that Mrs Ayşe, one of the teachers witnessing the participation of the above mentioned ladies in the play, did not find sufficient enough to abstain from such kind of unselfishness but she also tried to sabotage our House's efforts on this issue by referring to the wickedness

⁵⁷¹ Hürrem Arman, *Piramidin tabanı. Köy Enstitüleri ve Tonguç* (Ankara: I Matbaacılık ve Ticaret, 1969), pp. 208, 213, 240.

⁵⁷² Letter of the Vali of Denizli to the General Secretariat of the CHP, dated 2/6/1939, contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/831.281.1. The Vali reports that the schoolteachers are those among 'the youth' whose psychological state (*halatı ruhiye*) and their occupation makes them suitable for the activities of the Houses. Nevertheless, he continues, a lot of the teachers of the Primary and Lise schools have neglected to assume "their duties in our Houses". "The women teachers were not able to be convinced to take part in the Halkevi theatrical plays, although the Section's chairman is a woman teacher and has asked for their participation, despite the intervention of the Director of Education and of the Vali, who is also the local Party chairman." At the end of his letter, the Vali asked the Party to have the Ministry of Education apply pressure to the schoolteachers who had rejected to participate in the theatrical activities of the local Halkevi. The Party replied that the participation of the female teachers cannot be achieved by an administrative order but through "inspiration, and wide affection and respect". Letter of General Secretary of the CHP to the Vali of Denizli, dated 4/7/1939 and contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/831.281.1. Both documents were forwarded to the Education Minister. In his reply to the CHP in 13/7/1939 contained in the above archive folder, Hasan Ali Yücel agreed with the General Secretary.

*[fenalığı] of acting on stage and spreading her propaganda towards other women.*⁵⁷³

Apart from sheer pressure, the Halkevi authorities sought other ways to solve the problem. The Halkevi By-Laws prohibited the allotment of any kind of salary or any amount of money to the Halkevi members in exchange for their participation, which was considered voluntary. Nevertheless, financial compensation was a rather common practice, especially for women. Some women were offered a job in the Halkevi in return for their participation in the Halkevi plays. When she was asked to take a role in a Halkevi play, the ex secretary of the Edremit House told the Halkevi chairman: “I am not the Halkevi secretary any more, I cannot go on stage.” She had found a job in the İş Bankası of Edremit, as the angry chairman complains to the Party.⁵⁷⁴ In a letter to CHP sent in 5/2/1937 the chairman of the House in Elazığ states that “because of the lack of women to act, [our stage] cannot be put in permanent motion. While thinking of how to overcome this difficulty, in articles we read in the Istanbul newspapers on various dates we saw that 1) The People’s House of Bursa is employing female stage performers (*sahne artistleri*) for its stage activities with a wage, and that 2) the Ferah theatre of the Eminönü Halkevi is staging plays with an entrance fee. In order to follow such examples, we request to know to what extent such actions are appropriate to the Halkevi Bylaws, and in what way they were invented.”⁵⁷⁵ In a letter to CHP, dated 16/5/1942, Mazhar Gençkurt from Bursa, member of the Local House’s theatre section, seeks the Party’s mediation to solve his problem. His 12 year daughter had apparently received twice the amount of ten lira to cover her expenses in the plays she took part in the Halkevi. He is asking for this amount to be given to his daughter on a monthly basis,⁵⁷⁶ together with two more female members of the Theatre section. In his words, “taking into consideration the problems encountered in the procurement (*tedarik*) of ladies, you [CHP] have ordered that necessary expenses are to be given especially to women in all Houses.”⁵⁷⁷ Zatiye Tonguç, the young girl, whose request to be re-employed in the library of the Kayseri Halkevi is given in Chapter 3, was probably also employed in the library as an implicit payment for her participation as an actor in the Kayseri Halkevi’s stage.⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷³ Letter of 16/3/1937 by Hasan Özaraç, chairman of Karahisar Halkevi contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/833.293.1.

⁵⁷⁴ Letter of 13/1/1942 contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/825.265.2.

⁵⁷⁵ **BCA CHP**, 490.1/832.287.2.

⁵⁷⁶ He does not call it a salary though, probably understanding the Party’s objection.

⁵⁷⁷ Letter contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/829.273.2 together with CHP Bilecik Bölgesi Müfettişi Zühtü Durukan’s 1/6/1942 relevant report.

⁵⁷⁸ See Chapter 3.

The complaint letters offer considerable insights into the perceptions and attitudes towards theatre and women on stage. Theatre introduced by the People's House was something new for many parts of the country and for many people it was not a morally upright form of entertainment, given the presence of women on stage. Previously it was not that common to have Muslim women on stage and female roles were usually enacted by non-Muslim women, Armenian, Jewish and Greek. Given the 'liberated' role women were assigned in Turkish society by the Kemalist elite, whether 'off' or 'on stage', controversies and confusion are expected. This is evident when considering that the only subject discussed by our authors in relation to theatre is women and morality issues; there is no letter complaining about low quality artists or plays, for example. In many cases, the letters use theatre as a metonym for immorality, a category we have also encountered when dealing with the coffeehouse in the previous chapter.

To a large extent the experience people had of theatre in provincial towns in the 1930s and 1940s was that of the *tuluat tiyatrosu*.⁵⁷⁹ In most of the cases it is not certain whether the letters complain of travelling theatre groups performing *tuluat* theatre in the strict sense or not. Given the widespread negative connotations the word had among society, it is probable that in many if not most of the cases the word is used as a metonym for low quality and obscene language or morality performances. In Reşat Nuri Güntekins's travelogue *Anadolu Notları* a scissors maker gives a vivid picture of the effect *tuluat* artists, especially women, had on Anatolian men. "May Allah punish them, once in a while theatre players come here. There are inappropriate (*uygunsuz*) women among them. They take the country's (*memleket*) money, but they also seduce families. I say families, but they have also destroyed a couple of old men's families." The author continues himself: "the town's sober, the Hacıs and Hocas get bored of these groups, while the pure Turkish woman fears them like disease or fire." As for local men, "the only thing they can see of women during the day is a ghost lost inside a large *çarşaf*,"⁵⁸⁰ a tight veil. The young know of no woman except their mother and sister." The effect the *tuluat* stage had on these men seems to be devastating: "they enter a crowded place in the middle of the night. A little later, a colourful wall is lifted among sounds of *davul*, violin and *zil*. Women dressed in golden cloths glimmering under the lamps' flashing lights appear, with their faces, hair, and

⁵⁷⁹ A type of theatrical performance usually combining music, songs, with a large degree of improvisation and no script. İsmail Dümbüllü (1897 - 1973) is considered the most famous *tuluat* artist. Gradually *tuluat* came to be considered by intellectuals as a low quality theatre of light or even vulgar entertainment. During the Republic the coarse vocabulary and obscene scenes of the *tuluat* performances were occasionally giving rise to police-related incidents. "Tuluat tiyatrosu", *Türk Ansiklopedisi*, Vol. 31, (Ankara: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 1982), pp. 483 - 4.

⁵⁸⁰ "An outer garment covering a woman from head to foot and designed to hide her body form the view of men." *Redhouse Büyük Eİlsözlüğü*, (İstanbul, 2000).

arms uncovered, their chests open. What are these men supposed to do faced with this view, if not go crazy, abandon their wives and children?”⁵⁸¹ *Tuluat*, theatre in general, and especially the ‘inappropriate’ women are a calamity, consist a threat for the family and for moral values. The expression ‘*tiyatrolar*’, used in the complaint letters to denote the immoral women acting and/or singing on stage, expressively reveals a quite common perception about women performing on stage. In a letter from Eleşkirt, the local Demokrat Parti leader complains that the local CHP’s refused to allow his Party to use the Halkevi Hall. His use of the expression ‘*tiyatrolar*’ underlines the gravity of the wrongdoing.⁵⁸²

Tuluat Theatre Companies on the Halkevi Stage

As has been shown above, the traveling theatrical groups that the People’s Houses hosted in their Halls, occasionally called *tuluat kumpanyaları* or ‘common theatre’ (*adi tiyatro*), constitute a common target of the petition letters. In 15/11/1946 Hakkı Özveren, from the Kütahya Halkevi, describes the people’s reaction to the *tuluat kumpanyası* performing in their Halkevi. “The Halkevi Hall was used by a *tuluat kumpanyası* and for days the people had been coming to the House with the only purpose to watch naked legs. Some people did not even refrain from gossips like ‘Well done Party! At last by showing naked legs they managed to assemble people at the People’s House’.” A couple of years before, the author wrote, the Halkevi stage had been given to a *tuluat* theatre again. A sign was placed on the Halkevi wall: ‘It is prohibited to pass words to the girls’. The author does not feel the need to comment on this sign. It is explicitly improper enough for the Halkevi ‘sacred building’. True or not, this sign is also an indication of the popular perception of what a *tuluat*-theatre girl or, more generally, a woman on stage is and how men can behave to her.⁵⁸³

Another example from Izmit sent in February 1942 is more expressive. The author is not stating his name, but instead signs as ‘an officer and his family’.

I love theatre. But only theatre. And not the gung of prostitutes and vagabonds that has brought shamelessness, immorality, disgrace and all the consequent calamities to our city. In short, these supposed theatre people made their third visit here and this

⁵⁸¹ Reşat Nuri Güntekin, *Anadolu Notları* (İstanbul: İnkılâp ve Aka, 1989), pp. 132-133.

⁵⁸² “*Tiyatro kızlarının oynamasına müsaade edilen Halk evimizde partimiz menfaatına tertip ettiğimiz müsamerenin oynanmasına müsaade edilmediği.*” (Our show, organized for the benefit of our Party, was not permitted to take place in our Halkevi where the performance of theatre girls is permitted). In **BCA CHP**, 490.1/733.2.2, dated 13/02/1950.

⁵⁸³ Letter of Kütahya Halkevi Temsil kolu komite üyesi (member of the Committee of the Theatre Section) Hakkı Özveren sent to CHP in 15/11/1946, contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/839.319.1. “*Kızlara laf atmak yasaktır*”.

*time after drinking in taverns (meyhane) they tried to deceive the region's youth by poisoning them with propaganda, by having a 13-14 year old girl almost naked on stage drinking from a rakı bottle. Is it the aim of the People's Houses to entertain the country's drunkards and womanizers in the lowest way, by having prostitutes perform in their Halls? [...] is our House going to enlighten the people in this way, with belly dancing?*⁵⁸⁴

Two more letters from the same city, Izmit, criticize the *tuluat kumpanyası* performing in the city's Halkevi. The former, sent in 18/6/1943, complains about an incident that was "completely contrary to the sacred aims" of the Halkevi.

*Known to be an Armenian, the person known with the nickname Attila, together with Muhlis Sabahattin and some ill-famed women he had gathered from Istanbul, have been performing şaklabanlık [performance by a stand-up comedian usually considered of low quality or obscene] for a fortnight in the - sacred for us - Halkevi stage; we also saw them bringing a live donkey on stage and becoming the cause for a number of repulsive events.*⁵⁸⁵

The author also finds annoying the way the Halkevi megaphone system advertises these events. In order to state his annoyance he offers a colourful description of the setting:

For the last 15 days the Halkevi megaphones have annoyed thousands of citizens with extremely boring and irritating broadcasting. Hello, Hello, Dear citizens. This is the People's House. One of our country's most famous artists, Kamil Tekin now on our stage... From this to that date he is going to amaze you for ten days with his strange tricks ... Don't miss it. Skeletons speak, living people become skeletons .. Cheap tickets, simple 35, balcony 50 cents.

Two miserable gypsy kids with bells walk around the town carrying a table with pictures on it shouting: run to the People's House tonight ... watch, be amazed.

*These days we watch again in the streets the pictures of the funny dümbüllü İsmail .. we also see them squeeze their flyers in the hands of the passers-by....*⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸⁴ In **BCA CHP**, 490.1/839.316.1.

⁵⁸⁵ *Bir ermeni olduğu malum bulunan Attila takma isimli zat, Muhlis Sabahattin ile İstanbul'dan derlediği kötü tanınmış kadınlarla Halkevinin bizce mukaddes olan sahnesinde onbeş gün şaklabanlık ettiklerini hatta sahneye canlı merkep çıkarıp bir takım çirkin vaziyetlere sebebiyet verdiklerini gördük.*

⁵⁸⁶ **BCA CHP**, 490.1/839.316.1.

The second letter, sent in 16/11/1943 by one of the members of the Theatre Section, clearly states the repercussions of having “the vulgar and low expressions of a *tuluat kumpanyası* [performing on the Halkevi stage.] The plays we have been staging years now with the school theatre group have stopped, just as the affinity we had with our House has ceased. A family girl that has closed her ears with great self-sacrifice to all kinds of gossips and has participated in the Halkevi Theatre would now feel the necessity not to take once more any role on the Halkevi stage.”⁵⁸⁷ In a similar vein, in a letter from Boğazlıyan (Yozgat) published in the newspaper *Tasvir*, Hüseyin Öney complains that “the Halkevi chairman and members have left this nest that is our own House to worthless theatre people who only work to fill their stomachs. In my opinion it is an unforgettable mistake to have some senseless people break the Halkevi’s windows while trying to watch theatre through windows and doors.”⁵⁸⁸ What all letters above demonstrate is the close association between wider perceptions of immorality and theatre, especially the *tuluat* version, and the disinclination of women and girls to participate in Halkevi plays, their families’ reluctance to permit their participation, and more generally the shortage of actresses in the Halkevi theatre.

The *tuluat* travelling theatre groups performing in the People’s Houses are occasionally mentioned as one of a number of calamities the local society is facing, such as the playing of cards and the drinking of alcohol. Mustafa Timin, a party member from Bayramiç, criticizes the local Halkevi’s decision to rent out the Halkevi stage to *tuluat* companies, as well as the playing of cards in the House. As a result, he writes, “the children of our deprived town are robbed off the few cents (*kuruş*) they have to feed themselves creating in this way difficulties to their families.”⁵⁸⁹

Mazar Gençkurt, member of the Theatre Section of the Halkevi of Bursa, wrote a denunciation of the Section’s chairman. Apart from the many things he accuses the chairman of, he stresses that he acted in *tuluat* theatre companies (*artistlik yapmış*) and that the previous year he brought Faik’s *kumpanyası* to perform his ‘pornographic’ (*müstehcen*) acts on the Halkevi stage.⁵⁹⁰

‘Immorality’ on the Halkevi stage: relationships

Another sensitive issue the letters touch upon was the reported sexual and/or emotional relationship between Halkevi members. Many letters suggest that such relationships were inappropriate and immoral damaging the Houses’ esteem among the population, or in the words of five witnesses to such an

⁵⁸⁷ **BCA CHP**, 490.1/839.316.1.

⁵⁸⁸ “Boğazlıyan Halkevinde neler oluyor”, *Tasvir*, 11/12/1947, contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/845.343.2. *Halkevi başkanı ve mensupları kendi evimiz olan bu yuvada ilim kıymeti olmayan kavın tokluğuna çalışan tiyatroculara bırakılmışlardır. Bir çok kendi bilmeyenlere kapıdan pencereden tiyatro seyredeceğim diye halkevinin camlarını kırılması bence affedilmez bir hatadır.*

⁵⁸⁹ Letter dated 1/3/1948 contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/830.277.1.

⁵⁹⁰ Letter of 5/4/1944 in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/829.273.2.

event “it badly affected the families and the region (*memleket*)”. The incident started when the gendarmerie officer of the town of Pazar hug and kissed Necmiye, a lady “singing on stage” during a Halkevi concert. The Halkevi Secretary saw them and “the following day it was heard by everybody”. This is called an ‘ugly incident’ (*çirkin hareket*) by the Party Inspector Kemal Çelik and five witnesses alike, inappropriate for an upright/moral “nest of culture that is always open for our People” (*Halkımıza kapusu daima açık bulunan nezih bir kültür yuvasında*). As for the lady involved, “according to the result of the researches I have carried out properly, she is a woman of low morals going with everybody” (*düşük ahlaklı herkesle düşüp kalkan bir kadın*).⁵⁹¹

The Bursa Halkevi became the stage of a similar event. In a letter to the Party headquarters the chairman of the Bursa Halkevi explains why Ms Saadet was dismissed from the Theatre Section. Her affair with Mr. Turgut, also a member of the section, necessitated their expulsion. “This lady lives together with Mr. Turgut as his mistress. As a result, Mr. Turgut has abandoned his family. (...) This affair has affected our House and stage [and] their resignation became necessary”. In what way were the Halkevi and its theatrical stage affected? According to the Halkevi chairman the affair gave rise to allegations against the rest of the female members, although “the allegations directed towards them belong altogether to another woman.”⁵⁹²

Here again the public opinion is considered extremely important and apparently taken seriously. We cannot say for sure whether in this case what the people (are supposed to) say is really the sole reason for the Halkevi chairman’s letter or whether ‘the people’s’ reported aversion serves solely as a pretext for the dismissal of an otherwise undesired person from the Halkevi. The common use of such categories (immorality, gossip) though, suggests – according to *my* reading of the sources - that popular reactions to such events were taken seriously (or even feared) and attempts were made to avoid them. The dispatch of a Party Inspector for instance is a definite indication of the Centre’s interest. In a number of cases the Party Headquarters in Ankara reacted to a number of problems the letters were complaining about by issuing directives. On the 29th of March 1949 a Party directive to the People’s Houses requested information regarding traveling theatrical groups performing on the Halkevi stages after a number of complaint letters reached Ankara. “The Halkevi Administrative Committees must consider the impressions and influences these theatrical plays will have on the area.”⁵⁹³ In this respect the Centre appears to make some allowances to local reservations and even negative responses to its policies by instructing local Party structures to take the *local* conditions into consideration, thus refuting the nationwide singularity of the Halkevi project. Here we can only guess whether the Party’s half-

⁵⁹¹ Report of Parti Müfettişi Kemal Çelik, 3/8/1944 and *Zabıt varakası* (official record) signed by five witnesses, contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/842.329.1.

⁵⁹² Letter of Bursa Halkevi chairman to CHP General Secretary dated 5/4/1940 contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/829.273.2.

⁵⁹³ **BCA CHP**, 490.1/9.47.14.

heartedness on this matter was connected to the changing political landscape with the introduction of multi-party politics after 1946.

Another anonymous letter from Izmit touches upon a similar subject, although not directly connected to Halkevi theatre. According to a complaint letter, the president of the *Yardım Sevenler Birliği* is not only the Halkevi chairman's mistress, but also "she, together with some more loose women, invites every day some local ill-fated women teachers and girls and introduces them to men of her kind. Therefore, the Halkevi of our Izmit has become a house of theft, gambling, rendezvous and prostitution, unlike the People's Houses that everywhere else are cultural and moral institutions." This is why, the author adds, the "honourable families and family girls" (*aile kızları*) have withdrawn from that "dirty place".⁵⁹⁴ The Halkevi chairman and his condemned relation with the president of the *Yardım Sevenler Birliği* became the cause for yet another complaint letter, this time from Colonel F. Kutlu, the staff commander of the 6th Army stationed in Izmit. The Halkevi's "Hall is a place where our boys should assemble under conditions of firm inspection and supervision from a moral and social point of view (*ahlak ve içtimai hayat bakımından sıkı bir nezaret ve murakabe altında bulundurulması*), and where moral people have to be employed." The source of the problem is an employee called Namık, who is "a bachelor and corrupts the youngsters." As for "our girls, the situation is more tragic. Our girls, students of the High School and the Girl's Institute (*Kız Enstitüsü*) who wish to continue in the Music, Fine Arts and Theatre sections of the Halkevi are frightened by the attacks of that immoral employee. [...] I state with regret that a keen on art young girl working at the Monopolies (Tekel) Administration became the subject of gossip because of that disgraceful scum." The list of 'immoral' persons in the Halkevi goes on: apart from the above "famous for his immorality uneducated bachelor jerk", the chairman is a grocer (*bakkal*); his girlfriend teacher corrupts the rest of the female teachers with the help of a third teacher, "a lick and a stain for the High School and our Izmit".⁵⁹⁵

A similar complaint comes from Ağrı. In 12/1/1939 the local Party chairman complains about the regional (Tercan) Kaymakam's affair with Emine, again described as a woman performing on stage. (*tiyatro sahnesinde oynayan alefî Emine adındaki kadını evine aldığını ve karı koca gibi yaşadığını*). Moreover, because of this relationship, a number of moral

⁵⁹⁴ Anonymous letter dated 27/11/1948 contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/839.316.1. A betrayed husband complains to the Party about his wife on similar terms: "*Halk evimizden Nazilli halkevine fuhuşla meluf 24 yaşında genç ve güzel bir kadının memur sıfatile alınması ve nazilli kaymakamına ve halkevi başkanına bir zevk aleti olmaktan başka bir vazifesi bulunmayan [...] bu benim karımdır.*" [A young and beautiful woman of 24 years of age is employed by the Nazilli Halkevi; this woman is known as a prostitute and has no other duty in the Halkevi other than being an instrument of pleasure for the Halkevi chairman and secretary. (...) This is my wife.] In **BCA CHP**, 490.1/824.260.1, dated 21/9/1940, signed by Tütüncü Mümin.

⁵⁹⁵ "*Mektepsiz bekar ve ahlaksızlığı ile nam kazanmış bir serseri*", Letter of 20 March 1950 in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/839.316.1.

(*namuslu*) families were insulted by the Kaymakam.⁵⁹⁶ The letter is a denunciation of the Kaymakam full of accusations of extortion and profiteering. Here corruption and immorality go hand in hand, a combination typical of many similar denunciation letters as we have also seen in Chapter 5.

The accountant of the Giresun Halkevi and his reported immoral character and acts became the cause of yet another anonymous complaint/denunciation letter from Giresun.

Our Theatre Section is more active than the other Sections and, as it is normal, women and girls take part in the plays. Naci Laçın [the Halkevi accountant] comes close to the women and girls during the rehearsals drunk in order to get to touch and watch them if possible [sıkıştırmak kaş göz oynatmak]. He has managed to dishonour [yoldan çıkarmış] some of them and as a result no girl or woman is to take any role in the Halkevi stage any more. They managed to stage the 'Andaval Palas' play by giving the female role to one of the clerks of the Monopolies Department, since there was no woman to take the role. [...] This man, who is a catastrophic disease for the Halkevi, said a number of improper things to my sister as well. He said to her 'we want to stage a play and if you take a role I'll give you a pair of shoes, in the second play I'll give you a skirt' and so on. [...] Although many girls and women could take advantage of the Halkevi's activities, no one approaches because of this man's immoral behaviour [namusuzca hareketinden].⁵⁹⁷

Women's voice

Given that all the above letters were written by men, as the majority of complaint letters collected for this study, it is interesting to see how a woman described one of the above incidents. Ms Saadet, accused of being Mr Turgut's mistress, wrote her own account of her dismissal from the People's House. Her letter touches upon the difficulties a female Halkevi member might encounter, as well as the reasons that might direct her to the Halkevi stage.

I am a housewife with a family of two male children. In 1930 I finished the second class of the Teachers School for Girls in Bursa and I begun working. For some time now I am obliged to

⁵⁹⁶ Kazamız kaymakamı Bay Cemil Aytemurun tiyatro sahnesinde oynayan alefte Emine adındaki kadını evine aldığını ve karı koca gibi yaşadığını Kaymakam Bay Cemil kazada tiyatro sahnesinde oynayan Emine adındaki kadını evine götürmüş ve dördüncü umumi müfettişin kazaya teşriflerinde bu fena hareketi meydana çıkar diye hususi bir otomobille kemaha kadar yolcu etmiş olduğu halde müfettiş kazadan ayrıldıktan sonra yine hususi adam göndermek suretile tekrar evine getirtirmiş ve hamamda kaza halkından birkaçının namuslu ailelerini tahkir [insult] ettirmiş ve bu kadın yüzünden dispanser odacısını odacılıktan kovmuş ve Celal adında birisini de tabancasile tehdit ve fena halde dövmüştür. Letter contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/833.289.1.

⁵⁹⁷ Anonymous letter of 31/12/1942 contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/833.293.1.

earn my livelihood myself as I shouldered the responsibility to cover the expenses of my children myself. So, I live a modest family life by sewing. In 15/12/1937, after the numerous pressures and requests of my friends at the Theatre section of the Bursa Halkevi, and in spite of the intense critiques and objections of my environment and especially of my family, I joined the Section, which I regard as a work for the country in a holy nest. The very negative ideas of our people and especially of my environment and my family about the theatre stage left me in seriously speculation. But I was not discouraged. [After a while] they understood that the stage is not a bad place and that the people on stage are clean and honourable/moral as a teacher is. I worked for two years for 15 liras.⁵⁹⁸

While Saadet denied the accusations of being immoral, she described her acts and her opponent's (Halkevi chairman, chairman of the Theatre Section) acts on the same terms, moral/immoral, which were also the terms used by her family, environment and even 'our people'. Saadet's letter seems to imply that one of the reasons for her participation was the material hardship she was experiencing and thus the compensation in money she was probably receiving from the Halkevi to 'cover expenses'. It seems that Saadet did marry Turgut Simer, as a letter some years latter refers to a Ms Saadet Simer, member of the Bursa Halkevi Theatre Section.⁵⁹⁹ Moreover, the tone of her letter is apologetic, in direct contrast to the angry pitch of most men who happen to complain or defend themselves against a denunciation.⁶⁰⁰ This differentiation between the voices of men and women is definitely corresponding to wider social perceptions and practices regarding the place of women 'in the family', under the tutelage and protection of men, and not in the public and 'open' life of the community. What then makes this differentiation in the gendered voices interesting and telling of the ways the regime's 'emancipatory' policies were enacted, understood and voiced, in short the ways they were consumed by social actors, both male and female, is the surfacing, in the voices of social actors purportedly acting within the discursive and political framework of the regime's reform programme, of rival to that same framework and oppositional to that same programme voices.

In sum, what the above examples manifest is an overt preoccupation with issues of morality. This obsession with morality suggests that it was a popular (in the sense of widespread) 'code' by which people were apprehending the

⁵⁹⁸ Saadet Çırpın, 7/3/1940, contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/829.273.2.

⁵⁹⁹ Letter of Mazhar Gençkurt dated 16/5/1942 contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/829.273.2.

⁶⁰⁰ For a similar remark on the women supplicants' voices see Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in the Sixteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987). Also Leslie Peirce, *Morality Tales. Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 199.

People's Houses and their activities. This will become clearer when we turn to the language of the letters.

Accommodative Discourse: Distinction

All the above letters imply that there was a distinction between the Halkevi stage and 'common theatre', the distinction being expressed in terms of morality/immorality. Not all agree on this distinction though. In a letter sent to Ankara in 13/1/1942 by the Edremit Halkevi chairman, we are able to view some of the reasons for a woman's participation, as well as the negative reactions towards her acting on the Halkevi stage. Once employed in the İş Bankası of Edremit, the former Halkevi secretary Didar Dülünay declined to continue performing on the Halkevi stage, because, as she is reported saying, "I am no longer the Halkevi Secretary, so I won't do it". The problem for the Halkevi chairman is that "she is spreading a negative propaganda about the House". In the chairman's description of the incident we also find fragments of the voice of the girl's mother. "Moreover, her mother, who is a dirty model of ignorance (*cehaleti galiza numunesi olan validesi*), is spreading this negative propaganda in a more public way, by saying that *there is no difference between common theatre and the Halkevi stage and that all those girls on the Halkevi stage are, at the end, nothing more than theatre girls*".⁶⁰¹

Another incident highlighting this perceived and expressed difference between 'common theatre' and Halkevi stage took place in Buldan in 1943. The local Halkevi decided to stage the theatrical play '*Bir Doktorun ödevi*'. While the 'youths' (Lise students) were preparing for the staging of the play, a theatrical group visited their town. In all probability, the lack of female volunteers made the chairman of the Theatre Section come to an agreement with the visiting group. The theatrical group would provide two actresses for the Halkevi play. This arrangement provoked the reaction of the gendarme commander, who deemed this cooperation inappropriate, because "the staging of a play by the youths together with sick (*hastalıklı kadın*) women [has resulted] in numerous gossips and is going to create a number of negative feelings among the youths".⁶⁰² As a result, the Halkevi chairman was brought to court accused of being 'an ordinary theatre man' (*alelade bir tiyatrocukası*), according to his own account of the issue. It is not clear whether the real (or even the only) cause for the commander's reaction was the described event, or whether it was a pretext used in the context of a local feud or power

⁶⁰¹ In **BCA CHP**, 490.1/825.265.2. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁰² Letter of Cevdet Kızılöz, Halkevi chairman to local Party structure (CHP Vilayet İdare heyeti reisliğine), dated 7/1/1943, and letter of Buldan Jandarma komutanı to Buldan Halkevi chairman, dated 8/2/1943, both contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/831.281.1.

struggle. Nevertheless, the language used by both sides to describe the event underlines the (discursive at least) border separating the two stages. In the commander's account, this border was trespassed. The result was gossiping among the populace and the 'awakening of negative feeling among the students', necessitating, as a consequence, his intervention. Conversely, the Halkevi chairman struggled to prove that the accusations were false.

The tension produced upon the attempt to execute the Party's policies concerning theatre and women on stage that clashed with society's moral standards and the widespread perception of the immoral character of women on stage, as the term 'theatre girls' denote, is evident. This tension is also evident even today when that period is remembered with amazement. Consider Meeker's interlocutors in Orf still remembering in the 1970s the 'waiting girls era' (*karson kızlar devresi*) in the 1930s, something they did not fail to commend that 'is not happening today'.⁶⁰³ One of my interlocutors, an amateur actor in the Balıkesir Halkevi theatre stage in the 1940s, when asked about the local population's reaction to the participation of women in the Halkevi theatre plays, evaded any direct reference to likely accusations of immorality by evoking that "at that time in Balıkesir there were coffeehouses where girls were serving, something you won't see anywhere today".⁶⁰⁴ For others today, as it was definitely in the 1950s as well,⁶⁰⁵ having waitresses and local women on stage is received disapprovingly. Even today divergent memories of the period are indicative of the tension produced by the introduction of similar women - related novelties to local societies.

To recapitulate, my argument here is that the carving by our social actors of this distinction between 'moral' Halkevi theatre and 'immoral' *tuluat* theatre or 'theatre girls' is an actual tactical move accommodative to society's gender relations, perceptions and practices, in more general sense an tactical response to the tensions produced in local provincial settings upon the establishment of Halkevi theatre stages and the participation of local women in theatre plays.

The People's House: 'stage' of resistance, accommodation and segregation

By looking at the discourses (re)produced in the letters in relation to the presence of women on the Halkevi stage, the aim of this chapter is to show the difficulties the Halkevi administrators and audiences – not to mention the women themselves – faced upon attempting to realize the regime's directives to create a theatrical stage wherein local women (their wives, sisters and

⁶⁰³ Michael Meeker, *A Nation of Empire*, p. 307.

⁶⁰⁴ Interview with Mehmet Şahin, Balıkesir, 3/6/2005.

⁶⁰⁵ Umut Azak, *Myths and Memories of Secularism in Turkey (1923 - 1966)*, (PhD Thesis, Leiden University, 2007), pp. 214 – 5, where requests by local congresses of the Demokrat Parti in the 1950s for the abolition of beauty contests, dancing parties, the employment of women in the public sector, etc.

daughters), and not the ‘dubious’⁶⁰⁶ *tuluat* women, would perform – act and sing – in public. We also have to keep in mind that this was supposed to happen in local societies where such a practice was broadly considered inappropriate and/or even immoral, given the popular experience and perceptions of theatre in the provinces exemplified above in the quotations from Güntekin’s *Anadolu Notları*. Those in charge of the Houses in the provinces – local Party elites, schoolteachers and civil servants- were thus situated between two opposing and conflicting set of ideas; on the one hand they were charged with the duty to fulfil the regime’s plan to introduce women into the public sphere by bringing them on stage, in social events such as concerts, lectures, social gatherings and celebrations (*balo, aile toplantısı*), where they were to socialize with, or at least be under the gaze of non-family men. On the other hand, the Halkevi officials were to do so in societies where such novelties purportedly aiming at a radical change of the social role of women were widely considered wrong and described as immoral.

Within such a social ‘stage’ we observe a number of ‘scenes’ acted by social actors. Firstly, we have detected the pressure applied on women, mainly on female schoolteachers, to ‘climb the stage’. They were rather easy targets, because of their status as state employees. After all, education was probably one of the few state sectors where women were employed in significant numbers. Teachers were frequently appointed in towns other than their place of origin and were thus lacking any social network outside their occupational group (such as family or local acquaintances) that might function both as their supporter against pressure as well as a social environment that would reject or offer support for their participation in such novelties.

Secondly, we encounter exactly those practices of direct rejection of state/Party pressure, or similar acts of evasion. We have seen above the cases of two women reportedly spreading ‘negative propaganda’ about the women who act on the Halkevi stage. One was reported declaring that there is no difference between *tuluat* artists and Halkevi actresses, while the latter was badly influencing her fellow teachers about the “wickedness (*fenalığı*) of acting on stage”. In another case, when asked to sign their refusal to participate, one teacher wrote underneath her signature “I cannot participate, I feel uncomfortable”.⁶⁰⁷

At a discursive level, what was called ‘common’ or ‘*tuluat* theatre’ performed on the Halkevi stage was charged with immorality and with having a bad influence on the ‘people’ and the ‘youth’. In many cases, undesired events (women related) during ‘Halkevi theatre’ this time were described with the same words (vocabulary) that were directed towards the *tuluat* stage indicating immorality. On the other hand, a distinction –reported as existing or necessary to be attained - is carved between the ‘common/immoral theatre’ and

⁶⁰⁶ ‘*Kötü tanınmış kadınlar*’, ‘*hastalıklı kadınlar*’, ‘*düşük ahlaklı kadınlar*’, ‘*orospular*’ etc.

⁶⁰⁷ Letter from the Director of Education of the town of Iskilip to the office of the sub District Governor, dated 11/11/1941, contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/831.280.2.

the theatre produced by the Halkevi. The connecting element among the above discourses is the polarity morality/immorality, which is unquestionably related to women and their place and function on stage and in society in general. At the local level, this distinction indicates the production of a – what I choose to call – ‘accommodative discourse’ about theatre, that is, about the participation of women. Accommodative in the sense that it attempts on the one hand to follow the regime’s intentions and thoughts, while making, on the other hand, allowances for the widespread in society perceptions and moral reservations about theatre and, more generally, women. The conveyor of this discourse that tries to float between the two seemingly contradictory ends is typically the Halkevi Chairman, a Halkevi member, or even a habitué of the Halkevi. The Halkevi chairman would usually try to refute the allegations of immorality about his⁶⁰⁸ Halkevi stage and the female artists, while a Halkevi member or a frequenter would whine about the transgression of that border that separates the two theatrical stages. What our letters did not openly reject was the practices the regime was attempting to introduce through the Halkevi institution in relation to women. The letters rather complain about the wrong – immoral as they state – way such activities as the Halkevi dancing parties or theatre plays were executed. The implication is clear though: such women related innovations and activities were not well received by the people or, as the letters occasionally state, ‘they left a bad impression in the region’. A few years latter, after the electoral victory of the Demokrat Parti, similar opinions were expressed more outspokenly. Local Party Congresses in 1951 and 1952 issued requests for the banning of beauty contests, dance parties (*balolar*), the dismissal of female state employees and the closing of City Clubs where officials were gambling and consuming alcohol.⁶⁰⁹

Turning back to practices, based on numerous complaint letters I argue that a certain practice of social seclusion was applied in/during activities similar to the ‘Halkevi theatre’, where the presence and participation of women was required, for instance dance parties, celebrations, and public lectures. A number of complaint letters indicate that entry restrictions were imposed for activities – especially ‘family meetings’ and dances – where women were present. On the basis of the identity of the complainants, as well as of the replies to such complaints by Party and Halkevi officials, it seems that the inclusion of some and the parallel exclusion of others was both desired and applied in practice, although no normative text or Party directive stating such a stipulation seems to exist;⁶¹⁰ on the contrary, the Party Bylaws and directives emphatically state that the People’s House is open for everyone and that any denial of entry could only be applied for practical reasons, for example an overcrowded Hall. Who is considered excludable? Bachelors, men

⁶⁰⁸ We have not encountered yet a letter by a female Halkevi chairman.

⁶⁰⁹ Umut Azak, *Myths and Memories of Secularism*, pp. 214 – 5.

⁶¹⁰ The Halkevi bylaws only impose restrictions in the entry of unattended children and High school students. See paragraphs 54 – 56 of 1940 Bylaws: *C.H.P. Halkevleri idare ve Teşkilat talimatnamesi* (Ankara: Zevbamat, 1940), pp. 12 -3.

unaccompanied by their families and men (women?) of low status or social position were excluded, because their presence amongst those participating and their families (i.e. women) was deemed inappropriate.

To make the above argument more clear let us turn to the texts.

'Family Meeting' and Dance Parties: occasions for segregation and 'shameful events' (çirkin hadiseler)

An afternoon/night family meeting took place in the House of Erzincan on the Halkevi anniversary. The Vali, all of us, and all the civil servants' families were there. The orchestra of the Division was playing. In the meanwhile, some youths came; although without [their] family, they were allowed to enter because their social position was considered. At 24:00 hours the meeting ended in an upright way. A little later, these youths asked rakı from the buffet. Although they were told that rakı is prohibited in the Halkevi, they insisted and the whole issue went on and they started to dispute with the waiters. At that moment, Ali Akcakoca, employee of the Forest Department, grabbed his pistol and fired twice at the ceiling. The officers sitting next to him took his pistol and took it (him?) to the Division. [...] the police officer made his investigation and the issue was taken to court.

This is the report of Muzaffer Akpınar, Party Inspector for Erzincan and MP of Balıkesir, sent in 3/3/1942.⁶¹¹ Similar reports are compiled by Party Inspectors as a result of a complaint letter or telegram, which is in most cases attached to the Inspector's report. This is not the case here, but it is not unwise to read this report as a possible reply to such a letter and its probable charges, just like the reports Party Inspectors were habitually writing. The report then immediately becomes a defence of the Halkevi (officials) against charges that could have been both possible and typical. There is a great number of letters complaining about the consumption of alcohol and immorality in the People's Houses. Read in this way, the Inspector's declaration that "the meeting ended in an upright way" (*toplantı çok nezih cereyan etmişti*) and that alcohol, although asked for, was not served, echoes like an answer to two common accusations.

Inspector Akpınar's report gives valuable information about the people attending the meeting: civil servants (*memur*), "all of us", which has to mean the 'Party friends', the provincial Governor (*Vali*), with their families, which is easily translated 'with the female members of our families, women and

⁶¹¹ BCA CHP, 490.1/833.289.1.

children'. The Inspector then, by referring to those entering the House although they were not supposed to be accepted, is suggesting exactly who were considered undesired during similar activities. The 'youths' were all civil servants in various state departments. The reason for not accepting such 'youths' was that they were without their families, i.e. with no women, probably bachelors. The reason then they were allowed to enter was their 'social position', that is being a *memur* (state functionary, bureaucrat). This being the case, in such a happening where the well-established men of the town had brought their women, people of lower 'social position' and bachelors were rather excluded, while the civil servants' entrance seemed rather acceptable.

Let us now examine a similar case through the eyes, or rather the pen, of the excluded. The following is the translation of a complaint telegram from Bitlis, sent by Nesimi Oğullarından Güney and Erdem (representative of Taş mahallesi) in 5/2/1940. The telegram was sent to the Prime Minister Refik Saydam, but was evidently forwarded to the CHP.

*Yesterday at 20:00 hours we went to our Halkevi to hear the news on the radio. A group of people, almost thirty of us, we were expelled politely by the Director of Education and Halkevi chairman, because there was a family meeting going on inside. Is this insult lawful? Until when are we, Turkish children, going to be regarded with such contempt? We ask to what extent this insult is proper according to law.*⁶¹²

The Vali of Bitlis, Hulusi Devrim, was entrusted with the investigation of the incident. The following is an extract from his report on the incident, sent in 15/2/1940.

There is a small recreation room in the Bitlis Halkevi. On Saturday evenings it has been decided that family meetings are going to take place there. All those desiring to take part with their families will be accepted. As for those from the people (Halktan), they can stay in the library room if they wish so. A letter announcing all the above had been placed on the Halkevi entrance and later on in the Halkevi Hall. Despite all these, those sitting there had not left the room at the proper time. Rifat Güney, whose personality has been figured out after this investigation, argued that the announcement was not signed. Upon hearing that, the Halkevi chairman came and signed it leaving thus no room for any warning to Rifat and his friends. Rifat's claim that they were thrown out is wrong. [...] Given the fact that the recreation room was appropriated for the family meeting, and although they do have a family, these people

⁶¹² BCA CHP, 490.1/827.270.2.

*desired to stay there among families unaccompanied and in this way use this family meeting as a pretext for wandering around.*⁶¹³

In short, what the Vali is stating, is exactly what the Party Inspector suggested rather more implicitly above; family meetings are for people with their family and not for men unaccompanied by their family, especially bachelors. It is not thus open to everybody. One of the reasons is definitely the presence of women, who have to be protected from the possible dangers of being in a place with undesired men. Who might they be? Men considered of low status, or of low social origin, youths, “persons wishing to stay among the families” to gaze at and/or flirt with the women present, women of those respectable families invited to such events, daughters and sisters of respectable men. By a flip of the tongue the Vali is also demonstrating another cleavage the letters routinely complain about, between civil servants or local elites and the rest of the people. When stating who can participate in these ‘family meetings’, he differentiates between ‘families’ and those ‘from the people’, who cannot take part but can stay in the Library room. The contrast is between ‘families’ and ‘those from the people’ who were obviously not without families. The Vali is implicitly stating a number of things. The excluded were first of all ‘from the people’, i.e. locals, probably not civil servants and of low status. They were also without their families, which is an implication that they did not bring their families, i.e. their women, to the Halkevi.

A large number of letters, all written by men, refer to such a segregation, or else exclusion of their writers from the Halkevi, the Halkevi library or Hall, and from a Halkevi activity. Their complaint is voiced in terms of ‘we’ against ‘them’,⁶¹⁴ where the category ‘we’, or else the writer and/or those the writer represents (or claims to represent), is ‘the youth’, ‘the people’, while ‘they’ might be ‘the civil servants’, ‘the rich’, ‘a few rich merchants and civil servants’.⁶¹⁵ In case reports of investigation about such complaints exist in the

⁶¹³ *Halkevinin halka daima açık bir kütüphanesi ve diğer büyük salonu mevcut olup haftada bir akşam bu küçük istirahat salonunun aile toplantısına tahsis edilmesine rağmen evli olduğu halde bila mazeret yalnızca aileler arasında kalmak isteyen ve böylece aile toplantılarını kendileri için bir seyrenghah sayan bu kimselerin.* **BCA CHP**, 490.1/827.270.2.

⁶¹⁴ The social cleavage uttered in terms of ‘us’ and/against ‘them’ is a recurrent category of the letters, and will be treated separately. It suffices here to note that the ‘us against them’ theme has been noticed elsewhere too, in works based on similar sources (letters) for the same period. See Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin’s Russia. Terror, propaganda and dissent, 1934 - 1941* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), pp. 124 – 144.

⁶¹⁵ Some examples: Letter from Biga, 14/9/1941 in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/830.276.1: “*müsamereler verilir memur içeri halk dışarı emri verilir*” (a show is taking place, the people are ordered out the civil servants in); Telegram from Bulanık, 21/5/1942 in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/841.326.2: “*Kaza Halkevi memur evimidir?*” (Is the People’s House of the district the Civil Servant’s House?); Extract from ‘Kars’ newspaper, 6/2/1940 in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/837.306.2: “*Zira davetiye memur ve tüccar gibi ileri gelenlere dağıtılıyor, halk tabakası bu müsamereden mahrum kalıyor*” (The people are denied access to the show because the ‘invitations’ are distributed among notables like civil servants and merchants); telegram from Kuşadası, 3/11/1944 in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/836.305.1: “*Halk odası memurin kulubumudur orada halk tabakası terik edilirmi*” (Is the Halkevi civil servants’ club. Is the people to be kept away from there?). As for the writers of the last telegram the local Party Chief wrote the following: “All of them are about 18-20 years old. They are not

relevant files of the archive, a variety of reasons are given for the exclusion or even expulsion. They usually range from ‘they were not allowed to enter because the Hall was full’ or because ‘they did not have an invitation’ to ‘they were expelled because they asked *rakı*’ or because ‘they wanted to play cards’. In some cases, a Party Inspector usually, or a local Party boss, would explain that the Halkevi officials could not have accepted them among families, because they were alone, ‘without family’, or, more openly, bachelors (*bekar*).⁶¹⁶ What was then to be avoided (and feared), although not explicitly stated, was the being together of undesired and/or uncontrolled (by the presence of their family for instance) men among ‘family girls’, the women present in such Halkevi events. It had to be avoided and it was feared because it might lead to incidents that would ‘have a bad influence on the area’ (*muhitte kötü bir tesir bırakmış*) and on the ‘honorable families’, that might abandon the Halkevi and its activities. The excuse offered for these acts of segregation is double: to safeguard the female family members among their families without the intrusion of bachelors, but also to keep non-elite locals away from these families and their women. We have also seen this segregation tendency among civil servants and the tactics employed to enforce it in the previous chapter. The presence of women made the need to segregate even more pressing. From another point of view, the exclusion of ‘the people’, so much denounced in the complaint letters, could be justified on the pretext that ‘those from the people’, as the Vali categorically stated, were not bringing their women to the Halkevi, but rather attempted to use it as a place of male socialization, in a way similar to the coffeehouse, a place nobody attempted to inhabit with women in direct contrast to the wider society’s practices and perception about the position of women.

What should not happen during such an event, as a family meeting, a dance party or a public holiday celebration, as well as how such an event should be accomplished is the subject of yet another letter from Çanakkale, dated 12/8/1940. T. İleri, chairman of the Village Section, member of the local Party Administrative Committee and director of the Department of public works, starts his letter by stating how a family meeting has to be conducted:

[I]n a meeting a fortnight ago the House’s Administrative Committee decided how a family meeting is to be carried out in accordance with the Halkevi’s aims and in order to introduce such an important innovation to Çanakkale. In short, every family meeting is to take place in the form of a show (müsamere) and under the responsibility and supervision of one of the

intellectuals, but youngster wishing to pass for punks and hooligans (*hemen hepsi 18-20 yaşlarında münevver olmayan serkeş ve külhanbeyi geçinmek isteyen toylardır*). The chief’s letter of 1/4/1944 is contained in the same file, **BCA CHP**, 490.1/836.305.1.

⁶¹⁶ Cengiz Kırılı, “The Struggle over Space”, p. 41; Leslie Peirce, *Morality Tales*, pp. 197 – 8, about “the widespread perception that young men in unregulated spaces were social pariahs, sexual aggressors who destabilized moral boundaries.”

House's Sections. In this way, every Section will work to arrange new kinds of entertainment and, as a result, the family meeting will be a means for the people to spend beautiful, moral (upright) and joyful moments. In this fashion, the House will reach its objectives in relation to these family meetings. It was also decided that the Fine Arts section's orchestra would play music (exactly like the orchestra in the army club).

The specific event the writer complains about happened when a family meeting was arranged in a fashion contrary to what had been decided before. As a result, "I learned that families with their children were not taken in, that *caz*⁶¹⁷ was played and finally that ugly incidents between army officers and civilians trying to dance with a young girl happened during this meeting that was arranged without a previous decision, unresponsively and with no supervision." This event "is going to be a stain on the Halkevi and will prevent moral/upright families from coming to the House".⁶¹⁸

Another letter from Dursunbey this time discloses what was considered inappropriate for a family meeting.

*Some days ago a family meeting took place as it happens occasionally. The young and single Kaymakam Osman Akçalı, who had recently arrived in our kaza, was also among those invited. In one moment, he was seen drinking beer in the room and upon told that this was contrary to the Houses' Bylaws this whole issue was prevented. During the meeting some youths came in with alcoholic drinks. After a while the Chairman told them 'the right way to participate in the meeting is with your families'.*⁶¹⁹

The letter, compiled by the local Party chief, was the reply to a letter by the General Secretariat requesting information about a traffic accident that happened after the family meeting and outside the House but involving some of the participants. In all probability, the issue had come forth by a complaint letter to the Party Headquarters that unfortunately was not attached to the rest of the documents. If that was the case, the local Party chief refers to the

⁶¹⁷ It is not clear here what the author tried to convey by stressing that jazz was performed instead of "music like in the army club", but in any case it seems that the author considered 'caz' (or what he thinks that 'caz' was) a kind of music that can potentially lead to 'immoral' incidents. It may be possible that 'caz' was employed by social actors in a similar way 'tango' was used to denote – usually in a quite negative way – women dressed in European clothes. See Funda Cantek, *'Yaban'lar ve Yerliler. Başkent olma sürecinde Ankara* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2003), p. 151 f.

⁶¹⁸ Letter of 12/8/1940 contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/830.276.1.

⁶¹⁹ Letter of 28/11/1945 by Ramazan Kılıç, chairman of the local Party Administrative Committee, contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/825.265.2. Italics mine. Note the indication of the Kaymakam's age and marital status, a reference to widespread perception of young, non-local and unrelated/unmarried men as potentially threatening moral rectitude. See Cengiz Kırılı, "The Struggle over Space", p. 41 and Leslie Peirce, *Morality Tales. Law and Gender*, pp. 197 – 8 for similar remarks from the 19th century Istanbul and 16th century Antep.

alcohol-drinking incident with the youths and the Kaymakam, although not directly connected to the traffic accident, because they were probably mentioned in the complaint letter. Even the reference to the Kaymakam's age and marital status, as well as the reference to the fact that the youths were not accompanied by their families, both seem as a reply to a previous accusation. What this letter and, in all probability, the missing one say is that the presence of 'unaccompanied youths' (especially if they bring or consume alcohol) and 'young and single' men – even if they are important people as the Kaymakam – is not considered to be entirely appropriate for a family meeting.

While CHP and various Houses have published numerous works on several Halkevleri related issues (Theatre plays, Village Excursions – Studies, Folklore Collections, Guidebooks for Folkloric or Villagist research) there is no – to our knowledge – work on how to conduct a 'family meeting', a dance (*balò*), or, more generally, an activity involving women, their presence and/or active participation. Nevertheless, the letters used above indicate that there were some shared tacit rules or principles employed, which were necessitated by the presence of members of the local and/or state elite, but also of women during certain occasions. The most evident one would be the exclusion, or limited inclusion, of undesired persons. These can be broadly portrayed as male, single (and young), unaccompanied by his family, *and* of lower social status, something a Halkevi chairman or a Party Inspector might describe as non-intellectuals (*münevver olmayan*), non-civil servants, or even 'from the People' (*Halktan*). Those 'non-intellectuals' excluded from such Halkevi events use different categories though. Turning to the letters for a view from the other side, the excluded complainants turn the self-description of the included (*münevver*) to 'memur', 'zengin', 'muallim', 'ağa' (civil servant, rich, teacher and master, respectively), while they call themselves 'the people', 'of the people', 'the youth', or simply with their name and occupation, as in the following case of two tailors from Biga:

The chairman and the administrative committee of the People's House, which is supposed to be open to the people, came by every shop and store to sell tickets for the House's shows and meetings; as for the rest of the meetings that require no ticket they invite only the civil servants and those ladies and gentlemen suiting their interests, while they do not even open the door to the people and the youths who go there. In that [sense] the chairman is personally insulting [those people]. [I]s the Halkevi the personal property of these kind of gentlemen? (bu gibi Beyefendilerin çiftiği midir)⁶²⁰

Occasionally even those invited and covering all the necessary requirements prove to behave not as expected. The following event took place

⁶²⁰ Letter of 3/9/1941 sent by Mehmed Dilmez and Sami Filibeli, both tailors from Biga, contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/830.276.1.

during a dance party (*balo*) in Gelibolu, at the local Halkevi. Nafia Izli, signing as ‘the wife of the secretary Kemal Izli’, invited with her husband to the dance, had to “share a table with the school principle Ahmet, his wife and his sister. While we were watching those dancing I saw that Ahmet was encroaching upon my virtue under the table (*ahmedin masa altından namusuma tecavüz etdiğini gördüm*). Coming immediately to myself I showed it to my husband. Faced with this calamity, my husband told me to show his sister. Prodding her with my hand I told her ‘Don’t you see your brother Ahmet’s dishonourable action?’ But Ahmet continued behaving this way. [...] We returned home. My husband protested to the Party chief, but up until now [after almost three months] nobody showed any interest. [...] We are thinking how are we going to leave our children to instructors of such ethics and morals.”⁶²¹

In order to prevent such incidents, to keep aloof from those who might endanger their status and social position, or even because of unwelcome events as described above, the Halkevi officials and frequenters - Party men, local elites, state functionaries and teachers – employed a system of limited inclusion to activities where ‘their families’ were present. In some cases, this segregation was regulated with the use of invitations, the letters’ infamous *davetiye*⁶²² an issue for frequent complaints. By these acts of exclusion/inclusion a distinct *space*⁶²³ was carved, a space selected women could inhabit during certain occasions. My argument is that this *space* can be viewed as an “implicit, hidden form of segregation”, an “ingenious” –tactical to remember De Certeau - solution “devised to deal with the confusion” and the tension created when women – some women - were “propelled into the public world”, “in a culture where, by and large, women were still perceived under the tutelage of a man”.⁶²⁴ Thus the paradox⁶²⁵ Kandiyoti mentions and we claim to have detected in the creation of such a *space*: the propagated and in certain circumstances applied ‘unveiling’ of the ‘Turkish woman’ “has mandated new forms of puritanism” – and seclusion we might add – “in a society where femininity was incompatible with a public presence”.⁶²⁶ In a ‘family meeting’ or a dance party a girl seemed to be at the same time located both outside and inside the culturally prescribed for her space, not *in* the family, but *with*, or under the supervision of, the family and within an ‘extended family’ formed

⁶²¹ Letter of 31/5/1938 contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/830.276.1.

⁶²² For a description of the ‘davetiye system’ see Chapter 6.

⁶²³ A spatial (place) and temporal container, but also a locus inhabited by social actors, occupied by discourses, loaded with meanings, a ‘stage’ of (and for) social interaction/activity.

⁶²⁴ All the above quotations from Deniz Kandiyoti, “Gendering the Modern. On Missing Dimensions in the Study of Turkish Modernity”, in Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba (eds), *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1997), pp. 126-8.

⁶²⁵ In a similar tone Zehra Arat writes “with Kemalism and modernization the preoccupation with namus, which had been prevalent in the Mediterranean culture and was reinforced by the Islamic notion of *fitne*, must have increased as a result of the desegregation of the sexes and the women’s participation in public life”. In Zehra Arat, “Introduction”, in Zehra Arat (ed), *Deconstructing Images of the Turkish Woman* (New York: Palgrave, 1999), p. 26.

⁶²⁶ Deniz Kandiyoti, “Gendering the Modern”, p. 126.

for the purpose. In another sense, she was residing in a *space* located somehow between the public and the domestic world, a secluded *space* denoting class and social status cleavages.

With the occasional breach of this secluded space our letters above describe, a dynamic picture of the practices and discourses employed in relation to women-related events comes into sight. The practices of segregation of women and their families from the undesired men and the occasional violation of this secluded space carved for such Halkevi events reveals an ongoing struggle between conflicting practices and discourses utilized by social actors, not to mention struggles and feuds between social actors as we have studied in Chapter 5. The regime's demand to conscript women out of their 'traditional' space in the family to the Halkevi space was running contrary to wider society's 'moral code' assigning a different space for male and female actors and demanding the 'protection' of women by the male members of their family. Consider for example petitions for explicit forms of sex segregation in the Houses. The chairman of the Halkevi of Elazığ inquired whether women and men could be invited separately during wedding ceremonies in the House.⁶²⁷ The chairman of the House of İnegöl is even more illuminating. "From time to time we permit weddings to be carried out in the Halkevi in accordance with the 61st article of the Bylaws. Some families though ask for ceremonies to be attended only by women, with which men would not interfere." Even after being told by the chairman that such ceremonies do not accord with the "Halkevi principles and the rules of civilization", they insisted on their requests relying on the absence of any clear explanation about this issue in the Bylaws. "In order to give a final answer we ask you to issue a clarification."⁶²⁸

The regime's expressed policy on the other hand to utilize the 'intellectuals', the majority of which were state employees, in an attempt to 'meet' the 'people' partially through the Halkevi network was equally running in contrast to the old tradition and current tendency in the period and society under study to maintain a border separating those same state employees from the rest of the populace, something all the sources we have thus far used amply demonstrate. Viewed in motion on the Halkevi 'stage', both sets of conflicting demands and conditions produce *tensions* surfacing in the numerous complaint letters and the ensuing reports by Party Inspectors or bosses. The practices we have thus far identified through our reading of the letters were attempts at resolving these tensions. The accommodative discourse and the distinction carved between moral Halkevi and immoral *tuluat* theatre, between theatre-girls and Halkevi actresses; the exclusion of non-elite or non-civil servants and low-class men from the Halkevi space through ingenious solutions like the *davetiye* system; and the creation of a 'modern mahrem' in the Halkevi for the

⁶²⁷ Letter of 3/12/45 in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/832.288.1.

⁶²⁸ Letter of 8/5/1945 in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/829.273.2.

female members of prominent local and state men, are all signs of a ‘border administration’, to remember Meltem Ahıska.⁶²⁹

‘Kemalist certainties and Moral reservations’:⁶³⁰ vocabulary of gender

This felt and expressed tension is also evident if we turn our attention to the vocabulary employed by our authors. Beside their content, the letters contain language and rhetoric elements once utilized by their authors to enhance the expected result of their complaint and demand, but at the same time reflecting, to a certain extent at least, their authors’ perceptual and cognitive panoply.

Since (s)he is writing to the Party usually asking for something, the author is likely to start and conclude the letter with some kind of reference to the ideals of the Party and the People’s Houses. The vocabulary is very close to the official Party jargon. Words such as duty/görev, principle/prensip, high aims/yüce gaye, struggle/mücadele, self sacrifice/feragat, the/our great cause/büyük davamız, arrow/ok prevail. In this way the authors demonstrate their commitment to the regime’s/Party’s program of social change in a strategic attempt to ensure a positive reaction to their demand. We can read in this tactical move to ‘speak Kemalist’ the social actors ability to acknowledge and utilize (fragments of) the regime’s jargon, but we cannot in no sense conclude by this that the discourse underlying this vocabulary was readily accepted by our authors, especially if we consider that such an opening as a structural and in that sense conventional way to address authority was surely used in the past as well. Not earlier than 20 or 30 years before similar or even identical letters touching upon a variety of issues were addressed to the authority of the time, which was not ‘the lofty CHP’, but the ‘pious Sultan’, the head of “the well protected domains”. The wording was definitely different though. My argument then is that people can neither change their tactics when approaching authority nor their mental map within such a short period of time; a ‘copy and paste’ of the official jargon was not difficult to achieve especially if we accept that this was rather the core of their tactics in pursuing their aims when petitioning the state.⁶³¹

Nevertheless, when they move to the centre of their complaint, the authors use a completely different language: their discourse deploys language/rhetoric elements not to be usually encountered in the official discourse. The language they use about the Halkevi activities and officials revolves not on the axis of

⁶²⁹ Meltem Ahıska, *Radyonun Sihirli Kapısı*, p. 46.

⁶³⁰ To paraphrase Reşat Kasaba, “Kemalist Certainties and Modern Ambiguities”, in Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba (eds), *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1997), pp. 15 – 36.

⁶³¹ We should also take into consideration that a number of these letters was composed by a professional petition writer (*arzuhalcî*).

modern versus backward but moral vs. immoral. The authors do not complain that the local Party and state officials are backward or reactionary, but, on the contrary, that they are acting in an immoral fashion. The words heavily employed are morality/immorality, clean, morally upright (*nezahet, nezih, ahlak, gayri ahlaklı, ahlaksız, feci, temiz, hayasızlık, rezalet, namuslu/suz*). Moreover, a common rhetoric means to make the complaint more telling is to convey the image of the coffeehouse, the gambling house, the drinking tavern and the brothel, all signifying a moral and social decline⁶³² as well as making the letters an amusing source to read.⁶³³ What is interesting and significant is the inability – in our reading – of the authors to use what we can think of as ready-made anti-regime categories in their denunciations. The letters rarely accuse their adversaries as being ‘reactionary’ or ‘backward’. We rarely meet the vocabulary the regime used to identify its enemies: *yobaz, irtica, murteci, şeriatçi* and so forth. I argue that this absence can be telling of the degree the regime’s discourse and discursive categories had penetrated society or rather, from another point of view, of the degree these categories were relevant or meaningful in society and among social actors. Their relative absence rather points to a lack of relevance within any widespread frame of reference outside the official discourse. Otherwise, our authors would have been quick to use the Party’s jargon and catchwords to blame their adversaries as in the Soviet case, which exhibited a similarly, even greater one might say, social opposition/disagreement to the regime’s intentions, and where accusations like *kulak* and *Trotskist* were amply used.⁶³⁴

Occasionally, the emphasis on morality is coupled with words having religious connotation. The Halkevi stage, its activities, even the Halkevi building, are ‘sacred’, while the Houses spread the ‘lights of decency’ (*nezahet nurları*). The Edremit Halkevi chairman describes the House’s female members as “*imam ve hatip* girls and most honourable family children (*imam ve hatib kızları ve en şerefli aile yavruları*).”⁶³⁵ In some cases expressions or

⁶³² See complaint letters on coffeehouse in Chapter 6. The coffeehouse was also a central target of the discourse of moral decay and decline in previous centuries. Cengiz Kırılı, *The Struggle over Space: Coffeehouses of Ottoman Istanbul, 1780 – 1845* (PhD Dissertation, State University of New York, 2000).

⁶³³ **BCA CHP**, 490.1/824.257.1. Letter of Hüseyin Ekiz 19/2/1947: “*bu mukaddes yeri kerhaneye çevirmiştir. Halkevine şimdi aklı başında namuslu bir adam gidemiyor abdestaneler 31 çekme yeri olmuştur.*” (They have turned this holy place into a brothel. Now nobody who is moral and in his minds can go there. It has become a place of masturbation). **BCA CHP**, 490.1/834.296.2, March 1943, letter of Mustafa Kurtay from Egridir: “*Yıllardan beri kadın oynatarak, belediye parasile fahişeler ve piçler besliyerek*”. (For years they have been bringing there women and feeding prostitutes and dirty people). **BCA CHP**, 490.1/842.331.2, 22/11/1946 from Osmaniye orta okulu müdürü Fuat Kutal: “*İleri gelen partili bir iki ağanın meyhanesi (oldu) ve hatta Adanadan zaman zaman getirttikleri umumane kadınlarını oynatarak*”. (It has become the drinking tavern of a couple of Party notables and landlords, who they occasionally bring brothel women from Ankara to play).

⁶³⁴ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 16-7, 200, 254-60.

⁶³⁵ Letter of Faik Barım, chairman of the Halkevi of Edremit, dated 13/1/1942, contained in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/825.265.2. Also, “*Halkevi başkanı Remzi Ergene işgal ettiği Makamın kutsiyetini*”, in a letter by Hakkı Özveren from Kütahya dated 15/11/1946 in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/839.319.1.

words closely connected to the Party jargon are used in unison with religiously flavoured words, such as in the case of “our Party’s sacred aims”, or “our bright [and/or saintly] arrows” (*nurlu oklarımız*). Even an expression that had become a Party and Halkevi slogan is uttered in an overtly ‘non-secular’ way: “Under this sacred roof, which is the Kaaba of our holy Party”.⁶³⁶

In a sense, what the regime had already banned from official and public discourse reappears in a fragmentary form, in disguise and in an awkward combination with officially sanctioned expressions. Our authors draw on two discourses in their attempt to administer moments of tension erupting upon the execution of a number of women-related events in the People’s House. These attempts give rise to the accommodative tactics of segregation and the accommodate discourse that establishes a distinction between moral and immoral theatre.

If there is a certain place wherein morality definitely resides, the ‘family’ is the centre of it, the place of women. Family is the prime victim of immoral deeds. The word is used in several letters to denote morality, moral women, or the proper place for women, in direct contrast to the ‘common women’ of the *tuluat* theatre. ‘Family girls’ are opposed to ‘theatre girls’. In this sense, the meaning of a ‘family meeting’ becomes clear: an event with the participation of ‘families’, that is ‘moral’, not ‘common’ women and ‘family girls’. The employment of the vocabulary of kinship was - and still is - used regarding unrelated women the contact with which had been initiated by a number of Halkevi activities. It was/is a common way to administer an encounter between social actors of the opposite sex that might be otherwise considered inappropriate. When inquired about the opinions within local society about the presence of women on the Halkevi stage and their relation to them, my informants, who acted on the Halkevi stage of Balıkesir in the 1940s, resorted to the vocabulary of family: “We respected all the girls acting on stage with us. For us they were our sisters (*ablalarımız*).”⁶³⁷ The employment of the ‘vocabulary of kin’ was a resourceful response to moments of tension, as in the cases we have treated above when unrelated men and women were participating in a Halkevi activity I view this response as an inventive and tactical act of ‘border administration’ that was aiming at alleviating and administer the tension produced when a social ‘border’ or ‘protocol’, in this case gender relations and practices, was ‘breached’.⁶³⁸

⁶³⁶ “Aziz Partimizin kabesi olan bu mukaddes çatı altında”, in **BCA CHP**, 490.1/829.273.2, by Mazhar Gençkurt, 5/4/1944. The expression ‘Halkevinin çatısı altında’ is ubiquitous in any source related to the Houses, after being probably firstly used by Recep Peker at his speech at the opening ceremony of the first 14 Peoples House’s. In *Ülkü*, Vol. 1, No 1, (February 1933), pp. 6.

⁶³⁷ Interviews with Mehmet Şahin, 3/6/2005, and Zeki Özalay, 4/6/2005 in Balıkesir.

⁶³⁸ For a similar note on the “kinship idiom as a vehicle for easing social interaction and defusing tension” see Deniz Kandiyoti, “Gendering the Modern. On Missing Dimensions in the Study of the Turkish Modernity”, in Bozdoğan and Kasaba, *Rethinking Modernity*, p. 126.

Conclusion(s)

Women were one of the targets of the Kemalist reform movement and the People's Houses were entrusted with the duty to publicize the changes the regime had initiated in that respect. The Halkevi library, hall and stage were planned as desegregated spaces where women would participate next to men in Halkevi activities, something quite novel for many a place in Turkey of the period. We have seen that the female participation in probably the majority of the Houses was very low and that the majority of female Halkevi members were schoolteachers and wives of bureaucrats and very few local elite members. In this chapter we have tried to view the consumption of the regime's policies on women by focusing on a number of letters touching upon women-related activities and incidents in the People's Houses.

Firstly, our letters speak of morality/immorality and place women within this discourse of morality. The emphasis on immorality, especially in relation to women, highlights the importance of honour as a social value. Without taking into account whether each accusation of immorality is real, false or an exaggeration, the persistence of the dual morality/immorality points at its significance as a cognitive category, a way through which people viewed the People's Houses and the new ideas and habits they were introducing. Furthermore, the pervasiveness of the morality feature in the language of the letters might also offer an indication of the extent the official discourse (which mostly relies on the dual modern vs. backward – old vs. new) had penetrated society. This becomes more evident if we consider in contrast the quantity of the language elements of the official discourse and the way they are employed in the letters. They are less⁶³⁹ and used in an imitative or, occasionally, even in a non-orthodox way (e.g. holy Party etc).

The preoccupation with morality and honour, as well as the language elements, words, and images abundantly employed to illustrate it, indicate the magnitude of this way of thinking in society, and especially, as the letters themselves sporadically whisper, among 'the people', those who were not close, or explicitly committed to the Houses and their activities, not to say anything about the reforms. More plainly, in their attempt to make their accusation more effective the authors use rhetoric/language elements whose pervasiveness and richness in the letters reveal their magnitude in society, especially beyond its segments that are considered proportionately more partisan of the Kemalist cause, like our authors. In that sense, the letters can be

⁶³⁹ In contrast to what the only available paper dealing with petition - though - letters from the same period suggests. Akın, Yiğit, "Fazilet değil vazife istiyoruz: Erken Cumhuriyet Dönemi sosyal tarihçiliğinde dilekçeler", *Toplum ve Bilim*, No 99, (Winter 2003/2004), p. 118-9.

seen as containing but also reflecting the voices of people who usually remain silent in the sources.

The ‘morality discourse’, the preoccupation with issues of morality, point at a further phenomenon, the exclusion from the Houses and their activities of many of the complainants. A large number of letters, not only the ones related to women’s issues, convey a sense of exclusion of their writers. This exclusion is occasionally portrayed as a symptom of corruption and immorality on the part of those who administer the House and/or the local Party structure. In many letters an explicit cleavage is expressed in terms of ‘we’ against ‘them,’ where the category ‘we’ is given as ‘the youth’ or ‘the people’, while ‘they’ are named as ‘tyrants’ (*mütegallibe*), landowners (*ağa*), people with old mentalities (*eski kafalı adamlar*), occasionally opponents of the innovations (*yeniliklere karşı*), illiterate – uneducated (*terbiyesiz, mektepsiz*), and of course with all the above mentioned words suggesting immorality. In that sense the Houses emerge as an arena where different fractions compete with various objectives; control over the Party and Halkevi structure; access to the Houses’ resources and to the social status it entails.

Our letters amply express the tensions the social actors implicated in the events they describe were experiencing. They also hint at the tactics, discourse and practices used to confront similar instances producing tension, pointing towards a set of ‘tension management’ or ‘border administration’ tactics habitually employed by social actors in the field. In terms of practices, the letters we have chosen to read here in relation to the presence and participation of women to Halkevi activities (theatre, family meetings) disclose a number of responses to the imposed (women related) ‘innovations’ by local actors. We have noticed cases of attempted evasion of participation in the Halkevi stage by women teachers, as well as resistance to the state and Party’s pressure to act on stage.

On another point, what I chose to call accommodative tactics emerge, both as discourse and practice: on the one hand a distinction separating ‘moral’ Halkevi theatre from ‘immoral’ *tuluat* or ‘common theatre’ is uttered, while on the other we have discerned the creation of ‘new’, ‘moral’ and ‘modern’ *spaces* of mixed gender socialization. In another sense, we have seen the seclusion of women to the domestic sphere the regime was ostensibly fighting to re-emerge in the form of a new seclusion within the ‘modern’ space of the Halkevi, a space carved by acts of exclusion of the ‘other’, as exemplified in the case of a ‘family meeting’.

Lastly, if we are to move beyond the authors of our letters towards a wider imagined collective authorship, we seem to approach the wider society’s ideas about women and about the imposed novelties, or towards a third option: the total refusal of the ‘new’ ideas and practices about women, and the self-exclusion from them which can be both spatial and discursive: refusal to participate and rejection of the distinction between moral and immoral options, rejection of the ‘accommodation’ with the ‘Kemalist’ novelties and discourse

option. This is meaningfully expressed by one of Öztürkmen's informants: asked about the People's House of her region she replied, "there was shamelessness, we were not going there".⁶⁴⁰

Having stated the findings of this chapter we cannot but stress the importance these tactical manoeuvres and the positioning of our actors (evasion, refusal, accommodation, etc) vis-à-vis the prescribed by the centre activities and the local public played in relation to identity issues. I view such practices of 'border administration' as signifying acts, and contend that the Halkevi theatre and dancing events recounted above ultimately produced discursive and cognitive categories such as the 'theatre girls' of our letters, women of 'low moral disposition' in contrast to 'upright women' and *imam ve hatip* girls', as it equally produced 'liberated and modern' in contrast to 'secluded and backward' women.

⁶⁴⁰ Arzu Öztürkmen, *Türkiye'de Folklor ve Milliyetçilik* (İstanbul: İletisim, 1998), p. 69: "ayıplık vardır, gitmezdik".

