

Ahmet Ertegun Memorial Speech

The Turkish American community lost two remarkable individuals in Ahmet Ertegun and Arif Mardin last year, only five months apart. Today we celebrate and honor the life of Ahmet Ertegun, yet we also bow our heads in respect for a gentleman of enormous talent and grace, Arif Mardin. His kind and humorous style, his suave and debonair flair, his infinitely respectful demeanor we will sorely miss.

I asked myself what word can we best ascribe to Ahmet? It is RESPECT. For those of us familiar with the famous song by Aretha Franklin, one of Ahmet's "stars" who he launched into fame and fortune, it encapsulates what Ahmet represented to so many people around the world. His was a unique life, made more special by the avid devotion that is particular to music lovers and cognoscenti. Witness the scene where one drives up to another concert by a world-famous act. From the moment his limousine slinks up to the VIP gate, everyone, from the gate guards, to the ushers at the door, to the elevator attendant, to the guards back stage, to the hostesses and bartenders in the VIP rooms, to the grand-ego impresario who put on that great show, to the lounging world-famous musicians, everyone stops, or moves to him or takes notice of him as he walks by with Mica by his side, always chatting with everyone.

Then there is the serious, quietly determined Ahmet. A private club in New York, a very "high-level" group of his friends (indeed they dined with him regularly at home), one a chairman of one of the world's largest investment firms, the other the ceo of one of the world's largest investment banks, the other a rather famous fellow who served under three American Presidents, the last one a blue-blood patriarch of an American business empire, all meeting with a certain Turkish politician who is on a quiet trip through the U.S. Ahmet is asking cutting questions, coaxing the true story out of the Turkish politician, making sure not to embarrass nor annoy, but to gently reveal.

That was vintage Ahmet, he never disparaged anyone, he could only charm and comfort everyone, he would always be civil, infinitely polite, totally hospitable. At home, on the soccer field, in the music industry, the political world or among his Wall Street buddies, he was always keenly concerned, interested, and engaged.

He coached without giving the impression that he was, he persuaded without sounding like he was arguing. His actions spoke louder than any of his words. Despite his ridiculously stretched daily programs, he would try and return everyone's phone calls and email messages (through his trusted assistant, Frances) the same day or at most the next morning, no matter the "importance" of the caller. He would answer his own phones at home.

His beloved Bodrum life was always too short because of his many other commitments worldwide. Interestingly, in Bodrum, at every one of his residences, and at parties he attended, one of his great pleasures that he was known for was that he loved to

tell jokes. People would send him jokes from all over the world, and he would remember hundreds of them and tell them perfectly. Mica would always laugh heartily even though she heard them so many times.

And how about Turkey and America? Ahmet concentrated his energies on the Society, as he would call it, our little Turkey in America, American Turkish Society, Amerikan Turk Cemiyeti, a place where he liked to say “if we do good things, good things will follow”. We now practice what he believed in, “below-the-radar” PR, not in-your-face, but Ahmet style: cajole, educate, seduce, impress, entertain, comfort, persuade. Give America the best of us, the best of Turkish business, of Turkish culture, of Turkish history, and of Turkish humility and pride. Work more behind the scenes instead of in front of the cameras. Forget the Capitol egos, embrace the capital ideas. Be cutting-edge in your thinking, innovate. Let others take the kudos, that will strengthen us in the end. And make sure to give plenty of performance space to the young Turks !

And now he lies at peace on top of a beautiful hill above Uskudar, overlooking what he liked to say is one of the most spectacular bodies of water on this earth, the Bosphorus. Curiously, he used to sing that famous Turkish song jokingly every once in a while, “Uskudar’a gideriken”, meaning “As I go toward Uskudar”. I hope you will all have a chance to one day visit that beautiful place at the Ozberkler Tekke. We will miss you deeply, Ahmet, may you rest in peace.

Murat Köprülü
March 2, 2007