

## ***Reflections on the International Committee for Crimea (ICC)***

### **An Interview with Inci Bowman**

*The questions for the following interview were submitted by Barbara Wieser (BW), a former Peace Corps Volunteer in Crimea and a member of the Board of Directors of the International Committee for Crimea (ICC), Washington, DC. Inci Bowman (IB) served as President of the ICC.*

**BW. You have been interested in Crimean Tatar issues for some time. What is your connection to Crimea?**

**IB.** I am a native of Istanbul. When I was growing up in Yeşilköy, a quiet suburban neighborhood, there was very little to indicate that I would one day become a Crimean Tatar activist, or even retire to Washington, DC someday. I knew that my family had roots in Crimea, but my parents considered themselves Turkish. Both of my maternal grandparents, while of Crimean Tatar descent, were born in Turkey and they spoke Turkish at home. My paternal grandparents had passed away before I was born. I heard spoken Crimean Tatar when we went to visit elderly relatives on my father's side. My paternal grandfather was born in Crimea and educated in Istanbul. His activities as a Crimean Tatar nationalist and educator would later become an inspiration for me.

**BW. Did you go school in Turkey? That is, how did you make the transition from growing up in Istanbul to living in the US?**

**IB.** I went to public schools in Istanbul and graduated from a girl's high school with a good reputation, Çamlıca Kız Lisesi, on the Asian side of Istanbul. Clearly, my upbringing gave me a good grounding in Turkish language and culture. After attending the University of Istanbul for one year, I came to the US to complete my education

in upstate New York. Prior to going to graduate school, I worked in the chemical research labs of Corning Glass Works in Corning, New York, as a technician. The next several years were spent in the Midwest (Bloomington, Indiana; Madison, Wisconsin; and Grinnell, Iowa). By the time I completed my Ph.D. in the history of science and medicine at Indiana University in 1975, I had lived in 6 different states and had spent considerable time in the Washington, DC area.



Inci Bowman at Victims of Communism Memorial, Washington, DC, 2007

A good job opportunity came up at one of the medical schools in Texas and I spent the following two decades in the Galveston-Houston area.

**BW. *How did you end up in Washington, DC?***

**IB.** In the mid-1990s, I started thinking about retiring and living part of my time in Istanbul while some of my close relatives were alive. I wanted to explore my Crimean roots and research the life of my paternal grandfather, Fevzi Altug. I had already published a journal article about him. I had personal and professional contacts in the DC area and decided to settle here. In the 1970s, I had done research relating to my dissertation at the National Library of Medicine, and completed projects at the Smithsonian and the Library of Congress. When I was leaving the University of Texas, people there had a hard time understanding why anyone would want to retire to Washington, DC! Admittedly, this was an unusual move.

**BW. *When did you first go to Crimea?***

**IB.** Just as I was making plans to retire in 1997, I was invited to present a paper at an international conference on the use of Internet in libraries and information centers. The conference, organized by a group in Moscow, was scheduled in Sudak, Crimea. Wow! How could I miss such an opportunity? My grandfather had served as Director of Education in Sudak in 1921 and the family had lived in a nearby village. I was still in Texas then. I flew from Houston to Kyiv via London and then to Simferopol. The trip took two days as I had to stay overnight in Kyiv. The conference was held at a resort, a facility previously used by the KGB personnel vacationing in Crimea. One afternoon, there was a special Crimean Tatar cultural program, where I met a number of Crimean Tatars, including Refat Chubarov and Professor

Adile Emirova. Earlier I had met Ayder Seitosman, who served as a coordinator at the conference and would later become ICC's first Vice-President. However, I did not have much contact with Crimean Tatars during this professional conference.

**BW. *How did you get involved in the International Committee for Crimea (ICC)?***

**IB.** Before I moved to Washington, DC in the summer of 1997, I was already very active on the Internet and corresponding with a number of individuals interested in Crimean Tatars. There was also an online discussion group called Turkistan-L, which was managed by SOTA, a research center based in The Netherlands. I learned about the existence of a group of individuals interested in Crimean Tatars, but I did not have time to get actively involved in the ICC until the following year. I spent a lot of time in Istanbul during 1997 and 1998. I remember volunteering to work on one of SOTA's Web projects, "Home of Crimean Tatars" while I was in Istanbul. This was the first Web site in English about Crimean Tatars. Prior to my retirement from the University of Texas, I had a chance to work on a Web project and was already familiar with HTML coding and handling digital images.

**BW. *Who were the original founders of the ICC and how did that group come together?***

**IB.** From the existing documentation, we know that the ICC evolved as an Internet group. In fact, the discussions on Turkistan-L that I mentioned above, led to the idea of forming a group that would focus on Crimean Tatars solely. For many years, Idil Izmirli maintained that she founded the ICC. At least, she spearheaded the group, as the ICC was organized as a special project of SOTA with the assistance of Mehmet Tutuncu, SOTA's President, and other individuals. When I joined the ICC, as I recall, Idil Izmirli and

Mubeyyin Altan were Co-Chairs. In short, I was not with the group during the early discussions about forming the ICC.

***BW: What were the original goals of the ICC and was it even called ICC?***

**IB.** The original name of the group was “International Committee for C.R.I.M.E.A. Crimean Tatar Repatriation Initiative & Movement for Equality Alliance.” I am personally glad that C.R.I.M.E.A part of the name did not stick, as it would be hard to remember all those words. Simply, CRIMEA is much better. As it is clear from this acronym, however, the group’s initial interest was to assist the repatriation of exiled Crimean Tatars who had already returned to Crimea. The earliest document we have on ICC’s Web site is a petition that dates from August 1997. It was sent to the Presidents of Ukraine and Uzbekistan, the US government and the EU. The group asked that the Mejlis be recognized as the only body representing the Crimean Tatars, the indigenous people of Crimea. We must note here that the initial move of the ICC was basically political in nature.

***BW. How did the ICC survive as an online group? It had started out as a project of another organization.***

**IB.** The ICC remained an Internet group for many years. The members adopted a set of bylaws in 1999 and elected Mubeyyin Altan as their first President. I agreed to serve as the Executive-Secretary. The group continued as an unincorporated organization until 2012. By obtaining a postal mail box in Washington, DC, also in 1999, the ICC “grounded” itself in the US. If I were not living in DC, who knows, the ICC could have become a New York organization or perhaps one that would be based in The Netherlands or even Germany. After all, we were

an international group and spoke mostly Turkish and English among ourselves.

I would also like to add here that this was an exciting period both for the organization and for me personally. Mubeyyin Altan and his wife located to the DC area in the year 2000. Mubeyyin worked for the DC government and his office was close to Union Station (train station), a 30-minute walk from our house on Capitol Hill. Mubeyyin and I occasionally met during his lunch hour at Union Station and talked about the ICC and issues relating to Crimean Tatars. Mubeyyin was a Crimean Tatar activist, his interests and activism going back to at least the early 1970s. My interests in Crimean Tatars, on the other hand, were more bookish, having spent most of my adult life in academic circles.



Mubeyyin Altan speaks at a White House Rally protesting Russian Occupation of Crimea, Washington, DC, 2014

He had the knowledge and experience, and I had the editorial as well as PR skills and knew how to make Web pages. I learned a lot from Mubeyyin, and it was a happy coincidence that we happened to be in the same location for a while. We tried to place the ICC on a secure footing, as secure as any online organization could be at that point.

***BW. What were some of the early activities of the ICC?***

**IB.** Clearly the establishment of Crimea-L, a discussion group interested in Crimean Tatars,

gave the ICC a great deal of visibility. This initiative was taken in November 1998. Through the online media, we could reach not only the repatriates in Crimea but also Crimean Tatars living in diaspora communities mostly in Turkey and Europe. The discussions focused on news, politics, history and culture. By 2003, Crimea-L had nearly 700 names on its membership list and had distributed over 5,000 messages. It remained active until 2012. I hope that Crimea-L's role in bringing together the Crimean Tatars and those interested in their Crimean roots will be evaluated some day.

Another major activity involved the establishment and growth of the ICC's Web site. Until 2000, SOTA's Web site covering the history and culture of Crimean Tatars was the only site in existence. I was instrumental in getting the domain name ICCRIMEA.ORG in September 2000. The Web site grew slowly by the addition of articles written by Mubeyyin Altan, Idil Izmirli and others. We also made an effort to recruit articles from academics and researchers interested in Crimean Tatars. For example, Otto Pohl, who had written a book titled *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR*, was very supportive of Crimean Tatars and contributed a number of articles to our Web site. Book reviews and summaries of news were also added. Recently, we observed the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ICC's Web site, which is today an important online resource on Crimean Tatars in the English language.

A third area of activity involved the participation of ICC members in professional meetings. The first such event was in 2001, when five ICC members wrote a paper, titled "e-Tatars," and one member living in Ankara traveled to Stockholm, Sweden, to present it. The paper was the result of brainstorming on the Internet, as some of these members had never met each



Brian Williams, Idil Izmirli and Otto Pohl at ASN Conference at Columbia University, New York, 2004

other personally. Between 2002 and 2008, we attended annual meetings of the Association for the Study of Nationalities and American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies in cities like New York, Philadelphia and Washington, DC. Idil Izmirli, who was a graduate student at the George Mason University in Arlington, VA, was primarily responsible for organizing panels at these meetings. During this period, Idil also made many research trips to Crimea, and sent us reports and photographs. Such activities gave the ICC exposure and helped us meet individuals affiliated with academic institutions. We were drawing attention to Crimean Tatar issues.

***BW. When did the ICC become a non-profit organization? Who were the original Board members?***

**IB.** In December 2011, Idil Izmirli and I met at a suburban Virginia café, as we occasionally did, and discussed ICC's future. We decided to go ahead with plans to incorporate the ICC in the District of Columbia. The ICC had existed for 14 years as an interest group promoting the cause of Crimean Tatars mostly on the Internet. It had remained an unincorporated organization, with a post office box in Washington, DC. Mubeyyin Altan, Idil Izmirli and I had served as Presidents of the ICC. The Executive Committee included

individuals such as Özgür Karahan, a computer specialist, and Kürşat Çağıltay, an expert in educational technology, who still live in İstanbul and Ankara respectively. Without such technical expertise and backing, it would be difficult to manage an online organization.



Crimean Tatars are remembered at the annual wreath-laying ceremony, Victims of Communism Memorial, 2012.

In 2012, the ICC was registered in DC as a non-profit organization, with Idil, I and Nurten Ural, former President of the Assembly of the Turkish American Associations, as the initial incorporators. The first Executive Committee included me (President), David Smith (Secretary), Nurten Ural (Treasurer), Idil Izmirlı (Director for Research and Development), and Greta Uehling (Director for Academic Affairs). At that time, you were in Crimea serving as Peace Corps Volunteer, Barbara. And, you agreed to be one of ICC's Directors and Coordinator for Crimea. The ICC subsequently applied and received tax-exempt status (501 c 3) from the IRS, retroactive to April 2012. Later, Mubeyyin Altan, Zafer Karatay (President of Emel Foundation in İstanbul) and Brian Woods, a former Peace Corps Volunteer in Crimea, were invited to join the Board of Directors.

**BW. *It is not easy to start a non-profit organization, as many NGOs fail within a few years. Did you encounter any difficulties as you started?***

**IB.** Let me touch upon briefly the setbacks we experienced as we started the new phase of the ICC. Late in November 2013, the IRS notified us that our application for the tax-exempt status had been approved. Of course, this was an achievement in itself, as it is not easy to get the blessings of the IRS. A few months prior to this date, however, Idil Izmirlı resigned from the Board of Directors, stating that she was overcommitted in her obligations. At that time, she was living in Crimea and working on a grant project. I felt somewhat betrayed, as I would not have undertaken alone, without Idil's support, the tedious job of registering the ICC in the District of Columbia and sending our application to the IRS, which was almost 50 pages. These were very expensive and time-consuming undertakings. Secondly, three months after the favorable IRS decision, Crimea was occupied by the Russian military forces late in February 2014, an event with wide political repercussions. At that time, we were planning a cultural tour of Crimea in conjunction with the Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları Vakfı (Turkic World Research Foundation), based in İstanbul. Of course, our plans had to be cancelled. As the saying goes, however, every cloud has a silver lining, and that turned out to be true in our case. The news of the Russian aggression in Crimea drew public attention to that part of the world and perhaps some people heard about Crimean Tatars for the first time. Where is Crimea and who are Crimean Tatars? As you will recall, Barbara, in the spring of 2014 we were contacted by the members of the press. You, Mubeyyin Altan and I talked to reporters about Crimea and Crimean Tatars.



Ukraine's exhibit at Winternational, Annual Embassy Showcase, Washington, DC, December 2016.

**BW. What do you see as the major accomplishments of the ICC?**

**IB.** I already mentioned Crimea-L and the ICC Web site in the context of early activities of the organization. Especially, the 20-year old Web site is a significant online resource on Crimean Tatars and will remain as the archives of the ICC. In terms of local activities, I would like to mention our participation in the annual wreath-laying ceremony at the Victims of Communism Memorial, which was first unveiled in 2007. Without missing a year, we were there with flowers to honor the Crimean Tatar victims of communism. This event is attended by representatives, often ambassadors themselves, from various Embassies in Washington, DC, as well as many civic organizations. And, it was a good way to make contacts and to spread the word about Crimean Tatars.

In May 2014, we observed the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Deportation of Crimean Tatars by organizing events that featured the screening "Son of Crimea: KIRIMOGLU," at several venues both in DC and elsewhere. For example, you helped organize an event in Minneapolis and in California that year. The documentary was produced by Zafer and Nese Sarisoy Karatay for the Turkish TRT, with English subtitles. In 2016, Christina Paschyn's "A Struggle for Home: The

Crimean Tatars" won an award at the DC Independent Film Festival. With that recognition, it was easier for us to organize film screening events both in DC and elsewhere for the next two years.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about our cooperation with the Embassy of Ukraine here in Washington, DC. The Russian occupation of Crimea resulted in policy changes at the higher levels of the Ukrainian government and the Crimean Tatar issues gained priority. We could feel this change at this end in DC. For example, the Ukrainian Ambassador came to the first event we organized in conjunction with the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Deportation in May 2014 and spoke there. I have been invited by the Embassy to attend events and/or to assist with temporary exhibits featuring Crimean Tatars at such events. On June 26, 2017, I was at the Embassy when the Crimean Tatar flag was raised to fly with the Ukraine flag for the first time. The Crimean Flag Day, June 26, is officially recognized by the Ukrainian government. And, of course, I was very proud.

**BW. What does the future hold for the ICC?**

**IB.** The ICC ended its activities in the DC area in 2019 by arranging three events to observe the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Crimean Tatar Deportation. We relied on our connections and the support of other organizations and friends, as there is no Crimean Tatar community in DC.

The first event was a vigil to honor the victims of the Deportation at the Diyanet Center of America (Islamic Center) in the DC area. About 50 members of the Crimean Tatar organization in New York attended this meaningful program. The second event took place on the exact anniversary, on May 18, at the Victims of Communism Memorial, attended by the Deputy Chief of Mission from the Embassy of Ukraine,



Vigil for Crimean Tatar victims of Deportation, Diyanet Center of America, May 18, 2019

and friends from Ukrainian-American organizations. Regrettably, we could only get three other Crimean Tatars come this event.

November 4, 2020

NOTE: The documentation for the above interview can be found in the following online publication:

“International Committee for Crimea: A Timeline, 1997-2019” by Inci Bowman.

<https://www.iccrimea.org/reports/icc-timeline.html>

And, the last event was organized by the Washington-based Kennan Institute of the Wilson International Center for Scholars, with our assistance. The panel discussion on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Deportation featured Gulnara Bekirova, the well-known Crimean Tatar historian from Kyiv, Ukraine; and Brian Williams of the University of Massachusetts, and author of a reputable book, *Crimean Tatars*. In sum, I am pleased and grateful to all those who supported us. There is no critical mass in the DC area to continue our activities. I am well advanced in years and do not see myself as the future of the ICC. Eventually, all good things come to an end.