

Zafer Malazgirt, Part One

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of June 5, 2023)

Benita Albert brings us another story of an Oak Ridge schools graduate and this time she includes some recent interaction regarding the recent devastating earthquake in Turkey.

Preface:

While writing this story, the southeastern region of Turkey was struck by a 7.8 earthquake followed by many days of aftershocks with massive destruction and loss of life. To date, the human death toll is more than 50,000 while more than 1.5 million people are left homeless across the affected regions in Turkey and adjoining Syria. My concern for a former American Field Service (AFS) student whose story I was preparing was palpable. That student, Zafer Malazgirt, lived for a year with the Joel Buchanan family of Oak Ridge, and he graduated from ORHS in 1973.

I reached out for more information from Zafer's American brother, Joel Buchanan Jr., who had talked with Zafer one week after the tragedy. He was relieved to learn that Zafer and his family were safe. Joel wrote of their conversation, "...They felt the earthquake far away in Samsun (Approx. 500 miles from the epicenter). They now have a program that pairs cities in the damage zone with a sister city. Zafer's home city, Samsun, is paired with Elbistan, which has much damage. Staff from Zafer's hospital traveled and set up a field hospital in Elbistan. They sponsor a kitchen which serves regular hot meals. Many displaced persons from Elbistan are now staying in Samsun. Zafer's wife Sibel (an ophthalmologist) is helping with many of them, because many have lost their glasses."

Soon after hearing from Joel, Zafer wrote to me: "Thank you for your concerns about me and my family after the devastating earthquakes that occurred in the southeastern part of Turkey. This was a very large earthquake, one of the largest in the world, and it involved the breaking of several plates. It caught people in their beds during a very cold night. We, the Turkish people, used to think that we learned lessons from the past (1999) Istanbul earthquake and that we built better buildings more recently. However, we sadly learned that this is not the case. Most of the cities are ancient cities with old buildings. Some of them collapsed, some were heavily ruined. 2200-year-old castles, 1800-year-old churches, and 1400-year-old mosques are down. However, many other new buildings were ruined to rubble as well. We are all very sad, and we will start over again. We have to change our minds, and we must learn to live with earthquakes."

In a February 17th email to Jane Buchanan, Zafer wrote of the first deadly quake and its aftermath: "We in Samsun awoke from sleep with a prominent sway to and fro... Strong aftershocks continued, and at noon the next day (Feb. 7th) another big earthquake occurred. I was in an operation, and I very strongly felt it. This second hit caused great damage to already damaged buildings, and unfortunately caught many people in destructed buildings who had returned there for shelter from the freezing weather."

Zafer commented further on the human suffering. "The late effects of the earthquake come closer to us in many ways. Wounded people were taken to hospitals in all parts of Turkey. Some of them were brought to Samsun. Most of them have crush injuries, bone breaks, and pneumonias. They are sad, startled, and look around with empty gestures."

Strong aftershocks have continued into the fourth week since February 6th. Zafer's words speak to the heartbreak and challenges of the Turkish people in 2023. Should you wish to help, numerous agencies are accepting donations to support both Turkish and Syrian victims of the earthquake. Visit sites like *Charity Navigator* or *Guidestar* for ratings of a nonprofit's transparency and effectiveness in disaster relief.

Zafer made Oak Ridge citizens better cosmopolites for his AFS year experience here. It has been my honor to reconnect with him and to tell his story fifty years after his Oak Ridge residency. My story, part one, follows with a focus on his "American experience."

Zafer's Oak Ridge Year:

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Early in my career, I had the honor of teaching Advanced Placement Calculus to an American Field Service (AFS) exchange student, Zafer Malazgirt, from Turkey. The AFS student exchange was a popular program at ORHS dating back to the mid-1950s. Evelyn Armstrong, an ORHS German language teacher from 1967-1992, was one of several AFS faculty sponsors over the years. She said the AFS program began after World War II to promote international travel and greater cross-cultural understanding. Frau Armstrong, as she was well-known by ORHS students, was Zafer's AFS faculty sponsor during his ORHS 1972-73 school year. She remembered Zafer as a young man eager for new American experiences while also being a popular speaker and ambassador for his home country and culture.

Zafer was the first AFS student from a western Asian region of the world to come to Oak Ridge. Previously, most ORHS AFS students had come from Europe. Zafer explained that he qualified for a student exchange during his sophomore year of high school, but he did not receive a family assignment. He once again took the AFS qualifying exam in his junior year, and this time he received an official acceptance letter from AFS along with a small black and white photo of his soon-to-be American family in Oak Ridge, TN.

Zafer wrote of his first impressions of his new family, Joel and Jane Buchanan and their sons, Joel (Joey) and Stephen: "(The photo implied) a very nice family, good looking people, well-educated, and happy. I later realized that Mom (his name for Jane) most probably wanted the kids to sit and look well to give a good pose to the unknown brother coming." Writing this memory fifty years later, Zafer observed, "Stephen and Joey would normally get bored immediately and want to sit in a relaxed position. I laugh now while writing these sentences."

Zafer joined the ORHS senior class of 1973 along with Joey while Stephen was a rising sophomore. Zafer composed a list of his ORHS memories: "School days, my teachers, many friends, yellow buses with lady drivers, doing homework at home, mowing yards of neighboring houses, getting math support from Joey, so much (and difficult for me) required reading in Senior English, doing very well in physics, and learning a lot in chemistry with teacher Powell Puckett." Zafer boasted that Puckett's "goalposts," a graphical, mnemonic aid, was invaluable in later medical studies and his career. Of Puckett's clever dimensional analysis guide, he said, "It has given me a good ability in calculating moles and equivalents, etc. in medicine." He has fond memories of his teachers, namely Benita Albert, Catherine Ledgerwood, Jackie Jacoby, Eugene Pickel, and Barbara Bennett.

Zafer spoke of his adjustments to American life with humor. He wrote, "As a new AFS student, I attended an orientation camp in Istanbul, then we flew to New York with a plane full of exchange students from many countries surrounding Turkey. My first days in New York, and later another month in Oak Ridge, included too many 'firsts' and 'mysterious things'... I got locked in a toilet because I could not figure out the mechanism of the door lock! I put orange juice into my first-ever cereal, because I was not familiar with cereal... My first encounters with knobs were somehow mostly disastrous. I would have to take either a burning hot or a very cold bath for not being able to manage the faucet knobs." He also marveled at the number of American food items that came in boxes at the grocery store.

Numerous speaking engagements became a routine part of Zafer's social schedule. He was a popular invited guest to many civic clubs, social gatherings, and area schools where describing his Turkish roots fascinated his listeners. In fact, Zafer often felt that his audience considered his cultural upbringing to be straight out of the literary work, "The Thousand and One Nights," also known as "The Arabian Nights." He answered some questions with humor, such as a student question asking if they had camels in Turkey. His answer was "only for the tourists." Brother Joey remembered his fielding questions on magic carpets and whether Zafer had ridden them.

Zafer loved sharing the history and cultural life of his home country. In a June 1973 interview for *The Oak Ridger*, Zafer spoke lovingly of Turkish culture: "Hospitality is the most important thing in Turkey. When I used to go to the villages around my school, those people would sleep outside and let you use their beds. They would eat crusts and give you the best part of the bread. In a villager's house, maybe there isn't good furniture, but the floor is shining. Maybe everything is old and the family poor, but you can see the cleanliness."

A well-received feature of Zafer's public presentations included his playing and singing Turkish folk songs. Jane encouraged his talents by offering him use of her guitar. Zafer wryly remembered that it was Jane who kept all her boys

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on schedule including often rushing Zafer to and from events at, as he described it, "a rather fast speed in her Volkswagen Bug."

In a recent interview, Zafer mentioned that music plays a significant role in his American memories. He remembered that Jane often sang while she cooked. "She had an affinity for folk singers such as Joan Baez and the song 'Diamonds and Rust.' I loved hearing her sing," Zafer recalled. Joey liked James Taylor, and Taylor's folk rock songs still evoke special memories for Zafer, songs like "Carolina on my Mind" and "You've Got a Friend." He confessed to playing Taylor's songs for inspiration during late night medical school studies years later. Finally, he laughed while recalling Stephen practicing his trombone lessons and playing his preferred hard rock music while Joey protested. He added, "Whenever I hear 'Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree,' (by Tony Orlando and Dawn) I am immediately transported back in time to the ORHS cafeteria where I first heard the song." A love of music knows no borders nor language barriers as, in turn, Zafer's Turkish folk singing was enthusiastically received by his new American friends.

Zafer's connection to the Buchanan family was an immediately affectionate and close relationship. He reflected: "(The family) gave me full support in improving my speech and proper native English words. Joey and Stephen gave all kinds of technical and scientific support. Mom and Dad were masters of logistics, namely they drove me everywhere and made all kinds of connections with a lot of people." Zafer described his preparation for speeches as a "family affair."

In a recent letter following up on my request to interview him, Zafer wrote the following tribute to his AFS experience. "My AFS year (in Oak Ridge) was truly a highlight of my life. The Buchanan's, my AFS family, have been my second family throughout my life. I was changed upon my return to Turkey. Everyone in the family worked to teach me everything I needed. The ORHS teachers, school friends, Emory Valley neighbors, and family friends contributed to my orientation. When I came across something I could not figure out, either Joey would explain it to me or Stephen would summarize in a few words, after which he categorized such things as 'American ingenuities'. When confused on issues regarding science, engineering, law, or government affairs, Dad Joel would rescue me. As he was an engineer, he explained all the details from the very beginning to the end in scientific order. He was a calm, quiet, and considerate gentleman."

He saved his last words of praise for his American mom: "Mom Jane was my teacher, my advisor, and my problem solver. She was simply my mom. We used to talk about everything for hours. She was very curious regarding everything about me and my life in Turkey, my Turkish family, and my future plans. In the first months of my arrival, the whole family used to sit weekly and read and discuss Turkey and the Islamic religion."

Jane said, "Zafer would often join me when I prepared dinner. While Zafer helped by preparing delicious Turkish salads, we talked. I was so impressed at how adept he was with his hands in food preparation. Thus, I was not surprised to hear his dreams of a career in surgery where those hands would be an asset. I also remember that Zafer loved American hamburgers so much that the family observed a weekly Sunday night dinner at Burger King." Additionally, Jane recalled that Zafer had never eaten peanut butter. She said, "He took an immediate liking to it."

The AFS program strongly encouraged students to be active in various school and community extracurricular programs. One of Zafer's favorite activities was Boy Scouts, specifically the spelunking excursions his troop made. Although he pursued basketball as his primary school sport in Turkey, it was the newly formed ORHS soccer program that became his niche at ORHS. Zafer had played soccer throughout his childhood, and though he claimed that he was "not that good," most certainly his ORHS coach and teammates disagreed. He was an important playmaker for the fledgling team. Frau Armstrong, Zafer's AFS faculty sponsor, said that for years after the 1973 soccer season ORHS soccer coaches would remind her that they would love to have another Zafer.

Zafer shared with friends his confused impressions of his first ORHS football game. "I thought the players were astronauts (in those helmets) ...here you use your hands (in the game) and you call it football." (*The Oak Leaf*, April 17, 1973)

As for academic extracurricular involvement, Zafer joined the International Relations Club (IRC). He traveled with the ORHS IRC to Washington D.C. to participate in the North American Invitational Model United Nations. This event involved thirty-two ORHS students who competed against other high school teams for diplomatic honors, specifically, flag awards for excellence. Zafer was one of eleven in his assigned delegation representing Poland. All students in his delegation had

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the honor of meeting with officials at the Polish Embassy and ultimately representing Polish interests in a simulated United Nations debate.

Zafer listed other events and places that held special memories for him: the lovely green spaces throughout Oak Ridge, the TVA Norris Dam, houseboats, sailing with Joey, hiking/camping trips in the Great Smoky Mountains, and his self-described, "first anthropological experience" in the Cherokee Village.

In a September 1972 interview for the school newspaper, *The Oak Leaf*, Zafer described two notable differences in his American educational experience from Turkish schooling. He observed that ORHS classes seemed more informal and that the relationship between students and teachers was closer. Adding another difference, he mentioned that it seemed American teenagers were able to have more time for hobbies.

Throughout his ORHS school year Zafer was diligent with his studies, ever conscious that midsummer Turkish university placement exams were looming. The battery of tests he was required to take measured his competency across academic disciplines and set his career possibilities. As his Calculus teacher, I worried that the math curriculum in Turkey was different, that Calculus was not a part of the Turkish senior-year curriculum. Conversely, I knew that Zafer was an excellent math student who had completed the best of ORHS math and science course offerings successfully and that his problem-solving skills were strong.

Saying goodbye at the end of the 1973 school year was especially poignant for this teacher who felt I might never again see him. Little could I have dreamed how much smaller our world would become. Thanks to the efforts of Joey Buchanan and virtual, communication platform technology, Zafer, Joey, and I were reunited exactly fifty years later. Our conversation ranged from Oak Ridge memories to Zafer's ongoing career as a surgeon. His wonderful sense of humor, his love for his Oak Ridge family and friends, and his continuing zest for adventure and challenge remain strong.

The next installment of Zafer's story will focus on his Turkish life, his childhood background and family, and his career journey and accomplishments.

Thank you, Benita, for insight into an American Field Service exchange student's experience in Oak Ridge High School and his exceptional relationship developed with his host family of Joel and Jane Buchannan.

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From left to right, front row: Zafer, Jane, Joel, and back row: Joey and Stephen



ORHS graduation picture where Zafer is receiving his diploma from ORHS Principal, Dr. James Schott