

13-FAYMONVILLE

In East Belgium, alongside Walloons, German-speaking Belgians and Flemish, are there also Turks?

In East Belgium, one can find many cultures living together in close proximity, not only Germanophones, Francophones and Flemish, but also ... Turks, ones who hail neither from far Anatolia nor Istanbul, who have neither immigrated here nor been born to immigrant families: the Turks of Faymonville. These really belong to the Walloons of East Belgium. They designate themselves as Turks however, and have always been considered as such, for about 400 years. Yet in point of fact, Turks have never lived here, and neither can neighbouring villagers ever claim to have seen any Turks in Faymonville. So maybe these East Belgian Turks are imaginary, mere phantoms?

On the trail of the Turks of Faymonville

Let the hunt for clues begin! Our first port of call is the population registry at the municipal office. But this no longer functions, not since Faymonville, together with other localities, was incorporated into the district of Weismes in 1977. Today there is a library in the former municipal office. Yet over the entrance to the building is our first indication: five coats of arms on a marble tablet, each of them clearly featuring the Turkish sickle moon and star. Apart from these, no sign of any Faymonville Turks; neither Turkish shops, nor anything vaguely like a mosque. Yet there is one day in the year, when the whole of Faymonville is firmly under Turkish rule.

In Faymonville the Turkish carnival is celebrated in a most un-Turkish manner

Once a year, the Turkish faction in Faymonville spills visibly and very audibly into the streets. The villagers dress as Turks, boldly carry the Turkish flag through the village and play brass band music in Turkish mode. They drink themselves into a whirling stupor on “Turks blood”, a well-seasoned beverage produced by a local merchant from Born. This was first introduced in the 1920s as a fashionable aperitif, and is made from a mixture of herbs with fortified red and sparkling wine. In recent years, this folk-fest has been drawing more and more genuine Turks, who arrive by bus for the carnival from all corners of Belgium. Even the Turkish ambassador, driven down especially from Brussels, was here. In 2012, a highpoint was reached when a Turkish TV station sent a documentary team to report on this phenomenon for the real Turks back home. What they saw certainly must have surprised them, because carnival is a custom quite unknown in Turkish culture!

A Turk guards the goal of the Royal Football Club

Further research leads us, thanks to a signpost on the edge of the village, to the football stadium, home of “RFC Turkania Faymonville”, the Royal Football Club. The club, founded in 1921, currently plays in Belgium’s fourth division. The club arms are once again dominated by the sickle moon and star. Club president Werner Giet informs us that until recently (Summer 2012) no Turkish player had ever featured in the team. But now, for the 2012/2013 season they have engaged a genuine Turk, Anil Çiftçi, as replacement goal-keeper. He mentions in passing that a Turkish family settled here in 2002. To a question concerning his loyalties during the 2012 European Cup, when qualification Group A contained Turkey, Belgium, Germany and Austria, he insists that “naturally, I was rooting for Belgium!” Turkey managed to book a ticket for the play-off. Belgium just missed qualifying. In the long run, Turkey didn’t make it to the last round in Poland and the Ukraine, but Germany did, though they lost the final to take second place – with Mesut Özil, one of Germany’s Turks, as a star in their team.

So how did the Turks get to Faymonville?

The Turks of Faymonville can look back on a long history. How they actually came to be here depends on which of two versions you credit. One version says that on a particular occasion the villagers had refused to support the Catholic Church’s appeal for believers to finance the raising of troops to drive back the advancing Ottoman army. Thus, they were accused of being complicit with the Turkish cause. They had taken this labelling on-board and treated their Turkish status with irony ever since. The second version seems more plausible. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the villagers of Faymonville

are said to have refused payment of a tax for the maintenance of the Imperial Abbey of Stavelot-Malmedy, which at the time held a seat and a vote in the Holy Roman Empire's "Council of Princes". The villagers' reason for refusing was profane rather than sacred: they were part of the Duchy of Luxembourg at the time and saw no reason to pay additional taxes to another sovereign dominion, whether spiritual or temporal. This unchristian behaviour resulted in them being apostrophised as "Turks", which was a standard synonym at the time for "unbeliever". But Werner Giet of the Royal football Club "Turkania" insists that, although they are referred to as Turks, their own identity is unaffected: "People may call us Turks, but we don't feel like Turks".

Real Turks in Wallonia and Belgium

The "real" Turks of East Belgium, according to Werner Giet, are less to be found in the villages than in the towns, such as Malmedy. Turks first immigrated into Belgium in the early 20th century. Their number dwindled significantly during the Second World War, according to the migration researchers Birte Nienaber and Ursula Ross. Those Turks who stayed were mainly traders, diplomats, students or refugees. In the mid-1970s, their numbers rose. A rising birth-rate and the possibility for families to be reunited were the main reasons for this. In 1990, Belgium marked its largest Turkish nationality population, at 88,000 individuals. By 2000, more than 126,000 people of Turkish origin lived in Belgium, of which half were already naturalised Belgian citizens. Of these, about a quarter lived in Wallonia. In 2008, Wallonia had a foreign population proportion of 9.3%. In the province of Liege, this was 10.4%. In the two districts of the German-speaking Community, there were 14,387 citizens of foreign nationality in 2007, from a total population of 73,675. This represents a foreign national proportion of 19.5%, more than double the national level of 8.8%. By far the largest group of this foreign population in the DG is German, followed by the Dutch and the Spanish. In 2007, Turks did not even feature in the top six countries of origin.