TURKISH CELLULOID

by ÖZER KABAŞ

"In front of us, a screen about a meter and a half wide. We looked at each other blankly. Signs on the walls meant very little: LIVE PHOTOGRAPH...MIRACLE OF THE CENTURY.... BULL-FIGHT AT ANDALUSIA....THE WORLD BY TRAIN. These aroused our curiosity and no more. Then, there came a sudden darkness. In fear I reached for my brother's hand and grasped it, feeling threatened and lost.

Then the smell of gas intensified in the closed and heavily draped room. It was caused by the petrol lamps used to light the cinema projectors.

A train station in Europe. The engine puffing black smoke and a chain of wagons behind with people running around crazily. Suddenly the train started coming upon us and all of the spectators started moving in various directions to get out of its way. The bull charging at us was even more frightening. If shown earlier, I am sure few of the spectators would have remained." (1)

These remarks are by Ercüment Ekrem Talu, who is telling about the earliest shows of cinematography in Istanbul. However, there are even earlier events related to cinematography. A photographer in Istanbul called Vafiadis applied to the Lumière Frères for information after their first public show on December 28, 1895. Soon after, the Lumières Frères sent a team of cameramen to Istanbul headed by Alexandre Promio. At that time Promio did a very important experiment in "travelling" (shooting in motion) on a row-boat on the Golden Horn.

Cinema first entered Turkey through a magician named Bertrand, who was employed in Yıldız Palace. The first shows took place in the palace itself, after which they were shown to the public, producing the effect which Ercüment Ekrem Talu earlier described. These films were shown by Sigmund Weinberg, who was then a representative of the Pathé Frères in Istanbul.

The first movie house in Istanbul was at the cross-roads in Galatasaray where the old trams took a turn. These movies were shown in a famous beer-house called Sponeck. Later, the Fevziye coffee-house in Şehzadebaşı also began to show films, and soon became very popular.

The first film to be made in Turkey was shot after the Ottomans entered World War 1 on the side of the Germans, three days after war was declared against the Russians. National feelings during this time of the war took people to Ayastefanos (Yeşilköy) to tear down the Russian monument. The monument marked the farthest Russian advance during the war of 1876-77. Ruat Uzkınay, a reserve officer in the army used his camera to record this event, thus producing the first Turkish documentary film, about 150 meters long.

Enver Paşa, a great admirer of the Germans, on a visit to Germany in 1915, had noticed the efforts of the German Army in war documentaries and their strong effect on the illiterate masses. On his return, he assigned Weinberg to the head of what he called "Army Cinema Center", and Uzkınay became his assistant. With the aid of German and Austrian technicians they shot a series of war documentaries and newsreels. (Some of these films are kept in the archives of the present Army foto-film center.)

The first feature film was attempted by Weinberg in 1916: a film called The Marriage of Himmet Ağa. But, unfortunately, all the actors were soon drafted by the army and the production stopped, only to be finished by Uzkınay after the war.

In 1916 a semi-military organization called the "Müdafai-Milliye Cemiyeti" was founded for film making purposes. They had a promising young director Sedat Simavi (deceased, owner of the present Hürriyet newspaper) who successfully completed two feature films: The Paw (1917) and The Spy (1917).

The defeat of the Ottomans in 1918 was followed by the Allied occupation of most parts of the Empire, including Istanbul. The film makers, from fear of confiscation, turned over their equipment to an organization called the "War Veterans Organization". During this time Ahmet Fehim efendi,