The New York Times | http://nyti.ms/1yXkxVH

MAGAZINE

The Mine Disaster That Shook Turkey

By SUZY HANSEN NOV. 26, 2014

That morning, Tugba woke at 4 to clean the three-room stone house, which leaned into a hill full of apple trees. She and her husband, Ahmet, grew up here in Kayrakalti, a village in the western Aegean region of Turkey, between conservative Anatolia and the raki-and-cigarettes coast. Already, a bus that would pick up Ahmet for work was making its way through the area's cypress trees and olive farms. Tugba had gone to the bedroom to nurse their daughter, who was just three days shy of her first birthday, and they had fallen back asleep, so Ahmet left without eating breakfast. Tugba was 18 and Ahmet 30, and sometimes they still blushed around each other; their faces shone with youth, hers heart-shaped, his angular and fair. That morning, Tugba, asleep with the baby who looked like her, did not say goodbye.

The bus stopped at the end of the village road, so just before 5, Ahmet left his home and walked down the dirt path opposite his mother's house (whose outhouse they shared), around the old farm equipment and his unfaithful car. Ahmet had tried for some time to sell Ramadan bread from the car before it broke down; he and Tugba were Muslims but rarely had enough money for celebratory Ramadan dinners themselves. Many of the 350 villagers in Kayrakalti used to grow Turkey's famous tobacco and raise sheep. But three decades ago, when the country opened up to the world, the government started importing Marlboros and Parliaments and raising the price of animal feed, and soon no one could make enough money from farming anymore. Some Turks migrated from the countryside to the cities seeking better lives, though they often ended up worse. Other men, like Ahmet, stayed behind to keep working the land, not knowing that modernization would catch up to them there anyway. These days, Ahmet left his village every day to go to work an hour and a half away as a machine operator in a coal mine.

Turkey, even where poor, tends to be well maintained and orderly, and the mining town of Soma is no exception. In the evenings, the men, and sometimes

women, gather in one part of a central tea garden; and the women and children, and sometimes men, gather in another section called the family salon; and everyone, especially in summer, sits for hours, smoking and gossiping until bedtime. It's not a well-to-do town, though there is a nice coffee shop with plush gray chairs and a relatively expensive chain restaurant called Kofteci Ramiz. The place's wholesome, upright quality derives in part from the buildings that dominate the center of town: the mosques, the men's teahouses, the mining-company offices, the Police Department, the local office of the country's ruling Justice and Development Party, the governor's hall, the miners' union.

It was to Soma that Ahmet had fled with Tugba four years earlier — a lovers' "kidnapping," in the Turkish vernacular, which, because she was 14, led to many weeks of arguing with her father until he let them marry. At the time, Ahmet worked at a mine run by another local company, Imbat. That was the fourth mine he had worked in; the first had been decrepit, and when it collapsed, the rescuers had to take a motorbike headlamp in to look for miners. Imbat's was a larger mine in a region known for its *linyit*, or lignite, a soft coal burned in thermal power plants nearby, like the one that stood just outside Soma. The air all around town was filled with the smell of burning dust, and sometimes, especially on hot summer nights, you could feel it tingling on your skin. In the center of town, adjacent to the building of the Turk-Is union, to which most of the coal miners belonged, there was a Linyit Otel; elsewhere, there was a Linyit High School and a Linyit Psychiatric Center.

After working for a year at Imbat, Ahmet was owed his first vacation, and he used it to run off with Tugba. He shared his plans with his superior, who understood the importance of such matters and consented to his taking time off. But when Ahmet returned, his job was gone. "I don't remember you," the superior said. Ahmet went to work in the mine next door, called Eynez and operated by Soma Holding.

When he got to Eynez that day, Ahmet changed at his locker, where he stowed his clothes and cellphone and put on his miner's coat, boots and gloves. Miners complained about the outfit's shoddy materials; they often had to pay for new gear for themselves. The locker room was shabby and full of mice, but at least it offered cover. At Soma Holding's other mines, like Isiklar, the men changed outside. Ahmet had been asked to work at Isiklar the month before, and the conditions at the waterlogged mine were awful. Even the machines sank in

the mud. I hate the mines, he swore to Tugba at home. I am not ever going back to them! *Allah belasini versin!* (God damn them!)

He especially hated his shift, the day shift, because that was when the bosses came; their orders could conflict with those of the *taseron*, or subcontractors. The *taseron* were the men who hired the miners and received commissions based on how much coal was produced. As subcontractors, they were accountable to no one, free to push the miners as hard as they wished. The *taseron* insulted the men if they were slow, even cursed their mothers and sisters. All day long, the same: *hadi, hadi, hadi* — come on, come on, come on. Get back to work. If a miner rested, he heard about it. If something went wrong: *hadi, hadi, hadi*. The miners had few rights. A complaint about contradictory commands, or bad conditions, or safety risks — or anything — might get you labeled a troublemaker, and no man in a country with a long history of subversion and paranoia wanted that.

Ahmet bought a bun from the company canteen before his shift and chatted with his fellow miners. Some lived in Soma, and some in nearby villages. Some were young, and some were old. Some had come from coal mines elsewhere — Zonguldak, Kutahya — and some had never worked outside Soma. Some had children, and some were as young as 18. There were around 700 of them, and on that day, May 13, 2014, almost half of them would die in the worst industrial disaster in Turkey's 90-year history.

The Eynez mine was more than a square mile in extent and 1,300 feet deep. Fans constantly blew clean air inside. It took Ahmet at least 30 minutes to walk the mile to his job underground. *Hadi! Hadi!* the supervisors yelled, the constant cry to speed up, to do more. A decade ago, the mine was state-run and produced 1.5 million tons of coal a year, which had been deemed its natural production capacity. But in 2005, the mine was privatized, and eventually annual production rose to more than 3.5 million tons, all of which was bought by the government. The state still owned the mine, but through a system called *rodovans* ("royalty," in English), it rented out the mine to a private company, which in turn sold back the coal for a fixed price. In practice, there was little separation between company and state. When government inspectors visited, the miners said, there was a sense of shared interests; the inspectors looked at the nicest parts and gave the mine a pass.

The Justice and Development Party, or the A.K.P., which has been in power for more than a decade now, needed the coal for electricity, for construction projects and, as the miners saw, for gifts to dole out at election time. The

country's prime minister and now president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, had bags of coal delivered to poor Turks during his last three campaigns. Most miners supported the A.K.P.: If the party didn't win, their bosses told them, you won't have jobs. Sometimes, the miners said, they were paid their daily wage to take a bus to the A.K.P.'s famous, techo-thumping rallies, which often gave the impression that the entire nation had gathered in impromptu parties of collective joy. The miners, too, waved their hands in the air and screamed.

Ahmet liked the A.K.P. because it built good hospitals, made health insurance cheaper and helped farmers' cooperatives with their debts. That wasn't enough, though. In the mines, working 30 days a month, Ahmet could make 1,800 lira, or around $900, less than $11,000 a year. (Others' salaries could be as low as $600 a month.) Working conditions varied, depending on the location within in the mine. In the weeks before the disaster, some miners complained that certain areas were hotter than usual; they found themselves drinking more water and sweating profusely, their skin growing irritated and suffering from rashes. They told their wives: It's as if we're burning. Many went to the hospital for creams. They worried about the rising heat, about the small fires that broke out, about the methane and carbon monoxide.

To Ahmet, the heat felt normal, but not the hours. In the previous month, he had worked much longer than usual, shifts of 10 hours rather than eight. To the miners, there seemed to be a strange urgency in the mine. Some new anxiety seemed to bear down on them from above. But overproduction was the sultan that had always ruled their days. The shift after Ahmet's, which started at 4 in the afternoon and ended at midnight, had better hours for a normal life, or more time in the daylight at least. The men nicknamed the later shift *pasha*, a title of high rank among Ottoman officers.

The older miners hazed the newer ones, sprinkling bits of earth over their heads in the dark to make them think the mine was caving in. This was not an idle concern; Ahmet had already been in two accidents that involved falling materials. Once, a large stone landed on his back. Another time, a rock crushed his finger, and he had to have a metal plate put in it. A week before the disaster, he mentioned to his wife that if he was ever burned in the mine, they could identify his body by the metal in his finger.

Ahmet arrived at his tunnel, in a section called A Panel, one of the deepest parts of the mine, and relieved the worker at his station. (Changing shifts underground increases the risk of more casualties in the event of an accident.)

His work area, around 80 yards long, was where a shearer machine, a giant pinwheel-like cutter, broke apart the earthen walls so the coal could be extracted from the rock. Other machines, one of which Ahmet operated, provided support overhead to keep the ceiling from collapsing. Eynez is not as mechanized as most modern mines. Still, coal extraction is no longer just the backbreaking work associated with mines in Britain in the 1930s: men on their knees in low spaces, shoveling out coal. Many Soma miners clean, do electrical or security work, pump water out of the mine or, as in Ahmet's case, push buttons on earth-moving equipment. The machines are modern, but the work and safety conditions are ancient.

The men in Ahmet's tunnel, who numbered around 40, typically got a half-hour to eat lunch, but they took turns eating alone while their fellow miners stayed on the job. There was no designated room (or time) for meals, nor even a place set aside for them to relieve themselves. They ate and did their business wherever they worked. Ahmet recalled how most new miners went through one adaptation at lunchtime. On their first day, they opened a plastic container full of yogurt only to find black dust on it seconds later, and then they threw it out. The same thing happened on the second day too, and maybe the third. By the fourth day, they just scooped out the bits of coal and ate their yogurt. When inspectors showed up, the managers hung lights and a sheet to create a protected eating area; otherwise the men just ate in the dark and in the open. Rats often stole their lunches, though some miners befriended the culprits, knowing that they were a good way to detect whether poisonous gas had filled the mine; many of the Soma miners did not trust the gas sensors. In any case, small fires were so common that the superiors often ignored the alarms.

Just after 3 o'clock, the shearer machine stopped working. The conveyor belts that carried the coal stopped working. The lights stopped working. The power had gone out. Only the lamps on the miners' helmets shone in the dark.

Ibrahim, an engineer in Ahmet's tunnel, tried calling the surface with one of the mine phones, but they didn't work, either. So Ibrahim and Vedat, the tunnel supervisor, said, What the hell, we might as well leave. They told Ahmet he was in charge and began the half-hour ascent to the exit. When they had gone, other men suggested that the whole group should leave — clearly something was wrong, and the shift was almost over anyway. But ordinary miners rarely left a shift early; that could result in the loss of an entire day's pay. So the men in A Panel waited, chatting. Some minutes later, Ibrahim and Vedat returned. They had run

into some electricians wearing gas masks, who said a cable had exploded and a fire was discharging black smoke.

It was a mine, and there were fires in mines. Lignite, prone to spontaneous combustion, often burned on its own. And the electrical cables were old and flammable and hung haphazardly. So the men didn't panic and stayed in place.

Unlike German or American mines — or the Chilean mine where, in 2010, 33 miners survived for 69 days underground after a cave-in — the Eynez mine had no safe rooms, which were expensive to create and maintain. The tunnel where Ahmet worked was connected to a ventilation tunnel at one end and an exit tunnel at the other. The circulating air was controlled by a series of wood doors throughout these tunnels. Ibrahim and Vedat told the miners that they could leave, but not through the normal exit tunnel, which they themselves had tried to use earlier. Around the corner, perhaps 200 yards down the ventilation tunnel, however, there was a passage that provided access to a higher level in the mine.

The men were told they could try that route out. But the smoke was pushing in from the far end of the ventilation tunnel, fighting the circulating air from the other direction. Smoke was then being sucked out through the passageway up. They were stuck.

Carbon monoxide can kill a miner in minutes, if not seconds, depending on how much oxygen is in the area. If the carbon monoxide is concentrated enough, a man can begin to die after three to five breaths of it. But these 40 miners were lucky. Their area was the site of the shearer machine, which cut into the earth's wall, and supporting machinery that created a higher ceiling, where some of the carbon monoxide could collect. Other men from elsewhere in the mine had fled the smoke and moved to Ahmet's section, till about 140 of them were gathered there.

They figured they would get out shortly, maybe in a half-hour. After an hour, they began to worry. What was taking so long? Why hadn't anyone come to talk to them? Some of the men worked as security experts, and they had gone to investigate what was happening — clearly this had been going on for too long now — but they never came back.

Every minute brought more worry. The men considered trying to leave, but the air was fresh there, and they assumed it was better to wait. When the smoke seemed to increase, Ibrahim suggested that they use a door to block their section. The men paced behind their barricade and prayed.

Tevrat could hear all the ambulances, sirens rushing to and fro. It was midafternoon on May 13, and his wife had just rustled him awake. He had gotten back to his apartment in Soma after his night shift at Atabacasi, another Soma Holding mine, around 9 o'clock and gone straight to sleep without breakfast. The gases from the mine made him so sleepy, he sometimes slept for more than 10 hours at a time.

Something must have happened at the mines, his wife said. There are so many ambulances.

The area was home to five different mines, each of which employed thousands. Everyone knew that ambulances meant something bad at the mines. Even so, this was a lot of sirens. Tevrat called a friend who worked at Soma Holding.

There is a fire in Eynez, the friend told him, but the phones are jammed from all the phone calls. I don't know what it is. They might need rescue. You should go.

Tevrat was 28, slight and wiry, with short brown hair, thick-lashed eyes and a fair face that was all cheekbones and jaw. He had moved his wife and son to Soma from a city called Ordu, on the Black Sea. He started working in construction at 16. It paid well, but traveling to jobs kept him from his family for months at a time. His uncle lived in Soma and worked as one of the subcontractors whose job was to round up and recruit men to work in the mines. As an incentive, some recruiters lured the men with promises that their salaries would qualify them for credit cards, which were new and alluring to many Turks. Luxury goods were flooding the country, and the people of Soma wanted nice televisions, too. But many miners never seemed to be able to get ahead of the interest charges, and soon they found themselves needing to make the kind of money it was hard for them to make outside the mines.

Tevrat's uncle had persuaded him to come to Soma. Tevrat hated the claustrophobia, the lack of freedom inside and outside the mine. A full workday, door to door, lasted almost 12 hours. That meant two hours a day at most with his family. His one day off every month consisted of cleaning his home and going to the bazaar — if you could call the one in Soma a bazaar, he said. Maybe once a year you could have a picnic. He had no social life, no life at all. But, he said, this is my personality; I don't leave things I started. Tevrat's job was to operate the coal conveyor belt. He once warned his superiors that there were dangers in the mines, but they yelled at him, told him he was hardheaded.

He went first to the Soma state hospital; it was swarming with miners' relatives. One man wailed: My brother was there — where is my brother? There were so many people, but no miners from Eynez. Tevrat caught a ride to the mine.

The next shift of miners had already arrived at Eynez and begun to change, so hundreds of men milled around the entrance, trying to get in to help. They knew only that more than 700 men were trapped underground by a fire, and that carbon monoxide killed fast. One rescue team, from the nearby Imbat mine, had already gone in, and another team of seven was dressing. Tevrat joined them.

Many of the rescuers that day were ordinary miners, men who ran down through the one entrance that was clear of smoke. The Imbat crew, equipped with oxygen tanks, went in another entrance and was able to save five men, but the smoke was too thick, and the carbon-monoxide concentrations too high, for them to go deeper into the mine. The tunnel needed to be cleared. A few hours after the fire started, those leading the rescue operation reversed the airflow of the fans, and Tevrat prepared to descend.

Ahmet and the other miners noticed something strange: the smoke was coming down from the passage that led upward. Shouts from the other end of the mining tunnel indicated that smoke was creeping in from both ends. How could this be?

The men began to panic, running back and forth. They were trapped. They didn't know when it would hit them, the carbon monoxide they couldn't see. They crowded together in the tunnel away from the smoke. They all had gas masks on their belts, but few trusted them: They were old, their expiration dates rarely checked. Some miners put them on and breathed in coal dust that had collected inside; other masks did not work at all. Ahmet knew his was only four years old, but he also knew it would last for only 45 minutes.

The smoke began to burn their faces and their mouths. Ahmet started to feel lightheaded. He knew what was happening: Even with the space above the shearer machine, there was too much smoke. Some men knelt to the ground and stuck their faces in the mud, rubbing it over their skin, filling their mouths with it, even breathing it, anything to avoid the poisonous smoke.

Ahmet saw 20 or so standing in the ventilation tunnel, in the smoke. They were panicking. He put on his mask, and with the help of a friend pulled one struggling miner back to what had been fresher air, but the entire area was filling up with smoke. The miners were staggering, looked ill. Ahmet found Ibrahim, the

engineer, sitting on the ground, his gas mask slung around his neck. He was breathing, but blood was coming out of his nose. He turned and saw a friend named Ali sitting under an old, unused conveyor belt. He went to help him. His body was cold. Ahmet realized the miners were dying.

He was growing weak, too. He looked at Ibrahim again, wanting to help, but Ahmet weighed only 135 pounds, and Ibrahim was twice his size. There was nothing he could do. As Ahmet moved toward the passage to the next level up, he had to step around the men sprawled across the ground. Some of them turned and stretched out their arms toward him, as if reaching for his hand.

Vedat, Ahmet's superior, had glassy eyes, but he was alive. They couldn't speak to each other through their masks, so Ahmet signaled: Let's go. Up. They climbed to the level above and into more smoke.

There, Ahmet and Vedat reached a conveyor belt, which could be used for coal or miners, but almost always for coal. The coal can take the belt, the superiors would say, you can walk. Ahmet saw men laid out on it, as if in their desperation they hoped the conveyor belt would carry them out. Other men were on the ground. Near them, also on the dirt floor, Ahmet saw hundreds of lifeless rats. He knew they were dead because their fangs were showing, their jaws open and stiff. Here we are, Ahmet thought, the brotherhood of rats and men.

Aboveground, thousands of family members, gendarmerie, state rescue workers, police officers and E.M.T.s thronged around the mine entrances. People screamed, pushed, cried, demanded answers: Who was in the mine? Where was the day's register? No one seemed to know. Every time a man emerged alive, coughing and black-faced, the crowd applauded. Every time a body was clumsily brought out on a stretcher, the crowd lurched forward, trying to get a glimpse of the face to see if any feature could be recognized: the cut of the hair, the curve of an eyebrow, the bend of a nose.

Tugba was home that afternoon when some men stopped in the village to tell people about the fire at Eynez. She tried to call Ahmet on his phone, thinking his shift was over and he might have left the mine, but the phones still weren't working. She sent a boy to find Ahmet's mother in the fields.

A car convoy quickly assembled to head to the mines, but the villagers didn't want to take Tugba with them — she was distraught, and she had a baby to take care of. After they left, a man on a moped stopped outside her home. "They are all dead," he said.

Coal-mining disasters often expose an economic system's injustices, and for Turks, used to hearing their growing economy referred to as a miracle, the Soma disaster has been a reckoning. It is one thing for workers to have few rights; it is another for a democratic country to have evolved in such a way that its citizens have little protection from their employers. As Ayhan Yuksel, the director of the mining engineers section of the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects, put it to me, referring to the death toll at Soma: 301 people don't die because of a technical malfunction; 301 people die because of larger systemic forces.

Over the last few decades, as its state-run economy struggled, Turkey opened up its markets. In the early 2000s, to help repay a $16 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund, the newly elected Justice and Development Party began to sell off significant state companies. One was Tekel, which controlled tobacco production; its removal of price supports and eventual privatization led to the loss of jobs for hundreds of thousands of small tobacco farmers, like those around Soma. Some coal mines were privatized, too, but Eynez's rodovans arrangement kept it effectively under state control. In this way, the government was not simply looking the other way while big business did as it pleased — at Eynez, the government was enabling and profiting from barely restrained big business.

As privatization took hold, Turkey's unions languished. In the 1960s, the left coalesced primarily around two unions: DISK and Turk-Is ("Is" means work in Turkish). Turk-Is was close to the state; DISK was more radical. When military generals took over the country during the 1980 coup and dissolved the government, they also broke up DISK and passed laws restricting union activities. While the Soma miners have blamed both the company and the government for the disaster, many of them reserve a special anger for Turk-Is. In the weeks after the fire, the union's local administrators acquiesced to miners' demands that they step down because of their failure to push for better working conditions, or better pay, or paid sick days, or reduced hours. Union leaders had led the miners, they said, to think they would be fired if they did not comply with the union's directives.

A founding member of the miners' union in Soma told me that the union was unfairly criticized after the disaster. "Even the government to some extent scapegoated the union," he said. Like many miners, he did not want his name to be published. Ahmet, whom I first met at the union's office in June, also felt that

the union was a victim of the relationship between the mining company and the government. “I can’t really blame the union, because they are forced to be under the control of the company,” he told me. “Normally, the mine should be subject to the union, not the union subject to the mine.”

The A.K.P., perhaps the best-run political party the country has known, dominates life in Turkey: It has a majority in Parliament and support among half the population, including many miners in Soma. Over the last decade, miners pointed out, Soma has slowly come under the control of the A.K.P. The unemployment office is the A.K.P. office. If you want to open a store, you have to vote A.K.P. If you want to do construction work on your house, they joked, you have to be an A.K.P. supporter. And if you want a job in the coal mine, you need to back the A.K.P. The general manager of the Soma mine, Ramazan Dogru, was married to Melike Dogru, an A.K.P. representative on the City Council. They had been nobodies, the miners said, and suddenly there they were, running the mine, sitting in the front row at the Somaspor soccer games. The police, the hospitals, the local businesspeople — the A.K.P.'s role in Turkish life makes it seem like more than a political party. The miners called the thing that controlled their lives “the octopus.”

The images from outside the mine were broadcast every night on TV and were some of the most painful many Turks had seen in some time: dead bodies, women screaming, old men collapsing in tears. But after the disaster, which many miners call a “massacre,” one day passed before Prime Minister Erdogan visited Soma. Even that delay was a surprise: Wasn’t the prime minister a man of the people? Erdogan is an authoritarian but often brilliant politician; the tragedy called for him to deliver an emotional speech, even shed a tear, as he was known to do (though usually on state visits to foreign countries). It was natural to expect that Erdogan would use the tragedy to pull on the heartstrings of a nation and win a few more votes when he ran for president later in the summer.

Instead, Erdogan proclaimed that he should not be criticized for Soma. Turkey, just as England had in the 19th century, was going through its industrial revolution and would suffer some of the same consequences every developing nation experiences. He said: “I went back in British history. Some 204 people died there after a mine collapsed in 1862. In 1866, 361 miners died in Britain. In an explosion in 1894, 290 people died there. Take America, with all of its technology and everything. In 1907, 361. These are usual things.”

In 2010, Erdogan referred to a mining tragedy that killed 30 men as the profession's "destiny." Erdogan is a religious man, so some Turks, especially those secularists who associate religion with backwardness, have been inclined to interpret these types of comments as ignorance. Many have seen them as pure callousness. In another way, though, Erdogan seems to be expressing something else: his belief in the divine power of the capitalistic system whose rise he presided over.

Tevrat could breathe without his oxygen tank, but he kept it on his back as he walked more than half a mile into the mine. It took him almost 30 minutes to get to the spot where the first five men had been rescued. And as he advanced farther, he saw bodies under and on top of the conveyor belt. Were they miners? Were they part of the rescue teams? He began to worry for his own life.

Deeper in the mine, he found supervisors gathered together. They gave orders to Tevrat and the others: Go about 150 yards down this main road, and you will see the entrance for S Panel. They expected that many miners had taken shelter there. Tevrat, now wearing his mask, dipped under a conveyor belt, turned into S Panel and stopped.

Unlike the rest of the mine, it wasn't dark. Dozens of lights played upon the ceiling; the room was illuminated from below. It had the strange light of hell, Tevrat thought. The beams of light were coming from the helmets of miners who had collapsed on the ground.

There were so many bodies, maybe a hundred. It was as if someone had just thrown them, one by one, into a heap. The space was not big: The miners had fainted, fallen, collapsed on top of one another. Some were stiff, their arms up in the air. Some were in the position of prayer, both hands turned upward. They were so tangled up together that you would have to lift a leg to see the face below. A couple of miners from the rescue team couldn't handle the scene and left the room. If you vomited in your oxygen mask, you could join the dead yourself.

Tevrat was nervous. The gas must have been everywhere. The rescuers saw a headlamp move and ran to feel the man's skin. He was warm. They dragged the survivor away from the room, back up the 150 yards or so to where the air was better and more rescue teams were waiting. Then Tevrat went back in.

The rescuers threw themselves at the pile of legs and arms, touching them, feeling for warmth. Trying to discern which arm belonged to which body. None of the bodies were warm, except one. They wrested him from the pile and carried him out too.

Tevrat ran down another ramp into another tunnel. There were more bodies, bodies everywhere on the belts and on the floor. Someone said, “No one is alive here.” If there were this many, there could be so many more.

There were some miracles that day. A hundred or so men near the shearer machine where Ahmet worked were discovered alive, for example. But when Tevrat got there, he also found about 20 bodies, on the ground and under the conveyor belt, including that of Ibrahim, with his gas mask around his neck. They had died while trying to escape through the ventilation tunnel. It was the same route Ahmet had taken.

At one point when Tevrat was near the mine entrance, he went to operate the conveyor belt, which was bringing out bodies — he was a coal-conveyor-belt operator, after all. The belt was moving faster than people could take bodies off it and get them into ambulances. At the end, the bodies were piling up on top of one another. Some had blood on their faces because their lungs had exploded. Others were burned, on their hands, on their boots, their skin like leather. Tevrat and others placed blankets over the dead and oxygen masks on their faces so the hysterical crowd would think they might still be alive and refrain from rushing the rescuers in their grief. In the days after the catastrophe, many Turks accused state rescue teams of putting oxygen masks on the dead to cover up, for insurance purposes, how many miners actually died inside the mine. But according to Tevrat, it was because too many bodies were coming out on that conveyor belt, too many for the operators like Tevrat to handle.

That night, the fire in the mine still burned. The rescue teams stayed overnight and slept under the dead’s blankets.

When Erdogan finally arrived in Soma, protesters confronted him. The prime minister sought shelter from them in a grocery store in the Linyit hotel. At one point, a young man booed him. According to reports in the Turkish press, Erdogan said, “You boo this prime minister, and you get a slap!” (An adviser to Erdogan denied that he said this.) Later, one of the prime minister’s aides was photographed with his leg caught in midkick over a protester curled up in a ball on the ground. Police battalions dispatched by Erdogan had attacked and shot tear gas into crowds many times before, but it was a shock to see government officials themselves kicking people, to hear accounts of Erdogan insulting and threatening ordinary people in person, on the street, in front of cameras, in the very town where people were mourning their dead.

For a moment, it felt as if the government might fall. Surely this was the sort of industrial calamity that would spark outrage in everyone. But three months later, Erdogan, who had already been prime minister for a dozen years, was elected president of the republic for four more. This outcome was not unexpected; he is a popular leader, partly because of Turkey's growth under his leadership, partly because he has undermined any opposition to his rule. A country like Turkey might be in some sort of industrial childhood, like Britain in the 19th century, and Erdogan might be right that you can't go through an industrial revolution without tribulations. But Britain and the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries probably had more effective influences supporting reform — unions, a free press, stronger opposition parties, the fear of Communism — than 21st-century Turkey, where globalization and capitalism have been overwhelming forces. Ordinary people felt as if they were shouting into a void.

Much of the attention paid to Soma has faded in light of Turkey's larger geopolitical issues, namely new tensions with the country's Kurdish population and allegations that the government has allowed thousands of members of the Islamic State militant group to pass through Turkey to the Syrian border. But the legal cases against Soma Holding continue. This month, Turkish prosecutors asked for eight company executives to be imprisoned; 29 other employees, including mine managers, engineers and security supervisors, have been charged with involuntary manslaughter. The September report from the Soma public prosecutor found 20 counts of gross negligence at the Eynez mine: inadequate ventilation, flammable equipment, inadequate education for miners, lack of gas sensors, poor telephone systems inside the mine, defective gas masks, an incomplete fire-escape plan. It's still not known what caused the fire: whether methane gas, which often causes an explosion, or the oxidation of coal, which emits carbon monoxide. Ayhan Yuksel, the coal-mining engineer, said Eynez might not have monitored its coal-oxidation levels carefully. "And because of overproduction, there were more workers than should have been in the mine," he said.

This month, a parliamentary investigation undertaken by representatives from all political parties concurred with many of the report's findings, including the claim that the pressure to produce so much coal caused mine managers to overlook safety concerns. But Ozgur Ozel, an opposition member of Parliament who has been warning about the conditions in Soma mines for years, criticized

the A.K.P.-led commission for declining to explore the larger systemic issues that might have created the poor mine conditions in the first place: the relationships between the companies and the government, the lack of transparency in licensing the mines, the way the government uses coal as a form of patronage to the poor. “When you want to talk about these reasons,” Ozel told me, “they prevent it.” (Erdogan’s office denied these claims.)

A “Soma bill” recently passed the Parliament, too. It met some of the miners’ demands: six-hour shifts, a lowering of the retirement age, the erasure of debts for victims’ families, paid vacations. Ozel believes that Turkey’s mines are still unsafe, however. “Most of the promises were kept to the families of the dead,” he said. “They were given houses and money. There has been a little improvement in terms of the miners’ basic rights. But with respect to the security of the mines, none of the promises have been kept.” Critics also contend that a system in which the state subcontracts out coal production to a private company, which in turn subcontracts some of its labor to unaccountable middlemen, will always be an irresponsible and destructive one.

Since the Soma disaster, Ozel says, some 30 additional miners have died in Turkey; in late October, 18 miners drowned in a flooded mine in Ermenek, a town in central Anatolia. In response, the government has pledged to issue a reform bill for work safety, while opposition members of Parliament have demanded the resignation of Taner Yildiz, the energy minister. Also, protests returned to Soma this month because a construction company illegally ripped up 6,000 olive trees belonging to small farmers in order to build a new coal-burning thermal power plant. When farmers occupied the land, the company’s security team beat them up. The construction firm, Kolin Group, is part of a consortium of companies recently chosen to build a controversial third airport in Istanbul, which the A.K.P. promises will be the largest in the world.

The miners of Soma remain traumatized. They say they feel as if their lives have no value. When Tevrat was finally ready to go home after days at Eynez, he began to walk the 17 miles back to Soma. A passing car gave him a ride until they reached a checkpoint. The A.K.P., fearing insurrection, had dispatched the police to prevent people from entering Soma. Tevrat approached a policeman. His appearance made it obvious that he was a miner.

“Can a car take me home, or just open the road?” Tevrat asked.

“No, we cannot open the road.”

“I have been at the mine for five days. I want to go home.”

“I cannot open it.”

Tevrat didn’t understand.

Another policeman approached. “What is going on here?”

The first policeman flicked his head at Tevrat and said, “This wants to pass.”

“This!” Tevrat yelled. “Who are you calling this?”

Ahmet nearly collapsed in his last minutes in the mine. He and Vedat both had masks on and could not communicate, and several times one or the other tried to stop and let himself die. But they pushed each other forward. They stopped every 10 yards, then walked again. The only thing Ahmet could think of was all that he had in the world: Tugba and Duygu, the baby whose first birthday was only three days away. He promised Allah that if he were saved, if he could see his family, he would never return to the mines again.

Just as four rescuers happened upon them, Ahmet and Vedat saw smoke coming through a collapsed part of a wall. Ahmet thought this might have been a source of the smoke that flooded his work area. He felt a strange burst of energy, and he and Vedat and the rescuers picked up an old wooden door lying nearby and laid it across the collapsed area. Ahmet took off his shirt and stuffed it into one of the holes. Then he and Vedat continued the long walk forward, into the bright, shining lights.

It was late at night when Tugba screamed. Her husband’s face was on the television screen, and he was alive. Ahmet had emerged into the grieving crowds and cameras with only shorts on; during his trek, he felt so tired, he had stripped off all his clothing, even his boots. But he held onto one thing the entire five hours he was trapped in the mine. Some months earlier, he had found a white helmet that belonged to a superior in the locker room. Ordinary miners wore cheap yellow helmets that broke easily, but superiors wore sturdy ones that Ahmet believed were made in Germany. That day, Ahmet took the white helmet and had worn it up to and on the day of the fire. When Ahmet walked out of the mine, even at the moments he felt himself dying, he held onto his white helmet — he wasn’t about to let it go.

And as of this month, Ahmet has kept his promise to Allah.

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A version of this article appears in print on November 30, 2014, on page MM38 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: ‘It Had the Strange Light of Hell’.