

84 A Compassionate Correspondence: On the Humane Killing of Street Dogs in Istanbul

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Located in the Istanbul Research Institute Library archives, this original autographed document is a type-written letter from Nazım Kibrızlı, the president of the Turkish Society for the Protection of Animals (Türkiye Hayvanları Koruma Cemiyeti) throughout the 1940s.¹ It is a reader's letter directly addressed to Fikret Adil (1901–1973), a prominent figure in Istanbul's cultural milieu from the early republican period onward.²

Dated July 19, 1947, Kibrızlı's letter is a succinct but detailed, moving and revealing response to Adil's column published in the *Tanin* newspaper four days before the date of posting, July 15, 1947. There is no archival evidence that Fikret Adil ever directly responded to Nazım Kibrızlı or the editors of *Tanin* at the time ever considered publishing it as a reader's letter.³ Still, what we have here is a correspondence between two leading figures from overlapping social circles in Istanbul during the late 1940s: Fikret Adil—a prolific writer, journalist, columnist, renowned art and culture critic, a bohemian *par excellence*,

storyteller, translator, and interlocutor of intellectuals and bourgeois elites of the time—and Nazım Kibrızlı—the soft-spoken representative of the burgeoning animal welfare policies in the 1940s; the long-term president of the city's (as well as the country's) first animal protection association in modern sense of the term; a bureaucratic elite, an ardent animal lover and welfarist, an attentive, enthusiastic, and responsive participant in intellectual circles, and a meticulous and fastidious collector.⁴ The historicity of this peculiar correspondence lies in its forceful unpacking of the material-discursive processes it entangles, in the affective intensities it articulates around an ethical dilemma that has shaped dogs' lives in Istanbul since the aftermath of the mass dog exiles of 1910: Humane treatment and painless killing of street dogs in Istanbul.⁵

In “Köpeklere Dair,” Fikret Adil draws attention to an increasingly common albeit controversial municipal practice in Istanbul: the killing of street dogs.⁶ He broaches the subject with dismal sarcasm: Writing in the immediate aftermath of World War II, the Nazi genocide and the concentration camps, and the gruesome extremes where millions of humans were treated as disposable and killed with impunity, Adil satirically proves that it might be absurd to talk about canine lives. Nevertheless, he feels obliged to write about the atrocities against those “quiet, innocent creatures.” He sardonically criticizes the war on dogs and reprimands the municipally orchestrated mass *caninicide* undergirded by the incessant vilification of dogs. He ridicules the obtrusive, self-aggrandizing, triumphant tone of the Istanbul Municipality extermination squad's (*itlaf ekipleri*) death toll published in the newspapers and the society's annual reports.⁷ However, the discursive foil legitimizing the city-wide dog cull in Istanbul is not Fikret Adil's only concern. Despite his general distress about dog killings, Adil seems to be more concerned about the *method* implemented by the municipal authorities than by the moral controversy around large-scale dog killings.

Beginning in the early 1930s, killing many street dogs (and cats) by poisoning them had increasingly become the *modus operandi* of the Istanbul Municipality's attempt to control the city's street dog population. By 1947, feeding dogs with poisonous food, often meatballs intoxicated with rat poison, or chicken or meat broth mixed with paralytic drugs, was already a routine operation conducted by the extermination squads, revealed by even a cursory examination of widely circulating newspapers from the 1940s.⁸ Moreover, the killing of dogs by poisoning did not even require investigative journalism to disclose the agents, processes, and repercussions of the poisonings. Instead, it was an explicit municipal policy, which used to enjoy wide circulation thanks to printed monthly or annual reports of the death toll—the number of street dogs (and cats) local authorities had killed within a month or a year. Substantiated by the high numbers of animals killed was the public revelation of the intoxicated dogs who endured prolonged suffering, days, even weeks of misery and excruciatingly agonizing dying processes.

As the random, arbitrary, and unprovoked street dog killings had become a pervasive phenomenon throughout the city, affective responses of indignation, terror, disgust, fear, and grief vis-à-vis dying dogs also turned into a material/discursive force shaping the daily encounters, processes, flows, and networks that entangled various different actors, interlocutors, and spectators of urban public culture—practically everyone in the city, all residents and denizens across the species divide. Fikret Adil's critique is a burst of these powerful affects—of forced witnessing to unnecessary, abhorrent, repulsive cruelty against innocent, gullible, and undeserving dogs, and the caring human cohabitants of the city who the municipal police were terrorizing on a routine basis. What added insult to injury, for many Istanbulites like Fikret Adil who found dog killings tragic, abhorrent, and unconscionable, was the misery that poisoning incurred on dogs: Dogs who ate poisonous food the Istanbul Municipality had randomly left across public spaces densely populated by

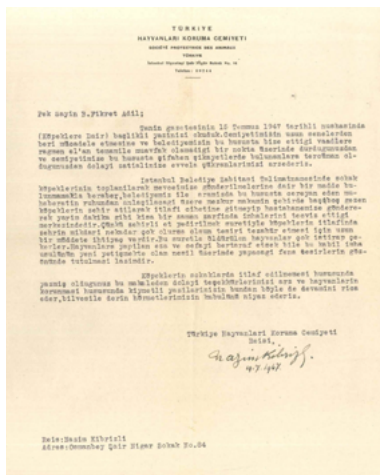


Figure 1: Letter from Nazım Kibrızlı to Fikret Adil, July 19, 1947. SVIKV, Istanbul Research Institute Library, BLG_000035.

dogs, including streets, parks, market-places, weekly bazaars, went through prolonged suffering and a slow, excruciatingly painful death.⁹

Adil's critique on the method of dog cull highlights that the Istanbul Municipality inflicted gratuitous pain on dogs despite the presence of a highly controversial subsidiary, the Istanbul Society for the Protection of Animals, which was founded in 1912 by military-bureaucratic elites who vowed to never let the atrocities of the 1910 mass dog exiles happen again, that *nevertheless* killed dogs in a fast, less painful, woefully effective manner.¹⁰ In fact, the society was initially founded under the auspices of the first municipality of the Ottoman Empire, the Sixth District Municipality (Altıncı Daire-i Belediye) of Beyoğlu.¹¹ In response to these reactions and public revulsion against the blatant violence towards exiled dogs, the Istanbul Municipality had gradually switched to more clandestine methods of killing, developing designated carceral spaces away from public sight to isolate canine bodies.¹² The society's facility in Şişli, which both Adil and Kıbrızlı refer to in their texts, epitomized the technoscientific, affective, and spatial infrastructures undergirding the paradigm of humane dog killings. As the epicenter of humane killing and animal welfare politics, the society's hospital on Şair Nigar Street did not only serve to encapsulate what Fikret Adil sardonically refers to as "scientific killing," but also to cloak the cruelty against dogs in banal insidiousness of the shelter-form and welfarist discourses.¹³

In the background of this peculiar correspondence, we also have a unique moment in the history of municipal governance in Istanbul. By 1947, the year of the Fikret Adil-Nazım Kıbrızlı correspondence, Lütfi Kırdar had been serving as both the mayor and the governor of the city for almost a decade. During Kırdar's tenure (1938-1949), in the early years of World War II, the municipal governance went under major infrastructural inversions that upended the experiences of urbanity, public spaces, and mobility in Istanbul. Among these inversions were the

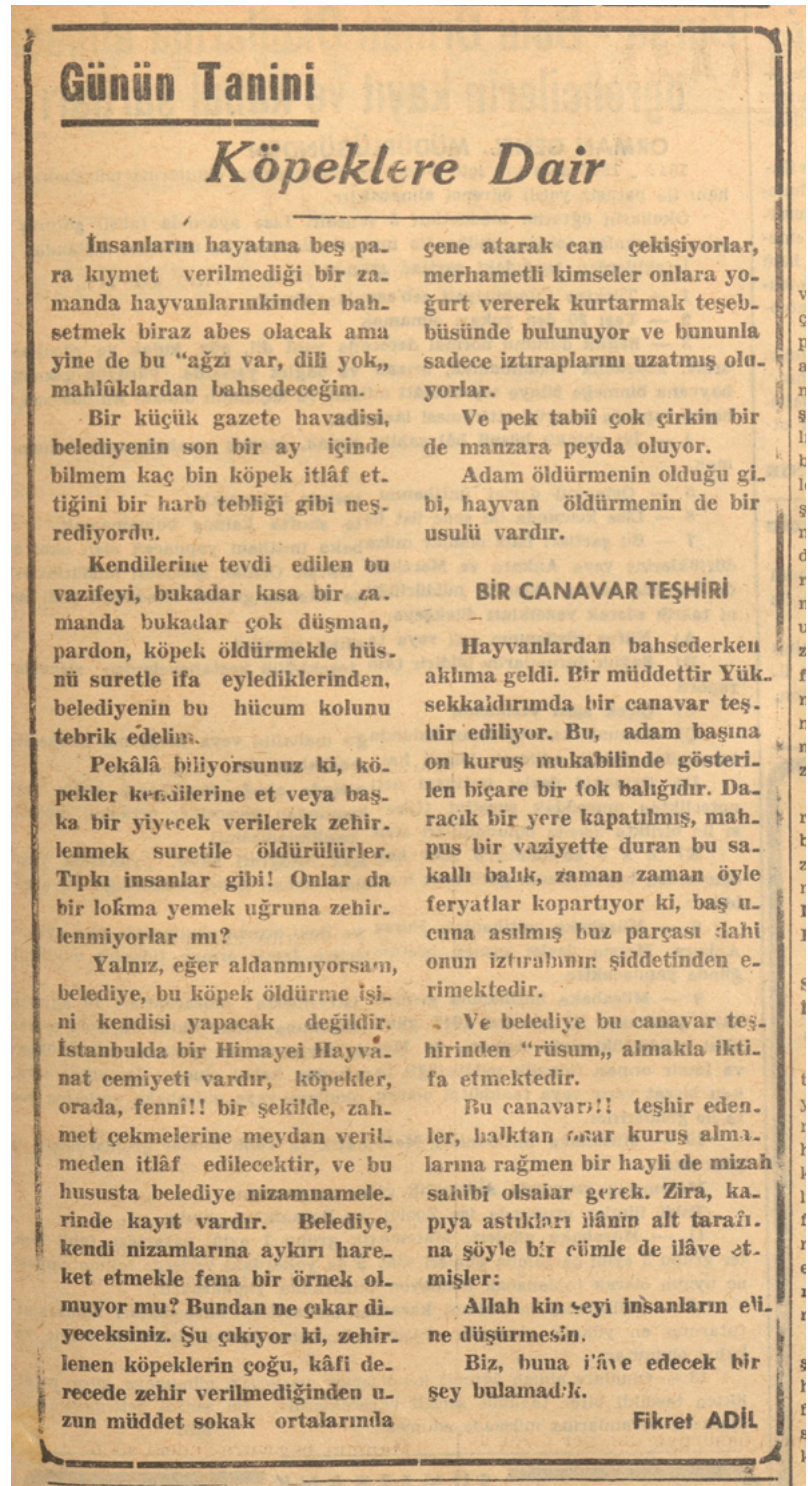


Figure 2: Fikret Adil, "Günün Tanini: Köpeklere Dair," *Tanin*, July 15, 1947. Atatürk Kitaplığı.

expansion of public spaces, the widening of policing mechanisms, the greening of densely populated urban cores, the building of *espaces libres* (*serbest alanlar*), the construction of smaller scale community parks, the

establishment of the city's first integrated public transportation system (İETT), the building and renewal of tram lines, the construction of new asphalt streets, and the revision of road networks planning and traffic

86 routes.¹⁴ The overarching themes of Henri Prost's 1937 Master Plan also animated the spirit of these infrastructural implementations by restructuring the outlook, paying close attention to "hygiene, cleanliness, health," *embellissement* (beautifying), the elimination of dust and microbes for "well-being" to improve the "quality of life" for "the young generation," and for the "attainment of contemporary civilization."¹⁵ Street dogs' unruly, resilient, erratic bodies were among the lives captivated by Prost's radically hygienist urban imagining. Or, how else could we explain such exciting overlapping spatial orientations in two registers of change: the literary and affective landscapes of Fikret Adil's column and Nazım Kırızlı's letter in response. On the one hand, we have Fikret Adil's bohemian universe, strolling around Asmalımescit-Galata-Pera to the headquarters of the Istanbul Society for the Protection of Animal in Nişantaşı, to Şair Nigar Street where hundreds of street dogs perished—killed swiftly, scientifically, and humanely. On the other hand, we can trace experiences from Galata to Taksim, to Harbiye, further along Nişantaşı, Şişli, and down to Beşiktaş (and then Ortaköy), in the densely populated districts of an urban center within the sights of Prost's restructuring. While the winds of material, infrastructural, and affective change brought on by Prost's plan wreaked havoc on these districts, symbolic and affective boundaries between publics enjoying the expanding *espaces libres*, and publics attaining the puritan, sterilizing, disciplinary standards of contemporary civilization were redrawn.

Looking with a broader perspective into the spatial politics of inter- and trans-species encounters in the city also helps us to situate the collaboration between the Istanbul Municipality and the Society for the Protection of Animals into a burgeoning politics of animal welfare in Turkey, as well as in the world. After its reopening in 1927, the society increasingly appealed to the wide spectrum of affective states (of refrain, discontent fear, grief, rage, indignation vis-à-vis the torturous deaths of dogs) of concerned publics to

avoid witnessing prolonged suffering and torturous treatment of dogs, and the push to create designated spaces for the confinement and medical treatment to hide the pervasive cruelty committed by the municipality. The society's facilities had provided auxiliary services to facilitate medically manipulated, more efficient, swift, and painless dog cull.¹⁶

Nazım Kırızlı's letter to Fikret Adil can be read as an explicit statement to clarify the extensive misunderstanding that the society operated as a legal subsidiary of the municipality. Instead, as Kırızlı highlights, the "Istanbul Municipal Police Directive" ("İstanbul Belediye Zabıtası Talimatnamesi") did not assign any official role to the society. On the grounds of the 1913 Directive, there is no official protocol signed between Istanbul Municipality and the society. However, Kırızlı reiterates that the society, in order to avoid gratuitous pain and suffering, asked the municipality to dispatch the dogs to facilities where dogs were almost instantaneously put to death. As Kırızlı states, the society did not have any binding force to the municipality. It had neither executive stand nor political power over the municipal bureaucracy to oversee the day-to-day veterinary services, nor any legal authority to put a halt to poisoning, to end the publicly visible plight of street dogs.

Such exceptional positioning of the society vis-à-vis the growing bureaucracy of municipal governance in mid-1940's Istanbul is also a testament to the vicissitudes of the animal rights movement in Istanbul, as well as in Turkey. The politics of animal rights and animal welfare, which was used to encapsulate affective attachments of urban bourgeoisie in the major cities of Europe and North America, grew as a tangential force and served to challenge the deeply entrenched practices of care towards street animals in Istanbul. Such peculiarity, which also manifests itself in the still-pervasive presence of street dogs in Istanbul albeit sporadic attempts to eradicate them, perfectly highlights the cultural distinctiveness of cohabiting the city with dogs,

and the urbanity of trans-species encounters in Istanbul.

Concerns for animal welfare, the politics behind humane treatment, and the killing of animals in Istanbul emerged as a compassionate reaction to the *decanization* methods of the previous decades—i.e., deportation, forced displacement, and relocations in the early twentieth century, followed by *in-situ* killings mostly by way of poisoning. It has been a unique outcome of such generative tension between the traditional care for street dogs, and primacy of easing their suffering and pain if the killing is inevitably at stake. Nazım Kırızlı's letter to Fikret Adil does not only clarify this obscure relation but testifies to the extra-legal collaboration between the municipality's executed violence against street dogs, and animal protection organizations. It also recapitulates the generative tension that underlies the perils, posing possibilities for an animal welfarist approach. A question still hangs in the air: What do the ways we treat the lives and deaths of animals tell us about ourselves? It is this unsettling concern and powerful disquiet with which Kırızlı ends his letter. His sorrow for all the dogs who were killed, albeit humanely, haunt his closing remarks, and continues to haunt us today: No matter how humane, swift, and painless, killing an animal is an act of utter violence. Whether municipally orchestrated or humanely conducted, Kırızlı mourns that killing dogs with impunity comes back to torment the next generations; it haunts our future, it haunts our here and now. We can continue to share urban public spaces in Istanbul with more-than-human lives, if and only if we stop turning them into passive recipients, weak and dependent objects of compassion and pity, and instead treat them as active, resilient, and unruly beings needing our care, love, and respect.

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1) Kibrizli's Letter to Adil

Dear B. Fikret Adil;

We read your article titled (About Dogs) in the 15 July 1947 issue of *Tanin* newspaper. We would like to express our gratitude to you for being an ambassador for those who have verbally complained to our society about an issue that, we at our society have been struggling with for many years, despite several promises our municipality has made to us in this regard.

While there is not a clause in the Istanbul Municipal Police's Regulations regarding the collection and transfer of street dogs to our premises, we have expressed that the street dogs in the city could be sent to our hospital where they can be culled quickly, in about half a minute, in communication with our municipality. Because culling of dogs by feeding poisonous meat, regardless of the amount of poison involved, requires a long time for the poison's effect to manifest. Animals killed in this way suffer immensely. Even if we eliminate the cruelty and brutality inflicted on animals, the harmful effects of this method of destruction on the new generation should be taken into consideration.

We would like to thank you for this article you have written against the culling of dogs in the streets. We kindly ask you to continue writing valuable articles regarding the protection of animals in the future, and wish you to accept our deepest respect.

Chairman of the Animal Protection
Turkish Society for the Protection of
Animals
Nazim Kibrizli
19.7.1947

Chairman: Nazim Kibrizli
Address: Osmanbey Şair Nigar Sokak
No. 84

2) Adil's Column: About Dogs

It would be a little absurd to talk about animals at a time when human life is not valued for a dime, but I will still talk about these "hush-little" creatures.

A small newspaper report resembled a war notice broadcasting that the municipality had culled thousands of dogs only last month.

Let's congratulate this offensive arm of the municipality for fulfilling this duty assigned to them in such a good manner by killing so many enemies, sorry, dogs in such a short time.

Well, you do know that dogs are killed by poison via meat or some other food given to them. Just like people! Aren't they also being poisoned for the sake of a bite to eat?

But if I am not mistaken, the municipality is not going to venture out on this dog-killing-spree on its own. There is a Society for the Protection of Animals in Istanbul, the dogs are there, and somehow, they are culled in scientific way! Without causing any trouble, and there is a record in the municipal regulations about this. Isn't the municipality setting a bad example by acting against its own regulations? You could say, what wrong could come from that? Well, it turns out that most of the poisoned dogs are dying in the middle of streets after suffering in pain for a long time because they are not given enough poison, and when merciful people try to save them by giving them yoghurt, they are only prolonging their suffering.

And of course, a very ugly sight emerges. Just like there is a proper way for killing a man, there is also for killing an animal.

A Monster Exhibition

I remembered something as I was talking about animals. A monster has been on display on the Yüksek Kaldırım (High Street in Karaköy) for a while. This is a wretched seal being displayed for ten cents per person. This bearded fish, which is kept in a tight place as a prisoner, sometimes cries out so much that even the piece of ice hung on its head melts from the violence of its agony.

And the municipality is satisfied for they are receiving "taxes" from this monstrous display.

Those who expose this monster must be very humorous people even though they took ten cents from the public. Because, they added this sentence to the bottom of the advertisement they hung on the door:

May God not let anyone fall into human hands.

Well, we could not find anything to add to that.

Fikret Adil

Documents translated by
Neylan Bağcıoğlu

- 1 Unfortunately there are limited archival sources on the life and works of Nazım Kırızlı. The duration of his tenure as the president of the Society for the Protection of Animals is not definite. The society does not have an institutional archive or collection. I owe my reading of Nazım Kırızlı's tenure and his distinctive characteristics to our conversations with Birgül Rona, the current president of Turkey Association for the Protection of Animals (Türkiye Hayvanları Koruma Derneği, THKD), the successor of the Istanbul Society for the Protection of Animals. I thank Ms. Rona for her time she has generously shared with me, her illuminating remarks and insightful comments on the history of animal protection in Istanbul.
- 2 The letter came to the Istanbul Research Institute from the estate of Fikret Adil, with the donation of Büke Uras. See SVKIV, Istanbul Research Institute Library, BLG_000035. I thank K. Mehmet Kentel for sharing Nazım Kırızlı's letter to Fikret Adil with me. I thank Furkan Sevim, the head librarian of the Istanbul Research Institute, and Engin Şengün, responsible for the photography collections, for their help in locating the letter in the archival records. I also thank Ekrem Işın who has inspired my research and encouraged me to pursue the history of dogs and their sorrowful fate in the modern history of Istanbul. I am deeply indebted to him for our long conversations and discussions about the historicity of animal rights and animal welfare politics.
- 3 Nazım Kırızlı's letter can be considered as a unique version of a reader's letter. As an urban cultural practice of the growing reading public in early republican decades, a reader's letter enabled the concerned public to use the written press to actively engage with ideas, to criticize, often to revise a counterfactual point, or to comment on speculative remarks that are of particular concern. Since Kırızlı's letter was not published in the *Tanin* newspaper, and it was donated from the estate of the addressee, Fikret Adil, we can humbly assume that Adil read the letter and kept it. Further discussion requires more detailed analysis of Adil's very few, scattered remarks on animals.
- 4 Interviews and personal conversation with Birgül Rona.
- 5 Humane killing, the main pillar of animal welfare discourse, was implemented first in Istanbul in July 1927 after the reopening of the Society for the Protection of Animals in the same year. The use of electrocution and asphyxiation chambers to kill the large number of dogs at the society's facilities was felt like an affront to many. Ahmet Rasim was one of the first who voiced early criticisms about the humane "gas chambers" and the allegedly painless methods of extermination employed by the society. See Ahmet Rasim, *Cumhuriyet*, May 25, 1927.
- 6 Fikret Adil, "Köpeklere Dair," *Tanin*, July 15, 1947.
- 7 Annual reports of the Society for the Protection of Animals in 1929 and 1930 indicate the total number of dogs, cats, and horses killed *humanely* at the society's facility. The 1929 report indicates that "in a year, 3,309 dogs, 807 cats, and 47 horses were killed humanely at our hospital." The annual report of 1930 indicates a higher death toll: "1,309 dogs, 982 cats, 27 horses." *İstanbul Himaye-i Hayvanat Cemiyeti Nizamnamesi* (1929) (Istanbul: Express Matbaası, 1929); and *İstanbul Himaye-i Hayvanat Cemiyeti Nizamnamesi* (1930) (Istanbul: Express Matbaası, 1930).
- 8 In the 1940s, the society had remarkably expanded its medical infrastructures and institutional capacities aimed at the humane killing of dogs. In 1940 and 1941, within the span of two years, a total of 25,000 street animals (more than 9,500 dogs and 15,000 cats) were killed; 25,000 animals in total were medically treated and cured at the society's headquarter and animal hospital. See *İstanbul Himaye-i Hayvanat Cemiyeti Nizamnamesi* (1941) (Istanbul: Express Matbaası, 1941).
- 9 Expressing his deep sorrow for the poisoned dogs' agony, Adil also mentions peoples' desperate attempts to rescue the dogs by way of force-feeding them with yogurt or regurgitating the bait. Many other animal rights activists concerned locals and intellectuals were distressed by dog poisonings and the misery of the intoxicated dogs, too. For some examples of dog poisonings in the later decades, see Aziz Nesin, *Hayvan Deyip de Geçme* (Istanbul: Adam, 2000).
- 10 Cihangir Gündoğdu, "The Animal Rights Movement in the Late Ottoman Empire and the Early Republic: The Society for the Protection of Animals (Istanbul, 1912)," in *Animals and People in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Suraiya Faroqhi (Istanbul: Eren, 2010); and Gündoğdu, "Doksan Yıl Önce İstanbullu Hayvanseverler: İstanbul Himaye-i Hayvanat Cemiyeti, 1912," *Toplumsal Tarih* 116 (2003): 10–17.
- 11 G. Berfin Melikoğlu, "Türkiye'de Kurulan İlk Hayvanları Koruma Derneğinin Tarihsel Gelişimi," *Veteriner Hekimler Derneği Dergisi* 80, no.1 (2009): 37–44.
- 12 In fact, after the Hayırsızada Incident of 1910, which continues to haunt the urban public culture even today, the Istanbul Municipality discontinued large-scale dog deportations. The earlier methods of killing dogs under the glare of publicity (captures, forced displacement, exile, followed by poisoning) had pricked public conscience and sparked indignation and outrage among the concerned locals and animal rights activists for long lasting years.
- 13 For a detailed discussion on the making of *decanisation* politics in Istanbul, its relation to the politics of care and sight, and its settling in the aftermath of the 1910 mass dog exiles, see Mine Yıldırım, "Between Care and Violence: Street Dogs of Istanbul," (PhD diss., The New School for Social Research, 2021).
- 14 Lütfi Kırdar's tenure as mayor-governor was also one of the three terms for which an internationally renowned architect and designer, Henri Prost, served as an appointed official to develop a master plan for Istanbul. Prost's 1937 Master Plan and its commitment to *contemporaneity* and *modernity* was the pioneering vision of urban governmentality during and after World War II.
- 15 Henri Prost, *İstanbul Hakkında Notlar* (Istanbul: İstanbul Belediyeye Matbaası, 1937).
- 16 In 1937, to ward off the municipality's justification for poisonings due to the lack of investments and the absence of service trucks to properly handle dogs, the society donated service trucks and accessories to motivate dogcatchers to execute fast and painless interventions during catching.