

**Esma Özturan**  
*Interview conducted by Esin Özturan*  
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Izmir, Türkiye

**Esin Özturan:** *Can you tell us your life story? Where and what year were you born?*

**Esma Özturan:** I was born on December 28th, 1954, in Gediz, Kütahya.

*What is your educational background?*

Primary school.

*Which schools did you attend? How did your education affect your life?* I only went to primary school. Since I couldn't study, my education hindered everything. My outside view of the world was restricted. There was not much studying back then. Girls were not educated. That's why I couldn't read it either. But I was able to develop myself a little bit.

*Which profession did you choose and what stages did you go through in your professional life?* I worked in garments, I worked in tobacco. After this, I was able to retire after that. I mean, I worked anyway.

*Are you married? Do you have children?*

I was married and lost my husband five years ago. I have two sons. I have two daughters-in-law and five grandchildren.

*What role did the earthquake play in your life story? How has it shaped your life for you?*

The earthquake was very bad for us. Our life changed a lot. It became a completely different life. How did it happen? That day we experienced the earthquake and our life changed after we lived it. We had to move to Izmir. Because we had nothing left. There was nothing... Back then, there were no bottled gas companies like Aygaz. They only had gas stoves. With, one gas stove, two or three broken pots and pans, we moved to Izmir.

1'44"

*Can you tell us which earthquake you experienced? And when?*

On March 28, 1970, I experienced the Gediz earthquake in Kütahya. I was fifteen at the time. I saw a lot, and I was very saddened. I still get goosebumps when I think about it.

*How would you describe your home and surroundings before an earthquake?*

Our home, our surroundings were beautiful. There was a place in Tepipark. We lived there. We had a house there. There was a park above us. There used to be a movie theater with a park, summer movie theaters. There were weddings there. We loved it very much as a child. Every night we would watch the same movie over and over again. Our life was good. The environment

was also beautiful. People were also very good then. Everyone looked after each other's children. Evil didn't cross anyone's mind and everyone lived freely. We lived our childhood freely.

*In which neighborhood did you experience the earthquake? What was your neighborhood and city like before the earthquake?*

It was very beautiful. As I said, we had a nice house in the park. After that, it was Özyurt neighborhood, our neighborhood. We had a nice neighborhood. The people were warm, intermingled. They were people who shared their water and bread. We had a very nice neighborhood. I remember those who died now. God bless those who stayed, they treated each other very well. We had a beautiful childhood.

**3'19"**

*How would you describe your daily life before the earthquake?*

Our daily life was good. I was going to primary school. Then I studied until the fifth grade. After fifth grade, I was accepted into a nursing school. After I was accepted, they didn't send me to the nursing school. Why? Girls shouldn't study too much. I went to Koran classes. There was sewing then. There were evening art and vocational high schools for girls. I went there. I went to the Quran course for two years. I went to the Evening Art School for a year. I learned to sew. In my second year there was an earthquake. My schooling there was left unfinished.

*How did you experience the earthquake? Where were you when the earthquake happened? What was the first thing you did? What did you do immediately after it stopped shaking?*

We were at home when the earthquake hit. Because it was around twenty-two, twenty-three in the evening. We went to bed at 22:00. 22 o'clock. At that time we went to bed very early. There was no television. And it was winter, it wasn't quite summer yet. Then, we went to bed early. We went to bed. We slept right away. It was five minutes past eleven. We must have slept for an hour or so. We woke up with a tremor. We were already sleeping in my grandparents' room. My mom had another room. We lived as a family in a house. My uncle, my aunt and her children were in one room, while we were in my grandmother's room. The earthquake shook us very badly. Our foundations collapsed. That's how bad it was. We had such an earthquake. It was horrible. May God never give it to anyone again. Then, with all that shaking, we three siblings were sleeping in one bed, hugging until the earthquake passed. We were so shocked, and could not understand what was happening as children. Then when my grandfather said that there was an earthquake, they started chanting the word of testimony. We were even more scared. Then, when the earthquake stopped, there were aftershocks. We got up and realized that our roofs had collapsed. We are somewhere, but it is so dark we don't know, it is raining, it's dark everywhere. I pulled myself out of something, from somewhere, from somewhere, he reached out for my hand and I was sucked down into the rubble. He said, "My girl find a way and get out." I didn't know where I came from and where I went in. I went out outside. Everybody is screaming. I don't know where my mother was, where my father was. I went back inside. One by one my grandfather gave me my brothers and sister, from the window. I took the kids out. My grandfather and grandmother couldn't get out. Poor things, they were very old.

Then they came out slowly on their own, but my parents were under the rubble screaming “Save us!” And no one, I went out to the neighbors. I said please save my mother from my father, they are dying. They were so scared they couldn't come. I went back again. My mom sounded like she was seven stories underground. They were buried deep under the rubble. They were swallowed

right into what we called our courtyard, what we called the roof. Our house was also wooden. There were no bricks. The house was only made of mud, adobe and sticks. The poles, all the debris, all the earth was on my parents, my father, my mother. Anyway, they got out of the rubble on their own, but they got out of the earthquake at eight o'clock in the morning. They were swollen like this, drenched in sweat. Excuse me but they were vomiting. They vomited up the whole earth. For many days my parents couldn't pull themselves together. Doctors came from outside, foreign doctors, Turkish doctors. Doctors from all walks of life came, the gendarmes came. Soldiers pulled people out from under all the rubble. It was a very bad day. May God never let anyone go through this. I still get goosebumps from that day, the more I remember. Now I scream at the slightest thing. If a child falls, I scream from the effects of it. If there's any shaking, I'm terrified, I scream. Why? I stayed under the influence of that earthquake. My aunt and uncle, also came out from under the rubble. They also had a daughter who slept with them. But their son was sleeping downstairs in the kitchen. There was no news of that boy. Because he says he fainted. Many months later, he told me about this. He said he didn't remember anything. He got out of the rubble much later than us. It was daytime. He came out around ten o'clock in the morning.

Then my uncle was crying “my child is dead,” he dug through the rubble, through the wood, through the debris, shouting, “My son, my son, my son. There was nothing, because his son had fainted, and was distressed. It's a pity. Then, in the darkness, our neighbor had a motorcycle. None of us had ever thought to turn on its light to illuminate the area. It wasn't until two or three days later that anyone thought of it. In the darkness, there were no chainsaws, no saws, no hoes or shovels. Everyone dug with their fingernails, trying with their hands and nails to get out those trapped beneath. Those who could be pulled out were saved. The ones who couldn't be pulled out, would say “my mom's dead,” or “He's my dead father, those brothers of mine are dead.” Everyone was screaming.

Anyway, I went out with Can, Ali, and Metin. Everywhere was on fire. We called it the Gaye neighborhood, there was the Gaye neighborhood. At that time, the stoves were still burning, fires from the stoves. People were shouting, “Save us! We are burning!” Across from us, there was a village called Akçalan. Smoke and fire started rising from there too. Everyone was scared. It was terrible. They said, “There will be people burning alive now.” We were very scared. Very worried. And indeed, as they said many did burn. 1,150 people died in that earthquake. It was very painful. It ruined many people's minds. Until you see your children like that... I had friends too. We were young, but each of us had friends. They were dead as well. I can never forget them. They were crushed. Trapped. I am still deeply affected by them. And I still am..

## **10'10”**

*How did you and your family or community react immediately after the earthquake?*

How did we react? We saw that, all of us, had got out. Around ten or eleven o'clock at night, until about noon, everyone from our area had got out. We had a horse. We used to go to Bağlibahçe with that horse. One of our horses got out too. We had a small dog. We had taken it inside, loved it a lot. Our dog got out too. The neighbors told us, "Your hands are very open. Your table is open to everyone. May God protect you, you all got out without a scratch.

Otherwise, you all could have died from the collapse of your house." Because our house had completely collapsed. The neighbors kept telling us that. Those who came for rescue, those teams that came after the earthquake to check everywhere, were surprised at how we got out alive from here.

*Did neighbors support each other or was there chaos?*

They supported each other. How did they support each other? For example, some houses were not destroyed, there were cracks, half-ruined. But we were cold. When we got out that day, we were terribly freezing. We were trembling. Of course, a bit of excitement and the cold air. How could we settle down? We went out barefoot with only blankets on our heads. But we were cold. When we got cold, they told us, "If you can, come into our house." They had seven blankets. "Take them and come in." Me, Can, Ali, Metin went. Because I was the oldest among the children and siblings, I felt sorry for them, so I was quickly going in and out during the aftershocks. I would bring them inside, cover my siblings with blankets. I put shoes or socks on their feet if I could find them. I did the same for myself. My mom and dad, poor things, they were sweating, overwhelmed. We covered them again with those blankets. They were shaking. It was so sad. They escaped death. Again, as neighbors we helped each other a lot. But when it came to going back inside, it didn't work out because people were afraid. There were many aftershocks. They thought it might happen again and they might be trapped. Some people went back inside, some didn't. But everyone was on edge. Everyone was afraid of dying.

**12'28"**

*What changes did the earthquake cause in your neighborhood or city? For example, how were the buildings, streets, businesses in your neighborhood affected by the earthquake?*

They were very affected by the earthquake. businesses, streets, neighborhoods, houses, everything. Very, very affected. Why? It was a terrible earthquake. Especially because our homes were made of wood. There weren't many concrete houses. Some of the concrete houses didn't collapse, but some did. Also, most people's homes were already old, and the earthquake was very strong. It came from deep in the ground and twisted the houses, like shaking a sieve. So it was really bad.

*What kind of changes did the earthquake make in your lives?*

It made many changes. We left our home, our homes. We left the places we were born and used to. Why? Why did we leave? There was no work, no food, no bread. Thankfully, the Red Crescent sent a travelling kitchen with hot food. Everyone went, each got a plate, a bowl, people carried it, ate in tents. May God bless our government. Our soldiers came. They brought bread, they brought everything, they fed us. Doctors came to examine us.

I heard them say, "These children are extremely scared."

I heard a Turkish doctor say this when speaking with a German doctor. They said, "These children won't live long." I heard that with my own ears. Now I'm seventy years old, and none of my childhood friends, none of the children of our neighbors, are alive. They either died from diabetes or cancer. I also had cancer. About eight or ten years ago. Thank God I survived. I hope God doesn't show it again.

We never forgot the pain, the stress. It was really, really bad. May God not let anyone go through this.

*After the earthquake, how did you and your family rebuild your lives? What were the biggest challenges you faced?*

Our biggest challenge was migrating. We left our hometown, our homeland. We had nothing left. Three families agreed, my father, my mother, and others. "Let's go to İzmir. Let's at least work." There was nothing left, no roof, no belongings. They said "How are we going to live? There is no work here either."

My father, grandfather, and uncle, all three were shoemakers. Back then, people used to get old shoes repaired because they couldn't afford new ones. That's how they made money. Some also farmed. But after the earthquake, there was no place left to make shoes. No land left to farm. Nothing at all. We had nothing.

So we said, "Let's move to İzmir." And we did. All three families. Thankfully, TEKEL helped us. They hired earthquake survivors. My mother, my father, and I, all of us got jobs at a tobacco shop. Slowly, one day we bought a pot, another day a pan, something else another day. Just like that we slowly built a life.

But it was all in one room. Three kids, one mother, one father, all in one room. That was our kitchen, our bedroom, our living space. We lived in one room for months, even years. We saved a little money, and eventually moved into a house with two rooms.

Of course it affected us a lot. As a child, I had to work. My mother and father worked nonstop. Poor things. They wondered if we would ever have a home again. Yes, after the earthquake, we were given house but until those homes were built, we faced a lot of difficulties. Later, thankfully, we were given long-term loans to buy earthquake homes with a ten-year payment plan. May God bless our government. We paid it off after ten years. And finally, we had a home.

**16'40"**

*What made you feel strong during the recovery process after the earthquake?*

What made us feel strong? What made us feel strong was the fact that no one in our family died. Not a single one of our family members died. After we all got out, I remember something my grandfather said, I've never forgotten it. He saw that we had all made it out, he opened his hands and said, "Oh Lord, not one of our family died. I am not sad. You may take our house, take everything, we are thankful, a thousand times thankful." He thanked God in prayer. I'll never forget that. I still don't. Even now, if something happens to my family or to me, I say "God is great." I say "God won't forget us." I tie everything to God, and I feel stronger, by myself.

*What kind of support and services helped you the most after the earthquake?*

The Red Crescent helped us the most. They came and set up our tents. Our soldiers helped too. They helped a lot. They pulled people out alive from under the rubble. They came and set up our tents. They brought food. The Red Crescent and the military were a huge help to us. Also, Turkish and German doctors were very helpful. Everyone was united. They helped us stand back up. They were very helpful.

*Were you able to return to your home right after the earthquake, or did you stay elsewhere temporarily?*

We couldn't return to our home after the earthquake because our house had collapsed. We set up a tent. Inside the tent, we set up a stove, because it was still very cold outside. We burned the beams and wood we pulled from the rubble. My uncle was living in Kütahya at the time and working in agriculture. He took five kids, three of us and two of my uncle's children, and brought us there. How? Barefoot, exactly how we got out that day, in pajamas or whatever we had on. My uncle came and took us. He also couldn't reach us, because the roads were blocked from pieces rocks. For hours, my uncle could only come the next day. He came and got us so us kids could get over the shock. He gave each of us a pair of shoes, something to wear. May God bless him a thousand times. He took care of us like a mother and father. My parents stayed behind, of course. They built a kind of shack there. Using iron rods, wood, and beams from the rubble, they made a tiny room. It was cold, the stove was set up in the room. People...People helped each other out. The Red Crescent handed out blankets. What do you call them... coats, jackets, they handed those out. We wore them for a while, until we could get back on our feet. If it weren't for that, what would we have done? We worked and struggled in İzmir. Eventually, little by little, we were able to buy a small house, but that happened five or six years later. We went through very bad times, really miserable times. For a while, we couldn't even smile. We were reserved, withdrawn. Because we had come out of that earthquake, and when we arrived in Izmir with that shock. In Izmir we were afraid of everything, of everyone. We were afraid something might happen. We didn't know that city, we had never left our hometown before the earthquake. It felt strange to us. Back then, people didn't travel much anyway. İzmir was a big city, we were scared. My parents took us under their wings. We didn't go anywhere without their permission or without telling them. Wherever we went, we went together. My parents were very protective, afraid something might happen to the children. May God bless them. Now I think about it, they raised us so well. Respectful, decent, loving toward everyone. May God bless them. We were deeply affected by the earthquake, my girl.

**21'07"**

*If you stayed elsewhere temporarily, where were those places and how long did you live there?*

We stayed in Kütahya for ten to fifteen days after my uncle took us. We couldn't stay in Gediz because there was only one tent. We built a small shack. Then there were eleven people, eleven of us in one family. We stayed there. Later we returned. Some of us lived in tents, some in shacks. Eventually, we started cooking our own food in those tents. We started washing our clothes. We wanted to take a bath but we couldn't. So we tried to bathe using a bucket of water inside the tent. In the end, we decided going to İzmir was the only solution.

*What was it like living in temporary shelters? Did you feel alone during that time, or did the social support you received give you strength?*

Of course, everyone was living the same thing. Everyone was just like us. Bathing was hard. There was no water. We had to go get water from the street fountains. We carried it. For cooking, for everything. All the neighbors went through the same thing. Nobody had any extra comfort.

*Did you lose your home in the earthquake? If so, how long did it take you to move into a new one?*

Of course we lost our home. Our house had completely collapsed. We had nothing left. Just some dishes and cookware we pulled out from the rubble. Some broken, some soaked, some dirty. It was raining during the earthquake. A light rain was falling. All our beds and blankets were soaked in mud. We took them out, washed them, and laid on them again. We suffered a lot. We suffered a lot.

*How did moving into your new home make you feel?*

It made us feel good. That house of ours was wooden. Until our new house was built and we moved in, we were already in İzmir. We came back, saw the house and we really liked it. Until then, we hadn't been able to buy a house in İzmir or anything like that. We hadn't been able to buy anything. We had only just started furnishing it, just a little, just enough to use. And living in a big city was hard. Things didn't happen quickly. Everyone had little money. What people earned was little. So we had to bring what we had. We loved that house. The houses given after the earthquake. Because they were concrete. We had never seen or been inside a concrete house before. It had a bathroom. A bedroom, a living room. Since our houses were wooden, we only had rooms. We didn't have a separate bedroom or anything like that.

**23'44"**

*How did you adapt to your new home, neighborhood, and neighbors? Can you tell us about that process?*

We adapted to our new home because all our old neighbors were there. Everyone's house was across from one another. It was the same there too. For example, that neighborhood... We were in Özyurt neighborhood. They gave the people from Özyurt to the Özyurt neighborhood. For example, let's say it was a different neighborhood, they grouped the same people from each neighborhood together. That's why our sense of community was strong. Of course, we didn't forget our losses, the pain of those who died, but we had a good relationship with the neighbors who remained.

*Based on your experiences, what do you think should be considered when rebuilding houses after an earthquake?*

I know what should be considered, I mean, I think about it. Places where fault lines don't pass. Places that aren't in a riverbed. I really want it to be a place where strong foundations are laid. That's very important. Now, for example, when they lay the concrete, they should lay it strong. They should build strong foundations. They should use strong steel reinforcement. When that's the case, people can get through the earthquake with minimal damage. But if something is built poorly, unplanned, or if they cut corners on materials, then the houses collapse. That's how I think.

*What has been done to commemorate the earthquake or remember the victims?*

To commemorate the losses? Everyone feels sadness. What is done? Prayers are said. I go to my hometown once a year. I go and see, there are memorial cemeteries. You can see who died, who survived, everyone's name is written there. We feel sad, we cry together as a family. Then we

pray for their souls. It really hurts a person. I don't know, you only truly understand when you live through it.

**25'47"**

*What do you think about these memorial events and symbols? How do they affect your memory of the earthquake?*

When you remember, of course you remember everyone. You had friends. You remember something. Then you have beautiful memories with them. We used to play games in school, at home, in the street. Of course I remember them, and I feel sorrow for those who died. I pray for mercy for them. And for those who are still alive, we talk on the phone or, years later, we run into each other somewhere. "Oh, are you so-and-so?" "I'm so-and-so." Of course, everyone scattered after the earthquake. That makes us very happy, when I see my friends or someone I know, it makes me so happy. It's the same for everyone.

*How do you talk about the earthquake with the younger generation in your family or around you? What do you think is important for them to remember?*

What do I say about the earthquake? I tell them to take cover during an earthquake. I say don't run, don't rush out to the balconies, don't go down the stairs. I say, take shelter under a table or a couch, protect yourself like that. I tell them not to panic. You shouldn't panic anyway. When you panic, it gets worse. I tell them to calmly wait for the earthquake to pass.

*What do you think about the way the media portrays earthquakes?*

The media sometimes exaggerates a lot and creates fear. They should explain things nicely without scaring people. They say, "There will be an earthquake at such-and-such time," "At such-and-such hour," but they shouldn't say that. What should they say instead? They should say earthquakes can happen anytime. They should warn people without frightening them, without scaring them.

**27'36"**

*Do you think your neighborhood or city's earthquake experience was accurately reflected in those news reports?*

In the cities, there was nothing like that, no earthquake awareness or anything. In the past, they used to say, "God is doing it," and they wouldn't give it any importance. They didn't know what to do or where it was coming from. They didn't know about fault lines. Now, we start to understand that the earthquake is on a fault line. Back then, we weren't that aware. We didn't know what it meant.



*How does talking about the earthquake make you feel? Is it hard for you to remember this event, or does sharing make you feel better?*

Of course, since it was such a terrible time, I feel a bit emotional. I get sad when I think about it. But when I share it, I don't mind. Maybe it can be useful for someone. It brings me relief, when I think about it like this, when I talk about it. I remember those days. I remember my friends. I remember the friends who passed away. In a way, it also feels good. It opens me up. It lightens my heart, you know?

*Lastly, could you draw us a picture describing your home before and after the earthquake?*

I can draw it. I can draw it. Since I was fifteen years old at the time, I remember everything, so I can draw it. Thank you. I thank you as well. Hopefully, with the hope that it never happens again.