

Taner Balcı
Interview conducted by İpek Balcı
December 25, 2024
Remote interview conducted via Zoom

İpek Balcı: *First of all, could you tell me about your life story? Where and in which year were you born? Your education, your children, your professional life? Are you married? Your memories of the earthquake in general terms.*

Taner Balcı: I was born in Babaeski District, Kırklareli in 1978. I completed my primary and secondary education in the same district. After that, attended a technical high school in Kırklareli Province. One year after graduating from the technical high school, I studied electrical engineering at Trakya University for one year. I then enlisted in the military in 1999. In April, my military service began. During my military service, I completed my basic training at a naval training battalion in İskenderun and was then transferred to Gölcük, where I served in my advanced training unit. There, I completed my military service in approximately 16–17 months.

1’20”

What did you do after the military?

What did I do after my military service? I worked simple jobs in the service sector. Tea, coffee. For example, in the coffee house, I was the tea and coffee maker. I worked as a waiter until I found a good job. After, in 2001, I started working in a factory. I have been working in the same factory since then. I am married, I am the father of two daughters. I continue my life in the same place I was born, in Babaeski district of Kırklareli. We are still trying to live in the same place.

I understand, thank you. Can you tell us which earthquake you experienced and when?

The earthquake centred in Gölcük on August 17th, 1999. The warship that I was on duty then, was in Gölcük. I experienced the earthquake, because I was in Gölcük when the earthquake struck. That night, there was something like this...On special days, for example, there are lights on the ships. Since I am an electrical engineer, I was working as an electrical engineer on the ship. Those lights stay on all night, and at midnight, they are turned off, and the lighting system is dismantled. Our job was to take those lights down. On that special occasion, our job was to make sure they stayed on all night until midnight. Then, at midnight, we had to collect them. That was our task. Yes, the next day, our ship was supposed to set sail. While we were anchored in the port of Gölcük, the ship we were assigned to was supposed to set sail. It would set sail, due to a military mission. We were told that we would get up early in the morning, and if we wanted,

we could collect the lights early in the morning or at midnight. We said that getting up early in the morning would be too late. Our commanders left it up to us. We said we would collect them at midnight so we could sleep comfortably. At midnight, we turned off the lights as usual. Then we started to pack them up. Of course, packing them up, going to sleep, and retiring to our own rooms, the cabins, as they're called. Retiring to our cabins etc., meant it was past 1 a.m. Of course, since it was so late, we were very tired. We had worked during the day as well. So, for example, we were very tired that night. Did I feel the earthquake? No, I didn't. One of the reasons I didn't feel the earthquake, thinking about it now, is that I was very tired, and the second reason is that I was on the ship. Because during an earthquake, everything shakes. On the ship, it just sways a bit because it's on the water.

4'35"

Naturally.

Naturally, I didn't feel it at the time. Of course, I had friends who felt it when we talked after the earthquake. But maybe it was also because I was a heavy sleeper. I didn't feel the earthquake. How did I hear about the earthquake? At that time, as soon as the earthquake happened everywhere in Gölcük, apartment buildings collapsed in the first 5 or 10 seconds. And on our ship, there was an alarm from the internal announcement system: "There was an earthquake, everyone should get up," etc... After that, we immediately got up like this. It was something I had never experienced in my life. Not only that, but I was experiencing one of the biggest earthquakes Turkey had ever seen, and I was in the military. I had no family, no loved ones. The people I could ask for help were limited. I had never experienced an earthquake before. I had never thought about it. I had no experience of what to do in an earthquake. As I said, I was 20 years old and far away from my family. I felt the earthquake in such a psychological environment. After that, we got up immediately, of course. They woke us up and told us to get up. Everyone was confused and didn't know what to do. As soldiers, of course the commanders were more experienced. They directed us, telling us what to do. So, at first, when we heard there was an earthquake, we went outside. For example, the ship's interior, where we lived and slept, our living quarters. We immediately went to the parts of the ship that were open to the outside. When I first went out, I saw a huge cloud of dust. It was around 3 o'clock in the morning when the earthquake happened. Normally, I should have been able to see the lights in the dark, but there were no lights. Instead, there was a cloud of dust, and I couldn't see the things I would normally be able to see in the dark, like buildings. The reason I couldn't see them was that some

buildings had collapsed, some were covered in dust, and everyone was running around. The lights were out, and there was chaos that night. On one hand, everyone was listening to orders, and on the other hand, you don't know how big the earthquake was and you're trying to tell their loved ones. You know, the earthquake happened in Gölcük, but the entire Marmara region felt it. But we couldn't grasp how big the earthquake was at first. Because you only know what you're experiencing yourself. However, the entire Marmara Region was affected by that great earthquake. Of course, with the excitement of that event, everyone was in a hurry to inform their family, relatives, loved ones, that they were OK. Back then there were very few cell phones. I mean very few, we are talking about 1999. Cell phones were limited, not everyone had one. Everyone was on the other side because there were landline phones, pay phones.

7'45"

While we were rushing around, on the one hand, we were worried about our problems, on the other hand, we were informed we had to take the seriously wounded. Because there is something like this on ships...For example, when you want to move, what do you do? You open the door, start the engine, shift gears, and go. There's a one-minute difference between your desire to go and the car moving. You don't get in the car and start it right away; you shift gears and go. But ships, by their nature and due to their machinery technology, are different. So, for example, you can't just say, "Okay, let's lift the ship, step on the gas, and go." It requires several hours of preparation beforehand. The engines need to warm up, various devices need to be set up, and so on. That's why, as I mentioned earlier, since we were going to set sail on the Marmara Sea, our preparations for sailing were complete. That's why we were given the following information: all the seriously injured patients who couldn't be treated at the hospitals, the ones that the large hospitals would take care of. They would be sent to our ship, and we would transport them to Istanbul. The closest place is Istanbul, for example. It's the place with many hospitals and the closest distance where the most hospitals can provide services. It is a place that was least affected by the earthquake, has many hospitals, and is very close. We were told that we would go to Haydarpaşa. Of course, within a few hours, the seriously injured were brought to our ship from various hospitals in Gölcük, from homes, wherever they were found, as directed by the hospitals. At that time, everyone was in chaos. The injured were brought to us. There was one pregnant woman. As far as I remember, she went into labour due to the panic of the earthquake. For example, she...

10'05"

Was it something like an attack?

Maybe a month before she was due. But with that excitement and stress, there were people who came to our ship because of the onset of labor. Anyway, we were on our way. All the soldiers were trying to help the civilians coming from there. Paramedics, policemen, soldiers, nurses, doctors were on duty on our ship to help. There were soldiers like us who came to the ship from outside. Because we had to take as many wounded as possible. On the other hand, we had to return to Istanbul with the wounded as soon as possible. We wanted to take more patients, but on the other hand, since they were seriously wounded, they needed to recover in a very short time and go to hospitals and health centers. So, it was actually such a difficult situation, when I think about it today. We were trying to take as many patients as possible in the shortest time possible. And of course, since there are many patients, there are no nurses or caregivers for each patient, so we soldiers were both assigned them and on duty.

For example, how can we help everyone individually? Blankets for those who are cold. In an earthquake like this, of course, people are caught unprepared, so they have nothing to wear, just wearing their pyjamas or whatever they managed to grab. We give them our clothes. We gave blankets. For example, some were cold. There were children. As I mentioned, a pregnant woman came to us. We can get to Istanbul very quickly. There was no way to go by road because the roads were closed. The fastest way was by our ship. The woman's situation had become so dangerous. While our ship was heading to Istanbul a helicopter arrived on our ship. It landed while we were moving, just like in a war. We loaded the woman onto the helicopter. We ensured she was transported to the hospital more quickly by helicopter. I remember that too. After that, we arrived at Haydarpaşa around 6 or 7 in the morning. At that time, we had ensured that the other patients, government officials, healthcare workers, nurses, and doctors who had come to meet us from the other side were transported to Haydarpaşa.

After delivering the patients there, we returned to our duty station. We returned to Gölcük, but our return to Gölcük wasn't immediate. Because at that time, there was a Tüpraş refinery in Kocaeli, and a fire had broken out due to the earthquake. Due to the fire hazard, all military ships were moved away from that area. They had moved them to the middle of the Marmara Sea. These are the things that remain in my memory. For example, I remember something that caught my attention. At that time, as I mentioned, we were transported to a place far from the ports we were assigned to, towards the middle of the sea. There, I saw all the dolphins gathered together, perhaps 300, 500 or 1000 of them, huddled together out of fear, pressed up against each other. Those are the striking details that stood out to me at the time and remain in my memory.

13'35"

Before and after the earthquake, when you looked around you, what differences did you notice? If you experienced such a moment of shock, can you think of any differences that come to mind when you look at the situation before and after?

There is. For example, the earthquake happened on 17 August. So, normally, that's the hottest time of the summer, and at that time, there was this extreme heat. I'll put it this way, in Kocaeli, in Gölcük, it wasn't quite as hot as Antalya, where it can reach 40 degrees, but I remember it being around 35 or 36 degrees, if I'm not mistaken. It was extremely hot, and such heat hadn't been seen in Kocaeli or Gölcük for years. Then, for example, a month later, it was just as hot, or a year later, it was just as hot... After the earthquake, while I was on civil duty, I noticed that people were worried again, thinking, "It's so hot again; maybe another earthquake is coming." For example, measurements were taken before the earthquake and during the earthquake. Of course, the investigations conducted after the earthquake revealed that the sea water temperature showed a very sudden change. For example, before the earthquake, the sea water temperature was 20 degrees. I don't remember exactly, but I'm just giving an example, it was 25 degrees, and during the earthquake, an unusual temperature of 3 degrees was observed in the sea water. Afterwards, as part of our duties after the earthquake, we were given the following instructions. Sea temperatures were continuously measured and recorded, in order to monitor and track whether an abrupt subsequent earthquake was approaching based on changes in sea temperature, and to collect data. I remember that we measured the sea water temperature every hour. Also, of course, both in my civilian life and in the military, something like this happened: there was an awareness of earthquakes. Because before August 17, I was 20 or 21 years old. Until then, earthquakes were something we saw on TV or in films. There was an awareness among everyone at that time. People started thinking about earthquake-resistant buildings, what to do in an earthquake, earthquake kits. What to do in an earthquake. Where to stay during an earthquake. Of course, these things started to catch our attention more. We started to pay more attention to what needed to be done. To be honest, we became more aware.

16'31"

Yes, I understand. I have one more question regarding your surrounding. When you looked at the physical changes before and after in your surroundings, what differences did you notice?

During the earthquake, for example, high-rise buildings collapsed. So, due to poor construction, even low-rise buildings collapsed. After that, I remember that earthquake regulations were introduced. So it wasn't that high-rise buildings were no longer being built after earthquakes. Earthquake regulations were introduced after the earthquake, again in 1999. In fact, the buildings that were constructed are still being talked about today. For example, there is a building. You are going to buy it or rent it. If the house or building was built after 1999, it was built according to the earthquake regulations. It is a sturdy building. There was such a difference between buildings built before and after 1999.

Yes, I see. Well, as I understand from what you just told me, your earthquake experience was quite hectic and focused on providing assistance.

Yes, that's right.

What exactly was your daily life before the earthquake? What were the differences?

My life in the army?

Yes yes. You were doing your military service in Gölcük at the time. Your life after the earthquake must have been quite hectic and focused on helping others. How was your work during that period, while you were still on duty? What was your daily life like?

I am an electrician, as I mentioned at the beginning. At that time, we would go to repair electrical faults on ships according to the orders of our commanders. These were our routine duties. We also had drills. We would do drills with ships from different countries or drills organised by our own country. That's how our daily life went by. We would go to various cities. Our ship was based in Gölcük. For example, we went on missions to Istanbul, Samsun, Çanakkale, and Marmaris. We had missions such as these before the earthquake.

19'08"

Yes, I understand. Yes. How did you and your family or those around you react and feel immediately after the earthquake?

After the earthquake, as I said, there were very few cell phones because technology was not very advanced at the time. We communicated using payphones. Right after the earthquake, before going to Haydarpaşa, maybe an hour after the earthquake, like everyone else, I was trying to tell my family that I was okay. At that time, I had cards to use the payphones, and I had my card, but I didn't have permission to go to the payphone on the ship. So, I asked my commander for

permission. He said, "Let's go together." We got permission together. He took me with him. They gave us temporary permission to go over and talk quickly, because the ship could leave at any moment. We went to the payphone. First, the commander spoke. Then I got on the same payphone. My commander was able to reach his family. At that time, my family didn't have a mobile phone either. I called the landline; I called the home phone. I called the phone where my wife was staying. I wanted to tell my wife that I was fine. But the phone rang, and I they didn't answer it. I called again later. The phone rang and went to voicemail. In fact, it was very busy. I couldn't reach my family that day. After we brought the injured from Istanbul during the day, we felt how severe the earthquake was and that the entire Marmara region had actually shaken. My father came to see me, because he couldn't reach me. He came all the way to Gölcük to find out if I was okay because he couldn't get any news. But he had to go back without seeing me because, as I said, we had gone to the centre of Marmara because of that fire. But my father received some news. I was able to see him face to face, three days later. He hadn't been able to get any news from me either. He had only been told that "There are no injured people on the TCG Fatih ship, there are no injured soldiers on board, there are no injured commanders. Your child is fine." My father received that news and returned. After that, I was able to establish contact somehow. In short, I can say this: three days after the earthquake, I managed to get in touch with my family by phone. I had the chance to say, "I'm fine, don't worry about me."

22'02"

I see. So did the earthquake cause any changes or differences in your life in terms of housing, work, relationships?

It definitely did. Now, when I buy a building, I no longer just look at whether it looks nice, whether it has two bedrooms, a living room, three bedrooms, a living room, or whether the colours are nice. I ask myself whether the building is solidly constructed. For example, I bought the house I live in after the earthquake. I asked myself, who built this building, how was it built, under what conditions? I asked the people living in this building, the people living in the neighbouring buildings, and my acquaintances. Is this building good? Who built it? Which contractor built it? Before the earthquake, I only looked at the visual beauty of the building, but now it's not just about visual beauty. Rather, we started looking at whether the building is structurally sound and compliant with regulations.

I understand. Alright....After the earthquake, in terms of recovery and psychologically, were there any things that made you feel strong? If so, what were they?

Honestly, nothing made me feel strong after the earthquake. Because I wasn't living a normal life. I was in the military. So, at 20 years old, you're away from home for the first time. I was also married before going to the military. So, you're separated from your spouse. There was the longing for her. Honestly, after the earthquake because I was going through such complex emotions, I can't say that I felt a specific emotion. Because I was experiencing such complicated emotions.

I see. Naturally

At the same time, my family was worried about me, and I was worried about my family. That's why after the earthquake, something like this happened...For example, maybe you realise that death is very close. You realise how important it is to value your loved ones. Because in an earthquake, thousands of people in the city you live in die in an instant. They were there an hour ago, and an hour later, they're gone. Of course, this isn't a trauma for a person, but it's...

It awakens a different consciousness.

It creates something. Like, don't worry about everything, life is short, look, there's an earthquake, things like that.

24'39"

I understand. Did your current home sustain any damage? Or did you experience any losses?

There were no losses in the house where my family lives. In fact, there were no losses in the city where they live. Because it was quite far from the earthquake zone.

You were already staying with your family?

Yes, but the reason I couldn't reach my family on the night of the earthquake was because I called and found out that my wife and family were in Kırklareli Babaeski district, which was shaken along with Gölcük during the earthquake. At that moment, the entire building had collapsed, so I couldn't reach them. In the end, my family felt the earthquake in the building where they were staying, but it was safe and there was no damage. It must have been the same throughout the entire district.

Did anything happen in your area to commemorate the earthquake or remember those who lost their lives?

Of course. Every year on August 17th, people don't go out into the streets. As an action, a reaction, or something. But when you say August 17th, I can say that I feel more than an ordinary person. Because very few people were in Gölcük on August 17th. I was also in the epicentre of the earthquake on August 17th. So I felt that pain much more deeply. The helplessness of the people there. No matter how strong people are, if the buildings are weak, an earthquake can leave them helpless, tear their lives apart, and leave them injured, with limbs torn off. We call it a natural disaster, but I saw very clearly what can happen if you don't take precautions. That's why when I hear August 17th, I immediately feel a pang in my heart and remember those days I lived through. Those days during my military service. Fear, excitement... Worrying about my family, trying to get in touch with them, trying to help the people there, realising the magnitude of the event. I mean, how big was it? What happened? Why did it happen? Who was affected? How did it happen? I remember the moment I had all those questions.

27'12"

Yes, I understand what you mean. Based on your experience, what do you think should be considered when rebuilding homes after an earthquake?

First of all, the rules set by the government must be strictly adhered to. In other words, the earthquake regulations specify how a building should be constructed, under what conditions, how the physical project should be carried out, what the cement quality should be, and so on. All service providers must comply with the rules set by the government. These are the rules that those who construct buildings must follow. From the consumer's perspective, when purchasing a building, in addition to its aesthetic appeal and location, it is important to consider whether it was constructed in accordance with regulations, whether it has undergone various inspections, and whether those inspections were conducted properly. There is now an awareness of the importance of purchasing from reputable companies.

Yes, you are right, I understand. How do you talk about earthquakes with your family or the younger generation around you? What do you think is important for them to remember?

I think it is important to remember the rules. Rather than making them experience the excitement of an earthquake, I tell them, "Look, I experienced this, and if this happens during an earthquake, this is what will happen." So, I think the first thing is to educate children and young people about the rules. Education comes first. Not just theoretical education, but I think practical education is also very important. For example, there are earthquake simulators. Instead of just earthquake news and stories, like "this happened, that happened," it's important for people to feel what an

earthquake is like. In those simulators, they recreate the same earthquake. For example, they build a building that shakes at the same intensity as the earthquake, say 5, 6, or 7 on the scale, and during that time, you experience what falls in that building or house. How do you feel that intensity? The building is shaking. I think everyone should experience that at least once.

It's really important in terms of empathy.

Yes. I think it's not enough to just have theoretical knowledge, it's also important to give people that feeling. I think it would be more effective if it were done that way.

30'08"

Yes, I understand. I think you're right. What do you think about the way the media reflects the earthquake? As someone who has had this kind of experience and has also helped, do you think the media is reflecting the earthquake correctly?

To be honest, I don't think it reflects the situation accurately. It's not that it's wrong, but I think it's incomplete, in terms of raising awareness. For example, when there is an earthquake, there are thefts, as in every country. The headlines are about the earthquake, the collapse of poorly constructed buildings, and the hundreds or thousands of deaths caused by those collapses. For example, in an apartment building, valuable items are stolen from a building that collapsed due to the earthquake. That shouldn't be on the front page. It shouldn't be on the front page or the main page. It's about raising awareness. When I pick up the newspaper, I don't want the first thing I read to be about theft. The first thing I want to read is about buildings that were poorly constructed, not up to code, and built by contractors who stole bricks and cement or bribed their way through inspections to build cheap, unhealthy buildings for the sake of making a lot of money. That's why I want to see people dying on the front page. Not the theft itself, to be honest. Because there's a big difference between the two. One belongs on the third page or shouldn't even make it into the newspaper. Of course, it's newsworthy, but if there's a flaw in the system that leads to the deaths of thousands of people, they shouldn't be in the same frame, they shouldn't carry the same weight, in my opinion.

So you think attention should be drawn to the right place.

Exactly. Exactly.

I understand. How does talking about the earthquake make you feel? Is it difficult for you to think about this event? Or does sharing it make you feel better?

Well, right now, talking to you about my old memories, telling you about what I experienced during the earthquake, didn't make me feel bad. To be honest, I just got excited. I remembered those days. We need to learn from that day. I'm saying the same things.

Yes, I understand. You're right. Perhaps sharing your thoughts with other people and future generations could raise awareness among them. At the same time, it might make you feel a little better.

Exactly, exactly right. You're right.

I understand. Finally, could you draw a picture describing your surroundings before the earthquake and send it to me?

Sure, I'll draw it and send it to you.

Okay, thank you very much for agreeing to do this interview with me. Those were all my questions. If you have anything else you'd like to add, please feel free to do so now.

Thank you too. I'd just like to end with a little slogan: It's not earthquakes that kill, it's buildings.