

How to make it out of Turkish prison (or avoid going there in the first place)

I finally watched Midnight Express last week. I know—EVERYBODY has seen it already (it came out in 1978, so I am merely 34 years behind the times). However, I am very glad I didn't see it before my trip to Turkey back in 2000, or I would have had more than a second thought or two.

In case you are like me, one of the last two people who haven't seen this movie, let me give you a basic plot summary. Billy Hayes is visiting Istanbul in 1970 with his girlfriend Susan, and right before leaving decides to smuggle some hash out of the country. He gets caught and then gets thrown in a Turkish jail. Jail is no picnic and Billy is desperate to get out but not his parents' money or the US consul can really help him. Turkey wants to make an example of him (if not of their prison system). He goes through hell (torture, hunger, madness, losing friends, losing hope, even ending up in a ward with demented people), until he is finally able to find a way out.

While I was watching, I kept thinking that Midnight Express is really a movie about communications, and how when communications fail, stuff goes very wrong. It is also a movie about how cultures clash. If Billy had been just a bit more culturally sensitive, he may have avoided being put in jail in the first place. It's clear that Billy is the typical "ugly American," thinking that he can behave in another country as if he's in the United States. He is also ignorant or very naive about the Turkish legal system. Smuggling hash through the airport makes him nervous, but when he is discovered, he almost treats it as a joke. He doesn't know Turkey considers this almost a capital crime.

By the way, Midnight Express is based on a true story. This really did happen.

To make it out of a Turkish prison (or deal with a communications problem), you, like Billy Hayes, could do well to:

Learn the lingo: Midnight express is a jail term for escaping jail. Billy doesn't seem to quite grasp this concept.

Speak the language: If Billy had bothered to learn some Turkish, he may have understood what was being said.

Understand that your culture is not the predominant one: Billy feels entitled. People should understand English, and they should treat him better just because he is American. But the opposite happens—he is singled out for brutal treatment.

Know when to speak and when to be silent: Billy could have spared himself a lot of trouble if he kept his mouth shut. Instead, he rages against the prison guard and gets badly tortured.

Did you see Midnight Express? Do you agree that Billy could have saved himself a lot of trouble or was he doomed just by doing what he did?