

Gönül Bakay / Leyla Pekcan (eds.)

Memorable Encounters with Atatürk



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To tomorrow's youth:
Tuvana, Eda, Ela, Semih, Derin, Cem and Emre...

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Prof. Nermin Abadan Unat

“A Choice Made” Following the Light Atatürk Lit

To me, Atatürk means the freedom of access to education. He was the person who sharpened my hunger for education. He was the person who gave me the opportunity to claim my identity as a woman and who helped me to have a profession. He extended our horizons. What he did for Turkey – the war he won, the state he founded – all of this is well known. Yet he was not just the person who accomplished these things. He was also the person who recognized the right of many women like myself to be individuals and to have professions.

His giving such importance to education – and with that key to life, giving everyone a chance to set up his or her own life – is an indication of what a great leader he was, and how far-sighted a statesman he was. He was not called the ‘Head Master’ for nothing. People now call me ‘the woman who chose her own life’. I say to them, “Is it only me?” Atatürk gave everyone the opportunity to choose his or her own life, not just me. In a non-secular order, women do not have this right. It was Atatürk who gave Turkish women this right. He created a space for women in society and enabled them to be recognized and valued.

I saw Atatürk once when I was very little. I only vaguely remember the occasion. It was the summer of 1930. My parents went to the Prince’s Islands one day and encountered Atatürk. As I remember, Atatürk was in a carriage. Father took me close to the carriage and introduced me to him. I only remember him stroking my hair, and his incredibly shining eyes. That image is still very much alive and fresh in my memory. That evening my parents dined with Atatürk at the Anatolian Club.

As to how my life was shaped by the road paved by Atatürk, let me begin by saying that I was born in Vienna in 1921. I did not know Turkish. I only learned Turkish at the age of fourteen. Consequently, the first things I learned about Atatürk came from newspapers in German, French and English. That was how I found out about him.

I saw my father, Mustafa Süleymanoviç, very little because he was a businessman from Izmir. He had an office in Hamburg, which was established before the 1920s. On one of his trips between Hamburg and Izmir, he met my mother during a stop he made in Vienna. Two years later they met again. My stepsister was with Mother at that time. Father proposed to my mother, and I was born in Vienna

in 1921. However, my grandmother knew nothing about all this. Father did not say anything to his family for a while. They only found out about my existence when I was five.

So in 1927, I came to Turkey with Mother. We settled in Istanbul. Being a German, Mother did not have many friends in Istanbul, and as a businessman, Father was constantly travelling. So I did not see him very often. Because I didn't have anyone to speak Turkish with, it was difficult for me to learn the language. I had a Swiss nanny, from whom I learned French. Mother did not send me to school, either.

Prof. Dr. Nermin Abadan Unat



Until Father passed away, I had private tutoring at home. He died when I was nine. Mother subsequently took me to Budapest, in Hungary, where I went to a boarding school. I learned English there, and since we were in Hungary, I learned Hungarian, too. Yet, I still did not know Turkish.

When I was in my last year of middle school, our family finances collapsed. They told me that they could no longer send me to a private school in Hungary, and they suggested I learn stenography so that I could become a secretary some-

where. Yet I was so keen on learning, I knew I had an uncle in Izmir – Sabri Süleymanoviç – who was also Father’s partner, and I decided to write to him. I wrote several times. I asked for money, but got no reply. I also knew that Uncle came to Hungary on business and that there was someone at the Embassy who knew him.

Our home was a small place with only a single room. We could not very well stay there during the day, so we went to coffee houses where there were numerous magazines and newspapers to read. As I skimmed through them, I saw news on Atatürk. They all talked about a new Turkey that had been born from its ashes. They said Atatürk created a new country. They also said that all young people, boys or girls, were given free education.

As I read these things, Turkey seemed like heaven to me: one could get a free education. What was more, Atatürk was doing all this at a time when there were no concepts of democracy or gender equality in Europe. What a serious reform it was to provide free education in Turkey for all – for boys and girls alike!

Having read such news several times, I began reading whatever I could find regarding Turkey. Atatürk was the number one topic of discussion in the 1930s and there were many books and articles about him. Imagine: in the very same period, there were dictators everywhere in Europe – Hitler, Mussolini and Franco – each was a rising star. All were leaders wanting war; only Atatürk was talking about peace. He was the only leader declaring a principal that said, “Peace at home, peace in the world.”

So I kept on reading articles on Atatürk. There were lengthy pieces on the War of Independence. Of course, at that age, I could not make much sense of such things. What I did understand was that all children had the right to education. That was the piece of news that interested me at the time.

I decided to go to the Turkish Embassy to ask for help. To the man at the entrance I said I wanted to see the Ambassador. Imagine: here was a fifteen-year-old girl asking to see an ambassador that day! Yet the man at the entrance did not find my request odd, and he took me inside.

When I was received by the ambassador, because I did not know any Turkish, I asked if I could speak French or English. He told me to go ahead in French. I first introduced myself, and then explained that I had asked my uncle for money, but that even if I did not receive his help, I still wanted to be educated in Turkey. I also explained our financial difficulties. The Ambassador merely said, “All right, we’ll send you to Turkey. Come back in three days.” I went there three days later. Again the Ambassador personally took up my case.

They had prepared papers for me to become a Turkish citizen again. They also gave me a voucher for the train restaurant so I would not be hungry on the trip –

in those days it took two and a half days to get to Turkey. I had not said a word to my mother or sister; I had gone to see the ambassador without telling them. But when I got the embassy's approval, I told them I was leaving that weekend. First they objected, but then they accepted it.

On November 1936, I got on the train in Budapest at noon. I never got to see Mother again. I lost touch with her because of the war. She died during the war. And I was only able to see my sister twenty years later. Anyway, that day I got on the train. They had been able to provide me only with a third class ticket. Yet that long trip, under difficult conditions, did not bother me at all. I chatted with other travellers and ate my meals in the restaurant. When the train stopped in Sofia, I got off to see the city; I almost missed my train because of that.

Finally, two days later, at about three in the morning, we came to the Turkish border. We arrived in Sirkeci, Istanbul, in the morning. The ambassador had given me a letter to give to the Chief of Police, who he said would help me. I found the Chief of Police and gave him the letter. He read the letter, called in another officer, and told him to take me to the boat that would transport me to Izmir. On board, they took me to the captain, who spoke to me in French. He told me he could not give me a cabin, but he could provide meals for me. He told me I could sleep in the ship's main hall. I ate dinner, then I slept. When I woke up, we were entering the bay in Izmir. I got off the boat and found a carriage. My uncle's mansion was two buildings away from the mansion in which Atatürk stayed when he first came to Izmir. The Ambassador had given me some Turkish money before I started out, and I paid the carriage driver with that money. My uncle's daughter, Perizat, opened the door. She was very surprised to see me. She took me upstairs to her mother. Neither of them spoke foreign languages well, so they immediately called my uncle.

He arrived; however, he was very angry because he thought his wife had invited me without telling him first. Later they took me to my aunt. After that, I stayed with different relatives, constantly changing places. Everything was very new to me. Turkish culture, Turkish language, everything was new and beautiful. Yet I was a bit afraid, too. I was apprehensive: I had arrived in Turkey, but what was going to happen, what was I to do?

I had another uncle, Uncle Tahir. He had fought for Kuvay-i Milliye, and he was the only one in the family with the Medal of Independence (İstiklal Madalyası). He didn't have any children, so I stayed with him for a while. Then there were some problems so I moved in with Aunt Şefika. My grandfather and her grandfather were brothers. Aunt Şefika was a typical Ottoman lady, and she took me in. She did everything she could, saying, "If this child came to Turkey in order to get an

education, we need to do something about that.” I was very happy that, finally, some steps were being taken for my education.

With Aunt Şefika’s help, I began to give private German lessons. In the mornings, I gave lessons to make money; in the evenings, Turkish students taught me Turkish. Thus I spent my time preparing myself for the opening of the school year. With the money I had made, we bought some black satin material and I had my school uniform made. We also bought my textbooks. When I started to be able to read in Turkish, I read about Atatürk from Turkish sources. My admiration increased as I read more about him from these sources.

Finally, they took me to the lycée. I thought I would have to take an entrance examination, but they did not think it was necessary. I was so ready to show off my Turkish that, when I found out I was not going to be examined, I was actually disappointed. So, I was placed as a final-year science student at Izmir Girls’ Lycée. There were twenty-five girls in the science section – out of this group, today four are full professors, including myself.

After my profession, my most important duty is motherhood. When I became a mother, the first thing I did was to name my son Mustafa Kemal. Both my husband Yavuz and I had justified reasons for this; and so we named our son Mustafa Kemal. We raised him as a person devoted to Atatürk’s principles.

My classmates, and all the other successful women of the period, who received their suffrage rights, owe all their success to Atatürk. It was thanks to him that I finished Law School and became a professor of political science. I became the first female instructor, the first female Associate Professor and the first female Professor at the *Mülkiye* (school of higher education for civil servants). Thanks to Atatürk and the educational opportunities he gave us, I, as a woman, became a member of the academic world.