

## A LOVE STORY LENT A HELPING HAND BY KEMAL ATATÜRK

*In Installment I, appearing in Voice of Atatürk (Spring 2006), the author wrote about his recollections of his visit just a year earlier to Mustafa Kemal's birth-house in Selanik, and the street on which his grandfather, Ismail Hakki, and Mustafa Kemal played as children (these were times before Atatürk introduced a law requiring family's to generate last names). He also wrote about cruising up the storied Dardanelles, and the Battle of Gallipoli — where in 1915 the two men, both 34, fought for eight months against the ANZACS. The experience of that horrific battle would come to define the new nation at its conception, and make kindred spirits of Turkey, Australia and New Zealand.*

*While Atatürk would go onto become his nation's savior and the first President of the republic that he helped found, Ismail Hakki would die in 1916 fighting against the Arabs near Diyarbakir, in southeastern Turkey. The author's father, the young Mustafa Kemal, would attend the military college, Kuleli, and at graduation, come face-to-face with his legendary namesake, but now the recipient of the honorific title, Atatürk, "Father Turk." In this, the second installment, he will meet the school girl who is to become his wife, the author's mother. And a second meeting with Atatürk will take place, with auspicious consequences for the young couple.*

### INSTALLMENT II.

*By Bülent Atalay, Ph.D.*

#### THE KÖKDEMİR FAMILY

My maternal grandfather, Bahattin Kökdemir, born in Sinop, on the Black Sea, was a young physician who had received his medical degree in Istanbul. Shortly after graduation in 1915, he married my grandmother, Refika. They had three children — the first child, a son named, Ertugrul Pertev, was born in 1916; their second child, my mother, Nigar Esma Atalay, would be born three years later; the third child, Hüsrev, would come almost a generation later, in 1938. (My grandfather had, however, been married once before, but that marriage had ended in divorce. From that marriage he had also a son and a daughter.) The family posed for a portrait in Istanbul (ca 1921), my uncle approximately five, my mother just two. My grandfather is seen wearing the customary fez, my grandmother a scarf over her head.

Then in 1926 when my grandfather was awarded a Rockefeller fellowship to undertake postgraduate work in medicine at Harvard, he would journey to the United



Family photo of the Kökdemir Family around 1921, a few years before they traveled to the United States.

States with his family, and spend the next three years on the East Coast of America. After a year at Harvard, he was given an extension of his fellowship and allowed to transfer to Johns Hopkins Medical Center,

ostensibly to receive additional training at America's other great medical institution. Accordingly, the family moved to Baltimore for the next two years. In 1929, with my mother and uncle — ten and thirteen years old, respectively — my grandparents returned to Turkey and settled in Ankara. The children had learned to speak flawless English, a skill that would serve them well the rest of their lives. Shortly after they returned to Turkey with some newly acquired western social habits — they found that Turkey was amidst some of Atatürk's social reforms, launched during their absence. Western style clothing was in, the traditional Middle Eastern garb — fez, turban, veil — was out; the Ottoman-Arabic script, written from right-to-left, was being replaced by the Roman alphabet, written from left-to-right — reforms that my grandparents welcomed, reforms that would make their own adjustment in returning to Turkey so very much easier.

In Ankara my grandfather was to become a successful physician, an internist, as well as a specialist in public hygiene. As a physician he was well known to administer to rich and poor alike, but especially the poor! As a child I remember occasions when patients would pay him with a pot of yogurt, a live chicken from their chicken



After the three years in the United States, my grandparents were visibly Westernized. Much to their delight, they would find that Turkey had also embarked on a course of westernization, echoing the vision of its founder.

coop, or not at all. And as a public hygienist with a pair of books that he had published on the subject and in the late 30s he would serve as a member of the parliament, a *mebbus*, after being nominated by Dr. Refik Saydam, the celebrated Minister of Public Health. But disillusioned by politics and politicians after just one term in office, he returned to his medical practice.

When my parents first met, my mother was only seventeen years old, my father 25. She was a student in a local school, and my father, a young officer on

temporary assignment, teaching military science at a nearby high school. It was not long before they became enamored with each other, but maintained a proper distance. Much, much later my father would confess to me, rather sheepishly, that they had once met secretly, having arranged to meet in front of the movie theater in the downtown square, *Ulus Meydanı*. There they would see a film together, come out of the theater, still maintaining the most proper decorum, and then bid good-bye.

But they would not forget each other.

One day a few months later, my father, uncommonly bashful, made an unusually brazen move. He telephoned my grandfather, the physician, and arranged for a private visit – not seeking any professional service. He was there to ask for my mother's hand in marriage. He explained to my grandfather that his own father had died in WWI, that he himself was a military officer who received a modest, but dependable salary, but that each month he faithfully gave a portion of his salary to his widowed mother.

My grandfather was impressed by the personal visit — untraditional in that no go-betweens were involved. He had seen during his years in America that intermediaries were not involved in asking for a girl's hand. But about giving his blessings to the marriage, he admitted his reticence, "I don't want my only daughter to be married to a soldier who might get killed one of these days, and leave her a widow. I must take this under advisement. I will get back to you." Then after a pause, he continued, "Please, call us in a month." He even gave a date for my father to call again.

In discussing the dilemma with my grandmother, there was agreement general agreement, he was very polite, and he was deeply devoted to his mother. And he was handsome — "Eli yüzü düzgün." But there was that seemingly insurmountable barrier, he was a soldier! And surrounded by hos-



A photograph taken of my mother in Ankara in 1937, shortly before her engagement to my father.

tile neighbors, the country seemed continually on the brink of war. There was also another factor to take into account: a successful and well-heeled engineer had also asked for my mother's hand, and a man not in constant jeopardy of being inducted into the military. The conundrum was not trivial. My mother expressed privately to my grandmother that it was the young officer that she distinctly preferred.

After my grandparents discussed the issue between themselves, they decided that my grandfather should consult his own mother, then living in Sinop. Accordingly, he wrote a letter to my great grandparents, expressing his own uncertainty. The answer, however, would not come for several weeks.

#### A SECOND MEETING WITH ATATÜRK

A ball was held in 1937 in Ankara at the *Halk Evi* with members of my father's military company assigned to serve as guards and ushers. Among the guests would be Maresal Fevzi Çakmak, five-star general and Secretary of Defense; İsmet İnönü, Vice-President, perennial "Second Man" of Turkey, and future president; and the incomparable Kemal Atatürk himself. My father was standing near an entrance, when Atatürk entered the grand ballroom of the *Halk Evi* followed by his retinue comprised of İsmet İnönü, Fevzi Çakmak, and other leaders. When he saw my father, Atatürk gestured to him, appearing to have recognized him. After a short pause, he actually started walking over to my father, who immediately ran over to greet him. Atatürk asked, "Weren't you introduced to me at commencement ceremony at the *Kuleli* a few years ago?" My father answered nervously that he was. "Then young man, come and sit with us at our table."

As my father's friends, the other young officers, all looked on in puzzled silence, my father was shown his seat — between Atatürk and İnönü. His anxiety must have been palpable. Atatürk then asked him, "Do you take *raki*?" (*Raki* is the familiar anise-flavored liquor in the Eastern Mediterranean, variously known as "*ouzo*" to the Greeks and "*arak*" to the Arabs. The clear liquid turns translucent, milky white,



Atatürk, accompanied by İnönü and in the rear right, Maresal Çakmak.

when water is added. It is believed that over two thousand years ago, the powerful relative of liquor was already known in the area. According to tradition, Aristotle, the legendary philosopher and teacher of Alexander the Great, offered his pupil the drink telling him that it was “lion’s milk.” My father had never tasted *raki* before, but he nodded that he did, “After all, it was Atatürk asking him.” After he gulped down one glass, a *kadeh*, he was immediately offered another, and another. And he was in no position to refuse.

Then as dinner was being served, Atatürk asked, “Are you married? Do you have any children?” My father, his tongue now altogether liberated by the *raki*, mentioned being smitten by a beautiful young woman, but that her father, an eminent physician, was reluctant to let his daughter marry a military man. He also mentioned that he was still hopeful, after all, the father had not said, “No!” The normally unflappable Atatürk became noticeably quiet; then he gestured to his *yaver*, his aide-de-camp, to approach. He whispered something in the man’s ear, and the man departed. All very baffling!

But just then the musicians started playing *Harman Dali*, a folk dance of Ankara. The dance is evocative of the Jewish folk dance, the *Hava Nagila*, where the partici-

pants form a chain, but in this instance the dance is performed by a group of men only. Atatürk stood up, and as if on cue, the other members of the high brass all rose. Then Atatürk turned to my father, “Kemal bey, won’t you join us?” By then, my father was entirely overcome with emotion, honored to be sitting next to Atatürk at the high table, imbibing *raki* with his hero, and now participating in a folk dance with him and the other commanders. His friends, all lined up along the periphery of the room, watched in utter disbelief! Atatürk led the dance, holding a handkerchief in his raised right hand, and my father’s right hand with his left. My father, in turn, held onto İnönü’s right hand with his own left hand, and so on. There appeared to be a hierarchy in the chain, from Atatürk down to the lower commanders, except for my father, who was distinctly out of place, so junior in age and rank to all the rest.

After the *Harman dali* the men returned to the table and began to sip their coffee. Afterwards, some of the men reflexively turned their cups over, if or when a fortuneteller appeared and read their fortunes from the ground coffee deposited on the inner wall of the cup.

The foregoing represented my father’s narration during the drive down the Gallipoli Peninsula in 1967, of an incident that took place thirty years earlier, in 1937. In hearing this, I remember asking rhetorically, “Of course, you told him then that you were the son of his old friend, Ismail Hakki, didn’t you?” And, again I heard my father’s familiar refrain, “No, no, I could not bring myself to tell him. I didn’t want even the appearance of favoritism.” “Favoritism,” I said in frustration, “. . . it would have made him so happy to hear that you were his childhood friend’s son.”

It has now been approximately forty-years since that memorable drive to Gallipoli (Gelibolu) when my father first narrated the foregoing, and certainly it conformed with my mother’s recollections of subsequent year. But a sequel may exist, unhappily one that I remember hearing just once — again on that trip along the historic peninsula. In this version, right after the men drink up their coffee, Atatürk’s *aide-de-camp* reappears and whis-

pers something in his boss’ ear. Atatürk acknowledges the message, but takes a few more sips before standing up. Again everyone at the table springs up in deference. But Atatürk turns to my father, and announces, “*Buyrun,* Come, Kemal Bey, we are going to visit the doctor!”

Atatürk, followed by my father and the aide-de-camp walk outside the *Halk Evi*, where the Presidential Düsenberg sits, along with two lines of motorcycles prepared to lead the way. With my father sitting next to Atatürk in the car, the motorcade negotiates the five or six miles to *Bahcelievler*, in the suburbs of Ankara. The roar of the motorcycles brings out everyone in the neighborhood. When my grandfather steps out of his house, he cannot believe his eyes. It is my father, accompanied by his “friend.” With this kind of tacit recommendation my grandfather is not about to refuse his daughter. I hope that his version is not apocryphal — a product of my own fertile imagination, but it is not outside the realm of possibility. Rather it is just that neither my grandparents nor my parents are alive now and I cannot inquire further.

Although, the last incident is one that I was unable to confirm, the following ‘sequel-to-the-sequel’ is entirely verifiable — repeated to me over the years by my mother and grandmother. Just a day before the incident at the *Halk Evi*, my grandfather had received the much-anticipated letter from his father (it might be remembered that my great-grandmother had been asked to counsel on the choice of suitors — “the engineer or the officer?”). This was in accordance with a traditional, perhaps centuries old practice, calling for a designated person, most likely the matriarch of the family, to go to bed, and “sleep on it,” *isti-hare’ye yatmak*. The next morning, it was hoped, she would wake up with the answer. In my *great* grandfather’s letter to my grandfather there was the report: “Your mother went to bed. And when she woke up she announced that she had seen in her dreams ‘. . . a man standing at the foot of the bed. . . he was wearing a uniform!” This clinched my grandparents’ decision. Atatürk had expressed his pleasure, my *great* grandparents had expressed theirs.

My grandparents were sanguine with their decision. My mother was happy. And my father was ecstatic! The engineer is never mentioned in family annals again.

The next time my father contacted my grandfather would be to plan the date of the wedding. It was to be in late 1938.

As it turned out, just before the wedding could take place, Atatürk passed away in Istanbul on November 10, 1938. He died in bed in Dolmabahçe Palace on the Bosphorus. When one tours the Dolmabahçe now, the guides will point to the alarm clock by his bedside, poetically stopped at 9:05am — as if by divine intervention — at the moment of his death. Although there is an apocryphal element here, there is little doubt that the collective hearts of all the Turks skipped a beat on that day. November 10<sup>th</sup> has since been recognized as the day of mourning for the ‘Father of the Turks,’ the ‘Father-Turk.’ My parents postponed their wedding for two months, finally marrying on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1939.

In civil weddings performed in Turkey the protocol calls for the two most senior individuals in the room — sometimes celebrities, often officials or elders — to serve as the witnesses, one witness for the bride, the other for the groom. I would like to think that had Atatürk not died when he did, had my father approached him and told him about his own father, Ismail Hakki, then Atatürk perhaps would personally have been one of those witnesses at the wedding.

### MY FAMILY POST-ATATÜRK

Before he died Atatürk had foreseen the war that was going to erupt in Europe, and had impressed on Ismet İnönü that Turkey was not to participate, but “to sit this one out!” In 1939 the war broke out, and the countries of Europe started being pulled in one by one. Both the Allies and the Axis Powers began to impress on Turkey to join their respective sides. Churchill reminded Turkey that it had been on the wrong side of the fray during the WWI, and he made it amply clear that this time around it had better stand on the Allied side; and Hitler, for the opposition, argued the converse, “...better to side with the eventual win-



A page from my father's passport, dated August 2, 1942, indicates his visit to Berlin. The pages of the passport are virtually exhausted with visas to other countries, some of them written entirely by hand.

ners.” İnönü, Atatürk's always loyal right-hand man, however, was determined to follow Atatürk's directive, and Turkey would remain neutral.

Between 1939 and 1942 my father was assigned a post in the Office of Military Intelligence at the Defense Department. And among his tasks was to serve as an domestic courier and convey important messages received by the Minister of Defense to President İnönü, occupying the *Pembe Köşk* (literally the “Pink Palace,” Turkey's White House).

By far the most memorable message that he personally remembered carrying to President İnönü from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs came from the Americans. Roosevelt urged Turkey to remain neutral in the war. The message read, “After the war ends, Turkey is needed as a bulwark against the drive for expansion anticipated from Stalin and his Communist cohorts. We will transfer to your armed forces some of the most advanced weapons we are sending to the Allied Forces.” Turkey did remain neutral. After the war, the Marshall Plan was launched, as was the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), inviting Turkey as a charter member. Both of these developments bolstered Turkey's western leaning, entirely compatible with

Atatürk's vision.

When I was two or three years old and living with my parents in Ankara, my father would often go off on courier duty to embassies in Europe. He would take the train, frequently the Orient Express, to various capitals – Axis, Allied, occupied and neutral alike. Because of security concerns, he was ordered by his superiors in Ankara to always rent an entire compartment, and to plug the keyholes with candle wax lest enemy agents gassed him to get to the papers that he was transmitting back and forth between Ankara and its embassies. Now, as I peruse his passports from the war years, I can see that his visits included the Turkish Embassies in Lisbon, Paris, London, Bucharest, Berlin, and Moscow. Note: the page for Berlin features a Swastika.

Less than a year after the termination of hostilities, in January of 1946 my father was appointed assistant military attaché to London. Just five years old, I remember well sailing from Istanbul, by way of Izmir to Cairo; then after several weeks in Cairo, flying to London, with a stopover in Malta. The photograph of my father, wearing his uniform, was taken when he assumed the post in London in 1946 (Figure II.6). My sister Gülseren was born in London in 1946, but after just seven months, would be returned by my visiting grandparents to



Major Kemal Atalay, Assistant Military Attaché to London, 1946.

Turkey, where they would take care of her. Two years later my father was promoted to Lt. Colonel and assigned to a new post, as assistant military attaché to Paris.

After Paris, a pair of domestic assignments would follow — two years in Sivas, then an assignment in Ankara, as an assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chief's of Staff, Org. Nuri Yamut. These assignments would be followed in 1953, with another foreign assignment — this time to the “sweetest of all plums” among diplomatic posts. He was assigned as the military attaché to Washington, DC.

About the time that my father's assignment to Washington expired in 1955, I was awarded the Warm Memorial Scholarship, and enrolled at St. Andrew's School, in Middletown, Delaware. Founded in 1930 by the duPont Family, this is an academically rigorous and unusually beautiful school featured in the 1989 Robin Williams movie, *Dead Poets' Society*. (Indeed, I was serving as a member of the Board of



My mother in Malatya around 1957.

Trustees of the school when the film was made.)

During the three years I spent at St. Andrew's, and subsequently the 9-10 years I spent doing undergraduate and graduate work in theoretical physics at a variety of institutions in the United States and England, my parents were living in Turkey. My father had assignments to Malatya (Figure II.7), then Gelibolu (Gallipoli), followed by Izmir, where he was promoted to the rank of Brigadier General in 1960.

During the decade of the 60s, my father had assignments to the NATO Headquarters in Izmir. Then he was based in Ankara, where he served as Commandant of the Jandarma, Undersecretary of Defense, then in Istanbul as the Commander of the First Army. In 1967, when he was receiving his final promotion, I had the singular honor of pinning a fourth star on each of his epaulets. I had missed all his other promotions through the ranks, and this was my very last chance.

#### REVISITING ISMAIL HAKKI

My father frequently spoke of his memory of his own father's visit to Biga in 1916, a memory he always described as being a “dreamlike vision” — formed when he was just five years old. He would retire in 1970, but not before another transformative incident took place. In 1968, fifty-two years after his father had died, my father, now as Commandant of the Jandarma, was on a visit to the southeastern city of Diyarbaki, ostensibly to inspect troops. One day as he drove through the small village of Silvan he was approached by a village elder. The man, after introducing himself, claimed to my father's astonishment that he had personally known his father, Ismail Hakki. And he said that he had followed my father's progress from a distance, through his assignments and promotions through the ranks. He added that he knew where Ismail Hakki was buried. My father, stunned by this revelation, accompanied the old man to a nearby graveyard, where he actually saw for the first time his father's weathered headstone, the site of his grave. The headstone was inscribed in old Turkish, right-to-left, “Major Ismail Hakki,



Seen in the photograph taken in 1968 is Ismail Hakki's grave in Silvan, with the inscription rendered into modern Turkish characters.

son of Yusuf Ziya, Chief Justice of Thessalonica.” The marker also identified Ismail Hakki's brigade as being based in Ohri, where my father was born in 1910. Ohri was then part of the Ottoman Empire and is now a town in Macedonia. My father had a local stonemason build a slightly more elaborate memorial, and the inscription in old Turkish replaced by one in modern Turkish (using letters of the Roman Alphabet).

I had always known that my maternal great grandfather (whom I still remember from my childhood and subsequently from a myriad family photographs) had been the chief justice in the City of Sinop on the Black Sea. But from the inscription on Ismail Hakki's gravestone there was now the revelation of my paternal great grandfather's name, and that he also had been a chief justice.

#### EPILOGUE — DISTINGUISHED LIVES

I have long envied the Irish who organize wakes for their dead, celebrating good lives and not just mourning for them. To be sure, we may miss immensely those departed. Leonardo da Vinci's words, “A life well-lived is long,” resonates with meaning for both of my parents, who left remarkable memories, lived such wonderful lives. My mother died in 1993 just barely into her seventies — somewhat young for our

times. She had lived an astounding life — recognized by everyone who met her for her wisdom and selflessness, her wit and humor, the elegance and astonishing beauty. When General Matthew Ridgway (1895-1993) and his wife, “Penny,” came to visit Turkey in 1952, my mother was assigned as Mrs. Ridgway’s escort during her visit. Indeed, this turned out to be a time of immense ambivalence for my mother – she was with the Ridgways in Ankara, when her beloved father passed away in Istanbul in September 1952. A year or two later, when my father was serving as the military attaché to Washington, the Ridgways came to visit us in our home — Ridgway at the pinnacle of the armed forces of the United States, my father a colonel in the Turkish Army, and indeed they all maintained a correspondence for years afterwards. Fifteen years later when Charles de Gaulle came to Ankara on a visit, my mother was assigned the seat next to the great man at the official state dinner. She exuded charisma, and she spoke French as well as English.

By any measure, my father had a long and distinguished career. Having graduated from Kuleli in 1930, he retired in Istanbul in 1970. My sister and I gave a surprise 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary party for our parents on January 8, 1989, and some of their closest and oldest friends were in attendance. We showed slides (some of which have been integrated into this story). My mother died in 1993 after a long and debilitating illness. At the time, I tried getting in touch with her friend, Penny Ridgway, only to find out that General Ridgway had also passed away that year, at age ninety-eight years.

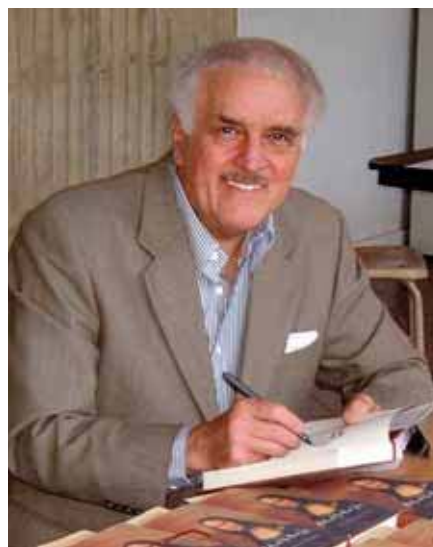
My father lived a longer life than my mother — having been born nine years earlier than she was and surviving nine years past her death — died on February 14, 2003. He lived to see five of his eight great grandchildren, a grandson and a great grandson named after him. His defining virtues had been his kindness and wisdom, his unassailable honesty and his legendary modesty; and above all his graciousness. He would never open a door, without insisting on someone else going through it ahead of him. He would never see guests to

the door, and not wait outside until the guests had entered their cars and departed. He never spoke ill of anyone else. Finally, I cannot remember a day that passed when he did not mention Atatürk with deep veneration!

How appropriate it was that such a good and honest man, so full of love, would die on St. Valentine’s Day. Late in the summer of 1993, as I completed the manuscript for a book that I had been writing for several years, I felt the painful ambivalence in penning the dedication, of noting the terminal year of his life.

“To the memory of an extraordinary man — soldier, statesman, father — General Kemal Atalay (1910-2003).” ☒

The author, Bülent Atalay, is a professor of physics and an artist. The article about his family’s connection to Atatürk is excerpted from a book that he is writing as a tribute to his late father, Orgeneral Kemal Atalay. He is the author of the highly acclaimed book *Math and the Mona Lisa*, published by Smithsonian Books (2004), currently in its eighth printing, and translated into numerous foreign languages. The Turkish edition, *Matematik ve Mona Lisa*, was published by Albatros Books in Istanbul in January 2006, and has already had three printings. Bülent Atalay’s website appears at <http://www.bulentatalay.com>



Bülent Atalay

## MILESTONES

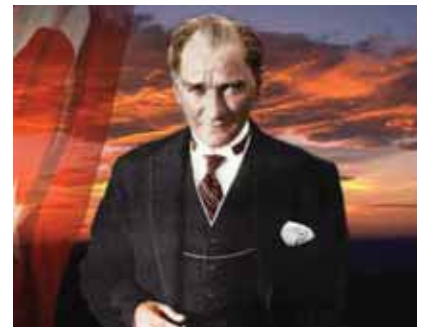
### JULY

.....  
**July 12, 1932**

Opening Day of Turkish Language Institution

.....  
**July 24, 1923**

Signing Lozan Reconciliation Agreement



### AUGUST

.....  
**August 09, 1928**

Atatürk introducing Latin letters to Nation in Istanbul

.....  
**August 30, 1922**

Independence Day

.....  
**August 05, 1921**

Giving Atatürk; agnomen of Commander-in-chief by Turkish Parliament

.....  
**August 23, 1920 - September 23, 1920**

Sakarya War

.....  
**August 13, 1920**

Sevr Agreement (Agreement of Captivity before Independence War)

.....  
**August 06, 1915**

Victory of 1st Anafartalar War

### SEPTEMBER

.....  
**September 01, 1929**

Abolishing lessons in Arabic and Persian from high schools

.....  
**September 02, 1925**

Shutting down Islamic tombs and dervish lodges

.....  
**September 09, 1922**

Victory of Izmir