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SABIHA SERTEL

THE STRUGGLE FOR MODERN TURKEY

Justice, Activism and a Revolutionary Female Journalist

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To my grandson, Deniz,

You were only eight years old at the time. We would sit on the balcony of our seaside house in Istanbul's Moda District, and I would tell you rich and colourful tales from the Orient. Leyla and Mecnun, Ferhat and Şirin, Kerem and Aslı . . . As you listened with rapt attention, sparks would light up in your blue eyes. As soon as I finished a story, you would jump up and say, 'Come on, Grandma, let's act this out!' You would stage the tale like an expert director, giving me my role and playing your own with excitement and gusto.

Seeing the richness of your imagination and artistic expression, I told your mother, 'This child will either be an actor or a director. Be mindful of his talent, and don't discourage it.'

Many years have passed. These days, I hear, you successfully act in Shakespeare's plays at theatres in the United States. I myself played a small role, not on stage, but in life. I'd like to tell you and my readers about that role. Once again, I will tell it to you as a tale, as a novel.

The time hasn't come to write about my life in exile. When that time comes, if I'm still alive, I will tell you and my readers a tale about that as well.

This is the story of a life of struggle.

Frontispiece New York City, 1919, Sabiha and Zekeriya Sertel with daughter Sevim

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The English translation of my Turkish grandmother's autobiography grew out of a personal quest to learn the truth about her revolutionary and elusive life. Her story was wrapped in layers of mystery and I was determined to unravel them.

As the youngest of Sabiha Sertel's three grandchildren growing up in the United States at the height of the Cold War, I couldn't speak or read Turkish. My mother was our window on our past. Her enchanting bedtime tales about her childhood left us begging for more – there was the one about her pet lamb while summering in a Black Sea fishing village. And how she baked gingerbread men at her experimental nursery school at Columbia University in New York City. And the time her mother saved the day while chaperoning a school trip to the islands near Istanbul. When the captain discovered he was speaking to Sabiha Sertel, author of the popular advice column, he waived an onerous fee in return for personal counselling as he ferried the group back to Istanbul.

Many of my mother's adventures hid a complex, historic backstory. Take that idyllic Black Sea fishing village – she'd been sent to visit her father, Zekeriya Sertel, who was under house arrest for stories he'd published while Sabiha stepped in to save their magazine. And her nursery school? Her parents were at Columbia, charged with bringing back cutting-edge Western ideas on the eve of the Turkish Republic's birth.

Questions about our exiled Turkish grandparents often led to simplistic explanations that glazed over the tumultuous politics that had upended their lives. Was it true, we'd ask, that one of our pioneering grandparents' journalistic pursuits had led to their downfall and exile? 'Oh the family is divided over that,' our mother would answer vaguely, artfully preserving an apparent Sertel pact of secrecy. Over time, I realized that even she didn't know all of their secrets.

My journey to learn the truth about my grandmother – my Anneanne – begins in a bathtub.

It's 1955 and I'm three years old. My sister and I are giggling uncontrollably as Anneanne tries to give us a bath in the drafty villa our grandparents have rented for our reunion, set in the mountains near Vienna. Despite the chilly water, we can't stop laughing as the plump woman with a sing-songy foreign accent battles an ancient hot-water heater, running up and down three flights. 'Allah Allah!' we'd hear from the basement, following loud bangs as she gave the faulty heater several powerful kicks.

By the time I met my grandparents in Vienna (Figure 0.1), Zekeriya and Sabiha Sertel were beginning what would become a long, tragic and furtive exile. We knew that they'd fled Turkey in 1950 and had told us they were living in Vienna. Our mother's stories served as a child's primer, filling in the basics about their downfall. On 4 December 1945, a government-orchestrated mob of thousands destroyed the Sertels' publishing house and *Tan* (Dawn) newspaper, the powerful voice of the

Figure 0.1 Vienna, 1955, the Sertels' first and only reunion with all three American grandchildren. L to R: Sabiha Sertel, granddaughter Sevim O'Brien, Zekeriya Sertel, granddaughter Tia O'Brien, Sevim Sertel O'Brien. Photograph by grandson Denis O'Brien.

opposition, fighting for multi-party rule, a democracy with a free press and civil rights for all Turks.

Over the years, I'd scour the few photos of our only reunion, jumbled in with pictures of relatives wearing fezzes and *çarşafs*. Zekeriya – my Dede – remained a vivid memory, a warm and charming stand-in for my father, an Associated Press correspondent, who'd stayed home that summer. But memories of Sabiha quickly faded. I remembered nothing except that bath and a stilted accent.

Letters were rare and they were usually postmarked Vienna until my grandparents moved to Baku. One time, a package arrived with embroidered Chinese silk jackets, souvenirs from the Sertels' trip to what we referred to as Red China. Halloween photos that year showed off our jackets but as Cold War kids, living in the suburbs of the nation's Capitol, these mementos from Communist China flagged up our grandparents as, at a minimum, unusual.

After my mother translated Zekeriya's autobiography, I asked if she'd also translate Sabiha's memoir, *Roman Gibi* (Like A Novel). She shook her head, 'It's very political, not personal. It won't interest you.'

What she didn't explain was that it was a self-censored account, written while living in Baku during the late 1960s, then part of the Soviet Union, where the Sertels were stripped of their passports and trapped. If she'd revealed their full story, it could have jeopardized any hope of returning to their homeland.

In the preface, Sabiha confides to the readers, 'The time hasn't come to write about my life in exile. When that time comes, if I'm still alive, I will tell you and my readers a tale about that, as well. This is the story of a life of struggle.' In 1968, not long after penning those lines, she died from lung cancer and was buried in Baku, never returning to her beloved Turkey.

The irony is I could have posed my questions to Sabiha in person. Just two months before she died, I was on a high school trip to the Soviet Union but Anneanne didn't want her granddaughter to see her so ill and at the time, she didn't know she was dying.

So, the questions that no one else would address remained unanswered for almost forty years until I started on a global trek.

By then, my interest was more than simply a granddaughter's curiosity. As a veteran journalist, instinct told me that my mother's simplistic primer concealed a far more politically loaded, multifaceted account of Anneanne and Dede's pioneering lives. I interviewed scholars, tracked down the Sertels' last remaining friends and colleagues, all octogenarians and nonagenarians. Among the most reticent were my relatives, who politely deferred probing questions, even seemingly harmless queries about where Sabiha was born and her childhood. No amount of time had eased concerns about being associated with their politically volatile relative.

One piece of the puzzle fell into place with the translation of *Annem* (My Mother), a biography authored by my aunt, Yıldız Sertel. She delved into what relatives refused to discuss, describing how Sabiha was raised amid revolution in Salonica (now Thessaloniki), a hub of the movement to abolish the Sultanate. How her fate was influenced by growing up in a non-practicing *Dönme* home, a community of Jewish origin that converted to Islam in the 1600s but secretly preserved many of its traditions. And why she was radicalized as a feminist at the age of eight, pledging to defy tradition and pick her own husband. She kept that pledge. Her marriage was hailed as the first time a *Dönme* wed outside of the community, a symbol of a new secular Turkey.

Still, like other historical works, Sabiha's own narrative and voice were largely missing from this account. I went back to the scholars. Was it worth translating *Roman Gibi*? The unanimous answer was, 'Yes.'

When the first sections finally arrived, page by page, my grandmother's remarkable saga came to life. It was like turning a key in a lock. I could finally meet Sabiha and hear her story in her own words, capturing history in blunt insights, colourful vignettes and humour. My aunt once described her mother as happiest when engaged in fierce battle with her opponents. As I read, Sabiha emerged as a seemingly fearless warrior, who challenged a male-dominated power structure to turn rights promised on paper into true reforms for women and workers. It's filled with intrigue, assassinations, betrayals and a bold idealism that ultimately cost the Sertels their country and freedom.

I was puzzled by my mother's attempt to dissuade me from reading *Roman Gibi*. Deep in the Cold War, had she tried to protect her American children from our grandmother's idealistic embrace of communism, even while fighting for a democracy?

Of all the Sertel mysteries, the most closely held involved Sabiha's ties to the outlawed Turkish Communist Party. In 2009, shortly before Yıldız's death, my aunt revealed a fuller, more complex truth about their lives in her memoir, including the fact that those photos labelled 'Vienna' were taken in Leipzig, East Germany, where they'd

actually worked and lived. Yet, like her mother, she held on to some secrets, as though revealing them after a lifetime of persecution would break a family vow. In fact, mother and daughter shared more than a vow. I realized that their allegiance to the Turkish Communist Party was likely the primary reason that had held them back from disclosing a hard-to-tell truth: the role that their political idealism played in the Sertels' downfall.

'Communism is for fools,' Dede once lectured me, stressing that he was a social democrat.

It's 1978, and Dede has recently returned to Turkey after 27 years in exile. We're together in Istanbul, sipping afternoon tea by the Bosporus. I press him. Hadn't his own investigative journalism and tough editorials also put them at risk? Yes, Dede admits, but he insists that if it hadn't been for Sabiha, he wouldn't have been forced to leave the country.

Like everything about my grandparents, I found that the reality was much more complicated. Political scientists and historians I've interviewed conclude that both Sertels' unbending pursuit of democracy, a free press and civil liberties set them on a collision course with the authoritarian regime. The destruction of *Tan* was designed to permanently silence not just the Sertels, but also their platform for the loyal opposition.

Over the years, Aunt Yıldız assured me that, like her parents, she was confident the progress they'd fought for would be achieved despite steps backwards. However, in 2009, as she lay dying, Yıldız was riddled with doubts. A new wave of arrests and crackdowns intensified concerns about the future of a multi-party, secular republic.

I asked my aunt what seemed a rude question for someone who'd devoted her life, along with her parents, to establishing a democratic Turkey.

'*Was it worth it?*'

'This is what's been troubling me,' she confessed. Her eyes were filled with sadness, her expression fallen. 'I wonder. There were such hardships, so much suffering. For what?'

I couldn't pose the same question to my grandparents. But a recently discovered letter from Dede makes it difficult to believe they ever would have abandoned their fight for a Turkish democracy. His words were intended for his 16-year-old granddaughter, but they are just as relevant for new generations of English readers. Writing from exile in Baku, Dede asked if I'd read their memoirs. 'They are sad stories, which show under what conditions we were working and how we have suffered in our time.' He continued, 'But we worked and we fought for our ideal of democracy and for our people. That is our consolation. You must read and learn it.'

Tia O'Brien
San Francisco, 2018

Introduction

Sabiha Sertel (1895–1968) was a woman of firsts. Let me name just three to provide a quick overview of her remarkable life: she was among the first Turkish women – if not the first – to work in professional journalism, to face prosecution and imprisonment for her writings, and to end her life in political exile. And, as though Sertel's own life was not exceptional enough, it was embedded in an era of unprecedented change: Sertel witnessed the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the foundation of the Republic of Turkey, the formative years of the new republic under an oppressive single-party state, the deeply troubled years as Turkey hovered on the edge of the Second World War, and the country's subsequent alignment with the USA and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Throughout these stormy times, Sertel held her finger on the pulse of Turkey's social and political life. In her role as chronicler and commentator, she advocated for the most disadvantaged parts of the population while having the ear of the highest echelons of Turkey's political elite. Her life was truly like a novel, and thus it was only appropriate for her to name her memoirs *Roman Gibi* (Like A Novel). But since the 'novel' was targeted at a domestic audience – this is the first English translation – I will devote this introduction to providing some context that might be useful to the reader not well acquainted with the political history of Turkey or the intellectual history of its elites.

The Ottoman Empire, which traces its origins back to the early fourteenth century, was one of the most powerful and enduring empires in world history. With the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottomans became major players in world politics, going on to establish their rule over the Balkans as well as most of the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa. At the height of its power, the Ottoman Empire dominated the Mediterranean Sea, controlling Western access to vital trade routes into Asia and forcing the Europeans to explore alternative routes via the Atlantic Ocean.

The empire retained its status as a dominant force in the politics of Europe and the Middle East for centuries. However, the European naval expeditions triggered by the Ottoman threat eventually led to Western colonial expansion across the globe, and European states started overtaking the Ottomans in terms of wealth, knowledge and power. By the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was suffering massive losses at the hands of its main land-based rivals, the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires, and its colonial antagonists, the British and French empires. These losses went hand in hand with extreme internal turmoil as many of the empire's ethnic and religious groups vied for independence, inspired by the ascendant ideology of nationalism and supported by the Ottomans' imperial rivals.

It was in these troubled years that Sabiha Sertel was born in the Ottoman port city of Salonica (Selanik in Turkish), today Thessaloniki in Greece. She belonged to a particular ethno-religious group that had made the city its home, namely the *Dönme*

(literally, 'those who have turned'), a community of Jewish origin that had converted to Islam in the seventeenth century but retained its own religious profile and sociocultural cohesion through endogamy and self-segregation.

When the Ottoman Empire started embracing major reforms in the nineteenth century, opening itself to the cultural and technological influence of the West, many *Dönme* made their way to the forefront of the empire's modernizing forces. They went on to play an important role in the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) – also known as the Young Turks – a secret political organization of young Ottoman elites that staged a military coup in 1908, sidelining Sultan Abdülhamid II and assuming de facto rulership of the Ottoman Empire until the end of the First World War. One of Sertel's brothers, Celal, was a member of the Young Turks and participated in the declaration of the new regime on 23 July 1908, at Freedom Square in Salonica. True to the progressive and reform-oriented impetus of her community, Sabiha became one of its first members to publicly marry outside the group, choosing as her husband Mehmet Zekeriya, a staunch secularist and atheist, who descended from a Sunni Muslim family.

As the European and primarily Christian provinces of the Ottoman Empire seceded, one by one – Sabiha and her family had to relocate from Salonica to Constantinople in 1913, after the loss of the city to the Greek army – the empire experienced a massive demographic shift, weakening its multi-religious character and fortifying the predominance of the Sunni Muslim population. The trend was not lost on the ideologues of the Young Turk movement, which struggled for a nationalist ideology of its own to hold the remnants of the Ottoman Empire together. They found it in Turkishness, which they conceived as an ethnic identity with an implied religious, i.e. Sunni Muslim, component. But the ascendancy of Turkish nationalism was by no means a foregone conclusion. Ottoman elites had traditionally used the word 'Turk' as an insult, denoting an uncivilized country bumpkin. More importantly, the empire still contained sizeable populations of non-Turks such as Kurds and Arabs, non-Sunnis such as Alevis, and non-Muslims such as Armenians, Jews and Greeks. But the events and policies of the First World War and its aftermath provided a decisive push for the new national identity. During the war, the empire's Arab provinces seceded, while the Ottoman state exterminated its own Armenian population – as well as certain smaller groups – in a ruthless genocide. And a few years after the war, a 'population exchange' between the states of Turkey and Greece removed the last major community of Orthodox Christians from Anatolian soil. With some exceptions, such as the minorities of Constantinople, soon to be officially renamed Istanbul, the population under Turkish rule was now largely Turkish and overwhelmingly Muslim.

Just as the prevalence of Turkish nationalism was no foregone conclusion, so, too, the establishment of a Turkish nation-state was no foregone conclusion. The Ottoman Empire fought the First World War on the losing side of the Central Powers. After the war, the Allied Powers occupied Constantinople and imposed the Treaty of Sèvres, partitioning the empire's remaining territories among themselves and leaving the Ottomans with an unviable rump state. However, many Anatolian segments of the Ottoman army were still intact and in the process of regrouping under the supreme command of a Young Turk officer by the name of Mustafa Kemal. These troops went on to stage a war of resistance against the implementation of the treaty, a struggle waged

against armed forces from Greece, the only country willing to fight for the treaty in the aftermath of the First World War. These times of occupation and resistance are remembered forcefully by Sertel, who devotes vivid chapters to the Greek occupation of the port city Izmir, her participation in Istanbul cells of resistance, and her involvement with the anti-occupation journal *Büyük Mecmua* (Grand Journal), the contents of which she fiercely defended against British censors. Eventually, Turkish troops drove the Greek army from Anatolian territory, forcing a renegotiation of the Sèvres treaty. The result was the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which established, with some minor variances, the borders of modern Turkey. The same year, the Turkish republic was proclaimed, with Mustafa Kemal as its president – he would soon assume the family name Atatürk, often translated as 'Father of the Turks'.

Surprisingly, Sertel and her husband spent much of the Turkish–Greek conflict obtaining a university education in the USA. This sojourn was arranged by Halide Edib, a leading female Turkish writer, intellectual and activist, who, at the time, supported the idea of the USA exercising indirect rule over the remaining Ottoman territories through a League of Nations mandate. Edib was instrumental in securing scholarships for the Sertels from Chicago businessman Charles R. Crane. The goal was to educate them as young Turkish elites, who would return home with cutting-edge knowledge in various fields of learning, along with personal connections to the USA. Some of Sertel's most fascinating memories are from this time, detailing her studies at Columbia University in New York City, the fundraising events she staged for the Turkish resistance, and her efforts at organizing and unionizing Turkish and Kurdish factory workers in New York City and Detroit. It was also during her studies in the USA that Sertel first encountered socialist thought in the English translations of authors such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, August Bebel and Karl Kautsky. The ideals of socialism were to guide her for the rest of her political and intellectual life.

The Sertels returned from the USA right around the time the Treaty of Lausanne was ratified in July 1923, and mere months before the Republic of Turkey was proclaimed. They found themselves in the midst of a tremendous sociopolitical paradigm shift, where, in effect, a new country was being created. Everything seemed up for debate, few topics were taboo, and even the wildest dreams seemed to stand a chance of realization. Should the new Turkish state be a republic or some kind of constitutional sultanate? Should its law be secular or religious? Should women be granted equal rights with men? Should the country be self-sufficient or enmeshed in the world economy? Should the land of quasi-feudal lords be redistributed to peasants? Those of us born and raised in established countries with relatively stable political systems will find it hard to imagine taking part in such a momentous process, but Sertel's memoirs do a superb job of reflecting this period in all its excitement and tension, all its hopes and frustrations.

It was in this environment that Sabiha Sertel embarked on her journalistic career. In 1924, her husband Zekeriya established *Resimli Ay* (Illustrated Monthly), a monthly magazine aimed at covering intellectual trends and debates about politics and society and conveying these to the average Turkish population, in an accessible language and engaging manner. The magazine was a first in Turkish publishing both for its editorial approach and for its appearance, which boasted an eye-catching and lavishly illustrated

American-style layout. Encouraged by her husband, Sabiha contributed to the magazine, with feature articles containing social and political analysis as well as the popular advice column 'Cici Anne' (Sweet Mother), in which she answered the queries of readers puzzled by the rapid changes in Turkish social and family life. *Resimli Ay* became a massive success, firmly establishing the Sertels as journalists and publishers of major stature on the emerging Turkish media scene.

Resimli Ay's agenda of conveying progressive ideas to the uneducated masses was buoyed by the direction in which the Turkish state, led by Mustafa Kemal, seemed to be taking the new country. After the proclamation of the republic, Mustafa Kemal and his allies sidelined the broad coalition of political forces that had helped them win the Turkish–Greek War, a coalition that included supporters of the sultanate and defenders of sharia law. Instead of compromising with such groups on matters of government and law, Mustafa Kemal forced the creation of a modern, secular state, following Western models. His goals could hardly have been more ambitious: the Arabic alphabet employed by the Ottomans was replaced with a Latin one. Sharia law was fully abandoned in favour of legal systems adopted from Western countries. The sultanate and caliphate, offices through which the Ottoman dynasty had ruled its empire for many centuries, were abolished and the dynasty itself banned from the country. Religious brotherhoods, a crucial form of social organization in the empire, were outlawed. Women were granted equal rights with men and guaranteed freedom by the state in matters such as education and their choice of clothing. These and many other measures were nothing short of revolutionary and were, indeed, perceived as such: they were called 'revolutions' (*inkilap* in Arabic, *devrim* in Turkish), and to Turkish minds, their combined significance was comparable to that of the October Revolution which had ended the Russian Empire in 1917, a mere five or so years ago.

But while the Kemalist reforms may have had a similar impact to those carried out by the Bolsheviks, they also suffered from some of the same drawbacks: they were decided and carried out in a top-down fashion, and they were implemented by a state that lacked the resources and manpower to spread them across the whole country. As a result, the reforms largely took hold in major urban centres, where the state had a strong presence and where many inhabitants worked as bureaucrats, teachers, doctors, lawyers, or in other white-collar professions dependent on the state. The vast majority of the population, though, continued living in the countryside and working in agriculture as it had done for centuries. These people remained indifferent to the reforms, first because the reforms did not affect their livelihoods, second because there were few schools or other services through which the state could have reached the rural population, and third because the new state, just like the Ottoman one before it, depended on the political support of quasi-feudal local rulers, whose sway over rural communities the state dared not challenge. Sertel experienced the deep divide between city and countryside first-hand when, as she tells us, the first social project she proposed to the state, a survey about children's needs in the countryside, was shot down by none other than Latife Hanım, Atatürk's wife at the time. The plight of peasants became one of Sertel's main preoccupations, and she was repeatedly frustrated by the state's failure to implement a land reform that would have redistributed ownership of arable land from local lords to farmers.

The city–countryside divide was not the only factor complicating the nationalist ideal of a unified Turkish population from the outset. The state continued to harass remaining non-Muslim communities, inducing them to leave the country in successive waves. This was not just a measure to achieve demographic unity, but also a programme of wealth and status redistribution. The trade and economic elite of the Ottoman Empire had largely consisted of non-Muslims, such as Orthodox Christians and Jews, and the emphasis on a Turkish Muslim nationalism gave the founders of the republic the chance to expropriate this elite and redistribute its wealth and power among their own followers. This process continued long after the founding of the republic, with events such as the introduction of the Wealth Tax in 1942, a discriminatory levy that disproportionately affected non-Muslims and was described by Sertel as having 'the stench of fascism'.

The non-Muslim communities were demographically – if not economically – negligible. But the state also had to grapple with large population groups that were either Sunni Muslim but not Turkish, such as the Kurds, or Turkish but not Sunni Muslim, such as the Alevis. Against these groups, each making up about 20 per cent of the population, vehement policies of oppression and assimilation were put into place, including the armed suppression of rebellions, forced migration off ancestral lands and cultural re-education through the banning of native languages and other measures. Rather than a non-negotiable racist exclusion, such policies were – and remain – an attempt at cultural extermination. As long as a person declared themself to be a Turk, with all the cultural and religious characteristics the term implied, they could claim a full stake in the new republic. But in return for this inclusion, the state demanded an abandonment of traditional or alternative national, religious and cultural affiliations. Mustafa Kemal and his followers believed that the Ottoman Empire's multi-ethnic and multi-religious make-up had been a major factor in its disintegration, and assimilationist policies were to prevent the same fate from befalling the new Turkish state.

Sertel takes up minority issues in Turkey at various points in her memoirs. In early chapters, she recounts conflicts between Turkish and Kurdish migrant workers in the USA. Later, she writes about the suppression of the 1925 Sheikh Said rebellion by Turkish armed forces, conceding at the end of her account that the rebellion, for all its flaws from her perspective, should still be appreciated as 'a movement for Kurdish independence'. And she gives a detailed assessment of the Wealth Tax, condemning it as a 'shameful episode' in Turkish history. However, in all these chapters, Sertel cannot help but come across as somewhat apologetic of the actions taken by the Turkish state, while many other atrocities, such as the Ottoman state's genocide against the Armenians, which Turkey officially denies to this day, or the Dersim massacres carried out by the Turkish state against rebellious Alevi groups from 1937 to 1938, find no place in her memoirs at all. Added to this is the fact that Sertel never mentions her own *Dönme* background, except for one instance where her opponents use the term to vilify her, which implies that Sertel herself did not identify with the description. It is evident from her memoirs that Sertel was no racist or cultural chauvinist. But it is equally evident that she was a true believer in the project of Turkish nationalism and the necessity for all parts of the population, including herself, to abandon old identities and contribute to the integrity of the young state.

To Turkey's leaders, this integrity depended not just on domestic factors such as demographic uniformity, but also on a maximum of independence from the influence of foreign states and the global economy. The demise of the Ottoman Empire, they reasoned, was not only due to the disruptive influence of non-Muslim communities within the realm, but also to the interference of the empire's rivals on the stage of world politics. States such as Britain, France and Russia had collaborated with Ottoman non-Muslim communities, fomenting their drive for independence and using them as a wedge to tear the empire apart. But these states had also co-opted the Ottoman economy: by the end of the nineteenth century, the empire was largely running on foreign debt acquired from European creditors. In 1881, these creditors established the Ottoman Public Debt Administration, which was given the right to collect certain Ottoman taxes directly to service the Ottoman debt. At the dawn of the twentieth century, about 30 per cent of the empire's tax income was being funnelled abroad through this system, without ever seeing the vaults of the Ottoman treasury.

To avoid such a trap, the founders of the new Turkey were determined to keep the country as economically self-sufficient and politically independent as possible. They championed 'Westernization' not to bring the country into the orbit of the West, but to help the country catch up with the West. They adopted Western laws, institutions, practices and technologies while dispossessing the most 'Western' parts of Turkey's population, cutting off the country's economy from global currents, and steering a political course that was free of alignment with the West, the Soviet Union or any other global players. This is why intellectuals like Sertel, while keen to learn as much from the West as possible, could at the same time take a highly critical anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist stance, railing against the influence of countries like Britain, France and the United States on the world stage. Sertel devotes many passages to framing the Turkish–Greek War as a national struggle for independence, in line with anti-colonial struggles around the world. And throughout her memoirs, we find her firmly opposing any political or economic concessions to foreign entities that she felt would undermine Turkish sovereignty.

The internal and external threat perception of Turkey's ruling elites helped them justify a very loose attitude – to put it kindly – towards democratic values. Nominally, the republic under Atatürk was holding elections, with women achieving voting rights in local elections as early as 1930. However, the country was, in effect, ruled by a single-party state. The Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi or CHP), founded by Atatürk, kept a tight leash on political life and public debate, only allowing a highly circumscribed opposition at certain junctures and on carefully chosen topics. Some of the Sertels' fiercest struggles were against this single-party authoritarianism, which, time and again, resulted in censorship of their writings, banning of their journals or newspapers, as well as trials and imprisonment of newspaper staff, and of the Sertels themselves. Especially after Atatürk's death in 1938, which Sertel recounts in a chapter that is as moving as it is sobering in its critical assessment of the leader's achievements, the authoritarian bent of Turkey's rulers increased. Under Atatürk's successor İsmet İnönü, Sertel witnessed the single-party state move further and further to the right, to the point of establishing various avenues of cooperation with Nazi Germany.

These developments had a major impact on the Sertels and their milieu of leftist thinkers. In 1928, *Resimli Ay* hired the controversial young poet Nazım Hikmet Ran,

who had recently returned from studying in Moscow and could not find employment because of his political opinions. In an attempt to ward off criticism that the magazine was harbouring communist writers, the Sertels merely retained the poet as a copy-editor. Nonetheless, Nazım Hikmet quickly emerged as the leading voice of modern Turkish literature, spearheading a literary revolution that turned Turkish poetry away from the formal and thematic preoccupations of Ottoman literature and towards social-realist themes, expressed in free verse. At the same time, his charismatic personality transformed *Resimli Ay* into the gathering place of a whole new generation of leftist Turkish writers and intellectuals, who produced some of their earliest and most seminal works while affiliated with the magazine. Sertel devotes many chapters to the political and literary discussions that were held in this stimulating milieu, the members of which retrospectively read like a who's who of famous Turkish authors, including the eminent novelist Sabahaddin Ali, whose 'discovery' by Nazım Hikmet, Sertel describes in a touching chapter.

The emergence of the *Resimli Ay* milieu gave Sertel the chance to form friendships with some of the most interesting figures in Turkish artistic and intellectual history, and her memoirs clearly show her affection for these friends. It was all the more difficult, then, for Sertel to witness as these figures were silenced, imprisoned or even assassinated at the behest of the Turkish state as anti-left oppression mounted in Turkey. The Sertels themselves had to appear in court numerous times. Sabiha acquired the dubious honour of becoming the first Turkish woman to be prosecuted for her writings. Her husband Zekeriya spent one-and-a-half years imprisoned in exile, with Sabiha running the magazine in his absence. Finally, at the end of 1930, the magazine ceased publishing over a dispute between its investors and the editorial staff: intimidated by the Turkish state's hostile stance towards the magazine, the investors demanded the dismissal of Nazım Hikmet and other leftist writers. The Sertels refused, choosing to discontinue the magazine rather than betray their friends and principles. In 1938, Nazım Hikmet was sentenced to twenty-eight years in prison on trumped-up charges of spreading communist propaganda. He remained incarcerated until 1950, when he was released as part of an amnesty and went into Soviet exile, where he died in 1963 without ever returning to Turkey. Sabahaddin Ali's fate was even more bitter: he was assassinated, by agents of the Turkish state as Sertel suggests, while attempting a clandestine border crossing into Bulgaria in 1948. These tragedies add a deeply emotional side to Sertel's account, which is as much about the struggle for social and political ideals as it is about the personal struggles of the exceptional people who risked life and limb to defend these ideals.

The Sertels' struggle reached its climax with their takeover of the daily newspaper *Tan*, which they were to publish from 1936 to 1945. It was one of the most dangerous and volatile periods in Turkish and world history: in Turkey, the single-party state attained new heights of paranoia and cynicism following Atatürk's death, while internationally, the major world powers were lining up along the ideological fault lines of capitalism, fascism/Nazism and communism, paving the way for the Second World War. In this atmosphere, the Sertels used *Tan* as a platform to call for more democracy and human rights at home and to staunchly oppose far-right, fascist and Nazi thought across the globe. In the process, they transformed *Tan* from a minor and moribund

publication into the country's main leftist opposition paper and a journalistic powerhouse. Some of the most riveting sections of Sertel's memoirs cover *Tan*'s struggle against the far right before and during the Second World War, a worthy cause that leaves no doubt as to the couple's political integrity and personal bravery. Shortly before the outbreak of the war, we even find Sabiha travelling across Western Europe, interviewing journalists and state officials who, for the most part, blithely underestimate the threat posed by Nazi Germany or cynically try to play the Nazis and Soviets off against each other. Political frustration turns into existential fear as Sertel is held up by police officers in Fascist Italy, barely avoiding inspection of a trunk full of banned leftist books she is smuggling from France to Turkey.

Much to Sertel's satisfaction, Turkey did not become a party to the Second World War. Nonetheless, the war and its aftermath came at a heavy price for the country, namely the economic and political sovereignty that Atatürk had valued above all else. The country was bankrupted due to maintaining a massive wartime army as well as other factors such as interrupted trade flows. Even during the war, there had been heavy pressure on Turkey to take sides, from the Allies and the Axis powers alike, and the country had wavered greatly in providing support for both sides while trying to keep both at arm's length. As the war ended, though, mounting economic and political pressure forced the Turkish state to align either with the US-led coalition soon to become NATO or with the Soviet Union under Stalin. Turkey's leaders chose the former, mainly because Stalin demanded territorial concessions in north-eastern Anatolia as part of any agreement. And so, Turkey declared war on Nazi Germany during the last days of the Second World War and thus became eligible to join the United Nations as a founding member, and soon went on to receive US aid as part of the Marshall Plan. In 1950, Turkish troops were dispatched to fight in the Korean War to secure Turkey's admission to NATO, in which it remains, to this day, the only Muslim-majority country.

It is one of the great ironies of historiography on Turkey that the post-Second World War line of military integration with NATO, economic opening to global capitalism and political alignment with the European Union have been presented as the continuation and culmination of Atatürk's reformist agenda. In fact, the opposite is true. In rendering the country militarily, economically and politically dependent on the West, Turkey's leaders abandoned the *sine qua non* of Kemalist thought, namely national sovereignty. The Sertels clearly recognized this contradiction and vehemently argued against the undue influence they felt the United States and NATO were beginning to exert over the country. Key passages in Sertel's memoirs describe the anchoring of the US battleship *Missouri* in Istanbul and the participation of Turkish soldiers in the Korean War. 'We sacrificed our sons,' Sertel writes poignantly, 'for the sake of the US monopolies. America sent Turkish soldiers into the line of fire, frittering them away like small chips at the casino. [. . .] US battleships hadn't conquered the Turkish people's hearts, but their independence. We paid for America's dollars with the blood we shed in Korea, with graves that rose in mounds.'

But at least, one might think, Turkey's alignment with the West must have resulted in more democracy. On the face of it, this did seem to be the case. The first Turkish multi-party elections were held in 1946, and while these were rigged and won by the

CHP, the party lost power to the centrist and populist Democrat Party (DP) in the second elections in 1950. But there were limits to this new freedom. Turkey's Western allies wanted the country to be democratic, but not so democratic as to tolerate a political left that might awaken sympathy for the Soviet Union. 'Free' elections excluded leftist parties, which were usually banned as soon as they emerged. The result was a string of populist, economically liberal and socially conservative governments, all more or less toeing the NATO line. The Turkish military steered the proceedings from behind the scenes when it did not seize power overtly, such as in the military coups of 1960, 1971 and 1980. Leftist thinkers and activists like Sertel, who had been persecuted for opposing Nazism and the far right during the war, were now subjected to a new round of persecution for refusing to endorse the political and economic objectives of NATO and the USA.

The new, post-war persecution resulted in one of the most terrifying events in Turkish media history: on 4 December 1945, the Sertels' newspaper *Tan* was destroyed by a government-instigated mob that demolished the *Tan* printing house and all the technical equipment it contained, along with two other, smaller newspapers. Instead of trying the perpetrators, the prosecutors put the Sertels themselves on trial, accusing them of publishing articles aimed at undermining the Turkish state. Their home was raided, many of their private documents were confiscated and the Sertels were each sentenced to a year in prison. They successfully appealed the verdict, but even though their convictions were overturned and they were released from prison, their lives had changed forever. They found it impossible to return to publishing, were subjected to constant police surveillance and faced the risk of further violent attacks. Many of their closest friends, all of them high-profile writers and intellectuals, were similarly affected by the vehemence with which the Turkish state cracked down on leftist thought in a bid to ingratiate itself with its new strategic partner, the USA. 'One evening,' Sertel recalls, 'we were entertaining some friends on the seaside balcony of our Moda home. They'd all lost their jobs. They weren't just unable to serve the nation; they couldn't even make a living anymore.' In 1950, the Sertels decided, with a heavy heart, to continue their lives in exile.

Sabiha's memoirs come to an end with the Sertels' departure from Turkey. The couple first relocated to Paris, but, with Nazım Hikmet's encouragement, ended up spending the majority of their exile in Eastern Bloc countries, most prominently East Germany and Azerbaijan. It was here, in the city of Baku, that Sabiha decided to write her autobiography. She wanted readers in Turkey to hear her side of the story – what she had seen and done, whom she had known and loved, why she had left the country she fought for, and how she hoped its future could still be redeemed. 'We sacrificed everything for our cause,' she wrote. 'Today, we live in exile, anguished at having to watch from afar as the struggle we began is carried on by capable hands.' But the struggle was destined to outlive her: in 1968, the same year her manuscript was smuggled into Turkey in a suitcase filled with laundry, Sertel died of lung cancer in Baku. Printed the same year by the leftist Turkish publishing house Ant Yayınları, her *apologia* became her farewell.

Since their publication, Sertel's memoirs have only grown in significance. The increased importance of women's studies underlines her value as a rare female voice

from Turkey's formative years. Not that Sertel stands on an avowedly feminist platform or makes a consistent point of highlighting women's issues. But her very life story, the goals she set herself, the obstacles she faced and the ways in which she succeeded and failed, vividly illustrate what a 'new woman' of the Turkish Republic – albeit one from a privileged background – could aspire to, accomplish and expect to put up with. Sertel accomplished much: she gained access to the highest ranks of the Turkish intelligentsia; published countless articles, newspapers and books; and was taken seriously enough to face imprisonment and exile. However, her memoirs are also those of a woman who was exploited by business partners when her husband was absent, subjected to sexist slurs by her political opponents, and expected to take full charge of raising her two children in the midst of all her endeavours. Sertel makes light of such issues or only mentions them in passing. Even when she goes into detail regarding her personal life and feelings, she sounds remarkably detached and matter-of-fact. But this literary strategy only exposes another dimension of her gendered experience: clearly, even at her life's end, Sertel was at pains to project the ideal of the enlightened, rational, sexless woman, a twentieth-century ideal encountered across the sphere of influence of 'Western civilization' but perhaps expressed most forcefully in Soviet ideology.

Sertel's seeming indifference to her gender is just one of the 'blind spots' we encounter in her memoirs. Above, I mentioned her tendency to downplay the racist and exclusionary nature of Kemalism in the name of national sovereignty. And the minority issue is not the only one where Sertel seems to toe a 'party line', whether Kemalist, socialist or otherwise. Her take on religion is unreservedly negative. She has nothing but contempt for the moribund Ottoman Empire. Her historical materialist belief in an inevitable sequence of political revolutions is absolute. And often, she seems to regard her opponents as one-dimensionally as they did her: while she is outraged when her detractors paint her as a communist stooge in the pay of the Soviet Union, she is equally liberal in depicting her antagonists as serving the interests of global capitalism and Western imperialism.

Still, despite her political leanings, Sertel is no ideologue. Awed by Atatürk's accomplishments, she, nonetheless, takes him to task for failing to establish a democracy. Supportive of Kemalist reforms, she still laments the wide gap between ideals and implementation. A committed socialist, she does not hesitate to criticize her comrades for internal squabbles and utopian thinking. Throughout her memoirs, she impresses the reader as an independent, critical thinker, offering an honest, personal and thoughtful opinion on matters she experienced first-hand. Her views may not be unbiased, but she always carefully weighs the available ideological and political options against historical realities, and when she speaks and acts, it is not with the fervour of blind faith, but with the conviction of considered thought. Thanks to this attitude, Sertel uses her memoirs to develop an exceptionally nuanced and inquisitive take on Turkish history. Readers only familiar with linear grand narratives depicting the country's supposed progress, Westernization or Islamization, will find in Sertel a refreshing reminder that history is a complex and contradictory affair.

This intellectual honesty and open-mindedness is why Sertel's memoirs are as relevant to contemporary Turkey as to the country's history. Sertel's analytical and largely unromantic gaze allows many issues that plague Turkey today to emerge in

their historical continuity. These issues include an authoritarian state with a strong leadership cult; a lack of appreciation for the freedom of opinion and speech; ethnic, religious and regional divides; the wide gap between city and countryside; the disconnect between elites and masses; the exploitation of these masses by the country's power brokers; and the tension between national independence and outside influence. Sertel helps us to see that such issues are not solely to blame on one or the other political group taking power in the country, but must be addressed in a complex analysis that cuts across ideological lines. In many ways, Turkey today is repeating its history, and while the names of the actors may have changed, most of the underlying dynamics remain the same. Thanks to Sertel's account, we gain a closer view of those dynamics than ever before.

David Selim Sayers
Paris, 2018

Translators' note

Sabiha Sertel's autobiography is truly a hybrid text. It is more than a mere memoir, offering a chronicle of upheavals in the outgoing Ottoman Empire and the nascent Turkish Republic. It is also an expert analysis of these events, introducing main players, explaining circumstances, and assessing outcome, success, and failure. In addition, it is an intellectual treatise examining sociopolitical ideas, ideologies, and movements in the first half of the twentieth century, endorsing some of these, and rejecting others. And finally, it is a manifesto, a passionate call to political action informed by Sertel's socialist convictions and deep sense of justice.

To Sertel's credit, she manages to weave these disparate approaches into an intriguing narrative. Still, such a text comes with its unique set of challenges. One of these is the way the text switches back and forth between narration of events and intellectual analysis. For a comparison, readers may imagine a James Bond movie in which 007 takes time out after every action sequence to enlighten the viewer about the geopolitical ramifications of what just happened on screen. While both aspects may be equally fascinating, their combination has the potential to rattle the audience. Sertel does a good job of maintaining a stylistic continuity between the more narrative and scholarly parts of her account, and this translation follows her lead in attempting to render the transitions as smooth as possible.

More challenging for us as translators were certain lapses in Sertel's citations, chronology, and arguments. In her Baku exile, Sertel faced the task of writing without access to crucial primary sources (as she points out herself) or (as we might add) a critical editor. Many of the passages she puts in quotes are either partly inaccurate or not really quotes at all, but rather paraphrases or summaries. We only intervened in a handful of instances when a precise quote from an anglophone source was easy to track and correct. Otherwise, we permitted Sertel to let her characters speak as she saw fit. Further, Sertel can be ambiguous as to the exact chronology of events. We added footnotes to address some of these instances, but others retain their mystery.

Another caveat concerns Sertel's interventions in literary, social, and political debates. In these passages, the author often employs a narrative device much beloved by Turkish writers but harder to decipher for non-Turkish audiences: More is said between the lines than in the actual lines themselves. This may obscure the topic of debates: Precisely what is the argument about? It may also obfuscate the stance of one or more participants: What exactly is X arguing for, why does Y object to this, and which alternative does Z propose? Occasionally, the reason for this opacity is presumed background knowledge. At other times, it feels like Sertel may have benefited from an editor streamlining her thoughts. But in most cases, we assume, Sertel is nebulous on purpose, because crudely spelling things out is something most Turkish political authors simply don't do. In an environment as volatile as the Turkish political scene, it

always helps to retain a modicum of deniability, and Sertel in particular was writing in an exile from which she hoped the Turkish state would let her return one day.

Once again, our response as translators has been mixed. In cases where Sertel eventually reaches her point, but does so in a convoluted and repetitive way, we have allowed ourselves to play the role of editor. But in passages signaling a more deliberate ambiguity, we felt that imposing a clear and unretractable argument would have interfered too heavily with the author's style and intent. Therefore, as in the Turkish original, we left it up to the reader to decide exactly what Sertel wants to say, and where on the spectrum of opinion she wishes to come down.

Finally, readers should be aware that Sertel assumes a great deal of prior knowledge on their part. She expects them to be familiar with the main events of Ottoman and Turkish history. She also presupposes intimacy with the urban layouts of Istanbul and Ankara, taking readers through a variety of neighborhoods and locales only introduced by name. Occasionally, she lists the names of people participating in a meeting or other event, tasking the reader with finding out whether the people in question are major figures or mere bit players. And she freely employs the terminology of thought systems like socialism and Kemalism without explaining the meaning of specialist terms.

Introducing brackets or footnotes to address all these issues would have rendered the translation unwieldy. So, in the spirit of Sertel herself, we combined a variety of approaches. We followed Sertel's orthography when it came to names, leaving place names largely uncommented. We inserted the English names of publications in brackets. We added footnotes for historical events and names of persons if they were particularly relevant to Sertel's narrative, leaving inquisitive readers to research the rest for themselves. We explained political and other intellectual terms in footnotes if they were easy to summarize and collected the rest in a brief glossary. And we provided additional footnotes when Sertel's omission of certain events (such as the Armenian Genocide) was significant or when events after the close of the narrative (such as Turkey's military coups) added poignancy to her story. Our goal was to create a text that is neither bewildering to the layperson nor cumbersome to the expert; whether we succeeded is up to the reader to decide.

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