

## Neslishah: The Last Ottoman Princess

By Murat Bardakçı (translated by Meyzi Baran)

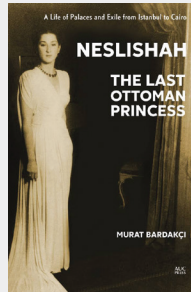
Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2017, 313 pages, \$34.62, ISBN: 9789774168376

Reviewed by Necmettin Ayan, Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University

“All that is beautiful has been made by my grandfathers!” (p. 285)

Throughout the history of the Turkish Republic, Republican historians regarded the abolition of the Ottoman Empire and the Caliphate as a just act, in keeping with Republican ideology. In the last 20 years, opinions and emotions differing from this ideology have surfaced. *Neslishah: The Last Ottoman Princess* is one of the works exploring the situation of the dynasty's members after the demise of the Empire and Caliphate. This is the story and biography of Neslishah Sultan. It is also the narrative of the decadence of the two influential dynasties. The book describes the eventful life of the last Ottoman Princess and goes into detail about Neslishah's turbulent early life, from her first banishment, through her marriage to the Egyptian Prince Abdel Moneim and her second exile, to her demise at the age of ninety-one in 2012.

Neslishah Sultan was born on February 4, 1921, two years before the foundation of the Republic of Turkey. She was both the granddaughter, on her mother's side, of the last Ottoman Sultan, Mehmed Vahideddin, who was exiled from Istanbul in 1922, and on her father's side, granddaughter of the last Muslim Caliph, Abdulmecid II. Neslishah Sultan was the last imperial member of the Ottoman royal family; her name was the final entry inscribed in the official palace registry of the



dynasty members, before the Ottoman sovereignty was abolished on November 1, 1922.

The first chapter begins with the marriage story of Neslishah's parents, the toppling of the last Ottoman Sultan Vahideddin from the throne, and the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924. It continues with the exile of the one hundred and fifty-five members of the Ottoman family, including three-year-old Neslishah in 1924. The subsequent chapter describes the family's move to Nice, France, where the princess spent her childhood and adolescence, and her family struggled from financial difficulties. In the third chapter of the biography, Neslishah and her family go to Egypt, before the outbreak of World War II.

Sixteen years after the Ottoman dynasty members' exile from Istanbul, Neslishah married Prince Abdel Moneim, who was the son of the last Khedive of Egypt. She brought two children into the world, Princess İkbâl and Prince Abbas Hilmi. Following the coup in Egypt in 1952, Abdel Moneim was made regent and Neslishah became First Lady and Princess of the Egyptian Royal Family. After the abolishment of the Egyptian monarchy by Gamal Abdel Nasser, she and her family were accused of taking part in an international conspiracy against the government. The trails continued for months; Neslishah and her husband were finally acquitted and were

exiled once more. The Turkish government allowed female royals to return to Turkey in 1952, and Neslishah and her husband moved to Istanbul in the spring of 1959.

This is a not only detailed biography of Neslishah Sultan, but the story of the Middle East in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Neslishah and other members of her family married into the Muslim royal households in the Middle East. Therefore, her life is more intricately tied to the Middle East than to modern Turkey. Neslishah personally witnessed two monarchies removed from power by revolution.

Murat Bardakçı refers to this study as the sequel to his book, *Şahbaba*, which is about the Sultan Vahideddin's life. Maybe that is why the author plunges into the political and historical situation of the last Ottoman Sultan's rule in the first chapter. Despite the "who's who" section and the family tree at the beginning, such parts of the book make it difficult to understand the background of events for general readers unfamiliar with Ottoman history.

The work is based on original documents and the author's extensive personal inter-

views with Neslishah Sultan. Although this is not an academic study, the use of private personal archives and unpublished memoirs of other members of the family increases the importance of the book. One of the best attributes of the book is its large collection of photographs, portraying the imperial ruling family members' private lives. However, in order to have a more objective perspective, it is necessary to open up the existing private archival documents to wider research.

Generally researchers' evaluation of the events that took place in the last period of the Ottoman Empire has remained stuck between republican ideology and sentiments of loyalty to the sultanate. The problems faced by members of the dynasty outside the borders of the Republic have not been handled from a humanitarian point of view. In this respect, it is important to understand the exile and subsequent events from the perspective of the dynasty's members. *Neslishah* is an important work in terms of understanding the events that took place in the last period of the Ottoman state and its inherited territories, through the eyes of its last princess.