

Prologue

“I miss my toys! Let’s go back home! I want to go home!”

A three-year-old girl, choking herself to tears while trying to hide behind the curtains in the stationmaster’s room at Çatalca train station, was shouting, “Let’s go home!” It was as if she sensed that something was wrong, as if she knew that her parents were in deep trouble.

A few ladies moved toward her, as her mother said, “We are going in a little while, my child. Look, the train is waiting for us.” Then the Swiss nurse picked her up in her arms and with a strong German accent whispered in French, “Ne criez pas ma cherie, ne criez pas!”—Don’t cry my darling, don’t cry! Eventually, her weeping gave way to a tranquil doze in her nurse’s lap.

The little girl was not the only one crying in the stationmaster’s room. Some ladies timidly perched on the edge of the chairs were silently drying their tears with exquisitely embroidered handkerchiefs in their trembling hands, trying hard to stifle their sobs.

There were others who managed to refrain from crying. The little girl’s mother was one of them. A few days before traveling, she had locked herself in one of the many rooms of her *yalı*—a mansion on the shore of the Bosphorus—in Rumelihisarı, where she cried constantly, thinking about what the future would hold for her and her family. The more she thought about it, the more frightened she was and the more she wept. Then she told herself, “On the day of our departure I have to

be strong. Crying is unseemly, and I don't want people to rejoice while watching my tears."

She put her decision into action with an unbending will; from the station in Çatalca where she boarded the train until she heard the whistle blowing and the sleeper in motion, not one tear ran down her cheeks.

Hours later, when the little girl woke up in the arms of her nanny, the train that was carrying them into exile had already reached Bulgaria. She had not seen the soldiers surrounding the Çatalca station saluting her, saluting her mother, or the other passengers for the last time.

As soon as she woke, the child looked for her mother and found her sitting just in front of her. Her mother was smiling, but there were tears in her eyes. Again she thought that something was just terribly wrong, but her childish mind prevented her from reasoning any further.

"Come on darling," said her mother. "Miss Brunner will give you dinner and then you may play with your cousins. Hümeýra and Osman are both here with us."

Once she finished her meal she went into another compartment with her nanny, and then together with her cousins she ran along the narrow corridors of the train, until the three of them were utterly exhausted.

Finally, she slept again. When she woke up this time, even Bulgaria was well behind them.

All this happened on the evening of 10 March 1924. Neslishah Sultan was three years old when together with her mother Sabiha Sultan, her younger sister Hanzade Sultan, and other relatives and members of the Ottoman family she had to leave Turkey. That child lived to the age of ninety-one, and lived a life of splendor and opulence equal to none, yet trouble, sorrow, distress, and tribulation never left her side.

Part One

Turkey

A Cold Night in March

1

Waiting for Oğuz Osman

On 3 July 1918 Sultan Mehmed V Reşad passed away after nine years and two months as ruler of the Ottoman Empire, having ascended to the throne on 27 April 1909. He was succeeded by his only living brother, Mehmed Vahideddin, seventeen years his junior, who ascended the throne with the name of Sultan Mehmed VI.

The fifty-seven-year-old new sultan was to be the last sovereign of the Ottoman Empire, which had lasted six centuries, and for years to come Mehmed VI's role and place in history would be the subject of contentious debates.

Throughout his childhood, his youth, and even during his middle age, Sultan Vahideddin had financial difficulties and worries. He was less than six months old when he lost his father Sultan Abdülmecid and four years old when his mother Gülistu passed away. He grew up with nannies, female servants, and tutors. During the thirty-three years of his brother Sultan Abdülhamid's reign he lived under the Palace's close scrutiny, like the rest of the Ottoman Dynastic family. Every step he took, every move he made was strictly monitored.

Although he was no spender, there were times when his allowance was insufficient and he would be obliged to ask his older brother the sultan for help.

Şehzade Vahideddin was Sultan Abdülmecid's forty-second and last son. At his father's death, he was tenth in line of succession to the

Ottoman throne. It was therefore unthinkable that he would one day rule the empire.

According to the traditions of the seraglio, upon the sultan's death his children, his wives, and all the women of his *harem* were immediately removed from the palace and sent to other mansions and manors. After Sultan Abdülmecid's death on 25 June 1861 rule passed to his brother Abdülaziz, so all the former sultan's wives and children left Dolmabahçe Palace and moved elsewhere.

One of Sultan Abdülmecid's wives who had to leave the palace was Gülistu Kadın, who with her two children, five-year-old daughter Mediha and five-and-a-half month-old Vahideddin, took up residence in a palace on the waterfront of Eyüp, where she died four years later in an outbreak of cholera. Şehzade Vahideddin Efendi and his sister Mediha were now left without a mother, a father, or a home.¹

The children were entrusted to two of the wives of Sultan Abdülmecid: Mediha Sultan was given to Kemaleddin Efendi's mother Verdicenan and Vahideddin Efendi to Şayeste Hanım. The little prince had a rough time with his overbearing stepmother, and at the age of sixteen, he left his stepmother's mansions with the three attendants who had been serving him since childhood. He moved into one of the apartments of the Feriye Palace in Ortaköy, built to lodge members of the Ottoman family who did not have a mansion or a home of their own.

As an orphan, Vahideddin Efendi had to educate himself. He took private lessons, he read a great deal, and he was interested in various subjects, including the arts, which was a tradition of the Ottoman family. He took courses in calligraphy and music and learned how to write in the *naskh* script and to play the *kanun* (a kind of zither). Then he became interested in Sufism, and unknown to the Palace he followed courses at the madrasa of Fatih on Islamic jurisprudence, Islamic theology, interpretation of the Qur'an, and the Hadiths, as well as in Arabic and Persian. He attended the dervish lodge of Ahmed Ziyaüddin Gümüşhanevi, located not far from the Sublime Porte, where Ömer Ziyaüddin of Dagestan was the spiritual leader, and he became a disciple of the Naqshbandi sect.

During his youth his closest friend was Şehzade Abdülmecid Efendi, the son of his uncle, Sultan Abdülaziz. But sadly in the years to come the two cousins became unyielding rivals.

Before moving to the Feriye Palace the prince had lived briefly in the mansion in Çengelköy owned by Kemaleddin Efendi, a son of Sultan Abdülmecid. Sultan Abdülhamid then bought this eighteenth-century estate in the silent hills of the Bosphorus for Vahideddin—his younger brother—and registered the deed of the property in his name.

During the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid, Vahideddin Efendi was considered to be the sultan's closest brother. In the years to come, when the young prince ascended to the throne, this closeness would greatly influence his political attitudes, such as his intense dislike of the Young Turks and the Union and Progress Party, and his sympathy for the British. Likewise, when faced with situations where conditions were conflicting, his general attitude of wait-and-see, rather than making hasty decisions, was also due to the influence of his older brother. Even during the War of Independence, when he was accused of being a “supporter of the English,” his overall outlook was based on Sultan Abdülhamid's political legacy.

On the Çengelköy estate given to him by his brother, Vahideddin Efendi had another house built for Şayeste Kadın, with whom he had spent his childhood: even though he had not got along well with his stepmother in the past, he could not forget the struggle she had gone through while bringing him up. He drew the plan of the house himself and had it built by a craftsman named Süleyman. Then he had his own house pulled down and he commissioned the well-known Levantine architect Alexander Vallaurty to design the new one, where the internal apartments of the house were planned by him. Due to financial difficulties he was unable to finish the construction himself, but eventually with the help of his brother Sultan Abdülhamid he managed to complete the building, though not its furnishing.

Vahideddin Efendi resided in Çengelköy with his family and servants until he became the sultan. Away from the city and from its inhabitants,

he lived a solitary life. In the beginning, during the winter months he would move to the Feriye Palace, returning home for the summer, but eventually he stayed in Çengelköy all year round, going to town once or twice a year on special occasions or on official duties. Even when he became heir apparent to the throne, he declined to move to Dolmabahçe Palace, or to any other palace, but continued to live on his Çengelköy estate, where in various pavilions of the garden he bred rare and exotic fish in large aquariums. He also kept monkeys in the garden and maintained a farm adjacent to the forest behind the property.

One day in his twenties, visiting his older sister Cemile Sultan (1843–1915) at her palace in Kandilli, Vahideddin Efendi saw a young girl whose eyes were the color of honey and whose long auburn hair flowed softly down to her slender waist. Her name was Emine Marshan, an Abkhazian princess born in Sukhumi in 1866, the daughter of Prince Hasan Bey Marshan. She had been brought to Istanbul as a young child, where her father entrusted her to the seraglio together with her wet-nurse. She was then sent to the palace in Kandilli of Cemile Sultan, where her Caucasian name, according to the custom at the Ottoman court, was changed to Emine Nazikeda.

Cemile Sultan's youngest daughter Fatma Hanımsultan had tuberculosis, and Emine Nazikeda became her closest companion: Cemile raised the girls together as if both were her own. Nazikeda's Caucasian nanny remained with Emine even as she grew up, although she had been told that she could return to Caucasia if she wished. Her reply was clear: "Hasan Bey would ask me why I had abandoned his daughter and would raise hell and even kill me should I do such a thing," and she stayed on at the palace, remaining with Emine Nazikeda until she died.

Vahideddin Efendi fell deeply in love with this barely seventeen-year-old Abkhazian girl. According to the rumors, it was love at first sight. The young şehzade asked his sister to give him the girl in marriage, but Cemile Sultan flatly refused. She did not want her sick daughter Fatma Hanımsultan to be deprived of a companion, and at the same time she was afraid that her brother would eventually take a