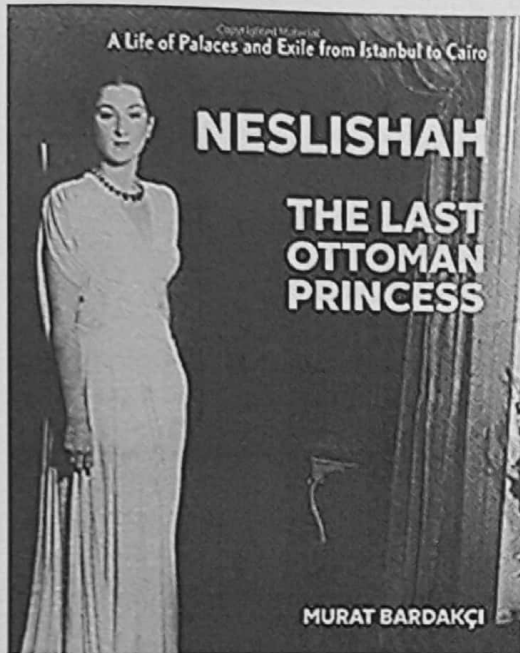


## Books



### Neslishah: The Last Ottoman Princess

A Life of Palaces and Exile from Istanbul to Cairo

by Murat Bardakçi,  
translated by Meyzi Baran

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#### Old reminiscences of a new biography

It was a warm June evening in 2003 and I was conducting the Istanbul Chamber Orchestra at an open air concert in the grounds of the old Archaeological Museum, near Topkapı Palace, on a portable stage placed on the steps of its Corinthian portico. This was during the Music Festival, popular among the city's diehard musical aficionados, and held every summer since the 1970's by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts. *Waltzes with Sultans in Bosphorus by Moonlight* was the romantic title I had chosen for the concert, since we were performing popular European dances, such as polkas, mazurkas and waltzes written by members of the Imperial Ottoman family in the 19th century, including two reigning sultans, Abdülaziz and Murad V, who played the pianoforte and dabbled in musical composition while living in their palaces along the Bosphorus and being coached by Italian pashas, including Giuseppe Donizetti and Callisto Guatelli. As a final encore the virtuoso violinist Cihat Aşkın played my arrangement of a moving and prophetic *Elegy* composed in 1921 by the last caliph, Abdülmecid Efendi, three years prior to his exile from the country, thus bringing to a close more than six centuries of continuous reign of the once mighty and invincible House of Osman in the Turkish lands.



Among the audience that evening, seated in the front row, holding her silver-topped cane, distinguished as ever in her tall

outward demeanour, elegant dress and beautifully kept wavy white hair was Princess Neslişah, or Neslişah Sultan as she was known in Turkey. As the granddaughter of the composer of that *Elegy* and the last member of the Imperial family, whose birth was recorded in the official court register, her presence that evening, alongside the other, younger members of her family, made the concert at the Archaeological Museum very special indeed, adding a real historic link to an otherwise imaginary thematic programme. I was so moved by this spectacle that at the end of the concert I walked off the stage and presented her, much to her surprise, with the bouquet of flowers originally given to me. I was invited a few days later to a luncheon at her home. It was a rare and very brief insight into the extraordinary life of this grand lady, 'twice a princess and twice exiled', who was 82 at the time and still very regal, even without a tiara on her head, but clearly imperious behind that composed and calm façade. It was not until Murat Bardakçı's meticulously written biography, *Neslişah*, appeared a year before her death in 2011 that I was finally able to have a fuller picture of the life of Neslişah Sultan, who was also the granddaughter, on her mother's side, of the last Ottoman sultan, Vahideddin.

"I do not remember much of the night we were expelled. After all, I was only a three-year-old child... My mother gathered what she could of our belongings, but took very few other things with her. Some carpets, a few paintings, some porcelain, and books from my father's library, especially the ones in German... For a child like myself; unaccustomed to going out much, a train journey was a real adventure. Perhaps this is why I only remember that until we reached Çatalca I was running up and down the train's narrow corridors with my cousin Hümeýra. Everybody had sullen expressions, but we did not notice it on our mother's faces, and we went on playing. Besides, no one told us anything... In Çatalca we were to board the Orient Express, but we had to wait for the train to arrive. They took us to a kind of waiting room. That is when I realized that something was wrong, and I started to cry. Hiding behind some curtains, I said, 'I want to go home'".

That is how the dramatic life of the three-year-old Princess Neslişah began to unfold during the turbulent events in the deposition of the members of the Ottoman family from Turkey in 1924. Fatma Neslişah Sultan was born in Istanbul on 4 February 1921, as the eldest daughter of Şehzade Ömer Faruk Efendi and his first wife and cousin Rukiye Sabiha Sultan, when "cannons were fired in the four corners of the Ottoman Empire, commemorative coins were issued in her name". But she was to grow up in Nice, where her family settled after their exile from Turkey. In those years Nice was home to many exiled families of deposed monarchs, including some members of the Habsburgs, the Qajar royalty who were expelled from Iran, as well as white Russian aristocrats who had fled the Bolsheviks. Their first abode was the Villa Xoulces in Cimiez, where the last caliph chose to settle, followed by a sixth floor spacious apartment at the Palais Prince de Galles. In her new surroundings in Nice, Neslişah did not have many friends and her time was mainly spent in the company of her two younger sisters, Hanzande and Necla, under the strict rule of their father. Great attention was given to the girls' education, in particular by Caliph Abdülmecid, who wanted them to know all about Ottoman history. "So he made us learn by heart the names of all the sultans to rule the empire. He would make us sit in front of him saying, "Come now, enumerate your ancestors" and we would start in unison "Sultan Osman, Sultan Orhan, Sultan Murad, Sultan Bayezid...", Neslişah was later to remember.

She had naturally witnessed, close up, the life of the deposed caliph in Nice, who by that stage had moved to Villa Carabacel and her firsthand account therefore provides us with much invaluable information, beyond just the political and the diplomatic, about the private life and the habits of her grandfather. And, as a musician, I was particularly struck by the vivid depiction of a private concert at the Villa Carabacel, undoubtedly one of many, which also reminded me of one of the caliph's most famous paintings, *Beethoven in the Harem*.

"In the evenings, he would play the piano and he would ask us to come and listen to him playing. He was not interested in Turkish music, he only played classical music. At times, he would perform together with his wives and the *kalfas*, in chamber music concerts. He would be at the piano, my grandmother and Hayrinüsa Hanım would play the violin, and Mehisti Hanım the cello. On other occasions, one of the *kalfas* would play the piano, while he listened".

Neslişah owed her love and appreciation of Western classical music to her grandfather and her childhood in Nice. "Neslişah lived in Nice for fifteen years. She had moments of joy and moments of sorrow in this pretty French town on the shores of the Mediterranean where she left behind her childhood – which was not an affluent one", writes Bardakçı.

The second chapter in her life opens in Egypt when, in 1940, aged nineteen, Neslişah married Prince Abdel Moneim, the son of the last khedive of Egypt, Abbas Hilmi Pasha, and became a princess of the Egyptian royal family. The outbreak of World War II had forced many deposed members of European royalty to seek refuge in Egypt – in those final years of the Gilded Age – along the banks of the Nile and the palaces of Alexandria. What at first seemed a sheltered life for the newly-wed royals, however, was soon to turn into active participation in the running of the country. When King Farouk was deposed in 1952, Abdel Moneim was appointed regent for the infant King Fuad II and Neslişah thus became the 'first lady' of Egypt. Yet there was trouble ahead; with the abolition of the monarchy the following year. Not only did the brief regency come to an abrupt end but, in 1957, Abdel Moneim and Neslişah found themselves accused in taking part in a plot against President Gamal Abdel Nasser and were duly arrested and charged with treason. They remained under house arrest for six months and were eventually released but were both exhausted by the ordeal and their health suffered as a consequence. "Exile followed once more, this time from Egypt". With the amendment of the 1924 decree by the Turkish Parliament in 1952, when women members of the Ottoman family were allowed back in Turkey, 22 years ahead of men, Neslişah Sultan did not hesitate to return home, completing the full circle in her life. She died at the age of 91 in 2012; hers was a truly remarkable life. Murat Bardakçı's highly commendable book is based on original documents and extensive personal interviews, so far only available in the original Turkish. The excellent English translation by Meyzi Baran, published by the American University in Cairo, makes the life of 'the last Ottoman princess' accessible to a much wider world readership.

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