LATİFE HANıM by İpek Çalışlar

LatifeHanım – “Hanım” means “Lady” in Turkish – was the wife of Mustafa Kemal (of Gallipoli fame), the founder and first president of modern Turkey later to be known as Atatürk, “Father of the Turks”.

(Note: I will refer to Mustafa Kemal as Atatürk throughout this report even though the cognomen was conferred on him long after his marriage to Latife Hanım.)

In the main, this biography concentrates on Latife Hanım’s life. Living through a phenomenal era which saw the birth and evolution of modern Turkey, she was acclaimed and revered by people during her brief marriage to Atatürk – it lasted less than two years – but shunned, scorned, forgotten, even despised in her advanced years by some extremists. (Neither she nor Atatürk married again.)

Birth of a nation:

The Ottoman Empire, as Germany’s ally, not only suffered a calamitous defeat at the end of World War I, but was also subjected to the partitioning of much of its territory. Britain and France seised Istanbul, Ottoman Thrace and the Marmara Sea basin. (Britain also expropriated the Arabian Peninsula and Mesopotamia; and France accroached vast tracts of Central, Eastern and Southern Turkey, including today’s Syria and Lebanon.) Italy gained much of Western Turkey and some sectors of Southern Turkey unclaimed by France. Greece, having been apportioned the coastal areas of Ottoman Aegean, promptly invaded İzmir in May 1919. And the Armenians, having been promised a state of their own, were allotted the North-East provinces bordering Russia.

Much of this dismemberment was to change following Turkey’s War of Independence under Atatürk’s leadership. In the course of this War – launched four days after the Greek occupation of İzmir – which aimed to reclaim, as Atatürk declared, “The Turkish soil” - his armies reconquered the territories occupied by the Italians and the French, fought off the Armenians in the East and, finally, in September 1922, liberated İzmir and Turkish Aegean from the Greeks. The relief of Istanbul from the British and the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 which secured “The Turkish soil” – today’s Turkey minus the province of Hatay which was annexed in 1939 – followed. Thereafter, forcing the last Ottoman Sultan into exile on a British warship, Atatürk abolished the Sultanate and declared Turkey a Republic. (The abolition of the Sultanate also abolished the Caliphate – Islam’s spiritual authority – which the Sultanate had held since Selim I had requisitioned the title in 1517 during his conquest of Egypt.)

Atatürk served as Turkey’s first President until his death in 1938. During the 15 years of his presidency, he forged a variety of cultural, political and economic reforms to westernise Turkey: the Latin alphabet replaced the Arabic one; European dress, instead of Ottoman attire, not least for women, became law as did the accretion of surnames; the sharia was abrogated and substituted with legislation based on Swiss laws; and, remarkably, the statute that declared Turkey a secular state became one of the pillars of the constitution. (To this day, for most Muslim countries, the concept of a secular state is unthinkable, if not intolerable.
The same can be said of many Christian states.) Thus, under Atatürk’s rule Turkey rose from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire and set out to transform itself from the undeveloped, theocratic, regressive “sick man of Europe” into a vibrant, westernised country.

**Synopsis:**

Latife Hanım – maiden name: Latife Uşakizade, married name: Latife Mustafa Kemal and, after her divorce, given the surname of Uşşaki by Atatürk himself – was born in 1898 to one of İzmir’s richest families. Her father, a merchant much influenced by the West and well-known in Europe and the USA, provided his children with the best education possible. Thus Latife became an accomplished pianist, spoke the languages prevalent in the then open-port of İzmir – French, Italian, Ladino, Greek, English – and pursued higher studies in Chislehurst, England, and law in the Sorbonne in Paris. Consequently, by the time she met Atatürk on September 11, 1922, she was a lively, enlightened young woman much engrossed with women’s rights.

Atatürk reached İzmir soon after its liberation. As the remnants of the defeated Greek army desperately fled by sea, a ferocious fire – probably started by the Turks – raged and consumed vast tracts of the city.

Latife who, captivated like most Turks by Atatürk’s fame and hero-worshipping him as “Turkey’s Saviour”, went to meet him to offer him her family’s mansion, located in a district untouched by the fire, as his headquarters. Atatürk accepted the offer.

Latife proved to be the perfect hostess during the three weeks he billeted there. His charm, striking looks and exemplary good manners soon transformed her hero-worship into love. Atatürk, in turn, though feverishly engaged in supervising Cease-Fire negotiations, was enthralled by her education, polyglottism, intelligence, high spirits and, not least, by her views on women’s emancipation – views which he shared and which would be one of his main reforms in patriarchal Turkey. At times, he even consulted her on certain matters of state or asked her to help draft important messages in English.

By the end of his stay, deciding that she would be the perfect consort for him – as well as an invaluable helpmate in rebuilding Turkey – he proposed to her.

On September 29, 1922, overriding Latife’s requests to accompany him and telling her he would summon her soon, he left for Ankara, his proposed capital for the new Turkey, to attend to pressing political matters. (One reason that hindered Atatürk from taking Latife with him might have been the presence in Ankara of Fikriye Hanım, his long-time mistress whom he no longer favoured but from whom he had not yet separated. This he did when he sent Fikriye – who was ill with tuberculosis – to Munich for treatment.)

On January 27, 1923, soon after his mother, Zübeyde Hanım’s death, Atatürk returned to İzmir to marry Latife. (Though Zübeyde Hanım had approved of her son’s marriage to Latife, Latife’s father, Muammer, had advised against it.)

The marriage took place on January 29, 1923.

This was a time when the Lausanne Peace Treaty negotiations and plans to declare Turkey a republic were primary concerns. (The Lausanne Treaty was signed on July 24, 1923
and on October 29, 1923 the Grand National Assembly which had been elected in 1920 on Atatürk’s appeal but had since been overhauled as the new parliament, proclaimed Turkey a republic.

The marriage started harmoniously. Atatürk, eager to embark on his reforms, set an example for the emancipation of women by touring parts of Turkey – with Latife prominently at his side – in lieu of a honeymoon.

The people in those regions, charmed by Latife – who was always dressed in smart, but modest, European clothes – took her to their hearts.

Back in Ankara, Latife’s popularity increased through her visits to the nascent Parliament with Atatürk, her candid interviews with journalists from various countries and her cordial meetings with foreign dignitaries. Almost without exception, she was lauded as an irresistibly charming woman with a fine intellect and political acumen.

Latife’s love toward Atatürk deepened day by day. By now even more convinced that he was “Turkey’s Saviour”, she felt gratified that he included her in his activities and at his dinners with old comrades-at-arms and important personages. (At times, he even rehearsed his speeches by reading them out loud to her.)

But she also worried about Atatürk’s health – particularly about his smoking and heavy drinking with his cronies long into the night – and tried to curtail his excesses. Her concerns for his health increased when, soon after the birth of the Republic, he suffered a heart attack. She nursed him back to health devotedly.

(All proved the depth of her love, her affirmation that she would die for him, on two occasions.

On the first, in April 1923, when Topal Osman, the leader of a militia, having murdered a member of the Grand National Assembly, surrounded their residence with his men and fusilladed Atatürk’s room, she improvised Atatürk’s escape by dressing him in her clothes; then to give the impression that Atatürk was still in the room, she put on his hat and stood on a crate of oranges by the window. Entering the residence eventually, Topal Osman, seeing that Atatürk had escaped, ransacked the place and manhandled Latife. He was later arrested and killed.

On the second, in January 1924, an unknown man, said to be from Crete, having been granted an audience, attempted to assassinate Atatürk by throwing a bomb. Latife, trying to shield Atatürk, was slightly wounded in the process. Though the man was apprehended, the incident was kept secret from Turkish journalists and was reported only in foreign media.)

After some months, Latife’s deep love commuted into possessive love. Her status as Atatürk’s consort and aide fuelled her sense of self-importance.

Eventually possessive love tinged with hubris brought on resentments. She begrudged Atatürk’s dinner-and-drinks parties with old comrades and felt excluded. She was gravely offended when he refused to allow her to stand for parliament as well as when he disapproved of her support for the newly-formed Women’s Party and other fledgling parties. She became jealous when he was attentive to other people, particularly women. (This jealousy may have
been fuelled when Fikriye Hanım, Atatürk’s former lover, having returned from Germany, visited him at the presidential residence. Latife met her during her first visit and found her unlikeable. On her second visit, Fikriye, failing to receive an audience with Atatürk, left the presidential residence in a huff, then shot herself in her carriage; she died two days later. It has been assumed that on this second visit Fikriye had the intention of murdering both Atatürk and Latife before killing herself.

Though there appeared to be a hiatus in Latife’s moods when she accompanied Atatürk on a tour of Eastern Turkey, this proved very brief. At Sarıkamış, irked by Atatürk’s praise for their hostess, she threw another tantrum, even challenged him to divorce her. Atatürk, infuriated by the incident and despite Latife’s subsequent pleas for forgiveness, began to consider that possibility.

Finally, following another of her outbursts against his drinking companions, Atatürk wrote a letter to Latife on July 22, 1925, suggesting that she should go away for a while to Istanbul or İzmir for “treatment”. Feeling desolate, but thinking that this would only be a temporary separation, Latife left for her family home in İzmir.

But her hopes proved delusional. On August 12, 1925, Atatürk divorced her with a governmental directive. This was a rushed and unexpected procedure that mirrored Ottoman procedures. One reason given as mitigation for the haste was that as the new civil law had not yet been passed by the Parliament the particular directive was the only law applicable. (The new civil law was ratified about a year later.)

The divorce rendered Latife inconsolable. (It also harmed the family’s prestige in İzmir, inducing them to move to Istanbul.) Self-recrimination – including, as she put it, “her inability” to give Atatürk a child – dominated much of the early years. By all accounts, Atatürk, too, deplored the disunion and was much saddened by it.

(After the divorce Latife and Atatürk met only once – from a distance. Yet throughout their separate lives, both remained considerate, even “loving” toward each other. Quite undoubtedly both had sworn never to disclose matters concerning their conjugal life and kept this promise. Latife who outlived Atatürk for almost forty years, not only observed this fidelity until her own death, but also instructed those family members who survived her to follow her example.

Atatürk died on November 10, 1938. At the time Latife was having treatment in a hospital in Bern, Switzerland. The news left her desolate.

During the ensuing years, Latife spent much of her time in seclusion, seeing only members of her family and her old friends. Of the latter the most notable was İsmet İnönü, Atatürk’s best general during the War of Independence and his successor as President. Sorrow continued to be ever-present in her life as she lost beloved members of her family, including her parents.

Atatürk’s death prompted many publications, mainly memoirs. Most of these idolised him. However, some publications in the 1950s, haunted by the “possibility” that Latife might be persuaded to divulge the real dynamics of her marriage and thus mar Atatürk’s iconic image, blamed Latife Hanım for the failure of their marriage by relating certain contentious incidents that had become public knowledge. These publications, despite Latife’s continued
silence about her life with Atatürk, unleashed a condemnatory campaign against her. Though she found this campaign hurtful and malign, she refused to break her silence.

Latife Hanım died on July 12, 1975 of cancer.

She left numerous writings and documents in two safe deposit boxes in two separate Istanbul banks. Her family bequeathed the contents of these boxes to the Turkish Historical Institute. Though the boxes were duly opened, respectively, in 1977 and 1979, a considerable number of their contents—letters and documentation that would shed important light on Turkey’s recent history—were returned to the Historical Archives and still await declassification.

**Summary of Chapters:**

(As this book comprises 41 chapters and 5 addenda, I will summarise them in groups.)

**Chapters 1-5:**

Introduction to Latife’s childhood and youth, her rich family, her privileged background and her exceptional education.

Latife, who, during the Greek occupation of İzmir was with her family abroad, is the first to return to Turkey. She is present in İzmir when the city is liberated by Atatürk’s forces.

As a great fire rages in İzmir, she goes to meet Atatürk and offers him the family mansion for his headquarters. Atatürk accepts the offer.

He stays in İzmir for three weeks. During that time, he is captivated by Latife’s charm, intelligence and views on world affairs. Before leaving for Ankara, he proposes marriage. Latife accepts.

**Chapters 6-8:**

Anxiously Latife waits to be summoned to Ankara.

But Atatürk has a heavy schedule. He also has to end his relationship with his lady friend, Fikriye Hanım. This he does by sending her to Munich to be treated for tuberculosis.

Atatürk’s mother, Zübeyde Hanım develops health problems.

Nonetheless, she goes to İzmir to meet Latife. Latife looks after devotedly. Zübeyde Hanım approves of her as daughter-in-law. Latife’s engagement to Atatürk is announced.

Zübeyde Hanım dies on January 15, 1923.

**Chapters 9-13:**

Atatürk reaches İzmir a week after his mother’s death.

He and Latife marry two days later on January 29, 1923.
A small tour of Anatolia and meetings about the future of Turkey, particularly with the team negotiating the Lausanne Peace Treaty, serves as their honeymoon.

The people they meet, particularly the women, are much impressed by Latife.

They return to Ankara – at the time a gloomy, poverty-stricken town – and settle down in a run-down mansion on the heights.

Latife, dipping into her dowry, repairs and embellishes the mansion.

This being a period of intense political activity, she meets many important personages and visits the Grand National Assembly.

Her presence in Ankara intrigues the world media. They eulogise her in their writings.

**Chapters 14-16:**

Latife accompanies Atatürk on a tour to Southern Turkey.

Smartly dressed in European attire, she endears herself to the people, particularly the women.

On their return, Topal Osman, leader of a militia that served as Atatürk’s bodyguards, having murdered a member of the Grand National Assembly, chooses to resist arrest. He surrounds the mansion with his cohorts and fusillades Atatürk’s room.

Latife improvises Atatürk’s escape by dressing him in her clothes, then puts on his hat and stands on a crate of oranges by the window to give the impression that Atatürk is still in the room.

When Topal Osman enters the mansion and sees that Atatürk has escaped, he ransacks the place and manhandles Latife.

**Chapters 17-20:**

As the signing of the Lausanne Peace Treaty looms ahead, steps are taken to form a new parliament.

Latife, by then much involved with women’s rights, seeks to stand as a candidate for an eastern seat. But Atatürk, though in favour of women’s suffrage, does not see fit that his wife should stand for parliament.

In the elections, Latife and a number of women from the nascent Women’s party receive some votes. But this is a Pyrrhic victory: women are still excluded from politics.

The Lausanne Peace Treaty is signed on July 24, 1923.

On October 29, 1923, the Republic is proclaimed. The Parliament elects Atatürk as President.
Stressed by the eventful months, Atatürk suffers two heart attacks.

**Chapters 21-24:**

On January 1924, during a restorative visit to İzmir, an unknown man, having been granted an audience, attempts to assassinate Atatürk. Latife, trying to shield Atatürk, is slightly wounded.

The incident and the would-be assassin’s identity, kept secret from the Turkish press, is nonetheless reported by foreign media.

Atatürk’s dinner parties become a forum. His drinking late into the night with close friends makes Latife feel excluded. She also worries about Atatürk’s health.

**Chapters 25-27:**

Toward the end of May, 1924, Fikriye, Atatürk’s former lady-friend, reappears in Ankara.

Latife meets Fikriye on Fikriye’s first visit but does not like her. She also shows signs of jealousy.

On her second visit, Fikriye, having failed to have an audience with Atatürk, attempts to commit suicide. She wounds herself fatally and dies two days later.

Atatürk inaugurates the first Turkish bank.

At the end of August 1924, Atatürk and Latife go on a long tour of Turkey.

At first, harmony prevails. People receive them joyously.

Latife is much affected by the poverty in the country and the devastation caused by earthquakes. She gets impatient with Atatürk, particularly of his bonhomie toward his entourage. The tension between them rises.

**Chapters 28-30:**

The newly created Progressive Republican Party sets up in opposition to Atatürk’s party.

As this new party promises women’s suffrage, Latife praises its policies.

On February 13, 1925, the Kurdish Sheikh, Şeyh Said, rebels and captures the eastern cities of Elazığ and Diyarbakır. Draconian laws are passed and the rebellion is quelled. On the assumption that the rebellion had the Progressive Republican Party’s support, many of its members are arrested and the party is dissolved.

During these events Latife receives many honours and becomes the Honorary President of the Turkish Hearth – a cultural nationalist organisation. (Note this organisation was incorporated into Atatürk’s party, the CHP, in 1931.)
But the disharmony between Latife and Atatürk prevails.

After another of Latife’s tantrums, Atatürk decides to divorce her. He sends her to her family home in İzmir, then, on August 12, 1925, divorces her with a governmental directive.

**Chapters 31-33:**

The divorce – and its Ottoman procedure – evokes perplexed international reaction. Some journalists compare the Latife-Atatürk relationship with that of Joséphine and Napoleon.

**Chapters 34-36:**

Latife, full of remorse, is inconsolable and remains so.

Atatürk, too, appears to deplore the situation.

Most honourably, neither she nor he speak ill of each other throughout their lives. Though Latife, after meeting Napoleon’s famous biographer, Emil Ludwig, does confide in Ludwig, she forbids him to publish the story of her life.

**Chapters 37-41:**

The latter half of Latife’s life passes in semi seclusion. Living in the family home in Istanbul, she sees only members of her family and her old friends.

But her interest in women’s suffrage continues and she eventually sees the day when a woman is elected to the Parliament.

Another tragedy strikes her when her brother Müncidies in mystifying circumstances over a love affair.

Latife receives the surname Uşşaki – which meaning “those in love” is a pun on her family name, Uşakizade – directly from Atatürk.

Atatürk dies on November 10, 1938.

Latife hears the news while having treatment in a hospital in Bern, Switzerland.

Desolate, she becomes even more reclusive.

In the 1950s extremists launch a campaign to blacken her name. Much as this hurts and offends her, she keeps her promise to Atatürk and never discloses anything about their conjugal life.

In the 1960s she moves to a small apartment.

She dies there of cancer on July 12, 1975.
She leaves two safe deposit boxes in two different banks. These contain her personal effects, letters and writings.

**Addenda 1-5:**

These addenda draw attention to the contents of the safe deposit boxes which Latife’s family bequeathed to the Turkish Historical Foundation.

They were opened respectively, in 1977 and 1979.

Some personal items were returned to the family or sent to the Military Museum.

Some letters and writings, already in the public domain, were released.

But a considerable number of letters, writings and documentation that would shed important light on Turkey’s recent history were sealed and returned to the Historical Archives. They still await declassification.

**Report:**

This is a meticulously researched work that must have examined every available source. In the best tradition of biographical works, the author not only focuses on Latife Hanım’s persona, but also explores her anima. Abreast with this endeavour, there are notable insights into Atatürk – the real person as opposed to the deified figure he has become for most Turks. Moreover, there are pertinent references, albeit compressed, to some of the important historical events that occurred during Turkey’s birth and development.

(Some readers might feel disappointed by the compression of some of the historical events – such as the assassination attempts on Atatürk and the Şeyh Said rebellion – and hanker for more information. This can be remedied easily.) (See **EDITORIAL RECOMMENDATION II**.)

Then again it should be borne in mind that the author has not set out to write a historical treatise, but to provide – despite the unavailability of some important documentation – as comprehensive a biography of Latife as possible. That said, the fact that this biography recounts the life of an exceptional woman, briefly married to a pre-eminent statesman and living in extraordinary times, elevates the work as a unique historical document. Indeed, **Latife Hanım** should appeal to publishers as an important reference work, a companion to the two major biographies of Atatürk, both published to great acclaim, by Lord Kinross and Andrew Mango.

**If I may, I will take the liberty of suggesting two editorial recommendations.**

**I.**

Given İpek Çalışlar’s exhaustive research, the book is saturated with the personages that touched Latife’s life. Most of these personages would be unfamiliar to the Anglophone readership as, I imagine, the personages of Churchill’s War Cabinet would be unfamiliar to most non-British readers. I would, therefore, suggest that the personages in **Latife Hanım** should be listed as an Appendix with brief mentions of their identity and/or status. (And if
possible some of the minor ones should be omitted.

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**II:**

*Latife Hanım* has a profusion of footnotes which cite the source/s of the given text. I would suggest that these footnotes can be dispensed with or, should the author insist, transferred to a second Appendix.

This would enable the publisher to insert far more important footnotes, namely, more detailed accounts of those important historical events that, at present, are compressed. This measure should satisfy those readers who prefer a larger historical perspective.

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**Recommendation:**

I would recommend the publication of this book. It not only brings to life an extraordinary woman, but also serves as a unique historical document. My concern is that, given its length, many publishers might hesitate to take it on. However, I believe the author and the translator are in the process of abridging it. That would be a very favourable move.

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**MORIS FARHI**

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