Chapter 10

Escaping to Girlhood in Late Ottoman Istanbul: Demetra Vaka’s and Selma Ekrem’s Childhood Memories

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To the extent that childhood stays with us through reminiscences, traces of memory and impressions, writing one’s childhood and recollections of growing up is an act of self-reflection and self-understanding. In many autobiographies, the part devoted to childhood is quite brief: narrating one’s childhood in detail is a difficult exercise in memory, and it may be felt that the subject is of lesser interest to readers than later life. However, although an autobiographical work is a combination of fact and fiction, personal accounts of growing up are important sources for historical research; firstly, because they provide clues to the psychological make-up, family background and socialization of the person studied; and secondly, because they shed light on the whole process of the narrative reconstruction of early life, closing the distance between the present and the past. This chapter uses Demetra Vaka’s A Child of the Orient (1914) and Selma Ekrem’s Unveiled (1930) to explore different experiences of Ottoman childhood in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Istanbul, and how these were presented to foreign audiences. Both authors’ coming-of-age narratives were written in English for Anglo-American audiences.1 I also refer to Demetra Vaka’s earlier book, Haremlik,2 and her novella Bribed to be Born. This is a story about an Istanbulite Greek girl, and was greatly inspired by her own familial relations and upbringing. Her husband reported finding this among her papers after her death, and it was published posthumously in 1951.3

Demetra Vaka (1887–1946) was a novelist, a journalist and travel writer, and her writings include Orientalist works on the Muslim women of the Ottoman

3 Demetra Vaka (Mrs Kenneth Brown), Bribed to be Born (New York: Exposition Press, 1951).
Empire. She also wrote more broadly on the late Ottoman Empire and its politics, the Eastern Question and the politics of the Great Powers, as well as Greek nationalism. Her ideological formation is a mixture of Greek nationalist ideas that she received from family members, a soft Ottomanism that she inherited largely due to her father’s bureaucratic post in the Ottoman administration and a critique of modernity that she developed in her later life, especially while living in the United States.

Selma Ekrem (1902–1986) settled in the United States as a young woman, and she worked in Turkey’s diplomatic missions in New York and in Washington. She was a lecturer and a journalist writing on the birth of modern Turkey until 1970s. Along with Unveiled, she was also the author of two books for youngsters: Turkey, Old and New (1947) and Turkish Fairy Tales (1964).4 She was the daughter of an upper-class, westernized bureaucratic family that witnessed the transition from the Empire to the Turkish Republic. Her ideological background combines an Ottomanism (Ottoman patriotism) mostly inherited from her family’s bureaucratic and military position, a modernizing and liberal attitude critical of the Hamidian absolutist regime and later Turkish nationalism.

The Greek girl Demetra Vaka and the Turkish girl Selma Ekrem belonged to different communities of the Ottoman Empire and their writings demonstrate that their experiences of the age of dissolution of the Empire, nationalism and war were shaped by the particular circumstances of their communities. However, as children of Ottoman bureaucrats and modernized upper-class families, they shared an ideological environment; indeed, I argue here that they were raised according to quite similar childhood models. Although Vaka was about fifteen years older than Ekrem, they both grew up at a time of socioeconomic, material and ideological change: this was a period not only of changing clothes, homes, furniture and consumption patterns, but also a time when Westernization, Enlightenment values, constitutionalism and nationalism were very much in the air. Both their accounts of childhood are retrospective examinations of the nationalist strife, imperialist projects, modernization currents and social transformation experienced in the last decades of Ottoman Empire. This chapter will compare and contrast the two girls’ development from childhood into girlhood, which in both cases led to their migration to the USA. I argue that both girls sought to escape the social conventions and moral obligations of their respective communities and deliberately opted for a childhood which extended into girlhood, compared to peers in their respective communities. In both cases, a prolonged girlhood was their response to familial and