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# “MY LIFE PLAYED ME A SERENADE”

Princess Fahrelnissa Zeid is nearly as old as the century yet she is still one of the brightest stars of a family which illustrates the Ottoman Empire's seductive combination of grandeur and emancipation. By Philip Mansel



Top: Princess Fahrelnissa Zeid in Berlin in the Thirties and, right, at her Amman home surrounded by her paintings and family photographs

*Fotoğraflar ve hılgılar  
Lenin arxivinden*

Photographs courtesy of Taha Toros



Turkish women could lead independent and challenging lives even before the reforms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. At the Ottoman court the harem was a separate female power-base which could decide the future of sultans and viziers. After the Young Turk revolution of 1908, the writer Halide Edib, a friend of the Bloomsbury group, helped to found the Society for the Elevation of Women. And on June 6, 1919, unveiled, she made a famous speech in Istanbul's Sultanahmet Square, urging the huge crowd to liberate Izmir from the Greeks.

There were modern girls' schools in Istanbul and one of their most emancipated pupils, in 1920, was Fahrünnisa Şakir. As Her Royal Highness Princess Fahrelnissa Zeid of Jordan, she celebrated her 88th birthday recently.

Her family history illustrates the Ottoman Empire's seductive combination of grandeur and nobility. Princess Fahrelnissa's grandfather Asim came from a family of teachers in Afyon Karahisar in Anatolia. Since they disapproved of his desire to be a soldier, he arrived in Istanbul, hidden under a pile of vegetables. He eventually became one of the five members of the Military Council of the Empire.

His eldest son, Cevat Pasha, was appointed Grand Vizier in 1891 at the age of 40. Cevat Pasha was a particularly cultivated member of the late Ottoman élite. He spoke Turkish, Arabic, Greek, Italian and French, wrote a history of the Ottoman army, employed a French gardener to look after his orchids and was also a skilled potter and photographer.

Princess Fahrelnissa's father, Cevat Pasha's younger brother Şakir Pasha, a prominent officer, ambassador and historian, was shot dead by his own son, Cevat, in 1914. The family said it was an accident. However, Cevat, whose extravagance and determination to be an



*Princess Fahrelnissa's work has ranged from impressionistic interiors to larger-than-life portraits inspired by Byzantine mosaics*

artist had led to many quarrels with his father, was accused of murder.

In prison and then in Bodrum (Halicarnassus) on the Aegean, "the fisherman of Halicarnassus", as he came to be known, had ample opportunity to realise his talents. He became one of Turkey's best-known novelists and essayists, writing in a simple natural style about the local people, landscape and archaeology.

Princess Fahrelnissa was born in 1901 in the large wooden family house on Büyükkada, one of the Princes' Isles in the Sea of Marmara south of Istanbul. She was educated at the Pensionnat Brogiotto and the Academy of Fine Arts founded by Sultan Abdül Hamid. Her first husband, Izzet Melih Devrim, president of the Imperial Ottoman Tobacco Monopoly, was a writer and a Francophile and she was able to continue her art studies in Paris.

Like most of the Ottoman élite, her family rallied to the Republic. Her brothers-in-law, Emin Pasha and Ahmed, fought in the War of Independence; Fahrelnissa knew Atatürk and attended some of the historic conferences in Dolmabahçe Palace.

After the dissolution of her first marriage in 1934 she married Prince Zeid, a member of the Hashemite Arab dynasty which has helped to create the modern Middle East. Prince Zeid's father Sherif Hussein bin Ali, Emir of Mecca, launched the Arab (or, more accurately, Hashemite) Revolt against the Ottoman Empire in 1916. One of Prince Zeid's brothers was the Emir

Abdullah of Transjordan, grandfather of King Hussein of Jordan; another was King Faisal I of Iraq.

Like many Arab leaders of the first half of the 20th century, Prince Zeid was a product of Istanbul in its last days of imperial glory, when differences between Turks and Arabs were less significant than their shared Ottoman Muslim heritage.

Just as the Princess Fahrelnissa was a Turk with an Arab grandmother, so Prince Zeid was an Arab with a Turkish mother. Born in 1898 in Istanbul, where his father was the Sultan's guest (or prisoner), he knew Turkish well. Despite revolting against the Ottoman Empire, the Hashemites maintained a residence in its former capital, the Şerifler Köskü, overlooking the Bosphorus, where Prince and Princess Zeid lived for a time.

Prince Zeid then pursued a dazzling diplomatic career, serving as Iraqi ambassador in Ankara under Atatürk, in Berlin under Hitler and in London under Churchill and Eden.

People still remember the splendour of the banquet Prince and Princess Zeid gave in honour of the state visit to England of their great-nephew King Faisal II of Iraq in 1956. Two years later, the young king was murdered with his family in Baghdad. The prince and his family had to exchange the embassy in Kensington Palace Gardens for a quiet life in a flat in Oakwood Court, London.

Although she enjoyed her position as an ambassador's wife, Princess Fahrelnissa Zeid did not allow it to overshadow her career as an artist. One of those fortunate people who know how to make the most of their lives, she says: "As my life played me a serenade, I danced around it like a gypsy."



Portraits of a brilliant and relentless family. Top: Princess Fahrnelnissa's family in Damascus before her birth in 1901. Above: her brother the author Cevat Şakir Kabaağaç in exile in Bodrum in the Fifties shortly after being released from prison for alleged patricide. Right: her sister Aliye Berger, an acclaimed etcher who held a legendary salon in Istanbul



*Top: the last survivor of her generation, Princess Fahrelnissa in her early twenties. Above and left: her father, Şakir Pasha, who was an officer, ambassador and historian, and her mother Sare Hanım*

She has painted all her life and is confident of her status as a great artist. "When I am painting I am always aware of a kind of communion with all living things... I then cease to be myself in order to become part of an impersonal creative process that throws out these paintings much as an erupting volcano throws out rocks and lava. Often I am aware of what I have painted only when the canvas is at last finished."

Her art, like her life, is an intoxicating mixture of East and West. At first she used a semi-impressionist style, but after 1950 she turned to abstract art and painted as a member of the Ecole de Paris. Even at the height of her abstract phase there seemed to be an element of oriental design in her choice of colours and patterns.

Some of her portraits — those of King Hussein's eldest daughter Princess Aliya and of a bedouin family, for example — are partly inspired by the hieratic figures and mosaics in Byzantine churches. Spurred by her discovery of cookery after her husband ceased to be ambassador, she also made surrealist collages of chicken or turkey bones and stones, set in glass and resin and powered by small electric motors, which she called palaeochrysalos.

They were so admired by André Malraux when he was Minister of Culture under General de Gaulle that he placed one on his desk. The princess has held exhibitions at locations as varied as the Gimpel Gallery in London in 1949, the Hittite Museum in Ankara in 1964, the Katia Granoff Gallery in Paris in 1969, and the Royal Cultural Centre in Amman in 1983.

When Prince Zeid died in 1970, Princess Fahrelnissa then decided to move to Amman, the capital of her great-nephew King Hussein of Jordan, to be near her son Prince Ra'ad, Lord Chamberlain of the Royal Hashemite Court and the father of five children (including a young daughter called Fahrelnissa).

From the outside, the princess's small stone villa looks like many others in the suburbs of Amman. Inside, in the words of her daughter by her first marriage Şirin Devrim, it is a "miracle of colour, opulence and excitement".

Her L-shaped drawing-room is full of framed family photographs, her own dramatic pictures (covering the ceiling as well as every inch of the walls) and whirring palaeochrysalos. The princess's villa also acts as headquarters of the Royal National Jordanian Fine Arts Institute Fahrelnissa Zeid, for, despite old age and ill-health, she 41



Queen Elizabeth in 1947 visiting the opening of Princess Fahrelnissa's first London exhibition at the George Gallery

is the teacher and inspiration of many devoted pupils. She used to give lessons every Wednesday and still paints every day.

Her personality is so warm and enveloping, her conversation so fascinating — the critic Cemil Eren compared her to a magnetic storm — that visitors find it hard to leave. As her orderly pours more champagne, talk ranges from the colour of the dresses worn by her mother's slaves in Istanbul to the strange death of King Ghazi of Iraq in Baghdad, from tea with Hitler in the Reichskanzlei to the exploits of her husband in the First World War.

Princess Fahrelnissa is not the only member of her bright and relentless family to have devoted herself to the arts. Her sister Aliye Berger, who married a Hungarian violinist, was an acclaimed etcher and held a legendary salon in an old house in Beyoğlu, the "European" quarter of Istanbul.

In *Strolling through Istanbul*, Hilary Sumner-Boyd and John Freely wrote that she was "one of the most fascinating and entertaining women in this or any other city. For more years than she can hope to forget, Aliye's place has been the madcap centre of the local artistic scene."

Princess Fahrelnissa's niece Füreyya is a famous Turkish ceramicist. Her daughter Şirin Devrim, whom the diarist James Lees-Milne described as a "forward miss" when he met her in 1947, is a talented actress and director.

Brought up in Istanbul, Berlin and Baghdad, she studied at Yale Drama School, and has divided her life between America and Istanbul. She was a leading actress and director in the Istanbul City Theatres in the 1960s, playing parts as different as Lady Macbeth (in the magnificent Ottoman castle of Rumeli Hisarı on the Bosphorus) and Mary in Clare Boothe Luce's *The Women*.

Her uncle Cevat once told her: "You are a Mediterranean woman. Live in those faraway places and you will shrivel up and die. Once a Mediterranean, always a Mediterranean." Nevertheless, she lives in New York and Princeton with her fourth husband Robert Trainer and is very much alive. She made her New York debut playing a Jewish mother in *House Music*, by Hans Shahl, and acts throughout the United States. Last autumn, for the first time in 23 years, she acted in Istanbul, playing the star role in a play about Sarah Bernhardt.

When not on the stage, she is writing a fascinating memoir of her family called *Stars of Istanbul: the story of a Turkish Family seized by the Rapture of Being Alive*.

The Şakirs' cosmopolitanism is as extraordinary as their commitment to the arts. It is a relic of Ottoman Istanbul, when it was a junction of cultures and religions, as well as a tribute to the age of the global village. Frontiers mean nothing to this gifted multilingual tribe, whose members live in New York, Istanbul, Amman and Kraków, home of Princess Fahrelnissa's son

Nejad Devrim, who is also a painter and is married to a Pole.

A typically cosmopolitan and spirited occasion, marvellously described by her daughter Şirin Devrim in *Stars of Istanbul*, is the birthday of Princess Fahrelnissa Zeid in Amman. Wearing a long black evening gown and sitting in one of the large gilt armchairs from the house of her uncle the Grand Vizier, which have followed her wherever she lived, she first receives her children and grandchildren.

As her daughter-in-law Majda, wife of Prince Ra'ad, is Swedish, in accordance with a Swedish custom they arrive early in the morning wearing wigs and funny clothes.

Prince Zeid, whose dark-eyed brooding portrait dominates the room, courted her when they were playing tennis, so her birthday cake is in the shape of a tennis racket. Other food is Turkish — pilav, grilled lamb, clotted cream and honey — enhanced by caviar and champagne.

Jordanian sentries are at the door; a Polish band plays Arabic and American tunes; and bouquets of flowers arrive from King Hussein and Queen Noor. Guests troop in bearing splendid presents. The princess declares: "I am so happy, so happy. We are all together with the stars." □

Philip Mansel's latest book is *Sultans in Splendour: the Last Years of the Ottoman World*; 192pp, 200 photographs. Andre Deutsch £17.95.

