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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★★ HISTORY

The Turkish Ambassador

Emir Kivircik
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"Unsung hero" may be a term too often used, but after reading The Turkish Ambassador no one will contest that Behic Erkin is worthy of being so honored. As told by his grandson, the story of Behic Erkin, a man of courage and conscience, is inspiring. Although Emir Kivircik calls his work a "novelized biography," it is essentially a work of history, with the author using his grandfather's papers and other sources to imagine the dialogues the ambassador had with key figures during the Nazi occupation of France.

A highly decorated lieutenant colonel during World War I, Erkin once again answered his country's call to duty in 1939, when Turkey's president gave him the choice of representing the nation's interests in either Paris or Berlin. Having dealt with German generals when Ottoman Turkey and Imperial Germany were allies in the Great War, Erkin politely declined the ambassadorship in the Nazi capital in favor of the post in Paris.

Fortunately for many thousands of French Jews, it was in France where Erkin would once again encounter the same kind of German generals he found so exasperating twenty years earlier. Erkin presented his credentials in Paris on the eve of World War II—the day before Hitler invaded Poland. By the following summer, France had capitulated, and Erkin found himself ambassador to the German-allied state of Vichy.

As the author explains, France in 1940 was home to thousands of Jews of Turkish heritage. With the eager complicity of Vichy officials, the Nazis persecuted, rounded up, shipped off, and executed tens of thousands of French Jews.

Erkin found this unconscionable, and risked his position and, at times, his life to do everything in his power to save as many Jews as he could. Kivircik chronicles how Erkin saved many French Jews of Turkish birth or citizenship from the concentration camps. The stoic ambassador of Turkey, however, did not stop there. Through bureaucratic skulduggery, dinner-table diplomacy, and the manipulation of paperwork, Erkin extended the mantle of his protection to any French Jew who could show even the slightest connection to Turkish ancestry. As many as ten thousand other French Jews were spared by being coached to speak a few words of Turkish and by having papers, made available by Erkin's staff, attesting to their invented "Turkish" status.

The author's passages on his ancestor staring down Vichy Jew-hunters, German generals, Nazi gauleiters, and even Gestapo butchers skillfully recreate the tension of those meetings. Kivircik details how, over three very tense and difficult years, Erkin managed to spirit nearly 20,000 Jews out of France. Many went to Turkey on special trains Erkin organized, a feat for which his post-war career as the "father of the Turkish railways" made him uniquely qualified.

While in his own papers Erkin likened his efforts to "a game of chess," the ambassador's polite yet intense diplomatic battles are portrayed by Kivircik as verbal dueling matches. Although Turkey remained neutral, the ambassador himself often told his staff that they were in "a war of diplomacy," a war in which "giving up is not an option."

It is of such heroes that songs should be sung, and Emir Kivircik has written beautiful and inspiring lyrics for a man truly deserving of such a song.

MARK G. MCLAUGHLIN (August 31, 2011)

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