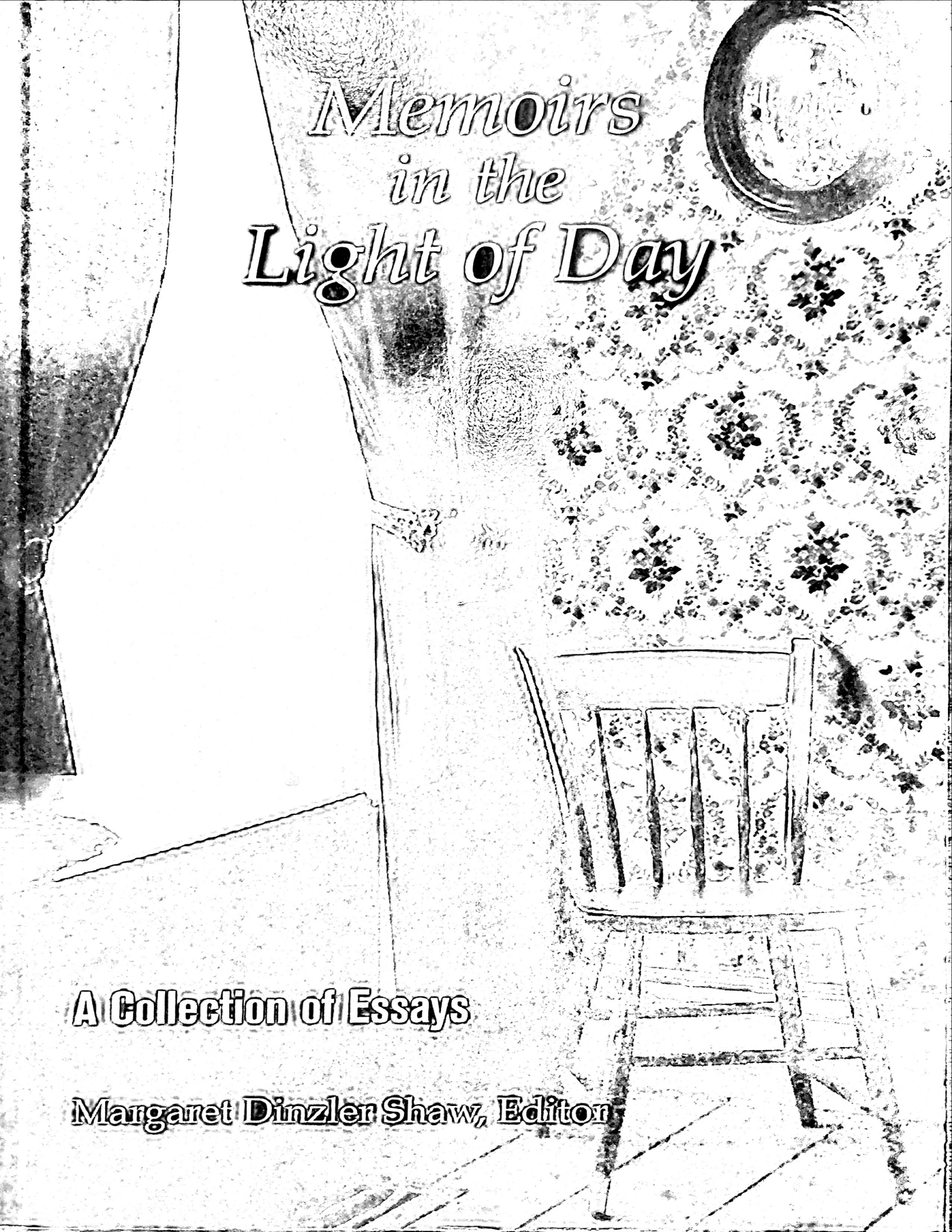
Memoirs in the Light of Day



A Collection of Essays

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LITERACY AND HERITAGE: GROWING UP TURKISH ON LONG ISLAND

Filiz Turhan

My grandmother passed away recently, just days before I gave birth to my second child. She was 9,000 miles away in Trabzon, Turkey, where she had lived her whole life. She was born in 1926 and was married to her cousin at the age of 14. Her second pregnancy at the age of 16 resulted in her first live birth (this girl was to be my mother). She lived with my grandfather for 55 years, until his death in 1995. She was never sent to school, never learned to read or ride a bicycle and was rarely consulted on any matter of importance. She had virtually no contact with anyone who was not a Turkish Muslim.

In contrast, I was born on Long Island in 1967. I grew up in Freeport, New York, a town so diverse as to include large populations of Latinos and African-Americans, as well as descendants of Poles, Irish, Jews, Italians, Slavs, Hungarians and Greeks. I went to a big university in New York City and I have a Ph.D. in English literature. I didn't have my first child till I was 31. My husband and I consult on all matters of importance regarding our children, finances and when to get the siding replaced on our house. In so many ways, both big and small, my life has been different from that of my grandmother, and it is my belief that literacy has been the most profound of the many differences. It has been the difference that both

separated us and that made the separation bearable. It also brought us together in an unexpected way at the end of her life.

For those of us in the first generation of American immigrants, education and assimilation have gone hand in hand: it both gives us a place in American society but also takes us away from the "place" our parents inhabited. They might have moved physically from one continent or hemisphere to another, but our education moves us in less tangible, but far more pervasive ways. As the writer Richard Rodriguez put it in the essay, *Family Values,* "immigrants risk losing their children when they come to America." We integrate: we learn English; we move far away, we marry outside the faith or ethnic background. We imbibe the spirit of dissent or the wanderlust that our emigrating forebears gave us, and we live our lives accordingly. Just look at my grandmother and me: how very different we became.

As a child, I rarely had the chance to see my grandmother or any family regularly. In America I had three relatives: mom, dad and a big brother; the extended family had been left behind in Turkey. In the 60s and 70s all forms of communication were either costly or slow or simply unavailable. No emails, no Internet, no satellite TV. Letters arrived from my grandfather every few months. Phone calls were enormous events that sometimes required hours of dialing before a connection could be made, and then entailed a few minutes of shouting and waiting for the echo to subside before the other person would talk.

Actual trips abroad occurred years and years apart. We had no community center, no church, and no extended family with whom to socialize, gossip or feud. Moreover, my hard working parents had little time to cultivate personal friendships and organize social events with other families. I sorely missed these kinds of engagements and was very curious about how other families behaved. My next-door neighbor playmates were self-identified as "Slovaks" who attended mass every Sunday at the local Catholic Church. They would pile into their green station wagon every Sunday, in their proverbial Sunday best, and return a few hours later, whereupon they usually lunched with an array of cousins and grandparents. This was a source of intense curiosity and jealousy for me. I loved the idea that the family went somewhere together where they shared

some kind of interaction with other people. Never mind that the kids assured me that it was dreadfully boring and they themselves would do anything to be excused from this weekly excursion. No, I thought nothing could be better than being named Kristen and getting to go to Sunday Mass.

Instead, we had weird names, a baffling religion and a humorously named country of origin. Mrs. Miller, my kindergarten teacher, mispronounced my name on the first day of school (I was still only 4 years old) and her rendering of it stuck until I left for college 13 years later. As for religion, despite the diversity of our community, Islam was virtually unheard of, and Turkey had no meaning beyond Thanksgiving, and obviously provided kids with an unfortunate source of verbal play. While the diversity of the town and the school helped to smooth out the rough edges of our Otherness, I was painfully struck by the lack of family and community. There simply were no other kids from Middle Eastern, predominantly Muslim countries around. I frequently felt isolated and lonely and did not know how to express these emotions, indeed, probably did not understand them fully myself.

Of course, all kids go through the social and academic challenges of school, not to mention the harrowing hormonal roller coaster known as puberty. In my case, cultural and religious differences exacerbated the challenges that many adolescents must face, with a couple of memorable events affecting me greatly. Although I suffered quite a bit, eventually, something wonderful happened that proved to be the antidote to my loneliness and self-doubt.

In 1977 my brother, then in the 6th grade, became the special target of derision by an otherwise seemingly normal kid. In a beginning of the school year getting-to know you activity my brother had been perfectly candid that he was a Muslim and his parents were born in a country called Turkey. This boy decided that this material was too good to pass up, and found ways to ridicule my brother whenever possible. The problem was such that a parent teacher conference was called. It turned out that the boy's father was mortified that his son would be responsible for such an atrocious act, not only because they were African Americans, with their own intimate knowledge of discrimination, but also because he was a

minister of the church who preached benevolence, tolerance and humility. The problem was patched up pretty quickly, thanks to the Minister's intervention with his son. While my brother seemed somewhat unscathed by the whole experience, (his reaction to the bullying was more exasperation and impatience than actual fear or anxiety) the effect on me was greater. My hunch had been confirmed: it's better to downplay, if not flat-out lie, about certain aspects of my family, ethnicity, or religion if I was to avoid any sort of negative attention directed my way. One example of "bending the truth" that I developed resulted from the common question: "What did you get for Christmas?" I was already familiar with the stupefied, dull looks I would get if I answered that, "uh...Muslims don't do that holiday." I would therefore "hoard" my birthday presents (received in late November) and convert them into Christmas presents so I'd have something to say when such discussions arose. At home we had no lights, no wreath and no Christmas tree, but in homeroom, I did have presents. In a way.

Another influential development during this time period dwarfed this minor incident in my brother's school career. The film Midnight Express was released, and pretty soon, everyone knew where the nation Turkey was, and that Americans definitely did not want to go there. In 1978 I was in 5th grade and about the only thing anyone around me knew about Turkey came from the film. The older kids in the neighborhood heartlessly berated us about this movie. They seemed to be intimately familiar with all aspects of the film, and continually asked us why Turkish prisons were so cruel, why Turkish people were so gross, and weren't we lucky to have escaped this horror ourselves.

But more insidious were the comments of adults. Can you imagine my friend Amy's 80-year old Hungarian grandmother asking me, an 11-year old, if I'd seen the movie? Of course, to her, Turks were more than just the swarthy, cinematic bad guys *du jour*. Looking back now I can imagine how she must have been sadly struck by the irony that her granddaughter's main playmate should be a descendant of those Saracens at the gate. She probably hadn't seen the film either, but had heard enough of the abusive, sodomizing Turks depicted in it, to confirm the stories and or experiences of her people: Turks were bloodthirsty brutes with no regard for human

suffering or understanding of justice. And that dumb kid doesn't put the toys away, either!

As if the effects of Midnight Express weren't bad enough, something with far greater political and personal influence was soon to occur. In November 1979, a group of students took hostages in the US embassy in Iran. I didn't really know anything about the country itself, except that it was near Turkey (in fact, I had seen signs pointing to it when I was in my parents' local area in Turkey) and that the people were Muslims too. It was hard to tell just how this would affect me (which was about all I cared about at the time).

The first time I saw the phrase "Fuck Iran" it was spray painted on the side of the supermarket; no one washed it off and pretty soon one could find these two words grafittied all over our town. I was struck by the strange combination of the words: at once symmetrical and harsh, the phrase became ubiquitous in my town and mind. I worried that things could get dicey for me if a connection between my Middle Eastern, Muslim identity were to be made with the images of flag-burning, insane mobs of Tehran that were being played on TV each night. It also just happened that my last name was dangerously similar to that of the Iranian capital. For 444 days Walter Cronkite, the CBS Evening News anchor, counted the days of the crisis and yellow ribbons bloomed on the trees throughout town. Again, I was 12 years old, and everything for the past few years had seemed to swirl around my need to fit in with my peers and be an American. So all these manifestations of American patriotism and hostility were a constant source of anxiety for me: would I somehow be held responsible for the outrages perpetrated by seemingly psychotic Muslims against liberty-loving Americans?

After some weeks I began to realize that—in fact, nobody seemed to make any connection between me and them at all. I wasn't sure why. Was it that I was more "us" than "them" after all; that I was far more involved in current events than most of my peers; or that my immigrant-outsider concerns were nothing more than paranoia? My friends and classmates, I soon discovered, were more interested in getting their parents to drive them to the roller rink on Friday nights, and making sure their hair was flipped the right way than in geopolitical affairs.

This latest development started me on a new path of self-reflection: I was definitely "Other" but there was something sort of OK about me too. Although there were no Turks around—that could count in my favor. I could define just what a Turk was for my friends. My name stayed befuddled until I went away to college and it took me many years to feel comfortable making any references to religion in front of other people. On the other hand, I realized that *most* kids just looked at me and reacted to me, not to Midnight Express or the Nightly News. Moreover, teachers responded to me and most surprisingly, to my schoolwork. Not coincidentally, it was during this time of intense psychic pressure that I began spending solitary hours writing my feelings down in crude poems and in reading books of all kinds. Once I became an avid reader, my academic success came naturally.

Until about the 4th grade, my English was middling, but then something seemed to click in me. Although we didn't have a lot of books around the house in my early years, constant exposure to books in school was wonderful. It seemed that one day I found that I could read a lengthy and dense book chapter with virtually no difficulty, and indeed, not even notice that I had been reading for a while when the chapter (or book) would come to a close. Now this was an accomplishment! Instead of feeling like I was drowning in a sea of words, I was reading like an Olympic swimmer gracefully gliding from one end of the pool to the other, flipping underwater and heading back again. Of course, like those swimmers, a lot of hard work went into making it look easy. I often read with a dictionary at hand and frequently did not fully understand all that I read, but this, like weightlifting, became easier with repetition. Hearing a word spoken in context and already knowing what it meant made me part of a community; proficiency in English made me a member of one of the greatest and longest conversations in human history ... the written record of countless thousands of minds struggling to make sense of the disparate moments of human life.

My new life as a reader provided me with the "Church" that I had so longed for in my earlier years. In reading a novel, I became a member of the world of that novel, enjoying the time, the place, and the people within it. In reading text books for school, I could be thoroughly engrossed in the

drama of the writing of the Bill of Rights; or the discovery of the fossil skeleton known as Lucy; or the description of the Alhambra in Granada, Spain. Indeed, gaining reading proficiency in English was the most shocking and delightful epiphany I've ever had.

Perhaps ironically, the experience of being part of the community of English speakers and readers and writers gave me the confidence necessary to finally embrace my Turkish heritage more broadly and openly and to integrate it into my American identity. For instance, I've since read the memoir upon which the film Midnight Express was based. It turns out that many of the most brutal parts of the film were written into the screenplay by Oliver Stone. Indeed, in 2007 the writer of the original memoir, Billy Hayes, returned to Turkey where he publicly apologized for the film's erroneous and slanderous depiction of the Turks. Of course, it would have been great had I known this back in 1978 when Jeffrey gave me the finger as he rode by on his bike! Although English literature was my great love and took most of my energy, I eventually embarked on an independent course of study of Turkish history, language and literature. The old cliché is so true—knowledge is power—knowing who I was and where I came from was a priceless gift. Although I can't answer for many of the unsavory aspects of Turkish history or for the unpalatable practices of Islam, I can make up my own mind about them within the context of all that is great about Turkish culture, as we Turks are actually living it and defining it today and on into the future.

The Moroccan writer and sociologist Fatima Mernissi has studied the role that literacy plays in shaping the lives of women. Her research has shown that increased literacy not only improves the lives of women directly, but also directly improves the lives of their children. In addition to the fundamental statistics, literacy and cultural literacy afford even more extensive advantages in quality of life. Access to education and information can give us the confidence we need to do, to be, to know we are not alone in our experiences, our struggles, and our joys. Countless hours of Oprah have done the same. The message is clear for the 21st century: keep learning, striving, and knowing all you can about the world you live in, which now, of course, includes the entire Globe!

One last thing: in my grandmother's final years she embarked on the greatest journey of her life. She'd been to America a few times, but hadn't ever felt quite right here; she missed her home and her community so much that even the prospect of living with us in our comfortable American homes could not give her solace. Even after my grandfather died, she missed their home too much. The journey that she began did not involve physical travel; instead, she began a course of tutoring by one of her nieces who was a Hafiz, someone who has memorized the Koran and can lead groups of women in prayers at holidays and other special occasions. My cousin Hafiz began teaching my grandmother how to read the Koran in the original Arabic. When she told me how it felt to hold the Holy Book in her hands and finally decipher the squiggles on the page as the words she already knew by heart, her eyes expressed the power of this experience for her. It was one I could understand fully: in the shared experience of literacy our worlds merged in a way that I had never known before.