# JOAN KIM ERKAN

Memories of a not so ordinary life in Turkey



### Joan Kim Erkan

Joan Kim Erkan was born in Wales an educated in London at the Central School of Speech and Drama. She has spent most of her life in Turkey with her husband, Aydın Osman Erkan and two daughters.

At the author's request proceeds from this book will be given to OMM (Odunpazarı Modern Museum), Eskişehir.

#### LADY WHO

© 2021, Tudem Yayın Grubu 1476/1 Sok. No:10/51 Alsancak-Konak/İZMİR

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**PRINT:** Ertem Basım Yayın Dağıtım San. Tic. Ltd. Şti. Başkent Organize San. Bölgesi 22 Cad. No:6 Malıköy, Temelli, Ankara Tel: 0 312 284 18 14

First Edition: September 2021 (2000 copies)

ISBN: 978-625-7314-50-3 Publishing House Certification No: 45041 Printing House Certification No: 48083

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To my family Erol and Rana, Ceylan, Alican and Chantal, İdil, Emrecan and Selina, Erol Emil and Oskar Ali

Many people in Britain use endearing nick-names left over from their childhood and the title of this book is a pun on my nick-name which is Kim and was fine until I came to Turkey. But in Turkish, Kim means 'Who' which is rather unfortunate and is met first with a look of surprise, a pause and then a smile or hoots of laughter. Conversation goes something like this:

'Merhaba, senin ismin ne?' (What is your name?) - Benim ismim, Kim (My name is who), 'Ne?' (What) - 'Kim' (Who) and on it goes but it broke the ice, I made friends and no-one ever forgets my name.

### Preface

This book is about my life and the people I met in Turkey in six decades as a *yabancı gelin*, 'a foreign bride'. It has been a time of immense change. Within a few decades, from its agricultural roots with a largely rural population, Turkey has burst onto the global stage as a secular democratic country and consequential regional power in the Middle East. It has been a rocky ride kept in motion, not by governments or ideologies, but by the fortitude, resilience and tenacity of the Turkish people, whose hard work, earthy good humour, and strong sense of community have overcome geopolitical challenges facing a country located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia.

Not in our wildest dreams could we have imagined that during our life-time, Istanbul would become a megacity and change beyond recognition – one census estimated a population growth of nearly 450% between 1960 and 2000. In 1959, when I arrived, the population of Istanbul was 1.2 million. Unprecedented urbanisation resulted in massive physical changes as the influx of migrants from Anatolia was accommodated. We watched as familiar places – part of the identity and childhood of the citizens of Istanbul – vanished into rubble. People mumbled and grumbled 'everything's changing'. Parks became shopping malls, and that relaxing Sunday family drive along the shore of the Bosphorus to Belgrade Forest became a traffic nightmare. Glorious, wild beaches on the south coast disappeared and entrances to antique sites newly discovered by visitors were bombarded with tourist shops and cafes.

Memories of things we hold dear or wish to let go change according to our circumstances. But the overall memory-picture that I and the citizens hold of Istanbul from those years never changed. This is not mere nostalgia, for they were years beset with difficulties. Each decade presented different obstacles to be overcome: shortages, street fighting and military coups or, after a decade of prosperity, a decade of economic

disaster. Nor was it all the fault of the wrecking ball and dust of construction work as the city became a mega-city.

It went deeper. What concerns many people is that amongst the rubble of familiar childhood places they are at risk of losing their true identity as a compassionate, caring community and their culture and traditions as a secular country.

Listening to these 'everything has changed' moans, I realised they were connected with the threads from my life's tapestry in Turkey. This is what has inspired me to write a book, so that my grandchildren might know the Turkey that welcomed me as a foreigner all those years ago. I was destined to meet many extraordinary people in my life and this book is about some of those who have enriched my journey as a *yabanci gelin*.

My own Welsh childhood was spent listening to my elders, especially my father and his brother Uncle William, who related stories of the Second World War, of brave young cousins who fought and died, of local eccentrics and the best choral singers, all told with quick wit and a touch of sarcasm. You can imagine my delight to discover everyone but *everyone* in Turkey has a story to tell. It is the best of these stories that I recall here.

I refer to some men as *Bey* which means sir, and some women as *Hanım* which means lady. These are titles used out of respect for their position or age. It was how I was introduced to them and have addressed them, so.

All historical and political opinions are mine and mine alone.

I appreciate that I have lived a charmed life in a fascinating country, one that is frequently misunderstood by those who have not been fortunate enough to acquire a taste for *Turkish Delight*.

I am deeply grateful to everyone who generously gave their time and shared their stories with me. Thanks to Rosa Vane who edited the first draft, to novelist, teacher, Roger Norman for his guidance, help and encouragement during our discussions about Turkey and the book in Eskişehir, John Scott, editor of *Cornucopia* for his advice and valuable suggestions throughout. I have benefitted in countless ways from the help of journalist, author and translator, Zeynep Avc1 and graphic designer and friend, Emine Tusavul who has guided me through to the final process. Thanks to Nihat Odabaşı for his beautiful photographs. Very special thanks to Erol and Rana Tabanca for their constant, patient interest and enthusiasm, without which this book would never have been finished.

### From London to Istanbul

'The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step'. Lao Tzu

It was St. Valentine's Day, 14th February 1959.

'Someone's knocking,' my husband, Nil murmured sleepily. It was the steward.

'Good morning,' the steward said, his smile cheering a dawn wake-up call. 'Too early for breakfast, so I'll prepare a tray for you on deck.'

Istanbul approached from the sea is said to be one of the most beautiful sights in the world and I had no intention of missing a chance to see it at its best.

Ignoring Nil's grumbles, I made my way to the upper deck. The ship's gentle roll rocked its sleeping passengers as a golden dawn rose over the vastness of the sea. Cold and crisp, sea and sky merged into harmonious shades of blue. Wrapped up in a thick blanket, I nestled into a deckchair to savour the final stage of our journey. Migrating birds head for Turkey on their flight to warmer lands and, at the age of 22, I was about to follow them.

As Nil, wrapped up in a blanket, threw himself into a nearby deckchair, a waiter arrived with a tray of freshly baked bread, white cheese, olives, tomatoes and steaming tea.

I had met Nil Arbel, my husband, a tall, fair, good-looking Turkish student at the School of Aeronautical Engineering in Chelsea, when I was studying at the Central School of Speech and Drama based at the Albert Hall in London. I lived in Onslow Gardens with other music and drama students as well as Myshka Kuleshka, a Polish relative of the landlord who was a little older and enjoyed mothering us. Nil lived at Joe's house in Cranley Gardens, the next street, with other Turkish and Greek students. There was a large Polish war-veteran community in South Kensington, the members of which had escaped to Britain during the Second World War to set up the Polish Free Army. Myshka invited us to a party hosted by our landlord, veteran freedom fighter Mr. Zavidski and Joe, Nil's landlord.

Nil was European, worldly-wise, well-travelled and full of surprises. He went out of his way to charm me. If I mentioned a play, exhibition or event, tickets would appear. He played the piano at parties, frequented the best restaurants, and spoke Swedish, Turkish and French at the embassy functions to which he invited me. Nil was not shy to express his feelings and I was more than flattered.

In the common-room of the Central School, I rubbed shoulders with future greats of the British stage: Judy Dench, Vanessa Redgrave, Mary Ure, Jeremy Kemp and Philip Bond. Kenneth Tynan and Peter Hall judged our end of term performances, John Gielgud and Laurence Olivier came on visits to Miss. Thurborn, the autocratic school principal.

At Uncle William's house in Wales, I had met Richard Burton with his Welsh actress wife Sybil. When he learned I was in my first year at Central School, he was kind enough to send two tickets for Macbeth at the Old Vic Theatre with an invitation backstage after the performance. I met him again a year or so later, this time with Elizabeth Taylor a few weeks after they had completed Cleopatra, the magnificent film that fired their stormy love affair. Hiding from the press - since both were married at the time - they escaped to Cwmavon in Wales, the village where both Richard and I had been born. While there, they visited his family and his old friend, my uncle. Invited to lunch, my cousin and I scrambled through my aunt's wardrobe for something glamorous to wear. Thank heavens we found only scarves to throw over our shoulders because Elizabeth Taylor turned up simply attired in a black cashmere jumper and pleated skirt. She was very beautiful with fine, transparent skin, dark red lips and magnificent deep, velvet eyes that followed Richard's every move. Petite, with a tiny waist, her natural friendliness put us at ease as she spoke of the tedious hours spent on Cleopatra's make-up and enthused at what a wonderful experience it had been playing opposite a magnificent actor such as Richard Burton. 'He taught me so much,' sighed the highest paid Hollywood actress of the day. With a twinkle in her eye, she repeated the rude Welsh words Richard asked her to pronounce to amuse his men friends. For a stage-struck drama student, it was a magical afternoon. I remember telling my cousin, 'I want to fall in love like Elizabeth Taylor.'

Theatres at that time played to packed houses, and writers and directors dared to create controversial plays. Even so many theatres were closing due to a lack of government support. The director George Devine, a larger-than-life character, poured his energy into everyone's favourite playhouse, the Royal Court at Sloane Square.

The Central School was invited to the final dress rehearsal of Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* before its premiere. Waiting to take our seats we stood in the small, packed bar, where John Osborne, Peter Cook, Laurence Olivier and Joan Plowright often wandered in for a drink. As the lights dimmed, Marilyn Monroe, in a figure-hugging black suit, her silver-blonde hair shining like a halo, wiggled down the aisle followed by her husband Arthur Miller. After the play, he rose to answer

questions but all eyes were on his wife and with a wry smile he invited her to the stage to say a few words. She was lovely, natural and funny.

In the late 1950's, the first great age of TV and the odd noisy glamour of Pop Art, London was swinging to the sound of rock and roll starring Bill Hayley, Fats Domino and Elvis Presley, the King. Dressed-to-shock hippies roamed along Kings Road where Italian coffee bars were the place to be seen, and out of work actors waited on tables or modelled in fashionable boutiques. Iconic designers began changing the shape of the female body with precision cutting and sharp, clean designs. Andre Cortèges, Pierre Cardin, Yves Saint Laurent, Pucci's divine Mondrian designs and Mary Quant's white mid-calf-length boots filled the shop windows. It was the right time and place to be a drama student. Even if such a fast Bohemian lifestyle was out of our reach, just being there was excitement enough.

Somewhere along the way I fell in love and decided to marry Nil Arbel. It was much against my parents' wishes, and the mother of one of my friends took me aside to tell me that I was making a terrible mistake. Still there came a moment when I found myself at a church near the Albert Hall, inquiring whether it was possible to be married there. The young priest suggested that he came for coffee that evening to discuss it with both of us. When he arrived, we chatted about his hitch-hiking days in Greece and Turkey before he had decided to take up the priesthood.

Then, in more solemn tones, he explained it was not possible for us to marry in a church because Nil was a Moslem. I was very disappointed and Nil sensed it. 'If a church wedding will make you happy, then we'll have a church wedding,' he said. 'I will convert. I never had any religious instruction anyway.' The priest's eyes lit up at the thought of a convert, which irritated me. 'Of course, I am upset at marrying without my parents' blessing and without a church ceremony,' I told Nil. 'Even so I can't let you change your religion for my sake because I will never change mine for you.'

It was Nil's loving support that overcame all my doubts and brought me to the Chelsea Register Office on March 14<sup>th</sup> 1958. As we waited in the lounge, an official ushered me into his room where he stood in front of me peering at my face. 'It is my duty to inform you that Moslem men are allowed four wives,' he declared. 'Did you know that? I suggest you think very carefully, young lady, before marrying. It's not too late to change your mind.'

At that moment I would have married Nil Arbel simply to spite the world. In a quiet, controlled voice (when angered I become quiet), I told him to check his facts about marriage laws in different countries before voicing ignorant opinions. In 1928, I informed him, marriage laws in Turkey had been reformed according to Swiss law.

Without a word, the official opened the door. I would have marched straight out of that registry office had Nil not stopped me. Thank heavens the registrar was all smiles and wished us well. After lunch at the Savoy Hotel with Myshka, Petros, Nil's Greek friend, Mr. and Mrs. Zavidski and Joe and his wife, we drove to Bath for a honeymoon weekend before returning to London and our studies.

Three months later my mother telephoned to invite us to stay for a weekend. My parents were tense and overly polite – so unlike my father – while Nil, desperate to make a good impression, tried too hard to please (in all the wrong ways) but the ice was broken and I was happy with the thought that I was free to visit home or telephone my parents whenever I wanted.

In those days of innocence, it wasn't unusual for a waiter in a Kings Road restaurant to bring a card from a theatrical agent or photographer at the corner table requesting permission to take a photo. Even then we all knew the perils of the casting couch and I felt that I didn't have that core of inner steel, dedication and confidence demanded of an actress. When Patricia, an acquaintance who owned a modelling agency off Bond Street, asked me if she could take some photographs, I agreed. Much to my surprise a week or so later she sent me on my first assignment, an outdoor shoot on Hampstead Heath. It was a miserable cold grey day, but the photographer, knowing it was my first job, was kind and funny and helped me to smile. A few days later the same photographer asked me to model for a TV advertisement for a fashionable shirt company. I was the background figure hanging onto the arm of an incredibly handsome man. Later, another call came. This time the incredibly handsome man hung onto *my* arm as I smiled at the camera wearing an exquisitely cut shirt for women. 'Cool,' I thought and spent all my earnings buying that very shirt, which I wore forever. So began a not too serious career as a model.

Nil and I had rented a flat in Onslow Gardens. Friends dropped in to cook, study or just chat. I was getting regular work, which pleased the agency and, as I was earning my own keep for the first time, pleased me too. I went to Wales as often as possible to appease my guilty conscience and see my parents. Life was hectic but fun. Then Nil received a letter from his father saying that it was time for him to return to Turkey to prepare for his compulsory military service.

We spent Christmas with my parents, I hate goodbyes. My mother smiled through her tears as she made me promise to 'write and telephone every Sunday'. I had telephoned my parents on Sunday mornings ever since I had left home. My father was tight-lipped, disapproval written all over his face. He held me close. 'Remember I am just a telephone call away,' he said. 'Take care.'

Turkish customs forbade the entry into the country of all sorts of things at that time, but Nil was returning indefinitely and was allowed to take all his personal and household goods. He was inundated with telegrams and telephone calls from people in Turkey asking for medicines, cosmetics, electrical items, underwear and anything cashmere. 'Buy everything you need now because there is nothing you will want to buy there,' he kept warning me. I was busy packing family photographs, prints, books and silly trinkets I thought I couldn't live without and didn't heed his words. I lived to regret it.

We spent the New Year with Nil's uncle, Ambassador Selahattin Arbel, and his wife, at the Turkish residence in The Hague in the Netherlands, an utterly charming, tall, narrow building on a quiet tree-lined canal. We had stayed there twice before, once to attend the opening of the World Fair in Belgium, and another time for a never-to-be-forgotten week.

On that occasion, while his wife was in Istanbul visiting their daughter, Selahattin Bey had moved to a suite at the Steigenberger Kurhaus Hotel, a palatial hotel on the promenade at Scheveningen, from where he kept an eagle eye on the restoration works in progress at the Residence. We arrived at the hotel during the afternoon to be informed that the ambassador had been called away, but that we were to be in the dining room at 7.30 p.m. sharp and he would join us later.

The stately ballroom sparkled with a thousand stars as we were led to a table in the centre of an already crowded room. My eyes widened and jaw dropped as I realized that the sparkles were not from stars on the ceiling, but from the emeralds, diamonds, dazzling pearls, earrings and brooches, medals and ribbons adorning ladies in sumptuous evening gowns and gentlemen in immaculate evening dress. And there was I in a Harrods full skirted dress with a tight bodice and narrow straps, sans jewellery. Totally out of place. As if that wasn't enough, I was hungry not having eaten since breakfast. When a chef set up a Guerdon to slow-cook a steak flambé, the odour of the steak simmering in wine, cream and herbs was torture. I munched on the bread rolls glaring at Nil, who was deep in conversation with a bejewelled lady and her handsome grey-haired husband at the next table.

Selahattin Bey appeared in time for dessert, pausing at each table to say a few words until he reached us. 'Thank you, my dears,' he purred, just like a Cheshire cat. 'You saved the day. This gathering is one of the most important dates on our diplomatic calendar. As one of the organizers, it would have been a scandal had my table been unoccupied.' He beamed with pleasure. 'I do hope you are enjoying yourselves.'

'I wish you had warned me,' I mumbled petulantly. 'I would have brought something more appropriate to wear.'

He laughed. 'Look around you, child. Youth is beauty and beauty, youth.' Then, in his sanguine manner added, 'Youth cannot be bought, so stop fretting. My guests are charmed by my young relatives. Nil will provide the jewels you need when the time comes, never fear'.

That evening from the balcony of the hotel we watched the most magnificent fireworks display I have ever seen in my life.

When we visited Selahattin Bey and his wife on our way to Istanbul, Safiye, their daughter was there. She had come to give birth in Holland. Voluptuous yet ethereal,

her long black dishevelled hair framed a lovely oval face. She constantly argued with her father, adored her mother, and pined for her husband who was due to arrive nearer the birth. Every morning, wrapped up against the bitterly cold winds, we walked along the promenade and lunched at a small Vietnamese restaurant on the waterfront. Safiye hugged me when we were about to leave. 'You'll love Istanbul. When I come, I'll introduce you to my friends' she promised. Safiye and I became friends, but a few years later, still very young, she died giving birth to a third child in Istanbul.

We drove to Paris to spend five wonderful days at a small hotel in Saint-Germain that Nil knew from his student days. It was snowing and Paris was magical in its white cloak. We walked along the Seine, spent a day at the Louvre, and dined at the Trocadero, but it was the evening watching my first cancan revue at the Moulin Rouge – a theatre filled with history – that I remember most vividly.

In the mornings I would dip flaky *croissant au beurre* into a bowl of steaming black coffee, copying my favourite actress, Jeanne Moreau. The croissant was too buttery and the coffee too bitter and I longed for tea and toast.

Edouard Mesley, Nil's friend from London, arrived to take us to his family home outside Paris. His parents lived in a rambling, old French farmhouse with a mill and stream flowing through the land. Two frisky dogs greeted us at the door. The sun sparkled on the snow as we walked across the fields, and the nights were full of stars. Madame Mesley spent her days in the large kitchen amongst shining pots and pans, jars of homemade jams and pickles, casks of wine, and dishes of butter and cream. She entertained neighbours, read newspapers and cooked up mouth-watering meals without ever leaving the kitchen. In the evening we would gather around the large table in the dining room for a Madame Mesley feast: pâté, steaming rabbit casserole, tender duck with wild mushrooms and pork or boar washed down with gallon-size bottles of tart wine. Edouard's father was a typical French countryman; solid-looking, reserved and serious. He would appear at lunch and dinner time to pour the wine before sitting down, whereupon he would complain about the weather, the government, expenses, and Edouard. Nevertheless, with typical Gallic charm, he never once left the table without complementing his wife on her cooking.

The Mesleys owned a modern poultry farm for intensive indoor broilers. Thousands upon thousands of poor chickens were kept in enormous, immaculately clean box-like structures equipped with a complicated mechanical system to control heating, lighting and feeding. We were never served chicken.

One afternoon, against his father's advice, Edouard insisted we drive to Paris for dinner in his father's new 1959 Peugeot car, even though the weather forecast warned of an impending storm. On the outskirts of Paris, the blizzard made visibility minimal and Edouard decided to turn back. The car hit an icy patch, skidded out of control, and somersaulted into a ditch. I remember being dragged out of the car and then Edouard and Nil carrying Valerie, Edouard's girlfriend, to the roadside. Not long later an ambulance arrived. I must have fainted, for I woke in a crowded hospital ward with a splitting headache. After causing a fuss in school French, I found Nil in a private room conversing with a pretty French nurse.

Except for a few bruises and scratches, Nil, Edouard and I escaped unscathed, but poor Valerie broke her hip and to our horror the car was beyond repair. Fury and high blood pressure made Monsieur Mesley's cheeks even ruddier as he brushed away our apologies with a shrug, but later on his scathing outbursts to his son behind closed doors in the library echoed through the farmhouse. Madame Mesley's cooking tasted bland without its generous pinch of love.

To escape the atmosphere in the house, every morning I walked the dogs across snow-covered fields. The air was invigorating and I shook heavily laden branches of snow over the leaping dogs. I went to a smoke-filled café to warm my hands on a bowl of steaming soup, smiling hello to staring locals.

Nil and I realized that our presence was not helping the situation, so we decided to leave early. We begged Edouard to join us for a few days but he refused, and we bade an apologetic goodbye to our hosts who were, I am sure, delighted to see the back of us.

Sheer panic kept my hand clutched on the lock of the door as Nil drove down the breathtakingly panoramic but precipitous road from Cannes to the Riviera. Nil, a gambler at heart, headed straight for the casino. I was wearing trousers and was therefore refused entrance to the Royal Casino in Monte Carlo. Delighted to escape a boring evening, I walked around the town then sat in a café, nursing a glass of wine and watching the tanned winter yachting crowd.

With all our cash in the hands of the croupier, we drove on to a hotel in Naples, pre-booked (thank heavens) by Selahattin Bey. Nil went off to the shipping office and returned with tickets for the Ankara, a cruise ship owned by the Turkish Maritime Line, and enough Italian liras to tide us over for the three days we had in Naples before boarding. I looked forward to the voyage; it would give me time to gather my thoughts before meeting my Turkish in-laws and whatever lay in store for me in Istanbul.

At sea, we read books and walked the deck before dinner at the Captain's table. Other guests included a friendly Turkish couple and their recently qualified doctor son, two Turkish ladies who kept us amused with stories of their adventures, and a handsome naval officer, who spoke English with an Oxford accent. One of the ladies, wife of an industrialist, asked if I would take a fur through the customs for her because it was forbidden to bring furs into the country. That first glimpse of Constantinople, former capital of the Byzantine and Ottoman Empire, was unforgettable. In the misty morning distance, its celebrated skyline formed a unique pattern of towers, domes and slender minarets belonging to famous churches, mosque and palaces, arsenals of faith, conflict, intrigue and war. Who can tell what went on behind those walls? It was breathtakingly beautiful. As the ship sailed on, the buildings appeared to change shape while remaining as solid as if they had been there forever, witnessing the passing of centuries.

The ship moved into the port of Istanbul escorted by a flotilla of fishing boats, tugboats, paddle-boats, and ferry-boats. Sirens blared, bells rang, and seagulls swooped, circled and cried. Boatmen secured thick twines of ropes to huge iron rings. Porters, young and old, ran barefoot up the gangway into the bowels of the ship to reappear carrying bags, suitcases, bundles of all sizes and shapes on their backs, shouting, 'Make way, make way', as they scurried down the gangway to throw their load on a luggage cart, then scramble back for a repeat performance.

The large hall of the *Yolcu Salonu*, 'the waiting room', echoed with people shouting and waving their arms. Luggage was shuttled to and fro while police and officials blew repeated blasts on their whistles. Nil pointed out his parents standing on a balcony above the maddening crowd. Ambassador Bedii Arbel, tall and upright in a long black coat and crowned with a shock of white hair, waved his hat. His wife, Afife Hanım, was wrapped in fur, her face hidden under a wide brimmed hat. Next to her was Nil's aunt, Professor Fazila Giz, who had stayed with us in London a few times while attending university seminars. Slim and of average height, she seemed taller in her well-cut, classical black suit which set off her slender figure to perfection. Her dark hair, knotted at the nape of her neck, framed a long, sensitive face with brown expressive eyes, often wreathed in smoke from her strong Turkish cigarettes.

We navigated our way past porters and passengers down the gangway. Police blew whistles to control the noisy crowd milling around the custom buildings. Nil told me to wait in a corner of the customs-house. The noise was deafening, the crowd extraordinary. I spotted the car containing my precious belongings swinging in the air at the end of a steel cable as though about to crash onto the pier. I tugged an officer's arm, pointing anxiously to the vehicle. 'That's my car!' 'Good, very good,' he smiled, walking off. As soon as the luggage was checked, our dinner companion appeared to collect the fur. She presented me with a box of Turkish delight and handing me her card insisted I keep in touch before disappearing into the crowd.

In possession of our car once more, Nil drove to the entrance of the customshouse, hand on the horn. Here we were met by his parents and his aunt. Under her hat, Mrs. Arbel had porcelain-white skin, piercing blue eyes and red lips. 'Welcome to Istanbul, my dear,' she said, squeezing my hand. 'Welcome, welcome, my dear,' echoed my father in law. 'It's too noisy here. Let's be off.' With my face pressed to the window of the car, I caught my first glimpse of Istanbul, a city with a population of less than a million and a half, a city of mosques and churches that divided Europe from Asia and was to become my home.



*Lady Who* tells the extraordinary life story of Joan Kim Erkan, who has spent approximately 60 years in Turkey. Through her eyes, we witness a changing country for over half a century. This book is like a precious treasure, especially those who would like to gain a deeper knowledge about the political and social upheavels that occurred in the history of Turkey.

"This book about Turkish life in the second half of the twentieth century is a gem. There is nothing like it. The viewpoint appears to be that of an outsider looking in, but actually a lot of the episodes and characters and developments are seen through the eyes of the insider looking out."

Roger Norman



