

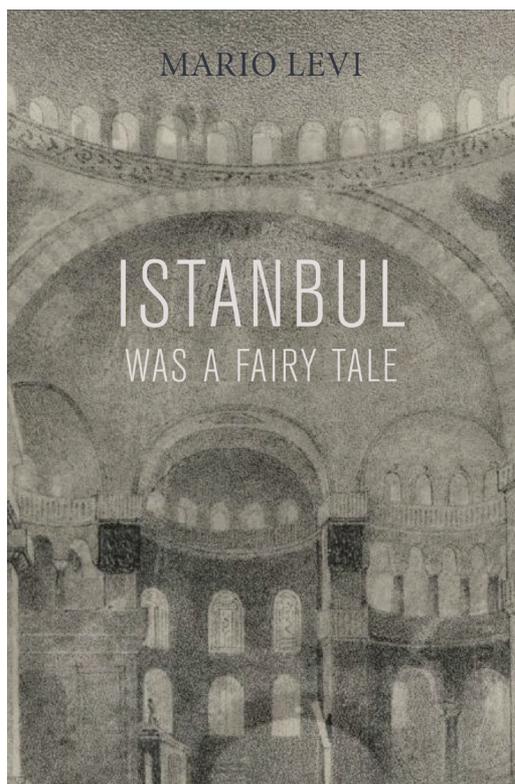
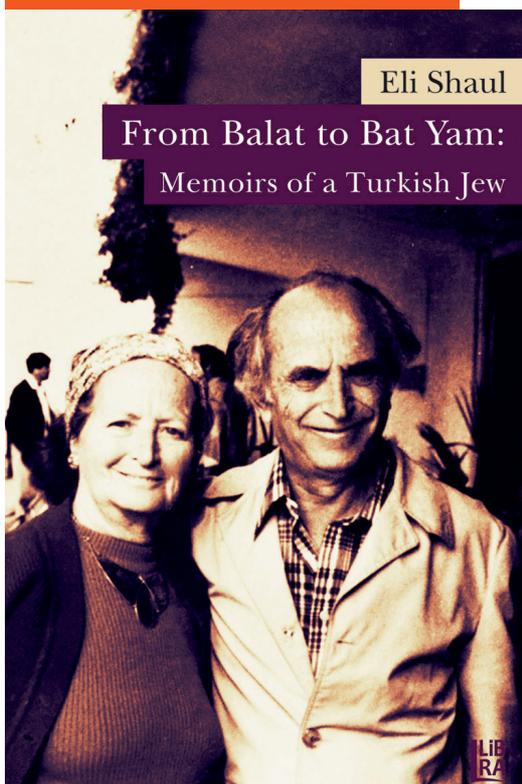
# Books



If you know Turkish, you can feel yourself to be so justified, so brave, so righteous a person that you need not fear even God

Eli Shaul

From Balat to Bat Yam:  
Memoirs of a Turkish Jew



Books

## A Jewish perspective

Julia Harte takes a look at two historical novels set in 20th-century Istanbul

**From Balat to Bat Yam: Memoirs of a Turkish Jew** Eli Shaul  
Edited by Rifat N Bali, translated by Michael McGaha



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Eli Shaul grew up in an Istanbul where Turks, Greeks, Jews and Armenians gathered in coffeehouses and taverns to exchange jokes, stories and plenty of non-hostile ethnic or religious taunts. In his Istanbul, neighbourhood news was declaimed in the streets by public watchmen, Kâğıthane was a wooded picnic destination, and fires were extinguished by mobile pumps that volunteer firemen carried by hand.

Shaul was born into a Turkish Jewish family in 1916, in the last embers of the Ottoman Empire. He came of age as the Turkish Republic struggled through its own turbulent adolescence,

characterised by ugly rashes of nationalism, rebellious urges in different parts of the country and spurts of growth toward a multi-party system.

Through Shaul's eyes, these changes manifested themselves in the increasingly discriminatory treatment he encountered as he grew up.

In his childhood, Shaul's neighbourhood of Balat was a predominantly Jewish area, with a few thousand Greeks and Armenians and a handful of Turks. By Shaul's estimate, Balat had 20,000 Jewish residents, 10 synagogues and more than 100 rabbis; the only hospital was Jewish, as were all the doctors. Jewish influence over the area was so strong that even inner and outer Balat were referred to by the Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) phrases 'Ariento Balat' and 'Afuera Balat'. Aside from the occasional anti-Semitic remark or slur, Turkish Jews experienced very little antipathy from Balat's other residents.

By middle school, however, Shaul

found himself ordered out of the room during military classes so that he couldn't learn military secrets and sell them to foreign states. He heard Jews described as cowardly and dishonest, with close friends praising him as 'not your average Jew'. In high school, two of his friends were refugees from the 1934 pogrom against the Jews in Thrace.

In 1942, he watched the infamous Wealth Tax impoverish and demoralise his family, even as his wealthiest Turkish friends were barely affected by it. With the intention of eliminating the non-Muslim middle class by charging them arbitrarily large sums of money, the government forced citizens who couldn't pay to 'work off their debt' in labour camps at Aşkale, in eastern Turkey.

Shaul's memoirs include excerpts from letters he received from desperate Jewish friends during this period, bewildered by the government's assessments of their wealth: 'Things

happened that we didn't understand... They assessed me 3,500 liras. I don't have three and a half paras [approximately half a kuruş]. ... One person had only five hundred liras, and sixty thousand were required from him... It's no good to say you don't have any money. They'll send you east, to work in the Aşkale camps.' The family of Shaul's future wife Diana lost their house and business to the Wealth Tax collectors, but it still wasn't worth the 7,000 liras they had been assessed, so Diana's father was briefly sent to Aşkale.

Anti-minority measures such as these weren't the only aspects of Turkey that Shaul lamented during the period of single-party rule by the Republican People's Party (CHP). While serving in the military between 1941 and 1944, he was appalled by the living conditions in Turkey's far eastern provinces. Even as typhus raged in Istanbul and hundreds of villagers fell victim to malaria each year in the east, Shaul met villagers who had never used soap in their lives, had no access to basic medicines and vaccines or were perpetually infested with lice.

'If you were to say our villages are medieval, you'd be making a big mistake,' says Shaul in a diary entry from 1943, while posted in Doğubeyazıt. 'In our villages I have seen with my own eyes what the first people in history and their way of life must have been like.'

Less than a month after the south-eastern province of Hatay joined Turkey in 1938, according to Shaul, prices went up and jobs became scarcer. He blamed it mainly on Turkey's primitive and incompetent bureaucracy and 'many other reasons I don't know. But the consequence is clear; we are very expert in turning heaven into hell.'

Shaul immigrated to Israel in 1950 with his wife and child. In this action, too, his experiences are indicative of broader historical trends. From 1942 to 1950, between 70,000 and 80,000 Jews left Turkey, representing approximately four-fifths of the Jewish population before 1934.

Despite everything he experienced and witnessed in Turkey, however, Shaul's patriotism never diminished. In 1953, from his new home of mostly Turkish-Jewish immigrants in Bat Yam, Israel, Shaul wrote, 'When I lived in Turkey, we all adopted the great Atatürk's formula, "How happy is he who says, "I am a Turk." In Israel I learned a new motto: "He who knows Turkish doesn't fear God." ... If you know Turkish, you can feel yourself to be so justified, so brave, so righteous a person that, as the embodiment of righteousness, you need not fear even God.'

Until the end of his life in 2004, Shaul considered Turkey and Israel his dual homelands and rejoiced to see them 'live together in friendship and mutual understanding.' He would undoubtedly be upset to see how relations between the two countries have deteriorated in recent years.

But as a man who lived through the ugliest years of anti-Semitism in Turkey

and eventually saw its Jewish residents achieve equal standing in society, he'd probably take the long view and remain optimistic. After all, international relations are founded on interpersonal ones, and Eli Shaul never lost his great faith in the potential of the Turkish and Israeli people.

### Istanbul Was a Fairy Tale

Mario Levi

Translated by Ender Gürol



Dalchey Archive Press 34.65 TL

Reading 'Istanbul Was a Fairy Tale' is like eavesdropping on the lives of strangers through a wall.

Their interactions are conveyed through muffled whispers, their personalities and interactions sketched in frustratingly sporadic and incomplete details. The instants we overhear are mostly out of context, with no sequential relationship to one another, like a building through whose windows a series of disconnected events and people can be glimpsed. And during the entire maddening process, a perverse voice in our minds spins wild questions and theories about these shadowy characters' hidden dreams, desires and motivations.

Levi's novel, the first of his works to be translated into English, is about several generations of a Jewish family living in Istanbul over the course of the 20th century. The nexus of the family comprises Monsieur Jacques, his wife Roza, their children Berti and Jerry, and Berti's family. Most of the book revolves around these characters, although one of the most interesting sections concerns Jacques's brother Nesim's family, who migrate to France during the 1930s and are seized during the Holocaust.

Peripheral relatives and acquaintances of the family swirl in and out of the plot. Although Levi expends few words on these characters, they have some of the most tantalisingly original back stories of any individuals in the book: Schwartz, an amnesiac Austro-Hungarian officer abandoned by his regiment in Istanbul, with just a

photograph of a farm to remind him of his home; Mimico, a childhood friend of Berti's, fatherless and bullied, who substantially severs ties with reality after his mother destroyed his marble collection; and Lena, Mimico's beguiling wife, who claims that life begins after midnight.

Episodes that locate the narrative in its historical context are rare but equally rewarding. One scene shows shop owners striking a pomegranate against a counter in their store on New Year's Day, 'in order to see their crimson seeds disperse to the accompaniment of their own prayers so that they might have a prosperous year.' In another part of the book, a distant relative who has survived the Holocaust sends a letter asking to meet the family in Istanbul, who are meanwhile 'still enduring the agony' of the 1942 Wealth Tax in Turkey.

The book shines with such details, evocative images and phrases that make a reader yearn for more in this vein. Were 'Istanbul Was a Fairy Tale' condensed down to just these excerpts, contextualised and presented in order, it would be 500 pages shorter and a much more lucid and enjoyable read.

Whereas most novels consist of long stretches of conventional narrative broken by occasional ruminative interludes, these proportions are reversed in Levi's novel. The narrator, a hybrid of the third-person omniscient and a person who interacts with the other characters in the book, dominates the dense, oft-convoluted prose with agonised deliberations about whether and how he should reveal certain stories.

Such intense narration suggests that fascinating characters and intrigues lie in store. But rarely do the people and events being described warrant this hype. Most of the characters aren't so unusual: they love, they sin, they are hurt, they flee their circumstances, and they die, often in a state of slow-simmering resentment against life. As Levi repeatedly hammers home, each is trying to act out the life that he or she wants to live – performing their fairy tales – while fate plays malicious interference.

But these characters aren't sketched out fully enough for a reader to become so attached to them that she can appreciate the narrator's trembling speculation about every detail of their lives and psyches. Rather than adding to their mystique, the narrator's lengthy interjections serve to distance readers from the characters and prevent them from being viewed whole.

Some of these issues are undoubtedly exacerbated by the translation, which is manifestly imperfect. In some passages, the subject is unclear for several pages. Typos and unnecessary punctuation confuse already lengthy sentences. The overbearing narrator, weak character development and disorganised presentation of facts, however, are clearly the author's choices. While artistically interesting, the result is a very difficult read, albeit with occasional diamonds gleaming in the rough.

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