

A Love Affair Across the Centuries

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In the spring of 1999, I was seeking background for a novel about fifteenth-century Ottomans and the Christians of Constantinople when I came across this entry in the New York Public Library catalog: “Nicholas N. Martinovich papers, ca. 1935-1951. [...] Collection consists of biographical sketch; correspondence, 1935-1951; and manuscripts of Martinovich’s monographs ‘Battal and Danishmend’ (a Turkish legendary work) and on Mihri Khatun, a Turkish poetess of the 15th century”.

The catalog entry continues as follows: “Nicholas N. Martinovich (1883-1954) was a Russian-born authority on Ottoman and Turkish art. He served in the Russian diplomatic service in the Near East and taught Oriental languages at the University of Petrograd. In 1922 he emigrated to the U.S. where he prepared descriptions of manuscripts and art objects for various museums. He wrote books and articles, lectured and taught courses at Columbia University in New York City”.

The Martinovich boxes in the library’s Special Collections Office looked as though they had not been opened in years. Within them were many lantern slides (glass plates) of friezes of *beys* and warriors, masks, a map, and mysterious allegorical paintings; correspondence in Russian, German, French, and English; a curriculum vitae, and a curious and passionate love story spanning four centuries.

As he tells it, Nikolai Nikolayevich Martinovich was first smitten—“stupefied” is his word—by Mihri Hâtun when he heard her name in a lecture hall at the University of St. Petersburg. This must have been before he received his L.B. degree there in 1905, when he was 22 years old. He later took part in scientific expeditions in Asia Minor (winning a medal from the Russian Geographic Society in 1906) and served the Tsar in Alexandria, Salonika, Crete, Constantinople, and Athens, where he had further opportunity to investigate Mihri and her times and to seek out copies of her *divan*.

Martinovitch (as he began spelling his name once he reached the United States) wrote and lectured on many other topics over the years, including Persian manuscripts and Turkish popular puppet theater. He eventually married a *living*, contemporary woman—it was his widow who gave his papers to the library. Mihri, however, was his lifelong passion. His manuscript about her, set down in pencil in English, his fourth or fifth language, is not only a work of scholarship but a hymn to that “Turkish, Moslem, beautiful woman”. He struggled mightily to get it published, but was frustrated first by the Second World War and later, perhaps, by the very oddity of his project. His monograph is simultaneously a defense of his subject’s virtue and a vigorous argument for her carnality. It seems as important to Martinovitch to prove that Mihri was not a virgin (and that she wrote clinically accurate verses about menstruation and postpartum vaginal discharges) as that she was a brilliant poet. Perhaps he needed to imagine himself as Iskender, whom he proposes as her lover.

By bringing this work to print, we have helped Nicholas Martinovitch consummate his love. More important to the rest of us, his work brings to life a truly fascinating figure, Mihri Hâtun, whose very existence tells us surprising things about the possibilities open to well-born women in the early Ottoman Empire. Martinovitch’s

Mihri has also been personally helpful to me: she has lent her wit and spirit to the women in my novel, *A Gift for the Sultan*, set in Anatolia in the summer of 1402—some fifty years before Mihri's birth—as they contend with a *gazi* (Muslim warrior) much bolder than Iskender.

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