

TURKISH DAYS

Snapshots of a Sephardic girl's life in the Bronx

BRENDA SEROTTE

Ke mal te kiere

Aunt Clauta had been kidnapped at age thirteen by a Turkish sultan and placed in a harem. It had happened sometime during Attatürk's reign. The family treated the incident as a secret, never giving out any details. The bare facts were repeated through gossip to a very few. But I wanted to know more: What does a sultan do? What is a harem, and what did Aunt Clauta do in it? I heard that she had been *ermozura* [very pretty]. I was also told that the same could happen to me if I wasn't a good girl. I would get dire warnings, followed by an incantation: *Ke mal te kiere! Ojos i klavos! Azhinkuli!* [Heaven prevent a similar fate from happening to you!]

Gossip had its own rules, especially around children. The common practice was for the person telling the anecdote to curl the right forefinger, then bite down hard on it before repeating the *Ke mal te kiere*. I liked hanging around my mother and her sisters, for they always had a juicy secret to share, whispered in Ladino.

Most Turks I knew wore a *nazarlık*—a bead or a real-looking blue eye or an amulet—to ward off the *ojo malo* [evil eye]. Since some of us fell into danger anyway, I concluded that Aunt Clauta had probably left her evil-eye necklace at home on the day of the kidnapping.

Happily, she was “kidnapped back” into the family at some point and lived well into her eighties on Long Island.

Sarika

Our building in the Bronx was a universe unto itself. Its art deco lobby, with its marble benches and gilded mirrors, was ideal for staging elaborate three-act plays. It had passageways a kid could get lost in. If you were quiet, you could hear everyone's life discussed through the walls.

On a rainy day I heard screams from an apartment rented by a Turk. While he sat fingering amber worry beads in the bedroom, his wife Sara—*Sarika de Salonika*—jumped out the kitchen window. By the time my brother and I had run around to the alleyway to see what had happened, someone had covered the body with a mantle. She was a Sephardic, *una de los muestros* [one of our kind]. My brother and I watched,

stupefied, as Sara's husband rocked back and forth, pulling his hair out and crying aloud, *Guay de mí! Guay de mí!* [Woe is me!].

A suicide *de los muestros!* What awful things could a woman from Thessalonica, *una Saloník*, keep in her heart that would make her jump out a window?

Sin mansevo

There were two Stellas among the neighborhood Sephardim. One was ugly and mean as a witch, the other attractive and kind. We called them Straya-fea and Straya-buena. They were middle-aged *soltéras*. I loved the word in Ladino and also its English equivalent, *spinster*. I rolled it around on my tongue often enough to get slapped. To be a spinster was a *verguenza* [something to be ashamed of].

The nice Stella had a well-known secret: her betrothed had gone crazy, *tomó lokura*, right before their wedding day and had been committed to a state hospital. The ugly Stella had an even worse secret: she really was a witch. An *echizéra*. She was our seamstress.

Straya-fea was a stereotype: she had a pointy chin with a little lump on it that a bunch of hair grew out of. I was told not to look at her too long—*no miras!*—or I would grow hair on my face, too. She was a slight, grim person who spoke little English. She was uglier when she smiled, displaying her three gray teeth. She hummed under her breath as she sewed the hems on my skirts. I tried to be nice to her, because I was afraid of coming under her spell. She was a good laundress, too. For a dollar more she did all our wash.

There was one other *soltéra* in our building, an Italian called Rosa, who told Mother that she was secretly dating a married man. She was the daughter of everyone's baby-sitter, Mrs. Fanny, who charged fifty cents and let you get away with anything. All she did was sit in the living room, praying on rosaries for Rosa to get married.

Mother knew all the details of Rosa's illicit relationship and reported them to me. To be *sin*

mansevo [without a man] was a terrible thing, and, judging from the two Stellas, I had to agree. Mother called it a *maravia* [miracle] when Rosa met an available man and he proposed. I figured it had to be Mrs. Fanny's rosaries.

I wanted beads like that but got smacked for asking.

Rosa's wedding was a much-anticipated event. Blinding white and frothy, she ran down the steep steps of our stoop one Saturday afternoon, with Mrs. Fanny trailing behind and holding her train. The children Mrs. Fanny baby-sat for, their mothers, and even some fathers lined up on both sides of the painted stone lions that decorated the stoop. Each autumn the lions were painted a different color. That year they were appropriately white.

When Rosa passed us, her dark hair bobbing under the veil, people threw fistfuls of rice, confetti, and sand: “Two, four, six, eight, who do we ap-pre-ci-ate? Rosa, Rosa, Rosa . . .”

Behind, I heard Mother whisper, *Kara duerte, mazal derecho!* [Darned lucky, 'cause she ain't pretty!].

Una dezeada

We were patriotic at heart and celebrated every national holiday with small-town gusto. Our home was between 170th and 171st Streets. On Thanksgiving we took the subway downtown to Macy's. At Eastertime, as if being filmed for the Fifth Avenue pageant, we paraded up and down the wide, maple-lined boulevard of the Grand Concourse in little flowered bonnets, shiny patent leather shoes, and beautiful dresses. On Saint Patrick's Day everyone wore green to school. Memorial Day, the best holiday of all, found us curbside on either side of the Concourse, frantically waving tiny American flags to the marching bands and weeping along with our parents as the veterans' cars passed by. The parade began at 138th Street and went all the way up to Fordham Road. Nobody missed it.

The best place to watch the parade from was somebody's fire escape on the first floor. My