

Historical Portrait of Prof. Dr. Sema Kut

Sema Kut, Ankara

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I was born on April 28, 1931 in İstanbul. My father named me "Sema", originally an Arabic word, which means "The Sky". I was the only child of the family but I have never missed having a sister or a brother because I had a cousin who was born six months after my birth. The time that I was born, was the 8th year of the proclamation of the Turkish Republic, when national feelings were high. I grew up with nationalistic feelings such as the love of my country, love of my flag, love of the Turkish army, but on the other hand I had never thought that human beings are different wherever they live or they belong, maybe it is because since my childhood I had Armenian, Jewish, Greek and German friends.



I remember my childhood since I was two and a half years old. These were happy times for me, with my father and mother, in a loving atmosphere. The most enjoyable times for me were summers when I was with my cousin, when we learned how to swim, playing with balls and roller-skating. When I was four years old, I had already learned how to read and write at home (we didn't have pre-school education that time). I enjoyed trying to read children's books with beautiful pictures on it. I started school when I was six years old.

Talking about my country, geographically, Turkey, being a peninsula, stretching from Asia Minor to Europe, in a way is a bridge between Asia and Europe. It is a meeting place of Eastern and Western cultures. During the Republican era, Turkey has been a founding member of the Council of Europe, UN European Charter, UNDP, WHO, Unicef, OECD, UNESCO, FAO, etc... Turkey is the only Islamic country that had adopted Western way of life. I was brought up in a secular society and in a non-conservative family. I did not have a formal religious education, I learned Islamic rules within my family, particularly from my grandmother. None of the woman in my family covered their hair.

After I finished my primary education, my cousin and myself started our secondary education in an American school in Istanbul (Uskudar Amerikan Kız Lisesi), now it is called Uskudar American College, as boarding students, so we were together almost all of the year. Towards the end of our secondary education, we were thinking what to study in the university. My cousin did not think too much: she was sure that she would study medicine because she wanted to be like our aunt, who was a well known doctor in Ankara.

Some people are born with special talents and they had to have an opportunity to display their them. But most of us develop their interests as they learn and what they discover or what they hear or what they see in the environment they live. We all live in a social environment, the first is our families, then we start school, we make friends, then we join with our interest groups, all of these have an impact shaping our personality. Then we start to think what we want to be, for the rest of our lives. I was sure I wanted to continue my education in the University and become a professional woman. I already had two models, the difficulty was which one to choose: I also wanted to be a medical doctor like my aunt. She was not only a doctor but also a professional woman leader in early days of The Turkish Republic, involved in building up social policy as a volunteer in the field of women's rights, child protection, rehabilitation of the handicap, anti-tuberculosis and malaria eradication campaigns, taking measures for the welfare of the poor. She was an honour student who pursued her medical education in Istanbul University and when she graduated, as a reward she was appointed as the first woman doctor in the capital city of Ankara, of the young Republic of Turkey. On the other hand, I also wanted to be like my father who was a lawyer who worked in the penal court as a Judge, having authorization to give death sentences (we don't have it anymore). In addition to law, he also studied sociology, philosophy and literature. He was a real intellectual, he also knew French. Every morning he used to get up early and work in his library , to prepare his cases.

There was also another profession called "Social Work" which I had learned from my American teachers but we didn't have any department to study. Even if I went abroad for my studies, I would have had no opportunity to work as a professional when I came back.

All three professions that attracted me had a common denominator; law for social justice, medicine for physical and mental health, social work for socio-economic welfare of the individual. At the end, I decided to study law. I asked my father what would he think if I study law, he said "Do whatever you want, the only thing I would like to see is you, as a well educated woman. If you want to learn about my opinion, I have no objection if you want to study law". So, that was my decision.

Our graduation from High School was the second of June 1950. I was happy thinking my studies in the University and was also planning a nice summer holiday. We had a very nice graduation at the end of the school year: Our guest speaker was the Governor of Istanbul. The stage was decorated with magnolias and our class motto was written with flowers "Ad Astra per Aspera" which means "To stars through difficulties". What an ambitious motto!

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On August 7, 1950, I had the biggest shock of my life, with the unexpected and sudden death of my father due to a heart attack. He was a 53 years old, healthy, cheerful and handsome man. I was 18 and my mother was 40. It took almost the whole summer for me to recover. I didn't change my mind, so I started to study law in Istanbul University. I was having difficulty to adopt myself to the lost of my father. I couldn't concentrate on the lectures. Fortunately, my mother was also my best friend, she was very understanding and loving. Talking briefly, she was a woman who didn't study in the University. After her secondary education, she went to a French school called Ecole Moderne in Istanbul but didn't finish it. Then she married my father.

At the end of the year, I didn't feel like taking the exams and told my mother what would she think about it, she said "Don't force yourself and do what you want to do.". Then we decided

to move to Ankara because my mother felt very lonely and wanted to live with her mother and sisters in Ankara, so we moved and joined my mothers family. My cousin had already started medical school in Ankara University and I shifted my previous decisions and joined the English Language and Literature Department, also taking Latin and roman law courses. After I completed my studies, I worked as an administrative assistant during the establishment of METU (Middle East Technical University) in Ankara. But I had no interest to continue working.

When I was thinking what to do, there was this surprise of my life: The Turkish Government had decided to re-organize the social services run both by the Government and voluntary associations. The first negotiations took place rapidly, in 1959, soon after a big meeting, a new law establishing an institute of social services was crafted. Two articles of the law made reference to open an Academy of Social Services, a four year study after secondary education at University level, to train professional social workers. After the passage of the law from the Parliament, a new General Directorate of Social Services was established under the Ministry of Health and Social Assistance in 1960. Following the General Directorate in 1961 Social Services academy started education of professional social workers.

When all these preparations were taking place, I met the first social service advisor appointer, send by UN to Turkey. She was called Mrs. Hersey, she asked me if I was interested studying social work. So my dream had come true after so many years. I accepted the offer without thinking a second and I had options whether study in USA or UK. I preferred UK for two reasons: Firstly, my cousin was in UK. Secondly, since I had studied English Literature and social history, I was particularly interested in the social development of England. I also had information about USA since I went to an American School, but somehow, UK attracted me more.

In 1960, I went to England and I started my studies in the University College of Swansea, The Department of Social Sciences of the Cardiff University. I studied social administration and social work two years as post graduate. I thought I made a good choice with studying in England, because it suited more the Turkish Society. In the first place, it was a compact program, there was only one month holiday in between. Secondarily, it was a generic approach. Thirdly, we had courses like "Political Theory", "Government Machinery", "Social Development", "Social Anthropology"(Study of different cultures), "Social Administration" which were the basic courses for social development. I was also lucky in my field of work places, such as mental hospitals, in case work; Jewish Settlement in the East of London for group work; public Housing, Bristol Social Assistance Department in Liverpool, Irish Republic rural areas for community organization. I have experienced senior supervisors. I also enjoyed tutorials discussing my essay with my advisor. My dissertation was a comparative study between Turkey and England, slam clearance programs.

As I had expected, when I came back to Turkey in 1962, I started to work in the Social Services Academy as teaching staff, which was opened under the Ministry of Health and Social Assistance, a four year study equal to University level, in 1961. I gave the first professional course "Introduction to Social Work" to the second year students. That was the beginning of my professional life which continued until my retirement in 1998. When I started working as a faculty member, I had two more colleagues who also studied in England. One was a sociologist, she studied only one year, then coming back, she preferred to teach sociology with social work orientation. The other colleague was a history teacher, coming

back from England, he wanted to teach history which is an obligatory course in Turkey in higher education, so we almost had no social work staff.

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I am not an ambitious person. I did not think that I should be a leader. But it happened so. We had an education advisor, so I had to work with her. She was a very pleasant person. I thought the first thing to do should be to revise the Curriculum. The first one was drafted by some professors from different departments of Ankara University, with the First UN welfare advisor. There was a social anthropologist, a sociologist who was well known in social research, a medical doctor (specialist of hygiene), a psychologist and a lawyer. My suggestion was to have a more generic approach because Turkey could not yet afford case workers, group workers, community organisations or specialized fields such as medical social work, psychiatric social work, labour etc... What we need was a social worker who would be able to practice every method in more field. There was a new advisor for social research, for the study of social problems and social policy courses. I consulted her and I suggested that it is not cosy to introduce a new profession in an old practice. Therefore, we had to be very careful in educating social workers. In the first place students had to know that social work as a profession is a discipline, it has a scientific basis, his own methodology and techniques. Then we decided to revise the Curriculum. In the University, our approach was, the first two years: generic social work, concentrated on basic social sciences also introductory course to social work; the last two years, we had methodology of social work having courses as case work, group work, community, development, organization and social research having concurrent and block field work. We also had some other courses in between such as structure of Turkish Society, public administration, government, etc.... Students had to conduct a research under supervision starting from the second year. That was a condition to be able to graduate and arrange field work programs for two reasons: firstly we did not have enough institutions, secondly, we did not have enough supervisors. Although it was time consuming, we were able to solve the problem through negotiations with some agencies such as "Children's Home" where doctors, nurses and teachers were working in small areas such as rural communities, university hospitals and psychiatric clinics.

Luckily, we had a short term UN education advisor, who had experience in different things. Our most pressing need was to recruit experienced social work teaching faculty members, related to the department responsible of higher education (The Ministry of Education). In order to start a solid education, we had to have good teachers for basic social sciences and other courses. The only recourse to find such teachers was the related departments of the universities in Ankara. I knew some academicians in other universities, through my friends, and others that I knew personally (even some of them were my classmates). Most of them were well-known in the country, giving great conferences. Anyway, I started knocking on their doors, explaining their contributions would be very valuable. Most of them accepted the offer, and some refused because they were over-working (but they also made a favor, with referring me to their colleagues). Finally, our non social work faculty had been completed.

The Government made an agreement with Fulbright commission to have social work professors from different universities in USA. A couple of professors came to Turkey. We also had a new UN education advisor. In addition, through bilateral agreements, we had faculty members from Holland, India and also from Pakistan, so we became nearly an International faculty. In the meantime, three more Turkish colleagues, who obtained their Master Status in the USA, joined the Academy. So gradually, the number of guest staff was decreasing and the local ones were increasing. At the end, the faculty became self-sufficient.

But, we still had a very important problem: we had no Turkish social work book and social work had no place in Turkish Literature. Some of the essential books were being translated. We also had to use consecutive translators in lectures since our education was in Turkish. Most of the translators were not familiar with social work jargon so I had to help them. In addition to my work in the Academy, I was also trying to have good relations with the bureaucracy of the Ministry.

Strange enough, in the third year of the Academy, we had no full time administrator. Under Secretary of the Minister, was our acting director. We also had an assistant director who was experienced in bureaucracy and we had an education advisor who was an American professor from Berkley University. He insisted that I should be the Director. I refused his offer because I thought I was not ready yet for such a responsibility. But against all my rejection, I had to accept to be the assistant director in academic affairs, after two more years I was appointed as the director of the academy, which lasted until my retirement. In the mean time, we had two more Turkish Colleagues who joined us, after their MS in USA. Also, we had our first graduate in 1965 and two more graduates joint the academy.

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In Turkey, Professional education and social work started in the early 60's. It is almost one century behind from Europe and USA. This is because the Turkish Republic is a very young country: parliamentary system started with the opening of the Turkish Grand National Assembly in 1923. There was only "Peoples Republic Party" (CHP). Atatürk was unanimously elected as the President of the Turkish Republic. Up to 1946, it was the only party. Atatürk, before he died in 1938, made two attempts to have another parties, but unfortunately it did not work. In 1946, a new "Democrat Party" was founded and in 1950 election, they took over the Government. On 1967, we became a member of IASSW. Our educational system was up to be more international. But unfortunately, we still did not have independent Department of Social Services. At the end of long negotiations with the Parliament, a new General Directorate also of social services, under the Prime Ministry, which had over at responsibility of running social services. It was followed having provincial directorate. So, social workers started to work as administrators, mostly in "Children's Homes".

However, this does not mean that there were no other welfare services under the Ottoman Empire or the new Turkish Republic. Prominent examples of welfare services under Ottoman Empire were: Foundations (vakıf), which were originally based on Islamic thoughts; Artisans Union (guild), also Islamic in the beginning, but later evolved to accept non-muslim members as well; homes for the destitute and schools for the education of veteran orphans; founding of the "Turkish Red Crescent" as a member of the "Red Cross League". All of these were non-governmental organizations and they were maintained with some revisions after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the founding of the Republic of Turkey, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and his colleagues, following the War of Independence.

The most striking feature of the new Turkish Republic was its secular characteristic, which was reflected in legal reform. A new ministry of Health and Social Assistance was established following the passage of a law on health and welfare of coalminers before the proclamation of the Republic in 1923. Soon after, in 1930, a Ministry of Labor was established, followed by the adoption of the Labor law in 1939. In addition to the governmental reforms related to labor and social security, voluntary societies and associations were formed under related legislation. Among these are the Benevolent Association (Yardımseverler Dernegi), whose

name in Turkish was suggested by Atatürk. He also established the Association for Eradication Malaria, the Antituberculosis Society, the Women's Association. Up to the 1960's, several related ministries also undertook social assistance responsibilities/tasks, which sometimes resulted in a lack of coordination and a lack of professional understanding.

In 1960, economic progression began to confront some difficulties: the "Coup - d'Etat" made by the army, the high increase of population and migration from rural to urban areas, followed by the increase of the unemployment. The population suffered from unplanned urbanization and growing poverty. Also, in late 60's, Turkey witnessed the university unrest. These situations made necessary to take serious majors, such as professionalism of social work, preparing 5-year national development plans, changing family laws, improve the university conditions.

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After this historical chapter, coming back to beginning of my career, one of the important events was me to participate in the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW). I can't remember exactly, but I think it was 1964 which took place in Athens, the host country.

At that time, Turkey had very tense relations with Greece due to the Cyprus issue, therefore my family didn't want me to go there but I insisted to go, after all Greece was the host of the conference and this had nothing to do with political or diplomatic relations. Anyway, in spite of all the resistance of my family, I went there. My Greek friends with whom I studied in England came to meet me, I was very glad to be able to go there, I thought that my participation in the conference was a great opportunity for my academic life. It was very exciting for me to meet all those well-known academicians whose books I had studied. Most important, I met the secretary General Dr. Katherine Kendall, whose name I had heard so often. I was the only Turkish person representing the only school in social work in Turkey for the first time ever. There were about 400 schools all over the world being represented. Everybody got interested with me, all newspaperman wanted to interview me. I was running from one meeting to the other and collecting all documents trying to learn as much as I can. That was my first introduction to the world of social work education. At the end, our host, a professor from the Athens University gave banquet in Delphi where there was a wine festival. About 2000 participants were looking for their names on the tables so I was also trying to find my name and which table I was going to seat. When I was looking around Professor Quatos, our host came and hold my hand, took me to his table and made me seat on his right, I didn't know what to do, so when the banquet started, he got up too and made his speech. Then, he hold my arm and made me stand up. Then he raised his glass for a toast for the friendship of Turkey and Greece and everybody followed him, I was so excited I couldn't utter a single word, then I remembered Atatürk's words, which was: "Peace at Home, Peace in the World", I told that these words were what social work was trying to do. I came back home full of energy.

Another important event for me was to get invitation to UN seminar in Cambridge. I was asked to participate to the seminar as a speaker, to talk about the relationship between volunteers and professional social workers in 1968. That was my first experience with UN, in the meantime I was having correspondence with IASSW. Dr. Katherine Kendall wanted to pay visit our school in Ankara, so she came and met our staff and made a speech to our students. I was happy to have her in Turkey. On her return, she wrote me that our school

could apply for membership to IASSW. As I understood, our standard of education was accepted by the Association.

In 1982, we had a re-organization of the Higher Education in Turkey. A new law passed from the Parliament and according to the law, Social Services Academy was now on affiliated with Hacettepe University as the school of Social Work. Having representation in the Senate of the University, I became a senator. Two years after our affiliation we opened the Master Program. Four years after, we all worked very hard to keep up the standard of the education but unfortunately, formal organization of the social services of our country couldn't keep up with the standard of our education.

In early 1970's, as Hacettepe University School of Social Work, we started having relations with schools of social work in United States and in Germany (with Berlin's School of Social Work), then we started, at the small scale, exchange of students in field work and our staff made couple of visit to Berlin. After Berlin's School, we also had relations with Schools of Social Work in other cities of Germany. After Germany, we started having relations with schools in Holland, Denmark and Sweden. Every year, we were having groups of students or social workers from those countries visiting our school. When we were having exchange of students with countries in Europe we were also keeping our contacts with IASSW. I was nominated for the Executive Board of IASSW and I was also elected to the committee in 1972 until 1976. I was participating to all kind of meetings and seminars organized by IASSW all over the world, which gave me an opportunity to learn about the social work education in different cultures, at the same time I was also participating to some programs organized by UN, such as European Development Program and the other organizations as WHO, ILO, UNICEF, Center of Social Welfare Research in Vienna under UN.

I became a Turkish delegate in the social committee of Council of Europe in 1970 until 1975. I also was involved in the organization of National conferences such as Higher Education, Social Services and preparation of the 5 years National Development Planning. Furthermore, I took some responsibility in the working groups in Turkey for the "National Years", working on the handicap of the women and the child. I have never stopped working in some voluntary associations, particularly in ones where my aunt worked so many years and I used some of them as the placement of fieldwork for our students.

Another great experience for me was to work in the South Eastern Anatolian Project (GAP), as an advisor in social programs, also working in the committee for the preparation of second master plan from 1995 to 2005. Before I was retired in 1998, I was honoured by the president of the country as a member of the Advisory Board of Social Services. My last work in UN was to present the Turkish Report under the rights of the child. So all these years and in 1998, I was retired but they wanted me to continue and stay two more years at the school.

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I would like to conclude saying that I had a full professional life and also enjoyed my social activities. For everything I was capable to do, in the first place, I would like to thank my family for all the opportunities they gave me. If I had contributed something to the education of social work in Turkey, it wouldn't be without all the support and understanding of colleagues whom I have worked shoulder to shoulder. Of course I have all my thanks for my teachers who contributed so much to my education; and I couldn't do without thanking to my students who always gave me joy of living. I'm proud of them and now it is time for me to learn from them...

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