Posing for the Republic

Making the modern Turkish citizen in vernacular photographs from the 1920s and 1930s

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PART IV
PHOTOGRAPHY, MATERIALITY AND LANGUAGE
CHAPTER SIX

Disseminating Citizenship

In this chapter, using the case study of a group of portraits sent to an individual named Şükrü Bey as a starting point, I will explore how the circulation of photographs helped to construct, disseminate and consolidate the image of the new Republican citizen. In the Şükrü Bey series, a group of men, holding respectable positions at various government institutions, use photography and photographic inscriptions to endorse the image of the well-educated and well-mannered gentleman who is loyal to the principles of the Kemalist regime. This series helps us examine how a classed image of the new modern Turkish citizen was cemented, reproduced and disseminated through exchanges of photographic prints in various social networks in the early years of the Republic. With their fashionable suits, perfectly tucked-in pocket squares, elegant ties and bowties, polished boots and clean spats, the men portrayed in the series perform their sophistication and gentility, which is further affirmed through the inscriptions written on the front or the back of the photographs, indicating their belonging to a high social class and the institutional apparatus of the modern state.

The 1928 alphabet change from Arabic to Latin, followed by a comprehensive language reform in the 1930s, presents an exceptional historical moment for modern Turkey and can be tracked in the transformation of handwritten notes on photographs. After analyzing the images, therefore, I will study these inscriptions, found on the Şükrü Bey series and on other photographs, which add layers of meaning and function to the practice of exchanging photographs. The way such inscriptions were written and replicated unveils the etiquette that emerged around the circulation of photographs among urban middle-class citizens, across space, gender, class and age.
The Curious Case of Şükrü Bey

Figure 6.1 A studio portrait: “My precious Şükrü Bey! I know that months and years erase memories very fast! In order to save myself from the danger of being forgotten, I present my picture to you. 1 March 1927.”\(^{161}\) 13.8 x 8.7 cm. Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

Figure 6.2 A studio portrait: “To my respectable brother Şükrü Bey, the Balya deputy of Ziraat Bank. Remember me as you look at my shadow. Geyve muavin of Ziraat Bank, 26 February, Sivrihisar.”\(^{162}\) 13.8 x 8.7 cm. Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

\(^{161}\) In Turkish: “Azizim Şükrü Bey! Ayların yılların hatırat silmekte pek tiz-dest olduğunu bilirim! Bu hatardan kendimi kurtarmak için bu hürmetlerimi takdime bu tasvir-i teessür-mâlimi tavsit ediyorum 1 Mart 1927.”

\(^{162}\) In Turkish: “Balya ziraat bankası muavini muhterem kardeşim Şükrü Beye şu gölgeme bakıtkça beni yad et ve hatırla Geyve Ziraat Bankası muavini 26 Şubat Sivrihisar.”
Figure 6.3 A studio portrait: “To Şükrü Bey, sincerely, to remember the days we spent together. Burdur muavin, 5 March 1927.”\textsuperscript{163} 13.8 x 8.7 cm.

Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

Figure 6.4 A studio portrait: “To my brother Şükrü Bey, you will not forget me while remembering the sad and sweet days of our life as a student, right? Denizli Çal muavin, 26 February 1927.”\textsuperscript{164} 13.8 x 8.8 cm.

Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

\textsuperscript{163} In Turkish: “Şükrü Beye samimiyetle bir arada geçirdiğimiz günleri tahattur etmek üzere 5 Mart 927 Burdur muavini.”

\textsuperscript{164} In Turkish: “Şükrü Bey kardeşimize, hayat-ı tahsiliyemizin acı ve tatlı bir çok haturat ve safahatı yad ederken beni de unutmazsın değil mi? 26 Şubat 927 Denizli Çal muavini.”
Figure 6.5 A studio portrait: “To our respectful brother Şükrü Bey, an immortal memory of the prosperous days. Registrar at Yenişehir Banking School, Ankara. 21 February 1927.”¹⁶⁵ 14 x 9 cm.

Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

Figure 6.6 A studio portrait: “My brother Şükrü Bey, when you remember the days we threw snowballs at each other, look at this picture.

İçel muavin. Ankara, 23 February 1927.”¹⁶⁶ 13.8 x 8.7 cm.

Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

¹⁶⁵ In Turkish: “21 Şubat 927 Muhterem Ağabimiz Şükrü Beye; feyzli günlerin lâ-yemût bir hatırası olmak üzere takdim olunur. Ankara Yenişehir‘de bankacılık mektebinde pul evrak memuru.”

¹⁶⁶ In Turkish: “Kardeşim Şükrü Bey Ankara karları arasında top yapıp da oynadığımız günleri hatırladığım zaman işte bu resme bak Ankara: 23 Şubat 927 İçel muavini.”
Figure 6.7 A studio portrait: “To my brother Şükrü Bey, remember me as you look at my shadow! [...] Ankara: Şarköy muavin. Ankara, 26 February 1927.” 167
13.8 x 8.8 cm. Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

Figure 6.8 A studio portrait: “To our brother Şükrü Bey, in order to remind you of the sincerity of our school friendship, look at my shadow and do not forget me! Bozkır muavin, 27 February 1927.” 168 13.7 x 8.7 cm.
Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

167 In Turkish: “Kardeşim Şükrü Beye gölgeme baktıkça beni hatırlı! [...] Ankara: 26 Şubat 927 Şarköy muavini.”
168 In Turkish: “Şükrü Bey kardaşımıza: mektep arkadaşlığımızın samimiyetine vesile olmak üzere işbu gölgeme bak da beni de unutma e mi 27 Şubat 927 Bozkır muavini.”
Figures 6.9 & 6.10 (recto & verso) A studio portrait: “To my brother Şükrü Bey, for keeping an immortal memory of a mortal life we spent together, Painting and Physical Training Teacher at the Erdek Numune Mektebi [High School].
Erdek: 29 […] 339 (1923/1924).”¹⁶⁹ 13.8 x 8.9 cm.
Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

¹⁶⁹ In Turkish: “Erdek: 29 […] 339 Aramızda güzderân (geçen) eden bir hayat-i muvakkatin ebedi hatırası olmak üzere kardeşim Şükrü Beye Erdek Numune Mektebi Resim ve Terbiye-yi Bedeniye muallimi.” The note “2” possibly refers to the number of copies printed of the portrait.
Figure 6.11 A studio portrait: “Şükrü Bey, my brother, here is a photograph of me as a souvenir, hoping it reminds you of your life and precious moments in school. Ereğli muavin, 21 February 1927.”\textsuperscript{170} 14 x 9 cm.

Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

Figure 6.12 A studio portrait: “To our valuable friend Şükrü Bey, hoping this picture strengthens the feelings of love and sincerity developed in the cold climate of Ankara. Ankara, 25 February 1927. […] from Fatsa.”\textsuperscript{171} 14 x 8.9 cm.

Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

\textsuperscript{170} In Turkish: “Kardeşim Şükrü Bey şu hata har olara takdim ettiği fotografımı mektepteki hayatımızın ve kıymetlendirmiş beklentilerimiz yadına vesile olur umidiyle 21 Şubat 927 Ereğli muavini.”

\textsuperscript{171} In Turkish: “Aziz dost Şükrü Beye! Ankara’nın barıd (soğuk) ikliminde teessüs eden meveddet (sevgi) ve samimiyeti teyide vesile olmak üzere takdim. 25 Şubat 927 Ankara Fatsalı […]”
Figure 6.13 A studio portrait: “Hoping that you will not forget the […] school life we had together. 22 February 1927.”\(^\text{172}\) 13.8 x 9 cm.
Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

Figure 6.14 A studio portrait: “To my roommate and my dear brother Şükrü Bey. Garbi Karaağaç. Ankara, 24 February 1927.”\(^\text{173}\) 14 x 9 cm.
Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

\(^{172}\) In Turkish: “Şükrü Bey biraderimize! Birlikte geçirdiğimiz […] mektep hayatımı unutmaması için 22/2/927.”

\(^{173}\) In Turkish: “Oda arkadaşım ve çok sevgili kardeşim Şükrü Beye: Ankara 24 Şubat 927 Garbi Karaağaç.”
Figures 6.15 & 6.16 (recto & verso) A studio portrait: “Dear Şükrü Bey, hoping that it leads to the continuation of the deep fondness built together in a short time. Akçaabat muavin. 7 March 1927.”

174 13.7 x 8.8 cm.

Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

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174 In Turkish (recto): “Sevgili Şükrü Bey kısa bir müddet beraberligin bıraktığı derin muhabbetin bekasına medar olur umidiyle 7 Mart 927 Akçaabad muavini.” The Arabic script on the back of the print includes a poem written in Pontic Greek (Romeika). The same poem is written twice on the print. The poem in Turkish reads: “Oralan Romeika [Rumca] gezdım/ Türkçe konuşarak/ Bir kız sevdim/ Keleşoğlu'dan.” The poem talks about a man who “traveled there,” perhaps referring to the Black Sea coast of Turkey, as a Pontic Greek by speaking Turkish, and loved a girl from the Keleşoğlu family. The note “2” possibly refers to the number of copies printed of the portrait.
Figure 6.17 A studio portrait: “My dear brother Şükrü Bey! Here is a dark face, as opposed to your bright mind. I present this picture to you. Perhaps from time to time you can glance at my pale face and remember me. 22 February 1927. Ziraat Bank Erbaa muavin. İhlamur [a street in Tokat].”

14 x 9 cm. Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

Figure 6.18 A studio portrait: “To my brother Şükrü Bey, hoping that it reminds you of the valuable moments. Çorlu Ziraat Bank muavin, 21 February 1927.”

14 x 9 cm. Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

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175 In Turkish: “Şükrü Bey kardeşim! İşte size karanlık bir sima sizin şaşan zekanız bu simanın eksiğidir. Takdim ediyorum. Belki ara sıra şu solgun çekreme bir nim-nigâh ettik hatırlarsınız. 22 Şubat 1927 […] Ziraat bank Erbaa muavini İhlamur [Tokat].”

176 In Turkish: “Kardeşim Şükrü Beye: kıymetli dakikalar hatırlatmak üzere takdim eyerim kardeşim Çorlu Ziraat Bank muavini 21 Şubat 1927.”
Figure 6.19 A studio portrait: “My dearest Şükrü! Hoping that it helps you remember our sincerity, Karacasu [Aydın] muavin, 27 February 1927.”
13.8 x 8.9 cm. Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

Figure 6.20 A studio portrait: “To my dear brother Şükrü Bey, Kangri [Çankırı] muavin, 5 March 1927.”
13.8 x 8.8 cm. Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

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177 In Turkish: “Şükürcüğüm! Samimiyetimizi yâda vesile olur ümidiyle takdim 27/2/1927 Karacasu muavini.”

178 In Turkish: “Sevgili kardeşim Şükrü Beye takdim 5 Mart 1927 Kangri muavini.”
Figure 6.21 A studio portrait: “To my precious brother Şükrü Bey, may our love and sincerity that started in school years continue. Taşköprü muavin. 22/23 February 1927.” 13.7 x 8.8 cm.

Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

179 In Turkish: “Aziz kardeşim Şükrü Beye; mektep sıralarında başlayan meveddet ve samimiyetimizin devamı mümkün olursa ne mutlu bana […] emanetim vardir sana […] 22/23 Şubat 1927 Taşköprü muavini.”
In September 2015, I purchased a set of images in a shop in Izmir’s Kızlayaşğı Han Bazaar, one of the handful of places that sell old photographs in the city. The set includes a series of individual studio portraits of young men in formal Western suits with ties or bow ties and carefully groomed hair. A number of the portraits show the men from the chest up, with a white vignette around them. Along with their visual likeness, the similarities between the handwritten notes on the portraits are striking. The neatly written notes are all of a similar length, typically include a date and a location, and end with a signature, implying a conventional genre that had become established and was widely copied by the 1920s.

The inscriptions, most of which appear on the front of the photographs, tie these images together. Written in Ottoman Turkish, they reveal a fascinating puzzle that each of these images holds a piece of. The majority of the portraits in the series are signed by “muavin”s (a position corresponding to that of deputy director) of various branches of Ziraat Bank. The notes on these portraits all address a certain Şükrü Bey (Mr. Şükrü), who seems to have been a muavin at Ziraat Bank’s Baýla branch in Balıkesir, as revealed in Figure 6.2 by the Geyve (Sakarya) deputy holding the same title as him. Some portraits, however, do

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180 In Turkish: (verso) “Şükrü Bey kardeşi; Mektep sıralarında nakl ettiğim hikayeleri tahattura vesile olur ümidiyle kardeşin.” (recto): “İnegöl mukayyidi Zekeriya Bey.”
not seem to be of Ziraat Bank employees, such as that of the man in Figure 6.9, who signs as a “Painting and Physical Training Teacher” from Erdek (Balıkesir). From the references made in the inscriptions, it appears that the majority of the men in these portraits were Şükrü Bey’s schoolmates.

The emphasis on a language of friendship, reverence and love in the elegantly written notes complements the subjects’ projection of a desired self-image that complies with the Westernized urban middle-class masculinities emergent in Turkish society in the 1920s and 1930s. This case study, then, provides some clues regarding the ways in which vernacular photographs were circulated both as objects for memory-making and as tokens for self-promotion and self-representation (Hearn 2013: 25; Hudgins 2010), helping to reinforce the making of modern Turkish masculinities in the formative years of the Republic.

The faded light-colored pattern embedded in the rim of these portraits, creating a vignette aesthetic, seems to suggest that Figures 6.2–6.8, 6.14–6.17, 6.20 and 6.21 were taken in the same studio. In these eleven photographs, the men sit in the exact same spot. Some of them (i.e. Figures 6.1, 6.13, 6.18 and 6.19) show a similar background with a leafy pattern. In Figures 6.13 and 6.19 the same trunk is used as an accessory, while in Figures 6.18 and 6.19 furniture items including a chair and a side table are added. Considering the close-set timestamps on the photographs, it is likely that both the vignettes and the full body portraits were taken in the same studio.

Most of the inscriptions are dated between 21 February and 7 March 1927. The placing of the text on each print and the similarity of the phrases used suggest that this group of men might have been together when writing the inscriptions, aware of and influencing each other’s notes. It is likely that these portraits were given to Şükrü in person, rather than being sent to him through the post. However, it is not possible to sort the images chronologically, since the date written on each photograph likely refers to the day when it was dedicated and handed to Şükrü Bey rather than to the day on which it was taken.

Looking at the studio portraits of Imperial Ottoman Bank employees recruited between the 1890s and 1920s, Eldem (2015: 240) explains that “employees posted in a same town generally had their picture taken at the same studio,” which seems to have been the case for the pictures in the Şükrü Bey series. Some studios produced pictures of employees as part of a photography campaign, imposing the same pose on their sitters, such as Bogos Tarkulyan’s Studio Phébus in Istanbul (Eldem 2015: 240). This may explain the visual consistencies in the Şükrü Bey series. Indeed, a similar campaign might have been organized for Ziraat Bank, with employees photographed in nearly identical poses in the same studio.
The photographs of Ottoman Bank personnel discussed by Eldem provide insight into the relationship between posture and social status, marking differences in terms of rank and seniority. For instance, Figures 6.24 and 6.25 reveal a clear difference between a subordinate’s “stiffly standing to attention” (Eldem 2015: 240) and the more sophisticated, self-assured pose of an employee with a higher rank. The poses and postures of the high-ranking muavins in the Şükrü Bey series show, indeed, striking similarities to the elegant and confident poses of the high-ranking employees from the Ottoman Bank.

Ziraat Bank (Agricultural Bank), the first agricultural financial institution to be founded by the Ottoman state with a state guarantee, served as a leading bank for farmers in the early years of the Republic, with its number of branches rising to 300 by 1923. Indeed, the Ziraat branches whose names appear on the images in the Şükrü Bey series cover a wide spectrum of Turkish coastal areas, including the Aegean (Burdur in Figure 6.3; Denizli in Figures 6.4 and 6.14; Aydın in Figure 6.19), Marmara (Sakarya in Figure 6.2; Tekirdağ in Figure 6.7 and İnegöl in Figure 6.18), the Black Sea (Zonguldak in Figure 6.17).
6.11, Trabzon in Figure 6.15 and Kastamonu in Figure 6.21) and the Mediterranean (İçel in Figure 5.6) regions.

What were these Ziraat Bank muavins doing in Ankara in the winter of 1927? How were these men connected to Şükrü Bey? Figure 6.5, signed by a banking school clerk in Yenişehir (Ankara) may offer a clue regarding the story of these images. In September 1926, Ziraat Bank established an applied banking school, Ameli Bankacılık Mektebi, which was designed to train bank personnel in the field of cooperatives over a period of six months (Yıldırır Kocabaş 2011; Hızır 2020). The school admitted “young officials, who finished secondary education and were eager to learn and expand their knowledge” (Hızır 2020). The school continued to operate until 1933–1934, producing 379 graduates in eight years.

The dates in the inscriptions correspond to the approximate graduation date of the 1926 class, suggesting that these young officials attended the school together over six months in the “cold climate of Ankara” (Figure 6.12). These images might thus have served as both professional and graduation portraits. Quite possibly, multiple prints were made of each portrait to be exchanged among classmates and school officials. The practice of exchanging pictures may even have been promoted by the school. Şükrü Bey appears to be one of those who attended the school and who, as the Balya muavin of Ziraat Bank, held the same rank as his classmates. It is likely, therefore, that he handed out a similar studio portrait to his classmates, with a similar inscription expressing feelings of love, friendship and respect. While Şükrü Bey may not appear in the pictures, he was clearly fully part of the culture of exchanging studio portraits among colleagues and friends. As such, he was one of many to adopt photography as a way of making and sharing memories, while cementing his identity as a proper Turkish citizen and a well-respected and beloved government official, endorsed by his colleagues and classmates.

As this section has shown, the portraits in the Şükrü Bey series suggest that a wide range of people adopted the culture of gifting and exchanging photographs, also outside the immediate family circle. The young men in the Şükrü Bey series constitute an exemplary case of how well-educated, Westernized professionals embraced the practice of exchanging photographs, and its associated function of spreading a model image of Turkish citizenship, in the early years of the Republic. In these portraits, the men present their public selves in accordance with models of modern Turkish masculinity and use photography as tokens of self-promotion in the hope of carving out a place for themselves in the new professional networks established by the Kemalist regime.

Circulating Memory through Photographs

In the Şükrü Bey series, what kind of memories are captions like “the days we spent together” (Figure 6.3), “the days we threw snowballs at each other” (Figure 6.6) or “the sad and sweet days of our student years” (Figure 6.4) meant to evoke and endorse? What is the purpose of the cementing of these memories that the inscriptions hint at? What broader purpose did the practice of gifting these portraits with their memory-focused inscriptions serve? In this section, taking the Şükrü series as a starting point, I will study
what images “did” for middle-class Turkish citizens who used photographic exchanges not only for memory-building and memory-sharing but also for the promotion of a classed self-image (Rose 2010). Thinking of photographs as material objects, I investigate how the materiality of photographs informed the visual economy in which their circulation was embedded. Edwards and Hart (2004: 1) suggest that

[photographs exist materially in the world, as chemical deposits on paper, as images mounted on a multitude of different sized, shaped, colored and decorated cards, as subject to additions to their surface or as drawing their meanings from presentational forms such as frames and albums. Photographs are both images and physical objects that exist in time and space.]

As Batchen notes (2000: 60), vernacular photographs in particular “exploit the fact that the photograph is something that can also have volume, opacity, tactility, and a physical presence in the world.” Consequently, I use the Şükrü Bey series as an opportunity to think about some of the “affordances” of photographs (Edwards 2002), which Rose (2010: 18) defines as “the material qualities of an object that allow some things to be done with it and not others.”

Rose (2010: 20) points out that “an image has a specific range of qualities as an object, but it is only when someone uses the image in some way that certain of those qualities become activated, as it were, and significant. When that use changes, the photograph also alters, as it is seen and done differently.” Therefore, the material qualities of photographs are never irrelevant to the ways in which they are used (Pinney 2005). For instance, enlarged and mounted prints such as Figures 1.1, 2.1 and 5.1 were probably framed to be hung on the wall or placed on a dresser, whereas postcard size prints like the Studio Göçek portraits in Figures 3.12–3.15 were likely placed in family albums. The studio portraits in the Şükrü Bey series were produced as carte postale prints, signed and inscribed to be gifted to others. They could have been kept in an album but it is unlikely that they were ever framed by the receiver. We do not know how many prints were made of each portrait; however, it is probable that multiple copies of the same portrait circulated in multiple familial as well as collegial circles.

The photographs in the Şükrü Bey series are connected to a larger historical framework with regard to the circulation of images as objects. As Ersoy (2016: 333) points out, “[b]y the end of the nineteenth century a rapidly increasing number of Ottoman subjects became objects of the camera, and were exposed to the growing discharge of circulating images,” which led to the creation of a market for photographs. Photographs that the Palace commissioned state officials or professional studios like Abdullah Frères to produce for various projects “soon turned into purchasable items in the market in the form of albumen prints or postcards, and were also widely circulated in the illustrated press.” On the other hand, many photographs in Sultan Abdüllah-Amid’s collection were items already available in the market and later purchased by the Palace (Ersoy 2016: 339).

Hearn (2013: 25) writes that the circulation of photographs as three-dimensional objects of social practice started with the spread of cartes de visite, patented by Disdéri in France in 1854, across Europe and North America in the 1860s and 1870s: “Cartes de
visite were small, inexpensive paper portrait photographs mounted on card stock that were exchanged and collected by all classes of people. Particularly in France and England, cartes were popularized as accessible representations of notable figures from Napoleon III to Queen Victoria, sold in boxed sets in the tens of thousands (Darrah 1981).

This phenomenon, referred to as cartomania, caused a craze not only for collecting the images of others but also for having one’s own portrait taken, “in styles and poses favored by the celebrated” (Hearn 2013: 28). Cartes, moreover, as essential components of social interactions among the wealthier classes, transformed “portraiture from a luxury to a necessity” (Volpe 1999: 54). These portraits would take part in gift circulation networks among family and friends (Darrah 1981; Wichard and Wichard 1999). Often collected in albums, cartes de visite helped “construct and solidify family narratives and extend networks of sociality” (Hearn 2013: 25). Hearn (2013: 25) explains that cartes de visite “worked to entrench and commercialize the profession of photography, democratize access to self-presentation, and introduce easily standardized visual codes and conventions for respectable selfhood.” Even after cartomania abated, “the trends inaugurated by their popularity only intensified” (Hearn 2013: 34).

The culture of producing and exchanging cartes de visite permeated the Ottoman territories soon after it became a fad in Europe. Koloğlu (in Bölük 2014: 68) notes that Ottoman newspapers like Ruzname-i Ceride-i Havadis and Tasvir-i Efkär wrote about cartomania in the early 1860s as a popular trend in the West, where people made special albums in which they kept carte de visite size pictures of their loved ones, relatives and European celebrities.

The popularization of the cartes in the Ottoman Empire, which resulted in an increase in photography studios, suggests a rapid spread of photographic production at the turn of the twentieth century (Ak and Modiano 2004; Çizgen 1987). Concurrently, the popularization of the postcard provided a “sudden leap in the circulation of images” (Eldem 2015: 139). Postcards offered a wide range of visual content from urban panoramas and “Oriental beauties” to risqué scenes “representing couples in various degrees of intimacy and dress” (Eldem 2015: 139). The images used on postcards were usually produced by prominent photographers.

Postcards were “bought, collected, exchanged, and mailed in prodigious quantities possibly sold for as low as “10 to 20 paras and sent to a friend or acquaintance for another 10 or 20” (Eldem 2015: 139). As Eldem (2015: 139) points out, “by and large, the market depended heavily on foreigners, tourists or residents, to whom the postcard was both a memento and a medium of succinct, cheap, and rapid correspondence, and of Ottomans who espoused Western practices and lifestyle.” Photo cards (cartes photo), which were personally selected photographs reproduced on preprinted photographic paper to be used like postcards, were also popular (Eldem 2015: 232).

Illustrated journals also helped foster the emergence of a photographic community in the Ottoman Empire, encouraging active participation and discussions among amateurs.

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184 In 1854, Disdéri invented a method of producing multiple images on one glass plate with a multi-lens camera by one exposure (Darrah 1981: 12). Photographic portraiture soon became a mass product with three to four hundred million cartes sold each year between 1861 and 1867 across Europe and North America (Berkin 2014; Darrah 1981: 4).
from the 1890s onwards, and encapsulating the impact of “the rising mobility of the image, and of its circulation within a modern, thickly layered and consumerized media environment” (Ersoy 2016: 356). Eldem notes that (2015: 149):

In less than fifty years, on a bumpy path to modernity, photography in the Ottoman Empire evolved from the marginal status of a novelty for the elite few to an object of mass consumption. During the three decades of Abdülhamid’s modernist autocracy, its period of gestation, it was dominated by a growing tension between the natural propensity of the image to free itself from all constraints and the regime’s implacable desire to monitor and subdue it. The revolution of 1908 put an end to this tension by unleashing the full power of photography in the making of a new social and political order.

The fast rate at which domestic practices for the circulation and consumption of images emerged prompted several prominent authors of the time to advise their rapidly Westernizing Ottoman readers on the “appropriate” ways to keep, arrange and exchange photographic prints. In European Etiquette or Alafranga from 1894, for instance, Ahmet Mithat (2001 [1894]: 256–60) talks about the rising popularity of photography, and claims that in larger Ottoman cities, people from all economic backgrounds have been rushing to studios to have their pictures taken. In his famously didactic tone, he writes that photographs should be kept in private rooms, on top of fireplaces or around mirrors, or in carefully arranged albums. He praises the custom of regularly looking at family albums since this helps evoke happy memories from the past. Stressing the value and significance attributed to photographs, he explains that people usually have only a few copies of their photographs made, which they exchange with friends and acquaintances on rare occasions.

Outside family and friend circles, Ahmet Mithat stresses, photographs should only be handed out upon solicitation, since pictures exchanged without request would damage the dignity of both parties. To prove that a photograph was indeed given by its owner, the print should be signed with an inscription like “a cordial souvenir” (yadigâr-ı muhibbane). However, while an inscription on the back of a photograph indicates modesty, writing on the front of a photograph is interpreted as “arrogance” (teshirî nefs). Also, a junior (“small man”) should first prove himself to his senior (“big man”) to be able to request his picture (Ahmet Mithat 2001 [1894]: 258).

According to Ahmet Mithat (2001 [1894]: 259–60), a man should never hand his picture to a woman unless requested to do so, nor should he ask a woman for a picture. If asked by a woman for his picture, a man should feel humbled by this request, and express his gratitude. When handing his picture to a woman, the man should not include a personal note on the photograph unless the woman requests it. A personal note, furthermore, should not imply anything that would embarrass the woman in front of those who might see the photograph. Conversely, a young woman should not give her picture to any young man other than her fiancé and should not keep any pictures of men other than male relatives or older male friends in her room (Ahmet Mithat 2001 [1894]: 259–60). Three decades later, in 1927, Abdullah Cevdet (in Meriç 2007: 502) gave similar advice to young women:
women may keep photographs in albums, use them in business cards and exchange them with friends, but should not hand out photographs of themselves as they please.

The intriguing case of the Şükru Bey series, which indicates that gifting or exchanging of photographs did not just happen in families, but also in a professional context, offers a good example of the use of photography in the early years of the Republic as a means of self-promotion and public appraisal. The circulated images can be considered both as mementos offered in genuine gestures of affection and as “tokens of self-promotion” (Hearn 2013: 25; Hudgins 2010) for reputable professionals who may have been trying to impress and compete with one another.

The fact that these men were trained and employed by Ziraat Bank gives some insight into these dynamics among a professional class that was being forged through the institutions established in the late Ottoman era, inherited by the Turkish Republic. Given their Westernized, higher class identities, it is likely that the men portrayed in the series were keen to follow the etiquette promoted by the likes of Ahmet Mithat and Abdullah Cevdet for exchanging photographs as a way to reinforce their social status and personal prestige. While some do write on the front of the portraits, contrary to what Ahmet Mithat advises, the language they use in their inscriptions, emphasizing admiration, appreciation and respect, reveals their eagerness and effort to impress each other with their fidelity, humility and kindness.

Presumably provided upon solicitation, the inscriptions in the series repeatedly refer to the cementing of relationships. In an attempt to create an “old boys’ network,” a group of men seek to make their colleague Şükru Bey remember them and, in some cases, to stand out among the group by activating personal memories of experiences they shared with him. Recollection is repeatedly anchored to shared activities in specific places, such as telling stories in school (Figure 6.22). By referencing shared membership of a community as alumni of the same course, the men who address Şükru Bey in the portraits try to mobilize their status as friends and former classmates within the newly built professional network of Ziraat Bank employees.

Looking at British photography, Nicole Hudgins (2010: 564) writes that the circulation of photographs in personal and professional networks served to cement a sense of community belonging as migration from villages to cities increased with the rise of educational institutions and office jobs in the nineteenth century. In the early years of the Turkish Republic, the Kemalist regime sought to establish a national infrastructure for administration, education and healthcare, which meant appointing thousands of government employees, bankers, educators and health personnel across the country. These servants of the Republic regularly sent studio portraits documenting the various phases of their personal and professional life to their families and friends.

With more job opportunities in cities, Turkish youth increasingly moved from rural to urban areas, leaving their parents behind in their hometown. Meanwhile, newly married couples progressively moved out of their family homes to build a new nuclear family elsewhere. Photographs were sent to relatives who lived elsewhere; soldiers (see, for instance, Figures 2.3 and 2.5) and students especially habitually mailed pictures to their families back home (Duben and Behar 2014). In some cases, photographs were used in lieu of postcards or letters, featuring longer inscriptions with notes like “Since I could not
write you a letter, I send you this card as a souvenir.” Apart from mailing photographs, family visits appear to have presented an opportune moment to exchange photographs, as suggested by common inscriptions like “I have come to see you.”

As Rose (2010: 64) suggests, “sending a photograph to relatives is precisely a practice that performs family.” Through the act of gifting, the photographs travel as mobile objects “dense not only with the presence of the people they picture but also with the trace of that person doing the sending” (Rose 2010: 64). In Turkey, exchanged family photographs allowed the idea of the modern Republican family to spread across the country. Gifting and exchanging family pictures, often accompanied by news from the giver/sender, helped to “make the home” by safeguarding the cohesion and togetherness of the family (Rose 2010). Used to cement family ties and record family history, the family portrait simultaneously functioned as a medium of class and national identity through which citizens sought to construct their distinctness and respectability (Campt 2012: 47).

Owing to practices of collection and exchange, vernacular photographs become objects with cumulative histories rather than static images that capture a singular moment (Berkin 2014: 50). What did Şükrü Bey’s colleagues share when they presented these studio portraits to him? What did they hope to share in the future? How might the photographs have facilitated this sharing? Beyond their common educational and professional history, the men in the Şükrü Bey series were all part of a turbulent historical moment during which they witnessed the transition from a 600-year-old empire to a nation-state following a decade of warfare. They helped the Kemalists build a new Turkish state by taking on various roles in the government sector, emerging as members of a much-needed Turkish bourgeoisie loyal to the regime.

The portraits in the series seem to fully align with the regime’s strategy of visual representation and to project an aspiration to national belonging and model citizenship. They adhere to the vision of a new modern secular educated Turkish self emerging from a Westernized Ottoman elite self. Through the exchange of these photographs in their professional circles, these men collectively perform the new nation state. The circulation of their portraits might have served as a way for these men to make sense of a new Republican identity, which they conformed to in order to carve out a life and a career for themselves in a new political system and a new homeland.

In this section, I have shown that the circulation of photographs through diverse and extensive networks in the early years of the Republic effectively contributed to the making of the modern Turkish identity and a collective national memory. Through gifting photographs, families, friends and colleagues cemented communal ties, seeking social acceptance and public appraisal. In the next section, I will study the relationship between photography and language, examining the role photographic inscriptions played in forging a new classed identity and social status among urban middle classes in the emerging Turkish nation.
Candid, Cordial and Courteous: Captions for Lifeless Shadows

In the construction of their desired self as an exemplary modern Turkish citizen, what role did the inscriptions play for the men in the Şükrü Bey series? What did they imply about photography’s role in generating memories? What was the purpose of marking oneself so insistently in others’ memories with a portrait and inscription? In this section, through the analysis of common patterns that emerge in inscriptions on photographs, some of which repeatedly appear in the Şükrü Bey series, I look at the ways in which such inscriptions were used to consolidate the image of the new urban middle-class citizen of the Republic. Furthermore, I will explore how these inscriptions contributed to making and circulating personal and collective memory, and what they tell us about the role of photography in everyday life in the 1920s and 1930s. To perform a comprehensive analysis of the significance of inscriptions, besides looking at the Şükrü Bey series, I will revisit some of the images studied in the previous chapters and also introduce a number of other examples from the Akkasah archive.

Batchen (2004: 41) writes that “[t]he addition of text to photographs was a common strategy used by those who wished to enhance the memorial power of the image. The inscription of signatures, for example, was a potent way to make a photograph more than a record of appearance; for a signature is the unique trace of a person’s hand, a proof of identity, an unequivocal statement that ‘I was there, and here is my mark.’” Similarly, inscriptions help personalize photography:

Even when prosaic in content, handwritten inscriptions suggest the voice of the writer, adding sound to the senses of touch and sight already engaged. This is particularly so when the inscription is in verse and thus demands to be read aloud so that we can enjoy its rhythms. (Batchen 2004: 47)

Inscriptions, then, serve as “performances through which photographs acquire meanings and are embedded in histories (Pinney 2003: 148). In the photographs in the Şükrü Bey series, professional men write to other professional men in an elaborate language that uses intricate Ottoman phrases, disclosing emotions like love, affection, sincerity, gratitude, fidelity (hakikat), frankness and loyalty (merbûtiyet). Because of the inscriptions’ dramatic tone, which relies heavily on clichés, it is hard to surmise the actual degree of the men’s friendship. Some of these men may have been closer to Şükrü than others, such as the Garbi Karaağaç muavin in Figure 6.14, who shared a room with him. Others may have known him only very briefly and superficially, but apparently still felt the need to address him in a sentimental style.

While the Şükrü Bey series stands out as an example of the circulation of photographs outside family circles, the inscriptions on the prints feature the same linguistic patterns and clichés used on vernacular photographs in general. In Figure 6.8 from 27 February 1927, for instance, the Bozkır (Konya) muavin writes:

To our brother Şükrü Bey, in order to remind you of the sincerity of our friendship in school, look at my shadow and do not forget me!
This note is emblematic of the expressions and phrasing used on many vernacular photographs in the 1920s and 1930s. In elegant handwriting, the Bozkır muavin addresses Şükrü Bey as “brother,” as do most of the men whose pictures are included in this series. This form of address constitutes a gesture of fraternal affinity even though the two men may barely have known each other. In other images, Şükrü Bey is referred to as “my precious” (Figure 6.1), “our respectable” (Figures 6.2 and 6.5) or “dearest” (Figure 6.20) brother, signaling an attempt to build a familial bond within a professional setting. At the same time, calling him “Şükrü Bey” (Mister Şükrü), a common form of address among colleagues, family and friends at the time, constitutes a gesture of respect.

Expressions emphasizing love and respect are ubiquitous in personal notes on photographs of the time, implying a classed rather than a gendered trend. These patterns are consistent between late Ottoman era and early Republican pictures, showing the importance of moral values such as love, respect, candidness, devotion, reverence and faithfulness in both eras. In virtually all inscriptions, the addressee is referred to with loving words like “my dear” (sevgili, canım, çok sevdiğim) (e.g. Figure 1.9 from 1929: “A souvenir for my dear uncle and Ms. Fahrünisa.”), “my beloved” (aziz, biricik), “esteemed” or “respected” (muhterem, hürmetli), “precious” (kıymetli, kıymettar) (e.g. Figure 1.7 from 1920: “A souvenir for our precious sisters and respectable brother in law.”) or “truehearted” (hakikatlı) (e.g. Figure 2.12 from 1934: “To my truehearted mother-in-law and father-in-law, a souvenir from us.”), regardless of the gender of the addresser and addressee.

Spouses, siblings, parents, children, uncles and aunts, friends and colleagues, teachers and students, as well as neighbors and acquaintances of different ages end their notes with “deep love and respect” (derin sevgi ve saygılar), “best regards” (ihtramat-i faika, üstün hürmetler), or “sincerity and love” (samimiyet ve muhabbet), expressed in a rather formal language, at times also wishing each other health and happiness (sihat ve saadet). In inscriptions among family members, it is common for younger ones to “kiss the hands” of the elderly as an expression of respect and for the elderly to “kiss the eyes” of the younger in a gesture of parental affection.

In Figure 6.8, as in many other images of the time, remembrance, nostalgia and reminiscence emerge as common themes for the man gifting his picture to Şükrü Bey. The muavin notably refers to his own image as a “shadow” (gölge, hayal). In photography notes of the early Republican era, the self’s image is often referred to as a faint (sönük, silik) shadow or a “lifeless body” (cansız beden, ruhsuz beden; also ruhsuz benzer, or “lifeless duplicate”) in a self-deprecating fashion (Figures 6.2, 6.7 and 6.8), which served to emphasize one’s modesty and the transience of life on earth. In some notes, the self-deprecation is accentuated by dramatic phrases like “Here is a dark face as opposed to your bright mind” or “Perhaps from time to time you glance at my pale face and remember me” (Figure 6.17). In others, a more cynical tone manifests through references to a “worthless” (kıymetsiz, degersiz) or faded (silik) memory (hattira), or to a photograph that is “not worthy of you” (size layık değil).

The inscriptions are geared towards generating a sense of nostalgia on the part of Şükrü Bey, who was clearly meant to look at these images and reminisce about a common happy
past. Accompanying the acknowledgment of the ephemerality of life, as suggested by the reference to “an immortal memory” (hatıra-yı ebedi, lâ-yemût hattra) of “a mortal life” in Figure 6.9, there is often a bittersweet reference to good old days spent together, regardless of their length (Figures 6.3, 6.4 and 6.13). These references encourage the addressee to remember, but also suggest that, without the material support of the portraits, memories will fade with time and moments spent together may be forgotten.

“Forgetting” is repeatedly mentioned as a sad reality of a transient life in inscriptions on photographs. However, the inscriptions also frequently invoke a glimmer of hope for the remembrance (hattılamak, tahattur etmek, yad etmek) of “the sincerity” (samimiyet) of a friendship (Figures 6.3, 6.8, 6.12, 6.19 and 6.21); or a sense of “deep fondness” (muhabbet, mavaddat) between people (Figure 6.15) and “precious moments” spent together (Figures 6.11 and 6.18). Typically, the giver wishes for the photograph to remind the recipient of “happy” (mesut) or “unforgettable” times enjoyed together. The photograph thus serves to counter the evanescence of memories, saving one from “the danger of being forgotten” as indicated in Figure 6.1. For Batchen (2004: 47), the insistence on an exchange of memories, asking the recipient to remember the giver, just as the giver remembers the recipient of the photograph, suggests that the photographs “are not really about remembering; they are instead dedicated to the fear of forgetting, or of being forgotten.”

In this light, it is relevant that the presented photograph is often referred to as a souvenir. For the photograph-as-a-souvenir, words like yadigâr (Figure 1.7), hattra (Figure 1.9, Figure 2.12), hattra-yı yadigâr, yadigâr-tı kıymettar (precious memory), armağan-ı ebedi or ebedi bir hattra (eternal gift) are commonly used. Since the word yadigâr is typically used in relation to a family heirloom (aile yadigârı), its usage in relation to photographs suggests the eminence attributed to them as part of family heritage.

Batchen (2004: 97) argues that “the act of remembering someone is surely also about the positioning of oneself, about the affirmation of one’s own place in time and space, about establishing oneself within a social and historical network of relationships.” In the series, the men urge Şükrü Bey to look at their picture as a memory-aid to help evoke “precious” and “valuable” (Figures 6.6, 6.11, 6.13 and 6.18) memories of the past. These men express their hope that Şükrü Bey will actively reach for their images in order to look at them, not only to be remembered as people who marked their presence in Şükrü’s life (Figures 6.2, 6.7 and 6.8) but also to evoke a joint past (Figures 6.6, 6.9, 6.13 and 6.22) and to facilitate a shared future. “Marking and making past experience visible,” these portraits are not simply linked to a “nostalgic ‘pastness’”; they are also about “the realization that the past will play a part in the future” (Edwards 2004: 35). By giving him their portraits, in the manner of a business card, these men hope to assure Şükrü Bey’s recognition and memory of them as competent, serious professionals of a certain milieu with a promising future. Simultaneously, the inscriptions addressing him allow Şükrü Bey to mark his importance in others’ lives and to assert his own status and identity within the elite social, cultural and political networks he was part of.

Significantly, different, sometimes contradictory ideas about photography and memory appear in the inscriptions. Some endorse photography’s function as enshrining memory in an “attempt to transcend the hard fact of death with the sweet promise of resurrection”
(Batchen 2004: 91), while others express a more cynical attitude by pointing to the ephemerality of the photographic prints. These attitudes about photography are bound up with attitudes about the bonds of collegiality or friendship, which, too, are seen by some as everlasting and by others as more fragile. Despite their seemingly conflicting takes on the relation between photography and memory, however, the inscriptions share a common desire for people to leave behind a legacy and to provide others with visual proof of their best selves.

Figures 6.26 & 6.27 A studio portrait of a woman, 12 July 1935. 9 x 14 cm. Courtesy of the Akkasah Center for Photography.

The poetic nature of some of the inscriptions illustrates how photographs served as a platform for exhibiting one’s intellectual sophistication. In Figure 6.27 from 1935, for instance, the inscriber addresses a woman named Nadiye, perhaps a sister, with the following dramatic words: “To lovely Nadiye, look at my self-confident joyful eyes, which invite you to the past in order for you to remember me in the faraway cities of the country. Life is held captive by a cruel force called evil. What is happiness, other than its sweet consolation?" 185 In Figure 6.26, a middle-class young woman with short hair, wearing a long dress reflective of 1930s fashion, poses for a studio portrait, hoping that her happy appearance will remind Nadiye, who seems to be living in or traveling to a

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faraway place in Turkey, of their shared joyful past. The dramatic tone of the inscription on the photograph’s back enhances the sense of longing that this young woman tries to convey and her rather pessimistic outlook towards life, which stands in stark contrast to her wide smile in the portrait. While Figure 6.27 presents a rare example of an idiosyncratic inscription, people generally resorted to clichéd expressions, including a popular verse that, with variations, recurrently appears on photographs from the 1920s to the 1960s: “If fate dissolves my body, keep this picture forever as a memory.”

Inscriptions, clichéd or otherwise, help us to identify some of the common functions and meanings ascribed to exchanging and gifting photographs. The salutations on the photographs reveal, for example, that the practice of exchanging photographs was most popular among the younger generation. Among family members, it was more common for the younger generation to gift their pictures to the older generation, including parents, parents-in-law, grandparents, uncles and aunts. However, the inscriptions also indicate that exchanges did occur in multiple directions: mothers and fathers gifted their portraits to their children, and spouses also exchanged portraits.

As the Şükrü Bey series shows, the exchanges did not only occur among family members; people also gifted their portraits to schoolmates, colleagues and acquaintances for various reasons, including self-promotion and a desire for public appraisal. Figure 6.28 from 11 April 1934, signed in Balıkesir, suggests that photographic prints were also gifted as expressions of gratitude. Here, an engineer named Hamdi presents his image, in which he is reclining in what appears to be a sickbed, to an acquaintance by the name of Hacı Şeref Kemal Bey. The long inscription suggests that Hacı Şeref Kemal Bey worked in the hotel where Hamdi was staying when he fell ill. Hacı Şeref Kemal Bey might have been the owner of the hotel, where Hamdi “found the warmth of a true family home.” Hamdi gifts this image to Hacı Şeref Kemal as a gesture of gratitude (hatıra-yı şükran) in the hope that the photograph “will forever carry the gratitude I have for the profound affinity and devotion as well as the infinite help and kindness” provided. The gifting of this dark, rather gloomy portrait constitutes an intriguing choice, as Hamdi presents a sick, tired self that is arguably far from his “best” appearance.

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186 In Turkish: “Eğer mahfederse felek cismımı o zaman yadigâr olsun ebediyen sakla resmımı.” In other variations: “Dünya bir değirmendir, döner döner, insanlar bir fenerdir, gün olur sonuç eger fani felek yok edorse ismini bir hatıra olarak saklayınız resmimi,” “Dünya bir gemidir, yoktur yolkeni, eğer felek yok edorse cismimi bir hatıra olarak sakla resmimi,” and “Devr-i felek mahvederse cismimi/ yadigâr kalmak üzere takdim ediyorum resmimi.”


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Given that the photographs in the Şükrü Bey series were taken before the alphabet change from Arabic to Latin letters in 1928, the notes on them are all in the Ottoman script. Besides the stylish handwriting and sophisticated vocabulary used in the inscriptions, the ability to write in the Ottoman script itself was an indicator of class. In 1923, the year the Republic was founded, the literacy rate was only 6% and the total number of students, from primary to higher education, constituted 3% of the population (Aydoğan 2009). During the 1923–1924 school year, there were only 23 high schools in
the country with 513 teachers and 1241 students (Önsoy 1991). In 1927, when modern Turkey’s first census recorded the population as numbering 13,650,000, the literacy rate was measured at 8.16% (Yılmaz 2013: 147). In the same year, 4,280 students were enrolled in 12 institutions of higher education across the country (Demirtaş 2013). By 1935, the literacy rate of the school age population reached 20.4% (31% male, 10.5% female) and by 1945 it was at 30.2% (43.7% male and 16.8% female) (Yılmaz 2013).

Consequently, the inscriptions on these studio photographs from the mid- to late 1920s hint at their circulation among an elite class that was educated in the institutions of the Ottoman Empire, which the Turkish Republic inherited and expanded. It is no coincidence that so many of the people I was able to track down on the basis of the handwritten notes on the photographs discussed in this study turned out to have been government administrators, military personnel or educators, whose number grew exponentially after 1923 with the establishment of hundreds of new educational institutions across the country.

Following the alphabet change, the Kemalist government initiated a mass education campaign, teaching the new letters in all schools as well as in the newly launched Millet Mektepleri (the Nation’s Schools established for adult citizens of all backgrounds). The issue of language, however, remained a key concern for the regime throughout the 1930s. Eager to promote Turkish as the unifying national language, the government implemented a series of strategies, including the formation of the Turkish Linguistic Society (TDK), the purification of Turkish, the Surname Law and the renaming of places. As Yılmaz (2013: 139) notes, by the early 1930s “the ability and willingness to speak Turkish” had become a prerequisite for being fully accepted as a Turkish citizen. The emphasis on learning Turkish intensified through government-funded initiatives like “Citizen, Speak Turkish!” (Vatandaş Türkçe Konuş!) campaigns, which led to harassment of, attacks on and even arrests of those who spoke another language (Çağaptay 2006; Bali 1999).

The ornate language used in photographic inscriptions fades away following the Turkish Language Reform, which aimed to build a modern Turkish language by removing Arabic and Farsi words, standardizing Turkish grammar and spelling, and constructing a new vocabulary inspired by the Turkic languages from Central Asia (Lewis 1999). In the 1930s, consequently, texts on photographs become noticeably shorter. Rich Ottoman Turkish expressions are gradually abandoned as people opt for simpler diction. Increasingly, photographs only feature basic information such as a date, location, name(s) or address(es), and signature. Hence, the increase in both the circulation of photographs

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188 Ten years later, in 1933–1934, the number of high schools had increased to 72 with around 9,560 students (Önsoy 1991).
189 In some Eastern provinces like Van the literacy rate was as low as 1.3 %, almost as low as the overall literacy rate of the Ottoman Empire in 1800 (Yılmaz 2013: 160).
190 The adoption of a new Turkish alphabet was declared on 1 November 1928. After 1 December 1928, all press, advertisements, street names, signs and subtitles for foreign films had to be in the new alphabet. As of 1 January 1929, all government offices, banks, associations and institutions were required to use the new letters. The public was allowed to use the old letters in their dealings with institutions until 1 June 1929. The law set June 1930 as the absolute deadline for all public and private transactions, including laws, to be written in the new letters (Yılmaz 2013: 145–146). The Turkish Language Association (TDK) was established in 1932 with the aim of conducting research on modern Turkish, marking the beginning of a language reform that intensified throughout the 1930s, under “Head Teacher” Atatürk’s direct influence.
and literacy rates happened at a time when inscriptions became more spartan and studio backgrounds increasingly showed an unassuming character.

As Schick (2014) points out, the Language Reform was designed not only to remove an old alphabet but also to replace a culture perceived as old-fashioned and undesirable with a new, modern one. This created a gap between the old generation, who grew up using the Arabic letters, and the new generation, who lost access to the written heritage produced in the Ottoman Turkish language. Some people who grew up in the Ottoman cultural environment never learned the new letters, “resulting in their functional or partial illiteracy for the rest of their lives” (Yılmaz 2013: 166). Conversely, banning Arabic letters in favor of Latin letters in all schools and Turkish publications meant that a written culture of over six centuries became oralized (Schick 2014: 28).

This ideological shift helps us to understand the disappearance of ornate Ottoman phrases from photographs by the 1930s. People are likely to have avoided the old script in order not to be associated with the old regime. Also, the new generation may simply not have been familiar with the intricacies of the Ottoman language due to the abruptness of the Language Reform.

Yılmaz (2013: 178) writes that “adult citizens who needed literacy for pragmatic reasons, such as maintaining or finding employment, learned the new alphabet quickly.” In the case of the Ziraat Bank employees, it is highly likely that these young government employees would have been eager to learn the new alphabet and adopt a new modern language to prove their loyalty to the regime, to maintain their professional and social status, and to cement their status as model citizens of the new Republic.

Nonetheless, the old script continues to appear in some photographic inscriptions up until the late 1940s and early 1950s, implying a certain resistance to the government-backed alphabet change not only among the older generation but also among younger Turks educated in the pre-1928 period. Yılmaz (2013: 178) explains that “people frequently distinguished between the public and private spheres, and the Ottoman script persisted in the latter.” The persistence of the Ottoman script in inscriptions may thus suggest that vernacular photographs were seen as part of the private sphere, where the Ottoman language and culture could still be performed to a limited degree. However, Yılmaz (2013: 177) notes that the Ottoman script long coexisted with the new alphabet even in the public sphere, including in government bureaucracy throughout the 1930s.

The government policy with regard to noncompliance was relatively accommodating since noncompliance was often understood as a personal struggle with changing habits and cultural identity rather than as a sign of ideological resistance or outright opposition to the regime (Yılmaz 2013: 163). Similarly, some citizens, “among them some nationalist intellectuals and politicians, saw no contradiction between their commitment to the Republic and their work to promote the principles, ideals and institutions of the Republic on the one hand, and their continuing use of the old letters on the other” (Yılmaz 2013: 173).

As this section has shown, inscriptions were central to the circulation patterns of photographs, contributing to memory-creation and identity-building processes among the new Turkish middle classes. Inscriptions reveal the diverse functions of photographs as effective modes of communication, at times used in lieu of letters, circulated among not
only families and friends, but also colleagues and acquaintances. With the transition from the Arabic to Latin alphabet, ornate Ottoman phrases were replaced by simpler diction, disclosing the effects of the language reform that resulted in the homogenization of Turkish as a modern national language. Inscriptions demonstrate the vernacularization and secularization patterns of the Turkish language that emerged in the 1930s and that would characterize the circulation of photographs until the digital era.

Conclusion

In this chapter, through the lens of a series of portraits given to one individual in the late 1920s, I have looked at the ways in which the circulation of vernacular photographs helped to construct and disseminate the image of the new Republican citizen. The portraits in the Şükrü Bey series suggest that a wide range of people adopted the culture of gifting and exchanging photographs outside immediate family circles. What is more, the practice of exchanging photographs contributed to the making and circulation of a model image of Turkish citizenship in the early years of the Republic, reinforcing new classed and gendered normativities for modern Turkish men and women who used photography as an opportunity for self-expression and self-promotion.

Rapid modernization also led to the rise of the nuclear family and the fragmentation of multi-generational family life, as the new regime worked hard to establish an administrative, educational and industrial infrastructure for which thousands of employees were appointed to various government positions across Turkey. Photographs, sometimes in lieu of letters, were regularly sent to relatives who lived in faraway places. As Edwards (2004: 35) puts it, “as objects of familial and community communication, the act of owning and cherishing the photograph as a trace of its subject was arguably as important as the image content itself.” To this, I have added an emphasis on the inscriptions, which constitute a central element in my analysis of the functions and meanings of exchanged photographs. Commonly used linguistic patterns and clichéd phrases in handwritten notes from the 1920s and 1930s signal the etiquette that emerged around the circulation of photographs among urban middle-class citizens. Photographs were exchanged and inscribed to make citizens appear respectable in the eyes of their family, colleagues and society at large. Through the inscriptions, they reinforce their desired selves, embracing cultural and social values like kindness, politeness, respect for the elderly, love for family, appreciation for friendships and admiration for their seniors.

Initially limited to an educated elite in the late Ottoman era, the circulation of photographs grew rapidly among the middle classes in the 1930s. At the same time, the language reform, which aimed to simplify the Turkish language, led to the disappearance of the intricate Ottoman expressions often used in photographic inscriptions by the mid-1930s, reflecting the regime’s success in implementing the policies that shaped the modern Turkish language. By the 1930s, the practice of inscribing photographs was no longer limited to the elite and became more widespread, making it less of a marker of proper citizenship than in the 1920s.