

## Who Was Ahmet Robenson?

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### Abstract

Surprisingly, little is known about the background and life of Ahmet Robenson, the celebrated Galatasaray sportsman and a founder of the Scouting movement in the Ottoman Empire. Much of what is known has become distorted or exaggerated as myths about Ahmet Robenson and his family have taken shape. Some accounts, including a story recounted by Ahmet Robenson himself, note that the Robensons were a family of English stock who converted to Islam, relocated to the Ottoman Empire, and established close ties with the Ottoman court. Others claim that Ahmet Robenson was the son of "Abdullah" Quilliam, the well-known Liverpool-based lawyer, who established one of the first mosques in Victorian England, and who became a close confidante of Sultan Abdülhamid II. Myths may have some element of truth, as in the case of the Robensons. What is clear, though, is that Ahmet Robenson's mother came from an impoverished family. There were unsubstantiated claims that Ahmet Robenson was a British spy, and in the 1920s hard-line Turkish nationalists frustrated his work. Representatives of the Turkish Hearths opposed his involvement with the YMCA, which promoted and sought to fund various social, cultural and educational projects in Ankara and Izmir. This probably forced Ahmet Robenson to abandon Turkey and emigrate to the US in 1929. His life in New York is not well-documented. He worked as a seller of oriental rugs, and in his later years was employed as a caretaker at the Lyndhurst estate in Tarrytown. Certain myths about Ahmet Robenson and his family are debunked, in part at least, in this article. Nevertheless, Ahmet Robenson was certainly a fascinating and complex character who contributed much to social life in the late Ottoman Empire and early Turkish republic.

**Key Words:** Galatasaray, Ottoman Empire, Turkey, Quilliam, Turkish Hearths, myth.

### 1. Introduction

A supporter of the Galatasaray football team would think that they knew the answer to the above question. Ahmet Robenson (also known as Ahmed Robenson) was one of the first goalkeepers to play for the team before the First World War, and he then briefly served as President of the Galatasaray Sports Club in 1925. He also played a key role in introducing basketball to the Ottoman Empire and helped popularise other sports such as tennis and field hockey. On the website of the Galatasaray Sports Club, Ahmet and his brother, Abdurrahman, are listed in a small group of individuals "whose names are engraved in Turkish sports history today".<sup>2</sup> While employed as a teacher of physical education at the Galatasaray High School, Ahmet, together with Abdurrahman, also helped launch the Scouting and Girl Guide movements in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, however, much is still unknown about Ahmet Robenson. And, apart from details of his contributions to sports and Scouting, a lot of what is reported about Ahmet Robenson's life is not accurate. It seems as if he suddenly disappears from the records after serving as President of the Galatasaray Sports Club. This would appear difficult to explain, given how he became a legend for Galatasaray, and given how stories of his early life and that of his family became, in effect, a part of the national fabric in Turkey.

What is generally known about Ahmet Robenson's life has been embellished and even fabricated by various commentators. There are fascinating stories about how he was raised by an English woman who had converted to Islam and had come to live in the Ottoman Empire, and how he and his brothers had fought in the First World War against the British and their allies. These are also timeless tales which can resonate across different generations and which

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<sup>2</sup> Galatasaray Sports Club, "Galatasaray: Story of our Foundation," accessed April 12, 2020, <https://www.galatasaray.org/en/s/galatasaray-spor-kulubu-1905/3> .

<sup>3</sup> For details of Ahmet Robenson's early life and his achievements in sports and Scouting, see my, *Whispers Across Continents: In Search of the Robinsons* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Amberley Publishing, 2019).

cast a favourable light on the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey. There is also some truth in them. However, there is also an opposing counter-narrative which throws suspicion on the activities of the Robenson family and their supposed loyalty to the Ottoman/Turkish cause. Questions have been raised over whether Ahmet Robenson, at one time, operated as a spy for the British government. Evidence suggests that hard-line Turkish nationalist opposition may have compelled Ahmet Robenson to abandon Turkey in 1929 and emigrate to the United States (US).

It is even more difficult to understand the life of Ahmet Robenson because of how he, in his later years, spun various stories about himself and his family which were obviously not true. Why did he feel the need to exaggerate the status and pedigree of his family? A case may be made that Ahmet Robenson depicted his family in such a way in order to secure a modicum of revenge for how he perceived himself and his relatives to have been unfairly treated in the past.

There is inevitably some speculation here, and certain questions about Ahmet Robenson may never be fully answered. Nevertheless, the aim of this article is to acquire a more accurate and better understanding of Ahmet Robenson. In my research, I have made use of my close ties with members of the Robenson family and I have been fortunate to be able to read some of Ahmet Robenson's personal correspondence. I have also made full use of census records in the UK and the US and consulted documents in the National Archives of the UK in London. The picture, though, remains far from complete. At times, I have had to acknowledge that family recollections of Ahmet Robenson may have been unintentionally distorted or exaggerated to fit in with or reinforce what have become certain myths about the Robensons. This article will partially bust some of the myths about Ahmet Robenson and his family which have been cultivated over the years by commentators and historians. Nevertheless, the life of Ahmet Robenson remains a fascinating one.

## 2. The Myth

Search for Ahmet Robenson on Google, and what immediately appears are entries in Wikipedia, and its Turkish version, Vikipedi. According to Wikipedia, Ahmet Robenson was born in Liverpool in 1886 and lived much of his life in Istanbul before dying in the US in 1968.<sup>4</sup> A little more detail is provided in Vikipedi, where it is noted that Ahmet Robenson's father served in the British army in India. After his conversion to Islam, his father contacted Sultan Abdülhamid II, came to the Ottoman Empire, and then served in the Ottoman military.<sup>5</sup> In reality, Ahmet Robenson was not born in Liverpool in 1886 and he spent a long period of his life living and working in the US. Most of the information about his father is wrong. Also inaccurate is an entry in the highly respected *İstanbul Ansiklopedisi*, which referred to Ahmet Robenson's father as "Sir Rhodes", who ostensibly married a Muslim Indian woman.<sup>6</sup>

A myth about the Robenson family has been handed down. The origins of this myth remain obscure. The story goes that Ahmet Robenson's English parents, named Spencer and Sarah, both decided to convert to Islam after witnessing the brutal treatment of the Muslim natives in India by the ruling British authorities. Spencer and Sarah adopted new names - Abdullah and Fatma - and they decided to relocate to Istanbul. Their three sons, now known as Yakup, Abdurrahman and Ahmet, volunteered to fight against the British in the First World War. Ahmet survived, but his two brothers were martyred. The tale of the Robensons apparently

<sup>4</sup> "Ahmet Robenson," accessed April 12, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmet\\_Robenson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmet_Robenson) .

<sup>5</sup> "Ahmet Robenson," accessed April 12, 2020, [https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmet\\_Robenson](https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmet_Robenson) .

<sup>6</sup> Cem Atabeyoğlu, "Ahmed Robenson," *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi, Cilt 1* (Istanbul: Kültür Bakanlığı ve Tarih Vakfı'nın Ortak Yayınıdır, 1993), 132.

demonstrated that not only ethnic Turks, but also people of English descent could be a part of Atatürk's Turkey because of their love and service to the homeland.<sup>7</sup> A version of this eye-catching story has been published in a children's comic strip booklet.<sup>8</sup> Other sources have noted that Ahmet Robenson's mother was actually known as "Lady Sarah".<sup>9</sup> Clearly, the story of a family of very high pedigree deciding to convert to Islam and choosing to abandon the British Empire to live in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey would be of considerable propaganda value to Turkish nationalists.

Myths are not necessarily judged on their truth, but rather on the value of their memory and of their possible symbolic and metaphorical importance. They involve stories of significant events and celebrated individuals which have been passed down from generation to generation.<sup>10</sup> Myths may help bolster nationalism and national identity.<sup>11</sup> It can be argued that myths are in part based on truth, but they have been worked upon and remoulded by governments or other institutions. Obviously, the story of the Robensons provides a rich source of materials for Turkish officials to make use of if they so wished.

According to the UK census records, Ahmet Robenson was actually born and baptised as Peele (or Peel) Harold Robinson in Kalimpong in British-ruled India in May 1889. His father, Spencer Robinson, was originally a tenant farmer from East Keal in Lincolnshire who had migrated to India in the 1870s after the death of his first wife. In Bengal, Spencer worked as a tea planter and a wool trader, and was employed for a time to help manage the newly constructed Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. Spencer did not serve in the British military in India, but he did make use of his knowledge of the territory to give advice and help supply provisions for the British Expeditionary Force which fought against the Tibetans in Sikkim in 1888. Spencer Robinson died in Kalimpong in 1889, six months after the birth of Peele (Ahmet).

Peele's mother, Hannah, came from very humble origins. Hannah Rodda was raised in the slums of London's impoverished East End in the 1850s. She worked as a domestic servant before somehow meeting and then marrying Spencer in England in 1880. Following Spencer's death, Hannah returned to England from India bringing her children with her – at the time, one daughter and four boys. Hannah converted to Islam after meeting "Dr Gholab Shah", a supposed famous Afghan warlord. The couple were married in Liverpool in one of England's first mosques, in 1891, and then moved to Istanbul. Hannah and her children adopted new names after becoming Muslims. The marriage was a disaster. Hannah's husband was an imposter who had a reputation for marrying women for their money. The plight of Fatma (ie Hannah) attracted the interest of Sultan Abdülhamid II. She secured a divorce, received financial support from the Sultan, and eventually married Ahmed Bahri, one of the Sultan's rising military officers, with whom she had another child - Fevzi. Ahmet, together with his brothers, Yakup and Abdurrahman, were taken under the wing of Mustafa Zeki Pasha, one of the Sultan's chief military advisers, and they were provided free education at the prestigious

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<sup>7</sup> Ali Sami Alkış, *Yedi Kandilli Avize: Çanakkale'de Şehit Düşen Futbolcular* (Istanbul: Yarımada Yayınları, 2008), 53-64.

<sup>8</sup> *Galatasaraylı Hasnun Galip ve Robensonlar'ın Çanakkale Destanı* (Mavi Medya Yayıncılık, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Rifat N. Bali, *The Saga of a Friendship: Asa Kent Jennings and the American Friends of Turkey* (Istanbul: Libra Kitapçılık ve Yayıncılık, 2009), 175.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Rose, "Government and Advertising and the Creation of National Myths: The Canadian Case," *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing* 8, no.2 (2003): 154.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9.

Kuleli military school. Later, the brothers were transferred to the Galatasaray High School. Another brother of Ahmet from his mother's first marriage, Abdül Kadir, died in his infancy.

After graduating, Ahmet Robenson ("Robenson" being the Turkified version of the surname, "Robinson") worked at Galatasaray High School, and also at the Vefa School in Istanbul, as an instructor of physical education. Various anecdotes from former students reveal that he was a highly popular teacher who bonded well with his pupils. Apparently, over half of the period of his class would be taken up with Ahmet Robenson telling comic stories about sporting life in England and in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>12</sup> Students could not work out if their teacher was English or Turkish.<sup>13</sup>

Established by Ahmet and Abdurrahman Robenson in 1911 in Istanbul, the Scouting movement was initially frowned upon by the Ottoman authorities. It was suspected that the movement could be used as a vehicle to indoctrinate the Ottoman youth with Christian values.<sup>14</sup> These concerns were quickly dispelled and the potential value of Scouting realised in the wake of the humiliating military defeats of the Ottoman Empire in north Africa and in the Balkans. Seizing power in a coup in January 1913, when it appeared that the Ottoman government was about to abandon Edirne to the Bulgarians, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) swiftly purged the armed forces and introduced a more centralised system of education. A project of Turkification was launched in an attempt to boost morale. The Turkish Hearths, organised by a group of intellectuals, and formally established in 1912, promoted Turkish nationalism and Pan-Turkism. The CUP set up the Turkish Strength Association to improve the physical education of the youth, and thereby bolster the fighting effectiveness of the Ottoman armed forces. The argument was made that the Turkish race was naturally strong and robust.<sup>15</sup> These newly founded institutions coordinated their work with the Scouting movement. Boy Scouts became members of the Turkish Strength Association upon reaching the age of seventeen.<sup>16</sup>

How did the Robenson brothers react to this turn of events? It seemed that they did not complain about the CUP effectively co-opting the Scouting movement. The Robenson family appeared to be adept at adopting to rapidly changing circumstances in the Ottoman Empire. For example, their previous very close connections with the regime of Abdülhamid II did not seem to work against them after the deposition of the Sultan in 1909 in the wake of the upheavals following the Young Turk Revolution of 1908. In a photograph taken in December 1915, Ahmet Robenson is present in his full Scout's uniform posing with military officers (including Mustafa Kemal, the later founder of the Republic of Turkey) and members of the General Inspectorate of the Ottoman Strength League – the successor organisation to the Turkish Strength Association.<sup>17</sup> This should not be surprising. For example, the Boy Scouts in the UK also played a useful supporting role in the war effort. After defeat in the First Balkan War, the Turkification policy of the CUP was primarily aimed against the Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire who had been largely managing the economy. Coming from a family whose

<sup>12</sup> Suat Aray, *Bir Galatasaraylımın Hatıraları* (Ankara: İnkılap Kitabevi, 1959), 78.

<sup>13</sup> İ. Hakkı Sunata, *İstibdattan Meşrutiyete Çocukluktan Gençliğe* (Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2006), 331.

<sup>14</sup> Zafer Toprak, "Meşrutiyet ve Mütareke Yıllarında Türkiye'de İzcilik," *Toplumsal Tarih* 52 (April 1998): 15.

<sup>15</sup> Bora Isyar, "The Origins of Turkish Republican Citizenship: The Birth of Race," *Nations and Nationalism* 11, no.3 (2005): 355-56.

<sup>16</sup> Handan Nezir Atameşe, *The Birth of Modern Turkey: The Ottoman Military and the March to World War One* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 170.

<sup>17</sup> "Ata ve Ahmet Robenson," accessed April 16, 2020, [www.girgin.org/galatasaray-lisesi-ve-spor-kulubunden-kesitler/ata-ve-ahmet-robenson/](http://www.girgin.org/galatasaray-lisesi-ve-spor-kulubunden-kesitler/ata-ve-ahmet-robenson/).

mother had converted to Islam, and who had then married an officer in the Ottoman army, Ahmet Robenson appeared to be safe from possible attacks by Turkish nationalists.

### **3. The Purported Son of "Abdullah" Quilliam**

William Henry "Abdullah" Quilliam was a solicitor who converted to Islam and who by 1889 had set up one of the first functioning mosques in Victorian England in Liverpool. Sultan Abdülhamid II was soon attracted to Quilliam's work and close ties between the two developed. In 1894, the Sultan appointed Quilliam as his personal representative in the UK – the Sheikh al-Islam of Britain. Regularly received by Abdülhamid, Quilliam attempted to further relations between Britain and the Ottoman Empire. However, in 1908 Quilliam was accused of forging evidence in a notorious divorce case in favour of his client, Mrs Martha May Thompson. A discredited Quilliam was struck off the Rolls, and the disgraced lawyer left England and spent a period of time in the Ottoman Empire. In his absence, activities at the mosque in Liverpool soon came to an end.

Another myth has been cultivated with regard to Quilliam and Ahmet Robenson. The story goes that Ahmet, Abdurrahman, and Yakup were the sons of Quilliam, who had had a relationship with Hannah/Fatma. This line of argument, for example, has been pushed by the Turkish historian, Melih Şabanoğlu, and is evidently based on documents found in the Ottoman Archives. Challenging the official history of the Galatasaray Sports Club, Şabanoğlu noted that Quilliam, on his final visit to Istanbul, left his partner and three sons who would become Ottoman citizens.<sup>18</sup> No mention is made of Maud (Adile), the daughter of Spencer and Hannah Robinson. In the Ottoman Archives, there is a reference to Yakup being the son of "Abdullah Gevilyan" (ie Quilliam). This is to be found in a report which stated that Yakup was executed by the Ottoman authorities in December 1916 because he had committed treason by passing on intelligence to the British.<sup>19</sup> This report challenges the account of the Galatasaray Sports Club, which claims that Yakup was martyred while fighting the British in the Sinai Desert.

Clearly, Hannah/Fatma and Quilliam did know one another. Quilliam, himself, may have officiated at the wedding of Hannah in the mosque in Liverpool in November 1891. He may also have earlier encouraged Hannah to convert to Islam. With her marriage in tatters, Hannah/Fatma made use of her connection to Quilliam. In a pleading letter in June 1892 addressed to the Grand Vizier, Ahmed Cevat Pasha, appealing for support from the Sultan, Hannah/Fatma mentioned that she had ties with Quilliam.<sup>20</sup> The Liverpool lawyer did have a reputation as a womaniser and so it is quite possible that Quilliam may have had a relationship with Hannah/Fatma. However, the evidence clearly indicates that Quilliam was not the father of the Robenson brothers. The boys were born in India in the 1880s. Quilliam never travelled to India.

This myth associating the Robensons with Quilliam has not gained as much traction as the official storyline of the Galatasaray Sports Club. However, the Robenson-Quilliam linkage could be used by an Islamist government in Turkey, for example, to bolster the religious credentials of Ahmet Robenson. The current administration of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) appears to be taking an increased interest in the life of Quilliam. A recent glowing

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<sup>18</sup> Melih Şabanoğlu, "Sütlü Kahve Renginde..." accessed April 16, 2020, [www.iskenderbaydar.com/galatasarayli-muttalib/](http://www.iskenderbaydar.com/galatasarayli-muttalib/).

<sup>19</sup> Celil Bozkurt, "I. Dünya Savaşı'nda Filistin Suriye Cephesi'nde Nili Casusluk Örgütünün Faaliyetleri," *Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Dergisi* 30, no.88 (March 2014): 108.

<sup>20</sup> A. Ebru Akcasu, "Migrants to Citizens: An Evaluation of the Expansionist Features of Hamidian Ottomanism, 1876-1909," *Die Welt des Islams* 56, nos.3-4 (2016): 411.

report in the state-run *Anadolu Ajansı* has noted how Quilliam, with his charismatic oratory, defended Islam in Victorian Britain.<sup>21</sup>

However, the Robenson-Quilliam connection would need to be handled with caution. This is because there is evidence which indicates that Mrs Martha May Thompson, the woman directly involved in the 1908 divorce case, was at one time engaged to Ahmet Robenson. A letter, dated November 6, 1917, is in the UK National Archives, in which Martha May makes inquiries to the British Foreign Office with regard to the whereabouts of her fiancé, "Ahmed Robinson Bey". The letter is full of details which demonstrate that Martha May was fully acquainted with the Robensons.<sup>22</sup> We may never know if Martha May was, indeed, engaged to Ahmet. There are rumours, though, that Martha May was in Istanbul with Quilliam at the time when the divorce case was collapsing.<sup>23</sup> It is quite possible, therefore, given Quilliam's ties with the Robensons, that Martha May could have been a guest of Hannah/Fatma where she would have been introduced to Ahmet. Martha May worked as an assistant in a tobacco stall in a railway station in Liverpool. Presumably, she had never previously ventured abroad. Staying with the Robensons would have made Martha May's time in Istanbul a more comfortable one. Certainly, by the time of the national census in the UK in 1911, Martha May had returned to Liverpool.

#### 4. The Foreigner

There is a well-known saying in Turkey: "The only friend a Turk has is another Turk". This expression may have originated at the time of the Balkan Wars when the beleaguered Turks of the Ottoman Empire were confronted by nationalists of many sorts. These included Albanian nationalists who were Muslim. In the face of this widespread opposition, the CUP would decide to downplay the importance of Islam and stress more the significance of Turkism. The attempted dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire by the victorious powers at the end of the First World War at the conference in Sevres, would have heightened the feeling that outsiders were determined to crush the Turks. The suspicion in Turkey, today, of the activities of foreigners, and the tendency for many Turks to believe in certain international conspiracy theories directed against Turkey's interests, may be traced back to events immediately before and after the First World War. The above-quoted phrase, though, leads to another question - Who, exactly, is a Turk?

The civic form of nationalism espoused in the first years of the Republic of Turkey, in which Turks were deemed to be inhabitants and citizens of Turkey, irrespective of their race or religion, would be increasingly challenged in the late 1920s. The revived Turkish Hearths played here a prominent role, as officials in the embryonic Republic of Turkey sought to consolidate the regime by appealing more and more to Turkishness. The First General Congress of the Turkish Hearths in 1924 appeared to favour cultural over racist criteria when determining who could become a member of the Turkish Hearths. Membership was open to those who were Turkish by descent, or to individuals who had culturally embraced "Turkish aspirations and

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<sup>21</sup> Bekir Aydoğan and Faruk Zorlu, "Şeyh Abdullah Quilliam: Britanya'da İslam'ı Savunan İngiliz-Müslüman," April 11, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/kultur-sanat/seyh-abdullah-quilliam-britanya-da-islam-i-savunan-ingiliz-musluman-/1800949>.

<sup>22</sup> The National Archives (TNA), Kew, "Message of Mrs M.M. Thompson to her Fiancé – Ahmed Robinson Bey," November 6, 1917, FO383/345.

<sup>23</sup> Ron Geaves, *Islam in Victorian Britain: The Life and Times of Abdullah Quilliam* (Markfield, Leics.: Kube Publishing, 2013), 258.

feelings" and who had demonstrated "their faithfulness to Turkishness".<sup>24</sup> Turkey's first prime minister, İsmet İnönü, himself a member of the Turkish Hearths, declared in 1925 that there was an "immediate duty" to ensure that all those who lived in the Turkish fatherland were Turks, and that minorities "opposing Turks and Turkism" should be cast aside.<sup>25</sup> The Turkish language became increasingly important. The "Citizens Speak Turkish" campaign was launched in April 1927. It seemed that an individual who was Muslim, who supported Turkish culture, and who had a proficient knowledge of the Turkish language, would be accepted as a Turk. But, these criteria soon threatened to be superseded, as more emphasis was given to the importance of race. In this context, myths about the origins of the Turks in Central Asia would take hold as officials sought to construct a homogenous Turkish nation.

The post-First World War period in the late Ottoman Empire and early Turkish Republic would be a difficult time for Ahmet Robenson. He had appeared to benefit earlier from his conversion to Islam together with his mother, and his services to sports and Scouting had been appreciated by the authorities. He was fluent in Ottoman Turkish. Letters he wrote to his brothers in the First World War demonstrated a masterly command of the language. Nevertheless, he was of English descent. In the eyes of hard-line Turkish nationalists, convinced of the importance of blood and race, Ahmet Robenson would always be a foreigner. This was in spite of the fact that in the war Ahmet Robenson had fought against Britain and its allies by serving as a sledge instructor for the Ottoman Third Army on the Russian front.<sup>26</sup>

There was a suspicion that Ahmet Robenson worked as a spy for the British in the months immediately following the end of the First World War. In 1919, he was employed as a translator and interpreter for the Kars Islamic Council, which would later form the government of the short-lived South West Caucasus Democratic Republic. Ahmet Robenson participated in high-level negotiations with the occupying British forces in the Caucasus. Concerns were raised with regard to correspondence between Ahmet Robenson and his family about the future of occupied Istanbul and its possible partition or transformation to an international city. This captured the attention of Kazım Karabekir, the then commander of Turkish nationalist forces in the Caucasus. Karabekir pondered whether Ahmet Robenson and his family were British spies and in a telegraph, dated August 24, 1919, he requested the military authorities to begin an investigation into the Robensons.<sup>27</sup> Ironically, at the same time, the British forces in the Caucasus suspected that Ahmet Robenson was an Ottoman agent.<sup>28</sup> If Yakup Robenson had, indeed, been executed earlier for treason, the loyalties of the Robensons may have been seriously questioned. However, there is no evidence that Ahmet Robenson's life in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey in the 1920s was directly hindered by lingering suspicions that he may have previously worked as a British spy.

While in Kars, Ahmet Robenson met Nina Yankovski, a Polish woman born in Grodno who worked with the Kars-based government. The two married but would have no children. By the early 1920s, Ahmet Robenson was employed by the Beyoğlu branch of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) as the head of physical education. He would maintain a keen

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<sup>24</sup> Sibel Özbudun Demirer, "Anthropology as a Nation-building Rhetoric: The Shaping of Turkish Anthropology (from 1850s to 1940s)," *Dialect Anthropology* 35 (2011): 123-24.

<sup>25</sup> Banu Turnaoğlu, *The Formation of Turkish Republicanism* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), 248.

<sup>26</sup> Murat Cihan Yıldız, "Strengthening Male Bodies and Building Robust Communities: Physical Culture in the Late Ottoman Empire" (PhD diss., University of California, 2015), 67.

<sup>27</sup> Kazım Karabekir, *İstiklal Harbimiz*, Cilt 1 (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 2010), 355.

<sup>28</sup> TNA, Kew, "G.H.Q. General Staff – Intelligence – no.3640 'I' – Report on the Self-Styled 'SW Caucasus State'," FO371/3658.

interest in sports and played an instrumental role in the construction of the Taksim stadium in the centre of Istanbul. This was the first proper sports stadium built in the Ottoman Empire. Ahmet Robenson worked together with the American, Asa Jennings, a prominent local representative of the YMCA, to coordinate various educational, social and cultural projects in Ankara and Izmir. However, in his activities, Ahmet Robenson was repeatedly frustrated by opposition from Turkish nationalists.

"Mr P.H. Robinson" was a secretary of the committee which made preparations for the Istanbul Games. These "Mini-Olympics" were to be held to coincide with the official opening of the Taksim Stadium in June 1922. But, at the last minute, Turkish sports clubs decided to boycott the Istanbul Games. Only the Kadıköy Union Club confirmed their participation.<sup>29</sup> Other Turkish sports clubs had not been happy at preparatory meetings being held in the office of the YMCA at Beyoğlu, given the organisation's Christian and American links. They also objected to the invitations extended to athletes from the occupying forces and from the local Jewish, Greek and Armenian communities.<sup>30</sup>

The Turkish Hearths opposed the involvement of the YMCA in the funding and planning for the construction of a building in Ankara which would offer social, cultural and physical educational programmes. This was intended to be, in effect, the flagship project for an envisaged Turkish-American Friendship Association. Ahmet Robenson served as a translator and an intermediary for Asa Jennings in talks with Turkish officials, including negotiations with Hamdullah Suphi Tanrıöver, the education minister and a long-time president of the Turkish Hearths. In spite of attempted mediation by Ahmet Robenson, the negotiations collapsed in 1926, although a facility would later be built in Ankara by the Americans without the involvement of the YMCA.<sup>31</sup>

Representatives of the Turkish Hearths also obstructed work on the YMCA-backed Smyrna Welfare Council Project, which aimed to establish a comprehensive social welfare programme as part of plans to rebuild and modernise Izmir. Ahmet Robenson worked energetically as head of the Council's Physical Education Committee, and was responsible for the construction of the first public playground in Turkey. However, the work of the Council came to an abrupt end in 1928 as local members of the Turkish Hearths objected to plans to transform the Council into a fully-fledged association. Ahmet Robenson, himself, was personally criticised for printing and distributing leaflets in Turkish and French to promote a public health campaign for the children in Izmir to be provided with clean milk. A furious Ahmet Robenson responded by declaring that he was the only person in 1908 "to take a brush and paint in my hands and go out in Constantinople to paint over foreign languages and write 'here is Turkey, write in Turkish'".<sup>32</sup>

Continuing opposition from hard-line Turkish nationalists may well have prompted Ahmet Robenson to decide to abandon Turkey and emigrate to the US in 1929. Ahmet Robenson had worked together with the Turkish Hearths before the First World War. However, the political environment in the 1920s in Turkey was different. Views on race were gaining more publicity and support, and "non-Turks" were regarded with increased hostility. In practice, the supporters of civic nationalism receded into the background as the sponsors of theories of Turkish race became more emboldened. It must have been exceedingly difficult for

<sup>29</sup> Zafer Toprak, "Taksim Stadında Mini-Olimpiyat, 1922," *Toplumsal Tarih* 4 (April 1994): 17-18.

<sup>30</sup> Mehmet Yüce, *Ale'l-ıtlak Baldırı Çıplak: Hatırat, Makalat, Mulakat* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayıncılık, 2018), 241.

<sup>31</sup> Bali, *The Saga*, 178-81.

<sup>32</sup> Bali, *The Saga*, 227.

Ahmet Robenson to leave Turkey with his wife. Letters reveal that he had a particularly close relationship with his aging mother. Hannah/Fatma had lived together with her son and daughter-in-law in Izmir. Leaving his mother behind and departing for New York, Ahmet Robenson would commence a new and less well-known phase in his life in the US.

## 5. In the US

Many people in Turkey are unaware of the details of Ahmet Robenson's life in the US. This latter period of his life would have no direct relevance for the myths which evolved around Ahmet Robenson and his family. Indeed, closer attention to his career after his arrival in New York would, perhaps, partly tarnish the carefully constructed depiction of the sporting legend that is and was Ahmet Robenson. He lived with his wife in downtown Manhattan and then in Tarrytown by the banks of the Hudson River for over thirty-five years. Working from home as a seller of oriental rugs, he apparently suffered financial difficulties as his business partner went bankrupt. Ahmet Robenson had no previous experience in this line of work, and much of the market in New York at that time was dominated by carpet sellers from Armenia. According to family members, Ahmet Robenson may then have owned and operated gas stations in the New York area. Life was difficult, and the Robensons had to make do living in rented accommodation. However, by 1956, Ahmet Robenson was employed as a caretaker and groundskeeper on the famous Lyndhurst estate in Tarrytown. At that time, the mansion and grounds were owned by the socialite, Anna Gould, the daughter of the notorious "robber baron", Jay Gould. Ahmet Robenson may have secured this position through his past work with the YMCA. The previous owner of the estate, Anna's sister, Helen, had been a generous benefactor of the YMCA.

One intriguing and puzzling aspect of Ahmet Robenson's life in the US, was his use of different names in official records. In the censuses of 1930 and 1940, not surprisingly he is listed as "Ahmet Robinson" and "Ahmed Robinson" respectively. In his draft registration card for the Second World War, as the American authorities took stock of the manpower resources available in the US for the war effort, he is referred to as "Ahmet Abdullah Robinson". However, on the record, his birth details are given as born on February 23, 1884, in Kurseong in India. These details were actually those of his older brother, Yakup, who was baptised Spencer John Bernard Robinson. Later, in January 1956, when Ahmet Robenson applied to be naturalised and become a US citizen, he again gave the 1884 birth details and referred to himself as Spencer John Bernard Robinson. When working at Lyndhurst, Ahmet Robenson was known as Mr Spencer Robinson. A Spencer Robinson – ie Ahmet Robenson - died in Tarrytown on 3 October 1965. It is not clear why Ahmet Robenson chose to adopt his brother's name instead of using his own birth name.

More controversially, in his final years, Ahmet Robenson presented misleading and contradictory accounts of his earlier life. Only weeks before his death, a correspondent from the Turkish publication, *Hayat*, encountered Ahmet Robenson by chance at the Lyndhurst estate. In an interview he gave, Ahmet Robenson explained how he came from a family which had given England prime ministers, and that he was connected to Cecil Rhodes, the wealthy businessman and promoter of the British Empire. The close connection between the surnames "Rhodes" and "Rodda" should here be noted, and the reference in the *İstanbul Ansiklopesi* to "Sir Rhodes" should be recalled. Ahmet Robenson continued to describe how his mother came from a family which was famous in the fields of art, education and literature. In reality, his mother was the grand-daughter of a bricklayer from Bethnal Green, a poor neighbourhood of London, and the daughter of a humble seaman from Cornwall. Ahmet Robenson went on to recount how he was received at the palace by the Sultan who had taken a personal interest in

the family.<sup>33</sup> This part of his reminiscences may well have been true. Why, in his old age, would Ahmet Robenson have felt the need to spin such a story? Perhaps this was one way for him to have a measure of revenge for the way that he and his family had been treated in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey after the First World War? He would have known that his story would have aroused considerable interest among the Turkish readers of *Hayat*. And, who would have been able to dispute his account? This depiction of his family would have served to reinforce the myth of Ahmet Robenson and the Robensons.

I have learned a little more about Ahmet Robenson's life in Tarrytown. Richard Miller is the former official historian of the village. When he was a student in the early 1960s, Miller helped catalogue the books at the Lyndhurst estate after the death of Anna Gould. This was immediately before the estate became a national museum. Ahmet Robenson was still working on the property at the time and Miller bumped into him on several occasions. According to Miller, Mr Robenson would always make time to talk to him. Miller recalled how "Spencer Robinson" was "always soft spoken" and he was "a true gentleman".<sup>34</sup> Ray Phillips, at the time, was a young doctor who made house calls on "Spencer Robinson". Ahmet Robenson was suffering from cancer of the lung and knew that he was dying. In spite of this, Phillips recalls how Ahmet Robenson was very gracious and was more concerned about the future well-being of his wife who had developed serious mental health issues. Ahmet Robenson was determined to ensure that after his death the managers of the Lyndhurst estate would guarantee that Nina would continue to receive proper medical treatment.<sup>35</sup>

Most fascinating of all were the conversations Dr Phillips had with Ahmet Robenson. "Spencer" had supposedly been the wealthy owner of a country estate in England. According to the story Ahmet Robenson recounted, he had lost almost all of his money after the Second World War when the British government imposed stringent tax measures on holders of substantial landed property. Almost overnight, he moved, as it were, from "Upstairs to Downstairs". Because he had only known the life of a country gentleman, the only job he then felt capable of doing was to work as a butler in the employ of another rich property owner. Hence, "Spencer" had taken up work on the Lyndhurst estate. In this particular narrative spun by Ahmet Robenson, there was no mention at all of his life in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey and no reference to his sporting successes. Perhaps, we may never know why Ahmet Robenson had decided to present himself as an English country gentleman who had fallen on harsh times.

## 6. Conclusion

So, who was the real Ahmet Robenson, or Peele Harold Robinson? There are many gaps in the narrative which remain to be explored and a number of questions which are still to be answered. Why, for instance, did Ahmet Robenson decide to emigrate to the US rather than relocate to England where he had relatives with whom he could stay? And, was he actually engaged to Mrs Martha May Thompson? There is a lot of misinformation about the life of Ahmet Robenson, and Ahmet Robenson himself was partly responsible for this. Nevertheless, it has been possible to establish a clearer picture of his family background and to learn a little more about his later life.

Certain myths associated with the Robenson family and Ahmet Robenson have been debunked to some extent, but, as with all myths arguably, there are elements of truth in the way that the Robensons have been depicted. The story of the Robenson family and Ahmet Robenson

<sup>33</sup> Sara Korle, "Ahmet Robenson'u New York'ta buldum!" *Hayat*, 26, June 24, 1965, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Personal correspondence with Richard Miller.

<sup>35</sup> Personal correspondence with Dr Ray Phillips.

is a rich and multi-coloured one. Kemalists and Islamists, as well as football and basketball fans, for example, may each be attracted to parts of the different narratives of Ahmet Robenson's life which have evolved or been constructed.

Undoubtedly, Ahmet Robenson was a great sportsman, and he played a crucial role in the development of Scouting in Turkey. An organiser and a go-getter, he appeared to be at ease mixing with high-level military officers and prominent officials and politicians. A gentle and gracious man, he was also a devoted husband and son. Although Ahmet Robenson achieved much in his life, he could have achieved considerably more under different circumstances. In effect, his career was cut off at its prime, and it would not have been surprising if, in his later years, he harboured a degree of resentment with the way his life had unfolded.

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