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Obituary

Colonel Dr. Zeynep Karaosmanoğlu: A trailblazer in Turkish orthopedics and traumatology

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On June 21, 2024, the Turkish orthopedics and traumatology community bid farewell to one of its most respected and trailblazing figures, Colonel Dr. Zeynep Karaosmanoğlu (née Mirasbay). As a pioneer, she not only left an indelible mark on the field but also paved the way for future generations of orthopedic surgeons. Her journey was defined by immense courage, resilience, and unwavering dedication to her profession, which she nurtured during a transformative period in Turkish orthopedics and traumatology.

Born in Crimea in 1937 as Zeynep Mirasbay, her early life was marked by hardship. She was only 5 years old when she and her family, like many Crimean Tatars, fled from Crimea in 1942 during World War II, spending 2 years in a refugee camp in Landeck, Austria. This challenging experience profoundly shaped her character, instilling the strength and perseverance that would define her future career in medicine. Her early education and worldview were greatly influenced by the renowned historian İlber Ortaylı's mother and father, who served as her English and history teachers during this period. After the war, the Mirasbay family immigrated to Türkiye in 1948, first settling in Ankara and later in Eskişehir, where Zeynep attended Eskişehir High School.[1]

Undeterred by the financial challenges her family faced, Zeynep's resolve to pursue a career in medicine remained unshaken. She took the bold step of enrolling in Istanbul University's Military Medical Academy, where she received a full scholarship. This decision was a testament to her devotion to becoming a physician, even if it meant enduring the rigorous demands of a military education.

Graduating in 1961, Dr. Karaosmanoğlu always harbored a deep interest in surgery and aspired to specialize in the field. At that time in Türkiye, general surgeons were responsible for a wide range of procedures, from fractures to brain and lung surgeries, with traumatology only becoming formally integrated with orthopedics in later years.[2] Even as a medical student, her passion for surgery was evident, as she interned for an extended period at Eskişehir Air Hospital, fueled by the joy that surgery brought her. By the time she graduated, she had gained experience under the guidance of Dr. Asım Kaplan to perform appendectomies and hernia surgeries independently.

In 1961, after finishing medical school, she was required to complete a 1-year internship at Gülhane Military Hospital. During this time, she married Dr. İhsan Karaosmanoğlu, a general surgeon, and took his surname. Though she initially sought to pursue general surgery, there were significant barriers and discouragement for women entering surgical specialties at the time. Additionally, because her husband was also a general surgeon, military regulations prevented spouses from being assigned to the same city if they shared the same specialty. While pursuing a career in surgery, she applied for a residency in the Orthopedics and Pediatric Surgery Department at Gülhane Military Medical Academy (GATA), which had recently been established in 1961 by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rıdvan Ege, who had completed his specialization in orthopedics and pediatric surgery in 1959 and later in traumatology in 1965. Initially, she was told that "Women can be doctors, but not surgeons" and was directed toward anesthesia. However, Dr. Ege changed his perspective after recognizing Zeynep's competence and determination. He remarked that she was someone who should "be at the side of the operating table as a surgeon, not behind it," and played a pivotal role in shaping her career.[1] But, due to the rules in place at the time, once she had applied for the anesthesia residency, she was required

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Figure 1. Dr. Zeynep Karaosmanoğlu (on the right) with her colleagues (Dr. Selçuk Atilla, second from the left) in orthopedics and traumatology at Gülhane Military Medical Academy, Ankara.

to spend a full year in that department before being eligible to switch specialties. It wasn't until 1962, after fulfilling her initial requirement, that she was finally able to begin her residency in orthopedics. This delay, however, did not deter her resolve but rather strengthened her determination to follow the path she was destined for. This transition marked a turning point for Dr. Karaosmanoğlu, as she not only overcame societal limitations imposed on women in medicine but also entered a male-dominated field at a time when few women dared to specialize in orthopedics and traumatology.

During her residency, Dr. Karaosmanoğlu endured the grueling "barrel" shifts—15 consecutive days on call each month. One month before completing her residency, she spearheaded an initiative to reduce the intensity of these shifts, advocating for her junior colleagues. Thanks to her efforts, the shifts were reduced to 1 week per month, significantly improving working conditions for future residents. Among her colleagues and lifelong friends were notable orthopedic surgeons Dr. Yücel Tümer, Dr. Selçuk Atilla, Dr. Erdoğan Saraç, and Dr. Mahmut Varlı (Figures 1-3), with whom she shared the many challenges and triumphs of residency.

At the same time, she faced the challenge of balancing motherhood with her demanding professional responsibilities. Despite the intense demands of her shifts, which often required her to remain on call for 15 consecutive days, she also cared for her young son, Tufan, who stayed with her at the hospital throughout these periods. Her husband, the hospital's chief physician, would bring their son to the hospital at the start of her shifts, leaving him in her care due to his young age. Dr. Karaosmanoğlu's ability to balance both personal and professional life became a defining aspect of her character.



Figure 2. Dr. Zeynep Karaosmanoğlu (on the right) with her colleagues in orthopedics and traumatology at Gülhane Military Medical Academy, Ankara.



Figure 3. Dr. Zeynep Karaosmanoğlu (sitting in front) with her colleagues in orthopedics and traumatology (Dr. Yücel Tümer, third from the right; Dr. Erdoğan Saraç on the third left and back) and their families.

After completing her residency in 1968, Dr. Karaosmanoğlu began her career at Ankara Mevkii Hospital, at a time when there were fewer than a handful of female orthopedic surgeons in Türkiye[3] (Figure 4). Globally, pioneering women like Dr. Marian Frauenthal Sloane and Dr. Ruth Jackson had become the first certified female orthopedic surgeons in the United States in 1937.[4] In Türkiye, Zahide Şefik had already made strides by becoming an orthopedic and pediatric surgeon in 1932. Between 1932 and 1968, only 12 women earned their orthopedics certification in Türkiye, and Dr. Karaosmanoğlu was part of this early, trailblazing group of female orthopedists.[5] Today, with 97 women orthopedic surgeons (41 specialists and 56 residents), we continue the mission to regain the early momentum in gender balance achieved by Dr. Karaosmanoğlu's generation.

In 1971, Dr. Karaosmanoğlu took on a new challenge at Kayseri Military Hospital, where she played a pivotal role in treating severely injured soldiers from the 7500-strong Parachute Commando Division over an 8-year period. Her unwavering dedication and expert care during this time cemented her reputation as a highly skilled orthopedic trauma surgeon. During her tenure in Kayseri, Dr. Karaosmanoğlu worked for many years without an assistant, managing not only the surgeries but also the rehabilitation of her patients. It was only years


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Uzmanlık Belgesi

İstanbul Üniversitesi Tıp Fakültesinden 27-6-1961 tarihinde 3871/13339 sayılı diploma ile mezun 1937 yılında Kırım'da doğmuş Dr. Zeynep Karaosmanoğlu tababet ve şuabatı sanatlarının tarzı icrasına dair 1219 sayılı kanun ile bu kanuna bağlı Tababet uzmanlık tüzüğü hükümlerine göre asistanlık süresini bitirerek huzurumuzda yapılan sınavlarda başarı gösterdiğini ve Ortopedi ve Travmatoloji dalında bir laboratuvarı kliniği müstakilen idare edebilecek niteliği kazanmış olduğunu bildirir uzmanlık belgesidir.

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Figure 4. Dr. Zeynep Karaosmanoğlu's diploma in orthopedics and traumatology, awarded in 1961 and signed by the distinguished professors of that time.

later that a physical therapist was assigned to assist her, further highlighting her commitment to managing all aspects of her patients' recovery. Her expertise was particularly prominent during the 1974 Cyprus Peace Operation, where she provided critical trauma care under extremely challenging conditions, saving countless lives.

Dr. Karaosmanoğlu was renowned not only for her medical expertise but also for her strong moral compass and adherence to principles. A notable incident that exemplified her integrity occurred at Kayseri Military Hospital when she refused to allow a corps commander to enter the hospital with a weapon, upholding hospital regulations regardless of rank. Throughout her career, she remained a steadfast advocate for justice and equality, always emphasizing the importance of empathy and conscience in medical practice. Dr. Karaosmanoğlu was known for her steadfast dedication to the soldiers in her care. She consistently valued them, treating them with compassion and responsibility, not only as a skilled surgeon but as a deeply empathetic caregiver. Remembered for dining with the soldiers under the same conditions, rather than in more comfortable, separate quarters despite her rank, Dr. Karaosmanoğlu's actions reflected her strong belief in equality and solidarity with her team. She went beyond her medical responsibilities to ensure their well-being, advocating for their proper nutrition and overall care. Prof. Dr. Haluk Yetkin, her colleague and a notable trauma surgeon, often praised her remarkable discipline, commanding presence, and tireless work ethic. These qualities earned her great respect from colleagues and peers alike.

Her unwavering loyalty to Türkiye, the country she adopted as her own, was reflected in her frequent expressions of gratitude for the opportunities it provided. On August 16, 2022, at the age of 85, she was honored at a webinar on mentorship organized by the "Advocacy, Research, and Empowerment Network for Women in Orthopaedics" within the Turkish Society of Orthopaedics and Traumatology. During this event, she shared her life journey and vision with women orthopedic specialists and residents, offering invaluable advice and inspiration.

Even after her retirement with the rank of Colonel in 1979, Dr. Karaosmanoğlu continued practicing medicine for more than 15 years in Istanbul, Bursa, and later in her private clinic. Outside of her medical career, she was an avid sportswoman and a talented tennis player, maintaining an active lifestyle that reflected the same discipline and inner strength she brought to her surgical work.

Her perseverance, resilience, and contributions to orthopedics and traumatology earned her the nickname "Iron Lady" ("Demir Leblebi" in Turkish), symbolizing her toughness and unbreakable spirit. Dr. Karaosmanoğlu's journey, from overcoming financial hardships and societal barriers to becoming a leading figure in Turkish orthopedics and traumatology, is a powerful testament to her tenacity and skill. Her legacy endures not only through her contributions as a surgeon but also through her role as a mentor and advocate for gender equality in medicine.

Rest in peace, Dr. Zeynep Karaosmanoğlu—a true pioneer, mentor, and hero of Turkish orthopaedics and traumatology.

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