

# Bagrat Shinkuba

## *The Last of the Departed*

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*He who loses his country loses all.*  
Abkhasian proverb

## **FOREWORD**

Early this winter on a Saturday night Karbei Barchan stopped by for a visit. We had been students together at hr teachers’ training college, but he left Sukhumi a long time ago and was now the principal of a country school; e had not seen each other for several years. I was looking forward to spending some time with him talking about what had happened to us in the interval, but Karbei was in a hurry. In half an hour he had to be off on some urgent business. Without losing a second, he opened up an old briefcase, took out a thick folder, and put it on the table.

“Here’s a manuscript I want you to read, and the sooner the better. It’s been lying around in an old trunk for 31years already, just two doors away from me at my Aunt Tatal’s house. After her funeral last week we opened the trunk that no one remembers her ever opening herself. Here’s what we found. It’s a manuscript written by her dead son, Sharakh Kvadzba. He wrote it just before the war, but in my opinion it’s still relevant. Read it and tell me if you think it can be published. It’s not just because he was my relative. Anyway, read it and you’ll see for yourself.”

Karbei departed, entrusting to me the fate of that manuscript which had spent thirty-one years in a trunk kept shut by a woman who had lost her son so many years ago. Before I even opened up the folder there was something about it that gave me a keen sense of responsibility, and not just to one dead person, but to two.

I read the manuscript the first time quickly, from beginning to end, but then I went back over it a few times in order to get a better grasp of parts that were incomplete or 'reined improbable. It was not a simple manuscript, nor for that matter was the fate of its author.

I did not know Sharakh Kvadzba personally, but I had heard much about him before the war. He was five years older than most of us in our class, and after being graduated from the teachers' training college in Sukhumi\* he went to Leningrad. There he majored in the Caucasian languages at the Institute of Oriental Studies, one of his professors being Academician Marr\*. Then he went on to graduate school and specialized in the northwestern group of the Caucasian languages, including the Ubykh language which is important in establishing the historical relationships between other Caucasian languages.

I had also heard that Kvadzba, according to his professors in Leningrad, was an extremely talented linguist, and that is probably why he was sent to Turkey and the Middle East for research work, a rare opportunity in those days. He was supposed to find people who still spoke Ubykh, which was especially important since there was no written Ubykh language.

During the war few of us knew each other's whereabouts. I did not know anything about Kvadzba. I had heard from someone, probably from Karbei, that Kvadzba was in Leningrad when he was drafted, was seriously wounded soon afterwards, went back into action and was reported missing in 1942. Sixteen years later, in 1958, we got word in Sukhumi that far away in Italy, outside the small town of Chermentate near Lake Como there was a tombstone over the grave of Italian partisans killed the very last days of the war in April 1945; among the names was that of Sharakh Kvadzba written in the Latin alphabet with only one letter incorrectly spelled. We could only speculate on how Kvadzba had ended up in Italy—probably the same way as most others like him, he had fled there from somewhere in Austria from a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp near the Italian border. Because his surname is so rare, there was no doubt in my mind that it was his name on that tombstone. The date of his death, April 24, 1945, was evidence that he had fought until nearly the end of the war, and was killed just about two weeks before Victory Day.\*

That is the life story of Sharakh Kvadzba, or at least what I know about it.

As for the history of his manuscript, some of the details were explained by Karbei when he came to visit me several times those six months I was getting it ready for publication.

Sharakh Kvadzba had written the nearly 500 pages in one sitting, as it were. After returning from abroad in the summer of 1940 he spent his whole vacation, all six weeks of it, at his mother's home in Abkhasia. He did not go anywhere, but sat and wrote from morning till night.

Before he left he put the folder into his briefcase, which he locked in the trunk, and probably asked his mother to keep his notes there until he returned. He must have given these instructions in such a way that she honored them the rest of her life. How was he to know then that he was leaving home for the last time and that he would never again see his mother, or his native Abkhasia. But something in his voice must have made his mother sure she should keep the folder her son had put into the trunk until the end of her days, not only keep it there, but not tell a soul about it. She had never told anyone about it either when she was informed her son was missing, or when she learned that somewhere far away, farther than she could imagine, her son's name had been discovered on the tombstone of a common grave.

When she heard this she asked Sharakh's relatives and friends to sell everything of theirs and hers and use the money to send her to his grave site. Later, after it became clear the relatives were unwilling to cooperate, she never brought up the subject again. She was silent. Perhaps because she never saw her son's grave she continued to question his death. At any rate, she never did take her son's brief case out of the trunk: after all, he had asked her to take care of the papers until he returned. Maybe she kept on waiting for him. She had been born a long time

ago and could not read or write, but neither Karbei, nor I believe she could have simply forgotten about her son's folder.

As I already mentioned, Sharakh Kvadzba's manuscript consisted of nearly 500, or more precisely, 482 pages in small clear handwriting that sometimes, especially toward the end, showed haste, yet was legible. Inserted in the middle of the manuscript were two typewritten pages dated August 1940—Kvadzba's prewar resume—and a hand written outline of the report that he apparently made to his institute about the trip. There was also a receipt in the manuscript made out to Kvadzba for a brass horn and a Caucasian dagger he had brought back with him from abroad for the Abkhasian State Museum.

I don't know what happened to the dagger, but I have seen the Ubykh horn, a truly rare artifact, in our museum several times. However, I had no idea it had been donated by Sharakh Kvadzba.

In his report Kvadzba said the information he had obtained could shed light on missing facts about the tragic story of the Ubykh people, a story, as he said, that was obscured by too little data.

Kvadzba explained in the report that he had failed to learn many toponymical names and find out more about some historical figures he knew of from his research. And he was not ready to give a complete scientific analysis of much of what he had written. He added, however, that the next part of his undertaking would not be a scholar's commentary, but a careful account of all the information he had gathered, which would form the groundwork for his future efforts.

Obviously, the manuscript in the trunk was that account which he had stopped writing in the middle of a sentence. He was apparently somewhere near the end.

Before presenting Sharakh Kvadzba's manuscript, which has undergone minimal editing only whenever absolutely necessary, I would like to say a few words about the subject which is certainly pertinent today.

Kvadzba's manuscript gives us a vivid picture of the history of the Ubykh people, a people that lived long ago in the mountains of the Western Caucasus approximately in the area bordered north and south by the Shakhe and Khosta rivers. At the end of the campaigns in the Caucasus the czarist government offered the uncompromising Ubykh leaders either to move down from the mountains into the plains of the Northern Caucasus, or emigrate to Turkey. The choice the leaders of the Ubykhs made between these two unappealing alternatives would later turn out to be the most shortsighted: in 1864, following their feudal lords, the Ubykh people opted for Turkey. Soon afterwards fate scattered them like birds in a hurricane to many countries in the Middle East.

Just one century later a people with a rich and valiant past had disappeared from the face of the earth.

The Ubykh language increasingly became a memory and although the knowledge of the language and history of the Ubykhs is important to studies of the Caucasus, there are many unanswered questions.

About fifteen years ago I happened to see a report by a prominent European scholar of the Caucasus. According to his information, there were two small neighboring villages where there were still sixteen people who could speak Ubykh, perhaps, the only ones left in all the Middle East where the Ubykhs had emigrated. That report of fifteen years ago was the last one I read on the subject. I have not seen any later information in academic studies about people who still speak Ubykh.

Therefore, I would like to call attention to Sharakh Kvadzba's manuscript which is mostly based on the detailed notes he took in 1940 of conversations he had with a man who still remembered the migration of his people to Turkey, a 100-year-old Ubykh with whom Sharakh lived for a little over a month. Judging by the manuscript, this centenarian, Zaurkan Zolak, was a man who not only had rare vitality, but an excellent memory. He spent the month recounting to his guest nearly all the events in his life, and Sharakh listened and wrote, apparently, not omitting even those incidents the old man confused chronologically, or that seemed to be fantasy. Obviously, the linguist tried at first to record everything he heard with the intent of investigating it later, sifting what was more probable from the less probable.

In my opinion the manuscript thankfully was preserved just that way. It is not too late now to analyze it from a strictly scientific point of view. It is not too late to give a critical analysis of the information it contains—both historical and cultural. Despite all its defects academically speaking, the manuscript in its original form is an interesting human document revealing, of course, particularly the personality of the storyteller, and to some degree that of the listener who was much too moved by all that he heard to be just a stenographer.

And so, let us open the manuscript. I want to warn that I had to deal with 482 pages of small handwriting, a text not only devoid of titles, but of chapters, and even paragraphs, a text written by a man who was not considering its publication, but only how he could finish the job in the time allotted. The name of the manuscript, the titles of the chapters and divisions into books, were intended to make the manuscript easier to read. I bear full responsibility for all that, not Sharakh Kvadzba.

## **BOOK ONE**

### **FEASTING WITH THE DEAD**

Having got out of the carriage that picked me up on the road, I stood looking around, not knowing where to go. The skinny horse that barely dragged us up here was now trotting downhill. The silence was disturbed only by the clattering of the wheels. The heat had somewhat subsided and the warm wind that came up toward evening was like a huge invisible broom sweeping the dust along the road. To the right in the distance a village was visible and dogs barked. To the left there was a sun-baked bare hill with rain-chiseled furrows that looked like deep scars, and ahead up to the horizon a dismal plain stretched for miles, dotted here and there by trees. I stood there looking at the unfamiliar terrain and could not help feeling surprised. Could the Ubykhs really have traded their mountains for this place; could the bones of several generations be lying in this land?

Hearing a hammer pounding on an anvil I knew the driver had been right when he told me the smithy was nearby. There it was just 100 feet behind me. When I stepped off the carriage I went the wrong way. The blacksmith hammered a few more times as I walked up to the smithy, and, as if he already knew why I had come, he went out to greet me. He was a short man with a thin, black mustache on a soot-stained face. I noticed he had a small bundle in his hand and thought perhaps he was not the blacksmith, but someone else.

Fortunately he turned out to be the blacksmith Biram, the one I had heard about. I was told if I met him everything would go all right. That parcel in his hand was also a piece of good luck for me, because he was taking it to the old Ubykh, Zaurkan Zolak, the man I had come so far and with such difficulty to see.

I walked with Biram along the bottom of the hill. It seemed so god-forsaken, that hill: furrows on one side like scars; and on the other side—bare rock with cracks where even wild grass had withered in the scorching-hot sun.

“Here we are,” said Biram. “That’s his house.”

He pointed with his finger, but I could not see a house.

“Not there. Here!

He pointed once again and I finally saw the abode. It looked as though there was a cave inside the bottom of the hill, and at the entrance three small walls were built of adobe and roofed over with soot-stained shingles.

“Wait here. I’ll find out if Zaurkan is home. I’ll ask him if he wants to talk to you. Sometimes he’s moody and doesn’t want to see anyone, not even me. He’s a hundred, you know!”

Biram shrugged his shoulders as if to say that when a person’s a hundred he’s not expected to give a reason for being in a bad mood.

“But I’m afraid he’s not home right now, or the dog would have already noticed us.”

Just as he said that a big dog ran out of the hut and began barking. But the hoarse bark reverberated as though someone’s sorrow of long ago was howling with a dog’s voice from inside a hollow cracked pitcher.

Biram walked up a few steps made of earth and disappeared into the hut through the black hole that served as a door. The dog got tired of barking and stood watching me in silence.

I was disturbed by the thought of what I could expect from this centenarian I had journeyed so long and hard to see. Of what use could the meeting with him be to linguistics? What was taking Biram so long; what was he saying about me? Maybe it would have been better if I had gone in with him? Just then Biram appeared. Watching him come down the steps, I noticed for the first time how much he limped.

“Zaurkan is at home. He was lying down, but now he’s getting up and will see you,” said Biram. I could tell by the sound of his voice that he was happy for me.

We walked up the steps together this time and stopped in front of the hut.

It wasn’t exactly a yard, but a small earthen terrace in front of the house that boasted four stunted, old, and probably sturdy trees. There was a bench underneath one of the trees, so Biram and I sat down and began smoking.

“He promised to get up and see you,” repeated Biram, and added as though in apology, “he’s moody sometimes, but how can you blame such an old man who doesn’t have one friend his own age? I told him I brought what he wanted, but he didn’t even look at me and didn’t say a word. He often doesn’t respond. Then I told him about you, that you’re an important guest. But he didn’t respond to that either. Only when I started to leave he called after me, ‘I’m getting up now.’ I didn’t tell him why you came. It might have made him angry. It’s better if you do it yourself when he sees you. Since he’s agreed to meet you he won’t turn you away. I know him well. He was like a father to me, he fed and clothed me when I was a boy. He chose to live alone, but we’re still like father and son; he doesn’t have anybody but me. I’ll go now; you stay. Please forgive me for leaving, but toward evening people stop for the night and may need to have their horses shod. I’ll come back later on. Since he’s getting up and will see you he’ll invite you to stay the night. I’ll bring you some food.”

I thanked Biram and told him that I’d try to return his kindness.

“We’ll talk about it later,” he interrupted. “Only don’t offer Zaurkan money, or anything else. To him a guest is something sacred.”

I remained alone, or rather, with the dog. Both of us waited in silence; it lying down, and I sitting. My eyes were fixed on the open door—it was a door, in fact, that opened to the inside and not a hole as I had thought previously. I waited for him to finally come out, this unknown host who had promised to get up and meet me. How long had he lived here? Had he always been alone? How had fate brought him and Biram together? Why did he prefer to live alone? And why did a living human being choose a house that was more like a grave?

I heard a deep cough come from the house. A few minutes later Zaurkan appeared at the door. He was very tall with broad shoulders and a long face that seemed even longer because of the white beard that came down to the middle of his chest. He was wearing what appeared to be a robe, but not quite. It was a flowing, white attire that reached well below his knees and had wide sleeves. In his right hand he held a staff with a heavy iron tip. He did not move for a long time as he stood at the door and carefully looked me over. The dog affectionately nuzzled against the old man’s legs, but Zaurkan silently moved it aside with his leg and finally walked a few steps toward me. He was light on his feet and his back was straight, not only when he stood still, but also when he walked.

“Welcome,” he said in Turkish as he stopped and raised his right hand to his chest.

“Good day,” I answered in Turkish.

When I could see him up close I realized just how tall he was, and I noticed that his eyes were sky blue, not in the least paled by age. When he grew tired of looking down at me, because it was apparently harder for him to bend than to stand, he slowly seated himself on the stump of a thick century-old tree and pointed his hand to the bench where Biram and I had been sitting. I sat down as he wished. He placed the staff in front of himself, thrust the tip into the ground and took some amber devotional beads out of his pocket.

“Terrible heat today. Even that branch over there has dried up.” He pointed to some twig on the tree, but I could not see it.

“Yes, it was very hot,” I replied.

He did not say anything for a long time. All I could hear was the sound of the beads clicking as his hands fiddled with them.

Where should I begin? I wondered. With the main thing, the real reason why I came, or something else? Without having made a decision I suddenly asked him a question:

“How old are you?”

Zaurkan smiled.

“You probably came here because of my age? There’s nothing else about me that’s interesting any more. If I’m not mistaken I’m exactly a hundred.”

“Were you born here?” I asked, knowing that if he said yes the whole trip would have been for nothing.

“No,” he replied. “I was born very far away from here.”

I waited, hoping he’d say something else about himself, but he did not say anything. After another minute or so of playing with his beads he stopped, and asked me:

“And who are you? Where are you from?”

I looked him straight in the eye and decided that I had to be honest with this man right from the start. What will be will be!

“I’ve come a long way, from another country. From the Soviet Union.”

“What’s that?” he asked me to repeat as he cupped his hand to his ear.

“The Soviet Union. Russia, the Caucasus. Abkhasia,” I said these words one right after the other trying to pronounce them exactly the way they are said in Turkey hoping he would understand at least something.

He understood and repeated:

“The Caucasus. Abkhasia.”

“Yes, I am from the Caucasus, from Abkhasia,” I shouted to make sure he could hear me.

“What’s your nationality?” he inquired hastily as though I might evade the question. He even moved closer to me.

“I’m an Abkhasian. I’m from Abkhasia.”

“You’re an Abkhasian? Oh, Allah Almighty, am I hearing things!” The old man said these words in perfect Abkhasian as he raised his hands to the sky in astonishment.

“Yes, I’m an Abkhasian, I’m from Abkhasia,” I repeated again, this time not in Turkish, but in Abkhasian.

“Oh, what joy you’ve brought me! How many years it has been since I last saw an Abkhasian. How many years I have thought that the dead would be resurrected before

I’d hear the Abkhasian language again.”

With that the old man got up from the stump and pulling me toward him kissed my eyes, one after the other.

“You know, we have the same blood. My unfortunate mother was an Abkhasian from the Shat-Ipa family from Tsebelda. What’s your name?”

I told him. He still had his hands on my shoulders and suddenly remembered he was holding his beads. He quickly put them back in his pocket as though they were no longer needed, and did not take them out again the whole time I stayed with him.

“Sit down, sit down,” he told me. “You shouldn’t be standing. I’m older than you are, but you’re my uncle, so according to custom you’re the elder.”\* We both urged each other to sit down. “If I die today and end up in heaven where all my people are waiting for me,” he said as he tried to stand up again even though I held him down by the shoulders, “I’ll tell them that there are still Abkhasians.”

The old man could not calm down and it made me too. He would sit down, then stand up, go back into the hut, and again return to the yard, pacing aimlessly from one tree to the other, touching them with his hands as though he was checking whether they were in the right place, whether all this wasn’t a dream. Then after touching a tree he would come back to me, and say the same thing over and over as though to someone who was not there, someone whose presence he obviously felt.

“I have an important guest today. He came to me from where I was born. He came to see me. I live far away, but he came all the way to find out how I live!”

He was not talking to me, but then he remembered I was there and again made me sit down, forcing me with his hands so unusually strong for his age.

“Sit down, Sharakh, sit down. You’re my uncle, you shouldn’t be standing. Yes, yes, the Ubykhs knew how to take care of their guests,” he said, and again sat me down. “But who can do that now besides me? And what can I do, a man alone, to properly host such a guest as you?”

As the old man talked he incessantly walked up and down the yard, sometimes talking to me, sometimes to himself, and there were moments when I figured he was crazy, or nearly crazy.

When it was completely dark he went back into the house and lit a fire in the hearth. Sitting where I was I could see its reflected light through the open door. Finally he came out again and invited me inside. He sat me down by the hearth and went out again. I looked around. There were a few low benches by the hearth, a plank bed covered with a quilt and old house slippers in front of it on the floor. A door led to a second room. The place was neat and clean, so someone obviously took care of the old man. But who?

He returned with an armful of brushwood, throwing half of it into the fire.

“So that’s the way it is, my friend Sharakh. That’s the way it is,” said the old man holding me by the shoulder so I would not get up. “Look at this fire, at this hearth of the last Ubykh. It’s a good thing I haven’t forgotten Abkhasian, but if I do forget a word, forgive me. Praise be to Allah that my unfortunate mother taught me her language and that I can still hear her voice.”

Having sat me down by the fire, he still could not calm down; he kept going in and out of the house, forgot all about my presence, then remembered. Finally he went into the other room and was away for about ten minutes. I wanted to take my notebook and pencil from my suitcase, but felt it wouldn’t be polite until I had a chance to explain why I had come. He had said that he was the last Ubykh and it appeared that he was. In the two months I

had been wandering all over Turkey and Syria I had not met anyone who called himself an Ubykh besides this centenarian. I had only heard about Zaurkan Zolak from other people who thought he was an Ubykh.

At last he emerged from the other room, only I could barely recognize him: he looked even taller. There he stood in an old black Circassian coat\* wearing a tall Astrakhan hat on his head, and on his narrow Caucasian belt decorated with tarnished silver there was an old dagger in a sheath, a silver dagger that was also tarnished and had a large, black haft perfect for handling in battle. The old man held a brass horn nearly one meter in length. He remained standing as he told me the history of the horn.

“Soulakh, the eldest of us Ubykhs left on this land, gave me this belt, dagger, and horn before his death. The belt and dagger belonged to him, but the horn belonged to the people. Today I have it, and when I die, who knows whose it will be. When we lived in the Caucasus my father had one very much like it, and when my mother’s brothers came from Tsebelda to visit us, my father blew the horn to call together all our neighbors and relatives. Anyone who heard it

knew that Hamirza had company. The horn will be played tonight to let all the people know that a relative, my maternal uncle, has come very far to see me! Everyone should know and come to the feast!”

Without saying another word, the old man left the hut with the horn in his hands. Perplexed, I followed him out the door. He passed all four of the trees outside the house, stopped above the precipice and began blowing the horn.

I had never heard such a frightening and pitiful sound, like the cries of a wounded animal. The call now rose high into the sky like smoke floating over rooftops, then died grievously somewhere far away having been carried away by the wind. I listened and thought. Why doesn’t the horn blare even louder and even more pitifully so that everyone who hears it should cry? Why don’t all those listening take off their hats in memory of a nation that has disappeared from history? The last horn of the Ubykhs is being played and the tragedy is not that the centenarian playing it will never again be a child, a youth, or a warrior; the tragedy is that no other Ubykh will either, because the old man is the very last Ubykh!

As those bitter thoughts raced through my mind the horn continued to hoot, until finally it stopped, and Zaurkan and I returned to his hut and sat down by the hearth. The last horn of the Ubykhs was silent, but the last hearth was still warm. I looked at the last Ubykh sitting across from me—at the deep wrinkles carved on his face; at the big hands resting on his strong knees; at his broad shoulders; at his strong neck, which like his face, was also jugged with wrinkles—and could imagine what an unusually robust man he had been in his youth.

“I realize you have come a long way,” said Zaurkan, pronouncing each word slowly as though he were calling to mind one word at a time. “I realize you have come for a reason. I know you will ask me questions and I will answer you, but I beg you to relax today and try my bread.”

The old man had barely got the words out of his mouth when Biram walked quietly up to the door and our Abkhasian habit, instilled in me in childhood to last a lifetime, brought me to my feet to greet the person entering the room.

“Sit down, sit down. He doesn’t appreciate such gestures,” said Zaurkan nodding at Biram.

Biram silently began to untie the bundle of food he had brought along and put it on the table. He would lean over to Zaurkan from time to time and say something in Turkish, practically in a whisper so I could not hear. He was probably asking the old man advice about supper.

While Biram was busy with the food the old man sat immobile, patting his white beard that hung to the middle of his chest, and looked me closely in the eyes. He sat nearby, but watched as though from afar. This distant glance of his showed both kindness and heaviness of heart. Then he turned away from me and gazing out into the darkness of the yard through the open door he spoke loudly and with great joy as though something really were going on out there:



"Yes, it was a good thing, Sharakh, I blew that horn. The neighbors and relatives have already come together in answer to its call and each one is working: some cut up young goats and are roasting them over the fire; others sliced up a bull and are boiling the meat in a big pot; and still others are cooking cornmeal porridge. The young people are also busy. Our Ubykh elders will soon come to welcome you, my dear guest from the land of my mother. You'll see them in their Circassian coats with their sharply curved sabers and excellent daggers on their belts. We agreed long ago that we would gather at anyone's house suddenly visited by a guest from the Caucasus!"

I listened to him and several times I silently looked back at Biram who calmly continued setting the table. Perhaps it was because he did not understand Abkhasian, or maybe it was not the first time he had heard all this.

Zaurkan got up, took a smoldering twig out of the fire, and lit a candle that he put on the edge of the table set by Biram. Then he went to the center of the room, stood with his hands on his hips, and commanded good-naturedly:

"Well, young men, tell the girls to bring out the pitchers and wash-basins. It's time for the guests to wash their hands before the feast."

He went outside to stand by the door as though people were passing him by on their way into the house.

It was dark and quiet in the yard. Immobile stars dotted the clear sky.

"Honorable Sit, Daut, Soulakh, Tatlastan, Zoskhan, Ahmed, wash your hands and accompany our guest to the table. Everything's ready," said Zaurkan rather loudly. And he moved his head as though all those he was talking to were standing around him. Then he took a few steps up to an old tree, and putting his arm around the trunk, bent over to someone short, some invisible person standing under the tree.

"My dear mother, why are you so sad today? Come closer and give our guest a sisterly hug. After all, he's from your native Abkhasia. I remember how you would hide your bitter tears from us and lament in Abkhasian for the brothers you left behind. He's not your real brother, but he's Abkhasian all the same. Talk to him. Maybe he knows something about your brothers."

Zaurkan stood up. Then he began talking to someone who was as tall or nearly as tall as he.

"Father, I wanted to make you happy. I remember that when an Abkhasian came, young or old, you would always feed him and invite the neighbors, and accompany him up to the Mzymta River. Today our guest is Sharakh Kvadzba. He's young, but it would be disgraceful not to host him properly. He must have come so far to find out what happened to us, why we Ubykhs disappeared from the face of the earth."

As Zaurkan came back into the house he stopped at the door and raised his voice:

"Whoever has washed his hands is invited to sit at the table with our dear guest."

Then he suddenly switched from Abkhasian to Ubykh. I had studied the language, but had never heard it spoken; so because I knew so little and was taken unawares I could not understand what he said. I could only make out words here and there and sense the general tone. Zaurkan was no longer inviting, but urging someone and even giving orders— I could tell by his voice.

We stood under the motionless stars in the black sky. Down on earth a centenarian stood near me talking to the dead who were unable to answer him. The ground lay under his feet and the sky rose over his head: as I listened to his incomprehensible talk, I thought that this earth and this sky had probably been unfair to the Ubykhs.

The old man stopped talking Ubykh and gestured for me to go into the house.

Biram came up to us with a pitcher of water so we could wash our hands.

"That's all God gave us today," said Zaurkan when we sat down at the table close to the ground.

I saw that everything Biram had placed before us on the table, except for the bread, was different from what we ate in the Caucasus. I had eaten these Turkish dishes several times during the trip—bean soup and steamed rissoles of meat made Turkish style.

Zaurkan served my plate; Biram, with closed eyes, sat far away from the table in the corner so quietly he could have been asleep.

The hot coals were burning out in the hearth, and smoke was coming from the thin, pale candle on the table. In this semi-darkness I began to feel strange as though I both believed and did not believe what was happening to me.

Zaurkan sat opposite me, ate slowly and from time to time glanced past me in one and the same direction. At such moments a disgruntled look crossed his face as though someone sitting there was not obeying him. Suddenly he pressed his palm against his knees, helping himself slowly rise, and shouted to someone:

“Narchou, hey, Narchou, have all the guests been seated? Does everybody at the table have wine? Does everybody at the table have boiled meat? I beg you to be attentive, Narchou, and when the time comes I hope you know who to give the boiled leg to?” Zaurkan stood up erect. “And now, dear guest and dear neighbors, although I have no special merits other than my age, it’s my honor to begin the celebration. May God grant all of you happiness and health. Today we have such an honored guest, perhaps the most honored we will ever have. He’s my uncle, my mother’s brother. He deserves much more than we have been able to put on this humble table; but everything we have was prepared with the utmost love and care.”

Zaurkan held his head high. He raised his right hand and his fingers looked as though they were holding a wine glass. He stared into the distance as if there were hundreds of people sitting at a table that stretched far into the darkness outside the hut.

I watched the old man in near belief: his manner was so convincing and he spoke so earnestly to the surrounding emptiness. I forgot everything for a minute—this country I was visiting, this desert I had come through, this bare hill I had climbed, and this hut where I was sitting. I forgot everything and felt as though I were not there, but in the Caucasus, and not now, but a hundred years ago at a big feast among the Ubykhs. I could almost see the steaming fried meat and cornmeal mush and the wine poured from pitchers. I could see the faces of unfamiliar elders whom Zaurkan had named as he stood outside the door. Who said the Ubykhs no longer existed? There they were sitting around me and speaking their language... One of them who was picked by the host to be the toastmaster stood up, tucking the flaps of his Circassian coat under his belt and drank to my health. All the others followed suit. When I begged them not to bother standing, that I was not worthy, they would not listen to me and continued standing... I closed my eyes to prolong this strange moment, but suddenly the silence jolted me back to reality.

Zaurkan stopped talking and slumped into his seat abruptly. He sat across the table from me, looking tired as he reclined against the wall.

Once again only he and I were at the table. Biram sat a few feet away from us, only now his eyes were open and he looked with indifference at us both as though nothing had happened, as though the old man had not stood up and had not said all that he had.

What’s the matter with him? Why is he so indifferent to everything? I wondered about Biram. Maybe he really had been asleep until now and didn’t hear anything, or maybe, what was so astounding to me he’s already tired of because he’s heard it many times before?

Zaurkan sat in weary silence. Five minutes, then ten minutes went by while Biram made coffee on the coals of the hearth and poured it into our cups. The old man kept quiet while we drank the coffee, and only when we finished it he slowly rose and said:

“Sharakh, I will not bother you anymore tonight. You’re tired after your journey. Lie down and rest.”

He pointed to the plank bed with the quilt that I had noticed right away when I entered the room.

“Good night,” he said walking up to the door and bowing his head in farewell. “I’ll go check on the others. Many of our guests have not finished eating. And the neighbors who helped cook and serve still haven’t had supper: I should take care of them.”

He raised his head, picked up his staff that had been leaning against the wall, and without looking back at me, walked out of the room majestically. Biram, hurrying before the old man returned, showed me my bed; it was not where the old man had shown me, but in the other room.

That night I could not sleep. While it was still dark I could hear the old man walking around, in and out of the house and talking to himself, sometimes softly, other times loudly. At sunrise when he finally settled down and went to bed I no longer wanted to sleep. I pulled out a notebook from my suitcase and spent several hours writing down all I could remember, especially everything the old man had said that night from beginning to end. As I wrote I worried how he would greet me that morning after the explosion of emotions I had witnessed. Would he come to his senses, would he calm down? Would I be able to talk to him?

My fears were in vain.

In the morning he sat down under the oldest of his four trees on that homemade bench and started our conversation by asking me what I would like him to tell me.

When I explained I wanted to hear the story of his life, and hoped he would help me learn the Ubykh language that he spoke and that no one else could ever teach me, he silently nodded his head in agreement.

That day he seemed quite tired from the previous night, so I did not rush him. But the next day we got to work right in the morning. Every day, morning and evening, I talked to him several hours at a time. I stayed with him more than a month, or more precisely, thirty-four days, exactly as long as my visa allowed. To get the visa extended I would have had to make a long trip, but since I had little hope of success I decided not to take the risk.

Biram—with whom I had made a deal about a small payment without the old man knowing—sometimes came once a day, but often twice to bring us a modest meal that was quite sufficient.

In the morning until noon we usually sat in the yard, the old man under the tree on his homemade bench, and I with my notebook in hand sat opposite him on the thick trunk of the plane tree.

Every morning until noon Zaurkan, at my request, spoke in Ubykh, and I listened to him intently, writing down what he said and asking him to repeat himself when I didn’t catch something the first time. The last week the work became easier, but at first it was hard because despite all that I had learned at college, I really did not know the living Ubykh language.

It was a stroke of luck that the centenarian who had left the Caucasus when he was just twenty-four years old not only had not forgotten his native language, but knew my language, Abkhasian, the language of his mother, just as well. In addition, during the next seventy-five years of his life he had learned Turkish and Arabic fluently so that we went back and forth between languages until we were able to eventually get to the real meaning of whatever Ubykh word I could not understand.

When I was at college I had no doubts that the Abkhasian and Ubykh languages were related. But it was one thing to theoretically know the similarity between the grammar, and quite another to try to learn the living language that in reality was not so similar and sometimes even confusing because of the seeming likeness. Yes, despite my solid theoretical background I had to learn the language all over again, although I did find many common roots in the Abkhasian and Ubykh vocabularies, especially in the ancient vocabularies. In Abkhasian the word for fire is “a-mtsa”, and in Ubykh it is “a-midze”; moon in Abkhasian is “a-mza”, and in Ubykh it is “a-medzy”; rain in Abkhasian is “a-kua”, hind in Ubykh it is “ak-ku”; water in Abkhasian is “a-dzy”, in Ubykh it is “bzy”; eyes in Abkhasian is “a-bla”, and in Ubykh they are “a-blia”; salt in Abkhasian is “a-djika”, and in Ubykh it is “dzhi”. There were many similarities in the phonetics, too, but there were also some differences. At any rate I determined two consonant sounds that were pronounced very differently in Ubykh and Abkhasian.

Toward the end of my stay I tried to ascertain whether the Ubykh language had different dialects, but I was unable. Zaurkan had lived near the mouth of the Sochi River in an area that was considered the heart of Ubykh territory. He did not know whether Ubykhs north of his home toward Tuapse, or those high in the mountains, spoke differently. Perhaps, he had simply forgotten.

Sometimes during our morning conversations Zaurkan would ask me about Abkhasia, his mother's homeland. In those cases, having begun speaking Ubykh he would impatiently change over to Abkhasian so I would understand him better. He was especially interested in his mother's relatives and people with the same last name. Although I told him many times that in the few trips I had made to Tsebelda, where his mother was from, I had never met anyone from the Shat-Ipa family, he still did not want to believe it and would ask me persistently again:

"Well, maybe somewhere, maybe there's one person, let him be blind or crippled, from the Shat-Ipa family still left in Tsebelda?"

"No, in Tsebelda there's no one with that surname," I would patiently repeat my answer, "although in other parts of Abkhasia there are people with that name. Some of them are old and illiterate; some are young and literate; some are my friends."

The first time I told him this he was not the least bit interested. He only wanted to know about those Shat-Ipas who lived in Tsebelda and were his mother's relatives. But the next time he took an interest in the other Shat-Ipas as well, and he asked me where and how they lived, and whether their villages were close or far from the sea.

I tried to explain all the changes that had taken place in Abkhasia, about the cities, the railroads and the high ways, the efforts to drain our swampy lowlands along the seacoast, the fight against malaria, the hospitals, the schools where children study in the Abkhasian language, and in general about Soviet government in our Abkhasian autonomous republic.

Although he tried to listen carefully, I could sense that it was all too remote for him to grasp. There was a nearly insurmountable distance of three-fourths of a century between what I told him and what was stamped in his memory from his youth.

In the evenings, depending on the weather, we would sometimes sit under the same tree in the yard, but other times we would stay in the house and Zaurkan would tell me about his life in Abkhasian, sprinkling his sentences often with Turkish and sometimes Arabic words. As I already said he spoke Abkhasian fluently, but in the last three-quarters of a century time had added hundreds if not thousands of new words to the old vocabulary, and so he had to use the Turkish or Arabic words he knew to fill the gap.

Sometimes for that same reason he did not fully comprehend when I asked him questions. It happened whenever I used new words that had entered the Abkhasian language, or old words that had taken on an altogether new meaning.

I managed to write down what he told me about his life, especially since he was always glad to repeat himself if I asked him then and there, when I could not keep up with him. Or sometimes I would not want to interrupt him so I would make a mark in the notebook and the next day come back to what I had not had time to write down, or had not understood. Then he would repeat the story in nearly the same words he had used the day before.

At night when the old man went to bed I would fill in my notes and sometimes add my own brief comments that I felt would be necessary later on in the final version. But most important, of course, was to record precisely what I was told by Zaurkan Zolak, a man of truly indestructible life-force and an indelible memory.

## **WHEN WE WERE AT HOME**

It's a mistake to think, dear Sharakh, that we can forget a language learned from infancy. No, we can't, just like I cannot forget my mother—although I know several languages and know how necessary they are. I learned three

languages when I was still young. Facing the sea, the Adighes lived to the right of the Ubykhs and the Abkhasians to the left. I know not only Abkhasian, but Adighe, too; of course, not as well, but I know it. We were all close neighbors, so we had to know each other's languages. Ubykh is my native language. It was spoken all around me from childhood—at home, around the house, and everywhere I went. How could I forget it? I learned Abkhasian from my mother. Grandmother knew Adighe very well, and when I was a child she told me fairytales, tongue-twisters and riddles in Adighe. I remember walking with her to the mill, and how she carried a full bag of grain on her head, but kept her hands free to twist wool as she walked. Grandmother's tongue wasn't idle either; she would tell me Adighe fairytales and facetious sayings. Once I remember she stopped and showed me some ants crawling somewhere across our path:

"Look, they're on a march. Can you stop them?"

"Just watch," I declared and intended to step on the ants, but Grandmother wouldn't let me.

"You want to show that you're stronger than the ants?" said Grandmother. "What if men with guns see us in the woods and kill us or let their horses trample us? Is it right to kill the weak just because they're weak? After all, sometimes the smallest and the weakest happen to be the smartest."

Then Grandmother told me a story. Our memory is like a sieve: some things seep through and others do not. That Adighe story didn't so I'll tell it to you.

Once there was a man who understood all languages: the language of the wolves, of the rabbits, and of the ants. One day as he was walking through the woods he accidentally stepped on an ant. The ant cried out in anger:

"What kind of a fool is that who doesn't look where he's going?"

When the man heard that he caught the ant, put it on his palm, and looked it over in astonishment:

"What a big head you have!"

"That's where I keep my brains," said the ant.

"Why do you have such a small waist?"

"Because I don't live for the sake of eating, but eat for the sake of living."

"How much do you eat in a year?"

"One kernel of wheat lasts me a whole year," said the ant.

"Okay. Let's see if one kernel lasts you a year," said the man and put the ant in a box with a kernel of wheat.

A year later the man remembered the ant, opened the box and saw to his surprise that the ant had only eaten half a kernel.

"Why did you eat only half a kernel?" asked the man.

"Because I figured the stupid person who put me in this prison through no fault of mine might not remember me in a year, but in two, so just in case I left myself half a kernel," answered the ant.

I like that story, dear Sharakh, but I think it's been twenty years since the last time I told it to anybody. There was no one to tell it to. I remember it so well probably because on my long road of life I have occasionally acted as that small ant. True, it was my strength and endurance rather than my ingenuity that saved me from trouble. If I were as smart as I am strong my whole life would have been different. My mother, as I already told you, was an Abkhasian from Tsebelda, and she came from the Shat-Ipa family. I don't know whether she actually taught me Abkhasian, or whether I knew it from the very beginning, ever since I can remember. When I was small and later when I was a teenager I sometimes stayed at my uncles' in Tsebelda for long periods at a time. They had a big

hospitable family and if stayed with them in the winter I often heard stories and songs by the famous Tsebelda storytellers and singers who were frequent guests in the home of my relatives.

That's where I heard the legend of Abrskil, who fought God himself, and the legend of the ancient warriors narts.\* I remember that when we wanted to praise someone for speaking well, we compared him to the nart who made a pot of water boil with his eloquence. The story of that nart was told quite often. I heard it several times: it was about how the narts argued which of them was the most silver-tongued. Each, in turn, went up to the pot as he spoke, but the water remained cold. Only when the most eloquent of them spoke, in the middle of his speech a bit of smoke rose up from the pot, and by the time he finished the water was bubbling and boiling his oratory was so smooth, honest, and just.

My mother's brothers valued hospitality most, and then eloquence.

I seem to be blinking often today, probably because I'm recalling the deceased.

Everything that I knew in childhood is carved in my memory like the inscription on a tombstone. The years pass, but neither rain, nor snow, nor wind, nor sand storm can erase the epitaph.

Don't be surprised, Sharakh, that I remember the languages of my childhood. I would be amazed myself if I had forgotten them.

Life forced me to learn Turkish and Arabic, and I am grateful for that. I had a hard life, and wouldn't have survived without those two languages; knowing them didn't help make me happy, but it kept me from dying.

You told me yesterday that neither in Turkey, nor in Syria, nor anywhere else have you met another person, but me, who can speak the language of the Ubykhs. You also said that in the Caucasus, in the land of the Ubykhs, there's not one person left who can speak the language. Perhaps I misunderstood you, but it seems you mean to say the language of the Ubykhs has disappeared, it no longer exists. But even if you're right, to me it can't be the truth.

You have said several times that you have visited the land of the Ubykhs, that it's nearby—all you have to do is cross the Khosta River and go toward the Sochi River. I don't know what it's like today, but then the river was wide. Tell me, when you stood looking at the river did it talk to you, or didn't you understand it? Since it flows it talks; it will stop talking only when not one drop of water is left.

Probably when you went to the land of the Ubykhs you could not help but see our holy place, the refuge of our almighty Bytkha. Some people called it a shrine, others—an icon. A green meadow lay under a tall hill, and on the hill there were seven huge oak trees protecting our holy place with their foliage. Their branches brushed against one another, their leaves whispered to each other. When you stood there couldn't you hear how they were talking in our language? Couldn't you see the numerous scars in the trunks left by the hot candles attached to them each spring by the worshipers of Bytkha?

When I lived there in the land of the Ubykhs I heard elders say many times that at the beginning of the summer the shrine disappears from the holy place. Suddenly there is thunder and it flies away into the sky amidst sparks of lightning high up in the mountains till the end of the summer when it returns.

I remember the year we moved to Turkey something terrible happened to our shrine. It was in the middle of the winter on a frosty night when against a clear sky thunder broke from the holy site; thunder that lasted several minutes without interruption. All of us, young and old, ran out of our houses not comprehending what was happening, when suddenly we saw our shrine blaze through the sky.

Never before had any Ubykh seen the shrine leave its sanctuary, nor return to it, in the middle of the winter, only in the summer.

Everyone took it as a bad omen.

Did you ever see under those same seven oaks the eternal source of holy water? If you saw it and stood over it, didn't you hear its voice?

I also want to ask you whether you were in Matsesta, there where the fiery water flows; where the land sheds hot tears? Didn't this fiery water that bursts forth out of the earth say anything to you?

But even if you didn't notice and didn't hear anything else you must have seen the sea on our coast. Didn't it speak to you? Didn't it say anything?

And what about the graves of our ancestors? I don't believe the tombstones are silent. They can also talk to you if your memory has not run dry, if you're capable of lending an ear to silence.

And what about the birds who live there and not here? You didn't hear their language either?

No, my dear Sharakh, a language cannot die as easily as you think, because it lives not only on the tongues of human beings, but inside them too, and not only inside them, but also inside water, land and stone. I believe that there in the land of the Ubykhs branch still talks with branch, stone with stone, and stream with stream in my own language!

My father and my grandfather were peasants. My grand father died before I was born, but I was told that he was a shepherd, that he tended the cattle of a nobleman to earn a living for his family. My father, Hamirza became a peasant. He grew millet and corn and worked so hard from morning until evening that I remember him lying down when I would wake up in the middle of the night, but I don't remember him sitting up in the middle of the day.

My mother and father's first child was my elder sister, Aisha. I was next, then my younger brother, Mata, and then my two younger sisters, Juna and Kuna. They were twins.

Up until our emigration to Turkey we lived together, except for Aisha, who lived in a nearby village because she married a peasant there by the name of Garun.

We had several beehives, and every autumn we sold some corn and nearly all our honey and bees-wax in return for salt, soap and most importantly, gunpowder.

When there were droughts, or heavy rains and the crops were bad, my father and I would leave my little brother at home and go up the Sochi River to chop box wood. There weren't any roads so we would drag the wood on oxen up to the shore and sell it to Turkish merchants who sailed there. They paid little and we also had to pay Shardyn, son of Alou for cutting down trees on his land.

Of course we paid him little, less than we would have had to pay somebody else. There was a good reason; we were related. Like the Abkhasians we, Ubykhs, had the honorable custom of taking in foster children. We peasants would bring up the children of noblemen in our own homes, thus becoming relatives. Sometimes a peasant made arrangements before a child was born. He would send the most highly respected villagers to the future father and ask through them permission to touch his hem, which symbolized becoming relatives.

If a nobleman sent his son to be brought up by the peasant and was wealthy and powerful, the peasant would regard him as a patron and count on his assistance.

The nobles, however, were quite discriminating. They did not give their children away in fosterage to just anyone, but carefully selected which peasant family it would be better to establish a relationship with, which family would be more useful and whose support, if necessary, would be the most reliable.

We were the relatives of the nobleman, Shardyn, son of Alou, who had been raised by my grandmother. We cut down box wood in his grove and paid him less than we would somebody else. Sometimes we just sent him presents.

Shardyn, son of Alou, was the foster brother not only of our family, but also of the entire Zolak kinship group. All our kinsfolk were to stand up for him if necessary.

Shardyn, son of Alou, like all Ubykh noblemen, lived in a nice, strong house built of choice chestnut wood. He owned land, woods, pastures, and fields. The people of our village grazed his and their livestock on his pastures, and together they ploughed, sowed and harvested his fields. They also picked grapes for him, and made wine not only for them selves, but for him too.

I remember how on holidays all our relatives offered him presents: a kid, a lamb, or a young bull. They gave him nuts, honey and wine, whatever they had.

I will always remember Shardyn, son of Alou, as a warrior. Day and night a saddled horse was always waiting for him, and his weapons were also ever ready. I can't even remember him doing anything else but fighting in war, plundering and raiding.

Sometimes after a raid, if it was a success, he went to the seashore and sold slaves to merchants who came there on Turkish ships and feluccas.

But he always kept a few of the slaves to work in his home as servants—any prisoner was his personal property—and he could sell them, kill them, or return them for a price.

When there was strife between neighbors, or between nobles (that happened frequently), Shardyn, son of Alou, went to the communal meeting where the dispute was discussed and the men from our kinship group always accompanied him there to protect -him from danger, or to seek revenge if he were killed.

Each time he was accompanied by a different man. But my father Hamirza, as his foster brother, followed right behind Shardyn, son of Alou, everywhere he went. I heard that in ancient times, in the days of the Abkhasian kingdom, the land of the Ubykhs was part of Abkhasia, but not in my day. We weren't subjects of Abkhasia, nor did we have our own sovereign prince. There were several influential noblemen among the aristocracy and although they fought each other for power they ruled the Ubykhs together. But I'll talk about that later when I tell you about our misfortune.

My father Hamirza was a kind and fair man. When there was a dispute in the village he was often asked to pass judgment calmly and fairly. In war and in raids he was daring and ruthless and valued courage above all else.

When my brother and I were still children he taught us how to use a saber, to shoot on target, and jump on a horse fearlessly. In the winter we went hunting in the mountains, practiced shooting, and set traps. If it snowed we went hunting on skis. He taught us that too.

The sea was nearby and Father took us there to swim, row, and put up sails. Ubykhs went out on their boats sometimes for fish and sometimes for other prey—we would go to the shores of Abkhasia to plunder or would rob the feluccas of Turkish merchants who couldn't get away to the open sea in time.

My mother Nasi, after my twin sisters were born, was often ill, but just as in her youth she wasn't afraid of any thing and would go without any escort to Tsebelda to visit her relatives. She went on horseback with only a gun, and me, a mere boy. When I close my eyes I can still visualize her as a young woman. She was tall and very slender, and her auburn braids reached practically to her heels.

We were poor, and had many cares and worries. But I remember those days as happy ones for my family, although perhaps they only seem happy in contrast to the terrible things that happened to us later on.

When you're my age childhood seems the shortest time of life: before we knew it we weren't children anymore, but warriors, the youngest of them, but obligated to march with the rest.

I was in three raids with my father, brother, and the other men in our village. The first raid was short: we went southward to Abkhasia; the second and third were longer: northward far over the mountains. Those raids to the north were already in those dark days when the Russian czar waged war against the Ubykhs.



The war lasted not one year, or two, but much longer. I can't even remember how long, but I remember very well how winter changed to summer many times while the war kept on and on, and toward the end of it every single man was fighting except for the sick and the elderly. It was especially hard in the summer when we had to carry guns and food supplies with us at all times, even when working in the fields, so that we could be ready to gather at the assembly place at the first call. Yes, dear Sharakh, those were dark times. Even the best stallion couldn't have jumped across the river of blood we shed then. But no matter how much blood was spilled it didn't bring the Ubykhs anything but grief and, as you know, the most bitter thing is blood shed in vain.

We still had no idea how strong the Russian czar was, how many soldiers he had, nor the true intentions of the Turkish sultan who incited us to war from the very beginning. Oh, my dear Sharakh, when mourners at the casket cry and scratch their faces and chest till they bleed, it only eases the anguish of the relatives; nothing can help the dead. And doesn't the same thing go for my story?

My father, brother and I took up our arms and never put them down till the end.

Of course, the land of the Ubykhs was never peaceful: we couldn't imagine life without plunder and raids, without selling slaves overseas to merchants in Turkey, hostility between families, between the Ubykhs and neighboring tribes, without abducting women, and feuds. But when all the Ubykhs were in danger we forgot about everything else, except this menace.

Ubykhs had always been able to defend themselves from anyone who infringed on their freedom whether they were neighbors, or came from afar—Greeks or Romans, Arabs or Turks. There were legends about some wars, and the elders remembered others, but no one could recall a time when Ubykh men were not trained as warriors. We simply could not imagine any other way, or that anyone capable of holding a weapon could refuse to. And if such a culprit did appear among us, he was stripped of his name and exiled.

Every family, no matter what time of year, even in the summer, in the hottest season, was obligated to send one warrior on a march at the first call. Ten men chose a leader, and those leaders chose their leader, and so on down the line. When several thousand men went on a march they elected a supreme commander who had done battle many times, who was experienced, patient and brave. After being elected, his orders were law for all warriors, whoever they were—peasants or noblemen. He was the one to decide when and where to gather. And he said how many infantrymen and how many cavalymen were needed. Every single man, except for the supreme commander, was to carry with him all necessary supplies: dough mixed with honey, smoked meat, smoked cheese, red and white salt. Everyone had to bring along two pairs of soft leather boots, wool leggings, and a felt cloak. Some were also asked to take along saws, axes, shovels, and ropes in case we needed to put up a bridge across a river, or build huts for sleeping in cold seasons.

Before a march someone would blow a brass horn like the one I have.

## **Haji Berzek Kerantukh**

Haji Berzek, son of Adagva, was the supreme commander of the Ubykhs for twenty years. He emerged victorious after many bloody battles, and when the generals of the Russian czar could not take him by force, they decided to get rid of him by cunning: they announced they would give one thousand silver rubles to anyone who brought them the head of the recalcitrant supreme commander

of the Ubykhs.

However, his good fortune continued: not one man turned traitor. In the end, he stepped down from his leadership voluntarily.

I never did know the real reason: perhaps he did it because of his advanced age, or maybe the course of events took the people further and further along a path that the old and experienced warrior thought was too dangerous, but didn't have the strength to avoid. At any rate, he suddenly resigned as military leader, returned home, and

died soon afterwards. That happened the year after the end of the big war between the Russians and the Turks. His nephew Haji Berzek Kerantukh took over as the new supreme commander.

Many were unhappy with the replacement; they thought he wasn't the best choice. But a war was on, so there was no time to argue or hesitate, and besides, the man's uncle had been a great leader.

Soon after Haji Berzek Kerantukh became the leader of the Ubykhs many decided the choice was right; he proved to be firm and brave, although rumor had it before that he could wobble like a rotten tooth, back and forth, and the reputation was well-deserved. Not long before the beginning of the big war, he made peace with the czar's generals; he even received a military rank from them and was paid in silver rubles. Then for several years while his uncle was fighting at the head of the Ubykh army against the czar's generals he sat at home on his carpet and played backgammon.

If it hadn't been for the Crimean War, my dear Sharakh, the fate of the Ubykhs might have been altogether different. When the Russian army retreated from the Abkhasian and Ubykh coast during the war, the Grand Vizier Omar Pasha landed his troops in Sukhumi. Mullahs came across the mountains from Daghestan and sailed in from Turkey. They went through our communities telling the people the Russians were defeated and would never return.

"We have come to you forever," they said, "to raise high on your mountains the sacred banner of the great sultan, the representative of Allah on earth."

That's when our Haji Kerantukh turned away from the czar to the sultan, tore the shoulder straps from his Circassian coat and stopped taking the silver rubles.

The sovereign prince of Abkhasia, Hamutbei Chachba, remained on the side of the czar, but our Haji Kerantukh went over to the sultan. That's when he was made our chief and he did not turn back when the Turks soon afterwards began sending their soldiers on ships back to Turkey.

The czar's generals began returning one after another to take up the fortifications they had left. Here Haji Kerantukh showed his firmness and courage that many of us had not expected the Turks were gone, but he continued fighting the czar's generals. The czar's warships began landing soldiers near Tuapse, Adler, and at the mouth of the Sochi River. They were in no hurry to advance deep into the territory of the Ubykhs. They just built or restored their fortresses where they landed, but we all realized they would not stop at that. And our chief, Haji Kerantukh, knew that very well. Wherever he could, he tried to interfere with the landing of the czar's troops and rushed to attack their fortifications before they were finished.

We were proud of our own staunchness, but to tell you the truth, dear Sharakh, by then our people were worn out by war. People didn't have time to come together even for funerals or weddings, to hoe what was sown, or to bring in the corn that they had managed to hoe.

My Lord, how long ago that was and how many times since then everything has changed in this uncertain world!

Life is often compared to the sea and rightly so, because, as in life, the sea's pitiless waves sometimes destroy and bury all life forms in their way, and sometimes, satisfied with their easy prey, quickly retreat. But there, where the waves have rolled back and forth life disappears just the same, like the water left on shore to dry on the blistering hot sands.

I always remember that when I think about what happened to the Ubykhs, and I hope to God I can tell you everything about it step by step.

Suddenly good news ran through our villages: the Russians wanted to sign a peace treaty with the Ubykhs, and within a week on the banks of the Mzymta, where the ferry crossed the river, a general sent by the czar was to meet with our leader, Haji Kerantukh. The mediator in these talks would be a man brought up by the Ubykhs, Abkhasia's sovereign prince, Hamutbei Chachba.

Haji Kerantukh had had disagreements with some of the influential people from other noble families, but after proving his bravery in battle, the Ubykhs trusted him. If you want to know what he was like

then I can tell you he was no longer a young man, but still did not have gray hair, he was of average height and strong build, moved quickly like fire, had a powerful and loud voice, and a heavy, imperious look. He liked staring at a person to force him to look away or lower his eyes.

Like many other young Ubykhs, I was intoxicated by Haji Kerantukh's fame and courage. I loved him so much I was always ready to shield him with my body, but through no fault of mine, I never had the opportunity in the three years I was one of his bodyguards. Three years I was near him and tried to imitate him in every way the way he tucked the flaps of his tunic into his belt; the way he rode on horseback letting his hand in with the whip hang, and leaning his saddle slightly to the left.

Now that my long life had made me wiser with experience, when I remember what Haji Kerantukh thought and did, then and later, I realize he was too impetuous, too conceited, too impatient, and most important, too shortsighted. But in those days because of my youth and my inexperience I did not notice any of this.

Oh, youth! The best thing about it is that it knows no fatigue and is unable to look back.

I had been in raids, and in battles many times; with my saber bared I had raced through gunfire and I no longer looked away at the sight of death, but all the same I felt young and carefree, unaware that I was hanging by a thread.

I remember well that day was unusually cold; spring had already changed to although summer.

One and a half thousand soldiers ready for the march stood holding their horses by the rein in the wide clearing near the holy place of Bykhta. Haji Kerantukh was meeting with the most influential Ubykhs under the seven age-old oaks I told you about. All the warriors saw how they argued for a long time but few of them knew what it was they were quarreling about. But I was a bodyguard and was close enough to hear what was going on. Haji Kerantukh was adamant about not taking so many soldiers with him to negotiate with the czar's general.

"I don't want him to think I'm afraid of him," said Haji Kerantukh. "I'll only take ten men, and the rest will wait here."

But the others wouldn't agree with him. They said the meeting could end not in peace, but war; that the czar's general could not be trusted; that they had already been known to take leaders and Caucasians prisoner one by one and send them to Siberia with its harsh climate; that if this meeting would have a dangerous outcome the Ubykh leader needed soldiers nearby.

Finally Haji Kerantukh agreed. They all rose to their feet at the same time, he jumped on his horse, and led his one and a half thousand horsemen to the Mzymta River.

Usually when so many soldiers marched together they all sang. That morning we moved in silence; we were ready for battle, but behind us were our homes, our families, our neglected fields. Although we were ready to fight, we could not help but think the bloodshed must someday end. Perhaps the decision to end it would be taken today before sundown.

Suddenly Haji Kerantukh, who was galloping ahead of the rest, stopped abruptly, dismounted and gazed into the sky.

We also got down and lifted our heads to the sky. What we saw was a flock of ravens flying westward, forming a thick black trail across the sky. We were all unnerved, but we kept quiet and waited to see what Haji Kerantukh would say.

"Call Sakhatkeri over here," he said while continuing to peer into the sky.

In a minute Sakhatkeri had pierced through the ranks of the warriors and stood before Haji Kerantukh. He was a very tall, thin man with long whiskers and a white turban. He was the Ubykhs' main mullah and the only one among us without a weapon.

"What could it mean?" asked Haji Kerantukh pointing his finger to the birds already far in the distance.

"It's a bad omen," said Sakhatkeri. And just like Haji Kerantukh, continuing to look into the sky after the birds, he added: "I don't know if you should continue on your way. The crows blacked out the light of day for us today, and the infidels you're supposed to meet won't let us live tomorrow. Allah has already given us His blessings to leave this land and move to another. The sooner we carry out the will of Allah, the better it'll be for us!"

Haji Kerantukh stopped looking at the sky, and stood thinking for a long time with bowed head. One thousand five hundred dismounted soldiers also stood in silence waiting for his decision. Only the horses' snorting could be heard.

Haji Kerantukh jumped on his horse so quickly that I did not even have time to hold the stirrup for him. We galloped on.

After crossing the Khosta River, Haji Kerantukh ordered the troops to divide into three units: one unit he sent to the sea, to the mouth of the Mzymta River to watch the sea approaches, the other upstream to block off mountain paths in case of an attempt to hit us from the rear. He took the five hundred remaining men with him down to the Mzymta ferry crossing.

There was a hut built for our leader on this side of the river under some big plane trees. Two tents, one for the general and one for the sovereign of Abkhasia, were on the other side.

A Russian officer with an interpreter came over to our side of the river and returned to the other side along with one of our Ubykh noblemen.

After brief negotiations it was decided the meeting would be held on our bank.

A ferry approached bringing the Russian general, his officers, bodyguards, and the Abkhasian sovereign prince Hamutbei. The last time I had seen Hamutbei was when he came to mourn the death of his foster parent, Haji Berzek, son of Adagva. Although he had cried then, he looked even more somber this time; as he walked uphill from the ferry he was quiet and seemed to have trouble putting one foot in front of the other.

The czar's general was wearing a uniform with shining epaulettes, had a round face and a round, red beard.

I had never seen a czar's general up so close. Although he was an infidel, there wasn't anything special or frightening about him.

When everyone met at the center of the meadow near the tent the sovereign prince of Abkhasia, Hamutbei, made the first move toward Haji Kerantukh. He bent over to kiss his chest as it was correct for him to do since he had been raised in an Ubykh family.

When the talks began I, guarding Haji Kerantukh, stood over his shoulder and heard every word.

Don't be surprised, Sharakh, that although I have forgot many other days of my life, I remember every minute of that day, from the first to the last. It was the day that decided the fate of my people. Later there were other days crucial to our fate, but that was the first of them. I remember everything, even the dried stalks of last year's corn crackling under our feet. I remember what the weather was like that day: the sun would hide behind the clouds, then appear again. And I remember the wind blowing from the sea and how it began to drizzle several times, then stopped. And I remember how long the argument lasted, how it got louder and louder, because Haji Kerantukh was like a rider being thrown around on an untamed horse he could not control himself, nor the conversation. His face changed every minute, and a vein throbbing on his forehead looked like it would burst a sure sign he was hardly able to stop himself from thrusting his dagger at all those who disagree with him.

I knew him and knew that anything could happen, and was ready at any moment to come to his aid. I guess that's why, although I heard every word said, at times I stopped understanding what was being said, because I was thinking of something else: that the daggers would any minute now jump out of their cases by themselves.

The Ubykhs were represented at the talks not only by Haji Kerantukh, but also by Dziapsh Ahmed, son of Barakai. He was a man well known all over the Caucasus. In his youth he had studied in Istanbul, spoke several languages, and when the leader of the Ubykhs was old Haji Berzek, son of Adagva, Ahmed, son of Barakai, was his councilor in business with foreigners. He helped straighten things out for the Ubykhs several times, traveled to the sultan, to London, and to St. Petersburg. He was a passionate man, but cunning. He could go up to the edge and stop there when he had no other alternative. And so as you see, Ahmed, son of Barakai, was at those talks for a good reason.

The czar's general spoke first and the sharp words he used were out of line with his calm face and voice, so that I thought in the beginning the general was saying one thing and his interpreter quite another.

"You belong to the famous Berzek family, Haji Kerantukh," said the general. "You are a man of noble birth, so it is beneath you to do one thing today and another tomorrow. His Excellency the Emperor presented you with rank and title, but you proved unworthy of the Emperor's favor. When the war began you relinquished the rank and title conferred by the Emperor. Instead of being faithful to Russia, you went over to the Turks and not because you were forced to, but by your own free will. Since then you have been violating our agreed terms, keeping all your men armed, attacking our fortifications, conducting secret negotiations with the Turks, and getting weapons from them."

"General, Sir, you should watch your words more carefully when you speak to me," said Haji Kerantukh. "I'm not a rabbit that has been chased here by your hunting dogs. I am standing on my own land and not in shackles, but armed."

Blood rushed to Haji Kerantukh's face, but the general, unruffled, waited calmly for the interpreter to finish.

"But this isn't enough for you," the general continued from where he left off as though he had not heard Haji Kerantukh. "You are still counting on the Turkish sultan. We know you're asking military aid from him, that you're hoping to get it, but although you're certain there's no one stronger than the sultan, you're seeking aid elsewhere as well, just in case. We know that Ahmed, son of Barakai, who is standing near you now, went to London three years ago and on your behalf asked the British for defense and military aid against us. It was reported in British newspapers and so it's no secret. And recently you sent a letter to the British Consul in Sukhumi. That's no secret either. We have that letter now and can show it to you. I don't mean to offend you, but I can't call your actions anything other than betrayal."

The first time Haji Kerantukh interrupted the general I thought he would pull out his dagger instantly. But after that first outburst he stood and listened, immobile, like a post dug deep into the ground—with one hand held on his waist, and the other on the white bone haft of his sword. He did not look at the general, but over his head to the top of the mountains where clouds were gathering. It appeared as though he could not see or hear anything. The interpreter was nervous, mixed up words and stuttered, so Haji Kerantukh, who understood Russian, finally got tired of it all and without waiting for the interpreter to finish, with an angry grin on his face, spoke directly to the general:

"Yes, you're right. It would have been betrayal if, like some other sovereign princes in the Caucasus, I had traded my people for your ranks and your silver rubles. But praise be to Allah, as you see, no one has tempted me. General, you call that betrayal. But what do you call what you're doing, coming here with so many troops to expel the Ubykhs from their land?"

"Tell me, if all great sovereigns came together in council and asked your czar what we Ubykhs have done to hurt him, what we are guilty of, why we are being annihilated, I would like to know what he would answer."

"Yes, you are right: we once took your citizenship hoping we would live well. But we were deceived. We are used to trading by sea with whomever we please, without asking someone else's permission. You forbade all ships but yours to dock on our coast. You began calling our noblemen thieves and didn't allow them to sell war prisoners into slavery. We have our laws, and you have yours. We don't want your alien laws to be a yoke around our neck."

You want to deprive us of our Muslim faith. We know that just as soon as we are under your power you'll force our children to be christened. In time of war when you can't defend this coast from Turks, you leave and we have to take care of ourselves! Then when you return you call us traitors! And so I ask, what kind of peace can there be between us?"

Without replying, the general took a handkerchief out of his pocket, wiped the sweat off his white forehead, put his hands behind his back, went up to a plane tree and began looking at its trunk as though he were figuring out the best way to chop it down. Then he turned around suddenly and spoke to Ahmed, son of Barakai:

"Honorable Ahmed, son of Barakai, I believe you are not the least important of the Ubykhs and so I'd like to hear what you have to say on the matter."

Ahmed, son of Barakai, stood tall and erect, not moving a muscle, and did not answer the general's question right away, only when everyone already thought he would not reply:

"You do not understand us, General, and we don't understand you."

Haji Kerantukh's eyes flashed in anger; he probably didn't like Ahmed talking so calmly.

Hearing this, the general smiled:

"You are too wise, Ahmed, son of Barakai. You would like, as you say, that the chicken be brown on all sides and that the stick which turns it over the fire remain whole. But such wisdom is not for war. It doesn't work that way in war."

The general folded his hands behind his back, paced back and forth slowly, and standing in front of Haji Kerantukh, said loudly and with deliberation:

"You were the ones to force His Excellency the Emperor to take such drastic measures against you. Other Caucasians were more farsighted than you: they either moved into the valleys, or put down their arms and promised to live with us in peace, but you are still fighting, still counting on the sultan to help. His Excellency the Emperor, just last year when he was in the Caucasus, deigned to make an extremely important decision that I must remind you of once again, and probably for the last time: 'The Ubykhs must decide whether they wish to move to the Kuban Region, where they will have perpetual ownership of the land and will retain their own system of government and courts, or emigrate to Turkey.'"

The general stopped talking. He did not add his own comments to this fatal pronouncement that was no longer new to anyone at the talks. After the czar had said these words to a large crowd as he sat on a tree stump covered with a Caucasian felt cloak, they traveled quickly throughout the Caucasus. But their repetition that day at the peace talks was nevertheless like a bolt out of the blue.

"If those distant plains of the Kuban, where you want us to move, could sustain life, people would have settled there long ago," said Haji Kerantukh. "We live by the sea and are accustomed to trading. We are used to hunting in the mountains; we like our cattle to graze in mountain pastures. We are used to living here, not there. No, General, we will not put our heads into your trap. Just as soon as we leave our mountains that protect us from you, to resettle in the empty plains of the Kuban, you will do whatever you want with us. You will tell our peasants that you have abolished serfdom, but how are we to know in what way you are going to distribute or sell the land in return for the lands you are taking away from us? You want our peasants who move there to start fighting with us, their patrons, so they will lose their respect for us and stop obeying. You want to encourage these divisions so you can control us more easily!"

This time Haji Kerantukh could not remain calm. He spoke passionately, quickly, and inconsistently while the general stood quietly waiting for him to finish.

When he finished, however, it was not the general who spoke, but the sovereign prince of Abkhasia, Hamutbei Chachba, who had so far said nothing.

"If there is only one road through a mountain pass and no other, a traveler must take that road," he said. "Do not take offense, but you Ubykhs don't have any more time to vacillate; there's only one road leading through the pass."

Hamutbei Chachba said this quietly and it was obvious he spoke each word with difficulty.

"No matter what difficulties we may be having, we would rather work it out with the Russians ourselves. I don't want you to mediate anymore," interrupted Haji Kerantukh angrily. But this did not stop Hamutbei.

"I was nursed on Ubykh milk and brought up in an Ubykh family. I am a foster brother of the Ubykhs, I feel obligated to save them from disaster. I wish the Ubykhs the same as the Abkhasians—no more, no less, no better, no worse. If necessary, I am willing to prove it no matter what the sacrifice."

But Haji Kerantukh interrupted him again, would not let him finish:

"It's hard to believe you. We Ubykhs remember how you fought against us together with the czar's generals. You mentioned Ubykh milk. But you were the one who mixed it with blood. And you have nothing to boast of to your own Abkhasians. Did you not spill the blood of those of them who opposed giving in to the czar?"

"You say you pity us. But did you really pity your own people?"

"Did you not bite yourself with your own teeth?"

"If your grandfather Kelishbei, who once united us all, were still alive, neither you Abkhasians nor we Ubykhs would be on the verge of disaster now! But he was killed, and your father Safarbei gave the Russian czar all of Abkhasia without firing one shot, and now you want to throw the noose around our neck too."

The sovereign prince stood frozen with his head lowered while Haji Kerantukh raged in front of him hurling one insult after another.

"No one gave us this land," said Haji Kerantukh after turning away from the sovereign prince and stopping in front of the general. "And no one can take it away from us as long as we live. We are asking for a truce, and if you refuse, we shall continue to fight."

Haji Kerantukh squeezed the haft of his sword with his left hand, and thrust his right hand forward as though unsheathing his arms.

The interpreters hardly had time to translate. I didn't take my eyes off the general and the Russian officers with him so I would have time to pull out my sword in case of danger.

The general watched Haji Kerantukh closely in silence, then he smiled ironically and finally said:

"Fine. If it's war, let it be war. But I would still like to ask you, who dare decide the fate of your people, one more question: I know that if you sell all your belongings you will be able to buy weapons from the Turkish merchants and the English smugglers for some time. You still have guns and we even know that you recently received from Britain six rifled cannons plus two instructors to train your soldiers. But you must realize that relatively speaking there aren't that many of you. Can you not understand that you are incapable of beating us with your small numbers?"

"And if you understand you have no hope for victory, why do you want to condemn your entire nation?"

Everyone waited for Haji Kerantukh's reply; no one knew what he would say to that.

"Don't worry about us, General," Kerantukh practically shouted, trying to raise his voice as loud as he could so he would be heard by as many as possible. "No one has yet gauged the courage of a people by their numbers. And be sides, we have enough weapons and men who know how to use them. If we don't have enough warriors some day, we will slit open the stomachs of our pregnant women to get more soldiers from their wombs!"

When he finished, Haji Kerantukh looked my way and shouted, “The horses!” in such anger as though I had done something wrong.

The general did not reply. He only shrugged his shoulders and looked at the sovereign prince of Abkhasia as if to say: “So now you see for yourself that it was a waste of time.”

But Hamutbei Chachba did not budge; he still did not want to leave. Standing with his arms crossed, he suddenly addressed our leader slowly and softly:

“My foster brother Haji Kerantukh, I ask you once again to hear me out. None of us should be hasty in choosing between life and death. Before you bare your sword again think about the fact that the war is over in Daghestan, that it is over in Chechna, that it is over everywhere in the Northern Caucasus. The Caucasus has been taken over by the Russian Emperor, and those who don’t go along with this are moving across the sea where, as far as I know, nothing good awaits them. No matter what, the future will bring peace, good or bad, but peace. And it will come to every one in the Caucasus. Perhaps the Ubykhs, up to their knees in blood, theirs and that of others, still don’t understand that the war is coming to an end, that if they continue the war they will eventually perish. Who is pushing them into this madness, someone else’s hand or someone else’s tongue?

“My foster brother, I beg you in honor of the memory of my foster father, Haji Berzek, son of Adagva, in honor of the man who for many years led the Ubykhs, allow me to come to you. Send out messengers to call together the wisest of the Ubykhs: on the day designated by you I will come alone, without the general, to talk it over together—you, me, and the people. Before we part what is your answer?”

“Since you ask me this in honor of the memory of Haji Berzek, son of Adagva, I cannot refuse you, even if I wanted. Come to us and listen to the opinion of the people whose milk nurtured you. But come no later than the end of next week. We cannot wait long for you. Goodbye!”

Haji Kerantukh put his hand to his heart, bowed his head for an instant, and went quickly to his horse.

Looking back I saw how the general and the sovereign prince of Abkhasia boarded the ferry. They were probably watched from the other side of the river, too; drums beat as the soldiers stood up from under the trees where they had been resting and assumed formation.

The Ubykhs, led by Haji Kerantukh, already sat astride their horses. He cracked his whip in the air and that very second the horn began blowing shrilly. It was the signal that the talks on a truce had broken down and everyone bearing arms should again be ready to use them. That is what the horn said.

## **HOW THE UBYKHS MET THEIR FOSTER BROTHER**

“I was not a witness to all that I would like to tell you, but in those long ago days and later, when we were already in exile, the people talked so often about Hamutbei Chachba’s visit that I will have to pull out the bits and pieces from the bottom of the dry well of my memory.

“My dear Sharakh, you must know everything that I remember; everything to the last word because that day the Ubykhs’ foster brother, Hamutbei Chachba, came to our land was, perhaps, the last day we had to change our minds...”

That evening Zaurkan scraped from the well of his memory everything that had remained on the bottom of it for seventy-five years, everything connected with Hamutbei Chachba’s visit to the land of the Ubykhs.

I already knew what an unusually good memory Zaurkan had for what he had seen with his own eyes and heard with his own ears. But this time it was not so, and he had warned me about it. He did not actually remember the event he told me about, but only some of the hearsay about it and the legends and songs it had inspired. That is why this time I will not quote Zaurkan directly as I do elsewhere, but will describe everything I learned about this



page in the history of the Abkhazians and the Ubykhs from various sources even before I met Zaurkan. I personally found this event one of the most interesting. And I will add just some of the details he told me, the ones I feel are most accurate. In conclusion, I will relate word-for-word the end of Zaurkan's story, which, though it sounds more like a legend, is based totally on historical fact.

The trip by Abkhazia's sovereign prince, Hamutbei Chachba, to the Ubykhs that Zaurkan recalled took place that same summer as the talks in which Hamutbei Chachba was such a failure in his attempts to mediate.

Now he was planning to go to the Ubykhs, and judging by whom he took with him and tried to take with him, he understood so well how important the trip was not only to the Ubykhs, but also to himself, to his own status in the eyes of the new vicegerent of the Caucasus—the Grand Prince Mikhail Nikolaevich.

The trip's failure could undermine his already weak position, so Hamutbei Chachba decided to take with him people loyal to him, influential in Abkhazia and, for one reason or another, capable of swaying the Ubykhs. He took with him Emkhaa Algyd of Samurzakano, Girgual Chachba of Abzhui, and 90-year-old Maan Kats of Bzyb, who, despite his age, remained the sovereign prince's adviser on foreign affairs and, in general, on all of the most complicated matters.

On the one hand, taking Maan Kats to the Ubykhs could be a risk, because he, like the sovereign prince, had fought with the czar's generals against the people of Tsebelda, the Sadz, and the Ubykhs, and now his presence could call up memories of those bloody times. On the other hand, the sovereign felt it was even more risky to go without him on his trip that was dangerous enough as it was: Maan Kats' stepsister, born when he was nearly fifty years old, was married to Haji Kerantukh. The hope was that there fore the trip would be less dangerous and Kats could help in the talks.

Hamutbei Chachba wanted to pick up two others on the way, but he was unsuccessful. Almakhsit of Tsebelda prudently had gone hunting, and Prince Gechba Rashid of the land of the Sadz said he was ailing when the sovereign prince summoned him. It is not difficult to guess the cause of his illness: if the outcome were peaceful Gechba did not want to meddle, and if it were bloody he would obviously side with Haji Kerantukh.

The sovereign prince realized that if these two had come with him it would be easier to persuade the Ubykhs to make peace. This thought plagued him the whole way.

After crossing the Mzymta River the men on their fine steeds rode quickly to the north. They could see the sea to their left from time to time and at one point they noticed a felucca sailing rapidly away from shore.

The sovereign prince stopped his horse and asked the others to whom they thought the felucca belonged.

"It's in a hurry to leave, so it's not Russian," answered Maan Kats standing in his stirrups to get a better look at the felucca.

"They're probably Turkish merchants," suggested Girgual Chachba. "As a matter of fact, Haji Kerantukh was right when he said the Ubykhs have to trade with someone."

"They've brought more British weapons," said the sovereign prince, no longer looking at the sea, but at the path winding over the hills and disappearing in the forest.

Around thirty pack horses loaded down with guns were trailing each other up the road. The sovereign prince stood there for a long time not moving until the last horse with weapons had vanished into the woods.

"That's bad, very bad. I don't know who put out the money for the guns, but the Ubykhs will pay with their blood. It'll be a tragedy," said Hamutbei Chachba.

His fellow travelers regarded those words as prophetic, or at any rate, that's how they were recalled by the elders telling the story in the 1920s.

The sovereign prince of Abkhasia, Hamutbei Chachba, already had the rank of adjutant general in the Russian army and had been conferred several Russian military orders. He got both for helping the Russian generals subdue Caucasians who did not want to be either under the Russians, nor under the sovereign prince. The last thing he wanted to do when he set off to talk to the Ubykhs, of course, was remind them of this with his Russian general's uniform and his decorations, so he dressed simply in a riding Circassian coat the way any other Caucasian would dress when visiting another. Witnesses provided this detail. They also said that he rode practically the whole way in silence and in the gloomiest possible mood; he was immersed in some disturbing thoughts.

What could he have thought about on his way to the Ubykhs? I will not try to speculate, but would like to point out some facts about the sovereign prince Hamutbei Chachba, circumstances that complicated his life in general and especially in the upcoming talks with the Ubykhs.

Whether he was thinking about all that precisely that day, I do not know, but he did have much to think about. Before the Crimean War he had resolutely taken sides with the Russian generals in their fight against the Caucasians and thereby expanded and consolidated his own sovereign power. Consequently, during the war Hamutbei Chachba was in a difficult position: the Russian troops left the Black Sea coast because the Russian generals felt it best for strategic reasons to temporarily abandon Abkhasia, to remove their military force. The sovereign prince, realizing the danger he was in, first went to Mingrelia to his wife's relatives, the Dadiani princes, but then he decided, despite the risk involved, to return to his principality.

While he was on his way back to Sukhumi he saw what promised to bring him bad fortune: the masts of Turkish ships coming to shore. Soon after he arrived in his palace he was visited by one guest after another. The first visitor was not from Daghestan, but Istanbul, one of Shamil's\* vicegerents—Muhammad Amin, and with him was the Circassian Prince Safarbei. They said quite frankly their aim was to spread the ideas of holy war among the people of the Western Caucasus. They came to the Abkhasian sovereign to persuade him to side with Turkey. The conversations dragged on for hours, the arguments were heated, but the sovereign prince did not shift to the Turks.

Just after those two left, the Turk Omer Pasha, in charge of Caucasian affairs in the Turkish government, arrived in Sukhumi. He wanted to hand deliver a letter to the sovereign prince of Abkhasia from the grand vizier appealing to the Caucasians to fight the infidels in a holy war. But Hamutbei Chachba refused to accept the letter saying that he was not a Muslim, but a Christian.

The next visitor called himself Mehmedbei. In reality he was known in Europe as the adventurer Bandia. He was one of those whose motto was the ancient slogan: *Ubi bene, ibi patria*.\* His self-proclaimed title was commander-in-chief of the European army in the Caucasus.

This man and two other European adventurers supported by the British—Lapinsky and Brown—came to the sovereign prince of Abkhasia to persuade him there was no force in the world that could withstand the combined power of the British lion and the sultan's crescent.

The sovereign prince was promised everything—from modern weapons to eternal glory throughout the ages. But he did not give in then, nor later when Turkish troops landed everywhere along the Abkhasian coast and many princes and noblemen, ready to switch over to the Turks, began accusing Hamutbei Chachba of being nearsighted, of refusing to see which side was stronger.

There were two main reasons why the Abkhasian sovereign so stubbornly stood his ground in the face of such difficulties: he understood better than many how strong the Russians really were and, despite all their failures in the Crimean War, he did not believe they had left Abkhasia forever. If his assessment was correct, he knew that after the war, because of his loyalty to the Russians, he would be able to keep his sovereign principality within the boundaries of the Russian Empire, and would retain his vast personal landholdings, and the annual 10,000 rubles in silver that he had been drawing from the imperial treasury and had grown accustomed to long ago.

But there was another reason for his obstinacy: he knew that there were many Abkhasians who disapproved of his Russian orientation, yet he also knew that after three centuries of Turkish domination many Abkhasians, and probably even the majority who had first-hand experience with Turkish rule, would not support him if he seemed

ready to submit to the Turks. If these Abkhazians would rebel against him it was unlikely that the Turks would back up Hamutbei Chachba. Rather they would install someone else more to their liking.

When I was studying the history of those days I found a reference to the complicated situation the Abkhazian sovereign found himself in on the pages of the London Times. Here is the dispatch sent from the paper's correspondent in Sukhumi:

"There is no doubt about the aversion the local Abkhazians have for the Turks... They not only are not helping us, but have destroyed several bridges to hinder our movement, and are mining roads everywhere they can. The upper classes do not conceal their sympathies with and attachment to Russia and are horrified by the prospect of a Turkish invasion."

The steadfastness of the sovereign prince during the Crimean War was rewarded. The Russians returned to Abkhazia and, in the beginning, Hamutbei Chachba felt he was the real sovereign of Abkhazia.

However, the Caucasian War was coming to an end. Shamil had been defeated, fighting had ceased everywhere except in the Western Caucasus, and the czar's government saw less and less reason to continue supporting the sovereign princes and khans that had in the old days sided with the Russians in the struggle against the Caucasians who were still resisting. By 1862 the Abkhazian sovereign principality was the last throughout the Caucasus. It probably would have been abolished then and there if the viceroy of the Caucasus, Prince Bariatsky, had not written directly to the czar in defense of Hamutbei Chachba: "Persecuting the prince will get us nowhere, in my opinion what's more, it could work against us. His influence in Abkhazia and among neighboring tribes, as I understand, is still quite important. Therefore, I think we stand to gain by keeping him well disposed to us..."

But in the two years since then the situation had deteriorated for Hamutbei Chachba as the new viceroy of the Caucasus, the Grand Prince Mikhail Nikolaevich, feeling that the sovereign principality of Abkhazia would hardly bring any new benefit, was only thinking of getting rid of it as soon and as quietly as possible so that its very name would not remind people of its former independence.

Hamutbei Chachba had heard rumors of these plans as well as alarming reports of the peasant reform in Russia. He had no idea how or when, but he was positive that the reform would inevitably be carried out in Abkhazia and he was worried about his own future and that of his only son Georgy whom he expected to be the future sovereign of Abkhazia. He wanted to gain time; he hoped the whispered plans of the new viceroy to do away with the principality would be postponed for several years at least.

Soberly calculating the strength of the Russians, the Abkhazian sovereign was sincere when he wanted to stop the Ubykhs from continuing- their bloody and futile struggle. Hamutbei Chachba was well aware that Haji Kerantukh's determination to continue fighting was fed by the secret visits of one Turkish agent after another, and this realization weakened his sympathy for the Ubykhs whom he respected for their courage.

Haji Kerantukh was certainly brave, but lacked cleverness and foresight. Hamutbei Chachba, however, went to the talks with the Ubykhs not only because he was concerned about their future, but also because he was even more troubled by his own fate.

He had good reason to believe that the irreconcilability and obstinacy of Haji Kerantukh also stirred up his own subjects, the Abkhazians, especially in Tsebelda and other areas close to the Ubykhs. He felt that if the Ubykhs would agree to a peace with the Russians it would also affect his own subjects, that is, those of them who were considered his subjects, but actually showed insubordination whenever they had a chance.

It seemed to him that if he were successful in talks with the Ubykhs it would help him take control of those rebellious Abkhazians. This would enhance his prestige in the eyes of the Russians and, possibly, force them to give up the idea of abolishing the sovereign principality. If during talks with the Ubykhs he could accomplish what the Russian general failed to do one month before, the success would make him look so good in the eyes of the Russian viceroy that there would not be any more talk of doing away with his principality, at least for many years to come.

My digression from Zaurkan Zolak's story has only one objective—on the basis of the relatively little I have so far been able to learn of the sovereign prince, Hamutbei Chachba, an important figure in the history of Abkhasia, I would like to define what his trip to the Ubykhs just before their tragedy meant to him, and why he went to these talks at great risk.

As to their outcome, and most important, the way the event was remembered by his contemporaries, that is best described in the last part of Zaurkan's story. As I said before I recorded this most coherent part of his recollections word for word. Although it contains legendary details, the story is based on hard facts:

"You may or may not believe me, dear Sharakh, but people told me (and not one person, but many, and not once, but many times) that during the two days and two nights, that Hamutbei was on the road from his home to the land of the Ubykhs, he was silent like a mute; he never said a single word.

"He only spoke when they were already in the land of the Ubykhs and he suddenly saw a tall snow-white steed quietly grazing in a forest glade. Prince Hamutbei was fascinated by its beauty. He turned around to the men following him to show them the steed, but when they caught up with the prince the white steed was gone. It vanished as though it had never existed.

"Then, standing in the middle of the glade with his companions, the prince spoke for the first time in those two days and two nights. He told them about the time when he was seven years old and traveled this same road, only in the opposite direction—not from the land of the Abkhasians to the land of the Ubykhs, but from the land of the Ubykhs to the land of the Abkhasians.

"He was just seven years old but he rode like an adult and on a tall snow-white stallion. He was dressed in a Circassian coat as white as the horse, wore a white Astrakhan hat, and over his shoulders was a white riding hood. Next to him on a grayish brown steed was his foster father, Haji Berzek, son of Adagva, and behind them were a hundred Ubykh horsemen who sang marching songs and, without dismounting, shot into the air the way soldiers do when returning home from war victorious.

"Everyone who saw these horsemen along the way could not take their eyes off them.

"Those who did not know asked, 'Who are they?'

"And those who knew would answer, 'That's the son of Safarbei, the sovereign of Abkhasia; he was sent to be brought up in the land of the Ubykhs and is now returning home. May the young prince returning home be happy! May the day come when the people will praise his name!'

"Not to tire the small Hamutbei, Haji Berzek, son of Adagva, stopped twice along the way to spend the night, first at the Rydba princes', then at the Inal-Ipa princes'. Each time the party feasted, and only on the third day they arrived in Lykhny, the home of the sovereign prince of Abkhasia, Safarbei. The feast lasted for three days and three nights, and the most expensive gifts were presented not only to the young prince's foster father, Haji Berzek, son of Adagva, but to all the 100 Ubykh horsemen who accompanied him.

"But when the young Hamutbei was taken to his room in his father's home he remembered his foster mother who had remained in the land of the Ubykhs and cried bitterly. No matter how much his own mother caressed him and tried to comfort him it was no use. When his foster father, Haji Berzek, son of Adagva, left with his horsemen the young Hamutbei darted after him trying to jump on the horse to go back to the land of the Ubykhs.

"And so after suddenly seeing the white steed that promptly disappeared, Hamutbei Chachba, saddened by this memory, told his fellow-travelers about his childhood.

"His companions decided to drive away this melancholy by trick riding in the glade: they fired their pistols at young green apples on wild apple trees; they made a hit every time, but not even that could cheer up the prince.

"He was silent again as he rode ahead of them until they came in sight of the large meadow with the seven oaks and the shrine of our Bytkha, where the Ubykhs had agreed to meet their foster brother.

“Prince Hamutbei rode to the edge of the forest and saw that the meadow was empty. Not one person waited for him under the huge oak trees.

“What happened? Why isn’t anyone here?” asked prince Hamutbei looking over the meadow and without waiting for a reply rode on.

“He had not reached the middle of the meadow when he saw on the other side something strange and black moving toward him. He rode further, and a minute or two passed before he realized that coming toward him were women with their hair down and dressed in black from head to foot like mourners.

“Prince Hamutbei and his companions dismounted, and, handing their horses over to the bodyguards, walked toward the advancing black crowd of women. They walked toward the women and asked each other in alarm:

“Where are they going? Why are there so many? What happened? Who died?”

“But the women kept coming closer, and finally prince Hamutbei saw at the head of the procession a woman dressed like the rest, in black, and with gray hair hanging over her shoulders—she was the woman who had nursed him, the widow of Haji Berzek, son of Adagva.

“When he realized that the prince hastened toward her, but the old woman did not even look at him as he came near.

“She walked on and cried as though over the body of the deceased, and all the other women cried with her.

“She continued to ignore her foster son as she cried and wailed. When he listened and tried to make out the words he heard what it would have been best not to.

‘Have you heard, stranger, about my sorrow?  
Have you heard how unhappy I am?  
Have you heard that the one nursed by my breast,  
My foster child, prince Hamutbei, has died?  
He died a terrible death, one that the earth won’t accept.  
He died in disgrace; he died unmourned.  
The Ubykhs have lost their foster brother.  
The Abkhasians have lost their prince...’

“Hamutbei’s foster sister walked out of the crowd of mourners behind the old woman. Her hair, which she usually wore in braids, hung loose, down to her feet, and striking her head with her fist she cried loud enough to drown out her mother’s wailing:

‘Oh, Hamutbei, tell me what to do?  
Tell your unhappy foster sister what she should do?  
Could it be that for the czar’s silver  
You betrayed the land of the Ubykhs that fed you?  
How terrible it is to think of the death you died!’

“The women wept louder and louder, and in their midst stood prince Hamutbei with his head hung low, and immobile like a rock. He had seen much sorrow in his time, but he had never experienced such shame and disgrace in his entire life.

“Haji Kerantukh, having agreed to the visit, arranged to have his foster brother met like a mortal enemy.

“Finally, Hamutbei came to his senses, rushed away from the crowd of women to his horse, and took a running jump into his saddle.

“Cry, my wet-nurse mother,’ he shouted through his tears. ‘Cry, my foster sisters: I, your foster child, cry with you. Cry, cry, cry now, because later you won’t have any time! Cry, because the land of the Ubykhs is dead. And you, Haji Kerantukh, you are probably laughing at me now as I cry. But remember that you, not I, will be damned by your people!’

“Shouting all this through his tears, not feeling ashamed of them, and not wiping his tear-stained face, prince Hamutbei lashed his horse, and rode like a madman through the meadow as though he wanted to leave behind him as quickly as possible the wailing and lamenting of the women. And his companions also galloped after him like madmen, each trying to outstrip the other.”

## **SHARDYN, SON OF ALOU**

All of us, except my younger brother, were home on that fateful day for our family. He was still fighting with the Russians; we did not know where he was, or whether he was alive. My father Hamirza had been wounded in his right arm three days before; the wound was infected and painful, but he refused to stay in bed. He got up in the morning, put another treatment of painkilling herbs on the wound and bandaged it, but the pain would not abate and he paced back and forth through the house and in the yard. Every morning my mother and both sisters went to the neighbors to weave broadcloth with the other women of the village, broadcloth for the warriors. They returned home in the middle of the day to do their chores.

I was the last one to get home. For several days I had not left the side of Haji Kerantukh as his bodyguard—under fire and in hand-to-hand combat.

That day the leaders of the people were to begin their meeting to decide what to do next. I had arrived with him for the meeting, and he let me go to spend the night at home.

The cold day was turning into night, and the heavy snow fall from the morning was beginning to subside when my grandmother’s foster son and my father’s foster brother, Shardyn, son of Alou, approached our gate on his small, but strong mule.

I rushed out to help him dismount and the rest of the family came after me forming a circle around him.

“How’s your wound?” Shardyn, son of Alou, asked my father.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” answered my father, ashamed to admit to our guest that he was in pain and hiding his wounded arm behind his back.

“Our dear brother, our hope, may all sorrows and all illness pass you by, may they be mine,” said my mother and according to custom, to protect him from all illness, she walked around Shardyn three times and kissed his chest. My sisters shyly did the same.

Shardyn went into the house and we followed him. I helped him take off his felt cloak and Astrakhan hat, shook off the snow and hung them on the wall.

Shardyn, son of Alou, was short, broad-shouldered and very strong, but his waistline had expanded long ago because he was fond of eating. The edge of his long, black beard fell in curls on his powerful chest.

Mother placed a leather cushion specially for honored guests on the bench near the lit fireplace; Shardyn sat down on it.

We young people, of course, had no thought of sitting in his presence; even mother and father, although both were older than Shardyn, also remained standing in the presence of such a prestigious relative.

Mother, as she always did when Sharyn came, put up a pot to boil cornmeal mush. Father indicated to me with his eyes to go out and slaughter a lamb specially fed for such an occasion. However, when Sharyn, son of Alou, noticed my father's look, he said he was in a hurry and had no time to stay for supper.

"I heard you were wounded," he said to my father, "that's why I decided to visit you and your family. Besides, I want to talk to you, my relatives. We're living in difficult times, and you're the closest family I have. I came to consult with you." That is what he said, and as I listened to him I could not help wondering what he was leading up to, and whether what he was about to say bode us ill.

"Yes," said my father Hamirza. "True, we Ubykhs have never had such a hard time. Not only our family, but I know that everyone under your protection in our and neighboring villages have complete faith in you. We're so glad you chose our hearth to sit before in these troubled times."

Sharyn, son of Alou, took a black cigar out of his tunic pocket. We had seen him many times with such cigars that he got from the Turkish merchants. I picked a piece of coal out of the hearth for him to light up, and as he smoked he said:

"You probably know already that Haji Kerantukh has called the council together again today to decide the future of the Ubykh people. I don't know how long the council will sit, but so far no decision has been made. Meanwhile I'd like to tell you what my opinion is! I don't think there's any way the generals of the czar will let us stay here on our land. The battles are waged higher and higher in the mountains, closer and closer. Before we're all bayoneted to death wouldn't it be better to try to save ourselves?"

"The Turkish sultan, Allah's representative on earth, will save us if we agree to become his citizens. Nothing but his great power can save us. A few days ago a Turkish merchant from Istanbul came to my house. I've known him a long time and trust him. He's not only wealthy, but knows people close to the sultan. I realized he had come here not only to trade with us as before. He told me about our neighbors, the people of Natukhai, who have already moved to Turkey. The sultan kept his word and settled them on land of their own choosing. The land where they live is heaven on earth. It's never too cold or too hot; the weather there is always like it is here in late spring and everything grows there that anyone could want. If a jay flies over with a grain of corn in its beak and drops it on the ground, within a month in that spot there'll be a tall stalk with a few ripe cobs! He told me the buffalo are used only for ploughing, not for milking because, like our alders, milk trees grow there everywhere: you just slit the trunk with a knife and you get pitchers full of rich milk! If you want to make sour cream out of it you just tear off a leaf from the tree and put it into the milk—before you get home you'll have such thick sour cream that you can cut it with a knife. And he said the pumpkins there are so huge you can't cut them, but have to use an ax to chop them up. The things he told me seemed so incredible that I couldn't believe them at first, but he took a letter out of his pocket that confirmed everything. The letter was written by a man from Natukhai by the name of Murat whom I have known for a long time. We visited each other many times before he left Turkey. You probably have heard of him yourself.

"Here's the letter he sent me," said Sharyn, son of Alou, and pulled out of an inside pocket of his Circassian coat a piece of paper folded over many times. He opened it up, straightened it out, and held it up so we could all see it.

But who could read it? Not only in our family, but in the entire village there wasn't anyone who knew how to read in any language. And I don't think my father's foster brother, Sharyn, son of Alou, could read very well, either. He just held the letter in front of our eyes, and even after putting it away he continued to tell us in his own words what his friend Murat had written. Oh how he praised that man he had never mentioned to us before.

"He was also a very well respected man among the people of Natukhai, but in Turkey he was given such an important job that he has become close to the Grand Vizier himself. The Turkish merchant could deceive me, but certainly not Murat, son of our mountains, and one of my frequent guests.

"He writes that if we have enough strength to leave this hell we will come straight to heaven! He says that if I can get the people under my protection to the shores of Turkey all of us will have a happy life! That's what he writes, and calls us to come. What can we expect here? Shall we just wait for the Russian generals to make us move to the Ku-ban? If we freeze here in our native forests during the cold winters, we'll just die like flies from cold in the open plains. And we won't be allowed to practice our faith. Our sons will be compelled to serve in the army as

soldiers and everyone will have to buy his own land, because now the landlords in Russia don't take care of their peasants; they no longer have any rights over them. Where will you get the money to buy land there? And if you can't buy it, how will you survive without land? My foster brother Hamirza, we were not born of the same womb, but we were fed from the same breast! I've told you what's on my mind, and now I would like to know what you think about it."

That is what Shardyn, son of Alou, said to my father. My father stood in front of him, tall as a dry tree, and holding his wounded arm in the other.

The only sound in the room was that of the hungry fire devouring the dry logs. Although Shardyn, son of Alou, talked about miracles and promised us heaven on earth, not even thunder above our heads in winter could shock us as much as his words.

My father did not say anything for a long time. Waiting for him to speak my throat went dry and it seemed I had lost my power of speech. I could hardly hear the first words my father uttered; he began speaking so softly and slowly:

"Our foster child, you are our hope, you are wiser than we are and have seen more, know better what to do. Wherever you go, we will go and will serve you as we always have. What more can I tell you, I who can only plough and sow? But if you will allow me, I would like to ask you what has been decided at the council—are all Ubykhs going where you want to take us?"

"No decision has been made yet, and I don't know what all the Ubykhs will do, but you are my closest family and I came here to tell you my own decision," replied Shardyn, son of Alou. I saw alarm in his eyes.

"Then wouldn't it be better, our brother, our hope," said my father Hamirza, "wouldn't it be better for us to share our people's fate? While some are fighting how can others lay down their arms and go across the sea first? How can we be the first to put out the hearth of our ancestors with our own hand, to abandon the graves of our fathers, and bid farewell to our shrine Bytkha? And what about land? Will we have other land in Turkey to replace what we are leaving here or will we be forced to buy our land?"

My father had not finished; he wanted to say something else, but my mother interrupted him with her weeping:

"How will I ever know what happens to my brothers in Tsebelda? How can I leave them here and sail across the sea? I envy the dead, those who did not live to see this day!" My mother wept bitterly, and my sisters stood behind her also crying as they leaned their heads against her back.

My mother seldom cried, and Shardyn, son of Alou, seeing her this way for the first time reproached her:

"My sister, your courage has always been admired by men. It doesn't become you to shed tears at a time like this! Your brothers in Tsebelda are real men. They will not agree to live under the rule of the czar's generals. As far as I know they are either waiting for us or, perhaps, have already left for Turkey. And you will soon see your brothers alive and well there, on the blessed land of the sultan. And you, Hamirza," he said, turning to my father, "don't you worry: no one will make you pay for your land. I, Shardyn, son of Alou, tell you this. But here who can say whether the generals will resettle us in the Kuban, or make us move even further? They promise us the Kuban only because we still have guns in our hands! But when we no longer have them who will stop the generals from moving us straight to bitter cold Siberia, depriving us of our faith, and making us christen our children?"

That very minute he was interrupted in the middle of a sentence by the thunder of cannons from far away on the coast. It was so sudden that it seemed as though a demon had unexpectedly jumped out of the earth right next to our fireplace.

"Why are you standing there so calmly with that pitiful scratch on your arm when it may well be that those cannons over there have killed your son!" shouted my mother Nasi.

When she heard the thunder of the cannons she stopped crying and looked around at us all with angry eyes.



“What’s the matter with you? Keep quiet and have patience!” Father scolded her.

Mother did as she was told, but she kept looking at us in such a way that I wanted to crawl in a hole.

Meanwhile the cannons kept firing on the coast.

“If you want to survive I advise you to get ready to move, starting tonight,” said Sharyn, son of Alou, and turned to me: “You, Zaurkan, should remember that many young people wanted to be Haji Kerantukh’s bodyguard, but you got the job thanks to my influence. I wanted you to be close to him so that your family would eventually rise to the status of the nobility. The only thing that prevented it was the misfortune that befell the Ubykhs. I put you in Haji Kerantukh’s suite myself, but now I say you must leave him! He’s still keeping it a secret, but I know that he’s planning to sail for Turkey with all his relatives and subjects. And I don’t want the grandson of my foster mother to serve him not as a bodyguard in war, but as a slave on the journey. You must leave him now and return under my wing!”

What he said cut through my heart like a dagger.

“You’re not telling the truth,” I shouted. “Haji Kerantukh will fight to the death. He’s no coward. I will never break my oath and leave him!”

“What’s the matter with you?” interrupted Sharyn. “I don’t like the way you’re talking to me.”

But that did not stop me.

“I beg you to forgive me for speaking so boldly to such an honorable relative as you,” I said. “But I can’t understand you! Wasn’t that you who went first into battle many times? Wasn’t that you who many times—before battle and after—told us that every one of us killed in the holy war with the infidels goes straight to heaven? And now it seems we can go to heaven if we put down our weapons? And that heaven is Turkey, and you’re persuading us to go there? What were you thinking of before, you and other respectable people like you? If it’s so simple to escape to heaven then who up there in the sky will appreciate blood spilled in battle? Who in heaven will accept those who have died in vain? And you, my father, why did you raise us to be true men? Why did you teach us not to fear death when we defend our land?”

I could not understand myself what had come over me, but nothing could stop me now, although until then I had never, not only in the presence of our relative whom we worshipped like a god, but also in front of my father, dared raise my voice.

“Shut up,” said my father. “I’m ashamed of you. You spoke too loudly even for my ears. You have disgraced us all by speaking so brazenly to our dear relative Sharyn, son of Alou! Would he have come so far to see us on this cold winter day if he did not love us, simple and plain people that we are?”

Having lashed me with his tongue, my father turned to Sharyn, son of Alou:

“Forgive us that we did not realize right away how we should answer you. If you, our closest protector, are certain that we should go with you to Turkey and that we will have a good life there, all my family will go there and will be inseparable from you.”

My father stood before Sharyn, son of Alou, looking downcast and guilty as he spoke. He was afraid that Sharyn was offended. But our guest, on the contrary, livened up, rose from his cushion and, lashing his boot with his whip, spoke as though none of us had ever contemplated arguing with him:

“You must not waste time; begin packing right now. Don’t forget to take food with you, too. I have to go now and start getting ready for the voyage myself, and if I need your help I’ll tell you. In the meantime, Hamirza, if your wound, thanks to Allah, is not serious, visit all the homes of our relatives and neighbors—you’re not an elder, but they respect you—and let them hear what you have to say on my behalf! Tell them not to spill their blood any

more in vain, to prepare for the trip, and not to worry. Tell them that Sharyn, son of Alou, will be with you and them everywhere. If some one else comes and starts convincing them to go to the Kuban they should refuse!”

Having decided everything for us he did not waste any more time, but got on his mule, and left.

The custom was that the nobility rode on horseback when they went off on a march or to visit their equals, but rode mules when they went to see peasants in their province, because it was easier to travel on mountain paths and they did not have to worry about how they looked.

He rode away on his mule and after seeing him off we stood staring gloomily at the fire as though we had come back from a funeral.

Mother did not make any cornmeal mush, she did not hang the pot over the fire, nor did she put the chickens back in their pens. She sat quietly and wept bitter tears. Father did not go out to milk the cows; he sat silent by the waning fire, thinking. His forehead broke out in beads of sweat several times and he wiped it with the edge of his riding hood.

Even when our dog howled outside, probably frightened by the sound of cannon fire brought up with gusts of wind, Father did not go outside, did not shout at it or chase it away, although he knew a dog’s howling was bad luck.

The un milked cows in the yard mooded, and the rooster suddenly crowed in the evening as though it did not want to wait until morning to tell the whole village that the master of the house was planning to extinguish the fire in his hearth forever.

I sat across from my father and stared at the weaved twig wall of our patskha,\* at the ceiling black from smoke, and at the chain hung by my grandfather over the hearth. I had been used to all that since childhood, taken it for granted, but now it seemed beautiful and good, and I was very sorry to be parting with it all.

I had already got accustomed to thinking about how next autumn I would bring home Feldysh, the neighbor’s daughter. They were not neighbors who lived close, but in the next village. We had met by chance a long time before and then we met many times after that on forest paths that led from our village to theirs, only not accidentally. I knew that my family had already guessed about our intentions and was getting ready for the wedding. But after that day’s visit I could not imagine how I would bring her to our home when it no longer existed.

“Will we get married?” I asked myself. The longer I sat and thought about all this, the more anxious I was for the sunrise to come so I could saddle my horse and go to her.

My mother often took a deep breath through her tears and the name of my younger brother was barely audible on her lips. And my sisters too—they either sighed or cried.

I don’t know how long we would have sat there if our dog had not barked suddenly. Someone was coming up to the house. I had just got out the door when I saw my brother who was being led, or rather carried, by two men. I helped them carry him into the house and lay him on a bench. He was all covered with blood, and my mother and sisters threw themselves at him with shrieks and tears. One of the men told us not to worry, the wound was not fatal. He was hit in the hip and would recover, but they had to leave. Without another word the two men departed.

Father wanted the fire lit so we could have boiling water quickly. Together we undressed my brother. He had lost a lot of blood and was weak, but although the wound was large it was not dangerous; Father was able to take care of it quickly. He was good at that and was well known among the neighbors for his skill. He stopped the bleeding and bandaged the wound tightly. At first he gave my brother some matsoni\* diluted with water to drink, then he got him to eat some thin gruel with honey. Only after that he sat next to my brother and spoke for the first time.

“Allah has had mercy on you and us. You returned home alive.”

“Better if I hadn’t returned,” my younger brother Mata said in a choking voice as though he did not have enough air. “We’ve lost everything, Father, everything. We were wiped out. The battlefield where we fought is covered with the bodies of our dead. Just a few horsemen survived, and we ran out of bullets and gunpowder. We attacked the chain of soldiers and although there was so much fire around us that it seemed our horses’ manes were smoking we managed to get through to the seashore. But a bullet hit my hip and killed my horse. I fell under the horse and it crushed me. Lying on the ground I saw how the last of the survivors rode to the precipice, jumped right into the sea, and the hungry sea gobbled them up together with their horses. Where are my friends? Why didn’t the bullet kill me; why am I lying here by the fire shaming your old age?”

“Calm down,” said my father. “Someone always survives a battle so he can fight and die in another.”

As he said this, Father patted Mata’s head. Mata finally fell into an uneasy sleep, and we sat awake all night at his bedside until the sun rose over the snow-peaked mountains.

Our home was plunged in sorrow, but the sun shined as though it were a holiday. Father asked my mother and sisters to make breakfast and then he made everyone eat their fill, my brother too. He finally woke up and felt much better than the night before.

Father put on his best clothes, sat at the head of the table, and looked at each of us, one at a time.

“All of you, men and women, must not lose heart. We never thought this would happen, but our foster brother, Shardyn, son of Alou, is right: we will all die if we stay here. We have to find a land where there is no war, we must get ready to go.”

“What do you mean—go? What are you talking about?” shouted my brother and sat up on the bench, although he winced from the pain. What had tormented us all night was news to him.

“Calm down. We’re sailing to the blessed land of all Muslims—Turkey. The sultan will give us citizenship and land. Our foster brother, Shardyn, son of Alou, promised to protect us in Turkey and on the way there. All we have to do is collect our belongings and go with him,” said Father with such resignation as though, indeed, there was no other choice.

“What are you saying?” cried Mata upon hearing this and again winced- from the pain. “What’s the matter with you? Just a week ago you sent me to fight the Russians. Just three days ago you were wounded. Have you forgotten how many battles you’ve been in? Just count your scars!

“Lie down, you have a fever,” said Father and forced Mata to lie down. “You shouldn’t shout. I remember my scars very well, but if we continue fighting not one Ubykh will survive.

“I don’t believe all the people think that,” I said to Father. “I don’t believe our chief, Haji Kerantukh, will lay down arms. I don’t believe anything good will come of running away to Turkey. I don’t believe the stories Shardyn, son of Alou, tells. Father, don’t let anyone deceive you!”

Both Mata and I, in turn, tried to talk our father out of following the plans Shardyn, son of Alou, had made. He sat and listened, but didn’t argue and didn’t agree with us. He sat in silence. Then he picked up his staff, and at the threshold turned to us:

“All right. We’ll wait and see what the people decide. Zaurkan, go to Haji Kerantukh and stay on as his bodyguard. Since he called together the council they should make a decision today or tomorrow. I’ll go to all the neighbors. I promised to tell them that Shardyn, son of Alou, wants them to move with him to Turkey. I’ll give them the message and listen to what each of them has to say.”

“Father, don’t go!” shouted Mata and nearly jumped off his seat after Father. “Don’t go! When other men are fighting and we can still hear the sound of cannons, how can you go door-to-door persuading people to leave this land for whose sake blood is still being shed!”

“Be quiet!” said Father.

"He'll be quiet, but he's right. You shouldn't go any where, Father," I interfered.

"Better I should die than you go," shouted my brother Mata, and throwing off all his covers he rose to his feet, began to reel, and, before I could get to him, he fell to the floor in a dead faint.

My mother and sister rushed to him after me. Father turned around and left the house.

## **THE LAST COUNCIL IN THE HOUSE OF CHESTNUT WOOD**

The council, or medzhlis, as we later got used to calling it in Turkey, the governing body of the Ubykhs, consisted of thirteen people plus two others who were representatives of the Abkhasian Sadz and Akhchipsou tribes which were actually closer to us in those days than to the Abkhasians.

Our land of the Ubykhs was divided into eleven provinces something like the Turkish vilayets, and the head of each one was a member of the council. Our province was represented by Shardyn, son of Alou. And besides these eleven representatives there were another two people on the council: our main mullah Sakhatkeri, and Musa. It seemed to me then that Musa was the most learned of the Ubykhs, but as I now realize, he was simply the most literate. He sat and jotted down everything that was decided at the council meetings. I never heard his voice; he always sat quietly, with his head lowered, behind a small three-legged table with many pens. He took one, then another, and wrote down everything in Arabic letters from right to left, with out missing a word.

The council met in the village of Mitkhas where Haji Kerantukh lived along with all the other Berzeks from his kinship group. In the summer the council met in the shade of several oaks that formed a semi-circle, and in the winter it gathered in a house of chestnut wood built collectively.

It was in that house and in my presence that the decision was made for the Ubykhs to move to Turkey; a decision that in the end resulted in my being the last person who can speak to you in the Ubykh language.

It was the very beginning of spring. The temperature was freezing the day before but that night it rained so hard that in the morning dirty snow remained only in the ravines. After the rain the sky was blue, but while Haji Kerantukh and I were riding to the wooden house it began half raining and half snowing.

Usually on such days no one even went outside; we all tried to keep warm by the fire. But that morning hundreds of people were gathered around the council house and their faces were as sad as if they were at a funeral.

Haji Kerantukh dismounted near the house. The rest of the council members were already waiting for him outside the house and followed him inside.

I remember that day very well and will tell you every thing that happened in that house. Haji Kerantukh sat separately from the rest in a large chair. Everyone else sat to his right and left on long benches. Behind them stood those we called "people with eagle minds", not the nobility, but reputed among the Ubykhs for their intelligent speeches and wise advice. Among them was Soulakh, the guardian of our shrine Bytkha. Haji Kerantukh had for many years been recognized by all as the head of the council, and I, as his bodyguard, had the right to be present in the chestnut wood house somewhat behind him.

The last one that morning to enter was the mullah Sakhatkeri. He walked slowly and cautiously in his tall turban, as though he were carrying a cup of water on his head. He walked past us all; did not look at anybody, and sat nearest Haji Kerantukh

The chiefs of the Sadz and Akhchipsou were not there. They had not come to the council that morning. But all the Ubykhs who were wise, old and had the right to voice their opinion were present. They stood in a crowd behind the benches of the council members, watched Haji Kerantukh, and waited in silence for him to begin the meeting. He usually began at once, like a man in a hurry to shoot first, but that morning he was quiet for a long time; he sat with his palms on his knees and looked down at the floor. His eyes were swollen from lack of sleep. Finally, he

raised his head, looked everyone over, quickly stood up, pushed back his Astrakhan hat, put his dagger in place, then placed both hands on the hilt and said:

“You already know how the war is going, and I can’t add anything to what was said about it yesterday. The Russians are attacking from all sides. Now they are very close, not only from the direction of the sea, but also from the north. Our scouts told me that in the night. With your consent I sent my own uncle to General Geiman to conclude an armistice three days ago, but we haven’t heard anything from him since, and don’t know what happened to him. He may have been killed, he may have been taken prisoner. You see the empty seats—the Sadz and the people of Akhchipsou didn’t come because they’re probably vacillating. Our neighbors the Shapsugs, after long fighting, as you have already heard, have laid down their arms. The Natukhais have begun moving across the sea, and all the rest are hesitating. I hope that the people of Pskhu, Dal, and Tsebelda, if they’re not hindered by the sovereign prince of Abkhasia, Hamutbei Chachba, will keep their word and come to our aid. I don’t have to tell you that the most difficult day in the history of the Ubykhs has arrived. We don’t know today what awaits us tomorrow—war or peace, freedom, slavery, or emigration. The Ubykh people are waiting for us to decide where we will lead them. Let’s decide what we’re going to do. Even if we wanted to, it’s too late now to postpone a decision!”

Haji Kerantukh looked around at everyone who was sitting and standing around him in the council house. He fixed his heavy gaze on them and sat down again pressing his palms against his knees ‘and directing his eyes at the floor.

Everyone was quiet for a long time; I tried to figure out who would speak first. I thought it would be Sharyn, son of Alou, who had long ago decided to move to Turkey, but probably would not have the courage to say that out loud here and now in the presence of Haji Kerantukh; and if he did there would in all likelihood be bloodshed. I thought about that as I watched Sharyn, son of Alou, but he was calm as though nothing was happening; he just sat there playing with the end of his black beard.

I couldn’t guess who would speak first.

The first one to get up was the mullah Sakhatkeri. He began by clasping his palms together and raising them in front of his thin beard while he spoke in a wavering voice as though chanting a prayer:

“Oh, Allah! We are your slaves! Don’t deprive us sinners of your mercy; give us your blessings!” Then he crossed his arms and looked around at everyone in the house. He even stretched his neck to see those who were standing behind others. “The great Allah has written the future on our foreheads. Perhaps not forever, but for the time being’ our people are predestined to leave this land. That is our fate, and it is a sin to resist the fate preordained by Allah! The’ infidels have forced us to choose the way of outcasts, and it will lead us across the sea to Turkey to the blessed land of the sultan, the lord of half the world. The sultan has willed it that this honored land welcomes all Muslims to it with outstretched arms! I would like to ask you, esteemed members of the council, if this is so then what are we waiting for? What’s keeping us here? The devil-inspired plans of the czar’s generals to settle us on the plains of the Kuban can only disgust us. How can we true believers live in that den of infidels? Can anyone among us want to end up in that hell when we have an open road to true heaven on earth?”

Sakhatkeri’s words were not news to many of those gathered in the chestnut wood house. He had never spoken so frankly and openly about this in the council, but for several years he had been agitating people in private conversations to move to Turkey.

I noticed that some of those who would not stand for such talk earlier gave looks of approval this time. But far from everyone shared these sentiments.

Nouryz, son of Barakai, a short, but strong man, with a wide chest, known for his hot temper, jumped up as though he had been stung. He grabbed the Astrakhan hat off his head, threw it onto the floor in front of him and, knitting his thick black eyebrows, began shouting in a shrill voice:

“This is not a meeting of men, but a gathering of old women and fortune-tellers! Why are we sitting here for three days in a row now and fortune-telling when real men are fighting? If we go on fortune-telling instead of fighting let’s at least take off our men’s clothing so as not to shame it. We can put on women’s dresses, make cornmeal mush for the infidels and serve them at the table. The peasants have stopped paying us taxes because we

noblemen have stopped being warriors. A man who owns a horse doesn't ask to be loaned a horse! We have our own land, so why do we have to ask for someone else's? Our home is here, not in Turkey, not in the Kuban. Let the cowards go where they want, but the brave Ubykhs will stay and fight right down to the very last man!"

He picked up his Astrakhan hat from the floor, brushed off the dust, and placed it near him.

"Nouryz is right!" several loud voices said in unison.

"We never have been, and won't be slaves!" shouted Murat, son of Hirips, putting both hands on his thin waist. This tall, lanky man with a black beard and a clean-shaven head went on to say, "If we refuse to surrender others will follow us who now fear we will give up!"

"Yes, we will fight. We'll see who stays alive and who will fall dead—we or our enemies!" shouted someone, but I don't remember who.

"Wait a minute. He who makes a decision without thinking it over dies before having the chance to shoot," said Sit slowly and loudly above the general commotion. He was an elder and our relative, the husband of my older aunt. Among the peasants he was considered a wise and just man. He was asked to help mediate disputes, even the most complicated—disputes over land and spilled blood. Even Haji Kerantukh respected his opinion.

Hearing Sit's voice, everyone turned to him, but he said nothing more.

"You're a wise man, Sit," said Haji Kerantukh. "Since you started you may as well continue; we want to know what you think."

"My small mind is not for such serious matters," said Sit. "Three of my Sons went off to fight. I don't know what's happened to them, but if they come home alive all four of us will agree to your decision no matter what it is. But we ask you not to be hasty, to think things over carefully. Don't make a mistake! Don't confuse the sunset for daybreak. My old eyes want to see daybreak, but they only see the sunset and fear it is bloody and soaked with cold tears."

It was only later, many days afterwards, that I thought over what old Sit had said. But at that moment I had other things on my mind: I stared hard at the two people I depended on most of all—one for the general decision and the other for the fate of my family.

Shardyn, son of Alou, sat quiet and unperturbed as though he had resolved everything for himself long ago.

Haji Kerantukh was also silent. He was like an invincible fortress that would never raise a white flag to anyone. It's sinful to say it, but that day I believed in him more than in a prophet!

Ahmed, son of Barakai, the younger brother of the hot-tempered Nouryz, rose and broke the silence that lasted probably a whole minute after old Sit finished speaking. He was just as broad-shouldered as his brother, but so stately that his small waist looked as though it could be cut with scissors. His beard was trimmed and a long snow-white garment could be seen under his black Circassian coat. I knew Haji Kerantukh could not stand him, but concealed his hatred fearing that if they clashed openly Ahmed would go over to the Russians.

Ahmed, son of Barakai, did not speak right away. At first he stroked the hilt of his dagger in its fancy silver sheath, then he took out his gold watch, checked the time, closed the lid, put it back—and only after that he began speaking in a thin, loud voice.

"We have argued much about what we should do and now we've come to the point when all of us Ubykhs are hanging on a dry branch over an abyss and can hear it cracking over our head. Who's to blame? We are more than anyone else. I'm not afraid to say openly what each of us admits to himself. We should not have waged war against the enormous army of the Russian czar. Our ancestors, and then we, fought with our eyes closed, afraid to see the full strength of our enemy and compare his strength with our own."

"You mean to say you just woke up today, Ahmed, son of Barakai?" shouted Haji Kerantukh as he jumped up from his chair. "Wasn't that you who called louder than anybody for war when Haji Berzek, son of Adagva, was our leader? Wasn't that you who went to Turkey and England for help? Wasn't that you who brought us cannons and guns on ships? Why are you talking now as if you were just born yesterday?"

"Or like a rabbit that wants to cover his tracks!" cried the mullah Sakhatkeri.

But Ahmed, son of Barakai, stood immobile until the shouting and accusations ceased.

"You're right, Haji Kerantukh," he said. "I was mistaken like all of you, and just as often as you I unsheathed my saber against the Russians. But despite all our bravery we are threatened with death. This threat was there from the moment we fired the first shots. We beat our heads against a rock, and now our heads are split, but the rock is whole. And we can't just blame the generals of the Russian czar. There was a time when we leaders of the Ubykhs made peace with them, and agreed to accept their officer ranks and salaries. But then, relying on the strength of the sultan, we started fighting the Russian generals again. It's our tragedy that the sultan, who made us believe he is almighty and wants us to spill our blood for him, is afraid to fight for us against the Russian czar. That's why our situation is hopeless and having understood that long ago we should have made peace with the Russians!"

At this point Nouryz couldn't control himself any longer and interrupted his younger brother.

"If any of us here has split his head it's you!" shouted Nouryz. "You came here with a cracked head, with the pitiful advice to ask the infidels forgiveness. Even if some one else here agrees with this cowardly advice of yours, please tell me, my brother Ahmed, how we, born of the same mother, can make peace with the Russians who hoisted up our two brothers on bayonets? Who will pay for their blood if we become friends with the infidels? I swear in the name of my departed father that if you now say again that you want us to make peace with the infidels I'll slash you to death. Don't force me into fratricide. Get out of here. Leave us!"

He had his dagger half way out of its sheath and the people standing near him had a hard time pacifying him.

"Give me a chance to finish," said Ahmed, son of Barakai, to Haji Kerantukh. He stood as immobile as before and did not even react to his brother's words. "Even if you've already sentenced me to death I still have the right, according to custom, to have my final say."

"You already said everything!" yelled Nouryz.

"Be patient. Let's hear him out," said Haji Kerantukh.

"As you know, there are many more Georgians than Ubykhs, and yet they did not start a war with the Russian czar," said Ahmed, son of Barakai, after silence was restored in the house. "They became subjects of the czar, but kept their land and their language and, who knows, maybe someday they'll get back their freedom, too."

"I could expect anything from you, Ahmed, son of Barakai, but I didn't know you're capable of betraying your faith," said the mullah Sakhatkeri. "Who are you comparing us with? The Georgians and Russians are Christians; they made peace because they have the same faith. But we Muslims have always been and always will be the enemies of the infidels."

The mullah Sakhatkeri rose to say this and having spoken sat down again as though he couldn't expect anyone to contradict him.

But Ahmed, son of Barakai, nevertheless, did object.

"Reverend Sakhatkeri," said Ahmed, "you know as well as I do that the people still remember how one thousand years ago we adopted the Christian faith and, although we have considered ourselves Muslims for a long time, we continue to celebrate Christmas and Easter. We were not always the enemies of the infidels in the past and we don't have to be in the future."

This time Nouryz threw his Astrakhan hat on the floor again, grabbed his dagger from its sheath, and, instead of taking it out halfway, pulled it out all the way.

“Haji Kerantukh, you heard how I swore by my dead father’s name? If you don’t throw this man out now I’ll slaughter him right here in this house! From now on, Ahmed, you are not the son of Barakai, you are not my brother, you are an apostate christened secretly by the Russians, you are a traitor, a sinner. Leave us!”

Nouryz’s neighbors fell on him from all sides barely able to hold him back, and Haji Kerantukh stood up and began pacing back and forth. Then he slowly walked up to Ahmed, son of Barakai.

“What else would you like to say to us? That the Russian generals tempted you? When you were in England you were given a gilded saber. What did the Russians buy you off with? When you came back from England you gave us hope that the British would help us and agitated us against the Russians. Today, when we are hanging as you say on a dry branch, you want us to believe that you had nothing to do with all this? Yes, you have indeed reached the limit!”

“All of us have reached the limit. Especially you,” said Ahmed, son of Barakai, as calmly as before and not raising his voice. “Is it my fault the British deceived us? Yes, I brought home some British weapons. But as time goes on, I see all the more clearly that they will not fight the Russian czar for our sake. What are we to them? A handful of barbarians! When I was in London they paid more attention to my strange clothing than to our misfortune. And don’t scare me with the Russian generals. Even in those places they took by force and where much blood was shed they did not kill those who gave themselves up, nor did they kill their wives and children. They did not even kill Shamil and his wives and children, but just took him to Russia. The people of Daghestan who have submitted to their rule have not been annihilated, but continue to live in their homes. Our neighbors, the Shapsugs, those of them who did not cross the sea, were also spared and live in their own homes. I know as well as you do the cruelty of the Russian generals on the battlefield, but when they are not fighting they are not murderers. I have heard that one of them has even made up letters for the Caucasians I want to publish a beginning reader. I see only two alternatives for our people: either we fight to the last mart in battle, or admit that the enemy has defeated us—and let him act toward us as his conscience dictates. I have more trust in those who fought against us with bared swords than those who secretly sold us weapons, but never wanted to spill their blood for us. I was in Turkey many times and know that we men can expect nothing good there. We are men and we cannot become concubines in harems like our sisters! Whoever leaves this land will suffer to the end! I know one thing: if we Ubykhs leave, our nation will perish. Now, do what you want with me: banish me or kill me.”

Having said that, Ahmed, son of Barakai, did not sit down in his seat again, but stood with the crowd. He no longer considered himself a member of the council.

His last words had such a strong effect that everyone was silent. Suddenly there was the pounding of hoofs, and the steps of those who had dismounted. Everyone watched the door open and saw before them Haji Kerantukh’s uncle— Berzek Arslanbei, who had been sent to make a truce with General Geiman. Without turning around he threw his wet cloak off his shoulders into the waiting hands of his body guard. With his head hung low he stood surrounded by members of the council. They stood as if that could help them not collapse under the terribly heavy load about to fall on their shoulders.

“What’s the news?” asked Haji Kerantukh.

“I have bad tidings,” said Berzek Arslanbei. “General Geiman would not see us for a long time; we waited for him practically under arrest. When the soldiers finally took us to him he did not even want to hear us out and said: ‘It’s too late. There can be no peace between us now! Those of you who want to move to the plains of the Kuban can go through our posts; we’ll let you pass. And those who want to go to Turkey can leave by three roads we’ll open up for them. They can go by those three roads to the sea and take whatever ships are waiting for them. But we will not allow any of you from now on to stay living where you are.’

“He sent us back and resumed fighting again, burning and destroying everything on his way. He is moving quickly and in two or three days he’ll be here!”



I still couldn't comprehend what was going to happen, but felt that something terrible awaited us, and looked toward Haji Kerantukh as our last hope.

Unnerved, he fell back into his chair as though some invisible force was pulling him down, and clasped his head with his hands.

Some others sat down too, but the rest stood dumb struck.

You have probably seen a forest torn down by a hurricane? That's how the Ubykhs looked at that moment in the council headquarters.

Outside we heard the pounding of horses again, and a man entered out of breath from riding and holding a wet riding hood and whip in his hands.

"Haji Kerantukh, the chief captain of the Turkish ships, Suleyman Effendi, asked me to tell you this: 'We have been waiting at the shore for more than two days and no one is paying us for it. If you do not tell us tonight whether we are needed, our ships, along with the ships of the British smugglers, will set sail!

"Get out of here!" shouted Haji Kerantukh enraged.

The warrior left with his head down. He was at fault for shouting in front of everyone what he should have whispered to Haji Kerantukh in private, thereby betraying that Haji Kerantukh had made the decision before the council gathered.

But at that moment I had no idea what the soldier had done wrong. I only understood it later.

"Everyone should leave except for the members of the council," said Haji Kerantukh. "And you Ahmed, son of Barakai, you leave too; you have no business being here any more."

So we left one by one, letting the elders go first. The last one to leave waiting for everyone else to go ahead, was Ahmed, son of Barakai.

Soon the sun would set, the clouds had cleared, but the wind was so piercing it seemed the sun was cold. The whole meadow was full of people—on foot and horseback. I did not notice Father right away; I only spotted him when he grabbed me by the shoulder and took me out of the crowd.

"What was the council's decision: are we moving or are we staying?" he asked.

"They're still discussing it," I replied.

"What's there to discuss? Time has already made the decision," said Father. "Our foster brother was right. You wait here until the council members come out, and I'll go back to Shardyn's home. I was there already. They're getting ready to move and asked me to help. I talked to our neighbors and some of them don't want to go. Let Shardyn, son of Alou, go and talk to them himself!"

I stood dumb struck. Father sounded as though every thing had been decided. Could it be true? I stood there in a state of confusion, leaning against the wattle fence around the house, when the members of the council, led by Haji Kerantukh, emerged from the meeting.

Upon seeing them, the crowd moved toward the house.

"Listen to our decision," said Haji Kerantukh, and, hearing his familiar, loud voice, I figured he would now lead us into battle. I still yearned to fight! "Today at midnight we will cease fighting with the Russians. They have won and now they can be masters of our land, but not of us! The great sultan, hearing of our disaster, has set aside for us the best lands in Turkey and sent ships to take us across the sea. We will sail there with faith that the day will come when we will return together with the soldiers of the sultan. Now, however, we must leave here, but not like a horror-stricken herd scattered by a wolf, but everyone together—each community headed by its leader.

Tomorrow at noon we will gather at our shrine Bytkha and will swear to it that we will stay together; may her wrath fall on anyone who chooses a different path than we! Saddle your horses, and tell all the people in all the villages throughout the land of the Ubykhs of our decision. We'll send messengers to Akhchipsou, Pskhu, Dal, and Tsebelda. We fought long side by side with them, so they can go with us, too. After we take our oath tomorrow we'll go down to the sea and board the ships."

To tell you the truth I was ready for death, for absolutely anything, but not that! Where was that hero of heroes, Haji Kerantukh, who led us Ubykhs so many times into bloody battles, and who we believed would never kneel before any enemy? I thought of myself as the bodyguard of a giant. But at that moment I heard the words of a very ordinary man advising us the best way to run away from the enemy.

Suddenly someone who was shouldering his way through the crowd moved me aside, and, walking forward, stood in front of Haji Kerantukh. It was the Russian Afanasy—that's what we were accustomed to calling him. He had at one time been a Russian soldier, but twenty years before, he voluntarily went over to our side, married an Ubykh woman, learned our language and our customs. Having got through the crowd with difficulty, he stood before Haji Kerantukh, took his felt hat off his head and bowed low.

"I beg you to let me say just one thing."

When Haji Kerantukh did not answer the old soldier turned toward us and spoke in perfect Ubykh:

"By religion and blood I'm one of those who you are at war with today, and you have a right not to trust me! But when the Russian general comes here I will be the first one he'll hang and so you should believe me! I did not want to shoot you so I left the army of the Russian czar, and your sister became my wife and bore me two sons. For their sake, for the sake of the sky and the land, for the sake of god and all that is holy, do not be in a hurry to leave for Turkey, to leave your land orphaned! You do not know what awaits you here, but you don't know what awaits you there either! This, at any rate, is your land. Do not leave it. Let things take their own course!"

"Shut up you infidel!" shouted the mullah Sakhatkeri, and tightened his fist as though he were going to hit him.

"He's a Russian. He wants the soldiers to come here and stab us with their bayonets!" yelled someone from the crowd.

A small old man, bent with age, who was standing next to me, leaned heavily on his staff. It went deep into the moist earth, and he whispered with a grievous sigh:

"Our lucky ancestors—they died without seeing this terrible time."

"Bring some hay here," ordered Haji Kerantukh. Several young men rushed to the shed by the tethering post where they found some hay for the horses. Haji Kerantukh told them to hurry up, and they—one after another—ran into the house with armfuls of hay and scurried out for more. When they had brought in all the hay, Haji Kerantukh stopped them, went into the house and set the hay on fire.

The crowd around the house was in a commotion.

"What's wrong with the house?"

"Who would you suggest leaving it to?"

"Oh, Allah, spare us!"

"Better we should be killed here than sink with a ship on the way!"

"If you're so brave, then why are you standing here? "Take your gun and go out to meet the general!"

Suddenly one voice, the most shrill and desperate, was heard above the others:

“Are we supposed to burn down our own homes, too?” The fire got bigger and bigger; dogs in the yards nearby began barking and then howling.

Haji Kerantukh went to the tethering post where his horse was, but halfway there he stopped; he probably was expecting me, as usual, to rush to get his horse and help him mount.

But I didn't. I stood in the crowd and watched the council house burn. Probably someone else helped Haji Kerantukh on his horse. I saw him ride by me against the glowing background of the fire.

The house continued to burn. The flame pierced through the roof and blazed up into the night sky sending out sparks.

The people lingered on as though they wanted to enjoy the last bit of warmth from the fire before sailing to an alien country. I felt as though I were flying into a bottomless abyss. Along the way I could catch glimpses of faces distorted by fear and pain, roving eyes, lips whispering something, and chins trembling.

Someone touched my shoulder. I turned around and saw Shardyn, son of Alou, on his small mule.

“Hurry up and get on your horse; follow me! Thanks to Allah you have finally seen for yourself what your master Haji Kerantukh is worth, the man you would have given your fool head for,” he laughed maliciously and rode off on his mule.

“You must have a heart of stone if you can laugh at a time like this?” I thought to myself in despair. I no longer loved Haji Kerantukh, but at that moment I disliked Shardyn, son of Alou, even more.

## **A HANDFUL OF EARTH**

Convinced that the Ubykhs were moving to Turkey, the czar's generals stopped their troops, and the Turks promised to send more ships. It took us nearly two weeks to leave. I don't know if that was better or worse, but I felt it was worse. When you know you are doomed, it's better to die quickly, than slowly.

The day we gathered in the meadow of our shrine Bytkha, the guardian of Bytkha slaughtered several white goats prepared for sacrificing, strung up on a sharp edged stick a liver and heart freshly boiled and still piping hot, and began praying. We moved in around him and began praying, too. Soulakh's voice broke, and tears streamed down his cheeks. He was praying to our shrine, and although he wasn't saying anything about our leaving, he was probably thinking about it the whole time and that was why he cried.

“Don't let us perish, oh, Bytkha,” he exclaimed in tears as he finished the prayer, and we repeated several times after him in unison:

“Amen! Amen!”

Afterwards, each of us, one after the other, went up to the shrine and swore to follow the rest into exile, and if any of us failed to do so, let our shrine condemn him to death and eternal damnation, and not only him but all his children and all his relatives!

When we were eating the boiled meat from the sacrificed goats after praying, Soulakh spoke:

“We are all leaving to a foreign land. Who will pray here to our shrine? How can we leave it without prayers, like the millstone of an abandoned mill without water? I beg the people's permission to touch our shrine and take a piece of it with us so we can have its blessings when we are far away.”

At first the elders did not agree because they felt it was a sin to touch the shrine, but then, after thinking it over, they did as Soulakh asked. Together with three centenarians, he took Bytkha out of its underground habitat that no one had ever touched.

That was the first and last time I ever saw it. The shrine was carved of stone and looked much like an eagle. Its eyes were made of gold plates and its beak, wings and claws of silver.

After praying, we set the shrine back in its place, into its underground habitat. That was the Big Bytkha, or as Soulakh called it, the elder Bytkha. But with it in the habitat was another one, the younger Bytkha, also made of stone with gold and silver, but the size of a dove.

The elders and Soulakh took the younger Bytkha, wrapped it up a few times over in a sackcloth saturated with wax and placed it in a strong leather bag. The day we set off for Turkey Soulakh tied the bag to his belt; along the way to the shore, on the ship, and when we landed in Turkey, everywhere we went, and whatever suffering we endured, the younger Bytkha was always with us. Many years later something terrible happened to it: because of the shrine a man died; a man we regarded as the hope of our people. But I do not want to run ahead of myself and tell you about all that now. I will tell you later when we come to it.

That evening Zaurkan stopped right there; he did not want to talk, anymore, and the next morning he was quiet for a long time. He sat on the tree stump and crumbled tobacco that Biram had brought him. I had already noticed that he liked processing the tobacco himself. First he would cut it into long thread-like strips, then lay it out to dry in the sun, and afterwards crumble it. As I sat there recalling what he had said the night before about Bytkha I compared what he had told me with what I had heard and read earlier about other shrines like it that belonged to various Caucasians. I analyzed and wrote down my ideas.

The word bytkha did not just signify the object of prayer, but the physical object, the supernatural powers attached to it by the people, and the place where it was kept—the mound that contained its habitat and the cold spring that had to be nearby. All that was regarded as a single entity. That was perhaps why it did not occur to Soulakh or the elders of the Ubykhs to take the elder Bytkha with them. They took only the small one, leaving the big one in place. So the younger one was treated from then on as a representative of the older one, the representative of all that remained in their homeland.

I was naturally interested in the etymology of the word bytkha. The second part of the word could be from the Adyghe word—"tkha"—god. But then what does the first part mean—"by"? I could have asked the old man about it, but I did not have the heart, and besides, I doubt if he knew.

We Abkhasians also had our ancient deities and their names were based on the names of the holy places they inhabited: Lidzaa, Lykhny, Dydrypsh, Ingal-Kuba, Elyr, Lashkindar...

Actually, the word deity in Abkhasian is related to the word "anykha", and some linguists divide the word into two parts: "an"—god and "kha"—head, that is, head of god. "Anykha" refers to a pagan deity, but there are also elements of Christianity in the concept of "head of god". Obviously, the word "anykha", which dates back long before Christianity, adopted Christian functions later on. At any rate, in form these matriarchal symbols of faith do not look like heads of god: In some cases they are stones that look like a mountain eagle; in others—the skull of a sheep; and still others—some unidentifiable creature. There are historical data indicating that Byzantine missionaries spreading Christianity in Abkhasia as early as the fourth century used ancient pagan holy places for their purposes, building Christian churches on these sites: at Lidzaa in Pitsunda, in Lykhny, and in Elyr. In these churches the word "anykha" in its later meaning was the head of the Virgin Mary, but in other places the word kept its old meaning and, as in the old days, continued to be related only to ancient pagan rituals.

That was apparently how it was with the Ubykhs, too. The people followed their ancient pagan religion while practicing Christianity and observing Easter. Later, when the Muslim religion became dominant, it was not able to completely erase the traces of the two earlier religions.

I wondered why the Ubykhs, infected with the fanatical ideas of holy war, which motivated them to migrate to Muslim Turkey, gathered not at a mosque when they were leaving their homeland, but at the shrine of Bytkha? Perhaps it was because in their minds Allah was far away, but their shrine was close? From time immemorial all the people had come there twice a year to pray; individuals had come there for blessings before leaving on a long journey; those accused of wrongdoing had come there to justify themselves in public making a solemn oath to

Bytkha. That is apparently why the Ubykhs could not leave for Turkey, a Muslim country, without taking along their younger Bytkha.

I do not know what the old man will tell me about things to come, but I am already inclined to think that the ideas of holy war did not have such a strong religious foundation in the land of the Ubykhs. These ideas came from Turkey and, having gradually won the souls of the Ubykhs, lured them to that same Turkey. It seems absurd to me as I examine the events of decades gone by that the Ubykhs could not leave without their shrine, a stone with gold and silver plates, but they could abandon their land soaked many times with their blood.

When Zaurkan finished crumbling his tobacco and rolling a cigarette he walked up to me and watched with interest as I wrote rapidly on paper. He was not the least bit impatient. But the minute I stopped writing he began speaking at once as though he had been anxiously waiting for me to finish.

...I already told you, my dear Sharakh, that of all our Ubykh noblemen, Shardyn, son of Alou, was the first to decide to go to Turkey. He had made up his mind long before. But how could such a man as he move by himself? Since he was going, we had to go too with him, we who were related to him in fosterage and our relatives, our neighbors and those peasants subservient to him, and those who were in debt to him, or were obligated to him for some assistance or protection he had given. And so when we were mourning over the land we were losing, the noblemen began arguing among themselves as to who would be leaving with whom.

Haji Kerantukh wanted to take along not only the four hundred peasant families under his authority, but fifty others, including ours. I don't think he really believed all those fairytales about Turkey, and so he wanted to have as many people as possible to serve and guard him. Twice he sent messengers to me, who repeated his words by heart:

"Why has my bodyguard left me? I am used to him and want him wherever I go to be tied to my belt, him and his family!"

I was very strong then, dear Sharakh, and when I stood next to others I was a head taller than any of them. Besides, several times I had proved my courage to Haji Kerantukh in battle; that's why he sent the messengers to me. I understood that, but as far as I was concerned Haji Kerantukh was dead since the day I told you about. I did not want to travel with him. And my father was against it too: how could the family go with someone else, not our foster brother?

Shardyn, son of Alou, of course, found out what Haji Kerantukh was up to, and had no intentions of giving him our family, nor the other families he considered under him.

Those days they were canvassing peasant households trying to avoid one another as bitter enemies to prevent bloodshed.

One of them would visit a peasant family telling the head of the household: "You have to go with me." Then the other would come to the same house and demand the family go to Turkey with him. The peasants were so confused they didn't know who they should follow.

At noon one day when the family was getting ready for dinner Haji Kerantukh rode into our yard on his spirited horse. He was all alone. Father and I went out to help him dismount. He had never honored us with a visit, so my father was even more surprised than I was. But Haji Kerantukh was not planning on getting off his horse. The horse was jerky, restlessly champing at the bit while we tried to hold on tight to the stirrups.

"Not so long ago many were ready to cross swords just to have the right to serve me," said Haji Kerantukh as he sat on his fidgety horse. "Now, as you see, I'm alone! And you of all people, Zaurkan, have no business leaving me. Didn't you swear, 'As long as my master is alive I am bound to his belt? If he dies, may I die before him?!"

He reproached me in a voice that was bitter and irritated, but my father acted as though he did not notice and tried to persuade him to dismount and come into the house.

"You have never been in my home. Pay my family the honor. The cornmeal mush is ready. Please accept our humble hospitality."

I had already let go of the stirrups. But my father still held on and as he fought to contain the horse his eyes spoke to me:

"If he gets down you hurry and slaughter a lamb. Can't you see what an honorable guest we have!"

I don't know whether Haji Kerantukh would have dismounted or left us but while my father was persuading him Sharyn, son of Alou, entered the yard, as usual, on his mule. He felt at home and so without waiting for an invitation he got off his mule himself and quickly went up to Haji Kerantukh who was still in his saddle:

"You've got no business being in my foster brother's homestead. Go back where you came from and leave this family alone!"

Haji Kerantukh looked down at him angrily:

"No matter where I go you are right behind me, Sharyn, son of Alou. Just watch out. You've probably forgotten who I am and who you are. I have the right to go anywhere I want, and my word is law."

"You burned with your own hand what made your word law," Sharyn, son of Alou replied brazenly.

"Until now you were only capable of fawning," said Haji Kerantukh. "But now it seems you've decided to get in my way? Well, if you don't want any trouble just remember that this family has decided to move with me, and don't you try to stand between me and them."

But Sharyn, son of Alou, had no intention of backing down:

"I know you lost your conscience a long time ago. But you had better fear Allah! Hamirza is my foster brother. And he and his family will only go with me. Mother's milk binds both them and me."

I could not take any more of it. At that moment I despised both of them equally.

"Even when cattle is led by a rope nobody keeps it from turning its head where it wants," I shouted. "We're not beasts, but people after all. It wouldn't hurt to ask us which way we want to turn our head?"

"Shut up. How can you speak so brazenly with such people! "my father scolded me.

"If your family doesn't want to, so be it; I won't force them. You can go with me yourself," shouted Haji Kerantukh from his horse.

But I did not even have a chance to open my mouth to answer him when Sharyn, son of Alou, hastened to reply for me:

"Haji Kerantukh, this is not the first time you're attempting to separate mother and son! Tell me, how many Ubykh youths have you sold to Turkey and at what price?"

"You'd think a man with a clear conscience is talking," laughed Haji Kerantukh. "And how many young boys have you sold to Turkey—not ours, but Adighe and Abazin boys, bought and sold? How many—answer me!"

They both fell silent as though they could not think of anything worse to say about each other.

"I repeat: don't stand in my way," said Haji Kerantukh after a pause.

"I never know where I'm going to meet you," said Sharyn, son of Alou. "You're like a sunflower that turns its head wherever it seems warmer."

“Shut up! You’re forcing me into a fight.”

“Really? I don’t see any men here capable of fighting,” replied Shardyn, son of Alou, as he looked insolently right into Haji Kerantukh’s eyes.

“Why, you degenerate. Now I know why you were careful not to lose your life in battle with the enemy! You probably wanted me to kill you, not them,” shouted Haji Kerantukh in fury, and, having got off his horse, went up to Shardyn, son of Alou, with his dagger bared.

The other one did not budge and took out his dagger, too. But before my father and I managed to keep them from locking horns my mother shouted:

“Don’t forget you were both borne by a woman.” She tore the scarf off her head, and threw it between them faster than they could begin fighting.

Ready to fight till death just a minute before, they stood there looking with hatred at each other in silence. Only the cartridge pockets on their Circassian coats moved up and down with the heaving of their chests.

“You’ll regret this someday, Zaurkan!” cried Haji Kerantukh when I went up to hold the stirrup for him.

Slipping into his saddle he spurred his horse and galloped away. Shardyn, son of Alou, paced the yard for a few minutes.

“Well, are you ready to move?” he asked my father when he finally stopped walking back and forth.

“What’s there to get ready?” said Father nodding toward the house. “We can’t take it with us! Just as soon as you let us know, we’ll leave with you.”

“We’ll be sailing on a big Turkish steamship, the Nusred-Bakhri. It’s so big they say it can take 4,000 people at one time. The captain has agreed to charge less than usual, just six rubles a person. But he wants the money in advance when we board. What’s your situation with money?” Shardyn, son of Alou, asked my father.

“I don’t know if I can afford that, but I’ll try,” said Father.

“Any other time I would have paid for you myself. But now I don’t have any money,” said Shardyn, son of Alou, throwing up his arms in resignation, and went to his mule.

Mother asked him to stay for dinner, but he had other things on his mind.

“Haji Kerantukh is like a mad dog now,” he said as he was getting onto his mule. “I’m afraid he’ll try to work on your neighbors, too. Call them together this evening in someone’s house. I’ll come myself...” He was already out the gate when he turned around to give his last instruction to my father: “And have everyone available collect the money by evening.”

Having shouted that in parting, he left, and all of us stood there in the middle of the yard confounded. We just couldn’t recover from the shock.

My mother’s white scarf was still lying on the ground. Father picked it up, shook it and said to her:

“May it always be on your gray head. May it never be replaced by a black scarf. It just saved two of our guests from killing each other, and although they didn’t spill blood I’m still frightened. We are leaving our land and going on a journey that we don’t know how will end; in the mean time our protectors are fighting over us as though they’re dividing up cattle among themselves. They practically stabbed each other. Oh, Allah, could it be that you’ve begun hating us!”

Father walked slowly up to my mother and handed her the scarf. And I remembered Haji Kerantukh’s words:

"You'll regret this someday, Zaurkan." My heart ached with apprehension. The whole evening and throughout the night I could not drive away this alarm; at sunrise I hurried to the spring where Feldysh went to get water in the morning. It was far from our house, but very close to hers, and I knew what time and where to wait for her. We had been meeting each other in the same place for two years. That day as always we met under the big chestnut tree by the spring. In the past we would often stand under the green tent not afraid of rain or sun. But now the tree had lost its leaves, and the rain was lashing its wet branches and our faces. But we did not want to leave. Feldysh reminded me several times that they were waiting for her at home, but I would take her hand into mine and she would remain.

"What should we do now, Feldysh?" I asked. "Is it true what they say about your protector, Haji Kerantukh?"

"Father says it's true. Last night I heard him telling our neighbors that Haji Kerantukh got permission from the czar's generals to take his peasants across the sea at the government's expense."

"What else have you heard?"

"I heard that Haji Kerantukh has divided up all the peasants and decided who will sail on what ships. He's forbidden everyone to go to other villages before departure. He also said the young men and women couldn't marry anyone from other villages."

"Does he want to stop us from living, too?" I shouted in exasperation.

Seeing I was so upset she tenderly squeezed my hand.

"Today my father promised to go to Haji Kerantukh and beg him on his knees to allow our family to travel with yours. He doesn't want you and me to be separated."

Oh, how she wanted to comfort me! A bitterness came over me hearing her father was ready to get down on his knees to make such a useless plea.

"Tell your father not to humiliate himself in vain. Haji Kerantukh will never agree to that if only to spite our foster brother, Sharyn, son of Alou."

She was again silent, totally unnerved by this new blow when we heard her mother anxiously calling her daughter. Feldysh started and, picking up her pitcher, she went down to the spring.

"Don't ask anyone for anything," I said as I caught up with her. "The day after tomorrow, just as soon as the sun rises, come here to the chestnut tree. I'll tell my family and we'll get married. The day after tomorrow you'll leave here with me."

"But what will become of my family?" she asked and began crying.

I embraced her for the first time and wiped the tears from her cheeks. She pulled away to get her pitcher, but I got to it first and filled it up with water. To the Ubykhs a full pitcher is a token of happiness. How could I have known that was our last happy day together!

I picked up the pitcher and placed it on her shoulder. I did not follow her, but watched as she walked along the path winding up the hill like a snake. Her slender waist bent this way and that and her two long auburn braids slid to and fro across her back.

"Where are you, Feldysh?" called her mother from above. "I'm coming, I'm coming, don't worry, Mama," she replied.

I had no way of knowing then that was the last time I would hear her voice.



Although that's not quite true. I heard her once more in my life! But that was later, much later, my dear Sharakh! We have a long way to go before that. In order to tell you all about my long life I must focus on one thing at a time, or I'll get things mixed up.

The whole next day our family packed, and the last night before we were to leave none of us could sleep. We had packed everything we were taking, and sat the whole night silently by our hearth that was lit for the last time. Father forbade Mother to cry because he was afraid tears would bring us bad luck before the long journey the same as before leaving for war. But Mother could not control herself. To hide her tears she wrapped her face in a scarf, but the tears streamed down from there anyway—drop by drop— falling onto her dress. Oh, Allah, how many tears she shed then! Where had she been hiding that sea of tears? She cried for us, and for her brothers in Tsebelda, whom she knew nothing about, and for her oldest, married daughter who she knew was already sailing across the sea.

That's how we spent our last night. In the morning we went out in the yard. My brother also walked out, but on crutches my father and I had made for him. Father forced us to eat breakfast, and reminded the women again to take as much food as possible for the journey. We did not milk the cows, and we didn't drive them out to pasture either, but let them stay in the yard.

While the family was busy making the last minute arrangements for the journey, I, as Feldysh and I had agreed, hurried to the spring. No one tried to stop me or ask any questions. It's not right to discuss such delicate matters, but the night before I hinted to Mother and Father that I would bring Feldysh to them, and knew they were prepared for that.

I ran through the woods so quickly that not even a man on horseback could catch up with me. Youth is always a time of hope, no matter what, and I ran, not paying attention to the branches lashing against my body. I was already picturing how I would bring her up to the house and call to my sisters as they approached us, "Here is my bride!"

I knew that Haji Kerantukh had many things to take care of: it wasn't so easy getting all four hundred peasant households under his control ready for the trip, and so I thought precisely this day, because of all the commotion, I would be able to save Feldysh.

I ran up to our chestnut tree, but there was nobody there. Like someone mortally wounded, who has no strength left to move and is circling in place, I agonized under that chestnut tree not knowing where to go. By the spring I saw the broken pitcher lying on the new grass.

"Why is it here, smashed to smithereens? Maybe she dropped it accidentally when she was lifting it up on her shoulder? Or maybe she did it on purpose to tell me we would never see each other again?" I had a feeling something irreparable had happened, and, no longer fearing her mother or father would see me, I ran up the hill to her house and was at her gate within a minute.

The yard was empty: not a cow or dog in sight. The house was locked up and everything around was quiet and deserted. Only a black cat on the roof suddenly began mewling when it saw me, as though inquiring: "Where were you and what are you doing here now that everything's over?"

They had left before I thought they would. When I realized that, I was ready to tear Haji Kerantukh apart with my teeth like a beast--the man I had been willing to die for not so long ago. But what could I do now when the ship Feldysh was on was probably far out to sea!

When I got back home I took out my horse Bzou. He was our only horse now, because my father's and brother's had been killed in the last battles. I took the horse down to the stream and washed it, returned home, fed it corn for the last time and led it outside the gate once again. Seeing me, my mother and sisters covered their eyes with their hands and wept. My Bzou, who wasn't aware of what was happening, pranced after me affectionately nudging my shoulder with his head from time to time as if to say, "Why don't you get on!"

We went into a large meadow where I sometimes practiced trick riding in the evenings, and he was so overjoyed he began circling around me, tugging at the bit.

"My faithful Bzou, how many times you saved me from death, and now I'll have to kill you," I said and cried as I pressed my head against his neck.

Then I took off the bit and ran him around the meadow. We had already agreed that neither our horses, nor our selves should fall into the hands of the enemy and so anyone who had raised a horse must shoot it himself.

I cocked my pistol and put my finger on the trigger. Bzou did not move away from me, but grazed nearby, waving his long and beautiful tail.

"I wouldn't have felt half as bad if the wolves had torn him to pieces," I thought to myself, still unable to shoot.

Finally I aimed at the horse's ear, and pressed the trigger, but the pistol didn't fire.

The hardest thing was to cock the pistol again. The mortally wounded horse jumped up several times as though he wanted to leap over death itself, and fell to the ground, his head toward me. In the distance I heard several shots—other people were also killing their horses. That was probably the first time in my life I felt heartless.

Then I buried Bzou with my own hands, and, having put a rock over his grave, I went to the village graveyard. I was sure my family was already there, and I was right. Before I even got there I could hear people crying and moaning over the graves of their relatives. When I got closer I saw that my father was on his knees before the grave of his father and mother. He had bent his gray head low, and was crying and striking his chest with his fist. My brother stood nearby on his crutches. Because of his wound he couldn't get down on his knees. My mother and sisters were standing a distance away from them over a small grave where my eldest brother had been buried as a child. They stood with their hair down, cried and picked the weeds that had grown since the beginning of spring around the gravesite. My family had rarely seen me in tears, even when I was a child, but that day I stood next to them and cried for the second time that morning.

After crying over the grave of her son, my mother went up to my father and lamented through her tears:

"Sleep in peace, Grandfather and Grandmother, your grandson is nearby and will keep you company. We unfortunate ones are leaving and don't even know where."

Everyone in the land of the Ubykhs cried that day as though someone had died at the same time in every home.

Dear Sharakh, have you ever seen old people and children crying together? If you haven't heard that, I hope to God you never do. There is nothing worse than that in this world. I can't imagine how our mountains could stand it, how they managed not to fall apart listening to it! It's a wonder all our streams and rivers didn't turn salty from the tears shed that day!

Having cried our hearts out, we left pitchers of wine and some food at the graves for the dead, and feeling somewhat better after that each of us went back to his home.

It was cold in the house. The fire in the hearth had already burned out. Father took the kettle with cold cornmeal mush out into the yard and called our dogs. He emptied the contents on the ground behind the house so the dogs would eat and not follow us. Then he came back. We all stood immobile knowing that now we would leave, probably never to return. How pitiful a person becomes when he doesn't know what awaits him!

"It's time," said Father. "I see the neighbors are already leaving."

He took off his hat and, standing in the middle of our house, he looked at the ceiling as though he were looking through it into the sky.

"Oh, Allah, give us poor people your blessings!"

Then Father went up to the hearth.

“You warmed all of my ancestors, my father and my mother; you warmed me and my children. Forgive me for putting you out.”

Having said that, Father pulled the chain, black with soot, up to his lips and kissed it. Then he took out his dagger, dug up the earth near the hearth and put a handful of it in the linen sack hanging from his belt.

“When I die, sprinkle this earth on my chest,” he said to me and my brother. “And now it’s time to go!”

My father was the last one to leave the house. When he closed the door, it creaked loudly as though complaining: “What are you doing?”

“It’s a bad omen that the door creaked before we started on our journey,” said Father sadly and began praying once again.

“Oh, Allah, may the doors of the houses in the land where we’re going not be closed to us. May we not be left homeless!”

The farther away from the house we got, the more people walked and rode near us. Our neighbors were carrying their sick mother on a cart; she had been bedridden for five years.

“Why are you taking me with you?” she moaned through her tears. “Bury me here and go.”

The people kept coming and coming. Looking back you could not see the end of the line of people walking down cast and quiet down the road.

In a few hours, when we came to a crossroads, I heard loud voices: a crowd of people was blocking the way. Myself and a few other youths ran ahead, passing the old men and women, and saw that Ahmed, son of Barakai, was standing right there on the road holding his saber in front of the crowd. His snow-white horse was tied to a tree by the roadside.

“You can kill me, but while I’m alive I won’t let you pass by!” he shouted as he waved his saber. “Go back to your abandoned homes before its too late; light your fireplaces that are still glowing!”

“Step aside, Ahmed, son of Barakai! The ships are waiting for us.”

“So they are. But when you realize you’ve been deceived, they won’t take you back home. I have been to Turkey more than once and know what awaits you there— hunger, slavery and death. The sultan will take away your sons, give them guns and send them off to fight, and they will never come back to you again. That’s why he’s calling you there, that’s the only reason!”

Ahmed, son of Barakai, was shouting. But although he had delayed the crowd for several minutes already, no one would listen to him.

“What are you doing?” someone asked him. “Do you want the infidels to find us here and force us to christen our children? We are Muslims and we’re sailing to a Muslim country!”

“You’re going into an abyss, an abyss!” Ahmed, son of Barakai, yelled hysterically.

“Doesn’t this madman have any family to calm him down?”

“His brother Nouryz is sailing across the sea.”

“Don’t come near me!” cried Ahmed, son of Barakai, as he continued brandishing his saber in front of the stunned crowd. “Anyway, until you kill me I won’t let you pass! Those who have gone, have gone, but at least you can return; go back and save your kin!”

“Oh, Ahmed, son of Barakai! If you wished us well could you abandon your people? Wouldn’t you go with them!”

“Why isn’t there a real man among you who could kill me before I see how all my people die!” shouted Ahmed, son of Barakai, not backing down one bit.

But the crowd pressed women and children toward him, and he could not hurt them. So he retreated, and, moving him farther and farther aside, the crowd slowly moved past him. And no one, not one person who walked by even turned around to see what happened to him.

The closer we got to the sea the more people joined us. Not far ahead walked the blind Sakut helped along by two of his grandsons. As far back as I can remember he played his apkhartsa\* at all celebrations. At first I didn’t notice him, but now, when we were already near the sea, he took the apkhartsa off his belt, tuned it, tested the strings, and began playing, then singing. He shuffled his feet with difficulty, but his voice was clear and strong, so it was hard to believe it belonged to an old man.

Oh, what a bitter fate,  
What a bitter fate!  
What a large sea

he sang.

And what a small handful  
Of native land!  
The poor land will be empty,  
And the cuckoo will freeze on the branch.  
It’ll have no one to tell the future to.  
Did you bid farewell to the dead?  
Did you tell them we won’t return?  
You should have told them.  
You mustn’t deceive the dead!

More and more people ahead of and behind Sakut heard his voice and the sounds of his apkhartsa. He went on singing:

Let’s look back at our mountains,  
They don’t know where we’re going.  
Let’s look back and leave them our song  
To wander like an echo  
From one mountain to another.  
If a child leaves its mother  
The mother is to blame.  
But is she really to blame?  
Is she really to blame?  
“Why are you leaving, children?  
What have I done to you, children?”  
Our land is crying,  
Our land is asking.  
Forgive us unfortunate- ones,  
Forgive us!  
We have no power to stay.  
We can leave you  
One thing only: our souls.  
We are leaving forever.  
Forever our souls shall remain.

Oh, Allah! How many years, how many long years have passed since then, but this song of suffering is still ringing in my ears. I have seen many times how a shoot springs forth from a seed fallen to the ground. I have seen many times how life is born, but only once have I heard how a song is born. It was born that terrible day on the way to the sea and we kept it forever.

When our shoulders could no longer bear suffering we would gather in a circle, one of us who knew the words best would begin and we would join in singing. We would sing it until we had no more strength left, and, believe me, my dear Sharakh, the fatigue made us feel better.

When we arrived at the shore it was so crowded with people and livestock there was hardly any room to stand up. Sharyn, son of Alou, had warned us what we could and could not take with us. But many others had hoped they would be able to take their livestock with them so they brought their animals to the shore.

Steamships and sailing vessels were backed off from the coastline; boats pulled back and forth carrying people to the waiting ships.

Our foster brother, Sharyn, son of Alou, had already brought his family and everything he was taking with him onto one of the sailing vessels. He had promised us we would sail on a large steamship. He had come back to shore to make sure no one at the last minute stole one of his subjects and waited for us as he counted his devotional beads. He was no longer wearing a Caucasian Astrakhan hat, but a Turkish fez. And although I could not say it out loud, I was thinking to myself that if we had a hard time recognizing him already, then how would we recognize him later in Turkey.

“Is everybody here, Hamirza?” he asked my father.

My father answered in the affirmative:

“Then get started loading everyone into the boats. Only don’t take any livestock with you, nothing but people,” he reminded us of his earlier warning.

There was nothing to wait for anymore, so we got started. One boat after another set off from shore full of people and returned empty—and again went away full. The Turks shouted at us to hurry. But, dear Sharakh, as the Abkhazians say—you go along with the person whose boat you’re in! And so we quietly put up with not only swearing, but kicks as well.

By the time the sun had gone down there was no one left on the shore but the livestock bellowing with hunger. A few young men and I stayed on shore until all our neighbors had boarded. We kissed the rocks on shore and jumped into a boat.

Why didn’t I die then? Why didn’t my heart break when I stood with one foot on shore and the other on the back of the boat? How fortunate I would have been, how much suffering I would have been spared!

Our boat, the last one, was moving farther and farther out to sea when suddenly, looking back, I, and then the rest of the men I was with, saw a man ride up to the shore on a snow-white horse. We saw right away it was Ahmed, son of Barakai. He jumped off his horse, loosened its bridle and let it free. Then he stood on the edge of a cliff over the water. He waved his hands and yelled something to us, but the wind kept us from hearing what he said.

“Let’s go back and get him,” I said to the others. “We can’t leave him here all alone.”

The others were silent, not quite sure what to do, but Ahmed, son of Barakai, solved the problem for us. We heard a pistol shot and I even thought I saw a small bluish puff of smoke. After the gun fired, Ahmed, son of Barakai, still stood at the edge of the cliff. Then he began swaying and fell into the sea. His horse, frightened by the shot, ran along the empty shore.

We were all dumfounded. When he had tried to stop us on the road no one wanted to listen to him. But now his death filled our hearts with trepidation.

“A man who could do what he had probably knew some truth that we don’t know!” we thought to ourselves as we sat in the boat when it was already too late to matter. The land of the Ubykhs was empty, and the body of poor Ahmed, son of Barakai, was tossed by the waves back and forth between the coastal rocks as though the sea and the shore were fighting over him.

Our sailing vessel, filled to the limit with people, turned around, keeling over and headed out to sea. The farther we got from the shore the more clearly we could see the outline of our mountains on the horizon. I was used to them. I had grown up in their breast. I can still remember each peak as I saw them those last few minutes.

We were so far out by now that the mountains were obscured by the blue evening twilight. Just a little farther and they disappeared from sight.

The blind Sakut once again played his apkhartsa. But he did not sing. Sometimes the sounds were clear, sometimes not so clear, drowned in the noise of the waves, the creaking of the masts. But I could tell right away when the apkhartsa became quiet altogether. There was silence and for some reason my heart froze. I went over to the old man. He sat on the deck in his threadbare Circassian coat. Underneath he spread out his cloak. His grandsons, who had walked with him the whole day, were sleeping, one on either side of him and with their heads resting on his lap. “Probably he’s gone to sleep too,” I thought, but when I got up closer I saw he was awake. Tears, drop by drop, streamed down his cheeks and his gray beard and fell on the apkhartsa, which he held close to his chest as though it were the last handful of native earth.

“Oh, Allah! “I thought. “Could it be that with those blind eyes of his he can see through the fog of the sea the last hazy outlines of the native land we will never return to?”

## **BOOK TWO**

### **WHERE IS THAT PARADISE!**

I couldn’t sleep that night. Early the next morning I got out my pencil and notebook and sat in the yard waiting for the old man. What would he tell me today?

The sky had been overcast since early morning; the bare plains were silent as though they were as anxious as I was to hear the voice of the last Ubykh, to know what happened to him in that foreign land where he had not yet arrived yesterday in his distressing story.

I couldn’t have imagined when I first came here that somewhere in an outpost of Turkey I would meet the only Ubykh man who could still speak his native tongue.

It was fortunate for me that his mother was Abkhasian so my native Abkhasian language could be the thread that brought us together yesterday and would continue to unite us today. If he hadn’t known Abkhasian, or had forgotten it, what would I have done? With my poor knowledge of Ubykh we would have had no choice but to speak Turkish. And that would have been one more bitter twist of fate.

Oh, mahajirstvo,\* the tragedy of the Ubykhs. I’ve known that word since childhood, although I couldn’t fully appreciate its significance then. Because of that cursed word Abkhasia was devastated three different times.

When our elders get together to talk about some long ago event, one of them will inevitably say it happened during the first mahajirstvo, but another will insist it was actually during the second. When asked when he was born my father Luman would invariably reply: the year after the third mahajirstvo.

Consequently, the word was deeply etched in our consciousness. When someone would say our people were victims of mahajirstvo when I was a child my imagination conjured up some large muddy body of water carrying the Abkhasians away somewhere.

This murky water swallowed up tens of thousands of Abkhasians, but in the end our ethnic group survived, unlike the Ubykhs, thanks to the Abkhasians who remained in their homeland and kept their fires burning, emitting warmth to all Abkhasians to this day. However, it didn't necessarily have to be that way. All the Abkhasians could have, whether voluntarily or against their will, followed the doomed path of the Ubykhs.

Who then would have been left to trace the bloody tracks to this land, to study the Ubykh or Abkhasian languages? I couldn't have; I wouldn't have even been born!

All that I have today—my education, my profession, my homeland, my teachers and my students—would have been impossible. It's as simple as that.

What I had heard from this lone elder, from this last living man among the dead, made me wonder if the doomed fate of the Ubykhs had been preordained, if the Ubykhs couldn't have chosen another way. But I was also the son of a people who had suffered much, a people with a similar history, but a different destiny. I had come to Turkey from a country whose past said: Yes! What happened to them could have happened to us. It could have, but it didn't. And since it didn't, the logic that insists the Ubykhs were destined to disappear is somewhat muddled as far as I'm concerned.

Once again I go over everything I know about our own history that is similar to that of the Ubykhs, and I just can't agree. I don't want to agree that their future couldn't have been different! The fact that I, an Abkhasian, am sitting here today is living proof.

"What are you thinking about?"

I turned around and saw Zaurkan.

I jumped up, said hello and answered his well-meant and leisurely inquiries: how did I sleep, was the bed comfortable, was I hungry?

Then he slowly sat down on his homemade bench and leaned back against the tree trunk. His eyes got that far away look and without wasting another word on me, or on anything around us, he sank back into the last century where his thoughts continued to dwell.

The waves were so powerful as they pushed us on our way; they seemed to be rushing the Turkish ship taking us away from our homeland. I must admit, Sharakh, that our hearts were filled not only with alarm, but with hope as well. Finally, the voyage was over and all those who had chosen to emigrate, young and old, men and women, stepped on the shore of a land we knew nothing about. But, you know, no one was there to meet us as though we had come unexpectedly, as though we had not received the sultan's generous invitation. The Ubykhs sat down in groups all along the beach. We looked like flocks of birds that had lost their way in a storm and, finally exhausted, landed in an unknown place. Among the servants of Sharyn, son of Alou was our family. We had come on the Nusred-Bakhri, a large steamship for those days. When we disembarked we found a place not far from the bay in the outskirts of Samsun and tried to stick together like horses that sense danger. Our baggage was light, just the bare necessities, as though we had fled a fire, and had grabbed only what we managed to take away as we escaped the flames.

Oh Lord, how miserable and doomed a person feels when forced to live and die in a foreign land!

The first month of spring was just beginning. The country we had entered and would live in seemed to be barren and unfriendly. I even had a hard time breathing as though there wasn't enough air. Perhaps because of my heavy heart I kept on wanting to take deeper and deeper breaths of air. Just as soon as the sun hid behind a fleeting cloud it was chilly, but when the sun reappeared the cold instantly turned to sweltering heat. And every time I looked up the sun seemed to be a yellowish-white, as if it had faded.

Oh, my dear Sharakh, we began the road to extinction that very hour we took the fatal decision that led us to the ships whose masts were adorned with green crescent moons. May they be cursed, those ships!

I already told you that we sailed on the Nusred-Bakhri.

There were also a few other three-stack ships. So many years have passed, but I still remember their names. They were assisted by some sailboats. The ships' captains were paid the same for the passengers as for cattle, by the head. There's a saying that a scrooge can squeeze water from a rock. The ships were stuffed to the limit with live cargo. Our captain said with regret: "I'd take on more, but I'm afraid we'd sink."

We sailed a long time. We ran out of water and food soon. Then there was a storm. The people got seasick. Even the most courageous among us were frightened. The people prayed, cursed, and prayed again. The crew was no help at all. Their attitude was, if you don't have the strength to endure the suffering then die. Funerals were no trouble— you didn't even have to dig graves.

Winds didn't blow the way ships wanted them to. During the storm one of the sailboats was carried by the wind far to the west toward Varna. Because of the continuous pitching, lack of water and an accumulation of excrement, typhoid fever broke out. People died like flies. When the sailing vessel reached Samsun there were only a handful of people still alive. They weren't allowed to come ashore so the fever wouldn't spread to the city. The sailing vessel set anchor at sea and the unfortunate emigres called for help to the people they saw on shore wearing Circassian coats. But what could we do? We could only row up to the ship and send up jugs of water on ropes. The shore guards swore at us and threatened to open fire if we didn't stop trying to help.

People are people, no matter what, Sharakh. The small Sadz community set off after us on a white sailing vessel. The storm tossed the ship to and fro like a nutshell. The angry waves wouldn't let it get near the port. The people, crazed from thirst, began drinking sea water. The first to die were the children. They died like moths on a rainy night. The sailors threw the bodies of the infants overboard. One of the women was a widow. She was all alone in the world except for her infant son. The baby of that poor woman fell ill and soon died, but his mother kept singing lullabies to him and held him to her bosom. When sailors would come near she would sing: "Go to sleep, my baby, go to sleep." When the sailors went away her song would turn into a heart-rending lament. The people knew that the baby was dead, but they kept quiet. The third day the sailors could smell the corpse so they wrenched the dead child out of its mother's arms and threw it into the sea. The woman was beside herself with grief and jumped overboard after her son. No one could stop her.

People are living creatures, not mindless cuckoos. All those who had been spared death at sea saw when they got to shore, to their sorrow, that this was a God-forsaken land. There was hardly any vegetation here and the earth looked like the wrinkled face of a eunuch; it was nothing like the evergreen coast we had left.

It's true, Sharakh, that we can appreciate what we have fully only when we lose it. How could we help thinking about home, about the virgin forests that filled up the hollow canyons where the leaves of the plane trees glistened in the sun as the coat of a marten, and ice-cold springs murmured enticingly underneath huge trees. Our land offers everything you could want to eat or drink. If a stranger wasn't taken into any home, which was unheard of anyway, he could easily escape hunger and cold, whether it was winter or summer. Nature itself would take care of him. He could eat his fill in any meadow—juicy wild straw berries amidst all kinds of herbs, and a bit later in summer all the raspberries and blackberries he would want. And in early autumn all he'd have to do is go a little deeper into the forest to find nature's gifts galore—yellow bunches of ripe grapes, the wine-like berries of wild fig trees, walnuts, chestnuts in their polished shells, deep red cornelian cherries, and in the hollows of trees, combs full of wild honey giving energy to anyone who wants it for the asking. And if a man has a gun or can set traps there's no better hunting grounds on earth: mountain goats and roe, wild boars and aurochs—hunting trophies fit for a king. And there's so much wild fowl, all kinds and best you could find. But if he doesn't like meat, so what! He can make a fire on a riverbank and fish to his heart's content. He can even catch golden trout with his bare hands. There's no other such paradise on earth. But if a man flees from paradise he can only end up in hell. We realized that only when we got to Turkey. We understood, but it was already too late: the doors of hell shut tight behind one who enters.

God created us to be equal, but he gave us different purses. Our lord Sharyn, son of Alou, had no trouble resuming his acquaintance with a local merchant who took him into his comfortable home in Samsun. But we ordinary mortals had nowhere to go. Where could we find shelter? When you're in trouble you have to be resourceful. We saw some stone structures not far away; around ten of them. They were used to store the cornmeal Turkish merchants had brought from the Caucasus. All of them but one were empty. The cobwebs were so thick a person could have slept on them; they'd take the weight. Some butterflies that looked like locusts



crawled on the walls in the dark and flew in circles under the ceilings. Without waiting for permission we occupied those dreary hovels with stale air and considered ourselves lucky, because we had at least some protection from rain and wind. Our lord and benefactor, Shardyn, son of Alou, was surprised to find us in such a desperate state.

“Apparently there’s been some mistake,” he consoled us. “I’ll get to the bottom of this and try to straighten things out. In the meantime cheer up and be patient.”

Leaving us with renewed hope, he got ready to go to Istanbul. Of course, one doesn’t leave one’s wealth without supervision. Before he started on his journey he sat his wife in front of him and gave her strict orders:

“Keep a close watch on my only sister. In this Muslim country a woman is a prime commodity. Anyone who gets my sister, either by deception or kidnapping, can expect a handsome price for her. If anything happens to Shanda you’re responsible!

Shardyn, son of Alou, had good reason for apprehension: any brother would be worried sick being in charge of such a beauty as his twenty-year-old sister Shanda. Even in the land of the Ubykhs her reputation as a rare beauty was known all over the mountains. Many daredevils from Abkhasia, Adighe, and Kabarda, known for either their valor, nobility, or wealth, or all three, sent matchmakers to her. Although she found some of her suitors appealing she could not disobey her brother, who sent each of the honorable matchmakers away with polite words of refusal. Shardyn, son of Alou, was too proud and conceited. Even when it came to his sister’s future he couldn’t forget his own interests. He was holding out for some almighty brother-in-law whose golden glory would shed still more luster on the name of Shardyn, son of Alou.

It’s only fair to say that the glamorous Shanda also knew her worth. Spoiled in childhood, she liked showing off among the Ubykh nobility in her fancy clothes. But when men would play up to her she was much too trusting. That was what particularly worried her sister-in-law when she found Shanda in her care.

Don’t forget that name Shanda, my dear Sharakh. Soon I’ll tell you how capricious fate deceived her. Fortune and misfortune walk together. Shanda, captivating Shanda! Who could ever imagine she would be the cause of her own brother’s death and make our hopeless lot even worse.

Wherever there is life there is faith in the future. Shardyn, son of Alou, went to Istanbul while we waited and hoped. A week passed, then another, but he remained absent.

Hunger can make you chew a rock. All the food the Ubykhs had taken with them from home had disappeared the first few days as if swept away by the waves. While we still had some money we bought bread in the neighborhood bakeries. When our pockets were empty, we began selling the few family treasures we had. We sold everything for a song, because hungry men don’t bargain. When shop owners and tavern keepers saw how many people were starving, they closed down their places in fright. They knew that hunger could even drive a wolf out of the forest.

First the sultan’s government played on our gullibility, raising up our hopes; then it became confused, perplexed, not knowing what else to do. Seeing that we were armed, the government refused to keep its promise to let us settle where we wanted. Fearing us, the government decided to scatter us to different parts of the country. It’s not hard to guess that those places were remote and unpopulated and had unfertile land plagued by droughts. We soon forgot about the heavenly lands and rivers of milk, we’d been given nothing but fair words. We got none of the cattle, nor the assistance we had been promised. We were angry and demanded:

“Make good your promises! You said the Ubykhs wouldn’t have to pay land taxes for five years, but now you’re making us pay! You swore on the Koran that you wouldn’t take our sons into the army, but now you’re making them serve! How can you do that?”

But who could be made to answer for it all? All we got was cunning smiles and the insolent reply:

“Where’s the paper with the sultan’s signature that says so? Oh, he gave his word? One’s word is tax-free. It’s not an order!”

One thing was for sure: they were afraid of us. And they had good reason. The desperate are capable of anything.

Maybe that's why they left us alone at first thinking we might eventually calm down. They hoped we'd lose our will and become compliant. Hunger and deprivation will take them down a peg or two, they thought.

One of the stone structures, as you remember, was filled with cornmeal. Hunger gave the command. I pity the person who would have tried to stop us. After tearing the bolts off the doors, we emptied out the storeroom. We each took as much as we could. There was no mill nearby, so we had to grind the cornmeal ourselves. Some did it with stones, but others had an even, simpler solution: they boiled it. Hunger is the best cook you know.

The corn didn't last long and when it was finished we went hunting for food in the neighboring villages. I must say the Turkish peasants shared what they could with us. They would hand over some worn clothing to a person standing before them in rags and shivering with cold. They also gave out bread, but not as alms; they actually shared their bread with us.

But just how many mouths can be fed that way? A hungry crowd of people is like an overflowing river; there's no way to control it. Before we knew it we became thieves. We were in tatters, but we kept our weapons in silver sheaths. Led by hunger, the young went around in bands stealing cattle and sharing the fresh meat with their fellow-tribesmen. They raided towns, robbed dry goods and shoe stores. The truth will out, Sharakh: blood was spilled on both sides. We became known as ruffians. The Ubykhs were used to frighten children into good behavior. Caucasians haunted the streets of Samsun like bums. Their eyes were glassy from hunger and had a streak of madness. Their shoulder-blades and collar-bones protruded from their tattered Circassian coats and dirty toes stuck out of torn shoes. They walked into cafes and coffee shops with a roving look as men possessed, striking fear into the owners and customers. The sick and the old, the weak and the helpless lay in the shade of trees on dusty and torn capes; their faces thin, cheeks sunk and with only enough strength to shoo pestering flies.

I had lost Feldysh like one migrating bird loses another. Maybe she died at sea, on the ship, when she was coming here? Or... Terrible thoughts plagued my inflamed mind. I knew her parents were elderly and were unable to help her out of any trouble. With her auburn hair, that she wore in braids reaching down to her feet, with her slender figure and eyes like almonds, she was too seductive to go unnoticed on the shores of Turkey.

Most of the women in the harems of the Turkish lords and wealthy merchants were from other lands. Feldysh was an Ubykh and word about the charm and merits of Ubykh women reached Turkey long before our people emigrated there. On the other hand, maybe Feldysh was in rags and dying of hunger somewhere nearby, and satan was taking pleasure in keeping me from seeing her.

"Feldysh, my love, do you hear me? Say something! "I would cry out in my mind. "Who could I ask, who would know what happened to her?" I thought to myself like a man obsessed.

The very day we arrived here ... oh no, the very hour, all I could think about was where I could find the leader of the Ubykhs, Haji Berzek Kerantukh? Well, I wasn't the least bit interested in what had become of him personally, but wanted to know what had happened to Feldysh. She and her parents were supposed to be among his people. Rumor had it that the ship that had brought Kerantukh and his subjects here had stayed for a while in the Samsun harbor, but then it weighed anchor and set off for Istanbul.

I would often go to the shore as if I could learn about Feldysh from the waves or the chattering seagulls. If only they could give me a hint, I thought. One day a felucca made port, I heard someone shouting on board and saw four Turkish sailors kicking off a tied up man in a Circassian coat. "Adlia,"\* he cursed, and added a dirty swear word.

The felucca cast off. I went up to the man and helped him to his feet. You can imagine my surprise when I saw he was one of Haji Kerantukh's foster brothers—Said Dashan.

"What happened? Why did they tie you up and throw you off?" I asked.

"What happened?" he echoed and still furious he added: "What happened is what has happened to us all, the worst possible, Zaurkan."

He had once been a strong man who could, like a giant, break a thick rope with one pull, or force a bull by the horns to the ground. Now he was just a shadow of the former Said Dushan and could barely stand upright.

“My mouth is all dry,” he said as he licked his parched lips with his tongue. “If you’re a man get me at least a sip of water.”

“Just a minute, Said, just a minute,” I assured him as I used my dagger to cut the rope tying his hands.

We walked along the shore. He had to lean on my shoulder, he was so weak. The sun was going down. The sea reflected its last beams. Twilight had fallen. We were now quite a distance away from the city. Said was leaning still more heavily on my shoulder. I realized he was dead tired and could barely move his legs. I laid him down near some thin bushes, promised to come back soon, and set off to look for water.

I managed with difficulty to get a piece of bread and a bottle of water. Said drank greedily. His adam’s apple bobbed up and down as he drank and I could hear the water trickle down his dry throat. Having quenched his thirst a bit and catching his breath, Haji Kerantukh’s foster brother looked up at me with eyes full of sorrow, tears glimmering:

“It’s all over for us, Zaurkan! .. For all the Ubykhs... It was suicidal to come here! ..” he whispered as if condemning himself and the rest of us for that fateful mistake.

What he said made my heart contract with despair and not just because the sinister reality confirmed Said’s prediction, but because the man who was talking had once been strong-willed and never lost hope under any circumstances.

In the distance where the sea met with the sky a crimson beam was fading. For an instant I thought I saw Feldysh. But then her image vanished into nothingness. I came to my senses and realized I had a thin thread of hope in my hand:

“Said, where is your foster brother Haji Berzek Kerantukh?”

“The hospitable rulers of this friendly country gave him land on Rhodes”, he answered with bitter irony. “All of his subjects, except for my family, are with him.”

My temples throbbed, the news set my heart at ease, and, carefully, not wanting to press my luck, I asked him:

“Tell me, my dear Said, was the peasant Abij Vardan with Kerantukh’s people?”

“Is he a friend of yours?”

“Yes,” I said relieved.

Said looked at me closely, and spoke slowly as though bandaging my wound:

“When I left, Abij and his family were alive and well. He has a beautiful daughter, very beautiful... They all went to the island...” And then, lowering his head, he continued:

“Beautiful women -will suffer shame before they die.”

But his words didn’t register with me. I felt relieved of a heavy burden. A man in trouble lives for today. A mere spark can fill him with joy. He doesn’t seem to understand that more evil awaits him tomorrow or else he just doesn’t care to think of it, once he has been given a moment of respite.

Today luck carried me out of that gloomy stone structure, I thought to myself. Feldysh, my wonderful Feldysh is alive! Now I’ll find her. I’ll definitely find her even if I have to swim to get to the island where she is now, I promised myself triumphantly, and with determination.

Sitting across from me in the same pose, Said lowered his head, and didn't seem to notice my pitiful joy. Crumbling off bits of the stale bread, he put them into his mouth with an absent look. As I watched him I suddenly felt ashamed of my being so impolite; I hadn't even asked him why he had been thrown off the boat by the Turkish sailors, how come he was here when all of Haji Berzek Kerantukh's people were somewhere else.

When I brought up the subject Said stopped putting the crumbs in his mouth, became morose, like a wounded falcon with ruffled feathers and began in a roundabout way:

"Do you remember, Zaurkan, how we once unsheathed our daggers ready to kill each other as though in blood revenge? The reason was because I was really insulted..."

Said changed into a more comfortable position so that his back was propped up against a jut of the shore, and looking out at the sea where after the sunset the sky was turning dark blue, went on with his story:

"You had the honor of being proposed to serve as one of the bodyguards of the chief of the Ubykhs, my foster brother, Haji Kerantukh, and you refused the offer. Your refusal was insulting. Blood rushed to my head. And if someone hadn't pulled us apart I don't know what would've happened."

He caught his breath, still peering into the distance. His eyes were concentrated and immobile as if fixed on some object, although there wasn't even a lone sailing vessel on the scaly surface of the sea.

I waited a minute or so, not wanting to interrupt his train of thought, and then said:

"You know, Said, that since I was a teenager I worshiped Haji Kerantukh. He was a god to me. I wouldn't have hesitated to die for him. But, Said, one can't pray to the heavens while trampling everything sacred on earth.-  
When

Kerantukh agreed to stop fighting and move to Turkey, I no longer valued the life of our leader. That's why I refused to be his guard. Heads are crowned, not feet. Forgive me for saying this, but your foster brother became the leader of flight."

Here I suddenly realized that Said couldn't be blamed for the actions of the nobleman who had been reared in his family and whom he idolized. My harsh words could offend an innocent man. But Said listened with a stone-cold expression as I spoke so disparagingly about Haji Kerantukh. His face took on an air of suffering for just a fleeting second.

"As far as I'm concerned Kerantukh might as well be dead," I added.

My voice sounded reconciliatory as if to say: oh, well, who cares about Kerantukh; let's not stir up the past. But Said went on in the same vein:

"He's dead as far as all of the Ubykhs are concerned! We, the blind, have regained our sight just before dying!

I was taken aback, because the man who spoke those words always regarded Haji Kerantukh as someone even closer than a relative.

"Listen to me, Zaurkan," he said quietly to get my close attention. "I probably won't tell this to anyone else."

What he said next was like the lash of a whip to me.

"I know for sure that all of us were sold at a good price, like sheep. They called it migration and all of us fell for it. Where our leaders go, that's where we'll go! What asses! And one of those who made good money on us was my dear foster brother, Haji Kerantukh, may he die of the plague!

"That's enough, Said, a shaved head isn't as hopeless as a bald one. Anger won't heal an insult," I said, refusing to reconcile myself with the horrible meaning of his words. I wanted to stop Said, but he went on vehemently:

"I swear to our sacred Bytkha that I'm telling the truth. What I'm going to tell you will unravel the mystery. Do you think it's physical pain that tortures me? No, Zaurkan, no! Be brave and listen carefully to what I say. What would you, a courageous Ubykh, think if you knew that the head of the Ubykhs sold out to the generals of the Russian czar? Well?"

I was shocked and wanted to express my doubts, but Said wouldn't let me:

"Wait, I'm not through yet! The generals offered him a deal: 'When the bloodshed is over and you persuade your people to emigrate to Turkey you'll get enough from the czar to take care of you and your grandchildren for three lifetimes. Both sides need peace. It couldn't look better.'"

"That's just speculation, but where's the proof?" I cut in.

"I don't have any direct proof, but indirect evidence is just as good. I was the bodyguard of my illustrious foster brother and didn't leave him for a second. The day we boarded the ship two Russian officers from headquarters came to him and I saw with my own eyes that after having a friendly conversation they gave him an expensive small chest. I can't say for sure what was inside of it, whether it contained gold or not, but I think you'll agree there couldn't have been sheep's droppings in it. Besides, I heard with my own ears how our leader asked them to convey his gratitude to the vicegerent of the Caucasus, who is the czar's uncle. Doesn't that seem strange to you?"

I had the feeling, Sharakh, that a landslide in the mountains had caught me off guard on a mountain trail. It was as though I was hearing a rock overhead, and more coming behind it. Said's words were inexorable, like heartless rocks tumbling from a mountain peak I had been admiring just a moment before. It seemed as though Said wanted to finish me off. What he said was like self-flagellation; between the lines he seemed to be repeating with reproach: That's what we fools deserve! And then another boulder would hit me in the chest.

Said's accusations against Kerantukh became more and more credible as he spoke, and finally there was no way to deny it. What had happened could not have been an unfortunate coincidence.

"Our ship," Said Dashan went on, "like all the other ships, headed at first for Samsun. When we were a few miles away from shore a Turk who looked like someone from the port authority came on board from a moored felucca. He turned out to be a personal envoy of the sultan. He invited Haji Kerantukh to go with all his people to Istanbul. "The grand vizier is waiting for you," the Turk informed him. When your luck's not with you, you can drown even on land. Passing up the Bosphorus we arrived in the city of Istanbul. Only Kerantukh, the head of the Ubykhs was allowed to get off. But we insisted that he be accompanied by his bodyguards, that is, by us three brothers whose mother had nursed him in infancy.

The reception quarters of the grand vizier was a mansion with windows in the shape of semi-circles. Guards stood at the doors. We were led to a chamber with an elaborately patterned carpet so soft that when you walked on it your steps were as noiseless as birds flying. An elderly man with a black beard and wearing a tall fez sat with his legs crossed on a beautiful soft divan. He was the grand vizier. This man, who seemed to be dozing, didn't stand up, nor did he hold out his hand to Haji Kerantukh. He just pressed together the palms of his hands in front of him, and bowed his head slightly. A servant, shadow-like and bowing low to the grand vizier, seemed to have come out of nowhere with a cup of aromatic coffee and placed it in front of the grand vizier on a small table. Having sleepily sipped some coffee, the vizier, his eyes half closed, spoke to Haji Kerantukh who stood before him in a white Circassian coat with sixteen cartridge pockets on both sides of his chest, and with his palm on the silver haft of his dagger:

"The representative on earth of Allah, sacred father of all true Muslims, our gracious and merciful sultan and caliph, expresses his deep satisfaction that you did not let your people be killed by the hellish flame and hatred of the infidels, but instead brought them to safety in the heavenly land of our incomparable sovereign, and accepted his citizenship and protection..."

The grand vizier stopped talking and closed his eyes.

Haji Kerantukh put his hand to his forehead and bowed to the grand vizier who, with a barely visible foxy smile, continued:

“The Russian ambassador has asked us that you, noble Haji Berzek Kerantukh, be conferred special charity. The almighty sultan, ruler of half the world, has generously agreed to grant this request. Besides, the ruler of half the world, to the glory of Allah and his prophet Muhammad, filled with generosity and feeling well-disposed to you, Haji Berzek Kerantukh, in recognition of your merits, grants you the title of a Turkish pasha, payment accordingly from the treasury, and an estate on Rhodes. Take your four hundred peasants and go there so that in prosperity and happiness you can pray and sing praise to the kindness and generosity of the great sultan.”

Haji Kerantukh expressed his gratitude to the great sultan and his grand vizier. My elder brother whispered like an adviser during negotiations to warn Haji Kerantukh:

“As a relative I beg of you to think this over. You have suffered many adversities for the sake of your own people. You have always been above us like a silk banner, been our true and only leader. You can’t retire now. The Ubykhs are counting on your leadership. It would be a mortal sin to betray their faith in you. ‘You have no right to think of yourself when the life of your people is at stake.’

Kerantukh grew angry. Pretending that nothing had happened between him and my elder brother, he spoke through his teeth but with a smile still playing on his face:

“Don’t tell me what to do! This isn’t the time for that! It would be easier to resurrect the dead than restore my leadership. It was burned to ashes across the sea, together with the house made of chestnut wood. An alien god or one’s own devil—it’s all the same.”

Having as much as told my elder brother that one who plays with a panther had better get used to scratches, Haji Berzek Kerantukh respectfully went up closer to the grand vizier and, putting one hand to his forehead and the other to his heart, he bowed low:

“The sultan’s charity is infinite! Under this blessed roof, Grand Vizier, I’d like to assure you that I’m prepared to serve the first star in the eastern sky—the great sultan— and you. You will find in me a true and faithful servant!

The grand vizier livened up, his dark eyes glistened, and there was a fleeting imperious spark of self-satisfaction in the look he gave us all.

“It’s a big honor to be a pasha of the great sultan. To prove you’re worthy of the confidence and hospitality bestowed on you by the ruler of half the world, you must agree to two conditions...” After getting up off the divan and taking a seat in the armchair nearby, he added: “The conditions are in keeping with our faith.”

Kerantukh bowed his head to show he was all attention, but did not ask what the conditions were.

The clever vizier appreciated the cautious silence of the Ubykh leader, and as though saying a prayer he spoke:

“There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet! Whoever is given the title of pasha must have a name befitting the Koran. We, unlike the Christians, don’t have surnames. From this day on, instead of Haji Berzek Kerantukh, you will be called: Haji Suleyman Pasha. Your name will be inscribed in golden letters in the government’s book of pashas. That’s the first condition! The second is that each pasha must dress according to his title, so you will have to stop wearing your Caucasian clothing,” said the grand vizier in a tone of voice indicating the finality of the decision. What had happened to his drowsiness?

Haji Berzek Kerantukh’s face turned pale. The leader of the Ubykhs was torn between conflicting demands: the grand vizier sat in front of him and we, three sons of his own people, stood behind him. The eldest of us couldn’t contain himself any longer:

“The golden Berzeks, born to rule, are inseparable from the glory of the Caucasus. No family of nobles is an ancient and high-ranking as yours. You’ve been asked to change your name. Come to your senses! Tell him you’re not a slave or a captive.”

“Quiet,” said the perturbed Haji Kerantukh in a barely audible voice.

But my elder brother wouldn't give in:

"Remember how the Russians made you a colonel to win your friendship, but you found within you the pride to reject such an honor and tossed those golden shoulder- straps into the fire. Now the fighting falcon is being turned into a goose. It's just shameful! You're not a concubine in a harem to be wearing wide trousers with fancy designs. If you give in the next thing they'll do is make you wear a veil. Tell that black-bearded one that the best clothing for a man is a Circassian coat."

The grand vizier didn't know Ubykh, but he could tell from my brother's expression his words were like fire next to a powder keg. But the sultan's first minister was an experienced fox and so he didn't let on that he was alarmed. On the contrary, he kept right on fiddling with his amber devotional beads.

"I'm waiting for your decision," said the vizier.

But the man he was talking to seemed to have missed these words and didn't answer.

The grand vizier squinted, and added:

"Our holy Koran says: 'Know how to serve the one who brings you happiness.'" "Suddenly his voice became harsh: "I would like to know whether after consulting with your people," the vizier threw us a withering look, "you accept the proposal made by the all-merciful sultan, or do they, not you, make your decisions?"

Haji Kerantukh gritted his teeth in anger, sharply turned away to the wall, but then took control of himself, and came up closer to the- grand vizier:

"I would like to see the sultan, whose subjects my people and I have become."

"It's now the ninth month of the Muslim calendar. Ramazan. The great fast. The representative of Allah, the glorious sultan, has given up all earthly matters for the duration. He isn't seeing anyone; he devotes all his time to prayer, to prayers of purification. There's no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet."

Haji Kerantukh knew that this was the time of ramazan and that orthodox Muslims didn't eat or drink from sunrise to sunset, but he didn't believe the sultan was so pious, .so lie tried to outwit the vizier by reminding him;

"The Great Sultan's mother is an Adighe; the Adighes are relatives of the Ubykhs. She knows our customs and will sympathize with our predicament. The Grand Vizier has the power to let us see this noble woman at least for a minute."

The grand vizier pressed his palms together in front of himself and answered as though praying:

"Say your prayers, perform the purification, and kneel together with those who are already on their knees. When the leader of all Muslims speaks to Allah, those near him also give up earthly cares, and direct their thoughts to the heavens!

The grand vizier closed his eyes again as though he were dozing off.

Haji Kerantukh realized the old man would not give in. He also knew it would be risky to keep pressing the grand vizier, especially in our presence. So he sent us back to the wharf to wait until he returned.

"It'll be easier for me to deal with this fox when I'm alone with him. Go now. Do as I say!" he ordered.

"Don't let your anger get the better of you. Don't blow up! Fury is a bad counsel!" we warned him.

"Don't worry! I won't lose my head and will not accept any condition that entails loss of dignity! " he reassured us.

We left and waited patiently for him at the wharf until the moon appeared. Believe me, Zaurkan, it was the worst day of my life.

What do you think was the decision made by that man who had led heroes, who hadn't bowed his head to the entire army commanded by General Yevdokimov; a man whose name had been on the lips of the Ubykh people for so long, to whom mothers had sung praise at their sons' cradles: "Grow up my little boy to be brave like Haji Kerantukh." There's no use fooling ourselves, Zaurkan! He betrayed us, changed his name to please his new masters, became a Turkish pasha and put on Turkish clothes. If our mother had known about this, she would have jumped overboard, feeling it was her fault she hadn't raised her foster son properly.

The next day at noon our ship carrying around five hundred Ubykh families left Istanbul and set off for Rhodes. Neither my brothers, nor my poor mother, nor I were on that ship accompanied by a snow-white sailing vessel that belonged to the grand vizier. We had taken our mother off the ship before it set sail. The Ubykhs headed for Rhodes were confident that their silk banner—Haji Berzek Kerantukh—was following them in that beautiful sailing vessel. They still had no idea that Haji Berzek Kerantukh no longer existed. A newly born pasha, Haji Suleyman, was on that vessel. Our mother too didn't know what had happened; we decided not to tell her.

Since then I have been possessed by only one thought— to go home. If I didn't manage, I decided I'd shoot myself. I called my brothers aside and demanded they give me the right to do as I wished. They refused to.

"If we die, we die together!" was their reply.

Sometime later I sneaked away from them. I managed to hide on a ship leaving for Samsun. I had heard from one of the sailors that the next day there was a ship leaving from Samsun to Adler on the Ubykh shores. It was to pick up and bring over some Akhchip people. I was so eager to get home that I would've strapped myself to the mast. But the Turkish guards found out about me when we were leaving port, tied me up and, as you saw, removed me from the ship and took me to shore.

The round moon, like a severed head dripping blood, rose higher and higher. The waves echoed Said's story in a muffled roar.

"You'll die in vain if you try to stow away once more. Stay with us! God willing, things will get better!" I persuaded Said.

But he was deaf to my pleas. Tying the end strings of his riding hood, he stood up and said:

"Ahmed, son of Barakai, acted like a man! He was a prophet. Goodbye Zaurkan. Maybe we'll see each other again." And he added, "In the land of the Ubykhs."

Haji Kerantukh's foster brother went toward the wharf, merging with his own shadow.

"Oh, Said, Said! It would've been better to remain mortal enemies," I thought as I watched him walk away.

Many years later, without intending to, I killed him.

That sin I committed involuntarily is a heavy weight on my heart to this day. I'll tell you later how it happened.

## **MOUNTAINS AFLAME**

Emigres, pitiful creatures desperate for food, were up and down the Asia Minor Black Sea coast in every city and every village from Trabzon to Istanbul. They had once dreamed of heaven on earth. When they realized what a fatal mistake they had made it was already too late. These people who were like tumble-weed were not only Ubykhs, but Natukhais, Bzhedukhs and Shapsugs (Adighe tribes), who had crossed the sea even earlier. There were even many Kabardinians, although they had once made peace with the Russian czar. And every last one of the Sadz and Akhchips (Abkhasian tribes) were in Turkey.



There were so many emigres from the north that the Turks lost count. Alarmed by the situation, they even tried to stop the influx of foreigners, but it was impossible by now. You have to be an outcast in an alien land to know what we felt, what suffering we endured.

The wind of death does not appoint the time. A hungry man in the face of disease is like an unarmed man in the face of his enemy. Typhoid fever and cholera carried away our people by the hundreds. Nothing was done to stop the epidemic. Some days so many people died that there was no one to mourn and bury the dead. But there are different ways of dying. It's one thing to die in battle for a just cause: such death is honorable and even desirable. A brave man who dies on the battlefield does not disappear without a trace: his name lives on. A mortally wounded Ubykh would sing a proud song before dying. It's no wonder that the people who died here in a foreign land like stray dogs, envied those who had died at home. Death is unavoidable, but it can bring true happiness when you die quietly near your own hearth, Sharakh!

Look, there you are lying on your death bed surrounded by your family. On their faces is love and sorrow, and in their eyes tears of sincere grief. As you bid your loved ones farewell, wishing them long life and happiness, you are peaceful and calm. Your word is law. You give your last instructions for your funeral, the division of your property, magnanimously forgive someone's sins and you are forgiven yours. When you breathe your last and God takes your soul your relatives and friends from nearby and distant villages come dressed in black, on horseback and in carts, to pay their last respects and mourn you. They carry your body carefully in their uplifted arms, walking slowly to the eternal resting place of your ancestors. They lower you into sweet mother earth and after filling in your grave they leave in reverence; their eyes are sad and they speak in whispers as though your death brought them closer to something elevated and sacred, to some great mystery. Then they hold a wake for you and, without clinking glasses, they drink to every year of your life and talk about what a decent, honest and good person you were in this imperfect world of ours. Then they put a fence around your grave so that no wolf, dog, or any other animal can defile it. They will wear mourning for a long time to show their respect for you.

The poor emigres couldn't even dream of such a wonderful death. All they could hope for as they waited for death, poverty-stricken and homeless, was that their bones be placed underground and not be left to the prey of ravens and jackals. Those of us who were doomed to the close quarters of the stone hovels saw the signs of the fatal disease before the others. The elders figured the cholera had started from eating mouldy corn mixed with mice droppings. I thought it was a miracle that the lethal disease had by passed our family. My mother, father, brother Mata and both younger sisters were well so far. But my mother's tears never dried; she was worried sick about my elder sister, Aisha and was melting like a candle. Trembling in fear she told us about her nightmares that she superstitiously thought were bad omens. "Oh pitiful me," she bemoaned, "my heart tells me my poor Aisha won't be able to stand the suffering that has befallen us. I wish I had died at home rather than have to bear the pain of a mother who has outlived her daughter. My poor daughter, she was heavy with child..." Yes, Aisha had been expecting a baby when we left. You can imagine, Sharakh, the death around us, the terrible situation we were in and what could happen to a pregnant woman. Even satan himself couldn't have devised a worse fate. Aisha and her husband had landed near Samsun like we had, but then they walked westward along the coastline. We had no idea where they were now.

While there's life there's hope. Seeing my mother's tears and wanting to calm down my family, I decided to go looking for Aisha. My father and brother and I agreed that if I found her I would try to bring her and her husband to live with us. I set off following the seacoast. The sun was already rising. What I saw along the way, my dear Sharakh, was beyond description. I swear that if I had heard about all that even from a reliable person I still wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it. I wasn't gone long, but I came back with gray hair. The poor Ubykhs, the gullible emigres. What they experienced, the humiliation and suffering, was more bitter than any other tragedy they were capable of imagining. The deadly disease that entered man through food and water was rampant among us. And how could it have been otherwise since they were forced to eat garbage. Back home, the Ubykhs wouldn't even drink water from rivers that flowed down the glaciers up in the mountains, beyond the clouds, but would only quench their thirst with spring water. They wouldn't make cornmeal porridge out of flour that wasn't sifted twice, and they would consider a pumpkin rotten if its stem were torn off. But now, like homeless, mangy dogs they scrounged around for food in smelly garbage heaps. Girls and women in tattered clothes would turn away or hide their faces when they saw me because they were ashamed of being seen half-naked and in such a state. Children who were dirty and barefoot, live skeletons, ran up to me with outstretched hands, begging for food:

“Bread! Give me bread!”

Even a hardened man couldn't help but be pained by the sight of those children. One day when I was looking for my sister and her husband I wandered into a bazaar. You won't believe this, Sharakh, but people were being sold there. Barely moving her badly swollen legs, Kazyrkhan, the widow of an old friend of mine, was leading by the hand her two teenage sons and shouting:

“Boys for sale! Boys for sale!”

Shocked, I reached for the haft of my dagger and threw myself at her.

“May your old age be cursed! How dare you sell your own sons, you monster!”

She raised her tormented eyes with dark shadows under them and, as though excusing my outburst, she shook her head:

“Which of us will live to old age, Zaurkan?” And nodding her head at the children, she added, “Better they should be bought and fed than die of hunger before my very eyes.”

Ashamed, I loosened the grip on my dagger.

“May lightning or cholera strike down Haji Kerantukh who has killed off all the Ubykhs!” said the widow in parting and walked on with her children: “Who wants some boys? Boys for sale!”

She adored her sons and after selling them it's unlikely she could live another day. At that moment a fat bey in a blue fez appeared, waddling like an obese drake. He was followed by a lean servant stooped over in a slight bow.

The bey walked toward Kazyrkhan. He stopped her and began feeling the boys' arms and bodies to estimate what they were worth. Then he showed with his fingers the price he was willing to pay. She didn't bargain. The fat Turk slowly took the money out of his trousers pocket, and flung it at the woman's feet. The corners of Kazyrkhan's ashen lips quivered. With a trembling hand she picked up the money in a kind of stupor and took one last look at her beloved sons before she was separated from them forever. Oh, what a look that was, Sharakh! Kazyrkhan was a loving mother; only a mother is capable of doing a thing like that to save the lives of her children, of doing something compared to which her own suffering and even death meant nothing to her. The servant took the children away after thrusting a piece of bread at each of them. I covered my eyes with my hand—excruciating pain and misery shot through my heart as though it were pierced by a Turkish scimitar.

The freedom-loving Ubykhs! The proud Ubykhs! When a son was born the happy father broke the news to the mountains, the sun and all the neighbors, telling them that an heir of his blood was born. And the reply echoing back to him was: “May the family of Ubykhs grow in number!”

I staggered away from the cursed bazaar like a wounded man. The Turks bought and sold slaves, and in those ill-fated days a beautiful Caucasian woman cost no more than a sheep. The women were bought to serve as concubines in the harems of Istanbul, Ankara, Trabzon and other cities. Boys were even cheaper. Oh, those unfortunate Ubykh boys; it would have been better if they'd never been born! I can't even bear to tell you what they did to those boys. The evil profiteers would buy them and make them eunuchs for the harems of large and small lords.

The Ubykhs I met on the way looked like living mummies. Some of them didn't even have the strength to answer my greetings. Homeless people made huts and make-shift tents against the wind and rain. Hearing the crying and moaning of the living, the delirium of the dying was like walking through hell on earth. Some people who knew me advised me to go back:

“You won't be any use to your mother dead. Go back while your feet still carry you.” But I ignored their warnings. I was worried about my sister and her husband.

The plague was raging throughout the community. The local Turks were scared to death and tried to stay as far away from the Ubykhs as they could; they even put up cordons. But the greedy always want more; even if their stomachs are full their eyes are hungry. The owners of coffee shops, taverns, restaurants, and other establishments saw right away that they could make money off tragedy. They had the once proud and recalcitrant Caucasians do the dirtiest and hardest work, but paid them watery soup in return. The starving people were ready to work from morning till night for a little bit of food; they even thanked their employers as though they were benefactors. But the more man has the more he wants. And profit-seeking local officials searched the markets for young Ubykh women to buy and resell. Meanwhile the muezzin would go up the minaret five times a day to call orthodox Muslims to pray:

“In the name of Allah the gracious and merciful! ..“

The muezzin’s loud voice reached the deceived and rejected Ubykhs, but it couldn’t muffle their moaning and cursing. Sharakh, it seemed to me the women’s sighing turned into clouds and flew across the sea to our orphaned land where they wept over each abandoned hearth.

The farther I went from Samsun as I walked along the seaside, the more horrible was the sight I witnessed. Soon I came across corpses rotting right on the ground. The nauseating stench of death permeated the air. It was a sure sign that the whole emigre community in this area had died; no one was left to bury the dead. More and more I had a premonition of doom.

I crossed a stretch of highland covered with pebbles and descended into a valley where a muddy river was flowing. I was utterly exhausted although I hadn’t walked very far that day. There was a time when I walked with a youthful, springy step and my sinews were as strong as a mountain goat’s. I would have easily covered that distance then. But now I was tired out. I knelt by a quiet river, washed my hands, rinsed my face and, not being very thirsty, just took a sip of the warm water. But there are different kinds of water, Sharakh. In our homeland, where we used to live under the old plane trees, if someone would fall ill we would give him ice-cold water in a clay pitcher from a crystal-clear spring. Before you knew it the man was on his feet again, robust, and healthy. Yet no one thought of that as the miracle it was. I took out a piece of stale bread wrapped in my hood and dipped it in the river to stay my hunger.

I didn’t rest for long. With a heavy heart I went on. Soon I saw a squalid hut in the distance. It was obviously the home of a fisherman since nets were hung up by the door. Walking toward the house I noticed a woman lying prone on the side of the pathway and holding a baby to her breast. Next to her, in a small puddle, was a pitcher. I thought that the woman had come to fetch water in the river and had fallen down on her way back. I hurried to her to help her get up. I was so startled when I saw her face that I cried out. The woman was my sister Aisha.

“Oh, Allah! What’s wrong with you? Wake up! Say something!

When I tried to lift my sister I suddenly realized: she was dead! She apparently hadn’t been dead for long since her body was still warm. The baby was alive, but wasn’t crying; just greedily sucking my dead sister’s breast. For a second there I was lost; I didn’t know what to do. My forehead was covered with lead-heavy drops of sweat and my hands hung like those of a paralytic. Finally I got control over myself. I carefully, but forcefully took the baby away from his mother’s breast. There was a drop of milk on his lips. Oh, Sharakh, it seems like a millennium has passed since then, but the crying of that baby with the last bit of his mother’s milk on his lips is still ringing in my ears.

You know, my friend, I was thinking today that there’s a reason why I have miraculously survived to live such a long life. Someone had to wait for you so the story of how the Ubykhs perished would live on... A ship should reach shore, and the truth should reach people...

It looked like the boy was ill too. His body was hot. He clenched his toy-like fists, no bigger than walnuts, and cried so hard I thought he would suffocate. Holding him close to my breast, I practically ran up to the clay hut and before I even got to the door I cried out for help:

“Someone come out here!

But no one replied or came to the door. Standing at the threshold of the dilapidated hut, I peered inside. Someone there was moaning in pain. I took one more step and saw a man lying with his back to the wall and writhing in pain. He was my brother-in-law Garun, his forearms crossed and pressing hard on his stomach. His eyes were inflamed and his eyelids seemed burned. He was so thin his hooked nose looked even sharper and his unshaven cheeks were hollow. The once famous horseman who used to break in wild horses, a lucky and dare-devil man, now hovered between life and death.

Barely recognizing me, Garun tried to stand up to greet me.

“Oh, Zaurkan, forgive me for not having the strength to get up. Aisha went for water and will be back any minute.” His speech was interspersed with soft groans. Death was near. Half-dazed Garun obviously didn’t notice I was holding his son in my arms. Then suddenly he understood. Breathing heavily he spoke in a hoarse whisper, “If you’re a man, Zaurkan, kill me. Take me out of my misery! Aisha is dead and I’ll die like a broken-winded horse. But if I survive... No, I don’t want to... I’m older than you... I order you to kill me, shoot me! ..”

His face convulsed, his legs went straight, his head fell sideways, and blood foamed from his mouth. Forgive me, Sharakh, I guess I’ve depressed you. But if you want to hear more don’t complain if my story is like a bleeding wound that some evil soul has poured salt into. Our ancestors said medicine is never sweet.

Well, my brother-in-law Garun died, and I was left with the sick and hungry infant in my arms.

I set my nephew down on the plank bed and closed the eyes of my deceased brother-in-law. Then I went out to get Aisha’s body. I lifted her up carefully; her pitch black braids fell to my feet. Just remembering is terrible enough. Soon the dead couple was lying next to each other, side by side. My tiny nephew, whose name I didn’t even know, and who had been crying so hard just a minute ago suddenly fell quiet in his bed. The poor thing, whose life quivered like the wick of a candle in the wind, became silent. His little face was perspiring from the fever. When his eyes met mine I shivered because he looked as though he understood and was pleading for help. I brought some water from the river in the pitcher Aisha had dropped, gave the boy a drink and wiped his face with a wet cloth. The child sank into an uneasy slumber. What should I do? I thought as I stood near the deceased. Maybe cruel fate will at least spare the life of this newborn babe and I’ll be able to find him a wet nurse? But where? First, though, I had to bury the dead. According to custom they had to be buried and mourned by their family. But where would I find someone to report Aisha’s and Garun’s death to their relatives? Surely I can find someone in the area to help me? I thought I put a stick against the door of the hut to keep out the dogs and, grasping the last straw of hope, I went toward the seashore a little way and shot my pistol into the air three times.

“Hey there,” was the reply I heard in a little while. Three men and an elderly woman came toward me from the dusty shrubs. All of them were in terrible condition and could barely walk. The men held shovels over their shoulders and the woman dressed in black, had her hair down. I realized right away they were devout people who voluntarily became grave diggers doing the excruciatingly difficult job of burying those who had no family to do it for them. I told them about the death of my sister and her husband, and about my tiny nephew who was lying sick.

“Oh, my dear man,” sympathized the woman. “What happened to your noble relatives has happened to many others. Allah has turned his back on the Ubykhs. When we left our homeland we committed a terrible sin. And now we are paying for it.”

“We share your grief, dear man! We’ll help you bury your dead, but there’s nothing more we can do,” added the men as they dug their shovels into the earth.

I took them to the hut. We found the baby crying again, and making a sucking movement with his lips. He was choking. The woman picked him up, pressed him against her chest, and shook her head gravely:

“He’s not long for this world, either!”

Rocking and trying to calm the baby, she walked outside. I took off my hood and began beating my chest in mourning. I mourned them for myself, for my mother, father, brother and sisters, and I mourned them for the orphaned land of the Ubykhs which was so near, yet so far away from us now. The sun was hiding behind the trees when we brought the dead out to the foot of the hill. While we were burying them the baby died too as though he

didn't want to live without his mother and father in this land of the devil. We buried the still unnamed boy next to his parents.

"Farewell, Zaurkan," said the kind people who had helped me. "We hope nothing more terrible ever happens to you than what happened today. We can do nothing more for you because each one of us is doomed. There's no way we can escape death in the face of this pestilence." Pointing to the new graves they said in envy, "They're lucky! Our lot will be much worse. There will be no one to bury us. The ravens will pluck out our eyes and steal our bones. Pray for our souls, Zaurkan!"

When they left I remained alone in the silence of the graves. The sun, having blood-stained the horizon, finally went down. The sky turned dark and the shadows long. I decided to stay there and guard the graves the first night as my ancestors had always done to keep any animals from coming near and defiling the burial site.

When it got completely dark I lit a fire at the heads of the deceased. The flame was crimson red and showed me the visages of those who lay at its feet. Then the waning moon came out. The clouds looked like shrouds floating through the sky that was lighter than the land. Every muscle in my body ached with fatigue, my thoughts were muddled, and my eyes closed by themselves. I put my head down on my hood and fell asleep instantly. I dreamed of my grandfather. I never saw him in my life; he died before I was born, but my father often told me about him and so I recognized him in my dream. My grandfather was wearing a white Circassian coat, as white as driven snow. And his head was white, too. He was holding a huge black kettle in his hands and water spilled over the brim.

"Zaurkan," he said reproachfully, "how can you sit idle when all your people have risen up to fight their predicament?"

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Are you blind? Look around you: the mountains are on fire." Pointing his arm in the direction of the mountains he made an arc in the air.

When I looked where he was pointing I saw the mountains aflame. A terrible, shaggy fire rose up the mountain slopes like a herd of aurochs that had been skinned alive. The permanent snow on the mountain peaks bore its reflection. The clouds were tinged red and the sky crackled like dry brushwood in a huge bonfire. The sparks, as big as burning ships, flew skyward.

"What's going on?" I whispered in horror.

"A visitation of God! God has deserted us and has decided to wipe all the Ubykhs off the face of the earth. Woolly snow had been falling the whole night; there was so much of it the mountains were no longer visible. And then, heaven knows how, but suddenly lightning struck and set it all on fire: the earth is being enveloped in flames. Run, Zaurkan, run, my grandson. Save the mountains!" called my grandfather.

I grabbed the huge kettle of water out of the old man's hands and rushed to put out the fire. It was then I woke up. At first I didn't know where I was, but in the morning twilight, looking at the graves, I remembered everything. I heard whining behind my back. I turned around and saw a dog whose ribs stuck out so that each one of them could be counted. Covered with burs, with his tail between his legs, the dog was whimpering.

"Go away!" I hissed and lifted my hand as though I was going to throw a rock.

The dog moved away frightened, then sat down and resumed his whining. I tried several times to chase him away, but it was no use. Each time the dog ran a few steps away and howled again. Maybe the dog belonged to the owners of the fisherman's hut, I thought to myself. In that case he's the host and I'm the guest.

The funeral, the nightmare, and the dog's howling were all mixed up in my head. "Are the ones I left behind in Samsun still alive? And what if they're not?"

I closed my eyes: everything seemed blood red as if I were looking at the sun. I got up and hurried off for home.

## **“THERE’S NO GOD BUT ALLAH”**

When I was nearing the place I had come from, I saw from a distance a gray crowd of Ubykhs and heard the buzz of many people talking. I caught up with an old man on his way to the gathering and asked:

“What’s the meeting for?”

“The Samsun governor Omer Pasha is supposed to give us the honor of meeting him. He wants to talk to us,” answered the old man as he stuck his staff into the dry earth.

We came up to the crowd. Besides the people of Shardyn, son of Alou, there were also some other Caucasians I didn’t know. The people were talking excitedly, arguing, and gesticulating with their hands; some had grim predictions and others were hopeful. Their eyes looked like sparks from a fire that a rock had just been dropped into. There were women in black standing next to the men. Old shriveled-up women covering their mouths with the edges of their black kerchiefs sighed continually. Looking around the crowd I noticed my father; he was standing there leaning on a stick made of box wood. We caught each other’s glance and I realized, to my sorrow, that he could tell everything just by my look.

“Hamirza!” someone shouted to my father and he turned his head the other way.

My brother Mata came running up to me out of breath. “Thank Allah that you’ve come back alive and unharmed!” he exclaimed by way of greeting. Then he clung to my shoulder and looked into my eyes: “Did you find Aisha?”

Poorly concealed fear was in his direct and impatient question. How could I dash his hopes?

“Yes, I found her! I found her!” I lied, taking pity on him. “They’re doing fine.” And to keep him from asking any more questions I was the one to inquire: “And how are you getting along here?”

“All right, Zaurkan! Mother was very worried about you. She was in bed for three days and just today got up, as though she felt you were coming home.”

A broad-shouldered Ubykh in a patched Circassian coat and youthful-looking although he had gray hair, came through the crowd and said facetiously:

“I’d like to know what happened to our spiritual leader, the pious Sakhatkeri?” He wasn’t talking to anyone in particular, but to everyone all at once. “Long before we moved our pious mullah went through the villages telling us fools’ fairytales, tricking us into coming here.” Imitating Sakhatkeri, he chanted in a blissful sugary voice: “My dear people, Turkey is a flowering paradise. It’s a heavenly garden for the righteous. It’s never too hot, or too cold there. No one there profanes the name of Allah; they only pray in gratitude.’ Where is that dirty liar? If I could get hold of him I’d wring his neck!” The giant shook his huge fists in the air as though he was already holding the invisible Sakhatkeri by the throat.

“You’d have better luck looking for a needle in a hay stack!

“Just as soon as we got off the boat he vanished into thin air!

“They say he’s gone on a pilgrimage to Mecca.”

“May the black rock crush him there!” Hamida interrupted the men, while she wiped a tear from her eye with the edge of her kerchief.

“Turkey is a big country... Maybe from here on the outskirts of Samsun we can’t see things in their proper perspective, just like a hen that can’t see farther than her roost. Maybe it’s true that Sakhatkeri went off to find us

the fertile lands we were promised? Our leader, Sharyn, son of Alou, has also gone off," said the well-meaning Shrin, from the Sadz tribe.

"A man with money will eat, sweets even in hell! We're dying like flies, my dear Shrin, but you still believe that our benefactors will come for us to take us to paradise. Take off your blinders!" the angry Caucasian, who was the first to mention the scoundrel Sakhatkeri, lashed out against Shrin's rosy illusions.

Dziapsh Nouryz, son of Barakai, pushed his way through the crowd. He looked around as though he was trying to find someone. A hot-tempered man, he was like a pistol that's always cocked. Usually Dziapsh Nouryz did not just stand up, but jumped up; he could interrupt someone in the middle of a sentence and always acted on impulse.

My brother Mata, nodding at him, explained: "He just got out of his sick bed." I could see the son of Barakai was deathly pale, and hunched over. He looked so ill you couldn't help pitying him.

"I don't see any point in arguing about who's to blame for our misfortune," he began in a hoarse voice as though he had a cold. "One thing's clear: we were deceived and sold like a flock of sheep. Where's Haji Kerantukh gone off to? Huh? You don't know! I can swear to you that unlike us he's doing very well. That kind of man feels at home anywhere. We aren't at a majlis\* where people wag their tongues arguing all day long. I'll be brief: I've told my relatives, foster brothers and friends that I'm ready to lead anyone who wants to go back home. If we can't manage to do it peacefully then we'll take up arms. I'd rather die in battle with my head toward my homeland than starve to death for nothing in this foreign land. It's time to act! And pointing in the direction of the sea he shouted: "We leave tomorrow!

Most of those gathered there were surprised to hear Dziapsh Nouryz, son of Barakai, talk that way. Although people were used to his headlong decisions, his "we leave tomorrow" had them puzzled. Everyone of them had women, old people and children to worry about. Taking them along was easier said than done. But who could leave them here to fend for themselves and be at fate's mercy? Dziapsh Nouryz knew all that. The crowd was hesitant.

But Nouryz realized that cheeks don't burn unless they're slapped.

"Some of you, decent and brave people, warned that we were walking into a trap! Nevertheless, like sheep following a lascivious goat, you led your children and wives into this cholera-ridden hole!

"What you're saying is true, my dear Nouryz," said the old man Sit as he shoved the edges of his hood behind his back. "Your brother Ahmed tried to keep us from taking that fatal step. But at that time you..."

"The pasha is coming! The pasha!

This shout prevented the old man from finishing what he wanted to say.

The pasha, accompanied by a convoy of ten armed horsemen, approached along the road from Samsun. Soon he reached the crowd. The crowd made way for the pasha to come right into the middle. He was a huge man with a dark complexion, wearing a fez-like hat with a tassel. His reddish mustache seemed pasted onto his pouting upper lip. He looked over the crowd with his lilac-tinged eyes as he sat astride his portly, tall roan horse. The stirrups were lowered as far as they could go so it seemed the long-legged rider practically touched the ground with his feet. Many Ubykhs knew the Turkish language. But usually they were noblemen or their servants, or smugglers, not the common folk. Omer Pasha couldn't speak to the crowd of mostly commoners without an interpreter. That's why Mzauch Abukhba, a smart young man who could read and write, was by the pasha's left stirrup and acting as interpreter. He was a Sadz from Gagra.

After greeting the people the pasha inquired:

"Is everyone here a Muslim?"

"Yes, everyone, Governor!" replied the old man Sit.

"If everyone is a Muslim then why don't you go to the mosque and pray five times a day like the devout?" It was impolite, to say the least, to start off a conversation with reproach.

"Honorable Pasha, allow me to point out to you that Allah has rid the naked of the need to wash clothes. We would go to the mosque but there's no bread there to relieve our hunger, and no medicine to put out the flame of contagion that burns in our midsts."

I was startled by my own voice which sounded like steel while my right hand was clenching the haft of my dagger. It was as though I were seeing the pasha's face in a delirium and floating past it was the ghostly shadow of my dead sister Aisha whose live baby was still sucking her breast. My sister's black braids fell to the hoofs of the horse the pasha was sitting on. Mata instantly came between me and the pasha to protect me. But the interpreter turned a frenzied bull into a submissive sheep.

"We are hungry, Sir," was how he translated my words.

"Beginning with tomorrow every family will get a loaf of bread," declared Omer Pasha so solemnly and with such stateliness as though tomorrow he would open up the gates of paradise for us.

The pasha didn't hear any shouts of joy. On the contrary, the old woman Hamida, who looked more like a sick bird, jumped forward and squawked:

"How can some stale bread help us? All our children will die without milk!"

"What kind of gratitude is that," one could read in the pasha's eyes which betrayed his dissatisfaction.

"That's not the Muslim way," he spoke out loud and in great anger. "Women aren't allowed, especially without veils, to be where men are. You should forget the ways of the infidels. This is not Russia! The women must get out of here at once!"

"Please be kind enough to hear me out!" appealed the gray-bearded Soulakh, folding his hands and bowing to the distinguished pasha. "We Ubykhs have our shrine, the Almighty Bytkha. I have the honor of being its high priest. When we sing glory to our shrine, when we pray to it, our women are together with the men. That's our custom! We have carried on that custom from our ancestors."

When Mzauch Abukhba translated the high priest's statement word for word, the pasha hung his whip on the saddle and, raising his hands to the sky, muttered:

"There is no God but Allah..." and interrupting his prayer, he threatened the crowd: "You apostates must go to the mosque! All of you must go! Pray that your sins be forgiven or you will not see heaven!"

I was choking with rage:

"Give us a chance to live like people on this earth and we'll let you have your paradise!"

Mata once again guarded me, ready to fight, and I caught my father's critical look which seemed to say, Where's your self-control, Son?

Omer Pasha, whose rhetoric I interrupted, looked back. One of the horsemen pointed the handle of his whip in my direction.

"Damn you all!" swore the Samsun governor and, shedding the mask of well-wisher, declared: "In the name of the great sultan, the representative of Allah on earth, I have ordered that a list be drawn up of the young people capable of military service. Those on the list will be drafted. Whoever volunteers will be rewarded: his family will gain the protection of the state."

There was complete silence. It was broken by my father:



“They want to take away our sons! Deprive us of our last hope and support!”

“Oh, Hamirza,” someone said with total lack of spirit. “If you don’t agree today, tomorrow they’ll take your Sons by force. The sultan’s sword is long...”

The people were in a state of confusion. At that point Nouryz emerged in front of Omer Pasha. Sticking his short staff into the ground and hanging his saber on it, he said in Turkish, making his position clear without beating around the bush:

“You know, governor, your land of ‘happiness’ doesn’t suit us. Either we aren’t worthy of it, or it isn’t worthy of us. Half of those who sailed here with us are already in their graves. The same fate awaits the rest of us. So listen here, governor: we’ve decided to go back to our homeland! Give us ships! If you don’t we’ll walk, only open up the frontier. If you do us such a great favor we’ll pray eternally for the health of your sultan.”

The crowd was dead silent. But Omer Pasha wasn’t startled in the least by what was said by Nouryz, son of Barakai. He was probably expecting the exiles to make such a demand and that’s why without hesitation he exclaimed:

“It’s impossible! If it were only up to me, but I don’t have the authority to change the conditions specified in a treaty between two great nations—Turkey and Russia. You will prosper under our crescent moon. Even the prophet wasn’t recognized at first. Your sacrifices will not be forgotten. Patience is the sister of success. There’s no god but Allah! Don’t forget to go to the mosque every Friday and purify your souls...” With that farewell, after prancing for a while in front of us, Omer Pasha spurred his horse and trotted on his way.

His convoy followed after him. A cloud of dust hid the horsemen from us. The crowd broke up. People were depressed by all they had heard. Soon my father, brother and I were standing together. My father gave me a penetrating look. I couldn’t take it and so I lowered my head.

“I see by your eyes that Aisha is in great trouble! Tell everything as it is while we’re still alone,” and putting his hand on Mata’s shoulder, added: “we, men!”

Not concealing any detail, I related to them everything that had happened. Father’s jaws quivered, but he showed no other sign that the terrible news broke his heart. He even took his hand off Mata’s shoulder, supporting himself by his box wood staff. But my poor brother wept like a child. Of course he was just a young man and it showed. After giving Mata a chance to cry out his grief, father spoke in the voice of a man who has endured the most terrible tragedy in his life:

“Keep this sorrow, like a deep secret, behind the fortress wall of your teeth. Neither your mother, nor your sisters are to ever know this. If they find out it will kill them. Zaurkan, you go to them quickly and give them hope. Go now my sons!

My father left us and went to the edge of a stone-covered valley where some stunted trees grew. He had adored his elder daughter Aisha. She was the family’s first child. Now Father had to be alone to mourn her in the shade of the dusty branches. He sought solitude, so necessary for meditation, prayer and tears.

Mata followed after me. He was no longer sobbing, just sighing. Before I went off to find Aisha I noticed how he was losing weight and shouting in his sleep. His peace of mind was disturbed. I felt he was tormented by mental anguish, not a physical illness. He was suffering and didn’t have the strength to restrain his feelings that would have been hard for even a mature man to conquer. Every time he opened his mouth he’d say something about our mountains, our homestead, and our land.

“Recently,” he admitted, “I’ve been having bad dreams. Just last night I dreamed I was carrying a full sack of corn very early in the morning up to our old mill. The door was opened and at the threshold sat a gray dog I’d never seen before. He looked like he was ready to sink his teeth into my throat. The cursed creature was barking, but made no sound; it was a voiceless dog... I picked up a rock, threw it at the dog, and it jumped out of the way. I walked into the mill and saw in amazement that the lower wheel was moving at full speed, but the millstones stood still and there was dust on them three fingers thick. Instead of the wooden trough where the flour was supposed to fall, there was a black casket. I was terrified and ran outside, but it was pitch dark outside although

just a minute before the sun had been shining brightly. The sun was gone and instead there was a dull circle in the black sky that looked like a ball of smoked red cheese. I was probably shouting in my sleep, because Father woke me up..."

"He's like a man whose hand has been chopped off in battle but he still has the sensation his fingers are moving and hurt him," I thought to myself.

"Be patient, Mata. Maybe things will work out."

"Zaurkan," he said after thinking it over a moment. "You know, if I don't manage to find a way to go home I'll die."

A chill went up my spine: I realized he wasn't just talking.

"Don't sing a death song," I rebuked my brother while at the same time trying to warn him of danger and distract him from his disturbing thoughts. But what I said just fell on deaf ears:

"Nouryz and his friends are already getting ready to go back home. If Mother and Father find out about my plans to go with them they won't let me go not for anything. I beg of you, Zaurkan, talk to them for me. They say it's a risk; we could easily get killed trying. But misfortune has no laws; it all depends on luck, Zaurkan. Of course, I have to consider Mother, Father, and our sisters, but if I'm killed you'll take care of them. And if I manage to get to our abandoned home I'll light a fire in the cold hearth. I'll look after the homestead; I'll plough, sow and take in the harvest. I can do all that. I'll buy some livestock, go hunting, and then, no matter what it costs, I'll hire a schooner and come for you."

Standing in front of me was an Ubykh lad who looked like an eagle in captivity—no one could take away his dream of soaring into the sky. I was careful not to clip his wings, yet at the same time I didn't want to give him false hopes of success.

"Omer Pasha just dashed your hopes. He spoke on behalf of the Turkish government. Who can be sure that he'll be given the right to live in former Ubykhia even if he does manage to get there? Look before you leap! But if Nouryz and his friends have chosen this thorny path and you want to join them I won't stand in your way. You're your own master."

I wanted so badly to go with the daring group organized by Nouryz, son of Barakai. I could just see my home: the fire flickering in the fireplace, our door open to anyone. Yet I didn't let on at all. Not a single muscle moved on my face. The Samsun governor was probably telling the truth about the treaty signed between the two countries. That meant that all of us were doomed to perish: those who wanted to follow Nouryz, and those who would remain behind. Where was the way out of the vicious circle? Who could possibly get the czar and the sultan, those long-time enemies, to reconsider their decision about the Ubykh exiles? My head was like a beehive that thoughts flew out of like bees, without bringing back any honey. The bitter taste of truth grew stronger in my mind. We were approaching our stone quarters that looked more like a crypt when Mata put his hand on my shoulder:

"Wait a second, Zaurkan..."

"What's the matter? Are you tired?" He shook his head and suggested:

"Let's go listen to old Sakut. Just for a little while..."

"What about our mother and sisters..."

"You'll still have time to tell them that hopeful fairy-tale. And anyway I still haven't pulled myself together... They'll see through me..."

"This is no time to listen to music, Mata. This is no time at all!

"You're wrong, Zaurkan. This is just the time. Only the strings of an apkhartsa can ease our sorrow and soothe us, at least a little. Come on, I beg you..."

We walked toward the lone tree that stood on the seashore. Gray-bearded Sakut, with his back up against the trunk, was gazing with his blind eyes out where the waves, like horses with white manes, rolled in the roaring vastness of the sea.

Sakut was surrounded by people who had come from the meeting. There were at least fifteen of them. An apkhartsa and bow were lying on a faded horse cloth next to the blind singer. I knew that every day at sunset Astan guided his grandfather to the lone tree. People would soon gather around to hear him sing, would secretly shed a tear and get some relief from their sorrow. Sakut never sang his songs twice, making a gift of each one to the people. After all, who would give the same present twice? Old Sakut, ever since he went blind, could recognize people by their voices. He would say hello to anyone who greeted him and would call him by name.

“Good day, Sakut,” I said as I approached.

“Oh, Zaurkan. I could tell that was you from your footsteps. May God bless you, the eldest son of Hamirza. You know, my friend, whenever I hear your voice it reminds me of the heroes who lived in the days of my ancestors. They lived a long long time like the Narts—the giants of our fairytales... I wish you their long life! I’m so glad you came. I have a request to make for you. My grandson Astan is so young and inexperienced. All our relatives are now dead so I ask you this favor, Zaurkan: after I die don’t leave him without your counsel. Be an older brother to him. I have already told the others to bury me, a sinner, under this tree with my head facing toward my native mountains.” Pointing to the leather sack attached to his belt, he explained: “In here is a handful of earth from our homeland. Sprinkle it on my chest after you lower me into my grave. And hang my apkhartsa on this tree. The wind will touch the strings and I will be able to hear their sounds.” Then he rubbed his quivering palm over the rough tree trunk. “Where’s your brother, Zaurkan?”

“Greetings, grandfather,” said Mata quietly.

“Now you come closer to me. Bend down! Come on, bend down!”

Mata leaned over to the old man who felt his face with his thin sensitive fingers.

“You’ve been crying, lad?”

“Yes! “

“That’s all right. You need not feel guilty about your tears. May they turn into courage! “

Then he fumbled around for his apkhartsa and bow. He put the instrument next to his thin chest and strummed it a few times to tune the horse hair strings. Sakut was in no hurry. He turned his eyes to the sky as though he could see its light, the floating clouds, and the birds soaring in its endless expanses.

“Every day has its song,” he announced.

The people became silent. The bow, led by his hand, moved down smoothly and then went up sharply.

Wa-raida, don’t stop  
Playing my apkhartsa,  
Give us hope like you’d give  
Stirrups to a rider.  
Blind man, touch the strings.  
May light come through darkness,  
And let hope fill again  
Thousands of brave hearts.  
A son is weak from days of thirst:  
“Mother, I’m thirsty!”  
“Patient be, beloved son

Till Sister brings you water.”  
“I haven’t eaten, Mom, for days!  
I need some food or I’ll die.”  
“Your father is grinding the barley,  
Be patient, my dear son.”  
The mother is soothing her only son—  
Her husband and daughter are in their graves.  
Wa-raida, may always hope  
Be lighting up your darkest nights.

## BACK TO THE LAND OF THE UBYKHS

The Russian consul was in Trabzon. His last name was Moshnin. We knew he had been very persistent in arranging our migration to Turkey. His strategy was quite simple: if he could get the armed Ubykhs off their land it would be easy to take over the Caucasus completely. It had been the czar’s long-time dream to conquer that rebellious area. When the vicegerent of the Caucasus and his assistants saw there weren’t enough ships to take the emigres to Turkey, none other than the efficient and determined Moshnin worked it out with the Turkish authorities to provide more sailing vessels. Moshnin tried not to use second hand information if he could get the facts himself. When he got word of the Ubykhs’ dire situation he went with some of his men down the Turkish seacoast on foot. What he saw with his own eyes upset him immensely. He was conscience-stricken. Besides, like it or not, the exiles were from the Russian Empire. Consequently, Moshnin, may his name be forever remembered, demanded to see the governor, Omer Pasha. With polite firmness he told the governor what he thought about the Turkish authorities’ inhuman treatment of the thousands of Caucasians who had come under the sultan’s patronage.

“They are dying of hunger and disease, while your wealthy countrymen are taking advantage of the situation and buying their children for next to nothing, and especially their beautiful girls. You promised the leaders of the Ubykhs you’d be hospitable hosts... The sultan’s word in your country is law, and the prophet bequeathed charity...”

“You’ll excuse me, consul Sir, but to my great regret, I don’t have enough time today to engage in a detailed conversation about the Ubykhs,” replied Omer Pasha, containing his annoyance. And, as he rose, indicating that he, indeed, did not have the time, said: “Your Highness, I have met the exiles and found them to be ungrateful people who are difficult to deal with. They don’t respect the laws of the country that gave them refuge... They do as they please, refuse to let their sons serve in the army and engage in lawless activities... Most of them now have the irresistible desire to return home. Only I don’t know how your government will react to that,” said Omer Pasha with a victorious smile.

On his way out Moshnin realized it was unlikely his conversation with the governor would change anything for the Ubykhs. Anyway, he found the governor an unpleasant man. The consul knew for sure that Omer Pasha, who accused the Ubykhs of lawlessness, had bought himself fifty Ubykh women for a song. Some of them were now his servants and others, his concubines. Omer Pasha was one of those responsible for our tragic fate, not the main one, but nevertheless he deserved to be hanged. The hands of revenge, however, are short. But it was important that the Russian consul sympathized with us. It offered us at least some hope of returning.

On behalf of all those who wanted to go home, Mzauch Abukhba went to Trabzon three times to talk to Moshnin. I remember the final time he returned there was a meeting. Not only the Ubykhs were there, but representatives of other mountain tribes as well. You know, Sharakh, when you’re older it’s easier to see far. My God, how many years have passed and yet to me it’s as though it all happened yesterday and I can visualize Mzauch Abukhba standing in front of me. He was a broad-shouldered man with a black mustache. His home and field had been next to the Gagra fortress. Like most of us, repenting the fateful migration, he had only one desire now: to go back. But unlike Nouryz, son of Barakai, who was ready to take up arms if need be, Mzauch advocated negotiations with the governments of both countries. When he addressed the people at the meeting he insisted on working through the Russian ambassador in Istanbul—Ignatiev, an influential and noble man.

"The czar himself listens to the ambassador. And the Turks know it. Let's write to his majesty and in our petition as recent citizens of the Russian state, we'll describe all our misfortunes. Three people of your choice should take the letter to Istanbul to the Russian ambassador... That was Moshnin's advice. He has given me his own letter, may God bless him with good health. His letter should be attached to ours so it will be accepted by the embassy. Let's not waste our precious time..."

For an instant there was complete silence. Suddenly someone spoke out in a loud voice:

"May I remind you that just yesterday you were shouting 'Death to the infidels!' as you tried stopping the czar's soldiers from riding into the mountains." That was Uakhsit Rydba, a Sadz prince and member of the former Ubykh council. His narrow, silver beard was like a stream running down a steep hill; it made the lean man look even taller than he actually was. His whole appearance spoke of noble origins. Of late the prince was notorious for opposing the majority who wanted to go home. Some even said he gave leadership to the opposition.

"We were the ones who chose to leave the valleys of the Northern Caucasus for Turkey... First we turn our back on the czar, then on the sultan. How could anyone respect us after that? And if we go back, what will we find in our homeland? I heard that Cossacks are living on my land... Maybe you want me to take care of the Cossacks' geese?" Patting his well-groomed beard with his thin hand, the prince threw a proud glance at the crowd.

Someone laughed facetiously behind his back:

"Well, what do you know! He's so grateful for the sultan's charity. Tell me, highly esteemed Uakhsit, what have you gained in this wonderful country? Paradise on earth? Peace?"

"Yes, peace! If we go back we'll have to start fighting again. But the only ones who like war are those who look at it from a distance. Here at least bullets aren't flying," replied Rydba.

"Wait a second, Prince! Who told you bullets aren't flying here? You can't hear them, but they take the lives of hundreds of people a day. And the living don't have the strength to bury the dead. It's worse than war; it's murder, pure and simple." Nouryz was as pale as a ghost. He began coughing.

Taking advantage of the pause, Mzauch suggested drawing up a petition to the czar, as advised by the consul Moshnin.

"Hey, Nouryz, where's your nobleman's honor? A man who was herding sheep just yesterday is conducting negotiations today. What will happen tomorrow?" commented the prince sarcastically.

Mzauch gave a jerk as though struck with a whip, but controlled himself.

The old woman Hamida then emerged from the group of women. She was dressed in black since she was in mourning. There were dark shadows underneath her sad eyes, but she held her head high. As she tore off her black scarf and her gray hair fell down to her shoulders like a snowfall, she shouted:

"What's wrong with you? Maybe all of you have already left this world and have plenty of time to talk at leisure about noble origins, about lost wealth and other trifling matters? Count the graves on the shore! I hope our nobility will forgive me, but those graves are on their consciences. Our foster children, our leaders did not use their heads. The question is, why? You noblemen are to blame for our predicament! Even now you are haughtily talking about your lost property. You don't want to tend geese! But we're used to that job. I would rather have had my four grandchildren tend geese in their native land! But now only one is left. The other three are dead..." Hamida's voice broke, but she swallowed the lump in her throat and went on: "I'm hanging on to life for the sake of my last grand child, my beloved Tagir. What I wouldn't do to get him back home." And once again Hamida's voice became harsh: "You're not acting like Ubykh men! For centuries the measure of your dignity was your courage! But now you seem to have forgotten that you're men! Maybe I, with my head bare, should become your leader and take you back across the sea? We've talked long enough! Let's do something! If it's a petition we must write, then let's write it! I'll be the first to sign! If we must appeal to the czar, then let's do it! I'm willing to be the first to kneel down before him. This is no time for arrogance. We should have only one concern now and that is to return to the land of the Ubykhs."

No one wanted to talk after Hamida. Old Sit finally broke the silence:

“My dear Mzauch, who will write the petition for us if our scribe died of typhoid fever? He was the only one who knew how to write Russian. Again fate is working against us.”

“We have somebody else!” replied Mzauch and waved his hand to someone in the crowd.

A plain old man in city attire came out of the crowd. Nobody had ever seen him before. He was wearing glasses and his gray hair combed straight back came down to his shoulders. A golden watch chain was hanging from the old man’s front shirt pocket.

“This honorable man is a Greek. He has been all over Russia as an interpreter for merchants, but now he’s working for the Russian consulate... If we tell him everything we want to say in Turkish he’ll write it down in Russian,” explained Mzauch by way of introduction.

The old man took some paper, a pen and ink out of an old leather purse and arranged them on a little table that came from heaven knows where. Having wiped his glasses with the edge of his handkerchief, he stood on his knees in front of the little table and looked at Mzauch as if to say, “I’m ready!”

Prince Uahsit Rydba smiled ironically:

“How can a Christian hand scribble out our Muslim suffering? Don’t expect anything good from an alien prophet!”

“Your malicious remarks don’t help anyone, Prince,” cut in Hamida.

The old men and women sat in a semi-circle around the scribe while the young people stood back somewhat. Sit proposed the opening lines of the petition. The people discussed them: they shortened some of the sentences and added on to others. When the elders finished redoing Sit’s version, Mzauch translated it into Turkish, and the Greek, squeezing his pen, wrote it down in Russian. While the Greek was writing everyone was so quiet we could hear his pen squeak. Then another Ubykh offered his thoughts for the elders to consider. Once again they were discussed, translated twice and committed to paper. That procedure was repeated many times over. In the same way that streams merge into one river, so too our thoughts and desires flowed down along the lines of the petition, blending into one hope. Whenever the Greek picked up his pen the people held their breath, stretched their necks and fixed their eyes on the document illuminated by the sun. Their fate now hinged on that piece of paper.

If the Black Sea were a huge ink-well, if the trees on both its shores were pens, and if the earth were a paper scroll, there still wouldn’t be enough ink, pens or paper to describe all the torment the exiles had endured, I thought to myself as I looked at the petition.

Still I hoped for a miracle. I could imagine that paper, like a white-winged dove, flying from the hand of the ambassador in Istanbul across the sea and over the plains and forests of Russia, and landing in the czar’s palace in St. Petersburg. There are many windows in the white stone palace, but I prayed the document in the form of a white-winged dove would find the right one and alight on the desk where the emperor himself was seated. Why shouldn’t such a miracle happen? What if the sovereign of half the world would wake up that morning feeling energetic, cheerful and magnanimous. He’d pick up the paper with our words of entreaty and, after calling in an adjutant he’d inquire: “What’s this?”

“A petition from the Ubykhs, Your Majesty!” the officer would reply pleasantly having picked up on the czar’s good mood like the other people of the court.

“The Ubykhs? Oh yes! A brave tribe, quite brave,” the emperor would recall, and would comment respectfully: “They lived on the Black Sea coast and were called ‘recalcitrant’ in the vicegerent’s reports.”

“Yes, that’s right, Your Majesty,” the adjutant would say as he clicked his heels.

"They fought us valiantly, and after refusing to accept our terms they moved to Turkey. A worthy enemy, quite worthy! What do you think, General? Does such an enemy deserve our respect?"

"Absolutely, Your Majesty," would be the reply of the officer whose uniform would boast a medal "For Conquering the Caucasus".

"Oh, what a tragedy!" the czar would exclaim with compassion. "I had no idea they'd end up in so much trouble... After all, there are many old people, women and children among them... Of course it's their own fault, but why should I deprive them of my mercy." And picking up his pen in his white hand the czar would write just two words on the petition: "Request granted!" And justice would prevail. Ships would come for us and we'd return home to the land of the Ubykhs. We'd open up our neglected homes and once again the peasants would go out into the fields to plough and sow. Once again there would be joy and gaiety, weddings and births.

But what if the opposite would happen: the czar would wake up in a bad mood, angry and sullen because a beautiful woman refused his attentions the night before, and the adjutant, when the subject would come up about the Ubykhs, would offer the czar harsh advice: "It would be extremely unwise to forgive those barbarians, Your Majesty. Besides, we have an agreement with Turkey." Then the autocrat, picking up the pen in his white hand would write:

"Case closed, not to be reconsidered!" And we Ubykhs would perish, every single one of us. And so our fate hung on the tip of the czar's pen. The life and death of an entire people now depended on chance, on the disposition of the czar, on the power of the hand holding the imperial pen.

While I was trying to guess what would be the czar's reaction to our petition, the scribe and translator, the old Greek, finished his job.

It seems as though an eternity has passed since then, Sharakh, yet to this day I can remember the contents of the Ubykhs' petition to the czar practically word for word. It's as though my memory is a tombstone and the words in the petition, the epitaph. You ask what the petition said? It described our suffering that not one people had ever before experienced. It said the Turkish government that had invited us was not fulfilling any of its promises of hospitality. "On the verge of inevitable extinction, sincerely repentant and frankly admitting the full severity of the mistake we have made, we Ubykhs, all the surviving men and women, old and young, bow our heads to Your Imperial Majesty, and tearfully pray you allow us to return home to our orphaned hearths. We solemnly swear to you that if we are fortunate enough to be permitted to return to our homeland then not only we, but our descendants as well, will never forget your imperial charity and will faithfully and honestly serve the Russian state. Kneeling before Your Majesty we beg of you: don't let the Ubykh people disappear from the face of the earth!" "That, Sharakh, was what we wrote in the petition.

When the text was read out loud, Mzauch Abukhba signed it and asked us to do the same. The old woman Hamida never learned to write so she dipped her thumb in the ink-well and pressed it on the paper. There was nothing unusual about the fact that Hamida couldn't write. Even our honorable priest Soulakh was illiterate and so he did as she. I must say, Sharakh, that there were only a few who could write their names on the petition. In fact maybe there were one or two and that was it. All those who signed the petition or put their thumb prints on it came away in a good mood as though they had heard glad tidings. When my father's turn came he hesitated.

"Hamirza, why are you dallying?" asked Sit in surprise.

"What the people agreed to together is law to me, but my foster brother and master Shardyn, son of Alou, isn't here; I can't put my finger print to this paper without him knowing."

Mata and I looked at each other and went up to the table together:

"We'll sign even if our father won't!"

First I as the eldest and then Mata signed with our thumb prints.

"What about you, Nouryz? What are you waiting for? Or do you go along with Rydba?" asked Mzauch.

Nouryz raised his bent head and, hitting his short staff against the ground as was his habit, he said:

“If I had the slightest confidence that something could come of this, believe me, I would have signed it ten times over. All this will do no harm, nor will it do any good. Okay, give me that pen, I’ll sign. We’ve been building castles in the air long enough! Tomorrow Soulakh will bless us in front of sacred Bytkha and then, believe me, I’ll know what I have to do. But today, if this is what you want...” And Nouryz, son of Barakai, entered his name next to our thumb prints.

I must admit that there were plenty who supported Prince Uakhsit Rydba. They stood on the sidelines and didn’t leave because it would have been taken as a challenge to the majority. The people appointed three men, headed by Mzauch Abukhba, to take the petition to the Russian Ambassador Ignatiev. They were to set off immediately for Istanbul.

We couldn’t find a holy place in Turkey for our shrine Bytkha. The people were distressed that we had to keep it in the priest’s squalid housing as though it were an ordinary pitcher or spinning wheel. When the cholera broke out some of them speculated in superstitious fear that the offended Bytkha refused her protection because of our sacrilege. To raise the people’s spirits Soulakh carried Bytkha to all who contracted the disease and prayed for their recovery. The people believed Bytkha could work miracles; many of these cholera victims escaped death. People have to believe in something, Sharakh...

All the Ubykhs, except the sick, gathered on the seashore in front of the lone tree where not so long ago Sakut the apkhartsa player had soothed our pain with his songs. Everyone realized that today’s prayer meeting was special. Bytkha herself was to bless those who, led by Nouryz, son of Barakai, were going back to the land of the Ubykhs. After praying, Soulakh, dressed in white, took the statue of Bytkha out of its leather case and placed it by the tree trunk. We all got down on our knees.

“Oh, Almighty patroness Bytkha! Give us your blessings!

The priest’s incantation penetrated our hearts. We could smell the sweet smoke of the hearths we had left. Pleasant scenes passed before our eyes. We remembered our homeland, remembered the dead, and even the men had tears rolling down their cheeks. Raising his hands to the sky, Soulakh continued:

“Oh, All-merciful Bytkha! Today many of our people are setting off for home. Destroy the obstacles in their way! Build bridges for them to get over any precipice! And when they sail the sea, give them fair wind! Protect them, guard them, and bolster their spirits!

“Amen! Amen!” said those on their knees.

When we finished praying we all felt impatient for action. The men put on their daggers, and picked up their pistols and rifles they had laid aside before the ritual.

“We have Bytkha’s blessings. It’s time to go. Good luck!” exclaimed Nouryz, son of Barakai.

The crowd of men and women followed after Nouryz carrying bundles, saddle bags and pitchers. The old woman Hamida, holding her small grandson Tagir by the hand, didn’t even look back. They set off in the direction of Trabzon hoping to find a ship that would take them to Sukhum-kale\*. If they couldn’t get a ship they agreed they would walk to the border. Relying on the gods, their weapons and on favorable circumstances, the people hoped one way or another to get to the land of the Ubykhs.

Our whole family assembled on the seashore. We embraced Mata. I carried his load walking by his side. Then we hugged once more. I stood for a long time on a cliff, watching them walk away into the distance. It’s not right to envy one’s own brother, but I did. How lucky he was to be going home! Why didn’t I go with him? God is my witness that I would have run off after them if it hadn’t been for my mother, father and my sisters. And not only them. I could see before me the mysterious island of Rhodes. That island was where my beloved was, my Feldysh. My heart was ready to break.



Forced idleness is like an illness to someone used to working. What could our family do? We didn't have any land to farm, even the smallest garden; we not only didn't have any cows, but no goats to graze, either. So what could we do? Fortunately Father had brought our net from home. So now he spent days at a time out in the sea. The only food we ate was fish. At first I nearly died of idleness. But then I got used to looking around villages and cities for any odd jobs. To bring home a loaf of bread I loaded and unloaded ships in the harbor, chopped firewood for a wealthy Turk, and was hired to clean cattle-sheds. No job was too dirty for me. But I could hardly earn anything because labor was so cheap.

You, my dear Sharakh, probably don't even know what it's like to live half-starving. When your own stomach is empty that's only half the problem; it's not as bad as when your family is starving—that's a real calamity. When that happens you're willing to do anything. You may curse me or pardon me, but you ought to know that my family's hunger forced me to sin. When fifty well-armed young men went "hunting", I went with them. As you already know, we Ubykhs had a bad reputation all over Turkey. People slammed their doors in the face of a man wearing a Circassian coat. Shoot-outs were common between the armed Caucasians and the police. Even the army was on alert if the police weren't able to cope with the thieves. We tried to operate in remote areas where there were no roads and where no one knew about us yet. We didn't touch the peasants. What could we get from them anyway? They were as poverty-stricken as we were. But we did a good job on travelling merchants and shop owners. We cleaned out all their money, dry goods, and food supplies. We also stole horses. You can imagine we couldn't get along without horses. In our clashes with the police people were killed on both sides. Those who were taken alive by the police were punished mercilessly.

I got in with a group of young dare-devils around the time Mata left. We weren't lucky in every raid. Once the police encircled us. There were lots of them. However, we got out of their snare in twos and threes and through forests and mountains we gradually made our way back to the coast. We travelled in the dead of night like shadows.

While we were gone an important development took place among the Ubykhs outside Samsun: Sharyn, son of Alou, returned. Many people, including my father had been looking forward to his arrival. Our master's eyes were jolly and there wasn't a trace of sadness in his face. He wore Turkish attire and a red fez with a black tassel instead of a Circassian coat, and was fingering amber devotional beads. There was something haughty about him, self-satisfied. His movements had become measured. He inquired how his people were getting along without him, what had happened in his absence. As they were accustomed to, the people told him frankly all about the terrible things that had happened to nearly every one of them.

"War didn't take the lives of as many people as this foreign land has in half a year."

That news didn't upset our foster brother too much. He was more distressed to learn that we had written a petition to the czar and that many had left with Nouryz, son of Barakai.

"Where is your self-control?" he scolded. "What's the matter, has there been a flood or an earthquake? Aren't you an odd lot! You're like little children; you can't be left alone for a day! What scurvy knave thought of writing a petition to the czar? Have you forgot how the Russians shot holes in us? Do you want to be slaves of the infidels? This is terrible, just terrible! Just remember: we are Muslims first and foremost and we're in the land of the true believers!"

The most noble sultan himself, the representative of Allah, is the first citizen of this country. Just thinking of such an honor should fill your hearts with pride! I must tell you I was received by the mother of the great sultan, Abdul-Aziza. As you know, she is an Adighe. Her ancestors and mine were related. The same blood flows in our veins! The sultan's mother has entrusted my fate, and that means your fate, to a person who is the sultan's right-hand man. We've been given fertile land with forests, fields and water. There you'll forget all your troubles. Get ready to move; we should be there before the cold weather sets in."

What I'm telling you about Sharyn, son of Alou, is what I heard from others, Sharakh. At that time I was working my way back to the coast with a band of men on horseback after an unsuccessful raid. We had already covered more than half the distance home when suddenly we saw coming from the east a gray gang of emaciated people barely shuffling their feet and followed by soldiers with rifles. Soon we got closer. You can imagine, Sharakh, what

we felt when we saw with our own eyes that these tortured and weak, barefoot people were Ubykhs, a small number of those who had set off for home.

“Mata!” I shouted like a madman and shot off into the crowd.

He was walking stooped over, supporting himself on a stick and holding a boy against his chest. I immediately recognized the boy: he was Tagir, Hamida’s grandson. Not paying any attention to the soldiers who were trying to stop us we pulled out of our saddle bags everything we had to eat and began handing it out to the hungry, spiritless people under guard. The soldiers were scared to death by the unexpected appearance of armed horsemen and they allowed the fatigued people to have a short rest. Not giving the soldiers a chance to recover from shock we sat up on our saddles the wounded and the exhausted Ubykhs and merged with the crowd.

I put Mata and Tagir on my horse. Mata began telling me how they got to Trabzon. The ship owner who had promised for a handsome sum to take the people led by Nouryz, son of Barakai, to the Caucasian shore, backed down in fright at the last minute and went to sea without taking one single passenger. Then, as had been decided earlier, they set off on foot to the border. At the Churuk-Su River the Turkish frontier guards wouldn’t let them pass. For two weeks the Ubykhs sought a place where they could get through to the other side of the river, but all in vain; the border was carefully guarded. In desperation they decided to fight their way through. The first to be killed in the shooting was Nouryz, son of Barakai. A bullet struck him in the heart.

“I envy him,” whispered Mata. “Oh, why wasn’t I one of those fellows who died less than half a mile from our home land!” Mata heaved a heavy sigh and added: “And poor Hamida, not stopping to think about her small grandson, threw herself into the river. On the way to the border she adopted me and entrusted me with the fate of her grandson. Tagir is now my brother and yours, Zaurkan. If something happens to me, you’ll take care of him...”

Little Tagir slumbered pitifully in Mata’s arms.

Good news stays in place, but the bad travels on eagle’s wings. The Ubykhs who had remained in the outskirts of Samsun had learned somehow that their countrymen who had left with Nouryz, son of Barakai, couldn’t cross the border and many of them were dead. When the survivors returned, looking more like ghosts, there was heart-rending shouting and moaning along the shore. One couldn’t find a brother in the crowd, another his son, and a third a close relative. In the midst of these dramatic events the bitterly disappointing news brought by Mzauch Abukhba from Trabzon was met with only mournful silence. The news was extremely cruel: the czar had personally written his answer on our petition, “The Ubykh case is closed, not to be reconsidered!”

“I told you so!” responded Shardyn, son of Alou, gleefully, when he heard about the czar’s decision.

He was playing backgammon with Omer Pasha in a coffee shop under a white canopy by the seashore. The terrible news Mzauch brought with him made Shardyn, son of Alou, glow with self-content. He knew that whether the people wanted to or not they would now have to submit to his will. He kept winning, too, that day: the dice came up six practically every time. The pasha’s stuffed wallet was getting flatter by the minute. The only thing that upset our leader’s mood was that the pasha casually mentioned Haji Kerantukh.

“To hell with him!” said Shardyn, son of Alou, losing his temper. That meant: “I’m the only sovereign of the Ubykhs!”

Soon ships came to take us to that wonderful land Shardyn had talked about. We began boarding; and two days later there wasn’t a single Ubykh left in Samsun, except for those who lay in their graves.

Two sentiments were struggling in my soul, like two bulls locking horns. One was sadness that we were going even farther away from the land of the Ubykhs and the other was joy that our ship would take us closer to Rhodes Island and, the gods be willing, I might perhaps see Feldysh. I stood on the deck and looked at the outline of the shore with the lone tree. Underneath the tree was the white tomb stone over Sakut’s grave. Above it, tied to a branch up high, swayed his apkhiartsa that not long ago had so touched our hearts. And suddenly it seemed as though I could hear its strings and the words from the blind singer’s last song:

Once a warrior demanded:  
"Saddle me my battle horse."  
Though he was in the saddle  
Supported on his stirrups.  
So we ask sometimes in tears:  
"Where is that land of joy?"  
Though we've left forever  
What was our homeland.

Our ships set off toward Istanbul. On the third day we dropped anchor in the Istanbul roadstead, but no one was allowed to get off because the port authorities were afraid we would bring typhoid fever or cholera into the city. The water overboard was boiling as in a kettle, and the waves, as though in delirium, were lashing against the wharf. A Turkish sailor looking at the water bubbling overboard spit through his teeth:

"The current, devil take it!"

The superstitious among us were terrified: "It's a bad omen."

From Istanbul we sailed to Yemzid, but we weren't let off there either. The only person who could disembark was Shardyn, son of Alou. After spending a long time in the city, he returned smiling and boasting:

"This is where my friend lives, the savior of all of you, Selim Pasha. As long as we're under his protection we have nothing to fear."

The ships took off for Bandirma. There we disembarked and walked behind the carts carrying the family of Shardyn, son of Alou, to a place called Osmankoy.

Later the local people told us that long before we moved to that place an Ubykh had come there. His name was Osman. He walked around as if he were making plans. When he got the full picture he disappeared as suddenly as he had come. Maybe it was all idle gossip, but maybe the man had been Shardyn, son of Alou?

## **OSMANKOY**

It was evening when I entered the yard carrying a full sack of corn over my shoulders. Tendrils of bluish smoke rose over the roof of the mud hut. Our white dog with yellow spots ran up and snuggled against my feet. The hens getting ready to roost were cackling. My mother Nasi was scolding little Tagir for pulling the calf by the tail. Her voice, affectionate and indulgent, was comforting. My father was sitting on a small bench, milking our cow; the milk squirting into the wooden milk pail. Kuna was hurrying into the house with some green onions from the garden; she was afraid the water for the cornmeal mush was boiling over. And my younger sister Juna was pounding the dust out of a mattress hanging on the clothes line. I began wondering if the heavens would really help us live better, as we did before.

Everyone had something to do. Soon after we sat down to eat supper Mata arrived. He was upset about something.

"What's the matter, Son?" asked Father after supper.

"I'll never again go to our master's estate," replied Mata as he got up from the table. "Today when I left that place I promised myself: 'That's it! From now on I won't set foot here again!'"

"Don't get into a temper," said Father soothingly.

"We should have begun weeding long ago. The corn field is choked with weeds. And the tobacco plants are rotting at the roots because our sisters can't do the picking fast enough."

"I know all that, but what can we do? Every family has to send one of its members to work on the nobleman's estate twice a week. That's an old custom of ours. Besides, Shardyn, son of Alou, is our dearest and closest relative."

Father lit a candle and sat down to sew slippers.

"I'm not alone," blurted out Mata. "All the young men who are working there now have sworn not to go back tomorrow."

"When there's a unanimous decision it has to be right," I intervened.

Father stopped sewing and looked at me severely:

"I see you're good at adding fuel to the fire! He's out of his mind," he exclaimed nodding to Mata, "and all you do is encourage him. Have you forgot that Shardyn is my foster brother? Have you no shame? Not only our family, but all the Ubykhs who have settled in Osmankoy, are indebted to him for his kindness. Or have you forgot how rotten our life was on the outskirts of Samsun? It's sinful to be so ungrateful."

"Don't you realize your foster brother was thinking more of his own welfare when he brought us here? If he hadn't taken us with him who would work for him? Besides, there's no honor in being a nobleman without manor serfs. Now he's living high. Selim Pasha is visiting him; he came last night. They got up late after sunrise today, because of their drinking bout the night before and the first thing they wanted to do was play backgammon. Shardyn squandered oodles of money. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw him counting up those liras. I won't earn so much in a whole lifetime... We don't have even the smallest coin to pay for salt, but that good-for-nothing burns money as though it were paper, the money earned by our sweat. I shouldn't say this in front of our sisters, but I heard with my own ears the vile words they used, commenting on the girls who brought presents to the princess."

"You're still young, my son! You're not to judge who may do what in this world. Some people are born to command and others, to obey. It's not someone's caprice, but the will of Allah! And remember this, both of you," said Father, shaking his finger at us in warning, "we're in a foreign land and, heaven forbid, if anything should happen to us we have no one to turn to for protection but Shardyn, son of Alou!" Father put down his sewing, blew out the candle and added: "The day after tomorrow is Friday; don't forget to go to the mosque!"

"We won't be missed," I said losing my temper.

"May Allah forgive you," whispered my frightened mother.

Tired from the day's labors we went to bed early, but I couldn't fall asleep. I lay with my eyes open and thought about what my brother had said and about my father's reaction.

Although we had been given small plots of land and built houses we weren't doing well at all. We suffered hardships and did not have enough food. In the land of the Ubykhs we had one lord we worked for and paid in kind; but here we had to pay two lords. One of them was Shardyn, son of Alou, and the other was our landlord—Selim Pasha. We were left with one-third of our yields. Yet the field was nothing like it was in Ubykhia. It was a tiny patch of land that could be covered with the hide of a bull. Just try to feed a whole family on one-third of its harvest. We also had to pay taxes to the state. That night I went to sleep late and had bad dreams.

At noon the next day when Mother was setting the table for lunch, Shardyn, son of Alou, riding an Arabian horse, bursted into our yard like a madman. The horse was sweating, its master had driven it so hard. It was champing at the bit, squinting its violet eyes, and prancing on its thin legs moist from perspiration.

Without dismounting or even saying hello the horseman bellowed:

"Hey, Hamirza, what have I done to deserve your disdain?"

"What's wrong, my dear brother, what's happened?" asked Father frightened to death.

“Don’t you know that your arrogant young man,” said Shardyn, son of Alou, pointing his whip in the direction of Mata, “has decided to revolt? Following his lead, no one showed up at my estate today. That’s your upbringing, Hamirza!” and raising his whip he guided his horse toward Mata who had turned pale.

“Don’t you dare,” I blocked his way and held on to the horse’s rein.

In a rage, Shardyn, son of Alou, wanted to crack his whip on my head, but the expression on my face stopped him: the whip hung limply in his hand. Both of us breathed heavily in spurts. I was the first to speak.

“Listen, Shardyn, son of Alou,” I said threateningly when I caught my breath, “I don’t care how close a relative you are, but you don’t have the right to raise your whip at us! Just watch out! “And taking his horse by the bridle I led it to the gate: “Goodbye, Shardyn, son of Alou.”

“I won’t ever forget this!” he spoke hoarsely and spurring his horse, he galloped away.

“What have you done!” muttered my father, his lips quivering. “How dare you drive away someone who was nursed by your grandmother?”

One evening I went to the blacksmith to pick up the hoes we had given him to be sharpened. I also wanted to talk to Dursun, the blacksmith’s son and my good friend. The smithy wasn’t far from our house, no more than a mile away. It was raining and so many people had finished work earlier than usual. There were several peasants sitting in front of the smithy under the eaves. They were gossiping, exchanging news, and speculating on the future. It’s amazing how people get their news. I don’t know how, but the whole village had heard about our argument with Shardyn, son of Alou. And many people took our side.

“Greetings, Zaurkan!” said Omar. “You sure put that relative of yours in his place, didn’t you!”

“Serves him right!” grumbled old Rashid as he fixed the handle of his hoe.

I didn’t want to give them more ammunition in their conversation about our falling out with Shardyn so I inquired:

“Is Dursun around?”

David, the blacksmith, was a Georgian. A long time ago his ancestors were forced to become Muslims and when the southern regions of Georgia were taken over by the Turks they moved here. David was born in Turkey. His wife died young, leaving him a son named Dursun. The boy grew up learning his father’s trade so he eventually became his helper. They were hard-working and kind people. When the Ubykhs arrived in Osmankoy they helped many of us. They made hoes and axes free of charge, shared their bread with us and took milk to the sick children. I don’t know how it came about, but the blacksmiths and my family became especially close. They helped us in every way, and when we didn’t have any money to pay our taxes, David loaned us what we needed without hesitation. His son Dursun and I became fast friends; we saw each other every day. Dursun’s father approved of our attachment.

“Both of you,” he said once, “are the children of peoples wearing Circassian coats and so you should be one, like a two-edged dagger.”

Dursun was a daring young man. His kind don’t burn even in fire. In spite of his youth, he had been nearly everywhere in Turkey. “The only place I haven’t visited is satan’s palace!” he used to say. One time in a moment of confidence I told him about Feldysh. He sympathized with me and did his best to sooth my worries and reassure me.

“You say they took her to Rhodes? It’s not so far from here,” he said pointing toward the sea. “Don’t lose hope: we’ll think of something...” Translated into the language of friendship his words meant: “Be assured that from this day on I’m your faithful partner in this.”

It was getting dark. The rain had stopped. The peasants gathered in front of the smithy were tired of chatting and were getting ready to go home when Zhantemir appeared, soaking wet. He was returning from town.

“What’s the news?” asked Omar.

“Nothing good! The sultan is in a fix in the Balkans war. Very soon the village elders will start poking around every house to make sure all the men capable of carrying arms are drafted.”

The men’s only response was alarmed silence. You could even hear the raindrops falling from the top of the eaves.

“If they take away our sons we’re done for!” exclaimed Saat sadly pensive.

“Hasn’t enough happened to us already!

“When the sovereigns are fighting over land, the sons of others have to pay for that with their lives.”

There was panic in our neighbors’ voices.

I couldn’t move an inch after I heard the news; I was thunderstruck. My first thought was about Feldysh. “If they take me into the army I’ll never see Feldysh again,” I feared. It’s said that a faithful friend is more necessary in time of need than at a feast. I wanted to talk this new situation over with Dursun; he would think of a way out. But Dursun didn’t come home that night.

There was a full moon out. Greenish stars glittered in the endless expanses of the sky. A slight breeze rustled the leaves. I’m ashamed to admit it, but because of my emotional confusion and unabating love, I began talking to the wind. “Do me a favor, wind, and fly across the sea to the island of Rhodes. Look for my beloved there, but don’t slam the shutters on her bedroom window or you’ll awaken her. Make her cool if she is hot, and if there is a tear on Feldysh’s cheek, dry off the salty drop. Do me a favor, wind, fly to the island of Rhodes! And when my beloved wakes up at dawn and begins braiding her silky auburn hair, whisper to her: ‘Don’t lose hope. Zaurkan is on his way. The mountains will open before him; the sea will open before him. Wait for him...’

Like a lost soul I wandered under the bright moon not knowing what to do with myself. I came close to the gate of our yard several times, but I didn’t go in. Maybe I would have gone to bed if I had become drowsy, but that night sleep escaped me.

Soon afterwards, without telling us, Father went to see Sharyn, son of Alou. Begging forgiveness he threw himself at his foster brother’s feet:

“I beg you to forgive my brainless sons. Because they offended you I punished them. Please, don’t be angry with them; they have wind in their heads.”

“Hamirza, they don’t deserve my forgiveness, but out of respect for you I’ll try to forget what they did,” Sharyn, son of Alou replied indulgently.

“My sons are true Ubykhs. The battlefield to them is what arable land is to the ploughman. Zaurkan has already proved that by his actions, and you know yourself that Mata is no coward. Rumor has it that soon they’ll be taking young Ubykhs into the army...”

“That’s just where your hot-heads belong...”

“Yes, you’re right, but I’m losing my strength and my wife is often ill. If we’re left without our sons in this foreign land we’ll perish like old horses without food. I plead with you in the name of my mother who nursed us both, please help me keep at least one son with me.”

“What am I, a magician? Do you think, Hamirza, it’s easy to free someone from military service?”

“Well, of course, I know only too well how hard it is. But you...”

“Besides, my foster nephews don’t deserve such indulgence.”

“But just as fire can’t be put out with oil so too an insult can’t be healed with anger.”

“All right, don’t lecture me! I know kinship ties can’t be ignored. I’ll try to help keep your ruffians from being taken to war.”

Contrary to my father’s worst expectations, Shardyn, son of Alou, was pleasant and hospitable. He offered him food, played backgammon with him, and even presented him with a Caucasian Astrakhan hat. When Father was on his way out, the host said in passing:

“Your sons have been exempted from work on my manor or in the fields; they can work on your farm. And you, my brother, come and visit me more often to watch the servants working. I need someone close who has a loyal eye. Oh, and I nearly forgot, the princess has asked that your daughters take turns coming to her twice a week. She wants girls from the family to be cleaning her room and doing her laundry.”

How could Father refuse such an honor! He came home a younger man, thinking that his whole family had been done a tremendous favor. How could he, a kind poor man, know that the show of benevolence put on by Shardyn, son of Alou, was intended to conceal treachery of the worst kind.

From then on my sisters Kuna and Juna began taking turns twice a week to work for the princess from dawn to darkness. My father began spending a large part of his time in the lord’s manor doing everything the nobleman said.

Kuna and Juna were nice girls, considerate and open hearted. Kuna had a fair complexion, and long hair the color of golden wine. Her large gray eyes were pensive, and sad. She rarely laughed, was quiet and shy; she was quite sensitive, and could cry at the slightest insult. She took tiny steps when she walked, just like a dove.

Juna, on the other hand, had dark skin, and wavy black hair, as black as the wing of a raven. Her hair was so thick that the heaviest rain would only roll off the surface. Her eyes were like lilac-tinged blackberries. She was good-natured, boisterous, and was fond of laughing and dancing. She was no good at keeping secrets and if someone offended her she didn’t hide her displeasure, but spoke out at once. Both sisters were slender and tall, but they were so different that anyone who didn’t know them would never take them for sisters. All our family’s joy centered around my two sisters.

One day Juna didn’t come back from the manor at the usual hour. There had been times when she was detained until late at night, but she had always come home to sleep. We waited and waited but she didn’t come. We didn’t sleep a wink all night. As you know, in the homes of the wealthy morals are not always strict. And as you Abkhassians say: a girl is like a wine glass: let it slip out of your hand and it’s no more. I had already decided to go after my sister when a red carriage with ringing bells, driven by three bay horses, stopped at our gate.

“Who are those people at our gate? Maybe they want directions?” said Mother in surprise.

But then, you can imagine our shock when Juna came out of the carriage...

“My dear, what’s happened?” shouted Mother as she ran toward Juna.

“Nothing special. Shardyn, son of Alou, was entertaining important guests and they feasted all night long. The princess made me stay and serve the guests. I was very tired so the princess sent me home in the guests’ carriage.”

We noticed that Juna was sad and quiet. “Maybe she really is just exhausted,” we each thought to ourselves.

The next day at high noon when we gathered for lunch, Shardyn, son of Alou, rode his Arabian horse into our yard, and dismounted leisurely. It was the first time he had stepped over our threshold since the day I had quarreled with him and thrown out our noble relative. He did nothing to indicate he remembered that injury, as though it had never happened. Shardyn, son of Alou, kissed all of us with a friendly smile on his face, and patted me on the shoulder saying approvingly: “Aferim! Aferim!” \*

Strange, I thought to myself. What have we done to deserve such unusually warm treatment? And I noticed that just as soon as our important guest came into the yard Juna hid in the house. No, something's wrong here, I feared.

"Thank Allah, Hamirza, thank Allah!" said Sharyn, son of Alou, with exaggerated joy as he sat down on the leather cushion my mother brought him.

"It's not hard giving thanks, but tell me why should I?"

"Your daughter Juna is so fortunate that not only she will bask in golden rays the rest of her life, but you, her parents, and we, your relatives, and maybe all the Ubykhs, too."

"Good news is expected from welcome guests..."

"So, listen here. The honorable Vali Selim Pasha who has given us this land has been visiting me for three days. If it weren't for him I'd hate to think what would have happened to all of us. I hosted him like I would a sultan. When Vali Scum Pasha saw Juna, he lost his head. He wants her to be his wife."

I noticed that my mother's face went pale, but Sharyn, son of Alou, continued as though what he'd said was the greatest blessing to our family.

"Can you imagine, the sultan's close friend, and a man of untold wealth has fallen madly in love with your Juna. He practically got down on his knees to beg me to tell you, Hamirza, that he wishes to marry your beautiful Juna. He says all the women in his palace will become her obedient servants. She can have the keys to all his treasure chests if only she will brighten up the twilight of his life. And he hasn't forgotten about you! Oh, you're so lucky! He says you're welcome to move to Izmid, or you can stay here if you like. In either case he'll take care of you—he says it's his duty from now on!

Sharyn, son of Alou, was the only one showing any joy at the news.

"Why are you silent, Hamirza, or is this good fortune so unexpected you've lost your tongue?"

I glanced at my father. His face was somber, his lips

pale. Without raising his voice he said with sadness, but firmly:

"No, my friend, I cannot take your advice! I just can't figure out how you could think of selling your own niece into the harem of the old Turk? I didn't raise my daughter for a harem. But your Selim Pasha is, indeed, a noble man. He's being polite about it all. Another man with a go-between like you would have simply offered me money for my daughter, and that would be the end of it."

"Money in the pocket never hurts. If you don't have money no one will pay attention to you even if you're the groom at a wedding."

"It depends on the kind of wedding you're talking about. Convey my gratitude to the honorable Selim Pasha. He can keep his palace and treasures; he can keep his wives, but my daughter will remain in this humble home."

Sharyn, son of Alou, nervously pulled at his mustache. Under other circumstances he would have flown into a rage, but that time he controlled himself.

"As you wish, Hamirza! I thought you'd be pleased, but now that I see I've upset you, I beg your pardon. Don't hold it against me: a messenger isn't responsible for the news he brings. However, don't forget that when a girl in love chooses her fiancé and decides to marry him no dungeon you lock her in can stop her. If that's what happens it's none of my business."

With that, Sharyn, son of Alou, got on his horse and left.



The next day when we men weren't home that red carriage—may it be cursed! — stopped at our gate again. Two men unloaded a heavy trunk and a fancy box. They put the things down in front of Mother, bowed to her and said:

“These are for you! They're from Selim Pasha!

My mother refused to take the gifts and demanded they be returned, but the men bowed again, got into the red carriage—may it be cursed three times! —and disappeared. Little Tagir ran to the field where we were working.

“Grandma wants you to come home right away,” he burst out, panting.

We felt something was up. When we ran into the house Mother was standing over the trunk and box wiping away her tears. We opened the trunk and were amazed to see expensive cloth, velvet and silk with embroidered peacocks and roses. On the very bottom of the trunk there was a fur coat for Juna made of white fleece. When we looked into the fancy box, Oh Lord! : it was full of jewels. There were rings and bracelets made of pure gold, pearl earrings, and beads of gorgeous turquoise. When Juna saw it she froze and then shouted: “Give it to me! It's mine! “She grabbed the box and went to her room. We were quite surprised by her behavior. Soon afterwards our neighbor Uazamat paid us a visit. We couldn't believe our ears when he told us why he had come:

“Juna is shy like any Ubykh girl. She doesn't have the heart to admit to her father and mother that she's decided to marry Selim Pasha. She asked me to talk to you on her behalf and tell you that no one is forcing her to marry him. She wants to herself. Tomorrow she is to be engaged.”

My knees went liquid.

“What does she see in that lecherous old man who has more wives than he has fingers on his hands?” I asked bitterly.

“Love is blind,” remarked Uazamat, trying to console me. “When I fell in love with my old woman my friends laughed at me as if to say, what's wrong with your eyes, you fool? She's nothing to look at! If I had loaned them my eyes for just an instant they would have stopped laughing at me and become arch rivals! You see him one way, she sees him another way. Selim Pasha is on in years, but he's still going strong and it doesn't hurt to have money. And as you know money doesn't grow on trees. Don't judge Juna harshly; maybe she wasn't only thinking of herself when she agreed to marry him...”

Our neighbor knew when it was time for him to leave. After wishing us well, he went off.

We sat silently, crestfallen, trying not to look at one another. Mother, shaking her head, was sniffing and wiping her tears with the corner of her black scarf.

“You can't chop wood with a penknife. She wants to marry him; it's too late to make her change her mind,” said Father getting up. He picked up his scythe and went out to the field.

“Maybe in the manor house she was seduced by the glimmer of wealth, the accessibility of pleasures and the high-sounding words,” I speculated. So I decided to have a heart-to-heart talk with my sister and went to her room. I opened the door and what did I see: Juna, wearing one of the dresses she had been given, was looking at herself in the mirror and trying on some glittering earrings. Gold rings were sparkling on her fingers. She was so engrossed in what she was doing that she didn't even turn around when the door creaked. Shocked, I quietly left without saying a word to my sister.

Shardyn, son of Alou, was right.

The next day at sunset carriages of various kinds and sizes, accompanied by men on horseback, rode up to our house. Our neighbor Uazamat went into the house. Juna was already waiting for him. All dressed up and smiling, she walked out with him, sat in the red carriage and within an instant disappeared behind a screen of dust.

Deeply saddened, we lowered our heads. It seemed as though the shadow of deceased Aisha stepped over the threshold of our home. Each one of us was overtaken by unconsolable grief.

Soon afterwards, relatives, friends and neighbors began coming to congratulate us. Their joyful remarks seemed out of place to me, like laughter at a cemetery:

“We’re so happy for you! Very happy!”

“Nice going Juna! She sure did well for herself! Very well!”

“She’ll live in paradise: Selim Pasha is wealthy and a man of high station!”

“She’s really lucky!”

My Lord! How can they talk like that? My sister became a concubine of an old libertine, and they’re congratulating us! Many are even jealous! I thought to myself in amazement. For some reason the lines from an old Abkhasian song came to mind:

In the beak of an old black kite  
A flower can only find destruction...

Around the same time Sakhatkeri unexpectedly showed up in Osmankoy. We had long since thought he had been lost without a trace in the foreign land and had offered his soul to God. But he was suddenly resurrected along with all his family. And he reappeared not in the rags of a wanderer, not as a vagrant dervish, but dressed like a wealthy haji\* and wearing a snow-white turban.

“I made a pilgrimage to Mecca, my dear people, and, down on my knees in front of the black stone of Kaaba, I prayed for your salvation. As you can see, Allah heard me and sent you to lead a peaceful life in this paradise, praised be his name! There’s no God, but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet!

Soon a new mosque was opened in Osmankoy, and Sakhatkeri became the main mullah. Although he was paid out of the sultan’s treasury, he arbitrarily taxed every family “for the mosque”. It was hard to believe the main mullah had once been Sakhatkeri. He became haughty, conceited and overbearing. People were not only afraid to be open with him, but even to talk to him. And despite his religious vocation, he looked askance at everyone else.

Sakhatkeri’s return led to events similar to internecine strife. The newly born imam and the priest Soulakh began a war to the death. Each of them tried to establish his superiority over the other. It got to the point, Sharakh, when they both secretly got themselves pistols and now each had only one cherished desire—to put a bullet in the other’s forehead. As you know, it isn’t befitting clergymen to carry arms. But each decided that it’s never too late to become a pious man, even in the next world. The conflict grew more fierce and was no longer a secret to anyone, involving, like it or not, nearly all the Ubykhs in Osmankoy.

Everything is relative. When we moved from the outskirts of Samsun to Osmankoy, we felt as though finally we were in God’s favor. While thinking about ourselves we didn’t forget about our shrine Bytkha. For our holy place we selected a green hill with a hornbeam tree thick with foliage perched on the hilltop. We sacrificed a goat and held a prayer service. The shrine reminded us of our lost homeland, made us feel united as a tribe, and elevated us above worldly concerns. When we were praying to Bytkha we could visualize Ubykhia.

Upon his return Sakhatkeri said that in the land of Allah it was a great sin to worship anyone but Allah. He asked the priest Soulakh to come to the mosque and said without bothering to be polite:

“Why are you, old goat, encouraging idol worship!”

“You speak the truth, but...”

“No buts about it,” interrupted the imam. “You bury that hawk like stone, that Bytkha of yours, and cut down the tree on the top of the hill that you chose as its refuge!”

The priest got angry:

“What are you saying, Sakhatkeri! How can I bury the shrine that our ancestors bequeathed to us to safeguard better than our lives? Be careful: beware of its wrath!”

“Don’t try to frighten me!”

“Imagine telling me to bury the shrine!” exclaimed Soulakh with agitation. “It would be easier to tear the heart out of the Ubykhs than to dispose of Bytkha by burying it underground.”

“You aren’t being reasonable, old man,” insisted the imam. “The bones of our ancestors are across the sea in another land. The country we’re in is ruled by the law that has to be observed by all Muslims and you can’t break it!”

“If the other Ubykhs hear about this, I don’t envy you!”

“And if the great sultan, the representative of Allah, hears that the Ubykhs prefer a hawk like stone to the mosque, it’ll end in disaster, Soulakh!”

From that day on they were at war with each other.

Imam Sakhatkeri wouldn’t stop at anything to become the single religious leader of the Ubykhs. He went to Is- mid to see Selim Pasha several times to tell on his tribesmen. Sakhatkeri blacklisted many respected Ubykhs. At the top of the list, of course, was our priest. “To save the whole flock it’s necessary to get rid of the diseased sheep,” he admonished Selim Pasha as he handed him the blacklist.

When people complained to Sharyn, son of Alou, that Sakhatkeri was illegally taxing them for the mosque he let it go in one ear and out the other. The second time they wrote a complaint he just waved it aside and advised them that the servants of Allah were free to act as their consciences dictated. He was no judge of the imam.

But Soulakh the priest wasn’t idle either. He didn’t keep it a secret that the imam had demanded the shrine Bytkha be buried and the tree over the holy place be chopped down. The priest was setting a spark to dry stubble near a gunpowder magazine. The flames of resistance burned with new force in the souls of the Ubykhs.

“Because of them we lost our homeland, thousands of people died in the epidemic, and now they want to bury our holy guardian Bytkha! Well we won’t let them!”

“If they dare touch our shrine we’ll burn down the mosque!”

That was the kind of talk among the young Ubykh men who were proud and hot-headed by nature and paid no heed to caution. Those who act rashly aren’t concerned about the consequences. “It’s not hard to burn down the mosque, but what will happen after that?” warned those who were capable of soberly analyzing the outcome.

To me it was as clear as day that Sakhatkeri had sold himself to the Turks, lock, stock, and barrel. What made me furious was that as an Ubykh he had no regard for the self-esteem of the other Ubykhs. Why was he egging them into making a desperate move that would have ended in the death of many of our tribesmen in a Muslim country? And so I made up my mind to see the imam and have it out with him.

I stood by the doors of the mosque toward the end of the service one day. I waited until the last person left and when I was certain there was no one else there but Sakhatkeri I quietly entered. Standing between two lit candles he was counting his money and did not hear me approach. But then he caught the sound of my footsteps on the soft carpet. The imam shoved the money into his pocket and bent over the Koran. I came right up to him and our eyes met.

“You’re late, the service is over,” he said with affected reproach. I could see in the flickering light of the candle that his eyes were alarmed. “Why are you wearing your dagger, or don’t you know that you’re not supposed to step

into the abode of Allah with weapons?" said Sakhatkeri in a strict tone of voice, but his eyes continued to dart cowardly.

"Oh, I'm planning to go to paradise armed. Just in case! And as I uttered those blasphemous words I moved toward him.

His lips trembled:

"What do you want?"

"Here is what I want! " And pulling my dagger out of its sheath, I held it against the imam's chest.

"Have you gone mad, you ruffian! Hey, someone! Help!" he yelled and his face turned deathly pale.

"Stop shouting. No one's here and your Almighty is too far away—he won't hear you," I said as I pressed him harder with my dagger.

Sakhatkeri, moving back, screamed something unintelligible.

"Cut out that bellowing! You don't believe in Allah or in Shaitan, you cur! You're betraying your fellow tribesmen, you double-dealer!

The imam, whose chest was pricked by my dagger, moved back and mumbled:

"Think what you're doing! What do you want? Oh, someone, help!"

"Why should anyone save you? Because you led us astray when you persuaded us to leave our homes? Where is that Muslim heavenly garden where there's no animosity, no poverty, no heat, no cold, no calamity, no hunger? Where is it, I ask you? When we were dying like flies on the coast near Samsun where were you hiding to save your own skin?" The point of my dagger was pressing harder against his chest.

"Why are you killing your father's friend?" stuttered the mullah, his teeth chattering.

He stepped backwards, and I stepped forward. Soon his back was up against the wall, and my dagger, having cut through his clothes, was pricking his chest under his left nipple. Sakhatkeri's legs began to give way.

"Come on, out with it," I ordered. "Your time has come, you old liar. Tell me where you keep your blacklist?" I poked him a little harder to make him talk.

Pallid from fear and pain, he mumbled:

"Selim Pasha has the list! He ordered me to do it. It wasn't my idea... It wasn't me!.. To rule you must divide your subjects! That's the law of the sultan's state! You might as well know that if you kill me they'll just put someone else in my place."

I appreciated his forced sincerity and put my dagger back into its sheath. Sakhatkeri's legs finally gave in and he slumped down to the floor. I brought him the Koran:

"Listen, Imam, to what I'm going to tell you. There's going to be a meeting in front of our sacred Bytkha tonight, and I hope you'll come."

"I have no choice," he responded, shivering.

"You'll come and repent. You'll say something like this:

"My brethren, there's been a misunderstanding between us, but I'm an Ubykh and you're Ubykhs, so I want you to know I'm not making any demands on you. Pray when you want to your hawk like Bytkha and let it help you!"

“As you say, Zaurkan,” he agreed.

“It’s too bad you gave your blacklist to Selim Pasha and we can’t get it back.”

“Yes, it’s too bad,” repeated the imam. “We can’t get it back!

“Swear by the Koran that you’ll do everything you promised me.”

“I beg you, Zaurkan, don’t make me swear by the Koran,” said the old man standing up. Tears were streaming down his cheeks.

“Goodbye, Sakhatkeri! We’ll see how you keep your word! I’d like to believe that Ubykh blood still flows in your veins. And remember this: I wasn’t here in the mosque and none of this happened.” I put my hand on the haft of my dagger and left.

Not long afterwards Sakhatkeri resigned as imam pleading poor health, and moved to Izmid. I never saw him again and never heard anything about him.

An officer who had come from Izmid spent three days going around the neighboring villages and read the sultan’s decree to the people who were gathered on the main square. The officer already knew the contents of the decree by heart, but to add to his importance he unfolded the paper and shouted out like a herald in the old days:

“The representative of Allah on earth, the great sultan, wants to protect the sacred rights of Muslims throughout the world. Because of the treachery of the infidels he is forced to call the faithful to a holy war! All the sultan’s citizens capable of carrying arms are obligated before Allah to fulfil their sacred duty—rise up in defense of Islam and destroy its enemies! ..” The officer had a tickling in his throat so his voice was hoarse.

The decree called on all people named in the list to show up in the village square the next morning wearing the proper clothing and carrying provisions. The families of the draftees were promised assistance and exemption from paying state taxes. The population was warned that anyone who refused to do military service would be hanged.

Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds!

The following morning the earth was watered not with dew, but the tears of mothers. Many people that day saw their loved ones for the last time, but neither my name, nor my brother Mata’s was on that list.

I didn’t feel right about staying home when the others had to go into the army, especially Dursun, but at the same time I was wild with joy, the kind of joy I had not experienced for a long time. In my mind I asked for Dursun’s forgiveness: Forgive me, my friend. Don’t condemn me for taking advantage of this sudden stroke of luck. If it were the other way around I wouldn’t criticize you. I could see before me the island of Rhodes surrounded by murmuring gray-tipped waves. My dear faithful Dursun! He had planned to go with me to that island. What a pity we were pulled apart. I went to the owner of a sailboat, whom Dursun had introduced me to. The fisherman knew the way to Rhodes like the palm of his hand; we clinched a deal.

That year we were expecting a good tobacco harvest. If we managed to take it all in without any losses, after paying taxes we’d still have some money left over and I could put out the agreed price to the owner of the sail boat. And so I began preparing for that long-awaited journey. It had already been four years since fate had parted me and my beloved. All that time I had had only one secret desire, one persistent dream: to see Feldysh once again. Life was nothing to me without her.

## **UBYKH WOMEN DOOMED**

Three months had passed since Juna left. It was as though she had disappeared into thin air. Sometimes Shardyn, son of Alou, conveyed greetings from her supposedly through friendly letters he got from Selim Pasha. Then one day the postman came with a letter for us. No one had ever written to us, so we figured right away it was from Juna. She didn't know how to write herself, so we thought someone else had written it for her. None of us could read, and anyway the letter was written in Turkish. We asked Mzauch Abukhba for help. Juna said she was doing just fine, was happy with her life, but- missed us all very much, especially her dear sister. "It would be wonderful if Kuna would agree to come to Izmid. She could stay with me a week or so, would have a good time and would cheer me up too." The letter was brief, like a summer night, but it put us all at ease.

Soon afterwards a fancy carriage, carrying two women dressed in black, drove up to our gate. Their faces were hidden behind veils. The women entered the house, bowed and said:

"Peace to this home! "Then they introduced themselves: "We're your daughter Juna's servants! Our benefactress and mistress sends you her love and kind wishes. Thank Allah she's doing well and her radiant beauty illuminates the whole palace, to the joy of all those near her. Only one thing makes her sad: her separation from you! If you don't want us to be the victims of her anger, we beg you to allow Kuna to visit her sister. Our magnificent mistress deserves such joy."

At this point the coachman brought in a large box.

"These are presents from our lady."

The unexpected visit by Juna's servants and their confirmation that she was doing well, made us extremely happy. As for Kuna, our dear Kuna, she began asking our parents to give her permission to see her sister.

With heavy hearts, Mother and Father gave in to her pleading and, having dressed in her best clothes, Kuna left with our sister's respectful maids. How could we have known that her departure would be so disastrous.

Days went by, then weeks, but Kuna did not return. We became desperate.

"My God, maybe something terrible has happened to her and you three men are sitting there doing nothing," said Mother challenging us into action.

Father, consumed by worry, went off to Shardyn, son of Alou, but was met with a reproachful tirade:

"You're making a fuss over nothing, you old rooster, as though your daughters are drowning in the open sea or are lost in a primeval forest! They're having a great time in the white marble palace where their every wish is met, and here you are ringing an alarm. So what if your Kuna has stayed a few days longer than expected! Why shouldn't she when the sisters are so busy entertaining themselves they don't know whether it's day or night outside! It would be better if you performed your ablutions first thing in the morning, and prayed to Allah in thanksgiving that he sent us Selim Pasha. Have a look at the presents he recently sent to my wife! The carpet you're standing on was his generous gift. And that vase on the golden tray— also priceless. Go on home and relax! I'll be visiting our relative Selim Pasha soon and will personally bring back your treasure, Kuna, safe and sound. And your sons shouldn't forget that it was with Selim Pasha's help I was able to keep them from being drafted. Go on! Go home!"

Shardyn, son of Alou, did everything he could to stress his close relationship with Scum Pasha. It paid off because some would try to be in his favor to get protection from the Ubykh leader, and others, who were simply afraid of him, did exactly what he said. It was out of the question to file a complaint against such a person, or disobey him in any way. Yet the secret ambition of Shardyn, son of Alou, was to rise higher than even Selim Pasha. Ever since Haji Kerantukh receded into the background keeping a low profile, Shardyn, son of Alou, became the main spokesman on behalf of the Ubykhs. He was wealthy, but what was his wealth compared to the countless treasures of Selim Pasha? And he didn't have the power that the Izmid governor had. Therefore, the high-born emigre carefully looked for a round-about path to the summit of his power.

The first year we were in Turkey Shardyn managed to make the acquaintance of the sultan's mother. I already told you, Sharakh, that she was an Adighe. You have to give credit to Shardyn, son of Alou: he was able to get this woman to like him and she helped secure land for the Ubykhs in Osmankoy. Shardyn, son of Alou, had a good

sense of smell, like a merchant who could always smell a change in prices long in advance. He could instantly size up everybody's ups and downs at court and quickly, like an echo, respond. He took advantage of the envy that plagued the sultan's court favorites, their selfish interests and intrigues. Without batting an eyelid, Shardyn, son of Alou, would have pawned all the Ubykh exiles just to move one step higher. Selim Pasha knew his Caucasian friend was ambitious, but he still didn't know that Shardyn was hoping, no matter what, to surpass him. Shardyn, son of Alou, went to Istanbul more and more often. Sometimes he would stay in the Turkish capital for months at a time visiting the sultan's Adighe mother. He charmed this important woman whose beauty had not been dimmed by time. Shardyn, son of Alou, introduced her to his wife and sister Shanda. The first step is always the hardest.

Afterwards his wife and sister were invited to every affair given at the palace. The first time the Sultan's mother saw Shanda she was enamored by the beautiful features of that Ubykh girl and even scolded Shardyn, son of Alou:

"Why did you, honorable Shardyn, so ungraciously conceal from us the wondrous beauty of your sister?"

When a woman praises aloud the beauty of another woman, even if she's younger, there must be something in it.

The sultan's mother welcomed Shanda, was affectionate toward her, gave the young maiden a ring from her finger, and chose for her the flattering nickname "Diamond of the Caucasus". Shanda, I must admit, not only had heavenly features, but earthly ones too: she never forgot to be modest, meek and pious at the appropriate times. Shardyn's sister was now a frequent visitor to the palace. She went for walks with the sultan's mother, listened courteously to her when they were embroidering, and sang her Ubykh songs.

When the new sultan Abdulaziz ascended the throne he was able to put down the conspiracy by his enemies at home— the Young Turks—and, despite the fact that a war was on, he enjoyed life to the utmost. In contrast to his late father, the country's new ruler did not like to chatter with his courtiers about world events, was too lazy to read books and got bored when his advisers were long-winded. Oh, if only he could get the vizier to take care of all the affairs of state, all he'd ever do is watch cock fights, ride horses, hunt, and enjoy the company of women.

His grandmother's new confidante, Shanda, was appreciated by the sultan and soon became his third wife. That turn of events was like an enchanted dream to Shardyn, son of Alou. As the brother-in-law of the Turkish sultan he no longer felt it was befitting for him to live in such a god forsaken place as Osmankoy. So the favorite of fortune, along with all his relatives and reliable people, moved to Istanbul. Strike while the iron is hot, as the saying goes.

Abdulaziz was blissful as he was discovering the virtues of his new wife. Everyone knows that husbands are never quite as pliable, compliant and generous as they are during the honeymoon. Shanda didn't have to try hard to persuade the sultan to make her brother an officer and give him a large salary. The reality that was like living in a dream continued. The grand vizier himself read out the sultan's commission conferring Shardyn, son of Alou, an officer's rank. I have to give my foster uncle credit—he was clever and sly, and had a glib tongue. With one hand on his forehead and the other on his heart, Shardyn expressed his gratitude to the sultan and in the same breath, for everyone to hear, he said he wished to immediately join the war effort.

"That's commendable and exemplary," said the grand vizier approving the decision.

Shardyn, son of Alou, realized he couldn't depend on his sister's charms for long, especially since Abdulaziz wasn't the most faithful man when it came to women. Besides, there had to be a way to make the envious courtiers bite their tongues and stop saying that Shardyn's achievements were won by his sister Shanda on her marriage bed. That's why his willingness to shed blood or even die in the service of the sultan was a good trump card in a big game. And so, Shardyn, son of Alou, went off to war.

However, it was just his luck that he arrived at the advanced positions of the Balkan front right before a battle in which the Russians drove the Turkish troops out of a big city. The staff officers were racking their brains to figure out how to report this unpleasant news to Istanbul with the least repercussions. It's easier to charge the enemy, scimitar in hand, than to bring the sultan bad news. It's only a saying that a messenger is not responsible for the news he brings. Whoever brings unwanted news might not leave the palace alive. Finally, someone came up with the idea of Shardyn, son of Alou. Oh, what a wonderful thought— the sultan's brother-in-law! He tried to get out of this most unpleasant assignment, but it was useless. This was war and a refusal could mean being killed with your own men's bullet. What will be, will be, he decided, and went off to Istanbul.

When he arrived in the capital, Shardyn, son of Alou, didn't go to the palace, but hid in the home of a friend—the owner of a coffee shop—and through him was able to summon his sister. They decided that Shanda would find a scapegoat who would bring the bad news about the defeat to the sultan before Shardyn, son of Alou, appeared. The unfortunate messenger barely got out of the palace alive, while Shardyn, son of Alou, who followed him into the palace walking on soft carpets, came in as a consoler, as someone rubbing balm on the wounds. Many among the courtiers hoped that the Ubykh would be beheaded and his body thrown out of the sultan's reception room. But their hopes were in vain. On the contrary, the sultan walked out of his room with a sad, but brighter face, holding the hand of his brother-in-law dressed in full uniform, and said to the nobles bowing to him:

"Because our valiant Shardyn, son of Alou, survived heavy battle unharmed, I have awarded him an order for bravery!"

Not so long ago the sultan's following had been calling him an "upstart", "vagabond", "alien". But now people were even afraid to speak ill of him behind his back, especially since the minister of the police made him his adjutant.

I don't know how accurate my account is, Sharakh. I can't say for sure, because I'm just telling you what I myself heard about Shardyn, son of Alou, after he went to Istanbul.

The Ubykhs who remained in Osmerkoy had different interpretations of the friendship between Shardyn, son of Alou, and the sultan. Some believed it was a sign that things would get better for the Ubykhs.

"If something happens we can go right to him. He won't let any evil befall us!" they insisted.

"Call a hawk an eagle and he'll disown his own parents. You'd better pray we're not all destroyed because of that Shardyn," warned others.

My father was concerned about his foster brother and missed him; I personally was glad Shardyn had left. I would have been happy to never see him again!

In the mornings I would study the Ubykh language with the old man, Zaurkan, and in the afternoon I would write down his story. That's how the work went at first. But now that schedule was upset: Zaurkan got so carried away that he would continue with his story whenever he wanted, sometimes starting right in the morning.

I am fortunate, of course, to have this invaluable teacher. Although the story of his life is fascinating, I still manage to find time to add to my Ubykh dictionary that I started when I first arrived. Yesterday and the day before I wrote down the kinship terminology. Today I'm recording the names of household utensils. More than I suspected in the past, I'm finding that the roots are the same as in other related languages of the Northwest Caucasus.

Zaurkan was in a bad mood this morning; he's perturbed about something and is smoking a lot. In the middle of breakfast, for no reason at all, he came down hard on Biram and, not finishing his meal, he got up from the table. At noon he didn't take a nap as he usually does, but paced up and down the yard. When he noticed Biram was leaving the house, taking his bowls and spoons with him, he suddenly admonished Biram. But Biram made no response.

Zaurkan continued walking back and forth in the yard, but when I was already thinking I shouldn't disturb him today, he suddenly sat down and called me over.

I sat down next to him and got ready to write. But he couldn't begin for a long time, and kept rubbing his wrinkled forehead with the palm of his hand as though he was trying to gather together everything in his memory.

When he began talking, unlike his usual manner, he darted from one subject to another. Something deep down was bothering him and so Biram had to take the brunt of it.

But I still managed to get something written down. Zaurkan talked about how imam Sakhatkeri was replaced by another mullah, a Turk by the name of Orhan. At first he seemed to get along with the people, who even called



him a true servant of Allah! But then, gradually, he found subtle and sly ways to follow his own line. Weddings and Funerals couldn't be organized the way the Ubykhs had been used to since time immemorial, but according to the strict rules of Islam. The mullah called the people to the mosque more and more often and taught them how to say the prayer: "Allah always hears the voice of one who praises him!" When a child was born a name could not be given without Orhan's approval. All women had to wear veils. And anyone who missed going to the mosque, even once, had to pay a fine. And before entering the mosque the Ubykhs had to take off their weapons and hang them up outside.

Zaurkan would quiver each time he pronounced the name Sakhatkeri, he loathed the man so much. At the same time his attitude to the other mullahs was that of derisive indifference; he didn't talk much about Muslim rites and, apparently, didn't know them very well.

"I don't believe any of those who in Allah's name live in clover without lifting a finger. My dear Sharakh, if people could really get anything out of prayers then my Father would have gotten rich faster than anyone else. I leaven knows he prayed enough. But there was not a man more unfortunate!"

Recalling his father, the old man hung his head, was silent for a long time, and then suddenly began talking about all the troubles the Ubykhs met up with after they emigrated to Turkey. He said they had much less fertile land than in Ubykhia, but paid much higher taxes! He complained that it was so hot in the summer and so cold in the winter that the Ubykhs, like the other peasants in the area, had to coat their homes with clay or manure, which would have been shameful in Ubykhia.

He was even more critical of the fact that grapes could be grown here, and the Ubykhs would have gladly cultivated them, but only currants could be made out of grapes because wine was strictly banned in Turkey. Anyone caught with wine was forced out of the community.

"Whoever saw an Ubykh live without wine; what kind of hospitality could there be without wine! Just as a tree can't be separated from a vine twisting around the trunk, so too wine can't be separated from one's life. What Ubykh had celebrated the birth of a child without wine? Could there have been a wedding without wine? Who had hosted company without wine? Even when an Ubykh died the others had raised their glasses at the wake. But now that was no longer possible. It's amazing what people can get accustomed to! You may not believe this, my dear Sharakh, but if you'd give me an auroch's horn full of wine I don't think I'd be able to say a proper toast, just like I don't even remember the taste of wine!"

That was the last of his complaints that day. There is where we ended our conversation until we picked it up again the next day.

...It was a Friday. Our men, after hanging their weapons up on nails outside the mosque, went in for their prayers. Our new mullah Orhan declared:

"There's no God but Allah... Bless us, Lord! Give us guidance! Don't leave us alone!"

"Amen! Amen!" responded the worshippers.

"A true believer must set his hopes on Allah, the kind and merciful! It's enough for one who believes to say: 'Be it so!' and the holy wish will come to pass!"

"Amen! Amen!"

I noticed someone in a tall Astrakhan hat standing outside the mosque's open door. If he didn't come into the mosque he must be a stranger here, I thought to myself. But his face looked familiar. When the service was over and I was putting on my dagger, I heard someone say:

"Good day, Zaurkan!"

The words were spoken in pure Adighe. I turned around:

“Muhammad! What brings you here?”

Standing before me was one of my grandmother’s nephews! Remember I told you my grandmother was Adighe? Well, I hadn’t seen Muhammad all the time we’d been in Turkey. People said he had settled somewhere near Izmid. Father and Mata joined us. They were happy to see Muhammad, hugged and kissed him.

“Why are we standing here! Let’s get on home quickly,” said Father excitedly.

“I was at your house already and saw Nasi. She told me you were here,” he explained pensively, without looking up. I had the feeling Muhammad wasn’t in the mood for pleasantries at the table. “I don’t have time. I have to get back home tonight... Maybe it’s all for the best that we can talk in private. What I have to say is for the ears of men...”

Each of us understood: Muhammad had the unpleasant task of reporting bad news.

“I beg you to take this bravely!”

“What happened?” whispered my father barely able to move his lips.

“Selim Pasha has made Kuna his wife!”

We literally recoiled as though a cannon fired nearby. But Muhammad, with his face full of sorrow, continued.

“I’m one of the guards at the palace of this cursed pasha. One day your sisters secretly called to me and choking with tears begged: ‘Even if it means your head, our dear relative, tell our brothers our life here is unbearable. They shouldn’t believe that we’re living in luxury. We were deceived, dishonored. If our brothers can’t get us out of this house of sin then may they at least come to say their last farewell to us!’

If Allah does exist, how could he allow this to happen? I thought wrathfully standing outside the mosque.

“You can count on me!” said Muhammad.

Then he told us how to find him in Izmid, and left. I saw red. Oh how I wanted to turn into lightning and burn down the mosque because Allah no longer existed as far as I was concerned.

When we got back home we called all our relatives together and told them what we had just found out. They were all sympathetic and as aggrieved as we were. My mother put her daughters’ clothes on their beds and mourned them both.

An Ubykh man would never marry two sisters. And if that had ever happened the community would have considered it incest and anathemized the culprit.

Mata and I decided we’d rather die than look people in the face if we didn’t take revenge for the disgrace that had befallen our sisters.

Our father went looking for help from Shardyn, son of Alou, and his sister Shanda. But it’s true what they say: trouble never comes alone. Father returned from Shardyn’s estate with nothing for his pains. Shardyn, son of Alou, was at the Balkan front at the time. His wife and son were touring France, and Shanda, the sultan’s wife, was about to have a baby so she wasn’t seeing anyone. All our father’s hopes were blighted, so we had to rely on ourselves. The main thing was not to sit on our hands. My brother and I decided to go to Izmid. We left home at the crack of dawn. I kept looking back at my father and mother until the road made a curve and I couldn’t see them anymore. Mother stood there wrapped in a black shawl and leaning on a staff. She was as thin as the blade of a knife. My father, with his arms folded, leaned his back up against the gate as though his legs would not hold him. I was terribly depressed—could it be that I would never see them again? A bit of smoke rose above the roof and seemed to be frozen there as though sensing that our hearth would soon go cold forever. Walking along the dusty road, our boots, clothing and faces became one color. Oh how I regretted I didn’t have my hot-blooded Bzou. What a

horse he was! The half-wild three-year-old had been broken very well. He would have got me to Izmid in an instant and once we reached the home of that lustful Selim Pasha, he would have jumped over the fence just like that.

In the good old days, when we lived in our homeland, even the poorest man would always ride his horse wherever he went; whether going to a feast, a funeral, or what not, one would either arrive on horseback or in a cart. Brides were carried in carriages driven by six horses of the same color. When a boy was born a colt was raised so the boy would learn to ride as soon as he could. When a man would die or be killed in battle his horse, carrying his weapons, would stand near the body and his family would mourn him. It's no wonder, dear Sharakh, our ancestors said that human blood flowed in the veins of a horse. They also said:

The soul of a man  
And the soul of a horse  
Are the same  
And have always been thus.

In this foreign land we were without horses. A donkey took the place of a horse. A man with a donkey was considered wealthy.

We had been staying a whole week at the home of Muhammad, the Adighe, who lived on the outskirts of Izmid by the bazaar. Every day we wandered around the palace of the thrice cursed Selim Pasha, but we couldn't send word to our sisters that we were nearby. Just before we arrived in Izmid someone had robbed the harem. The women were forbidden to take walks and security had been tightened. In desperation Mata suggested:

"We should just go to the pasha and ask him to give us back our sisters!"

"Just like that?" Muhammad smiled ironically. "You can put a dog's tail under a press, but you won't make it straight no matter how hard you try! Do you really think that man will give you justice!"

I had only one regret: that we didn't think of murdering Sharyn, son of Alou, when he was still in Osmankoy. No enemy could have done to us what our relative had. I was more and more convinced that he had sold my sisters to Selim Pasha in exchange for some favors. In Ubykhia he would have never dared to do such a thing!

We were depressed by being idle. The days were going by, but we hadn't done anything toward our goal. Finally Muhammad found a way to whisper to our sisters that we were in Izmid. They asked him to tell us that Juna had not written any letter to us and that she had not sent the women who tricked us into letting Kuna go to the palace.

We also found out that Juna blamed herself for her sister's ill fortune and tried to commit suicide by cutting her throat with a piece of glass.

It was spring and the city was unusually warm for that time of year. Muhammad came home telling us that the next day the sultan's wives were to be allowed to take a walk in the garden. The circumstances were right for us: Muhammad was going to be the door-guard that morning. We already knew that at noon Selim Pasha sat in a chair by the fountain in the shade of the magnolias while his concubines entertained him. We decided that just before noon I would enter the garden. Mata would hire a cab and would be waiting for me on the lane nearest the gate. I would try to get my sisters out the gate and then we'd take them away. If I couldn't take them out unnoticed then I would have to fight, covering their flight. Muhammad was supposed to get away with us because remaining in Izmid would be dangerous. A boat was waiting for us on the shore to be rowed by a former smuggler we had hired earlier. After getting about ten miles away from Izmid we would hide in the mountains. Mata and I were vendetta-seekers whose time had come.

The spring garden looked like it was shrouded with fluffy white clouds—the trees were in full bloom. "How can this garden rejoice in the coming of spring when my sisters are crying their eyes out here? How can the nightingales sing as though they're deaf to my sisters' moaning? Why hasn't lightning turned Selim Pasha to ashes yet?" I complained bitterly about the indifference of nature as I sneaked along the garden wall.

Muhammad opened the iron door a crack to let me in.

"Stay on that path," he whispered to me as I went past him.

I walked as though hunting, quietly, practically not breathing, looking between the branches. Far inside the garden I could see the white three-story palace. It seemed abandoned to me: not a voice could be heard from the windows and no one came outside the doors. When I was near, I hid in the bushes. To my right I heard water splashing. I could tell a fountain was nearby. Suddenly a door opened and two elderly men walked out; one of them looked like the head eunuch. They exchanged some words, then walked in different directions and disappeared from sight. Soon afterwards young women came out. They walked alone or in twos along the marble stairway and into the garden's shade. They were obviously the pasha's concubines. All of them were young and pretty, although their pallid faces reminded me of plants that grow in dark caves. I didn't see my sisters among them. Two of them who passed me by were talking in a language I had never heard before. Then I turned to look at the third young woman walking alone behind them. My eyes went blank, my heart froze: It was Feldysh. My voice sounded strange, even to me, when I called, "Feldysh."

Seeing me so unexpectedly made her speechless. She looked at me dumbstruck, her mouth wide open. That lasted for just a second and then without showing any joy in seeing me, as though she wasn't even surprised I was there, she asked:

"Is that you, Zaurkan?"

"Feldysh, don't be frightened, I'll save you!"

"I'm not frightened; I stopped being afraid a long time ago. You're probably looking for your sisters? Juna is still weak after trying to slit her throat with a piece of glass. Kuna doesn't want to leave her alone... We're the victims of the same demon."

"Oh Lord, why are you here?"

"I've been here for four years now. A sapling sold in a foreign land is not planted where it prefers to grow."

I placed my hands on her shoulders and put my face close to hers, saying in a firm voice:

"It's my duty to take you and my sisters out of here!"

"I'll tell your sisters I saw you. But it's too late to rescue me..." And hanging her head she wept bitterly. "I am already dead. You're too late! Don't touch me, I'm worse than a leper. Goodbye Zaurkan!"

Covering her face with her hands she turned around, and taking quick steps, headed toward the women walking some distance away.

My body suddenly went limp. Holding on to a twig I stood there in a trance. Gradually I began to notice that servants were darting to and fro between the palace and the fountain. I hid myself among the thick of the trees and saw a fountain rising from a carved stone bowl. There was a rainbow above the dancing spurts of water. Near the fountain, under the cover of trees, some servants were putting down a shag rug, laying cushions on it, and placing a soft chair in the middle. Then they brought out some low tables that had viands on them and silver pitchers.

Soon Selim Pasha came accompanied by two servants. I recognized him right away because I had seen him once at the manor of Sharyn, son of Alou. He was a sturdy little man, with a thin beard and almost no eyebrows which made his heavy eyelids look like a turtle's. His head, as bald as a pumpkin, was covered by a red fez. The man was advanced in years, but his body was sturdy. He took small but fast steps as he walked up to the chair and plunked himself into it. Two servants, probably his most trustworthy, stood on each side. One of them unfolded a piece of paper and began reading it to the pasha who rested his head on the back of the chair. He held amber beads, with the hand that lay on his fat stomach, and he pulled at his goatee with the other.

The longer I watched him the more I was filled with hatred.

The servant finished reading the paper and bowed. The pasha made some comment and waved his hand. The man who had read the paper folded it up and went back into the palace. The other servant picked up a pitcher, poured the contents into a glass, and handed it to the pasha on a small tray. But the pasha, reclining in the chair, was sweetly dozing. The servant put the glass on the table. Some crazy impulse pushed me forward. In one instant I appeared before the pasha like a bolt of lightning out of a clear blue sky. Astonished by the presence of an armed man in his palace, he squirmed in his chair and stared hard at me. His face went pale and began to sweat.

“How dare you roughneck come in here?” cried the pasha unable to hide his fear.

“I’m not a roughneck; I’m the brother of the two girls you have disgraced! If you don’t want to die let my sisters go, Pasha!”

His eyes darted in fear and he noticed that my hand was resting on the haft of my dagger.

“Help!” he yelled.

The servant who stood by him shouted as though he’d been hit over the head and ran to the palace doors.

I realized that the palace guards would come soon. The pasha eased himself sideways out of the chair and began moving toward the pool around the fountain. He left me no choice. I grabbed the pasha by the throat and jabbed my Caucasian dagger into his chest all the way to the haft! The old man wheezed as I threw him into the water where gold fish were swimming. The water turned crimson and for some reason reminded me of the sea, of those terrible days of exodus, and the corpses of Ubykh exiles washed up to the shore. The sounds of people shouting came closer and closer. I didn’t care anymore. Total indifference overcame me. The bloody dagger fell from my hands and I didn’t try to pick it up. I probably could have fled, and got away with Muhammad’s help, but for some reason the thought didn’t even occur to me. I was surrounded by the guards. I didn’t resist. And so with my hands tied and at gun point I was taken to prison.

Today is the third day I’ve been working over my notes. Zaurkan is resting, although I don’t really think he wants to rest. He hasn’t even told me about half of his one-hundred-year life. A few times in the two weeks I’ve been with him it even seemed to me he was afraid to die before telling me everything he had stored in his memory. Of course, when you compare his story with one or another historical date, you realize that he sometimes gets things mixed up and says something happened earlier when it actually happened later and vice versa, but just the same his memory is phenomenal, his mind is alert, and emotions are still high in his centenarian, but still powerful body.

I have the feeling that no one but Biram has entered Zaurkan’s house in a long, long time. Maybe it’s also because he lives in seclusion that neither modern times, nor modern words even exist for him. He lives as though in a cemetery and wanders through his past along a narrow path amidst the graves, alive amidst the dead...

We’ve already arranged that tomorrow morning he’ll continue his story; this evening I finally got most of my notes in order, ending with the bitter tale about the Ubykh women. My wrist is aching from writing. I’m sitting here shaking out my numb fingers, but my thoughts are far away, back home in Abkhasia. Zaurkan’s story about the Ubykh women made me recall all the more clearly today our Uard school, which is now a white stone three-story building. When I started the first grade it was a small, wooden, two-room school, small like we pupils were then—thirty boys and girls from my village.

Now the school has 500 children. I remember how last year Karbei Barchan, the current principal, but once a first-grader with me, told me that figure and he was so proud. We got together for the 15th anniversary of our graduation. Not all of us, of course, but many: two agronomists, three school teachers, one mining engineer from Tkvarcheli, me—a linguist, and Natasha Louba, the main celebrity among the alumni, the first woman pilot in all of Abkhasia. Of course, it takes strong character to be a pilot, especially since Natasha’s father, Islam, was coincidentally one of the most devout worshipers of our village shrine Kiach. Our shrine was considered as miraculous as the Ubykh’s Bytkha and, as Islam said he saw with his own eyes, it sometimes would fly into the air at night at particularly historic moments and would return to its holy place. But a flying shrine is one thing, and a flying daughter, quite another, especially one that was nearly expelled from her air club when she flew a U-2 and landed in our big field on the edge of the village in the middle of the day when we were having a big outdoor

meeting. For a long time to come evil tongues claimed that Islam had hastily mistaken his own daughter for the shrine Kiach on another of its flights. I think it was just idle gossip at the old man's expense; our people in Uard like having a good laugh, especially when the joke's so obvious. For a long time after that, whenever they'd see some plane over the mountains they would tease Islam, call him out saying: "Hurry, hurry up and see the shrine flying!

I wonder where Natasha Louba is now? She didn't answer my last letter from Leningrad. She was at some aviation exercises. I can't write her from here; fate has taken me too far in my search for the Ubykh language, so far it even frightens me to think of it.

## **ALONG THE YELLOW ROAD OF THE DESERT**

Our caravan consisting of thirty camels, twenty horses and some fifty men advanced through the desert to the plaintive jingling of bells. We'd been on the road for a month already after leaving heavily populated and noisy Cairo.

I can still see Ismail Sabbah riding ahead of us on his black Arabian steed, wearing a white burnous.\* He was wiry, light-footed and tough. He was a Bedouin and felt at home among the sandhills. His bodyguards swayed in their saddles following him on both sides. They could understand their master from a mere glance or word barely uttered. If he'd give the sign "Die!", they'd die without hesitation. We who worked on the caravan were a mixed,

disorderly bunch, but an order given by Ismail Sabbah was law for all of us. If you'd disobey, he'd kill you.

When he was a boy, without a penny to his name, he latched on to a caravan and ever since then that hazardous nomadic trading has been his passion. He had one mirage since early childhood in that boundless sea of sand— money. The wild youth achieved his treasured dream: he became a caravan leader. In the desert he was God Almighty to us. Everyone has his sovereign. And Ismail Sabbah had his too. He was Kerim Effendi of Cairo, a well-known merchant and moneybag who wasn't averse to making illegal deals. When I first met Ismail Sabbah he was already past his prime. He was tall, dark and had a black, glossy mustache. His eyes were green like a tiger's. I said they were green, but they weren't exactly, because they were very strange: they changed colors several times a day. I never heard the caravan leader laugh his heart out. When he laughed he showed his yellow teeth and let out a sound like an animal roaring, but there was no joy on his face at all.

They say, Sharakh, that when your patience runs out the grave is near. Apparently, to my great misfortune, fate granted me tremendous patience and that's why I'm still alive. Born in the mountains, among the evergreen vegetation, I ended up, worn like a flint, in the desert that was as sterile as the groin of a mule. You can't keep up with me, Sharakh? Well, I won't talk so fast. Or maybe you're tired of my babble? Since you're not, then have your pen keep up with my tongue...

There was an old prison on the edge of Karaburun\* where pirates were once hanged. Condemned to death by a religious court, I was waiting for the sentence to be carried out for over four months. That means I was dying every day. Exhausted by waiting, my tortured soul begged for it all to end. The only thing I didn't feel was repentance for murdering Scum Pasha, neither then, sitting in my prison cell, nor later, throughout my long life. Held in shackles, doomed to die, reviewing in my mind all the events of recent years, one after another, like one would count black devotional beads, I wasn't concerned about God, but about my sisters, Feldysh, my mother and father. Were they still alive? I also worried about what had happened to my brother Mata and to Muhammad. What had become of them? The walls of a prison are deaf and dumb. All I could hear was the murmur of the sea. I would have asked the waves, but I couldn't speak their language.

Suddenly one day at midnight when I was dreaming about the land of the Ubykhs, the door of my cell creaked as it came open. I looked up to see the prison warden and a sailor I'd never seen before. Each of them was carrying a burning candle flickering in the dark.

"Look, there he is. He's as big as an ox! If you give him some food you can harness that one."

"Hey there, turn around! Flex your arm muscles! Bend your neck!" said the sailor as he examined me.

I figured they were trying to decide whether the noose would hold me or not. My heart froze.

Then an armed guard came in and gave the order:

“Out!”

With shackles clanking, I obediently followed my new master out of the prison. It was pouring outside. Clouds hung low over the sea.

When lightning struck I could see from a cliff overlooking the sea a schooner with sails. Soon I was in its hold. The sailor who had examined me in my cell turned out to be the captain. I guessed right away that the warden had sold me to him like cattle. It's not hard to explain the disappearance of a condemned man: he hanged himself and his body was thrown into the sea. That happened often enough...

I suppose I should have rejoiced at the sudden turn of events. Well, I escaped death, but only to become a slave. A slave isn't a person; his master can do anything he wants with him—the master's whim is law. While you have the strength and work like a horse you're fed; when you can't you're shot. You've got no one to complain to anyway.

The slave schooner, taking great care, headed for Cairo. There the merchant Kerim Effendi bought me from the captain. Sitting on a chair on the balcony of his country villa Kerim Effendi sized me up and said in Turkish:

“I know everything about your past. I heard another man's life means nothing to you. The Turkish pasha, apparently, wasn't your first victim. I don't even want to know how many men you've murdered. Let it be on your conscience. You're from the Caucasus, aren't you?”

I nodded in reply.

“We have Abkhasians in Egypt. Once long ago twelve Abkhasian women, the wives of noblemen in Cairo, you might say ruled Egypt. Their descendants took the surname Abaza. To this day there are many Abazas.” The merchant laughing roguishly, commented: “If Abkhasian women were good at running the affairs of state, an Abkhasian man like you should be smart enough to catch a fish with his teeth. You're a lucky fellow, you know: your head was going to be chopped off, but there it is in place. I bought it. But if you don't do what I say... It's not in your interests to cross me.”

Then he handed me over to Ismail Sabbah. And that's how I went to work on a caravan.

From then on I was called Abaza, which in Arabic means Abkhasian. I was, after all, half Abkhasian. At first my job was to feed the camels, pack and unpack the cargo. Ubykhs had always had horses; I had never seen a camel before in my life. When I started the job I disliked those humpbacked freaks, but then I got used to them and began respecting these uncapricious, intelligent and hardy animals. They helped us out many a time during sand storms and even saved our lives.

My Lord, how defenseless, small and weak a person seems up against the silent, barren desert sands! The wandering wind—the vulture's brother—whistles as it sweeps up sand waves that look like saber blades. In eight years numerous times I crossed the desert where countless numbers of people were buried. An hour after someone was laid in the ground there wouldn't even be a grave mound—it would be swept away by the wind. From the moment the morning sun opened its fire-spitting jaws and until nightfall the heat was so fierce that if you could endure it there was no reason to fear hell. Under these circumstances, close track was kept of every drop of water in the bull-skin flasks. But at night it was dreadfully cold and you couldn't light a fire—there was nothing to make it with.

Ismail Sabbah knew dead plains, where rattlesnakes change their skin, like the palm of his hand. He had travelled many a time through the golden sea of sands to various parts of Africa. You'd like to know, Sharakh, what goods we were carrying across the desert? For the sake of appearance we packed silk, utensils, prayer rugs and other ordinary wares. But the main goods hidden in our packs and saddle-bags were opium and gunpowder. It was illegal to trade such items, but that was no obstacle for Kerim Effendi and Ismail Sabbah. If they were caught with

the goods, they'd bribe their way out of the fix. I already told you, Sharakh, that the color of the caravan leader's eyes changed many times a day, but he also had a way of transforming himself from a cooing dove to a raging panther. He was willing to do anything, though, to get hold of precious diamonds, gold or fragrances at a low price. And at such moments it seemed that a more gracious customer couldn't be found anywhere else in Africa.

"I'll pay a good price, my king, a very good price! May all your illnesses be mine if you think I'm not paying the right price!" he persuaded a stubborn seller.

And when he managed to buy some precious merchandise at a profitable price, he was truly happy, happier even than he would have been if all his dead relatives had come back to life. But when he was furious he was a real beast, especially if his fury was caused by a person of lower station.

One day a small leather bag containing a copper coffee pot was missing. Ismail suspected one of the men:

"Where is it?"

"I have no idea, Sir!"

"You sold it, you louse!"

We begged the enraged caravan leader not to punish an innocent man. We even got down on our knees before Ismail Sabbah.

"Many others can slip on the dung of one camel," he retorted.

At that he took a Turkish knife from his belt and thrust it right into the heart of the accused. The poor slave gasped his last breath and dropped dead at the feet of his murderer who then sat down on a woolen mat nearby and began chewing on a leg of lamb. He ate with a hardy appetite, contentedly smacking his greasy lips, and his squinting eyes went from crimson red to yellow.

Ismail Sabbah took his time cleaning the bone, stood up, pulled his knife out of the dead man's chest, and ordered us to get the camels ready for travel.

"Let's get moving!"

Vultures appeared in the sky...

Have you ever seen real ivory, Sharakh? If ivory could cure diseases it would be worthwhile crossing the desert where there's no shade for protection. But the tusk of an elephant is only ornamentation for the wealthy. Ivory is hard, so hard a bullet can't penetrate it, but it's easy to carve.

Wealth leads to whims. The chess pieces that Kerim Effendi moved on his black and white sandalwood board, and the handle on his walking stick, were made out of ivory. The stem of the hookah he smoked, and the butt of his rifle, were decorated with ivory. Kerim Effendi wanted to be surrounded by expensive things: that's why he wanted the table and chair in his living room to be decorated with ivory. And why shouldn't he? After all, they say a rich man's rooster learns to lay eggs. I heard that in Kerim Effendi's office there was a white, slender, nude woman carved out of one large ivory tusk. When Kerim Effendi looked at it he would sometimes sigh, recalling his youth. And his noble wife also wanted things made of ivory, and not only powder cases, or jewelry boxes for her diamonds.

And so we would cross the yellow desert, suffering from intense heat, thirst and mosquitoes, then travel through the jungles where the humidity was unbearable, and come to rivers filled with crocodiles just to buy the white ivory from black men at the lowest possible price.

But more valuable than anything else were diamonds which, when cut, were more precious than gold. To get diamonds from the Africans Ismail Sabbah was ready to turn all of us men, and all the camels into a handful of dust and turn himself inside out forty times. A greedy man's sense of smell is better than any dog's. White men from



overseas had crossed half the world to uncivilized lands whose lower depths contained diamonds. They suddenly appeared with soldiers, alcohol and their own clergymen. I saw with my own eyes, Sharakh, how black natives turned into slaves worked in the diamond pits. There's no drudgery worse than diamond mining. When the work day was over the guards would search the men; they looked in their ears, their nostrils and their mouths. God forbid that anyone should be caught with a hidden precious stone— death was imminent. Sometimes the black tribes would rise up and rebel. Armed with arrows they made their captors tremble, even though the enslavers had rifles. I was a witness to how fear made the sun helmets of the white colonizers jump!

If a man's conscience is clear, but he meets one calamity after another, he has reason to believe he's being made to suffer for someone else's sins.

I was younger then than you are now, Sharakh, but I kept thinking more and more often that I was being punished for the sins committed by my ancestors. True, I had no idea what they had done to kindle the wrath of the gods, but I was certain that I was paying for some evil they had done.

Then one day I was spared the execution I'd been sentenced to and ended up outside prison alive. Perhaps fate had finally smiled on me? The hell it had!

Remember I told you that we adopted the grandson of Hamida who drowned herself in the river. Well, Shardyn, son of Alou, wanted that clever boy to accompany his heir to Istanbul. The boys were a year apart in age. When I returned from Africa Tagir had finished his studies and was still living in the home of Shardyn, the sultan's brother in-law. Tagir knew many secrets. For instance, I later learned from him that when the chief of police had told the grand vizier about the death of Vali Selim Pasha, the sly old fox spoke his mind for the first time:

"That Ubykh fellow, without even realizing it, did us a big favor."

The grand vizier immediately told the sultan what had happened, knowing the news would be received with great pleasure. And he wasn't mistaken. It was all quite simple. Scum Pasha was close to some men involved in the conspiracy of the Young Turks who wanted a new ruler. The sultan didn't have enough evidence to accuse him of treason and send him to the executioner's block, but he already distrusted the Izmid governor and couldn't wait to get rid of him. Then I entered the picture, jabbing my Caucasian dagger into the chest of the disgraced pasha. Maybe that's why the sultan, Abdulaziz, wasn't in a hurry to sanction my execution. That was probably his way of warning all those who went along with the man I had killed: "Whoever goes against me will be outlawed, and I will not be hard on the assassins of my opponents."

Tagir was convinced that Shardyn, son of Alou, had helped make the deal between the prison warden and the captain of the slave schooner. Shardyn was quick to use my name to his advantage when he inadvertently mentioned to the sultan:

"Incidentally, that Ubykh youth who murdered the unfortunate pasha is my foster brother's son. The poor lad was avenging his dishonored sisters."

Shardyn, son of Alou, didn't tell the sultan that he had actually guided my hand himself, but the way he worded his remarks did not exclude that possibility.

The bells of our caravan could be heard in many parts of Africa populated by various tribes. Once, after traveling for many days under the fierce pitiless sun we met some Tuaregs\*. The tall, broad-shouldered, small-waisted men wore daggers on their belts. The women with their olive-colored skin, and beautifully shaped eyes were revered, although they had to live by strict ancient rules.

When I heard the music of an amzade, much like an apkhiartsa, I couldn't help thinking of the Caucasus with its brave warriors and beautiful women. Tribes differ, but the people in them cry and laugh the same way. My peasant heart would melt when I would watch the Moors or the Berbers milk their cows. The milk would drip into containers made of huge pumpkins and I would be reminded of our Ubykh wooden milk pails. The milk fresh from the cows and the cow barns smelled the same; the cows had the same way of mooing; the roosters had the same way of crowing; and the goats had the same way of reaching up to the branches to get a taste of the leaves. And

the sounds of the wedding tom-toms reminded me of our mountain drums. Some tribes prayed to Allah, others to Christ, and still others were pagans who worshiped the sun.

Once I saw heaps of human bones along our caravan's route. Some of them had the loose rings of shackles around them—they were the remains of black slaves. But wasn't I a slave myself? I was a white slave that Ismail Sabbah could kill like a dog; there was no one to defend me, nor anyone to mourn me after I died.

The measured step of the loaded camels, the dismal ringing of the bells—there seemed no end to it all. Caravan routes crossed, came together and again parted ways. Sometimes events stretched serenely like sand-hills, some times they swirled like the yellow whirlwinds of sand storms.

Once I remember we settled down for the night, unloaded the camels, had a meager supper and divided up the night watches not to fall easy prey to thieves. About the same time a caravan of black slaves roped together stopped nearby. The chief of the escorts turned out to be an old friend of Ismail Sabbah. There was no moon out that night and the dark blue sky with a crimson lining boded evil. The head of the escorts asked our leader a favor: to let him have some of our men, of course, for money, to increase his watch on the black slaves whose tribesmen are ever ready to free them. When Ismail Sabbah heard the word money he didn't put up an argument. On the contrary, he was glad to appoint six men, including myself, to keep watch over the black slaves. We stood guard in three shifts. Another man and myself were assigned the second shift, and the third shift was to be taken by two flunkies of Ismail Sabbah; they were constantly telling on the others. At midnight when I took over the watch with my partner, the only thing I could think about was finishing the watch and getting at least a little sleep. Soon afterwards the wind began blowing, and the full moon peeped out from between the clouds. Against the moon's silvery light the slaves, lying on the sand, were like pieces of black marble columns of some very ancient temple. Suddenly my eyes met the eyes of one of them. At first they were hateful, then they began questioning me:

"Do you have a father and mother?"

"Yes, I do." I wasn't able to look away.

"A brother, too?"

"Yes, I have a brother!"

"Where are they?" those terribly melancholy eyes inquired.

"I don't know! Fate separated us," admitted my sad look.

"Maybe your loved ones are also being taken slaves, like us. And my brother is escorting them," his eyes spoke persistently, like that of a voodoo.

It was witchcraft! I lowered my eyes, but then some unknown power lifted them again to meet the slave's penetrating expressive eyes.

"Believe me," his eyes implored, "if my brother were sent to guard your enslaved relatives he would help them get away, because he values freedom and respects the laws of his homeland."

I tried to resist his look, but his eyes held me like fate and lured me like freedom.

"Don't ask that of me. I'm a slave just like you; I can't help!" and turned away ashamed.

Just as soon as I turned away I heard the voices of my father, mother, brother and sisters. They kept saying the same thing: Help that boy! Help him! Maybe, Sharakh, that was my conscience talking in their voices? The edge of the sky was growing lighter. Soon we would be replaced. I made my decision: a Turkish knife fell silently in front of that fellow who was tied by one rope with the other prisoners... After my partner and I were relieved, we got back to our camels and lay down on a woolen mat. My partner slept like a log, but I kept waiting, wondering what would happen. At dawn I heard shots and the warlike shouts of the blacks. All the slaves vanished into the bluish fog. In pools of blood lay three guards: our two, and one of the slave trader's hired men.

Who hasn't ever met up with someone whose features are similar to those of a good friend, or been to a place that looks as familiar as home...

The Southern Cross constellation was right above us when we left the god-forsaken Sahara and headed south. Soon afterwards the sun woke up behind us. Suddenly, in the first gleam of daylight, I spotted mountains. I was flabbergasted. Ever since I had left the land of the Ubykhs, I hadn't seen real mountains. I was overjoyed, as though I was seeing a close relative. The slopes were green and the peaks were white. Was I dreaming? I almost believed I was standing on the north shore of the Black Sea and blissfully admiring the Caucasus Mountains.

I could imagine myself drinking water from a spring as I stood on my knees holding a rifle atilt, and then walking up along a narrow hunting path ascending to the sky through the brushwood of blackberries, blackthorns and clematis. Birds were singing. And a keen eye could spot the trail of a wild boar and mountain goats. I sat down on a moss-covered boulder, listened attentively, looked through a narrow gap between the branches forced apart by the wind, and—oh, how lucky could I get: there was an auroch on the edge of a cliff near the eternal snow...

If only Ismail Sabbah would let me go hunting. But it was no use asking! I knew beforehand that he wouldn't allow me, and would take away my rifle on top of it. The dew had not yet dried when I decided to take my chances, and was climbing the mountain, holding my rifle atilt, moving from rock to rock. Eagles soared in the sky. Oh, I would give anything to be up as high as they are, I thought to myself, then I might even be able to see the mountains of Ubykhia, a picture I have always carried in my heart.

There was a babbling stream nearby with churning waves. I saw two chamois on the cliff of its high bank. The wind blew from behind them so they didn't sense the danger. My passion for hunting got the best of me. Clinging to a rock, I got down on my right knee and aimed my rifle. The mountain echo repeated my shot three times. The J shook as though no one before me had ever fired a gun there. The dead chamois, striking against the rocks on the slope, rolled down on the bank of the stream. The second chamois melted into the sky, the thunder of gunfire in its ears. I hurried down the slope to skin my prey, and as I was coming down I noticed a black man standing at a distance with his bow lowered. I greeted him in a friendly tone of voice. Apparently, this local hunter had aimed at the chamois at the same time I had, but my bullet was faster than his arrow. Squatting before the catch sent to me by the god of the animals, I cut off its head. If one man looks intently at another, the one being watched will surely turn to look in the other's direction. And that's just what I did. When I turned around, I saw the African was staring at me.

"Come here!" I called to him and signaled with my hand.

He came quickly and made some friendly remark in his own language. He probably said something like: "What good luck!" He took out his knife and helped me skin the chamois. In keeping with the ancient hunting rules of our ancestors, I carved the carcass in half.

"Here, take your part!" and I laid half of the fresh meat in front of him.

He understood me, accepted the gift with a wide grin, and bowed. Then he took an agate necklace off his muscular neck and put it around mine.

"Ngugi! Ngugi!" he said, pointing to himself with his index finger.

I did the same, saying, "Zaurkan! Zaurkan!"

The black man nodded joyfully and repeated after me "Zaurkan!"

Then he ran off to gather wood and made a fire in a flash. He cut two pieces of meat from his share, took off his belt a small leather bag with salt, and salted the meat on both sides. Then he whittled a twig from some aromatic tree and put it into the fire with our meat on it. When the meat was done, he gave me a big piece. We ate, praising each other and gesturing with sign language the whole time. All the time Ngugi and I were talking he kept looking at my rifle. I handed it to him. Then I put a bullet in it, cocked it, and fired. Ngugi danced for joy. He had probably

never held a gun in his hands before. I had no doubt that he wanted it. Who knows, maybe he needed it for hunting or for self defense, or maybe to fight for his homeland?

It was time for me to be getting back. Ngugi showed me the shortest path to the valley. When we were saying goodbye, I took the rifle off my shoulder and gave it to him, along with the cartridge belt.

“Take this gift in memory of an Ubykh who has lost his homeland. I hope this gun serves you well!” I said to Ubykh.

I don’t imagine he understood my words, but I’m certain he got their meaning. We embraced! After walking half a mile, I looked back. Ngugi’s body was gleaming in the sun. Raising the rifle over his head, he stood there and bowed as I walked away.

You’re probably surprised, Sharakh, by what I did. The mountains were to blame: they awakened my rebellious spirit, urged me into crazy generosity, and made me forget that I was a slave myself.

When I got back to where our caravan was standing and took the still warm, fresh meat off my shoulder, my friends became overjoyed. After all, for two months they’d been eating only jerked meat, stale bread and dried bananas. But Ismail Sabbah’s eyes turned blood red. It was a bad sign. His thin lips tightened and he inquired with a menacing s

“Where’s your rifle and cartridge belt?”

“When I was returning from the hunt, some ruffians it tacked me and took it away,” I lied awkwardly.

“Why didn’t you shoot your way out?”

“There were a lot of them and they all had guns!”

“Look here, I’m not an ass. You sold the rifle and the cartridge belt to those thick-lipped thieves!”

“Have me searched and if you find any money on me you can cut off my head.”

“You hid the money, you creep! And now any of us could be killed by a bullet from your rifle,” and with that he ordered the men to tie me up.

Ten hefty Bedouins, having forgotten all about the fresh meat, fell on me, tied me up and threw me at the feet of the caravan leader. I lay there not even able to wiggle, while Ismail Sabbah, with his legs crossed on a woolen mat, began drinking a cup of coffee someone had handed him.

He drank slowly, not looking at me once. When he finished, the “tiger of the desert”, as we called him, picked up a whip and walked up to me.

“Don’t whip me, just shoot me,” I beseeched him.

But he cracked the whip and one blow followed another. That could have never happened in the land of the Ubykhs. If anyone had even whipped my horse Bzou, I would have made him count his own guts. It was the first time I had ever been whipped in my life. I was disgraced in front of the others. I didn’t even feel the bodily pain, but my impotent fury was more than I could bear: it burned my brain and grabbed me by the throat.

“Stop whipping me! If I live through this I’ll murder you!” I wheezed and coiled like a snake.

But Ismail Sabbah went berserk, he kept whipping me like a man possessed. And here—you won’t believe me, Sharakh—I tensed every muscle in my body breaking the rope that was binding me. The very instant I got to my feet I hurled myself at Ismail Sabbah like a wounded panther. I grabbed the whip out of his hands, broke the handle, and threw it Lord knows where. If one of the men hadn’t stopped me, I would have choked the caravan leader to death. Then several men fell on me and tied me up again. But by that time I didn’t care at all. And the caravan leader had calmed down, too. My hands and legs were tied all night long, but neither Ismail Sabbah, nor

anyone else came near me. In the morning, the caravan leader came up to me as though nothing had happened, and cut the rope that had pierced into my skin.

“Eat and get down to work!” said Sabbah peaceably.

From that day on for some reason the caravan leader was more attentive to me, didn’t give me the worst jobs, sometimes asked my advice, and told me what to do without raising his voice. But I realized that the knife that had cut the rope binding my hands and legs could, whenever he wanted, be thrust into my chest...

Once Biram was late and didn’t bring our supper at the regular time. The sun was already setting, but there was no sight of him.

“What’s the matter? He’s never done this before! I don’t care about myself, I’m ashamed my guest should be kept waiting for his meal. As it is you have to eat our plain food not fit for company,” grumbled Zaurkan, and I kit that even though I kept insisting I didn’t mind, he was getting more and more worried.

He picked up his staff a number of times, but finally got up to go:

“I’ll go to Biram and find out what happened to him!”

He barely got to the gate when Biram appeared carrying his sack.

The old man turned around and sat down quietly, leaning n his staff.

Biram came up to me.

“Excuse me, dear Sharakh,” he said. “My wife is ill and couldn’t make supper on time!

“What’s wrong with your wife?” I asked.

“Since yesterday, and the whole night, she’s had a terrible headache, but today she’s a little better!”

Zaurkan listened, but didn’t say a word as though his tongue was tied.

After supper when Biram was getting his kitchen utensils together, putting them in the sack, I went up to him and said:

“If it had taken you just a little longer, Zaurkan would have gone to your house. He was worried.”

“What a pity! If I had known I would have taken even longer on purpose!” was Biram’s reply.

“Why?” I asked.

“I think it’s been around ten years since Father has been o my house! “ he said, speaking even more softly so the old man wouldn’t catch what he was saying.

“Why?”

“He doesn’t visit the neighbors, and he doesn’t visit me. I suppose it’s because he’s angry with my wife. I told you already we don’t have any children. He tells me all the time: It’s bad enough I’m all alone. You’re going to be alone, too, and it’s all her fault!” I don’t even know what to say to him; he’s a difficult man to get along with, very difficult! “ said Biram sadly, shaking his head, and then he left.

Zaurkan and I sat down across from one another and went on with the work we were already accustomed to.

The sun set; it got dark outside. I went into the house, lit the wick lamp and the old man followed me. There he continued his story.

He talked about all his experiences in Africa. Tried to recall where he had been, what peoples he had seen. Some times he even remembered words from the different languages he'd heard over his years of travel there. Mostly he talked about the deserts, but sometimes he described African jungles and the huge rivers that ships sailed.

At times he mixed up facts and would start all over again: "Just a second. Don't write that down; it's all wrong! Has everything dripped out of this old pumpkin, I wonder?" he exclaimed angrily as he pounded his forehead with his hand.

But in general, despite this stopping and starting, I ascertained that for eight or nine years straight he travelled, mostly walking, with caravans throughout the vast expanses of Africa...

Nine years is no laughing matter—it's a whole lifetime! A boy who was born nine years ago and sucking his mother's breast, nine years later can run so fast you won't catch up with him.

When we sold all the goods and loaded our camels with the treasures we bought, including opium, our caravan went back to Cairo. Some of the men who had families in Egypt were glad to get home. But what was waiting for me there? Only money for illegal labor. Even if I had been freed and went back to Turkey where my family was, I would have been executed for the murder of Vali Selim Pasha.

Ismail Sabbah was in a hurry to get back to his caravan. We made longer marches and stopped for shorter periods of time. We had already passed the city of Siva. The "tiger of the desert" was cautious. He never tired of reminding us to be on guard at all times. He was always on the alert, sniffing the air, as it were.

"Bands of ruffians on this road have robbed caravans a number of times," he warned us.

He gave each of us a double supply of cartridges. One night when there was no moon out, we pitched camp for the night near a well. We had just sent out guards when suddenly some horsemen burst out of the darkness and charged us like a hurricane. They shot at us as they rode, surrounded us, and we fired back. Darkness, the whistle of bullets, the roar of frightened camels, the snorting of horses, the hooting of the assailants—all that blurred into one. One of the horsemen attacked me and, hanging from his saddle, raised his saber to slash me. I overcame him and shot him right in the heart. Falling onto the sand, he shouted his last words in pure Ubykh:

"They got me! Now I'll never see home again!"

I was shocked. I was ready for anything, even death, but hearing my native language among those sand-hills where a demon wouldn't linger was too unexpected and unbelievable. Besides, the man's voice was so familiar. Meanwhile, the thieves on horseback realized they weren't going to get anywhere with us and vanished as instantly as they had appeared. I ran over to the wounded man. He was dying. I was overcome with horror: even in the black of night I recognized him. It was Said, Haji Kerantukh's foster brother. I lifted his head, feeling the warm, sticky blood staining my hand.

"Said! My Lord, Said! Is that really you?" I mumbled in a state of total shock.

The glimmer of death was in his eyes. He apparently recognized me and, whispering something incomprehensible, lowered his eyelids. My friends surrounded me carrying torches. Happy we were all alive they couldn't fathom why I was crying over the dead man's body.

I lost my senses; I wanted to die. Such inconsolable sorrow overtook me; living any longer seemed useless and impossible. I pointed the barrel of my rifle at my chest and was ready to pull the trigger when Ismail Sabbah, who was standing nearby, kicked the gun out of my hands. Then he pulled my knife out of its sheath on my belt.

"Tie up that madman!" he shouted to the men.

But I got away from them while they were sticking their torches into the sand and ran off into the darkness. I ran fast, as though I was trying to catch the soul of Said, the man I had killed. I ran, not feeling my feet underneath me, until I had no more strength to move and fell to the ground.

Poor Said! The last time I had seen him we were in the outskirts of Samsun, and he was dreaming of going back to the land of the Ubykhs. I figured he'd died on the way to our native mountains. How did he end up in Africa? What evil spirit brought us together that way? What evil spirit wanted me to murder my freedom-loving fellow-tribesman?

I was in a stupor till morning; the wind was covering me with sand while I tossed and turned lying on those dead plains. In the morning I got up, as if out of the grave, and after brushing the sand off my face I looked around me. There were two jackals about ten steps away from me. Barely able to stand up straight, I staggered over to them: they jumped up and ran off, looking back all the time. Why hadn't those filthy creatures eaten me up? I was half alive, defenseless and unarmed. Maybe they couldn't stand the thought of eating a man who had killed his own brother in misfortune? The desert rocked beneath my feet, like the deck of a ship during a storm. I was dying of thirst, and the sun was rising higher and higher. Soon I could see trees here and there. It wasn't a mirage, I had come to an oasis...

## ALONG DRY RIVERS

I joined another caravan. It was also headed for Cairo. The people with it were hospitable. They fed me the whole way and, although I was not under the protection of the law, they had no intentions of making money off me by selling me to some slave trader or turning me over to my former owner. The goods they were carrying belonged to an Armenian merchant. On our way to Cairo I found out that the cargo would be delivered from there by sea to Istanbul.

Cairo's a grand city, but looking like a beggar, a half-starved vagabond, I didn't have a single friend here, nor a roof over my head. My heart longed for Turkey, where I had left my family and fellow-Ubykhs. Just one day at home, just one day hearing the sweet Ubykh language, and then I could be chopped into pieces by a dull ax, for all I cared. I helped the stevedores working for the Armenian merchant transfer the goods to the ship sailing for Istanbul. When the merchant found out I was from the Caucasus he was sympathetic: he bought me clothes and shoes, and gave me money for food. The man was wealthy, but generous as well. Knowing him I learned that one does not necessarily exclude the other.

And so, due to the kindness and sympathy of the Armenian merchant, I arrived in Istanbul. I had heard a lot about that city since childhood. Ubykhs thought there was no place on earth more superb or rich. Whenever someone said: "He's going to Istanbul," it seemed as though the person was headed for the other side of the world. If an Ubykh saw an expensive dagger or fine jewelry he assumed they were made in Istanbul. Even in songs the eyes of a beautiful woman were compared to Istanbul amber.

Constantinople, which is what some people called the Turkish capital, astounded me with its white stone palaces surrounded by lush greenery, mosques crowned by a crescent, the most beautiful of them being the sky-blue Hagia Sophia; ships with flags from all over the world docked in the Golden Horn, and the noisy bazaars where everything was bought and sold from golden trinkets to whistles, from lamb carcasses to the delicacies of the sea. Throughout the bazaar there were the shouts of hawkers, the aroma of coffee stands, the supplications of beggars, the haggle of buyers, the whispers of smugglers, and the open sale of people, especially women. When you heard someone yelling: "Out of the way!" it meant a pasha or wealthy buyer was coming and the servant was telling the crowd to clear the way.

At the cemetery everyone is equal, but while we're alive, each of us has his place on this earth. I was living among the riffraff on the docks. There you could hear every language spoken in the world, but the longshoremen and sailors understood one another without interpreters. No one asked where you were from, what you were doing there or how long you planned to stay. My back, it appeared, was strong enough to carry bales, barrels, boxes and other cargo, which is how I made my living. Meanwhile, I heard from the sailors that many Caucasians had come to Istanbul.

"What tribe are they?" I asked.

“Abkhasians!”

“My Lord,” I thought in dismay, “so there are more exiles! Don’t tell me the Abkhasians have made the same fatal mistake?”

I was anxious to go into town. When I was free from my work after the sunset and on Fridays\* I went into Istanbul to wander the streets in the hope of meeting Abkhasians from Tsebelda where my mother’s brothers lived, or just seeing a Caucasian I might know. Haunting the mosques, coffee shops, and bazaars, I kept meeting more and more people dressed in Circassian coats and carrying weapons. They all spoke Abkhasian. I would listen to them talk. It was sweet and bitter at the same time: sweet to hear that language my mother used to sing lullabies, and bitter because the new exiles talked about the same things the Ubykhs discussed in the outskirts of Samsun.

Day turned to night, but the stones near the bazaar were still warm. On one of them there was an old man in a worn Caucasian shirt, his dirty toes peering out of torn boots. With his hands clutching his head hung low, dejected and immobile, he looked like a tombstone. I sat down next to him and inquired:

“What happened to you?”

Raising his head to look at me, he showed surprise; he couldn’t imagine a man who wasn’t wearing a Circassian coat and shirt could speak Abkhasian.

“First tell me who you are?” he asked in turn.

“I’m an earlier exile, an Ubykh.”

“Oh!” he sighed in sympathy. “You Ubykhs have only yourselves to blame for your troubles because you moved here without thinking it over carefully, but we were forced here.”

“By the Russian czar?”

“No! By the sultan’s troops who came to Abkhasia to take it away from the Russians. They burned down our village, and beheaded those who resisted. Abkhasia is empty, my friend. It’s razed and empty!” said the old man in a tearful voice.

“Tell me, old man, do you know what happened to the people of Tsebelda? My mother’s brothers lived there.”

“Three years after your brainless decision to leave your homes, emigration began again. This time people came to Turkey from Tsebelda, Dal, Guma, Abzhakua, and Machara. And as I already told you, young man, the janizaries, may they be thrice cursed, forced us Abkhasians to leave. Who is left in Apsny?\* The land is there, but its soul was driven out. Dogs are howling by the heaps of ashes left behind. I’m from Abzhui, born in Tamysh. My name’s Ratsba. Good luck, my fellow-sufferer!

Two young men came up to him—probably his sons— and helped the old man get up. Leaning on them, he walked off somewhere into the distance.

If I understood the old man correctly, the people of Tsebelda moved to Turkey the same year I went to prison.

My mother had seven brothers. And so I figured that if I looked hard enough I’d meet at least one of them here. That night I dreamed again of the mountains, of a spring flash flood in the Bzyb ravine. The river rumbled like a thousand drums, but through the frenzied roar I could hear the neighing of my own horse that I had shot. Fire raged above the council house, and against the flaming background I could see the faces of heroes. The most frequent among them was Ahmed, son of Barakai, who had pleaded with us not to leave our homeland...

I woke up because one of the longshoremen shook me:

“Why are you shouting and moaning? Are you ill?”



I didn't go to the port that morning. Instead I footed it to town again. You know, Sharakh, when others are over come with depression they seek consolation in drink, but I sought it in listening to the Abkhasian language. When you're far from home there's nothing like hearing your native language to make you feel better. It's truly a guardian angel. I would sit next to people in Circassian coats, and listen more than I talked myself. The hotheaded Caucasians argued about one thing only: who was responsible for their tragedy? Sometimes people would get into fierce arguments, even fight, each side reaching for their weapons. And it was all because they wanted to establish the truth: who was to blame? Some blamed themselves, others—fate, and still others—the czar and sultan. How could they have known all the reasons behind those events? And as for you, Sharakh, you keep on writing. Who knows, maybe my stories will help answer the riddle posed by the exiles, the answer that is still a sealed book. When the bellicose men from the Caucasus became the sultan's subjects, not being a fool, he began hiring them as cavalry men and bodyguards. The painful test of a whipping can be endured by many, but the sweet test of being treated to baklava\* can be withstood by few. Some the sultan frightened, others he enticed, buying them off with fertile land and protection. The Turkish government took advantage of the fact that the Abkhasian and Ubykh nobles and peasants have always been related. Such men as Sharyn, son of Alou, were received with honor. They got land and titles, and their peasants were given small plots. The benefit was obvious: the peasant lads were drafted into the army and went to war in the name of Allah. Today only God and I know how many of them came back cripples.

Remember when I started out I told you a little about Kats Maan? He was an Abkhasian, like you. That Caucasian did a lot for the czar in his time and so he was made a general. After we Ubykhs moved to Turkey, they say the gleam on his shoulder straps dimmed quickly: the old warrior died. One of Kats Maan's sons followed in his father's footsteps: he became an officer in the Russian army. The general's other son, Kamlat, when the kingdom of Abkhasia was done away with and serfdom was abolished, wouldn't submit to the new government and so he and his family moved to Turkey.

The Turks greeted him with honor, as an old adversary of their enemies. He was given a palace right in the center of Istanbul and made the head of all the Abkhasian emigres. As you know, military men aren't paid for nothing. They sent Kamlat and his troops to a neighboring Arab country where the imam was running things his way and had stopped obeying the ambitious Turks. Many Abkhasians were killed in those battles, but Kamlat managed to defeat the imam's army and take the imam prisoner. He returned home a hero and came just in time for a wedding: his daughter Nazifa married the heir to the Turkish throne—Abdulhamid II. No sooner was the wedding over than there was a new celebration—Kamlat Maan's son-in-law became the sultan. The new sultan was cruel, heartless and earned the reputation as a blood-thirsty ruler. His eyes were covetous and his hands grabby. There are three dangers in this world,

Sharakh: a knife in the hands of a child, praise in the mouth of a liar, and power in the hands of a man possessed by grandeur. Abdulhamid II dreamed of putting the Caucasus under his heel. After resolving to make his dream come true, he appointed Kamlat Maan commander of troops comprised of emigres and Turkish cutthroats. They were sent to Abkhasia. Before they set off on Turkish ships, Kamlat Maan made a speech to his men:

"My brothers, our time has come! The representative of Allah on earth, the great sultan of the Ottoman Empire, sharing our best interests, has extended a helping hand so that we can free our homeland from the infidels. When we land on our native shores with arms in hand, all Abkhasians who are being oppressed by the czar will rise up and join us. We shall free Apsny! Forward under the banner of holy war! May our sultan live a thousand years."

Many armed men crossed the Black Sea and landed near the Sukhumi fortress. Kamlat Maan was eager to get started; he sent his men all over Abkhasia calling on the people to unite:

"Whoever wants to be free, join the army of Kamlat Maan, the liberator of Abkhasia! He will lead us to the Inguri River to defeat the infidels!"

But things didn't turn out the way Kamlat had planned. Except for Maan's relatives and some other Caucasians who allowed themselves to be deceived, the peasants who herded cattle in the mountains and grew bread in the valleys didn't respond to the pasha's call to rebellion. The people had taken Russian citizenship and weren't prepared to give it up. Even Kamlat's soldiers, after entering, their homeland, found ways to desert. They got down on their knees, kissed the ground and whispered: "Forgive me, Apsny!"

Their tales of what they had suffered in Turkey also had a sobering effect on the Abkhasian peasants.

Kamlat Maan headed for the Inguri River with his faithful men and the Turkish detachment. But his army was beaten by the Russians. The sultan's hireling realized he would pay dearly for such a defeat, and for losing so many of his soldiers: some had deserted, others were killed, and still others were taken prisoner by the Russians. That's when he devised this devilish plan. As he was retreating he burned down mountain villages and spread false rumors that the Russians were taking revenge. With the help of guns and terror tactics he forced thousands of Abkhasians onto Turkish ships. The number was double the amount of soldiers he had come with to conquer Abkhasia. But no matter how hard Kamlat Pasha tried to get all the Abkhasians onto those ships, he didn't succeed. Shepherds with their flocks hid in the mountains, and whole families fled to the forests or to the Russians. And so Apsny eventually emerged from the ashes. The fact that you're here, Sharakh, is the best proof of that; isn't it? Here, let me hug you for bringing me such great joy so late in life.

I couldn't stop thinking about my loved ones. So I was off again, with staff in hand, heading for Osmerkoy. I had a long way to go: the autumn wind blew in my face, and sometimes I could almost smell the smoke from our hearth and see my mother bending over it. Often on the side of the road I would see neglected graves. I would ask someone I met along the way who was buried there. The answer was, "Circassians!"

Oh, I still haven't told you, Sharakh, that the Turks called all the Caucasian emigres Circassians. They still do to this day. I remember when I was a young man, the word Circassian was synonymous with bandit. If two Turks would argue and run out of insults, one of them would inevitably call the other a Circassian. And I also heard all over Istanbul the bloody story about how Sultan Abdulaziz was deposed and the sinister role played by Sharyn, son of Alou. Through history if one man commits a crime a hundred are punished for it. But about that in good time.

When a traveler's in a hurry he doesn't notice when night turns to morning. That was my state of mind when I saw Osmerkoy with its houses leaning against the slopes of the low hills. It was very early in the morning. There was a dank wind and granular snowflakes were falling. I could hear dogs barking, and from time to time I also heard roosters crowing half-heartedly to one another. I stood for a while on the hill in front of the place of worship to sacred Bytkha. The whole area was overgrown with prickly bushes. The lone hornbeam tree was chopped down. In its place was a stump covered with snow.

With a heavy heart I walked into the village. The first thing I noticed there was that the house where Mzauch Abukhba once lived was no longer standing. I saw the gate, but there was no house. The yard was ploughed and around the edges there were dry tobacco stems. Everything suddenly went black before my eyes as though someone had thrown hood over my face. Barely able to walk, I went up to our old house. It was the same house, only more dilapidated and it had sunk a bit. Children were playing on the balcony; they were oblivious to the cold. I whiffed the air and could tell from the smell that another family lived in the house. A big shaggy dog ran up to me looking like it wanted to bare its teeth, but changed its mind and sat down nearby me.

It got colder and colder. I went out to the road and heard the ringing of a blacksmith's hammer striking an anvil. That's probably David working, I thought to myself and headed for the shop. Its double doors were opened half way and I could see from a distance how a man who had a wooden left leg stood in front of the anvil striking it with a hammer—and each time he struck a swarm of sparks flew in all directions. The man's head was covered with a Caucasian hood. I walked up to the door and stood there watching.

"Come on in close to the fire and warm yourself up. It's really cold today," he said without looking up.

I managed to swallow the lump in my throat:

"Hello, Dursun!"

The hammer stopped in mid-air. Dursun quickly looked up:

"Zaurkan! Is that you, Zaurkan!"

His wooden leg pounding against the floor, he moved toward me. We hugged one another. Tears flowed down our unshaven cheeks. A red-hot bar of iron cooled off on the anvil, while Dursun gently patted me on the shoulder with his powerful hand. Not ashamed of his tears, he smiled:

“Have you come back from the other world, Zaurkan, my brother? Your family mourned your death, and here you are alive. Come on, say something, anything. Convince me, one-legged Dursun, that I’m not dreaming.”

Then he hid his face on my chest. With the same feeling as though I was loosening a tight noose around my neck, I asked:

“Did you lose your leg in the war?”

“I left it for a hungry wolf in the desert of Tunisia. I hobbled all the way back home and buried my father soon afterwards. Now I work all alone here, on one leg.”

“Your father was a wonderful man. I’ll never forget his kindness till the day I die!

“Father wanted us to live long. May today be a sign of joyful times to come.”

“Don’t hold me in suspense, Dursun. What happened to my family?”

“When you killed Selim Pasha in Izmid, Mata came back unharmed. My father told me Hamirza, Mata and your mother left the village soon afterwards. We haven’t heard from them since, Zaurkan. And the fact that the Ubykhs were made to leave this place had nothing to do with you. Shardyn, son of Alou, was to blame, but I’ll tell you about that later. Now you should have something to eat after your travels...”

We sat down at the table. There was fish, a flat cake divided into two and onions. A copper coffee pot was on the fire. It was getting dark outside, it was snowing and the wind hooted like an owl. The wick in the lamp smoked badly, so Dursun sniffed it several times. Its dim light illuminated our meager supper.

“Forgive me, please, Zaurkan, for such a humble supper. I had no way of knowing you’d come. And I don’t know the neighbors well enough to borrow something from them: they’re all new here. A guest like you should be hosted the way my ancestors in Georgia did. I should have slain a bull, brought wine in such a big pitcher,” said Dursun stretching out his arms, “and called our friends to drink with us, sing drinking songs and dance the whole week. But, where is wonderful Georgia,” he sighed bitterly, “and where are we?”

“A word is such a small thing: it fits on the tip of the tongue, but it can win one’s heart! I haven’t felt so good for a long, long time.”

The wind blew away the clouds. The snowfall turned to ground wind, and green stars glimmered in the sky. Dursun threw some firewood into the hearth and yellow shadows danced along the walls. We lay down by the fire, my eye lids grew heavy and I dozed off...

Yesterday I promised to tell you all about what Shardyn, son of Alou, did. Only the sandalwood tree had no growths on it, and only a tiny flock has no black sheep. The black sheep among the Abkhasians was Kamlat Maan; among the Ubykhs it was Shardyn, son of Alou. They say some noble trees came to God complaining about the ax, but God replied: “The ax is one of you—its handle is wooden.”

Abdulaziz’s brother-in-law, Shardyn, son of Alou, was an influential man in the Turkish government. Honors change manners. And so by words and by deeds Shardyn multiplied his ill-wishers by the day. To his face they would smile, but behind his back they would curse him. Shardyn wasn’t the least bit concerned about his people, the Ubykhs. He thought about Osmankoy only when it came time to get taxes out of the peasants. He would take bribes from clerks and officers in return for services rendered, and without a twinge of conscience. He accumulated the wealth of ten pashas put together. He led such a depraved existence that it shocked even men with harems, men who are not that easy to surprise. He told on others, and set one courtier against the other, as though at a cock fight. He was feared and hated. The grand vizier, a cunning fox himself, tried to find a way to get Shardyn, son of Alou, as far away from the capital as possible. He even went so far as to urge the sultan to make

the top-ranking Ubykh pasha, in the hope of getting him sent to the army, but Shanda watched out after the interests of her brother and so the grand vizier's plan didn't work.

And anyway, how could Shardyn, son of Alou, be expected to refrain from temptation when the sultan himself wasted his life away at horse races, in amorous pleasures, feasts and hunting. His senses dulled by admiration, flattery, expensive gifts, the availability of women, the sultan was one fine day knocked out without one shot being fired; he was put under house arrest in a remote estate and soon afterwards killed by a hired gun. The overthrow of Abdulaziz was a signal to the people at court to unite against Shardyn, son of Alou. They forgot about all their own intrigues, disputes and hostilities and united as one by their common hatred for the sultan's brother-in-law. Shardyn, son of Alou, was arrested, and his title taken away. He was execrated, humiliated, tortured and jeered at. All his property in Istanbul and his land in Osmankoy were confiscated by the state.

The new sultan, Murat, was sickly, half crazy, and weak-willed. The grand vizier and one of the more influential pashas began ruling the country in his name. The world is really much like a wheel: today you're on top, but at the whim of fate you end up on the bottom, no better than dust. Those who had just the day before cringed to Shardyn, son of Alou, the next day spat in his face and called him a dirty dog. The former pasha, a powerful man, locked up in jail, realized his days were numbered and, guided by well-concealed rage, decided to strike back. He petitioned the grand vizier to let him be sent into active army service as an ordinary soldier.

"Sure, why not," decided the grand vizier. "Sooner or later someone will put an end to you, you wandering hound." And so, Shardyn, son of Alou, dressed as a common soldier, was released from prison. It remains a secret, though, whether the former captive was acting according to his revengeful plan alone, or was hired by the ousted sultan's supporters.

It was midnight when Shardyn, son of Alou, appeared in the center of Istanbul in front of the palace belonging to Mihdat Pasha, a minister. Shardyn knew already that at this late hour the Minister of War Husein Avni Pasha, and four other ministers, were to hold secret talks here. On the belt under his coat, Shardyn, son of Alou, had two pistols and a dagger. Either he knew the password, or a secret passage into the palace, I have no way of knowing, but the Ubykh nobleman managed to get to the very room where the military men were meeting. Shardyn, son of Alou, fired the first shot, and the body of the murdered war minister, who had tried to get up slumped back into the chair. His second shot hit Captain Ahmed Kaisarly right in the forehead. Then Shardyn thrust his dagger into Rashid Pasha. Shardyn was like a wolf who had charged into a flock of sheep, although the men he killed were also representatives of the wolf family. The two others in the room hid under the table. The guards moved in quickly. Shardyn, son of Alou, didn't have time to fire the third shot. The guards picked him up on their bayonets.

The nation was shocked by the news about the assassination of the war minister and his associates. Shanda, upon hearing about the death of her brother, poisoned her self, because she realized what would happen to her in the end. An inquiry was appointed. But when the defendant in an investigation is dead he's usually blamed for not only his own deeds, but those of others as well: for someone's execution and someone's pardon, someone's demotion and someone's promotion—it's all lumped together. So someone came up with a minor charge against Shardyn. Another brought a cartload of charges against him, a third one hired all the draymen in town to bring all possible accusations against Shardyn. In the end there was a mountain of charges against him.

All of a sudden the name of the worthless Selim Pasha was on everybody's lips. It was I who thought him worthless, but to others he was made out to be practically a saint. "What a fine man he was, so intelligent; our state has few men like him! And his assassin was also an Ubykh!" tongues would wag. The sea is stirred by wind, and people by rumors.

"Do you remember who killed him?" "Oh, some Circassian by the name of Zaurkan Zolak!" "He was not some Circassian! No, he was the foster nephew of Shardyn, son of Alou, who knew all about the plans to kill Selim Pasha." "Shardyn later took all the women in Selim Pasha's harem and made them his own concubines."

So you see, a tale never loses in the telling. Then they suddenly remembered that I was sentenced to death, but the execution was never carried out. You can imagine what the gossips did with that:

“Who but Sharyn, son of Alou, saved his relative from the executioner’s block.” “And he helped Zaurkan escape from jail.” “Of course he was the one! Birds of a feather!..” “I wonder where Selim Pasha’s assassin is hiding now.” “Maybe since he was let out of prison he’s killed many others, too!”

Rumor runs the world. The Turkish police got instructions to find Zaurkan Zolak! They looked for me in every city and village, but at that time I was in the Sahara working on the caravan for the merchant Kerim Effendi. Consequently, the worst thing happened that could: all the Ubykh people were held responsible for the assassination of the war minister and Selim Pasha. I had heard of such things happening in this unjust world of ours.

“Who are those Circassians, or as you call them, Ubykhs?” “Everyone knows they’re all thieves. If they had been decent people they wouldn’t have been kicked out of the Russian Empire.” “They adopted Islam, but didn’t become Muslims!” “And they didn’t do so badly for themselves in Osmankoy, for example.” “Have you heard that Osmankoy is the hornets’ nest of Sharyn, son of Alou, and all his people?”

“The government ought to make all the emigres live in a remote part of the country.” “They shouldn’t all be in one place. It’s too dangerous. It would be much safer to send them to different places. Then most will die out and whoever’s left will just assimilate with our peasants, losing their language and customs.”

The pashas quarreled, but the Ubykhs were the scapegoats. It was decided to divide them up. The Turks split them up and made them move under guard, allowing them to take with them only what they could carry on their backs. People were scattered here and there. When the exiles had sailed to Turkey they still had some kind of hope. Now, besides the guards, they were accompanied only by hopelessness.

All that took place while I was wandering through Africa.

When Zaurkan and I went to bed last night, he seemed so tired I was afraid he wouldn’t be up to talking today. But he got up even earlier than usual. He whistled to his black dog to come for breakfast, fed it, and stood there in the yard petting it for a long time on the back and talking to it like he would to a person:

“If it weren’t for the flies that give you no rest, you’d die, you poor thing, of boredom! Okay, enough, go to your place! Why weren’t you born with white fur so it’d be easier to see you at night in this black hole where destiny has cornered me!”

The dog whined and rubbed against its master’s legs, overjoyed by Zaurkan’s unusual talkativeness.

I thought to myself, just after the dog was fed, that Zaurkan normally shouts sternly at the mutt to drive it away, but today it appears the old man woke up feeling cheerful.

After breakfast when we sat down to talk, I saw I was right. Zaurkan really was in a good mood. More than usual he dotted his unhappy story with sayings and jokes, laughed himself and got me laughing, too.

Figuring this was the best time for it, I decided to ask him a question I kept putting off:

“Were there any women in your-life?”

“Sure there were,” he replied. “I already told you about the woman I loved. But it so happened that neither of us was meant to be happy. And I never fell in love again. But women, of course, there were women... What do you want me to tell you about? What you already know, or what you don’t yet know? If you don’t know anything about women—

I can tell you about them. But if you’ve had experience with them yourself, then why should I repeat what you already know?”

I was afraid my blunt question would offend a man who was three times older than myself, but he thought nothing of my curiosity; he just made a joke of it.

His large hands with protruding veins, looking like the uncovered roots of an old nut tree, rested quietly on his knees. Then he began pensively fingering his beard and, after patting it a few times, he continued the story I had interrupted with my question.

I stayed with the blacksmith Dursun until spring. I didn't sit idly and wait to be fed. I brought firewood in from the forest, kept the flame burning in the hearth, cooked, washed, and mended the clothes. Work never hurt anyone, whether it's men's or women's work. I also learned the blacksmith trade, and became Dursun's apprentice. I could forge an ax or a shovel so well that Dursun himself praised my work. Young and tough I used to be able to tie up a hot-blooded horse and bring him down to shoe all -four hoofs.

Dursun was glad for me:

"If the sultan found out about your abilities he'd definitely make you the court blacksmith to shoe his Arabian horses."

When there wasn't any work for me to do in the shop, I went around the villages looking for odd jobs. I had grown a beard and a mustache, so even someone who knew me couldn't recognize me easily. I chopped wood, cleaned out barns and stables, cut grass. I said I was Dursun's cousin from Orda, and called myself Toufyk.

There were always a lot of people in the shop. One would come to get some work done, another just to chat. And even though Dursun passed me off as his cousin Toufyk, I lived in constant fear that someone might recognize me—and then not only my head would fly, but the son of David, who gave me shelter, would also have to pay for hiding me: I was listed by the police as an escaped criminal against the state.

Spring is the time of awakening: everything reaches for the sun basking in its warm rays. Slender shoots spring up around an old, moss-covered stump: its roots hang on to life. And what was I, but a twig on the root of the people. Now that my people had been uprooted from Osmankoy to be replanted in barren land, and I was separated from them, I was nothing more than a twig put in a vase of water.

Back in the winter, Dursun and I, sitting in front of the fire, drew up a plan how I could get to my relatives safely. We decided the best way would be by sea. But first I would have to go to Izmid, stay with a loyal friend of Dursun, and then go with smugglers on a sailing schooner to the Mersin Peninsula. There was a small bay on the far side, well hidden from the sea guardsmen. From there it would be easy to reach my destination.

When I was in Izmid I went to eat at a place for vagabonds, like myself. I sat down in a dark corner, and ordered some cheap soup and a cup of coffee. After I finished, while I was walking between the tables to the door, I saw some ragamuffin looking at me. His dark face seemed familiar, but I scratched my memory in vain. Once out of the place I got lost in the crowd that was streaming toward the bazaar, but I sensed that someone was following me. Suddenly there was a loud shout behind my back:

"Stop him! Stop him! He's the Circassian who murdered Selim Pasha!"

I looked around and saw the same ragamuffin. Only this time I remembered where I had seen him before. He was one of the servants who had tied me up in the palace garden near the fountain where his master lay dead on the bottom of the pool. The throng recoiled and the police appeared from out of nowhere. It was no trouble for them to grab an unarmed man.

## **SONG OF THE WOUNDED**

Soon after my arrest I was tried in Izmid. I don't quite understand how, but some extenuating circumstances affected their verdict, which instead of the death sentence was life imprisonment.

The prison I was put in that time was in an old fortress, a somber and isolated tower standing on a mountain top. There were chasms on three sides of the prison, and only on the fourth side was there a narrow road leading along the mountain ridge to the iron gates. The fortress walls, fortunately, weren't made of bricks, but of mountain

rocks, so while they gave off cold they were always dry. Almost no one was ever released from that prison and so among the people it had the reputation of a death house.

My cell was made for one person, but someone else could be put there if need be. Light came in from a small window, or rather a hole the size of a child's head. The edges of that hole were polished smooth by the prisoners' faces who had been looking out of it for decades yearning for freedom and the free-blowing wind.

At first I kept count of the days and nights, but I finally lost track. If the walls of the cell had ears they could have heard such heart-rending shouts, curses, and words born of delirium or the fear of losing the gift of speech. Neither a mullah, guard, or relatives, but only those deaf walls were destined to hear the whispering of the dying, the last wishes that were never to be fulfilled.

There was only one joy, the little window with two dents on each side. The dents were formed by the palms of the captives who peered out of that cold cavity in the wall to look at the sun, feel its warmth against their bloodless lips and with the leisure of those who have nowhere to hurry, sift the fresh air through their weakened lungs.

But the main thing was to feast one's eyes on the vast open spaces, watch, until one's eyes hurt, all that was happening in the outside world. Young people, who are free, as a rule, do not know how to concentrate on objects and phenomena; they only see the surface of things. There in prison, even young captives developed the ability to notice such trifles as the flight of a butterfly or the birth of a flower in the crevice of the mountain. Like my predecessors, I whiled away the time by pressing my forehead against the upper edge of that barless window.

On fine summer days, in the afternoon when the sun hung over the top of the mountain, its beams came sympathetically into my cell, reflecting from one of the stones on the opposite wall. I would stand in that beam warming myself up as though I was in front of a fire. Then I would watch the sunset. It seemed that the sky over the mountain was where the vultures feasted devouring their prey.

On sleepless nights I talked to the stars glimmering over the mountain shrouded in darkness. Their sparkle changed from night to night, sometimes brighter, sometimes dimmer. And if a falling star would trace a line on the black sky, I could imagine the person whose soul left his body that instant. What a fine person that was, I would think to myself sadly, because I knew for certain that otherwise the sky would give no signal.

The militant movement of the swirling clouds reminded me of a detachment of vehement and daring men. The clouds were illuminated from within by bushy fire and the triumphant thunder they produced was reminiscent of cannonade. Sometimes the violent wind would hurl through the narrow opening a few drops of rain and, feeling them against my cheeks, with tears in my eyes I prayed:

"Oh Almighty! If you want the earth to swallow the human race, if you want to destroy it by fire, I beseech you, don't do it anywhere else but here so that this fortress, from which there is no return, with all its torturers and tortured, disappears from the face of the earth."

But the Lord was deaf to my prayers. If He forgets someone, it's forever.

During my first days in prison I noticed that on the other side of the precipice, in the distance among scattered trees, there was a lone homestead. It consisted of a small house made of clay, a barn and a cow-shed. Soon I figured out that the inhabitants were a family of four:

a man around forty, two women, one younger and the other older, and a small boy. At the break of dawn the adults would get down to their endless chores, and the little boy, left to his own means, occupied himself as best he could.

As time went on I knew down to the last detail everything about the life of that poor family of Turkish peasants as though I lived invisibly under the same roof. If one of them didn't come outside in the morning I was alarmed—maybe he or she was ill? I must tell you, Sharakh, I survived those many years buried in a stone cell because of that family. It was as if they brought me food and water, cheered me up, kept me from going mad from loneliness.

Watching the life of that family through my hole, I came to the conclusion that both the women were the man's wives. Probably he had once been better off and could sustain two wives. I gave each member of that Turkish family an Ubykh name. In the Caucasus we had some neighbors and they had a family of four, too. And so I named my friends on the other side of the fortress after the family I had known back home. I called the head of the household Shmat, his little son Navei, the eldest wife— a lean and dark woman—Shamsia, and the young one— she had large breasts—Rafida. Rafida was Navei's mother.

We Ubykhs had never allowed polygamy. A married man couldn't bring a second wife into his home. If he did, the first wife wouldn't stand for it for one day under the same roof with her husband. Her parents or brothers would take her in, and the husband would bring down the whole clan's fury on his head; he'd be their mortal enemy.

When I first saw Navei he was around five years old. An active, restless child, he would play in the yard with a black dog, chase a red rooster or sit in the shade of a tree and make something out of twigs and rocks. The adults didn't meddle in his games. If his mother went to fetch water he tagged along. He was mostly afraid of his step mother. If he'd start to cry after falling and hurting himself or getting stung by bee, all his stepmother would have to do is shout at him and he'd wipe his tears with his sleeve, and gradually quiet down.

One day he and his mother dressed neatly and went off somewhere, maybe visiting, maybe to town. You may not believe this, Sharakh, but I waited for them to return as impatiently as if I were Rafida's husband and Navei's father.

Shamsia always wore black and never smiled. She was obviously barren and that was the reason for her sorrow. After Shmat brought a young wife into his home, he became completely cold to the lean Shamsia, but she tried to show in every way that she was still the mistress of the house. That was evident from the loud arguments the family had on rare occasions.

Shmat lived a secluded life. I could count on the fingers of one hand the number of days people came to his house to talk business or just bring news. They were probably neighbors from the village located a distance away and not visible from my window. I gathered that Shmat was not a talkative man. He had a grave, unhurried manner about him: he walked slowly, didn't start work right away, and if he was chopping firewood, for instance, he didn't rush. When he sat down to take a smoke Shmat always looked like he was thinking of something. Yet he worked from morning until late at night.

I remember once in early spring when the mountains were turning green, Shmat was preoccupied with something, he just couldn't get started ploughing. I couldn't help but severely criticize him for that. I wanted to tell him he was wasting precious time; he needed to start ploughing then and there. It turned out that the poor man didn't have any oxen; he was waiting for the others in the village to finish their ploughing so he could begin himself. But when you plough cornfields too late the crop is rarely any good.

As winter approached Shmat would sharpen his ax and say goodbye to his family. Throwing his shoulder bags over his back, he left the house. He usually didn't come back until spring. If there was heavy snowfall Shmat would come back for a day or so to clear the snow off the roof and in the yard, chop wood and prepare fodder for his only cow. Then he'd be off again. I speculated that somewhere over the mountain or further away there was lumber work to do and Shmat hired himself out there until spring.

Whenever Shmat and his wives were hoeing corn or planting tobacco, I was with them constantly. My nostrils were sweetly tickled by the smell of the soil and the blood in my veins speeded up its flow. I truly forgot I was in prison and would stay there till the day I died.

The years dragged by slowly, like a loaded cart going up a mountain. The day I was imprisoned my long beard didn't have one gray hair in it, but when Navel began shaving, my beard seemed sprinkled with flour. I counted the years I was in prison by the way Shmat's son kept growing. The boy was my calendar. The night guard sounded an alarm. I heard whistling, shouting, then shots. I thought someone had escaped.

In the morning when I went to the little window, I saw that some people were going into Shmat's yard. Then I saw a mullah. My heart dropped; I knew something terrible had happened. Indeed, that night Rafida had died. Her son Navei, not holding back his tears, mourned his mother's death. Had I been next to him I would have tried to find



words to console him. After his wife's death, Shmat looked years older. He would sit for hours in the shade, his hands on his walking stick, and his head hanging low. If he was called in to eat he would get up reluctantly and slowly shuffle over to the house.

One day when Shmat and Shamsia were alone in the yard, a horseman rode through the gate. The old man and woman bowed to him, but he just waved his whip and began yelling something. He seemed to be scolding them. Then he lost his temper altogether and moved his horse right into Shmat. The old man, barely able to stand on his feet as it was, fell to the ground. Shamsia started shouting something, calling for help, but there was no one around. "That son of a bitch!" I cursed, as I paced the cell, clenching my fists. "If I were there with Shmat you wouldn't see the light of day again," I raged. I was so frustrated I beat my fists against the wall. Suddenly I recalled the incident when Sharyn, son of Alou, cracked his whip at Mata in Osmankoy and I sent him back where he had come from. I decided the horseman was some effendi's manager. Most likely he was demanding taxes. But where would Shmat get the money when he could barely walk since the death of Rafida, I thought to myself.

Shamsia sat by the door sewing or patching up something. No one else was at home that day. Then four men I didn't know came into the yard with Navei in the lead. Each of them had a rifle! Well, how do you like that, you have a gun already, young man! I thought in surprise, not knowing that Navei even knew how to shoot.

Shamsia invited them all in. The men stayed in the house a long time. I guess they were eating whatever was on hand. But what if those four are from some band of thieves and Navei is mixed up in it? I worried. No, I couldn't believe that. The son of an honest peasant can't turn thief. But another voice protested: it takes years to raise a human being, but only an instant to ruin him.

When the guests walked out of the house they said their goodbyes and left the place, not by the gate, but through a hole in the fence. Navei waited until his four friends were out of sight and with his rifle over his shoulder, he went back into the house.

What's the meaning of all this, I wondered. I kept my eyes glued to that house, trying to understand what was going on there. My legs were tired, my hands supporting me on the wall were numb, the thin bean soup the guard had shoved through the door of my solitary cell, had become cold in the clay bowl, but I couldn't take my eyes off Shmat's home.

Once again I saw that same horseman who had run Shmat down with his horse. He rode into the yard and asked Shamsia a question. Maybe he wanted to know where the men were. Seeing that no men were home he turned his horse around, rode to the field where the family's only cow was out to pasture. He got down, untied the rope that held the cow to a stick and, getting back into his saddle, whipped it to go ahead of him. Shamsia, raising her hands to the sky, begged him not to take the cow, but the horse man paid no heed to her cries.

At that moment Navei ran out of the house. He had a rifle in his hands. At first I saw a flash over the muzzle, and then I heard the shot. The horseman slowed down, let go of the rope and spurred his horse. Then I heard a second shot and saw the horseman press his head to the horse's mane and gallop away. Navei tied the cow up to the stick again and, gesticulating energetically while he talked, he tried to calm down his frightened stepmother, who was wiping tears from her eyes. Then, through that same hole in the fence that his friends had gone through the day before, he headed for the mountains.

"Nice going, Son! You were great with that scoundrel! You're a real man!" I rejoiced, praising Navei out loud. You should have seen me. I was like an old eagle in a cage, imagining I was spreading my wings and ready to fly up into the free sky at least one more time. That's what it does to a man's waning spirit to see someone show courage. That's the kind of power a "keyhole" to freedom has over a man...

After that Navei rarely came home. When he would visit his father and stepmother he got to work right away and as soon as he was through he disappeared at once. Whether he was chopping wood, weeding the cornfield, or cleaning the cow-shed he never let go of his rifle. It seemed such a short time ago that boy was building simple toy structures out of pebbles and twigs, but now he was a strapping young man in his prime, prepared to protect with a gun in hand his father's home, father's field, and his own dignity.

Sometimes Navei would come home with his friends, brave young men like himself. I couldn't help but admire them. Those lads gave me new hope. More and more often I imagined one and the same scene: a group commanded by Navei would attack the prison guards, push them aside, and the doors of my cell would fly open.

"Come on out!" I could hear Navei say. "Long live freedom!" As I walked out of the prison I would embrace Navei. He looked a lot like my brother who had disappeared without a trace. Oh, sweet hope! There's no place where hope is so dear as in prison.

If Navei had said: "Here, take this gun and come with us; we have the same enemy!" I wouldn't hesitate to follow his lead even if I knew that the first enemy bullet would pierce my heart.

You Abkhasians, Sharakh, have a saying: "The soul of a drowning man, even at the bottom of the sea, mows the grass of hope." And isn't that the truth!

There was a period when at the same time in the dead quiet of the night, I could hear someone sighing, coughing and moaning loudly in the next cell. However, later, even when I put my ear next to the wall, I heard nothing. Probably the unfortunate lifer had died.

But then again one night when I had a terrible headache and couldn't sleep at all, I suddenly could clearly hear a song of suffering. I thought I was delirious. Who could be singing the Abkhasian song of the wounded in this place? But I wasn't imagining it. Absolutely shocked, and forgetting all about my headache, I pressed my ear to the cold stone and tried to hear what he was singing. My hearing got as good as a bat's. No, it wasn't my imagination; someone was really singing a familiar song in a muffled voice, quivering from pain. The song was sometimes interrupted by a deep and agonizing coughing or the prisoner fell silent, oblivious to the world, but later I would again hear the sad and courageous tune. I couldn't catch all the words, but enough of them to know what my neighbor on the other side of the wall was singing about. I didn't have a wink of sleep all night.

I passed the whole day waiting. When a distant star over the mountain began sparkling again I could hear the singing. I knew from my Abkhasian mother, even as a child, that a man sings this song when he's mortally wounded. Duty and custom obligated me to come to his aid. But how? Appeal to the guard's mercy? No guard in a jail for lifers would understand me, because even if he pitied the prisoner the best he could wish him would be death. It was the only way to put an end to suffering. A lucky prisoner was one who died quickly.

Song of the wounded... I thought about Tsebelda where my mother's relatives lived. I was already a teenager when one of my mother's brothers was wounded in the stomach and was dying. Every night his family and neighbors came to his death bed and sang the song of the wounded to him. Trying not to moan, he picked up the tune. My uncle died with this song on his parched lips. The suffering man in the next cell was not long for this world either, but by Abkhasian tradition I had to hear his last wish and when he died, close his eyes.

The next night when my fellow-convict finished singing I carried on for him in a tenor voice, and so loud that the guard came in and barked out: "What's the yelling about?" Paying no attention to the guard, I sang the song of the wounded three times. Straining my memory, I recalled the words:

Waa-raida, he who can't grit his teeth  
To hide his suffering,  
Is no man.  
Waa-raida, he who moans,  
Making his pain be known,  
Is no man...

Gradually lowering my voice, I rested my ear against the wall. I sang the refrain three times when suddenly I could tell the wounded Abkhasian heard me. He picked up the melody. There was no doubt about it; he was singing with me. I was so happy! Isn't it something, Sharakh, that a man singing a death song could be so joyful? I don't think it had ever happened before. But my neighbor and I rejoiced at hearing one another. I would finish singing and he would begin; then he'd finish and I start again.

Our strength sapped, we fell asleep. That went on for many nights. But then one night my neighbor didn't make a sound at the usual time. Poor man, his suffering has probably ended forever, I decided.

The next day we had our monthly walk outside. The inmates didn't look like people, but shadows. We were forbidden to talk; anyone who tried couldn't go out the next time. Nevertheless, one of those shadows took the risk of whispering to me:

"There's unrest out there. Soon they'll pack our flea-ridden cells with more men; we won't be alone any longer."

I could tell before that, from watching Navei and his friends, that some changes were in the air.

Just three days later my rusty door clanked open. Some guards brought in a wooden trestle bed with a straw mattress and then came back with a prisoner.

"Make your guest at home!" joked one of them somberly.

In the dim light I made out a tall man whose head nearly reached the ceiling. Thick hair that had not a trace of gray, fell on his forehead and his hollow cheeks were overgrown with a prickly beard. Sharakh, have you ever seen a mountain lake near a peak crowned eternally with snow? They're always sky blue. Well, that was the color of the eyes of that man who entered my cell. He was as thin as a rod and could barely stand up. But even though he was weak, he tried to stand up straight.

"Good afternoon!" he greeted me with his palm against his chest. And then he added with sad irony, "True, there aren't any good afternoons in prison. Tell me, my friend, were you the one who shared my pain and sang the song of the wounded? Are you an Abkhasian by any chance?"

I couldn't believe what was happening. If I hadn't been leaning against the wall I would have most likely fallen down.

"What a wonderful surprise this is," I exclaimed. And wanting to make him comfortable, I suggested, "Come on, sit down. It's hard for you to stand."

He eased himself onto the edge of the bed and his face was right in the beam of sunlight from the window. My heart was gripped with sorrow: the black shadow of death lowered over that blue-eyed man.

"I'm an Ubykh, but my mother was an Abkhasian," and, swallowing my tears, I put my arms around the doomed man in a burst of tenderness.

Then, as if startled by something, he began examining me closely:

"When I was a child I knew a man named Zaurkan Zolak. You look a lot like him. Only he'd be younger than you."

Tears clouded my eyes.

"But I am Zaurkan Zolak! And who are you?"

"Oh merciful Lord!" he whispered and sighed. "But they said you'd been hanged. Don't tell me you've been here ever since Selim Pasha was killed?"

"Practically."

"I was a boy in those days, but I recognized your eyes."

He couldn't talk anymore. His cough was getting worse and choking him. I helped the poor soul get into bed and gave him water. When his coughing fit subsided and the youth felt somewhat better he asked slightly panting:

“Zaurkan, you haven’t forgotten Osmankoy, have you? One of your neighbors was a Sadz Abkhasian, Mzauch Abukhba. Remember, you and he were good friends. His son, little Shoudid, spent more time in your yard than in his own. And you made him toys, remember?..”

The unfortunate creature breathed unevenly and held his hand over his chest the whole time as if he were afraid that cursed cough would overcome him any minute.

“So you’re Shoudid? You’re Mzauch’s son, Shoudid?” I exclaimed.

“Yes, that’s right, Zaurkan.”

“My God, what time does to us!”

Mzauch Abukhba’s son was born in Turkey, in Samsun, and my father had given him his name! Shoudid was the name of a high mountain in Abkhasia. I could have expected just about anything, but that standing in front of me was Shoudid, the same boy I once held in my arms and made toys for—that was beyond my wildest imagination.

The bullet wound in his chest was festering. His whole body was gripped by fever, sapping his strength. Oh how gladly I would have given my life just to prolong his for a little while more. He knew he was dying and didn’t complain about his fate; he acted like a man. It wasn’t good for him to talk, but he didn’t care; he wanted to tell me all that had happened to him and his family after I got rid of Selim Pasha.

“My parents and I left Osmankoy and moved to the outskirts of Adapazara where the Sadz were soon joined by the people of Dal, Tsebelda, and Gum. Relatives helped us build a home there. I started going to school. I was a good student and so after finishing the mekteb, I was sent to a Muslim college in Istanbul. I went there for two years, but I had to quit because my father couldn’t afford it anymore. In those two years, though, I managed to learn three languages and acquire some useful knowledge. In Istanbul I met Tagir, Hamida’s grandson. He was a teacher and after the Ubykhs were kicked out of Osmankoy he followed them. I corresponded with him. In some remote village he’s teaching Ubykh children how to read and write. He’s a fine person! And you know, Mansou, the heir of Sharyn, son of Alou, came to no good even though he grew up with Tagir: he has a penchant for drinking, cards and women, just like his father.”

Shoudid couldn’t get enough air and he was always thirsty. If you’d give him a pitcher full of water he’d drink it all. To make him rest at least a little I would talk myself; I told him all about my misfortunes, and I told him about the family I’d come to know, Shmat’s family.

Mzauch Abukhba’s son wasn’t the least surprised that Navei defended his home with a gun. He told me the country was in turmoil. The Turkish peasants, totally impoverished because of endless wars and heavy taxes, were resisting the authorities more and more often, and even engaging in revolt against the sultan’s government. In Russia, too, there was unrest. Shoudid told me his father had joined up with Kamlat Pasha’s troops just to get back home to the Caucasus.

“Before he left he told me: ‘Take care of your mother and don’t think I’m going to fight the Russians. Just as soon as we land I’m leaving Kamlat Pasha. And remember this, my son! Your homeland can forget you, but you must never lose your homeland in your own heart.’ Just as soon as the Abkhasian troops arrived in the Caucasus, my father ran away from Kamlat Pasha, taking a hundred men with him. We didn’t hear from him for a long time. Mother died before I got the wonderful news that he was still alive. I got a letter from him. The old man is living in Jgerda. He’s asked me to come there... But now I’ll never see my father again...”

Shoudid closed his eyes. I put my palm on his hot forehead. He asked for water. I brought him some and he drank greedily. A strange rasping sound came from his chest.

A little later he went on with his story:

“A week after I got the letter from my father, the Abkhasian emigres, sick of paying such high taxes and working like slaves, rioted and killed the manager of the Marshan princes’ estate. They were to be exiled to the desert or to Syria for that. The people decided to return home to Abkhasia. We wanted to hire a ship, but it cost a lot of money

and we didn't have it. In desperation we turned to crime. Our plan was to rob a mail coach carrying money from the state treasury. I was with the ambush party. As luck would have it, the coach that day had an especially heavy guard. Both sides opened fire. A bullet pierced my chest. Later I was tried. And so I'll never see my homeland. If you ever see it, Zaurkan, bow to it for me. I really do believe you'll be free one day! Waa-raida, waa-raida," he began singing the song of the wounded in a barely audible voice.

Singing that song, he died in my arms. My eyes filled with tears, I sang along with Shoudid till his last gasp. Then I closed his eyes, not yet knowing his words were prophetic. Everything was changing all around and the insurgent spirit got the upper hand. The malicious Sultan Abdulhamid II was overthrown and the reins of government were taken over by the Young Turks. They declared a manifesto. Many people were released from prison. Because my crime had been committed so long ago, I was set free.

## **BOOK THREE**

### **WHAT CAN TIME CHANGE?**

"Did you get a good sleep, Sharakh?" the old man asked with such concern this morning that I was ashamed to tell him I slept like a log.

"It's good when a man sleeps peacefully!" said Zaurkan. "Whenever I start thinking of all I've been through my memories lift me and carry me, like the waves of the sea, somewhere past sleep, as though past the shore. You know, my friend, what I was thinking about early this morning? While my guest, my maternal uncle, is here in my home, I don't feel alone in the world. But what will I do when he leaves? I've been thinking about it every morning since you stepped over my threshold! But today I imagined that our elders—Sit, Soulakh and the others, who have long since left this world, told me not to worry about you leaving.

" 'When he goes, give him your soul,' they instructed me. 'Have him take it back to our homeland. All our souls went there long ago. Your old bones, just like ours, can de cay here; who needs them!'

"That's what they said to me while you were sleeping and I wasn't. And if they're right, even if I don't do it in time, if I don't manage to give you my soul, it will follow you there anyway! And I guess it won't have to wait long for that! This damned old age! Don't be angry, but today I probably won't tell you anything. I have to go somewhere and then when I return maybe I'll fall asleep at last. Tired feet sometimes help the head go to sleep, even if it doesn't want to."

Zaurkan took his staff and left the house. Where? Perhaps he went to some old graves? Who knows!

Biram came as usual at noon, but when he saw that the old man wasn't at home he didn't ask where he was. He gave me my meal and left.

There I was, alone with my thoughts. What a pleasant surprise—a break when I could be by myself. When you're taking notes you don't have time to think. Zaurkan Zolak's biography, his bloody past, extends over the whole tragedy of the Ubykh people, like blood oozing from a wound. I never ceased to be astounded by the centenarian's memory. When I compared what he told me with historical dates, they almost always coincided. The Ubykhs left the Caucasus in 1864. If Zaurkan Zolak was 24 years old then—that's approximately what age he was judging by his story—he was born in 1840 and therefore when he says now in 1940 he's a hundred years old, he's telling the honest truth.

"I was with the Ubykhs no more than five or six years after we landed in Samsun, counting the time we were in Osmankoy!" he explained. If that's true then to avenge his sisters he killed Selim Pasha somewhere in 1869 or 1870. And after he was ushered out of prison and sold into slavery, according to him, "...for eight years day and night I stumbled through the African desert." And disregarding the poetic form in which he told his story, if he was in Africa eight years then he probably did return to Istanbul in 1877 right around the time when the Abkhasians were forced to migrate to Turkey, which left an indelible imprint in his aged memory.

Afterwards he was a free man for some time. But it's hard to ascertain from his recollections just when he was arrested again. When he was released from prison, however, is absolutely clear. The Young Turk revolution was in 1908; that's when the blood-thirsty Sultan Abdulhamid II was deposed, the sultan the old man remembered with such loathing.

When Zaurkan Zolak spent all those hopeless years serving a life sentence the sparks of the first Russian revolution managed just the same to fly through-the thick prison walls of his cell where he was isolated from the whole world. Remember the story the old man told about the song of the wounded? How could the old Ubykh prisoner, watching the life of the Turkish peasant family for many years, through the tiny window in his prison cell, know that the young man he called Navei, like thousands of other Turkish peasants, would rise up with arms in hand against the sultan's oppression and that even the military men the sultan relied on so heavily as the foundation of his power, would suddenly turn out to be unreliable. After all, the old man had no way of knowing that twenty-eight Turkish officers had written a letter to the sister of the executed Russian revolutionary, the fearless Lieutenant Schmidt; a letter I have known by heart since college: "We swear to fight and if necessary, to die for sacred civil liberties, in the name of which many of our best citizens have died. We also swear that we will do everything we can to tell the Turkish people about the events in Russia so that by common efforts we can gain the right to live as befits human beings..."

How could Zaurkan Zolak see the connection between all these different events—between the 1905 Revolution in Russia, the execution of Lieutenant Schmidt, the letter written by the Turkish officers, the ousting of Abdulhamid II and Zaurkan's own release from prison? No, of course, he had no way of knowing, but the traces of all these events can be seen throughout his story, even if they assume a sometimes strange and odd form.

So far we have stopped at this point, but I suppose that as he continues, the story of his life will not be deaf to the reverberations of history. After all, ahead are World War I, the 1917 Revolution in Russia, and the revolution in Turkey. I don't know how yet, but I have no doubts that all these events affected the history of the Ubykhs and the old man's personal destiny.

In one way I'm glad to have today's break, but this unexpected delay in my work also bothers me. I'll have to be leaving soon and it makes me wonder what I'll have time to write down, and what I won't.

When Zaurkan returned he didn't say anything about where he had been; we had supper together, but he didn't talk and went to bed earlier than I did. When he said tired feet help the head go to sleep he was absolutely right. I didn't hear him get up in the night, and next morning, right after we woke up, he continued with his story as though he could sense my hidden fears.

Years of wandering awaited me after I got out of prison. It's nothing more than a saying that once God gives you a day, He gives you food. You don't get anything for nothing. No matter how frugal, or how hardy a man is, he can't live without bread, isn't that true, Sharakh? The dust of many roads covered my feet. I worked at just about every kind of job. I was a shepherd for the owner of fat-tailed sheep, was a longshoreman in Izmid, cleaned the shop of a wealthy merchant, and dug ditches on a railway construction site. Eventually I got to the village of Shat-Ipa where Abkhasian exiles lived. No close relatives on my mother's side were alive by then, but a second-removed uncle by the name of Kansou gave me shelter; I lived with him for nearly two years. He showed me two graves in Shat-Ipa's cemetery. One of them was my mother's and the other my father's. There were rough boulders at the head of each of them. The graves were overgrown with grass. I put fences around them and consoled myself that my mother's and father's last resting place was among their own kind.

You want to know, Sharakh, how my parents got to Shat-Ipa? After I killed Selim Pasha, Mata had to go into hiding. He was a bright young man and sensed right away that he had to get Father and Mother away from Osmankoy to save their lives. And so they moved to Shat-Ipa to live with my mother's brother. Heart-broken because of the misfortune that had come to her daughters and because of my imprisonment, Mother lived less than a year. Five years later my father died.

After Father died, Mata decided to build a house and start his own homestead, but he was drafted into the army along with other Abkhasians from Tsebelda. His unit was sent to Arabia. No one has heard from him since.

And I have no idea what happened to my sisters, either. Selim Pasha's relatives sold all his wives and concubines after his death and I was unable to establish where my sisters and Feldysh were, or whether they were alive at all.

You're probably surprised, my patient Sharakh, that I should speak so calmly about the death and disappearance of the people I loved most. What can you do? A lot of water has passed under the bridge. Time dulls the pain, dries the tears, and gives the memory long-awaited oblivion. Time is a great healer. If it hadn't been so, half of humanity would go mad. But then why stir up the past at all, why resurrect the shadows of our ancestors, you may ask? For a good purpose, my son, to keep others from making the same terrible mistake and having to bitterly repent later.

I would have continued living in Shat-Ipa, but I longed to hear the Ubykh language. And besides, I was no longer accustomed to living in one place. I was uneasy and wanted to be moving on. As they say: No matter how long a journey, the road must be covered twice. I was not in a hurry and hadn't gone far when the land began looking more like ashes. The surface was like ash and under the white dust there seemed to be heat. No matter where you looked, everything around was bare all the way up to the horizon where the dome of heaven clings to the earth. The wind blew, picking up the dust and churning it in front of me. It was as though the whole world had died and I was left alone on this dark, unpopulated planet where the wind howled and where one was inclined to wail from loneliness and horror.

Suddenly, cupping my hand over my eyes to shut out the dust, I noticed some black spot through the rolling gray haze. At first I thought it was a vulture. Then the black spot grew, came closer, and through the grating and roaring of the enraged elements, I could make out a human voice. The voice quivered like an autumn leaf on a branch. Some one was singing a melancholy song much like weeping, a lament and a damnation at the same time. The wind would muffle it, sending it around me, then amplify it, moving it toward me. Soon I could see a man riding on a donkey. He was an old man, his face scorched by the sun and looking like the wrinkled land that he rode over on his small ass. Seeing another human being cheered me up. When the rider came up alongside me, I greeted him, placing my palm on my forehead. But he kept his blank gaze aimed at the pale sky, not noticing me and totally engrossed in his sad song. I even thought the old man was praying while riding his donkey, which is contrary to custom. But his song was unlike a prayer, although it was addressed to the sky. When he passed me by he didn't even look around. It was as if he were saying, "Fellow traveller, I'm in a hurry. My song will tell you all about me."

I watched him as he rode away. The wind, now blowing in my direction, carried to me the wailing voice of the old Turk. Urging on his tired animal, the rider sang about the fact that he had nothing left but the donkey and his old age. He was singing to his hardy, lop-eared friend:

Carry me where my anguish wills,  
Through the distance in any of the four directions  
Where my four sons went and remained  
Forever, killed on battlefields.  
My heart is one big wound,  
My eyes are filled with bitter tears.  
That's why I curse the bloody sultan,  
My cursing echoed in four directions.

The rider vanished into the distance, his sorrowful song getting softer and softer until it was broken like a thread. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I envied that miserable old man, because he at least found consolation in singing.

Oh, if only I could have sung like that lonely Turk about all I had endured, I would have moved even the coldest person to tears. But I remained an Ubykh; an Ubykh cannot sing alone, except for the song of the wounded. No, to sing I need not only an apkhartsa, but others to sing along with me, joining their voices with mine like glasses of bitter or honey-sweet wine do when brought together at a merry feast. In this respect we Ubykhs were like the mountains: when one would sing, others would echo.

"You lousy calf. I hope the wolves get you! You've just got to drink up all the milk to the very last drop!" a heavy set old man shouted as he brandished his stick and pulled a calf away from its mother's udder. He grabbed the tail of the red-haired glutton with a white spot on its forehead, pulling it away from the cow. Kicking open the gate, he shoved the calf into the yard.

"The sun hasn't even gone down but you've already come prancing home. Too lazy to chew the grass, you parasite!" the old man continued his tirade, now talking to the cow, whose eyes were like ripe plums dampened by the rain.

The old man's ranting and raving was the most welcome greeting to me, because it was in Ubykh.

Perhaps if it had happened earlier I would have got dizzy from joy and tears of elation would have streamed down my cheeks, but now my soul wasn't as susceptible to unexpected glee. My Lord, the Ubykh language! I hated to even think how long it had been since I'd heard it!

All I'm now telling you about took place in a remote village where I was seeking rest and a place to spend the night. A stocky old woman looked out the gate.

"It's impossible to keep track of that animal! Just yesterday it managed somehow to get outside so nothing would be left for the milk pail. You'll have to tie it up."

Though the life of a vagabond made my skin as coarse as a buffalo's, the sound of that voice sent shivers down my spine. I recognized the voice of my aunt Himzhazh, my father's sister. And the old man, he's Sit, her husband. How come I didn't see that right away? I thought to myself.

I stood there smiling and musing how many years we hadn't seen each other. But I was startled out of that state by a little mottled dog that jumped out of the yard barking loudly.

"Good afternoon!" I said.

The old man and woman looked at each other in wonder. They were surprised to hear someone they didn't know speaking Ubykh.

"Welcome, traveller," replied Sit, examining my face.

"Who's this poor man?" my aunt whispered to her husband, not concealing her alarm.

"Judging by his rags he must be the czar's son!"

She didn't get the joke and inquired in confusion:

"What czar's son?"

At that point I couldn't hold myself back any longer and stretched out my hands to her:

"Aunt Himzhazh, my dear woman, don't you recognize me? I'm Zaurkan!"

"Zaurkan?" she said under her breath and putting her fingers over her lips, as though she had said something wrong, she leaned back against the gate for support.

"Oh, Allah! Well what do you know!" gasped Sit and he began hugging me, crying.

"Who is he, Sit?" the old woman prattled again.

"You foolish woman, can't you see that's Zaurkan standing in front of you! " He practically yelled: "Zaurkan! Your nephew!"

"Zaurkan! My nephew?" my aunt said as she moved toward me, but after taking a few small steps her eyes closed and her knees gave way.



I caught the old woman, began blowing on her face, but it didn't help. She had fainted. I carried my aunt into the house and put her on the sofa. Sit dipped a towel in cold water and put it on his wife's temples:

"If you decided to leave this world, Himzhazh, you picked just the right time for it. Your own nephew will help me bury you."

Well, I wasn't in any mood for jokes. If my aunt died I couldn't bear the thought that I would be unwittingly responsible for her death.

"Don't worry, Zaurkan. She's not going to die. She'll come to soon. It's not the first time this has happened!" said Sit brushing it off with a wave of his hand. "Do you know how long you've been considered dead? You were mourned by your relatives, but here you are resurrected. Come closer, let me have a good look at you, my son. Time doesn't flatter us, no it doesn't. You're all gray, and it seems it was not so long ago you were a young man. Had your mother and father known you were up and kicking they wouldn't have been afraid of dying. Here, sit down and rest! I bet your feet are aching from your travels." Then he nodded to his wife. "Don't you worry about her. She'll be just fine."

Indeed, my aunt opened her eyes, groaned, sat up and, placing her feet on the floor, she called to me:

"Come and sit closer to me, my dear."

She brushed her gray hair under her black scarf. I sat on a low bench next to her and she, tenderly stroking my head, kept sighing. She didn't have the strength to talk, and tears streamed down her pallid face. Then she set the table. When we sat down to eat we poured out our hearts, remembering the dead as though we were at a funeral feast of unfulfilled hopes.

Sit's house was under a flat roof and was made of manure briquettes like all the other homes in the village. The walls inside and out were plastered with clay. The house had two rooms. When I woke up the sun was already high. Out side I could hear voices—men's and women's—and they were saying my name. They must be neighbors, I speculated, who had come to congratulate Sit and Himzhazh on my return.

I got dressed quickly and went outside. Instantly all of them stood up, surrounded me and, greeting me warmly, hugged me from all sides.

"Hello, Daut! I heard you were away, Murat. Where to?"

"So you remember us, Zaurkan?"

"How could I forget such fine fellows!" I replied, barely able to recognize the very aged Hafiz and Hatkhv, who were brothers.

In the middle of the yard there was a kettle of boiling meat on the fire. I could tell by the smell it was goat meat. The generous host had apparently gone into debt to buy a goat in keeping with the ancient hospitality of the Ubykhs.

When all the men sat down at the table, I was seated in the place of honor. The women in veils stood outside the door of the room. Only Himzhazh stood inside the door, not taking her dotting eyes off me. The neighbor women brought plates of food up to the door and passed them on to an efficient young man, who, in turn, put the plates in front of the guests. This was not part of Ubykh custom. Women never hid their faces and could sit with men at the table, sing songs and dance. Only young women served the guests, as a rule. As for the young men, they weren't supposed to sit as equals with the elders, let alone enter into their conversations. But those were other times, other songs, as we say. There were a few young men seated at the table in between the old men. They were talking loudly, laughing, and even dared interrupt the gray-haired men. In the old days meat was distributed among those seated at the table, depending on their station in life. The more honorable guests were given the best pieces, such as the thigh, blade, the head or half of the head. The person who was supposed to distribute the meat acted according to custom and no one took offense. But at that meal the goat meat was cut at random and was lying on a large tray; each person took the piece he wanted. Cornmeal mush, the thought of which would

make my mouth water, wasn't on the table. Instead there was hard bread. Honey diluted in water, was the substitute for wine.

Sit started off the feast:

"Honored guests, friends and neighbors! Today is a great occasion in our empty home. Zaurkan is back! He's back from the grave! I thank you for coming to share with us this unexpected joy. Do us the honor, my dear guests, and partake of everything you see in front of you. Don't be offended if something's not right! We've done our best. Bless us, Allah!"

Sit drank down the diluted honey and began eating. Everyone followed suit. The house was filled with loud talking, jokes and laughter. The young were the loudest of all; they shouted to one another and laughed without restraint. I looked at my old friends dressed in ancient patched up Circassian coats and thought to myself sadly, how time has changed them; what fine men they used to be.

I also thought to myself that if Sit were hosting guests in his own country everything would have been entirely different. He would have put the meat of a whole bull on the table and still excused himself for not having enough to express his respect for all those present. He would have sent around the table a wooden tray with a shot of vodka for a start; each person would have emptied it in one gulp. Then a toastmaster would have been chosen—the person with the most wisdom and honor. Toasting would have begun. People wouldn't have filled up their stomachs as much as their souls. And when the time came they would have begun singing around the table. Then the lads would have jumped up to dance, putting their hands on their thin waists. Shy girls would have joined those dancing, moving gracefully. They would have invited the gray-haired elders to be their partners. And the elders would have shown everyone there that they still had a lot left in them.

In the land of the Ubykhs Sit was reputed for his eloquence and his sense of humor. He had a way with words. Now it was as though he was searching his pockets for words, but couldn't always find them there. Once a dandy, he was now dressed in a well-worn, tattered, and patched up Circassian coat. All that remained of the old Sit, not spared by time or fate, was his kind heart.

Sit and his friends his own age could only live in the past. The young, however, who were born in Turkey, had no idea how mighty and able-bodied these stooped elders had once been. When Hafiz stood up and suggested singing an old drinking song, the young men didn't even listen to him. They chomped their goat meat, and argued about some events that interested them.

"Hey, my friends, our ancestors didn't behave like that," Hafiz said, trying to shout out the disrespectful youths. "When a guest came, the heartiest of welcomes awaited him. His hosts would do everything to please him, putting all worry aside for the meantime. A guest should be entertained with songs and dancing!"

"Oh, come off it, will you! What do we care what our ancestors did!" said the young men ignoring Hafiz.

I've never seen any Ubykhs like that, I thought to myself bitterly.

But Hafiz, despite the bad manners of the young, began singing an ancient Ubykh feast song:

Wa-raida, let us sing  
Of brave men who never failed.  
Everyone is but a link  
That unites the chain mail.

Two or three of the older people, including myself, began singing the familiar song with him. I was surprised myself, but my voice was carefree as though it had broken out of chains of silence.

Wa-raida, it's time to rest.  
But before the feast joy passes,

Young and old will honor the guests  
By raising high their wine glasses!

It was just for an instant, but while we sang the young people stopped talking and listened to us—the last custodians of our native culture. We stopped singing just as suddenly as we had begun. Hafiz, wiping his tears away, smiled at me:

“Our days are numbered but thanks to you, Zaurkan, we feel as though we’re in our native mountains.”

The women, crowded at the door and covering their mouths with the ends of their scarves, looked at me in surprise. But it didn’t take long for us to come down to earth.

I stayed on in Sit’s home. His sons, who had gone off to war when they were still in Osmankoy, were reported missing in action, and so the old man gave me all his love and care.

My dear Sharakh, if you walk south it would take about two weeks to get to Karinjovasy from where we are here. The name of the village means ant valley. It’s quite likely that before the Ubykhs came nothing but ants inhabited the area. It was a bare, narrow strip of land... It was like a dog’s tongue and the tip of the tongue pointed to the north. The base of the tongue to this day rests on a swamp infested with malaria-carrying mosquitoes and the tip ends in a rocky plateau. As a rule the heat of summer is suffocating. If you don’t water the fields not one blade of grass will grow. But in the winter it’s just the opposite: chilly and windy, and practically no snow. You couldn’t find a worse place to live. Only a demon on black Friday could give the Turks the idea of resettling the Ubykhs in that wasteland. I suppose they figured if the Ubykhs survived they’d be lucky and if they didn’t, who cared. And so that’s where the Ubykhs were moved.

When a man is caught in a storm out at sea and his ship sinks he must first rely on his own courage, the strength of his hands grasping the oars, and only later on God. The Ubykhs selected the edges of the valley where the land was less scorched and set up their farms. They built thirty villages of flat-roofed windowless houses made of manure briquettes. Can you imagine, Sharakh, living in such houses? It was as though fate were laughing at them. After all, at one time when an Ubykh was building just a simple hut he wouldn’t even use poles from nut trees, but from aromatic rhododendrons; an Ubykh didn’t use alder, but made rafters out of chestnut wood; he wouldn’t cover a roof with fern leaves, but with golden straw or resinous shingles. And no Ubykh would dig a well; he always quenched his thirst in life-giving springs. But in Karinjovasy the Ubykhs had to bore through the dead land almost a hundred feet deep just to get to some muddy water. How could anyone blame the young people who had been born and reared so far away from the rhododendron groves and the soft murmuring of mountain springs, for not being able to sing Ubykh songs, break into dancing to the tune of a ceremonial drum and ride horses the way their fathers once had.

You know what I’ve dreamed of all my life here, my dear Sharakh? My most cherished desire has been to spend at least one night in an Ubykh patskha. Oh, what marvelous dreams one has under its roof! No matter how hot it is in summer it’s never too stuffy in a patskha. Its walls made of thick branches let through the breeze and you feel as though you’re under the wing of a bird fanning the air! At night the light of the moon peeps through the walls and you can even feel it on your face. Outside cicadas sing lullabies. It’s heavenly!

And the fireplace! Not one Ubykh could imagine a home without a fireplace. We worshiped the fire in our hearths and would never allow it to go out. There was no curse more terrible than, “May your hearth collapse and be swallowed up by the earth!” It seems as though someone damned all the Ubykhs to that fate, because that’s exactly what happened. In Karinjovasy the Ubykhs dug a hole in the middle of the earthen floor and that’s where they made their fire, where they cooked their food and baked their bread.

## **THE BRASS HORN**

A summer afternoon brought out the blazing sun. Chickens would hide from the sun, waiting for relief from the heat with open beaks. Everything was covered with a thick layer of dust. You could feel its heat even through your boots. The roofs, leaves of scant trees, chicken coops, gates, and camels forever chewing their cud were all

covered with dust. If you slapped the side of a camel with the palm of your hand, or put your finger on the gate the hot volatile dust would fly. The whole village seemed dead; even the dogs didn't bark. The people would wait out the heat in their windowless homes. They would wake before sunrise, work until the air became burning hot, and then they'd wait until evening to finish their chores. It was the only way to survive the summer. I lived in Karinjovasy like a temporary boarder. At any rate, that's the way people regarded me. "Since he came it means he'll eventually leave," was how the neighbors thought about it.

There was a mosque in the middle of the village. Five times a day the muezzin would climb up on the minaret and call the faithful to say their prayers. He would say, "There's no God, but Allah..."

...In the autumn the Jamhasars (who belonged to the Uarak tribe, nomads by tradition) would make a camp east of Karinjovasy. They lived in a tight circle and according to their own strict adat\* ; and they didn't allow aliens in their midst. Even in their commercial dealings they wouldn't have anything to do with outsiders except when absolutely necessary. Like all nomads used to the saddle they were stately in their bearing, thin and dark-complexioned. They were livestock breeders, herding their goats and sheep from pasture to pasture. At the end of the summer when the nomads stopped for a short while some distance away from the Ubykh villages their black woolen cloth tents made one think of ravens at rest, but ready any minute to fly off. The chief of the Jamhasars was Javad Bey, a severe and uncommunicative old man. Although he had Ubykh women in his harem, he had no concern for the Ubykh people. He would even send his men to raid Karinjovasy, abducting women and stealing cattle.

Naturally, the Ubykh exiles took up arms to defend their property and honor, and each time blood was shed. But who thinks of the consequences when rushing headlong into a skirmish?

The Sharuals lived west of the bare plains. They were friendly and polite in manner, but actually rather cunning, calculating and even a bit roguish. Generation after generation of Sharuals engaged in only one occupation—trade. They had control over all the bazaars, near and far.

When a Sharual mother rocked her son to sleep she sang him this lullaby:

Sleep my sonny, rockaby,  
Things will come to you in time.  
One day you will be on top  
Like your father owning a shop.

Practically the very next day the Ubykhs arrived in Karinjovasy, the Sharuals came to check them out and vend their merchandise:

"Lavash for sale! Lavash for sale!"

"Kerosene! Kerosene!" called out the newly-arrived peddlers.

Soon one of the enterprising Sharuals opened up a shop in an Ubykh settlement. Another one opened up a coffee house and yet another began loaning small amounts of money with interest. When a mosque was opened the mullah there was a haji\* , .also a Sharual. The village elder was his nephew three times removed. People said that even the province's governor was from the tribe of the closefisted Sharuals.

In time the Ubykhs and the offspring of the Sharual merchants were not only doing business together but were intermarrying. The sharp-witted and artful young Sharual men would forget all about market days, profitable deals, and their debtors when they looked at beautiful Ubykh women. The wedding toasts in these cases were in two languages, and most often in Turkish so most of the guests could follow along. Ubykh men who had been born subjects of the Turkish Empire gladly married Sharual women with dowries that came from the profits made off trade and money-lending.

Sharakh, you remember Tagir, the grandson of Hamida who committed suicide by throwing herself into the Chorokh River? When I was in the prison for lifers the son of Mzauch Abukhba, bless his soul, told me that Tagir, who had become a learned man, followed the exiled Ubykhs of his own accord. And that was true. He taught the

children how to read and write in their native language. I'm sure you realize that he had to have books if he wanted to pursue his noble goal. But there were no books in Ubykh, so Tagir personally devised an Ubykh primer. Of course, his book, probably, the only one in our history, was a written manuscript.

The mullah couldn't ignore such reprehensible, in his opinion, behavior on the part of the "Circassian": "Why should children learn some heathen language? It's one thing when I, a mullah, teach them the Turkish alphabet so they can read signs and some day sign their names to a draft notice. Since they go to the mekteb they must also learn Arabic. In an Islamic country people must know their prayers by heart. But it's harmful to learn a language that you can't read prayers in, or the name of the sultan. It just keeps the students from learning what they're supposed to. If we ignore what that self-proclaimed teacher Tagir is doing, heaven forbid that the offspring of this tribe of scoundrels should take their lessons seriously and actually learn how to read and write in Ubykh. And then the day may come when they write something subversive and the authorities won't even know what it is they're up to. Allah only knows there are enough trouble-makers as it is."

Obsessed with suspicion, the mullah was more and more certain that Tagir was up to no good:

"Where did that scholar Tagir come from? From Istanbul! And where did he grow up? In the family of the traitor and assassin Sharyn, son of Alou! That explains everything." And so the mullah told his superiors: "I'm informing you that the impious Tagir is not only teaching the children of foreigners a godless language against the law, but is acting as the mouthpiece of rebels and murderers. Having no respect for the sultan's laws, he has encouraged his fellow tribesmen not to pay taxes to Ali Hazret Pasha, has written complaints about the mukhtar\* , and about the manager of Pasha Husein Effendi's estate. Tagir wrote complaints, or rather slander, supposedly in the name of the people, and he personally delivered many of them to the palace of the grand vizier."

Well, it's true, my son, that Tagir was the people's de fender and mouthpiece. The prophet tried to get his thoughts across through the scribe; the Ubykhs did it through Tagir. But the vizier wasn't the least bit concerned about our troubles. All he had to say was, "Who? The Ubykhs? Haven't they all died out or become assimilated yet? Well, if they didn't it's their own fault!"

All of Tagir's efforts were in vain. The mullah got his way: Hamida's grandson was forbidden once and for all to teach the children Ubykh. That happened just before I arrived in Karinjovasy. I wanted to see Tagir, but he wasn't available. He was in Istanbul again trying to get justice for his fellow villagers.

As you can well understand, Sharakh, I couldn't be a parasite in Sit's home. I thought about going into the black smith trade I learned from David's son, but you can't build a blacksmith shop on good intentions alone. I had no way of getting hammers, anvils, tongs and whatever else I would need to run a shop. I would have borrowed the money from Sit but he didn't have any. He would bitterly joke, "All I have in my pocket is a flea in a snare." Just to get coal in that treeless valley I would need a lot of money. So the only thing left for me to do was help the old man out with his farm; he and I sowed wheat, although what kind of a harvest could you have on land made barren by dry winds? And don't forget that the plot Sit and my aunt owned was so small you could practically cover it with a cape. We would have liked to plant cotton, but we gave up the idea: we couldn't have found enough water.

One day we got hold of wild pumpkin seeds that produced bottle-shaped pumpkins. We planted the seeds and were surprised ourselves how good the harvest was. So we had lots of pumpkins. Necessity is the mother of invention: we dried out the pumpkins and made ladles with pretty handles, colanders, cups and other utensils. We also learned how to make toys out of dried pumpkin: dolls decorated with bird feather, masks with whiskers made of wool and holes for eyes. Our goods sold well at the bazaar. Of course we couldn't make much money; each time we brought home just a few copper coins.

Thank the Lord my father didn't live to see the shameful day his son, born to be a farmer and warrior, ended up a market salesman of these trinkets.

One sweltering hot day when the flies were particularly annoying I stayed at the bazaar till evening, selling our wares made of pumpkin. The sun was going down when I took the money I'd earned and spent it on salt, kerosene and bread and went on home. I was depressed just because what I was doing was not worthy of a true man of the Caucasus. I was also upset by the latest news. People were talking about another war. They said Greek soldiers

were getting ready to land in Izmid, French ships had already dropped anchor in the Mersin bay, and the English were telling the no longer independent sultan what to do and involving him in bloody deals. I told Sit about the rumors I'd heard at the bazaar and said I was worried about what would happen to the Ubykhs.

"When the prince fights with his princess the maid is the one who suffers most," said the old man gloomily.

I would go to the mosque on Fridays. Don't think Zaurkan Zolak took to the Muslim faith. I only went because I didn't want Sit and Aunt Himzhazh to have any troubles on my account. What would people say about them if the man they sheltered in their home had a reputation for being faithless?

I must tell you, Sharakh, that while I was in Africa and serving time in prison all the Ubykhs became Muslims. This surprised me greatly. They even seemed more devout than the Sharuals who lived among them.

Every Friday all of them, young and old went to the mosque. My fellow Ubykhs now fasted according to the Muslim calendar. Of course, that wasn't so hard since the people had so little to eat anyway. And the Ubykhs also refrained from working on holidays, especially during Uraza\* and Nauruz.\* Lifting their heads skywards they would no longer say: "God help us!" but would utter: "Help us, Allah!" and put their palms together in prayer. But what surprised me most was that they never drank any alcohol. These people acted less and less like Ubykhs.

You ask about Bytkha, Sharakh? I was just going to tell you about that. Bytkha still existed and the elders continued to worship her. That shouldn't surprise you. When I was a young man I once saw how the Shapsugs worshiped the trunk of a pear tree with a cross on it although they were pagans. And the Circassians had two or three faiths: some of them worshiped Christ, others were Muslims. And still others had minor gods—Christian saints combined with pagan gods—like Merisa, patron of the bees. These Circassians insisted that one cold year all their bees died, except for one which survived because it hid in the sleeve of the virtuous Merisa. And so they claimed that this one bee started off a whole new family of honey bees.

The priest of Bytkha was still Soulakh. By that time he was very old, like I am now.

One day Sit said to me:

"Soulakh is ill. Let's go visit him, my son! Besides, you haven't even seen the old man since you've come!"

I agreed it was time I paid Soulakh a visit and so we set off to see the ailing priest. Sit was dressed as though he were going to a festive gathering. He had on a Circassian coat, a tunic underneath, a dagger on his belt, and was carrying a staff with an iron tip. The old man wanted to please the priest. On our way there people greeted us:

"Selam aleykum!"

Thrusting the point of his staff into the ground, Sit would reply each time:

"Vaaleykum asselam!"

No one used any Ubykh greetings. Instead of "good day" or "glad to see you" what we heard was just "selam aleykum", "vaaleykum asselam!" But these were Ubykhs talking! "What's wrong with them all?" I asked Sit. His answer was brief:

"They've got used to it."

Some boys were playing in the street. When we walked past them not one of them looked up to get out of our way. All of them acted as though they didn't even see the gray-bearded men and just went on playing, oblivious of our presence. So we walked around them. One black-haired boy, who seemed to be the oldest, looking at Sit shouted:

"Why don't you take off all that wool clothing, Gramps! Give your bones a chance to cool off."

The boys had a good laugh. But Sit didn't even look back. Probably that wasn't the first time he heard such little boys shamelessly ridiculing their elders. New times— new customs.

"Oh, dear! I wish I had never been born!" the old man muttered and seemed to be lost in thought. Maybe he was remembering his youth in Ubykhia. Oh, believe you me, everything there was different!

In the old days if one of the elders would just utter, "My horse!" the young Sit would dart off for the tethering post and bring the elder his horse. While the horseman was mounting, the boy would hold the stirrup. If the boy would have the honor of accompanying the horseman, he'd ride to his left, half a length behind. When the elder was ready to dismount, Sit was already on the ground and holding the rein with one hand and the stirrup with the other, assisting the rider. Then he'd hurry on ahead to hold the gate open.

When elders would sit down to eat young Sit would bring them a pitcher of water, a wash basin and towel so they could wash their hands before eating. And no matter how long the elders sat at the table, even if it was three days straight, Sit would serve them, not sitting down for a minute. Unless he was asked a question, Sit wouldn't say a word.

The years raced by, and Sit became an old man himself, but the young were not the same anymore. Those whippersnappers playing in the street were Ubykhs by descent, yet there was no trace in them of the traditional upbringing. They were only Ubykhs in name, but what they really were—well, it's even hard to say...

When we walked into Soulakh's yard I saw him dressed all in white as though the priest was ready to perform religious rites. He was sitting on a bench close to the ground and was holding a staff with an iron tip. His ash-gray beard went down to his belt. The local elders sat at each side of him. Soulakh recognized me, got up and hugged me.

"May there be happiness in the home that has given you shelter."

He sat me down next to him although I wouldn't have dared to take such an honorable seat on my own. The old man was suffering from headaches, but at that moment he seemed to have forgotten them. At his request I told him about my travels and my years of imprisonment. He was moved by my story.

"My brothers," said Soulakh to all those present, "if you hadn't come to me today I would have called you here myself. Zaurkan has come just in time. I have decided to give up my-duties as your priest."

We were all shocked by that sudden news.

"I've been thinking about it for a long time, but hesitated to mention it because I was afraid that you, the last of the Ubykh elders, would take it too hard."

"Forgive me for being so forthright, but you can't do this. You are still of sound mind and just mustn't make a rash decision. The duty you have been entrusted by the people is not an easy one, but because our fellow Ubykhs are disheartened as they face the prospect of extinction, your decision is too hasty," countered Sit with unconcealed alarm.

"Being of sound mind is more important than being of sound body," Daut added.

"Of what use is a leader if there's no one to lead? A tree can't go on living if its roots are torn loose! Who needs a priest for a shrine that's been long forgotten?" said Soulakh lowering his head and with sadness in his voice.

"Honorable Soulakh, as long as there's one Ubykh who worships the sacred Bytkha, you cannot step down," said Tatlastan to support Sit who was about the same age.

"What you're saying comes out of your fear for the people's future, but what I'm saying," replied Soulakh, "is the truth, bitter as it is, but unavoidable..."

The old man was quiet. He had one of his headaches so he sat still for a long time until it passed. He was already old, and decrepit. The wrinkles on his forehead were as deep as furrows. The skin covering the hump of his nose, protruding like a rock under the snow, was so thin you could almost see the cartilage. His lips quivered as though he was constantly whispering. His eye sockets had sunk, and from their depths his eyes covered with a hazy film glimmered like pale blue cold shards of glass. The priest's voice, which was once so loud, could barely be heard now as though it were coming from a cave.

"It is said: comply with the desires of the old and young alike. Let it be your way," uttered Soulakh when his headache receded. "We'll call a meeting and see just how many people still seek Bytkha's protection."

"There are fewer worshipers, but there are still some left," said Daut to the elder in encouragement, but not so sure of himself.

But the priest was a realistic man and felt Daut's words were just wishful thinking:

"A calf follows a cow, and a tale follows a teller. We won't have to wait long to see for ourselves. Call the people together this Thursday. If they come..."

"Oh, if only we were at home all we'd have to do is blow the horn and everyone would come at once," sighed Sit.

We got up to go our separate ways, but Soulakh asked us to wait a minute. He called his sickly, one-armed grandson and quietly gave him instructions. The grandson nodded, went back into the house and within a minute brought out a beautiful ancient dagger on an Ubykh belt and the sacred brass horn.

Soulakh got up, thrust his staff into the ground with the little strength he had left and patted his beard.

"My brothers," he said with unexpected ardour. "You ought to know that this has been passed down to me from my forefathers. This dagger was made back when the land of the Ubykhs enjoyed glory and fame. All its owners were real men and the hand of each of them was the continuation of the steel blade. And this horn called the people together, was the herald of their joy and sorrow. Even the mountains echoed its call. I have one foot in the grave. My grandson, as you know, is not well and has little experience." Soulakh turned to me: "My son, Zaurkan Zolak, you are younger than all of us here, but you have suffered far more. The weak hearted are broken by suffering, the strong are tempered. That's why you alone are worthy of inheriting these objects that carry the stamp of fate."

"Wait a minute," I was dumbstruck. "How can I possibly deserve them? After all, I'm stained with the blood of innocent Said and my conscience is not clear because I do not believe in Islam, yet I go to the mosque..."

"You must do as I say. I know best!" retorted my elder.

The others began congratulating me. Putting his hand on my left shoulder, Soulakh made this request:

"On Thursday morning you are to come to the sacred mound. You shall stand on top of it, put your lips to the brass horn and blow for all the people to hear. Its call will remind the Ubykhs who they are! Those who have been disheartened will regain hope, and those who have forgotten who they are will rediscover themselves. If God still has mercy on us we will have our meeting!"

The old men cheered up and looked ten years younger. I stood before them not knowing whether to rejoice or to cry.

## **OUR PRIEST'S DEMISE**

It was Thursday, the day we elders had been waiting for with trepidation. The weather was dreary. Low-hanging autumn clouds obscured the sun as they scurried into the distance. The air smelled of rain, but dust still swirled on the roads. Flocks belonging to the Jamhasars were coming down from the mountains and heading for our fields.



Armed Ubykh watchmen the night before had shot in the direction of the nomads who in return fired back at our guards.

Early in the morning, as I'd been told, I climbed the hill that had a scrawny tree on top of it, a hornbeam planted the year the Ubykhs arrived in Karinjovasy. Obviously, the soil wasn't good for it so the pitiful tree grew with few branches. Under that stunted tree and deep inside a rocky niche was the hawk like Bytkha. I stood opposite the shrine, wondering whether to begin blowing the horn, whether I, my lungs already so weak, could blow hard enough so the clarion call could be heard by hundreds of people. But I had no choice. So placing my lips on the mouthpiece, I was surprised myself by the sound that came from the horn's fiery throat. With regained confidence in my own strength, I continued blowing. At first I turned to face the east, then the west without taking the horn from my mouth. Soon my back was turned to the north and then to the south. I blew hard. I caught my breath and blew the horn once again. The blood rushed to my temples. The horn had sounded different in the mountains. There the mountains echoed its call, and the wind blowing from the sea kept it from being carried away. But here the horn's appeal surged lazily upwards to the low clouds, and stayed there as if sinking into cotton.

Then it began to rain. I kept blowing, straining my lungs as sweat dripped down my face, mixing with the rain. The horn did not sing, but sounded more like a ship sending out signals of distress.

I was exhausted and sat down under the tree placing the horn on the ground to my right. The drizzling stopped and the sun peeked through the ragged clouds. The meeting was to take place at noon, so I could have gone home and come back in time. But I wanted to sit there by myself and think. So I stayed.

Did the Ubykhs hear the call of the horn? What are they thinking about now? And if they come at noon will they listen to Soulakh? My anxiety gradually gave way to a blissful sense of peace. I think I even dozed off. Through my half-closed eyelids I could see the mountains enveloped in morning fog. The sharp snow clad peaks shined a primordial white. Along the slope, through the lush green thicket, I could see the foaming surface of the Sochi River, falling in a cascade from the granite ledges. When it reached the valley it flowed more slowly and became transparent. The pebbles on the river bed reflected the sun. Where the stream was narrow and the banks were high the river was crossed by a small bridge. I stood on that bridge looking into the water, examining my young, beardless face. Suddenly I could hear the barely distinguishable sound of broken reeds. Looking back I saw three roes timidly going down to their watering place. What beautiful eyes they had with gorgeous long eyelashes. I had seen women with such eyes in mountain villages. I had my flintlock gun with me, but it seemed a shame to shoot so I pushed my weapon away from me. Why was it so cold? Oh, my Lord, it's the horn. At that point I woke up. Before me was the yellow barren plain. The stunted tree, like God's fool, whispered something to me with its wet foliage; I was gripped by fear. Where had I been but a minute ago? Could I have fallen asleep? No, no, I hadn't even closed my eyes! But how could I have seen that dreamlike vision? Or can one dream with open eyes?

My thoughts were interrupted by a man coming toward the foot of the hill. I looked at the sky to see if the sun were already directly overhead. No, it wasn't noon yet, so if the man was coming to the meeting he was early. He had nothing on his head, was wearing a light shirt and boots. I could already make out his features. I didn't know him! He was tall, thin, and had gray-sprinkled hair brushed back from his forehead. When he got closer he smiled.

"Good day! Good luck to you, Zaurkan. You have no idea how happy I am today." And he hugged me.

"I wish you all the best, stranger!"

"Why do you say stranger? We know each other very well! You shared your food with me when I lived in your home."

Then it dawned on me:

"Tagir! I swear to sacred Bytkha, you're my adopted brother Tagir!"

I took that graying man into my arms. It was hard to believe he had once been the child Mata and I over half a century ago had carried in our arms nearly the whole way to Osmankoy. He had indeed lived in our home until Shardyn, son of Alou, took him off to Istanbul along with his own son. Oh, how my mother had cried bitter tears

when she saw off little Tagir! We couldn't take our eyes off each other. The harder I looked at Tagir the clearer I could see the little Tagir in my memory's eye. Yes, yes, that's his nose, so straight, and those are his eyes, so blue.

"Well, this was a fine place to meet again—right in front of sacred Bytkha. This is truly a holy place," I said.

The clouds were reflected in Tagir's smiling, blue eyes:

"The Ubykhs' sacred place is over the sea... Last night when I got back from Istanbul my wife told me about your resurrection. I didn't want to bother you so late at night. I found out from Sit this morning that you were here. Then I heard the call of the horn. Yes, your aunt's husband was right to say that if anyone ever rose from the dead it was our Zaurkan. If you had returned home after all that has happened to you and it were the good old days, the people of the Caucasus would have made up songs about you and sung them to the apkhartsa. But just the same, to the Ubykhs who haven't lost ties with their past, your return is a great event. You have brought them a reminder of the ancient parable: 'When the mountains were burdened with sorrow they couldn't bear the weight; when the people took over the weight they did not bend.' The story of your life gives strength of spirit, teaches courage and patience."

While he talked I looked at him with admiration. He had broad shoulders, a large forehead with only one wrinkle on it that looked more like a scar, and a long olive neck. His small mustache, barely covering his upper lip, was going gray, but his eyebrows were still black.

"I was glad to hear, Tagir, that you're known as the people's defender. That's admirable! What's the news in Istanbul?"

"Bad news, Zaurkan! No one cares about the Ubykhs. Everything's in chaos in the government. I spent a month haunting government offices, but no one deigned to take seriously the complaints I was making. I accomplished nothing there. We are outcasts..."

It was almost noon.

"What do you think? Will anybody come?" I asked.

"The elders went from door-to-door telling people about the meeting. And everybody heard the horn. Some will come perhaps!" he replied as he paced back and forth on the mound.

"The Ubykhs have become orthodox Muslims." Tagir nodded his head toward Bytkha. "They no longer worship it. What they need is a different shrine..."

"What do you mean?"

"Belief in freedom! But it has to be worshiped without kneeling and with weapons in hand."

"How can a handful of people fight against a whole state?"

"A handful can't, you're right, but belief in freedom should be the religion of all poverty-stricken people. Communal hostilities are not due to human nature, but are contrived by those in power. A poor man will always understand his own kind, no matter what language they speak. The masters of the land should be those who work hard on it. A better future, like children, should be born of harmony."

"Apparently harmony's not part of human nature. Wherever there is day, there is night; wherever there is wealth there is poverty. One man rejoices while another sheds tears; a newborn infant greets the world while a dying man says farewell! No, it's not in our power to change all this, Tagir."

"You're right when it comes to life and death, day and night; but not when it comes to people. Or haven't you heard that the czar has been deposed in Russia?.."

"I'm not deaf..."

“Revolution is no fairytale. The law of brotherhood is now in effect in Russia. Now it’s not ruled by the right of the mighty, but by the right of all peoples. Your mother’s people, the Abkhasians, have their own statehood. The head of the Abkhasian government visited Turkey just last year...”

You can imagine, Sharakh, what a state of shock I was in. I came to worship sacred Bytkha and suddenly I was listening to such things! No matter how hard I tried to picture the Abkhasia of my childhood as a prosperous, independent state, my imagination failed me.

“The echo of events in Russia can be heard here. The sultan’s power is hanging by a thread... The people here will go into motion, too, and then...”

“What then?”

“Everything will change, Zaurkan. Listen, I want your advice. Maybe when the people come together I could get up and give them my own opinion of what you and I are talking about...”

“It’s up to you, but I don’t think it’s appropriate here. I’m afraid you’ll only get yourself in trouble. There hasn’t been unity among the Ubykhs in a long time...”

When the sun was directly overhead people began coming in twos and threes. None of them were women. Apparently, Muslim custom, which forbade their presence, had taken root among the Ubykhs. Two young men were carrying a white kid that was hanging from a pole by the legs. They were followed by the elders led by the priest. Tagir and I walked off the mound because on the day of prayers no one had the right to be there but the priest. As I had expected, not many people came.

After praying, the priest stabbed the sacrificial goat. The young men didn’t know how to skin the animal so Tatlastan did it for them. Then he cut up the meat and put the pieces into a kettle to boil. In the good old days each kinship group was supposed to sacrifice a goat, but now all of Bytkha’s worshipers could barely scrape up enough money for one goat. In the old days the goat meat was eaten off wide, fresh plane tree leaves. But here, where there weren’t any trees for miles around, some people had brought corn husks.

The gathering was a sorrowful sight to those who had been fortunate enough to see the genuine prayer meetings of the past. Where were the handsome riders in their smart Caucasian dress? Where were the ceremonious conversations of the elders and the obliging conduct of the young? Where were the daring horsemen who after the prayer ritual would do their riding tricks in celebration? Where were the young women, braids to their feet, dancing slowly on tip-toes, their arms spread like wings while young men on horse back galloped around the dancers? Where were the zealous horses who waited impatiently for their riders, champing at the bit? There was just one shabby camel grazing in the distance. The people gathered were tired and worn out, and talked about everything but sacred Bytkha. Many who saw Tagir came over to ask him all about his trip to Istanbul.

But right then Soulakh, in his snow-white outfit, went to the top of the mound looking like a ghost. In his right hand he held the twig with the boiled heart and liver from the goat still steaming. The old men at the foot of the mound took off their hats and kneeled. I followed their example. To my surprise Tagir kneeled too. But he wanted to speak his own mind, I thought to myself.

Most of those present continued standing. Some even smoked.

“Oh, Almighty God!” began Soulakh. There was total silence. His voice unsteady and weak, the priest went on in a singsong: “Oh, sacred, hawk like Bytkha, our patron and defender! Bless us! Forgive the sins of the wayward and give us guidance. Do not condemn us for our humble sacrifice! Down on our knees we put our hope in you. Hear our prayers, most gracious Bytkha.”

Just when I began thinking that no wonder our ancestors worshiped almighty Bytkha, that it defended them and helped them, someone in the back row began whistling. Everyone looked back. A man wearing a faded army uniform was whistling with four fingers in his mouth. People tried to get him to hush up, but he boldly addressed the gathering.

"We've been praying all our lives, but what good does it do! Grandfather prayed to Bytkha, and Father kneeled in front of it like a paralytic, but what was the use? I spent three years for the glory of the sultan, rotting in the Balkans and sprinkling the land with blood. When I returned I had no father, no mother, no home. Tell me, honorable elder, why has the sacred Bytkha been so blind, so deaf, so helpless to take care of the innocent?" The man spat on the ground and waved his hand: "It's all a big lie, nothing more!"

"Have you gone crazy?" shouted Sit, offended by the blasphemy of the former soldier.

"You can't say a word in the mosque, and here you have to bite your tongue, too! We've had more than enough of this!" growled the soldier's friend.

"Quiet, that's sacrilege!" shouted the old man Daut. But the soldier and his buddy didn't pay any attention.

"Bytkha is long dead and gone, and you, Priest, are wasting your time holding that goat heart and liver on a stick in front of it!" exclaimed the soldier.

His friend seconded him as he laughed:

"Or if it weren't for Bytkha you wouldn't know the taste of heart and liver?"

Everyone began shouting and the elders and the young locked horns.

"Did you conspire to break up this prayer meeting?" howled Tatlastan, waving his staff in the air as he faced the young people.

Tagir started up the mound. He must have thought the time was ripe for him to say what he had meant to. At that moment Soulakh the priest dropped the twig with the goat's heart and liver. And like a sheet torn off the line by the wind, all in white, he threw up his hands and collapsed right in front of Bytkha.

The old man was picked up and carried home. That same night, without regaining consciousness, he passed away.

## **MANSOU, SON OF SHARDYN**

Oh, my dear Sharakh! If I haven't worn you out completely already, please take some more fruit from the tree of my memories.

I hated Shardyn, son of Alou, more than anyone else. I blamed him for all the troubles of the Ubykhs and our family. That sacrilegious man was responsible for the disgrace and ruin of my sisters. Even his torment in death could not appease my thirst for revenge. I still considered myself a mortal enemy of Shardyn, son of Alou, wishing that even in Hell the devil was still carrying him on a bayonet.

When I settled in Karinjovasy, I was surprised that Mansou, the offspring of my father's foster brother, was living in splendor. The peasants worked his land for him without pay. You would think that the son of a state criminal, the war minister's assassin, would at best be made a commoner and not live off the labor of others. But it seems the nobility have their own laws. If a poor man like myself commits a crime the whole family is wiped out, but if the same crime is committed by a nobleman his heirs are not held responsible. And so Mansou was taken care of. He was a rake, dense-headed, but his blood was noble. It wouldn't do for a noble man to be a farmer, otherwise the common folk might think the system on earth was not established by Allah, but the cunning devil, and would lose their respect for the nobility.

When Shardyn, Son of Alou, was killed, Mansou's mother, with some difficulty, sent the heir to France. But she died two years later, before he returned. He was a reckless young man, volatile and not bad-looking. He went into business and got mixed up with some cheating gamblers, so he spent the nights in casinos. One day he was caught red-handed in some fishy deal and decided he'd be better off in Karinjovasy. "I'm your lord," he reminded

the Ubykhs there when he arrived. "You must honor and obey me." The people recognized him as their lord and submitted.

The Ubykhs just never learned their lesson; the old ways were instilled in them too deeply. They bowed their heads; and it doesn't take long to put a yoke on a bowed neck, you know. The government displayed its generosity by giving him plenty of land as if to say: go ahead, and enjoy life. Having much experience in shady transactions, the newly-arrived leader of the Ubykhs took up the resale of cotton. He did quite well and soon the penniless lord was worth a considerable sum of money. The home he built, the best within fifty miles, was envied by Au Hazret Pasha. Mansou wasn't the least bit interested in how his fellow-Ubykhs were doing. All he cared about was that they worked on his land and regarded him their lord. Like father, like son: Mansou had all his father's habits and passions. I did my best to stay away from Shardyn's son, but Sit took ill so I had to go once a week to work in Mansou's fields, either to graze his cattle or to hoe.

At that point the Ubykhs and Jamhasars were fighting over a dozen sheep. The chief, Javad Bey complained to the governor that the Ubykhs had slaughtered his sheep. Three Ubykhs were detained and interrogated, but there was no evidence against them. The men were released only after being whipped, just in case they were guilty. Javad Bey was furious that his sheep were gone and the culprits not found. So he herded his camels on Ubykh fields. The Ubykhs shot at his camels and the men herding them. The gunfire was returned and for three days the fighting persisted. Meanwhile, Javad Bey, accompanied on horseback by his guards, went to visit Mansou, son of Shardyn. They sat and feasted, had a great time, drank to each other's health, and bragged about how many people each side had finished off.

The elders gathered in Sit's home and couldn't come up with a better plan than to send me to Mansou begging him to reach an agreement with Javad Bey to stop the blood shed.

"Can't you think of anyone better?" I protested.

"Your fathers were foster brothers," they reminded me and added that no one else could go but me.

Well, let me tell you, Sharakh, I wish your enemies the same luck I had in being chosen by our elders. The minute I opened the iron gate decorated with some kind of fantasy monsters, a guard appeared out of nowhere.

"What do you want?"

"My name is Zaurkan Zolak. I'm the master's relative and I'd like to see him."

"You say you're a relative? Zaurkan Zolak? What a name! Can barely pronounce it! I've never heard of him having such a relative."

He looked me over from top to bottom with suspicion and then commanded:

"Get out of here, you simpleton!" -

"Well, I hope your master doesn't skin your hide for such impertinence to a relative."

"The master is busy! He's got important company, not the likes of you! Au Hazret Pasha and the French general are here. So get lost! You hear me? Get out of here!"

Well, what else could I do? I stood there for a while and then went on home. When I was walking next to the fence which surrounded the yard I heard some jovial talking. I leaned against the metal rails and saw four men. Among them was Mansou—he was all smiles. I had no trouble recognizing him; he looked so much like Shardyn. To his left was a thickset, barrel-like Turk wearing glittering epaulettes and smoking a long pipe. That's Ali Hazret Pasha, I figured. To Mansou's right was a tall thin man, a cane in his hand and speaking loudly in a language I couldn't understand. "I guess that's the French general," I thought. A short distance away was Javad Bey, a tall man in a white cloak. That's how he was described by people who had seen him.

The men sat down at the table laid out with fruits, sherbet, and nuts. The extortionists don't live badly, was my thought. All that's lacking is a cock fight, I mused. Just then two servants came up with two cocks. When they set them down the red cock violently attacked the white rooster. They fought so hard the feathers flew. Then they were suddenly pulled apart. Their feathers ruffled, their wings outspread, the cocks sharpened their beaks against the ground and bent their heads. Blinking their eyes, they watched each other angrily for a brief moment, and then again rushed into battle. Their combs were bloody, and each cock had the other's feathers in its beak. The guests and master were dying of laughter as they egged on the fighters, whistling and throwing nuts at them.

I couldn't stand it anymore. I pushed myself away from the fence, clenched my fists and, boiling with rage, hurried as fast as I could away from that sickening scene.

They are pitting us against our neighbors the way they get those cocks to fight each other. They laugh when, the cocks tangle and they certainly get a kick out of watching people quarrel; they even have something to gain: when we ignorant peasants are fighting each other, our lords have less trouble from us.

The next day when I heard Mansou's guests had left, I went back to that damned iron gate again. I opened the gate and another guard on duty asked me:

"What do you want?"

I told him I wanted to see Mansou, son of Shardyn, my father's foster brother.

"Do you see that saddled horse? Our master is going hunting. He's got no time for you!"

"I won't take long. I just have to say a few words."

"I can't let you in! I've been ordered not to let anyone in!"

While I was trying to persuade the guard, Mansou, son of Shardyn, came down from his balcony into the yard. He had on thigh boots, a straw hat, and a double-barreled gun over his shoulder.

I was wearing a tunic, Circassian coat, and had my dagger at my waist. Seeing a stranger in clothes no Turk would wear, he came over to me.

"Good day! " I greeted him in Ubykh. Instead of answering my greeting he said in Turkish:

"Who are you?"

"If you look closely you might remember!"

"Haven't got the time to bother looking at you closely!"

"I'm Zaurkan Zolak. Our fathers were foster brothers."

"Oh, the mukhtar told me about you..." Winding the whip around the top of his thigh boots, he grinned, "So you're the one who murdered the noble pasha..."

"I wasn't the only one in our family to commit such a crime," I couldn't help saying, hinting that his father had killed the war minister... "I was pardoned under the manifesto."

"The manifesto, you say? What does the manifesto have to do with it? You're a murderer; your hands are stained with blood..." said Mansou, son of Shardyn, scowling.

"I have not come on my own account..."

"You say we're relatives?"

“My grandmother nursed your father.”

“Oh Lord, that was so long ago! That’s all buried in oblivion. What do you want from me?”

“Excuse me for taking your time, but I am just a go-between,”

“For whom?”

“For you and your fellow-Ubykhs.”

Mansou, son of Shardyn, became cautious.

“And just what do my fellow-Ubykhs want?”

“They want you to reach an agreement with Javad Bey about ending hostilities. Too much blood has been spilled.”

“Who are you to be sorry for spilled blood. The fighting will end when the Ubykhs stop stealing. You can tell that to those who sent you here.”

Making it clear the matter was closed, he went toward his saddled horse and, after taking a few steps, turned around:

“What days do you work for me?”

“Mondays and Tuesdays.”

“You remembered my father’s name. For that I free you of one day’s work. You only have to come on Tuesdays. But today, since you’re already here, you can just as well help out my servants. Hey, Hasan, show him what to do!”

He mounted his horse and went off along the big road where he was hidden in a cloud of dust. Why didn’t I break a leg on my way to this ill-fated place? I cursed myself.

The man named Hasan, a black-eyed hulk with an unshaven face, took me to a wood pile and pointed to the ax:

“Don’t waste any time; get down to work!”

When I finished chopping the wood, that bull, Hasan, took me into the garden and handed me a rake:

“Here, rake up the hay!”

The sun was straight overhead. My stomach was growling for food. I had only one thought: to get on the other side of the fence. But then that blubbery Hasan took me to the kennel:

“The dogs have to be bathed. Roll up your sleeves and I’ll pour water out of the pitcher.”

I had done just about every job in my lifetime, but bathing dogs was not one of them. I was dressed like a true man of the mountain with my Caucasian dagger on my belt. To hell with all those dogs! I had never even touched a dog, let alone wash one.

“What’s the matter? Are you deaf or something? Roll up your sleeves, you beggar!” shouted the servant.

“I can’t do it,” I explained angrily.

“May you be struck by the plague! What do you mean you can’t do it?”

He clenched his fist, but he should've known better. I pulled out my dagger and the fat and bulky Hasan, whose relatives would get hernias carrying him to the cemetery, seemed lighter than a butterfly when he flew off to the kitchen and just as suddenly vanished behind the door. I rushed out of that place—may it be ravaged by thieves!

What upset me most as I walked along the road was the thought of my grandmother buried in far away Ubykhia.

May thistles grow through your bones, I cursed under my breath. When you were bathing your foster son and you poured milk into the pan instead of water, why didn't your hands wither and fall off? You washed him in milk and now his rascal of a son is making me wash his dogs! Damn him and all his dogs.

I didn't know why I felt such pain in my sunken stomach—was it from hunger or from anger at my own deceased grandmother? The further away I got from the estate of Mansou, son of Shardyn, the wider became the gap that now separated the two of us. I never wanted to see the louse again.

## **ASTAN ZOLAK**

"Is there anyone left in the Zolak kinship group?" I asked Aunt Himzhazh the day after I arrived in Karinjovasy.

"There's only one and he's like the mule that when asked, 'Who's your father?' answered, 'My mother is a horse.'"

"Who is he anyway?"

"You must remember him, although when we came to Turkey he was a young boy. His name is Astan. He's the grandson of blind Sakut, the apkhartsa player. His grand father, bless his soul, died back in Samsun. But the grandson is still alive..."

As you remember, Sharakh, Sakut did die back in Sam- sun, but I forgot to tell you that Sakut was a Zolak. In those days I still had a lot of close relatives. But in Karinjovasy there were only two Ubykhs from the once large Zolak kinship group: myself and Sakut's grandson Astan. News travels fast, so he must have known about my arrival there. Although he was younger than I, he didn't hurry to Sit's home saying: "My only relative, I'm glad you've returned." However, if the mountain will not come to Muhammad, Muhammad must go to the mountain. It was summertime and the sun was not yet blazing as usual when I went to visit Astan. The peach tree branches with their amber fruits, peering through the foliage, rested against the fence. Smoke from the hearth rose up above the ramshackle mud hut. In the distance I could see the cow-shed and a pile of manure nearby waiting to be cleaned up. An elderly, thin man with prickly gray eyebrows was sitting under a tree sharpening his ax on a grindstone.

"Good day. I'd like to see my relative Astan Zolak," I said in a loud voice in Ubykh.

The old man, putting his palm up to his forehead to shade his eyes, took a good look at me. Even if someone he didn't care for or an enemy walked into the yard, custom dictated that he must stand up at once, but he did not.

"Hello! If you don't mind, I'm Astan Zolak! And who, may I ask, are you?" he inquired in Turkish.

"You don't recognize me? Then search your memory and see if you remember a man by the name of Zaurkan among the Zolaks?"

Astan put down his ax and looked around to check if anyone could hear our conversation:

"Zaurkan you say? Yes, there was such an outlaw, I remember ... an odd type... He got all worked up because some pasha abducted his sisters and so he murdered the seducer. The fool was executed!"

"If he was executed then I've been resurrected because here I am, your brother!"

"Stop joking! I haven't got any brothers or sisters. They all died..."



"So you really don't recognize me? You think I'm an imposter?"

"The dead are not reborn. Just the infidels imagined their prophet Jesus was resurrected."

"I can show you a document saying I was released from prison under the sultan's manifesto. Come on, look closer. You're not blind like your grandfather Sakut. If you want

I'll recite the song he sang when we were leaving Ubykhia. You were just a boy then, his guide.

Let's look back at our mountains,  
They don't know where we're going.  
Let's look back and leave them our song  
To wander like an echo  
From one mountain to another.  
If a child leaves its mother,  
The mother is to blame.  
But is she really to blame?  
Is she really to blame?  
"Why are you leaving, children?  
What have I done to you, children?"  
Our land is crying;  
Our land is asking.  
Forgive us unfortunate ones,  
Forgive us!  
We have no power to stay.  
We can leave you  
One thing only: our souls.  
We are leaving forever.  
Forever, our souls remain.

"Lord bless the soul of the man who created that song. May he rest in peace under the lone hornbeam tree near Samsun."

Astan's face seemed to soften. I even thought he'd jump up and embrace me. But I was mistaken. Astan continued sitting in front of his grindstone as though nothing had happened.

"I've never heard of a man condemned to death staying alive. Congratulations, Zaurkan, but don't be offended I can't take you in... Where are you staying now?"

"With Sit, although according to custom it's your duty to give me shelter, even if I were a fugitive from justice."

"Old customs are like old clothes you discard when worn too long."

"If I had been executed you would've been obliged to avenge my death."

"Where have you been? I didn't even seek revenge for my father's death. Maybe I won't go to heaven for that, but all I care about is being left alone while I'm still alive. I don't owe anybody anything."

"Don't worry! I don't want anything from you. I just wanted to see you. After all, we're not strangers, you know..."

When he heard I wasn't going to ask him for anything, Astan gave a sigh of relief:

"You're lucky you can still work. If you ask nicely maybe you'll get some land. Then maybe you will be better off and breathe more freely."

"We're the last of the Zolaks. It would be a shame for our family to die out."

"I threw my name to the devil," said Astan, "and took my Sharual wife's name."

"How do you like that! Since when does a man take his wife's name?"

"That's nonsense. A man's like a pumpkin and his name's like the seeds. When you clean out the pumpkin to make a ladle you throw out the seeds."

"Don't be blasphemous, you fool!"

The Ubykh who had changed his name laughed, but with no humor in his voice:

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Oh, that's just false pride. It was all right to show off when we were in Ubykhia. I remember back home if people saw a squash that had lost its stem it was thrown to the cows for feed. Meat left over from a feast was not served to company the next morning. If an Ubykh married a girl from a family below his status he would either have to get rid of her or resign himself to being an outcast along with her. It didn't matter if we had to go hungry all year round, as long as we served our guests the best food. We Ubykhs took up just a tiny part of the Caucasus, but our arrogance was infinite. And what did we get for it?"

"You're just making excuses for yourself! I'm an elder standing in front of you, and yet you haven't even asked me to sit down."

"There's plenty of room for you to sit down wherever you want!" he waved his hand in a semi-circle around the yard.

"What gorgeous peaches are hanging over your head, but you haven't even offered me one, you miser."

"If you want peaches, pick them off the tree. Help your self."

"I have to stand out here in the yard to talk to you. You won't even invite me into the house."

"It's hot in there... And anyway I would imagine in prison you had enough of sitting between four walls."

"You should at least introduce me to your wife!"

"I have two of them. Both are Sharuals."

"Where are they?"

"At home. They're doing the housework and bickering, as usual."

"How can you possibly afford two wives?"

"At one time I could; not anymore. But I still have the wives. You want me to introduce you to them, but do you have any presents for them?"

"Isn't meeting a relative better than any gift?"

"Isn't fresh air better than a stuffy house?" he ridiculed. Then he added with conciliation, but still feeling he was in the right, "Sit down a while. My wives will bake bread, make coffee, and I'll call over my neighbor, old Mahmed. There's a time for everything."

"Do you have many children?"

"Two of them, a son by each wife."

"And their names are their mother's or yours?"

“My new name—Kazanci-oglu... It sounds good to Turks and keeps us above suspicion...”

“So where are your Kazanci-oglu sons?”

“I haven’t heard from one of them for over a year. He got mixed up with a gang of thieves, the fool. Maybe he’s in jail, or maybe he’s been shot, who the hell cares. The other one is all right. He lives in Konya and works for a shop owner. He works hard for a living. He’s married, but I’ve never seen his wife or children.”

“What a pity you don’t have your grandchildren here. If they were running around this yard you wouldn’t be so lonely in your old age.”

“Oh, Zaurkan, taking care of children, worrying about how you’re going to feed them is one big headache. I just couldn’t afford it. They’re better off where they are. If fate wills it they’ll grow up, and hopefully become wealthy people.”

“How do you make your living?”

“I herd geese for our lord, Husein Effendi. Three of us work for him taking turns every three days.”

“What’s a man doing herding geese! Herding sheep or horses is a different matter, but cackling geese?”

“You certainly are arrogant. Haven’t you ever eaten goose meat? You should try it; it’s delicious. Just thinking about shish kebab made out of goose meat makes your mouth water. And the feathers aren’t like straw. Husein Effendi makes a lot of money off his geese. It’s not easy taking care of the stupid fowl, but I’m used to it now.”

Astan began telling me about the geese the way a horse-keeper talks about his charges. While he was talking a woman in a veil came out of the house. She picked up a small armful of brushwood from a pile in the yard and, without saying a word, went back inside.

I watched her as she walked and asked Astan:

“Don’t you think it’s strange, Astan, that you and I, two Ubykhs, are talking in different languages: I’m talking Ubykh and you’re speaking in Turkish? Have you forgot your native language?”

“You might say that. I understand everything you’re saying and I even think in Ubykh, but it’s easier to speak in Turkish. And my wives talk and fight in that language. I can’t just talk to myself like some kind of an imbecile. Sometimes when Husein Effendi wants a good laugh he asks me to speak Ubykh. All I have to do is start talking and he doubles up with laughter: ‘It’s like bird talk,’ he says. ‘Come on, keep chittering.’ That dagger you’re wearing on your belt: it’s probably become dull and rusty, just extra weight you’re carrying around. It’s the same with our language. So don’t judge too harshly.”

I took my dagger out of its sheath. It sparkled menacingly in the sun. The whole yard and Astan himself fit easily on its mirror-like blade. Everything around me seemed so small compared to what that blade, cold as a snow-capped mountain, symbolized now. My heart beat fast like it did in the African desert in the mid-day heat when there was no air to breathe. I realized I had to get away from there at once; my head was throbbing.

“Don’t forget, Astan, that we are of the same blood and if you ever need me you can find me in Sit’s home. Drop by, my brother. So long for now!”

“Goodbye,” he nodded, and picking up his ax, he resumed sharpening it.

It wasn’t with that ax, but with another, invisible ax, that Astan chopped down the tree of our fraternity. The woman wearing a veil and whose name he used, could throw the dead twigs of that felled tree into the crimson fire of their hearth.

Yes, the Zolak family, a family of bold horsemen and warriors famous, throughout Ubykhia, had died, and because of Astan it had died without glory, and even in shame. They say everything depends on circumstances. If that's the case then it would be silly to blame Astan alone. He was a victim, and the circumstances were the axe over his head. Anyway, what good had I done? I had no family, no children. I was just drifting through life and was like a moss-covered oak tree struck by lightning: it doesn't burn; it smoulders. In the end nothing remains. The Zolak family will disappear without a trace as though it had never existed. But how could it be; how could a whole tribe vanish? How could a language, spoken for so many centuries, cease to exist? A language in which people praised and criticized each other, sang lullabies to their children, talked about ways to make a living, made oaths, chattered idly, cursed and prayed! Was this fate preordained or was it the result of someone's destructive mistake? Could such a thing happen to our people if its sons were all like Tagir? No, if they were all like he was we would not have come to ruin, was my conclusion.

My thoughts rushed haphazardly through my head like a man stumbling through an unfamiliar thicket. I felt so thoroughly lost and confused that I don't even know how I ended up in front of a small house at the end of a dusty lane.

The only place I could get the answers to those nagging questions was in that quiet, humble, white-washed mud hut built by Tagir.

## **A NEWSPAPER FROM ABKHASIA**

Tagir's home, like any other peasant house, was plain and cramped, but not a day went by without someone coming to visit. Everyone felt welcome there because any word spoken from the heart will enter another's. There was no way to get justice with the mukhtar. It was useless even going to him. Tagir's doors were always open: Tagir would give advice, write out a complaint, but most importantly, he would listen, comfort and judge who was right or wrong in a dispute. People came to him even for herbal medicine although he hadn't learned medicine in Istanbul. Their trust in him forced him to know these things and Tagir learned all about medical treatment in old books. The mukhtar envied and hated him. He was beside himself that some Ubykh, who was not endowed with power, was so revered by the emigres. Their spiritual leader wasn't a mullah, but a simple teacher, a commoner whose father and mother no one could remember. Ah hah, such people had to be watched very closely. So the mukhtar placed Tagir under surveillance and wrote reports about him to Mi Hazret Pasha. Tagir knew that, but he wouldn't back down; he refused to be cowardly.

Noticing I had walked into the yard, Tagir came to the door:

"Zaurkan, have a seat in the shade a while and rest. I'll be with you in a minute. Some people are here to see me."

"A guest is in the hands of his host," I responded and sat down in the shade.

Gulizar, Tagir's wife, quickly brought me a cup of coffee. She was Turkish, from Istanbul. The slender, dark-complexioned, friendly woman, who didn't wear a veil or shy away from men, reminded me of Feldysh; every time I saw her my heart skipped a beat. Gulizar, whom Tagir had married late in life, understood our language, but she couldn't speak it. They had two boys, and not like those who were playing in the road when Sit and I were going to Soulakh the priest. Tagir's boys were brought up to be polite like the Ubykhs of the Caucasus. Soon, after Tagir saw off the villagers who had come to see him, he called to me:

"Come in, Zaurkan. Excuse me for making you wait so long in the yard. I was writing a petition for the peasants."

Tagir led me into a small room connected to a larger one. It was the first time I'd been in it. I was surprised by the number of books in the room. It was unheard of for an Ubykh to have books in his home. Yet Tagir had a whole library. Sharakh, you are also a big reader, I'm sure. But I'm like a blind man when it comes to reading, if I had opened up even one book in Tagir's room and tried to figure it out, it would have been useless. I looked at those books and the thought crossed my mind that if you could read all those books you could put any grand vizier in his place.

Pointing to the walls, Tagir said, "You'll find ancient and rare books there on those shelves. We Ubykhs are not just weeds; we have a great past. We were written about by men of letters in ancient Greek, Arabic, Turkish and many other languages. We ended up in this sad state because of our deceitful leaders. If they hadn't talked the people into emigrating, we would be a strong nation today."

"How did you get all these books?"

"Shardyn, son of Alou, gave Mansou a lot of money. While we were going to school I was forced to be his irresponsible son's confidant. He gave me money to buy books because he wanted me to study for the two of us. He was too busy having a good time to read books, so I would tell him what they were about and he would pay me extra for the service. That's how I collected my treasure you're seeing."

Tagir pulled up a chair and had me sit down at a table with a thick manuscript on it.

"This, Zaurkan, is the history of the Ubykhs from ancient times till the present. I've been writing it for a long time. If I live long enough I'll finish it. The living change and the changing live. Maybe the day will come when we as a people will disappear, be assimilated and remain only a memory, but my book will tell the world about us, about our greatness and our decline."

"That's a noble pursuit! Good luck to you! I remember how our fathers, even when they were losing a battle, would sing the song of heroes. The song bolstered their faltering morale and put fear into their enemies. Your book is like the song of heroes. Without it we won't even be remembered. But the written word is eternal: it will be read by people who will say with respect: 'Throughout their existence the Ubykhs never lost their courage.'"

"Thank you, Zaurkan!"

Tagir stroked the manuscript like a strict father would pat his beloved son, and I couldn't help but compare what I'd heard there with what I'd heard at Astan's house. At Astan's the spirit said a prayer for the dying and at Tagir's it made a toast to health; at Astan's the spirit was declining and at Tagir's it reigned supreme. Tagir picked up a pen from the table.

"Do you know what this is?"

"Yes, it's for writing."

"Believe me, Zaurkan, it's stronger than any saber. If we Ubykhs, like the Georgians, for instance, had had a written language, we would have had a weapon that couldn't have been taken away from us. I'm so sure nothing would have happened to us. If a people can read and write they will never perish. Our forefathers are to blame for our disastrous plight. Many mountaineers who have come to Turkey have woken up, better late than never. The Abkhazians have devised an alphabet; they want to be literate and they are trying to start schools for their children. The same with the Adighes. And I," Tagir pulled toward him a pile of paper with writing on every page, "have made up an Ubykh alphabet." Taking up the first page, he said: "See, these are the letters: a, b, c..."

"Oh, Tagir, even if they weren't so small, but the size of an elephant I still wouldn't understand them. Don't even try and teach me. Even glasses wouldn't help."

"If you were the only one like that it would be a pity, but when everyone's like that it's a tragedy. That's all there is to it. If I could get permission from the authorities to open up an Ubykh school for our children I'd use my home for a classroom and would teach with no pay. Opening day would be the happiest day of my life."

I held the manuscript of the reader on the palm of my hand with the same tenderness as if I were carrying a new born babe:

"I suppose your book is a good thing and probably, just because I'm so backward I can't fully appreciate your work. Excuse me for saying this, but I've heard Turks claim our language could never be written down on paper because it's too much like bird talk. Husein Effendi calls it a buzzard language."

"Husein Effendi has a pumpkin for a head. There isn't a language anywhere that can't be written on paper. If only I could get this reader printed and open up a school. I'm hopeful."

"And I think you should be."

Tagir picked up both manuscripts, evened out the edges of the pages, and put them in a trunk standing in the corner. Gulizar brought in cups of hot black coffee just off the fire.

Tagir rested his head on the palm of his hand and ran his fingers over his mustache. I sipped my coffee. I was so comfortable and calm, as though I were sitting in my own home in Ubykhia. Tagir rolled himself a cigarette and began smoking. His words came to me in a cloud of smoke:

"I'm forever thinking about Ubykhia which I remember like a sweet childhood dream. I've already told you that Russia, including the Caucasus, is now governed by the people. Do you realize what that means? There will never be any internecine wars or strife between ethnic groups, no more fighting between the peoples inhabiting Russia. All people have been proclaimed brothers. If only we hadn't left our country we'd be all right today! I can't believe any other people has had such bitter repentance as ours. It's so damned frustrating."

He sighed so deeply it was as if he were weeping inside! Then another cloud of smoke covered his face.

"I just can't believe it. I can't imagine, for instance, Ali Hazret Pasha changing from a wolf into a lamb, dividing his land up and sharing it with someone like me!"

"He wouldn't give up his land voluntarily, but if all the plowmen, all the blacksmiths, all the gunsmiths, all the horse keepers, and all the longshoremen unite, people like Ali Hazret Pasha change from tigers into cats."

"Don't make me miserable telling me about living in freedom."

"When I was in Istanbul the last time, I met a Greek in port. He was sailing from Sukhumi to Athens. When he found out I was from the Caucasus he told me all about Abkhasia. He told me it was an independent state. And when we parted he gave me a newspaper..."

"What's so special about a newspaper?" I asked.

Tagir opened up the same trunk where he had laid the manuscripts of his two books and got out a newspaper.

"This isn't just any old newspaper, but the newspaper of your mother's fellow. It's called Red Abkhasia. Red is for the blood spilled to win freedom and independence. Here, you see this picture? These are peasants who have taken land from the nobility. Look, maybe you'll recognize someone?"

"Who's that?" I asked, pointing at a man's portrait.

"He's the head of the Abkhasian government. He's, making a speech to the people."

"Oh, my Lord," I exclaimed in utter shock. "Thank you for letting me live to see this day. It would have been a great injustice if I hadn't." And I kissed the paper. Only a man in my place could have understood me at that moment. "Oh, you're tormenting my soul, Tagir! If you were given life by a compassionate woman, please do me a favor: the day I die put this newspaper on my chest. Bury me with it. It will be the same to me as a handful of my native earth."

Tears streamed down my face. Where had they come from? I thought they had dried up long, long ago. Had I lost my self Sometimes, Sharakh, when a bow-string is pulled too tight it splits unexpectedly. I sat there in Tagir's home until late in the evening but although he insisted I spend the night, I refused to stay over.

"Tomorrow morning Mansou wants to see us said Tagir when I was already outside.

"I don't want to see him!"

"If it were up to me I wouldn't see him ever again, but I think he wants to talk about something that concerns all the Ubykhs. So, whether we want to or not we have to go."

We said goodbye and arranged a time and place to meet. I spent the whole night wandering through the dark, quiet open spaces on the outskirts of the village. I held next to my bosom the paper Tagir had given me. If anyone would have seen me he would have thought I was a madman walking aimlessly and talking to myself. Sometimes a person can dream while he's awake. I dreamed I was walking to the village where my mother's brothers lived. I could see the mountain ridge of Tsebelda, the Piandj Mountain and from its peak the panorama of all of Abkhasia. One edge of the Kvanachkir cliff shimmered in the sun and below, in a rocky gorge, was the roaring Kodor. Listening closely I could hear the song of horsemen coming from Dal, the clatter of hoofs and guns firing a salute in honor of some festive occasion.

Finally I came to Sit's house. I walked onto the veranda, lay down on the wooden bench and listened to the roosters greeting the dawn.

## **ON OPPOSITE SHORES**

Opening the iron gate, Tagir and I walked into the yard of Mansou, son of Shardyn. To my surprise we didn't hear the guard shouting, "What do you want?" No one was at the gate. It was quiet; there were no servants rushing about outside.

"Are they all dead?" whispered Tagir.

"It's too good to be true."

When we went by the ground where I had seen the cock fight I had visions of bloody roosters and could almost hear the noblemen, making merry, cheering in encouragement. I sensed nothing good would come of this visit. Near the house a servant seemed to appear out of nowhere. All we had to say was that Mansou, son of Shardyn, had called for us and the servant responded respectfully:

"He's expecting you!"

He pointed to a spiral staircase leading up to the second floor. At the top of the stairs we found ourselves in a large room with a soft carpet. Mansou, son of Shardyn, was reclined on a sofa cushion, his legs crossed. He was wearing a loose-fitting Turkish robe and puffing smoke from a cigarette perched in an amber holder.

"Oh, come on in and have a seat," he said in welcome.

We sat on chairs opposite him. I looked carefully at the man of the house. The last time I saw him he was wearing hunting garb and had on a straw hat that covered his forehead down to his eyebrows. He was still a strong man, although he was already sixty, and I couldn't see any trace of gray in his cropped hair. His eyelids were slightly puffy and his small eyes were deeply set. I had known him when he was a boy, but that was so long ago; there was not one hint of childhood on his face now. Mansou's hands, visible beneath his free-flowing sleeves, were almost bloodless, slightly yellow, like corn stalks grown in the shade. On one of his bony hands there was a glittering ring.

"How's life? What's new?" asked the son of the former sultan's brother-in-law as he puffed his cigarette for the last time and shook the butt out of the holder.

"I'm just an ordinary peasant living in a small house. I'm sure you can see better from where you are on the second story," replied Tagir.

"Don't give me that! You're no peasant. Everyone around here calls you the learned one. Your house is full of books and you never stop writing..."

“Of course, that’s very true! I’ve devised an alphabet and am writing the history of the Ubykhs, but I eat only the food I plant and pick with my own hands.”

Both of them spoke in Turkish.

“You’re a man of extraordinary talent. I knew that back in Istanbul. But reading so many books hasn’t done you any good—books have confused you. It’s sad and ridiculous to go against the tide of time.”

“Each man lives according to his own conscience.”

“A stubborn learned man is worse than a mule. Just what do you think you can change? The circumstances are stronger than you. It’s like knocking your head against a brick wall. You should think about yourself and your children...”

“I would be more than happy to follow your advice if you would only think of the people in your care...”

Mansou, son of Shardyn, pulled out a snow-white hand kerchief and wiped the sweat off his face. Then he opened up a silver cigarette case and offered it to us:

“Would you like a smoke?”

“No thank you,” said Tagir for the two of us.

Mansou began smoking again and went on to say:

“Why sow hostilities between the rich and the poor? That won’t help the people. Surely you don’t think men like you, Tagir, are capable of changing human nature? It’s utter vanity and conceit. It wouldn’t be so bad if because of your own rash conduct you die, but you’re stirring up the people and don’t seem to realize you may destroy others.” Wanting me to back him up, he asked: “Aren’t I right, Zaurkan?”

“Tagir wants to help the people and does that with an open heart. He isn’t doing it for himself, or for any ulterior motive. After all, Mansou, forgive me for being so frank, but people don’t come to you to protect them from injustice. However, it’s your duty as their guardian to be concerned about all the Ubykhs in Karinjovasy.”

Mansou, son of Shardyn, smiled wryly.

“I see you’ve been poisoned too by that self-made preacher,” he nodded at Tagir. “Or maybe when you were in prison you got those foolhardy ideas along with the lice?”

“Poverty and prison will teach a man reason.”

Mansou, son of Shardyn, lowered his head; he was trying to figure out something. My eyes, roaming the walls over the sofa, caught sight of a picture. I was so surprised I started. It was a picture of a sleeping woman, beautiful and shamelessly naked; her blanket had fallen down and was lying carelessly on the carpet near her bed. Her hands were tucked under her head in such a way that you could see her arm pits with golden hair, and one leg was touching the other... I was so embarrassed I shifted my gaze. It was sinful and sacrilegious to have such a painting in a country where Allah forbade any pictures of people, where women hid their faces. The thought running through my mind was that Mansou, son of Shardyn, must be a man of many vices.

“There’s no point in wrangling, Mansou,” I heard Tagir’s voice. “Tell us why you wanted to see us.”

The servant we met downstairs brought in a tray with three cups of coffee and left.

“Ever since the Ubykhs came here they’ve been a thorn in the side for the Turks,” said Mansou, son of Shardyn, calmly and gravely.



Tagir should have been patient and let the man finish what he was saying, but even an experienced sharpshooter can forget to lock his firearm:

“The thorn isn’t the cause, but the effect!”

Mansou acted as though he didn’t notice the venom in Tagir’s voice.

“It is the belief in this country that the ruler has his authority conferred by Allah, is Allah’s representative on earth. That’s why all subjects are supposed to be Muslims through and through. The government clearly understands that if people lose their faith it will lead to anarchy. But the Ubykhs go to the mosque just for the sake of appearance.”

“The sultan should realize that all subjects have their faults. The only ones who don’t are in heaven where black-eyed beauties wait for the sultan with open arms. Besides, I’d like to point out to you that Muhammad was against using force against those who refused to be converted if they obeyed his every command and paid him tribute. And you know only too well that we pay our taxes!”

“Only the sultan can interpret the teachings of the prophet and you’re not even a vizier yet. The time has come for the Ubykhs to assimilate with the Muslims under the green banner with its golden crescent moon. They should take Turkish names and surnames and officially declare themselves Turks.”

“Most of them have already forgotten Bytkha, speak Turkish, go to the mosque and now they’re supposed to change their names. That’s going too far...”

“That’s the law! Anyone who lives in the Turkish Empire must be Turkish. I warn you, Tagir: don’t stir up trouble. Be careful or you’ll destroy yourself and others. A match that is lit to set fire to a mosque bums up before the mosque. Set an example to the Ubykhs and change your name.”

A side door opened with a creak and a young woman walked in. She had on a long white dress with short sleeves and a low neckline. The air carried the scent of perfume and roses. She looked like the woman in the painting. Tagir and I got up at once and bowed. The beauty smiled in reply and, going over to Mansou, son of Shardyn, said something in a language I didn’t know. Later, when Tagir and I left Mansou’s house, Tagir told me his wife had spoken French She was going on an outing and wanted to visit Mi Hazret Pasha.

“Don’t forget to pick me up tonight,” teased the young woman and, before leaving, she reached out her hand to Tagir, then came up to me with surprise in her eyes and exclaimed: “Oh la la! The Caucasus!”

Carefully touching my belt, dagger, cartridge pockets, the expression on her face reflected both fear and admiration at the same time:

“Oh!”

The woman left us just as quickly as she had appeared.

Tagir turned to Mansou, son of Shardyn:

“Don’t you think it’s sinful that your wife doesn’t hide her face like a Muslim woman?”

“She’s a French woman, a Catholic...”

“Allah forbids the faithful to depict human form. But you have a painting of a naked woman over your head... If any Ubykh hung up a picture like that in his house...”

“When we were at school together you once told me a Latin proverb: Quod licet Jovi, non licet bovi.\* I’m not a Turk or an Ubykh; I’m a European.”

“Then why are you, Mr. European, lecturing us and warning us to be careful?”

"I have a kind of feeling for you."

"Oh, so that's it! Well, if you care about us then would you mind parting with some of your money and give us enough to build a school and publish at least my reader?"

"I could. But who needs it? Don't you understand how ridiculous your plans are? When a big nation adopts a small nation, even if by force, it's dictated by the times. Even your Sons don't know Ubykh. They'll attain much more in life knowing Turkish than Ubykh which nobody else speaks. People don't speak Latin anymore although there was a time when books were written in that language, and great books at that!"

"Following your same logic, the whole world could be forced to speak in one language, French, for instance. And as for Latin," said Tagir getting heated up by the argument, "it continued to be spoken many centuries after the fall of the empire where it was the official language."

"Just cast a retrospective glance, you stubborn man, at that history of the Ubykhs. Can you name one outstanding person? No, because there wasn't one. Who can you boast about? No one. Who will you tell Ubykh children about? About the leaders of raids, about shaggy revenge-seekers, about devil-may-care outlaws? I think you should take pity on the children and understand that history itself has decided the fate of the Ubykhs. It's silly and useless to try and stop the course of history. The sooner Ubykh youths assimilate with the Turks, the more they stand to gain because in terms of literacy, culture and crafts, the Turks are far more developed than many small ethnic groups, not to mention the Ubykhs..."

I couldn't control myself any longer:

"To put it more bluntly: One must howl with the wolves."

Strangely enough Mansou, son of Shardyn, didn't blow up in anger, but continued persuading us:

"If the Ubykhs want to survive there's no other way than to put their fate in the hands of the sultan. Ali Hazret Pasha, who is lord of these lands, is organizing fighting units against insurgents. Ubykh youths should also join ranks under the sultan's banner."

"Where do you expect to find those Ubykh youths? Most of them never returned from the Balkans. And those who did are either cripples or ill."

"If you and Zaurkan put out the call the Ubykhs will take up arms."

"May your mother rest in peace," I said. "Tagir is right. What good can we do?"

"Every little bit counts. But if you don't support the sultan in his struggle against Kemal Pasha, he'll regard it as treason and won't forgive you for the treachery. And don't count on any help from me if Ali Hazret Pasha sends his troops against you for aiding the enemy. He'll run the Ubykhs off the land and turn their homes into cotton barns."

"Then you won't last long here either!" I blurted out.

"I know that!" agreed Mansou, son of Shardyn, calmly, and getting up, he went over to the mirror. "But don't worry about Mansou," and he smoothed out his brows. "Husein Effendi wants to buy my estate. I'm going to my father-in-law in France. In the province of Champagne I'll have a vineyard in a picturesque area and cellars full of wine. I'll drink to the health of Turks faithful to the sultan and, if you don't heed my advice, to the repose of your souls."

"You'll be sipping wine there while we're being trampled here!" interrupted Tagir indignantly.

"I'm not playing this game anymore. I could have left without warning you, and that would have been the end of it..."

"No matter where you run, the sorrow of the Ubykhs will finally grip your throat and choke you."

“Enough talk! I want you to know I’m not indifferent to the fate of the Ubykhs and that’s why I warned you of danger.” Turning to Tagir he spoke distinctly: “Just remember, you preacher of yesterday, if you throw my advice to the pigs, you’re responsible for what happens. Goodbye to both of you!”

Holding his head up high, Mansou, son of Shardyn, walked out of the room.

That evening Zaurkan stopped talking earlier than usual. He sat there for a long time, tired and quiet, and then, when we began talking again—about everyday matters—he complained that he couldn’t remember some word either in Abkhasian or in Ubykh.

Finally, it turned out the word he had forgot was frying pan.

“What a simple word,” said Zaurkan annoyed with him self. “But for so many years I haven’t heard it spoken in Ubykh. It’s as if I live in a grave. I forget words I don’t hear!”

He continued sitting there for a long time, upset and silent, and with his hands around his head. I couldn’t help but watch him and think about the tragedy I had come to know living in that house.

When I first met Zaurkan he seemed not to believe that the Ubykh language no longer existed, and he even tried to convince me that his mother tongue could still be heard in his native Ubykhia, that it couldn’t die out any more than the mountains, forests or rivers. I didn’t argue with him; I just listened in silence, amazed by how hard he hung on to his mistaken convictions.

Suddenly that night I realized that the old man, living with a language no one else around him could understand, like the only man alive among the dead, was just consoling himself. It was like the feast of the dead I witnessed on the first night I arrived.

Zaurkan Zolak didn’t know the word “problem”, because the scholarly meaning of the word didn’t exist in his language. But life itself many times over tragically posed to him the “problem” of language, a problem he had no solution for.

For years at a time he had only himself to talk to and yearned to hear his native language, like one yearns for a loved one gone forever. How many times, trying to make out the words somebody spoke in the distance, he hoped with all his heart it would suddenly turn out to be his native language. Then when he returned to his people, after being away for so long, what a bitter realization it was that there were less and less of the old people to whom he had spoken Ubykh since childhood, and more and more young people who knew the language poorly or not at all...

And so life itself brought him up against this problem that, if he had lived at home, he would have never given a thought.

In my case, as an Abkhasian, I had no such problem, because it was solved once and for all for my people.

As a linguist however, I was concerned about learning the Ubykh language; it was my job. What happened to the Ubykh language did not happen to the languages spoken in my country. But I couldn’t help but be troubled by the disappearance of another language, no matter what people spoke it. I suppose if it didn’t matter to me I wouldn’t have sailed across the sea and come all this distance to the edge of these bare plains, and two men, a man of a hundred and a man of thirty, each affected by this problem in a different way, would never have met.

## **BYTKHA’S DISAPPEARANCE AND TAGIR’S DEATH**

Do you know, my dear friend, Sharakh, what’s the difference between one’s memory and a woman? I see you don’t know. And don’t even try to guess. It’s really very simple: a woman can only betray her husband when she’s

young, but the memory can do so when it's old. Don't be surprised, my son, if my memory begins to betray me more and more often.

The year Mustafa Kemal was stripped of his title as pasha we had a big cotton harvest. It would have been cause for great joy, but times were bad; there was a war on and all the roads to the bazaars were cut off by the hostile armies. On one side was the sultan who had either gone into debt or sold himself out to the British, French and Greeks, each of whom had taken over a big piece of Turkish land, and on the other side were Kemal's rebels who had sworn they would liberate the country. Black marketeers, like jackals, went around the provinces buying up cotton for a song and selling it behind the lines for three times the price. There was no one to complain to. Husein Effendi himself was making a lot of money off speculation in cotton. He was not exactly the person you would turn to for justice. According to the rumors, the sultan in Istanbul, a hostage of the foreigners, had almost no power. He condemned Kemal and his comrades to death by default, but every night in the capital there were fires, explosions of powder magazines, ammunition ships burning up by the Galata Bridge and there was gunfire near the sultan's palace. The soldiers sent by the sultan to attack the rebels often went over to the other side led by the man condemned to death in Istanbul, but the ruler in Ankara. The country was like a two-headed monster. Karinjovasy was like one big inn. Everybody came through our village—the French, Greeks and the sultan's cutthroats, and all of them were lost to shame. Anyone who spent the night expected to be fed and given a bed in the house, even if the owner had to sleep outside! Then our Ubykh youths had to get into a brawl over a game of backgammon. One thing led to another and they were at each other's throats. Blood was spilled. One of them was left with a scar on his face. He was from the arrogant Nagua family. The relatives acted as though the man had been killed, they were so offended:

“An eye for an eye! We won't forgive anyone for that scar! We want revenge!”

The fellow who had made a scar on his former friend was named Farhat. He was from the Chyzmaa family. His relatives, sensing they were in for protracted blood revenge, didn't back down. They rejected the idea of reconciliation.

“If we start trying to make up with them those cowardly Naguas will think we're weak,” warned one of them who was fond of making predictions and had a reputation for always finding a mare's nest.

“We should send Farhat away to the Sharuals where he will be under the protection of Husein Effendi!” advised another who had brains, people sarcastically said, the grand vizier Tevfik Pasha would envy.

And so Farhat was sent off to the Sharuals. I'd like to explain to you, Sharakh, that any fighting among the Ubykhs gave Husein Effendi great pleasure. He welcomed Farhat like a son, dressed him up in uniform and assigned him to the guards that protected Au Hazret Pasha's property. Armed and riding a raging horse, and with the brains of a bird, Farhat was no different than the thievish and clamorous thugs who, like Husein Effendi himself, were capable of killing a defenseless person, without giving it anymore thought than when slaughtering a chicken. An emir's dog is worse than the emir himself. The cutthroat gang Farhat was with came from time to time to Karinjovasy. Each time it was like a raid.

I once saw Au Hazret Pasha at a distance in the estate of Mansou, son of Shardyn. When he came to our village I recognized him right away. He was sitting on a black Arabian stallion and holding one hand on the pommel as though he was afraid of falling off the saddle. Next to him, on a white gelding was a French general, tall and thin as a pole and wearing a peaked cap that looked like a magpie's tail. Behind them was a whole cavalry retinue. The mukhtar emerged from the throng, went up to the horsemen, took off his hat and bowed, but the pasha, prancing about, didn't pay any attention to him. The pasha turned to the crowd:

“I do not believe that you, the people of Karinjovasy, have broken your vow and refuse to support the sultan,

Allah's representative on earth. I do not believe you want to break the heart of your esteemed fellow-countryman— Anzavur Pasha, who is close to the sultan. It is not Turkey's fault that it suffered such terrible losses in the world war. Taking advantage of the situation, criminal types who claim military leadership, are sowing discontent. But the sultan will have their heads. And he is not alone. You see, next to me is a French general. This courageous military commander has come with his army to help out the grand sultan, the country's legitimate ruler. And not only French troops are giving us a helping hand. The British and Greeks are also the sultan's allies.

Who can hold out against that kind of strength? Brave Ubykhs, don't forget that in your time of trouble the Turkish government gave you refuge and bestowed on you all sorts of favors. The despicable rebels want to slander you; they're spreading rumors that you've refused to serve in the great sultan's army."

Sit came out of the crowd, went up to the horsemen, put his hat under his arm and bowed:

"Gracious Pasha, you're right that we are not against the sultan, but where will we get the soldiers for his army? Just a handful of men are left! Almost all our young men have been killed in battle..."

Ali Hazret Pasha impatiently interrupted Sit:

"It isn't becoming, old man, for you to deceive me. Mukhtar, give me that list of draftees."

The mukhtar ran up to the pasha with knees bent and took out of his coat a piece of paper that rustled in the wind.

"You see, old man, how many names there are here. Everyone on this list must report for duty at the appointed time. Anyone who ignores this call will be court-martialed. I see that some of you are trouble makers who are agitating the people to rebel. Hey, Mukhtar, what are you doing, indulging the enemies of the nation? Why didn't you report that the enemy's men are stirring up trouble here?"

Trembling with fear, the mukhtar kept bowing to the pasha as he mumbled:

"I told Husein Effendi!"

"Oh, yes, now I remember, of course. Some learned man is kicking up a dust..."

"Yes, that's it, Sir! A learned man by the name of Tagir!"

"Where is that traitor?"

"He's no traitor, Pasha. He's a well-respected man among the Ubykhs," protested Sit, putting on his hat.

"So where is he?"

"He went to Istanbul."

"What for?"

"To complain about Husein Effendi."

"Oh, so that's it!"

"It's all according to the law, and he's gone not just anywhere, but to Istanbul."

"I hope," said the pasha, addressing the people, "that the brave Ubykhs will once again be happy to serve with honor for the cause of the sultan and caliph."

You ask, Sharakh, what came out of our meeting with the sultan's pasha? Nothing. The pasha left; he had many other matters to attend to, not just the Ubykhs. Before drafting procedures began, many of our young men vanished. Some unlucky ones, however, were taken into the army, those who didn't get away in time. But that's the way it is when you're unlucky: you're either too early or too late...

One morning when the sun had already risen a horseman appeared on the road in a cloud of dust. He rode bareback and shouted:

"Hey, everybody! Our shrine is gone! Bytkha has disappeared!"

“What do you mean it’s gone? Where could it be?” was the common astonished response.

“Go to the hill and see for yourselves! Go on, you’ll see.”

The terrible news flashed through the village like a spark carried by the wind. People rushed to the hill with the lone tree. Sit was ill, but when he heard Bytkha had vanished, he forgot all about being sick, got dressed and, supported by his staff, headed for the hill. I could barely keep up with him. We approached to see that a crowd had already gathered there as in the old days when the faithful still prayed to their shrine. When the elders got to the top of the hill they were horrified to see that the young man who had aroused the whole village was telling the truth. The stone niche that held the hawk like Bytkha was destroyed. And the lone hornbeam tree, like a murdered guard, lay nearby; it had been chopped down. The people were silent. Sit examined the rock fragments, the traces the ax had left on the trunk of the crooked tree, touched the withered foliage, then stood up, looked at the crowd and spoke:

“A villainous act has been committed! Someone has stolen our shrine. And it wasn’t today or yesterday. It’s been long enough for the leaves to die and the ax mark to grow brown.”

There was a humming in the crowd. Most of the people there no longer observed the old faith, but they were offended by the blasphemy just the same. At that moment the memory of common blood reminded them of who they were and united them in anger. It was like after a long quarrel when relatives are reunited by the sorrow of a funeral.

Believe me, Sharakh, I felt as though someone had offended me to the quick. If at that instant I had seen the person guilty of that crime, I would have been the first to wring his neck.

“Who could have committed such blasphemy. Oh, Almighty Bytkha, turn into thunder and lightning and strike that evil soul! May all his family be forever cursed,” thundered Tatlastan, removing his hat and raising his trembling hands to the sky.

Many in the crowd chimed in:

“Amen!”

No Ubykh could have done that, I thought to myself, but I was actually talking out loud and someone shouted:

“That’s right, Zaurkan! It was one of our enemies!”

But a bald, scrawny, one-eyed man, Tagir’s neighbor, whose name I unfortunately can’t remember, grinned and protested:

“It’s always easy to blame someone else! But what if it was one of our people?”

“Come off it!” exclaimed gray-haired Daut.

“Why didn’t you notice before that Bytkha was gone?” asked a woman wrapped in a dark shawl. Her question was recrimination against all the men in the village.

As if to say the elders were not to blame, Daut turned to the youth:

“Why are you so surprised? Everyone knows the Ubykhs are used to turning their backs on their own gods and worshiping someone else’s. It’s no wonder people call us drifters. Not so long ago you were all deriding our priest Soulakh, bless his soul!”

The bald man spoke once again:

“Where there’s smoke there’s fire. Why look for the thief in another village when he’s right here...”

The people looked worried.

“Come on, tell us who you suspect!” demanded someone in the crowd.

“It’s not enough to point the finger at someone, we need proof!” warned Sit.

“There are witnesses...” retorted the bald man.

The people came closer together.

And at that very moment someone shouted:

“Let me through!”

The people cleared a path for Rahman and his son. Rahman was dressed all in white and had a watch chain dangling over his stomach. He had been in commerce for a long time and was known for his dealings in the market. He wasn’t exactly a merchant himself, but he would often get to know the people in a caravan going by and take assignments from the leader. In general he knew which way the wind was blowing and always took his son along with him; he wanted the boy to learn the ropes young.

“Oh, just and Almighty Bytkha,” implored Rahman as he kneeled and put his straw hat in front of him, “if I’m lying, may your wrath strike not just me alone, but my only son as well. Strike me dead on the spot if one word I say is false.”

“Look who’s solemnly swearing to tell the truth,” said Tatlastan.

“We saw him with our own eyes!” said Rahman’s son.

“Tagir stole Bytkha!” exclaimed Rahman reluctantly, as though the information was being pulled out of him.

The crowd became silent.

“That can’t be! It’s a lie!” shouted Sit raising his staff with a threatening motion.

“I know it’s hard to believe, but those are the facts.”

“Look, you’ve gone just too far! Throw him out of here!”

“It’s easy enough to say: ‘Get out of here!’ But maybe he knows what he’s talking about!” someone shouted from the crowd.

“Anything is possible,” the bald man spoke again. “Even the mullah’s daughter is capable of sinning! Let’s hear out Rahman and his son.”

“My dear friends, our stolen shrine, wherever it is, has the power of revenge. If I’m falsely accusing Tagir, let Bytkha punish me instead... Ten days ago my son and I joined a caravan going to the city of Konya. When we finished our business there we decided to buy ourselves something for the trip home. While we were walking down a busy street we happened to pass a shop that sells expensive articles made of stone, glass and ivory. Suddenly Tagir walked out of the shop. We called to him, but he didn’t hear us, or pretended he didn’t, and disappeared in the crowd. There are always many people on that street. We knew before we left

home that Tagir had gone to Istanbul with a complaint against Husein Effendi, so we were surprised to see him in Konya. Just out of curiosity my son and I went into the shop that Tagir had come out of; it was a very expensive place. We went in and saw three salesmen examining our hawk like Bytkha on the counter. We couldn’t believe our eyes!”

A deep oooooooo went through the crowd, and Rahman, like a Muslim praying, put his hands together in front of him and went on:

“Bytkha’s basalt body seemed to have darkened, its golden eyes flashed fire, and its claws seemed to have blood dripping from them!”

“‘It looks like that Circassian pulled a fast one over on us,’ said one of the salesmen as he looked Bytkha over. And another one patted him on the shoulders and laughed, ‘Don’t be upset! That thing isn’t so valuable, but it is rare. We’ll make a profit off it anyway.’”

“My son and I got down on our knees in front of Bytkha right then and there, but the salesmen ran out from behind the counter and threw us out.”

“Why waste any time! Now we all know who the thief is! Tagir had better give us back the shrine or we’ll tan his hide!” shouted the young man who, at the last prayer meeting the day Soulakh died, had been the first to speak up against our faith.

The people were torn between the desire to kill Rahman on the spot, and to go to Tagir’s house to raise hell.

“You can cut me up into pieces, but I don’t believe that wheeler-dealer! I trust Tagir like I trust myself!” shouted Sit.

“You can’t force everybody to keep their mouths shut!” yelled the bald man. “We’ve had enough of your talk. The man’s a real snake in the grass. Tagir said he was going to Istanbul, but actually went to Konya!”

A few other people and I knew that Tagir had actually gone to Ankara to talk to a representative of Soviet Russia there about our problems. We had heard rumors that the representative had come to see Kemal Pasha and Tagir wanted to know if now, after the revolution, the Ubykhs who wanted to could return home.

But it was dangerous to tell everyone about Tagir’s true whereabouts: there had to be someone in the crowd who was one of Husein Effendi’s men and the information would be reported instantly. And that murderer wouldn’t think twice about putting Tagir’s family under arrest.

I went to the head of the throng:

“Those liars should pipe down! You’ll all see for yourselves soon that everything Rahman said is a lie! He’s mistaken if he thinks we’re asses. Tagir was not anywhere near Konya!”

The bald man darted over to me and squealed as though someone had hit him in the place that distinguishes a man from a woman:

“You’re in on this with him! You’re in on this! Birds of a feather...”

I drew my dagger out of its sheath:

“I’ll tear out your guts and wind them around your neck.”

The bald man dashed off, stumbling down the hill. Rumors have wings, and this one took off and spread all over the Ubykh villages. One man lied, another embellished on it; and a third one got it all jumbled. That’s the way a person is: he blows hot and cold at the same time. Those who were hailing Tagir yesterday and believed his every word, now swallowed the lies about him, called that noble man a thief and wanted his head. Everybody in and around Karinjovasy was talking about the theft of Bytkha. Tagir’s friends and I couldn’t wait till Tagir returned to find out who had really stolen Bytkha and who put Rahman and the bald man up to telling the lie.

But Tagir didn’t come back when we expected him, so one night Daut and I decided to talk to Rahman ourselves. We went into his yard: there wasn’t a soul there; the chickens weren’t even clucking. We asked the neighbors:



“Where’s Rahman?”

“That same evening we found out Bytkha had been stolen he and his family packed up all their belongings, loaded them on a cart, hitched up a cow and left.”

“Where did they go?”

“Who knows? Farhat Chyzmaa came to see him the night before.”

“Oh, so that’s where it all started,” we thought, but unfortunately we didn’t know really how far back it had started...

If it isn’t one thing it’s another...

Ali Hazret Pasha had failed to get the Ubykhs to serve in the sultan’s army. The pasha’s mounted messengers went in vain through our villages agitating the people to fight for the sultan.

As I already told you, Sharakh, they managed to recruit only a few Ubykh men.

We heard that when Mi Hazret found out about all that he went into a ranting rage. Oh how he swore at the Ubykh people! If only that had been the end of it. But the pasha sent his thugs around to our houses, who took everything they liked in sight, stole our cattle, raped our women and if they found any young men, ill or pretending to be ill, they shot them on the spot as deserters.

“There’s no God but Allah! Long live the sultan!”

One can do evil in the name of God, and one can commit lawless acts in the name of the law.

“Help us, Allah!” prayed the people.

They realized the pasha and his men would make their life a hell on earth if they stayed on in Karinjovasy. They had to move somewhere, but where? Moving, all the time moving! It was as though evil fate was always following us Ubykhs.

It never rains but it pours... Tagir returned, not having reached Ankara. Everywhere there were sentry boxes, cordons, guard posts, road blocks and guards at bridges and crossings: in short—it was war. It was late at night when Tagir returned home and was met by his poor wife Gulizar. She threw her arms around him and the tears rolled down her cheeks.

“What’s the matter?” asked Tagir.

Gulizar told him how he was accused of stealing Bytkha. She had barely finished the story when someone outside called him.

“Is the man of the house at home?” said someone in Ubykh.

“Don’t go outside! Hide!” pleaded Tagir’s wife.

“Don’t worry; it’s one of our people!” he said reassuringly, and went to open the gate.

A shot was fired and Tagir fell to the ground.

Four armed men got off their horses, grabbed Gulizar, who was trying to call for help, gagged her and tied up her hands. Awakened by the commotion, the frightened sons were also tied up. After the intruders threw the children and their mother over the saddles, they set the house on fire and rode away.

When Sit and I got there, Tagir's house was just a frame of black smoking boards. Crimson sparks still flew from the dwindling fire. Smoke, ashes and the smell of burning were carried by the wind. Tagir, covered with blood, was lying face down in the yard. At first I thought he was dead, but he wasn't. He was fatally wounded and when he came to, he asked in a barely audible voice where his wife and children were.

"They're all right," I told him, not knowing what to say and suppressing a strong urge to howl in sorrow.

But Tagir didn't believe me. I realized that when I saw a lone teardrop rolling down his cheek.

"Who shot you?" I asked as I lifted his head.

"Farhat Chyzmaa."

People began gathering around the place. All those who had loved Tagir, who had placed their hopes in him, were present and distraught with grief. The wounded man was put under a tent constructed in haste. I looked at the face of that dying man so dear to me and had a terrible feeling of helplessness, a deep anguish. Tagir was dying, and every thing he had devoted his life to had perished in the fire. No one would ever write the history of the Ubykh people; no one would ever write a primer for Ubykh children.

Tagir barely moved his lifeless hand as he whispered:

"Go home! Go back to the Caucasus... All of you... Go home!"

Those were his last words, his last will and testament. Tagir died before the sun rose. Nearly everyone in the village came to mourn him. Even the mullah came, the man who had not so long before called Tagir an infidel. Rah man's mysterious flight and Tagir's assassination were proof beyond doubt that he had nothing to do with Bytkha's disappearance. And those who had believed Rahman's story were now deeply ashamed, cried and asked forgiveness of the dead man.

"Uaa, nan, my Tagir," wailed Aunt Himzhazh, her hair hanging loose, as she sat at the head of the deceased. "Look how many wonderful people have come to pay you their last respects!"

The women wept and the men sighed deeply.

Mansou, son of Shardyn, came to bid farewell to his childhood companion. He whispered to the people standing next to him:

"I feel so sorry for him! He was a real scholar! It's a shame he destroyed himself and his family. I warned him... He wanted to make a hole in a stone wall with his little finger... What a dreamer..."

An elegant carriage drove up and stopped a small distance away. Before he got in, Mansou, son of Shardyn, walked up to us elders:

"I wish you luck! I will not forget the work you did for me. Thank you! We probably won't ever see each other again. I've sold my estate and am moving to France, to my wife's country. As they say, let bygones be bygones, but I must tell you that you really offended me when you had Husein Effendi give the people's last shrine away to Ali Hazret Pasha. Did you think I wasn't worthy of such a gift? Were you trying to buy his favors, or what? Surely you realize you can't make deals with such scoundrels. It would have done more good if you had given your support to the sultan! But no matter what you think of me I haven't forgotten that my father was an Ubykh. Yes, my honorable fellow Ubykhs, I haven't forgotten that. So you know what I've done? I bought your gift from Ali Hazret. And I paid him a good price for it, too. I'll take Bytkha with me; maybe it will bring me happiness in an alien land. Farewell and bear me no grudge!"

Mansou, son of Shardyn, got into his carriage and in no time he was lost in a cloud of smoke kicked up by the horses' hoofs.

Nearly all of us who came to say goodbye to Tagir were of the older generation and in mourning him were mourning our terrible fate. Through our tears we could see what he had willed to us—our unforgettable homeland so far away and named Ubykhia.

We buried Tagir on the mound where Bytkha had once been. The setting sun illuminated the new grave with its departing rays.

No one was in a hurry to leave. People stood with heads lowered and deep in sorrowful thoughts. I went to the top of the mound and stood next to Tagir's grave, holding the ancient horn in my hand. I put it to my lips and filled the desert with the moaning of the Ubykhs' brass horn. The horn wept over Tagir's fresh grave and thundered against his enemies. It was a call to return to the land of the Ubykhs, to our homeland! "Put the sick on stretchers, the infants in saddlebags, and attach axes and daggers to your belts," the horn bellowed. "So what if the way is bloody; you must be on your way no matter what. You have nothing to lose; he who loses his country loses all."

And so the horn continued its mournful plea until I had no more strength left to blow it and hold it in my hands.

Darkness enveloped the whole area; only a few stars twinkled in the sky as though the heavens were mourning us with cold tears. It was the last night of the Ubykhs on a land where life was no longer bearable.

## THE FINAL JOURNEY

It was more than a week that nearly all the inhabitants of thirteen Ubykh settlements—the elderly, women and children, that is, those of us who were incapable of carrying weapons—were on the road travelling with the meager remains of their belongings. Looking at us one might think we were the victims of a fire, or gypsies, or war refugees. Three thousand homesteads had been uprooted. Of course, it wasn't ancestral land we were leaving, but land that we had been settled on for quite a long time. And three thousand is no small number. It was summer—dry and scorching hot. In the daytime the heat was enough to fry one's brains and at night the cold was unendurable. It was just like the African desert where I had suffered so much working on the caravan for Ismail Sabbah, may his soul burn in hell.

As the late Tagir had willed it, we were headed for the Caucasus. Perhaps if we had been going to Syria or Arabia, which no longer belonged to Turkey, Ali Hazret Pasha would have taken an altogether different attitude and realized he had enough troubles as it was without the Ubykhs. But we were headed for our homeland where the present government was friendly to Kemal Pasha. Ali Hazret Pasha boiled with indignation, "We warmed a viper in our bosom; all those emigres from the Caucasus are turncoats, enemies of the sultan. Well, I'll show them!" He wasn't just talking: the sultan's lackey sent his punitive units to attack us like a pack of wolves and they took more and more lives from our human flock in flight for salvation.

I'm not sure, but I think that if we had had more strength and weapons we would have been able to get past Ali Hazret's soldiers, past the Greeks who were sometimes on the offensive and sometimes on the defensive in those parts, and finally with enough obstinacy and good fortune we could've found our way back to the Caucasus and to our native mountains.

But we had little strength and few weapons. We did have some, though, because several dozen of our armed men joined us along the way after fighting on one or another of the hostile sides, or after coming out of the mountains where they were in hiding. They had guns and defended us as best they could.

We passed through the Konya plains that were as bare as a plundered grave. For miles on end there wasn't a tree, water spring or well in sight. It's no wonder the Turks would say you couldn't get through these plains even on a camel.

Our horses, tortured by horse flies, could hardly move. The wheels of our carts were grinding on the rocks, creaking noisily as they rolled along, carrying our children, invalids and disabled elders. We tried to go as fast as we could. The dead were buried quickly and mourned as we moved along. The wounded, who could still walk even though they were barely conscious, didn't ask to be carried in carts. Only those who were wavering between life

and death were carried in carts or on stretchers. We could be shot at from all sides. It was despicable to shoot at a human throng, but a hit was guaranteed; any random bullets eventually find a victim. Our young men had a harder time of it: those who were following us on horseback were shifty like demons; they used hit and run tactics.

Ali Hazret Pasha sent messengers to threaten us:

“If you don’t want to be killed to the last man, give up and turn back before it’s too late! I swear by Allah that anyone heading into the hands of the sultan’s enemy will end up, with my help, in the arms of death!”

But we did not give in to his threats. A river always runs to the sea and a man reaches out for his native land. Since we were already on our way we didn’t want to turn back because the call of home, like the call of truth, cannot be ignored. As a way to cheer up those who were losing heart, we elders would sometimes sing an ancient Ubykh marching song:

Bleeding wounds don’t make us sorry  
In defiance of the foe.  
For the mountains and glory  
Forward valiant horsemen go!

That was song’s refrain. The young didn’t understand the words, but they liked us to sing it anyway. Half the scorched plains were behind us. But then we faced a new problem: our small supplies of food ran out and people began starving; it started with the children’s crying. I’d rather listen day and night to bullets whistling overhead than the whimpering of hungry children. We had no alternative but to slaughter some of our bulls, then the horses. Sharakh, have you ever heard the neighing of a mortally wounded horse? After we had burned up our carts we had to use wooden cradles for firewood. Then we had nothing left that could be used to make a fire except for the butts of our rifles, but we still needed them for fighting back.

“Bleeding wounds don’t make us sorry...” the song soothed our souls. But we weren’t just hungry; we were also thirsty. Hunger and thirst gripped us like the jaws of two mad wolves. And there was no way to fight off the two beasts. Not a spring, or a well in sight!

“I’m thirsty, Mom, I’m thirsty!” a child with parched lips whispered to its mother.

But the mother didn’t even have any tears left to cry— they had dried up. When someone was injured, hardly any blood came from the wound. The group sent out to search for water never came back. Our human flock was no longer moving, just barely crawling along at a snail’s pace. People would fight over a piece of bread, or a drop of water. They ate the grass seen only on rare occasions. Anyone who managed to catch a mouse was really lucky.

Don’t give up hope,  
Rain will mercifully  
Pour from the heavens tonight.

We elders sang that to lift the people’s spirits. But the song was more like a lament.

Suddenly, like a voice from the heavens:

“There’s a swamp not far from here; there’s a swamp!” wheezed a man staggering as though he were drunk. Even those who were dying got up when they heard what he said.

Some ran, some walked, and still others crawled toward the place that man pointed to. Mothers picked their small children up in their arms, and older children outran the adults. Some just collapsed on the hot earth that was cracked like the shell of an overripe melon, and lay there with their mouths open like fish out of water. No one paid any attention to them.

Soon the people's feet were squelching over the swampy hummocks. The swamp was wide. The shifting soil on the approaches to it was overgrown with reeds. The quagmire exuded a rotten stench. The soil and grass around it seemed to have been drenched in salt. Someone yelled:

"Don't drink that water; it's no good!"

But who cared. People shoved one another aside, breathing heavily in excitement. They fell to their knees and when their mouths got to the brown, lifeless water, they drank until they nearly choked. The water was warm and viscid; slimy water bugs, larvae and spiders drifted on its surface, but we Ubykhs drank with more lust than we had ever drunk from our pure mountain springs. And when we had drunk all that we could hold we still stayed by the swamp. Despite the fiery heat our bodies shivered with the dread of thirst the way a mad dog does fearing water. When we finally recovered our breath we began looking for our relatives and friends. We helped up those who hadn't reached the water, and discovered that some of them were already dead.

If it's not one thing, it's another. We had barely quenched our thirst when we began suffering from hunger again. The next day, though, we were fortunate. Two of our scouts who had gone a few miles ahead noticed a herd of grazing horses. The young fellows had the presence of mind to frighten the horses with gunshots so they would move toward our people who were dying of hunger. Have you ever heard of a war between people and horses? Well, there was one by that swamp. Men with guns shot at the horses; those with daggers hurled themselves at the confused animals as though in hand-to-hand combat; and those who had axes chopped through the terrified herd as though it was a forest thicket. The hysterical horses wheezed as crimson foam rushed from their bodies. People fell under the hoofs of the crazed horses. There was moaning and cries of horror! Horses fell to the ground with chopped skulls, broken legs, slashed open bellies. And people were crushed under the hoofs of animals frantically seeking escape. Horses, sometimes not yet dead, were skinned, their bodies chopped to pieces. A hungry man is like a wolf. We cut down reeds and made stinking fires out of them. Soon the air smelled of roasted horsemeat. When our stomachs were full of the half raw meat we got thirsty again and went back to the swamp to drink the bad water cupping our hands. Then we buried those who had died in the battle with the herd of horses. But before we moved on we set fire to the reeds growing in abundance around the marsh: "Our enemies will think we're still sitting by our campfires!"

The hope we found in the flames of our campfire gave us strength; but not for long. After escaping two calamities we had to deal with a third. Cholera broke out. The first one to fall ill was a woman, the mother of three children. Pressing her stomach, and shivering from fever, her lips and her eyelids blue, she rolled around on the hot sand. Then her hands and legs began to convulse. In a few hours the woman died, but her children had caught the disease. Our people were terrified. Some prayed to God, others cursed him. I volunteered to bury the dead and in no time at all I had buried the two people closest to me: Aunt Himzhazh and her husband Sit. When Himzhazh died, Sit told me:

"Zaurkan, I am ill. When I die bury me next to Himzhazh; I don't want to leave her alone in this cursed land."

He dug his own grave right next to his wife's and he didn't suffer long before passing away.

I stood over their graves, and although my eyes seemed dry, tears appeared on my cheeks. That's how it is some times in the mountains: even though the sky is clear, one can see cold drops on the rocks. I cried like those rocks: my tears came as if through the wrinkled skin of my cheeks.

Suddenly I heard the voice of the eldest among us, Tatlastan:

"We haven't died yet, but we're already mourning our selves. Come on, chin up! Ahahara, hahaira! Clap your hands! Let's dance! Let's dance!" and he hummed a dance song as though he were the healthiest one of us and fifty years younger than he actually was.

I couldn't figure it out: had he gone mad?

But Tatlastan was definitely in his right mind.

“Haven’t you ever seen how a candle before it goes out suddenly gets brighter? Come on, and let’s brighten up like a shooting star, no, like lightning, for our enemies to see our splendor before we die.”

Tatlastan clapped his hands louder and louder as he walked up to one person, then another:

“Ahahara, hahaira!”

And really, it was a miracle. No one shouted, “You’re crazy! Calm down!” On the contrary, people who could barely stand up and who a moment before were lying motionless on the sand with no signs of life, began clapping their hands and singing, at first in whispers, then at the top of their lungs, a dance song of their forefathers.

“This land has gone deaf and doesn’t hear our children, crying; it’s gone blind and doesn’t see we’re dying! So, let’s dance, dance so that the noise we make with our feet thunders in its ears. May this land know we’re still alive and have no wish to surrender!” called out Tatlastan.

Gradually a circle was formed. If only you could have seen the faces, my son, of the people in that circle. Just imagine the faces of smiling corpses.

Tatlastan then shouted out, but this time to himself:

“Hey, Tatlastan, surely you haven’t forgotten how to dance? When you were in Ubykhia you could dance at weddings on the top of a narrow table. And the girls got dizzy when you—ahahara! —danced on your toes. The table didn’t shake. And the glasses full to the brim with wine, didn’t lose a drop! Come on and show you’ve still got your pep!”

He began dancing, his hands on his hips.

At that point there was a jumble of noise—laments, shouts of ahahara, tears and laughing. It was a moment of madness. And I began clapping my hands like a man high on hashish:

“Ahahara, hahaira!”

Tatlastan even tried falling on one knee, but he couldn’t do it.

His old bones will no longer do what he wants them to, I thought to myself. There’s a proper age for every dance! But where is he getting that strength?

To be sure, a woman’s age can be told by her face, but a man’s, by his soul. What I was witnessing there in the desert reminded me of the proverb my ancestors had long before my birth: “Invite the dead to a feast and make them want to dance!” When I remembered that I couldn’t help but wonder if our forefathers had foreseen the terrible end of the Ubykhs.

Suddenly Tatlastan, still dancing and clapping his hands, broke away from the crowd, calling us to follow him. The old man was out of breath. He couldn’t talk and nodded to the people to follow him. But everyone obeyed as though he had them tied to a string. He led them toward the sound of a rooster crowing. Not far from us was the first village we had seen in that desert...

What happened after that Zaurkan could hardly remember. He told the rest of the story incoherently. He couldn’t either remember how long the Ubykhs had been on the road, the place they had reached, or the number of surviving Ubykhs. One day he told me one thing, the next day, another. He had everything mixed up.

He was suffering from cholera then and perhaps that’s why he couldn’t remember much. But one thing was clear: the old man had endured a terrible experience. When he began talking about it he trembled all over, his face became sullen, and his voice broke.

But just where was that place?

I took out my map of Turkey and showed it to the old man. I pointed out the Konya plains and the swamps that were marked in green. But the old man couldn't tell me anymore than he already had.

On the map those swamps were not far from the place where the old man now lived. I figured I had traveled through those places where the bones of the Ubykhs lay buried after the cholera epidemic, somewhere near here. And so Zaurkan was mistaken when he said they were on the road for a long time and the journey took forever. Actually the Ubykhs had gone a mere forty to sixty miles. But how could old man be blamed for stretching out the days and the distance in his memory, affected by the power of his grief?

We sat down again, and once again the old man tried, with great difficulty, to connect all his disjointed memories.

We were driven into a corner: there was no way to go forward and there was no way back. People in the nearby villages fled to the mountains away from the cholera. They took their food and their livestock with them. Only those who were already ill stayed at home. Wherever there was thunder, lightning always seemed to strike the Ubykh people. The Turks blamed us for the epidemic and so those who had remained behind in their homes to care for their sick; and those who had already recovered from the illness, took up their guns to stand in the way of our exodus.

The police had strict orders from Istanbul: "Keep the Ubykhs from going anywhere. Do not hesitate to shoot. Burn up the dead!"

When we got to the first village and were already at the houses on the edge of the community, some peasant came running toward us and shot Tatlastan, who was leading us all. Then the man vanished. Tatlastan fell down. I bent over him.

"Well, they got me, Zaurkan! Bury me with my head toward Ubykhia."

He died and I felt feverish. I remembered the words from an ancient song: "In a cholera year even the swallows don't fly," and I looked at the sky: there were no swallows there. Far into the distance I saw fog. I pressed my palm on my forehead. The fog was gone, but then it came back. Standing over Tatlastan's dead body I couldn't for the life of me figure out which way was Ubykhia. I didn't bury him: I hadn't the strength. I was only able to drag his body under a tree and close his eyes. My condition got worse and worse. Feeling pain in my stomach, I went over to the house that stood somewhat apart from the rest. I could hear bullets whistling over my head, but I paid no attention.

Tatlastan's nephew and some other Ubykh ran past me with their daggers bared in search of the peasant who had shot the old man.

"He couldn't have just vanished into thin air?" shouted one of the Ubykhs.

"He's probably hiding in some house."

As I came near the gate, I could hear the heart-rending cry of a woman. Mustering up what was left of my strength, I went into the house. Tatlastan's nephew had pushed the frightened woman into a corner and was pressing his dagger to her breast.

"Tell us where the man who shot the gun is hiding? I saw how he ran into this house. Stop your teeth from chattering and answer my question! If you don't tell me, you witch, I'll put an end to you and your son!" He said and nodded to the sick boy tossing on the bed.

"I swear to Allah that no one came in here. You may search the whole house, but don't kill us. We're innocent! My son is an orphan; his father died two years ago," said the terrified woman, trying to edge her way to the poor boy.

"Get out of here!" I hollered.

Probably my voice was like the howl of a dying animal.

The astonished men put away their weapons. I heard a shot outside, then another, and the young men ran out of the house. I also turned to go out the door, but the woman grabbed me with both her hands:

“Don’t go, I beg of you. Don’t go! If we’re left here alone they’ll come back and kill us. Please take pity on us!” she pointed to the boy.

If that woman hadn’t tried to keep me there I wouldn’t have gone very far anyway. She laid me down on her bed and I lost consciousness.

I don’t know how long I was delirious and convulsing, and then unconscious, but when I did come to I saw that I was in some strange house.

“Where am I?” were the first words I spoke the day I came back from my journey to death. I was talking to the woman standing at the head of my bed.

“Just consider yourself at home.”

“And who are you, Hanum?”

“If you look closely you may remember me.”

I thought I saw the woman smiling and began examining her. Her round face, her big black eyes, despite her smile, were full of sorrow, and her hair was streaked with gray. I tried to remember who she was, but couldn’t.

The woman told me herself.

“Remember how two of your young men wanted to knife me and my son, and you saved us. Then you wanted to leave, but I begged you to stay. You were already ill, and I had to put you in bed. Till this day you’ve been on the verge of dying, but, praise be to Allah, you’re alive.”

Gradually my head began to clear and I could remember. One after another, I conjured up visions of the final journey of the Ubykhs... Corpses, corpses, and more corpses. Tatlastan dancing... And finally I remembered how I had come to this house. Cheered by my restored memory, I decided to sit up in bed.

“Lie down! You’re still too weak,” said the woman as she carefully wiped away sweat from my face and forced me to put my head back on the pillow. Then she brought me tea and helped me drink it.

“So these hands took me out of the grips of death?” and I patted her hand.

“You are our savior. Of course, it wasn’t easy to take care of two sick people at the same time—you here and my son there; but praise be to Allah, you’re both alive.” She went to the door and, opening it, she called out: “Biram! Come in the house, Son.”

A boy of fifteen, as skinny as a rail, quietly walked into the room. His face was very pale.

“You see, Biram, our savior is also recovering!” said the mother to her son, not taking her loving eyes off him. “Go to him, and talk to him, only not long, or you’ll wear him out!”

The boy looked at me with his kind deer-like eyes, and coming over to the bed, whispered:

“Praise be to Allah; praise be to Allah!”

The woman put her hand on the boy’s head and sighed hopefully:

“Maybe now our days will finally be brighter.”



Sharakh, that was the home where we're now sitting. I lay right there where my bed is now, and she sat watching me from where you're sitting...

I know that I shouldn't say her name. The Ubykhs, like the Abkhasians, are not supposed to mention the names of their wives. But you should know the name of that Turkish woman who saved my life: her name was Salima.

My dear friend, my patient friend, I must've worn you out with my story, every word of which has a sheen of blood and grief. All the Ubykhs who tried to return to their homeland perished: some from cholera, others from bullets. Still others, although these were few in number, survived, but I also consider them dead because they ceased to be Ubykhs.

You ask what happened to Salima? That woman had a rare soul. I was eighty that year when she pulled me out of the grasp of the angel of death. I completely recuperated within a short time and got back all my strength. I was planning to go, but she said: "Stay here, you have no where to go. From this day on my home is yours." Even though I was advanced in years I was still a strong man. We lived like man and wife. Within a few months there was no more cholera in the village. All those who had fled to the mountains had returned. Only the number of graves dug that year in the village cemetery was more than there had been in ten years of peaceful life.

Then one day Salima suddenly fell ill. She had some chest ailment. I did everything I could to save her, but I suppose it wasn't enough. Before she died she asked me:

"Don't leave Biram! Be a father to him!"

The next day I buried her. Her grave is not far from here— on the slope of the hill. When I take a walk I go there. I always feel as though not only she is buried there, but all of my loved ones. I told Biram a long time ago to bury me there, too, when my time comes.

While Biram was growing up he stayed with me all the time. I was his father and I taught him all I knew. When he got married he began to live with his own family. He has a reputation among the people as an honest man, and a hardworking, good blacksmith. You and God are my witnesses that my son does not forget me. Each day now can easily become my last in a foreign land, in a house I didn't build. I-Zaurkan Zolak—am the last Ubykh in this imperfect world. I even feel ashamed that I've lingered so long...

That's all that Zaurkan Zolak had time to tell me. I have read my notes over and over and am continually astounded by the man's vitality. He who witnessed the disappearance of his people, managed to find the strength for more than a month to recount their sad story to me.

"My son, Sharakh, don't be offended, but I must lie down, I'm dizzy," he said that last evening and got up wishing me a good night.

I went to my room, lit a candle, laid-my notes in front of me, and got to thinking about all I had heard from the old man. It was as though I had witnessed the Ubykhs' final journey; I could still hear the screaming and the gun fire. My manuscript seemed drenched in blood and tears.

There are many examples in history when whole nations, much larger than the Ubykhs, disappeared from the face of the earth without a trace. But the Ubykhs ceased to exist not so very long ago; it all happened within one man's life time, but of course, not overnight and not in one year.

From the day they boarded the ships in the hope of finding the Promised Land in Turkey, they doomed them selves to gradual extinction.

Assimilation was and continued to be Turkey's official policy, both under Sultan Abdulhamid and later under the government of the Young Turks.

The turbid and powerful river of assimilation picked up the Ubykhs and forced them into its rapids, as it did to many other peoples. The Young Turks dreamed of uniting all countries inhabited by Muslims, the Caucasus included. They believed that in the Great Ottoman Empire they would thus create, the state religion would be

Islam; the only language would be Turkish; and all nations would be equal— all would be Turks. The small ethnic groups had no choice but to be enveloped and swallowed by the waters of that single river. Those who resisted would end up like Tagir.

The 1917 Socialist Revolution in Russia affected the entire world; word of it also reached the emigres from the Caucasus who were living in Turkey. The emigres still, deep down in their hearts, continued loving their native land. When they heard that after the 1917 Socialist Revolution the other ethnic groups of the Caucasus had become masters of their ancestral territories, many of them wished to return home to their abandoned hearths... When Mikhail Frunze\* was touring Turkey in 1921 some of the Caucasians told him about it.

And so I wasn't surprised when Zaurkan told me about Tagir, who, in spite of all the dangers involved, tried to get through the network of frontlines to Ankara to meet some representative of Soviet Russia.

Archival material shows that many Caucasians living in Turkey were involved in the revolutionary events, although because the political developments were so complicated there were some who were forced to change sides overnight, going from one political extreme to the other.

Like the Ubykh Tagir, whose dream never came true, there were other Caucasian emigres in Turkey who realized the importance of preserving their languages and made at least some attempt to preserve them as well as their customs and their mode of life in general. They sought salvation in enlightenment. They made alphabets and readers, printed small newspapers in their own languages, and organized educational centers for their ethnic communities.

In 1919 Mustafa Butba, of Abkhasian descent, had an Abkhasian reader published in Istanbul. The alphabet he had devised was based on the Latin alphabet. Some Abkhasian schools were even organized here and there and they used Butba's reader.

But those first weak sprouts of enlightenment perished under the pressure of assimilation. They had just barely sprung up when they were pushed back down into the earth.

Because of the many complications of war, some Abkhasians from Turkey ended up in Greece. I once read the letter that they sent in desperation to Sukhumi, to the government of Abkhasia:

"Three years of life in Macedonia, full of the most terrible trials and tribulations, have been unbearable in this climate we are unaccustomed to. Even in Turkey we always looked back on our native villages of Abkhasia. But that was no time to go back. The old system did not want us to return to our native mountains. Now Abkhasia is free and independent, and we Abkhasians, thrown by fate into foreign lands, now more than ever, yearn for our free mountains, our own families, our brothers across the sea. All of us Abkhasians are inspired by a common dream: to serve the free Abkhasian people. We gathered in Kailaria on September 28, 1925, and unanimously agreed to request that the People's Commissariat of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhasia allow us, 700 Abkhasians and their families in Greece, to return to our native villages in free Abkhasia."

Sitting alone in Zaurkan Zolak's home and adding these comments to my manuscript, I thought about many things, including that letter, which revealed the dramatic history of the Abkhasian people, and not them alone.

Through the narrow window I could see a bright star shining in the distance, and suddenly I remembered Abkhasia and the home where I was born and where my mother now lived alone. Maybe she can't get to sleep tonight either...

All night long I could hear Zaurkan coughing and moaning in his sleep.

I wasn't able to fall asleep until early in the morning. When I got up I found out that the old man was sick; he couldn't get out of bed. He tried not to moan, but I could see he was straining to hide his pain; his sunken eyes showed the suffering. He couldn't eat anything; from time to time he swallowed some water and smoked.

For three days Biram and I tried to do what we could for Zaurkan, but how was it possible to cure the illness called old age?

I couldn't stay any longer; my overseas passport was expiring.

The morning of the day I was due to leave, Zaurkan called me to him:

"My dear Sharakh, don't worry about leaving: I'll either recover or, if I see I can't go on any longer, I'll quietly meet my death. I saw you, an Abkhasian, my mother's relative, the son of the people from whose body I came, and I was able to tell you all about my bitter experiences. And you brought me the good news that the Abkhasians and Abkhasia are still inseparable."

The old man called Biram and whispered a few words in his ear. He went out and returned with a brass horn and a big Caucasian dagger. The old man held them for a long time in his trembling hands looking them over.

"Dear Sharakh, this is all that's left of the Ubykhs who have disappeared from the face of the earth. Take these things with you to Abkhasia! With Biram they are silent, but they will talk to you. If they stay here, they'll end up in alien hands when I die. But if you take them they'll return to their native land."

I thanked him for these precious gifts, and made every effort to keep Zaurkan from getting out of bed. But he wouldn't hear of it and got up. He donned his old shirt and Circassian coat, put his Astrakhan hat on his head, picked up his staff, and walked me to the gate. It was only there, after he hugged and kissed me, wishing me a good journey, that he let me leave.

Biram helped me carry my baggage to the nearest road. We walked slowly along the plains, and when I looked back I could see Zaurkan standing on the mound; a lone figure, all that remained of an old fortress wall...

I didn't look back anymore. I wanted to remember him that way. And I want him to appear that way, like the last proud fragment of the past, to others when they read the book about him that I will most certainly write. This book will be based on my notes of his story.

## **AFTERWORD**

Those were the last lines in the manuscript written by the young linguist, Sharakh Kvadzba. As I said in the beginning, the manuscript had no title and no chapters, so when I was getting it ready for publication I broke it up into chapters myself, invented the titles, and called the book *The Last of the Departed*.