

IX

OSMAN DOBRA: TARTAR-JEW

I.

ON THE DAY OF MY DEPARTURE FOR THE CITY OF Simferopol—the capital of the Crimean Republic—where the offices of the Ozet, Komzet and the Agro-Joint are located, the colonists gathered in full force to see me off. Because of the holiday they did little work that day and most of them were in an elated mood. Feygele was there; Dinah, the serious-faced Komsomolka, Nachman and, of course, Leah.

As usual Leah did the talking. “*Nu-u*,” she said paraphrasing the old Hebrew saying, “Next year in Jerusalem,” “Next Year in Biro-Bidjan.”

“Nothing doing,” interrupted the secretary of the Komsomol, “next year in Soviet America . . .”

Everybody wished me luck and the girls remarked jestingly that I ought to learn more jazz steps if I ever intended to visit their kolhoz again.

Hardly had our Chevrolet moved when I heard someone calling: “Mr. American . . . Mr. . . .”

I turned my head: Hyman, his long coat flopping in the wind, like the wings of a crow, was running after us waving a piece of paper: “My brother’s address, Mr. American . . .”

I asked the driver to stop the car but comrade Efim only smiled cynically.

"That's all right," he said, "he has already sent over about a dozen addresses. Let him better do a little work for a change." He stepped on the gas and Hyman was left behind.

2.

It was my intention to spend one day in Simferopol and then go direct to Moscow, but I remained almost a week in that city and instead of going direct to Moscow, as I had planned, I yielded to the insistence of almost everyone at the Agro-Joint office that I visit Crimea's famous Eastern shore.

I did not regret it: it was on one of those enchanting and memorable evenings in the Crimean mountains that I met Osman Dobra, the Tartar Jew. Early that day, together with my friend Chaskin, we left Simferopol. Our destination, as I have indicated, was the Eastern shore of the Black Sea—the Russian Riviera—whose azure bays, bold highlands and other wonders, so the story goes, at one time inspired men like Homer, Euripides, Goethe and even our own Mark Twain.

Next to Kiev, Simferopol, particularly its ancient Tartar section, crowded by tiny crooked streets and flat-roofed oriental houses, remains one of the most vivid images in my mind. Here Tartars intermingle with Jews, Greeks with Russians, Caraites with Turks. At one time each of these nationalities dominated Crimea and most of them had their capital in

Simferopol. More than two thousand years ago, this city, then known as Neapolis, was the capital of the Scythians. Even today one can still find ruins of palaces erected by the Scythian ruler, Skilura.

In 1802, Simferopol—which means in Greek the gatherer of cities—was captured by the Russian queen, Catherine the Great, and made the center of the Crimean district. But between the rules of the Scythians and Catherine the Great, Crimea or, as the ancient Greeks referred to it, Taurida, was in turn dominated by Greeks, Khozars (a Turkish people who later embraced Judaism), Tartars and Turks. Naturally, each people left traces of its culture and customs—ruins, monuments, cemeteries—which make Simferopol, even as the rest of the Crimean peninsula, one of the most colorful and unique places in the world.

After the Bolshevik revolution, because of the predominance of Tartars, the Crimea was made an autonomous Tartar Republic with Simferopol as its capital.

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Past Simferopol we crossed the steppe where the Jewish collective farms are situated, and the road began to wind in zig-zags up the mountains. Our Chevrolet wound in and out and towards noon we reached the summit of Ai-Petri, the highest mountain peak in the Crimea.

Chaskin who had for some time maintained an unbroken silence suddenly began to speak:

"Look, observe well! This is the Crimea. This is

the ancient Taurida, whose grandeur and beauty even Homer and Euripides could not resist . . ."

Chaskin was right; a magnificent panorama unfolded before our eyes. Spread along the slopes were picturesque Tartar villages; their cabins, like some mysterious caves, were partly carved into the rocky mountains. In the distance, like a silvery streak, stretched the Black Sea. Its salt tang intermingled with the aroma of roses, rare plants and shrubs that emerged from the famous Nikitski Gardens. This, combined with the innumerable vineyards, rocks and cypresses to be seen everywhere, created a landscape that only a great poet or painter could depict.

It was already dark when we arrived at the Tartar village, Semeiz. The Tartars, after their day's work in the vineyards or tobacco plantations, were resting in little groups on top of a cliff. Puffing at long, curiously shaped pipes, they conversed quietly among themselves. The appearance of our Chevrolet disturbed the tranquillity of the atmosphere. Recognizing Chaskin, a frequent visitor to Simeiz, they greeted us with a friendly: "*Mirhaba . . . mirhaba . . .*"

Chaskin had some business at this village. He inquired after the chairman of the village Soviet.

"You mean Osman Dobra," ventured a young Tartar, "he is still at the vineyard. He is working hard, the old man."

He sent a little Tartar girl to call him and invited us to join his group. As usual, the moment they learned that I was an American, they began to bombard me with numerous questions. Soon, however,

the conversation reverted to their own problems. They spoke about politics, vineyards, tobacco and morality. A group of young Tartar boys and girls, singing the latest revolutionary songs, passed us. This called forth a bitter complaint on the part of a shrivelled up octogenarian:

"Everything is different now," he murmured under his breath. "Our girls go with strange men. They don't even cover their faces. Things were different in my day."

It was a pathetic complaint of old age. The old Tartars sighed. The young Tartars merely smiled condescendingly, showing their white teeth.

"Tell me, father," I said, "was it better in the old days?"

"In the old days?" repeated the old man meditatively. "In the old days . . ." It was obvious that he was comparing in his mind the old with the new life. Before he had a chance to answer, another Tartar who stood aside from our group interrupted.

"No," he said ironically, "no, now is better. Don't you see in what a good automobile you are riding? . . ."

He was going to say something else but he was rudely stopped by a powerful voice that came from the back: "You've got a snake's tongue, Ali-Ben."

We turned our heads: a tall, slenderly built Tartar was approaching us. He was a man of about fifty, with a wrinkled face and black, Semitic eyes. From beneath his Tartar sheepskin cap, a few hairs of a golden-reddish tint stuck out. His dress, bearing and Russian pronunciation was like that of the rest of

the Tartars; and yet, he seemed to me to be quite different from those that I had seen during my visit to the Crimea.

"Osman Dobra, *mirhaba!*" exclaimed Chaskin.

We shook hands and without any further preliminaries, Osman continued the interrupted conversation.

"You see, Ali-Ben is a snake. He owned a lot of land before the Revolution. He would lick the Tsarist officials' boots and betray his brother Tartars to the Russians. He is what we call a kulak. The Revolution made him equal to us and now he is grumbling, the dog!"

I looked at Ali-Ben. He was pale. His eyes seemed to be seeking support among his fellow Tartars, but all he encountered was a sign of hatred.

"So-o-o," he at last stammered out, "you are all against me, you are all with *the Jew . . .*"

He began to move backwards. Luckily for him, the road was clear, for at that moment a young Tartar, his fists clenched, jumped up and began to shout: "Snake, kulak, Tsarist dog!"

This scene made no impression at all upon Osman Dobra. As soon as the excitement subsided, we resumed our conversation.

"Don't mind him," he said. "This is not the first time that we quarrel with Ali-Ben. We have not as yet cleansed ourselves from the poison of Tsarist propaganda. Our life is still chaotic. The Tartars have been oppressed for centuries and you can't expect them to act like free human beings all at once. Yes, our life changes slowly, but it changes . . ."

Then, as though seeking for an image strong enough to impress upon me the significance of his words, he took my hand and led me toward the end of the cliff. Two rocks, almost human in form, rose in front of us. In the distance loomed a mountain bearing a striking resemblance to a cat.

He remained silent for a moment and then continued:

"Do you see those rocks?—we call them the 'Monk' and 'Diva.' Do you see the 'cat-mountain' crouching at the Black Sea as though it were quenching its thirst? Have you seen the palaces of the Tsar in Levadia and the wine cellars of Prince Yussouppoff? Once upon a time all this belonged to us. The Russian Tsar took it away from us. He cheated us and robbed us. They made us slaves in their wine cellars. They made us squeeze our own grapes while they squeezed our blood . . ."

With this part of Osman's story I was well acquainted. I have read a great deal about the Tsarist oppression of the various nationalities that have populated the vast Russian empire, particularly the Tartars, Jews and Georgians. In 1802 after Crimea was invaded once more by Russian soldiers, the Tartars were subjected to the most inhuman oppression. As a result, many of them fled to Turkey. Even to this day along the railroad from Sebastopol to Yalta, one can see deserted and ruined Tartar villages. Perhaps no one has described better the plight of these people than the great Russian author, Tolstoy. I still remember his grimly realistic scene of the punishment of a Tartar who, having been drafted

into the Russian army after he was deprived of his property at the whim of a Russian landowner, attempted to desert.

"Soldiers in black uniforms, holding fast their rifles, stood motionless opposite each other in two rows. Behind them stood the drummer and flute player who kept on repeating the same monotonous and screeching tunes . . . Shivering with his whole body, stamping with his bare feet on the snow, the Tartar, under the rain of blows was slowly moving towards me. At times he would fall backwards, then the soldiers would push him forward, or he would lean forward, then the soldiers would pull him back, to keep him from falling. At each blow, the punished man, as though surprised, would turn his face in the direction where the blow was coming from . . . He would repeat the same monotonous groan: 'Brothers, have pity on me. Brothers, have pity. . . .'"

Osman Dobra lit his curiously shaped pipe and began to puff slowly. Apparently he was through making speeches for the day. But there was still one question, a curious incident that I wanted him to explain.

I could, of course, understand Ali-Ben's hatred for Osman. Ali-Ben had been a rich landowner. The Revolution had deprived him of his property. In Osman, who was the chairman of the village Soviet, he saw the symbol of the Revolution. To be sure, as I later found out from the old Tartar woman, Abibulla (I gave her some Lucky Strikes for the information), even more than his property, Ali-Ben re-

sented the influence of the Bolshevik ideas upon his young and beautiful wife, Fatima.

It seems that shortly before the Revolution, Ali-Ben decided to take as his second wife the beautiful sixteen-year-old Fatima. Fatima's parents were poor tobacco growers. They considered it an honor that their daughter should be the wife of Ali-Ben-Effendi. But not so Fatima.

Before the Revolution the will of the husband among the Tartars was supreme. After the Revolution, however, the Tartars, like the rest of the Russian nationalities, underwent a complete social and cultural transformation.

Fatima was the first one among the Tartar women to discard the veil which all Tartar women wore before the Revolution. During my sojourn in Yalta, perhaps the most luxurious place on the Eastern shore, where the Tsar used to spend his winter vacations in his famous palace—now a workers' and peasants' rest home—I often saw Fatima. Always wearing a red kerchief, she unceasingly wandered from Tartar village to village haranguing the Tartars and agitating them about equality and freedom, much to the chagrin of the older generation of Tartars but to the satisfaction of the young ones.

Still, as I have already said, there was one thing that excited my curiosity and would not let me rest.

"Tell me, Comrade Dobra," I finally said, "why did Ali-Ben call you a Jew? Surely this is one place where there aren't any Jews."

"You are wrong, my friend," said Dobra. "There are quite a few Jews in these mountains. You are a

Jew, aren't you? I am a Jew, too, a real Jew, even like you."

It was then I heard for the first time the story of the Krymchaks, the Crimean Jews. In colorful strokes, Osman Dobra recreated a chapter in the history of the Jews. I shall repeat here merely the gist of his story.

About the fifth century, a people of Turkish origin known as the Khozars ruled between Byzantium and the original Russia of the Dnieper. Long before the Varangians established the Russian state, the Khozars were already firmly established in the Crimea and most of Southern Russia. Their capital, "Atell," situated on the banks of the Volga was then the most renowned cultural and commercial center.

According to legends, Jews who fled Greece from the mania of conversion which possessed the Byzantine emperor, Leo the Isaurian, found a welcome refuge in the Kingdom of the Khozars.

"One day," related Osman Dobra, "the King Bulan of the Khozars had a vision. He decided to change the religion of his people from Paganism to the belief in one god. For this purpose he invited to his castle a Christian, a Mohammedan and a Jew. He spoke to the Christian first. 'Tell me,' he said, 'if you had to choose between Mohammedanism and Judaism, which religion would you choose?' The Christian, jealous of the influence of Mohammedanism, chose the Jewish religion. Bulan then asked the Mohammedan what religion he would choose between Christianity and Judaism. The Mohammedan, too, chose the Jewish religion.

"It was then that the Khozars adopted Judaism. They began to intermarry with the Jews. I, myself, according to our family tradition, am a descendant of one of Bulan's sons who married a Jewish girl."*

After the Khozars were defeated by the Russians, many of them migrated to Europe, particularly to Spain. The majority of them, however, remained living on the Crimean peninsula. Their descendants, the Krymchaks—only fifteen hundred of them remain—are altogether unlike the Jews of Russia. In them the Semitic and Tartar elements are intimately blended. Also, in their mode of life, dress and language they are in no way different from the Tartars. They do, however, adhere strictly to the Jewish faith, even to Talmudic Judaism.

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Night was slowly descending upon us when we took leave of Osman Dobra. Our circle had dwindled to a few. The old men were fast asleep. Among the cliffs resounded the singing and merry laughter of the growing generation of Tartars.

* This, as I discovered later, is a legend current also among other mountain Jews in Russia.