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WHY IS THERE SO MUCH EVIL IN THE WORLD?

Leon Z. Surmelian

THE CROSS PASS on the Georgian Military Road opened out before us like a flat plateau suspended in midair. We stopped and gazed at the gleaming peaks. The brooding giants of the Caucasus stood like grave, hoary warriors with white pointed beards, carrying silver shields and lances, some of them doing guard duty as sentries on this traditional boundary line between Europe and Asia, others holding eternal war council.

None of us spoke. It seemed that I had flown away from the earth and become all spirit, and perfect. I was witnessing a serene meeting of mountain chiefs in the immortality of death, a peaceful, blessed festival of deathless men in death. These pure heroic beings in this Caucasian valhalla were indifferent to events on earth, and I felt a sweet homecoming in my ascension.

I seemed to hear a heavenly music of pipes and drums, guitars and tambourines, coming from that enchanting realm of snow-white sun, and saw myself moving toward it—moving with the assurance of getting a welcome. They would recognize me as one belonging to their supernatural tribe. I lived a moment of immortality, so beautiful was the scene.

As we walked across the Pass in awed silence, our feet singing in the blizzard-swept crust, though it was June and the sun hot in the valleys below, the bearded mountainchiefs moved along with us, stepping up in their white topboots and dancing a grand aerial war dance in sparkling vacancies of holy blue.

I looked at the long line of refugees stretching across the Pass and descending to the other side, at the pale, hungry faces of my companions, and thought how beautiful was nature in contrast to man. There were some two hundred thousand people on the road, escaping

to Soviet Russia. We boys were homeless, fleeing from the Turks who had killed our parents and would have killed us too if they had caught us. We did not know what was in store for us in Soviet Russia, where men too had lost their reason and become ferocious beasts.

"What will happen to all these people?" asked a gaunt, hook-nosed man who trudged along with a knapsack on his back, the cuffs of his trousers gathered in his socks—a provincial school teacher who had read all the great poets. "We have been an unfortunate nation, cursed by fate. Aharonian says in one of his poems, 'Woe to us if our sons ever forget so much evil!' Let's hope some sons will be left to remember all this evil."

Not only the Turks, Kurds, and Azeris were massacring Armenians, but Armenians retaliated by massacring them. After the Russian Revolution almost the whole Caucasian front, from the Black Sea to Baku and Iran, was defended by a handful of Armenians against the Turkish and German armies, and no less formidable enemies in the rear. From Trebizond to Erzinjan, from Erzurum to Kars, from Van to Erevan, as well as in Baku, Armenians slaughtered tens of thousands of Turks and Moslems, treating the guilty and innocent alike. They destroyed and burnt down hundreds of Moslem villages.

One of our teachers in Trebizond, a poet^a burning with revenge, whose family the Turks had massacred, had joined one of the most heroic but merciless Armenian bands. When I met him later in Tiflis, and he brought me a volume of his verse he had just published, I recoiled from him and did not shake his hand—though I had been his favorite pupil—because I could almost see the blood of Moslem peasants on his hands. He preferred not to talk about what he had seen, or done, and I had the feeling he was ashamed of himself. I knew, it was kill or be killed. If it had not been for the Vladikavkaz Soviet the Mohammedan Ingushes along the Georgian Military Road would have robbed and butchered us. Nevertheless, I was disturbed. We had been contaminated by the evil we wanted to fight. Like an infectious disease it had passed from our enemy to us.

Yes, the world was full of evil. But I had the feeling that I had just taken a pilgrimage to some sacred temple in the heavens, and now cleansed and purified, was returning to the world. Returning to the world to fight that evil.

The road wound through tunnels and galleries built to protect it against falling rocks and avalanches. And soon we came upon another

breath-taking scene: hundreds of cataracts racing down the mighty heights like long columns of elfin lancers riding headlong on the bare backs of snow-white horses—the narrow river gorge where they converged booming with the echoes of their silver hoofs.

“Marvelous country, Georgia,” the hook-nosed teacher said. “No wonder the Georgians never emigrate. But their geographic position is more fortunate than ours. They haven’t been like us, in everybody’s way. They too have suffered, though. They too have been massacred and enslaved. Plenty of blood has flown in these mountains—and is still flowing. Men have fought here all the time. Look at all these towers and castles along the road, built centuries ago. Have you ever seen a genuine Caucasian without a dagger?”

The scenery began getting barer and grimmer. The mountains gradually shed their forests. The prevailing color of the landscape turned from green to white-and-grey. We had entered the great dominions of the eagle and the hawk.

From time to time I glanced at the wild, pure beauty of the sublime mountains around us, wondering at the mysterious cosmic forces that had crystallized this huge and delicate spectacle—the earth’s lovely white breasts, it seemed.

A band of Ingush horsemen rode by in their black *burkas*—long hairy capes with stiff square shoulders—like a band of devils. These Mohammedan tribesmen looked at us with their fierce, hostile eyes as they galloped off.

“The devil take them,” the teacher said. “These Ingushes are the worst cut-throats in the Caucasus. Highway robbery and murder is an old tribal profession with them. But they have had a hard time with the Terek Cossacks. They are a Chechen tribe, and have a funny language of their own, but they generally speak a Turkish dialect. You won’t have any trouble understanding them.”

He told us of their customs, and of their famous Imam, Shamyl, who conducted a Holy War against the Russians at the head of the Chechens, Circassians, and the numerous tribes of Daghestan.

“Shamyl had several wives, but his favorite was a young Armenian girl whom he captured during one of his forays. He was a man of the most fanatic courage. The Russians sent their best generals against him, and systematically destroyed the crops and orchards of the rebellious tribes, smoked them out of their forests, burnt down their villages which cling to rocks like honeycombs. Both sides were ruthless. I

have read somewhere Americans did the same to the Indians." A smile broke on his lips. "Such has been the history of civilization."

We stopped at a road inn, a group of us older boys, and the teacher treated us to wine—the famous Kakhetia wine of Georgia. The inn was a log cabin made homey for its regular patrons with leopard, bear, and fox skins, with the branched head of a deer nailed above the counter. Seated around a thick, rude table gruff-voiced, bushy-browed Georgians were drinking and talking.

"*Gajimarjos!*" Victory be yours! the teacher greeted them in Georgian.

"*Gamarjibas!*" they said in chorus, wishing us victory in return. They were strapping fellows, in huge Caucasian sheepskin caps, cart-ridge-pouches across the breasts of their tunics, held tight at the waist with narrow silver belts. Their glove-tight topboots came up to their knees. Each had a dagger stuck into his belt.

The innkeeper untied the string from the foreleg of a bloated pig-skin—and out gushed the red wine, looking like blood. He filled a metal container, and then poured our glasses. I felt very romantic and grown up. The fiery wine was soon racing through my veins.

I was a bit unsteady on my feet, and we boys were singing the Song of Kazbek at the sight of that mountain. It begins with the words:

We have many legends and tales!

At Kazbek station the king of the Caucasus loomed before us in all its terrific bulk. Its vast silver shields shattered the setting sun, and its glaciers blazed like rivers of flame.

"It's higher than Mont Blanc," the teacher said.

The driver of a two-wheeled prehistoric bullock cart we had hired to carry our belongings, an Ossete tribesman, pushed his sheepskin cap back over his head, and like us kept looking at the mountain with wonder and awe. He said in their language it was called Christ's Mountain, and told us an Ossete tale about it: how God punished a giant for violating his secret and bound him with chains to the top of this mountain, and had a vulture eat his heart.

"A local variant of the Prometheus legend," the teacher commented, rolling a cigarette. "There are several in the Caucasus. Prometheus, who tried to be the liberator of mankind by stealing the fire of heaven—Zeus' secret—and teaching man the arts of civilization, was chained or crucified on Kazbek—or so it is claimed. Now you can say you have seen Kazbek too, the most famous mountain next to our Ararat."

Strange that it should be called Christ's Mountain, I thought.

Christ and Prometheus: both loved man, wanted to save him, and both were crucified.

The father of the Greek gods hated man and wished to destroy him. Our God too destroyed all men, except Noah and his family, with the flood. A vision of Noah's Ark, resting on Ararat, rose before my eyes.

Zeus and God—they were so much alike. As were Christ and Prometheus.

But—could it be possible that as Prometheus was crucified by Zeus, Christ was crucified by God?

Perish the thought!

But after all nothing could happen, I argued with myself, without God's knowledge and will. And why is God so cruel and unjust? If he is our loving heavenly father then why is there so much evil in the world, so much suffering? Why should there be wars, famine, disease, floods, earthquakes, in a world ruled by a good God? But if all this is the work of the devil, then why did God create the devil?

I wished I could ask these questions to God himself. They kept popping up in my mind as I looked at Kazbek and the cross on the old Georgian church in the village at the foot of it.

We slept in that village that night. The next morning, as we resumed our journey, and I found myself walking again in that endless caravan of woe up a mountain road that struck me as another Golgotha of our people, I was troubled by questions I dared not voice, and the answers of which I do not know to this day.

Do you?