

A Flautist in Flight

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At the Vienna airport, soon after we had landed there [on 7 June 1987], I briefly met a refugee my age, a musician. He was traveling with his parents, younger sister, and grandparents. They were from Baku, Mountain Jews. In Vienna their family and ours were put up in different refugee hostels. My father met the musician's father on our second day in Vienna in the JIAS offices. Their last name was Abramov and they were on their way to Florida, where they had family in Miami.

About two weeks after we had settled in Ladispoli [outside Rome], I decided to get a haircut and walked over to a barber shop located two blocks from our apartment building on Via Fiume. For the price of a dry haircut one could get four small gelatos, each with three different flavors. My mother then asked around on the beach and was told that one Abramov, a barber from Baku, was giving haircuts at his home for only about two dollars, the price of one gelato. The following afternoon, after what was becoming a customary siesta, I headed for the makeshift refugee barber shop.

It was in the eastern section of Ladispoli's central quarter, in a street of small villas, shady inner courtyards, crumbling stone walls, and oversized orchards, where many Soviet refugee families rented rooms. One side of a green gate was slightly ajar, and I entered through it, crossing the courtyard of a

decrepit villa, in the middle of which a *putto* pressed his ashen lips to a nonworking water fountain. Outside the gate, shirtless children were kicking a deflated soccer ball and screaming in Russian. In the back of the courtyard, under the shadow of an old quince, I saw a hirsute man slouched in a chair and Abramov giving him a shave. Instead of the heavy woolen derby I'd seen him wear at the Vienna airport, Abramov was now wearing a taupe summer cap. Next to him, on a three-legged stool, was a basin of water. Abramov's daughter stood next to her father, smiling and holding a cup with foam and a towel. A few steps away, under a maze of undulating vines, an antediluvian couple sat on two chairs, just as they had on a suitcase at the Vienna airport, dressed in the same outfits, including the old man's astrakhan. A dagger was attached to the belt of the old man's fitted coat. Silent and motionless, the old couple observed their son's performance on the refugee, a piano tuner from Belarus whom I'd previously met in Vienna. Like cherry petals, the piano tuner's large curls rhythmically fell to the ground. "Like cherry blossoms in a Russian orchard," I thought to myself at the time. "Like cherry blossoms in DC," I edit myself now.

The barber from Baku sprayed his client with something that smelled like an air freshener, like in a real Soviet barber shop, then took the money and stuffed it in the pocket of his linen trousers. He

then dangled a new cigarette out of the corner of his mouth and invited me to the chair. The girl wrapped a sheet around my neck and tied its corners in the back.

“What are we doing?” the barber from Baku asked quietly, like a singer sparing his voice.

“Just a trim,” I answered.

“I met your father in Vienna,” Abramov said in a deadpan voice. “A kind, educated man.”

“Uh-huh.”

“So what do you want to do in America?” asked the barber, scissors clacking.

“I’m not really sure.”

“Not sure?” he cackled.

“Study,” I replied, irritated by the man’s intrusiveness. “Make something of myself.”

“I’ll tell you what.” Abramov stopped cutting my hair and wiped his brow with a white handkerchief big enough to serve as an armistice flag. “Who lived well there will live well here.”

What could I answer to such a maxim? Nothing, really. Abramov and I didn’t speak for the rest of the haircut.

As I was getting up from the chair, having already refused the offer of being sprayed with air freshener, the old man in the astrakhan suddenly jumped up from his seat, like a Jack-in-the-box, and minced up to me on his crooked horseman’s legs. He spoke in fearsome, heavily accented Russian, the words knocking against his teeth like rocks in a mountain

stream.

“Have you heard the name Juhuro, son?” he asked.

“No,” I answered.

“Figures. What do young men know these days? Juhuro, that’s what we call ourselves in our language. We’re Mountain Jews. You sometimes call us Tats, but we call ourselves Juhuro. You understand?”

“Yes, I understand. And I’ve heard of Mountain Jews—from my father.”

The old man straightened the belt of his coat and made smacking noises with his lips.

“Do you know what an *aoul* is?” he then asked, disdainfully.

“Sure I do. Everyone knows that. An *aoul* is a Turkic word, it means ‘mountain village.’”

“Well,” the old man continued. “If you know that, you should also know that my ancestors lived in the same *aoul* since the fifth century. And before that... We are from the lost tribes of Israel, you see. We’d been in the Caucasus a long, long time. Long before the Azeris and various others. We were all warriors and winegrowers in my family, and I’m the last one.” The old man looked me in the eye and violently shook his head, the top of the astrakhan striking me. It was warm, so warm that it felt like a ram nudging me on the temple.

“What did your grandfathers do during the war?” asked the old warrior.

“One commanded a tank unit and later a torpedo boat unit that stormed Königsberg—”

“—and I,” he interrupted, beating himself on the chest with his clenched fists, “and I cleansed the Caucasus of the collaborationist dogs. Don’t believe anything they tell you. These dogs greeted the Germans like their liberators. We Juhuro fought against the bastards.”

Saliva now sprayed from the old warrior’s mouth. He grabbed me by the arm and held me, and I couldn’t get away without pushing him—which would have been awfully rude, considering I was in the lap of this patriarchal family from the Caucasus. My captor saw that he could do anything with me, and he triumphantly switched the subject from family history to family woes. His son, the barber from Baku, stood under the shadow of the old quince, awaiting his next customer, smoking, and observing his father not without pleasure. The warrior’s granddaughter stood beside her father, still holding a cup with lather and a towel, and still smiling like a village idiot. Smiling at what?

“My son moved to the city. You’ve heard of Baku, right? That’s where they ship the oil from, so my son had a barber shop and did fine for himself, but he wanted to make more money and dragged us along.” What he was saying no longer made any sense to me, and I had trouble nodding to the old man’s words. “All of you young people are a bunch of lazy good-for-nothings. Have you met my grandson Aleksandr?”

“Just briefly, at the airport. In Vienna, when we first arrived,” I replied.

“My grandson’s a sissy. I have two other grandsons—in the Israeli army. My older son went there in the seventies. They are warriors, like real men in our family. But my daughter is in Florida with her husband and kids. They’ve got a family business there, and that’s where...Ah, it’s no use.” The old

man bent over in a paroxysm of coughing and let go of my wrist and T-shirt.

I paid and turned around, preparing to make my exit, when I saw Aleksandr Abramov, the young musician with whom I’d briefly spoken at the Vienna airport. He was dressed in a rumpled white shirt and gray pinstriped slacks. He came up to me and put out his hand, small like a child’s. I shook it.

“Let’s take a walk together,” he proposed, gently taking me by the wrist and leading me out of the courtyard and into the street. Sea-green rain clouds had gathered over Ladispoli by the time our walk brought us to a poorly lit establishment in the train station square, where a couple of drunks argued politics with a long-armed, sloppily peroxidized woman who was tending the bar. I bought us each a Coca-Cola, and we sat there for about an hour, waiting for the summer downpour to subside and to release us.

“I’m sorry you had to deal with my family,” he said. “Grandfather has somehow gotten an old blade through customs. What was he thinking, the old moron? And he now wears it attached to his stupid belted jacket. He says it’s to defend the family honor. But I detest all that medieval barbarism and my grandfather’s cruelty—he’s killed men, you know—and also my father’s crude barbershop jokes. I only love my mother and little sister...and...,” he paused, holding back the tears and fishing for a lighter in his pocket. “I just want to be left alone,” he finally said, taking a long drag of smoke.

Aleksandr and I never became friends. Over the rest of the summer we would exchange an odd remark, trade a couple of words or a handshake, but not more. Our sole lengthy conversation occurred on that July afternoon, in a train station bar under pouring rain, after a haircut by his father and his

grandfather's lecture on Mountain Jews. Aleksandr needed to unbotle himself, and I simply came along to serve as a chance confessor.

Aleksandr didn't ask me anything about myself and the Moscow world I'd left behind. He only asked one thing:

"What was it like for you, growing up Jewish?"

"It was tough," I replied. "Especially in middle school." I didn't feel like getting further into the subject.

"I've heard about it from some other kids here in Ladispoli." The "it" referred to the taunting of Jewish children by their non-Jewish peers. "I personally have never felt discriminated against as a Jew," said Aleksandr. "In our yard in Baku all neighborhood kids played together." He held the Coca-Cola bottle by the neck between his thumb and middle finger, letting it sway and keep time with his words.

"We were like a family—Azeris, Armenians, Russians, Ukrainians, European Jews, Mountain Jews, you name it. Oh, you have no idea. It was such a happy life. I didn't want to leave, you know. I had everything there. I went to a special school for musically gifted children. At our Baku conservatory I had the best teachers. Oh, it was wonderful there. When we were leaving my whole neighborhood came to say goodbye. We all walked to the cabs, like brothers, arm in arm. I will never forget that, you see, never. And he was there, too."

"He who?" I asked automatically, without thinking.

"Just why did we have to leave?!" Aleksandr wailed, shifting his gaze toward one of the gesticulating drunks who was falling over the bar. "I just want to play my flute and be with him."

In my post-Soviet chivalry, I was quite innocent of anything that didn't concern liking girls.

"You understand, friend, don't you?" Aleksandr asked, and placed his limpid hand on top of mine, prostrate on the table like a dead animal.

Ignoring my hypnotized stare, Aleksandr took the last gulp of his Coca-Cola and said, "To my simple parents he was an Azeri. To my fanatical grandfather he was a Muslim dog. But he was Adonis to me, you understand. Adonis."

The rain had stopped, and moisture quickly dried on Ladispoli's sparkly gills. We walked back to the sea without saying anything to each other.

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