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Land of Fire

The Caucasus is located in the very south of the Soviet Union, bordering on Turkey and Iran. It consists of three Soviet republics: Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Strictly speaking, the region is Asian rather than European, the customary delineation being considered the Western Manych. And yet these three major Caucasian nationalities identify neither with Asia, nor with Europe, nor, for that matter, with each other. Each is proud of its individual cultural heritage; each has a long history of artistic development; each is famous for its generosity and hospitality to strangers. Of the three, Georgia is undoubtedly the most celebrated by the Russians in poetry, painting, and travel literature. Well-known Russian poets, including Akhmadulina and Evtushenko, who have long enjoyed Georgian hospitality, have reciprocated by translating Georgian classical and contemporary literature into Russian. Beyond the borders of the Soviet Union, Armenian communities have long had an interest in efforts to develop their ethnic, if not actual, homeland. Azerbaijan, the one Muslim republic of the three, is the least known. Volodya and I have just returned from this area, where we travelled at times as university guests, at times as tourists.

Azerbaijan (population 6,600,000), located in eastern Transcaucasia, is known as the land of fire. The word "Azerbaijan," derived from the Arabic azer (fire), refers to constant flames, burning underground gas at the surface of the earth. The presence of enormous oil and gas reserves has played a significant role in Azerbaijan's cultural, as well as economic development. This area is the center of fire worship, where pilgrims have travelled from as far away as India. As the oil fields began to be developed in the 1870's for industrial purposes, the ethnic composition of the region began to change. The area, populated by rural and semi-nomadic Azeri Turks, could not provide enough workers to support economic growth. Foreign workers poured in to take jobs in the oil industry. By the early years of this century, the capital city of Baku had become an international center, inhabited by foreigners at every class level. The oil production itself was largely in the hands of foreign capital, including the Nobel and Rothschild families. Today, about seventy different nationalities live in Azerbaijan, the largest groups being Azeri Turks (67%), Russians (14%), and Armenians (12%). While most of Azerbaijan industry is in one way or another associated with oil production--refineries, cracking plants, engineering works, and various chemical industries--this republic is also famous for its cotton, tea, tobacco, and fruit production, including grapes, apricots, peaches, cherries, and quince. Azeri Turkish carpets, known for their intricate designs and durability, often include the flame design, better known to Westerners as the "Indian" paisley print. In fact, the paisley shape originates from the Azeri region.

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Baku (population 1,700,000), capital of the republic, derives its name from the Turkish badkude, a sudden gust that comes down from the mountain. Baku is indeed a windy city, and Azeri Turkish has many different words to differentiate among the winds: ghilawar (a warm, southern wind), khazri (a cold, northern wind), and so forth. Baku is also an extremely dry city. Before minimal irrigation and pump systems were built in the twentieth century, fresh water was a more valuable commodity than oil; many families had an oil well in the back courtyard, but few could afford the fresh water brought in by boat from the Kura River in Georgia or from the Volga. Those who could not afford this expense relied on salt-water wells. Today, water is still in short supply and carefully rationed throughout the year. Considerable efforts have been made to devote water resources to maintaining parks and wooded areas--mostly cypress, pine, and olive trees--in the city itself. One acquaintance, an agronomist who works for the municipal parks system, cited an estimate that an average of six hundred rubles (about \$720) is budgeted for the maintenance of each tree planted in the city. "We are not even as badly off as Erevan," he said, referring to the capital of the neighboring republic, Armenia. "We at least are located on the Caspian Sea. In Erevan, the cost is higher still, and about a quarter of the trees planted there are lost to the climatic conditions."

However grim these estimates are, Baku is no longer the Black City, described in the early years of this century: Vladimir Maiakovskii once called it a city of only two or three green leaves, and Maksim Gorkii described it as a vision of hell. Only gradually has the city been transformed into one where plants could survive at all. The goal, my agronomist acquaintance said, of forty square metres of greenery per capita has now been reached, and a green belt has been planted around the city.

Our trip to Baku was a classic example of Intourist mismanagement. Having paid for and reserved everything in advance, we arrived to discover that there was no record of us anywhere - no visas, no hotel room, no ticket back to Moscow. As our time ticked away in the Service Bureau of the hotel, I could not help but speculate on the efficiency and economy of a surveillance system that managed to so restrict our activities at our own expense. By the time the mix-up was sorted out and we were legally in Baku, only one day remained of our three-day visit.

During part of that day, Volodya and I signed up for a tour of Baku. We were taken through Icheri Shekher, or the Inner City, surrounded by thick walls, which, until around 1840, had contained the entire town. Built and rebuilt from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries, these walls were last used for defense in 1826 against the Persians. With Russia's victory in the Russo-Persian War, which ended in 1828, the Azerbaijan region became part of the Russian Empire, by which it had de facto been annexed as early as 1723.

Among the architectural monuments we were shown in Icheri Shekher was the twelfth-century Virgin's Tower, built in the reign of Sultan Musad as part of the city's fortifications. Twenty-five metres high, with walls five metres thick, this tower was originally surrounded by the Caspian Sea, now receded far from the tower's base. The tower's name is usually explained

in one of two ways. The guide told us about a Baku khan, who had sent his baby daughter away at birth, met her, now a grown woman, and fell in love with her. She, knowing her royal parentage, refused his hand in marriage. The khan persisted; finally, the daughter, in desperation, promised to marry him in a year's time. Meanwhile, she lived in the tower. When a year had gone by, the daughter, hearing footsteps climbing the 116 steps to her chamber, threw herself into the Caspian Sea rather than marry her father. In fact, her visitor was not her father, but a young suitor, come to rescue her. Hence, in this version, the Virgin's Tower.

The second version we heard later the same day, from Azeri acquaintances whose home we visited. The tower itself is a model fortification: in its original design, nothing but a rope ladder connected the first and third floors. Once on the third floor, defenders could haul the ladder up and barricade themselves inside the eight-story fortress. Given sufficient food supplies, as many as three hundred people were able to survive up to two years without venturing out. A built-in well supplied water and a series of channels in the walls provided rudimentary plumbing. The fortress was said to be impenetrable, hence, in the second version, the Virgin's Tower.

Our hosts for the evening were local intelligentsia, whom we had met briefly in Moscow. The mother, Zeinab, was a retired schoolteacher; her husband, now deceased, had been a local government official. The son, Anvar, our friend, was a research scholar; his sister, a university student majoring in biology. Their apartment was no different than most Russian apartments I have been in: modern, small, and filled with highly lacquered furniture. Most of the living room, which became a dining room when we ate and a bedroom for Zeinab at night, was taken up by an enormous shiny wardrobe, containing everything from dishes to books to clothing. We were served intimidating portions of two pilafs (or plovs, as they are called in the Caucasus and in Central Asia): one with chicken and buttered apricots, the other with beef and herbs. "Serve them properly, not as the Russians do," scolded Zeinab as she watched her son heap up the plates with rice and meat. Apparently the Russians, whose servings are formidable by Western standards, are stingy by Azeri measure. As the meal progressed, I felt like the victim of a demonic taxidermist. Glassy-eyed and bloated, Volodya and I endured reprimands and lamentations by the offended cook.

To deflect attention from our failure as guests, Volodya began to ask about Azeri family life: women had long stopped wearing the yashmak or veil, but how much had the society changed beyond that? Anvar answered that among young couples, the men shared housework and childcare with the women, but within his parents' generation, the women still served at table while the men ate. As for his grandfather's generation, he smiled, many men, even Party members, still practiced polygamy. His grandfather had had three wives, only one of them legal, of course. The other two were "less beloved"; they lived separately with the children fathered by their common husband. Upon the old man's death, each had shared, albeit unequally, in his wealth. With the passing of that generation, Anvar stressed, polygamy was dying out as well: the women no longer stood for it.

Finally, Zeinab spoke up. You have to understand, she explained, that even

for wealthy women life was very hard. A trip to the baths was a chance for contact with the outside world, for the company of other women. The baths were open seven days a week, but only one day were women allowed to use them. The well-to-do women would come to the baths armed with all their jewelry, precious stones, and finery. Why? If you were unmarried, the explanation was simple enough: you could show off your possessions to older women, some of whom would have sons at home. The baths were your best chance to find a good husband. If you were married, however, your reasons were different. According to Islamic law, our husbands could divorce us by going out into the street and announcing three times, "I divorce thee." If the wife were not at home, she did not even have the right to return for her possessions; they were divided up among the remaining wives. And so, to be on the safe side, you took all your valuables with you. This, of course, was only for the wealthy; for poorer women, domestic conditions were much worse...

The evening was getting late, and Anvar still wanted to take us on a night tour of the city. We flagged down a passing motorist, and Anvar, without offering the poor man compensation or the chance to refuse, prevailed upon him to drive us around. We drove up a high overlook, from where you could see the ferry that connects Baku with Iran, homeland for 22 million Azeri Turks. Descending, we passed the two Baku mosques, one for the Sunni, the other for Shiite Muslims. The latter, Taza-Pir, is one of the largest Shiite mosques in the world, accomodating an estimated ten thousand people inside the building and the surrounding square. Asked about religious interest, Anvar replied that no reliable information was available. No statistics were published; religious leaders claimed to keep no records; and besides, as Islam required no attendance of mosques, any guess was pure speculation. Among his acquaintances, those who were believers were either elderly, provincials, or young "Pan-Turks," whose religious interest and knowledge did not seem to run very deep. Recent events in Iran had, on the one hand, stimulated interest in Islam, and, on the other, made existing contacts with Azeri Turks there more tenuous. Many of us have relatives in Iran, he said, but keeping in touch is very difficult.

We finished our tour and the driver dropped us off at the hotel, refusing all offers of money, but accepting a gift of cigarettes. In parting, Anvar listed all the reasons to return to Azerbaijan. Many things were still left to be seen outside Baku: Kobustan, site of over 4,000 prehistoric rock paintings; Surakany with its Temple of Fire Worshipers; and Naphtalan, the only place in the world where natural deposits of naphtalan have been discovered. For eight centuries, Naphtalan has attracted pilgrims suffering from burns, frostbite, phlebitis, and arthritis. It even boasts a Museum of Crutches, displaying the walking implements left behind by those who were cured. They, presumably, were foresighted enough not to have come through Intourist.



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