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The Ahiska Turks--Still Trying To Find Their Way Home

by Thomas Goltz

On the wall behind the stage of the dusty cinema-cum-theater-cum-meeting hall in the town square of Medrese, a village situated on a spur of the lesser Kafkasia range, is a wall-sized, water-color picture of a mountain scene of a dirt road leading upward along a tree-lined brook like a highway to happiness.

It was once, perhaps, a pretty picture; and even now it is certainly more honest than the usual postcard-perfect blow-ups of impossibly beautiful scenes papering the walls of shabby restaurants and cafes throughout the land.

What is curious here is that the painting was effected by the almost-deft hand of a local artist (a decided lack of proportion and depth is a fault) who, not content with looking at the environment he woke up to everyday, apparently felt moved or obliged to try and capture it on the cinema house wall.

For, gazing at the real, surrounding environment would seem to suffice most men's need for visual pleasure: right outside the dusty movie house, grapes grow green and purple in valley vinyards, fat animals graze in the fields and, in the distance, mountain streams trickle between old growths of walnut, spruce and pine.

It is the lush, fecund landscape of Eden and the artistic effort in the movie hall would compare badly with it in the best of times.

The natural surroundings and artistic merit of the original aside, the movie-hall landscape suffers for another reasons: the flowers and trees and stream in the picture are not renewed, and, as if deprived of such rejuvenation (even the occasional daubing of the artist's brush might do), they are now all wilted to something of the same color--that of time-yellowed paper, or nearly so.

Nuances of yellow and brown and white still distinguish objects but soon even those features will be lost in an ambient grey. Closer inspection reveals that the picture itself cannot last much longer: it has already started to crack and peel at edge and pieces of dreams are falling on the raw wooden floor.

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Nor is the anonymous artist likely to freshen up his rustic masterpiece anytime soon: for he is, or was, a descendant of the 19th century Armenian settlers of Medrese, and was driven away from his personal idyll during the expulsion of Armenians from Azerbaijan in 1989 following the eviction of all Azeris from Armenia the previous year.

And neither are those who now view the picture (or more properly, the unshaven men gawking at the the small, round man standing in front of it) likely to try and touch it up any time soon: not because they bear the artist any enmity (though some no doubt do) but because they, too, have an idealized image of a similar, yet different bucolic scene before their collective minds' eye and are indifferent to all others.

The men gathered here (there are no women in the room) are refugees, having arrived in Medrese after having been expelled from their own homes in Uzbekistan two years ago under circumstances all too similar to those that forced the Armenians to leave Azerbaijan. The men might almost harbor a sympathy with those whose houses they now live in and whose erstwhile fields and vinyards they now tend.

But their vision of that idyllic landscape is not in the hot and arid plains of Uzbekistan, nor of Tashkent, Samarqand or Andijan. If the faded picture on the wall has resonance for them it is because it reminds them of their own alpine villages in Georgia and the homes they were forced to quit there nearly fifty years ago.

The refugee men in the movie-hall are Turks from Ahiska (although they are known, if at all, by the curious lable of 'Meskhetis' or sometimes 'Meskhetian Turks'), and years before the world had heard of Palestineans expelled from Israel, Afghan refugees in Pakistan or any of the other large population movements of modern times, the Ahiska Turks were passionately suing for the right to return to their ancestral homeland from which they were removed so many years ago.

Now, almost half a century after their original deportation, they feel they are almost within sight of realizing their goal: they can feel it, they can taste it, they are closer than they have ever been.

"Ahiska!" shouts the short, bald man standing in front of the fading landscape painting in the dusty movie-house in down town Medrese, "Our Vatan!"

The unshaven men and peach-cheek boys nod their heads and move.

They want no other landscape and they want no other postcards.

Ahiska: Soon they will be Home.

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It has been 168 years since the forces of Czarist Russia overran the eastern Black Sea provinces of the Ottoman Empire and made the highland theirs. It has been 70 years since a new frontier was drawn between the nascent republics of Turkey and Soviet Socialist Georgia. And it has been 47 years since Stalin decided to move the remaining citizens of Turkish descent to collective farms in Central Asia.

The Czarist rationale was pretty straightforward: conquest of territory, allegedly to help local Christians toiling under the Ottoman yoke, but really for territorial aggrandizement. The fact that a substantial number of Muslims whose language, culture and human orientation was Turkish remained on the Russian side of the new frontier was incidental: St Petersburg was dictating the peace.

The demarcation of the frontier between Kemalist Turkey and Bolshevik Russian was more straight-forward and less bellicose: a border was needed between the two new states, and if it did not split the Ahiska in two here, it would have split another group in twain there. Local residents were given six months to choose which side of the frontier they wished to live on and be moved, if such was their choice, at government expense, to one side or the other. The majority of the Ahiska stayed in what then became Soviet Georgia not, they say, out of any love of communism (nor, from the perspective of those who stayed in Turkey, due to any love of Kemalism) but simply because their homes were their homes and their land their land and from which they had no intention of being moved.

The third great change in the lives of the Ahiska Turks came in early winter, 1944, when Joseph Stalin ordered that all the Ahiska Turks be deported from their mountain villages and sent to collective farms in Central Asia.

Of some 198 villages in the three Turkish speaking provinces of Georgia, only 11 were left unmolested.

Stalin's rationale for moving the 125,000 Ahiska Turks was that they, like the Crimean Tatars, had allegedly sold out the rodina and had made common cause with the Nazi foe, and should consider themselves lucky to be left alive at all.

Like the Crimean Tatars, the Ahiska Turks deny the charge. If they were guilty of treason, they say, Stalin should have moved them out in 1941--and not wait until 1944 when, as it happened, all young men were away serving the Soviet Army at the front.

Perhaps one day, when the Kremlin archives pertaining to the period are opened up to scholarly inspection, the real motivation for the mass deportations will come to light. But lacking specific archival material as to the workings of the dictator's mind in his decision to deport a complete if incidental people, one is left with surmise and speculation.

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As such, it would appear that Stalin hoped to effect two different things by the forced exile of the Ahiska Turks:

1) for security reasons, he believed that creating a de-Turkified zone between his native Georgia and the Republic of Turkey was a good idea (Stalin later tried, but failed, to claim the adjacent lands in Turkey after the war) and

2) he believed that the arbitrary mixing of populations in different parts of the Union was an effective way of playing ethnic groups off of one another, thus diverting attention from the real center of power.

Whatever his motivation, the social results for the Ahiska Turks are fairly clear: another small group of people, of totally insignificant numbers, has been frozen in place if not in time, obsessed with its own vindication of alleged historic sins and determined not to assimilate into any larger whole until it is restored to the status it enjoyed half a century ago. Only in returning to their lands will they be able to be normalized, throw off the place-name adjective and then, simply as Turks from the Ahiska region of Georgia, proceed with their individual and collective lives.

But the Ahiska were sent into exile and, if later vindicated by various decrees, it is in exile they remain.

Truly, it is a trail of tears matching anything experienced by any refugee group, but with little of the sympathetic historical research associated with, say, the story of the Cherokee or Chief Joseph.

The sad litany begins with The Day, a date etched into the Ahiska consciousness like similar dates of other peoples at other times--Kristalnacht in Berlin for the Jews, the Wounded Knee Massacre of the Lakota Souix, the start of the Armenian deportations from Anatolia at the hands of the Ottoman Turks.

True, those infamous dates are associated more with the start or act of collective death than with collective suffering, and other small people have their own unique calendars of despair at the hands of their oppressors, but the experience of the Ahiska Turks remains apart within the context of the Soviet Union.

It starts on November 14th, 1944, the day of deportation for alleged collaboration with the enemy. But far from being a sensitive front during the Great Patriotic War, the valleys and mountains of Ahiska scarcely even rated as a backwater. The only significance of the area was that it bordered on the north-eastern most province of Turkey,

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which, although officially neutral until the closing days of the conflict--when Ankara declared pro-forma war on Berlin--was less perfectly neutral than Moscow would have liked.

Supplies reached the Wehrmacht operating in the Crimea via the Turkish straits, or Dardenelles and Bosphorus, and it was known that ethnic Turks--Azeris, Uzbeks and Tatars--who were taken prisoner by the Nazis received rather better treatment than that afforded ethnic Russians and other untermenschen Soviet folks.

But Ahiska men were drafted into the Soviet forces and Ahiska men served with distinction; how many deserted or allowed themselves to be taken captive is open to question, but the number of medals pinned to the chests of Ahiska aksakals, or white-beards, speaks for itself.

In the event, on November 14th, 1944, after having used the few remaining Ahiska men not sent off to the front to build a railway spur into the region, Soviet interior ministry troops then turned on the workers and their families and bundled them off in box cars toward the Asian soviet republics of Uzbekistan, Kazakistan and Kirgizia.

Of the 125,000 so dispatched, far fewer arrived.

Equally as cruel, no notice of the sudden change of address was sent to relatives serving in the Soviet Army, even then turning the Wehrmacht before pursuing it back across the plains of Ukraine to Poland and then into the city center of Berlin itself.

"I didn't learn about the deportation until the day of my demobilization in 1947, after spending four years in the Soviet Army," recalled Ramiz Veriroglu Rahimov, born in the village of Adigun in 1926. Like all other 17 year olds in Ahiska, he had been drafted into the Great War against Hitler and spent two years on the front, ending his war in Konigsberg (today's Kaliningrad) on the Baltic. "Another Turk came up and told me there was no point in going to Georgia because there was no-one there anymore. I couldn't believe him, but he gave me an address in Uzbekistan and told me to go there."

He went, spending two months on trains and buses and horse carts and foot, bouncing from one collective farm to the next, looking for his exiled family. Their joy in seeing him alive--he was thought dead, as no word had come from him since he entered the war--was qualified by the burial service of his younger brother, who had died the day before of mental distress: some said it was the curiously fatal disease they called 'pining for the homeland'.

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Thus began the long years of exile, the long years of resisting assimilation and the dogged preservation of a separate identity predicated on the idea of the eventual return.

Even as the Soviet authorities disallowed the term "Turk" on identity papers and forbade the teaching of Turkish in schools and its publication in books (Ahiska Turkish is identical with the eastern Anatolian dialects of Kars and Artvin, less words added to Anatolia Turkish after the language reforms of the 1930s and 1940s) children were taught to retain their language at home as well as to identify themselves by the names of their native villages.

Adigun, Ahalkelec, Aspirza and Bogdanoka--these are but a few of the names of the villages or sub-regions of Ahiska and are the terms used, of necessity, to answer the question 'where are you from?'

It is a singular, psychological devotion, as obsessive as that embraced by Palestinians to the pre-1947 concepts of Haifa and Jaffa and Tel Aviv, not to mention the hundreds of other Palestinian villages in Israel destroyed in order to erase their memory from living geography.

(Curiously, the Muslim Ahiska Turks prefer to reference their hope of return in the context of the success of the Jewish Aliya to Israel than to the marked disappointment of the Palestinian diaspora to return to The Land: there is no talk about solidarity with the Palestineseans on religious or cultural grounds, only calls to heed the example and patience displayed by the Jews and Crimean Tatars and others who have successfully managed a return home.)

When the identity of 'Turk' was reallocated in the Soviet Union in the 1990 census, there emerged an official 207,562 individuals, scattered throughout the 15 Union republics of the day.

Although some hot-heads declare their total count at half a million, Ahiska leaders regard the official number as about half-right, considering those Ahiska who were obliged to take on modified Turkic identifications such as Azerbaijanian or Uzbek. They estimate a total of 350,000 Ahiska Turks throughout the USSR, 150,000 of whom are in Russia and the Ukraine, 93,000 in Azerbaijan, 73,000 in Kazakistan and 36,000 in Kirgizia. Most of those in Russia and many of those in Azerbaijan are recent immigrants who had been living in Uzbekistan up until their dramatic and bloody exodus from the Ferghana valley following ethnic violence there in 1989.

The causes of the events of the summer of 1989 are, like many things in the bad-old Soviet Union, shrouded in an official silence that gives easy birth to theories of manipulation and conspiracy.

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For years, the thrifty, industrious Ahiska Turkish farmers had been suing for the right to return to their homeland in Georgia (the Georgians, for their part, are said to have had no objection to this; of the total village population of 125,000, plus military age youth in the Ahiska region circa 1944, there are currently some 60,000 having taken their place or left the land unattended).

But the Center in Moscow remained deaf to their pleas or, perhaps more to the point, had its own ideas of how best to use the rural energy of the Ahiska Turks.

In 1985, a proposal came from Moscow to the Ahiska Turks inviting them to move to villages in southern Russia that had been or soon would be abandoned by ethnic Russians intent on moving from the country to the cities.

The Ahiskas responded that they had no problem with the idea of leaving their collective farms in Uzbekistan and elsewhere--but only to move to their homeland in Georgia.

Consultations were conducted, but the Ahiska Turks were insistent: either the homeland, or we stay where we are.

This did not please the powers that were; but the days of forced migration being past, there wasn't much else that the Center could do to address the farm-drain in Russia--save one: create a murderous antipathy among the majority Uzbeks against their Muslim Turkish brethren in order to coerce the Ahiska Turks to move to Russia under the protection of the benevolent, life-saving Soviet army.

If it sounds like far-fetched cause, there are not too many other explanations for the sad events of the early summer of 1989.

As if from nowhere, and blamed on such vague notions as "jealousy" and "nationalism", a series of bloody pogroms were begun by Uzbek farmers against the Ahiska Turks in the areas of Andijan in the fertile Ferghana valley and then elsewhere in Uzbekistan. Houses were torched and looted, pregnant women butchered and a general atmosphere of ethnic hatred reigned supreme--all for reasons no one has yet been able to fathom save for an alleged native lunacy among the Uzbeks or the whispers of KGB instigation or maybe a mixture of the two.

Thousands reportedly died, and virtually overnight, all Ahiska Turks in Uzbekistan found themselves living in squalid tent cities under the protection of forces of the Soviet internal ministry, or MVD, while Moscow tried to figure out what to do with the refugees.

The Ahiska leadership maintains that Moscow knew very well what it planned to do with them all along.

"At the height of the crisis, the Russian television program Verme conducted 30 minute interview with one of our leaders in one of the temporary tent camps and asked him

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where the people wanted to go," related Ismael Hamidov, the eldest son of Ramiz Vezirov and a key man in the Ahiska movement, "Our man repeatedly said that the refugees all wanted to go to Ahiska, to Georgia. But the interviewer pressed him again and again, asking that if that were impossible, would we accept Russia as an alternative destination? Given the circumstances prevailing, our man finally responded that yes, if Georgia were impossible, the refugees would go to Russia."

In the editing process, said Rahimov, only the request to go to Russia came out, and as a plea.

Within days, Decision 503 was announced: it 'invited' the Ahiska Turks to the empty farms in southern Russia that they had resisted moving to for four years, and provided air transport--and international television and press coverage--to get them there.

To the Ahiska Turks, naturally enough, it smelled of a plot--but one they had no strength to do anything about.

Not all of the refugees went to Russia, however.

Large numbers accepted the invitation of the government of Azerbaijan to settle in houses and regions vacated by Armenians during the ethnic clashes that wracked the country in 1989 and 1990 and continue to afflict the country today.

If they were not 'home', at least the Ahiska were swimming in an environment that was friendly and familiar: there is little difference between the Ahiska and Azeri Turks in the way of dialect, religion and culture. Significantly, the Azeris, like the Ahiskas, regard the place-designant part of their name as their homeland--and not their ethnic identity. The Moscow-promoted concept of 'Azerbaijanness' has always been weak, and most natives continue to regard themselves as 'Azeri Turks' or, increasingly, simply as 'Turks'--the same name the Ahiska would have as their exclusive designation within the borders of the erstwhile Soviet Union. Thus, the flip side of feeling understood and at home in one's temporary environment is the very real possibility of voluntary assimilation: How many generations can a Castillian exile in Italy distinctly Spanish? The history of Palestineans in the Arab world suggests that distinctions can be, must always be maintained. And for the Ahiska Turks who settled in Azerbaijan, they are closer to the homeland than ever before: The smell of the valleys of Ahiska is nearly palpable in the air, the promise of return but a day, a week a month away.

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The result is that even among the Ahiska Turks of Azerbaijan who moved from Central Asia in the 1950s, there is a sense of impermanence in everything they do. Ramiz Veziroglu, for example, has built no less than five farm houses since discovering his parents in Uzbekistan; two are in the Ferghana valley, and three are in Azerbaijan. The most recent is a four room farmhouse set in a lovely pomegranite orchard in the collective farm village of Adigun outside the agricultural town of Saatli in the middle of the Caucasian flats where cotton is king.

"I'd leave here in a New York heartbeat," said Ramiz in the author's more immediate paraphrase, "tomorrow, tonight."

Leave for what? The old homestead? Ten acres and a mule?

His son Ismael is quick with an answer:

"Less than 60,000 Georgians now live in the area once inhabited by 125,000 Turks," he said, trotting out well-honed statistics, "and of 120 villages in the Ahiska area when we were deported, 80 are now deserted. We are not asking Georgians to move. We say 'Let the Georgians remain in every house they occupy, even if it belonged to my father.' We only want empty houses and unused land. I will build half my house and my son the other, but we will be home."

Meanwhile in Medrese, Mister Yusuf Sarvarov, the short, round man in front of the idyllic picture in the cinema-cum-theater-cum-meeting house and President of the All Union Society of Meschetian Turks, has seized his bowler hat again and is waving it in the air with one hand while stabbing the other at his audience.

He has a remarkably loud voice for a man of such short stature, although he lacks the finesse one usually associates with public oration, even of the demagogic kind: in the middle of sentence he stumbles on a word, chews on his tongue, and then proceeds again. Although he has been doing so for years, no one has apparently thought to tell him that he talks too much. The presentation has been going on for two hours; the last half hour has been a question and answer session, and we are only on the second question: every query requires a twenty minute reposee.

The most recent, fielded from a young man of about twenty years of age, concerns the apparent lack of concrete progress has been made in the matter of the return since the last such meeting he attended.

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"Do not shoot at your parent with a pistol for their failings," bellows Sarvarov, quoting a Daghistanian poet of a martial turn of mind, "'lest your children fire a canon at you for yours!'"

A murmur of approval passes among the grey-beards in the audience, and if the meaning is not perfectly clear (and it is), Sarvarov proceeds to elucidate it for the ignorant and hard of hearing: yes, we have failed, but we are trying and failing as our forefathers tried and failed and if you are not careful, you too will fail to gain the Vatan, the homeland...

"It is like--like (and here he eats his words and chews on his tongue at high-volume hiatus) it is like American football, you know--boom, bam, ram...It looks easy when viewed from the stands, but for those on the field it is a different story."

The reference, hopefully not said for my benefit, is beyond the comprehension of most present, and Sarvarov moves on to more familiar ground--references from the Hadith, or Pious Acts of the Prophet Muhammad, concerning the difficulty of giving a guarantee to anything in this world; how a young mother begged the Prophet to vouchsafe the return of her only son from battle, and how the Prophet could not, but how the boy, thought dead, eventually returned alive.

It is revival-style preaching, preaching to the converted, but apparently thought necessary to keep the spark of faith glowing:

Next Year in Jerusalem.

Soon, Soon, Soon...

But this year's message from the pulpit is different, for rather than urging faith in the idea of an imminent return, he is urging patience, and it is this message that has the young Ahiski concerned.

For after years of applying and appealing to Moscow to listen to their voices and spurned from the halls of change effecting power, in early August of this year, the Ahiska Turkish leadership finally found a high-level sponsor in the inner corridors of power, a man who swore to them on his honor that he would get their application to return to Georgia on the desk of Mikhael Gorbachev himself.

Sadly, for the Ahiska Turks, their new sponsor was not a man like Andrei Sakharov, whose early, moral embrace of the Crimean Tatar cause clearly helped pave the way for their return to Crimea last year.

The name of the sponsor of the Ahiska Turks was Genadi Yanayev, and ten days after his promise he did in fact have their application on Gorbi's desk--only it was Yanayev who was now sitting behind it.

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The day was August 19th, and Yaneyev was chairman of the hard-liner government that ran the Soviet Union for 60 hours during Mikhail Gorbachev's curiously incapacitating 'illness'.

With friends like that, who needs...

Not surprisingly, with restoration of Gorbachev and the rise of Boris Yeltsin, the Ahiska cause not only seems to have been stymied, but to have been brought all the way back to square one.

But hope springs eternal, and this was nowhere as evident as in the tone of Sarvarov's voice as he preached to the converted in the movie theater in downtown Medrese.

"It was a sign! God only knows, it was a sign!" bellows Sarvarov, punching his fist into the pernumbral darkness of the movie-house room, thumping the other hand on the table and generally trying to compensate in volume what he lacks in style and content, "Who knows what would have awaited us if Yanayev had managed to send us back?! What disaster might we have been spared?! Look at Georgia today, when one can't tell who is who and who will win! It was a sign, a sign!"

Amen, say the believers, wanting to believe but doubting.

"And now," says Sarvarov, finally getting to the painful point, "In Moscow, we don't know who wants to use us as part of a hidden agenda to promote chaos in Georgia! Let us not be water in the enemy's mill!"

Again murmurs of reluctant approval from the gallery.

"It is time to believe and praise God and believe! We will return!"

"Amen," mumble the assembled, "Amen."

They have muttered the prayer a thousand times before.

And as we walk out of the cinema-cum-theater-cum-meeting hall, with the shadows grown large all around us in the fresh, fresh air of the town of Medrese, set high in the foothills of the lower Kafkasia range and prettier than any Armenian or non-Armenian artist could ever paint it on a interior or exterior wall, an Ahiska Turkish friend and I take a walk over toward the church in the center of the town, a small, intimate two-domed structure built in 1864, now given over to public use as a silo. A single, leafless tree grows out the cracked roof of the central apse, with no hint of where the roots might be.

"They will yearn for this place just like we yearn for ours," says my friend, "this was their home and it is not ours--only Ahiska is."

Myself, I can only think about the movie-house artist and wonder if he cares the way the Ahiska do and what it means if he does.

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Freedom!
Self-determination!
Them-vs-Us and Irredentism forever!
Or, more quitely and simply, the need for every people or
part thereof to feel rooted in this world, and then from
that strength, to procede.

Thomas Goltz

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, sweeping 'T' followed by a vertical line and a stylized, cursive 'G'.

Baku, October 15th 1991

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