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## MY RUSSIAN CAP

*Leon Z. Surmelian*

**T**HE RUSSIAN SHIP was wary of the German submarines prowling in the Black Sea and hugged the rugged coastline of Lazistan. Dolphins raced with us as we passed small Turkish towns—clusters of glittering white buildings with red roofs. I had never been on a ship before, and I was going to my great-aunt in Batum, with a group of Armenian war orphans.

At sundown we entered a mined bay crowded with Russian army transports and destroyers. The ship surged through a sea of molten glass, and moved right up to the edge of a cobblestoned pier, instead of anchoring half a mile or so off the shore, as ships did in the harbor of my home town, Trebizond. Presently the streets of Batum bloomed with electric lamps. I had never seen electric lights before, and was enchanted.

We needed no rowboats for going ashore; all I had to do was just walk down the gangplank. As I stood on Russian soil I felt so secure, and somehow at home, though I found myself in a different world altogether. This was Christianity and Civilization, this was a land of laughter, goodness, and music. Carrying my little bundle, I went and sat down on a green iron bench, looking around, thrilled by everything I saw. Gay crowds were promenading on the esplanade, girls singing and sailors playing balalaikas. The girls were chubby and barelegged, and wore light summer clothes with colorful kerchiefs tied around their blonde heads. They flirted with the sailors, and now and then I heard a chorus of feminine shrieks.

“So I am in Russia, so this is Batum!” I kept saying to myself.

A woman and two boys approached me. “Did you come on this ship, son?” she asked me in Armenian.

I said yes, wondering if she was my great-aunt, whom I had never seen, and admiring the Russian school caps the two boys wore. They also spoke to me, in halting Armenian, pronouncing the words like

Russians. She was not my great-aunt, but a friend of my mother's. She asked me if my parents were living.

"The Turks killed them," I said. "They were deported and killed. I was deported too; they gave me a Turkish name and tried to make me a Moslem, but I ran away."

"Oh, your mother Zvart was so beautiful!" she sighed, drying her eyes with a handkerchief. "She was here once with your Uncle Leon. And what a splendid young man he was! What happened to him, do you know?"

"They drowned Uncle Leon in the sea," I said, trying hard not to cry. "He was a revolutionary."

She told me my great-aunt, Mariam Hanum, was at Borzhom, a summer resort, and wouldn't be back for a month. She didn't look very prosperous, and I didn't want her to think I expected her to keep me until Mariam Hanum returned. "I'll go to the orphanage with the other boys," I said, though I shuddered at the very sound of the word orphanage.

They assured me it was a good place, and the two boys said enviously that the orphans swam every day. She wanted me to stay with her for the night, and I went to a cobbled court with them, where they lived in an old tumbledown cottage. Neighbors came to see me, questioned me about their relatives in Trebizond, and some of them cried, which made me very uncomfortable.

The next day she brought me a pair of new shoes, which I needed badly, and took me around visiting people who knew my mother.

"Zvart's son, would you believe it?" she would tell them.

I heard a story about my mother which made quite an impression on me. While she was in Batum, Tsar Nicholas II visited the city, and everybody admired the beauty of a young princess in the imperial party. My mother was sorry she missed the parade and didn't see this lady. Friends told her she looked just like her. Since my mother resembled a Russian princess I felt almost like a Russian, and one related to the imperial family. . . .

The two boys took me on a sightseeing tour and taught me a few Russian words. Then I went to the orphanage on an excursion train—my first train ride. It was located in the village of Kobuleti, the second station on the railway to Tiflis, and like a fashionable suburb of Batum. The orphans lived in a handsome villa fronting the beach. They were deeply tanned, barefoot boys with their hair sheared off.

Here, I learned to swim, and gained weight, after months of hunger. A neighboring farm supplied us with bucketfuls of rich foamy milk. We stole fruits from the surrounding orchards, and I stuffed myself with purple mulberries, tangerines, Japanese persimmons, big yellow plums. We were on the beach all day, my skin peeled off completely, and I emerged as a genuine member of the dusky orphanage tribe.

And so I was not anxious to go back to Batum when my great-aunt returned from her vacation and her daughter came to take me from the orphanage. We were in the middle of summer. Still, I was proud to be claimed by an attractive, well dressed young woman. She smiled as she saw me, and I realized I looked funny. She seemed disappointed. "You have taken after your father," she said. I knew I was homely.

Mariam Hanum received me kindly. She lived in a small house with her daughter and son Sarkis, a gloomy young man. She was a gentle woman with a pale face and blue eyes. I went to the bazaar with her every morning carrying her shopping bag. The bazaar was a cobblestoned square with many booths, divided into various sections: the fruit and vegetable market, the fish market, the meat and poultry market, and so on. There were great mounds of watermelons and cucumbers, huge barrels of sauerkraut for borsch, and some booths sold nothing but barbecued sucking pigs, the Georgian's idea of heaven on earth. I had never seen pigs before, for the Turks did not eat pork and pigs were not allowed in Turkey.

I played with Russian boys, who all wore Russian school caps with their Russian shirts and belts. And I who had worn a fez in Turkey but was now in Russia wanted nothing so much as a Russian cap. I wore a white summer cap which was too big for me and belonged to Sarkis. I thought everybody who saw it knew it wasn't mine. There wasn't another boy in Batum who wore such a cap. Sarkis had bought it in Paris, and it was a nice cap for a grown-up man who had been to France to wear, but it wasn't a Russian cap.

I learned to speak Russian, and hummed to myself Russian songs, which I liked very much, especially "Volga, Volga, Mother Volga," from the Song of Stenka Razin, the great Cossack bandit who helped the poor. I went to all the military parades, drank kvass, the sour Russian beer, cracked sunflower seeds like any genuine Russian boy. I was being rapidly Russianized, except for my cap.

Every day was like a holiday in Batum, the largest and most attractive city on the Caucasian coast of the Black Sea, a happy vacation

land for the Russians. Many of them who came from places like Omsk, Moscow, and Astrakhan had never eaten oranges and persimmons before, and had never seen mountains. They loved the boulevard on the beach, with its Australian palms and bamboos. The boulevard was the most popular rendezvous. A Cossack band played in a pavilion. Nursemaids pushed baby carriages along the gravelled walks, on sand piles plump children with flaxen hair dug with their spades. A casino served kvass, ice cream, Caucasian mineral waters. Under large umbrellas that dotted the beach like great poppies people read books, magazines, newspapers. Statuesque Russian blondes lay on the hot sand all day long, and even at nights, when the beach was flooded with a tropic moonlight. They had strong, shapely, nut-brown bodies with shocks of wheat-colored hair, and their cute little noses were turned upward. Their lush thighs quivered as they walked on the clean white pebbles.

During the vesper services in the Russian cathedral I could hear, no matter in what part of the city I happened to be, the ringing of its many bells—an air-borne concert of thunderous bronze and delicate silver chimes, the sweet vibrations of the little bells sounding as if produced by the beating of angels' wings, while the big fat bells boomed like cannon. This church had soaring domes of indigo blue, onion shaped, topped with double-barred golden crosses, and old Turkish guns gaped around its landscaped grounds. Magnificent and a bit barbaric, it represented all the might of Holy Russia near the Turkish border.

And then there were the great express trains that came from all parts of Russia via Baku and Tiflis. I would go to the station and watch the locomotives with their enormous steaming wheels and hissing pistons. The oil was pumped from Baku to Batum through an underground pipeline a thousand kilometers long, and in the oil harbor flat-bottomed boats crawled like giant turtles, making a chug-chug-chug sound.

On Sundays we visited a family who lived in a *dacha*, or country house, and I fell in love with the daughter of this family. Her name was Shushik, or Little Lily, and she was as white as a lily, too. She attended the girls' gymnasium, and captivated me with her dashing manners and laughing, sensuous voice. She had many admirers, gymnasium students who clicked their heels when they kissed her hand. She was unaware of my secret passion for her and treated me with con-

tempt and pity because I was an orphan from Turkey. I was so miserable in her presence that I hardly dared speak to her.

She had a chum, Araxi, also a gymnasium student, whom I loved in a different, spiritual way, for hers was a fragile, sensitive, ethereal beauty, and she had moist, soft eyes. Her mother was an actress. These girls were like two young fairy princesses, though both distantly related to me. They habitually spoke Russian.

One day I boasted to them I could read French. "Oh really?" Shushik said, surprised, and a little sarcastic.

"Let's see if he can read our French textbook," Araxi said.

I read: *J'ai, tu as, il a, nous avons, vous avez, ils ont.*

They were impressed. Here I was, an orphan, and only eleven years old, reading French. I felt better, but I was still very selfconscious in their presence and would have given anything for a Russian cap.

One day I found one in the bazaar, trampled upon by the passersby, but a real Russian cap such as all the schoolboys wore in Batum. I trembled with joy as I picked it up: it seemed as if God had dropped it for me from heaven. It was greasy and soiled and had one or two burnt holes in it, but I thought I could clean and repair it. I put it on my head, and it fitted me almost perfectly. I ran home with it and hid it in the bottom drawer of a bureau, hoping nobody would find it there. I imagined wearing it in the boulevard, during parades, while playing with Russian schoolboys. I could carry it in my blouse while leaving or entering our courtyard, for I didn't want to seem ungrateful to my relatives for not wanting to wear the white cap they had given me.

But the very next day Sarkis, whose discarded cap I was wearing, found my Russian cap. He lifted it up with two fingers as if it were a dead rat, and looked at it curiously with his gloomy black eyes.

"Who brought in this filthy thing?" he asked Mariam Hanum, and she replied that I must have found it somewhere. I was playing in the yard at the moment, but I could see and hear what they said. Sarkis came out on the porch holding my Russian cap, and with a look of intense disgust threw it into the rubbish can. He was an odd young man, always well dressed and well barbered, but not working, morose and taciturn. I was careful not to irritate him in any way and was always eager to show him my appreciation of his cap, but this was more than I could bear. I ran and took my Russian cap out of the rubbish can and dusted it off. He didn't say anything, but I could tell by the

angry look he gave me that he meant to say, "Don't you dare bring it in again!"

"Where did you get that cap? Throw it away," Mariam Hanum said to me, after witnessing this tense little drama between us.

But I would not, I could not, throw it away. It meant too much to me. I was choking with an emotion that was more than fury and humiliation.

I ran away with my Russian cap and wandered through the streets for hours. I debated in my mind what I should do, and decided to go back to the orphanage. So I began walking toward Kobuleti, which was ten or twelve kilometers from Batum.

It was getting dark by the time I reached the industrial suburb near the oil harbor. The sky was cloudy, and a few big cool drops of rain splashed against my face. I walked faster and faster across railroad tracks, past freight cars and tank cars, warehouses, colossal storage tanks, refineries, tin works. I had never been through this part of the city before, and it fascinated me and terrified me at the same time. I felt very lonely, lost, was seized by a strange fear. The ground under my feet shook with the noises of distant places, of Baku and Derbent on the mysterious shores of the Caspian, with the sounds of other worlds, and the immense wall of the Caucasian mountains looming before me became more and more menacing. The trees took fantastic shapes in the twilight, muggy darkness; the air was thick with steely goblins clacking and screaming in a grotesque carnival, pounding their fists against I knew not what, and showing their deadly iron teeth.

I got so scared I turned back. And moreover, I felt guilty. My great-aunt had been good to me, and even Sarkis, whom I didn't like, was after all my mother's cousin. I thought of the scandal my return to the orphanage would cause. People would say I was a spoiled, ungrateful brat, or would blame Mariam Hanum. This is a family quarrel that should remain in the family, I said to myself.

But it broke my heart to throw away my Russian cap. I dropped it into the sea, watched it float, then turned around and walked back, feeling again very much an orphan.

"Where have you been?" Mariam Hanum asked me, glancing at my shoes, which looked like a tramp's. "Come on, wash yourself and have your dinner."

They had eaten already, and fortunately Sarkis was out. I smelled the warm rich fragrance of egg plants and tomatoes stuffed with spiced

ground meat. I stood before her with bowed head, partly from shame, and partly to hide my tears.

"You silly boy," she said. "It was just a piece of rag."

I was silent. How could I tell her what that Russian cap meant to me, even though it was a rag? I wasn't a child any more. My desire to wear a Russian cap wasn't just a childish whim, and it wasn't because I looked so comic and pathetic in a man's cap. No, I could not explain it to anyone. It had to do with a magic Russian city beyond the horizon, on the other side of the mountains, and my sole hope in the most desperate and sorrowful moments of my life on the highway of death, during the massacre. It had to do with my wordless rapture in being alive and free and Christian again, for recovering the good world I had lost and which I loved passionately with every fiber in my little body. It had to do with songs and balalaikas, electric lights, trains, a certain Russian princess. It had to do with God, Europe, Civilization, and everything.