

Copyrighted Material

Ali and Nino

a love story



KURBAN SAID

Copyrighted Material

1

We were a very mixed lot, we forty schoolboys who were having a Geography lesson one hot afternoon in the Imperial Russian Humanistic High School of Baku, Transcaucasia: thirty Mohammedans, four Armenians, two Poles, three Sec-tarians, and one Russian.

So far we had not given much thought to the extraordinary geographical position of our town, but now Professor Sanin was telling us in his flat and uninspired way: 'The natural bor-ders of Europe consist in the north of the North Polar Sea, in the west of the Atlantic Ocean, and in the south of the Medi-terranean. The eastern border of Europe goes through the Russian Empire, along the Ural mountains, through the Cas-pian Sea, and through Transcaucasia. Some scholars look on the area south of the Caucasian mountains as belonging to Asia, while others, in view of Transcaucasia's cultural evolu-tion, believe that this country should be considered part of Europe. It can therefore be said, my children, that it is partly your responsibility as to whether our town should belong to progressive Europe or to reactionary Asia.'

The professor had a self-satisfied smile on his lips.

We sat silent for a little while, overwhelmed by such mountains

Kurban Said

of wisdom, and the load of responsibility so suddenly laid upon our shoulders.

Then Mehmed Haidar, who sat on the back bench, raised his hand and said: 'Please, sir, we should rather stay in Asia.'

A burst of laughter. This was Mehmed Haidar's second year in the third form. And it looked as if he might stay there for another year, if Baku kept belonging to Asia. For a ministerial decree allows the natives of Asiatic Russia to stay in any form as long as they like.

Professor Sanin, who was wearing the gold-embroidered uniform of a Russian High School teacher, frowned: 'So, Mehmed Haidar, you want to remain an Asiatic? Can you give any reason for this decision?'

Mehmed Haidar stepped forward, blushed, but said nothing. His mouth was open, his brow furrowed, his eyes vacant. And while four Armenians, two Poles, three Sectarians and one Russian were highly delighted by his stupidity, I raised my hand and said: 'Sir, I too would rather stay in Asia.'

'Ali Khan Shirvanshir! You too! All right, step forward.'

Professor Sanin pushed his lower lip out and silently cursed the fate that had banished him to the shores of the Caspian Sea. Then he cleared his throat and said pompously: 'You at least can give us a reason?'

'Yes. I rather like Asia.'

'Oh you do, do you? Well, have you ever been in really backward countries, in Teheran, for instance?'

'Oh yes, last summer.'

'There you are. And have you found there any of the great acquisitions of European culture, for instance motor-cars?'

'Oh yes, very great ones indeed. Holding thirty and more people. They don't go through the town, only from one place in the country to the other.'

'These are called autobuses, and they are in use because there are no railways. This is reactionary. Sit down, Shirvanshir.'

I knew the thirty Asiatics were jubilant, they showed it by

Ali and Nino

the way they looked at me. Professor Sanin kept angrily silent. He was supposed to make his pupils into good Europeans. Suddenly he asked: 'Well—have any of you been to Berlin for instance?' It was not his day—the Sectarian Maikov raised his hand and said he had been to Berlin when he was a small boy. He remembered vividly a musty spooky Underground, a noisy railway and a ham sandwich his mother had prepared for him. We thirty Mohammedans were deeply indignant. Seyd Mustafa even asked to be allowed to leave the room, as the word 'ham' made him sick. And that was the end of our discussion about Baku and its geographical situation.

The bell rang.

More at: <http://www.amazon.com/Ali-Nino-K-Said/dp/0099283220>