

Lev Nussimbaum and Banine, from Baku to the Golden Horn

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The year 1905 saw the birth in Baku of a man and of a woman that nothing predestined to literary career: Umm-al-Banu Asadullayeva, better known under the name she adopted later in Paris, Banine; and Lev Nussimbaum, who became known during the interwar period in Germany and Italy under the pseudonyms of Essad Bey and Kurban Said. Even if one was born into the Muslim community in Baku and the other one in a Jewish family in the same town, the two shared a prosperous and cosmopolitan childhood. Granddaughter of two oil tycoons, Shamsi Asadullayev and Mirza Agha Musa Naghiyev, daughter of Mirza Asadullayev who was Minister of Trade and Industry during the short interlude of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan, Banine, arrived in Paris in 1924, left two books of memoirs written in French, and *Caucasian Days* and *Parisian Days*, published respectively in 1946 and 1947 by the publisher René Julliard. Both are autobiographical narratives, but the second one is more romanticized than the first. Neither book has been translated into English, but I think *Caucasians Days* has been translated into Azerbaijani.

Banine, who died in 1992, was her own biographer. Her executor, a German painter named Rolf Stürmer, will maybe write the story of her life, but until now, only her two memoirs can track her eventful journey from a palace in Baku to a « chambre de bonne » (maid's room) in Paris. As for Lev Nussimbaum-Kurban Said, who died in 1942 in Southern Italy, he had the extraordinary opportunity to find a prodigious biographer in the American journalist Tom Reiss. Reiss was not starting from nothing, since the formidable inquiry that he published in 2005 is based in part on unpublished notebooks written by Nussimbaum in Positano, on his deathbed, entrusted to Tom Reiss by the last representative of the publisher of Kurban Said in Vienna, Therese Kirschner-Mögle. From this fragmentary posthumous autobiography, Reiss has delivered a fascinating reconstitution, who raises a whole era and a whole environment, including the Jewish orientalists in the Berlin of the twenties. Lev Nussimbaum as Banine were complex characters. They were both fascinated by sulphurous characters: Nussimbaum by Ezra Pound, at the end of his life, while writing a biography of Mussolini; Banine by Ernst Jünger, champion of the Conservative Revolution.

I certainly will not talk to you, here in Baku, about Kurban Said's famous novel, *Ali and Nino* (1938), which tells the love story between a Muslim Azeri and Georgian Christian, Romeo and Juliet in the Caucasus. The notoriety of the book was recently reinforced by its film adaptation and in 2011 the excellent *Azerbaijan International Magazine* dedicated two volumes to this major work¹. The novel that caught my attention, *The Girl from the Golden Horn*, was published in 1938. Unlike *Ali and Nino*, the book has not been heavily studied or commented although it is of great interest.

Their birth in Baku in 1905 is not the only event that brings together Lev Nussimbaum, the Azerbaijani Jew who maintained to be a Muslim prince in the Europe of the Roaring Twenties, and Banine, the emancipated Muslim girl, whose memoirs open on this eloquent sentence: «Unlike some worthypeople, born in poor but 'good' families, I was born into a family not 'good' at all, but very rich.» The sarcastic tone of Banine immediately strikes her reader, exactly as the insolence and the freedom of Asiadeh, the heroine of *The Girl from the Golden Horn*. It is certainly no coincidence that Kurban Said chose that name, the name of the heroine of the famous novel by Pierre Loti, *Aziyadé*, published in 1879. The popularity of this story, which tells the forbidden love of a British officer and a young Circassian slave in the harem of an old Turk, has exceeded the borders of France. In 1906, Pierre Loti published *The Désenchantées (Disenchanted)*, a survey on contemporary Turkish harems, where he was the spokesman of young Turkish women recluses and cultured, nourished by Western literature. His painting of the «Madame Bovary» of the Bosphorus was not unambiguous. Indeed, recognizing the suffering of these prisoners of the harem, Loti could not help regretting the old days. The education of women is, after all, one of the ravages of modernity.

Kurban Said's Asiadeh is the antithesis of Pierre Loti's Aziyadé. Similarly, Banine defies the prejudices attached to the Eastern woman. The interest of Banine's memoirs, which portrays herself self, and Kurban Said's novel, which features a double female, is to present to the Western reader an oriental woman freed from all the clichés ordinarily attached to her. A reverse, opposite vision: the Eastern woman as seen from the Caucasus and specifically from Baku, mosaic city disrupted by the course of history. Banine and Asiadeh are the product of this acceleration.

The title of Kurban Said's novel, *The Girl from the Golden Horn*, may mislead the reader. At first glance, this title has all of the exotic cliché. But the content immediately thwarts the expectations of the title. Asiadeh is a modern young woman who studied oriental languages at the University of Berlin, in the ambition to become

¹Azerbaijan International, vol. 15.2-4 (2011)

the ambassador of lost multiculturalism. Kurban Said transposes his own experience of studying in Berlin in the twenties. Tom Reiss wrote:

But why had an increasingly prominent group of Jews chosen the Islamic world as the solution to their dilemma? [Zionism or European ideals] They came to see themselves as being *of* the Orient – specifically, the Islamic Orient – in some very special and attractive way. Figures as diverse as Disraeli and the philosopher Martin Buber played a part in this relocation of the Jewish spirit to the realm of pan-Asia. They reinvented the historical Muslim Orient as a place free from clear ethnic and sectarian lines, and most especially free from anti-Semitism – no matter that the reality was more complex than that².

The tone is set, from the caustic opening:

«And this ‘i,’ Fraulein Anbari? »

Asiadeh looked up, her gray eyes thoughtful and earnest. «This ‘i’? » she repeated in her soft, gentle voice. She thought for a little while and then said decidedly and desperately: «This ‘i’ is the Yakut gerund, similar to the Khirgiz ‘barisi.’»

Professor Bang rubbed his long, hooked nose. Behind the steel-rimmed glasses his eyes looked like those of a wise owl. He wheezed softly and disapprovingly.

«Yes, » he said. «But I still cannot really understand why the ‘a’ should be missing in the Yakut form. » And he sadly leafed through the dictionary.

Goetz, another of his students, whose speciality was the Chinese language, proposed to explain the mysterious «a» form as being a petrified Mongol instrumental. «When I was young, » said Professor Bang severely, «I too tried to explain everything as being a petrified Mongol instrumental. Courage is a young man’s privilege. »

Bang was sixty years old and the Chinese expert forty-five. Asiadeh suddenly felt a sharp scratching pain in her throat. The sweetish air of the yellowing old books, the tortuous flourishes of the Manchu and Mongol letters, the barbaric forms of the petrified languages—all these were unreal, hostile, numbing her senses. She sighed deeply when the bell rang. Bang lit his pipe, a sign that the seminar for Comparative Turkish Languages had finished. His long, bony finger tenderly caressed the yellowed pages of the *Uigur Grammar* as he said dryly: «Next time we will discuss the structure of the negative verb, using the machinaean hymns. » His words seemed both promise and threat. Since the great Thomsen in Copenhagen had died, philology

²*The Orientalist. In Search of a Man caught between East and West*, London, Vintage Books, 2006, p. 229.

had lost its meaning for him. The young people of today did not understand anything and explained everything as being a petrified instrumental.

His four students bowed silently. Asiadeh went out to the wide staircase of the seminar for Oriental Languages. Other doors opened, bearded Egyptologists appeared, and idealistic youths who had dedicated their lives to the endeavor of deciphering Assyrian cuneiforms. Behind the closed door of the Arabic lecture room, the sobbing sounds of a ghazel by Lebid died away, and the lecturer's voice said, ending his discourse: «A classic example of the modus apokopatus. »

The Girl from the Golden Horn is a kind of philosophical fable, where Asiaseh plays the role of a modern and female Usbek, the traveler of Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*.

The novel is both moving and hilarious. Asiadeh Anbari is the daughter of a Turkish pasha in exile following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Promised as a bride to the heir of the throne she never saw, Asiadeh now studies the oriental languages in Berlin. When ill, she meets Dr. Hassa, a Viennese laryngologist, distant heir of a Bosnian family, the Hassanovic, whose attentions prove both terrifying and entrancing. Though Hassa and his Western ways are at times bewildering to Asiadeh, the two fall in love. Kurban Said masterfully captures the fragility of their cultural boundaries, and the resulting love story is hectic and disappointing. Asiadeh pens a desperate letter to her former betrothed, the Ottoman prince, asking him to release her from her obligation to him. Miraculously, the letter reaches the prince in hiding, who, overwhelmed by his own sorrow and loss, responds, urging her to follow any path that may grant her peace: the prince, drowned in whiskey and cocktails, has become an American scriptwriter and lives in New York assisted by Sam Dooth, who is actually a Phanariot Greek, Perikles Heptomanides. Both represent the lost Ottoman Empire. Asiadeh and Hassa marry, although neither proves truly unencumbered by the past. They go on honeymoon in Belgrade, homeland of Hassa's family. But Hassa feels homesick and disoriented, while Asiadeh feels the deep nostalgia of Istanbul. On settling in Vienna, Asiadeh seems to lose both her language and bearings, trapped in a cold country in which she is continuously and profoundly misunderstood. It is then that the prince, alone and hungry for his homeland, comes to claim her. Asiadeh divorce Hassa who remarried his first wife Marion, and embarks for New York with her prince scriptwriter, the Phanariot Sam Dooth and her father.

We rediscover many episodes of Kurban Said's life in this novel: the exile from the eastern and cosmopolitan hometown, the sufferings of the old father displaced, downgraded and ruined, the stay in New York where the obscene luxury shocked

him, in the wake of the wealthy family of his wife, Erika Loewendahl, and the final divorce. However, and very significantly, the city whose Asiadeh originated is not Baku but Istanbul: it is indeed here that Lev Nussimbaum changed its skin, there he left his old clothes of Azerbaijani westernized bourgeois to put on a real Western costume, before he disguised himself in a theatrical Easterner. For Kurban Said as for Banine, Istanbul appears both as a lazaretto and as an incubator. It is in this city that the writers as their characters are born to new life, Lev in 1921 among the Russians of the Wrangel army, Banine in 1924 with her hated husband Balabek Gojayev [renamed Djamil in her memoirs] that she abandoned, leaving him losing his last money at poker meanwhile she took the Orient-Express to join her family (father, stepmother and sisters) already exiled in Paris. In this perspective, which contrasts with the usual eurocentrism, Istanbul is not the first step towards the East but the first step towards the West. A city where the exiled from Baku is stripped in every sense: from its illusions, its eastern culture and its economies quickly spent in luxury hotels, in Russian restaurants and casinos. However, a final sight moves Banine when leaving the East, the cemeteries. This is the only moment in her autobiography where she renounces her corrosive irony:

Encouraged by our transient opulence and by a sky of legend, I went also to some excursions; I visited Prinkipo, Therapia, and other traditional places of pilgrimage.

But nothing moved me as much as cemeteries around Constantinople, with their straight cypresses, their straight stones, too, on the graves. Nowhere have I felt myself as Muslim as there: the crosses, the rich and complicated mausoleums, the flowers, irritateme in a place dedicated to peace. I like simplicity in death: I like the ascetic aspect of a Muslim cemetery. The last one I visited in Islam was on a hill from which we could see the Bosphorus. The beauty of the sky, the place, the sea, combined to create an immense beauty. This perfection, much more than fun, gives suffering. But suffering from a strange quality: beyond it, joy arises. We first experienced the feeling of the evanescence of beauty, but then the certainty that a certain degree perfection reached eternity, where it remains an unalterable fixed point.

[...] Moments I lived on this hill, you will never leave me; suspended somewhere in my memory, you will die with me. And even if, as I hope, the beauty that we reflected returns after our death to eternity, you will become immortal³.

This rare parenthesis in Banine's fierce and stripper account meets the vision of Western travelers, fascinated, like Pierre Loti and Claude Farrère, by Muslim

³*Jours caucasiens, op. cit.*, p. 251-252.

cemeteries. The only difference lies in the internalisation of their feelings, although the cemeteries of Istanbul have managed to touch travelers beyond picturesque.

Although he was not a Muslim, Lev Nussimbaum-Essad Bey-Kurban Said managed to carry of his false identity in death. His tomb overlooks the Tyrrhenian Sea at Positano. Tom Reiss described the small Italian cemetery:

«Eccola» said Hercules in a gentle singsongy voice. We stood before a narrow white tombstone with a turban on top. «It is the Turkish style, » he said. [...] The name read MOHAMMED ESSAD BEY⁴.

In the memoirs of Banine, Istanbul is the only place that escapes the mockery that hits the small world of Baku as well as Parisian society. The first is described as an assembly of farmers «nouveau riches», social climbers brutal and grasping, acculturated because they have lost the sense of customs and of Islamic traditions and because they mimic with awkwardness and vulgarity the habits and Western fashions. The same pitiless statement applies to the second city, as a concentrate of hypocrisy and social inequality.

In the same way, for Lev Nussimbaum in *The Girl from the Golden Horn*, Istanbul is the city of the fantasized origins:

Asiadeh was silent. Steadfastly unsmiling, she looked at Rolland. So, there he was. The exiled one, the lost one. Pines were growing in his palace. She had seen their branches and tops over the broad wall. [...] She belonged to him, every fiber of her body was his. For him she had once learned Persian poems and Arabic prayers, for him she had listened the sound of barbaric words.

«Your Highness, » she said, and then could not go on. The present was confused, a wild dream. [...] The house on the Bosphorus, home, the blood-red sunsets of the Golden Horn, all that was reality again, embodied in the strange man who had narrow, evil lips and staring eyes. [...]

She walked around the Ring, and the asphalt felt like a soft carpet. Happiness – the One – the Unthinkable – here it was, suddenly. It had pale eyes and narrow lips and spoke in the soft dialect of Istanbul. Suddenly it was hers – inseparable, like a limb – happiness⁵.

⁴ Tom Reiss, *op. cit.*, p. 331.

⁵ Kurban Said, *The Girl from the Golden Horn*, [1938], translated from the German by Jenia Graman, Woodstock & New York, The Overlook Press, 2001, p. 162-163.

Despite the lively rhythm and all the twists and turns, *The Girl from the Golden Horn* is a melancholic novel. Asiadeh's linguistic frenzy reminds the avidity of the young Nussimbaum crossing Berlin at dawn every day to learn oriental languages at the university. It was a way, the only way to apprehend, to rebuilt and to preserve the past. Behind the multiculturalist Berlin of the Twenties, cacophonous Babel, one can figure out the nostalgia for lost Caucasus, mixed up with the Turanianism or the pan-Turkism. In this perspective, it is normal that Istanbul, the capital of the federation of Turkic peoples is identified as the place of the origins, rather than Baku. For Westerners, Istanbul is the largest exchanger before they jump into the unknown. But seen from the Caucasus, Istanbul is the ultimate landmark. That's the way Lev Nussimbaum and Banine perceived it, and expressed it with humour, irony, and the politeness of despair.

References and notes:

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