

– Journey to Armenia –

SEVAN

On the island of Sevan, which is conspicuous for two most dignified architectural monuments that date back to the seventh century, as well as for the mud huts of flea-bitten hermits only recently passed away, thickly overgrown with nettles and thistles, but not scarier than the neglected cellars of summer houses, I spent a month enjoying the lake water that stood at a height of four thousand feet above sea level and training myself to the contemplation of the two or three dozen tombs scattered as if they were a flowerbed amidst the monastery's recently renovated dormitories.

Daily at five o'clock on the dot, the lake, which teems with trout, would boil up as though a huge pinch of soda had been thrown into it. It was what you might fully call a mesmeric seance for a change in the weather, as if a medium had cast a spell on the previously tranquil lime-water, producing first a playful little ripple, then a bird flock twittering, and finally a stormy Ladogan frenzy.

It was at such a time impossible to deny oneself

the pleasure of measuring off three hundred paces along the narrow beachpath that lay opposite the somber Gunei shore.

Here the Gökcha forms a strait five times broader than the Neva. The superb fresh wind would tear into one's lungs with a whistle. The velocity of the clouds kept increasing by the minute, and the incunabular surf would hasten to issue a fat, hand-printed Gutenberg Bible in half an hour under the gravely scowling sky.

Not less than 70 percent of the island's population consisted of children. They would clamber about like wild little beasties over the monks' graves, bombard some peaceful snag on the lake bottom, whose icy spasms they took for the writhing of a sea serpent, or bring out of their murky tenements the bourgeois toads and the grass snakes with their jewel-like feminine heads, or chase back and forth an infuriated ram who could in no way figure out how his poor body stood in anybody's way and who would keep shaking his tail, grown fat in freedom.

The tall steppe grasses on the lee hump of Sevan Island were so strong, juicy, and self-confident that one felt like carding them out with an iron comb.

The entire island is Homerically strewn with yellowed bones – remnants of the local people's pious picnics.

Moreover, it is literally paved with the fiery red

slabs of nameless graves, some sticking up, others knocked over and crumbling away.

At the very beginning of my stay the news came that some stonemasons digging a pit for the foundation of a lighthouse on the long and melancholy spit of land called Tsamakaberda had come across a cemetery containing burial urns of the ancient Urartian people. I had previously seen a skeleton in the Erevan Museum, crammed into a sitting position in a large clay amphora, with a little hole drilled in its skull for the evil spirit.

Early in the morning I was awakened by the chirring of a motor. The sound kept marking time. A pair of mechanics were warming the tiny heart of an epileptic engine, pouring black oil into it. But the moment it got going, its tongue twister – something that sounded like ‘Not-to-eat, not-to-drink, not-to-eat, not-to-drink’ – would fizzle out and extinguish itself in the water.

Professor Khachaturian, over whose face an eagle skin was stretched, beneath which all the muscles and ligaments stood out, numbered and with their Latin names, was already strolling along the wharf in his long black frock coat, cut in the Ottoman style. Not only an archeologist, but also a teacher by calling, he had spent a great part of his career as director of a secondary school, the Armenian gymnasium in Kars. Invited to the chair of archeology in Soviet

Erevan, he carried with him both his devotion to the Indo-European theory and a smoldering hostility to Marr's Japhetic fabrications, as well as his astonishing ignorance of the Russian language and of Russia, where he had never before been.

Having somehow struck up a conversation in German, we sat down in the launch with Comrade Karinian, former chairman of the Armenian Central Executive Committee.

This proud and full-blooded man, doomed to inactivity, to smoking long cardboard-tipped Russian cigarettes, to such a gloomy waste of time as reading Oguardist¹ literature, evidently found it difficult to give up the habit of his official duties, and Lady Boredom had planted her fat kisses on his ruddy cheeks.

The motor went on muttering, 'Not-to-eat, not-to-drink', as if it were reporting to Comrade Karinian. The little island rapidly dropped away behind us, as its bearlike back with the octagons of the monasteries straightened. A swarm of midges kept pace with the launch, and we sailed along in it as in a veil of muslin across the milky morning lake.

In the excavation, we really did unearth both clay crocks and human bones, but in addition we also found the haft of a knife stamped with the ancient trademark of the Russian N.N. factory.

Nevertheless, I respectfully wrapped up in my