

I

We all know families that are poor but 'respectable'. Mine, in contrast, was extremely rich but not 'respectable' at all. At the time I was born they were outrageously wealthy, but those days are long gone. Sad for us, though quite right in the moral scheme of things. Anyone kind enough to show interest might ask in what way my family wasn't 'respectable'. Well, because on the one hand it could not trace its ancestral line further than my great-grandfather, who went by the fine name of Asadullah, meaning 'loved by Allah'. This proved very apt: born a peasant, he died a millionaire, thanks to the oil gushing from his stony land, where sheep had once grazed on meagre pickings. On the other hand because my family included some extremely shady characters on whose activities it would be better not to dwell. If I get caught up in the story, I might reveal all, though my interest as an author is at odds with my concern to preserve the last shreds of family pride.

So, I was born into this odd, rich, exotic family one winter's day in a turbulent year; like so many 'historic' years, this one was full of strikes, pogroms, massacres and other displays of human genius (especially inventive when it comes to social unrest of all kinds). In Baku, the majority of the population of Armenians and Azerbaijanis were busy massacring one another. In that year, it was the better-organized Armenians who were exterminating the

Azerbaijanis in revenge for past massacres, while the Azerbaijanis made the best of it by storing up grounds for future slaughter. There was, therefore, something for everyone—except of course for the many who sadly lost their lives.*

No one would have considered me capable of taking part in the work of destruction, but I clearly was, since I killed my mother as I came into the world. To escape the bloodshed, she had chosen to give birth in an oil-producing area in the hope that it would be quieter there; but in the chaos of the time she ended up giving birth in dreadful conditions and contracted puerperal fever. In addition, the house was cut off from outside help by a violent storm, compounding the confusion into which we'd been plunged. Without the complex care that her condition required, my mother fought the illness in vain. She was lucid when she died, full of regret at leaving life so young and of anxiety at the fate of her loved ones.

My memories of conscious awareness begin with toys that my father brought from Berlin. It was through these that life was revealed to me: I first perceived the world through the purring stomach of a plush cat, the beautiful gleam of a maharajah astride a grey buckskin elephant, the bowing and scraping of a multicoloured clown. I perceived it all, felt it, marvelled and began to live.

My early years were the happiest; I was so young compared to my three older sisters that I enjoyed all kinds of privileges and knew how to make the most of them.

But, more than anything, my happiness was the result of my upbringing by a Baltic German governess—she was my governess, my mother and my guardian angel too. This saint (the noun is no exaggeration) gave us her health, and her life; she wore herself out for us, suffered all sorts of trouble because of us, and received little

* A brief summary of the history of Azerbaijan in the early twentieth century can be found at the end of this book.

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joy; she always sacrificed herself and asked for nothing in return. In a nutshell, she was one of those rare beings who are able to give without receiving.

Fräulein Anna had fair skin and flaxen hair, while the four of us had brown skin, black hair and a markedly oriental, hirsute appearance. We made a fine group when we surrounded her in photographs, all hook noses and close-set eyebrows, she completely Nordic. And I should say that in those days—despite the prohibition of the Prophet, enemy of the image—we often had our photograph taken, dressed in our finery and flanked by as many relatives as possible, all against the background of a painted park. A harmless obsession that can be explained by the novelty of the process for the near savages that we were; an obsession to which I owe several hilarious and touching pictures that I preserve with great care.

But back to Fräulein Anna. Surrounded by a fanatically Muslim family, in a city that was still very oriental, she managed to create and maintain an atmosphere of *Vergissmeinnicht*, of sweet songs for blonde children, of Christmas trees with pink angels, of cakes heavy with cream and sentimentality. All of which proves that she had character despite her sweetness, and willpower despite her gentleness. It's true that in those days she had yet to be run ragged by us, and was better able to stand up for herself in an atmosphere that must have seemed, or even been, hostile towards her. Her influence was constantly counteracted by that of my paternal grandmother, who lived on the ground floor of our house. Grandmother was a large, fat, authoritarian woman, veiled and excessively fanatical, who preferred to sit on cushions on the floor, as every good Muslim did. She performed her ablutions and prayers with unfailing rigour and exulted in her abhorrence of Christians. If a plate had been touched by non-Muslim hands, my grandmother would refuse to use it, passing it to someone less discerning. If a white-skinned stranger walked by, she would often spit on the ground and shout insults,

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the mildest of which was 'son of a dog'. In turn, we disgusted her a little too, being brought up by Christians: so many caresses, so much contact from profane hands had impregnated us with a subtle odour of impiety, and her kisses, though affectionate, were often accompanied by a grimace of disgust. It certainly could not have been Grandmother who entrusted us to Fräulein Anna, and I can imagine the painful battles my father must have fought to gain acceptance for this heretical education. But the Russians had long since colonized us; their influence was everywhere and with it the desire for culture, for Europeanization. For the younger generations freedom was gaining precedence over the veil, education over fanaticism.

Having deposited us in the white hands of Fräulein Anna, with a confidence he never regretted, my father no longer had much to do with us. Besides, he was always travelling. As the eldest son he ran our oil firm, visiting its depots and offices along the Caspian Sea and Volga River, its flourishing subsidiary in Moscow, and even its concerns in Warsaw. Having got that far, momentum meant my father could not stop, and as Berlin was close by for someone accustomed to Russian distances, he often popped over to the German capital.

Before the war of 1914 Germany enjoyed enormous prestige among my compatriots, who had barely awoken to civilization: automobiles, Kaiser Wilhelm moustaches, pale governesses, music, pianos—they all came from Germany. My father would return from there, weighed down with all these things, including the martial moustache, which became more vigorous every trip, growing longer and standing up straighter. It should not be forgotten that Kaiser Wilhelm styled himself protector of Islam and the Turks, hence his prestige among us cousins of the Turks.

I think those years before his second marriage must have been the best of my father's life: young, rich, free, handsome, he excited

considerable matrimonial interest and other, less honourable, desires. He had numerous affairs, but was in no hurry to get married, though he was encouraged to do so by all the family, who welcomed polygamy and disapproved of celibacy. Still, none of the suggested brides met with his approval: they were mediocre Muslims, barely educated, without elegance or charm, and my father would have none of them—he was firmly in favour of ‘culture’. Other women, whom he met during his travels abroad and might have liked, were, according to my grandmother’s definition, ‘daughters of dogs’, that is, Christians, and therefore not marriage material. The family had good reason to fear such marriages, and Grandmother a non-religious reason to hate them: her husband had rejected her to marry a Russian woman of dubious origin. After his marriage and until his death, when I was six, he lived in Moscow in a house cluttered with icons, mistreated by his wife and cut off from his family because of her. Did this example, so edifying for the faithful, make my father circumspect and prevent him marrying a Christian? In any case, he took a long time to choose a second wife.

We occupied the whole of the second floor in our town house, which compensated for the houses enclosing it on either side by stretching so far back that it reached the parallel street. This allowed for the creation of two identical apartments: twins with their backs to one another; twins separated by a courtyard but united by symmetrical passages running the length of the courtyard.

We girls lived with Fräulein Anna in the south-facing apartment that was always flooded with sunlight, while the other, north-facing, dark and quiet, was occupied by my father between his travels. It included what we proudly called the ‘reception rooms’, more simply the dining room and drawing room. Here was the grand piano on which, on holidays or when some governess too proud of her flock needed to be put in her place, Fräulein Anna would have my older sister Leyla perform a brilliant piece from her repertoire. A