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“Memoirs by Kadir I. Natho” ,. By Omer Turan*, Published by: Xlibris Corporation, New Jersey, Year of Publishing: 2010. Subject Area: 20th century Circassian History, Book Type: Biographies and Memoirs. Total Number of Pages: 731. ISBN: 978-1-4535-8897-0.

After bravely resisting the Russians for almost a century against the occupation of their homeland in Caucasia, the Circassians were finally defeated. Consequently, the Russians forced the overwhelming majority of them to emigrate to the Ottoman territories and settle there. The Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-78 and the First World War created more difficulties for the Circassians of Caucasia and the Ottoman Empire. They were obliged to emigrate again and deal with resettlement problems. Moreover, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, and establishment of new nation states after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire created difficulties for them also. The German occupation of Caucasia during the Second World War gave hope to some Circassians that they would be released from Soviet pressure, but after the retreat of the Germans, the Stalinist pressure grew even further.

The chain of disasters which the Circassians faced for about two centuries has not yet been written. The official view in Caucasia under Soviet/Russian rule claimed that the Russians came to the Caucasus and civilized the wild mountaineers. The Circassians of the diaspora who were separated from one other were struggling to survive. Under these conditions, the Circassians could not produce proper books to cover their sufferings, and had to be satisfied with whatever was written about them. None of them do justice to the Circassians. There are also other reasons for the absence of these types of books. One is that the Russian, Turkish and other neighboring states` archives as well as the archives of western states and institutions need to be explored, relevant documents must be collected, combined and compared with each other, in order to complete the picture. This work can only be achieved by groups of experts in long term projects.

At this point I must state that Kadir Natho`s *Circassian History* fills in an important gap. It is the

only book which covers all Circassian history from the early ages to the present time in and outside of Caucasia. He has attempted to accomplish the difficult task of, gathering information from sources written in different languages, combining them with his own observations, and producing this book. It reflects his professionalism and disciplinary approach and is well written and documented. The book received a warm welcome in all the Circassian communities, and has been translated to Arabic, Turkish and Russian, but published only in Jordan and Turkey, not in Caucasia. Although the strict Soviet regime has gone, Russian rule still continues there.

The same author has also published his memoirs recently (Kadir I. Natho, *Memoirs*, Xlibris, 2010). Although he lives in New York, he is well known among all the Circassian communities of the world due to his books and activities. Starting from his early childhood, *Memoirs*, 731 pages, covers his life under different regimes and in places in Caucasia, Europe, the Middle East and the United States.

The first chapter of the book is devoted to his childhood memories. He was born in the small village of Hatramtoug, in Caucasia in 1927 and belongs to the Natkhuagia tribe. According to the Russian spy, Novitski, who lived among them during the Russo-Circassian War, there were 240,000 people who belonged to the Natkhuagia tribe and lived in that area. Many of them were killed during the war and many left for the Ottoman Empire. Only the population of this village remained from that tribe. This example alone can illustrate the dimensions of the disasters I referred to. They were forced to leave their village while Russians took their places. All their belongings, agricultural tools, machinery, cows and horses were taken to the collective farms called *kolkhoz*. Seeing his mother in a ploughed field, pulling over it a harrow, made him upset. Although his brother and mother worked on the collective farm everyday (his father could not work because he was unable to stand) they received little compared to what they produced. He experienced starvation in 1933. With some friends, he began sneaking into the stable of the collective farm, stealing *mokhukha* (pressed and dried waste from sunflower oil) pieces from the mixed wet fodder of horses, and eating them. When his father found out about it, he prohibited him from continuing such actions. Cases of cannibalism in some Russian villages were reported in the local newspapers. The worst days were to come...

Memoirs is not merely the memories of an individual. It reflects the social, economic and political conditions of a period of Circassian history in Caucasia. In plain, sincere and honest language, he describes the childhood games and songs, the food, and traditional medical treatments. Even under such difficult conditions, Circassians, or at least his family and the others in their neighbourhood, kept their traditions. Following tradition strengthened their power to resist the difficulties they faced. They might be poor, and wear patched clothes, but they were always clean and ironed. Politeness, modesty and dignity were held above everything else. Respect and discipline were never forgotten. In their free time they talked about Nart epics and their ancestors' heroic defence during the Russo-Circassian War. It was important for the younger generation to keep their traditions and understanding of their past. Although they lived among the Russians, there was no antagonism towards them. However, the principle was 'not to be like Russians.' Even though his parents disagreed, he went to a summer resort for the successful students of the region. There he realized that he was the only Circassian child among the participants. At the end of camp, he returned home with a Russian type peak cap. His father took the cap off his head, threw it away, and said firmly "Son, don't try to become Russian! Otherwise you will neither be a Russian nor Adygha."

In the chapters that follow, the author describes the Nazi occupation of Caucasia, the regaining of

control by the Russian, the second Nazi occupation, and situation of the Circassians all through the experiences, feelings and observations of a Circassian boy. Both of his brothers were mobilized into the Red Army and it was left to him to look after his entire family including his old, ill father, mother, two sisters-in-law, and two nephews. His sister-in-laws were forced to dig anti-tank trenches. At first, the Germans occupied their village but then the Russians recaptured it.

While the Germans were coming back to their village, they killed nine Red Army soldiers in the garden of Kadir`s house. At the same time, a bullet broke through the wall killing his mother. The Germans did not allow him to carry his mother`s body to the village cemetery. His sisters-in-law prepared her body and according to his father`s explanation, he alone dug a grave in the backyard and buried his mother while bullets were whistling by his ears. A few days later while his house was in the center of the fight between the Germans and the Red Army, his pregnant sister-in-law gave birth. With his father`s permission, he secretly accompanied his other sister-in-law to her relatives in another village in order to save the lives of her two children. He was unable to return to his village and had no place to go. At anytime, he could die from the cold, hunger or a bullet. Finally he returned to Hatramtouk and was compelled to work in a German military warehouse. In spite of all these difficulties, life continued. He was human; he fell in love with a Russian girl who was working at the same warehouse.

The war destroyed everything causing the families to disperse. Some Circassians who escaped from Caucasia organized a community in Crimea which was recognized by the German authorities. With a group of other Circassians he went and joined them. After staying there for a while, they went to the Ukraine due to the start of the German retreat. In the spring of 1944, they had to leave the Ukraine by order of the Germans. Some of them left in carriages and horses but most of them left on foot. They went to Italy through Belarus, Romania and Austria. At the time he was just 17 years old. They were separated into small groups and sent to villages. A group of Circassian refugees, including members of Sheretlyqo family from Greece, reached Italy at the same time. In his childhood he had heard much about the heroic feats of Sheretlyqos during the Russo-Caucasian War, so he was happy to meet them. With his assistance, a friend of his abducted a Circassian girl, and married her. The entire process and the wonderful wedding ceremony were done according to Circassian tradition. The book contains much detail in terms of Circassian folklore and tradition. All aspects of the events that took place are covered; what was done, how it was done, and the philosophy and meaning behind it are described perfectly.

As the war was ending, they were gathered back together in Austria. Western Europe no longer wanted them. They were repatriated to the Soviet Union who called them traitors. They did not know what to do as they had no protector or place to take refuge. The Circassian refugees of Caucasia, like the others were sent back to the Soviet Union. They were then probably sent to the death camps of Siberia. Pretending to be a member of Sheretlyqo family, Kadir Natho remained in Austria until the family was sent back to Italy and branded displaced persons. After living in refugee camps, and prisoner of war camps for three years under the fear and threat of repatriation to the Soviet Union, he went to live in Jordan in 1947.

The Circassians of Jordan welcomed him warmly. He met some relatives who asked him to stay with them, but he did not want to bother anyone and refused. His resources were limited as there was not much work. New arrivals from Palestine made the conditions even worse. From construction to work

in a marble quarry he worked anywhere he could. While he was working for the railroad, he had an accident causing him to stay in the hospital for months. The doctors even wanted to amputate his arm but it was saved after six operations. Afterwards, however, it did not function well. With the help of the Tolstoy Foundation which was helping unemployed Russians of the Middle East migrate to the US, he was able to go to the US in late 1956.

He did not have a proper education and profession; and he was not familiar with the language and the culture of this new world. Apart from some Circassians from Jordan, he did not have anyone to rely upon either. He underwent several operations to recover the use of his arm but the results were not satisfactory causing him to finally give up. Instead he decided to learn twenty English words a day. His first job was addressing envelopes. He also started taking a high school correspondence course. After getting a high school diploma, he went to work on his university degree in the field of journalism. He studied political economy in Henry George School. Moreover, he enrolled in several writing courses, graduated successfully, and began to write his own books. In the meantime he improved his working conditions. He worked in a restaurant as the cashier for years. He then purchased his own printing shop.

He was a hard working, determined, persistent person. He proved that dignity and modesty can be maintained. He was mature, reasonable, reliable; generous and loyal. His tendency towards being hospitable was an important part of his personality. His hearth and door were always open. Circassian culture and tradition were the keywords in his world. In the book, he represented all the qualities that he believed to be an essential part of Circassian culture and tradition. He was an idealist, but not a day-dreamer. In *Memoirs*, he was not afraid of reporting his weaknesses and mistakes. This sincerity and openness increased his reliability. He was also not afraid to speak about unfaithful Circassians. While reading *Memoirs* the reader also notices that even the most devoted and traditional people, from time to time, could do harm due to their egos .

As soon as he was able to stand on his own two feet in the US, he started to help his fellow countrymen. During those years, the Circassian population of the US was about one hundred people with most of them living in New Jersey. Except for a few aristocratic families that came following the First World War, they were the first generation. Since they were coming from another part of the world, adaptation to the US was not an easy task. Some of them were old and sick, and some were alone and unemployed. Even though he was living in New York, he helped them like they were his brothers. He did everything that he could.

He was aware of the limits of an individual's help. There were some associations established to meet these needs. However, some of them were small Circassian groups like the Circassians of Jordan or Kabardins. Since their powers were so limited, they were unable to represent all the Circassians of the US. Therefore the Circassian Benevolent Association and its members like Kadir Natho attempted to unite all these associations. After a series of negotiations, their unification under the roof of the Circassian Benevolent Association was created in 1977. The Association would provide a place for the Circassians, organize solidarity among them, and work to keep the language, culture and traditions alive among the younger generation.

Doing anything to keep language, traditions and culture alive with the younger generation was the most sacred and noble job of all. This was his main motivation for writing. The younger Circassian

generation in the US did not have any written materials to learn their culture and traditions. Some books published in Caucasia were written in the Cyrillic alphabet and carried Soviet propaganda. Therefore he decided to write short stories, based on Circassian folklore, which would convey to the younger generation their culture and history. As a matter of fact, while he had been in Jordan he had written some poems in Circassian. Unfortunately while coming to the US, he destroyed them in order to avoid any trouble at the border. Based on old Circassian epics, he wrote poems, a novel and a play in English. They were accepted with great enthusiasm everywhere among the Circassian communities and translated into Circassian, Turkish and Arabic. He became a well-known, world-wide recognized author among the Circassian communities.

Among these literary works, *The Circassian Star* should be mentioned. It was the first Circassian periodical in the US. It was also the first Circassian periodical published in English in the world. Although some of his friends provided some articles, he was the sole author of the journal, publisher – he printed it in his printing shop- and distributor. He received some financial aid from his friends, but again, he was the main sponsor of the journal. It contained articles about Circassian history, culture, folklore and art. There were some Circassian articles as well. It was distributed for three years.

In order to tend to the needs of the Circassian community, the association bought a larger place in New Jersey. They began to build a big building with a huge meeting room, mosque, cafeteria and classrooms. The money collected from individuals in the US was not sufficient to cover all the expenses. Therefore, sometimes alone and sometimes with a friend, he went to the Middle Eastern countries to solicit donations. Always he covered his own travel expenses.

After completion of the building, he, with his wife and some friends, became volunteer teachers for the children on weekends. They taught the Circassian language, Arabic and Islam. In a few months the number of students rose to over a hundred. In 1991 he became the president of the association, and served for four terms. He also initiated the establishment of The Institute of Circassian Studies in 1970s, which aimed to organize academic research and activities about Circassian culture and history.

During the cold war years, relations between the Circassians of Caucasia and the Circassians of the diaspora was extremely limited. After the collapse of the Soviet regime and the switch to democracy, the pressure on the Circassians of Caucasia decreased. In these new conditions, starting from the early 1990s, the International Circassian Association was organized in Caucasia. Kadir Natho participated in all the International Circassian congresses of the International Circassian Association as the representative of the Circassians of the US. *Memoirs*, from that aspect, also contains very valuable information about these meetings, policies, negotiated subjects, different approaches, etc.

The book is written in simple language making it easy to read. It is a moving story, and anyone from any background can read and benefit from it. The numerous footnotes and pictures make it easy to follow and illustrate the events. The book is an important source for the political and social history of the Circassians of the twentieth century. From the viewpoint of the author, the destructive effects of the wars, people being forced to leave their homes due to the wars, their problems; the theory and practice of Communist ideology, its image outside the Soviet Union; migration to the US after WWII, their struggle to survive and their institutions are presented like a moving documentary. It contains

first hand information about the Circassians of Caucasia, the Middle East and the United States, their social life, problems, institutions, their relations with each other and their folklore. Since there is not much written on the subject of the Circassians in English, I am convinced that it will fill in important gap. I sincerely congratulate Kadir Natho and look forward to seeing his new publications about Circassians.

***Omer Turan** - Full Professor at Middle East Technical University, Chair of the Department of History, e-mail: omert@metu.edu.tr

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