

WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST FELLOWSHIP

SEARCHING FOR THE CIRCASSIANS

OLIVER BULLOUGH

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INTRODUCTION

In 1864, the Circassian nation, which had been resisting the Russian conquest of its homeland for 80 years, collapsed. In just months, the Circassians went from being a proud, warlike nation to a defeated, diseased rabble.

Destroyed physically, morally and politically, the Circassians fled their home on the north-eastern shore of the Black Sea. In their hundreds of thousands they poured into the Ottoman Empire, where they overwhelmed the local doctors and food supplies. With typhus, cholera and dysentery rife in their refugee camps, they died in their thousands.

By the end of the year, perhaps as many as half a million of them were dead. Their bodies were buried in makeshift cemeteries by the sea ports which had received them, and the survivors were moved on to marginal land which they would farm quietly and unspectacularly.

For most of the 19th century, the Circassians had been praised by western Europeans as brave defenders of their liberty against Russian tyranny. After 1864, they vanished from sight.

Occasionally, a sign would emerge that the nation still existed, although scattered and weakened. A Circassian called Ethem fought alongside and then against Ataturk in the creation of modern Turkey. Circassians form the bodyguard for the king of Jordan, and are the only Muslims conscripted into the Israeli army. I wanted to find out more than these scattered mentions.

Had their language survived? Did they still dance to the haunting music of their homeland? Did their peculiar code of honour and blood feud still survive in the barren plateaus of Turkey, the olive groves of Israel, the dusty streets of Jordan and the chaotic back-alleys of Kosovo?

When the Circassians surrendered to the Russians, they were an illiterate nation. They did not leave memoirs or letters describing the horror of the last months of their existence as a coherent unit. I hoped that I could find Circassians who still possessed stories passed down from their grandparents describing the conditions they had to live through just to survive.

I already had a contract for a book about the peoples of the Caucasus, and the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust provided the money for me to really take the time to get to know this little-understood nation. I would skirt through all the countries that bordered the old Russian Empire, looking for the self-absorbed communities that the Circassians had become.

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SECTION 1: POLAND AND AN UNEXPECTED BEGINNING

Warsaw may seem a funny place to start writing about the Caucasus, and that notion occurred to me with force as I bussed into town from the airport in mid-April. Poland is flat as flat could be, and could hardly have looked less like the lush mountains where the Circassians once fought for independence.

I had included Poland on my itinerary on a whim. The Poles and the Circassians had both fought Russian occupation in the 19th century, both without success, although the Poles were at least allowed to keep their homeland.

Polish adventurers, rebels and mercenaries fought alongside the Circassians. Polish leaders, who plotted their schemes in the Hotel Lambert in Paris, believed the road to Warsaw lay through Circassia, where at least Russian troops were being attacked in the field. They despatched exiles to aid the Muslim tribesmen, hoping they would pin down enough Russian troops to allow Poland to rise up and be free.

They were deluded. Poland was not liberated until the tsarist empire collapsed in 1917, but I wanted to see if any trace survived of the fellow-feeling that had bound these two unrelated nations – one Muslim and mountain-dwelling, the other Catholic and plains-bound – together in one fight.

I had no idea where to start, but was sure something would occur to me soon enough, and discussed my plans with a young Pole in a bar near my hostel. I wanted to research the Circassians, I said, drawing a little map on a napkin to show where they came from.

“Oh, you mean the Chechens,” he replied. “They are in Debak, that’s the refugee centre.”

I had never heard of Debak – pronounced Dembak – before now, but had had a lot to do with Chechens and their stricken homeland when living in Moscow. The Chechens are not related to the Circassians, but are fellow Muslims and were once their neighbours. Like the Circassians, they also fought the Russian advance into the Caucasus in the 19th century, but they had been allowed to remain in their lands when the war ended.

The Chechens rose up again with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and had been fighting an occasionally successful but usually doomed war against Russia since 1994. The atrocities from both sides regularly reached the world’s newspapers.

As a journalist, I had often travelled to Chechnya where an ever-smaller band of guerrillas was still resisting the endless manpower and bottomless coffers of the Russian government. I had heard about Chechens leaving Russia, trying to find a place to bring up their children without the constant danger of government harassment and Islamist violence, but never really connected them with Poland.

The next morning I found a taxi driver to take me to Debak. The Circassians could wait, they had already done so for 124 years and a few more days wouldn't do any harm. I wanted to find these present-day exiles.

Warsaw gradually faded away, giving way to fields, and trees, until we were driving through forest. The forest became village, the village turned back into forest. This was a land where wolves lurk, and children should beware isolated cottages owned by old women in pointed hats. We turned right, down a single-lane track into the forest, trundled on for another kilometre as the trees got thicker. This was the primeval Poland where peasants had picked mushrooms and berries for millennia.

Then suddenly, we were in Chechnya.

It was uncanny. The trees opened out around a compound with a barred fence and whitewashed gatehouse. Around it, leaning on cars, squatting in the dust, smoking, chatting, listening to Muslim music, were bearded, skullcapped men – just like those I had seen on every corner in Chechnya. When the car stopped, I heard only the guttural burble of their conversation. Chechen is a language like no other, and once heard, it is never forgotten.

They stopped talking as I got out the car, and watched me as I walked up to them. Introducing myself, I said I wanted to hear how they had got there and how they lived. This came as no shock to them, journalists are apparently regular visitors to the camp, but I was still surprised by the vigour with which they greeted my suggestion.

After a couple of minutes of conversation, Musa – who was the most outspoken of them – decided I should see what camp conditions were like in person. He assured me they were terrible, but thought I needed to see for myself. I protested that I had no permission to invade refugee camps. He assured me that was not a problem and crashed off into the forest. After a brief pause to wonder about wolves or old pointy-hatted women, I followed him. He led me to the back of the compound, where two bars of the fence had been bent aside, and we scrambled through.

Crossing the courtyard, where a boy played football alone against a wall, I could feel hundreds of eyes on me. The refugees living here were rightly curious to know what I was doing there. And so were the guards. I had not been inside for a minute before a furious-looking Pole in uniform demanded to see my papers. Grabbing them, he marched off to the managers' office. The Chechens, meanwhile, were delighted, they had not had this much fun in weeks. As I sweated out the manager's interrogation, bearded faces kept appearing at windows. Smiling gold teeth flashed at me.

I was quizzed, and quizzed again. Was I a journalist? What was I doing there? Surely my story about being a tourist was untrue? They demanded to see my camera, but were baffled when the images on the memory card were of giraffes I had snapped on a recent trip to Zambia. Scrolling back through the photos, they found my girlfriend relaxing by a swimming pool. They

were even more baffled. Then there were pictures of the Victoria Falls. Things were getting bizarre. After 30 lengthy minutes, during which I wondered if my trip was over before it had begun, they let me go. I was more trouble than I was worth.

But if they thought their promptness had stifled my curiosity they were mistaken. Even in my one minute inside the camp, I had seen the conditions the refugees lived in. Every room held four beds, every corridor held another ten. The entrance hall held 30. The Chechens were packed in here like livestock. And, Musa assured me, more came every day. This was a real-time exodus. I had come to research a people's tragedy of the 19th century, and stumbled on one in the present day.

Musa was not done with me. He had a car. I had zlotys. He would show me all the other camps, if I paid for his petrol. It was a bargain. And we set off, Chechen music blasting from the windows, the trees flicking by and Musa talking and talking and talking.

"Most people here fought the Russians. There's no peace at home if you fought the Russians, unless you agree to change sides and fight for them. I used to fire grenade-launchers, that was my speciality. I modified them so they flew further, no Russian could do that," he said, with a grin.

"But some of these refugees are not real refugees. They just pretend. Some of them pretend to know how to hold a grenade-launcher. They do it like this," he said, clutching his hands over his belly while the untended car made a sickening lurch towards the stream of onrushing traffic. "Ha, they are ridiculous."

The steady babble of conversation was rather comforting, despite his erratic driving. He showed me two more refugee camps where Chechen men stood or squatted by the roadside, woollen caps covering their shaven heads, cigarettes in their right hand, except when they held them out to welcome any new-arrival. These men said the Chechens arrived through Belarus, through a small border town called Terespol, where the Chechens requested asylum.

I couldn't resist it. The Circassians would have to wait another day. I was going to Terespol.

The train to Terespol barely seemed to get out of second gear as it rattled through the forests and fields of eastern Poland. The land was as flat as Russia, and I half expected to see the Russian flag waving above police stations and army bases along the line. I listened to Chechen music as we rumbled through the landscape, and imagined Chechens seeing this for the first time. What would they think as they left their old home, and arrived in a land at peace?

I didn't have long to wait to find out, disembarking at Terespol station, I was greeted by a familiar sight: men with beards and skull caps sitting around on the platform, one of them an acquaintance from the day before. I was in luck, a group of 30 or more Chechens was being processed by the immigration officials in the little station, and the group of men was waiting to welcome them.

They were going to wait all day at the little station, where they had nothing to do and no money to do it with.

“I couldn’t live in Russia,” said Magomed, the man I’d met the day before, in his heavily-accented Russian. “Chechnya is impossible for us. And in Russia, everyone thinks we’re terrorists, so we come here. Here, they don’t welcome us, but at least they leave us alone. We want to move on, to Germany or France, but we’re here for now.”

The hours dragged by. But eventually evening came and the impending promise of the new refugees’ release into their new home came with it. A woman in a nylon housecoat provoked the first whisper of excitement, until we realised she was the cleaning lady coming out of the office to fill up her bucket. The excitement subsided. Another five minutes passed. Then, suddenly, the Chechens burst out of their captivity. They were women and children, plus one or two men, and they showed gold-teeth smiles as they grinned at the relatives who had come to meet them.

Magomed hugged his sister. Another man hugged his mother. Children milled about, one of them giving me a shy smile and a little dance as I watched. This, apparently, was a typical day in Terespol. The only Poles interested in the new arrivals were taxi-drivers circling like sharks. If 30 Chechens arrive every day, they would add up to more than 10,000 a year. There are only a million Chechens in the world, so that is one percent of them arriving in this one little town annually. Chechnya was draining, and this was the plughole.

Back in Warsaw the next day, I found a politician to tell me why the Poles and the peoples of the Caucasus had a special bond. A former dissident himself, Adam Borowski had himself welcomed Chechen separatist officials to the country. He was critical of the Chechens leaving their homeland, they should stay and fight, he said. Perhaps he saw the Chechen war as a continuation of the struggle of the Poles for freedom from communism, but it was hard to like him.

His lofty sentiments about fraternal nations seemed irrelevant when compared to the raw emotion and desperate relief shown by the refugees on that chilly station platform just the night before. Perhaps Circassians had welcomed their arriving relatives with just such joy 124 years earlier, and ushered them into a new life in a foreign land.

SECTION 2: KOSOVO AND A HANDFUL OF INDIVIDUALS

I had dallied too long in Poland. I had a schedule to meet. The Lebanese and Syrian legs of the journey looked likely to be disrupted by a fresh uprising from Hezbollah in Beirut, but I still had a long way to go. As I rumbled southwards on buses and trains, I decided to take a detour. If I couldn’t visit Lebanon and Syria, I may as well investigate a couple of leads on the way.

When the Circassians left the Caucasus, they settled throughout the old Ottoman Empire which, in those days, included most of the Balkans. Many of these settlers fled once again when the

new Balkan nations of Bulgaria and Romania, annoyed that these immigrants had opposed their independence struggle, broke free. But one group remained – in Kosovo, which the Turks clung onto until 1912 and where the Muslim Albanians made the Circassians feel at home.

I knew there had been Circassians in Kosovo until recently, since a party of them relocated to the Caucasus in 1999 to escape NATO bombs and Serbian violence. Perhaps a few were still there, and would be prepared to talk to me. Rattling into Pristina, where the streets were still patrolled by European soldiers and the dialling code is (incongruously) the same as Monte Carlo, it seemed unlikely that any Circassians would willingly remain there. The traffic was terrible, and the roads were clogged with cars, jeeps, trucks and pedestrians, all shouting at each other in a vain attempt to get their way. My journey down through central Europe had drained me and I felt pessimistic.

On checking into my hotel, I asked the receptionist if he had heard of any Circassians. I had found a couple of village names in old news reports and was prepared to ask for them at the bus station if the worst came to the worst. But that was unnecessary. My friendly host not only knew where some Circassians lived, he had a cousin who would take me to see them the next day if I wanted.

Things were looking up. I ate a curry at a restaurant frequented only by European diplomats and went to bed curious to know what the morning would bring. The morning brought the receptionist's cousin, who spoke passable English and was as curious about the Circassians as I was. He knew what village they lived in, which was a start. Any more information could be found out on the way.

The village was called Stanovce Ulet. It was calmer than Pristina, which was a relief since I was developing a severe cold. We asked in a shop where the Circassians lived, and were rewarded with a vague gesture to a track and the words "over there".

Crawling down the rutted track, nervous of the BMW's sump, we saw nothing unusual until rounding a corner, where there was a small cooker-repair shop. Walking up to the door, hoping to ask more directions, I saw the name of the proprietor was Suleyman Abazi. Bingo. Abazi is a Circassian name, equivalent perhaps to an Englishman being called Lancaster, and these were surely the Circassians we had been directed towards.

Sure enough, the young man who opened the door was obviously Circassian. Blue-eyed, light-skinned, fair-haired, he was not one of the swarthy Albanians. He spoke excellent English, since he was studying computing in Indonesia and was home for a short holiday. But he knew nothing about his people. He knew not a word of the language, and insisted his name was Albanian. This was not an auspicious start to the trip. I had hoped for unknown stories and hidden facts. We had to look further.

The village was wretchedly poor. Jackdaws sat on dung heaps, and cows looked miserable as the rain poured down. The young man, called Shaban, had directed us further down the track. There

we found the timber gatehouse we had been directed towards, and the old man we were looking for. He was chatting to a neighbour as they sheltered from the rain.

Murat Cej was an unexpected source of knowledge. His grizzled cheeks, dirty boots and clouded eyes did not look like they belonged to an amateur historian, but his father had investigated the community's history and passed on his findings to his son. At the start, the village had held 360 Circassian families, who had built the local mosque and lived their own lives undisturbed by Serbs, Albanians or Turks. This village was one of 17 in Kosovo that had housed only Circassians.

They had lived well, but the times had turned against them. Once they had Circassian shops, Circassian artisans and Circassian intellectuals. But the communist government of Yugoslavia had closed down their school in 1955 and most of the Circassians had left for Turkey. The remainder had gone to the Caucasus in 1999, when the Kosovo war drove them out. Murat himself lived in the Russian city of Maikop for a couple of years, but could not settle.

"My wife did not want to come back, even though she is Albanian. But this is my place, it is my home. I was born here, and my father was born here," he said.

"It was nice hearing everyone speak Circassian, but I did not feel at home."

His neighbour chipped in: "this is the end of our people in this land. When I die there will be no one left who can speak Circassian or know anything about our history. The son of my brother does not know a word of Circassian. Our time has passed here. You should go to Turkey if you want to find Circassians."

Turkey was my next stop. I felt there was nothing for me here, so I arranged for a bus ticket and left at once.

SECTION 3: TURKEY AND REDISCOVERING A NATION

Arriving in Turkey I felt terrible. On top of my cold, I had to recover from a 17-hour bus journey and the smog created by the chain-smoking Albanians I travelled down with. Fortunately, I had a friend in Istanbul, and I could recover in her flat before venturing out to find Circassians.

This was clearly going to be harder than in Kosovo. Turkey had maybe 2.5 million people of Circassian origin, but they are spread out, they are assimilated and they do not speak English, let alone Russian. A friend had given me a few contact emails for Circassians active in the community, and (after a couple of days recuperation) I decided to get in touch.

During my time in Istanbul, tensions were particularly high around the disputed area of Abkhazia. Legally part of Georgia, Abkhazia won effective independence in the early 1990s and had managed to cling on to it ever since. But the Georgians were making threatening noises, and a Georgian pilotless plane had been shot down over the territory. The Abkhazians are close ethnic kin of the Circassians, and many of them also live in exile in Turkey, so the Circassian community was watching developments in the little Black Sea statelet.

On contacting Ergun, a friend of a friend and a Circassian academic, I was invited to attend the “Friends of Abkhazia” meeting, where measures planned to help Abkhazia protect itself were to be discussed. Now almost recovered from my cold, I decided this would be my first step into Circassian society in Turkey.

The meeting was held in a cultural centre in the Anatolian half of Istanbul, despite protests from the management of the cultural centre who felt the group was too radical in its demands for Abkhazian independence. Splits in diasporas are nothing new, but those within the Caucasus origin community in Turkey verged on parody. The community is represented by two federations: one of which includes only Circassians and Abkhazians, and is moderate with regard to Chechnya and Islam. The second also includes Chechens and others, and taken a tougher line on Chechen demands for freedom. Both groups technically support the Abkhazians, but are split over how much support they should provide to their ethnic kin in the “historical homeland”. They also worry about antagonising the Russians and thus sabotaging any hopes they have of ever going home.

A number of Turkish citizens helped the Abkhazians in their war for independence from Georgia, and others helped the Chechens, but their activities met with little approval from the nervous leaders of the cultural associations. They have only recently been permitted by Turkey’s nationalist government to teach children the Circassian language, which is unrelated to any other, and perhaps feel that too firm a show of community cohesion would frighten the Turks into rescinding their newly-gained rights.

The meeting showed quite how far the community had to go to gain this cohesion, however. The main working language was Turkish, but a number of the participants wanted to speak Abkhaz, meaning their remarks had to be translated back into Turkish (and into English for me). Two visitors had come from Abkhazia itself, one of whom appeared to speak bad Abkhaz so she got all remarks translated into Russian. When it was her turn to speak, however, she inexplicably chose to use English, which had to be cross-translated into Turkish, Russian and Abkhaz. The translations occurred after the individual speakers had finished, making the meeting perhaps three times longer than it might have been if only one language had been used.

This was not a community that seemed to pose much threat to anyone, especially since it disagreed on almost everything else as well. The Turkish citizens kept suggesting ways of helping Abkhazia. One man wanted to take out citizenship and thereby artificially swell the Abkhazian population, thus subtly dissuading Georgia from war. Another woman wanted simultaneous protests in Istanbul, Ankara and elsewhere, as a show of strength. The Abkhazians themselves wanted as many ethnic Abkhaz as possible to move to Abkhazia to be ready to defend the country if required. This was not an option that appealed to the Abkhaz living in prosperity in Istanbul.

It was a useful lesson that I should not expect to find a community united around one figure or organisation, especially considering the Turkish government’s only grudging recognition that

their country paid host to any ethnic minorities at all.

Other meetings at other cultural centres confirmed my impression that this was a community as likely to argue among itself as assert its own identity. I wanted to get out of the city, and see if Circassians still living in villages were any less prone to bickering.

When the Circassians left the Caucasus, the Ottoman government decided to employ them to secure its rule. Apart from settling them in the Balkans, where the Christian Romanians and Bulgarians were dangerously restive, it scattered them across Anatolia and Asia Minor. A large number were settled around Istanbul, where much valley floor was uninhabited marshland with potential for development. Their presence would counterbalance the predominance of Christian Greeks in the area as well. A second group of Circassians was employed to extend the land held by settled communities, and thus to protect the Anatolian heartland from nomads. They were settled in a line roughly stretching from Samsun on the Black Sea, via Sivas and Kayseri to Hatay on the Mediterranean, then further into the areas that now comprise Syria, Israel, Lebanon and Jordan.

The areas of central Anatolia near Kayseri – called Uzunyayla or “the long plateau” – were reputed to have retained Circassian traditions the best, so that was where I headed.

Kayseri is a quite a large town gathered around an old black castle, and has attracted many of the Circassians from the neighbouring region into its businesses and factories since Turkey began its economic boom 30 years ago. The inflow has drained the villages of Uzunyayla, but enough people survive in this Circassian heartland to give some idea of how Circassians lived for the first 100 years of their stay in Turkey.

I was lucky to be introduced to Aytek by a mutual friend. Himself a Circassian from Uzunyayla, Aytek worked in an all-Circassian insurance company and proudly twisted a string of prayers beads that made him look like a Mafiosi. Only the mafia men here use silver prayer beads, he said, as he spun the short loop in his long fingers.

We set off for the high plain of Uzunyayla with a colleague of his, who was tasked with checking whether insurance claims were fraudulent. We stopped periodically to take photographs of skidmarks and fragments of brake lights on the road, which gave me time to admire the austere landscape of a region where the snow lies a metre-deep in winter.

No one lived here permanently until the Circassians were settled in 1864, and their villages are huddled into whatever fold in the ground they can find. Even now, with electricity, satellite dishes and modernity in general, this is a hard place to make a living. At least half of the houses in the villages are just heaps of stones. Aytek pointed on such pile out as the house he had grown up in.

He was taking me to see Feyzullah Gogua, a 72-year-old man reputed to have the best knowledge of history on the plateau. He sat on the low divan in his living room with the lithe

ease of a much-younger man, and his face came alive as he remembered the injustices his family had suffered during the voyage across the Black Sea to Turkey all those years ago.

“If anyone complained about the conditions the ship-owners threw them over the side into the middle of the sea,” he said.

He said he thought in Circassian, and was proud to belong to the nation, but the children playing outside in the dust shouted their games back and forth in Turkish. Many of the inhabitants of these villages are now Kurds, who have fled their own national tragedy, and the distinctive culture of Uzunyayla has been lost.

That, in any case, was the opinion of Sebahattin Diyner, 75, who now lives in Kayseri but grew up in the villages of the plateau. He had visited the Caucasus many times, and remembered the Circassians who still live there hugging him with tears in their eyes on his first visit. They had been told that all the diaspora communities had assimilated long ago, and were delighted to find someone who still spoke their language.

Tragically, he said, in Turkey the language is all but lost in Circassians under 50 years old, and the culture threatens to follow it. But, he said, the community had still retained much of its distinctive honour code – the Habze, which is key to the Circassian national identity. Habze is a complex unwritten code which governs how a Circassian may behave. It exists where the language has died out, and makes the Circassians distinct from their hosts. Under the code, any show of weakness is frowned upon. A child may not cry, a father may not cuddle his child, and younger brother may not appear in the presence of his older brother. Elders are honoured, no man will appear publicly drunk, and men stand up in the presence of a lady.

“If you do not have a language, you do not have a culture. If you do not have a culture, you do not have an identity. And we do not want to live without an identity. Our duty must be to teach our language to young people,” he said.

As we left his apartment, two Turkish drunkards staggered past, arms around each others' shoulders to remain upright. Aytek clicked his tongue. “This is very shameful for a Circassian. This would not be possible for a Circassian man,” he said.

A large element of Habze is the hospitality shown to all guests. Circassians regularly boast of their generosity, and with good reason. I had never met Aytek before, and he dedicated three days to showing me around his area. That evening, he was going to take me a wedding. Habze might be dying out, he said, but Circassian dancing and music were still going strong.

“At this wedding you will see the eternal traditions of the Circassian nation, you will like it very much,” he said.

The wedding was being held in a hall on the edge of town, and attendance did not seem to require an invitation. On arriving I saw why. There were hundreds of guests, all finishing their meals and getting ready for the dancing. The bride and groom were nowhere to be seen, and

the guests were happily revelling without them. Dancing would come later for our party, however. Aytek had plans for what he called “gasoline” – or, rather, Johnny Walker Red Label. It might be shameful to be drunk, but drinking seemed to be expected.

The local lads were gathered around the boot of a car, with whisky being poured into, and out of, plastic glasses at a ferocious rate. The party was going to be a lively one.

Ours was not the only wedding in the vicinity. A group of Turks were celebrating with “gasoline” of their own just the other side of the wall, and suddenly we heard the crack-crack-crack-crack of celebratory gunfire. This was too much for one of our party, who had just been remarking that Turks don’t know how to hold parties. He pulled out a pistol of his own and, with muzzle flashes concealed by the tail of his jacket, sent up a volley of his own. The Turks, perhaps mindful of how promptly their challenge had been answered, did not respond.

And so, suitably refreshed, we progressed to dancing. The dancers, by the time we got inside, were swooping and circling in a ring of clapping Circassians. The music was staccato and repetitive, played on an accordion, and possessive of a hypnotic quality that suited the dancing.

For the dancing was totally unlike anything I’d seen at a wedding before. The women glided from place to place, their feet barely moving, their eyes downcast, their hands sliding and fluttering like fish in the tide. The men meanwhile strutted as they ushered their partners around the ring of spectators. They stamped their feet, puffed out their chests, and preened like courting pigeons. Sometimes a young man would lose control of his emotions and turn his back on his partner to show off to his clapping friends.

“This is a very big shame,” muttered Aytek resentfully. “A man must never turn his back on a woman.”

The concept of Habze is central to Circassians’ idea of themselves. And yet almost every Circassian has different ideas of what Habze is. Almost the only thing that two Circassians can agree on is that it is not as adhered to as it once was. Habze governs everything from stealing a bride, to addressing your father. But it is assailed from all sides. Secular Turkish values are undermining it from one direction, while Islam undermines it from another. At a strict Islamic wedding, the men and women would dance separately. At a non-religious wedding, they would dance to pop music. At a Circassian wedding they dance together, but to Circassian music. It is hard to keep the culture alive, while fighting battles in its defence on two fronts at once.

Aytek, so proud of the continuity of his culture at the beginning of the evening, was gloomy by the end: “let’s go, I hate these weddings. They are always the same. Gasoline, dance, gasoline, dance, why can’t we do something different for once?”

SECTION 4: ISRAEL, JORDAN AND “CHATROOM NATIONALISM”

A week or so later, I was sitting in a comfortable sitting room, with retired lieutenant-colonel Idar Khon of the Israeli army. He was a delightful host, chatty, generous, friendly and

knowledgeable. We had just finished lunch, and his son was charging around with the energy food gives to the young.

Suddenly there was a loud crack, the boy had slipped and hit his head on one of the dining chairs. He cried loudly and bitterly. Without changing position, but with a slight movement of his head, his father snapped at him: “are you not a Circassian?” As the boy’s mother rushed to comfort him, his father turned back to me, and continued my education in Habze.

That one moment taught me more than all the words I had heard about it so far.

It is a seeming paradox that the best-preserved Circassian culture and language is in Israel. There are only 4,000 Israeli Circassians, the smallest of all the diaspora communities, and they are well-integrated into Israeli society. The only Muslims to be conscripted into the national army, they live in two pristine villages in Galilee. Their small numbers, and their decades of geographical isolation caused by differences between their adopted country and its neighbours, had served not to undermine their culture but to preserve it.

Visitors to Kfar-Kama, the larger of the two villages, are welcomed by road signs in the Circassian language, which used a modified Cyrillic alphabet. The children on the streets laugh and joke in Circassian, the international Circassian flag graces their school t-shirts. The flag – which was invented by a British traveller to the Caucasus in the 1830s – flies above houses in the village and is stuck on the back windows of cars.

This is unmistakably a proud Circassian village, but people here had not seen the green flag with the 12 gold stars and three arrows until little more than 20 years ago. In those days, their only contact with the rest of the Circassian nation was a half-hour on the radio from Syria every week.

They only blossomed into full recognition of their Circassian heritage with the end of the Soviet Union and the treaty of peace with Jordan. Circassians free to travel around other diaspora communities discovered the wealth of their own culture. It is a phenomenon I dubbed “chatroom nationalism”, after the internet sites that allow these groups to communicate, and it has been spectacular.

Israelis were quick to exploit the possibilities of the internet and Idar, who was one of the first in the village to sign up to it, was amazed by the development.

“At the beginning, if you searched for Circassian on the internet, there was nothing. Now you have everything: culture, history, youtube. There was a conference in American not long ago and I could watch it in real time on my computer. We chat, we videochat with other communities,” he said.

Villagers had seen the possibility and launched Radio Adiga, an internet-based radio station playing Circassian music, with Caucasus-themed news in all the languages of the diaspora, 24 hours a day.

And the effects of the revolution had been dramatic. Idar showed pictures of a wedding in the 1980s, when the villagers danced like the Arabs: with the men lined up, arms linked, and no women to be seen. A wedding I attended two nights later could not have been more different. Men and women danced together to Circassian music, the men competing for the more flamboyant dance moves. Competition between the two villages was intense.

But this was a community never far from tragedy. One of the richest Circassian communities in the Middle East was once in the Golan Heights. They fled when Israeli soldiers seized the area in 1973, and never returned. Driving up through the Golan, it was clear how much had been lost. The graveyards were overgrown and choked. With no living Circassians to tend them, they looked far more dead than a graveyard ever should.

A mosque stood by the side of the road that runs between the "Warning, Mines" signs that dot the Golan, its walls and minaret pocked and shattered by shellfire. One corner of the concrete roof had collapsed and generations of Israeli soldiers had boasted of their mastery over the Muslims with graffiti of hate. Insignia of battalions were scrawled on the walls, in one place overlain with the words "death to Arabs". Stars of David and other Jewish symbols surrounded what was once the prayer niche. Perhaps most offensively because it was so understated, someone had carefully etched a wall with the date 15/5/1948: the day the first Arab-Israeli war started.

The young men and women who doodled on these walls probably did not know that this mosque once belonged to Circassians, to a community which also gave its sons and daughters to serve among them.

Idar and the other young men in Kfar-Kama said it was hard being a Circassian and fighting the Palestinians, who are fellow-Muslims. But Habze is all about loyalty, and the Circassians who fought so well for Israel were the cousins of Circassians who fought just as hard for Syria, until they were driven off the Golan Heights and made into refugees once more.

I was reminded that Circassians had been the bodyguards of the Russian Tsar Alexander II, the man who had ordered the expulsion of their nation in the first place.

Loyalty runs deep in this people, but even that is under threat from the modern world. Two decades ago, the villages had produced only a handful of university students. Young Circassians went into the army as a matter of course. Now, more than 200 villagers were studying at university, and moving into the hi-tech professions of IT, television or banking. The links between Circassians and warfare were being broken for the first time, although the ties linking them to their home villages were still strong. Students came home at the weekend as much as they could.

The Israeli Circassian community is so small that literally everyone knows everyone. There are no surprises. And I was greeted like an old friend by people on the street who had heard within minutes that a stranger was in the village. One of my new friends was organising a wedding for a

younger relative, and needed help making kebabs for 1,300 people.

Under the rules of hospitality, a guest starts helping with the household's work after three days staying in a house, so I was asked along, and accepted without thought. Although as a vegetarian, the thought of processing several dozen pound of shish kebab did not fill me with joy, this was a chance to see a community at work.

Habze can seem severe to an outsider. In public, it admits little emotion, and the Circassian men can seem stern and upright. But this group of a dozen or so kebab-makers showed how relaxed Circassians can be when they are doing something they enjoy. Our host continually exhorted us to greater effort with the words of an Israeli hummus advert, which told viewers that the product was made "with love".

"Make the kebabs with love," he would shout in heavily-accented English, then collapse with giggles, as we struggled to stay ahead of the neighbouring table in an impromptu kebab-making competition. The day was warm and the kitchen was hot, but conversation flowed – all zhs and shs in the hissy Circassian language – and the laughter was constant, and I felt like I had been accepted into the community without question. I didn't want to leave, but sadly the Sabbath was approaching and if I didn't get to Jordan that day, I would have to wait around until after the weekend.

From Kfar-Kama to Amman, home of the nearest major Circassian community, is little more than 100 kilometres, but until Israel and Jordan signed a peace treaty in 1994, the two groups may as well have been on different planets. Now, they can visit each other and intermarry – a great relief to Israeli Circassians in particular, who were beginning to struggle to find spouses who weren't cousins.

The drive to Jordan dips below Sea Level, which is marked in Israel by a slightly disconcerting sign. It is nothing like as disconcerting, however, as the Jordanian taxi drivers who combine an extreme verbosity with a truly terrifying approaching to overtaking. My taxi driver, frustrated by my failure to communicate with him in German, which he spoke even more badly than I do, at one point overtook another taxi on a blind corner and attempted to hold a conversation with its driver as we hurtled down a stretch of hill into Amman. The conversation was shouting pitch, and his mouth was within five centimetres of my ear. I was not sorry when we finally reached my hotel.

Amman was in fact founded by Circassians, who arrived here in 1878 (when the newly independent Balkan states drove the unwelcome Muslims out of their lands) to find the ruined Roman city of Philadelphia inhabited by just a few nomadic Bedouin. They set up camp in the old amphitheatre and used the river for water, washing and recreation.

When the British carved the land of Transjordan out of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War, this was the only sizeable town that would serve as a capital for the new state.

Since those days, the Circassians in Amman have been swamped by successive waves of Palestinian refugees who may now make up as much as 60 percent of the national population, but they remain the owners of the old town centre. They also retain a privileged position in society. They provide the bodyguards for the king, still wearing their national costume, and have dedicated members of parliament just for their community. They are disproportionately represented in the army and security services. Like in Israel, they are renowned for their loyalty.

I was lucky enough to have an introduction to a wonderfully hospitable Circassian lady called Zaina, who knew her community backwards and could open any door. With her help, I gained access to the exclusive Al-Ahli and Al-Jeel clubs, chatted to the members of the Circassian Charity Association, and met members of the Circassian and local Chechen communities.

Perhaps most interesting, however, was meeting Nart Naghway, the 24-year-old founder of Nart TV, a cable television station for the Circassian nation. It is an ambitious project, since he has little cash and less television experience, but he is already broadcasting a string of pre-recorded material (which I had been shown with pride by my friends in Israel) and hoped to gather enough correspondents as to cover the whole Circassian world. "Chatroom nationalism" was gaining a television station.

SECTION 5: THE BLACK SEA AND A SHATTERED ILLUSION

I had been forced to miss out on Syria and Lebanon by the continuing violence in Beirut. Though that had now died down, the Israeli stamps in my passport meant I could not visit their Circassian communities even if I wanted to. I decided, therefore, to head back to Turkey to visit some communities I had missed out on the first time round.

The Circassian surrender to the Russians had been on May 21, 1864, and every year the Circassians gather to mark the occasion by throwing flowers into the sea that had claimed the lives of so many of their compatriots. This year, they met by the Bosphorus. They had hired a boat which, sporting the Circassian flag on its bows, surged across the narrow strait between Asia and Europe, hooting its horn mournfully. Speeches were made, flowers were thrown, music was played. It was a potent reminder that they still exist, and other shipping hooted their horns in sympathy.

The next weekend, more Circassians travelled to the Black Sea village of Kefken to mark the anniversary more thoroughly. Kefken is an undistinguished fishing village on Turkey's north coast, but it too had accepted refugees in 1864 (and again in 1878), and Circassians had chosen it as the location of the memorial service. More flowers were thrown, more speeches were read, more songs were sung. Then, as night fell, a huge bonfire blazed up on the beach, and hundreds of people progressed towards it, holding flaming torches in their hands, as music blared out over the sands and the waves.

As the bonfire died down and the extinguished torches were tossed into the blaze, the music became more haunting, and the last thing I remember is the gentle air of "the Road to Istanbul",

a Circassian song commemorating the tragedy that befell the nation. As the wind blew off the sea, the tune floated with it, delicate and strong, like a scrap of silk blowing in the night air.

It left a profound impression on me.

The next week, my friend Zeynel, a Circassian from London, was in Turkey on holiday and we decided to visit some of the communities near Istanbul. These areas – Adapazari, Dubze, and others – had been shattered by the earthquake of 1999 and were still licking their wounds. The investment that had poured in to rebuild the local infrastructure had, however, produced factories and construction sites and left the Circassians as prosperous as they had ever been.

We stopped in central Dubze to meet Afitap Altan, the head of the local Circassian centre. She had lived in the Caucasus for several years, but came home after the earthquake, and was now spearheading efforts to create a more cohesive community. Central to that was a campaign pioneered by old men to ban shooting at Circassian weddings.

It may seem like a small issue, but shooting by the mid-1990s had got completely out of control. Most Circassians in their 30s have lost a relative to gunfire at weddings, since the bullets have to come down again and they were fired in boxfuls. This had been a far more intensive activity than the few shots I had seen being fired in the town of Kayseri. Young men would mass in ranks and fire to mark talented dancers, or just to show they had arrived. The crisis point was reached when a mother of two was killed at a wedding six years ago, and the old men in the village of Balballi decided enough was enough. That evening they gathered and started the campaign that was to stop firing at Circassian weddings.

Johan Agumba, 65, one of the old men who decided to take action, told me that the old rules of Habze were not as strong as they once had been and that the community was dying out. I was not so sure. The fact that a group of old men could impose their view on a whole community showed that the rules of respect and of loyalty were still coherent, especially in the light of comments I had heard earlier in the day.

Young men I spoke to in another village were profoundly resentful that they were not allowed to fire into the air whenever they wanted. It had been one of the most entertaining elements of a wedding, they said. But nevertheless they did what they were told.

A few days after this, the Circassians were due to hold a gathering to discuss the success of the ban. More than a hundred of elders would attend. In Turkey any sign of national minorities asserting themselves tends to be squashed, but here were the Circassians spontaneously mobilising to protect their own interests. The security services sent spies to watch their meetings, but so far had done nothing to stop them.

The Circassians might all be in agreement that Habze is dying out, but the community in fact seemed in some ways to be growing in cohesion. The great meetings called by the old men to discuss common issues seemed a direct parallel to the huge gatherings described by British

travellers to the Caucasus in the 19th century. In their memoirs, they described the old men sitting on the ground to discuss important issues like the attacks of the Russians, while the young men engaged in macho games to show their prowess. The situation seemed little changed.

Western travellers' memoirs are key to the 19th century history of the Circassians, since so little was written down by the highlanders themselves. Most of the memoirs are by travellers, but during the course of my research I had found a slim volume by a French mercenary who had fought with the Circassians in the last desperate year of their resistance, then shared their exodus from their homeland and the horrors of their arrival in Turkey.

Newspaper reports from the time pinpointed where the refugee camps were, but his account gave a far more detailed description of one of them: Akchakale, a ruined fortress near the town of Trabzon, on Turkey's northern coast. According to his account, this fortress had been the final resting place for tens of thousands of refugees, and I wanted to visit it before I left Turkey. Perhaps there were some traces of the many people who died there.

The bus to Trabzon takes 14 hours from Istanbul, a length of time prolonged by the fact that I went to the wrong bus station and had to catch it up in a taxi. But, that glitch overcome, we settled down for the steady journey along the north coast of the country towards Trabzon: the Trebizond of the ancients. The morning brought a view of the sheer shoreline. There were few natural harbours along this road, and it did not seem surprising that the Circassians had been confined to just a few ports. There was no shelter for boats or people anywhere else.

The highway was a huge construction, with several lanes of hurtling traffic, and when I arrived in Akchakale, I saw how it overshadowed the castle and village like a dam wall. The steady traffic noise made it hard to concentrate, and the road had altered the lay-out, but certain features were still clear from the French traveller's account.

The castle was still there, while a stream running along its foot must be the one the Frenchman drank from when he came ashore thirsty and exhausted. The hills behind the town are those that were thronged with refugees, although now they were covered in orchards and scrub.

The next day, reinforced by an interpreter, I headed for the mosque, where I supposed a crowd of people might be gathered. Sitting down, I asked them if anyone had heard of the Circassians and the fact that their village had been a refugee camp. Blank looks greeted me. They had heard of the Circassians, but there were none of them here. They lived in other parts of Turkey

I asked more people, and received the same response. Although I was given tea, I had to admit this was not going well.

Then an old man, hunched over in a flat-cap, came stumbling around the corner. He was going to the mosque but I waylaid him before he entered it. His response was one of the most surprising of all those I heard during my travels.

“Oh, I was wondering if anyone would ever ask,” he said. “I know where they’re buried, do you want to come and see? When I was a boy we planted an orchard and their bones were all under the ground. Like sand on the beach, they were so many.”

We jumped into his neighbour’s car. Rattling up the hill, we left the village far below us. The track was steep and the car laboured as we climbed. Finally we stopped and the 80-year-old man, called Ali Kurt, gestured at an orchard filled with what looked like hazels. Dig down 50 centimetres and you’ll find bones, he said. I asked what they had done with them when they dug them up, and he looked sheepish. It transpired they had thrown the bones into the sea.

“We had no choice,” he protested. “They were so many, what else could we have done?”

Now I believed him. Just the day before, while prowling along the cliff below the castle, I had found a little drift of bones in a cleft in the rocks. I am no expert, but one looked very like a shattered pelvis, while another was clearly a jawbone.

It was a sign of how huge the refugee camp had been that its graveyard was so far out of the village. Carrying the bodies up here in the summer heat must have been a terrible struggle, but better than having them contaminate the water courses by the seashore.

I wanted to return immediately with archaeologists. I wanted to erect a monument to the dead. And perhaps one day I shall, but at that time, I had to move on. My fellowship was over. That night I sat in a café in Trabzon drinking a beer and thinking of the last two months of travelling and of how the world had changed. I imagined the British travellers setting off to Circassia, when it was still the Circassians’ homeland. I imagined their reception they received by highlanders delighted someone was interested in their struggle. I remembered their description of the wooded hills of the Caucasus shore, with white-capped mountains behind, rising from the sea as the ships approached.

I couldn’t resist it. Work could wait. I had a valid Russian visa, and decided I too wanted to sail across the Black Sea and see those mountains appear on the horizon. Ferries left Trabzon for the port of Sochi in southern Russia twice a week and, as luck would have it, one was sailing the next day.

The voyage was not as difficult as those of the 19th century. We were not chased by Russian warships, or becalmed. But, it was still uncomfortable. The departure was delayed by 14 hours, and my cabin was like an oven. But the deck was cool, and I had plenty of thinking to do.

I thought of the Circassians who had once lived where I was going, and I thought of the Russian soldiers who had subdued them. The Russian soldiers were no pampered master-race. They had lived in miserable conditions too. Their earth-built forts along the seashore were cut off from supplies by the winter storms for half the year. Annual mortality was often 50 percent, and even that could be made worse by corrupt officers stealing their food.

One traveller told a story of an officer who marched his troops from Moscow to the Black Sea.

According to regulations, he had to feed them on a bullock a day. He kept a bullock with the group all the way, so he could show it to any inspecting officer, but he never killed it. Instead, he made sure it was well-fed and sold it for a healthy profit at the journey's end.

Another story, written by a Russian aristocrat reduced to the ranks for political opposition to the tsar, tells of a general who decorated his house with the severed heads of Circassian tribesmen. When a woman came to tea and objected to the grisly objects, he put them under his bed so as not to waste them.

This had been a land of terrible punishment and brutality, but I expected a warmer welcome now. Sochi is a resort town. It is visited by thousands of tourists a year, and will host the Winter Olympics in 2014. Russia's war may have been barbaric, but it had brought civilisation to the mountains eventually.

By evening, the mountains were visible and dolphins were gambolling around our ship. The hotels and nightclubs of the resorts of the coast were coming into view, and I was excited to be seeing it. I had not been in Russia for two years and was looking forward to seeing how it had changed.

Disembarking was easy, passport control was smooth. But I immediately attracted the attention of a Russian policeman on the other side. He demanded my passport, and marched off with it. He had already gathered a little group of new-arrivals, and we straggled after his well-fed rump as he waddled along with our identification papers. He vanished into an office, and with a few choice swear words instructed us to wait where we were.

My excitement soured as I sat on my suitcase.

The Turks who had been detained before me gradually were called in. Each of them emerged poorer by the price of the bribe needed to get their passports back. Then came my turn. He had invented three laws I had broken, and was prepared to send me to court. It was a familiar situation. Soon, he would tell me I could pay a fine if I wanted to: the approach was identical to one described by a 19th century traveller whose memoir I had read. A bribe was inevitable. He had all night, and years of experience in knowing just how long tourists were prepared to be detained for. I could have argued with him, but was too depressed.

The Circassians' culture has survived the 124 years of exile. Their language may be vanishing, but their national values were still alive, even thriving. Sadly, the same could be said of the Russian officers in the Caucasus as well. As I trudged out of his office into the evening, I couldn't help wishing that the Circassians had been allowed to stay where they were. If nothing else, they know how to welcome a guest.