Cotton Motherland

Pages 73-85

That same moonless night also marks the night between the 8th and the 9th of October 1967. In fact when the train with the many coaches on the Tashkent-Moscow line arrives at the 1st station in European Russia, in Orenbourg, the old clock of the old stone-built station built during the czarist era indicates that it's three o'clock in the morning. Everyone inside is sleeping in the berths. Everyone, that is, except Dr. Stergios X. Stavroula in fact is snoring lightly. Evidence enough that she's tired, mentally exhausted, and sleep finds her vulnerable, bringing to the surface that innocence which she never lost, and filling Dr. Stergios X. with guilt. Even now he is feeling guilty as he observes her thessalonian face, with fine aging lines surrounding her half-open lips; with her eyes closed, there were guilt feelings even though her well-intentioned look and her questioning silences didn't always meet his eyes directly; and that, because even to this day, with everything left behind him, and once again taking responsibility for his actions, ever more difficult and demanding, because he isn't deciding only for himself any more… even today, I narrate, a voice intercedes between Stavroula's innocence and his guilt. For no matter how he attempts just the opposite, this voice is in his ears, *"do you know what Orenbourg means, my dear, it means a 'hungry wolf', once people went hungry there, and I'm afraid that they're still hungry there today, it's a very poor city, when you pass by on the train, you'll see their wooden houses* – isbah *they call them, and you know how they make them? They place huge tree trunks one on top of the other, and the houses look beautiful in the woodlands, you should see them, my dear, they smell of poverty, but also of warmth*," that's what the voice was telling him when he was getting ready for his first trip to Moscow, which in the end never took place. Now in the darkness of this moonless night, how can Dr. Stergios X. make out the wooden houses of Orenbourg, which they call *isbah* and which reek of poverty and warmth?

Yet despite the fact that the doctor cannot make out anything else except poorly lit czarist yellowish stone buildings with arched windows – as of course all czarist stone buildings were, as were also the central buildings of Tashkent University Hospital – the female voice continues to sound in his ears, and strangely enough he is not confused at all with the sound of the train, a fact that instead of reassuring Dr. Stergios X., upsets him even more. *"Do you know, my dear, what the paramount characteristic of a Russian is? The need to believe. And right behind that?? The need to be sacrificed. Russians love feeling like candidate martyrs. But what's characteristic of a Greek?"* Dr. Stergios X is confused, and while clearly hearing the question, as he stores it into memory, is unable to hear his own answer; he thinks hard, 'what had I answered really', as the train's whistle sounds, indicating that in a few minutes, seconds, Orenbourg, with its wooden houses, its stone czarist station, will also belong to his personal story, just as the prior 18 years belong to his life.

Those years, Doctor, in order to bring you back to the sequence of the novel, begin at exactly the moment – what irony of History! – that the Liberty revs up its engines and begins slowly but steadily to move back out of Dyrrhachion harbor and in a few minutes become lost in the moonless humid October night. Where can an American-built vessel sailing under a Soviet flag be headed in the dark of night, and better yet, what has been filled to capacity in the ship's huge hold, as some Britons with justifiable suspicions seem to have asked themselves, since the white blip of this

Soviet Liberty would appear on the radar of their submarines' that were patrolling the waters ever alert on the Mediterranean approximately all the way up to the Dardanelles. Some persons indeed, the most suspicious and most conscientious of them, must also have sent the required telegraph signals. Tap tap tap tap …Soviet ship located in the Adriatic… STOP. Tap tap tap …heading towards the Ionian Sea…tap tap … following it . . . STOP. They were watching you, with good reason they were watching you, because what would the Soviets possibly be looking for in those waters, if you don't mind my asking? "*Didn't we divide up into zones of influence, gentlemen? Didn't you agree that we would keep Greece?"* Therefore, these stubborn bone-headed Greeks had given Joseph Vissarionovich a real headache. This Caucasic didn't like Greeks, above all he didn't trust them one iota, you don't know what trap they can set for you from one minute to the other, a Greek was one who raised a paring knife against his shoemaker father, there in the Caucasus, and the Great One hadn't forgotten it, but that which he couldn't stand the most was their disobedience, their proclivity for doing whatever they wanted to do, particularly their first and foremost indescribable leader whom he sent to Siberian Kolyma, having remembered to send him packing the sooner the better, just as he had sent packing those others, those compatriots from the Crimea, who went in '37 to cause him trouble, "but he's a madman, as if he didn't have enough problems and went to create one with his civil war, I've got so many to take care of now, thousands, I learned how it is to help someone escape and where to take them, no way should Churchill, that English fat fox get wind of it, you understand, Comrade Laurenti[6], what they're doing to me , you understand?" Like a wild beast, it is said, the first-in-his-class Great Comrade Stalin would come and go to his office in the Kremlin at ten, maybe even eleven o'clock at night – a time when he usually held his meetings – in late September of 1949. With every step, pain(s) stabbed him literally, winter sank deep into his bones, and his rheumatism began to flare up, Moscow didn't agree with him anymore, and then there were those terrible sleepless nights to boot, and as soon as he would manage to shut his eyes a bit after sunrise, and certainly in no way was he going to take sleeping pills that were recommended to him by his doctor, Vinogradov[7]! "Why is the Jew so insistent? What's he up to? Sleeping pills? And what if I don't wake up? I'll fix that wily traitor, first chance I get, I'll take care of him." And so the aging Joseph, in all his pains and fears and rage against those undisciplined and disobedient Greeks, and his mother wasn't near him to console him, to offer a tender "My little Soso" when he was a little boy in the Caucasus, and would run and hide inside her apron strings, to be saved from the vulgar shoemaker, Beso, that was his nickname, who through bad luck happened to be his father.

And it is said how on that rainy and already cold Moscow night, Comrade Stalin, Heart, Soul, and Mind of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the only thing he had on his mind was to return to the beautiful sanitarium complex furnished with the most modern equipment, that had been erected at the year's beginning especially for his ailments, i.e., 1949, on the coast of the heavenly beautiful mountain Lake Ritsa, well where else? In the Caucasus, of course, in Abkhazia, at an altitude of a thousand meters, specifically, where Soso could once again return to his childhood and suffer neither from his damned rheumatism, nor from his diabolical conspirators who he felt were increasing in numbers around him day by day. For that reason, he was in a hurry to close the subject on "Greeks" as soon as possible. It is said that there, where he was pacing up and down, he stopped for just a couple of minutes – not even five, truth be told – in front of the great window. Joseph Vissarionovich marveled at the Kremlin's magnificence; and he believed that the red glistening of the perpetual flame at the highest point of the medieval Russian palace, lit up not only Red Square, but the

whole world…the world that *I rule!*. He thought deeply within his soul, and this very deep satisfaction, this endless pleasure that it brought about at the same time a wave of deadly fear that choked him, and immediately afterwards infuriated him to death. They say he turned suddenly to the man who was following him quietly, but quite malevolently, waiting for his decision which he announced as follows: "To Uzbekistan, to Tashkent. Take them to Tashkent. All of our factories during the war have been moved there. We have need for workers. There, far away, in the desert. And they'll work there, and they won't cause any more trouble. Do you know what the other name for Tashkent is, Comrade Laurenti? 'The city of bread.' Therefore, these Greeks should be eternally grateful: for salvation, for work, for bread."

Could you however, Doctor, be grateful to anyone that first night, that night on which you would set out on your long journey, if you were packed literally in the hold of an American vessel but really a Soviet ship, Liberty, named Valerie Takhalov, according to my information? Did you know what this gigantic ship could be carrying in its hold? Well, I'll tell you what I found out. Nine thousand tons of freight, if you please! And that includes you as well. And now I can picture you, not by virtue of the doctor's notebook that strangely didn't have a word written about that night, about that fateful twenty-four hours, not even a word about the hastily sketched ship, just a hastily sketched train, and close by another ship, and then another ship, etc. and all of this mystery sketching finishes off like this, closely approximate to what I've drawn here.

Well, I can conjure you up through other narrations, other voices which have just now entered my mind and demand to be heard about that long trip into the night which has already begun. And as those voices speak, they are forming images, here a panoramic image like someone pulling a layout from above and we can see the entire belly of the huge ship with its three holds, one below the other, full of people stirring, mumbling, human waves of khaki colors moving about there, following the ships rocking movements, and if the lens is focused more clearly, the images become more specific, the voices are heard more clearly – there's nothing heroic about these voices – they're voices full of simple questions, the answers to which solve practical problems of the moment, how and where to sleep, how and where to eat, how and where to satisfy other immediate needs; and while this subterranean life stirs and strangles, and breathes with difficulty, becoming ill from the sea's capriciousness, which hasn't yet come up against the high mountains, he agonizes, where are they taking us?, he asks himself. Some moments bring him to tears; other moments lead him to sing, maybe even to dance. And while one can see these images played out in the ship's holds, the steadfast white Liberty continues its long voyage in the Greek seas. There it is now plying the Peloponnesian coastline now turning left up the coast, now it's crossing the Aegean, now it's leaving Greek waters, now it's heading towards the Bosporus Straits, now, there it is, in the late afternoon of October 9, 1949, heading into the Bosporus at a slow speed. Daylight makes way for the evening which is already in full swing on the Asian side, the European side still resisting nightfall. Legendary Constantinople emerges literally among the dark red shadows of the October twilight, lazily and unexpectedly… from the hills to the "master" sea in Europe, and Asia on the other side, and historically suspicious as seen by both sides. The first lights begin

to appear on the Sultanahmed and also on the Kandiki and further on the Skoutari. As on every day at the harbor, the activity is impressive. A German freighter is departing, sounding his awe-inspiring foghorn, two Turkish warships standing guard at the edge of the impressive – from the standpoint of topography – harbor, smaller sloops come and go, filled with people from Eminonou all the way to Boughioukanda. Some enthusiasts insist on remaining to fish among these various boats, but you, comrades, men and women alike, you'll see neither the legendary city nor the sea where for hours it torments you, because you're not permitted to come up on deck, although you already knew that when you first started out on this long journey, because you're illegal, outside the law, something akin to bank robbers, and maybe even worse. What do they call you in the homeland of stone you left behind over a month ago? Brigands! Well, such dregs of society and filth are being carried by the American ship disguised as Soviet, and woe to him who gets wind of this, and especially woe to – what did the Great Joseph call him, oh, yes, the British fat fox. Because these are the deals we made, gentlemen, the Russian bear cannot go against its own will. Therefore. . .don't simply just hide your heads, dear Comrades, but don't utter a single sound, now that we've arrived, tied up at the docks of the Constantinople's harbor; ah, there they are, the Turkish customs authority is coming to inspect the cargo, and they are unbelievably suspicious, dear Comrades, and besides they don't like us Russians, we're something like centuries-old enemies to them, and we, like you, dear Comrades, however didn't twitch a nostril in the last war, the cunning Easterners declared neutrality and tucked their tails between their legs. But let's stop the chatter here, the Turks have already come on board and are speaking with the ship's captain.

From my authoritative information, as usual, and not from your notebook, Doctor, in which you avoid writing anything relative, I learned that when the Turkish customs agents boarded the Soviet Liberty – "we're carrying coal" declared the Soviets – "coal, and here are our papers" and as much as the Turkish officers with Eastern suspicions (but also with the Eastern disposition to "finish up our work the sooner the better with these people"), at the time I am writing about this, mysterious horse trading was taking place up on the deck, right under the nose of the Turkish customs agents… oh! What a frenetic dance is that?. . .what is that accordion's tune?…what is this squirming about?...this leaping about?…what crazy mood overtook these young, almost beardless Russian sailors suddenly that they're jumping up and down on the deck and singing out loud at the top of their lungs? *"Kamarinskaya, Kamarinskaya,"* such a ruckus, no these Turkish customs agents can't stand any more, they just want to get the paperwork done more quickly "o.k., coal, coal" , why even bother for a second look to check the veracity of the papers. How could the sly, but ultimately gullible Easterners imagine that the "coal" was alive, had veins and nerves and memory, and a story that was being written minute by minute down below in the bowels of this Soviet ship which was, as we know, American.

When we embarked on the ship, a smell overcame me that almost made me implode, I had never gotten on a ship where I could see mountains beyond the sea, and I said, Stavroula, find the doctor and tell him we want to get the hell out of here… I'm afraid. Stavroula, when I see you crying, I'm even more afraid, tell your brother to get us out of here, and so, Stavroula started crying even more. Where would I possibly find either my brother or the doctor? They quickly pulled us down into the ship's hold for us to fall in, military style. I was holding Stavroula by the hand, some Russian sailors were there speaking their language, talking, talking, talking, only

their leaders and the Slavic Macedonians could understand what they were saying, I asked Fanka, a young girl from Prespia in front of me, and she said that they're giving us instructions to make ourselves comfortable and not to worry, they'll be bringing us food and water, but that we shouldn't make a lot of noise, we shouldn't draw attention to ourselves, you understand, Comrade? Stavroula heard this and starting crying again, we're going to suffocate in here, we've got to get out of here, it's hot in here, I'm dizzy, my stomach's doing high jumps. 'This is it, get used to it,' Fanka turns around and says to us sternly, telling us that we have to stay put until we arrive – but arrive where? Where are we going? Where are they taking us and why don't they tell us where they're taking us! –

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Pages 98-104

It was on the dawn of the second day of our trip, Doctor, and in accordance with the Gregorian calendar that is still followed in the large Soviet motherland, it is Monday, the 9th of October, 1967. Difficult and unpredictable years, to be sure. I see you thinking about having a glance at your notebook. I can only understand three spartan jottings following literally the look in your eyes. *"21st of April, military coup d'état, homeland under siege once again. A wall going up once again. There's no going back. What will we do?"* Dr. Stergios X purses his lips. How does he feel at this moment, I wonder, that the Soviet train with the many coaches on the Tashkent-Moscow line, whistling successively, is leaving behind one small Russian hamlet after the other, known by everyone as the Derevnia. How does he feel when he sees opposite him his first born Eleni ('*Lotska'* or '*Lenka'* as she called now and then – at least that's how his father called his mother lovingly – she's sad, oh!, how melancholy is his favorite, "I don't want to leave, Dad, all my girl friends are here, I was born here, I grew up here, I go to school here, I play here, I study music here, piano, guitar, what will happen to our band, Dad? We've scheduled performances in all the towns, we're going to play at the theater on Komsomol Festival Day this year, on the anniversary of the Revolution – don't you want to hear us play? –it's going to be very formal this time, we're going to be the best of all of the groups, please let's not leave", but they left, they're leaving, right now they're leaving, every minute they're distancing themselves more and more from that "cotton motherland", as the Doctor had referred to it, when he had first been impressed coming across the vast expanses of cotton fields before him as far out as the eye could see, a sea of white cotton spilling out to the horizon. He sweetened the name when he came face to face with reality, with the other motherland that was made of stone and had overwhelmed him. Nevertheless, his beloved first born didn't know anything about that, the Doctor hadn't instilled any of his own bitterness, none of his own fears, none of his disappointments which might have arisen about any homeland: to the contrary, he would always summon up his instinctive humor, that bittersweet self-deprecating humor to sweet-talk his daughters, not unlike his taking care to do as much with all the children whose parents brought them either to the hospital or to his clinic, where he treated them without charging them; it was one of his basic principles, to be more faithful to the Hippocratic Oath than to any one particular person. Nonetheless, it's now a case of recognizing one more reason for the fourteen-year-old teenager's being so sad, but oh, how sad, well look, she didn't even touch her breakfast, his little one has been on a fast since yesterday. Certainly the boy, that 15-year-old Sergei, with the bicycle, noticed him; that drummer in a band appeared suddenly around a turn, as

if he had been hiding among the tall trees. The bus set out for the station, and he then saw Eleni heading for a rear seat in the bus and pressing her cheek against the window, with the 15-year-old Sergei following the bus on his bicycle, pedaling, pedaling faster, faster. Sergei, in order not to lose sight of Lenotska's face, in order not to lose sight of your girl, all of the way to the train station, and then the two faces lost sight of each other forever. And the doctor realizes the gravity of this first, and therefore meaningful, loss, he knows very well now this feeling, with his decision to leave, reposed irreversibly in the soul of his eldest daughter. *"I wonder for how many other similar feelings that I instigated, I will have to consider myself responsible, and what about those painful feelings that I have had to endure?*", Dr. Stergios X. perhaps is asking himself today on the 9th of October, 1967, as he looks out onto the road outside of the family coach through the window, and sees one after the other the Russian villages of the Derevnia passing before his eyes. But still, I have the impression that the doctor doesn't regret anything that he has decided on and has done up to now, even though he must surely already know – he has accepted it completely – that he is unable to contravene History. *"We are grains of sand following the waves of History"*. When and to whom he had said this, yes, of course, it was to her, to the only person whom he could speak to from the bottom of his heart, with the only one with whom he could converse, but no, the time had not yet arrived to put her into those pages, Doctor, because we are still at the beginning, we haven't even arrived at the letter T, with which, I imagine we all remember, your plan ends: Ship – train – ship – train – T. So it's time to arrive at that which the Great Father called the "city of bread", Doctor, since, well, you know better than I do, waiting for us there is not just one, but indeed many stories, of which some you have noted in my notebook/guide, and others that are creations of my own.

That way, with a light leap in time from that which only memory or imagination allow, we bring ourselves once again to that slow train on the Krasnovodsk – Asgabat – Bukhara – Samarkand – Tashkent line. And while in Thessalonica, the calendar with the verses hanging right next to Eleni X.'s kitchen plate-rack shows the 20th of October, 1949, and the announcer on the Northern Greece Radio Station announces in an official voice: "The time now is 8 p.m.", whoever's travelling on the Soviet train on the Krasnovodsk – Asgabat – Bukhara – Samarkand – Tashkent line has begun to lose track of the days and the time, how many days, and how many nights, sometimes on a ship, sometimes on the train, sometimes on another ship, sometimes on this train, and in which town, what area, which country? Sometimes with accompanying protests. "Finally, where are we going? What is this desert, there's no end…" on occasion with reminiscences of victorious battles "and you see, comrades, when…but on those heights when… and we really surrounded them whereby…", sometimes with laughter, "Doctor, tell that joke about the jackrabbit again", sometimes with hasty departures for the hospitals of the cities in which they arrived. "The shell in your leg, Comrade, needs immediate surgery" sometimes with deep sadness, and even deeper questions, "I wonder, are we going to return, and when are we going to see our families again", and sometimes with effusions of enthusiasm and optimism when they arrived in a paroxysmal condition, like when a cat feels it's choking and reacts with an unbelievable overexcitation in order to avoid the choking, or at least to stay it. And all of those things, so different, yet somehow similar, are steeped deep down in Dr. Stergios X.'s memory that he watches at close quarters ready at any moment to intervene either as a doctor or as an entertainer of souls with his improvised jokes when he feels that the scale is beginning to tilt inwardly to the side of fear, even though never expressed about what will happen tomorrow. Besides, it's many a time that the days alternate with the nights

and vice-versa, and the long journey seems never-ending, when the unknown seas give way to unknown mountains, to unknown plains, to unknown rivers, and to unknown deserts, I'm sure that Dr. Stergios X. has a whack at the rush of the same contradictory and alternative feelings like "I'm a doctor, I have to be able to tolerate this." And he does put up with it, up to the morning of the 21st of October, 1949, when the Soviet train with the many coaches and the slow rhythm, namely the train on the Krasnovodsk – Asgabat – Bukhara – Samarkand – Tashkent line, enters slowly and decisively the train station of the capital of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Uzbekistan. The station's clock shows 10 o'clock.

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6. Beria, Laurenti Pavlovich (1889-1953). Notorious chief of the NKVD, the Soviet Secret Police, later renamed the KGB. Stalin's right hand, whose death occurred under suspicious circumstances.

7. Vinogradov, Vladimir. Professor of Cardiology and Stalin's personal physician from 1944 to 1952, when he was arrested on the charge of conspiracy in connection with the persecution of a number of doctors, Jews mainly.