

Story 1469 (1989 Tape 8)

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Location: Demirli village,
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Date: May 1989

On the Russian Front during World War I

I should like to tell you a story about the Turkish conflict with Russia during World War I. It is a story that I heard partly from my grandfather and partly from a friend of his. When my father's father, Mehmet Şahin, went into battle with the Russians for the second time, he did not return for a long while, and no one at home knew what had become of him. Was he dead, or had he been taken prisoner of war? None of my family knew

When the conflict with Russia started during World War I, there was a serious need for more troops, and every available man was needed, but some men refused to respond to this call to arms. My grandfather was one of those who refused to be recruited. Gendarmes¹ were sent to get him, and they found him in a field threshing grain. The four gendarmes surrounded him and said, "Do not move in any direction. Do not try to escape."

¹There are no organized police forces in the villages of rural Turkey. Law and order is maintained by army troops which have been assigned to the Ministry of Interior. These forces are called gendarmes, one small result of the French influence on Turkish life early in the century.

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"No, I shall not try to go anywhere," answered my grandfather. "Just give me time to tie my drawstring,² and then you can take me wherever you wish." While he was tying his drawstring, the gendarmes dismounted, but the moment that their feet touched the ground, he attacked them. He tied up three of them together with the same rope, and the fourth he knocked unconscious. Then my grandfather ran away. When the fourth gendarme recovered consciousness, he untied the other three, and the four of them began to pursue my grandfather. They could not overtake him, for my grandfather was a huge man, and his strides were six meters [sic] in length. That is how big a man he was

When they could not capture my grandfather, the gendarmes returned to their commander and reported what had happened. The commander called to his office my grandfather's father, whose name was Aliçi Koca. He said to him, "Aliçi Koca, go and get your son and bring him here. We shall not compel him to go to war. We are simply curious to see what kind of a man it is who can escape from four gendarmes by tying up three of them and knocking out the fourth." Of course, my grandfather was a large, powerfully built man with great dignity

My great grandfather promised my grandfather that he would

²Traditionally, Turks wore baggy, low-crotched trousers known as şalvar. These were held up not by a belt but by a drawstring around the waist.

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be forced to go to war, but he told him that he should not away to escape it. This country is our country, and if a man goes into battle to protect his country and his religion and dies as a result, he is given the title Şehit. If he returns alive, he is called Gazi. So my great grandfather persuaded my grandfather to go to the gendarme station with him. "This is my son," he said to the commander.

The commander asked my grandfather, "Why is it that you do not wish to go to war?"

"I know that serving our country is a sacred duty," said my grandfather, "but I have six children to provide for. I cannot go away and leave them. That is the reason for my avoiding military duty at this time."

The commander said, "Because you have come here willingly and because you have told the truth about your situation, I pardon you. You are now free to go your way, but if in the future you should ever decide to go to war, come back here and report to me at that time."

After that conversation, my grandfather thought carefully about the words of the gendarme commander. Inasmuch as he believed in the Koran, and inasmuch as he believed in the importance of serving his country, my grandfather finally decided to go to war after all. He went to the gendarme

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commander and said, "I am ready now to go to war. My life does not belong to me. I have left my children in the trust of Allah, and I shall go to serve my country."

As a result, he was sent to the Russian front. All together, there were forty men from that village who were sent to the Russian front, but only two of them ever returned.³ One of those was my grandfather, and the other was Mustafa Çavuş⁴ who had received a total of eight or ten bayonet wounds at various places in his body. Mustafa Çavuş moved from this world to the next⁵ only after he had reached the age of one hundred and twenty years. He used to tell us stories about the war with Russia, and now I am repeating to you some of the things that he said.

Mustafa Çavuş once said, "When I went to war against the Russians, I was with your grandfather for a while, but then we were separated. I had no way of discovering what had become of him. Sixteen of us were finally captured as prisoners

³The Russians attacked (with the support of a large Armenian "Fifth Column" within the country) after Turkey was already engaged on two other fronts. After the defeat of the British navy at Gallipoli, troops were rushed from the Dardanelles area to the eastern front, but the Turkish defense was at great disadvantage and took extremely heavy losses.

⁴Çavuş means sergeant, but this, like other military titles, often remains, almost as part of the person's name, long after he has returned to civil life.

⁵Here the narrator says, literally, "Mustafa Çavuş changed worlds. . . ."

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of war, but before that happened, we fought furiously and captured a number of Russian soldiers. We fought like lions, but the Russians greatly outnumbered us. They were so numerous that they swarmed around us like ants. Much of the fighting at that stage of the war was being done with bayonets. We always went out from our shelters in squads of eleven or twelve soldiers apiece, and when we attacked the enemy in this manner, we almost always took prisoners. Once one of those prisoners said, 'Oh, Osman' /̄They always addressed us as Osman because we were from the Osmanlı Empire⁶7, do not suppose that it was your small squad that captured us. It was the great mass of troops behind you that caused us to surrender. Those troops didn't even look like you, for they were all wearing green turbans on their heads.'⁷

"We understood then that there was a spiritual force helping us greatly. We said to the Russians, 'Since we do

⁶One Osman was the founder of the Osmanlı dynasty of sultans and the Osmanlı Empire. The Western word for Osmanlı is Ottoman.

⁷There are parallels in other cultures for the notion that angelic hosts appear on the battlefield to aid or rescue military groups--sometimes even whole armies. A good illustration of this is given in Arthur Machen's story "The Angels of Mons" (originally titled "The Bowmen"). In Turkish lore such divinely provided military reinforcements are often secured by a call for help from Hızır, a god in ancient times but a saint in the Moslem era. As a last-minute rescuer from disaster, he may provide any one of many different forms of help. For a good example of his marshaling divine military aid, see ATON Tale No. 497.

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have any bad intentions against your country or your way of life or your possessions, Allah always helps us.' But after a while the enemy troops became so numerous that we could no longer fight them off, and we were captured as prisoners of

That time there were sixty of us captured. They treated us well enough, but a few of them told us secretly that we were to be killed. We didn't respond in any way to this. We encouraging each other, but we all agreed that if that to be our destiny, there was nothing that we could do about it. The Russians kept taking away our men by two's and three's, after a while our number had been reduced to six. At that point I requested to talk with the Russian commander, and I taken to him by one of the Russian guards. I said to the commander, 'We were sixty when we arrived here, but now we are only six. What happened to our comrades? They were taken away and they have not returned

"The commander ordered coffee for us, and then he answered my question by running his finger across his throat to indicate that our comrades' heads had been cut off. We said nothing about this, and we revealed no sadness in our looks. We drank our coffee and we smoked our cigarettes. The Russian commander said to us, 'You are such brave men. I indicated to you how your friends had died and how you might die, but you did not appear

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to be at all frightened. Therefore you will not die but will be allowed to live here in this country

"They freed us and they took us to different houses to live. They took me to a house where there were nine women and they told me that all nine of them would be my wives. I lived there for ten years, and I had two or three children by each of my Russian wives. But I could never forget my home country or my Turkish wife or my first children. I often dreamed about them, and so even though I had good living conditions, I was not comfortable in my mind. The nine women in that house sometimes used to joke about my daily visits to them. They used to chant, 'Nine wives and one Ahmet.'⁸ What is Ahmet going to do? To which one will he go today?"

"After the end of the war, when order was restored and peace prevailed everywhere, I decided to return to my own country regardless of how difficult it might be to do so. It took me six months to make my way back to my village, and most of that time I had no regular food to eat. I ate wild grasses on the way, and I also ate frogs whenever I could catch them. But I finally did get back here to our own country."

⁸His name was not Ahmet, but the names Ahmet, Mehmet, and Mahmut (all forms of Mohammed) are so common in Turkey that they are sometimes applied loosely. The expression Ahmet and Mehmet is roughly equivalent to the English expression every Tom, Dick, and Harry.

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I listened with great interest to this story by Mustafa Çavuş--he whose world changed only when he had reached the age of one hundred and twenty years. He told us this story when we were in the village room,⁹ and I have never forgotten his words. They are always in my mind. I should like to end this story here, but I feel that I must add an episode which I forgot to include earlier.

"At another time I was in a regiment of 600 troops which were caught in a Russian trap. We were all captured as prisoners of war, but we were not treated as prisoners of war should be treated. Every hour they took a group of men from our regiment and executed them before a firing squad. We were becoming fewer and fewer. We went from 600 to 500, then 200 and finally we reached the point where there were only forty of us left. Thinking that we were going to die anyway, we decided to revolt against our guards and have the satisfaction of dying with dignity.

"As we were about to make our attack, the Russian commander appeared and told us to stop. He asked us why we were going to do such a foolish and hopeless thing. We explained to him what had happened to all of our comrades who had been taken as

⁹Although there may be a thousand rooms in the houses of a village, the village room (sometimes simply the room) serves several purposes. The village council meets there with the muhtar (head man). It is also used as a guest room to accommodate a stranger who has no other housing provided.

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prisoners of war. The commander was upset by what we told him, and he demanded his aides to discover which officer it was who had ordered the execution of so many prisoners of war. When he learned which officer was at fault, the commander attempted to shoot him, but the bullets seemed to have no effect against the evil officer. The commander ordered, 'Strip the clothes off that officer!' When this was done, it was discovered that the officer had a small muska¹⁰ fastened beneath an armpit. The Russian commander asked, 'What is that that he has beneath his arm?'

"All of us knew exactly what it was, and we told him, 'It is a prayer from the Koran which that officer is using for protection. It was because of the muska that your bullets did him no harm.' After the muska had been removed from the officer, he was at once shot to death.

Of course we were all very pleased by this outcome, for that officer had illegally caused the deaths of more than 500 Turkish prisoners. When the Russian commander saw how happy

¹⁰A muska is an amulet worn often to protect one from evil eye or from the effects of a curse that has been uttered against a person. In Turkey it is usually a slip of paper upon which a religious person has written a passage from the Koran. The religious person then breathes upon the paper and wraps it in a small triangular folding of oilcloth. This is then usually tied to a thong and hung from the neck of the afflicted or threatened person. In most cases it is not considered a protection against weapons but rather against evil intentions.

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we now were, he said, "No one can really beat Osman. We later learned that the evil officer was an Armenian."¹¹

I heard this story, just as I have now told it to you, from Uncle Mustafa. The Ottomans, who were very powerful and faithful believers in Allah, were our forefathers, and we are in many ways much like them. If you sow good seeds, you will harvest a good crop. If you buy a thoroughbred stallion, it will sire thoroughbred colts. The same is true with people. We are thoroughbred descendants of the Ottomans--brave, honest, and faithful to Islam. That is one of the things that I learned from such stories.

¹¹Inasmuch as Armenians are Christians, it is very unlikely that one of them would be wearing a Moslem charm to protect himself. The fierce animosity between Turks and Armenians that grew out of events during World War I may account for the original narrator's (Mustafa Çavuş's) labeling the villain Armenian.