

Story 1875 (1995 Tape 2)

Narrator: Olcay Serez, 45

Location: Erzurum, capital of
Erzurum Province

Date: January 1995

Laz¹ Camouflage

At one of the large NATO bases in Turkey, soldiers from France, Great Britain, and Turkey were practicing war games. Part of the training given to the troops for those combat exercises concerned the use of camouflage. They were taught how to camouflage themselves for different kinds of landscape in whatever area they might find themselves.

After they had completed the course in camouflage, they were tested on their ability to disguise themselves and protect themselves with this technique. In one room three soldiers—one French, one British, and one Turkish (a Laz)—were being tested by a committee of military examiners. Each of these soldiers was placed in a room which contained nothing but a large bag. Each was left there for half an hour, and at the end of that time, the committee members opened the door of the room to see how the soldier had camouflaged himself.

¹The word Laz referred originally to an ethnic minority living primarily in Trabzon and Rize provinces, along the extreme eastern part of the Turkish Black Sea coast. More recently the word has come to be applied to any resident of the entire Turkish Black Sea coast. In the Turkish oral tradition, Laz people are stereotyped as being stupid or inept. This stereotype (like most others) is unjustifiable, for Lazes are, of course, much like other people.

Story 1875

The Frenchman was tested first. After leaving him in the testing room for half an hour, the examiners opened the door and looked inside. They found that the French soldier had climbed into the bag, and from that bag now came the sound “Meow! Meow!” One of the examiners said, “He has disguised himself as a cat.”

The committee then put the British soldier in that room and left him there for the same length of time. When they opened the door, they saw that the British soldier had climbed into the bag and was now saying, “Hav!² Hav!” An examiner said, “He has disguised himself as a dog.”

Then it was time to test the Turkish soldier, a Laz named Temel.³ After he had been in the room for half an hour, the committee of examiners opened the door. Seeing that he too had climbed into the bag, they waited for several minutes for him to make some noise, but no sound came from the bag. Entering the room, they kicked the bag several times, but no sound whatsoever came forth from Temel. They

²The bark of a dog in the English-speaking world is usually perceived to be bow wow. In Turkish it is rendered hav hav.

³In tales about the stereotyped Laz as dummer or fool, the male characters usually have one or another of five or six very common Laz names. Temel is the name used most often, with Dursun in second place. Thus if either of these names occurs in a folktale, the audience knows at once that it is a Laz tale.

Story 1875

then picked up the bag and slammed it against a wall. Still no sound was heard.

Not knowing what to do next, the committee called the commanding officer of that base for advice. After the Turkish Commander had kicked the bag a few times without any results, he gave this order: "Now we shall all pick up this bag and slam it against the ceiling." After striking the ceiling, the bag fell down onto the floor with a loud crunch.

Then for the first time, they heard a voice, weak and barely audible, coming from within the bag. It said, "Potatoes."