

Dato Turashvili

The Other Amsterdam

I was about seven years old when my mum told me how her father was wounded in the World War II, was captured as a Soviet soldier, first sent to a concentration camp in France and then to Germany. Together with some others he escaped from the German camp, making his way to Holland through the wooded areas, and joined the local partisans to fight Nazi Germans.

My dad had a different version of the events: he claimed that rather than fighting the Nazi, my granddad was fighting the Bolsheviks and Soviet authorities, for which he was arrested as soon as the war was over. In fact, he was arrested the minute he returned to Moscow from Amsterdam. After that he was exiled to Siberia to the camp for the former POWs, only to be released eleven years later when he finally got the opportunity to return to Georgia.

I was little but extremely inquisitive, so one day I asked my granny which version of the events was correct – the one told my mum or dad. She smiled at my question and then replied very seriously:

‘Neither. In truth, your grandpa wasn’t fighting against either Hitler or Stalin in Holland, he was just evading the war as such. He had a Dutch lover there, so when I die, don’t even think of burying me next to him.’

It was Granny’s mysterious answer that inspired me to write the novel.

I kept thinking about her words until the Soviet Union ceased to exist and one fine day I arrived in Amsterdam: the city that was seen as the symbol of freedom for most Georgians, the city that offered everything the Soviet authorities took great pains to hide from its citizens.

It wasn’t only my wish to discover my grandpa’s legacy that took me to Holland. I wanted to find more about the island of Texel, the place that holds a very special meaning for

all Georgians, including myself of course. First of all, from time to time I used to get highly interesting letters from a young Georgian woman living on the island and I wanted to get acquainted with her. Secondly, I knew that about 800 Georgians, former Soviet soldiers, had been kept there during the WWII. However, just like any Soviet citizen, I knew exactly as much of the story as the censorship of the time considered safe to tell us. But all the while, I dreamed of finding out more about the 1945 May uprising that took place on Texel when the Georgians revolted against the Germans and the tragic consequence of the event which entailed a surge of terror and a high number of casualties.

The Dutch archives rendered a rich material not only about my grandpa but about all those Georgians who had ever set foot in the Netherlands. Various centuries tell different stories about the contemporary events, but my major interest lay in the Georgian one of the 20th century.

Georgia, a small independent, democratic country south of the Great Caucasus mountain range, was occupied by Soviet Russia in 1921. The country was annexed and, after a vicious resistance, the Georgian government fled the country. The new Soviet country was likewise abandoned by Georgian officers and soldiers, all hoping to return to their homeland once Georgia regained its independence. In 1941, when the Soviet Union got involved in the WWII, a group of Georgian émigrés decided it was their chance to fight for Georgia's sovereignty and joined forces with Germany.

Needless to say, there were far more Georgians fighting against the Nazi Germany than those supporting it. At one point, somewhere in a Dutch forest, a group of Georgians in German uniforms came across their countrymen in the Soviet outfit. The first thing they discovered about each other was their common language, so they lowered their weapons. What happened next is something that normally takes place when Georgians meet: someone uncorked a bottle of wine kept for a special occasion. True, it wasn't Georgian wine, but they drank to each other and soon toasting was followed by traditional Georgian songs, which got louder and louder until tears welled their eyes. In all truth, it wasn't the emotion triggered

by a chance encounter: it was the Georgian history which abounds in instances when the sons of a small country called Georgia were obliged to fight for large empires throughout centuries.

Incidentally, it must have been in a German or French forest that my grandpa first met the beautiful Dutch woman he fell in love with. She was among the partisans who jumped with a parachute and landed where he saw her. He must have regarded her as a heavenly sign: how else would he explain a beautiful woman falling down from the sky?

Occasionally, the inmates of the internment camp were apparently allowed to roam the island so that they could find some berries or mushrooms to supplement their diet. But my grandpa wasn't happy with trysts in the forest, especially after the day when his beloved failed to show up at the agreed time. He decided to escape.

His road to Amsterdam was long and arduous but there was nothing to stop him. As a rule, there are no hard ways for people in love even when the world is torn by the war and, seemingly, love is out of place.

Anyway, my grandpa managed to complete his hard journey to Amsterdam and the house where he thought his beloved lived. Incidentally, I saw that house, but only from the outside...

When the war was over the Georgians advised my grandpa, Meliton Maskhulia, not to return to the Soviet Union because the authorities had no mercy for the former POWs. However, he put his faith in the magnanimity of the victorious side and was gravely mistaken.

In May 1945 the Georgians residing in Holland and other European countries parted ways forever. They made different decisions, so their lives took very different paths and they met very different ends. My desire was to find out the finale of the Texel event, to discover the truth about the end of the war on the little island where the war hadn't even started. I firmly believed that the young Georgian woman who wrote me those strange letters from Texel would be able to explain everything.

That's why I took a ferry to the island...