

## **Stalin: From Georgian Smuggling to Siberian Freedom**

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2020

Two stories concerning Stalin, one in the early days in Georgia and the other from his time on the Arctic Circle in Siberia.

### **The Priest and the Donkeys**

In the last years of the nineteenth century in the market of Tseva, a small village near Zestafoni in Georgia, the local priest was minding his own business. He was greeted by young man who was obviously not a local.

‘I am Koba from Gori’, said the young man. ‘May I request some private business?’

‘What do you mean?’ Said Father Kasiane Gachechiladze.

‘I need to get to Chiatura, over the mountains, and I have heard that you have some donkeys’, said the young man.

A little nervously, the priest looked up and noticed that another man was standing guard in the bazaar. He recognised him as a member of the local Red Battle Squad. With no police in the area, the Red Squads were in control. Seeing the priest’s anxiety, Koba asked after his family, mentioning the names of his wife, parents, and children.

‘I would like to offer you fifty roubles for your troubles’, said Koba.

The priest thought for a moment and said, ‘Deal’.

‘Let’s go for a drink, to celebrate’, said Koba.

As they were toasting each other’s health, the future of Georgia, and their respective families, Koba said: ‘They will let you know when I am coming’. He waved his hand towards a number of other Red Guards. ‘Father, don’t be late. I must make the journey to Chiatura and back in a day. After all, we are both still young’.

So it was that a priest met ‘The Priest’ – the nickname for one who would later be known as Joseph Stalin. The nickname was no accident, for Koba – as he was known then – had studied for the priesthood too, leaving the Spiritual Seminary in Tiflis on the eve of sitting his final examinations. As he left the seminary, he passed from one faith to another. Or rather, he realised the continuity between the two faiths.

Within a couple days, Father Gachechiladze received the word, and ‘The Priest’ met him with two comrades. They loaded the donkeys with pieces of a printing press, money, and ammunition. ‘The Priest’ wanted a safe passage for his cargo, far from the prying eyes of the police, who often searched the trains looking for socialist revolutionaries.

On the trek over the mountains, the priest and Stalin talked. Stalin recited poetry, from the Georgian classics and from his own compositions.

‘Some of my poems have even been published’, confessed Stalin after one of recitals in the clear mountain air.

They drew closer, both of them singing songs as they clambered up to the mountain pass. Stalin rested his head on the priest’s lap when they rested. The young priest found him restrained, serious and decent. Stalin even recited the traditional blessing over their meals.

‘You see, I still remember it’, exulted ‘The Priest’.

‘You’d have made a great priest’, said the Father Gachechiladze.

‘I the cobbler’s son did very well against the offspring of nobles’, said Koba. Stalin had indeed topped his class at the Tiflis Seminary.

Too soon did they arrive in Chiatura. Stalin took the saddle-bags and returned with them empty.

‘At least I can use them as pillows on the train home’, said ‘The Priest’.

They parted, never to meet again.

### **A Little Bit of Siberia**

In 1913, Stalin was arrested by the Okhrana and sent for some years to the northern Siberian territory of Turukhansk – a vast area of taiga, winters of nine months, and minimum temperatures of -60 degrees. Initially, he stayed near the capital, Monastyrskoe, on the Yenisei River, which flows northward into the Kara Sea. The consummate escape artist was well-known to the Okhrana, and they were tipped off regarding yet another planned attempt.

Joseph was promptly sent 180 versts (almost 200 km) further north, to the hamlet of Kureika on the Arctic Circle. Here 67 residents, made up of three inter-related families,

lived in eight communal huts. Joseph – Osip to the locals – was allocated a corner in one of them. Existence was a struggle, to say the least. When Joseph had to visit the outhouse during one of the long nights, he made sure to take his rifle with him. A shot or two was needed to keep the wolves at bay. The inhabitants looked longingly southward, down the Yenisei River, for this was the only means of getting out the village. In winter, one would use a sleigh pulled by reindeer and dogs (and surrounding by the howling of wolves), while in the brief summer, river boats were hauled along by dog teams. In between, the ‘bad roads season’ meant no-one could move.

But others made this part of the world their real home: the Evenki (Tungus) and Ostyak peoples. Semi-nomadic fishers and herders of reindeer, they had creatively combined some elements of Russian Orthodoxy with their shamanistic practices – ‘shaman’ is itself an Evenki word. As one who had studied theology for many years, Joseph was intrigued by the way they held to beliefs in the spirits that inhabited the vast regions of Siberia. He would visit them, staying all night at their parties, and they would do the same to him. At other times, the company tended to be peaceful. When they visited, they would sit down for an hour or more in complete silence and then say, ‘Goodbye, we’ve got to go’. Joseph took to them.

With a compliant companion-guard – Merzliakov – in the later years Joseph was able to roam freely with the Evenki and Ostyak. Initially, they brought him fish and reindeer meat, but soon they taught him to catch his own. A close companion, Martin Peterin, showed him how to make a fishing-line and cut a hole in the ice of the Yenisei River. Soon he had learnt the skills of hauling in sturgeon and sea-salmon. His skills became such that even the locals were impressed. ‘Thou ist possessed by the Word’, they said.

Yet the fishing was not simply a matter of sitting quietly by the ice-hole on a sunny day. The Arctic is an unforgiving world. On one occasion, he was returning with a group of Ostyak comrades from a successful fishing trip. A blizzard blew up suddenly and separated him from the others. What to do? Abandon the heavy load of fish and speed up to catch his friends, or hang onto the fish and trudge on? There was little choice, for the fish would provide weeks of food. He stumped on, until figures loomed up in the snow. He yelled to

get their attention, but they scooted away. Finally, a hut appeared with a light shining. He crashed in and his comrades said, 'Is that you Osip?'

'Of course it's me. Why didn't you wait when I called?' He said

'We thought you were a demon spirit', one of them said. 'You were covered in ice and snow'.

'As you can see', said Stalin. 'I'm not a wood spirit'. He slept for eighteen hours after the ordeal.

On this occasion, Joseph was lucky. Losing a man on a fishing trip was not uncommon. On another such expedition, thirty men had gone out but only twenty-nine returned in the evening. When Joseph asked where the missing man was, they said, 'Oh, he remained out there'.

'What do you mean "out there"?' Joseph asked.

'He's drowned', said one of them.

'Drowned?' Said Joseph.

'Why should we have pity for men', said the other. 'We can always make more of them, but a horse, try to make a horse!'

Many years later, Stalin would still eat fish the way he had learnt in Siberia. With little salt and with temperatures well below zero, they would pile the fish in the outhouse, stacking them up like wood. When hungry, they broke off flakes and let them melt their mouths.

But the hunting he loved most, especially its solitude. Dressed from head to foot in reindeer skins and fur, he would head out on a sled hauled by reindeer. Of course, reindeer meat was one of the staples, but arctic hare, partridge and ducks also added to the stock. In summer, he took to a boat, hauled by dogs upstream and rowed downstream. Indeed, in the last summer of his exile (1916), he disappeared for some months. The fact that his young girlfriend, Lidia, was pregnant was perhaps an added incentive. Yet the main reason was common to all the Evenki and Ostyak: a long winter in crowded and reeking accommodation would lead to an almost insatiable desire to be out in the wide world of Siberia. Joseph was off too.

No-one quite knew where he had gone, although his amiable guard had an idea: 'It's an empty (uninhabited) place, this Polovinka. Just sand. Where was he fishing? There was nobody else there'.

He was indeed on Polovinka, a remote island downstream on the Yenisei. He built a small hut with birch branches. The only others on the island were the few members of the Dubikova family, who had their own birch shelter. Occasionally he visited, and shared a meal of grilled sterlet. Otherwise, he was on his own. He fished for himself, tended his hut, went on long hikes around the island. Above all, he learnt to be comfortable and content with his own company – an invaluable skill.

As Molotov put it much later, 'A little bit of Siberia remained lodged in Stalin for the rest of his life'.