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Feature

The Circassians

By HRH Prince Ali Bin AL-HUSSEIN

According to legend. When God was creating the Earth he carried all the mountains in a bag in order to distribute them across the land. The Devil seeing his slit a hole in the bottom of the bag and all the mountains fell in one area between the Black Sea and Caspian. So God made that land the one place in the World where the Devil would not be able to penetrate and make its people evil, since life would be hard enough for them as it is.

The Caucasus is described by many visitors as Eden itself, with warm, rich lowlands followed by majestic forests and alpine pastures, abundant rivers and lakes, superimposed by eternally snow capped peaks. These are the Frosty Caucasus of which Shakespear sang, and which dwarf the Alps. Mount Elbrus, the tallest mountain in Europe, where legend has it, between its two peaks the ark rested on its way to Ararat. Kazbek, where Promestheus was chained, known in Ancient Greek legend as the land of the Golden Fleece. The land of fables and dreams from which Tolstoy, Lermontov and Pushkin drew there inspiration.

It is from these mountains that the Circassians come, known in there language as the Adigas, or Noble People, famous for there beauty, symmetry of form, horsemanship, longevity and perfect manners.

The Circassians are an anciant race, compsed of twelve tribes, who have been dwelling in the mountains if the North Caucasus and along the Black Sea coast since time immemorial. Many would be invaders had found them a terrible foe. Roman legions, Attila, Gehgis Khan, Arabs, Tamerlane and the Persians who called the Caucasus Sedi Iskender, or the barrier of Alexander. The mighty conqueror had set out to possess the world and met his first cheek here. Having never been conquered, the Circassians have managed to preserve there ancient culture without outside influence up until the time of the Russian invasion which began in the 18th century and which flamed into a terrible war which lasted over 100 years.

The Circassians, freedom loving and bold, had fought desperately and fiercely, earning themselves legendary status and respect throughout Europe and the Middle East. For 100 Years they held all the might of the Tsars armies at bay preventing them from colonial expansion and the long cherished Russian dream of overland route to India. It was said that one Circassian is worth ten of anyone else, and their struggle is best described by the great Russian poet Mikhael Lermontov who wrote in the times of the Russo-Caucasian wars: "Circassian treasure rueful dreams. Circassian hearth is their supreme, but freedom, freedom for the man is more than peace and Motherland."

The war lasted until 1864 resulting in the death of over half the entire Circassian population, and the two great powers of the time Russia and Turkey collaborated to cause the forced migration of over half the entire remaining population to the Ottoman Empire. Russia wanted the Circassian land for its emancipated peasants, and Turkey needed fresh blood for its armies in the Balkans. The Circassian expulsion was the largest mass exodus in modern times and another third of them perished along the way from disease and starvation. It is estimated that if not for the war Circassians today would number over 25 million or more instead of less than 5 million spread out in countries all over the world.

Yet wherever the Circassians went they contributed tremendously to the countries that they now live in. They were the first people to settle in and revive modern Amman. When Prince, later King Abdullah arrived in Trans-jordan they welcomed him and during a rebellion in the early days of the Emirate they camped around his palace to protect him and were then given the honor of being the Kings personal guard. Nowadays they can still be seen guarding the palaces and Royal Court in their fabulous and Romantic costumes. The Circassians have served in every Govt and Military office and are well known for their honesty, and loyalty. Today the 100 thousand Circassians form an intricate part of Jordanian society and have fared much better than brethren in Turkey, Syria and the Caucasus, thanks to the cultural tolerance of the Jordanian Monarchy and people.

The Circassians practiced civilized behavior at a time when Europeans were still cave dwellers. The culture is extremely rich in poetry, myth, legend, song, dance and music. The social structure is Governed by the 'Adiga Khabza' or Circassian etiquette, a set of unwritten rules which emphasize perfect manners, hospitality, honesty, chivalry and respect for elders. They esteem their woman and grant them full public freedom and they never practice polygamy or marry anyone even distantly related to them as all Circassian relatives and neighbors brothers and sisters. Indeed the Circassians greatest achievement has been a perfection of their own culture.

Nonetheless Circassians are finding it increasingly hard to preserve their culture, traditions and language since to advertise their plight would be considered shameful, they are facing widespread assimilation. The ancient proverb "he who loses his homeland loses all", rings hauntingly in the ears of those Circassians who struggle to maintain themselves. Many of the younger generation no longer care about their cultural heritage, considered one of the most romantic and beautiful in human history, simply because, 'he who does not know his History or language cares not about his future'. The Circassian Nation is like an old man dwelling on the memories and dreams of yesterdays. Nevertheless, with the collapse of Communism, the great advances in communication technology, and widespread recognition of Human rights. Circassians now have the chance to achieve a social and cultural rebirth, expand their links with their brethren in the Caucasus and the Diaspora, which would also benefit the countries in which they live and be recognized and known once again to the world for what they are, a

beautiful and romantic people whose also wish is to revive and maintain ther culture, speak there language and live in freedom, peace and happiness.

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