

Forbidden Fruit

Barbara L. Baer

When Saparmurat Niyazov, the self-proclaimed Turkmenbashi, “Father of all Turkmen,” and president for life of Turkmenistan, died last December 21, Dr. Gregory Levin e-mailed me a Russian saying: “If you wait long enough, your enemy’s corpse will pass under your window.”

For the previous fifteen years, Turkmenbashi had ruled the former Soviet republic of 5 million mostly nomadic people with an iron hand. A strategic country since 9/11, Turkmenistan borders Iran, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan.

Levin is a botanist. During the Soviet period, he created in Turkmenistan the world’s largest pomegranate collection. He started working at an agricultural station in the foothills of the Kopet Dag Mountains, west of Ashgabat, the capital, in 1960. But when the USSR collapsed, Russian scientists like Levin got stuck in the newly independent states without passports or salaries. He hung on until 2002, investigating, collecting, and protecting 1,117 varieties of pomegranates from thirty-seven countries and four continents. Then Turkmenbashi exiled him from his life’s work.

A Russian Jew, Levin did not fit in with the dictator’s all-Turkmen vision. Levin and his wife emigrated to Israel. After their departure, orders came from Turkmenbashi, a self-styled “environmentalist,” to bulldoze acres of the agricultural station, to uproot rare trees to plant vegetables, and to allow grazing in the last wild pomegranate stands.

In late 2001, I chanced to hear a BBC report on the plight of Levin’s pomegranates and the agricultural station he managed in Turkmenistan. Levin’s gentle voice and his description of the Edenic subtropical valley between mountains and desert made me want to go there. I had worked as a teacher in Uzbekistan in the late 1960s, and knew I wanted to return to the region one day. This was my chance. If I reported on Levin’s situation, perhaps the story would reach others and help to protect his collection.

In October 2002, I headed for Ashgabat, crossing the Karakum desert by bus. It was night and everything was black and empty, until suddenly we plunged into Las Vegas East. There before us was a stage-set city of brightly lit fountains, pillars, and domes. Topping it off, hundreds of feet in the night sky, was a rotating, golden statue of Turkmenbashi himself.

Turkmenbashi’s son Murad, a high-stakes gambler and launderer of his father’s wealth, owned the glittering hotel where I stayed that first night. In the morning, I waited in its cavernous marble lobby to meet Dr. Levin. But instead of encountering him, I was greeted by two Turkmen botanists. One, a woman in a black



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padding Soviet jacket, told me Levin had left for Israel. She then handed me two volumes of Turkmenbashi’s own *Environmental Red Book of Turkmenistan* and told me the president regretted that I would not be able to visit the agricultural station. It seemed there were security concerns before a national holiday. The other botanist, a small neat man who looked embarrassed, presented me with two huge bags of pomegranates: balls of red and yellow, pink and purple, nestled like Christmas ornaments. It was the closest I would come to seeing Levin’s paradise.

A year later, I located Levin in Israel by e-mail. The stories he told me about his life and his passion for pomegranates later became a book that my small press published (*Pomegranate Roads: A Soviet Botanist’s Exile from Eden*, translated from Russian by Margaret Hopstein, Floreant Press, 2006). Recently the author, translator, and I were brought together from faraway continents by Voice of America. On the air, a Tatar called from the Crimea to ask Levin whether he thought Turkmenbashi had read his book. “No,” replied Levin, “but I haven’t read *his* book either.” Levin was referring to *Rukhnama*, Turkmenbashi’s collected thoughts. Said to have been written by a golden hand, the book was required reading for all Turkmen students and for all citizens each night at dusk. That Levin had not opened *Rukhnama* was a confession he could make only beyond Turkmenistan’s borders.

Since Turkmenbashi’s death, his personal physician (a dentist by training), Dr. Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, has assumed power. In February, he captured over 90 percent of the votes in a special election, and was certified as president. Despite his different surname, he is rumored to be Turkmenbashi’s son, and in photos, there is a remarkable likeness.

In Israel, Gregory Levin is finally being recognized for his encyclopedic knowledge of pomegranate culture and biodiversity. There’s even a plan to rescue the thousand varieties he was forced to leave in Turkmenistan, and to plant them in Israel in a pomegranate park open to everyone. ■

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