

Story 1775 (1994 Tape 4)

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How a Laz<sup>1</sup> Named Penicillin

A great new medicine had been invented for the people of the world, but for some time it did not have a name. Different names were tried, but none of them seemed satisfactory. Finally an international medical conference was held in order to select an appropriate name for the new antibiotic. Temel<sup>2</sup> was chosen to be the Turkish representative at that conference.

The conference began, and different delegates suggested a number of names. "Let us call it this

<sup>1</sup>The 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.

<sup>2</sup>Temel is the most popular given name for Laz males. Although other Turks occasionally have this name, it is so frequent along the Black Sea coast that Temel has become almost a synonym for Laz.

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someone said. Then another person said, "No! Let us call it that." This controversy continued for several days Temel grew more and more annoyed with this procedure until he could stand it no longer. Going to the Secretary of the meeting, Temel said, "Peni silin!" [erase me, or erase my name].<sup>3</sup>

The Secretary did not understand Turkish, but he liked the sound of Temel's expression. "That is what we should call it: Penicillin!"

<sup>3</sup>Silmek means to erase, and silin is the polite imperative form. Peni is the Laz pronunciation of beni, meaning me. Thus Peni silin means erase me. In Turkey penicillin is actually called penisilin.