

Story 1506 (1970 Tape 19)

Narrator: İshak Kemali

Location: Erzurum, capital of
Erzurum Province

Date: 1970

An Adventure of Two Turks in Russia

(When I was working as a blacksmith, my master, Habib Usta,¹ told me the story which I am now going to tell to you.)

Habib Usta used to smuggle Turkish tea into Russia before the time of the Communist revolution. They sold this tea for Russian currency. He had a partner in this smuggling business, a man named Aslan. They used to travel to Russia together after loading both sides of their saddlebags with tea. Actually Aslan had a second saddlebag, one which was sewn shut. Habib once asked him, "What do you have in that saddlebag?"

"I just keep my clothes apart in that saddlebag."

One day they went to Batum,² where a wrestling tournament was in progress. They went to the arena where the tournament was being held, and after paying for two seats, they began to watch the wrestling. After they had been watching for a short while, Habib Usta noticed that Aslan was trembling. "What is the matter with you? Why are you shaking so badly?"

"I am shaking with excitement," answered Aslan. "I am very fond of wrestling, and I wish that I were down there competing with the other wrestlers."

¹The word usta designates the master craftsman or tradesman.

²A city in Georgia.

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Habib Usta said, "My relationship with the commanding officer here is very good. I often give him some tea when we are in Batum. I shall ask him to permit you to wrestle in this tournament."

Habib Usta asked the commander about this matter, and the commander said, "Your friend may wrestle against anyone he wishes."

Aslan said, "I want to wrestle with the Russian champion," a huge man who weighed 190 okkas³

When he heard this, the commander was surprised. He said, "I do not have enough authority to grant anyone the right to wrestle with the Russian champion. I shall have to telegraph Nikolay⁴ for his permission. If he approves of such a contest, then Aslan may wrestle with the champion." The commander sent a telegram which said, "A Turkish wrestler would like to wrestle with the Russian champion. Do you approve of such a match?"

answer from Nikolay said, "Let the Ottomans take care of their wrestler for forty days, and you take care of our champion for forty days, and I shall arrive on the forty-first day to attend the wrestling match.

³An okka, an old unit of weight, was equivalent to 2.8 pounds.

⁴This had to be Czar Nicholas II, who ruled from 1894 to 1917 and was executed by Bolsheviks in 1918.

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When the commander reported this answer from Nikolay to Habib Usta, Habib arranged a training program for Aslan. Every day he was to practice wrestling against another Moslem wrestler who happened to be in that area. After both the Russian and the Turkish wrestler had trained for forty days, the Russian champion looked much stronger than he had been, but Aslan remained unchanged.

On the forty-first day the ruler Nikolay arrived in Batum. He went to the arena and seated himself on a throne that had been built for him there. He then arose and spoke to the great crowd gathered in the arena to watch the wrestling. "O Russian people, if my wrestler loses to the Turkish wrestler or dies during the match, you are not to cause any disturbance. I shall have hanged all those who cause any disturbance." He then said, "O you Turkish and Armenian people, if your wrestler loses the match or dies during the course of it, you are not to cause any disturbance. If you do, I shall have hanged all those who cause such a disturbance."

Aslan then asked Habib Usta to go to the hotel where they were staying to get his second saddlebag, the one which was sewn shut. Habib Usta was surprised when he picked up that saddlebag, for it was very heavy. When Habib Usta delivered the saddlebag to Aslan, he said, "How heavy this bag is! What do you have in it?"

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Aslan said nothing, but he opened the saddlebag and took from it a large pair of wrestling pants--too large, in fact, for him.⁵ After Aslan had put on these pants, he oiled his entire body.⁶ While he was doing this, it was noticed by those close to him that he had a mole on his belly

Nikolay ordered that before the match started, a priest should be brought to pray for the wrestlers. After the priest had offered his prayer, Aslan turned toward the Kible⁷ and prayed for a short while. When he arose, he looked much stronger than he had before, and now the large pair of wrestling pants fitted him almost perfectly. Furthermore, his whole posture had changed to become almost that of a tiger

The Russian champion advanced toward Aslan clapping his hands together as he came. Aslan took one step forward and then placed his hands on his hips, waiting for his opponent to arrive.

Russian wrestler struck a very hard blow upon Aslan's neck with his fist. It was so great a blow that Habib Usta expected

⁵The Turkish name for such trousers is kispet.

⁶Traditional Turkish wrestling is engaged in by contestants who are greased or oiled to make their bodies more difficult to grasp. It is referred to as "greased wrestling" or "oiled wrestling." The lubricant is usually olive oil.

⁷The word Kible is a variant of Kaaba, the small structure (with the Great Mosque at Mecca) which houses the sacred Black Stone, the most venerated object in Islamic belief.

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to see Aslan collapse. But Aslan did not collapse or even move the slightest bit. It was almost as if the Russian champion had hit a rock. Aslan then returned the blow, striking the Russian's shoulder so hard that it turned black. After the wrestling had continued for a short while, Aslan shouted, "Ya Allah!" and grabbed his opponent by the waist. Lifting the Russian champion above his head, he slammed him on the ground so hard that it killed his opponent.

Nikolay took Aslan to a public bath⁸ and after posting guards at the doors, had Aslan bathe. He then gave both Aslan and Habib Usta money for traveling expenses for their return journey. He had them taken to a military base from which they were to be escorted to Turkey by a company of troops. Nikolay ordered the commander of the base to have the two Turks delivered to the palace of the padishah at Istanbul, and he gave the commander a letter which was to be given to the padishah. The letter said this: "My dear padishah, I had your son and my son wrestle. My wrestler lost, and to protect your wrestler I am having him escorted directly to your palace."

When the two Turks and their military escorts had reached Hasankale,⁹ Aslan said privately to Habib Usta, "I am not going

⁸ Whatever the Russian name for a public bath may be, the narrator uses the Turkish name, hamam.

⁹ Now better known as Pasinler.

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to Istanbul. I could not live in such a place. I am going to escape from these guards."

On the following morning before dawn, the two escaped from their escorts. As quickly as they were able, they returned to their own village.