



INTRODUCTION

In May of 1988, a young Georgian woman walked up to the cemetery by the St. Panteleimon church in Tbilisi, the capital city of the then Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Accompanying her were two Westerners on their first visit to the Soviet Union. One of them carried a shoulder bag concealing a small casket which they had smuggled past the Moscow customs. Inside that casket lay the heart of a man – now as ashes. They arrived at the elegant 19th century church, with its grand view of the city and Caucasus mountains, knowing they were about to commit an act of defiance against the Soviet authorities. They also knew that their tiny rebellion would amount to probably no more than an unnoticed gesture in the face of the enormous Communist injustice inflicted on this ancient nation for the previous 67 years.

The man whose heart they carried was Nicholas Tchkotoua, the author of this novel. When he left Georgia in 1921 at the age of sixteen, neither he nor his family imagined in their cruellest dreams that their country would become totally sealed off from the world for the next three generations. Nor did he have any inkling that his whole life would turn into one of exile from his cherished home. He, along

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with so many other Georgian families, had been forced to flee as the Bolshevik army advanced on their country in February 1921. From that day until his death in 1984 he never returned. Indeed until the late 1960s, when limited phone contact was finally allowed, he had made no connection whatsoever with the relatives that stayed behind. Most émigrés feared that any contact with their Sovietised relatives could easily provoke more problems for them than it was worth.

Inevitably, like so many millions of Russian, Georgian, Azeri and Armenian émigrés who had fled the Bolshevik revolution, all his life he nursed a great longing to see again the forbidden land of his childhood. When the slight possibility of a visit opened up in his later years, illness would unfortunately prevent the journey. It was at around this time he requested that his heart at least be buried in the land where it had grown, and where he felt it and he truly belonged.

Although he had planned to write other books, by the time of his death 'Timeless' remained the only novel Nicholas Tchkotoua ever completed. Written in English in the mid-1940s, the plot tells the story of a young man returning to Georgia after some years away. It is no great insight to suggest that this journey of the mind was almost certainly the one he craved to make in the body. Nor does it seem a coincidence that in this imaginary pilgrimage he discovers love of the purest and most idealised kind – in the landscape where he first received it as a child. No reader can fail to be struck by the intense tone of longing and the romanticism of place that haunts this book. As the British poet Alfred Noyes noted in his forward to the original 1949 edition, it is the exquisite sorrow of distance that forms the very structure of this novel and casts such a powerful spell.

The reason for this of course, is that most of the action is based on real events. One only has to consider the bare facts of the author's life.

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Prince Nicholas Tchkotoua was born in Batumi on Georgia's subtropical Black Sea coast in 1905 or 1906. The year of his birth remains slightly unclear due to the confusing array of documents carried by fleeing citizens of the new and short-lived Menshevik Georgian state (1918-1921). His father, Shalva Tchkonია, was a wealthy Georgian businessman who had married Princess Pelagie Tchkotoua – whose name Nicholas would take on after being adopted by his paternal grandfather (unlike some émigrés who created their nobility in transit). While Georgia may probably have more noble families per capita than any other country, the by then impoverished Tchkotoua line did once own an estate in the Samourzakano region of Georgia (today called Gali). Nicholas spent the first sixteen years of his life between Batumi, Tbilisi, and during the summers, Montpellier, France where his father maintained a house. The main part of his education took place at the Tbilisi Gymnasium school – and it was in the Georgian capital that his imagination was formed. When in 1918 the British army set up a garrison of 20,000 troops in Batumi, one of their ancillary workers, an English nurse called Veronica employed by the Red Cross, married the cousin of Nicholas's father. This woman – his 'aunt Veronica' as she later became known – would play a strong role in the young Georgian's future.

In 1921, as the Bolshevik army crushed the Georgian defences, the family evacuated Nicholas and he found himself back in France – the same destination as Georgia's fleeing Menshevik government. Like many émigrés, he then continued his education between Paris and Berlin until a bout of severe tuberculosis forced him to recuperate in the clean air of Switzerland. When his 'aunt' heard about his condition she then invited him to complete his convalescence in England, which he did, arriving in 1931. Staying with her in Chelsea he quickly learnt English (his fifth language) and with her encour-