

Ak Welsapar

Sentenced to be the *people's enemy* ...

The centenary of Lenin's October Revolution is not far away in Turkmenistan. This anniversary is no longer commemorated as it was done for seventy years during the Soviet period. However, this does not mean that Turkmenistan has distanced itself from its Bolshevik heritage. It seems that totalitarianism and authoritarianism are deeply rooted in the country. The leaders of the country seem to have chosen a neo-Stalinist style of running the state and they seem to enjoy their style. Since its independence Turkmenistan has turned into one of the most authoritarian states in the world; now this country can be compared only with North Korea. There are not many tyrannical regimes like this in the world in the twenty first century. The political style of President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov, whose personality cult in the country has reached an outlandish level, can in many ways rival Kim Jong Un's style of running the state, which is based on Juche ideology. Ak Welsapar, the Turkmen writer, talks about lot of his father in the history of Turkmenistan in the Soviet period and in the years of independence. The whole life of his father – firstly in the USSR and later (after 1991) in an independent Turkmenistan, passed in conditions of great stress; from his childhood until his last day.

The story of an ordinary boy from the village, my father Juma Welsapar, encapsulates the political experience of the Soviet Union, reflecting the cruellest empire in human history, and has a strange beginning and end.

“This event took place long before I was born. At the age of eight my father was called “the son of the enemy of the people,” because my grandfather had died fighting against the Bolsheviks. After that my father's childhood and adolescence passed in fear of being put in jail at any excuse on the basis of an applicable item of the notorious law regarding having been revealed as a member of the family of an “enemy of the people.” Furthermore, all his life he had to live with the feeling that he was not qualified to be a full Soviet citizen. Nearly all his life passed with this feeling. Then in the second half of the 1980s when the Soviet period was coming to an end, I was declared an “enemy of the people” because of my job as a professional journalist. Because of this my father, who was then a pensioner, once again began to be persecuted. Then he became “the father of the enemy of the people.”...

The childhood and adolescence of myself and my siblings passed in huge discomfort at a time when some facts about our family were not talked about and were kept secret. We somehow lived with a guilty conscience, but we did not know anything about the source of this guilt. On the one hand my father had never been unemployed and we were not hungry. We too went to school like the children of all other Soviet citizens, but on the other hand, strange incidents used to take place ... When I was a pupil at school, if a routine argument or row took place, for some reason, I was scolded more harshly than others. Once, when I was involved in a fight

with one of my classmates, one of our school teachers reprimanded me heavily. I remember him saying "You take it easy, otherwise we will take harsh measures. You must be happy that you are studying at this school like anyone else." I told my father about this and asked him to talk to the teacher so that he would not say anything like that to me again. However, my father did not do that and on the contrary, he advised me not to face him and told me that I should not ruin my future by coming face to face with an ill-tempered person. He said "You must have a future, do not let anyone take it away from you." This was the only support my father gave under those circumstances; his support consisted only of some appeasing words. Both at school and later when I was a student, I had to live by taking this situation into account.

At school, especially in the higher classes, I began to think that in our family there was a secret that was not explained to us children. I understood that this secret was related to my grandfather whom I had never seen or known. My father, for some reason, never talked about my grandfather. If we asked a question about him my father would skilfully avoid giving an answer. My mother seemed not to know much more about our grand-parents than we did.

I had long discovered that my father did not live in the village where he was born. It was not difficult to find out, because sometimes some guests came to our house from far away villages. The accents of those guests were different from that of the people who lived where we were brought up. They were from Mäne (Maneh), a village near the border with Iran. Those guests came to our house with a feeling of both joy and tearful sorrow. In the 1970s my father began to visit his birthplace. I also wanted to see my father's birthplace. I felt as if my grandparents, whom I missed greatly, would meet me if I ever went there. However, no matter how I begged him, my father did not wish to take me to his beloved village. Once he talked to me about this: "You must have a future; if you go to Mäne, your future will suffer a blow..." At that time, although I had no negative feelings or hatred towards the Soviet structure, I felt that I was proud of my grandfather who had fought alone against a detachment of the Red Army. As I understood from cautious talks with my father, my grandfather had died in 1933. In the same year there had been an uprising against collective farms in Mäne.

When I was called "enemy of the people" in Turkmenistan my friends cut off their relationship with me. Our neighbours and some of our relatives preferred to stay away from me. When some people came face to face with me in the street they rushed to the other side of the street as if running away from someone with leprosy. In order to protect my acquaintances, there were times when I went to the other side of the street to avoid coming face to face with them... Then I realized that the situation of my father was like this, but we as children had not been able to appreciate it. I felt sorry for my father, because I could understand the ordeal he had suffered. Surprisingly, according to what he explained to me later, the only time he had enjoyed some peace of mind was during the years of the Second World War. According to my father, Stalin suddenly needed all the men he could get, because his good friend Adolf Hitler had betrayed him. Then Stalin, in order to take his revenge, moved everyone to the front. Three men from the family despised as "enemy of the people" were sent to the front. One of them, Geldi Welsapar, died at the front, the other two returned wounded.

As my father had said, during the war, if only for a short time, Stalin did not concentrate on annihilating his own people. This was not forever; it was so only during the war. Later, he continued his habit all the same! The effects of this fractious Stalinist policy could easily be detected in the destiny of my family. Here is what it meant: live in fear as long as you live, do not try to show your dissatisfaction, keep quiet even if you are not valued as human being!

Perhaps the sad words of my father reflected reality. Perhaps it was only because of that horrific wartime bloodshed that the children of “the enemy of the people” were allowed the opportunity to study and find a profession. Or, was it because running under the flying bullets they made the tyrant happy? My father too was supposed to go to the front, but because his three elder brothers had gone to the front and he had not come of age, he was assigned to a collective farm job. During the war years, he worked day and night as a cart-driver on the collective farm. This job gave him the right to study at technical college. Exactly twenty five years after the end of the war my father received a medal given to the adolescents who had served behind the front in “The Great Patriotic War.” Thus, my father’s rights were made equal to those of the war veterans. He was then overwhelmed with joy. This might have been the most fortunate time of his life.

When Gorbachev’s restructuring policy was introduced, my father heaved a sigh of relief. It seemed that the persecution that had been looming over our family since as early as the 1930s would then be stopped for ever. However, soon after that, I, as a writer and journalist, came forward. At a time when it was prohibited to talk about the policy of the Soviet government concerning child labour in the cotton fields, violation of the rights of women and ecological disasters like the desertification of the Aral Sea and other calamities which had gone on for decades, I had published articles both in Turkmen and Russian on those issues. After that I was involved in fighting for my disappearing mother tongue as well as the national independence of Turkmenistan. As a result, soon afterwards the publication of my articles in the Turkmen press was prohibited and I was called “an enemy of the people.” However, soon after that the Soviet Union collapsed. Nevertheless, it was too early to be happy...

In Turkmenistan national dictatorship and bashism (a term based on the official title given to S. Niyazov as “Turkmenbashi”) were already in the process of developing. As far as tyranny was concerned, this regime was no different from Stalinism in the USSR in the 1930s or the present regime in North Korea. Soon, as “enemy of the people” I was dismissed from the Writers’ Union and Union of the Journalists of Turkmenistan. Pressure on people who had different views increased and a stifling atmosphere developed in the country. My books were collected from libraries and bookshops and set on fire. The situation of my father once again had been exacerbated and he was persecuted, because now he was the father of “the enemy of the people!”

After persecutions that lasted a few years, a few short-term imprisonments and at the end a long house arrest, in October 1993 (once again in October!) I left my country in secret and

reached Moscow. Living in Moscow too had become dangerous for me. Towards the end of 1994 I immigrated to Sweden under the United Nation's Kota.

All of the members of our family are on the black list in Turkmenistan. For nearly twenty four years I have not been able to see any of my relatives. My relatives are not allowed to leave and I am not allowed to enter the country. In 2011 my father became gravely ill and began to suffer dementia. Later, my father, as my mother said, spent most of his time sitting and looking out of the window as if waiting for someone. When my mother told him "Why are sitting in front of the window, why don't you have a rest?" Every time he answered "I am waiting." When asked "Whom do you expect to come?" He would answer "I don't know who it is, but someone was supposed to come."

After waiting for me and his grandchildren for nineteen years, my father passed away in the early days of 2012. It was prohibited for us to meet him in this world. We could not even think of being present at his funeral. The country was resolutely closed to us. The life of the son and father of "the enemy of the people" came to an end in this way. On 11th March 2017, after twenty four years of unbearable separation and in the hope for a softening in the "bashistic" regime and the observance of some respect to the dignity of humankind, and waiting for the return of her son and daughter-in-law and grandchildren to Turkmenistan, my mother closed her eyes for ever...

This ordeal is not the private problem of an individual or a family. This is a cruelty that happened to a few generations of the peoples of the former Red Empire and also millions of people who are at present living in the post-Soviet region. And this is the horrifying aspect of the problem. This was tyranny, cruelty and fear that continued for a century..."

Translated from Turkmen by Youssef Azemoun

BRIEF INFORMATION ABOUT TURKMENISTAN

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan was one of the republics of the former USSR between 1924 and 1991. It has been an independent state since 1991. The first president of Turkmenistan was Saparmyrat Niyazov who was appointed leader of Turkmenistan by the Kremlin in 1985. In 1999 he declared himself the president for life. After his suspicious death on 21st December 2006, his personal dentist, Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov took over the post of the presidency. In the presidential election in 2007 he won 96% of the votes, in 2012 97% and in a Soviet-style election in 2017 he won 98% of the votes.

Turkmenistan is known one as of the most authoritarian and repressive states and only a single political party system functions in this country. There is no freedom of press in Turkmenistan and the state is run by an old Soviet-style dictatorship.