

INTERVIEW ANN MORGAN AND AK WELSAPAR

- What was life inside Turkmenistan like? What are the major differences that would surprise someone from a country like Sweden or the UK? How much did you hear about the rest of the world?

Life in Turkmenistan during the Soviet period was driven by the iron grip of the Soviet ideological framework and the development of society was determined by five-year plans, which descended from the Kremlin. Life in frosty Siberia, where winter temperatures went down to -50 and sultry Turkmenistan, where the summer temperatures went up to +50, were planned and determined by the same officials who lived in Moscow and had never been in Siberia or in Turkmenistan.

If representatives of Sweden and the UK visited Turkmenistan they would have been surprised by many things, including the extremely bad roads and run-down cars, cotton plantations and saline lands, which alternately stretched across the country.

However the westerner, if he was in in Turkmenistan during the Soviet era, had a very little chance of survival, because empty shelves of grocery stores, and extremely poor food in restaurants waited for him. During longer stays, the visitor would get vitamin deficiency, anemia and emaciation due to chronic malnutrition. In those years, we built communism on an empty stomach under the pressure of the Communist Party.

Prior to Gorbachev's perestroika we knew too little about life in the West to understand what was happening. I learned everything about life outside of the USSR through foreign literature, which, alas, was much filtered. To Russian and Turkmen languages mainly fiction books were translated. So, like most Soviet people, I got more or less reliable knowledge about life in other countries with perestroika.

- What was literature inside Turkmenistan like when you lived there?

Turkmen literature in Soviet times was even more Soviet than in the center of metropolises censorship have been tougher than in Russia or, say, in the Baltic States. Works in which censorship were suspicious about, were doomed. Anyway, I was not able to issue any serious book until Mikhail Gorbachev came to power and declared the policy of glasnost.

- What made you decide to be a writer?

Writers were the most advanced and well-educated people in my eyes. There was a constant struggle between good and evil in their books. I saw my as a place there, in the midst of the

battle. As I remember, I've never parted with books. Any book that came across my hands, I swallowed like chocolate. In the afternoon, after school, I had to work on a collective farm field, nurse for and picking cotton, but any free minute I would read. Moreover, in my family of educated people, the book cult was always great. It may have also played a decisive role in the fact that I became a writer. I wrote my first "works" while I was still a schoolboy. They were published on the billboard of the school.

- Did you limit your writing because of the regime before your work was banned? Where there certain topics or views that you could not discuss? How did you handle this in your work?

Being an educated journalist, I knew what to write, and what to not in the Soviet era. However, Soviet censorship was unpredictable, it could ban anything. In the USSR, the intelligence services always stood above the Constitution and the Penal Code of the country. Most of the things that was not forbidden officially was forbidden secretly, and you suddenly found yourself before a blank stone wall, a wall that was impossible to penetrate.

And yet in the literature there were more opportunities than in journalism, it was possible to by-pass censorship, using Aesopian language, the language of metaphor and allegory. So I was much more interested in writing fiction than journalistic articles. In the literature, one can always broaden the horizons, to get out of tight binding boxes. Anyway, I was able to pass seditious thought and ideas in Soviet under the watchful eye of censorship. Once I even managed to pass an idea of the need to create an independent Turkmen state in my book "A Long Journey to Nearby". Although it was in the years of perestroika, but for such an idea, under unfortunate circumstances, at least in Turkmenistan, the writer could get imprisoned. Or you could simply encounter an accident, according to the principle of Stalin: no man - no problem.

Yet in the principles of Soviet censorship there was one decent paragraph, which read something like this - all doubtful places in the text shall be interpreted in favor of the author, if you cannot prove otherwise. Like my predecessors, I also use this paragraph when it was possible. However, in the Turkmen censorship after the Soviet collapse, this section was not left. In it, by the way, there was not a list of prohibited topics, and all was determined by the censors who were recruited exclusively from the former party underlings. This was the beginning of the end of the proverbial literature in Turkmenistan. Here in the second decade of Turkmenistan, only surrogate literature thrives.

- Can you describe the experience of seeing your work banned? What did it feel like to become a 'people's enemy'?

In 1991, an extremely popular youth literary and social magazine "Yashlyk" published my satirical novel "The Bent Sword on the Old Carpet." By that time the Soviet Union had

already collapsed and Turkmenistan became independent. So, Turkmen censorship immediately hurried to censor my novel. The first part of the novel which was published in the 11th issue of the journal was simply destroyed; almost every other paragraph was crossed out. Then I couldn't handle that and went to the chief censor, minion of the Communist Party yesterday, who had been appointed head of the censorship department. I asked him why the censorship wiped out dozens of episodes in the text. For example there was an episode ... One of the novel's characters comes to a witchdoctor with a dislocated hand. The witchdoctor asks "How did you dislocate it?" And the patient responds "I fell off an ass." When he asked him, "From what ass?" He exasperatedly responds "from the Turkmen-Soviet ass, which else could it be?!".

So to my question chief censor said, you can not offend the Soviet system! The power of Soviet was no more, but death rattle of the Turkmen censorship continued to defend the interests of the communist system and the Red Empire that sunk into oblivion.

There was another episode where a young Turkmen woman defends her honor on a truck and pushes a man who tried touching her off. That man also dislocated his hand. The censorship deleted this episode. I asked why? The answer was: A Turkmen woman cannot get into such a nasty situation... In short, in Turkmenistan, the freedom of speech after the collapse of the Soviet Union met times worse than the Soviet era, the country returned to the Stalin era.

I became an enemy of the people because of my revelatory articles about the high infant and maternal mortality in Turkmenistan, which were due to overuse of chemicals in agriculture and chronic malnutrition of the rural population (70% of the Turkmen population). I raised my voice to protect the ecology of the country, against the Aral Sea disaster, as well as freedom of speech, human rights and democracy. For this reason, I became more and more ostracized by the Communist press during the times perestroika in Turkmenistan. And then, when Turkmenistan gained its independence, my case got worse: I was expelled from the Writers' Union and the Union of Journalists, my books were removed from all libraries and bookstores and were burned. I was officially declared an enemy of the people. People became afraid to say hello to me, I was avoided by my former friends and colleagues, no one came to visit us at home, and we were not invited anywhere. It got to the point where even my close friends and fellow writers would cross the street when seeing me... It was awful.

- Since you have left Turkmenistan, your work has had quite a bit of attention in other countries. Do you think this would have happened if you still lived in Turkmenistan?

This question has no correct answer. It might have been different, but it is unlikely that the regime had forgiven me. So everything would depend on my ability to continue regular

contacts with foreign media. But not even the Red Cross is allowed in Turkmen prisons, not to mention foreign journalists or publishers, so I do not have any illusions about how the events would have taken place if I'd stayed in the country.

I almost had to start from scratch to get up on my feet as a writer during the emigration. But I had no other choice, the choice between emigration and staying in the native country was for me a choice between life and death, and I chose to live. Therefore I will not repent leaving.

- When you write now, who do you think of as your audience?

Of course when the writer starts to write a new work, in my opinion, he/she always tries to imagine its potential audience. But I'm not sure it always succeeds. In my case, the audience I have now now is much broader than it was before the emigration. Through losing Turkmenistan, I have found another home - Sweden, and not only that! So now, as I write, I imagine readers from around the world. Because of that, I write so that my works are equally interesting for readers of any country.

- Is there anything else you would like to say about the issues of censorship and being and exiled writer?

A writer's best place to live is in its native homeland, if of course, the circumstances allow it to do so as a writer is inseparably associated with their mother tongue and native land. As for censorship, it is not able to kill the talent and can only ban its works, therefore censorship victory over a writer - is only a temporary victory, and in the end a writer always win if it remains true to its talent and gift.

I would like to someday, dead or alive, return to my native homeland. But this can only happen when the country is free from tyranny.