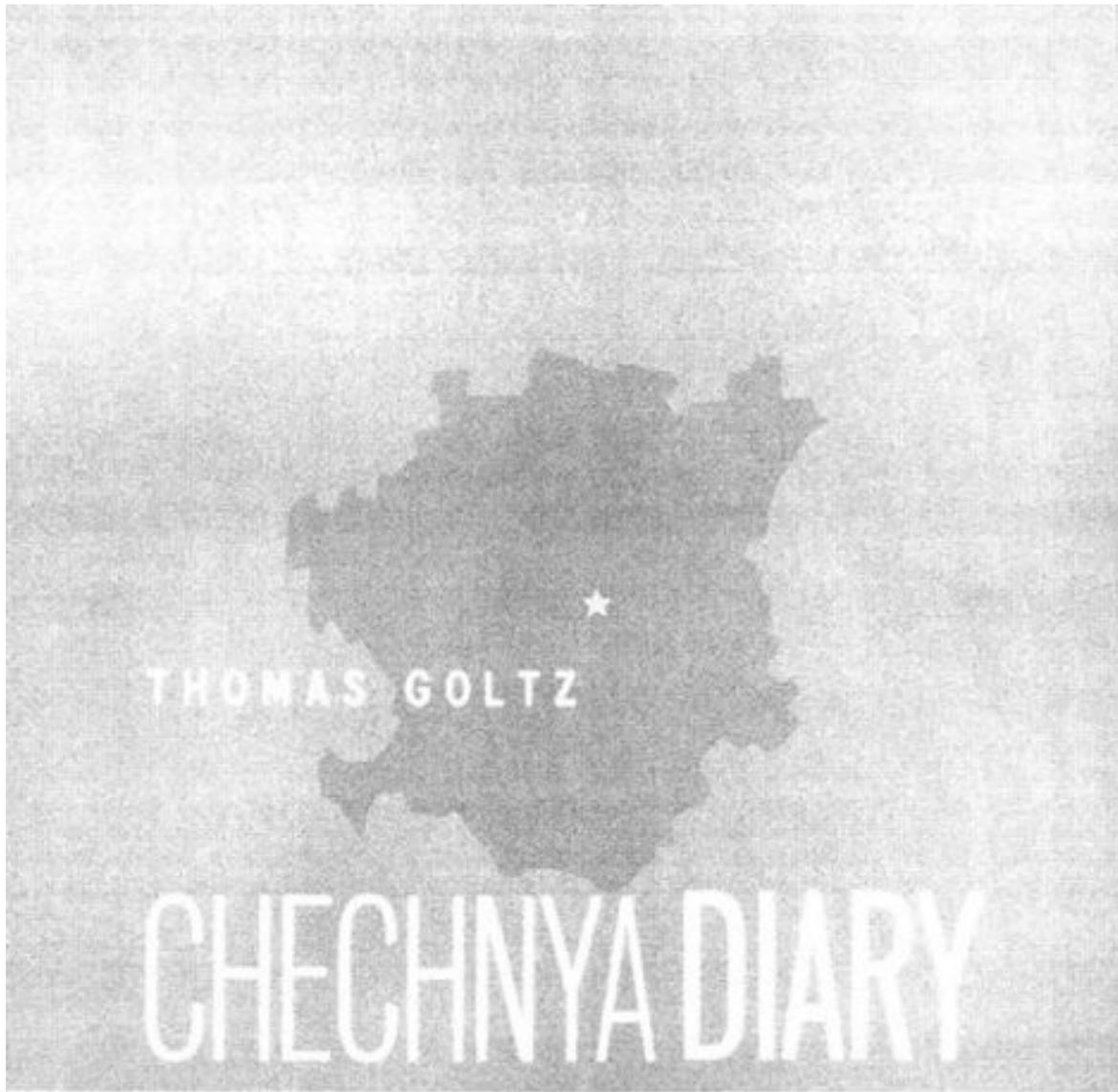


CHECHNYA DIARY

A WAR CORRESPONDENT'S STORY
OF SURVIVING THE WAR IN CHECHNYA

THOMAS GOLTZ





A WAR CORRESPONDENT'S STORY OF
SURVIVING THE WAR IN CHECHNYA

THOMAS GOLTZ BOOKS / ST. MARTIN'S PRESS IN NEW YORK

For Hussein and his family



Photo by Anonymous

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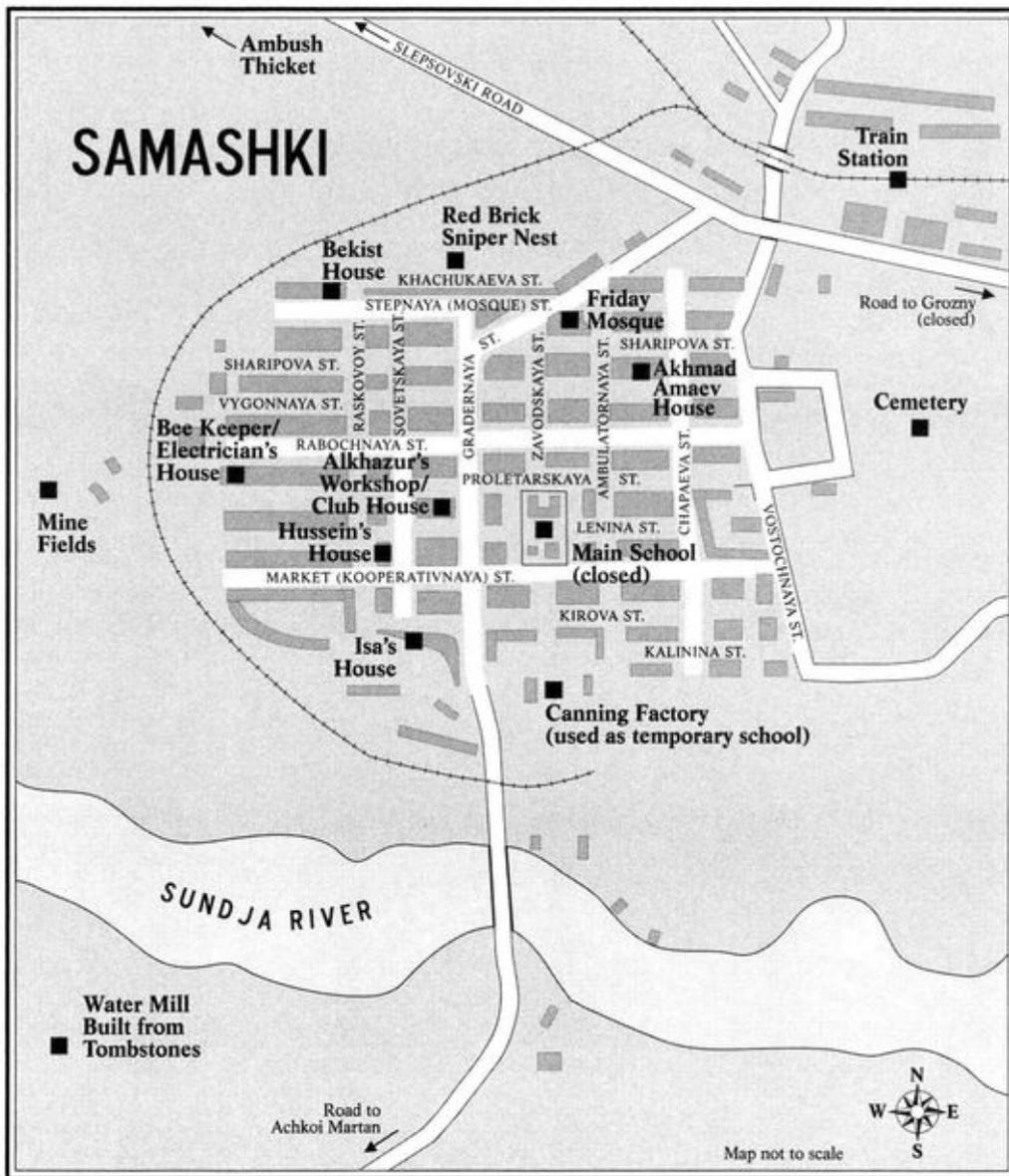
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The observer affects the observed.

- ESSENCE OF THE HEISENBERG UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE



PART ONE

prologue

WAR CORRESPONDENT ON A ROOF

It was while standing atop a two-story apartment block in a muddy little town in western Chechnya, waiting for an aerial assault to turn the mud into clay and the town into dust, that I started to reflect on the nature of my career, namely that of being a packager and purveyor of brutality between strange people in strange places, hopefully for the edification of television and reading audiences back home.

I was a war correspondent, and one, theoretically, in extreme danger. Aside from the minaret of the main mosque in town, the building I was standing on was the highest structure around. As such, it was an obvious target for the air attack expected to pummel the town that night. Because I was carrying a camera on a tripod with a shotgun microphone planted on top—a rig that many say greatly resembles a recoilless rifle with telescopic sight—the potential for pilots and gunners mistaking me for a gunman was high. I would have shot at me, too, had I been a nervous Russian airman.

Four journalists had already been killed in Chechnya before my arrival in country. Three more were announced as missing and presumed dead during my stay. Two were from a St. Petersburg newspaper; I was the third. Over the course of the next two years of war, followed by two years of not-war-not-peace between Russia and Chechnya and then more years of renewed war that continue unabated down to the publication of this book, even more journalists would fall—although their numbers would only be a drop in the bloody bucket of death and destruction visited upon players, both armed and unarmed, in that blighted land in the Russian North Caucasus.

Some people think that journalists involved in life-threatening work are brave. I no longer think so. If I ever get killed covering killing, I would like to state right now that the only person more foolish than me for getting into such a situation would be anyone who would describe my having done so as courageous. No, if I ever get killed covering killing, let my epitaph read something like *He squandered the gift of life by trying to get too close to death.*

As a print journalist I have lived dangerously—and foolishly—just to get “the story,” even when I knew said story would never see the light of day. The most ridiculous example of this tacit death urge was my hanging around the besieged city Sukhumi, in western Georgia, in 1993 with Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, long after it had become impossible to file reports on the collapsing situation. The reason for my silence was due to a lack of electricity and a functioning phone line. The media era of E-mail, the Internet, cell phones, and then, finally, direct video uplinks

had not yet arrived.

Still, writer-recorders of war have it easy, relatively speaking. You don't have to see the shell hit the building to know that it connected; you can wait in the basement until the screaming has stopped. There you can huddle up with people who have been living like rats for weeks, and describe in great detail the odor of old urine and sweat and fear. You do not ask your subjects to step outside where the light is better for an interview about how they feel about it all.

That is what television journalists do—and for the obvious reason that the image is all. You have to try and get as close as possible to the people shooting and the people getting shot, and make sure the lighting is right. And more. As a combat cameraman, you actually anticipate fighting and are often almost disappointed if it does not happen. What few admit but secretly hope for is that someone will actually die in front of your lens, because it makes such compelling material.

And that was exactly where I was that cold and frightening night, standing on a roof in an obscure little town in western Chechnya, risking my life in order to further my career by capturing an adequate measure of the death and destruction that was to be visited upon the very people I had been living with for several weeks, all for “the story.”

The place was called Samashki. In the Chechen language the name means “the place of deer.” It was destined to become the most resonant symbol of Russian brutality during the course of what most outsiders call the “first” Russo-Chechen War, when rampaging Russian forces slaughtered some two hundred men, women, and children in the town. Samashki maintained that status for almost five years, until its status as a font of sorrow was usurped by the nearby town of Alkhan Yurt, when the latter was subjected to an even more brutal wave of wanton killing during the “second” Russo-Chechen war.

Actually, most Chechens do not make any distinction between “first” and “second” wars. They tend to regard the entire period from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 down to today as being a long continuum of cold, cool, warm, and hot conflict with Russia, often expressed as merely the most recent attempt by Russians, repeated approximately every 50 years, to eradicate the Chechens from the face of the earth.

Genocide, in a word.

I am not sure if I agree with that formulation, but it is what most Chechens believe. And given their communal experience over the past ten years, with over 100,000 civilians and combatants killed and virtually all survivors forced into refugee status or reduced to a troglodyte life in the shattered ruins of their cities and towns and villages, it is difficult to blame them for believing so. Or blame them for their slow slide toward an Al Qaeda-style of Islam, with all that that implies in our post-September 11 world.

I first entered Samashki in mid-February 1995, and discovered a place so nondescript that I had initial misgivings about staying there at all. My assigned task was to make a one-man television documentary for ABC's *Nightline* on “the Chechen spirit,” an on-camera exploration about what motivated the outgunned Chechens to continue resisting the might of the Russian army. Virtually all other foreign correspondents in Chechnya at the time were focusing their attention on the capital city, Grozny. But

here I was, some thirty miles from the action, stuck in a large village consisting of walled compounds lining wandering lanes that seemed to be inches deep in mud, even when it did not rain. I stayed because I guess I intuited that the writing was on the wall. War *would* come to Samashki, and I would be there to greet it, camera in hand.

Situated on a small salient of territory still under the control of forces loyal to Chechen President Djohar Dudayev, Samashki controlled the main railway tracks to Grozny from the North and West. As such, it was an obvious target for the Russian forces as they slowly but surely “cleansed” the denuded hills of northern Chechnya of resistance, pushing ever southward toward the mountains where Dudayev had chosen to make his last stand.

My plan was to spend a few days in town, get to know some folks, go out on a few missions, and then get out before the place was obliterated. In the best of all possible worlds, I would accomplish the getting-out part while the obliteration was taking place. In the television trade, this is called collecting “bang-bang.”

But through February and then March 1995, the Russian military had been less than obliging in helping me complete the documentary as planned. True, we had taken a lot of hits around the periphery of the town, but this was mainly long-distance, nocturnal bombing and not very photographic: I got “great” sound—bombs going *va-BOOM!* and heavy machine gun fire going *BrrITT BrrrITT* in the outlying woods. But in terms of video image, there was not much to see: long minutes of jet black, all-enveloping night, occasionally interrupted by a drifting orb of distant flares or the sudden flash of a large explosion. Due to the laws of physics, these were seldom if ever in sync with the sound, and thus of no practical use, television-wise.

The daytime attacks by planes and helicopters had also been frustrating. The pilots and gunners had the habit of attacking those parts of town where I was not, or when I approached (as more reasonable people were fleeing or hiding under whatever shelter they could find), remained just out of camera range. Nor can I blame the Russians entirely for my failure. On one occasion, with helicopters literally firing missiles over my head, I was so frightened that I turned the camera off when the choppers were in focus, and back on to shoot my feet churning through the muddy ground while looking for a place to hide. Once the choppers had the audacity to attack while my battery charger was on the fritz, forcing me to wait while the device was repaired and the batteries recharged.

On a professional level this was all very irritating. But on a personal level I was very glad, because, as the days went by and turned into weeks, the townsfolk (and fighters) who had been strangers became acquaintances and then friends and providers and protectors—they became people. And maybe I started becoming a person, rather than just another media mercenary.

My initial hosts were three brothers—Isa, Muhammad, and Musa. None were fighters per se, but men who tried to make their own contribution to the cause in their own way by buying bullets, hand grenades, and even land mines from Russian soldiers. The medium of exchange was often alcohol, and they were not above spiking vodka with bleach. This allegedly increased the thirst for even more vodka, while contributing to blindness.

Through the brothers I met many others in town, civilians and militants. In the former category were men like Vakha, a local cigarette-and-chocolate merchant who

also excelled in the procurement of arms from Russian deserters; Ruslan, a high-wire walker in a Moscow circus who acted as a rooftop scout, and Musa, a tailor who had turned his garment-making skills to a rather different use: he stitched together vests from rags to hold Kalashnikov clips; they thus doubled as a bandolier and poor man's flak-jacket. Their clubhouse, as it were, was the home of the local blacksmith named Alkhazur.

At the time, these men (and boys) were labeled "separatist bandit formations" by Moscow, even though they regarded themselves as "freedom fighters," or defenders of Chechnya's independence. Today, almost seven years later, and with the concept of Osama bin Laden embedded into the fearlobe of virtually every Western brain, they would probably be called "Muslim terrorists." And given subsequent developments in Chechnya—despair, mainly, and a profound sense of merely having been used as pawns in a much larger scenario involving a host of outside actors—it requires no great stretch of the imagination to project at least some of them into Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan prior to September 11, 2001, or even participating in the ghastly hostage crisis in Moscow in October 2002, when some 50 kamikaze Chechens, including 18 women, seized a theater packed with more than 750 show-goers. Were any of my friends from Samashki in that theater, dressed in black and espousing suicide in the name of Islam? I do not know and want to doubt it. But human beings driven to despair are ultimately capable of anything, I have learned.

At the time of our acquaintance, the Samashki garrison was staffed with volunteers from all walks of life and motivated by a single impulse: to keep the Russian Army out of their muddy little town. It had to do with potato fields and harvest, and not Islam.

The unofficial leader of the local resistance was a forty-six-year-old farmer named Hussein, a man who embodied the multiple contradictions and historical baggage of being a contemporary *Noxchi*, as the Chechens call themselves in their own, very non-Russian language, which they call *Noxchi Mot*. Hussein had been born in the distant, Soviet Central Asian republic of Kazakhstan, some three thousand miles east of his ancestral homeland in the Russian North Caucasus. The reason for this was stunningly simple, and was basic to understanding the Chechen soul. On the night of February 23, 1944, and at the height of the Soviet winter war against Hitler, Josef Stalin charged the entire population of Chechnya with collaboration with the Nazi *Wehrmacht*, and sent the Chechens into internal exile. The *Vysl*, or Deportation, was conducted by the most brutal of methods: Families were rounded up, packed on boxcars and sent east in the general direction of Central Asia and the Chinese frontier. Half died en route, and all who survived carried the soul scars that came from the near-genocide. One of Hussein's three children, a boy named Ali, had the misfortune to have been born on "The Day" and had thus never been allowed to celebrate his birthday.

Hussein was back in Kazakhstan when word came that war had broken out in his homeland. He immediately sold all the farm machinery he had, with the exception of a truck, purchased weapons on the black market and began making his way back to Samashki. With him came his younger brother Ussam (whose wife and two young children were already there), his cousin Shirvani (a bookworm who had undergone two treatments for bone cancer acquired during his Soviet-era military service, when he and two other Chechens were obliged to load nuclear warheads—the other two men were dead); Shirvani's brother-in-law Xamid (a mean and wiry shepherd you wanted

on your side and not against you); a pleasant young man of about twenty-five named Seylah, who seemed to be related to Xamid in some way, and Ali, a big jolly fellow who was always laughing and joking (and who, of course, was the first casualty). Bringing up the rear was Hussein's nephew Sultan, a doe-eyed youth who was fulfilling his father's defense duty because the latter was bedridden after having undergone a liver operation.

With me tagging along, this small group planted antitank mines in the potato fields surrounding Samashki, patrolled the roads, and blew up railway bridges to prevent the Russians from sending an armored train piled high with ammunition down the tracks to reach Grozny. Driving off the armored columns that harassed the town was another activity that required more than a little nerve: In addition to Kalashnikov rifles, Hussein's arsenal consisted of a single heavy machine gun, which he had his men lug out to various positions in a hay wagon. Because ammunition was so scarce, he would load each shell individually, and never used automatic fire. Still, by moving the gun around, he gave the impression that he had more men and equipment than he did, and once even forced a firefight between two Russian columns, each of which thought that the other was the enemy, as we hid in thorn-bush thickets between the potato fields.

Those were the days. In the evening, I did what everyone else around me did: sat around Alkhazur's living room drinking endless cups of tea and chain-smoking cigarettes before wandering back through the blackened, muddy streets to Hussein's place to sleep. The nightly hammering of outlying positions made the windows rattle and shake as if the explosions were next door. After a few days, one got used to the nocturnal barrage and the racket became almost indistinguishable—or at least no more disturbing—than the snoring of the other men in the room.

Yes, after a few weeks, Samashki had become a normal town for me, filled with very normal people, people with histories, names, and even foibles. Imperceptibly at first, but with every day more so, I began shifting my focus away from war and in the direction of local humanity. I filmed farmers planting crops and children trying to study, even though there was no school. I got to be pals with the ladies in the bazaar, and made a point to never miss communal prayers in the mosque and the inevitable discussion groups that would follow. And I began to think differently about my project. If Thornton Wilder could make a classic play out of the very complacency of a Grovers' Corners, could I not do the same for Samashki, and make a real-life Chechen version of *Our Town*? It would be slow, as far as television goes—but it would be different, something deep.

Still, I was obliged to protectively position myself in case the Russian military finally decided to fulfill its frequent vow to flatten the place. That meant that after fearful days on the periphery with Hussein and his men and fascinating evenings with the just-folks in Alkhazur's coffee shop, my nights usually consisted of waiting on a rooftop in anticipation of recording the death of the very same people who had been keeping me in food, housing, and companionship, and the destruction of the town—*our town*.

That might sound dramatic and awful and cynical, and it is, but the dynamic was more complex than that. The men I was with had accepted me into their lives so that I might be able to report on their activities in the largest sense. A tacit part of our contract was that I would probably have to record very real violence when it was

visited upon them. The only way to draw attention to Samashki, and thus somehow impact American or world public opinion to move or persuade or force Moscow to cease and desist in the slaughter in Chechnya, would be to deliver visuals that were sufficiently dramatic to make viewers sit up and shout “*No! No! NO!*”

So long as the journalist can continue to believe that his or her reporting might indeed have that sort of impact or result—changing the world—the implicit contradictions and dangers of his or her situation are sustainable. The problem arises when one begins to understand that one is risking one’s own life—and by extension the lives of those around him—not so much to edify or enlighten, but to *entertain*.

Ghoulish? Yes. Realistic? Absolutely: This is exactly the sort of thing that producers describe as “great TV.”

And what is to be learned from such a sequence?

That people still believe in that totally contradictory principle that motivates rebels all over the world, namely, that they are willing to die in order to be free—and are quite happy to do it on television?

This book has taken me almost a decade to write because it has been so painful to remember and because it is about so many things: the Samashki massacre, Hussein, Chechnya, Russia, ethnicity, war, journalism, modern voyeuristic adventure, love, hate, betrayal, forgiveness, and a host of other subjects. But there are certain things this book is *not*. It is not, for example, a history of Chechnya, Russia, the Caucasus, or Soviet nationalities policy—although for the sake of context, I have included what I hope is a sufficient amount of information about all those subjects to serve as a potpourri Guide for the Perplexed.

What this book *is*, I hope, is an account of a confused and unhappy time in *one* human history, largely defined by but not restricted to the conflict as experienced in one small town in the self-styled Chechen Republic during its bid for independence from the post-Soviet Russian Federation, and as seen through the foggy lens of an imperfect outlander recorder who just happened to show up at that time and place.

My contact with Hussein has led me to ask a number of uncomfortable questions for myself and others involved in journalism, especially in areas and times of war and crisis. The main question might be: What responsibility does a journalist have to his or her subject? Are journalists perfectly neutral vessels who only see and record? Or does their very presence at critical moments make people act differently than they would have had the journalist not been there at all? What happens when *the story* becomes something more than that—when it becomes *life*? When does the observer affect the observed?

Thomas Goltz

2003

Livingston, Montana

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THE GOLDEN BRIDGE

“Walk slowly and just say ‘*Da*’ whenever I ask you anything—got it?”

“*Da*,” I said.

Isa, my guide and companion for the last two hours, looked at me and chuckled. “Are you scared already?” he asked.

“*Da*,” I replied truthfully. “But, in fact, I am only following your instructions.”

Isa’s cheeks jiggled and his large belly heaved as he suppressed a chuckle. “*Hehehe!*” he tittered, trying to hold his breath. It was actually not such a good joke, and hardly the opportune moment to enjoy it, even if it had been. We were halfway up the Baku-Rostov highway to the *Zalota Most*, or Golden Bridge, which we were going to cross illegally on our way to Chechnya at war. I was numb from a mixture of cold, fear, and several sleepless nights thinking about what I was about to do, but was determined to do it anyway.

It was February 1995, and the bridge represented the sole border post on the Azerbaijani-Russian frontier, and it was a bundle of contradictions. For starters, it had been officially closed a month before, when Moscow accused Baku of turning a blind eye to Chechen fighters and their supporters crossing on their way to Chechnya. And yet the bridge remained unofficially open. One reason was the fact that while the frontier in question was internationally recognized as that delineating the boundaries of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation, that particular part of the Russian Federation was Dagestan, a sort of sub-republic, or state, populated by a crazy quilt of mainly non-Russian (and almost exclusively Muslim) ethnicities, including many Chechens and Azeris. Their views about the Russian-Chechen conflict were quite different from those held by Boris Yeltsin and his advisors. While the latter thought it the most obvious place to intercept men and munitions on their way to Chechnya, the former were determined to keep the bridge open as an artery of supply.

Actually, the real reason the officially closed bridge and border remained unofficially open was more basic than the call of ethnic or religious solidarity. It had to do with cash.

“How are you feeling?” whispered Isa, when our communal taxi pulled off at the roadside shrine to Khidhir, the Muslim patron saint of sailors, travelers, and lost causes. It was the first time, for security purposes, that we had spoken since leaving Baku.

“*Normalno*,” I replied, shivering in the damp, Caspian winter chill. “Okay.”

“Don’t worry,” hissed Isa. “We have it wired. *Wired!* The name says it all—*Zalota Most*, the ‘Golden Bridge.’”

“What do you mean?”

“We call it that because everyone who works there gets rich,” Isa explained. “Now

give me some cash so that I can buy us through.”

I slipped him a couple hundred dollars in smaller bills. Isa took one and stuffed it into the contribution box outside Khidhir’s shrine, and looked on approvingly when I made my own donation. Then we walked back to our communal taxi and drove the next hour in silence, not speaking until we entered no-man’s land.

My disguise—a two-month beard trimmed to Muslim style that was gray enough to make me a respected elder, a greatcoat covering the thirty-pound flak jacket I was wearing and a lamb’s wool, Astrakhan-style *papakh* atop my head—seemed to be working. Coupled with my front-seat position, it had sufficed to keep our two other traveling companions’ curiosity in check, thanks to the local code of silence in front of elders, who must speak before being spoken to. I had kept strict radio silence. Now I was breaking it.

“Doktor Teymur,” he said in Russian from the back seat. “We have just crossed the *Zalota Most* over the Samur River! Is it good to be home?”

“*Da*,” I said, on cue.

Suddenly, a white Djiguli sedan darted out of the darkness and blocked our path.

“*Wha—?*” cried our driver, and mutterings of concern from the two other passengers ricocheted around the car.

“Don’t worry, friends, it’s for us,” hissed Isa, trying to reassure them. Then he turned to me. “Get out—now!”

“But my bags ...”

“Go!!” barked Isa. “Your stuff will rejoin you on the other side! *Go!!*”

Things were going too fast: I was out of one car and into the other and a man sitting in the passenger seat turned to me to say “hello,” revealing double rows of gold-capped teeth in so doing.

It was soon clear how he paid his dentist.

“*Denge!*” he commanded, and Isa forked over a small wad of twenty-dollar bills.

“It is not enough!” screeched the man after making a quick count.

“What do you mean?” said Isa. “You said one hundred bucks.”¹

“Each,” said the man in the passenger seat. “The price of transportation has risen.”

“This is a scandal!” growled Isa.

“That is the border,” said the driver. “The choice is yours.”

“Look, guys,” Isa implored the pair. “We are really low on dough—let’s make it an extra fifty and call it even.”

The driver and man in the passenger seat exchanged glances.

“For the Muslim cause, boys,” growled the driver, and took the extra cash. Then he turned on the ignition and hit the accelerator, screeching to a halt in front of the security gate.

“Doktor Teymur,” Isa asked in a loud voice as we emerged from the car. “Do you have a cigarette?”

“*Da*,” I replied, and gave him one.

“Remember what I told you,” growled Isa, bending close as if to get a light. “Just answer ‘yes’ to everything that sounds like a question.” These Russian dogs would sell their sisters, their mothers. Do you understand?”

“*Da*,” I said. The station was bathed in cheesy incandescent light, illuminating a knot of Russian soldiers standing near the barrier while others clambered like ants

over a truck. Invisible dogs barked. A searchlight swung across an adjacent field. Then we started walking toward the barrier.

Isa and I had met the day before through the agency of an Azeri friend who specialized in dubious business ventures such as importing “class” cars for resale to the Baku *nouveau riche*. A late model Mercedes with only a few dents and bullet holes sold for around five thousand dollars. For an added premium charge of five hundred dollars, my contact once told me, he could have the cars taken off the INTERPOL hot car register. Although my contact never said as much, Isa seemed to be one of his primary sources for such “used” vehicles.

But that was before the war in Chechnya exploded in November 1994. After that, trade had dried up. Whether he really had been in the stolen car business or in some more legitimate trade, in February 1995 Isa was unemployed and needed cash. I had some cash and was in need of a man who knew how to move things along difficult roads and over borders—like me. As such, we were a perfect fit; we were both desperate.

The reason for my desperation was pretty straightforward. Having accepted—no, pursued—a contract with ABC’s *Nightline* to sally forth to Chechnya at war to create a one-man documentary on “the Chechen Spirit,” made on the basis of my unique ties, language ability, and cultural connectivity, I had traveled from Montana to Philadelphia to Washington to New York to Istanbul to London to Istanbul to Baku, only to run up against the proverbial brick wall. My pals in the pan-Turkic crowd in Istanbul had talked big, but failed to provide anything except lofty platitudes and empty promises. Ditto for my “high-level” contacts among the Chechen diaspora.

I wanted the program to air on February 23, the anniversary of the “Day of Chechen Genocide.” Alternatively, I wanted to be inside Chechnya in order to capture on film whatever happened on that most resonant day in the Chechen communal psyche. But the project had been dogged by problems from the start. Specifically, the Video News International agency that had subcontracted me to ABC’s *Nightline* seemed unable to come up with any of the requisite paraphernalia for the venture, ranging from airline tickets to combat zone insurance and even cash. After wasting a week of precious time on the East Coast of the United States, I finally accepted a package of vague terms on faith and boarded a plane to Istanbul, ready to start swimming in familiar waters—and it was already mid-February.

After some useless meetings with official Chechen emissaries, I checked into the offices of the Chechen Solidarity Committee in the smog-invested Lalali quarter of Istanbul. The office, located above a coffee house on a side street with a name that never would be registered on any postman’s beat, was the throbbing hub of the Circassian diaspora in Turkey—that is, the descendants of the small Muslim nations who had fled the North Caucasus to Ottoman Turkey after the Czarist armies had conquered the region one hundred and fifty years before. Although there were posters and other cultural paraphernalia relating to the other seven nations of the North Caucasus, the emphasis was heavily and unabashedly slanted on Chechnya. Portraits of the two implacable nineteenth-century resistance leaders, Imam Shamil and his predecessor, Sheikh Mansour, framed that of the current Chechen president, Djohar

Dudayev. Nearby hung the green, white, red and black Chechen flag—the colors standing for religion, purity, blood and mourning, respectively—replete with the presidential symbol of an alert gray wolf on its haunches. On the wall behind the director’s chair, written in *Noxchi* (Chechen) with a convenient Turkish translation, were the words to the Chechen national anthem.

*We came into this world like the cub of a wolf
Like the lion, growling at dawn,
And were given our name!
La illah il Allah!
Our mothers suckled us in the hawk’s nest
Our fathers taught us to fight in the horse’s saddle
Our elders raised us for the people, for the country!
We learned to sing the dirge of danger!
La illah il Allah!*

Establishing my bona fides with an intense young man named Fazil Özen who served as the director of the center, I was allowed to try and find a group of volunteers into which I might “embed” myself. As the primary contact point for Diaspora and traveling Chechens, the center attracted a weird mix of second- and third-generation “Chechen Turks” from Anatolian villages who had suddenly rediscovered their identity but spoke no Chechen or Russian, fourth- and fifth-generation “Chechen Arabs” from Jordan and Syria who were actually closer to Chechenness than their “Turkish” cousins, and finally, a truly motley crew of real Russian Chechens who needed or wanted help and assistance to return home via the underground railroad to fight the good fight. It was strange and wonderful and chilling, watching volunteer-ism at work. One young man, who said he knew me from Sukhumi (although he was on the other side of the lines in the Abkhaz war), wanted me to travel with him. He seemed like a perfect subject for my project of explaining, through film, what the Chechen spirit was all about.

“*Sukhumi*,” he spat. “That was playing at war. Stick with me, and I’ll show you the real thing!”

My new friends at the Solidarity Committee cautioned me against this.

“Don’t you understand?” hissed Fazil. “Those kids *are going to their deaths!*”

Other visitors were suspect, and Fazil warned me against talking openly about my plans. Keeping a low profile was almost impossible, though, due to the surprisingly bad local language ability of my new friends. Twice I was seconded to be a Russian-Turkish translator at an interrogation of a couple of suspected agents because Fazil’s Chechen was insufficient to conduct the interview and the individuals in question spoke nothing but Chechen and Russian. I hasten to add that I in no way considered myself competent for such a task, although I performed as best I could.

“Where were you in September 1993?”

“Well, I was tending the sheep on the *Sovieteski Kolkhoz*, when suddenly I heard the *ehtKHizor* and the *bvf ofhe hnasdfo* resounding in garble garble.”

“Did he say *Soviet*?”

“Well, yes—but ...”

“He is an agent provocateur!” snarled Fazil, who equated anything “Soviet” with “Russian,” including place names such as collective farms.

One thing though, was certain: the Caucasus Culture Group/ Chechen Solidarity Center must have been staked out and penetrated by at least three intelligence services—the Turkish MIT, the Russian Federal Security Agency (the renamed KGB), and of course the CIA. Perhaps Fazil let me hang around precisely because he assumed I worked for the last agency and that my real mission was to help.

Contacts established, arrangements made and escape routes planned, I packed my bags in anticipation of the early morning flight from Istanbul to Baku and beyond. In anticipation of rough stuff, I was traveling as light as I could, but still had an inventory of things that would match that cited by the Ismaelia war-bound correspondent in Evelyn Waugh’s classic, *Scoop*. In addition to my customized camera, body armor, and Kevlar helmet, I was toting an emergency medical kit that would have landed me in jail on drug-smuggling charges almost anywhere in the world. The two basic dopes were Dolantine, a sort of lazy man’s morphine, used to break the pain of shrapnel lacerations and gunshot wounds, and Atropine, a jump-starter for heart-attack victims, in case I found myself going into shock and decided to do something about it. Hopefully, self-administration of either would happen with the right ampule. I was also carrying diverse pep pills and instant-action vitamins designed for athletes, in case I had to climb a mountain one fine night.

Clotheswise, I was packing a customized cross-country skier’s wardrobe: tights and turtleneck that absorbed sweat away from the body but retained heat, a fleece pullover with a kangaroo pouch for frozen fingers or diverse equipment, quick-dry windbreaker pants with reinforced knees and butt, instant heat packs for fingers and toes, a ski cap that could be pulled down so far as to cover the throat as well as nose and mouth, anti-glare ski goggles, a high-tech flashlight designed to be worn like a miner’s lamp on your head, two pairs of anti-ice traction claws for my lifelong-guaranteed water-and-cold-resistant boots, and even a pair of high-flotation, superlightweight snowshoes. Lest I appear out of place in my survival attire, I also brought along a well-worn dark blue overcoat that was missing two buttons. It served not only as a windbreaker and blanket, but also as a sort of generic Eastern European war refugee disguise, and was especially effective in this capacity when topped by my gray Chechen *papakh*, or Astrakhan sheepskin hat. For food, I packed two pounds of whole espresso-roasted coffee beans to chew as an energy aid, and two hundred and fifty grams of whole cloves to kill hunger. It might sound like a lot, but actually, the single biggest item was the camera kit: a Sony 3-chip Hi-8 job with boom mike, LAV interview attachment, and Bogan tripod, as well as a clam-oyster miniature remote viewing/dubbing unit and about 50 pounds of tapes and extra batteries. Or so it seemed.

In retrospect, the sheer volume and weight of this kit sounds ridiculous. The idea was to achieve autonomy; what it did was create the need for assistants and bearers. I

subsequently ditched half of it.

I tried to sleep, but in vain. It was the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, and the *muezzins* calling the faithful to midnight and dawn prayers in the grand mosques around Sultan Ahmet Square vied with one another to see who could extend their plaintive, amplified cries the longest. The *ezan*, which usually lasts around five minutes at most, seemed to last for a half an hour, one disembodied voice picked up where the last had left off. One particularly clear and beautiful voice seemed to have converted the Muslim creed into a scat song. *Allahul Akhbar, Allahul Akhbar!*

I lay on the bed, channel-surfing between Turkish TV and international channels and thought about the project at hand. Of all those I had dealt with, the most memorable were the two youths I had met at the Solidarity Center who had fought in Sukhumi, and were now returning for more war. *Sukhumi a game? A rehearsal?* I had nearly gone down with the ship there, along with my friend and colleague Lawrence Sheets from Reuters. Just how bad could Chechnya be? And now I, too, was going back to war—and the images that passed on the television screen had little to do with my memory of that subject: men without limbs, half-shrouded women's bodies lying in muddy streets, brains dribbling on the pavement, and rows of dead children lined up in blood-stained snow. I got up and started retching. I continued for hours, finally drawing blood from my stomach. I wanted to think it was something I had eaten, but knew better.

I was scared, really scared.

For someone trying to make a discreet entrance into frontline Azerbaijan, mine was not an auspicious start. The arrivals section of the new international air terminal outside Baku was packed with old friends and acquaintances from all walks of life. There were oilmen and diplomats and spies returning to post from R&R vacation leave and dozens of Azeri citizens who smiled and shouted greetings when they saw me to their prodigal son returned. Many of the security guards and official shakedown artists who passed for customs officials were old friends from the war in Karabkah. One reached out and kissed me on both cheeks and had a long chuckle when I sent his metal detector screaming: the body armor I was wearing had considerably more resonance than the usual watches, rings, cufflinks, and cigarette lighters his metal detector machine was geared to deal with.

Indeed, seemingly everyone I knew—or at least appropriate representatives of different segments of society—was at the airport waiting for my plane. Everyone, that is, except the people I expected to meet: the Chechens assigned to spirit me from the airport with minimal fuss, and smuggle me across the mountains and into war.

I waited for an hour, glad-handing old friends whom I really did not want to see and then just fending off persistent taxi drivers. At first I hoped that one would whisper to me that *he was the one*, but none of those who approached me uttered anything like a password. When the last of the men holding signs designating MISTER SMITH and MASTER JONES disappeared I knew that something had gone very wrong. I was in Baku and none of the contacts I had so assiduously cultivated in Istanbul (and London and New York and Washington and even New Jersey) had come through.

Finally, I hailed a taxi and asked him to take me into town to the Hotel Azerbaijan. I

had no intention of staying there, but they did have a satellite telephone, and I wanted to call Istanbul to find out why no one had met me as arranged, and what was going on, generally speaking. Fazil Özen was evasive, and suggested I return to Istanbul where we could have a more intimate conversation. *Return to Istanbul?* I demanded more information, and he became a little more specific. The Russians, possibly tipped off by Turkish intelligence, were rolling up one of the networks that led through Baku. He could not tell me any more on the phone. *Click.*

I was on my own. Or rather, it was time to check in with my own Baku network to see what was really what. I called a well-informed diplomat pal and arranged to meet him at a bar favored by the pan-Turkic crowd known as the Gray Wolves, who were said to be actively supporting the Chechens with men and arms. Even before the diplomat arrived I had the scene assessed, but he filled in more gaps. The Russians had intercepted a satellite telephone conversation between Djohar Dudayev and the Azerbaijani Gray Wolf leader, Iskender Hamidov, and leaked the entire transcript to the Moscow press. In it, Iskender reassured Djohar that “another delivery of ‘metal’” from Turkey was on its way via Dagestan, and that more of his men were scheduled to slip across the frontier and join in the good fight.

It was pretty damning material, and suggested open collusion between Dudayev, Hamidov, and his Turkish backers against the Russians. It was also highly embarrassing to Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev, because the content of the conversation suggested that he either tolerated anti-Russian activities on his fiefdom, or that he was out to lunch and unaware that any such activities were going on. This was all bad news.

I still had a few strings to pull, however. The first was to make direct contact with Iskender Hamidov and see if I could hitch a ride with him and his men if and when he made another cross border run. While putting out feelers in this direction (I assumed his phones were tapped by everyone with an interest in the internal politics of Azerbaijan), I also called on another old friend. I shall call him “Towfiq,” a man whose business interests included stolen cars and Chechen drivers.

“This is me,” I said into the telephone.

“My dear!” Towfiq exclaimed. “I thought you had left us for good!”

“All lies,” I replied. “But I must see you—*now.*”

“I will pick you up in ten minutes.”

He was there in five

“My dear, it is so good to see you again!” Towfiq began with the standard niceties. “A problem at customs? A woman? Are you moving back to us and need a house? I have one that is empty now. I am married and I got rid of my mistress. You can have her, too, and both our problems will be solved.”

“Congratulations on your marriage.”

“Thank you.”

“Introduce me to your Chechen friends.”

At two o’clock I was standing on the quayside near the disused tennis club, trying hard to look like I was doing something other than waiting. At five minutes after the hour two men crossed the street.

One was short, dark, and ugly. He wore a leather jacket that looked like it concealed a weapon tucked in his belt, and had a shabby, gray *papakh* crushed down around his

ears that looked like the conical hat was upside down. The other was tall, fair-haired, and handsome. He wore a maroon mackintosh-style overcoat, but no hat at all. They were, I decided, the hit man and the boss, respectively. They introduced themselves as Isa and Hamid, and suggested we go some place quiet to talk.

I had already selected the apartment of a best-nameless opera singer-cum-oil company caterer as a safe house. It was the least likely place I could think to be bugged. We split up and found our own ways to the address, met on the second floor, and entered without saying a word before turning the stereo on high. (Verdi, I believe.) We had a tentative deal within an hour, predicated on a mixture of patriotic zeal and self-interest.

I had envisaged a mountain-goat path over the snow; they insisted on a straight shot through the front door—the Golden Bridge across the Azerbaijani-Russian frontier.

Decisions had to be made. I could put my life in the hands of two total strangers of an ethnic persuasion notorious for crimes such as kidnapping, or pursue the Gray Wolf option and go with men I at least knew—but did not think much of. I could also declare that it all had become too complex and dangerous and simply back out and go home to Montana and spend the winter skiing. I needed consultation, so I went up to the Martyrs' Lane Cemetery to walk around the graves of friends and acquaintances killed in Karabakh—but none of the dead could tell me what to do. So I took a long stroll downhill in the direction of the Foreign Ministry. By chance, two old friends who worked inside were standing out front smoking cigarettes. They were the deputy foreign minister and his assistant, or more specifically, my old friends Araz and Elchin.

“Iskender Hamidov is making our lives rather difficult right now,” commented Elchin, the assistant. “Russia is talking about closing the frontier due to his antics.”

“I am merely a public servant in the government of a small and confused country, and hardly in the position to advise you about the preferred way to violate our frontiers, let alone those of our neighbors,” said Araz. “But, as your friend I would strongly advise you to stay away from the politicians and travel with the businessmen.”

“Meaning—”

“The interests of the latter are constant—money; the interests of the former change according to exigency. And all indications are that a crackdown is coming.”

I made two calls from the street. The first was to Iskender Hamidov's organization. It was designed to throw anyone interested in my movements off the track. I said I would call the next day to make final arrangements for the trip north. Then I found a second telephone and called Isa and Hamid and confirmed that we were leaving that night.

We were stopped seven more times between the Golden Bridge and the Dagestan capital, Mahachkale, and each checkpoint brought my colon into my throat. A brace of Russian soldiers would emerge from the darkness into our headlights and point to the side of the road. We would stop and nervously wait while the soldiers went through our documents.

“*Bismillah*,” I would mutter, using the Muslim Arabic formula for evoking the