

ARMENIAN REFUGEES IN NOVOROSSIYSK (1919)

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Teffi

Teffi (1872-1952) was the pen name of Nadezhda Lokhvitskaya, one of the most celebrated writers in pre-Bolshevik Russia. A poet, essayist, playwright, activist, she was best known as a satirist. Surprisingly, both Tsar Nicholas II and Lenin were fans of Teffi. Soon after the Bolshevik takeover of Russia, she headed (1919) to Paris by way of Odessa, Novorossiysk and Constantinople. In the late '20s, when she published ("Memories... From Moscow to the Black Sea") about her journey from Russia to Western Europe, she wrote about the Armenians she had come across in Novorossiysk, on the northeast corner of the Black Sea. They were refugees. Teffi didn't say where the refugees had come from. She died in Paris in 1952. The English translation of "Memories... From Moscow to the Black Sea" was published by New York Review Books (2016).—Editor.

Jetty after jetty, one after another.

Cranes towered everywhere, like the neck of gigantic black water birds. And endless sheds, depots, warehouses...

And people, crowds of people, all over the waterfront and the landing stages.

At first I thought they were passengers waiting for a steamer. But, after walking about a little, I soon saw that they weren't waiting there—they were living there. They had rigged up tents out of baskets and pieces of cloth, hung up their ragged things—and there they now lived.

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There were old women roasting scraps of food on braziers.

And there were half-naked children playing with mutton bones and bits of broken bottles. Swarthy children with tousled black hair.

In front of each tent stood a pole, and tied to this pole was a cluster of garland of garlic.

These people were Armenian refugees. They had been in Novorossiysk for a long time and had no idea where they would be sent next. There had been an outbreak of typhus in the city and many of them were sick. Children were dying of fever. The clusters of garlic were there to ward off  infection. Ghosts, vampires, werewolves, and a variety of diseases all strongly dislike the smell of garlic. As do I myself; I entirely understand these ghosts, vampires and werewolves.

These refugees were leading a strange life.

They had been driven here from one place, and they would soon be driven on to some other place. And though all they owned in the world might be a few rags and a frying pan, they seemed to be finding their lives quite tolerable. I sensed neither despondency nor even impatience.

They bickered, laughed, wandered through the camp to visit one another, and smacked their children. Some were even selling dried fish and pressed mutton.

A boy was blowing on a clay whistle and two little girls were dancing, their arms around each other.

No one grumbled, worried, or asked too many questions. They accepted their present life as something quite normal.

I saw one woman in a torn dress made from silk—not long ago she must have been rich. She was showing her neighbors how she'd stretched a shawl over a rope. She was very pleased with herself. And if the shawl had been a quarter—yes, just one quarter—as long again (she demonstrated several times with her palm how much more materials she needed), then she could have completed their tent.

It's true, everything is relative. Her neighbor could not help feeling envy—she herself had only a garland of garlic with which to protect her home from vampires, disease, and prying eyes.



