AN ARMENIAN NAMED HITLER

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Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 21 April 2016

> *This is an abridged version of "DARJEELING" (Globe and Mail).*

When I looked down, I noticed the little girl had emptied the contents of her stomach into my lap. Her mother apologized, but her words were drowned in thunder. We were flying towards the Himalayas through monsoon skies.

The script was all wrong: it wasn't supposed to be this way. According to my neatly-typed itinerary, I was supposed to have completed my journey and departed India a full week before the monsoons. They hit India too soon: practically everywhere I went heavy rains had already drenched the countryside. "Sahib, you should have come last week; the weather was jolly good," was the line everywhere.

At Bagdogra airport, I met Chang, the Nepalese driver who was to take me to India's premier hill station, Darjeeling, fifty-six miles away. As I sank into his battered, made-in-Calcutta Ambassador, Chang explained that we couldn't take the main road through Kalimpong because bus drivers were on strike. A day earlier, some passengers had roughed up a bus driver. In protest, the handful of drivers who provided service on the treacherous mountain road between Bagdogra and Darjeeling had not only gone on strike but had also blocked major intersections.

"Udder road is longer. Four, five, maybe six hours to Darjeeling," Chang explained as we started to climb the winding narrow road through dark green tea estates. The car wheezed, coughed and rattled as we kept climbing. Blanketed in fog, the black sedan seemed airborne. The wind whistled through window crevices, the radiator made anthropomorphous sounds and Chang took blind corners as if we were on a flat country road. His hand stiff on the steering wheel, a hand-rolled cigarette in his mouth, he looked as expressive as a cigar-store Indian.

Through the fog, I glimpsed slogans painted on the slopes--DRIVE LIKE HELL AND THERE YOU ARE; BETTER LATE THAN NEVER; DRIVE IN PEACE, NOT IN PIECES; LIFE IS PRECIOUS, LET'S PRESERVE IT. I was glad Cool Hand Chang couldn't read these Chinese-cookie gems at hairpin bends. His only concession to safe driving was to honk at every curve.

When I woke up four hours later, we were parking in front of the Oberoi Mount Everest Hotel. I had missed Bari, Ponkhabari, Kurseong, Sonada, Ghoom and several other mist-swathed villages.

Chang said good night and reminded me that we were to leave for Tiger Hill observation point at 4 a.m. to watch sunrise over Mount Kanchenjunga. At 8,556 meters, it is the third highest peak in the world. Sunrise over its peak was supposed to be a spiritual experience, according to veteran travel writers.

Unpacked, refreshed and hungry, I was at the dining hall within 30 minutes. A middle-aged magician called Sunil De amused the Indian guests with card tricks and sleight of hand. He beamed with pride every time the overfed children applauded and their parents shouted "bravo."

I couldn't take the show. I wandered to the reception area. A middle-aged man, with a slim moustache and pitch-black hair was manning the desk. He was the manager. I asked him about the hotel's history. He said that it was built in 1914, and during British rule was the hub of Raj social life. I then asked for the name of the builder and the architect. He said that it was built by a Calcutta architect called Hitler.

I had become used to similar outlandish pieces of intelligence from Indian hotel and lodge managers. Another of his tribe had informed me a few days earlier that Indian scientists had discovered atomic energy 6,000 years ago but had decided not to proceed because it was a destructive force. Another had given me anti-diarrhoea pills which, I later discovered, had been banned by the Indian government because they caused blindness.

Since what the Darjeeling hotel manager had told me sounded unlikely, I asked him whether I could see newspaper or magazine article clippings from the hotel's archives. He said that he would check the archives and show me the file upon my return from the Tiger Hill trip next day.

I headed for my suite with its inviting fireplace, white Victorian furniture, flowers, heavy curtains, high ceilings, and a hot water bottle under the blanket.

As I was checking my next day's itinerary, the telephone rang and a male voice asked if I would care for a massage. "I will massage you in your room for 45 minutes. Only two dollars, Sahib."

I said: "Come on up." Half-way through the massage, I went to sleep and dreamed of mule-limbed Hindu gods walking all over me.

Another telephone call. "Good morning, sir. It's 3.30 a.m. sir. The driver is here for Tiger Hill, sir."

Tiger Hill is the first attraction most travel writers mention when they wax poetic about Darjeeling. It's a promontory (2,547 meters) from which tourists can view sunrise over the sacred Mount Kanchenjunga.

Although Tiger Hill is only six miles from Darjeeling, it took our Land-Rover twenty-five minutes to climb the rutted road to the peak.

It was freezing and pitch-dark, but the observation point is already crowded with expectant tourists wrapped in long shawls. As darkness slips away the onlookers gasp in expectation...sixty second passes but there is no sun. Thick cloud has blanketed the Himalayan peaks. It's a Turner sky in grey.

Some Indians start chanting hymns to coax the sun out of hiding. The sounds blow away in the wind. After twenty minutes of false expectations, the dejected crowd dispersed. An American lady teaching in Hyderabad quips: "They should have built Kanchenjunga closer to Darjeeling."

On the way back to the hotel, I noticed a shoe-less urchin standing at the edge of the milky abyss selling tea. All he had was a kettle and three soiled cups. Enveloped in darkness and mist, the boy seemed like a ghost. The sugarless tea was the best tea I had ever tasted: it was also the cheapest.

Back at the Oberoi, the manager was waiting for me in his office with a pile of old newspaper and magazine clippings spread on his desk. The second or third article mentioned the man who had built the hotel a year before the start of the First World War when the sun never set on the British Empire.

The builder was a Calcutta real estate baron who had come with his family to Darjeeling to flee the summer heat of India's biggest city. During British rule it was customary for the British sahibs and memsahibs to escape in palanquins, camels and mules to the serene and cool hill stations such as Darjeeling in the same manner many Beirutis flee in the summer the sweltering capital of Lebanon for mountain villages like Alei, Bikfaya, Dhoor Shwair and Khnchara.

The Calcutta mogul was the owner of that city's swanky Grand Hotel on the fashionable Chowringhee Road, in addition to the ritzy Stephen Court. Lord Kitchener of Khartoum was a frequent guest at his mansion.

The realtor had come to Calcutta at the age of 20 with barely a hundred rupees (2 pounds) in his pocket. He had apprenticed at a jeweller's shop for a hundred rupees a month and eventually became a prominent jeweller. He wore a monocle and had one of the world's best collections of china.

He had tried to find accommodation at the Windermere Hotel, the top hotel of the summer resort. He was refused accommodation ("British Only") because he was not Anglo-Saxon. He had tried several other hotels with the same result. To get even with British racism, the irate real estate baron had decided to build a hotel in Darjeeling: a hotel which would be bigger and more sumptuous than the ones which had refused to admit him. Within a year he had his hotel. The British sahibs and memsahibs soon made a bee-line to Mount Everest Hotel as Stephen's property became the new hot spot of the resort town.

The real estate kingpin's name was Aratoon (Haroutiun) Stephen. Born in 1880, he was Armenian, originally from New Julfa in Isfahan. Many Southeast Asian and Far East Armenians of the era changed their name to avoid discrimination. How in the hotel manager's insouciant mind Aratoon had transformed into Hitler was a mystery.

Darjeeling means the Place of Thunderbolt. Aratoon Stephen had given the British colonial high society a taste of the Armenian thunderbolt.