



Levin in a pomegranate garden



The Sacred Place of Shevlan

Imagine a very late autumn. The rainy season has come and gone and the weather is cold. Leaves on trees and bushes have turned yellow. At the station, roses and chrysanthemums are still blooming along with annual decorative plants. Pomegranates, late persimmons and olives have already been harvested. Porcupines certainly have partaken of pomegranates and found them to be to their liking.

Seven-and-a-half miles northeast of Garrigala, in the foothills of the Sunt Khasardag Ridge, there is also a little spring. There is an old *mazar* quite near to it. *Mazar* is a Central Asian name for a saint's grave over which a mausoleum has been built. This site was dedicated to Shivlan-baba *Mazar* who was a Sufi and Muslim philosopher, most probably alive in the seventh century A. D. The place was spelled "Sheblan" in the Soviet transcription.

Actually, it appeared that this devotional site had existed from an older, pre-Islamic time. I'm supported in this assumption by the stone lingam that was standing next to the *mazar*: The lingam was the phallic symbol used in the worship by Indian believers to represent the Hindu god Siva in his manifestation of virility, as a masculine source.

To get to the site, you took a road up several ridges that climbed higher and higher. The view that opened up onto the Sumbar River

POMEGRANATE ROADS

Valley was magnificent. In spring, everything was turning green. In autumn there were bright spots of blooming yellow *Sternbergia*. Higher up, you saw several terraces where pomegranates and grapes were still growing.

Sunt Mountain dominated the site of Shevlan. At sunset, the usually dark-colored slopes appeared almost black. The silence over the mountains was stunning. Growing under the canopy of *derzhi* trees, you would find many Turkmen mandrakes. Local alcoholics illegally dug out mandrake plants though the plants were protected by law. They sold them for lots of money because there was a folk belief about that rare and sacred plant's mighty power of virility and potency.

In Shevlan, I enjoyed the hospitality of the pilgrims who came with their families from all over Turkmenistan and stayed in special houses. I had sometimes to stay overnight and they gave me shelter so that I could wake early the next morning and start my ascent of Sunt Mountain at sunrise while it was still cool. Ascent to its summit, 1,760 meters above sea level, was steep and hard. I can attest to it. I climbed it when I was young.

The site became crowded during Muslim holy days and sometimes pilgrims stayed a long time. Men slaughtered sheep, women cooked pilaf, mullahs prayed. In recent years, many mullahs had appeared. At Shevlan, there was work for everybody.

The vision of the valley and the serenity of the scene evoked in me a feeling of the eternal. It always reminded me of Isaac Levitan's painting, "Above the Eternal Peace and Calm." I was an irreligious Soviet scientist looking at a Muslim site and feeling as I imagined Isaak Levitan, a Russian Jew, had felt a century earlier above the Orthodox Christian cemetery that had inspired his profoundly reverent painting.

Interesting populations of wild pomegranates grew on the southern rocky slope of Sunt Mountain not far from Shevlan. It was there that I found the smallest pomegranate bush I ever came upon. It wasn't more than six inches high. By some miracle it grew in a narrow crack of a rock. It apparently had no resources to become

larger, as the water that collected in the rock's cracked face did not suffice for it to grow to greater height. Of course I wanted to test my idea about why it was so small. I collected cuttings from that little bush. They rooted, and we planted the little plant on our special test site. But our eldest worker, Tore-Aga, had poor eyesight. He was digging on the site, did not notice it, and dug over our little plant just as it had begun doing well. What could you say to the lonely old laborer who had to do hard manual work to earn his bread in his advanced years? Alas, things like this happened more than once.