

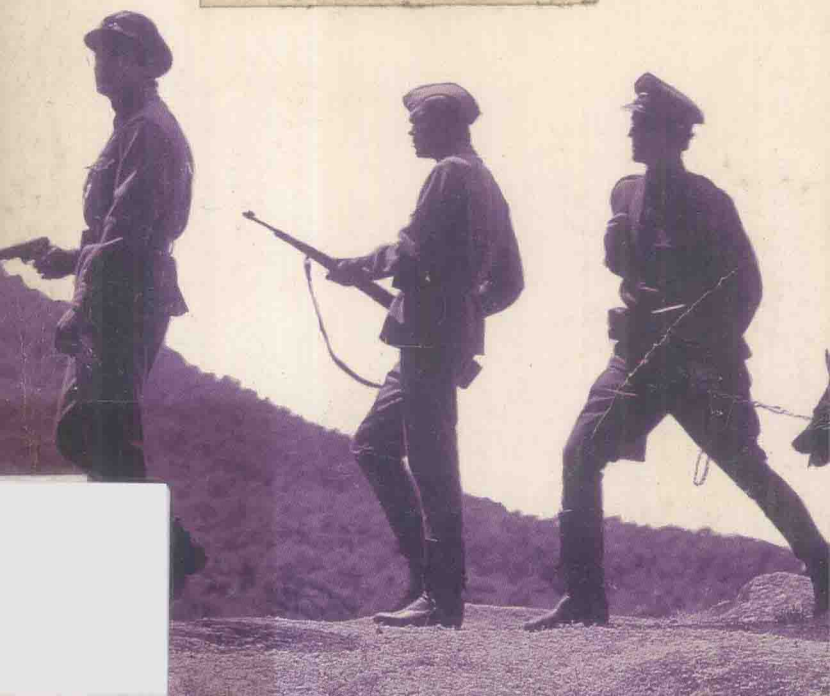
BEYOND



奇小说

THE  
MOUNTAINS  
ALEXANDER  
RAMATI

FILMED AS 'THE  
DESPERATE ONES'



Penguin Book 2557  
**Beyond the Mountains**

Alexander Ramati was born in 1921 in Brest Litovsk, Poland. He studied law and the theatre in Warsaw until the German occupation of Poland when he fled to Soviet Central Asia to join General Anders's Polish army, then forming in Russia. He subsequently served as a war correspondent during the Italian campaign. He then covered the war in Palestine for *Time* and *Life* before settling in Hollywood in 1951 with his actress wife, Didi. While in Rome he gained his LL.D. degree and in Los Angeles his M.A. in Theatre Arts.

After writing short stories in Polish – *Forest of Chwedkowice* (1944) – screen-plays in Russian and non-fiction in Italian – *The Silent Army* (1946) – Ramati discovered English, 'the best language for a writer to express himself'. In English he wrote novels *Rebel Against the Light* and *Beyond the Mountains*; a non-fiction work: *Israel Today*; a play: *Survival* and numerous screenplays. His books have been translated into many languages and *Beyond the Mountains*, based on his own experiences in Central Asia, was named Book of the Month by *Books and Bookmen*. In the last few years Ramati has turned to directing films, basing them on his own writings, and has just finished filming *Beyond the Mountains*.



Alexander Ramati

# Beyond the Mountains

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**for Didi**



The freight train from Tashkent to the border town of Ashkhabad had been waiting at the small station for two hours. Marek Sobel sat on the floor of one of the freight cars, watching the brown-faced, colourfully dressed natives, as with their brass pots and empty cans they lined up in front of the station's bubbling hot-water tap, keeping an anxious eye on the train. From the main platform, a small blue-uniformed station-master leaned out over the rails, peering into the distance for the long-delayed passenger train. Across the wall of the brick station building that reared up proudly in front of the mud huts dotting the barren desert, hung a long, linen poster, its hand-painted letters solemnly proclaiming that the railwaymen of Uzbekistan vowed to Comrade Kaganovich to run their trains on schedule. In one of the freight cars, three white-shirted Russian boys made loud jokes about the masculine uniform and red peaked cap of a pretty, round-faced girl conductor, standing on the tracks near by. The girl blushed and bit her lips, intently studying the horizon. Marek, one hand stretched protectively over two knapsacks, watched with amusement the boys' efforts to attract the girl's attention. Behind him in the car he could hear the sporadic exclamations of two Ukrainian boys playing cards, the staccato snoring of a chubby, uniformed Russian matron, the click of the white tea-bowls a Turkoman woman was extracting from a huge bundle with the help of her barefoot children. The air was thick with the sour smell of people who had not washed or changed their clothes for weeks.

Marek looked again at the crowd in front of the water fountain, trying to find his brother, who had gone for water half an hour ago, leaving him to guard their knapsacks. He wasn't there. Anxiously, Marek's eyes swept back and forth over the platform, searching for the tall, familiar, quilt-jacketed figure. A fierce-looking, bewhiskered Turkoman, in an enormous sheepskin hat,



climbed into his car, proudly carrying a full can of boiling water, welcomed by the appreciative whisper of his wife and the contented squeaks of his children. The girl conductor suddenly moved a step forward. In the distance Marek heard the sound of the approaching train. He jumped up quickly, his troubled eyes focused on the station-master walking to the bell. His hands clutched the straps of his knapsack, twisting them nervously. Uncontrollably, a muscle in his cheek began to pull. The bell rang and the crowd, like a scared flock of birds, scampered across the rails. Throwing empty cans and pots inside the cars, the people climbed in feverishly, one over another. The clatter of the running train grew louder, mixing with the shrill rattle of wheels changing rails. The girl conductor exhorted a few stragglers, waved her green flag to the engine-driver, and jumped up on the steps of the train. With despair Marek heard the station-master blow his whistle. The wheels were beginning to turn when he finally saw his brother hurrying to the platform from the station building. 'Victor!' he yelled. 'For God's sake, hurry!' Victor ran across the rails, a pouch and flask swinging from his shoulder. He reached the car easily and jumped in, waving away Marek's outstretched hand. 'Another second and you'd have been left here!'

'No, I wouldn't,' Victor answered confidently. 'I was keeping track from inside.' He wiped the sweat off his face with his sleeve. An amused smile appeared on his lips, as he watched the platform again filling with a new crowd of pot-and-pan-carrying people from the passenger train. 'Look what I've got.' He opened his pouch and pulled out a bunch of long, finger-like grapes.

'You're always so sure of yourself,' Marek said. 'What would I have done without you?' He rubbed his face nervously, as his anger and excitement grew with his words. 'If you do it again, I'm not going through with it, so help me God! I'm not going to risk losing you somewhere on our way.'

'Take it easy. Have some grapes.' Victor divided the fruit into two uneven parts and gave the larger portion to his brother. Marek shrugged and ignored the fruit. Victor happily reached for a cluster. Marek glanced at the grapes and plucked one, but Victor caught his arm. 'Wash them first.' He opened his flask and carefully poured a little hot water over each portion and then rubbed the fruit with his handkerchief.

A wan, self-pitying smile appeared in the corners of Marek's lips. 'I've almost forgotten how they taste.' As he slowly savoured the cool, tart flesh of the fruit, he looked at his brother's energetic profile, the sunburnt, angular, unshaven face, the full lips sucking grapes contentedly, the sharp blue eyes under the heavy brows watching a herd of thin-tailed karakul sheep. Victor looked like a carefree tourist enjoying a sight-seeing trip to Central Asia. It was hard to believe that he had just spent two years felling trees in a Siberian forced-labour camp. Marek thought of his own dry, pallid skin, bony cheeks, colourless lips and wary, shadowed eyes. He winced at the comparison, but consoled himself with the thought that Victor derived his self-assurance from his physical strength. He had never been ill in his life, nor even had a day's cold. If he only had his brother's health, Marek thought wishfully, he would be just like him.

The car was filled with the sucking sounds of the tea-drinking Turkoman family. The uniformed woman suddenly awoke and rubbed her eyes. 'We haven't passed Kagan, have we?'

'No,' a square-faced boy answered, his eyes glued on the cards in his hands. 'You've got plenty of time.' He threw a card on the floor. 'Forty!'

'Let's see the King,' his tow-headed opponent said.

'Don't you believe me?'

'Of course, but let's see the King.'

Marek glanced over his shoulder at the boys. 'Want to play sixty-six?' the Ukrainian asked, showing his opponent the King.

'I haven't the money.'

'Then you'd better watch the scenery.'

The Russian woman, completely awake by now, re-tied the scarlet kerchief under her chin, watching the shaven-headed Turkoman children, clad in long white robes, sitting cross-legged on a carpet. They were avidly drinking hot, green tea from bowls almost as big as their heads. The Turkoman beckoned hospitably. The woman nodded agreeably. 'But wash the bowl first,' she said. She accepted the tea, placed the bowl on the floor, unbuttoned her khaki Party jacket, unbuttoned her blouse, and digging deep, came up with a blue kerchief, full of sugar. She took out a single lump, re-tied the kerchief carefully and again hid it in her blouse. She licked the sugar and began to sip her tea loudly. 'My husband

is fighting Germans near Moscow. He got a Red Star medal a week ago, but they won't give me a place in a passenger train. I've got to ride in a freight car!' Her high, wheezy voice invited recognition of the railway officials' ungrateful behaviour.

'Shall we make some tea?' Victor asked his brother.

'No, not now. How can anyone drink tea when it's so hot?'

'Why are you going to Kagan?' one of the card players asked the Russian woman, his voice betraying no interest.

'I'm visiting my mother. She's sick. You know Kagan?'

'Yes.'

'My brother-in-law is a manager of the Party dining hall. On Pierwomajskaja Street. You know Pierwomajskaja Street?'

'Yes.'

'You know the Party dining hall?'

'No.' The boy threw his cards down. 'All aces and tens.'

The woman propped her bowl against her jutting bosom. She gave the boys a sharp, measuring look. 'Two healthy young men. Why aren't *you* in the army?'

'What are you – an NKVD officer? Looking for deserters?'

'Why should my husband fight and you – you have a good time playing cards?'

Marek chuckled, thinking of a ribald joke and opened his mouth to tell it, but Victor looked at him warningly and he snapped it shut again.

'Relax!' the tow-headed Ukrainian said. 'We've just been drafted into the Army and have to report in Kagan tomorrow. Satisfied?'

The woman grunted. 'I hope they'll send you to the front soon so you can share the privilege of defending our country.' Marek recalled the posters on the street walls of the Soviet cities, and the Sunday lectures in the labour camp, and the daily editorials of the Moscow *Pravda*. The woman finished her tea in one gulp and self-righteously put the bowl on the floor. In a moment she was asleep again, her head bent over the valise, her big bosom surging patriotically under her manly Party jacket.

Marek looked out of the car. The sky was not marred by a single cloud. A beturbaned Uzbek, with an upward-pointed beard, was swaying on a stately camel towards a lonely yurt. The train threw a long, racing shadow on the yellow sand dunes. Marek

saw Victor finish his grapes and only then realized that his own portion was bigger. 'Take these. You gave me more.'

'I don't want them.'

'Then let's save some for later. Put them into your pouch.'

'You'd better eat them. They're good for you. We'll get more in Kermine, don't worry.'

'Maybe we'll get chocolate there. I'd love just one piece of chocolate, or even a lump of sugar. Something sweet to keep in my mouth.' He went on slowly eating the grapes, watching the Turkoman woman who was wearing red pantaloons, a white caftan and a tall cylindrical hat, with a piece of heavy cloth at the back which fell in folds over her shoulders. Her husband's enormous feet brushed against Marek every time the train jolted.

Victor pulled out some tobacco wrapped in a piece of cloth, then he took out a shred of newspaper and tore out a square. He distributed a pinch of tobacco evenly along the centre of the paper, wrapped it carefully, licked the paper's edge and put the home-made cigarette to his lips.

'Want to smoke?'

'No.'

Victor struck a match, cupping it against the draught. 'We'll be there soon,' he said slowly. 'Remember, I do all the talking.'

'Yes.'

'We'll have to be very careful.'

'I know.'

'We'll have to sell my watch, but I'm sure we won't get as much money as we need.'

'I wish we didn't have to sell it. It's the only watch we have now.'

Victor smiled. 'We traded yours for garlic, remember?'

'I made the deal,' Marek said proudly. 'We got twenty heads. That was a lot, wasn't it?'

'Yes.' The wind blew Victor's dark blond hair over his face. He brushed it back with his fingers; his high forehead wrinkled in memories. 'It helped to cure your scurvy.' He glanced at his brother's right leg. Between the boot, the original red colouring of which had mostly been scuffed off, and the turn-up of his linen trousers was a reddish scar, conspicuous on the sockless leg.

Victor turned to his brother and patted his shoulder. 'That's all over with. Don't think about the camp. Forget it.'

Marek nodded, but his thoughts slipped back to the huge pin forest, its trees rarely green in the endless winter. He heard again the crisp, crunching steps of the prisoners marching to work in the violet dawn that broke through the peaceful starlit sky. He could almost smell the piercing frosty air spiced with the scents of snow, timber, and sweaty wadded jerkins. Marek shook his head as if reproaching himself, and glanced at Victor, guiltily. His brother was watching the Turkoman woman pull out some old clothes and wrap them carefully around the empty tea-bowls. The train's draught blew a musty, pungent scent into Marek's nostrils that made him think about the camp's hospital with its four naked wooden walls and people lying on sacks of straw, their open wounds filling the windowless room with an unbearably offensive stench. He saw the little, almost childish face of the hospital's nurse, Anushka, the only woman he had met in two years, bend over him, her cool hand touching his forehead, her gentle eyes focused on his face as if trying to read his thoughts. He remembered the sleepless nights filled with elaborate visions of making love to Anushka. He recalled the mornings when after restless expectation he would welcome her familiar thick black braids, her small compressed mouth and her wordless stare; and would finally feel happy, but at the same time miserably helpless, at the thought of his weakened body, of the crowd of people in the hospital, and of the barbed wire separating the camp from the barrack where Anushka lived.

A wan, nostalgic smile appeared on Marek's lips as his memories turned to the afternoon when, released from the camp, he came to say good-bye to the girl. Within the barren wooden walls of the hospital's corridor, he had stopped her. 'I'm leaving the camp,' he said. 'For good.'

She looked at him, 'I was told you're leaving,' she said. 'And I'm very happy for you. Very happy.' A slow gentle smile came upon her lips, she raised her hand and brushed his cheek delicately, then hurried away to her patients. As he heard the soft sliding noise of her felt boots, receding down the dimly lit corridor, he reproached himself for every time he had undressed her in his mind.

The train curved slightly and Marek saw the girl conductor

sitting in the next car with the three boys, all gay and friendly. One of the boys was playing a harmonica, and was particularly happy because the girl was holding his arm. Marek looked away, dried the sweat from his forehead and, leaning back against the frame of the entrance, closed his eyes. He didn't know why but suddenly he began to think about his mother. He could see her small and wrinkled face, as she sat on his bed, watching him picking up cherries from a bowl and drawing big letters in his exercise book by the yellow light of a kerosene lamp that had replaced candles in Brest Litovsk after the last war. His stout father was standing at the glazed tile stove, warming his huge hands and smiling at his son's uneasy efforts to master the art of writing. In the door Victor appeared in an Indian headdress. 'Hey you, you're not ill any more! Come on,' he called in a strident voice, that was just changing, 'let's play a man's game! Or would you rather stay tied to mother, eh, softy?'

Suddenly his brother's voice deepened. 'Don't fall asleep. We get off at the next station. We ought to be there soon.'

'I'm not sleeping. I'm thinking.'

'You're always thinking. What is it this time?'

'Oh, our parents, the camp, a girl, lots of things.'

'What girl?'

Marek grinned sadly. 'I haven't kissed one in two years.'

'Neither have I. But that's fine, think about girls. Don't think about camp or about our parents. It doesn't help. It only makes you soft. I told myself when we left home that I'd never think about Mother and Father. So if I catch myself thinking about them, I immediately force my mind on to something else.'

'I can't change my thoughts at will.'

'When you start thinking about home, switch to remembering a girl you once made love to. It's a very good method. You'll see how it helps.'

'That's not easy either.'

'It's easier. At least it doesn't hurt.'

'That's what you think.' Marek opened his eyes. 'I wonder how a girl's kiss tastes after all this time?'

Victor smiled. 'About the same, I imagine.' He raised his head a little and said warningly. 'Don't you get into any trouble. We can't afford to.'

‘Don’t worry.’

‘If you meet a girl, just make love to her. Don’t get attached and sentimental.’

Marek nodded in annoyance. ‘I’m not as soft as you think.’

On the horizon he saw five camels in a single line. As the train drew closer, the figures of the riders grew more distinct. He recognized the white uniforms and peaked hats with the red star in the centre. ‘The desert police,’ Victor said slowly. ‘Watching the borders.’ The two brothers exchanged glances.

The camel patrol halted and the policemen saluted the train. An uneven chorus of voices greeted them in response. The policemen grinned, waited till the train passed by, then resumed their routine desert inspection.

‘Marek,’ Victor touched his brother’s arm, his voice low and guarded. ‘Never mention the camp. Never say we were in it.’

‘No.’

‘Always pretend we’re Russians.’ Marek nodded in agreement. ‘And never talk Polish in public.’

‘We’re talking Polish now.’

‘Here it doesn’t matter. We’re getting off soon and we will never see these people again. But in Kermine we must only speak Russian.’ He shifted closer to Marek. ‘Remember, we moved south because you needed sun and better food. You know, fruit and fresh vegetables – vitamins.’

‘I know.’

‘We must avoid suspicion. We’ll mix with the villagers just like anyone else.’ Marek nodded. ‘Of course it’s different if the police stop us. Then we can’t lie. If we do and they find out, we’re sunk.’

The train began to slow down and suddenly a second line of rails appeared. ‘I think we’re coming to the station.’ Victor turned to the Ukrainians behind him. ‘What’s the next stop?’

‘Kermine,’ the blond boy said. ‘There’s plenty of time before we get to Kagan. Want to play?’

‘They don’t have any money,’ his partner said. ‘Your move.’

‘We’re getting out at Kermine.’

The shifting rails squealed under the car’s floor. The Turkoman’s feet were drumming against Marek’s hip and he drew away. The Russian woman woke up. ‘Is it Kagan?’ she asked in alarm, peering out at the telegraph poles.

The square-faced boy cursed under his breath. 'Relax, Comrade. You've got plenty of time.'

Marek held his long, gaunt hands limply on his knees. He watched the procession of telegraph poles in front of him, his thoughts far away, in the comfortable compartment of a Polish train, with his brother, himself and their parents the only occupants. It was ten years ago and they were going to the seaside for their summer vacation, the only one their father, a municipal bookkeeper, could ever afford.

'Get ready,' Victor said. 'We're here.' The train switched rails again, rolled past a semaphore, a traffic control booth, and a few white-washed buildings. A station-master waited on the main platform, signalling the train to halt with the wig-wag of his raised hand. The wheels squeaked, the cars jerked and stopped abruptly. 'Come,' Victor said. They hung their knapsacks over their shoulders. 'Good-bye,' Victor waved to their fellow travellers.

The Turkoman saluted good-naturedly, raising his hand to his fur cap. The Russian matron bowed slightly. 'Make some money,' the blond Ukrainian called, 'so the next time we meet, we can have a game.'

## 2

They crossed the rails, cautiously, looking right and left, stopping for a moment to let a locomotive adorned with the portrait of Kaganovich go by. They passed a crowd of people lining up at the hot-water tap and passed the brick building plastered with the same poster that they had seen at the previous station.

The waiting room was small and overcrowded. A few Russians dozed on wooden benches, Uzbek peasants bivouacked on their carpets on the stone floor. On one side there was a closed ticket window, flanked by a pair of low, narrow doors, a cock painted on one, a hen on the other. The air was heavy with the smell of human sweat and unattended lavatories. In the exit a bulky NKVD man in uniform scrutinized the faces of the new arrivals. 'Go straight ahead,' Victor whispered, and they eased out quickly, mixing with a group of freight-train passengers. They heard the



NKVD man's imperious voice halting an Uzbek for a routine check of his bundle in search of unrationed food.

In front of the station were several camel-drawn arbas with their two-yard-long axles and man-high wooden wheels, loaded with huge cotton bales. Barefoot Uzbek workers, in long, canvas blouses and colourful woven skull-caps carried the bales of cotton from the arbas into the train, grunting and groaning as they eased their burdens.

The small town lying before them looked as if it hadn't changed since Tamerlane's rule five hundred years ago, except for a red banner arched across two wooden poles urging the proletarians of all countries to unite. Its buildings were huts made of loam mixed with straw, chaff and the urine of camels, roofed with mud and reeds, patted into shape by human hands and baked by the sun's heat. As Marek and Victor walked along the narrow winding pathway which ran at the side of the earthen road, through clouds of dust whipped up by the iron wheels of arbas and the horses' hooves, the rhythmical sound of the men working at the station floated off in the distance.

A large square on their right opened on a mosque with a pagoda-like dome and long, wooden Mongolian pillars. Marek stopped, shifted his knapsack to the other shoulder and caught a glimpse of mechanics repairing a tractor in front of a wall with scenes in mosaic from the Koran. Over the open gate of the mosque was a sign identifying the place as the Kermine Tractor Repair Base No. 2.

'Come on,' Victor said over his shoulder. 'It's getting late.'

Marek caught up with his brother and they walked quickly past groups of people queuing up in front of shops; an unopened news-stand, a shop selling scissors, its windows decorated with empty tins and bottles, and a bakery filling the air with the fine smell of freshly baked bread. In front of the bakery stood a line of Uzbek women, robed in wide, striped, cloak-like paranjas with floating sleeves, wearing skull-caps on their much braided hair. Enviously they looked at the people hurrying out of the shop with bread, frightened that the supply might not last. Marek's eyes followed a little girl victoriously carrying the brown, disc-shaped loaf. 'I'm hungry,' he said.

'We must see Ulug Beg first. We'll eat later,' Victor critically