VINTAGE

THE RAILWAY

HAMID ISMAILOV

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About the Book

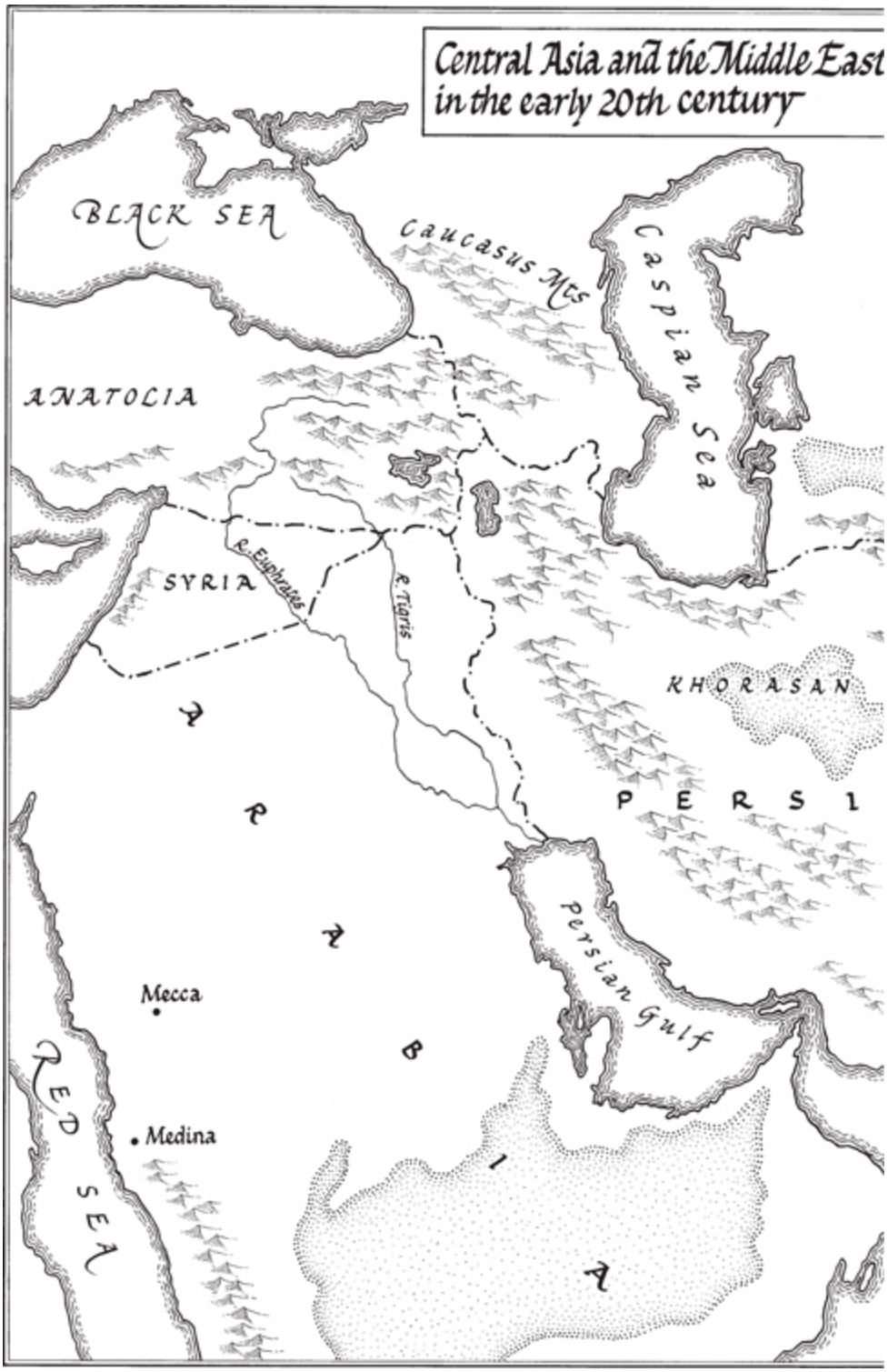
Set mainly in Uzbekistan between 1900 and 1980, *The Railway* introduces to us the inhabitants of the small town of Gilas on the ancient Silk Route. Among those whose stories we hear are Mefody-Jurisprudence, the town's alcoholic intellectual; Father Ioann, a Russian priest; Kara-Musayev the Younger, the chief of police; and Umarali-Moneybags, the old moneylender. Their colourful lives offer a unique and comic picture of a little-known land populated by outgoing Mullahs, incoming Bolsheviks, and a plethora of Uzbeks, Russians, Persians, Jews, Koreans, Tatars and Gypsies.

At the heart of both the town and the novel stands the railway station – a source of income and influence, and a connection to the greater world beyond the town. Rich and picaresque, *The Railway* chronicles the dramatic changes felt throughout Central Asia in the early twentieth century.

About the Author

Hamid Ismailov was born in Kirghizstan in 1954. He has lived in Tashkent, Moscow, Paris, Bamberg and London, where he is now Head of the BBC Central Asian Services. He was originally forced to leave Uzbekistan because of his writings and his works are still banned there. This is the first time his work has been translated into English but his most recent novel, *Comrade Islam*, is currently being translated.

Robert Chandler has translated the poetry of Sappho and Guillaume Apollinaire and is the translator of, amongst others, Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate* and Aleksandr Pushkin's *Dubrovsky* and *The Captain's Daughter*. Together with his wife, Elizabeth, and other colleagues he has co-translated numerous works by Andrey Platonov, two of which, *Soul* and *Happy Moscow*, were shortlisted for the Weidenfeld European Translation Prize.


Central Asia and the Middle East
in the early 20th century
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Caucasus Mts
Caspian Sea
ANATOLIA
SYRIA
R. Euphrates
R. Tigris
KHORASAN
PERSIA
Persian Gulf
Mecca
Medina
RED SEA
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MONGOLIA
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Samarkand
Kokand
TAKLAMAKAN
Bukhara
Kashgar
CHINA
PAMIRS
Mazari-Sharif
Herat
AFGHANISTAN
INDIA
R. Indus
ARABIAN SEA
Zailisky Mts
Pishpek
Merke
Balasagun
L. Issyk-Kul
Gilas
R. Naryn
Tashkent
Andizhan
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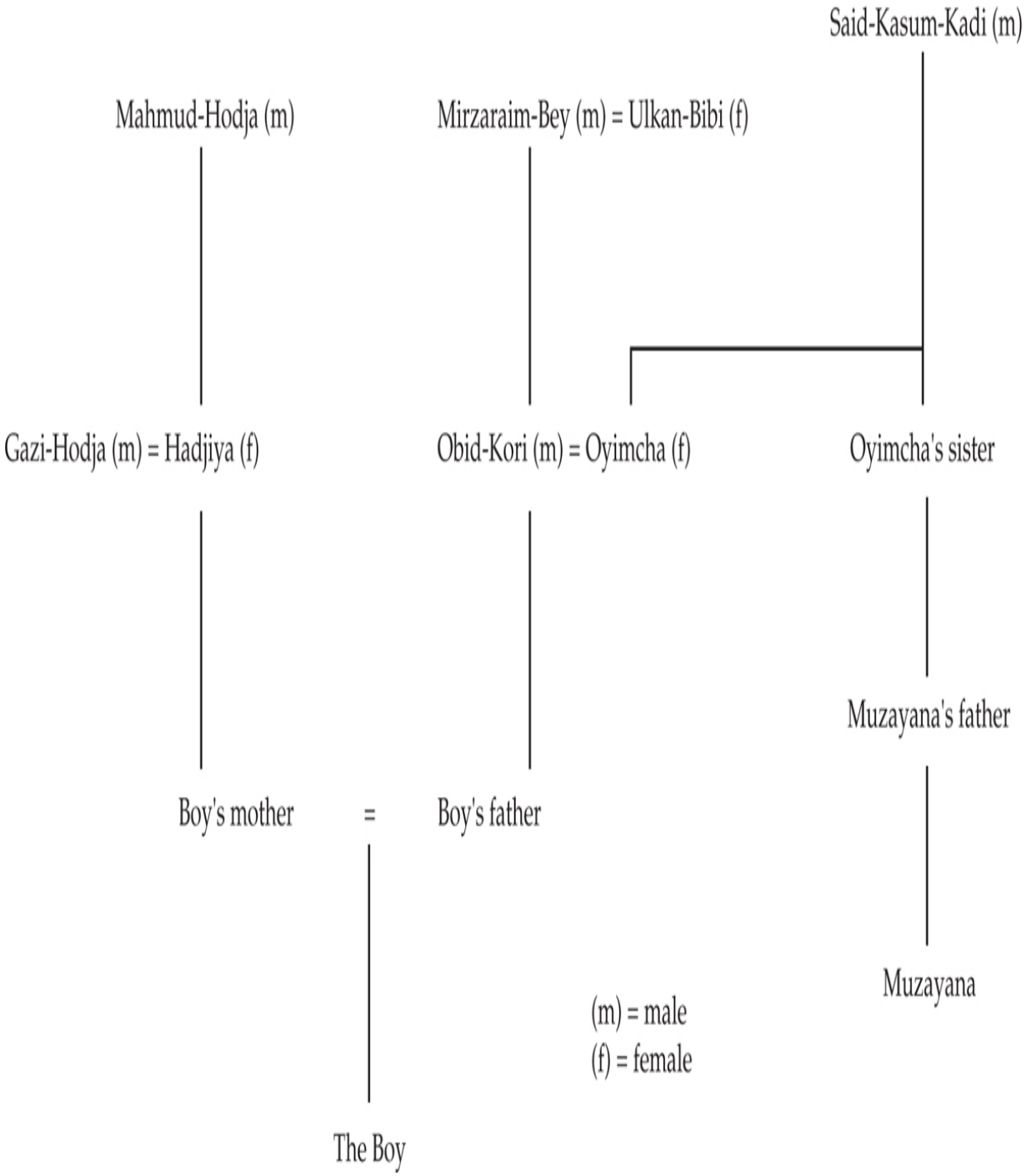
THE BOY’S FAMILY



HAMID ISMAILOV

The Railway

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN AND
WITH A PREFACE BY
Robert Chandler

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Preface

I first met Hamid Ismailov after a lecture at the Pushkin Club in west London. A colleague was talking to me about his experience of reading Andrey Platonov, a writer I have spent many years translating. As I listened, I realised that two other people, a man and a young woman, were listening no less intently. We introduced ourselves. The woman was Rosa Kudabaeva, a BBC journalist with whom I was later to travel to Uzbekistan. The man was Hamid Ismailov, who also worked for the BBC – as well as being a poet and novelist who wrote in both Uzbek and Russian. Hamid said that Andrey Platonov was one of his favourite writers; he had wanted to translate him into Uzbek but had found this impossible. He also said that many years before, after first reading *Soul*, Platonov's novel set in Central Asia, he had felt so depressed that he fell ill. This had not been because the novel was itself depressing but because Platonov seemed to have said all there was to say about Central Asia. Nothing was left – Hamid had felt at the time – for him to say himself.

A few weeks after this first meeting, Hamid and his wife Razia came to supper with me and my wife Elizabeth. It was a June evening, we ate and drank in our small walled garden, and it was as if they had brought something of Uzbekistan with them. Hamid told stories about his grandparents and great-grandparents, while Razia raised her eyebrows in mock-scepticism. I myself was captivated – both by the exotic quality of the stories and by their strange familiarity. Hamid and I evidently had much in common. His maternal grandfather, who was shot long

before Hamid was born, had been a mullah; my maternal grandfather, who died of cancer a year before I was born, had been a canon at Salisbury Cathedral. Both of our families had owned land. Hamid's family had lost theirs because of the 1917 Revolution; we too had lost our estates, though as a result of high death duties rather than of violent revolution. And both Hamid and I were living lives very different from those of our parents and grandparents. We both wrote and translated; we both loved Platonov.

In 1997, a year or two after these first meetings, Hamid gave me a copy of the first Russian edition of *The Railway* – a charmingly produced volume with a picture of a little train at the bottom of each page: a locomotive, one coach and one goods wagon, the page number printed in white in the middle of the goods wagon. He said that he had also tried to publish *The Railway* in Tashkent, in the main Russian-language literary journal, but that the Uzbek authorities had fired the editor and blocked publication of the issue containing the second half of the book. Hamid's generally sceptical attitude towards authority had, it seemed, alarmed a government that takes itself very seriously indeed. The Uzbek translation of *The Railway*, completed in 1997, remains unpublished to this day.

I soon realised that – for all his anxiety after first reading *Soul* – Hamid had found his own voice and his own subject matter. I translated three chapters of *The Railway* and began looking for a publisher. I am grateful now that this proved difficult, and that I had the chance to learn more about Central Asia before returning to the novel. Most important of all, it was around this time that I was commissioned to translate *Soul* – and Hamid and Razia were among many people I turned to when I had questions. Hamid helped me with regard to the work's religious and philosophical aspects; Razia, a musicologist, helped me to understand Platonov's treatment of song and music – an

important theme of both *Soul* and *The Railway.* And then, shortly before *Soul* was published, Hamid – who was by then Head of the BBC Central Asia Service – phoned to suggest I visit Uzbekistan; he wanted me to travel, together with Rosa Kudabaeva, to the area where *Soul* is set and to make a series of programmes to be broadcast in Russian by the Central Asia Service.

What has stayed with me from my two weeks in Uzbekistan is a sense of the age and sophistication of Central Asian culture. I sensed these qualities vividly in the Shah-e-Zindah in Samarkand, a steep narrow street which – unlike the city's over-restored grander monuments – embodies both the continuity of tradition and the continuity between art and nature. All twenty-two of the modest buildings, built in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, are mausoleums for the city's rulers. Walking round behind them, I found blades of grass growing from cracks in the walls; the street is sunken, so poppies and yarrow flowers in the fields beyond were at eye level. Perhaps half of the mosaic and majolica tilework has disappeared from the façades and even from the inside walls, but what remains is astonishingly fine. Beyond the shrines, which are still regularly visited by groups of Sufi pilgrims, stretches a whole series of cemeteries: Muslim, Jewish, Korean Christian and Soviet. The Koreans, I learned, had mostly entered the Soviet Union during the Second World War, to escape the Japanese; Stalin had sent them to Uzbekistan. As for the Sufi pilgrims, they seemed tolerant and welcoming, glad if I joined in the gestures they made as they prayed but accepting me anyway.

I sensed this age and sophistication no less vividly in the Friday Mosque in the silk-road city of Khiva. This was built in the eighteenth century, but many of the carved black-elm columns supporting the flat roof were taken from a tenth-century mosque nearby; one column, worn by time and

silky to the touch, looked as if it had evolved from tree to work of art and back again to tree. I was oddly pleased to learn that the columns' silkiness came from their being treated for five years with chicken dung before being worked. There was clearly no substitute for natural processes and the work of time; impatient Soviet restorers, unwilling to wait five years, had replaced missing columns with new columns that felt painfully rough.

In the old centre of Bukhara I talked to a blacksmith by the name of Sharif Kamalov; like most educated adults in Central Asia, he spoke Russian and we were able to understand one another easily. Despite the decline in tourism since 11 September 2001, his business was clearly successful. He had a line in scissors made to look like birds; when closed, they resembled the profile of a cock, or a stork, or a pelican. He began by speaking enthusiastically about the freedom he had enjoyed since Uzbekistan became independent. He could make what he wanted, and he had travelled to blacksmiths' congresses in England, France, Germany and Pakistan. When I asked about his life under the Soviet regime, his tone changed. All he had done, he said sadly, was to turn out three different kinds of agricultural implement; he felt particularly sad about his father, whose whole life had been lived under the Soviet regime.

After a while, I ventured a few words in Farsi – a language I had been studying for only a few years. Although Stalin chose to incorporate them into Uzbekistan, Samarkand and Bukhara are really Persian cities; the first language of most of the inhabitants is Tadjik, essentially the same language as Farsi. Kamalov was delighted by my stumbling attempt to speak his mother tongue – and still more delighted when I said I was learning it in order to read the poetry of Hafez. He began to recite one of Hafez's most beautiful ghazals; I happened to have been studying this very ghazal only two weeks before, and so I was able to

join in with him. We were both moved by this unexpected discovery of another, seemingly deeper, shared language. And I was astonished at how quickly we had moved back in time. Beneath the enterprising businessman was a dissatisfied Soviet worker, and beneath that – a man familiar with a tradition of mystical-erotic poetry going back seven or eight centuries.

The Railway is as multi-layered as the cemetery of Shah-e-Zindah or the cultural inheritance of Sharif Kamalov. There are several different narrators, and it is an open and tolerant novel that has room for crude sexual jokes and sophisticated multilingual puns, for allusions to Soviet political slogans, Sufi philosophers and to Claude Lévi-Strauss; it is this linguistic breadth, this variety of perspective, that enables Hamid to give a truthful account of the history and politics of twentieth-century Central Asia without slipping into mere polemic. Such complexity, however, is not easy to translate; I could not have unravelled the sometimes baroque syntax and deftly interwoven stories without Hamid's help. There were many points that I found bewildering, many references to details of everyday life – or matters of philosophical or political controversy – with which I was unfamiliar. In one chapter, for example, somebody comes 'under salty fire' from a nightwatchman; I had all kinds of ideas about what this might mean, but it never entered my head that the nightwatchman was simply firing pellets of salt. It was, Hamid explained, common practice for guards and nightwatchmen at collective farms or small factories to be issued with an air rifle and salt bullets – to wound but not kill.

More often, however, the answers to my questions were more complex than I had expected. Near the beginning of the circumcision chapter, for example, Hamid writes that the boy didn't want to leave the house and lose his

imeninost', his 'name-day specialness'. I asked Hamid whether it really was the boy's name day – or perhaps birthday – or whether the phrase was being used more loosely, to mean the sense of importance one feels at any time that one is the centre of attention. Hamid's answer was that the term 'name-day' was, in effect, a code word. Circumcision, though widely practised, was the object of official disapproval; the boy would have heard his parents inviting friends and neighbours not to his circumcision party but to his 'name-day party' … There were scenes I did not understand because I did not know enough about Muslim life, scenes I did not understand because I did not know enough about Soviet life, and scenes – like the above – where I was confused by the complexity of the interface between the two.

Towards the end of my work on the novel I began to feel as if I were restoring a precious carpet. Patterns I had sensed only vaguely, as if looking at the underside of a carpet, began to stand out clearly; seemingly unimportant details in one chapter, I realised, reappeared as central themes of other chapters. Colours grew brighter as I sensed their inter-relationship. Occasionally I even felt able to suggest to Hamid that a particular thread should be moved from one part of the carpet to another.

The world of *The Railway* – like that of Andrey Platonov's work – contains a large number of orphans. Hamid has said to me many times that there is nothing in *The Railway* that is not based on reality, and there is certainly nothing exaggerated about this emphasis on the theme of orphanhood; throughout the twentieth century a huge number of children in all the Soviet republics were brought up in orphanages. Many lost their fathers during the First World War and the Civil War. Others were orphaned during Stalin's purges; still others in the course of the Second World War. During the first decades after the Revolution

there was a sense, encouraged by Soviet children's literature, that orphanhood was the ideal state; an orphan's father was Stalin, his or her grandfather was Lenin, and there was no rival father whose influence might corrupt.[1]

The world of *The Railway* and the world of Andrey Platonov are also both home to a surprising number of cripples. *The Railway* even contains a chapter about a false messiah who encourages his followers to mutilate themselves, proclaiming that only the limbless can enter paradise. I asked Hamid what had inspired this. After saying that he had indeed witnessed a short-lived cult of this nature, Hamid talked about the Soviet faith in what was known as dialectical materialism or *diamat*; he thought that, in truly dialectical fashion, this faith masked its opposite: a profound contempt for the material, for the earth and for the human body. Not all of the many amputees – he went on – had been injured in the Second World War; many were the victims of industrial accidents, often caused by alcohol abuse and a disregard for safety precautions.

The Railway and *Soul* – though not Platonov's other stories and novels – have at least one other shared feature; they are among the surprisingly few Soviet novels that engage with one of the favourite concepts of Soviet propaganda: 'the brotherhood of nations'. Platonov describes the *Dzhan*, the heroes of *Soul*, as 'a small nomadic nation, drawn from different peoples and wandering about in poverty. The nation included Turkmen, Karakalpaks, a few Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Persians, Kurds, Baluchis, and people who had forgotten who they were.' As for Gilas, the small town where most of *The Railway* is set, its inhabitants include Armenians, Chechens, Germans, Jews, Koreans, Kurds, Persians, Russians, Tatars, Ukrainians, a variety of smaller nationalities from Siberia, the Arctic and the Caucasus – and, of course, representatives of all the main nationalities of Central Asia.

Gilas is a Noah's Ark of humanity – and a microcosm of the Soviet Union. Once again, there is nothing fictitious about this emphasis; for several decades after the Second World War, Tashkent was a thriving and cosmopolitan city. Some of its inhabitants had freely chosen to make their home in Central Asia; others had been exiled or deported there.

The path that has brought most of these people to Gilas is, of course, the 'iron road' (the standard Russian term for a railway) that provides the novel with its title. Hamid's iron road, however, is not only an actual railway but also a symbol that brings together the novel's Soviet and Sufi themes. To a group of pilgrims returning from Mecca not long before the 1917 Revolution, this twentieth-century equivalent of the silk route is 'a never-ending ladder whose wooden rungs and iron rails lay stretched across the earth from horizon to horizon'. To Obid-Kori, the mullah who is imprisoned in the 1930s and then taken off in a goods wagon to be shot, the two rails and the sleepers that bind them together are like a seemingly infinite extension of the iron grating of his prison window. To a young woman born in exile, the railway is an inexorable force that 'warps the earth and its people, twisting lives out of shape'. To Gogolushko the ex-Party functionary and failed mystic the railway is a spiritual path that has gone rigid and that has led him nowhere; it is covered in shit from the toilets of passing trains.

A particularly striking chapter evokes the nomadic Turkic tribespeople who were press-ganged, during the last decades of the Tsarist regime, into building the first railway to Central Asia. At the cost of their lives they struggle to assert the vertical dimension of spiritual belief, repeatedly tearing up small sections of track and transforming them into the ladders the souls of their dead need in order to climb up to heaven. The novel's most truly redemptive moment, however, occurs in one of the chapters about the character known simply as 'the boy'. Angry and depressed

after running away from home, the boy wants ‘to get his own back’ on a train that has startled him as he stands dreamily beside the line; in the event, however, he surprises himself by throwing a kiss and calling ‘I love you’ to an unknown girl standing by the door of one of the carriages. The boy is still free; he is the only character whose identity has not been fixed by a name; and it is his gradual initiation into the adult world that constitutes the heart of the novel. His unexpected ‘I love you’ is central to this process of initiation; his simple and spontaneous words transform a Soviet iron road – the unyielding way of linear thinking and material progress – into a Sufi path of Love.

If the boy can also be thought of as a passenger on this train, then the self-contained anecdotes that constitute many of the chapters can be imagined as scenes glimpsed by the boy – and the reader – in the course of a long journey. As Hamid wrote in a letter to me, ‘each individual story is like a station flashing by. Some of the stories disappear without trace, others wander from chapter to chapter; sometimes the reader can get down from the train, look at people’s faces, hear words, take something away in his memory.’ And if the individual chapters are scenes glimpsed by the boy, stories heard by the boy, it is possible that it may be the boy himself who has written them down.

The general tone of *The Railway* is exuberant, even if this exuberance sometimes seems to mask a pain so deep that the narrator cannot allow himself to dwell on it for long. There is an exuberant humour in most of the individual stories, and there is an exuberance in the way that the stories multiply; one story, or even just the beginning of a story, quickly generates another. Many sentences seem so full of energy that they are reluctant to settle down and come to a full stop. The wordplay is dense; its unruliness exemplifies an important theme of the novel, that words – whether they are the words of magic charms or of

Communist slogans – are endowed with an autonomous power. We read how Granny Hadjiya writes an Arabic charm on a scrap of paper, wraps a bit of cloth round it and hangs it from a tree in a cemetery; similar magic charms then terrify a group of schoolboys. We read of people who collect stories, people who collect manuscripts, a man who collects slogans, a man who collects words …

I soon understood that an adequate translation of *The Railway* must recreate this exuberance – even, if necessary, at the expense of literal meaning. There is often an element of paradox in the work of a translator; I have never before had to work so hard to understand the literal meaning of the original text – and I have never before allowed myself to depart from the literal meaning so often and so freely. Not every pun in the original is translatable, and I have omitted jokes that needed too much explanation; I have compensated, I hope, by gratefully accepting any appropriate pun that English offered. Sometimes these puns seemed to arise without any effort on my part; it would have been hard, for example, for an English translator to avoid a pun (a pun not present in the original) in the passage where the sight of Nasim's huge 'male member' makes Khaira 'remember' facts about her life that she had forgotten for decades. And it would have required a restraint out of keeping with the spirit of the novel to have refrained from adding the words 'trans-oxianic' to a sentence about a couple from the USA who are about to travel to a part of Central Asia once known in English as Trans-Oxiana:[2] 'And so the young couple set off on their trans-oceanic – and even trans-oxianic – ravels.' The words between the dashes are my addition, approved by Hamid.

Sometimes, however, even when wordplay seemed to arise of its own accord, it took many revisions before a passage felt right. The last sentence of the following passage did not come easily: 'Trying to forget Froska behind a veil of words, ex-Master-Railwayman Belkov

succeeded in forgetting everything except her act of betrayal; losing his whole life to oblivion, he struggled to recapture it in a web of words. But his webs and veils were in vain; his verbal virtuosity was to no avail.' 'Veil', 'avail' and 'in vain' are all literal and obvious translations, but it took me a long time to find a way of taking advantage of the sound pattern they create; at first its insistence seemed not to buttress the meaning but to distract from it.

There were many other comic moments that came to life only after patient but determined coaxing; humour, of course, tends to be what gets lost most easily in translation. We speak of jokes being 'barbed' or 'pointed', and jokes do indeed have something in common with darts or arrows. If a joke is to survive the journey into another language, if it is to hit the mark even when its cultural context can no longer be taken for granted, its point may need to be adjusted or somehow re-sharpened. A sentence about Bolta-Lightning the town electrician sounded irritatingly plodding even after several revisions. It was only after Liz suggested replacing the literal 'explained to' by the wittier 'explained over the heads of' that the English version began to seem as funny as the original: 'Bolta-Lightning climbed the column in the middle of the square, hung the banner on the loudspeaker and explained over the heads of the entire backward bazaar both the progressive meaning of the slogan and the precise time the proletariat was to unite.'

Just as puns sometimes seemed to appear of their own accord, so did instances of alliteration; once we had hit on the phrase 'gloom-dogged Gogolushko', we soon found that this unfortunate Party functionary (a caricature of Nikolay Gogol) was 'struggling doggedly' on one page and 'gazing glumly at every bit of garbage' on another. And on one occasion I went home from a meeting with Hamid and noticed that the letters 'f' and 'l' occurred surprisingly often in the notes I had made while he explained a

particular passage. The alliteration seemed in keeping with the tone required, and so I expanded a shorter original into the sentence ‘Something inside him really did seem to break off and fall – fulfilled or perhaps full of failure – to the ground’; almost every word here is Hamid’s, but not all of them are in his original text.

There were occasions when I incorporated oral explanations in the text of the translation. Once, merely as an aside to me, Hamid said ‘enough money to buy two Volga cars’ while we were discussing some other aspect of a sentence about two fantastically rich Chechens. I at once asked if I could include these words. The English version of the sentence now reads, ‘and they had once bought ten thousand roubles’ worth of goatskin coats and astrakhan hats in a day – enough money to buy two Volga cars or for Granny to live on for the rest of her life and still leave something behind.’

Curses and swearwords present a particular problem for translators into contemporary English. Our lexicon of abusive language is oddly limited, and the more florid curses still common in Russian tend to sound laughable if translated at all literally. Reluctantly, I have simplified much of the foul language. In one chapter I have tried to compensate for this impoverishment by adding my own brief evocation of the essence of Russian *mat* or foul language: ‘those monstrous, magnificent, multi-layered and multi-storied variations on pricks and cunts and mother-fucking curs’.

Many people hold oddly absolute views about translation. Some see translators as unsung heroes; others see them as inveterate traitors. Some believe that translators should concern themselves only with literal meaning; others believe that nothing matters very much except tone and readability. My own view is that translation is an art, and that no art can have absolute and universal rules. Every

book, every stanza or paragraph, every phrase may have its unique requirements.

The Railway reminds me in some ways of a jazz improvisation or the paintings of Paul Klee. Hamid keeps to a delicate balance between imposing order on words and staying open to suggestions from them, between telling a clear story and allowing words to dance their own dance. In translating the novel, I have tried to observe a similar balance – both to be attentive to precise shades of meaning and to listen out for unexpected ways in which English might be able to reproduce the music of the original. Fidelity, after all, is never simply a mechanical matter. To stay faithful to people or things you love, there are times when you need to draw on all your resources of creativity and imagination. If I appear to have taken liberties with the original, it has been in the hope of being faithful to it at a deeper level. I have never – I hope – simplified anything of cultural importance. The character known as Mullah-Ulmas-Greeneyes, for example, is not really a mullah; 'Mullah' is a nickname, given to him by people around him because it alliterates with 'Ulmas'. One reader suggested I omit this 'Mullah', arguing that English readers are not used to Muslims using religious terms so light-heartedly and would find the word confusing. This had the effect of bringing home to me how important it was to keep the 'Mullah'. The Muslim world has never been monolithic; Central Asia has nearly always been religiously liberal – with Sufis having the upper hand over dogmatists – and during the Soviet period secularism made considerable inroads. Even believers tended not to take their religion over-seriously.

The same wish not to simplify has also led me to include over 150 endnotes. Soviet Central Asia is an alien world to a modern Anglophone reader, perhaps no less alien than the Spain of Cervantes. We take it for granted that there will be notes in a new edition of *Don Quixote*; it is my view

that notes are no less necessary in a translation of *The Railway*. This short novel can be read as an encyclopaedia of Central Asian life. Its pages are doors into many realms; I will be glad if my notes make these doors easier to open.

Robert Chandler
September 2005

[1] There is a Soviet joke: a teacher asks children in his class what they want to be when they grow up. First child: 'Russia is my mother; Lenin is my father; I want to be an engineer.' Second child: 'Russia is my mother; Lenin is my father; I want to be a nurse.' Third child: 'Russia is my mother; Lenin is my father; I want to be an army officer.' Fourth child: 'Russia is my mother; Lenin is my father; I want to be an orphan.' Orphanages remain important in much of the former Soviet Union even today; often parents take their children there because they feel unable to support them. During my trip to Uzbekistan in 2003, the director of an orphanage told me that the number of children in her care had doubled during the preceding five years.

[2] i.e. the land beyond the Oxus – the Latin name for the great river now known as the Amu-Darya.

Instead of an Epigraph

O Lord! And you created so perfect a miracle! The elder looked out of the corner of his eye towards where the boy sat bent over the Book, and once again strangely uncontrollable feelings began to run wild in his pure and polished heart. It can happen that, in the middle of intense prayer, the thought of prayer can imperceptibly take the place of prayer and only by prayer itself, only by lifting your voice into a chant and listening to its sound, can this thought be driven out; but the elder (may the Almighty forgive me!) was not granted even this release, although he appeared to have attained not just a momentary illumination – the lot of those who are still struggling – but the light that is even and uninterrupted. I repent a thousand times, O Lord, but the elder was not granted even this release … He had long ago left behind our kingdom of dreams and mirages, but now his thought, although he suspected it sprang from delusion, was quivering like a moth between the Creator and his Creation (forgive us sinners, O Lord!) and once again his pale face turned towards the boy reading the Book.

After offering three hundred prayers of repentance, the old man put aside his now warm prayer beads and absolved himself, leaving everything in the hands of Allah. 'A question is the path from the end to the beginning, and doubt, too, is the journey back,' he repeated to himself. In his heart and mind he knew all this – but it made no difference. 'Am I longing, in this extreme of disobedience, for childhood – am I longing again for its unbeaten track?'

he thought sorrowfully. 'Has my flesh risen up at its last breath, untamed and untameable?'

The boy had been brought to him seven days before by Mirza Humayun Ardasher; he was on his way to Balkh, where there had been an uprising. 'Amid the sea of vanity and impenitence, you are a pillar of our inviolate faith,' Ardasher had said to the elder. 'The boy has no mother and he knows the taste of bitterness – he will value every minute of peace and obedience under your supervision. Only if he can live here in your sacred dwelling, far from the world's vice and lechery, have I the right to hope. And so may my boy hold firmly to the skirts of your gown and follow you along the straight path of righteousness.'

The elder remembered the warrior's words. Ardasher had found it difficult not to place the boy in front of him on the saddle and take him to Balkh, into dusty and sandy whirlwinds, into a world of battles and wanderings – and the elder had admired the father's act of renunciation. Amid his spirit's settled peace the elder had not resisted a contrary movement of his soul that had been barely perceptible – and now he was ceaselessly repenting before the Supreme One, who had evidently chosen to test him one more never-ending time. But He was free, free to do as He chose.

He stole one more glance at the boy reading the Book – and the boy, as if sensing the gathering weight of the elder's silent gaze, raised his eyes. His eyelashes were like a dark shadow, and this shadow lifted the boy's black clear eyes to meet the eyes of the surprised and embarrassed elder. The elder was no longer used to direct looks from young eyes – his disciples always looked down as they answered him – but the boy's gaze had nothing of the disciple about it, and the elder sensed this clearly in his confused soul. Used as they were now to the even light of the Book, the boy's eyes seemed to linger – as if within

them still lingered something of the Book's even and unstoppable light – and the elder's soul, his sinful soul, was tormented in the boy's presence, like a moth that doesn't know what to do with the light.

On the seventh day, when the boy had learned one thirtieth part of the Book, the elder broke with age-old rules and astonished the whole hanaqa[1] by declaring a chella, a forty-day fast. What is more, he declared this fast not for the hanaqa as a whole but for the boy alone, thus exciting long and fruitless self-doubt in the hearts of his disciples and even a certain envy towards a boy judged worthy of initiation after so very short a period of preparation.

Only in the chellakhona did no candle burn that night. The chellakhona was given over to nature – although it was protected by a labyrinth of underground walls reflected against which the light of night endlessly mirrored its own reflections. There was no place like it, no other place where thought returns to itself and blood imbued with thought polishes the imperfect heart.

After the midnight prayer the boy, whom the Teacher was leading along the path of perfection of the spirit, tried to master the pillars of the formally simple Ikhlas Surah, about the One and Only who neither begetteth nor is begotten, and there is none like unto Him.[2] The first thousand repetitions remained on the boy's tongue, not peeling away from the flesh; then a handful of raisins sent out sweet shoots between the dry, cracked words, and the Teacher told him that they were in the wilderness where the path begins.

Candles burned behind candles; a moth that had got lost in these underground depths, perhaps having been enticed into them by the smell of raisins – a moth that seemed to value its own life, sensing perhaps that there was little other life in this many-layered and resonant emptiness,

kept beating against the light reflected off the stone ceiling, and only on the ninth day did it exhaust itself, fall and burn up in the flame. And even this eternal image, which had always imbued the elder with resolve, at first evoked in him only confusion and panic. Sensing hesitation in the measured rustle of the Teacher's lips, the boy suddenly turned round – and the elder's tired eyelids shook off the dust of countless prayers.

The elder at that moment got the better of his desires; he had long known that the Path is only the Path in so far as – whether you have set out on it intentionally or by chance – you accept that you are doomed to allowing yourself to be led by the Path, even to be used by the Path. Submission to the inevitability of this truth had always brought him peace; now, however, no effort of will could eclipse his sense that the Path is not what begins with the first day of the anxiety that is left behind and yet still pierces your spine, nor is it what people consider achievement – not even the fortieth day that glimmers ahead of you and that you anticipate as early as the nineteenth day. No, the elder now understood that the Path was the distance dividing him from the boy – two sideways steps between two kneeling figures, two short steps that must never be taken.

On the twenty-seventh day the boy was seized by a fever. Even Hafez Safautdin Sheikh, as he came silently to them that morning with warm water for their ablutions and to take away the pots with their rare excretions, now devoid of all smell – even Hafez Safautdin Sheikh noticed that the stone shelf in the wall was less cold than usual. The boy was shaking, and at first the elder thought that he had reached the Valley of Terrors that is governed by djinns; the elder was frightened, however, by a strange sense that he himself was not so much leading as being led, and so he hurried in spirit into the midst of these terrors and hallucinations, where djinns dance like tongues of fire,

where every dance ends in copulation, where demons like newborn babies slip inside you and use your face as a mask, taking over your body to give free rein to their corrupt natures. With a superhuman effort of will the old man formed out of tongues of fire the single word 'Allah', like a spell, like a talisman, like salvation for both him and the boy, and when the fires died down, quivering their last unruly little tongues, the old man saw that the boy was not whispering a prayer glorifying the name of the Benevolent and Merciful One, but calling to his mother, whose name he did not even know because it was so long since she had died. Sweat was streaming off the boy, mingling below his damp turban with cloudy tears … 'What makes a child's tears so cloudy?' the old man wondered in bewilderment; it was, after all, the thirtieth day, and by this time all the functions of our frail bodies usually become pure and insensible, while the body, the body itself, begins to shine with a pale light … From where, from what unreachable depths, were these cloudy drops drawn?

Lack of sleep and the demands of the fast had turned the old man's soul into a tangle of strings – yes, he could not shake off this sense that his soul was a tangle of strings that had become knotted together yet were somehow still able to sound; every movement of the boy's inner being echoed long and resonantly in this tangle, but for the first time in many years of enlightenment the elder was bewildered, unable to understand what the sounds meant.

The boy regained full consciousness only after a week.

After the midnight prayer, the old man was laying the boy down on his felt mat and, having covered him with a prayer rug, was wiping his burning face with the end of his own fine turban. Why had he not, at the first sign of weakness, sent the boy back up above? No, even before that, why had he led this young and frail soul underground? Why had he

set him on this long path of loneliness and renunciation? What pride had made him lead a child along a path that belongs to Allah alone?

Face to face with these questions, the old man hid for a long time behind a shield of prayers, but not even they could revive his exhausted spirit; the never-ending prayers, which had lost all meaning, were now tearing his soul to shreds …

On the fortieth day the boy opened his eyes at dawn. The old man knew it was dawn from the gentle touch of a breeze on his back. There was a flicker of light, reflected through the labyrinth of stone walls. A faint scent of henna from the beard of the hunchbacked Abu-al-Malik, whose turn it must have been to bring them their water and the usual handful of dried raisins and ground nuts, carried into their solitude a memory of the life that goes on outside.

And the boy opened his eyes.

1

Every summer the chaikhana was moved outside and set up beneath the huge silver poplars that the railway had headed for when, fifty years before, it had first made its way to Gilas. It had been the same during the year the Fascists invaded; the five low wooden platforms were set up beneath the poplars. There were fewer and fewer people, however, to sit on them; the previous tea-drinkers had gone to the Front, and a new Gilas had yet to emerge from the influx of evacuees and the wounded. Really there was only Umarali-Moneybags, whose insatiable greed had led him to be pronounced fit for prison, where he had gained another three stone before the War, but had also made him so fat that he had been pronounced unfit to fight; and Tolib-Butcher, who, as if to spite Umarali, was so thin that he had been entrusted – on the grounds that he could hardly be keeping anything back for himself – with the allocation of the occasional meat rations, although the half-blind Boikush slanderously questioned how on earth Tolib could feed others when he was unable to feed himself; and then there was Kuchkar-Cheka,[3] whom Oppok-Lovely had once struck so hard that he had gone deaf in one ear. As a result he had had to found his career on making the other ear work overtime.

These three would sit down at dawn on three separate platforms so that no one could think they were conspiring together; each would put a black pellet of opium under his tongue, close his swollen eyelids and greet either the dawn or his dreams, or else the 7.12 train – Gilas's counterpart to the SovietNewsBureau bulletin.