



Tatar settlers returning from Central Asia build a house near Yalta, a city which is inhabited mostly by Russians and Ukrainians

Photograph: Maria Kolonayets

Tatars return to land of their ancestors

ACCORDING to Crimean Tatar legend, the hill near Yalta is a bear waiting faithfully by the sea for its drowned mistress. Faced with similar odds, Tatars exiled en masse to Central Asia by Stalin in 1944 for alleged collaboration with the Nazis are now streaming back to this hill and their homeland in Crimea.

Asan Chapukh is one of 120,000 energetic Tatars in Crimea claiming land to build houses. But his eyes dull momentarily as he tells how his small group of 70 settlers was set upon by Russians from Yalta last autumn. They tried to force the Tatars off the tobacco fields where they had already laid earth-and-cement foundations for more than 20 houses.

"We built a fence around our settlement and poured petrol over it. We were afraid they would attack us; there have been many instances like this already and we told them if they tried again that we would set fire to ourselves," said Mr Chapukh.

Only half the Tatar community survived Stalin's 10-day deportation journey in cattle wagons 47 years ago. Until 1967 Tatars were denied citizenship and unauthorised travel was punished with forced labour in

Susan Viets in Simferopol meets Crimean Tatars who have come home from exile imposed on their nation by Stalin 47 years ago

the Gulag. Encouraged by *perestroika*, one-fifth of the 500,000 Soviet Tatars have returned to Crimea in the past three years alone.

In a tidy office overlooking the Crimean capital of Simferopol, a member of the organisation, Vladimir Gyrkovich, explained: "All of us had a relative who died in World War II, so when they say the Tatars helped the Germans, that's already enough to make our blood boil... The Tatars say this is our homeland; we'll create our own government and then we'll solve your problems — which of course causes a negative reaction from Russians and Ukrainians."

"If the Soviet government does not draw up a realistic programme to help the Crimean Tatars to resolve the land issue and harmonise relations between the nationalities, then soon there will be a national conflict," said Mr Gyrkovich.

Mustafa Jenileyev, imprisoned for 20 years for anti-Soviet activity, heads the Cri-

mean Tatar National Movement. His goal is to restore a Tatar national government. Even with repatriation well under way, however, post-war demographic changes in the recently proclaimed Crimean Autonomous Republic have reduced the Tatars to five per cent of Crimea's 2.5 million predominantly Russian population.

Crimean laws, stresses Mr Jenileyev, also discriminate against the Tatars. The population of Tatars in any electoral district cannot exceed 20 per cent and none of the 146 deputies in the parliament is a Tatar.

Tatars cannot legally settle without an official *propiska*, or registration, from the city council. The 15-member Tatar Committee, crammed into a tiny office at the city council, has so far only managed to win registration for two of the 16 settlements.

One, Kamenkaya, is located on the outskirts of Simferopol. There, 20 men are spending the winter together underground in an earth dug-out while they build houses

for their families. Eventually they will create a separate Tatar village, complete with a school, temple and shops.

Along the road connecting Simferopol with Yalta, Lilia Budzherova, a Tatar schoolteacher who left behind a comfortable two-storey house in Uzbekistan to return home to Crimea, points out the old Tatar villages. "After the deportation they moved Russians into our houses. They never compensated us. Now we can only look at them," she said.

A coach station near Yalta now stands over a Tatar graveyard dating back to the 15th century, when the Tatars broke away from the Mongols to form the Crimean Khanate. Mr Chapukh said: "The Russians don't understand that for us the homeland is where our ancestors lived. We haven't been assimilated but we have been russified. The children have lost the language." Two weeks ago a bulldozer arrived from Yalta to try to knock down houses in his settlement. Mr Chapukh and his friends blocked its path. Eventually it left and the settlers carried on building. Soon, they say, all the Tatars from central Asia will be back home.