

A woman with dark hair, wearing a black top, is shown in profile from the chest up. She is carrying a large, heavy, light-colored sack on her back, which is secured with ropes. Her head is bowed, and she has a somber, weary expression. The background is a blurred, outdoor setting with a light-colored ground and some sparse vegetation.

A heavy burden

**Internally Displaced
in Georgia:**

Stories of People from
Abkhazia and South Ossetia

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in Georgia**

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and South Ossetia**

Acknowledgements

The completion of life stories, which culminates in the publication of this book, would not have been possible without the participation of many people, in particular, the displaced people who opened their hearts and told their stories. We are profoundly grateful to them. Without them this book and the whole IDP Voices project presented at the web site www.idpvoices.org would not exist. We also would like to thank the non-governmental organisations involved in this project for offering human resources and facilitating contacts with a large number of the narrators.

Finally the project was made possible by the contributions of many other people committed to the displaced population in Georgia, including Abkhazia and South Ossetia. We would especially like to thank:

- Local NGOs involved: "Atinati", IDP women's association "Consent", IDP Teachers' Union "Lampari".
- Manana Gabashvili
- Margaret Vikki
- Siobhan Warrington
- Keren Ghitis
- Greta Zeender
- Matthias Thiemig
- All NRC Georgia country office staff

Special thanks to our donors for their support in this project, which made the publication of this book possible: Statoil/Hydro (via NRC Georgia) and (via IDMC) Australia's AusAID, Canada's DFAIT, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway and South Africa, Sweden's Sida, Switzerland's MFA, Stichting Vluchteling, the United Kingdom's DFID, and UNHCR.

ISBN: 978-9941-9021-1-6

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The photographs that appear in this book are not the interviewees.

Photograph front cover:
Heidi Bradner, Panos Picture

A Georgian woman hauls a bag of belongings over the Abkhazia-Georgia administrative border, via a footbridge over the Inguri River, after fleeing an outbreak of fighting between Georgian partisans and Abkhaz forces in the Galsky region.

Photographs back cover and page 22 (bottom, right), 84, 85, 104:
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Photographs page 20, 24 (bottom left), 40, 41, 48, 49, 72, 73, 90, 91:
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Photograph page 24 (top right):
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Photographs page 23 (top right), 24 (bottom right), 96, 97, 108, 109:
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PROLOGUE

When did you last listen to a displaced person and grasp the impact of displacement? Did you ever think what it means to lose close family members in conflict, lose all your belongings and to be uprooted from your place of origin? This book invites you to explore the personal reality of a protracted displacement situation. Thirteen individual accounts from Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia give us an insight into the reality of conflict and displacement. These direct voices have the power to cut through prejudice and political agendas, they speak for themselves.

The focus is on universal human experiences and responses, not specific political issues. By reading what the displaced people themselves want to tell us, we may learn what is important to them and what issues they are particularly concerned about. The process of collecting these stories, whereby trained interviewers allowed the displaced individuals to direct the course of the narrative, allowed unexpected facts and ideas to emerge. It allows us to glean the reality behind generalised notions of displacement. The stories stand alone with little analysis added – their power lies in their offering of images, a voice, sensations, feelings, hopes and dreams. The stories gathered in these pages complement more factual and analytical data from sources other than the IDPs themselves.

This book has been developed jointly by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC); Norwegian Refugee Council in Georgia and Panos London's Oral Testimony Programme, and is part of the larger endeavour to capture IDP voices worldwide. You can also listen to and read these and more stories from the IDP Voices project at the website www.idpvoices.org.

The life stories were collected by 12 interviewers selected from different communities affected by

conflict and forcible displacement. They all had a good knowledge of displacement, either through their work or through first-hand experience. The project gave them the opportunity to develop oral testimony skills, to collect life stories and also to contribute in planning and compiling the stories.

A total of 59 interviews were completed, 29 of which were selected and edited for the website and 13 for this book. Through participatory training workshops on oral testimony, the participants learned to carry out open interviews, to listen, and to handle sensitive information. They were also trained to manage the psychological impact on the narrator and themselves. The interviewers helped to identify themes for the interviews and develop ethical guidelines and appropriate security policies. Two review meetings enabled the interviewers to give feedback on their experience and adapt the focus, carry out initial analysis of the life stories, develop ideas for dissemination, and identify advocacy targets. Through this project the voices of the displaced, who are normally not listened to, have been heard, recorded on tape, transcribed word by word, read by a reading committee, selected and then carefully edited in order not to change the atmosphere and personal flavour (see Selecting and editing the testimonies).

To be involved in an IDP Voices project is an empowering process and makes people change. For the individuals involved, the interviewers and the narrators, the experience of undertaking a life story interview can be invaluable. For people who were not being heard, having the space to tell their story in the way they want to tell it and sharing their thoughts with an interviewer who has themselves experienced internal displacement, was often a delicate and significant experience.

This collection of stories reveals issues that go beyond typical displacement and protection needs and touches on values, issues of identity, feelings and emotions.

Most narrators said they felt relieved, or even happy and privileged, to be able to tell their life story to an attentive and sensitive listener; however some acknowledged that it was also difficult to recount painful experiences. Some narrators stated that they didn't talk much to other people about these deep experiences due to their fear and mistrust, and so they considered this opportunity to be heard of great value. One interviewer stated "*I can understand their pain because I am an IDP myself*". A climate of trust was created and a space in which people could share their experiences without any worries about security or discrimination.

Security issues are still a real concern, particularly in the conflict zones, and as a consequence the narrator's real identities have been protected and pseudonyms have been used. Even some interviewers preferred to appear under pseudonyms as their involvement in this project may put their lives at risk. Two of them decided to avoid visibility even under a false name.

The title of this book *A heavy burden* comes from the great weight of the war traumas that most narrators reveal. After years of displacement, narrators still need to share with the world their losses and their continuing grief that they could not carry out traditional mourning ceremonies and processes. How can you come to terms with your loss if your loved ones cannot be buried next to their ancestors on their own land as tradition requires? It is evidently necessary to address this concern to help people move on with their lives. Unsolved problems of displacement may also cause instability and threaten

peace building efforts. But in these stories we do not only meet sorrows, we meet also strong women and men who have found their own coping mechanisms and strategies to enable them move forward.

In this project, the involvement of IDPs is clearly crucial. As one of the narrators stated regarding her relations with the other side, "*Only after talking about our own tragedies did we truly learn about each other... It took time to trust each other. It was when we believed that we understood each other's pain, when this moment came, that we could sit down and talk openly - without aggression, without accusations*" (Thea). Creating spaces for dialogue between the people concerned is of utmost importance in the process of healing wounds. For the sake of the displaced people themselves, and to give lasting peace every chance, it is essential that their experiences and concerns are recognised by others, addressed appropriately and taken into consideration by both the national and international communities.

It is our hope that that this book will be widely circulated and used by governments, regional organisations, the UN and other international agencies, NGOs, civil society actors, researchers, students and, last but not least, IDPs themselves, to give them a deeper understanding of the main concerns of the 245,000 or more displaced people in Georgia. Their voices need to be heard.

How much shall they bear before national and international communities responsible for their future are prepared to move the agenda forward and ensure that real durable solutions are found?

ANNE-SOPHIE LOIS

*Director of the IDP Voices Project
Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC)*

TEAM OF INTERVIEWERS

RITA MARGANIA

Teacher, 48 years old, displaced from Sukhumi, Abkhazia

“I have three daughters. My family lives in a collective centre for IDPs in Tbilisi. My brother and parents are still living in Abkhazia. I work as a trainer for the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). The most important thing was the opportunity to interact with displaced people who have faced the same problems as me. It is interesting to hear how they view the problem and what kind of solutions they found. In this process we had the chance to help people express themselves about sorrows which they had, we helped them to look at their lives from different perspectives, to reflect upon things and to go further without giving up. Apart from the interview situation, it was a pleasure to note that some people wanted to keep interacting and share some other things from their lives, just for the sake of sharing. I gained a lot from this work and I also gave a lot”.

LEVAN ARKHANIA

Economist, 23 years old, displaced from Sukhumi, Abkhazia

“I live with my mother in Tbilisi. I have been working as a volunteer with a non-governmental organization, the IDP Women’s Association “Consent”. I trained as an economist and now I work at a bank. I always find it very interesting and important to interact with displaced people and to share their pain. Maybe this is due to the fact that I can understand their pain, as I am an IDP myself. I have gained a lot of experience from this project. I even couldn’t imagine that I could learn so many things. I have learned how to enter into dialogue with people. I thought that I knew that, but apparently it was not enough. The human being is constantly learning; until the end of our lives”.

TAMRIKO (pseudonym)

Lawyer, 47 years old, lives in South Ossetia

“I work for an NGO in Tskhinvali town. I am proud that I was selected to take part in this project in South Ossetia. The project influenced me in many ways: I got to know people of different ages, who are sensitive, supportive, smart and humorous; I met and got acquainted with my narrators and now I feel I am living their lives. Their stories come to me in my dreams. This project has helped me a lot in my work as a lawyer. I have become kinder and more sympathetic.

I remember a narrator saying: ‘My father before his death planted trees in all gardens in the neighborhood. Thus he is remembered now by all these people.’ I asked myself: ‘What have you done?’ So I gathered all my friends together and suggested we meet the mayor and encourage him to start renovating housing blocks, the roof, then entrances, then facades. We told him that his task would be just to offer his good will and provide us with construction materials. Everything else – labour, management and supply – would be our task. I had only one condition that groups of workers should be mixed, that Ossetians, Georgians, Armenians and others should work together. Today this idea is being implemented. This is how the IDP Voices project has influenced me”.

IRAKLI TABAGUA

Student, 24 years old, displaced from Gali, Abkhazia

"I live in Zugdidi at the collective centre. I studied international relations, and I have worked as a trainer within the Peer Education project at NRC. It was very clear for me after taking part in this project that I am not only someone who remembers our difficult past, and worries about the present, but also someone who has hopes for a bright future. Looking at displaced people, I have told myself several times that the human being is made of the strongest stuff on earth, but needs the most help. It was hard for me to start an interview and then to make the transcript, but the rest went more smoothly. The great pleasure was always to see the sign of hope in the eyes of the narrator while they were telling their story."

KHATUNA GADELIA

NGO worker, 34 years old. Living in Zugdidi

"I work in Zugdidi at the Atinati Association NGO, and I have worked for NRC as a trainer. This project has been extremely interesting for me, but it was not easy to make people speak about themselves or to listen to them. This project helped me to gain these magic skills. I had the chance to meet five IDPs. One was telling her story with pride, the other one was crying, the third one was describing the experience of sorrow, the fourth one was smiling. For me, I felt that it was very important that I could assist somebody, listen and make them feel relieved. I am happy because there are five people in my life who trusted in me, and spoke about topics with me that they almost never ever disclosed to any one. All of them became a part of my life, and their stories have become my friends. Isn't it a mysterious feeling? "

TEAH GOGIA

NRC trainer, 30 years old, displaced from Gali

"I live in Poti with my father at a collective centre. I am now an NRC trainer. The project is very important for the participants, for the organisers, the narrators and for everybody in general who cares about people. It is very important when you tell a person that his life and his emotions are interesting to someone else. Initially we see a surprised face, but as soon as they are convinced that this is true they speak about their lives with great pleasure. They feel that they are not alone and feel empathy. This project reveals the very important and hidden, invisible parts of the conflict. When I was listening to the stories of these people I went through the conflict once again. I had an impression that the narrators and their stories became an integral part of my life. This project made me more generous, patient and tolerant. After interviews the narrators had a sense of satisfaction, they could feel their importance and it was a pleasure to be linked with this."

NATIA (pseudonym)

Unemployed, 29 years old, returnee to Gali district

"I live in Gali district with my grandmother. I have graduated in Gali, I was trained as a lawyer in Kutaisi, now I am unemployed. I didn't think that it would be so meaningful for me to take part in this project. After completing the workshop in oral testimony methodology I was amazed, but at the same time afraid of using the tape recorder in the conflict zone, as it could imply risk for me as well as for people close to me. One lady said, 'Please don't use this equipment and I will tell you whatever you want.' So I had to listen to the stories without being able to record them. Listening to the stories was very difficult for me, because I passed through almost the same during the conflict. The feelings, emotions and tears accompanying

these stories were not new for me, but it was very difficult to recall them all. I was experiencing everything from the very beginning together with my narrator.

It was very important that people were willing to talk about their hardships in their lives. However, all of them were optimistic and had trust in the future. I was also surprised that people had overcome such great tragedies and so many, but still didn't differentiate between people on the basis of their nationalities. This gives me great hope".

GEORGE (pseudonym)

19 years old, returnee to Gali district

"I have returned to Gali district and live there with my family. I like to study. I have had the opportunity to interact with IDPs during the project. I gained a lot of impressions about them, their lives. I also received a lot of new information, and I learned to get to know new friends. I haven't experienced difficulties so far, but it will probably be very hard that the group will not meet up anymore. The relationship was easy and pleasant between the group of project participants. I have gained great experience and I have heard about new things, which makes me very happy."

NANA SABANADZE

43 years old, displaced from South Ossetia

"I work for the department of refugees and accommodation of Shida Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti region. I am a member of the Society of Tskhinvali NGO. For me what was important with this project was that a person with displacement experience was able to think about their own life and evaluate it with the help of the storytelling, but it was difficult to work with children. I thought that children are open and they don't have anything to hide, but I was wrong. They had much more to say about displacement than the conflict, but it was difficult for me to ask about collective centres and living conditions. I was thinking that if they have never thought about it, why should I bother them with my questions? I didn't want to hurt them. Another child was from a mixed Georgian-Ossetian family, and I couldn't ask questions about it, he said that he was a Georgian, and that's it. I thought it was easy to talk with adolescents, but in fact it was not."

VAKHTANG KHUTSISHVILI,

Journalist, 37 years old, lives in Gori region

"I am a journalist at the local newspaper "People's Newspaper" and also a history teacher at the secondary school. Taking part in the life story project was my first experience of cooperating with NRC. During the workshop and meetings the most important thing for me was to ensure that all materials we had gathered or issues that we had discussed could be used for the project. After the project ended I realized that I had changed my attitude towards displacement and conflict, it was one of the most significant impressions which I've taken from it. I talked with people and saw that ordinary people are dreaming about peaceful life together. The narrators recall with great pleasure the positive things from the 'opposite' side."

SELECTING AND EDITING THE TESTIMONIES

With such a wealth of material, choosing which narrators' stories to include, and selecting and editing the 'right' extracts from those interviews, was a complex process. Those involved had to achieve a balance of different experiences of conflict and displacement. The aim was to choose material that best reflected the variety of those experiences, and conveyed them effectively to outside audiences. The following is a brief description of a many-layered process which has drawn on different skills, perspectives and backgrounds.

First, a master list for all the testimonies was created. The interview team provided the following information: the main characteristics of each narrator, such as sex, age and family status, the language of interview, and narrator's location before and after displacement. The master list also included notes on the main themes of each testimony, contributed by the interviewers after reading their interviews.

A reading committee was then created; its seven members were selected from NRC projects and included both IDPs and locals to make the selection process as comprehensive as possible. The committee was asked to bear in mind the following criteria when making their selection, in order to keep a balance of issues and experience: living conditions and locations, different focuses on conflict and displacement, the impact of conflict and displacement on an individual's life, war-related episodes, return 'home' and related issues, life after displacement, livelihoods, stigma, integration, health and education. It was also very important to ensure that the selection represented a diversity of age, gender and ethnicity. After each member had made an initial selection, a panel discussion took place in which members justified their personal choices. Eventually, out of 59 tape-recorded interviews, 29 testimonies were selected for the website and 13 for publication.

The next stage was to edit the chosen interviews, a process which followed established IDMC/PANOS editorial guidelines. As the language issue was fundamental, two editors were selected to work in parallel on Georgian and Russian testimonies. In addition, all testimonies that had been recorded in Megrelian were translated into Georgian as they were transcribed by the interviewers. While both editors were highly experienced, it was their first time working on transcripts of the spoken word, a process that is not always as straightforward as editing written text. The guidelines provided suggestions and advice on: how to choose the most interesting and relevant material, bearing in mind the criteria already outlined; how to identify locally or culturally specific words, names, and historical events related to conflict, to be defined in a glossary; how to break up the text and 'signpost' content by adding sub-heads, often using short quotes from the text; and, above all, the importance of respecting the flavour of the original testimony as far as possible, and retaining the subjective viewpoint of the narrator. The primary aim in making any editorial changes was clarity¹. There were regular joint meetings between the editors and the project coordinator in Tbilisi to guide and reflect upon the process. Support and advice was also provided on a regular basis from the director of the Life Story Project at IDMC. At the same time, the team was compiling a detailed glossary.

The next stage was for all the interview edits to be translated into English, Russian and Georgian languages. The English language versions were then sent to Panos, where Olivia Bennett and Wendy Davies worked on them. Their tasks were to improve the fluency and accuracy of the translations, make sure that all cultural, political, geographical and historical references were clear, and generally ensure consistency of definitions, format and style. The

translators had rightly tried to stay as close to the original content as possible, but as they were not native English speakers, the language sometimes lacked the flavour and spirit of spoken English; some interviews had also been through two stages of translation (Megrelian to Georgian to English) thus increasing the risk of ambiguity. The edits were also dense with locally specific references, and each story took place against a background of complex political and ethnic conflict.

The first editorial team, Tamar Tavartkiladze (project coordinator in Tbilisi), Beata Skwarska from IDMC and the Life Story director had identified and tried to resolve many areas of ambiguity or confusion. Working from their comments and the detailed glossary, and doing some detective work of their own, the Panos team gradually worked through the 29 interviews, improving the language, accuracy and fluency of these powerful stories.

“We hope the final results speak for themselves. These interviews were challenging – the four languages involved, the complex political background and the endless enforced movement between so many locations made some accounts hard to follow at first. But as we immersed ourselves in the material we learned so much about conflicts that are cruelly under-reported, and how they have changed - and often blighted - so many lives, that it became a real privilege to help these compelling stories reach a wide audience and convince others of their importance.” (Olivia Bennett)

“Working on the testimony selection and editing process was very engaging. We took responsibility and committed ourselves to give the opportunity to people who have been affected by the conflict and displacement to speak up, and to be heard. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to be part of this work. We have heard a lot, selected the testimonies

to share more widely, and now we want you to hear them and gain greater understanding of their lives. I believe that, with the participation of the displaced themselves, we can challenge the world to change their future into a bright one.” (Tamar Tavartkiladze)

Tamar Tavartkiladze and Olivia Bennett

1 In the final edits, square brackets indicate ‘inserted’ text for clarification; round brackets contain translations/interpretations; and words or phrases in bold are defined in the glossary.

GLOSSARY

A

Abkhazia

Region of Georgia in the south Caucasus. A Soviet Socialist Republic from 1921 to 1931, and then an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia until 1991, Abkhazia is situated on the eastern coast of the Black Sea. It borders the Russian Federation in the north and Georgia's Samegrelo (Mingrelia) and Upper Svaneti districts in the east.

Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, the Abkhazian separatist movement declared independence from Georgia in 1992. Its independence has not been recognised by the international community. As a result of the armed conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians in 1992-1993, thousands of Georgians in Abkhazia fled their homes and moved to other parts of Georgia or abroad. In 1994, a ceasefire agreement was reached, which has since been monitored by UN observers and Russian peacekeeping forces, but attempts to resolve the conflict have so far failed. Some 83 per cent of the territory is controlled by the government of the self-declared republic. The remaining 17 per cent is controlled by the Abkhazian government in exile, whose administration is based in the Kodori Gorge, under the jurisdiction of Georgian government. According to unconfirmed estimates, there are 157,000 to 190,000 people in Abkhazia.

Abkhazian language

A member of the North Caucasian language group. Together with Russian, it is one of the official languages of the unrecognised Abkhazian Autonomous Republic, and also the second official language of Georgia. The Russian alphabet (Cyrillic) is used for writing. Abkhazian is mostly spoken in Abkhazia and in Turkey. Around 100,000 people speak Abkhazian, mostly in Abkhazia and in Turkey.

Abkhazians

A Caucasian ethnic group, mainly living in Abkhazia, a de facto independent republic which is internationally recognised as part of Georgia. A large Abkhazian

diaspora – comprised of descendants of emigrants from the late nineteenth century – lives in Turkey. Many Abkhazians also live in other states of the former Soviet Union, particularly in Russia, Kazakhstan and Ukraine.

Adamon Nykhas

Popular Front, Ossetian nationalist organisation. It demands greater autonomy for South Ossetia, and ultimately its unification with the North Ossetian Republic, which is part of the Russia Federation.

April 9 Tragedy

The April 9 tragedy took place in 1989, when a peaceful anti-Soviet demonstration was held in Tbilisi. The Soviet Army responded by firing into the crowd and using chemicals to disperse demonstrators. 20 demonstrators were killed and hundreds of people were injured. April 9 is an official Georgian public holiday called Day of National Unity.

C

Caucasus

A region bordered by the Black Sea in the west, the Caspian Sea in the east, Russia in the north, Turkey in the south-west, and Iran in the south. The Caucasus is one of the most diverse regions in the world in terms of culture and language; it includes the former Soviet republics of Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and various republics within the Russian Federation, including North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya, Dagestan and Stavropol. The region also includes Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, which all declared independence following the break-up of the Soviet Union, but which have not achieved international recognition.

Civil war in Tbilisi, Georgia

The armed confrontation between the government of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first President of Georgia and his opposition took place from December 21 1991 to January 6 1992. In September 1991, the opposition began demonstrations against the government, and

three months of clashes followed. Opposition leaders were arrested by the Georgian police during one of the demonstrations, the headquarters of opposition parties were destroyed and newspapers supporting the opposition were closed down. The main military force, the Georgian National Guard, was divided between the supporters of President Gamsakhurdia and those of his opponents; on December 22, the rebels occupied a number of official buildings and attacked the parliament building where President Gamsakhurdia and his supporters had sought refuge. As a result of the armed clashes, over 100 people were killed and part of downtown Tbilisi was destroyed. On January 6 1992, the President was forced to leave Georgia but went on to lead a government in exile for 18 months, first in Armenia and then in Chechnya.

Collective centre

A building owned by the State or by private owners, where people displaced from Abkhazia or South Ossetia settled or were invited to settle. Approximately half of the displaced population still lives in collective centres.

E

Enguri border / Enguri bridge

The agreed administrative division line between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia, which passes along the Enguri River. The border runs between the Gali District and Zugdidi. Officially it is a check point (an administrative boundary within Georgia) but it is referred to as a border by the many narrators of the life stories.

Ergneti

Small village in the Shida Kartli region, a few kilometres from Gori, Ergneti is situated between the conflict zone of South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia. For years, a black market operated in Ergneti, selling oil, food, alcohol, tobacco and wheat imported illegally from Russia. The Georgian government closed the market in 2004.

Ergneti block post

Administrative border between South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia, controlled by several entities: the Special Unit of the Ministry for Security of Georgia on the

Georgian side, the Russian peacekeepers at the border, and the Ossetian unit on the Ossetian side.

G

Gali / Gali District

Main town of the de facto independent Republic of Abkhazia, as well as the name of the surrounding District. Ethnic Georgians formed the majority of the District's population until the 1992-1993 war when most of the Georgian population fled following ethnic clashes. Many of those who later returned to Gali fled again in 1998 following renewed clashes.

Some 45,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) have returned to Gali District (the number is not verified, but used as an estimate by the Georgian authorities and international agencies working in Georgia). This figure includes IDPs who live in other parts of Georgia but who return to Gali for part of the year. At present, 95 per cent of the population of Gali District are ethnic Georgians. Ethnic Georgian IDPs have been unable to return to other parts of Abkhazia.

Gamsakhurdia, Zviad

(March 31 1939 –December 31 1993) A scientist, writer, politician and one of the leaders of the national liberation and human rights movements in Georgia. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, he became the first, independently elected President of Georgia in 1991. In 1976 Gamsakhurdia spearheaded the creation of the Georgian Helsinki Group, which secretly spread information about violations of human rights in Georgia. He was also the first member of Amnesty International from Georgia, and was often arrested for his activities, and even exiled, which raised his international profile. He later returned to Georgia, and was one of the leaders of the peaceful demonstrations in April 1989 against the Soviet regime which were severely repressed by the Soviet army. Once President, he faced a strong opposition, who judged his behaviour dictatorial and too harsh towards ethnic minorities in Georgia.

In September 1991, armed clashes between Gamsakhurdia's supporters and opponents erupted in Tbilisi and continued for the next three months. In January 1993, he fled Georgia and found refuge in Armenia first, and later in Chechnya, where he led a gov-

ernment in exile. His return to Georgia in September 1993 and establishment of a government in Zugdidi, western Georgia, led to the resumption of civil war, as Gamsakhurdia's supporters occupied Poti, an important trade port. Soon afterwards, Georgia joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

In 1993, Russia sent about 2,000 soldiers to support the government of Shevardnadze, who had been President since Gamsakhurdia was forced to leave power. Zugdidi fell and Gamsakhurdia died in unclear circumstances. In February 1994, Gamsakhurdia's body was buried in Grozny, Chechnya, but in March 2007, his remains were brought to Tbilisi and buried in the Mtatsminda Pantheon beside other distinguished Georgian public figures.

Georgian language

Belongs to a south Caucasian language group that includes Megrelian, Svanetian and Lazian languages. Georgian is spoken by about four million people worldwide; it is the official language of Georgia, and is also spoken in Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Russia. There are three significantly different Georgian alphabets: Asomtavruli, Nuskhuri and Mkhedruli. The modern Georgian language uses the Mkhedruli alphabet.

Georgian-Abkhazian conflict

The Georgian-Abkhazian conflict referees to the conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians in 1992-1993 in the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic. One of the main reasons for the conflict was the disagreement over the status of Abkhazia after the collapse of the Soviet regime and Georgia's declaration of independence. The war between the Georgians and separatist armed forces lasted for 13 months. The Abkhazian side received some military support from the Russian Federation, although this has not been officially acknowledged by the Russians. About 10,000 people died during the conflict, and some 300,000 ethnic Georgians fled the region. A ceasefire was agreed in May 1994 under the auspices of the UN, and Russian peacekeeping troops were subsequently deployed. An agreement was also signed between the Abkhazian, Georgian and Russian authorities and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to facilitate the voluntary return of internally displaced persons and refugees to Abkhazia, but this agreement

has so far not been implemented at the beginning of 2008. The Georgians view this as a patriotic war, which aimed to restore the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia, while the Abkhazians consider it a war of liberation against Georgian aggression.

Georgian-Ossetian conflict

The conflict in Georgia's former Autonomous Region of South Ossetia, which started in 1989 and developed into a civil war in 1991-1992. About 3,000 people died in the war, and some 62,000 people, both ethnic Georgian and South Ossetian, fled or were forcibly displaced in Georgia and abroad. About 11,000 became IDPs in Georgia, and 50,000 became refugees, mostly in Russia. As a result of the conflict, 10,000 ethnic South Ossetians who were living in Georgia proper found refuge in collective centres in South Ossetia's main town, Tskhinvali.

Despite a ceasefire agreement and a number of peace efforts, the conflict remains unresolved in 2008. The central Georgian government still controls some parts of South Ossetia.

IDP schools (officially Abkhazian public schools)

Public schools under the responsibility of the Abkhazian Ministry of Education and Culture in exile. These schools opened between 1994 and 1998, mostly close to collective centres housing internally displaced people (IDPs), in response to the lack of education opportunities for IDPs and the crowding of local schools. The majority of teachers as well as students are IDPs. These schools, while being physically segregated, follow the standard curriculum used in Georgia.

Internally displaced persons / IDPs

According to the UN's Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, IDPs are "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised State border."

L

Lower Gali zone

An area in Gali District close to Enguri check point and bridge. From 1992 to 2000, this area was known for harbouring a guerrilla movement.

M

March 9 Massacre

On March 9 1956, the Soviet army crushed peaceful anti-Soviet demonstrations led by students campaigning for the restoration of Georgia's independence, causing several deaths.

May Events / Gali Events

In April and May 1998, the conflict erupted when Abkhazian security forces entered Gali District in order to support separatist elections. Fighting between Abkhazians and Georgians erupted; hundreds of people were killed before a ceasefire was agreed on May 20.

Megrelian

One of the sub-groups of the Georgian nation.

Megrelian language

One of the Kartvelian (south Caucasian) language group. According to unconfirmed data, 100,000 to 400,000 people speak Megrelian, mostly in Western Georgia. While different from the Georgian language, it is written with the Georgian alphabet. Megrelian is mostly used in day-to-day communication, while Georgian is the official state language.

Mkhedrioni

A Georgian paramilitary group and political organisation formed in 1989 by Jaba Ioseliani. Mkhedrioni presented itself as the historic successor to the Georgian guerrillas fighting against Persian, Turk and Russian occupants. By 1991, Mkhedrioni boasted 8,000 members, more than the National Guard, the official army unit. Mkhedrioni members were increasingly viewed as armed thugs who used force to intimidate their political opponents. They particularly targeted "Zviadists" in Samegrelo, the supporters of Gamsakhurdia, the first President of Georgia. Officially outlawed in

1995, Mkhedrioni became a political party, The Union of Patriots.

N

National Guard

Main military force in Georgia after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The National Guard was involved in Georgian politics from 1992, when it forcibly opposed supporters of the first President of Georgia and violated their rights. The National Guard was often uncontrolled, and it was dissolved in 1993 by Shevardnadze, the second President of Georgia.

November 23 Events

In 1989 the Supreme Soviet of South Ossetia took a decision to unite with North Ossetia. This decision was then revoked by the Supreme Soviet of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. On November 23, thousands of Georgian nationalists led by future President Gamsakhurdia and other opposition leaders tried to hold a meeting in Tskhinvali, the main town of South Ossetia. They could not reach the town as Ossetians blocked the roads, and Soviet army units intervened to avoid clashes between the two sides. In later clashes between ethnic Ossetians and Georgians, several people were injured.

O

Ossetian language

Belongs to the eastern Iranian language group of the Indo-European language family. About 700,000 people speak Ossetian, 60 per cent in North Ossetia and 20 per cent in South Ossetia. The Ossetian language uses the Russian (Cyrillic) alphabet. Together with Russian, it is used at schools in both North and South Ossetia.

Ossetians

Iranian ethnic group from Ossetia, region in the North Caucasian mountains. Ossetians live in North Ossetia in the Russia Federation and in South Ossetia, which is a de facto independent republic but is internationally recognised as part of Georgia.

P

Privatisation of collective centres housing IDPs

The sale of collective centres to private investors began in 2004. Many displaced people were resettled although there was no concerted resettlement policy. As a result some IDPs were forcefully evicted, for example from the "Iveria" Hotel in Tbilisi and from centres in Ajara Region.

Investors buy the buildings through tender, in a procedure controlled by the Ministry of Economic Development. IDPs evicted receive monetary compensation from the investor, in 2004 around \$7,000 per room. While compensation has since increased, it is still considered insufficient to find decent accommodation.

R

Refugee

According to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is a person who flees his country "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it".

In everyday life, IDPs who fled from separatist territories of Georgia often describe themselves as refugees in their native language. There is an assumption that this is partly due to the lack of awareness about the legal definitions and differences between refugees and IDPs, but some link the term refugee with their identities and use it to express how they have experienced living in displacement and how they see themselves.

Republic of North Ossetia /Alania

Republic within the Russian Federation, mostly comprised of ethnic Ossetians. Russians, Ingushetians, Armenians, Georgians, Ukrainians and Chechens also live in North Ossetia. The main languages spoken are Ossetian and Russian.

S

Samegrelo (Mingrelia)

Historic administrative and territorial unit in western Georgia, also known as Odishi. Samegrelo borders with Abkhazia in the northwest, Svaneti in the north, Imereti in the east, Guria in the south and the Black Sea in the west.

Shevardnadze, Eduard

(1928-), Georgian politician, who became the second President of Georgia in 1995 and was reelected for a second term in 2000. Shevardnadze joined the Communist Party in 1948 and became a member of the Supreme Soviet (legislature) of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in 1959. In 1968 he advanced to the post of Georgia's Minister of Internal Affairs, which he occupied until 1972.

In 1985, he was nominated Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, a post from which he resigned in 1990. In 1992, after Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia was forced from office and the presidency was abolished, Shevardnadze was chosen to lead the newly independent Republic of Georgia as acting chairman of the State Council. Later that year he was elected chairman by direct referendum after winning about 90 per cent of the popular vote.

When the Presidency was restored in 1995, he was elected with 70 per cent of the vote. He secured a second term in April 2000 in an election that was marred by widespread claims of vote-rigging. On November 2 2003, Georgia held a parliamentary election that was widely denounced as unfair by international election observers. The outcome led to mass demonstrations in the capital Tbilisi and elsewhere. Protesters broke into Parliament on November 21 as the first session of the new Parliament was beginning, forcing President Shevardnadze to escape with his bodyguards. He later declared a state of emergency. On November 23 Shevardnadze announced his resignation, declaring that he wished to avert a bloody power struggle.

South Ossetia

In 1922, during the Soviet regime, the Georgian government formed the South Ossetian Autonomous Region. At present, the larger part of South Ossetian republic

is controlled by the de facto government (which is not internationally recognised). The Georgian government controls a small part of South Ossetia. In April 2007, the Georgian government formed the Provisional Administrative Entity of South Ossetia headed by an ethnic Ossetian. The unrecognised republic held a first referendum on independence in 1992 and a second in November 2006. Both showed an overwhelming majority in favour of South Ossetian independence, but were not recognised internationally.

Russian is the main administrative language; during the Soviet period South Ossetia enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy as an autonomous republic, and the Ossetian language was taught at schools. At present there are about 70,000 inhabitants of South Ossetia.

Soviet Union

The Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (also known as the Soviet Union), which had a constitutional socialist system, existed in Eurasia between 1922 and 1991. The Soviet Union was composed of 15 republics, among them Georgia. They were part of the centralised federal union largely dominated by the Russian Federation.

Sukhumi

Capital of the de facto independent Republic of Abkhazia, which is internationally recognised as part of Georgia.

T

Tbilisi

The capital of Georgia since the sixth century. Georgia's largest city, it is also the main industrial, social and cultural centre of the country. It is strategically located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia as well as on the "Silk Road" route. About 1,090,000 people live in Tbilisi.

Trotskyism

Movement of the followers of Leon Trotski (1879-1940), a Russian revolutionary, an influential politician and a Marxist. An important representative of the Bolshevik party in the early period of the Soviet Union, he actively promoted socialist ideas among the workers. His followers were called Trotskyites.

Tskhinvali

Capital of the de facto independent Republic of South Ossetia. The international community considers it as part of Georgia. According to the current administrative divisions of Georgia, Tskhinvali is a town in the Shida Kartli region.

V

Vladikavkaz

Capital of the North Ossetian Republic of the Russian Federation.

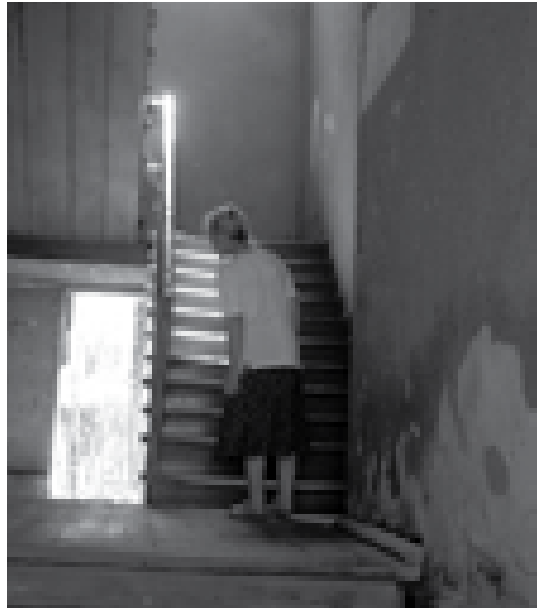
Z

Zviadists

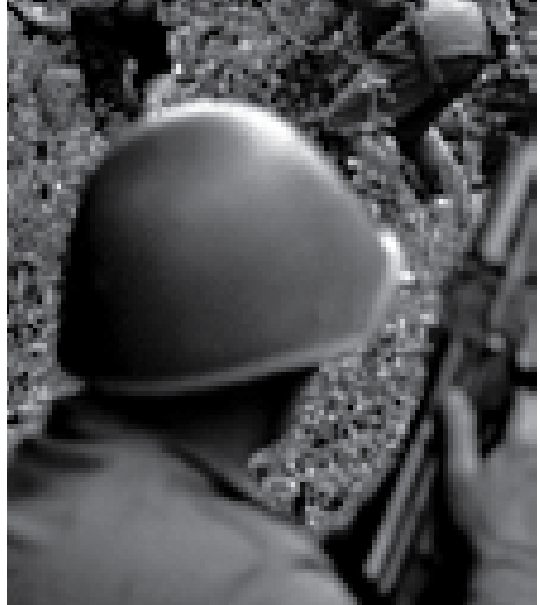
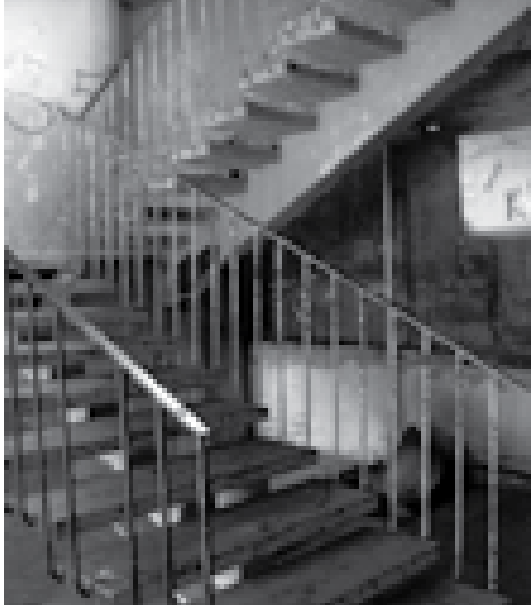
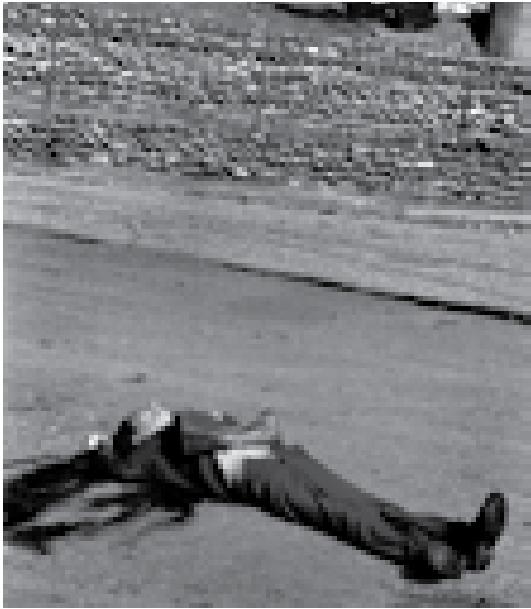
Informal name of the supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia (see glossary entry), the first President of Georgia. Clashes between his supporters and opponents resulted in the Civil War of 1992-1993. The Zviadists held mass demonstrations against the Shevardnadze government which came to power following the coup against Gamsakhurdia, and offered armed resistance to the entry of government forces to Samegrelo.

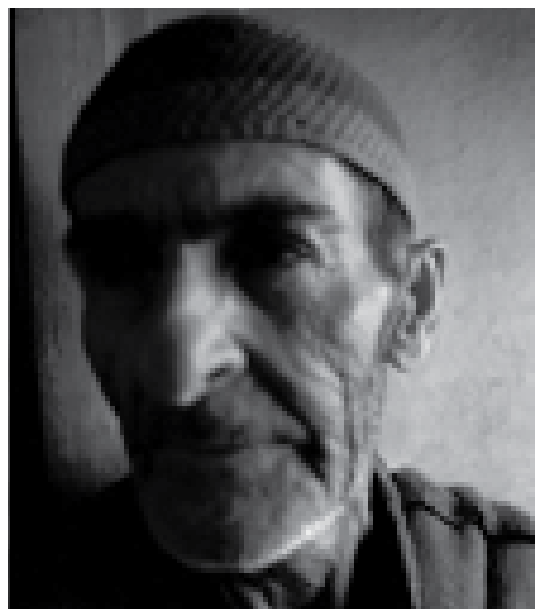
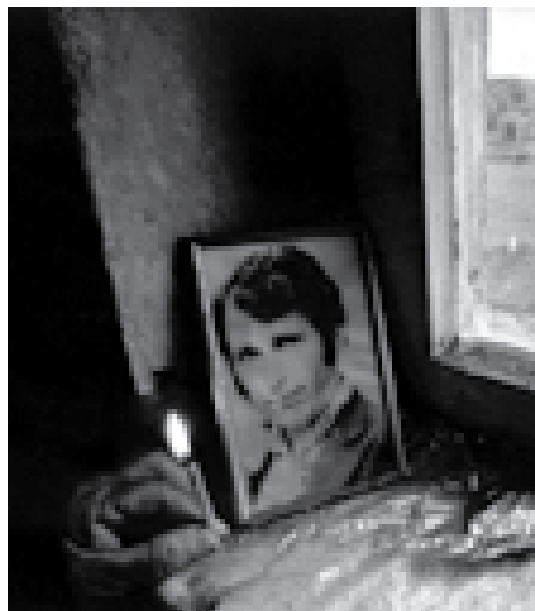
The Zviadists considered the existing government illegitimate and expressed their opposition by means of spontaneous demonstrations, which were severely repressed by government forces and the paramilitary Mkhedroni, which committed numerous human rights violations in Samegrelo (Mingrelia) and triggered additional clashes between the local population and the Shevardnadze government. In 1993, Gamsakhurdia returned to Georgia; the Zviadists were defeated, and Gamsakhurdia died. After his death, the Zviadists did not form a political party, but some of them continued their struggle against Shevardnadze.











LIFE Stories



Teah

Teah is 30 years old. Teah comes from **Gali district, Abkhazia**. Her mother died when she was a young girl and war took away the grandmother and grandfather who used to take care of her. Teah felt she grew up on the day when she truly understood that the **Georgian-Abkhazian conflict** is a tragedy for both nations, one steeped in the pain and tears of both peoples. Now, as an **internally displaced person**, she lives in Poti¹, in a **collective centre**. In a search for work, and to find some personal peace, she visited several cities of the former **Soviet Union**. And then she returned to Georgia, the place for which she had grieved all this time. Today she dreams of an “ordinary life” for all Georgians and **Abkhazians**, who must “forgive each other” everything.

The story was recorded in Russian.

“My heart hurts”

I was born in Abkhazia, in Gali district, in the village of Khomushkuri - it is such a small village. The people who lived there were very friendly, they loved each other very much and now each time I arrive there, my heart hurts [*long silence*]. There has been destruction, but I worry not so much about buildings being destroyed, but because the relationships between people have changed so much.

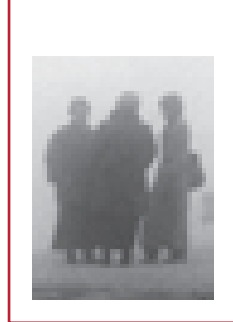
I would say that our village is empty now. There are a few people, but those who remain there are, for some reason, very hostile and aggressive towards each other. I do not know why distrust and fear rule. People are even afraid to leave their house in the evening. They are afraid of their neighbours and in most cases they are afraid of each other. Georgians are afraid that someone will see them with Abkhazians, that they will say something about them. The same goes for the other side... They are afraid that Abkhazians will see how they are communicating with Georgians... In both cases there is some risk. I saw such absolutely different attitudes

[among people] that it was hard to believe I was in my native village.

“We left our village in September 1993...”

We left our village in September 1993 because the war began. Abkhazians occupied **Sukhumi** and three days later, Gali too. We left at the beginning of the conflict. I remember that day as though it was yesterday, but it was 14 years ago. I was 16 years old when my whole family left, except my grandparents; they remained there. They did not leave [*pauses for a while*]; just I, my father, my uncle, and my cousins left that day.

My mother was already dead by that time; she died when I was 11 years old. I was brought up by my grandmother and grandfather... My father lived with us also. And so, during the conflict we left the village, and my grandparents remained. My grandfather was an invalid. I remember he was sitting on a balcony and crying [*shivers, weeps*]. I remember our dog, which was running around us, as though it knew that we were about to leave - not to return for a long time. Near us were also our Georgian



neighbours, people very close to us; we lived on very good terms with them... I cried and Zuri, my neighbour and my mother's godson, said to me: "Teah, why do you cry? We will return after three days." I looked at him and saw that he was crying too, because he did not believe what he told me.

"Everybody thought that we would be back soon"

We moved through **Enguri** (administrative border), through Dixazurga². I remember that the whole village gathered together and all left together, in my cousin's large vehicle. No one took anything with them, just documents. For some reason everybody thought that we would be back soon. People did not understand that it was war...

We went to a distant relative, because we had no close relatives on the other side of the Inguri river. And so all of us went to this person's place, we were

60 people. After us, other people arrived. Can you imagine what it means when 60 people live in one house, with small children, a pregnant woman, and ill people...? It was a catastrophe...

A long and difficult journey

Then my father decided that we had to go to the Western Ukraine. But at that time there was also a **civil war** in Georgia. There was a struggle between the supporters of **Zviad Gamsakhurdia**, the first president of Georgia, and supporters of **Shevardnadze**, who subsequently became president. So our journey turned out to be longer than we had assumed. We went by train from Zugdidi³ up to Abasha⁴. That was as far as we could go by train as it was considered, because of the military activity, too dangerous to continue. Because of the other conflict near us, we had forgotten for a while about our conflict in Abkhazia.



2 Village in Gali district

3 City in western Georgia

4 City in western Georgia

My father decided that it was necessary to leave [Georgia] and save the children. I am grateful to him that we left there in time and did not see all the terrible things that happened there... And so... from Abasha up to Samtredia⁵ we walked. It is a pretty long distance. It was windy and cold, there were children with us and a pregnant woman, who had a difficult pregnancy and could not walk. It was terrible. We did not travel on the main road because we had been told that it was very dangerous; instead, we moved through villages. Really, I have no idea how we reached Samtredia. From Samtredia to **Tbilisi** we travelled by train. Then, we continued by train from Tbilisi to Kiev and from Kiev up to Chernovtsov⁶.

In Tbilisi we stopped only for the night while we waited for the train. I remember that we spent the night at the station and there were a lot of people there, a sea of **refugees (IDPs)**, like us. I also remember how the Tbiliselians, just ordinary people with whom we were not familiar at all, were coming [to the station], bringing food and clothes. Some of them invited people to their houses to spend the night.

I still remember their warm attitude...

"When I heard a Georgian word I got very excited!"

Soon we arrived in the small town of Starozhinets⁷. It is situated on the border with Poland. My sister-in-law's aunt lived there; they were very distant relatives. There were no Georgians in this town and nobody from the **Caucasus** at all, and for me it was a real torture to live there. I was 16 years old and had never lived anywhere else, and suddenly I ended up there - torn away from my native place...

I remember when I heard a Georgian word in this city for the first time, I got very excited! I will tell

you how it happened. I was walking down the street and suddenly I heard a guy say bad words in Georgian! I asked him: "qarTveli xar (Are you Georgian)?" We were friends with him for a long time after that...

In Ukraine people accepted us very warmly. I do not mean relatives; I'm talking about people who did not know us at all. They helped us to send the children to school. They often called out: "You are from Abkhazia, so you may need something. We wanted to bring you some apples, grapes." We lived for eight months in Ukraine.

"Killed because they were Georgians"

After a while we decided to leave Ukraine. My father had to work, to earn money, and we had to stand on our own two feet. We decided to move to Krasnodar territory⁸. It was possible to reach Georgia from there in just two days... We hoped that we could visit our grandmother and grandfather soon. But...we never saw them again...

They were killed there, in Abkhazia. We couldn't even bury them humanely [*cries*]. Both of them were 60 years old. They were killed for nothing - just because they were Georgians. On that day a couple of other people were killed in our village, burnt in their own houses. They were buried by their neighbours, that same day...

Two years later, my aunt often travelled to Georgia. One time, when she had decided to go there, I became hysterical, shouting "I want to go, I will not stay here," and so she took me with her. When we arrived in Zugdidi, I could not just stay there; I wanted to go further, to Abkhazia. I was ready to go there even on foot. I did not know how but I had to go there, to my house. And when I got on the bus, I was very glad that I was going home... I knew

5 City in western Georgia

6 City in Ukraine

7 A town in Ukraine

8 In the Russian Federation

that everything was burnt down; I knew that my grandparents had been killed; I knew that everything was different there now. But I could not have imagined how difficult the return to my native land would be.

“I began to hate everyone”

When the bus crossed the Enguri river, I saw that everything was destroyed, houses were burnt down, or the thatch roof was, or whatever remained... It was a terrible scene... When we reached the school where I had studied [in the village of Zemo Barbegi], it had been turned into a post for peacekeepers. And the school building... the school was totally destroyed. For me that was the first shock... In fact, I was in the eleventh grade when the war begun and I wasn't able to finish school...now it didn't exist anymore.

Then I went to our street - where I grew up, where I spent the best years of my life. It was unrecognisable. Everything was completely different... I headed towards home, at a rapid pace, trusting that my grandmother would meet me where we saw each other the last time [*cries*]. But, certainly, it wasn't how I had imagined. And then... to my great shame, I must admit that I began to hate everyone who participated in this war - both Abkhazians and Georgians.

I hated everybody and I was terribly aggressive. I stayed at home only one day, and on the second day I left for Zugdidi and then I went to Russia, to Krasnodar.

“It was then that I grew up”

Sometime later, after a year, I was able to visit Sochi⁹. Sochi is situated near Abkhazia, and Abkhazians go there very often. I met a lot of Abkhazians there, and all of them were dressed in black¹⁰ and all of them

had three or four photos¹¹ pinned to their breast. And at that moment it struck me. Yes, I had experienced great tragedy, because my grandmother was a huge part of my life; she raised me. But I also realised that others grieve too; that there are other people who have experienced even greater loss than me - some of them lost their sons, daughters, brothers...

At that moment I decided that it is a grief and a tragedy - not only mine or Georgians, it is a tragedy for Abkhazians and Georgians. At that time I was 18 years old. But it was then that I grew up...

“We should forgive each other”

And ever since then I try to speak to both Georgians and Abkhazians. It is impossible to hate each other; we have made enough mistakes without adding that one as well! We should forgive each other and ourselves too. And one more thing: there has to be the will on both sides to achieve more trust and good relations. One party alone cannot solve anything.

I think these borders [between Abkhazia and Georgia] should be opened so that people can communicate with each other. Dialogue comes first, that can lead to trust...

“It took time to trust each other”

There are Abkhazians in the place where I work. We have fine relations. They know about my tragedy and I know about the tragedies they have endured. Only after talking about our own tragedies did we truly learn about each other and start to love each other. It took time to trust each other.

It was when we believed that we understood each other's pain, when this moment came, that we could sit down and talk openly - without aggression, without accusations.

Now I live in Poti and I work in Abkhazia, in Gali district. I have been sanctioned to do this, the doc-

9 City on the Black Sea coast of Russia

10 In Georgia, relatives of the dead at certain times wear black clothes as a sign of their grief

11 According to Abkhazian custom, during mourning people display a photo of the deceased on their chests

ument Number 9 [allows me to cross the border]. That is why I do not have problems with travel.

“We do not want this war”

I work for the Norwegian Refugee Council¹². Together with a group of other young trainers, I run training courses for youth on gender, AIDS prevention and drug addiction. A lot of young people live in Gali region now. Despite this, it was difficult to collect a group together for the first training. After the war, they went through a lot of tragedies. People used to live soundlessly, as the Russian proverb says «ниже травы, тише воды» (“below the water and as silent as grass”). Then we appeared and invited them to training sessions! And they had no idea what this meant.

But it was difficult only at the beginning. Now there are many interested people who want to take part in our trainings and they approach us themselves. We held two trainings in Tkvarcheli¹³. The participants were local residents, Abkhazians. I was afraid that we [trainers, being Georgians] would not be accepted and that there would be some constraints, but luckily, to our surprise, it was easy to work, very easy. The trainings went well. We spent two fine days together. Yes - and in the evening, after training, we sat together, simply talking, and the Abkhazians mentioned this issue [of hostile attitudes between Georgian and Abkhazians] and said: “How tired we are of all this! We do not want this war.”

“There were no jobs”

I go to Gali region, conduct trainings and return to Poti. [My father and I] live in the collective centre for internally displaced persons. We are adjusting to life in Poti with difficulty - because for a very long time it was very difficult to find a job. In Georgia this is a widespread problem, not just ours. When we arrived in Poti, there were no jobs, absolutely none. My father tried everything. Poor man, he

tried so hard, he tormented himself with his efforts - but it was useless.

I went for a year to Russia again, and lived with my aunt. Everybody had work there, and I had nothing to do. I had a lot of time and I decided to study computers. I had no idea whether I would find a job - I just decided to study. And suddenly, I got a call from Poti: “Teah, if you are able to work a computer, we have a job for you.”

“Let’s forgive and shake hands”

I rushed back to Georgia at once. I started to work in a non-governmental organisation (NGO). From the beginning I trained my contemporaries in computers, then I became the coordinator of the programme and later the executive director of the organisation. I worked [in that NGO] for five years and was very successful. My father did not work then. Now he has found a job in a port. It is possible - at last - to say that; we sighed with relief. We had searched so much...wondered so much... I’ve even lost count of how many times I changed residences: I lived in Russia - in Armavir, in Rostov, in Krasnodar, in Astrakhan - and in Ukraine, and then I returned to Georgia - to Zugdidi, Tbilisi, Poti... but I always thought about and dreamed of my village.

I still dream - as all internally displaced people probably do - of returning to my native land, to my village, and that my village will be the same as it was before. My village as I said is small, and each family has lived through a tragedy. But, I still dream of returning there. And my innermost dream is that people can live an ordinary life, that they respect each other, that all have jobs, that... [laughs]. In general, I dream of such an ideal land, where all people will be happy.

I want to say to all the people: love each other! Let’s forgive and shake hands. If we want to live an ordinary life, with a pure conscience, it is necessary for us to create it!

12 International humanitarian organisation which has been working in Georgia since 1994

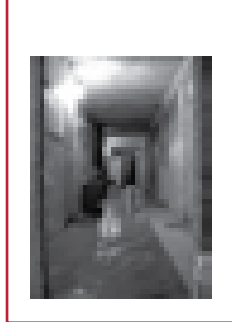
13 City in Abkhazia



Peter

Twenty-one-year-old Peter¹ is an **internally displaced person (IDP)** from **Abkhazia**. His family home in **Gali** was burnt down during the **war** and his family came to Zugdidi². Peter was very young at the time and has few memories of the years he spent in Gali. He is now a student and lives with his brother in a **collective centre** in Zugdidi. His parents have returned to the village in Gali. Peter rarely goes there as he is afraid he might face the problem of call-up to the army. In his story he focuses on young people's problems, the poor conditions in the collective centre and his feelings about the impact of the conflict.

Part of the story was recorded in **Georgian** and part in **Megrelian**.



"I keep in contact with my family by telephone"

I was born and brought up in Gali. At present I'm living in Zugdidi. My house in Gali was burnt down. I still remember some episodes from my childhood. I know no one in my [old] street. I was born there, but I didn't grow up there. I grew up here in Zugdidi.

I don't remember my childhood years [very well] but I remember some details of the games I played, the things I did. I remember it was Easter and my neighbour had a painted guinea fowl egg. I was running after him all day trying to break that egg. I remember that. I don't remember New Year celebrations or anything else...

My best memories are connected with my neighbourhood and my relatives... My street, my friends, my peers are what I remember...

I have a mother, father, one brother, a grandmother and an aunt – my father's sister. At present my brother and I are living here. My parents visit us. My mother and my grandmother take turns staying here. Sometimes we stay here on our own. My fa-

ther is always there, in the village. He grows maize and things like that, so he's in the village.

I keep in contact with my family by telephone. I went to school there as a child. We moved here after the **May 1998 events**, [when the second escalation of the conflict] took place. I used to go to the village [in Gali district] every weekend while I was still at school [here]. But since they started call-up to the army, I haven't been able to go there so often. If a relative or a neighbour dies, I go there only if it coincides with a safe period.

Problems at the Abkhazian border

Recently I went to a wedding in Abkhazia; my neighbour got married. When we were going there, we had to leave our documents, the identification cards, at **Enguri Bridge** (the administrative border). We were told not to return for the documents because we wouldn't get them.

No one was there from the other side to meet us, which is why they got angry. They said, "Why don't they come to collect their people if they're having a wedding?" That's why they told us not to come

1 Not his real name
2 Town in western Georgia

back for the documents, that we'd forfeited the documents. When we went to the village, people told us that when we returned to the border the work shift would have changed – there would be a different shift. They said that those border guards might have wanted to get some money out of us – that if we'd got frightened they might have got some money out of us and let us go. When we arrived the following day, there really were different people there. We told them we'd left the documents and they gave them to us. So there was no problem.

There were quite a few **Abkhazians** at the wedding. You couldn't feel any tension at all between the two sides. It was a pretty good party, like anywhere in Georgia. Everything went peacefully and we left the following day.

Here's one situation I heard about. There was a 40-year-old man here who was invited to Abkhazia by his relatives. He didn't warn anyone at the border. That man was an IDP from Ochamchire³; he is Georgian. He had left his car at the border. That car was left at the border for two days. Then the [Abkhazians] came; they wondered who these people were and arrested all of them. They found that man had Georgian ID and arrested him. When the Abkhazian law enforcement authorities looked into the matter and found out that he was from Ochamchire, that he was an inhabitant of Abkhazia, that he was an IDP, they charged him with illegally crossing the border. The man spent four or five months there before he was released. It's often like that, someone might be accused of crossing the border illegally and might get arrested; but if those at the border are warned that there's a wedding and that people are invited, then it's OK...

Some Abkhazians insist that this point [at Enguri Bridge] is the Abkhazian border with Georgia, but if someone tells them "These are my people, let them pass", you can take anybody you like. But if you go without doing that, you might get arrested and sent to jail. That man was a Georgian speaker; he had a Georgian last name as well. He was not very good at Megrelian. Well, he understood it, but couldn't speak it. When it turned out that he was an IDP from Ochamchire, he was considered innocent and was released.

"There is fear"

Here [in Zugdidi] you are very free, you feel fine and you don't feel anxious. When you are there...

Let me tell you what happened once. Someone proposed the toast "Long live our land" and the *tamada*



(‘toastmaster’ in Georgian) said, “Long live Abkhazia.” The first one asked, “Why don’t you say ‘Long live Georgia?’” and, you know, this man didn’t dare to say “Long live Georgia”, and said “Long live Georgia and Abkhazia” instead. There is fear – there definitely is.

I myself went to a wedding in Abkhazia. It was a wonderful feeling to be at home and at the wedding. It was good, but I didn’t feel as comfortable as I would somewhere else, for example in Zugdidi. It’s still different. You are still not as free, although you know nothing’s going to happen.

“I’d never had grey hair before”

It was May 1998, 24 May. I was completing the fourth year at school. The first attacks at the borders of the villages started on 24 May. Well, it was 6 o’clock in the morning. There was a loud knock on our door. My father got up. He was told in Russian to open the door and the Abkhazians rushed in. There were about 15 or 16 of them. They rushed in and checked all around. “Do you have guns?” they asked. My father is disabled – anyway, he is not someone who can fight at all. He is disabled – he has no physical strength... When they saw how he was they stopped asking about guns. They didn’t behave badly. Well...they weren’t threatening... They came to our home, just like they went to all the other houses...

When they were leaving, they told my father not to go anywhere, not to hide or run away, or if they saw us they would kill him – my father, that is. But as soon as they had left and as soon as we could [move], we ran to a place nearby that was the neighbour’s ruined, overgrown dwelling. We crawled into a place which even a jackal might find difficult to get into. It turned out to be something like a *канавка* (‘ditch’ in Russian) and we lay there from 6 o’clock in the morning till 4 o’clock in the afternoon.

Actually, there was such intense gunfire that we couldn’t raise our heads anyway. I don’t know whether that experience was to blame or not, but I’d never had grey hair before then – and I have had since then. It might be a genetic trait – my father has a lot of grey hair as well. But one factor might be that I was scared. I was in the fourth form and I was frightened... I was shivering and I couldn’t control myself. I was afraid.

At 4 o’clock the gunfire pretty much stopped. The Abkhazians retreated and we were able to get out. Masses of people left at that time. We’ve been here since then. We walked to the neighbouring village and then took a bus. The buses were still operating. These were the scheduled buses and one of them picked us up...

There were guerrillas⁴ all over the **Lower Zone**. They created a certain line which the Abkhazians could not cross. The population managed to cross that line. When we crossed it, our people were already there and no one stopped us, we were in our zone...

“We became IDP for the second time”

I don’t remember anything much about the first displacement [in 1995]. I remember we came by tractor. I know we went to Russia; then we returned. In 1995 we returned to Abkhazia and stayed there till 1998 – we organised our life again. We lived there till 1998. Then we lost everything and became IDPs for a second time.

By [1995] the majority of people had returned. Abkhazians used to come here...they often came during the hazelnut harvest. They bought hazelnuts and took them away to sell. They behaved in a normal way.

Now they've declared themselves a republic and their actions support that. But at that time everyone had to fend for themselves. They would come, they would do nothing to harm us – they just did their job. Now the situation is different. There are taxes: 100 kilos of hazelnuts. Those who have a piece of land [of a certain size] have to pay 100 kilos of hazelnuts. The soil in our village is not fertile enough for us to get 800 kilos or a ton of hazelnuts. Usually we pick about 350-400 kilos. And you have to give them 100-120 kilos. Those who have two pieces of land deliver 200 kilos.

“I breathe differently there”

Actually I'd never really had a problem going [to Gali] until I reached the age to join the army. Then it became complicated. Now it's very strict. The [Abkhazians] come and wander around the village. They break into the houses where they know young men of the age to join the army live. They don't know me and they don't come to us, but I don't want to go there too often because if they see me I have no guarantee they won't create problems for my father because I haven't joined the army – because I'm not there, and he lives there... That's why I avoid going there. Otherwise I'd like to stay in my village. There is still proper countryside there. There are woods and the air is good. [It's] lovely where there are woods... I breathe differently there.

Conditions in the hostel: “damp...dirty...dangerous”

Our living conditions are pretty bad... We depend on our parents who live in the village. They have cattle; they grow hazelnuts, maize. We have the 11 *lari* IDP allowance⁵ and my father's and my grandmother's pensions. That's it. We economise – we economise very seriously. For example, let's take the issue of food. I would like to have meat

or some very good food, [like] good salads. We all know what good food is but...we can very rarely afford it. Usually we have a peasant's meal such as *ghomi*⁶, cheese, beans etc.

As for living conditions, the [collective centre] building is badly damaged. It's a very old, shaky building. The floor is rotten in numerous places - once a woman fell when she trod on a rotten floorboard. We try to repair it somehow, on our own. When it rains, the rainwater collects in the basement. It's damp and scorpions make their nests there. The conditions are good for scorpions and they multiply. The wiring is in a very bad condition as well. Fire broke out in some cables and the dwelling behind [this one] burnt down the other day. An IDP [lived there]. Sometimes when it's windy, we switch off the electricity to avoid fire and stay without it all night.

The stairs are in a very dangerous state. There are wooden steps that are rotten. We try to repair them every day. There's a wide space between the handles and the steps. One rainy day a three-year-old child was running down the stairs; he slipped and went through that space and fell from the second floor. That child had his spleen cut out. He has no spleen now. But he survived.

The dirt [is everywhere] – there have been no cases of disease, but there's no guarantee [against that]. We organise Saturday cleaning days and collect the garbage. We've appealed to the *gamgeoba* (local government), and requested them to remove the collected garbage but they've done nothing. Then the dogs and pigs spread the garbage around and the area is filled with dirt.

“We have what fun we can”

You can't tell one day from another, because all days are alike here. They are all similar, and my ordinary day begins like this: I get up early in the

5 National currency of Georgia; 1 *lari* = 0.6 USD

6 Traditional Megrelian dish made of maize flour

morning, I go to the university; then I get back... if my neighbours keep quiet and it's calm, I manage to do my homework. But it's still a hostel and the living conditions are very bad. You need strong nerves to deal with this day after day... Then the evening comes as usual; then the night comes as usual. It's a routine. Nothing special happens. I'm always happy to be involved if there are some kinds of training.

Sometimes we get together. It might be someone's birthday or a holiday. We have what fun we can.

We had an interesting New Year celebration once. The electricity was cut off because we hadn't paid our bills. It turned out they had calculated our debt for all the months according to the sum the meter was showing for four days. That was that. And they cut off. We couldn't pay, and we saw the New Year in by candlelight.

Young people: "Their life is getting worse day by day"

As for the life of Georgians in Abkhazia, well, people live there. But if you are there, you have to keep to yourself and eat your food alone. If something bothers you or if you don't like something such as the hazelnut [tax] issue, or if someone harasses you, you can't voice it. You are afraid. Actually they are oppressed. They have no rights. Here you can express your dissatisfaction. There's nothing like that there...

There are young people in our village [in Gali], but they do nothing there. They have work only in spring, when they have to work in the field. They have nothing to do otherwise. They either drink or entertain themselves with [drugs]. Somehow they're in a bad state. There's no entertainment [for young people] there. They are isolated and stuck in one place. There are not so many young people – people their own age. They might sit down and play cards. But you can't do that every day. Then they either drink or get

high on *plan* (marijuana) or some hellish thing like that...then they have stomach or liver problems. Heavy drinking caused one of them serious stomach trouble. Others have livers in a very bad condition. Their life is getting worse day by day.

The difference is that young people here [in Zugdidi] are trying to find employment or study somewhere – that is, to use their physical or mental abilities in some way. They are trying. They certainly have more opportunities. The young people back there lack everything. The only thing to think about there is: what can I eat today? And what can I eat tomorrow? That's it. They have problems about joining the army as well. However, after they join the army they are not treated badly. They are not abused there. On the contrary, if you join the army, no one does anything wrong to you afterwards...

But I wouldn't like to serve in the Abkhazian army. Because I think there should be one army in a country. But the Abkhazians call themselves a republic. When you serve there, the Georgian legislature here doesn't acknowledge you. When you serve in the Georgian army, their legislature doesn't acknowledge it. I am a Georgian man and I prefer to serve in the Georgian army rather than to be unacknowledged by Georgians or the Georgian legislature after serving in the Abkhazian army.

"We don't know what a good life is"

Our parents tell us they wish we had the kind of life they had. Actually our parents had a good life. They know what it is like to live a peaceful life. We've only experienced suffering and afterwards we've been [living] in such bad conditions here. Actually the majority of IDPs are connected with the collective centres. Our parents might be working hard now and doing their best to help their children, but they had a better life at our age compared with us. However, we, who have experienced so many

troubles, who have become stronger, might know better what to do and how to do it. We might have different views on our future prospects but we still don't know what a good life is.

If I had been [in Gali], and if there had been favourable conditions [with no war], I might have become a completely different person. I was good at painting, singing. I just couldn't afford to take singing or guitar lessons. I had no opportunity to do that. I had plenty of talent but it was stifled during the war, because I didn't have the opportunity to study...

"I'll try to improve my life"

I think everyone tries to live a better life; to settle somewhere and live better. As time passes, I constantly think about how to improve my life; what to do; what to change. I don't want to spend all my life in these conditions. I want to live well, even to drive a car, even to get married, to think of the future...

What would I change? First of all, I'd go away and settle at a place where I could live in good conditions. If I only could calm my nerves away from this place. To live a calm and normal life you need calm nerves. I'm a bundle of nerves. I've often said I wish I could get away from this place, go somewhere on my own; because this is a hostel and it's noisy whether you like it or not. I'd like to live somewhere else. I wish I had a job, so I could live a good life. But at the moment I can't be too demanding on myself. I'm still young and I'll try to improve my life.

"Women are the breadwinners in most families"

I have certain obligations towards my family and myself. These obligations include first of all going to the university [and secondly] bringing about 20 pails of water every day... I do that.

Women are the breadwinners in most families. The men are as well. But mostly it's the women. Those [men] who stay at home have also taken up the domestic role, taking care of the children, dressing them, sending them to school. Those who earn money, mostly work in the market... It's already happened that I've stayed here on my own and have had to do all the housework such as cleaning the room, washing the dishes after the meal, washing my trousers, bringing water...

Children: "isolated [and] disadvantaged"

There are no forms of entertainment here. This upsets me. There are children in the seventh or eighth form – they mostly grew up in the town but they have such sadistic ideas. I saw one of them had made a bow and arrow and had stuck a nail on the tip of the arrow. I saw him aim it at a puppy and hit it in the back. I went crazy; how can a child brought up in the town do a thing like that? But there's no difference between the children who grew up in the town and those who grew up in the woods or the mountains. I told that guy that when I was his age I was proud of myself, that I was interested in girls. I wonder how they can do such terrible things. If they see a girl walking in the street with an acquaintance, they start calling out to her – they scream and shriek.

When children don't have any opportunity to entertain themselves, their attention is drawn to something else. Children here have no forms of entertainment. If there was at least a playground, their attention would shift to something different, they would be more advanced. Here, they are actually confined to the yard and over time they grow crazy.

If they had better opportunities, if they did sport or could go into town and attend some classes, if they interacted with other children, [the children here]

would be more advanced – in a different way. Here they only see one another; they're stuck in the yard. They go to school and then they come back. A lot of them don't even go there. They're just isolated. They don't even have a ball to play with. That's why they make wooden arrows and grow up like Papuans. But it's not just the children's fault. It's because they're disadvantaged. These circumstances, these conditions have caused all that.

“They ask to be taught the history of Georgia”

In terms of education the situation is even worse [in Gali]. Let's take the curriculum. Here children go to the consultancy centre [preparing for admission to higher education] now, don't they? Those who go to school in Abkhazia say they don't know the history of Georgia. When representatives from the Ministry of Education come and ask them what they like and what they dislike, the children ask to be taught the history of Georgia. They were asked which book they wanted. The answer was any book that would enable them to learn about the history of Georgia. They say although they live in Abkhazia, they are Georgians and want to have knowledge about the history of Georgia, at least at the elementary level.

In terms of interaction, the children here are more advanced. Those in Abkhazia just go to and from school. That's all. Actually they are like the children with bows and arrows I mentioned earlier. The children here are more advanced. As for there, they don't have any ability to think independently. The children here go for some training, they have better chances to develop mentally and think independently. As for there, the curriculum is loaded with stereotypes. When a child comes from there, they find it difficult to think independently and take part in discussions. In this sense they are disadvantaged.

“A bitter memory”

All my childhood was connected with war. I once did a drawing of a soldier. Once, the Abkhazians attacked the village, perhaps to steal something or take something away. We were in a neighbour's place when they broke into our house and took things. There was my drawing of a soldier up on the wall. They'd written something on it in Abkhazian...

All that time, from my childhood up till now, all those events have had an effect on me. Sometimes when the young people get together, I'm cheerful and very friendly; but when I'm alone I become too serious. I'm depressed and I think too seriously for someone my age. There's a lot of sorrow in me...

I [feel] I must have lost a happy and carefree childhood, and that has stayed as a bitter memory in my life.



Engurdaleuli



Engurdaleuli¹ is 23 years old. He is an **internally displaced person (IDP)** from **Abkhazia**, living in a rented flat in Zugdidi². At present, his parents live in a village in **Gali district**, Abkhazia. In his testimony, Engurdaleuli talks about the everyday life of the family after their return to the conflict zone, of violations of human rights, oppression, and criminal activity there. He talks about the difficulties of living separately from his family, as he has chosen to stay away from the conflict zone.

Part of the story was recorded in **Georgian** and part in **Megrelian**.

“My whole life was ruined”

My day begins in the same way as it does for anyone. In the morning I get up, I have breakfast and go to the town. If I find work, I work. If I can't find work, I see either a friend or my girlfriend. That's how I spend my day till evening. Then I get back. That's that and nothing special, as usual. There's no entertainment here. Whatever there is can hardly be called entertainment. There's nothing like good entertainment –nothing of a civilised kind for a person to enjoy.

The displacement and the conflict have played a very important part in my life. Before the Abkhazian conflict, my parents separated because of marital problems. Besides, I'm the only child. What a tragedy it is for a child [whose parents separate] – I can't describe it. No one can understand it if they haven't experienced it. Then there was the displacement in addition to that, and my whole life was ruined. This conflict was a real disaster for me.

I didn't know then what the consequences of the conflict would be. I knew there was some danger but I could never imagine such consequences. I was 10 years old then. There was the war, I remember that. I also remember masses of people coming [to the non-conflict zone].

“Our relatives...shared whatever they had”

We drove to the [**Enguri Bridge**] border by car but it was closed. There were some back roads where big tractors were used to bring people, including us, [to Zugdidi]. Some went to their relatives; others went to live in the empty buildings. We, for example, went to our relatives. They treated us like their own family. They made us feel at home and shared whatever they had with us.

I remember once there were 40 of us sitting at dinner. We would lay a long table in the field because there was not enough room for everyone [in the house]. The hosts shared with us everything they had. Just imagine, there were 40 of us in one family. They gave us hospitality at the highest possible level.

“My future lies here”

There are three of us [in my own family]: my mother, father and me. I'm here [in Zugdidi] and they're in Abkhazia. Sometimes I go there. The reason I live here is that my future lies here; I have no opportunities over there. Besides, I'm of the age for military service and the Abkhazians might force me to join their army. In addition, I've been here

1 Pseudonym, meaning 'one who has drunk the water of the Enguri river' in Georgian.

2 City in western Georgia

since my childhood. I completed my studies here. I'm used to this place.

I often go to Abkhazia. If the situation hasn't deteriorated and it's relatively calm, I often go there.

I remember the first time I went there. My father and grandmother took me. I was in the eighth form then. We took a detour and this is what happened. We were walking along, my father had his arm round my shoulder and I asked him: "Father, what if the Abkhazians see us, what will you do?" My father answered as a joke... "Well, I'll cut my own ear off and put it in my pocket." We hadn't even taken two steps, we'd just reached the top of the hill and, all of a sudden, we saw the Abkhazians in two cars. What reaction could we have? – We just froze, as if someone had poured cold water over us. It seemed they hadn't heard our conversation. We just exchanged greetings. They asked where we were going. My father told them and we went on.

When we got to our place it was absolutely wrecked. Everything had been taken away. I remember we returned [to Zugdidi] the same day.

"I was saved from drowning"

There's a risk connected with going there. If [the **Abkhazian government**] catches me, they'll make me join the army for two years. If I desert – if I run away – they'll punish my family.

Once, the following happened to me. I decided to take a roundabout route to get to the other side. I wanted to cross the Enguri river but I saw that the river was swollen³. It was spring. When the snow melts in the mountains the River Enguri swells. I was alone. That river crossing is 3 kilometres away from the motorway. The water level was very high, but I didn't want to return. Yes, I saw the water level was high, but I thought I would go ahead... Imagine you've walked that distance, you see your home on the other bank, and you have to turn back. It would feel bad, wouldn't it?... So I decided to go; I hoped I could swim across.

But I was unable even to swim. The water was about 3 metres deep... It dragged me along for about 300 metres. Then there was something like an island somewhere in the middle and I managed to reach it. I got there and started shouting for help. My neighbours heard and the whole village gathered. I was there for four hours. It was snowing. I remember it was March 6. I spent four hours in wet clothes there. I escaped from drowning, but I was close to death from freezing. Those who saw me were running around trying to help me but no one dared to enter the water. There's the Abkhazian command post up in my village. They must have called the head of staff – an Abkhazian. So, that Abkhazian man drove the big tractor and helped me to get to the bank. That's what I went through when crossing the river.



3 When the river is not swollen people often enter Abkhazia by going through the river instead of crossing the border at the bridge

“That bullet was aimed at my father”

My father returned there three months after Abkhazia was lost. He went back to look after the house and rescue at least something. Twice he was almost killed by Abkhazians. They'd already made him stand up against the wall, but one of them prevented the other [from shooting]. One told the other not to kill him and then they started arguing. The bullet that was shot at that time can still be seen [in the wall of] my house. That bullet was aimed at my father but, by the grace of God, another Abkhazian hit the gun with his hand and the bullet was shot higher, into the second floor of the house. There are numerous incidents like this.

Little by little the Abkhazians became somewhat friendlier in our village... Once they came to our place. The story is that my father told them he was just as good a soldier and a marksman as they were. The Abkhazian gave him the gun and told him to shoot at some target to see what sort of a marksman he was. Our gate has some iron plates at the bottom. So my father fired at one of the plates. Then he told them that he would shoot again and get within the length of a matchbox from the place where the first bullet hit. The Abkhazians didn't believe he could do that because my father had never had a gun in his hand before. My father fired again: there are only 5 centimetres between the first and second bullet marks. You can still see those two marks on our gate.

“Time has stopped there”

I miss my village; I always miss it. But I won't agree if I'm told to go and live there permanently. The thing is, there are actually no opportunities for making a future there.

Time has stopped there. It's come to a standstill. There's nothing like progress – only regression. If you're young, you're afraid of leaving your yard because you might be arrested. There's no way of surviving financially. You can't start a business there. There are no educational opportunities. In short,

there's nothing there. There are no decent conditions enabling the young to live [in Abkhazia].

Stereotypes

The well-being of my parents and relatives is my greatest happiness. I also have some small aims, which I want to achieve. Then, I want my country to unite again and everyone to live happily there. That would be the greatest happiness for me. I think the most important condition for my happiness is to live my life with my girlfriend in the way I want to.

We have no personal problems. We're crazy about each other. But life keeps us apart and this is the tragedy for both of us... I met my girlfriend here, after I became an internally displaced person.

My girlfriend's parents hinted that [they didn't like it that] I'm an IDP, not a local. They didn't say it directly... You know there still are the stereotypes that the IDPs from Abkhazia and the locals have different mentalities. But I don't think that's right. The parents of my girlfriend hinted that they didn't want their son-in-law to be from Abkhazia.

Constantly on the move

I remember my childhood quite well. I used to go to **Sukhumi**, Ochamchire⁴. I remember the sea. My parents would take me there. I also went there with my school friends. You can hardly find another person who has moved from one school to another so often. I have changed school seven times. I don't think anyone can break this record.

It's traumatic for a child to keep moving to new places because of being displaced. For me it was like that, because I had to adjust to each place, the living conditions there and the school. I think that adjustment is always a negative process. It has made a mess of my life in a way. How can you have one stable aim when you don't even have accommodation and, every day, you expect to move from one place to another?

“I believed I would have a secure future”

Each generation has its pluses and minuses. The plus for my parents' generation was that they didn't have to think about how to survive. But I think they were more restricted because of that damned [Soviet system]. We're freer, but we have less financial means. I think that's the difference between our generations...

There were no problems like this in my childhood. There was no conflict, no war,

no destruction. Life was more cheerful. When you're a child, you have a different view of life and just a small thing is enough to make you the happiest person. Adults have to think of a thousand things. That's the difference between childhood and adulthood.

When I was at university, I believed that when I graduated, I would have a secure future and a guaranteed career. But that time has come and I have graduated. I suddenly found myself in front of an abyss – as if a certain period had come to an end. I had a big question mark in front of me – What shall I do? Unfortunately I had no answer to that question. I suffered from depression for some time. I was thinking about what to do and where to go. These questions bothered me very much. Then I got used to it little by little. Now I am immune to depression.

“Displacement was devastating”

I lost a lot. I lost the opportunity to go home and to [live in] my village normally. I lost the prospect of a better future. I might have been more successful if we had not been displaced, because I wouldn't have these problems. I'm sure I would achieve much more. Not only me; everyone would live better. The displacement was devastating not only for my family, but for many other families as well.

Just imagine – there are families where not a single person works. There are no economic conditions to secure your future. You have to spend the whole

day thinking about what to do tomorrow. People think about how to earn money to feed their children. It's difficult. All parents want their children to have good living conditions. It's a tragedy for parents when their children do not live as well as they want.

“Displaced...in our own country”

My life was complicated because, on the one hand, my parents were divorced. On the other hand, we turned out to be displaced persons in our own country. I can't say I've dealt with this. Actually I haven't dealt with it yet. Well, a human being gets used to everything, but I haven't yet got used to it completely. Sometimes I wish I were dead. The reason for this is that life is without prospects...

I would say there can be something positive about a war. It's just difficult to find anything positive about this war. I consider the Abkhazians as part of my community. We're the part of one country and we're one community. Then this community split into two and turned into opposing camps. It's been 15 years since we've been split and since the whole country collapsed. We'd live much better and we'd have many more chances in life if there hadn't been that **conflict**.

We celebrated last Easter in Abkhazia. We all got together, all the neighbours and relatives who are here, our Abkhazian neighbours there... It was not the army enrolment season. We got together at Easter. We brought food and drink and had great fun. It was if we dispelled the sadness of that place.

“We are treated like slaves”

[My family] have contacts with the Abkhazians, but these contacts are based on vertical relationships – it's like the relationship between a master and his servant. To survive, we have to toady to them so that they don't treat us badly. In Abkhazia there is no law and there's no authority that enforces the

law. Everyone does whatever they like. In short, it's a Mafia system.

It's a [master and] vassal relationship. However, it's been worse in the past. Now it's not so bad, at least people are not killed or injured on a mass scale. We are treated like slaves but [at least] the situation is stable compared to earlier times. There is peace, which is better than war.

“Let's live together...”

What I'd do is tell the Abkhazians: “Let's live together! Let's live together – give me your hand!”

Let me tell you a story. There was a youth initiative group here, in Zugdidi. The idea of the project was to organise a live chain from Tbilisi to the Abkhazian border – to the Enguri Bridge. It's a long distance and we wouldn't have been able to gather enough people, which is why we reduced the distance and decided to make the live chain from Zugdidi to the Abkhazian border. We wanted to appeal to the President and make the idea known to the whole country. I don't know why, but the idea didn't work. That would have sent a message to the Abkhazians of “Give me your hand, let's live together!” – as I said.

I would rule out talking with a commanding tone, which we are subjected to when talking to the Abkhazians. I would establish direct contact with middle-class Abkhazians and hold a dialogue with them... without certain people interfering; without [imposing] the aims and schemes of the politicians, the 'politicos'. I would have contact with ordinary people. I think ordinary people would understand one another. My dream is for Georgia to be unified and for everyone living in Georgia to be happy.

“You feel split in two”

Often when we go to Abkhazia those who live there

say that the Zugdidians have come. Once, my relative and I had an argument because of this. We were sitting at the table and they referred to us as Zugdidians. We contradicted them. Why Zugdidians? We were born here [in Abkhazia] and we're locals. Why should they have said that? There must be a reason for this, but I don't know why they did so. It's the same thing here. When we're here they refer to us as Galiens. It's then that you feel split in two... It often happens. I've heard that from many people.

The relationship between the returnees and the displaced is like that of [people from] two different worlds. The world where the returnees live is one of obedience to the rules there. They have the attitude of slaves towards life generally. Those who are on this side are like the rebels, because there's more freedom here. This difference can be discerned between those who have moved here and those who have stayed there.

Ethnicity and discrimination

I would say that I've never heard of anyone's human rights being respected [in Gali]. There are just no conditions for a person to claim his rights there, when they're violated. There's nowhere you can file a suit or make a complaint. Here, you might be arrested or something else, but you can go to a lawyer and he'll sort it out or help you somehow. There are no lawyers there. Nor are there any structures, where you would make a statement. People living there do not even think of defending or protecting their own rights.

Even if there was a lawyer, I don't think he'd defend the rights of Georgians. I've never heard of such a case. Ethnic background determines the treatment towards people there. Our Georgian population is treated as if they were servants, lower-class. It's wrong, but there's a caste system, because if you're an Abkhazian, you're considered to have a higher social status than if you're a Georgian.

There are numerous cases of oppression. I know from my own experience. I'm talking about Gali as an example. Even when we cross the bridge, there's something like a moment of mockery; you know, they say whatever they want to you.

I'd like to tell you something [that happened] – it was a time when tension had risen. There's particular aggression [on the Abkhazians' part] towards you, especially if you're of the age for military service. I was leaving Abkhazia and I only had my birth certificate on me. When they asked for my documents, I gave that to them. The Abkhazian border guard looks at me with suspicion and asks me: "What's your nationality?" I thought a little. If I tell them that I'm 100 per cent Georgian they'll find faults with me, and I might get arrested. I thought it would be better to tell them I was **Megrelian**.

There's a slight difference in this case. They're more tolerant to Megrelians than to Georgians. Then, that Abkhazian border guard gave me my birth certificate and let me go, laughing ironically and saying "OK! OK!"

That was the time I felt like a coward. On the other hand, I couldn't say anything else concerning my nationality. On my way [to Zugdidi] I was wondering whether it would have been better to say that I was a Georgian or what I told them. But I don't know, perhaps it was good that I said what I did in that situation. But my conscience was telling me I hadn't been right.

"An unimaginable shock"

I've also remembered something about the oppression [we suffered]. It was an ordinary evening. My whole family was at home watching television. Suddenly we heard a loud knock on the door. My father opened the door. I was in the front room and couldn't see what was happening in the back room. When I heard some noise, I opened the door. I saw someone hit my father on his head with a gun. I didn't even realise it was an armed burglary. My father fell down, later it turned

out that his teeth had been broken as well. Suddenly the front door opened and two men in masks came into the room. They grabbed my mother. Then one of them looked into the other room. I instinctively raised my hands. Suddenly, actually in a matter of seconds, he kicked me. It all happened very quickly, in a matter of a hundredth of a second. I fell on my knees, and to be frank, I was so nervous that I don't remember what happened next.

They demanded all our money, gold and jewellery, everything we had at home. They made my mother stand up. One of them brought some pincers from another room. My mother had a golden tooth. He said he'd pull out that tooth. I can manage to say [this now] but when your mother is being told that – when someone [is going to] pull her tooth out just because it's gold – it was an unimaginable shock for me... Imagine, my father and I were just looking at this. [Imagine] your husband and your son are looking at someone pulling out your tooth. We had both been tied up and thrown on the sofa before that.

There were four of them, with masks. I don't know how many of them there were outside. Then one of them turned out to be merciful. I don't know how to express my gratitude to that person. He took the pincers out of the man's hand. He was generally kind to us. At that time my cousin was staying with us for a week. She was a 12 year-old girl. She had a heart disease. She died afterwards, [not during the attack]. So a child with heart disease saw those *в масках* ('masked men' in Russian). Imagine what would have happened to her! She had a heart attack. She'd already undergone three operations on her heart.

My mother spoke to the person who'd taken those pincers out of the other man's hands. She told him that the girl was having a heart attack. She explained to him that the girl had a heart disease. That man did the following. He went out, came back with a cup of water to her and started to stroke her, saying: "Every-

thing will be all right. We'll go away soon." And the child somehow calmed down.

"They threatened to kill us"

We told them we had no money or possessions. Can you imagine? They demand what you don't have. Or they'll kill you because you don't have money. They thought we had it hidden somewhere and we'd give them it if they used force. Because of this they made me stand up in front of my parents, take off my T-shirt, and lie on the table. Meanwhile, one burglar brought an iron out from another room and made as if to iron me. Imagine the situation – you are naked and someone's going to put a hot iron on you. What a butcher he must be!

I don't know, perhaps they wanted to force my parents to give them money. Finally they were convinced that we didn't have any money and they told us they would be standing outside for half an hour. Under no circumstances were we to go out, or they would kill us all, they threatened. Then they went out. They collected something, very little money, one gold ring, a television, and some clothes. They took things like these and left.

That night we really didn't look outside for half an hour. Next morning we learned that they went to another village. They broke into someone's home. He was Georgian. He must have guessed that burglars had come and he managed to lock the door. He had a gun at home, a double-barrelled gun. Just as one burglar burst into the room, he shot him directly in the eyes. He wasn't killed but we learned later that his eyes were [permanently] damaged. Then the [Abkhazians] reciprocated and took the injured burglar away. [The house owner] was injured in the jaw. But he survived as well.

Police intervention: "just a formality"

I don't know how it happened but the Gali police intervened after that... They could no longer turn a blind eye to the situation. One injured man was taken to hospital. The other was arrested. There were four of them. It was just a formality. The burglar was held for a week only. Then he was released. We learnt that the television they took from our home had been left in the militia office in Gali. They watched it there. Then those Abkhazians at our command post told us to go and get our television back. But my father decided against it. He didn't want to make them angry. So we left it with them.

After the arrest they turned out to be Abkhazians. That had been clear from their speech, intonation. There are numerous examples like that – of armed robbery among the population. And not just once; there are families who have suffered three or four armed burglaries.

"There's always hope"

Whatever happens, I'm still an optimist. In spite of everything I've gone through, I hope that the situation will come about when a gifted person is appreciated here and are able to achieve success through their work. I also hope our country will become one where I'll be able to use my abilities. There's always hope.

It was a victory for me that the girl I love has also admitted that she's in love with me. That was the greatest happiness and achievement for me, as I managed to make that girl fall in love with me.

I would ask the international community to take an interest in our problems and help us as much as they can. I would also tell them that we are not a so-called 'banana republic'. We are gifted people with great potential. Cooperate with us.



Inga



Inga is 38 years old. She is **Abkhazian** and her husband is Georgian. There are four children in the family. Fifteen years have passed since the family went into exile; they lived in Ochamchire district in **Abkhazia** before the war. Inga talks about the difficulties and hardship experienced during the period of armed conflict, how hard it was even to get bread to eat and the problems of equipping a new place. She speaks of the sadness of losing her home and leaving behind her elderly parents, whom she sees very seldom. She describes the everyday problems of a large family, the constant search for work, shortage of money and the fear of being made homeless.

The story was recorded in Russian.

Marrying a Georgian: “I had no concerns”

I was born in Abkhazia. I lived in Ochamchire district, in the village of Gvada in Abkhazia. I had a very happy childhood – there were no problems, no worries. The problems started later when the **war** began.

I met my husband in the region where I lived - though he was from another village, Kogara. I am Abkhazian, but I married a Georgian. Nobody was against our marriage. I had no concerns that my future husband was Georgian. Nobody cared about that then. All that happened later... It was all [caused by] the war... We fell in love and got married. My husband came from a large and good family – three brothers, two sisters, mother and father. His father was killed during the war, in December 1992...

Now I’m bringing up four children. My three daughters were born in Abkhazia and the boy was born here in **Tbilisi**.

“Bread was in short supply”

I will tell you how difficult it was during the war to get a piece of bread.

During the war we had to leave our house. We had to move every six months – we lived with different relatives. It was very difficult. We had nothing. Our relatives didn’t have much income and were just able to support themselves. And then suddenly we turned up...with small children! At that time the children were two, three and four years old...

First, we lived in Martvili¹. This was in my father-in-law’s native region. Once a week we had to go to Poti² to buy bread: it was impossible to live without bread, there was nothing else to feed the kids on. But bread was also in very short supply. It was very difficult to get it. Then my husband and I decided to buy wheat grain. We bought it, and brought it in, this grain, sat down and husked it like rice, sorted it with our fingers. We took it to a mill and ground it.

I remember what the grain looked like - it was as black as pitch! What we baked using the flour obtained in this way was edible only when hot - we had to eat it straightaway, as soon as it was taken out of the oven. When it was cool, the batch became so hard it was impossible to eat. The grain was actually of very poor quality - but we were glad to obtain even this kind of grain. My children ate this bread for a whole month.

1 City in **Samegrelo**, western Georgia
2 City in Samegrelo

My eldest daughter, who was four years old, used to get stomach ache; it was difficult for children to digest such food. Then we got corn flour and mixed it with wheat flour, to economise; we tried to use the flour sparingly so that we wouldn't run out of it too soon. And then I began to sell cheese...

“I carried 40 loaves of bread on my shoulders”

There was a market day once a week in the village of Bandza³. You had to buy goods within a couple of hours, then take them to a market in another village, resell them at a profit and buy something for the children. So I would buy 50 kilos of cheese, resell it, and then, with the money I earned, I bought bread. And as for buying bread, it meant queuing all night at a bakery in Poti. Once, I met a relative of my father-in-law's, who worked at the bakery; with his help I was able to get out through the back door [with all my bread]. I would buy 30-40 loaves of bread. I carried 40 loaves of bread on my own, carried all this on my shoulders. What else could I do? Three children, a daughter-in-law, a brother-in-law, the owners of the house where we'd found shelter - 12 people were waiting for this

bread. We put it in a bag, steamed it thoroughly over boiling water and only then allowed the children to eat the [warm] bread...

“It's not easy to live here”

Now we live in Vashlijvari⁴, in the **collective centre**. No fewer than 200-250 **internally displaced people** live here. The building is big. My neighbours are all good, kind people and we help each other. Nobody has discriminated against me for being Abkhazian - either during the war, or afterwards. Maybe I'm just lucky that all my neighbours are good people.

It's not easy to live here. Almost everybody is unemployed. We live under constant pressure, we're afraid that we will be turned out of here; we don't know what will happen next. You can see what's going on in different places; they're turning people out everywhere. Nobody has said anything officially, but generally people are [talking about the issue of **privatisation**. People are afraid that they will be deceived, that the documents they're given will be fraudulent, and things like that. No investor has appeared yet. If there is an investor, maybe things will finally become clear. Otherwise we don't know yet whether we'll be moved elsewhere or, if we do leave, whether they'll give us some kind of a compensation. The main thing is to buy something with the money they will give us.

I remember when we first arrived in Tbilisi, it was possible to buy an apartment for 3,000-4,000 [US dollars]. Now the prices are so high that it is impossible to buy anything even for the 7,000 [dollars] usually offered usually by investors. I am a mother of four children and there are six of us living in this family - how are we going to live in one-room



3 Martvili district, Samegrelo

4 District in the suburbs of Tbilisi

apartment? And, in general, will it be possible to buy an apartment for 7,000 [dollars]?

“Loss after loss”

I don't work anywhere; my husband works 15 days per month, every other day, all of us live on his salary. We tried to begin our own business. We opened a shop, we just worked three to four months, and then we were under pressure to close the shop because it is impossible to trade here... Each time my husband almost dies [of worry], he's so upset - and there's always something that disrupts our efforts. So it's loss after loss, without any hope of a stable income.

“I think only about the past”

I am an only daughter. My parents are alone [in Abkhazia]... I live here in Tbilisi but mentally I'm there all the time, something has been pulling me from there. I keep imagining that the process of returning will begin and that I will be home again. I have a lot of things to do, so I don't have time to dream and at night I think only about the past, all my dreams are about how we will return...

In the summer, when there is an opportunity, I go there sometimes, for some days or for a month, it depends. My children like to go with me, too. They get on well with their peers in Abkhazia. There is no constraint in the relationships with our relatives, only warmth and love. Our Abkhazian relatives tell us all the time: come and stay with us. But right now, we can't move and live there. Though I am very glad that my children get on well with my relatives, the bond between them is strengthening, they call each other on the phone.

“For the sake of the children”

My children went to school in Tbilisi. The eldest one has already finished school, she has entered [a higher education] institute and she is already in her second

year. My second daughter finished school several days ago, she also has to go to [a higher education institute]; my third daughter is in the eleventh class. The youngest is a boy, he is three years old. He is at kindergarten. The children are growing up and they have more and more needs. It is necessary to pay for the study course [to prepare for national admission exams], which is very expensive. And in fact it is still necessary to look after and support four children, to provide them with clothes and shoes - I don't know how long we can live like this.

In the beginning, when we arrived in Tbilisi, it was very difficult for us, but somehow it was possible to stand on our own feet. I did a lot. But after some time everything fell apart - I lost my job; the family business didn't go well... I had to start all over again. I am in the same situation today as I was after the war - I don't have anything! Sometimes I can't keep calm, I feel I no longer have any strength. But I am determined to go on for the sake of children.

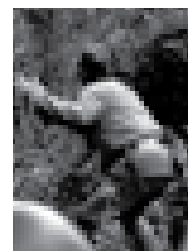
“The most important thing is a kind world”

I have many dreams: what is most important for me is the health, happiness and bright future of my children. It is every woman's dream to see their family happy and safe. I also dream of finding work - permanent, stable work - and that I won't [always] begin every day with worries, wondering where to go, where to search for a job. It seems to me that if this dream comes true all our problems will gradually be solved.

And the most important thing is a kind world, with no war, so that women - mothers - would never suffer again, would never have to see their sons go to war, and wouldn't see their children distressed. I want this dream to come true for women all over the world - I wish it for them - then the difficulties would be easier to overcome. We have overcome many obstacles. I have not told you all of them yet. I don't think I can continue as am a bit upset...



Temuri



Temuri¹ is a 55 year-old **internally displaced person (IDP)** from Upper Barghebi² village, in **Abkhazia**. Nowadays Temuri is living in a **collective centre** for IDPs in Poti³. His story is filled with his memories and reflections about time before the war, about life under the Soviet regime and about **the conflict** itself. He participated in the armed conflict as a combatant. His story is also about the life of an internally displaced person, the problems connected with such a life, and his belief in the need for compromise and greater understanding of different perspectives.

The story was recorded in **Georgian**.

“There was no ethnic conflict”

I was born into a peasant family in Upper Barghebi village in 1952. My mother died when I was 10. By the time I returned from the army my father had died... I had brothers, sisters-in-law. I was brought up normally in a family, but there was a lack of motherly warmth after I was 10... Like others, we lived in the atmosphere which was typical of the period of the **Soviet Union**, and it seemed as if almost everyone was content. We were able to live normally... There was nothing like ethnic conflict affecting relationships then. It was like this then - we are all brothers, we are all sisters, we are all one family, we all do one job, we are all somehow upright, honest, in this, and it should be like that. We believed that and lived that way.

My best memories are connected with the time I lived with my family... At that time, having a brother - a family - meant pretty much an inseparable relationship, as if we were all together. A brother was a brother, but if a brother was older, then he was like a father figure... You could never stand up to him... You had to believe that he knew more, that

an instruction given by him was always correct. You couldn't, well, ever doubt that. It was understood, it was agreed... This somehow created the conditions for you to be a satisfied, self-confident person and think of your life as normal. At that time, everything was organised so that a family was ruled not only by its head (the oldest male), but by the state as well. That was reflected in the fact that each member of the family knew what they were supposed to do - where and when they were supposed to be after they got up in the morning. This was decided by the state as well as by the family.

It was necessary that a man went out to work, no matter what his occupation was. A woman was obliged to take care of her family and home. To do the chores at home in the morning and then go to work or to the state farm⁴...

“Now we might understand more about our past”

There was always some opposition [to the Communist regime]. It's because, as they say, the spirit

1 Not his real name
2 Village in Gali district, now in the conflict zone
3 Town in **Samegrelo** in western Georgia

4 Labour unions in the Soviet Union were mainly formed in villages and owned the common property

of youth is rebellious. Sometimes you agree with someone about something, sometimes you don't. This sort of opposition could result in the whole family being declared traitors to the clan. Indeed, there were moments when you would stand up to defend your country - **1956** [9 May], **April 9** [1989] were such moments... That is, people were always worried about something...

Now we can see how they triggered the confrontation inside the nation, how they triggered confrontation between the ethnic groups. Now we can see that all this caused only us harm. But at one time we didn't think so...

Thus, at a certain time one might not perceive or understand something, but later one will, and now we might understand more about our past... I mean conflicts. Generally, ethnic conflicts in the whole of the Soviet Union... There are very many

similar ethnic conflicts all around the former Soviet Union...for example, Moldova, the Baltic states, the Ukraine, Georgia and, I don't know, not to mention Armenia and Azerbaijan, as many as you can imagine...Thus, it turned out that people brought up with a common ideology turned out to be easy to manipulate. Just a drop [of freedom] was enough for them to clash on ethnic grounds...

When all this was happening we didn't realise [that this might grow into such a serious conflict] because we were brought up with the ideology that we were brothers, that we were friends...When someone said that we were enemies, not friends, it flared up so quickly. The seed cannot sprout in the soil so quickly... When we realised we shouldn't have allowed that to happen, that we shouldn't have done that, we had already become so deeply involved that it was too late...

"When brothers will kill one another"

It was...brothers killing one another. It's difficult even to remember that, it's difficult even to talk about that... People should talk about that to God, not to other people... We know God forgives what we do, while a human being can never forgive others... To be forgiven, you have to talk to God about that [*pauses*].

I remember Kostava⁵ coming to Ilori⁶. He made a speech and said: "In no way should we be involved in this process, because this is the beginning of the war when brothers will kill one another." At that time there was a car called a KRAZ, and he was standing on it. I was there then...

When I had a chance I went to Ochamchire⁷...because I had relatives there, and when I got there I found two **Abkhazians**, a **Megrelian**, a Georgian



5 Merab Kostava, a dissident, one of the leaders of the then National Liberation Movement fighting against the Soviet regime

6 Village in Ochamchire district, Abkhazia

7 Town on the Black Sea coast in Abkhazia

and a Russian sitting together playing backgammon... That was three or four kilometres away from the Galidzga⁸ bridge, some way from the town centre... It was called the ninth district within Ochamchire district.

I got there and asked the man - God bless his soul - "Tarzan, how are you?" and he asked: "Why [have you come], what's up?" I told him that there were some people killing each other some distance away. "Come on! The fools are killing each other; it's nothing to do with us." That was his reply.

"All of us made a mistake"

When I left, my way was barred by the very same people who had allowed me into the town... Everyone had their own opinion at that time and everyone understood everything in their own way... Real patriots were standing [firm] on [the Georgian] side... women, men, girls, boys, elderly people, and young people. That patriotism and spirit stopped [the Abkhazians] until 1992.

What I'm telling you is about the events in 1989. I don't know. We made a mistake, perhaps. We made a mistake. I mean we, me - as an ethnic Georgian - just like the Abkhazians, **Ossetians**, Megrelians, Ajarians, Rachians, Kakhetians, Kartlians⁹, all of us made a mistake... We yielded to the provocation... We should have stood together. The whole of Georgia should have stood together, an Abkhazian should have supported a Megrelian, an Abkhazian and a Megrelian should have supported an Imeretian, an Imeretian, an Abkhazian and a Megrelian should have supported a Kartlian... That was very dangerous for the [Soviet] empire... just as it's very dangerous at present. But now we are so fragmented, and such a strong feeling of animosity towards one another has been created, that it will take time for [unity] to be restored. Even if it is

restored, it won't be as solid as it was before.

[We talk] as if Abkhazians demanded Abkhazia [on their own] and broke away from Georgia, but [in fact] we [Georgians] were so steadfast and so unified that this huge [Soviet] empire - an empire that covered a third of the planet - was scared of the Georgians [*pauses*] being so united, and put an end to that .

"The synagogue was opposite the Christian church"

Now they use the word 'separatist'. There always has been and still is separatism in the nation. Someone might read a book and think that the whole of history is made according to that book. Well, the story being written down now might contain a bomb, a delayed-action bomb, which will be activated if there's a need. What was that, then? The [leaders of the political movement in the 1990s] wrote "Georgia for Georgians"... Now they write: "Georgia, not for Georgians, but for all ethnic groups." Which one is right? Georgia for Georgians, or Georgia for all those whose ancestors contributed to its survival up to now?... There has always been separatism. It has been everywhere...

Why should we be talking about someone being a Christian or a Muslim, when there is a synagogue opposite a Christian church... Everything that happened during the period of the conflicts hurts me... At that time I couldn't imagine that all that [peaceful coexistence] had just been staged; we all believed the conflicts had to be solved at that time.

In 1998 I was serving in my army unit. By the way, I have never been a guerrilla, I have never gone anywhere on my own. I have always served in the state army. Four months before the events in **May 1998**, we were in Zugdidi¹⁰ guarding the so-called bor-

8 River in Ochamchire district
9 Subgroups of Georgian nationality

10 Town in western Georgia

der between Abkhazia and Georgia – the **Enguri** border. We were in Anaklia¹¹. An officer and I were coming back from Anaklia. At that time, we used a walkie-talkie to keep contact. Shooting started at one of the River Enguri crossings... We didn't know how serious it was...

At the place where the shooting started a woman asked us to give her a ride... It was hard to get any transport at that time, nothing worked, there were just two of us – a driver and me. So we picked her up. When she saw the guns, she started talking...she started 'preaching'...I let her speak... She started saying that there was no need for the guns, that guns are a means of killing... I asked her if she knew the real purpose of the guns we were holding. Yes, she said, they kill. I told her that a gun served another purpose as well. It could be used for defence... We use guns for defence, I told her. "God bless you!" she said in the end... I say this because some people used guns for one purpose, and others for another. One more reason for this conflict is the fact that not everyone used guns to serve the purpose they were supposed to...

"The war has damaged everyone"

No one should think that Abkhazians were happy with this conflict and all this happened to us because they were happy with it. Ask the other party too. Ask Abkhazians as well... They haven't suffered any less than we have and they haven't been damaged less either... The war has damaged everyone. It depends on how one thinks, how one perceives, who can forgive and who has enough will and intelligence to forgive these crimes - crimes committed against Abkhazians, against Georgians living in Abkhazia, and more or less against Russians as well.

There was a village in Abkhazia called Estonka, because the majority of the population was Estonian.

What wrong did they do? Did they fight against Abkhazians or against Georgians? They never fought against either of them, did they? Why are they banished from Abkhazia? Has anyone ever asked this question? Imagine, Estonians are expelled to Estonia but from Abkhazia, Georgia...

"It was then that I decided to go to war"

I was in Uskaminogorsk¹² when they announced on TV that the war between Georgia and Abkhazia had started. I could never imagine a war between Georgia and Abkhazia... There were not so many means of communication at that time to contact one another. As soon as I learned what was going on, I returned home. General mobilisation was declared, but some joined the army and some did not. My nephew was called up to the [Georgian] army to go and fight near **Sukhumi**. But my brother went instead. He didn't want his son to be killed. At the beginning I could not make up my mind about going to fight, because of the love and the [good] relations between Abkhazians and Georgians... Somehow, I couldn't make myself take up the gun and fight. So I waited for a while.

We were in town [pauses] and suddenly a man comes up to us pleading to go to the hospital with him because blood is needed. Who can refuse giving blood when there is a war going on? Now they call it the conflict, but you can call it whatever you want. People die, there were the injured in hospital so we had to go to the hospital and give blood. So we went... There were 14 or 15 year old girls from Reka¹³ village there - 14 or 15 year old children had been raped and they were pregnant but couldn't give birth. Blood was needed for them [pauses]. It was then that I decided to go to war.

There was an army unit formed in **Gali** as well as in Ochamchire, in Tkvarcheli¹⁴. But since I had de-

11 Village in Zugdidi district on the River Enguri

12 Town in Russia

13 Village in Ochamchire district

14 Town in Abkhazia

cided to join the army, I joined the unit where my brother was serving. When I arrived, everyone was surprised. I don't know why. By the way, people in the unit I was serving in had such a correct attitude to the issue that our nickname was 'Gali'. Sometime someone will remember this and call a spade a spade. If we were mentioned, we were referred to as 'Gali'.

Well, I don't want to remember that disaster at all. I don't think anyone has suffered more than my family, my close relatives and me in that war... My family lost someone from almost every generation during that conflict: old and young, a child and an infant. They were burnt alive, they were killed and burnt [*pauses*]. You know, it's so very difficult.

"I felt sorry for him as a human being"

I have to tell you about an encounter with the murderers [of my relatives]. During the war, various sub-units were stationed one or two kilometres away from one another to carry out the operations... One group was asking for help... as there were injured people, the dead, captives - and they needed help to get out... [Our sub-unit] was the closest and we joined the operation... They had already told us "Ничего страшного ('Nothing dangerous' in Russian), we're already on our way out." They'd really been just 200 metres away from us and they got out. Some of them were injured... I saw two men with their hands tied...

We reached a safer place and we were standing in the very same yard where my relatives had been killed - they had been dragged into the house and then burnt, together with the house. We stopped at that gate and I felt sorry for the captive [who I suspected had participated in that murder], sitting with his hands tied. I felt sorry for him as a human being and I offered him some water and alcohol [to clean the wounds] as he had

been beaten.

When someone is in trouble and someone else offers help, they feel that support, that sympathy. The guy must have felt that I sympathised with him and we started talking. I asked him why they were coming here, as they knew there was nothing but disaster here... "What can I do?" he said. "My family is dying of hunger. "Well," I said, "my family is dying of hunger too but we are all somewhere in this hell and, if I come, I do not do what you do." By the way, they were stealing the stores of hazelnuts...

We went on talking and I said: "Well, we deserved to be driven away, we turned out to be weak and you drove us away, all right, but why did you burn down the houses? They were yours now, weren't they?" "I haven't burnt them down. The one who's dead - over there - did it", he said. "OK, to hell with it. It wasn't you who burnt them down. But why did you kill those two old people in this very yard?" "I didn't kill them, the Russian killed them," he said. So I found out that he hadn't killed them.

Well, if I'd wanted to take revenge, I would have shot him... When my friends learned I suspected him of the murder... they told me to do away with him. But no, I couldn't kill him. Later he was tried by [the then military court of Georgia] and was sentenced to be shot. By the way, I was told he asked about me just before the execution. When I got to the headquarters where he had been executed, some guys told me. Some guys, who had enjoyed watching all that... said that the amnesty was issued too late for him. I couldn't have been an amnesty for him, but I was still sorry that he had been executed.

"We will be reconciled"

We met Abkhazian guys taking part in the war quite a few times. On their - the Abkhazians' - ini-

tiative. On their initiative, not ours. They came here quite a few times. We had a talk quite a few times. What I now say might be misunderstood, but I do know what we were talking about... They were saying that the conflict would end and we'd be like we were before. I'll work as a taxi driver, I'll drive my own car, I'll work in my profession, we'll still find something in common. This was what they were saying. Then those people who were negotiating with us died... Those [Abkhazians] who survived know that we didn't [commit atrocities], it was their side that did all that...

Everything gives me hope to think and believe that there's no other way. We will be reconciled. I don't even want to think about it, but even if Abkhazia separates from Georgia, I don't want it to join Russia. Let it become an independent state, and if Abkhazia has to stay separate from Georgia, let it be independent. I mean not a part of another country, but independent. Even if Abkhazia becomes independent, which I strongly doubt, it will still have Georgia as its closest neighbour or relative. Whatever you call them, Abkhazian or Tatar or Turk, whatever, anyone living in Abkhazia or born in Abkhazia is Georgian to me.

“At least I can speak in my native tongue”

It's less than desirable to be driven away from your home. It's difficult when you can't go to mourn a member of your family. It's difficult when you can't go to their graves. [Pause]... People would talk about homesickness and for me that was 'everything that you missed'. Now I know what it truly is. Whoever experienced that - and God save anyone in Georgia from experiencing that any more... homesickness is when you miss even the mud in your garden, even the mud.

Things don't always turn out as you'd like even

when you are at your own place. So how can everything be all right when you're displaced, when you've escaped, when you're hiding?! Sometimes you just feel hurt that they don't understand you... I think those who are like me but live abroad feel worse. I think so... They might not be hungry, they might have better financial conditions but still, they're not in Georgia. I miss my home just on the other side of the Enguri river, my land, my region.

Now imagine someone living beyond the Caucasian ridge¹⁵ or on the other side of the Black Sea. I miss Abkhazia, they miss their home, their Abkhazia and Georgia. At least I'm in Georgia... I'm in Georgia and can speak in my native tongue. They listen to me when I speak because they understand me and I listen to others speaking because I understand them. So many people went to Russia. Many people went to Russia even though they didn't speak Russian...

Friction between IDPs and local people

There are good as well as bad people in every family with four, three, or even two members. Everything is relative. We compare everything with something else. Three hundred thousand people were forced to leave Abkhazia. How can they all be the same? Three hundred thousand people had to leave their homes, they came via mountains, via valleys, via Zugdidi, via Svaneti (mountains), by sea, by - I don't know - air. Everyone was called a **refugee** (IDP). The majority of the Georgian community had the same attitude to all of them - as if a refugee is someone bad. You can hardly expect yourself or someone else to be good to you when they're hungry. A lot of effort and will is needed for reason to prevail over hunger.

When the majority of the population had no means of living, the state helped¹⁶ the IDPs. This kind of assistance caused discontent among the local people. It was like, you are an IDP and they help you, but I am in worse condition than you are even if I have a home. The locals had this attitude: “You’re being helped and you still complain.” So, an IDP complains about the lack of home and a local person complains about the lack of food.

It’s difficult because we had different problems to face and worry about. Only the individual can understand which problems are more serious. There was no limit to that. Such were the difficulties we faced.

Every Georgian knows what it means to give shelter to a displaced person. Giving shelter to a displaced person doesn’t only mean giving accommodation. Imagine, you also have to share with them the food that you’ve kept for your children.

Competition for food

Zugdidi is a real shelter for IDPs. Three hundred thousand people have passed through Zugdidi. If 300,000 people pass through a place the size of Zugdidi at one time, grass wouldn’t grow there for 10 years...

I have to tell you a story. It was 1997, I was sent on a business trip from **Tbilisi** to Zugdidi. The situation there was this: an IDP would curse a Zugdidi local and vice versa. So it was a complete disaster. I arrived in town. My brother was living as an IDP in Zugdidi. I was walking in town because the transport system didn’t work properly at that time. I swear by my mother’s soul that as I was walking, I saw that there was not a single leaf left on the trees, not to mention any fruit below the height that could be reached by a man stretching up his hand. It was early autumn...

I saw someone, the owner, standing by a fig tree picking even a slightly under-ripe fig... My friends

in Tbilisi asked me how it was in Zugdidi. I said: “IDPs have eaten almost everything there.” They wondered why. I said, “I was walking along the street. Someone was standing in his own garden eating an unripe fig. A neighbour called to him: That fig isn’t ripe yet. The answer came back: When it’s ripe, the IDPs will be quick to eat it.” Later this became a joke...

“It’s terrible when you’re not accepted”

During the first two years, Zugdidi locals and anyone who received IDPs couldn’t pick any harvest in their gardens... People were troubled, the community was troubled, and we were troubled as well. When you feel that you’re troubling someone, you feel troubled too... You think that you are an ordinary member of the community, you are normal, but someone can’t stand you. Someone can’t accept you the way they should.

You can’t oblige anyone, but the society should a feel moral obligation to accept you. We were not forced to leave Abkhazia because we were unnecessary; we were forced to leave it because we were Georgians... Where did we go - to Russia or to Turkey? We came to Georgia. And it’s terrible when you’re not accepted here... Well, anyone can try and see how it feels.

“Georgia is only now regaining its strength”

Everyone should hope for God’s mercy. Everyone should believe in God... All those 70 years [under Communism], we were taught that there is no God, that a person should manage their fate. You know, only one man had a Bible in the village and, when he said something he’d read in the Bible, he was called a prophet... When all this became accessible, we realised that a person can’t manage their life without God and without His mercy.

It was thanks to God’s mercy that Georgia is being helped from inside as well as outside to carry

16 The monthly allowance for IDPs is 11 laris (around 7 UD dollars) for those who live in the collective centres, 14 laris (around 9 US dollars) for those who rent accommodation in the private sector.

out the correct policy. I can see that there is some progress. There is employment. How can you ask for higher salaries in a country like Georgia, which is only now regaining its strength...? It's important that you don't have to beg for a piece of bread.

Our income is enough for my family. There is hope, there is something to think of. Things will get better over a period of time if not day by day. I might have got tired of all this and it might only *seem* to me that everything is all right. But even if it just seems so... I still hope that everything will improve. I was angry too. I was hostile until I understood everything... Now that I've analysed everything, I can allow myself to think that we're moving towards well-being and everything will improve.

If I can think this way - if I, whose family was [almost] wiped out, whose children and older relatives were killed, can think so... why can't those on the other side think this way?

The need for dialogue

It would be good if we had a dialogue. It would be good if we could somehow meet one another. I don't mean the way it is arranged now - when they open the door and we close it, and the other way round, when we open the way and they close it. Let people go to Abkhazia and stay there if they want. I just can't understand what's wrong with that. Let people from Abkhazia come and stay here. What's wrong with that? They shouldn't block such relationships between people, no matter whether they are Georgians or Abkhazians, inhabitants of Georgia or those of Abkhazia. However, when I say Georgia I can't imagine Abkhazia separately, but Georgia and Abkhazia are being mentioned separately today.

Let these people talk to one another. Let them seek relationships in their own way. They won't use guns to talk to one another any more. Let the traders

meet traders... let a man meet a man, let a woman meet another woman, let a businessman meet a businessman. Let him do business in Abkhazia if he does it properly. What do you want? There are cases where goods are brought in illegally at night... Trailers and tractors are used to bring in goods. Let these people move freely. Let them pay taxes and bring cigarettes. Can't we smoke Russian cigarettes? Should we smoke only German and American cigarettes? Let's smoke Russian cigarettes too if we want. But let the importer pay a tax.

It's easier to come here from [Abkhazia]. I don't know, I haven't experienced it, but those who travel there say so... Here, when [IDPs] go they ask you... what do you want? What do I want? Well, members of my family were buried there... I have relatives there, a relative died and I'm going to mourn him. Or a relative is getting married and I'm going to the wedding. What, can't I go? Why are you delaying me? Or when someone comes back, people ask: "Where have you been? Aren't you afraid?" - do I have to be afraid? I am a peaceful person - and "Why aren't you afraid standing just 200 metres away from them [Abkhazians] I just don't understand how that happens. I don't think I will ever understand.

"The collective centre is good"

We live in hope as people do everywhere. People feel at home in the collective centres. Why? Because we are all close to one another, former neighbours having common traditions and customs. Now, there are different traditions and customs in all regions of Georgia... When there's some happy occasion in a family, the neighbours help. When there's trouble, they help as well. This way, the problems are easier to deal with.

The collective centre is good, because people are united, with common traditions, and this certainly makes life easier...

“My only dream is to return”

We need to have a sensible approach to the issue... The state is being formed only now. The state has problems. No wonder the IDPs have problems... I think that the regional or city budgets still consider the IDPs, to the extent that they are more directed towards helping the IDPs than the locals. I think the IDPs are still a priority. Anyway, I feel this is the situation in the place where I live and I don't think it's different at other places...because these people are in trouble and they're being helped. Besides there's humanitarian aid. It might be controversial whether it is done properly and with honesty - still, something is being done...

I have only one dream which I want to come true... I learnt from my ancestors, the ones I knew, that in the past *mkvakhi* ('pumpkin' in Georgian) grew well in a place where the house has been burnt down... What if I get back to my burnt-down home...? Pumpkin would provide food for a year. There are so many burnt-down places. Yes, my only dream is to return. What other dream can I have...?

“You should compromise where you can”

A person should be able to compromise. I don't mean he should be submissive. I don't think submissiveness is the same as the ability to compromise. I don't think you should compromise [when it comes to] your motherland, I don't think you should compromise over everything. I made one compromise I still can't forgive myself for and I still can't get over that. But before you compromise where you shouldn't, you should compromise where you can. Some compromise is required in life.

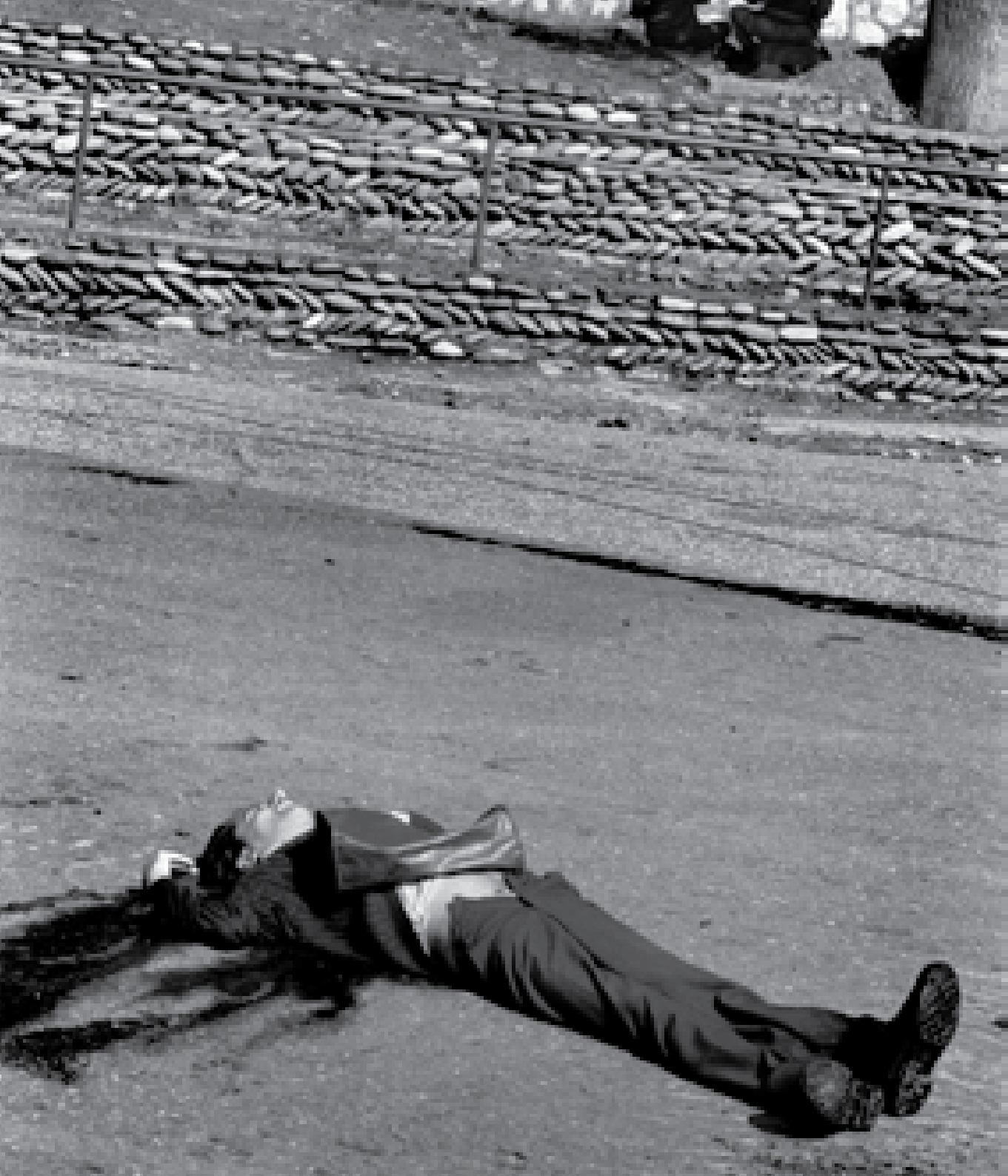
Well, I couldn't do everything, but couldn't we have compromised over certain things...? Not in the way the Abkhazian delegation¹⁷ They just left the session and those who stayed declared Abk-

hazian independence. They should have fought to the end. They should have tried [to stop this]. No matter whether they were a minority or a majority. Why did they give in? I'm not talking about a [significant] compromise like that. I'm talking about a different kind of compromise. Have you been offended? Did someone hurt you? Just compromise so that you don't have to compromise over something that shouldn't be negotiable [like our land] – which is what we did.

An orphaned child is growing up in my family - my grandson. This is the thing that makes me happiest. My son got married and died after some five months. His pregnant wife decided to stay with us. She gave birth to a boy who's called after my late nephew. He's growing, he's very bright. His father would have been proud of him. This warms my heart.

I'm responsible for what I think, for every word I've said. I have no secrets... You should not be afraid of responsibility... And I'm certainly not ashamed of what I've said...

17 The Georgian authorities represented in the Abkhaz government at that period



Mzia

Fifty-three year-old Mzia¹ is a **displaced** teacher from **Gali**. At present she lives with her sister in the **collective centre** in Zugdidi². Mzia moved from Gali after the **May events**. She talks about the tragic things that happened in **Abkhazia** during that time. Mzia lived in Gali in the conflict zone for five years, when conditions were critical and extremely hard to bear. She took the initiative to walk 12 kilometres a day to teach reading and writing to the children who had stayed in Gali. As well as this, Mzia often used her second profession - nursing - to help the population in the conflict zone. She provided emergency treatment, in the absence of a doctor and any other medical services. She was called a “geroinia” (‘heroine’ in Russian) for her virtues and courage.

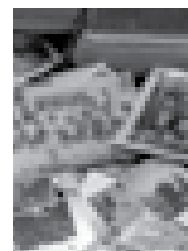
The story was recorded in **Georgian**.

“I remember all the fear”

Gali occupies a constant place in the hearts of those internally displaced persons (IDP) who have had to move elsewhere, which is why there are many things we remember and associate with it. The most painful thing for me in this respect is that I don’t live on my land, and I rarely manage to go there at all.

I witnessed the most tragic events. I lived [in Gali] from 1993 to 1998. Now, as time has passed, it seems to me that it’s a simple story to tell; but back then I remember that we stayed in the woods during the day from 6 in the morning to 12 at night. Then we would come out like bats and the whole village would get together at one house. The village consisted of 13 to 14 people.

I remember all the fear, which was part of the life of those who stayed there. There was despair. It’s most painful for me to remember 27, 28, 29 September [1993, when **Sukhumi** surrendered] – when masses of people were passing by. They all streamed past me because they were coming



over **Enguri Bridge** [administrative border]. The [people of] **Lower Gali** villages were there as well. The whole Gali population had to go through that village to get here.

“I couldn’t leave”

I stayed. I was naïve to think that I can’t do any wrong to anyone [by staying], I hadn’t fought, I hadn’t done anything wrong – [so, I thought,] what could they want of me?

I couldn’t leave. My parents were there and I didn’t want to leave my home. Besides, I had studied there and I had numerous **Abkhazian** friends and acquaintances. This is what I thought, but I was bitterly wrong. This war wasn’t going to let us return easily. Those who forced that war on us – for we believe the war was forced on us – they planned to break all the links we had and take all the benefits themselves. I was wrong – because what I witnessed was a disaster.

I don’t regret staying, because I managed to bring comfort to at least one person and I didn’t allow the guerrillas to kill anyone, whether they were Ab-

1 Not her real name
2 Town in western Georgia

khazians or Georgians – on either side. I managed to convince someone of this, a guy younger than me. By the way, there were some people who did understand [that it was wrong to kill].

“Both sides were equally aggressive”

To be honest, I can't definitely say that one side was wrong and the other completely right. Both sides were equally aggressive – and killing each other. As for me, during the first stage, in the spring of 1995, I mostly avoided those who were pouring in and who, to tell the truth, were mainly interested in looting. They were not coming to defend their land; they were just busy looting. My house was broken into 58 times. They came 58 times and there were different groups each time.

I certainly avoided them. We usually hid. As soon as we saw them coming we would run and hide. There were woods round about and it was pretty

easy to find a hiding place. You only needed to take one step and you were in the woods. All the places around had turned back into woods.

Hiding from the ‘Scorpions’

I remember we had two houses. And one of them was turned into a *nozpe* ('food store' in Russian) by one group called the 'Scorpions'. One member of the group had chosen my house and wrote 'Scorpions' on it.

The Scorpions were the Abkhazian military unit. It might have been a battalion or something like that – the name was written in inverted commas – or it might have been a nickname. I don't know exactly who they were. When we got up in the morning, we would ask each other "Have the Scorpions come?" They had a red ribbon on their sleeves. Later we heard a rumour that the Scorpions had been blown up while passing through the centre of Achigvara village carrying looted goods.

“They think we are changing their history”

I remember one very important thing. We had 12 volumes of the Georgian encyclopedia at home. I remember a unit came and started to search the books. They took away the complete set of world literature. There was the Great Soviet Encyclopedia in Georgian. They took that, but before that they marked those places in the encyclopedia that contained information about Abkhazia. They marked it in red. Someone sat down, diligently read them and marked them. He didn't cross them out; he marked them. It looked like it had been read by an intelligent person, not someone who was part of a mob.

The book had been left open. It was a sign. He must have wanted to make the owners of that rich collection of books understand that it was not



correct, because they think we are changing their history.

I constantly think: what if we've exaggerated something in our history? What if we made a mistake? I'm not a history expert – but what if [the problem was that] we didn't accommodate one another, and what if we've committed a sin?

“War has no rules”

I remember they came once. There were a lot of guerrillas coming in the summer. They pulled out one woman's teeth. She was the same age as my mother. She was shouting, and my sister and I ran to the place where her husband was hiding. There were so many thorns and bushes that we were covered in blood. That man asked them to let her go and promised an ox in exchange. They said they wanted money, but afterwards they agreed. Do you think [that kind of thing] was part of a policy? It was not part of a policy. What was happening was at the level of the mob.

War has no rules, but there must be some human justice. The law governing acceptable behaviour towards the enemy was established in the times of Davit Guramishvili³. At that time, it was impossible for mob rule to prevail. All that was very difficult.

“Blood has never been washed away by blood”

I've seen even worse, but I'll never talk about it. I will never talk about the worst things I've witnessed. There will be no reconciliation if anyone learns about it. That's why I won't ever write a book. I stayed there for five years, and I could write, but I won't; because future generations should not read [this story]. Someone might think that they should read about it and they should know about it. So what? Blood has never been washed away by blood and never will be.

This was the situation I was in. There were five children in the group whose fathers had been killed. I asked those children to write “a letter to the child of their fathers' murderers”. And I saw that the new generation had started to re-evaluate past events, because time heals.

They wrote wonderful things – I don't know if it's been put somewhere [safe] but whoever read it admired it. The result was that they didn't know one another and [realised that] none of them were responsible for what had happened.

Less work of this kind is done [in **Abkhazia**]. I know one very good project, in one good school. It's 'the Abkhazian Literature Project'. It's a successful project done by the **School of Abkhazia** [for the IDPs⁴] in Zugdidi. The children have put their writings on the website and asked for feedback. But not one single Abkhazian child has responded. There are scanned versions of Abkhazian literature [there too]. It's in Georgian as well. They are selected in order to demonstrate the good relationship with Georgia. I wonder why they haven't responded. There was a letter competition as well - that is [they were asking for] pen-pals. Again, no one responded to the Georgian children.

“We should have spoken...a little Abkhazian”

Those who have access to the internet have another problem. They don't speak Georgian. The children told me they had a good idea. They want the school to offer a course in the Abkhazian language so that they can communicate [with their pen-pals].

I think we should have spoken at least a little Abkhazian. You know they did it pretty well when we were there. I saw how badly the Abkhazians behaved; but our people too may have been behaving equally badly. Still, I watched their classes in the Abkhazian

3 Distinguished Georgian writer (1705-1786)

4 So called IDP schools or Abkhaz schools in exile which is managed by the Abkhaz Ministry of Education and Culture in exile

language with pleasure. They broadcast the lessons in the evenings. Not many people had the opportunity to watch them. There was no television there. I just watched five programmes and learned several words. Sometimes I say them and people laugh, wondering where I've learnt them. It's just that the more languages you speak the better.

I think we were behind the times. When we lived there there was no demand for teaching Abkhazian in schools. That was not right.

"We want to promote reconciliation"

I moved here from Abkhazia in 1998. I talk on our behalf because the [Abkhazian] attitude towards us is stricter. I think we Georgians are more tolerant by nature. We always want to promote reconciliation. I asked some Abkhazians I have good relations with to help me go to **Sukhumi**. They are very intelligent people. My visit was about educational issues. I don't know how they'll respond now, but three years ago they advised me against going. They said it was inappropriate, that I might not have been understood.

They were afraid too. They were very educated Abkhazians, but they kept silent at that time.

"The bridge collapsed for the second time"

To be honest, I moved because it was already extremely dangerous to stay there. You should assess the situation carefully before you make a move. In 1998 someone from our government didn't assess things properly, which is why Gali, which had almost been returned [to us], was lost again... There was a school for 500 children in my village. It was attended by 240 children. The school worked. Other villages did the same. It was a very good way of returning – without war – because the young would integrate, and I think it would have been good. After what happened⁵ the schools were burned down.

Our army moved in. People were excited. The reservists were saying there would be support. Frankly speaking, those of us who had stayed there were very worried because we knew things would end as they had before. The bridge collapsed for the second time; relationships deteriorated again. God save us from continuing like that!

"I would walk 12 kilometres to help someone"

When I was there, I never refused anyone who asked me for professional help. Sometimes I would get up early in the morning and walk 12 kilometres to provide help to someone, to do something good. There was nothing like guerilla activities; these were just human relationships.

The following happened once. I can't say whether it was a Georgian who did it or an Abkhazian. I had walked 6 kilometres and had another 6 kilometres to go. For 3 kilometres there was not a single living person. The place had already turned back into woods and the fields were covered with grass. Some people – who were speaking pretty good Russian and also **Megrelian** – emerged from [the trees]. They were about to cross the road when one of them looked at me. I must have been as white as a sheet. He told me in Russian not to be afraid. "This isn't the first time you've been on this road, and we have nothing against you. Go on as you like, we know you are not going to do anything bad."

That unit must have had a camp there or they might have come there pretty often. They must have seen me on the road. I remember as well that I was going to do the same job, a good job, while they were pointing their guns at me, firing in the air, laughing; I'm running and they're making fun of me. Well, what can you do? That's war.

The good job I mentioned was teaching the children who stayed there, for free. We did that and the families kept it a secret.

There were very few there who could do that. Two years had gone by and the children who were there had to learn to read and write, or they might not have been accepted by the school. I couldn't make them come to my place in such danger; so I went to them.

Working as a nurse

All the professional people moved here. No one stayed there [in Abkhazia]. I don't judge anyone. It was my stupid decision [to stay]. I respect those days, whether they were good or bad. I consider those days when I was helping someone to be the best days of my life.

I had my second profession as well. I could provide medical service too, as I was a nurse. I'm happy I was given a chance to do that. Someone might have a problem with their kidneys and need medical assistance - but there was no doctor there. At that time one would walk 7-8 kilometres to help them. Even if you only used the simple method of bathing them in warm water and easing their pain that way, they would bless you as you left in the morning and you would go away sleepless but happy. Nothing can compare with that feeling.

There was an epidemic of 'botkin'⁶ in the village. No one could do anything. I remembered from my grandmother's medical handbook what could be done in village conditions: how you can treat the patient with honey, great plantain and other plants. You can help somehow, prevent a person from dying, and before he is taken to the doctor a week later, you can at least lessen their pain. There were numerous such situations, which is why I didn't come here earlier. On the contrary I did a lot of good.

"He told me I was a heroine"

I went there [to Abkhazia] four years ago [first time after displacement]; my relative died. Three years

ago I went to the mourning. I was afraid to go there and I always avoided it, as I knew there would be Abkhazians there. The village received me so [rap- turously] that one Abkhazian thought their national hero had arrived. One Abkhazian man told me his mother was from Gudavi⁷ and he was from Gudauta⁸. He said his mother was almost my age. He told me he considered me a *героиня* [*geroinia* - 'heroine' in Russian]. Then he stood up and kissed me. So many people were gathered around me that there was no space! That young man told me he would be certain to tell his mother that he'd met me. That young man held a high position there.

Women "badly treated by both sides"

There wasn't an Abkhazian population in our vil- lage; but we have Abkhazian daughters-in-law. I believe those daughters-in-law did their best to help their children and their relatives and the Georgians. They stayed there because they were the wives of Georgians. I remember three such women who stayed there with us and I can't de- scribe how strong the pain is when I remember them. They were not respected either by the Ab- khazians or by the Georgians. They were badly treated by both sides. If I've had any troubles it's only because I had a sensible attitude towards them [and defended them] when they were sometimes blamed for no reason by the mob. Two of them were driven out of there. I'll always think of them as the real symbols of Abkhazian and Georgian mothers.

The Abkhazians were responsible for driving one of them out and the Georgians were responsible for driving the other out. They accused one of them of having six children by a Megrelian man and threatened to 'deal with her'. She came to me asking for help. Her husband had been beaten and she had been beaten. She was covered in blood. At

that time those women didn't receive any support from our side either.

I remember four or five years ago [the Abkhazians] spied on us and I'll tell you why. I don't want to sound boastful, but we lived very well. We were a hardworking family and we had everything [we needed]. Really, we were well off. And we had everything. We didn't have a shortage of anything. Whenever they broke in and turned everything upside-down, we would tidy up the house. It turned out that they wondered who lived there.

Our attitude was, OK, they've taken things. So what? Sit down in the woods and knit something. They've taken away the shelf. Well, you can make one yourself and cover it with what you've knitted and make it look nice. We had an orchard and a garden too. We looked after everything. By the way, they were afraid as well. They would always fire their guns before they came. They didn't want to encounter something unwanted either. So they would fire a gun a couple of times and then they would come. A couple of people might have had a gun in the village - but who would dare to do anything? That was the only occasion when they waited until we returned. They said they wanted to see who lived in that house, which was so well taken care of after so many break-ins.

“Can you imagine a tragedy worse than that?”

They caused trouble. They pulled one woman's teeth out. They set fire to the house. When the men came out and tried to put it out, another unit came and killed all eight of them. That happened in the evening. We put the coffins two at a time on the small carts [which we call “tachka”] and buried them at night as we were afraid they might have taken away the deceased by force. There were many such cases. A couple was hid-

ing with me in the woods whose son's body had been taken to the headquarters in Nabakevi⁹. The parents wished they'd been killed as well. Can you imagine a tragedy worse than that? As if it was not enough that they killed their son, they also took away his body.

By the way, Ruslan Kishmaria¹⁰ – I don't know if he's still the governor of Gali district – took a key role in returning that body to the parents. The embittered mother rushed towards him and Ruslan Kishmaria even brought back their second son who had been arrested.

When the hostages or the dead bodies had to be returned, the fathers would stay at home – while the mothers were more active. Maybe because [the Abkhazians] would kill the men more easily and their wives were afraid of that and didn't let them go. It's natural.

They drove into the garden of my former teacher with *beteer* (tanks). His mother came out, thinking they wanted some food and she did what Megrelians usually do when they bless a person; and she was shot with her hand raised [in blessing].

An encounter with the ‘enemy’

There were numerous such situations. I'd like to repeat that it was done at the level of the mob. Because once an Abkhazian man came to my place to rob us – I was surprised by the way he talked. In the beginning I thought he was a bad man. He rudely told me that we usually tidied up the house and then we ran away. I talked to him honestly and told him that I didn't like the war; that we were not to be blamed for the war, and that other people, those who gained from it, were to blame. You know, I would never have imagined that he would agree with me. He told me that I spoke good Russian but he wanted to speak in Megrelian with me.

9 Village in Abkhazia

10 Head of the administration union in Gali district

He spoke Megrelian very well. When he spoke Russian, he had an Abkhazian accent.

He said he absolutely agreed with me. I asked him how he, the descendent of Kamachichi,¹¹ could talk to women with the help of guns, and he replied that my words made him put the gun away. Suddenly my sister fell on her knees in front of the man and begged him not to shoot us - because we hadn't done anything wrong, we were just unprotected women. At that time we had an 84-year-old woman at home. She had no one to take care of her so we'd taken her to our place. We asked the man not to frighten her. He immediately stood up and said that he had finished talking with us. I'll never forget him going backwards to the door, holding the gun. I asked him what *he* was afraid of. "You have too good a brain for me to trust you," he said.

He also said he was worried that we would be harassed by others, and advised us against staying there that day. "We can't take responsibility for those who come after us. There are units we can't control." I'm afraid I might cause him harm which is why I won't mention his name. He told us to mention his name: it turned out that he had a high position and [he implied that] when we mentioned his name we were less likely to be harassed. We would also get a certificate showing that we had not taken part in the fighting and that we were local. "It won't be treachery or anything like that. It will be a formal document for the displaced persons, in the Abkhazian language," he said.

"He apologised on behalf of his nation"

When I asked him how he, the descendent of Kamachichi, could do things like that, he answered that it was his dream for our people to live together again. He said he was determined we would live together again. He said he was sure there would

be a time when we would have a passport with neither Abkhazian nor Georgian citizenship written there. "At least our descendents will achieve this. If people like you are on the other side, you've converted me and I've started thinking about it, and our descendents will have a passport like that and it will be an ideal society. This war has not been caused either by me or by you, and I'm sorry for this. I apologise on behalf of my nation." That's what he said.

I didn't leave immediately as he had advised. I didn't follow his words and also I didn't leave as he didn't entirely trust me either and went back to the centre of the village walking backwards. It was at that time that I realised that they are as scared as we are and someone has misled them. Someone should work on this.

"Only one side does the talking"

I still think that the government controls the NGOs. It's my personal opinion. For example, the document on the integration of the IDP¹² was not prepared with the participation of the IDP. That law was written for them without their involvement. When the law on the IDP is written, their opinions should be taken into account. But there, everything was done as the government wanted.

I attended one meeting - I was invited - where such a document was being drawn up. The person in charge admitted that it didn't matter what we did, that the government wanted it that way. I said sarcastically: long live his government and the NGOs. In my opinion the NGOs should be a support for me and the government should be an even stronger support.

Only one side - the Georgian side - does all the talking. The war really was between this side and that [Abkhazian] side. Well, the Abkhazian NGOs

11 Heroine in the fictional story "Kamachichi" by Dimitry Gulia, an Abkhazian writer

12 State Strategy on Internally Displaced Persons adopted in February 2007 by the Government of Georgia

might really be extremely weak, but they still exist. Those NGOs should be interested in the same [conflict resolution]. Otherwise, having information from only one side doesn't make any sense. On the contrary, they should act as mediators.

The need for media sensitivity

The situation is deteriorating there [in Abkhazia], according to what is broadcast here. A single tactless phrase might have a huge effect. They listen to our media. There are families with pretty sensitive antennae. They mostly watch the Odishi TV channel from Zugdidi.

One very clever, intelligent woman went to Abkhazia. The situation was very unpleasant, but she had to go without permission because of a family tragedy. She says there were television sets in every room. She listened to all the channels there. I don't know where she was taken, but somewhere in the centre.

In the place where she was questioned for investigation purposes – as she had come from Zugdidi – the whole wall was covered with television sets showing the [different] channels. So they watch all the channels. When someone here talks tactlessly, saying he'll do this or he'll do that, it kindles their aggression.

Some people think the job can be done with the help of force. When they hear [what we're saying], they block the roads, attack people's homes and frighten them. Poor people can't come here and the situation becomes very difficult. Or [they get upset] when you declare that you've opened the patriots' camps¹³ in the middle of Abkhazia. First of all, Ganmukhuri¹⁴ is not in the middle of Abkhazia; besides, [people in Abkhazia] immediately started arresting the boys to take them to the army and none of them are allowed to go to the camp.

I haven't been to Gali and they say the situation

has improved now. I've been as far as 50 kilometres from the Enguri river and I haven't seen a single house. There are very few young people. The majority are elderly people and everyone is very hard up. There is still an observable tendency to treat the IDPs living there differently from those living here. I think it's because of the social conditions. If our government saw the place where I'm living, they'd definitely be shocked. Those unplastered walls.

The situation is similar everywhere. There are no [decent living] conditions. Yesterday one IDP died in the Marble Settlement¹⁵. The [body] of the poor man was placed in someone else's house because they didn't have a single appropriate room in which to place the deceased person.

Division and discrimination

Let's take the schools. The children living in Gali get all the attention. You should never divide the IDP here and those there. The IDP living here have been completely ignored recently. Those there are not exactly spoilt with attention either, but if there are camps or holidays or excursions there is a clear division. I always think everything should be done fairly. Show him he's your brother; he should meet you there.

We talk about integration but with such projects we've created such a gap between the children there and those here that I don't know how they will interact there [in Abkhazia]. I think this problem is worth thinking about. For example, the training for the doctors and teachers living on that side – wonderful, very good – but don't the doctors and teachers living here need training? Aren't we getting ready for the return? Aren't these people going there? Aren't they valuable resources? This tendency has been very clear lately.

The fact that young people go to the patriots'

13 Summer youth camps financed by the President's foundation for young people who are socially insecure, either IDPs or living in the conflict zone.

14 Village on the border of Gali and Zugdidi

15 Suburb in Zugdidi where a large number of IDPs live in the collective centres

camps is over-publicised. However, I welcome the fact that all children have [access to] grants. I like it, but I don't like it being turned into a pompous affair.

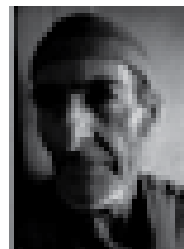
“Each day is a joy”

After the time spent I in the woods in 1993-1998, each day is beautiful and wears a bright crown. I found out that I had lived in an ideal world [before] as I didn't know what war was like. Believe me, each day is a joy, full of flowers and happiness for me. You know I was very young when my father died and I thought it was my life had ended. Girls have a special attitude towards their fathers, and that's what I thought, although everyone was very sympathetic towards me. But after what I witnessed during the war, each day seems a thing of beauty to me.

I wish for the time to come very soon when I'll no longer remember a single day of the war.



Alexandre



Eighty-three year-old Alexandre¹ is a **displaced** person from **Tskhinvali**. At present he is living alone in the **collective centre** in Gori.² He has children but they and their families live in different parts of Georgia. They too are IDPs and cannot help him because, like him, they have financial problems. Alexandre worked all his life and now he is heartbroken that he is in such a desperate situation in his old age.

The story was recorded in **Georgian**.

“I never depended on anyone”

I had a wife and two children. My wife died here [in Tskhinvali] in 1965. My children grew up. My daughter got married here. My son and his family are **refugees** (IDPs) in Borjomi.³

I was pretty content with my life... I had everything – food, drinks, clothes. Everything was enough. I've never been greedy and we had everything appropriate for middle-class people with a reasonable income.

I had my own two-storey house. It was adequately equipped. I never depended on anyone. I helped my relatives, my neighbours, everyone, whenever I could. I graduated from Tskhinvali Pedagogical Institute in 1949...I worked as a laboratory assistant for several years but the salary was too low. So I gave up working there and got a job at one of the state organisations of the Autonomous Region of **South Ossetia**.

“I left without even taking the key”

At the beginning I thought this conflict was ridiculous. I never imagined I would find myself in such a desperate situation. I even laughed at the possibility of such a tense relationship between us and the **Ossetians**. However, I had to leave... [The Ossetians] would come three or four times

every night... They would take whatever I had, such as wine, bread, food, drink. They demanded everything and took it. We were forced to leave our home. I left without even taking the key... I thought I would return in a day or two and live a normal life. I took my children, my wife [from my second marriage]. I already had grandchildren. When we came here, we found shelter in this hotel... I took nothing with me... I left everything I had [in Tskhinvali].

I've been living here since [1999]. My wife died of a nervous breakdown on 11 July last year (2006)... So I'm left alone, not able to do anything...

“We should be together again”

What breaks my heart most of all is that this shouldn't have happened between us and the Ossetians. We Georgians are not the kind of people who would make them – the Ossetians – find themselves in the unacceptable situation that we are in now. This is what breaks my heart. How could people who have been living together for so long... people who have spent all their lives together... – in the end, how could this have happened?

I don't know what the future will be... I have no hope that I'll live till we return. Otherwise, just as the nose can't be separated from the face, the relationship between us and the Ossetians can't end. We should be together again! We should for-

1 Not his real name

2 Town in Shida Kartli in eastern Georgia

3 Resort in mid-east Georgia

give one another; we should hold our hands to one another. Because they can't take our [homes], they can't take them away. They should be here [in South Ossetia] with us. They should die here with us; they should be buried here with us.

Financial assistance withdrawn

My thoughts and feelings are still with my house. Only the outer part of the house is left. They took everything away, broke and destroyed everything. Only the walls are left; only the walls and nothing else... I've already told you I was so traumatised by this situation that I lost the desire to live [*stammering*]. I am 83 and I wish my life would end as soon as possible. I'd like to die... I can't stand this disaster any longer... This is my tortured, tortured life... I am isolated like this. I have nothing to do.

I'm left with this pension⁴, which is 38 laris.⁵ I'm very, very disappointed. For a while I was

also given financial assistance for people living on the verge of poverty... I received it for a few months only. I have no other income. My children are hard up as well. There's nothing to hide about it. My son is in Borjomi. He has a wife and children. He has brought them up. What assistance can I expect of him...? My daughter lives in Akhalgori.⁶ She has her family to take care of. They can't help me. They just drop in once in a while to see how I am doing and that's all.

The authorities have cancelled my allowance although I'm living in such poor conditions. They came as if to check my living conditions, as if to see what I had, and cancelled the allowance. Sometimes I wake up at night and think: what wrong have I done? You know what reason they gave? They said it was because I had a television and a fridge.

The television – we bought it when my grandchild was born. My son bought it... It was second-hand [*stammering*]. Besides it's broken. It doesn't work... It just looks good when you look at it, but it's completely broken. This fridge, this was also thrown away...it's a very old fridge. I worked at that time and I got it repaired. I paid 60 laris for it. They told me that I had a fridge. But dear me, what can you get out of it if you haven't put anything in it? Don't you need money to put food in the fridge? This television can't feed me. They've also told me that I've had more space [than I needed] since my wife died. How can they say this? How can they be so insolent? The room is just 12 square metres, no more.

I was going to make a complaint in Tbilisi; but I was stopped. I was told it wouldn't work, that theirs is the last word. This has completely destroyed me spiritually and morally. They just brought me to the ground and kicked me instead of cheering me up. Now I have a pension of 38 laris



4 Pension for retired people; in addition to this he was involved in a poverty reduction programme and receiving the poverty allowance for a few months until lit was cancelled

5 Georgian currency; 1 US dollar equals 1.6 laris

6 Village in Shida Kartli near South Ossetia

and [an IDP] allowance of 11 laris. That's all the assistance I receive. It's impossible to live on that amount of money... Each kopek⁷ is estimated... There are 30-31 days in a month. Now, how much money per day do you get? Besides, I find it difficult to live in the collective centre – noise...bad conditions...

“I want peace”

I've often wished to live in an isolated place, where I would be completely alone and where I would do whatever I want... It might be my fault as well, it might be the fault of my age as well. I'll be 83 years old soon. I can't stand arguments between women; especially between the neighbours. I can't stand rows between children. I want peace. I wish I had something small somewhere where I could be on my own.

First of all I wish for everything to be all right. People are tired of so much trouble. We don't have electricity in winter... We always pay; when it is not enough we collect money and pay; then the company give us electricity. But it's not enough. They torment us just as they like. We are in a very bad state, especially during winter. As for water, it isn't even worth talking about water... As if [lack of] electricity was not enough, they don't give us water either. Our patience has already [*stammering*] reached the limit.

“This has broken my heart”

We cannot demonstrate initiative because we are weak. We can't reach out... We have a lot of problems to settle. It's impossible to bear this any longer. The government used to help us in a way. They used to provide us with either food or clothes or whatever... Everything has stopped. Well, what can I do at my age of 83? I'm not interested in anything. I just want my children and grandchildren

to be fine, healthy. I think only about this, nothing else...

And one more thing. I'm hurt, I'm very hurt. I never expected such things from [Ossetians]. And another thing, that girl [from the State Assistance Program who carried out inspection] came and left me without anything to survive on... This has broken my heart. The lack of justice... Isn't it enough that my wife died? [*Laughs ironically*] She told me that since my wife had died I acquired more space [than I needed]. Isn't it enough that I'm left without anything? She said I had a fridge. But if you don't put something in it, what will it give to you? How can it feed you...? She said I had a television. It seems that the television and the fridge can provide me with food, drink, clothes... How can they say this - how can they?



Rosa

Rosa¹ is 65 years old. She lived in **Gali** in the conflict zone and had to leave with her five children during the war. Her husband was killed there, in particularly horrific circumstances. At present, she is living with her children and grandchildren in the **collective centre** in Tskneti². From time to time she visits her house, which was partly burnt down. Rosa talks about the experience of displacement during the **conflict** as well as life in the collective centre after the war.

The story was recorded in **Georgian**

“Dogs and pigs ate...my man”

My husband was killed [in Gali]...he saw us off, the whole family, and he stayed... They killed him the following morning... He'd told me to take the children and go. "I'll stay, everyone is here, so how can I be a *чучело* (coward; literally 'scarecrow' in Russian) and run away?" he asked me. He was young, 52 years old. I'm not that old either, but I've grown old after what we've gone through.

During the war they punished everyone, no matter whether a person was fighting or not... I always remember my husband's words. He said, "I like Abkhazian dances. We're on pretty good terms with **Abkhazians**, why should they kill me? I'll stay here. When they arrive, I'll play Abkhazian songs on the cassette player for them"... He had no time to switch on the cassette player... They burned down everything in front of him and shot him there... No one even asked if he was a combatant or not.

Dogs and pigs ate my man ... I wasn't able to bury him. I don't even have a proper grave [for him] ... My neighbours collected only some parts of his body...

That day when he was killed...four [Georgian neighbours] had come over to our place. There



was a table in the basement where my husband's workshop was and he would welcome whoever came there...they were sitting and eating there. It was already morning... They say my husband had brought out vodka, wine... Suddenly [the Abkhazians] broke the window pane with a rifle butt and saw four guys sitting and eating... They climbed inside and pointed at my husband ...He was large and they thought he would be strong. They told him to go with them to someone's house, to help them take the possessions from there and load the car... My husband answered: "I'm not the kind of a man to break into another person's house. Here you are – take whatever you want from my house, but I won't go to another person's place." Still, they forced him to go there.

“Only his trousers and belt were left”

While they were looking for something there... he ran away. He ran away but didn't run very far. He got back home. You need luck...in everything. They made him leave again and shot him in the field. They killed him...

Before killing him they set fire to the house and asked... "How do you find it - that we're burning your house down?" Mine was a really well de-

1 Not her real name
2 Hamlet near Tbilisi

signed house. "Fine," my husband said...[and] they kicked him. They were just children of 17 or 18. "How is it now?" they asked again. "Very good," he said again. Then he gathered all his strength and, thinking they'd kill him anyway, threw the explosive that he had in his pocket. He had the explosive in his pocket because he'd expected to be killed, and he wanted to kill them too. So he threw it, but it did not explode. After that he was shot.

A neighbour got there and buried him. Only 10 centimetres of earth were dug out where he was buried. A pig dug him up and ate my man [*tears well up in her eyes*]. Only his trousers and belt were left. We made a coffin, put them inside and buried that. There's nothing else in the earth - neither his head nor his skull... He was killed in my yard and I want to cry at the place where he was killed. I don't want to cry when I go to the cemetery, because there's nothing of him buried there, so what shall I cry about?... I know for sure that he was killed at home and that's where I cry.

Ten people in my street were killed that day – a woman and nine men. They killed whoever they came across that day... [These people] had done nothing wrong but still...OK, there was some reason in the case of my husband and [that's why] they killed him, but they killed the woman only because she screamed when they killed her brother...

I receive no help from the government because they told me my husband didn't fight. Isn't it the reason that he was the victim of the genocide. His death ruined my whole family. My son, who has four children, has never recovered from the grief.

"Everyone is afraid...to name the murderer"

One more story. My sister was killed [in Gali] nine years ago. Poor woman. She stayed here in Zugdidi³ district for three months. Her husband stayed there; he couldn't manage to come over [here]. So she went there. She was killed there. She was such a fine woman...everyone knew her. Abkhaz-



ians –the head of Gali administration - sent me a message; even the UN representative came to see me, together with an interpreter. They asked me to tell them if I had any *намек* (idea; 'hint' in Russian) who the murderer was. They promised to find the murderer...

What can you tell them? If you say anything, they'll kill you... We told them we didn't know if she had been killed by Abkhazians or by Georgians. We said this and let them go, because we can't say anything. If, for example, you blame someone, they'll kill you at night. They'll give *заказ* ('the order' in Russian) to kill you... That's why everyone is afraid to name the murderer even if they know who it is...

Leaving Gali

That morning [my husband] stayed at home; he had seen us off at night. We left the car at home because it was a problem getting petrol... Someone else gave us a ride. As we were walking, we saw the tanks... We had children. I was carrying my grandson who was three months old. Soldiers with guns were sitting on the tank. I asked them to help me and give me a ride, as I had to carry the children. But there was no room there [for our possessions]... We had to leave behind everything we were carrying...

I put one child in one car, the second child in another car and I carried the three-month-old baby with me. The children were starving. We got to the **bridge** [administrative border]. They parked the tank there... They blocked the road... It was so difficult coming here, separated in different cars. Then we went on foot...

"I no longer wanted to live"

We left the cars and came here, to this side, to the village of Rukhi in Zugdidi district... The baby was

starving. I didn't even have his food – I was so scared that I left it behind... I went to a stranger's place and asked them to give me some tea for the baby... My daughter and the baby's mother, [my daughter-in-law], had stayed [on the other side of the border]. They made me go in someone's car with the baby.

I went through such a terrible experience that I no longer wanted to live.

It was a real torture to come over to this side... I left the baby with a family. I knew no one there but I wanted him to be fed and kept warm... I could hardly get any food for the baby... Afterwards, my daughter-in-law and her [other] children came to this side too. We stayed temporarily with that family.

We were expecting my husband too, but he didn't come...he promised to join us, but he didn't come...

My sons-in-law escaped here too. The Abkhazians fired at them but they managed to come over after a lot of trouble.

"Still living in one room"

We have a room [in the collective centre]. We've been trying to do something, but we're still living in one room. There are seven of us... How can 11 roubles (lari)⁴ be enough? My daughter-in-law has a nervous condition. She is ill and is receiving treatment. I swear by my children she pays about 200 or 300 roubles (lari) for her medication. She's worried about the children. This is how we are... Four children need care, they need education... they need clothes, need to go to school...

One child has finished school. Now he's at home. He isn't studying [at university]... Another is a [university] student. I don't know how we manage to

4 The narrator is using the roubles (Russian currency) and lari interchangeably, the lari is the national currency of Georgia: 1 lari= 0.6 US dollars

pay for his tuition... So many tears, so many worries... I'm upset...can you see how much weight I've lost? I look terrible, but what can I do? Forget about me!

My son works hard. He works at different houses every day. He brings something for the children... Once, one of his children got angry and complained, asking why their parents had given birth to so many children if they couldn't bring them up in proper conditions. She was four years old when we left Abkhazia; how can she know what we had at that time? We were so well off...at that time we could have brought up not just four children but 10!

Re-roofing the house in Gali

Once I was called to the UN. They offered materials for the roof in Gali. My house there was in the kind of condition that made us eligible for re-roofing... They sent us a letter here, with the help of those who knew us [in Abkhazia].

We went to Gali six years ago...in 2000-2001. I went to Gali in June. The UN provided me with whatever they could. But my house was too big for the amount of the roofing slates I was provided with. There were 90 roofing slates, but 150 were needed for my house... So it was not enough. I told them that one side of the house was left without cover. [They said] it must be a leisure centre, not a house! They wouldn't give me any more roofing slates.

My daughter was in Moscow. They struggled to collect money for me... I was scared that I might get killed because of that money, but such a reliable man brought it to me. I bought the [remaining] roofing slates immediately and covered the house. My neighbours helped me too... My husband had always been good to them, so they were happy to help. I swear by my children, everyone helped. That's how we re-roofed the house. But the house that was burnt has been covered

– that's all. My neighbour takes care of it and uses the yard as well.

My daughter and son-in-law still go to Gali. My daughter's mother-in-law and brother-in-law are there. They are both ill with cancer... The poor woman remained there but we let her know about the registration⁵ taking place and she's coming here today. She's on the way now...

My daughter's relatives live in the town centre. No one bothers them. No one tells them anything... But you eat if you have something to eat; if you don't have anything you just look at the sky. What else can you do?

"My health has completely collapsed"

When I first went there I knew that the house I had worked hard to build had been burnt down... But I was looking at the place where my husband had been buried... First I looked at that place and then I started screaming and crying...

I thought he had been buried. But when we dug out the coffin and opened it we saw...it was filled with sawdust. There were some bones wrapped in paper, torn parts of the body and torn trousers in the sawdust... I wanted neither the house nor anything else after seeing that.

I remember it all and that's why I've lost so much weight. My health has completely collapsed... Everyone else sleeps at night but I still lie awake. I constantly think about what I have [in Gali] and whether I'll ever go there, whether I'll be buried there.

"You can't run away"

when I went to bed at night at my neighbour's place. When I heard a dog barking, I would get up and go to the window, without making any noise. I didn't want

my neighbours to wake up, as I was staying at their place. If someone had come, I wouldn't even have been able to run away... You can't run away, they'll kill you and that's all... Who knows how many people of my age were killed like that, lying in bed...people who had never done anyone any harm.

A lot of people live in Gali... I've been told that only five families have not returned to Dimitrov Street, which is 1 kilometre long, and [I have been] asked why I haven't come back. Why should I go there? It's difficult for me. They killed my husband; dogs ate him. My heart is not set on going there... I'd go crazy living there alone. If he hadn't been killed in the yard, I might strengthen my heart and go...I would stay at home during the day and go to a neighbour's at night...

Why should I go? I can't earn anything there. All I had earned was burnt down. Now I am here with my children. Sometimes I cook food for them or help them with the housework and so on. I wish they'd let us go [to Abkhazia]. That's all I want.

"They're so embittered with life"

If we're thrown out of here [because of the **privatisation** of the centres], they'll give us a little money. What shall I buy with that little money? I prefer the house I have [in Gali] to everything. I wish I could live there! My children would repair it. A year might not be enough, it might take about two or three years and...somehow [we'd manage]... We'd live there on that little money... As long as we're safe...that's what I'm interested in. As long as we're safe there.

They call it *очистка* ('clearance' in Russian) when the police go there. During the *очистка*...they go from home to home and take away whatever the population has, including piglets, chickens, turkeys, everything... Not so much in the town [of Gali], but bad things still happen in the vil-

lages... They still go there... They kill whoever they want...

Men with masks hang around at night... They must be locals... You can't blame Abkhazians; they don't hang around at night. Only locals hang around at night, but they are so embittered that they can even kill their own people... They're so embittered with life. Those who are dissatisfied with life do terrible things. Three years ago they broke into the house of my daughter-in-law's mother and killed her with a rifle butt...

"I can't go back if [Georgian] rule is not restored"

The young have no income at all... That's life. Even if they let me, I can't go back if the [Georgian] rule is not restored... A lot of people returned to the town. They say only percent have not returned so far.

When I go to mourning⁶ or to see my relatives there they tell me to come back, as everyone is there. But what can I do there without my children and grandchildren? ...What have I left in that burnt-down house? I see nothing but stones there. Why should I stay there? At least I can see my children here while I'm alive. Anyway, I don't think I've got too much time left...I can't live without my children and grandchildren.

My son says that he can't be nice to Abkhazians since they killed his father. He says, "Yes, those who are there [in Gali] are being nice to them, but I can't do that"... Those whose family members were not killed can adjust to life there.

My son-in-law also refuses to go there. However, his brother lives there pretty well... He has opened a drug store there...he even bought a house and has everything he needs... No one harms him. They know he didn't take part in the war... The

6 A tradition in western Georgia. The deceased is placed at home for one week. During the mourning period relatives and close friends visit the family to offer condolences and pay their respects. The body is buried on the seventh day.

Abkhazians have checked out his past history and treat him pretty well.

They have very good relations [with neighbours] there. Once I visited my son-in-law [in Gali] who was ill... At their home [Georgians and Abkhazians] were having a meal together... They treat one another very well.

One of my daughters got married and lives in Moscow. Another daughter is living in the apartment block further up the hill. The third daughter is living in a rented flat; she doesn't have a flat [of her own] at all. She was late moving from there [Abkhazia] and there was no room left for her in the collective centre...

My son is here. He has to take care of four children... I tell him to sell the house in Gali if he doesn't want to go there. By the way, everyone who has the local passport⁷ can go there. No one bothers them... It doesn't even cost anything to go there. Those who are registered in Gali are allowed to go.

“We expect to be evicted”

It's very difficult to live here in the collective centre. They came the other day to carry out the registration process as they're going to evict us. We held protest meetings... No one knows what's going to happen... We don't know when we'll get thrown out of here. We can't do repairs or anything. Every three months we expect to be evicted. Even changing the wallpaper makes no sense in view of the money wasted. I'm scared. I constantly worry about food. What will we eat today? What will we eat tomorrow?

Cramped conditions

Our living space is too small. There are too many of us for this room. There are four children, a wife and a husband. The husband and wife need a separate

room... The boys are already grown up. They need a separate room too... The girl moved upstairs, into a room like a *кухня* ('kitchen' in Russian). She put a *кровать* ('bed') in and she lives there. My little grandson, the one I carried here in my own hands, is in the seventh form at school. He's upstairs too.

The room downstairs is terrible. It's terribly damp. But those two boys are downstairs there with me. It's damp and my legs hurt... I feel so bad that I wear *chokha* ('woollen socks'). But I prefer not to tell my children that anything hurts, so as not to bother them... That's our life...

We mostly depend on the [IDP] allowance of 11 laris...there's no work. The boy has finished school and says he'll find the university tuition money himself if we only can get him some work. I have very good children and I'm not afraid that they'll do anything bad. But I'm sorry for him. He wants to work. He asks his father to let him help in some way... My poor son works in a workshop where windows and doors are made. The boy helps him there... They give them 20% of the profit. They earn something if there's money coming in; otherwise they do nothing for a month or two...

“I prefer the bare land there to the palaces here”

What do I have here? I had a good life there, in Abkhazia... I'd love to go there... That house that was burnt now has a roof over it. They can take that roof, just let me go there. I just want to see my house and live there... My son wants that too. He says that [seeing] the trees there will be enough for him [to survive]. If they let us go, I prefer the bare land there to the palaces here... I don't have any means to restore whatever is burnt there, but I still prefer that empty place... It's mine – whereas we don't know when they're going to throw us out of this place...

7 Form N 9 – temporary identification card provided together with a pass, which enables a person to enter Abkhazia

The children prefer it here, because they've been growing up here for 15 years. My grandson, who has just finished school, says he won't give up his grandfather's house. He hopes that this situation will come to an end some time [soon] and that we'll be allowed to go back... He says he personally won't give it up even if others go wherever they want. The children are happy here because they don't know what it's like back there. They're already 17 or 18; they don't like [the idea of going] there because they know nothing about it.

My grandson was four years old when we moved here, so what does he know? I took him once [to Gali], when we had a kind of mourning for my poor husband. It was then that he saw the house and he was extremely surprised. He never imagined that we could own such a big house!



Eliso

Eliso is 27 years old **internally displaced person (IDP)** from the village of Okhurei in the Ochamchire District of Abkhazia. Eliso was 13 when she became an IDP. At present she is living in the **collective centre** in Zugdidi¹. The **conflict** had a serious effect on her family. Her mother had to go to Russia in search of work in order to improve the economic situation of the family. Her brother intends to go to Iraq. Financial need was the main reason for his decision too. Eliso is a presenter of a music programme on the local Georgian radio station. She considers herself a successful and fulfilled person. She talks about the process she went through to achieve a sense of integration.

The story was recorded in **Georgian**.

“It was too much for a child of my age”

I was 13 and I was in the seventh form. I remember everything very well. I remember exactly the night we left. There had been conflict before and we used to come here from time to time. Sometimes we went to Tbilisi; other times we went to Tskaltubo². [The authorities] would suddenly say that everything had calmed down and we would go back. I had to keep changing schools, which was very bad. Imagine having to change schools five or six times a year.

It was difficult to adjust to the new environment. I found it very hard to part with my friends with whom I had spent so many years. It was difficult both to part with them and to have to adjust to the new environment. Basically I'm not afraid of a new environment, but the change was not permanent. I had to go somewhere new every three or four months and it was too much for a child of my age. We had to change locations according to what we could afford; my parents would decide. Sometimes we had to go to Tbilisi too.

After coming [to Zugdidi], we chose the place to stay according to our financial capacity. Financial

means were the deciding factor, not our desire. I wanted to be either in Tbilisi or Kutaisi³³ or Tskaltubo. My relationship with my friends was most important for me at school. So I can't say I experienced [real] discomfort from the adjustment to a new environment but it was still difficult.

Generally, I like interaction, getting to know new people, but I was more reserved in my childhood. Because of my personality I might have slightly negative memories of certain things.

Conditions in the collective centre

Now we're living in Zugdidi. We've been living here since we moved out after **Sukhumi** surrendered [in 1993]. There are not many families living here. This must be the reason that no one pays any attention to us. Other IDP families may be “spoiled” by [humanitarian] assistance or the repair works, but we get nothing like that – although I am active in approaching various institutions. I have written several letters of request as well - but no one has responded so far. On this matter my father tells me - either I didn't write anything or I did not hand them in and I'm telling lies [about the letters].



1 Town in western Georgia

2 Resort in western Georgia

3 Town in Imereti region, western Georgia

I just ask them to repair the building and improve our living conditions. It's a small space and it would be great if they repaired as much as possible, but there's no response.

“The IDP children...were last in everything”

When we moved here I went to School number 10 in Zugdidi. Again, my preferences didn't count. We took a spontaneous decision because the school was the closest. There was a very nice environment there. I say this without a trace of hypocrisy. Everything was wonderful. I got used to it. When my friends told me different stories I was surprised. It's part of human nature that something that is not part of your experience seems strange.

I happened to visit my uncle's in Samtredia⁴⁴. I met the girls who were living in the collective centre there. One

day we got together to have a cup of coffee and started relating our memories of how we moved here, how we had adjusted to the local environment. I described Zugdidi very positively. By the way, they were surprised. They thought Zugdidi was difficult to get used to. The situation turned out worse in Samtredia; the IDP children sat at the rear desks in the schools there. That might not matter now, but children are very sensitive about such things. That meant they were last in everything.

It might be true that a person creates their own environment, but everyone I talked to there shared the opinion that their friends made fun of them because they were the IDP from Abkhazia. Their peers often told them that they didn't have their own homes or anything. A lot of children left school because of that.

Adjusting to displacement: “my age should be taken into account”

I think it is both good and bad when I say it was easy for me to adjust to the life of an IDP. When a person listens to me they might think I am satisfied. After listening to [myself in] the tape-recording, I didn't like it. I say that I have adjusted, I have got used to being an IDP and that I feel well now. On the other hand, someone might get annoyed listening to me. My age should be taken into account as well. I've spent a significant part of my life here. Life starts at the age of 13, [when you start to notice the world around you]. Before that was the age of childhood. Some people might not be pleased by the idea that I feel fine without being in Abkhazia.



I am very critical of myself. I look at my situation from a different angle. Afterwards I listened to the story of a friend of mine and I was more concerned. He says he still has the feeling of dissatisfaction; that he is still worried that his parents are here, that he can't go to Abkhazia. He says this feeling of dissatisfaction enables him to struggle. I think so too. I just wanted to say that there are both positive and negative sides to everything

Memories of kindergarten

I remember everything about our life in Abkhazia. I particularly remember my friends from school and the kindergarten. Once when I was in Tbilisi a friend of mine invited me to her birthday party. A boy was sitting in front of me. I was wondering where I knew him from. Suddenly I remembered that we had gone to the same kindergarten. I took some photos with me when we left and those photos helped me to recognise the people. I asked him if his name was Dato. I remember everyone's names; I can say the names of everyone in a photo.

He said his name really was Dato. He didn't recognise me. I told him who I was and afterwards he remembered me. We embraced each other and completely forgot that we were at the birthday party. What special memories could we have had of the kindergarten [as it was so long ago]? But we still remembered lots of things; we remembered things like dancing and singing together in the kindergarten.

I've certainly had moments when I thought it would be great if I had not been an IDP. I constantly think that it would have been good. My life might have taken a completely different direction. Certainly our life would have been more positive; we wouldn't have had to begin everything from the beginning, from scratch. We are still trying to organise our lives. As it turned out, nothing happens easily.

"I always say I am from Abkhazia"

At present I do the job I like. I work at the Atinati⁵⁵ radio station. I am a presenter of the music programme. I like the idea of so many people listening to me. Although I don't belong to this town, people will still remember my name.

I feel special warmth in the letters from Abkhazia. I always say I am from Abkhazia. I realise it has a positive effect on the Abkhazian listeners. They always tell me about themselves.

I went to a party yesterday. There was a guest from Abkhazia. He had read my interview in the newspaper and he recognised me from my photo published with the interview. He told me he was proud of me and that he always listened to me. I was so pleased that I almost clapped.

I was surprised when someone called from Gudauta⁶⁶ once. I even remember his name. It was clear from his accent that he was **Abkhazian**. He spoke in Russian. He said that he still loved us [Georgians]; that he always listened to our radio [programmes]; he hoped we would return soon. I told him I was from Abkhazia. He said he wanted me to come home. I was so excited. I told everyone that the Abkhazian had called me.

"I'll return with great pleasure"

There's no one left where I used to live. Although my grandfather and uncle live in Gali district, I didn't dare to go there even once. My sister, my brother and my parents went, but I turned out to be a coward. However, I wonder what it is like.

I'll return with great pleasure if there's a chance. I think I will share my time between here and there. At least I imagine that I will be able to. Frankly speaking, I don't believe in our return very much. If it happens it might happen as a result of war. We

5 The radio station covers Samegrelo, Ajara, Imereti, Guria and Abkhazia (Gali district)

6 Town on the Black Sea coast in Abkhazia

should regain through war what we lost through war. How can we get it back by peaceful means? Well, I can't imagine.

Even if there is a return, imagine [what it would be like] if we returned. I know beforehand what the situation would be like there. There will be chaos and mess. Actually we'll have to begin everything from scratch. I can't imagine living there in the first years. I think we'll need time to prepare the foundations for our return.

“I won't have that IDP complex”

My peers and friends really have an IDP complex. What most ordinary people experience is that when you don't have a house or a flat you feel ashamed to invite people to where you're living, because of the conditions there. But I remember a story by Revaz Inanishvili⁷⁷. It's a wonderful story. A girl and a boy are in love. The girl is poor while the boy's family is well off. The boy wants the girl to invite him home, but the girl can't do so because of the extremely poor living conditions. Whenever the boy asks her when she's going to introduce him to her parents, the girl always avoids [the issue]. When the boy found out the reason for her hesitation he dumped her, saying he could never have imagined she would think about such things. He said he thought she had turned out a completely different person.

I always calm myself down with things like this; I look down on such attitudes, as it were. The person I fall in love with will understand me and I won't have that IDP complex. I don't think I could fall in love with anyone who made me have a complex like that. I haven't had that kind of complex so far. I find it easy to invite my friends home. But the reason might be that they are real friends.

“The older generation suffers more”

I think everything has had an important effect on the formation of my personality. First of all it's important that I am employed. I think I would be different without this. However, I've never thought about what kind of person I would be. Success itself is a great advantage in my life. I get attention and when a person gets attention, there's no place for all those complexes, especially the negative ones.

The attitude of the older generation such as my father is different. When we moved here, they used to say that we would return in a week; then they said that we would return in a month, in two months. Well, 14 years have passed and if asked he'll reply that the return will be tomorrow. He listens to the news programmes every hour. He still can't get over [what happened]. He has retained the attitude that he formed on the very first day of this situation. We should admit that the older generation suffers more, because they spent the major part of their life there. We adjusted more easily.

“The conflict had a serious effect on my family”

I can't say there's an ideal situation at home. The conflict had a serious effect on my family. My mother is in Moscow because of the financial situation. My father can't support the family. My brother is in the army. He is in the Commandos. My sister is a student in Tbilisi and I am here.

My mother hasn't come back from Russia for three years. We take turns to go there. It was my turn this time but travel to Russia is cancelled. I'll go if travel there resumes. My visa has already expired.

My brother is in the army. He's going to Germany for three months and to Iraq afterwards. By the way, he made this decision without even talking to us. One day he came and announced that he was

going to Iraq. It turned out that our cousin had written to him and told him not to go. But he said he would go even if all our relatives opposed him. The first reason for this is the financial advantage and another reason is his desire to go there. He has a one-year contract but before that he has to do a training course in Germany.

He will be part of a peacekeeping mission in Iraq. It's something like the Russian peacekeeping army located in Georgia. His salary will be about 700-1000 US dollars. He couldn't find any employment here so he made a choice. His decision must have been determined by the financial consideration. The government pays no attention [to us], so you have to take a risk to survive.

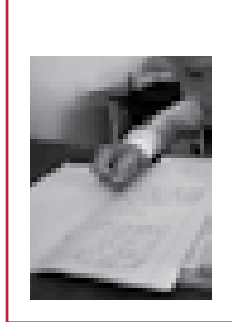
It's appalling that force is used to throw IDPs out of collective centres [when they are sold to private investors, **privatisation**]. This is no different from the behaviour of the Abkhazians and the Russians. Our government treats us the way the Russians did. So far we haven't been threatened with being thrown out. However, I expect that to happen. It sometimes happens that the IDPs don't know who to appeal to when there's trouble. Actually they are in a passive state. They think they are not threatened with eviction, so they stay put.



Zurab

Zurab¹ is 16 years old. He lives in a village in **Gali district**. He is in the tenth form at school. Zurab remembers how his family moved temporarily to Zugdidi² after the second escalation of the **conflict** and how they returned home to find that their house had been burnt down and only a garage left. In his story, he talks about how he helps his father do manual labour, as the sole means of survival for the family is to cultivate the land, and he is the only son. Zurab notes sadly that he does not have enough time to study because of the demanding physical work he must do.

The story was recorded in **Georgian**.



“I was getting ready for school when gunfire started”

I don't remember anything of the first displacement because I was two years old in 1993. I can't say anything about that.

During the **May Events** I lived here [in Abkhazia] and I only have vague memories of it. But in 1998, the war began just as I was getting ready for the first form at school. I was dressed in a shirt and tie; I had a jacket on my shoulders although I hadn't put on my [school] trousers. So I was getting ready for school when gunfire started. My mother was driving the cattle out of our yard.

Suddenly a neighbour called her and said that there had been the displacement, that we had to leave. I heard everything. My mother ran in and started collecting our clothes. Documents, clothes, whatever money we had, we packed everything hurriedly. We packed all those clothes and then went to wake up my sister. She was asleep. Our neighbours arrived. My sister had already woken up by the time they came. Our neighbours arrived and I thought we were going with them; that we would all go together with my parents, but I was wrong - I was wrong, and I went with the neighbours.

I can't tell you their names. Half of them are dead.

So I went with my neighbours; when I looked around, I couldn't see my parents. As it turned out my parents had got out and started looking for me. They started calling me, thinking that I'd had some problem. "I'm here," I shouted back. The neighbours also called to them that I was with them. As we were climbing over the neighbour's fence, it seems that a guerrilla³ told my parents to keep quiet, not to say anything. After that my parents came as well and went *через черный ход* ('through the backyard' in Russian) or whatever it's called, through the bushes, and by crawling we reached the centre [of the village], where the Russian peacekeepers received us. Some of them brought chairs, others brought water. They didn't bring any food, but still [*pause*] they showed us attention.

Let me tell you something that happened once. My father went to fetch some clothes in a neighbour's bus. They went together. He went to fetch whatever we'd left behind [in Gali]. He found half of them in the bushes and took them. At that time someone told us that the neighbour's bus had blown up. My mother started screaming. She didn't know yet that it wasn't our neighbour's vehicle. My sister and

1 Not his real name
2 City in western Georgia

3 Armed fighters during the war

I were calming her down, asking her to keep quiet as we felt ashamed about her screaming. But why was it shameful? There was a war taking place...

Then my father returned. He had a big *дырка* ('hole' in Russian) in his sweater. He was wearing five sweaters, or four, and a *осколка* (shell splinter) had hit him. He said he'd somersaulted three times in the air before falling into the *канавка* (ditch).

Moving to Zugdidi

We were saved... Then my neighbour gave us a ride to Zugdidi by bus. My father stayed here [pause]; my father stayed here. We went to one person we knew there. He worked as a *парикмахер* ('barber' in Russian) at Zugdidi station. He was our relative. He lived in Chitatskari⁴. He had a flat in the former kindergarten. It was assigned to the **refugees** (IDPs) too. We went with him, dressed in tattered clothes torn by thorns. We stayed for a month

there. Then my aunt and her husband came and invited us to their place [in Zugdidi]. They said they had a two-storey house and offered one floor to us to live there. We drove the cattle there [in a truck] as well. Actually my father did that. I was seven years old at that time.

We moved [to Zugdidi]. We hired a truck called a GAZEL. We loaded it with everything: straw, hay, then the cattle, then our clothes. Certainly, all these things were in there together with the cattle, because there was not enough room in the car. We arrived [in Zugdidi]. My aunt had a two-storey house. She let us have one floor, one room. One room was enough; there were four of us. Then the time came for me to go to school. I went to school. I completed the first year of my school there.

My father returned [to Gali] pretty soon. When we went [to my aunt's place] my father couldn't stay there. He was worried; so he came back here. We had roofing slates [distributed by the UN] during the first and second displacement [in 1993-1998]. We sold them and my father bought a Moskvich⁵ and began to work as a taxi driver in Zugdidi. But he was very worried about Abkhazia and our village.

The teachers at school in Zugdidi showed great respect towards us. I particularly remember one of them because I loved her very much. She was a very good person. I'd love to have a teacher like her now as well. I had good friends.

Back to the village: "I'd forgotten Megrelian"

When I had completed my first year at school, my family decided to return. We missed our village. We thought we'd have some harvest –



4 Village in Zugdidi district

5 Type of car

we had planted hazelnut trees, we had planned to grow maize, and so on; we came because of this. We were sick and tired of living in Zugdidi; we were sick and tired. Our village was still better; so we decided to return.

When we returned, there were just two neighbours in the neighbourhood. There was one child and all the rest were old people. Suddenly a child ran up to me saying, here's a new neighbour. I was not 'new' at all, but he didn't remember me. I couldn't speak **Megrelian**; I started remembering it again little by little. I'd forgotten it. When I arrived [in Zugdidi] I didn't speak Georgian. I learned Georgian there, but I forgot Megrelian. When I came here, I didn't speak Megrelian; I learned it here. Now I speak both.

"There are honest and kind Russians"

Our house had been burnt down. There was only a garage, built by my grandfather, left. Now we're living in that garage. What can we do? There's no other way [pause]. My father works, I help him. We send money to my sister. She's doing a course at the university [in Tbilisi]. She took the national exams. So we help my sister, and I help my father.

My father worked as a taxi driver [in Zugdidi]; that was his income. Then we sold the car. We divided the garage into two parts; one room for me and another for my parents.

It was not dangerous at all when we were returning, because Russian peacekeepers were stationed here. My father knew some of them. One of them was his good friend. He was Russian but... They say Russians are mean, but that's not quite true. There are honest and kind Russians as well. I also know a couple of Russians [peacekeepers] who are already my good friends [and the friendship will continue] if they don't get moved to another place. They, too, helped us when we didn't have food. When

we came we had no food and they gave us sprats, stew, bread, jars to put chutney and jam in; so we started a business as well as a home.

"Constantly under stress"

It's difficult to live in a garage. It's cold and damp in winter, it's dirty as well. I'm ashamed to talk about my home in this way, but that's life. It's certainly cold in winter in the garage. It's also *сырость* ('damp' in Russian). The wallpapers are all rotten. It's so hot in summer that you can't even touch the walls. They get so hot.

Sometimes we open the doors. We're not afraid now; but we used to be. There were cases of armed robberies. Once - it was November or December - they broke into our house. No, to be correct, they wanted to break into our house but we didn't open the doors. We started screaming. All of us, a boy, a girl, a man, a woman, were all screaming like women. They started to fire at us and one bullet hit our garage and then it hit another side. Thank God it was an AKC⁶. If it had been an AKM⁷, one of us would have been killed. Well, we survived. Then our neighbours ran to our place. Then, my parents took my sister and me to stay at my aunt's place, somewhere else. My parents stayed here, but they took us to my aunt's as they were afraid the robbers might turn up again and we would be scared.

It's not easy to live constantly under stress and to be afraid of break-ins at night.

"It was dangerous to walk alone"

There was no school; but there was a school in a neighbouring village. So we went there. We walked about eight or nine kilometres. My sister, some other children and me. There were about eight of us. I was the youngest; I went into the

second form. Some of them were in the third form, the fourth form and so on. Only I was in my second year. Three or four days later a girl joined us. She lived in that village. And we went to school together. There was no second form. We had a joint class. There was one teacher for the first and the second year pupils.

Later a school was opened here as well. In the beginning it was located in a private house three kilometres away from my home. Then they moved it to the centre – to the council building. We went there when we were in the fourth and the fifth years. By the second semester of my fifth year at school, we moved back to the former school.

It was dangerous to walk alone on the roads. We were scared. But we were not afraid at all if we were together.

“If I’m not too tired I pick up a book”

The Russian peacekeepers were stationed in the school before, then they were moved to another place. [So our] school opened first in a private house and then in a council building, before the Russian peacekeepers were moved out of the village. There was an order for them to move out of the school. The school was opened up. Then Russian peacekeepers moved in again. Now they are stationed in the former leisure centre. They are still there.

I go to school. I’m happy. I don’t do much studying because I have to work and my father has no one else to help him. I mean I’m the [only] son. He has a daughter as well, but she has no time. She’s studying at the university. So I help him. If I’m not too tired I pick up a book, but if I’m too tired or feel ill, what can I do then? It’s not my fault. That’s life. Neither our life nor these conditions support me [in my studies].

“There’s no reason to be ashamed about manual work”

I openly admit that I help my father to cultivate the land. There’s nothing shameful about that for a peasant.

There’s no reason to be ashamed about [manual] work [*pause*]. It’s not shameful for a peasant to work with a hoe. A hoe, an axe, a spade and a scythe, and so on, I do everything I have to. Only the rich and the city dwellers think it’s shameful. That type of people might say that I’m a peasant... But we earn our bread with this in the village, and now in the city as well...

Recently we built a stadium at our school. The UN or some NGOs have provided 2,000 laris⁸ or dollars. Our headmaster bought cement, pipes, wire-netting, gravel. We made a wire-netting fence 4 metres high to prevent balls going over the top of it. So we’ve done that. He paid the workers; we, the children, helped with pleasure - and we built the stadium. Competitions are held in handball, basketball, football and in table tennis in summer. We also compete with the neighbouring villages. Our team even went to Sukhumi, but I didn’t go.

“I have plans”

There are three boys and two girls [of my age] in the village. There are eight boys and seven girls in my form. This is the case with my form. There are more or fewer pupils in other forms. We spend our free time, well, at the stadium. Sometimes the girls come out as well and that’s how we have fun.

Half the IDPs haven’t returned. However, we have quite a lot of neighbours. Now a good many people come in the summer. We get acquainted - and that’s the way we live.

I have plans for the time when I finish school. First of all, I'll enroll for a course [at university] if I can. If I can't do that, I'll do my best to go to a college at least. I wanted to be a lawyer but my father insisted on my becoming a dentist. So I agreed. My sister too is studying dentistry. My father says that we'll make money together and earn some income for the family.

I dream of travelling. For example, I want to go to America to see my favourite actors. Jackie Chan is my favourite actor. I'm crazy about him, because he always makes funny films. I always laugh when I watch his films. I like to put on performances. I'm quite good at this and can't resist it. We put on some shows at school. I always take part in them. I've participated in many shows.

I prefer learning to the [physical work]. Now there's no computer here, in the **lower zone**. Dandy and Sony [Walkmen] are our computers. But they're no use for studies. We are provided with half our textbooks and we have to buy the other half. By the way, we have a library. But there's a time limit for borrowing a book there. I don't know about the others but a week is not enough for me to read a book. Because the books are pretty thick and I don't have enough time to read them. I have to work a lot. On the one hand, I have to work; on the other hand, I have to do my lessons. So I don't have time to read books.

They teach the piano at music school but they do that only during the school day. They also teach dance; a local person is a teacher... I'm not very keen on Georgian dance or Ajaran dance. I prefer rap. We - the boys - mostly dance rap at the events at school.

"The Abkhazians don't harm ordinary people"

There's only a playground here. What else can you do in the village? All the buildings have been destroyed. You need a lot of money to restore everything. Our village will never have that much money. Some NGOs assist the population; for example, they've distributed a pesticide against the worms [the so-called 'American butterfly'] which have infested the hazelnut trees, fruit trees and crops. They used to distribute hoes, spades, plastic bags, spraying devices, but it all stopped.

Now they're restoring the burnt-down houses. Twenty families have been promised financial assistance. They say it'll begin on 15 July [2007].

The Abkhazians come to the village, but they don't harm ordinary people. They arrest the dishonest ones, robbers and thieves. They've already got annihilated half of them.

"I've never held a gun"

Now I have to get the ID. But I'll lie about my age. Sometimes you need to tell a lie because if you're legally an adult you have to join the army. Seventeen and eighteen year- old guys have been taken into the army and they're serving now. I don't want to make the same mistake. I don't want to join the army because I don't know what's going to happen [in Abkhazia].

Besides, I'm not confident in myself. I can't use a gun. I've never held a gun and I won't need to if I don't join the army. I'll join the army when I'm about 21. Before that I'll try to hide from the Abkhazians, because I don't want to join the army at such an early age. I'll try to avoid [that]. Then I'll decide whether to join the [Georgian army] or the [Abkhazian army].



Tamar



Eighty-eight year-old Tamar¹ lives alone in the conflict zone, in Khumushkuri village, **Gali district**. Her child and grandchildren are in Moscow. She has little contact with them. Tamar says that as a result of the **Georgian-Abkhazian conflict** the whole village is deserted. She does not even have any neighbours, which is very difficult for a lonely old person; her health too is poor. Before the conflict Tamar lived in the same village but in a different house, which she had to leave because of what happened in the area. Her house was burnt down several times during the conflict, and she had to rebuild it. Tamar talks of war-related events, the story of her family and her present life in **Abkhazia**.

The story was recorded in **Mengrelian** and was translated into Georgian.

“This is what my life has become”

My life is a difficult one. My childhood was difficult, too, because when we were small, father was exiled for being a **Trotskyist** - and we lost him there². Then we five [children] were brought up by our mother on her own. We finished school, anyway. After I'd left school, my mother helped me to enrol in an institute in Tbilisi... I graduated from the institute with distinction, and then came here to my country (Abkhazia). When I arrived here, there were not many people at that time who had received an education. That is why I had not one but five jobs. I worked in my specialism and also had some other jobs. Life went on. I had a splendid life [pauses]. Then I met my fate and I got married.

I had one child, then another, but that man did not turn out to be a family man. He was a drunkard. He would go here and there, and drink... He earned a lot, but was useless in the family. He did not take care of his family... I went to the court, brought a suit against him, demanded divorce and undertook the responsibility of bringing up my children... I forced divorce on that man, so to speak. Then my children and I lived together. We lived, went on liv-

ing, we had plenty to eat and drink... I worked at three places at the same time and had [enough] money...

Look at the situation I am in today. I brought up my son, brought him into society, he worked and [pauses] this is what happened to me during this chaos. This is what my life has become. My child is buried in the earth and I am as if screaming here. Is this a fair life? He is trying hard there [in the world of the dead] and I am on his back [alive]... My son is dead. My story is so short. But if I speak, I won't stop retelling it for 10 days...

“I am a lost woman”

This damned war. You see what it has done? I have not done anything wrong, God knows this, and look, I was the one who lost most in the village... Who has lost more than me here, who? The things I had in just one room were enough to build me a whole house... I had eight rooms, all eight rooms were filled up to the ceiling [with possessions]. Fire took away all this.

Everything I had perished in the fire. I don't know

1 Not her real name

2 Probably in Siberia, where most political prisoners were sent to labour camps

whether fire destroyed it all or whether the man [who burnt the house down] stole it. I did not see that because that man [hit] me and threw me down; so what could I see? I am still suffering today. My children can't stay here - [the Abkhazians] will catch them there, they will catch them here, and so people have had to move [elsewhere]... I worked like a slave... I built what I could here. It's a miracle, but I thought to myself: where will they bury me if I die? A child of my brother-in-law did not have a home. I did not have a home. Where will they bury me, I thought. And that was the reason I decided to build this house. If the word 'build' can be used... So here I am now...

My life is complicated. I can't talk about it to anyone, and how long can I tell my story? So I am like this, a lost woman and suffering till today. I lead my

life with difficulty. Sometimes I get sick. I fell down in the yard the other day. I fell down and it was raining. The heavens had opened. I was not able to get up... I was shivering, wet, dripping, until my neighbour rode past on his horse, came up to me when he heard me shouting, pulled me up on his horse, carried me into my house and dropped me down to lie there. This is the life I lead - and how long can I go on like this? I've considered thousands of ways [of ending my life] but I did not manage to do anything.

Life is getting worse and worse, worse and worse. There is no progress... It is like this...

"The world was collapsing"

I would not wish on my enemy what we went through here. [The Abkhaz] reached Repa³. The world was collapsing and I had gathered everyone - my son-in-law and my nephew and nieces from Ochamchire⁴ - in my house. I got frightened and thought that they might kill all these people here... I ran into the house and said to them: "Look what's going on!" The whole village had been burnt down. The whole of Repa had caught fire. Flames were consuming everything. Roof slates were cracking. You could hear an awful noise. It was awful, awful...

When they set fire to the village for the first time, we were hiding in the village, somewhere there, in Bokveti⁵; myself and my daughter with her husband and children... My son-in-law took the little girl in his arms [pauses] and began to run... We were also running behind him when suddenly the child's head flopped back. I died at that moment. I thought she'd been killed. "Mamma!" I cried, and my child also saw that and we both screamed and



3 Village in Gali district
 4 Seaside resort on the Black Sea coast in Abkhazia
 5 One of the small parts of Kvemo Bargebi village

ran. The child's head had flopped back and her father was running with her in his arms...

"It was sadism, wasn't it?"

We crossed the river. I don't know where we were - wet, dripping... We stopped in the forest. When we saw that the child was alive we felt such relief. Who knows how long we were sitting there. Until it got dark, until they stopped shooting, until these people crossed Bargebi⁶ and left, we were sitting in the forest.

Anyone who wasn't here and didn't see this doesn't know what was really going on... No one who wasn't here right up to the last moment knows [what it was like]...

When we were hiding in the forest, two brothers from Kvemo Bargebi, schoolchildren, 10th grade students [*pauses*] - were caught and taken into the forest... It would have been better if they had shot and killed them [straightaway]. They castrated one child. They say the child was screaming and begging his brother for help... [His brother] was answering: "How can I help you? ... I feel even worse..." He too was castrated and then both of them were killed. Why did they need to do that? It was sadism, wasn't it? What else could it be?

Another story is of two brothers who were harnessed, like oxen, to a cart, and made to carry a heavy load for several kilometres; then they killed them and threw them into the water. Who can describe the things that took place here...? Who knows how many similar stories happened here...?

The attack on her home

When the Abkhazians came for the first time [to my house] they ran upstairs... They destroyed everything there, removed the deceased person's *nishani* ('sign', in Georgian)⁷ from the sofa upstairs.

They took the food and drinks that were placed upstairs and came down. «Накорми нас!» ("Feed us!" in Russian) [they demanded] «Давайте, заходите» ("Come in"), I said. They came in. I served them food and drinks... I gave them a seat, fed them... I brought them dry *sulguni* - red smoked cheese. One asked the other in Abkhazian, "Did you see where she brought it from?"

They left nothing... They took everything with them. The other one answered that he hadn't noticed. "You see how stupid you are? Why did you not notice it?" I had spent all my life in Abkhazia and understood the language... I said to them - «Давайте пойдем, я покажу, нечего ругаться» ("Let's go, I will show you! No need to argue"). I took him to the place where I had hidden some cheese and said - «Вот, говорю, заберите» ("Take it!")...

It turned out that he needed a rucksack to carry it and he said to me, "Give me a rucksack." Я говорю: «У меня такого нет, пожалуйста, возьми мешок» (I told him: "I have nothing like that. Please take this bag."). "How dare you say that you don't have one?" [he said], and he went mad. Я говорю: «У меня нету в семье боевиков, зачем мне вещмешок?» (I told him: "I have no guerrillas⁸ in my family. Why should I have a rucksack?")...

I can say that I became a victim of this argument... [Those Abkhazians] wounded me... He was a young boy... And he shot me. He was not a good shot. If he had been, the distance was so short that five people could have been killed.

My daughter, her husband and children were there, but they had already run into the forest... That man [wounded] me between my house and the *oda* (kitchen building)⁹. I was lying there. I heard noise coming from upstairs, because they were taking everything out of the house... But I had no strength. As I fell, my legs went numb... I heard

6 Village in Gali district

7 In Abkhazia, after someone has been buried his or her clothes and shoes are placed on the sofa for one year. This is called the deceased person's 'sign'

8 Armed fighters during the war

9 A separate building in the yard used as a kitchen, typical in western Georgia

my blood trickling. I could hear that, but I had no strength and so I was just lying there. What could I do? They came down and one shouted to the other to come to him. So he came... They dragged me into the house.

“Fire was consuming everything”

I don't know what their plan was. There was a small sofa in the room and they threw me on it... It was too much. I was bleeding. I was fainting and lying there. I don't know when they left... It turned out they had set fire to the house... Something flashed and I regained consciousness. I saw fire burning. Fire was consuming everything, upstairs, downstairs... They are burning me alive, I thought to myself, but I could not move. Fire was already close to me. Finally I managed to put down one foot, then... [raised] my head ... I was thinking about how to get out... What could I do?

I was sitting in the same place and crying. Suddenly, something shifted with a terrible noise and fell on to the table... I lay down on the floor with great difficulty and, like a snake, started to crawl, crawl... I crawled and crawled, and meanwhile everything was falling into pieces and the house was going up in flames. I reached the verandah with great difficulty... and got into the yard. There was a big pear tree in the yard and I crawled up to it... I felt weak and sick. I thought I would lie there, but the fire was roaring... I managed to get up onto my knees... and put my arms around the tree to have a little rest...

“Getting out of there was hell”

Meanwhile everything around was getting hot... I saw how I was being pursued by the fire... I forced myself...to get up and I leant against the tree. I thought that I would rest a little and then some-

how get to the cowshed... After I had had enough rest, I went on moving so mechanically that I ran into the door, brought it down and went into the cowshed... I had put food for cattle in the manger and I lay down in it. Oh [pause] I just hate recalling this. I was lying there thinking: they will come in and burn me here... But getting out of there was real hell...

After a while I looked out and saw a lamppost a little way off, but you had to get to that post... I made a huge effort and got out of the hay and crawled to the post... put my arm around it... had a good rest and then mechanically moved in the direction of my brother-in-law's yard and leant against the gate to the yard... He saw me and screamed. He ran up to me, poor thing that I was, and dragged me in [from] there and threw me on the terrace [pauses]. That's how I got out of there.

Meanwhile, my [family] had run into the forest, found a pipe there and climbed into it. My daughter thought that everything was finished for them, that [‘the soldiers’] would kill all of them there, but, thank God, they were saved. When the armed men were running in their direction, they didn't notice them, they crossed the bridge and ran away. When [my family] got home they saw that everything had been burnt down and I had been shot.

“For eight days I was bleeding”

I was wounded but we couldn't get [to Zugdidi¹⁰]. A man was sent to Gali to say what the situation was, that there was a wounded woman who had to be transported there. But no one came. People were too frightened... For eight days I was bleeding, without medicine. My belly was swollen... I was dying, but there was no one to help. You couldn't even get close to **Enguri** (the administrative border).

My son-in-law's car was the only hope. It was hid-

den in tea leaves. It was covered by the tea and wasn't visible ... Boys removed the tea, threw it away and took the car out. But the car wouldn't start. Then they tied it to an ox, and it still wasn't able to move... It was the ninth day, I think, [that we left]... I was put on the cart, with horses [drawing us]; the children were placed up there too, but my son-in-law didn't take a seat. My daughter was sometimes walking, other times sitting. And we were also accompanied by several women from the village. They took me by night [to Zugdidi]. Slowly we made the journey to Enguri and got to the other side of the river...

[In Zugdidi] we spent one night with someone's family... Then they took me to Chitatskaro¹¹ hospital, left me there and I had surgery the next day. But could any surgery help? [The doctor] stuck what felt like a screwdriver between my ribs and took out, with a syringe, [thickened] blood.

After that, on May 4th, my daughter took me to Moscow. I stayed there in hospital for three months and was connected to a drip. The doctor was amazed that someone in such poor health had managed to survive...

After that I was supposed to visit the doctor regularly, but I couldn't abandon [Kumushkuri], I couldn't leave it. I thought when I arrived that everything would look the same as in the past. How could I know that everything had been reduced to ashes? I did see [when I was attacked] that everything caught fire, but you know human nature.

"I couldn't live in Zugdidi"

I returned alone. I came alone... I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy. Where had everything disappeared? There was only the place where my house used to be. That's it. Everything was destroyed [pauses].

In general, I went [to Zugdidi] just for a short period, only twice. I will not be able to live there; I can't. I couldn't stay there. It's as if we and they were different in every way. People *are* different as well...

I stayed a little with the children and then left and came here. On my way [to Abkhazia] I met a journalist at the Enguri [border]. And he asked me where I was going and what I was expecting to find when I got there. I said that I didn't know what to expect and that my other house had also been burnt down, but that I was going there, anyway... That I couldn't live [in Zugdidi], anyway...

Why? Are they treating you badly? No, I answered. I don't bother anyone - but anyway, no, I said. Will they accept you [in Abkhazia]? I said that it wasn't my fault that I had all these problems and that they didn't have the right *not* to accept me... Did the Abkhazians let me get here so easily? I asked them to let me in and I explained that I was sick and had to stay in bed for a long time. They let me come here and I managed to reach this place.

"Among them there were nice people"

Before the **May events** I had built a two-storey house... beautiful and elegant, with the help of my grandchildren, who had come from Moscow to help me. But we were looted there, too. That day the children were tidying up the yard and getting rid of the rubbish. Suddenly I saw those people with guns were following my children. I almost died and fell down. Their mother is a dreadful coward. When she saw that she almost died of fright...

They came in and said that they were hungry. What could we do when we were told to [give them food]? We slaughtered a hen, prepared maize porridge. But [my daughter] walked to and fro, pale, scared... That bastard spotted that immediately. «Что боишься?» ("What are you afraid of?" in Russian), he asked her «Мы люди» ("We are human beings").

To tell the truth, some of them were nice people... You shouldn't say bad things about all of them, because among them there were nice people, too. We prepared food, invited them to the table. When they were eating they called my grandchild and offered him a seat: «Ты здесь хозяин, сядь» ("You are the host here, sit down."). They ate and drank and when they were full and were about to leave, they noticed a horse in the yard, caught it and decided to take it away. That horse had been raised by my granddaughter and when the child saw that they were taking the horse away, she burst into tears.

I told them that the children used the horse and cart to go to school in Gali [every week], that it was their only transport, and asked them not to take it away. One of them, who was their superior, called the others and said: «Отпусти!» ("Let it go!") and made them release the horse. When they left, my grandchild was standing there with swollen eyes. It seems she had cried a lot, but no one cared about her...

I couldn't stay [in my old village]. One day [the Abkhaz] came— some masked bandits, at night. They took away everything, didn't leave a single thing. I thought that fear would kill the children here and we left. First we went to the house of a near neighbour. We lived there for a while. It was better for the children. The school was also near. So we stayed there [some time].

Then I thought: I might die tomorrow and the children would be homeless - without a roof over their heads - and I decided to build a house. My poor brother-in-law found me a yard, we brought a tractor from the neighbouring village, we cleaned the yard and put up a fence around it. We built a house. It was such a nice house that I would never have wanted any other one... A man set fire to this house as well and reduced it to ashes. So this second one was also burned down...

After that I made myself a small hut. [My neighbours] roofed it, I fixed some things myself; I was never able to finish building houses... I thought it was the last one and that I would make it a bit better, but it turned out to be awful. My heart breaks when I look at it...

"Is such a life worth living?"

No one returned [after the May events]... There is nothing good about this place to come back to. They break into people's houses, beat them, kill them. A man gets frightened and leaves: at least [in exile] he can enjoy eating a slice of bread; he is not afraid. Here you never know who will [try to] kill you or throttle you.

Recently someone stole my five-year-old ox. It was standing over there, near the yard gate. I also lost horses - two horses at the same time. You can't work for someone else. If you can't raise a cow, if you can't raise a piglet, if you can't raise a pig, how can you live? Is such a life worth living?

There is nothing in it for our people. The [Abkhazians only] pay attention to those who side with them [*Pause*]... But there is nowhere better to go and that is why we are here. Why would we be here, otherwise?

"There are many taxes"

Now [the Abkhaz military] do not come often. No one is here. Those Abkhaz, those Abkhaz, they say, but if you put all the blame on them you wouldn't be right, either, because our people sometimes did even worse things.

There are many taxes... Every year every family has to deliver 100 kilos of hazelnuts to the Abkhaz. You have to gather them, sort them out and give them to the Abkhaz... If there is no harvest, you have to buy them and deliver. You have to deliver maize, as

well. But I don't know how much. To tell the truth they haven't made me pay for two years; no-one has come, because I can't plough...

I stay at home all the time and can't go anywhere... That is why I only know what I've heard about... In the neighbouring village they don't pay [taxes] that much because they have a good patron – *gamgebeli* (village head). And our [*gamgebeli*] enriches himself, misappropriates [funds]... And what can you say to him? We have been robbed of everything...

“People have become worse”

Last year I harvested 500 kilos of hazelnuts [in the village I lived in before]. My grandchild harvested it, not me, of course. We harvested 1000 kilos when the yield was good. Last year I only received 500 kilos. Some other person harvested it. He gave part to the Abkhazians, and took the rest home... He brought it here because I know him and he felt ashamed. Otherwise, he would not have given me even those 50 kilos.

I can't stand this any more [*groans*]. These people want everything for themselves... We also pay for wood... I have not burnt a piece of wood this year, not even a single piece. Also I did not have anyone to chop wood [*groans*] ...

Where is the village? Nothing has been left of it, as I see. Where are the people? Where is anyone like a human being? There is no one at all. People have become worse... Our people have become worse, too. They will never spare you... [*pause*]. Boys like Taniel¹² used to live here. People were afraid of them and felt respect for them. No one is here now, so they do what they please [*pause*]. They behave very badly... You can't destroy everything; how can you...? There is no school, either... They dismantled the school, too.

I don't know... But how can this country be totally lost? Will there not be anyone to look after it? Now I see what is going on in Tbilisi, the opposition there is to Saakashvili¹³. Saakashvili made **Tbilisi** beautiful, developed it into a city that looks like a capital. He can't do everything at the same time. It can't be like this. People should support him. One person is pulling in this direction; another one in the opposite direction. Nothing good will come of this...

There will be chaos all the time, unless some leader appears. I believed in Saakashvili, but he has lots of enemies, lots of them.

12 Character from the Georgian epic poem *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*

13 President of Georgia 2004-2007



Ekaterina



*Ekaterina is 27 years old. She was a child when the **Georgian-Ossetian conflict** in **South Ossetia** began and has sad and vivid memories of the tragic events of those years... Ekaterina describes how her mother had to flee the conflict zone with three children, how her father, after three months' imprisonment, also escaped through the mountains and rejoined them.. During this period he, an **Ossetian**, met a Georgian who became almost like a brother to him, and helped him in his hour of desperate need.*

The story was recorded in Russian.

“We were a big, friendly and cheerful family”

My name is Ekaterina. My mother is Russian, that is why my name is Russian too and I'm called after my grandmother. My father's name was Zaxar .They got acquainted in Russia. He went to work there and then brought her to our village, to Arcevi¹. I also have a brother and a sister. My elder sister was born in Russia, my brother and I in Arcevi. We were a big, friendly and cheerful family. My father has five brothers and sisters. We had a big house. We had cattle and chickens. We had a good, happy childhood ... Our pastime was to pick strawberries in the wood. I also liked helping to collect hay very much.

When Mother arrived [in South Ossetia], she adjusted quickly because life was peaceful and quiet then. Also, she got a job in her profession. She worked in a rural ambulance station and also ran her household perfectly. In Russia, she had lived in a village too. That is why she did not feel a big difference when she arrived here, especially since our people are very friendly.

Our village of Arcevi was composed of both Ossetians and Georgians, they were like the two halves [of a whole]. Children were friends among themselves and adults were friends too...

“Our plans suddenly fell through”

We grew up, matured. Our parents were thinking of our

future, about our development. As our father worked in the city, in construction, he decided to put himself on the waiting list for an apartment in **Tskhinvali**. The whole family, especially the children, waited with impatience for the new apartment and couldn't wait to move and live in the city. Like all children we wanted to go to the cinema, to parks, to ride on the roundabouts. Oh, but our plans suddenly fell through. The real **war** began. War - and not as it's called now, the Ossetian-Georgian conflict.

Our village was burnt down before our eyes. We hid in the forest and watched our house and our grandfather's house burn. We were with Mother. Father was in the city then, at work, and he remained there. Like all the others, our mother took the decision to go to Tskhinvali through the mountains.

My brother was small at that time. Mother carried him in her arms, and we kept close to her skirts so as not to get lost. We went through a forest. It was wintertime; it was awful, terrible. We didn't know what would happen: where we were going, what for, why our house had been destroyed. When Mother got tired, carrying our brother, she took off her scarf, wound it round her breasts, put our brother there and we went further...

Then, as I remember, we went to my father's relatives. I don't remember exactly because I was a small girl. My

father was lost, we couldn't find him anywhere; our mother was running around, searching for him, but he wasn't with us. As Mother tells us, we knew nothing about our father for about three months...

Then Mother found out that he had been arrested by the Georgian police, who on the first day of the war had occupied the city - it turned out that my father was in prison in **Tbilisi**. Mother tried to contact him somehow, to get him out of prison, but without any result. But, probably, God helped us. In [Tskhinvali] Mother became acquainted with a Georgian woman whose husband was Ossetian too, but her father worked in Tbilisi. He was a highly educated and intelligent person. Mother contacted him through her new friend and he, in turn, wrote a letter appealing to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia. Probably his letter was so affecting that they decided to release my father. As they say, the world is not without kind people.

Father was released, but I will tell you now how he reached us in the city. When he was released from prison, he was without documents, had been beaten

up, had broken ribs, and no proper clothes. Naturally he was afraid to go to Tskhinvali direct, through the Georgian cities and villages, and decided to get there through mountains, like we did. As Father told us subsequently, he aimed to go to Kazbegi² first. It's towards the North Ossetian side, on the Georgian Military road³, and from there there's a track through the mountains, - it was very narrow and went down - I can't remember precisely where - to the village of Kevseli, I think. It's already South Ossetia there.

"The world is not without kind people"

As Father told us, he reached the suburbs of [Tbilisi]. I think it was Nataxtari, it's a village near Tbilisi. There is a fork in the road: one road leads to the South Ossetia side, and the other towards North Ossetia, towards **Vladikavkaz**, through Pasanauri, Kobi and Kazbegi⁴. It was there that my father tried to stop a car to get a lift, but in vain. It was only in the evening that he got lucky, a car stopped and the driver agreed to give him a lift. The driver was rather chatty. They started talking and Father told him about the situation he was in. The driver was Georgian, but his mother was Ossetian. I repeat - the world is not without kind people! He understood my father's situation and turned his car towards his house.

His name was Sandro. He brought Father to his place, gave him food, let him warm up and take a shower. Then he gently wound a bandage round his chest - because Father's ribs were broken. He put him in bed. Father woke after two days. Sandro was taking care of him all this time. He woke him up from time to time to give him food. Probably, it was the three months of exhaustion that affected Father and he couldn't [easily] sleep it off. When Father had regained his strength, Sandro took him in his car to the last Georgian settlement situated on North Ossetian road - I don't remember the name of the place - and he dropped him there. And from there my father had to go on foot.



2 Main city in Kazbegi district of Georgia, located at the foot of Kazbegi Mountain, on the Georgian Military road.
3 The historical name of the Vladikavkaz-Tbilisi highway which goes through the main Caucasian ridge
4 Settlements on the Georgian Military road

“People....will do their best to survive”

Father left [for South Ossetia] with great hope. Winter was severe. It lasted for a very long time. As he told us, he was afraid of freezing to death, of falling down, but the desire to see his children, his family, was paramount. Despite everything, what can't you do when you have the desire to live?! Finally, he reached the Zarskoi road⁵, the road that Ossetians call the 'Road of Life' today. Then it was only a narrow track and it ran through Zarskoi wood. Father decided to take a rest and go a bit further after it got dark. It was getting dark in the forest. He had up to 12 kilometres to go, to reach the nearest village, Zar. And suddenly, to his horror, he found he was surrounded by wolves. He had nothing [to defend himself] except a walking stick.

But it's in people's nature that when there is no way out, they will do their best to survive. My father, too - the only way he could think of was to yell all night long. Do you understand, he was yelling all night long? I don't know what effect it had on the wolves. They neither ran away, nor attacked him. Only at a dawn, did a group of people appear on the road, taking their children from the city [in the conflict zone] along this 'Road of Life'. They had a gun, they started shooting at the frightened wolves, and that is how my father survived. During that night my father turned grey. It took him almost a month to get home...

Father wanted to meet with Sandro very much, to thank him. But after going through this ordeal, he couldn't even think of going to Georgia. As far as I remember, it was some time in 2000 that my father invited Sandro to Tskhinvali. You know, Sandro didn't feel able to come to South Ossetia and then they decided to meet in neutral territory, in the city of **Vladikavkaz**. Mother wanted to go with Father too, she wanted to meet Sandro and thank him personally for the kindness he had shown my father. My parents came back very happy. The meeting must have taken place in a very friendly and warm atmosphere.

So, our family was reunited. Along with other internally displaced people, we occupied a house [that had belonged to] Georgians. The owners of the house had left Tskhinvali. At the end of the war Mother started to work in her profession in the city of Tskhinvali. My father came to his senses after what had happened to him and, to support the family, he started to work as a loader in the market. But the stress he went through left a mark on his health. He became ill, got tuberculosis. It's been almost two years since he died....

“We support each other”

But life goes on. I got married. I have two children. My sister got married, too. And my brother lives with our mother in that house which we occupied. My brother has a fiancée, but he cannot marry her yet. Housing and financial conditions make it impossible... Mother is still working. My mother and my brother live together and both work, but don't earn enough to extend the family. They have enough money for food only. All my father's brothers and sisters are alive and healthy. Two of them are internally displaced, and they live in North Ossetia. Of course, we are in touch and we support each other during hard times...

A talisman for life

You know, I have a little talisman. When I was small, I remember, when my father came back from one of his work trips, he brought small gifts for all of us. I got a doll and, also, a small souvenir - a dolphin. You know, at that time it was a very rare toy and that is why I loved it so much. And so, when we ran away from our burning village, I was able to put it in my bosom. But I couldn't put the doll there too - it was probably burnt to ashes together with the house. The dolphin travelled with me all the way here, and since then it has been my amulet. Here it is. I never part with it....

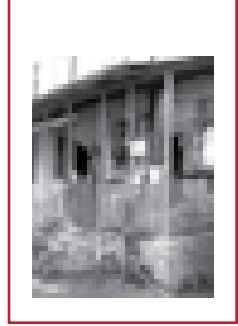
5 Small road connecting South Ossetia with the Transkam highway, passing through the Georgian villages beyond Tskhinvali



Zuriko

Zuriko¹ is 47 years old. He is **Ossetian** and lives in **South Ossetia**. His wife is Georgian. He was born, grew up and was educated in **Tbilisi**, the city he considers his 'cradle' and which he loves and misses very much. Together with his parents and his grandparents he had to leave his native city and for nine years move around from one place to another. Mindful of his grandfather's last words, Zuriko made a promise to himself that his family would have a house of their own. Doing his duty as a man, as required by tradition, he built a house, raised his children and planted a garden.

The story was recorded in Russian.



Tbilisi: "the city I often dream about"

You can record my story, but don't mention names or geographical names. The situation here is very difficult. We have to live here. So you understand, I don't want any problems in the future...

I am Ossetian, but my grandparents and parents were born and lived in Georgia, in Tbilisi. I was born and grew up there too. I spent my childhood and youth in Tbilisi; that is where I attended kindergarten, school and music school, where I learned national dances and did sports. When I finished school, I entered the Georgian Polytechnic Institute, the faculty of industrial and civil construction, and received a diploma in civil engineering. I started working in Tbilisi, too. I loved my work very much. When the work was being carried out I would get stressed. Deadlines put pressure on me, urgent work almost overwhelmed me, bills, receipts, orders – I used to feel all these on my shoulders like a heavy load! But I was filled with happiness when all the work was behind me, when the commission had been

accomplished and we had delivered the final product.

So I lived in this city, which was like a cradle to me. The city I loved and which I still love. I would like to visit it. I just want to hang around there for a while, walk down its streets, and sit in the places where my friends and I used to like to spend time, breathe its smoky foggy air ... The city I miss so much...the city I often dream about. In fact, the city is not to blame. It's the politicians and the policy of the last two decades that are to blame.

Waking up to the cries of street vendors

Our family lived near the railway station. We had a big courtyard and an old house. Such houses were called Italian houses and we still call them that today... I don't know why – probably, Italians once built houses like that. As a rule, these are three-storey mansion houses with long balconies for general use on each floor. The houses have shared bathrooms and kitchens. In the courtyard there was a sink for washing clothes,

1 Not his real name

for general use too, one for all three floors. I remember waking up every morning to the shouts of “Milk!! *Matsoni!*!”². It was a group of people selling dairy products. After them the vendors of vegetables came, and shouted: “Greens! Greens!” As a rule, my neighbours didn’t go down, they just called out from the balconies, “How much does it cost?” And it was like that every morning, from 6.30 till 7.00.

I stayed in bed till, on my old radio, I heard the announcer say „დილა მშვიდობისა, ძვირფასო რადიო მსმენელებო!“ (“Good morning, dear listeners” in Georgian). Then I jumped out of bed and started to do my morning exercises to the sound of the music and following the precise instructions of the radio broadcaster.

“I could look at these paintings for hours”

This is how days started in Tbilisi. As I am telling you about it now, in front of my eyes I can see our house, our apartment in this house, my window with the short snow-white starched linen curtains and the old radio on a wide window sill. Almost 17 years have passed since then, and I still remember the voice of the radio announcer. Even now I can hear him, like back then.

We had three rooms. One of the rooms was situated at the beginning of the balcony, at [apartment] number two, and the other two were situated at the end of the balcony, at number eight. One of the two rooms at number eight was big: 9 metres long, 6 metres wide, and 4 metres 80 centimetres high. The other room was very small, 3 by 3 metres, but with the same high ceilings. That small room



2 Product made from cow's milk, fermented with the addition of bacteria

was my parents' bedroom. On the opposite walls in the big room there were two paintings extending from the floor up to the ceiling. One of them represented Saint George and the other a landscape from the Caucasian mountains: a mountain river, a young girl on a stone by the river playing the *chonguri*³ and nearby, on a big boulder, a young *dzhigit* ('man' in Russian) dancing to the sound of her music.

I could look at these paintings for hours; I knew every detail. We lived in this room all together: myself, my parents and grandparents. But I slept in my grandparents' room, room number two. Ah, that room was also spacious. It was subdivided into two parts: a dining room and my grandparents' bedroom. Oh...there was an ancient dresser in that room and when I opened it, the pleasant smell of vanilla and carnations would reach me. There, by the window, was an inlaid writing desk with two small drawers. There was a table there as well; it was covered with a green cloth and, to make it more comfortable for me to study at the table, my grandfather put a sheet of glass on top of the cloth. Also there, in the corner, there was grandma's sewing machine, a [German] Zinger covered with a beautiful cloth embroidered by my grandmother.

Every Sunday my grandparents used to take me for a walk to the zoo or to the children's park - it was called Mushtaidi. My grandfather used to buy cakes, fruit and sweets...for me.

And when I became a student, we - my classmates and I together - started to get to know our Tbilisi independently. During five years of study at the institute we studied the city and got to know it like our own hands.

Our city was stately, elegant and beautiful. Old Tbilisi, the Kura⁴, the Gorgasali monu-

ment⁵! Tbilisi was a very hospitable city too, and people were responsive and kind... I will live with these memories till the end of my life...

“Suddenly there was bitterness”

What happened then? How did it all happen? I suddenly started to feel a certain discomfort. At work I began to feel a negative attitude towards myself because I was Ossetian. My immediate superiors stopped addressing me by my family name, for example: „შენ, ოსო, დაამთავრე პირველი სართულის გაშენება“ (“You Ossetian, did you finish bricklaying on the first floor?” in Georgian). The gracious, friendly and collective culture disappeared in a moment. Suddenly, there was bitterness, innuendo, insults and oppression. Then, the approximately one-year-long **Georgian-Ossetian conflict** - as it is called now - started. But our [immediate] neighbours didn't hurt us; on the contrary, they cried when my family was expelled from our apartment by gangsters and bandits “guardians of the purity of the Georgian nation”; nobody knows where they suddenly appeared from.

Living in a stranger's house

So we arrived in South Ossetia, in **Tskhinvali**... became **refugees**, forcefully displaced. At first we were sheltered by people we didn't know. They accepted us very warmly. They tried to calm us down; all of us, especially the old people. They shared with us their homes, bread and salt. After a few months, they helped us to move into a Georgian-style house nearby. We lived there for almost nine years. My grandparents died. They died in the same year; on the day we buried my grandmother, my grandfather passed away. They lived together in love and harmony all their life, and died almost together, three days apart. Their coffins were carried away from a stranger's house...

3 Georgian stringed musical instrument

4 In Georgian, the Mtkvari (Kura in Turkish); the largest river in the Caucasus Mountains, flowing through Turkey to Georgia, then to Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea.

5 Vakhtang I Gorgasali (440-502), king of Kartli (Iberia), famous for his struggle for the liberation of Georgia from its Persian conquerors. He was killed in battle. According to legend, he founded the city of Tbilisi.

It was then that I realised what it means not to have your own corner, your own house, your home. The last words of my grandfather were: „მთელი ჩვენი ცხოვრება მეცა და მამაჩემიც ჩვენს სახლს თოთო ბავშვივით უვლიდით, და ახლა ვკვდებით, და სხვისი სახლიდან გასატანი გავხვდით“; it means: “All my life, my father and I were taking care of our house like a baby; now we are dying and we will be carried out from a stranger’s house...” I made a promise to myself that I would do everything I could to have a place of my own, be it some small corner, a small room - but my own.

I started to work like crazy. In the beginning, I did any job I could find. Then, I gathered together a team of builders: a mason, a welder, an electrician, a plasterer, a house painter, a joiner and a plumber. My workers were highly skilled experts. By the time the war was nearly over, people had started to build, buy and repair houses – so I and my building brigade had a lot of work to do. The people who had money began to buy land in the country and build summer residences. We built these, too.

They asked: “Whose house is this, son?”

The last words of my grandfather were a constant reminder to me that I should get a place of my own. And I bought a house in the city centre. It needed major renovation, but that was a detail. My parents knew nothing about the house. I repaired it and bought everything, even the utensils. I ordered portraits of my grandfather and grandmother and hung them up on a wall in the hall. On the anniversary of my grandparents’ death, I set the table in the new house.

I picked up my parents and drove them to our new house. I didn’t say anything, just opened the door, invited my parents inside and made them realise

that it was our own house. At the beginning they started to look around and asked: „ვისი სახლია, შვილო? ეს სად მოგვიყვანე?“ (“Whose house is this, son? Where have you brought us?” in Georgian). But as soon as they entered into the hall, they both stood motionless when they saw the portraits of my grandparents on the wall and the memorial meal⁶ Mother burst into tears, then she began fussing about, wandering around the house, touching everything, admiring. And my father – he stood in the middle of the hall in front of the portraits of his parents and... cried...

Then, he wiped away his tears and said that he was crying because of the happiness [he felt] that his dream, and his father’s dream, had come true... And also he said that he was going to spend the night there in this new house and would not go anywhere else but here. We called all our relatives, invited them, sat down around the memorial table and drank to the memory of my grandmother and grandfather.

Love, marriage and family

In Tbilisi I left my first love, my classmate; she was Georgian. I was in touch with her even after I and my family moved to Ossetia. In the beginning, we were just calling each other [on the phone]. When the war calmed down, ordinary people found a common language. I was in the Ossetian and Georgian border area. The **Ergneti** market opened; my future father-in-law started trading. He was coming from Tbilisi to this market, buying some goods, and going back to Tbilisi to sell these goods. Back then essential commodities were much cheaper here than in Tbilisi. Thus he earned money and maintained his family. So his daughter, my love, came with him. I went to this market and while her father was engaged in his affairs, we had two or three hours alone together.

Clearly, the prospect of their daughter marrying in Tskhinvali, especially after the war period, was not very welcome to her parents. On the other hand, they knew that we had loved each other since we were students. My wife – she is a beautiful woman and she had several admirers, but she rejected all other offers of marriage. Finally her parents supported our decision, and we got married. My wife's parents live in Tbilisi and they often visit us. Now, together with my wife and our children, they have gone to the seaside, to Batumi⁷. Our first child is a boy, and we also have twin daughters.

People say that a man should build a house, plant a tree and raise a son. I bought a house in a very pitiable condition: with neither windows, nor doors nor a roof. There were only foundations and walls, so one can say that I built it on my own. I have three children. And I planted a lot of trees, too. The whole garden.



The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) established by the Norwegian Refugee Council in 1998 is the leading international body monitoring internal displacement generated by conflict or violations of human rights around the world. IDMC, mandated by the UN's Inter-Agency Standing Committee, publishes information on forced displacement in a database that covers some 50 countries.

Based on that information, IDMC works to enable better protection and assistance of millions of the world's most disadvantaged and vulnerable people, to increase respect for their rights, and promote solutions that ultimately lead to their safe return home or resettlement and integration.

It makes relevant information and analysis available to policy-makers, humanitarian practitioners and the general public, to enable international, national and local stakeholders to make timely and informed decisions in line with international standards such as the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. IDMC provides training on the protection of IDPs and makes voices of IDPs heard. IDMC initiated and directed the Life Stories project.



The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) is one of five major non-governmental humanitarian organisations in Norway and the only one with the sole mandate to assist displaced persons throughout the world. NRC has been providing help and contributing to protection of millions of refugees and internally-displaced-persons (IDPs) in 20 countries of Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America. In Georgia, in particular, NRC has been active since 1994. At present, NRC Georgia Country Office runs three main programmes which target IDPs: Information, Counselling and Legal Aid (ICLA), Shelter/Community Mobilization and Education.



Panos London, established in 1986, is part of a global not-for-profit network that promotes the participation of poor and marginalised people in international development debates through media and communication projects. Oral testimony is a method of recording and amplifying individual voices which is inclusive and empowering. It allows people to speak for themselves without being interpreted by others. The Oral Testimony Programme trains and supports communities around the world to carry out their own oral testimony and life story projects.