



**COST OF CONFLICT:
UNTOLD STORIES
Georgian-Ossetian Conflict
in Peoples' Lives**

2016

Editors: *Dina Alborova, Susan Allen, Nino Kalandarishvili*

Publication Manager: *Margarita Tadevosyan*

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COMMENTS FROM THE EDITORS

“Actual or potential conflict can be resolved or eased by appealing to common human capabilities to respond to good will and reasonableness”¹

The publication you are holding is “Cost of Conflict: Untold Stories-Georgian-Ossetian Conflict in Peoples’ Lives.” This publication follows the collection of analytical articles “Cost of Conflict: Core Dimensions of Georgian-South Ossetian Context.” This collection brings together personal stories told by people who were directly affected by the conflict and who continue to pay a price for the conflict today.

In multilayered analysis of the conflict and of ways of its resolution the analysis of the human dimension is paid much less attention. This subsequently impedes the perception of the complete picture and leads to decisions that neglect the interests of those people who carry the heavy burden of conflicts and wars. At the same time, the memory and experiences of such people hold the keys necessary for peaceful resolution of conflicts at all levels – national, regional or international. These hundreds of thousands of people who often involuntarily end up become a party to the conflict with their unique experiences make important decisions to remember or forget, take the path of repentance, forgiveness, or remain in a permanent state of searching for retribution. And this affects not only the mood and decisions of direct carriers of these memories, but also the mood and decisions of future generations.

The collection of human stories started at the end of 2015. Journalists Irina Kelekhsaeva and Goga Aptsiauri asked people directly affected by the conflict to assess past events, talk about current realities, discuss the possibilities of relationships and perspectives for the future from current points of view. These human stories are authored by men and women of all ages who grew up already during conflict, and those who have a unique experience of shared life, those who remember that shared experience, and those who prefer not to talk about it. Despite the fact that all these experiences are unique and are filled with personal pain, we purposefully have left out the names of the storytellers, in order to emphasize once more the commonalities in their experiences.

Georgians and South Ossetians have very different interpretations of the events that took place in the 1990s, as well in 2008, despite the similarities

¹ Davidson, William D., and Montville Joseph V. “Foreign Policy According to Freud.” *Foreign Policy*, no. 45 (1981): 145-57.

of enormous challenges that people on the both sides had to go through. Sometimes it is enough to change the ethnicity of people in the stories and it becomes difficult to distinguish a story told from one side from the one told on the other.

In their memories, along with personal experiences people point to those whom they consider directly responsible for the conflict – in most cases the political elite. With deep sorrow they recall so-called “betrayals” and trauma caused especially by close neighbors and friends. At the same time people do not forget the real human actions taken by the representatives of the opposite side – mostly by close neighbors, acquaintances, friends of friends or even complete strangers.

These stories remind us that not only does the overall context matter, but also the life of every single person. These stories are not only full of losses, pain suffered and boundless resentment, but they also include assessment of the present situation and thoughts about the future. In most cases the assessment of the present and views about the future differ greatly on both sides of the conflict. The stories reflect the political background that exists in each society and which influences the way events are viewed by people. Both in South Ossetian and Georgian stories the reader can see completely opposite political and public sentiments that exist in Tskhinval and Tbilisi and that directly affect the free expression of the will by the people. Often peoples’ existing potential for building confidence is sacrificed in favor of political expediency, total control and pressure.

On one hand, in both South Ossetian and Georgian stories the perception of events clearly reveals a never-ending vicious cycle – the trend of victimization of the own side and demonization of the other side. On the other hand, there are hints of the willingness for confidence building and reassessment, perhaps not such a deep one, but still reassessment of the past. Such different perceptions and approaches to conflict resolution, perhaps are the result of Tskhinval’s and Tbilisi’s completely different approach to these issues, their access to different information spaces and political paths.

Maybe this is the reason that the South Ossetian stories are mostly looking at the tragic past and present, while the Georgian stories are mostly oriented towards the future, despite being largely told by forcefully displaced people and full of pain.

As hard as it might be for the reader to digest these stories, and as much as they might seem not true, it must be underlined that the presented approaches are central for both sides.

Whether we like it or not, whether it is acceptable for us or not, whether we feel comfortable as citizens to acknowledge their existence or not,

whether it creates obstacles for building trust or not these are the feelings, perceptions and pain we are dealing with on both sides. Failing to recognize the existence of these approaches and this pain, ignoring it, attempting to explain it only by propaganda and continuing to shut down the people who carry this pain, become serious obstacles on the path of finding a way out in the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict, and in the case of other conflicts in different parts of the world.

Therefore, the editors of this volume, working on the analytical articles, felt that this publication would not be complete without human stories. Having read the data collected on both sides editors decided that it is worth a publication of its own within the framework of the “Cost of Conflict” publication. The pain and losses described in the “Untold stories” are completely different and often reflect dramatically opposite points of views, but they are costs that the societies continue to pay even today.

For this reason, the geographic terminology used by the authors was not edited and no changes are made changes to the authors’ presentation and interpretation of the facts. Each of us, as editors, has our own individual views on the terminology, facts and interpretation of the events, but we have been very careful not to make any changes to the personal views of the narrators.

We hope that readers will find the diversity of perspectives useful in increasing understanding. While we editors may disagree with authors and with each other about many issues, we agree that we respect each other’s rights to hold different perspectives.

Dina Alborova, Susan Allen, Nino Kalandarishvili²

P.S. The stories were originally recorded in Georgian (Georgian side), Russian and Ossetian (the Ossetian side). The collection “Cost of Conflict: Untold Stories-Georgian-Ossetian Conflict in Peoples’ Lives” is published in Georgian, Russian and English languages. Unfortunately, during the translation style and nuances of the live speech are lost and not always and not everywhere the reader has the opportunity to “listen the live voice” of the narrator.

² *Dina Alborova is a Lecturer at the Department of Political Science and Sociology as South Ossetian State University. Susan Allen is Associate Professor of Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University, where she directs the Center for Peacemaking Practice. Nino Kalandarishvili is the Chair of the Board of the Institute for the Study of Nationalism and Conflicts. The views expressed in this article are the personal views of the authors and do not reflect those of their places of employment.*

INTRODUCTION TO GEORGIAN STORIES

Eight years have passed since the August 2008 war. Many things have changed since then. The moods and approaches that people have toward resolution of conflicts also have changed. I often visit the conflict zone. I've talked to people both before and after the war. The communication with them was especially difficult after the August war of 2008. Internally displaced persons still lived in the tent-city near Gori when I came there to record their stories. Some of the people who escaped the war, brutalities, violence and aggression were unable to say anything. As a result of the shock, some of the traumatized people completely shut down. Others, who lost friends and family, houses and property, were more aggressive and thirsty for retribution. Eight years have passed since then, and again I came to people living in the conflict zone to listen to their personal stories. And again I visited the internally displaced people living in the cottages near Gori. For the "Cost of Conflict" publication I had to collect personal stories and understand what price did people pay during and after the conflict. I already had preliminary information about them, but I did not know the details of the tragic events they went through. Some of these people I did not know personally, and I visited them with my friends Mikheil Chitadze (Gori Information Center) and Natia Nadiradze (Saferworld). When looking at the interviews once they all were transcribed I realized that after eight years peoples' views of the events were more sober, less emotional, and pragmatic approaches prevailed. The feelings of hatred and desires for revenge were gone. I was surprised to hear these people talk about reconciliation, rebuilding of trust and rekindling of relationships. They remembered relatives, friends and acquaintances living on the other side. They remembered the years spent together. What price did they pay during the conflict in 1990s and 2008? The majority of these people are concerned not so much about the material losses, but the moral price that they've paid – lost human relations, erected barriers, and shattered links. Time has passed and these people have started thinking about their relatives left on the other side more and more. After finishing an interview, an elderly man who was telling the story and who lost a lot during the war took a deep breath and said it had relieved his heart. I asked "Why?" and he explained that it has been a while that he wanted to tell his story to somebody.

People working on the processes of reconciliation and confidence building should listen to the people who went through the war more. This is because people living at the epicenter of conflicts see and feel the environment better, including the opportunities for conflict transformation. After

all, that elderly man was pained that nobody listens him. Unfortunately, Georgian journalism is targeting other topics and is oriented towards other types of “heroes.” But media can play a significant role in confidence building, and this process would not be complete if we did not listen, and most importantly, hear these people.

I would like to thank all the narrators for sharing their stories openly and honestly. They were not shy about criticizing the local authorities, for example, for being too slow in rebuilding destroyed houses. They are no stranger to the process of re-evaluation of past mistakes. After all, only an open and free society can break down stereotypes, get rid of the image of the enemy, and take steps towards building peace.

“Who am I? I am an ordinary person, an ordinary Georgian who paid a huge price for the conflict that was unleashed by wicked politicians and that eventually turned into a full scale war. Nobody gained anything from this war – neither Georgians, nor Ossetians. It seems that the wounds have healed and we again yearn for the time when we were living together”, says one of the narrators.

Today these people told their stories. These stories are full of tears and pain, but they want to be heard, understood and for their life story to become a lesson for others so that the tragedy that unfolded eight years ago is never repeated. Politicians and decision makers should listen to these people, because resolution of conflicts, confidence building, and establishment of sustainable peace will be impossible without participation of these people. These people survived the war, they know the price of conflict and better than anyone they know the price of peace.

Goga Aptsiauri

* * *

***A. A. Resident of the village of Chvrinisi of Kareli Municipality,
80 years old***

Right now I am in the village, doing housework. I have a cow, two hens and I cultivate some grapes, wine... I am 80. I was born and raised here; I started working in 1959, sometimes I happened to work near Kareli, in Akhaltsikhe, then in Znauri, etc... I worked in Znauri for a long time, around 32 years.

I was working in Znauri when the unrest began; I did not like that mess. Georgians and Ossetians were separately muttering among themselves. I did not have anything, my words were not considered significant, but sometimes I told them not to do it, or else everything would end badly for both sides. Who would believe me... in the insurgent country... no one besides Stalin would be able to calm them down. In the end, they still messed everything up. I spoke mostly with Georgians, not with the Ossetians. There was a judge named Kako, who led his own group; by that time I was working at “NTS”, when they talked about those events I told him: Please stop. At least *you have* to stop, you are a judge. Don't do this thing, do not complicate everything, do not mess everything up, I know this won't end well. People will suffer and be exterminated. They said I was a Stalinist. I was a Stalinist, but who were they? Neither the judge, nor the prosecutor could scare me. After all, they would not believe me. Anyway, they messed everything up: burned things down, threw people out and now there are so many refugees and Tbilisi can barely accommodate so many people, while very few people are left here. Villages were depopulated... I was detained four times... I went to Tskhinvali and beyond, to Java. Everything is ruined... particularly Georgian villages (Kekhvi, Achabeti and others were less affected)... not even the ruins of houses have remained. Nothing is left. I have no idea who will restore those villages. This is the result of the 90's, villages were destroyed, people died of stress and other reasons. There is no one left to save us.

I left in the 90's, when the unrest began; I left my home hoping that everything was temporary, and soon people would make up. I closed my office, I was working in the storage unit in Znauri. Then they robbed that storage unit, destroyed it, took everything what was mine, and theirs – the government's. Then I tried to save my property; I left it with my friend. I moved here and started living in this village. I have been here since then; I did not go anywhere. Then militia, Adamia (Vazha Adamia – Chairman

of Merab Kostava Society in the 90's) came here with his broken cannons. They left and walked on, we did not let them stay here. Had we let them stay, they would have soon started shooting us from the other side. They went to Kaleti (*it was a mixed village before the conflict, bordering Chvrinisi*) and stayed there. After 5 days the Russians came in our direction... with Russian weapons, maybe some of them were Ossetians. After hearing the sounds of Russian weapons they ran away. They left their plane there. The plane and cannon were burned down and afterwards they came back just to steal from people. When someone from our side went there, they stole different things. Those villages became empty. Nothing good happened. Everybody stole – both us and them. Everyone stole except for me. I did not want anything from them and stayed put, so that they would not take anything from me. They had already taken everything I had and now I would not let anyone take anything else.

One day in 90's, our side once entered the area known as “Seri Balta”. There was only one family living right at the edge of the village and they burned their house down. It turned out that these were exactly those people who happen to live in my house. Their commander came... He was from Znauri. He was talking to his guys about how they burned the house. As soon as I found out I had an argument with them. “Because of you all of Kaleti was burnt down”. I immediately threw them out of my house. Then they came for the Imeretians... Half of Kaleti was populated by Imeretians and another half – by Ossetians. The houses of those Imeretians were burned entirely, because of that one house. Although, no one came to Chvrinisi, neither Ossetians, nor Russians, nor Tatars, no one.

I was still here in August 2008, my wife was quite ill, still in a wheelchair. And neither Russians, nor Ossetians came in our direction. The Ossetians came to Atotsi (*neighboring Georgian village*) and burned one house. I saw them walking by wearing masks, but I identified one of them...my friend's son. He asked me whether I recognized him and I laughed. I, together with other older people, met them... How can I not know you, I said, you are wearing a mask, but I can recognize your voice, you are my friend's son. He told me, that they are not going to harm Chvrinisi “...you have not robbed or burned anything. Now we are going to Koda”. The residents of Koda had offended them too. Thus, we survived. We had a ruined school and they burned it down, although it was already burned. Once, when I was shepherding, I heard that the Russians had arrived. I could not believe it, but I still came back. I had left my wife in her wheelchair on the balcony. I had to come back by noon, to feed her. When I came home I found out that they had already been there and stolen my property. I asked my wife where

they had gone. She said that they had probably gone up the village. I caught up with them. They were wearing masks. They were Ossetians, I realized that quickly. They recognized me themselves, and said that my stuff is in the sack, and that I can take it. It turned out that they took my chainsaw. Chainsaws were hard to get those days. They had taken my drill as well, and everything I kept in the shed. I took everything back, then I realized who he was, but what could I do... Afterwards they returned my things. Nothing like that happened again. Russians did not enter our village; and those Ossetians left us alone, no one came back and this is how we have lived until now. Unless some unrest starts again...

Nowadays, we would not go to their side without a particular purpose. We know they will detain us. Sometimes cattle go there and do not come back. No one except me goes there. If we lose the cattle, what else can we do? I have to go. There was a one person, Ali... Ali was a Lezghin from Makhachkala. He caught me several times with the cattle; then he let me go, at least 5 times. They detained me and then let me go... Previously, when they detained me, I paid them 1500 rubles and they would let me go... They would detain me in the evening and let go in the morning and they detained me again... they detained a local girl once. People came to me and asked me help get her released ... I went to the fir-grove, near the banner. She was standing there and crying. She was afraid. It is very difficult. It is hard when you don't know their laws, quite hard. Then Ali came and told me to go; I refused to go unless they let the girl go, and said I would leave only after that. They refused and said that they had already reported her (*reported information about the detention*). I told them to detain me as well. They told me to go. I refused to go unless they let her come with me... they did not free her, so I went with them. When we arrived to the detention facility I told the head of the military division that I needed him to lend me four thousand rubles, which I would give back the next day, then... I could see that he did not have the money; probably... maybe he had, but he could not trust me. Then I told him to call my friend Seva from Kaleti, who would get the money. He called him! He was a very good man... He called him and he brought me 4000 rubles; now I had money in my pocket, they took us, we paid the amount in the morning and they let us go. We came back via Gori. Another incident happened as well. We sent the cattle to the field, some of them came back. One cow did not return; it belonged to that same girl, Lali. It was pregnant and we had to do something to make sure it did not go into labor there (*on their territory*). If it stayed there a wolf would kill it. A week ago a wolf had eaten the girl's heifer. So we went there and started looking for the cow. I had a new

flashlight, which was quite strong, and I happened to turn it on in a very bad spot, a crossing point, and they noticed and caught us. They detained us and told us that we had gone there for products. I said “What did we need your products for? We already had plenty...” It is actually true; one can find anything here. Everything is abundant. They still took us to the garrison, completed the paperwork; we told them that we came to find a cow and a calf... there was an Ossetian from Beslan... he was called Godo from Balta, we are somehow related... he found the cow in the bushes... we had gone up instead of going down to the swamps, where we would have found the cow and... they found it and took it to a local (Georgian) girl who was married there. By then they were convinced that we were there to find a cow, although they still detained us. I had some money in my pocket; I knew that they might detain me so I kept 5 thousand rubles... although... they made us pay a lot, 8 thousand. The judge said that if they caught us once more they would make us pay twice as much, which appeared to be true.

We are farmers and we are broke, aren't we? Freedom is expensive on both sides. I lost those 8 thousand rubles. 8 thousand Russian rubles is about 300-400 Lari, isn't it? Right? In addition, my cow almost dried off. It did not let anyone else milk it. So I was not able to milk the cow on Saturday evening, Sunday morning, another evening and another morning. It fed the calf... but when I came back it had almost dried off. I barely managed to get it back on track. It is also a loss, isn't it? It is a loss for a farmer... it is my loss. Although, it is not the only loss I have sustained. Just look – we lost our relatives, we live in tension, we can't move freely. There are so many mushrooms there, but we cannot go there to gather them. If you sneak in, they'll catch you. We cannot go to the forest, we lack wood. If only they made up... both the mushrooms and wood are so close. This is what we lost: relatives, nature, even nature is sad without us. Their side has gone wild, they do not have many cattle, and cannot take care of them; they do not plough – we do, we sow crops. If the cattle go into nature it becomes cultured, otherwise it goes wild, that's it... this is a loss, isn't it?

I take all these things quite painfully. Worse things have happened in the past, everything that is written in ancient Georgian history. They used to destroy and burn us and this is exactly what happened. Brothers burned, destroyed, and killed one another. I had some relatives from Borjomi region, and our side threw them out, they had to go to Orjonikidze. I have another relative... after my wife passed away, I wanted to see that relative, but I can't. I have to go via Larsi, which is very time consuming and I have no one to leave at home. I need a visa, money, time. If it was possible, I

would to Tskhinvali, stay there for a while... I would travel to Tskhinvali in a day, stay overnight and come back the next day. They might detain me and now... The way they detain people nowadays – one day they catch me, the next day they let me go.

We still live the same way in Chvrinisi, cultivate what needs to be cultivated, take care of our families, take care of the cattle, whatever we have... and... if a cow goes to their side I don't go after it, sometimes they send the cattle back. Sometimes their cattle come to our village. Just yesterday their cattle followed ours here. But when I went there... now I won't go beyond the posted sign, not again. I cannot fall into their hands again. Sometimes I stay here and watch how our cattle return and 5 of their cows follow. Then they come, follow them to our village and I send them back. This is what we do, we send their cattle back. They do the same.

Our future depends on the government. Reconciliation and everything is up to them. I hope that... there were times in the past, when the country was in trouble, then... we would suffer a great deal and someone, a kind person would appear... currently, there are no kind people within the government, no one. I had hopes for Ivanishvili, but nothing works out, he has many opponents. The way I see it on television, everyone wants to be a boss, and everyone wants to achieve their own goals. But in reality, this is not how it works. The boss is there because he is the smartest and his words should have some power. There is no rule of law; otherwise no one would talk this much. Maybe a truthful person will appear who will reunite us, let us go there, let them come here. That's all that is needed, life will go on the way it did before.

Now listen to me. I have been detained and taken to isolation four times. I went twice to get my cow and the Russians caught me. Another time my Ossetian friend passed away. We went to express our condolences and everything went fine. Second day, I had to attend the funeral; he was my friend after all. I took some money for making a donation and paying the fine, in case they caught me. And they did catch me in the fir-grove. I told them I was going to my friend's funeral. They did not believe me at first, then they did, but they still detained me. I asked them to let me go faster, I would pay the fine – they could take me to the court. They took me to the investigator and afterwards to Java. They fined me and wanted to send me home. But, I did not want to go home, I had to attend my friend's funeral, this was the reason why I went there. They said it was impossible. Their president, Tibilov was attending the funeral. My friend's sons told him that their father's older friend had been detained, while trying to come to the funeral. He called them and arranged everything. They drove me to the

funeral in his car. I attended the funeral and stayed for another half hour for the repast. Then they drove me back. That's it, I won't go there again, I won't let them catch me again, enough...

You are asking whether I want to reunite. Of course I do. Is reconciliation possible? Of course it is. There are people on their side, at least my acquaintance's children who are quite eager. They want this as well... the older people. The youth does not want reconciliation, and it is the same on our side. It is the same there. But I think they'll make up after all. Otherwise, what are they going to do with our territories? All this, until Java and beyond, is ours, it is Georgia... What are they going to do with this land? Our people and governments must make up... there is no other way.

* * *

L.Ch. resident of the village of Ergneti, Gori Municipality, 60 years old

I was born in the city of Tskhinvali and graduated from middle school and university there. Those days Tskhinvali was a city where the doors of houses were never locked, there was such intimacy and enormous trust. We played in the street and did not know the nationality of our friends: there were Ossetians, Russians, Jews, one Armenian... I was raised in such an environment, where the people were not segregated by their nationality... I did not know who needed this, although, probably everyone knows who did... who needed that hidden mine in Tskhinvali, which was put into operation from the 90's.

I remember the edgy situation which began in 1989, when our roads, our links with one another, started to weaken. When the conversations regarding sovereignty began – the Ossetian side started talking about separation, independence... although, Zviad Gamsakhurdia also contributed to that process by his policy and actions. Now, when I look back, this seems to be such a big mistake, the biggest, which brought nothing but misery and unrest to our side, our region. At any rate, it did not bring any good.

By that time, 1991 was the worst period since 1989, when the large-scale military actions began.

As for my family, these events definitely affected us: my husband died during the first battle, which took place close to Ergneti. My husband died on the 23rd of November 1991. This is when my alienation from Tskhinvali started. Before that we had a normal relationship, exchanged visits, everything... We had a house in Tskhinvali, where I was born... born and raised. I had friends, relatives. Within 10 years I lost virtually all connection with them. For ten years from 1991 I never visited Tskhinvali. Although, I remembered every house and stone, every street; I missed all of that.

The first time I visited Tskhinvali since 1991 was in 2000. I went there in 2000 and saw that this city was not the same anymore, many people, including those creating the cultural and political atmosphere, had left... many people... I remember a particularly well-respected individual, an ethnic Ossetian, who had been raised among Georgians; I won't say his name, definitely. He consciously left for Vladikavkaz or some other Russian city; he said that he did not want to be shot by his friends, nor shoot them himself and consciously walked away from the situation.

In 2000 Tskhinvali was quite alien; I walked in the streets and did not have the opportunity to meet my old co-citizens, as the situation was somehow different, tense; we were not able to interact with each other... although, even-

tually, these relationships started to heal. Spontaneously opening the Ergneti Market played an active role in the restoration of these relations.

The existence of the Ergneti Market on that territory was... I don't know how to say... it was well planned... you had to come up with such an idea, a form of relationship, leading to the reconciliation of close but alienated nations. One had to come up with this idea, but life and coexistence, which continued during years and centuries, led to the restoration of relations, closeness and confidence-building by itself. I'm not saying that only Georgians were guilty, the Ossetian side had also committed great sins, so many innocent youth were killed; after all, there was the Dzara tragedy, Eredvi tragedy, when they buried them alive and... this was a grave sin, but it was not a state policy; there were those people, known as milita... those dark people, who, instead of uniting people's grief and joy, kindled everything further, which led to the deterioration of the situation.

I remember it very well, that during one of the meetings they claimed that Georgians had to apologize to Ossetians; but if Georgians had to apologize, then Ossetians had to do the same. My family experienced a horrible tragedy in 1991, which was followed by others. Every three years one of my family members passed away due to the pain, anxiety and misery caused by the tragedy. I will apologize, but will they? Society should have worked on this particular issue, although there was a third party involved quite seriously, which would not benefit from our reconciliation, which aggravated the situation even more, this led to negative developments between two sides; but people are wise, they do not get confused with attitudes, relationships, never...

I remember the situation in Tskhinvali, when the children of intelligent Ossetians were enrolled at Georgian schools, as those schools demonstrated higher levels of culture, in comparison with the Russian ones. I'm not trying to diminish Russian culture, but Georgian culture was closer and more acceptable for them... they were raised in this culture and did not lose it, on the contrary... Georgia supported them as much as it could... the newspaper was being published, they had their own magazine Fiduag and everything else. There was theatre and most significantly, Georgian and Ossetian actors worked side by side, Georgians and Ossetians were never distinguished from each other.

The Joint Control Commission was the only legitimate body in terms of regulating the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. Those issues were addressed on the level of State Ministers. The meetings took place not only in Tskhinvali, but also in Tbilisi, Moscow, Vladikavkaz, abroad... I participated in all the meetings, I saw virtually all the documents. I worked in the commission as a journalist from the Georgian side. There were fights, arguments, controversy,

but eventually common sense always won and achieved some balance. The Georgians offered many things. I remember a meeting in Ljubljana in 2006, where the European states, not only the EU, but also the OSCE and other European countries allocated about 8 million Euros for the infrastructural development of the region. Yes, this amount was quite handy for the economy, which had been destroyed and devastated since the 90's. It was beneficial not only for the Ossetian economy, but for ours as well. It was planned to go toward the development of infrastructure, to put the factories into operation, rehabilitate the systems of potable and irrigation water, organize sports events, improve state structures on the national level, etc. But in the war in 2008... The funding was terminated, although some amount was still left after the war. I remember a personal meeting when the OSCE representatives travelled to Ergneti. Boris Chochiev (*currently the head of Tibilov's Administration*) came from their side and they arranged a meeting... the main issue was the unspent amount, about 2 million, which would be sufficient for putting the Ergneti channels into operation, which had been closed down after war. A consensus could not be reached and as a matter of fact, that money was lost for the entire region. Someone probably used it somehow afterwards.

The decisions of this commission contributed to the establishment of peace and stability. Although, sometimes certain groups complicated the situation, there were ongoing shootings, provocations from both sides; I cannot deny that. But the peace, however fragile, was there. At least, the situation had not reached war.

The Ergneti market was very successful until 2004; it practically led to the reconciliation of two nations. Ergneti was attended not only by Ossetians, but also by the residents of North Ossetian republics.

In general, I believe that business and economic relations have the best effect in terms of reconciliation for these two nations. And they had made up to some extent... I did not have a good income then, we did not have any connection with that market; although I had a small hotel, where different peoples from North Caucasus would gather and trust hundreds of thousands to each other. E.g. Ossetians, Kabardians, Balkars from Rostov would arrive and leave those large sums of money with Georgians, without any fear of losing it. You may remember that half of Georgia depended on Ergneti market. It certainly had some disadvantages, those black holes and smuggling and so on; although it could have been regulated on a state level; they could have established some control, put a customs system into operation. After paying the taxes, all that money would have accumulated in the budget of Georgia. This should have led to the activation of a very good corps of Georgian economists and lawyers. But unfortunately, Saakashvili's and Okruashvili's ad-

venturism led to the closure of the market. The system broke down. Although on the other side, not in Ergneti, but in Mamisaantubani (*small area between Ergneti and Tskhinvali, at the entrance of Tskhinvali*) the market, founded in the 90's, still exists. But certainly, now without Georgians' participation.

Although Ergneti market was shut down in 2004, travel was still possible. Although, both our and the Ossetian side increased strict control, this did not prevent people from exchanging visits, as most of the populated areas close to Tskhinvali were located, in the south. They came to Tbilisi to see doctors, for trading purposes, for purchasing construction materials, various goods, everything... They came to see doctors in Tbilisi, this was a good thing. I cannot say that those things continued automatically, such things never continue by themselves. Thus, there is a prehistoric period, which leads to the establishment of connections to the opposing side. This had its historical roots, relationships, everything... more than a half of the Tskhinvali population had graduated from universities in Tbilisi. There were scientists, who had completed post-graduate studies in Tbilisi, e.g. in the Academy of Sciences. These people did not lose those connections. Under no circumstances. And from 2004 to 2008 all roads were purposefully closed and shut down and the war tore us apart completely. As of today, we have reached a dead end; let's say that no negotiations can solve these issues. Our enemy used this very well. They used it and certainly, this is neither good, nor natural, nor regular. I am certain that maybe after one, two, ten years the time will come and communication will be restored by all means. I would like to recall a particular fact, when the roads were closed and Tskhinvali had a prime minister appointed from Russia, a certain Brontsev. I saw some documents signed by him, published in the Ossetian media claiming that Ergneti was one of the checkpoints allowing unrestricted travel. This was after the war, i.e. this meant that they still believed (and we did as well) that our relations would be restored by all means. And the Ergneti checkpoint was one of many others in different locations. And naturally, they should not close the Transcaucasian Highway. It is a part of big politics. This is the place where Georgian and Ossetian interests intersect, and not only theirs, there are other South Caucasus countries as well, Armenia, Azerbaijan... all of them used this road, as it is the shortest, shorter than Larsi and much safer in every way possible, even in that period.

If we talk about 2008, I'll add that this village sustained the biggest damage. My family was harmed and our house was virtually destroyed. Although, for us, the war did not start unexpectedly. That war was ongoing for several years and tense incidents took place every day. A car was parked in front of my gate all the time, during those tense moments, they were on watch.

These were certain agencies and so on. Step by step we came to that war, step by step. And August 2008 was a turning point, when there was no way back and large-scale war began, and during the previous days... we were as involved as possible. And when everything grew calm, I was surprised why they had stopped shooting; we had become so accustomed to living under these shootings, sounds of explosions, that, to be honest, silence started to scare me. The war, August 8th, concluded everything. I don't know whether I can refrain from evaluating the war and that situation, but it was the last straw for us and... but time passed, six years passed since the war and from today's perspective me and probably entire Georgian side, and I'm sure the Ossetian side as well, regret many things, which led to our isolation from each other. There were moments when my friends called and said that living there without us made no sense, Tskhinvali was not the city it used to be.

After the war, Ergneti was certainly a midpoint, 160 houses were burned there; I cannot claim that all of those houses were destroyed as a result of explosions and cluster bombs, this was also a result of the actions of certain groups of separatists, who walked around throwing Molotov cocktails at the houses, burning them down. It was very hard for us... e.g. as soon as the fight was over, I returned home, I did not know in what condition my house would be, since we had fled without even taking our documents with us. I simply had to save my children, there was no other way. This happened on August 9th and when I returned on August 19th I saw an empty village, where every house had been burned down, especially in our neighborhood... Ossetian and Russian cars were still patrolling on the highway and seeing those cars was so hard for me, that when they approached us I would close my eyes thinking that they might shoot us from there and I did not want to see who was shooting me.

When I came back to my village, in my neighborhood, each and every gate was open, I cannot say that anything had been stolen, in the yards... there were still chickens and dogs running in the yards... but the silence was unbearable. A gentle wind was blowing, shaking the tin roofs of those houses, which emitted squeaking sounds, those terrifying sounds... All this was definitely very hard. But still... somehow we survived everything. Although there were victims, several people in Ergneti were burned inside their houses and shot, not by Russians, but by Ossetians...

Those wounds are healing gradually, slowly... the houses have been restored already. The Danish Refugee Council helped us a lot, they built two-bedroom cottages, where we could find shelter and stay overnight, and then, two years ago, our houses were rehabilitated. Life got back on track and people's lives went back to normal.

I want to tell you a story, which I will never forget in my life, which left a certain impression on my life and personality. It was already a closed period and a friend of mine, an ethnic Ossetian, working for the police, or rather militia as a high rank official, called me from Tskhinvali at 6AM. He was crying and saying that he had had a horrible accident. His 60-year-old brother from the village of Tbeti was bitten by wolves and he was in a terrible condition – the wolves had bit off the tip of his nose, his entire ear. He was completely mutilated and had been transferred to Tskhinvali hospital in a coma. But the doctors told them they did not have any means for saving him and he had to be taken to Vladikavkaz, although they did not know whether he would survive the trip to Vladikavkaz. They could not even administer serum. And that man called me crying and saying: you have to help me transfer this man. I asked if they would come with him, but he refused. “The government has warned me that if I leave the adjacent territories of Tskhinvali, I won’t be able to go back and I will lose my job”, he said. So he trusted me entirely. Well, obviously, it was very hard for me to complete this task, since the road had already been closed... a closed road, security measures, that dying man... they might accuse me of multiple provocations, so I coordinated with some people, called the Ambulance of Tkviavi and told them that we were going to transfer a man from Tskhinvali. The doctors answered that unless we gave them security guarantees, they would not go there. Then I used my official status, my position as a journalist of the Joint Control Commission and called Kulakhmetov (*Marat Kulakhmetov was the commander of the joint peace-keeping forces deployed in Tskhinvali*) directly, explained the situation and he agreed. They contacted him from the Tskhinvali side as well, Kulakhmetov sent us the security guard, who came here, to this closed checkpoint; he sent the guard, and the Tkviavi ambulance, accompanied by his guards, went to Tskhinvali. We took that man, who was already dying, in a coma, and transferred him immediately to Gori hospital, as we would not be able to make it to Tbilisi.

I am so grateful to Mr. Nukri Jokhadze, who then was a head doctor at the hospital, who mobilized the entire hospital. In a couple of minutes after admission that man was transferred to the surgery unit and was operated on. Of course I was in touch with his relative over the phone, explaining the situation... and that man survived, he regained consciousness, started eating, I fed him myself, let him use my phone... People from Tskhinvali feared that someone might hurt him on purpose, and he always told them on the phone that he was in good hands, he was not afraid of Georgians, everyone took good care of him, treated him well. All this was done entirely free of charge... but... that ominous August 8th came and the war began... We had to save ourselves and

run and to be honest, during those couple of days I did not even remember that person. We had to think about ourselves, where and how to go. When we finally settled down and regained some reason, I asked about this man. The hospital had been immediately evacuated and the patients, wounded people and others, had been transferred to different hospitals in Tbilisi. Everyone who had the slightest opportunity to go, was discharged and that man had been transferred to Tbilisi Hospital of Infectious Diseases. We mobilized all of Tbilisi, started looking for him, and found him in the Hospital for Infectious Diseases. Although, unfortunately he was no longer alive when I found him, he had died and before passing away, while he was still conscious he asked them to take him to Ergneti, where there was a woman who would save him and take him to Tskhinvali. The head doctor, with whom I spoke, gave me his passport and medical history. I called his brother in Tskhinvali, I was in a very bad situation too. I did not want them to think that this had happened on purpose, due to the war and the tense situation... this was out of the question! No medical staff would consciously allow a person's death, even if it were their enemy. And... then, as a result of negotiations, that man's body was transferred to Tskhinvali on a vehicle from the Red Cross. By that time our soldiers were being held hostage in Tskhinvali and he was exchanged for three Georgian hostages. These are the rules of war. Although, it is still very hard for me to remember that, war has its laws too.

You are asking about the cost of conflict. I paid a very high price in this conflict. Besides the fact that my husband died and as a result of this stress and other subsequent events my family members died every three years, and to be honest, their funerals and everything... all this was on one woman's shoulders, on my shoulders. Human victims, this was the hardest part, and it was completed by August 2008, when only ashes remained from my 80-year-old family. When nothing was left, no history, everything was destroyed. This was... I don't know what else a person can experience? I do not have anything left except for my children, but thank God, my children survived. This was very hard. I am nobody, I am one common Georgian, a regular person, who had to pay the price of conflict started and kindled by bad politicians, which grew into large-scale war, which was not beneficial for anyone, neither Georgians, nor the Ossetian side. And nowadays, it seems to have healed... we have not forgotten, the wounds caused by war have healed and we still long for those days, when we used to live together.

I am a total optimist and I believe that after some time these relations will be restored. Sometimes, when I go deep down in the roots of this conflict and compare it to others – this was not an ethnic conflict between Georgians and Ossetians, this was not... e.g. a conflict for seizing territories; it was creat-

ed artificially, an artificially kindled conflict between each other, which was used very well by a third party. I often think that solving this conflict today is not in someone's interest, otherwise... I think that people around me are ready to make up with those people, meaning the Ossetian side, forgive everything that happened between us and start from a clean slate. The currently unused great resource of mixed families gives me good grounds for thinking so. Although, certain powers do not want to solve this conflict. It is better for the conflict to continue like that for many years, rather than have some positive changes. There are certain channels, which, if put into operation, would lead to very good results, I am not saying that the road will be opened tomorrow, thousands of our refugees, who were forcibly displaced, will go there and see their restored and rehabilitated homes, which they left behind and you know it very well that people left huge properties there, Georgian properties. Today, they are still fighting to rehabilitate those houses in Tskhinvali. And I heard it many times that they asked why they had burned those houses, if they would have to live in the streets six or seven years after the war, they could have settled in those houses and lived there. This was a very short-term politics for removing Georgians entirely and everyone knows from different published photos that the houses were completely demolished, lanes and vineyards were cut down. But vines will grow again after one or five years. Vines will grow, those gardens will be restored and everything. It is essential for the people to find each other again. People should be able to visit each other.

I once read in one of the Ossetian publications that people in Tskhinvali demanded from their Government to officially prohibit Georgian songs, music, dance, everything, they even banned Gandagana, it is a well-known fact, it was even published in the media. I live so close to the boundary line and Tskhinvali, that whenever there is a wedding here the sounds of music go in their direction and often they dance to the sounds of Shalakho, we can often hear the sounds of Georgian song. This gives me hope that they have not forgotten Georgians and if... even today, according to my friends' rumors, if they want to tell each other secrets, they speak in Georgian, this means that history still lives among them and it cannot be erased, it is not natural to erase such things. These are the rules of nature. I remember a friend of mine, my classmate of Ossetian ethnicity, who graduated from a Georgian school, telling me: they forbid me to speak in Georgian, but I still think in Georgian and then translate it into Ossetian and Russian. And this would mean changing their entire consciousness and mentality, which is inadmissible. It is not easy to change person's consciousness, this has been accumulated in their consciousness over years and centuries and cannot happen so easily.

* * *

G. V. resident of the village of Saribari of Kaspi Municipality.

Village consists of 8 households and is entirely populated by ethnic Ossetians

I was born in the village of Saribari. I graduated 10th grade here; I've been working since then. After my army service, I worked as an electrician. Then, before the unrest began, I worked everywhere, in farms, drove a bus. I drove people to excursions. Even today I serve the village as a mini-bus driver. Sometimes I go to Tbilisi for the sake of two passengers, sometimes to Gori. I have one working day per week and I serve the village.

In the beginning of the 90's... the danger of invasion came from Kodistskaro... or from the side of the Georgians. Residents of Kodistskaro protected the village, they did not let anyone pass... If there is anyone to be "eaten", we will be the first ones to "eat" them, they said.

Georgians protected us, local Ossetians. And we did not let anyone go there. No one ever came from Orchosani to rob somebody or steal someone's car from Kodistskaro, nothing like that ever happened... nothing... we had cars as well and they were protected from us, and they protected us from there. We've been like that since then. We are still on good terms. But, if only the Russians had not stood between us. Sometimes we want to share a meal, and talk about some things... they are afraid of Georgian militia and we are afraid of the Russians.

Such things have happened. There is a water channel there, and we sat in that channel, their shepherd was sitting in one side and I was sitting in another. I took some food there, he, the shepherd, had his own, I brought mine too... They do not have as much wine as we do, they do not have so many things, alcohol. Sometimes we have a feast there.

I left many relatives over there. My cousins, children of my father's brother, they already have grandchildren and I don't know any of them. They left, one of them was only one year old, and another one was two. It has been 17-18 years, hasn't it? My son is now seventeen and does not know anyone. He cannot speak a single word in Ossetian. He is being raised in Kaspi and here, with me.

2008 was a horrible time for the entire country and this particular village, of course. We were hiding. There are some shelters here, old pools and other things. All the men and women gathered there. We spent the nights there and tried to avoid those spots from where the light was coming. They knew where we were hiding. And during those days we stayed there. Who would spend the night at home – no one. And we would take turns;

one, two or three men would go outside and make sure that no one came in from this or that side. And during that war the Georgians did not bother us at all. Once, when we were having dinner in the evening, a commander came to my house. When the bombing of Gori began, probably on the 9th, Georgians hid in my house. Once, when the Georgians were running away from Orchosani, I went outside and they said: "Uncle, please give us some water." "There is no water," I told them, "come in, have some wine, no time for water..." They were tired, six-seven men, from Kakheti. I had Kakhetian boys at home. I spoke with my children in Ossetian and asked them to bring some water... when I looked back no one was there... they had run away. When they heard Ossetian language, they thought that they had managed to escape from Ossetians and now they had met another Ossetian here... not everyone knows our story. From the beginning of times, we did not have any animosity towards neither Georgians, nor Ossetians, nothing like that... even now, they have not detained anyone, I have not heard of any such thing.

Although, there were cases when the Russians detained people. They took two young men, who went there for water; they went there to get water and got detained. There was an old man with them and they left him alone. There, on the hill close to the ravine; "he is too old, to hell with him," they said and left him alone... they get bonuses, they get paid for doing this.

Sometimes we have joint meetings. Once we had a meeting with Ossetians in Yerevan... in the beginning they were surprised: you are from here, you have an Ossetian surname and how did you end up like this? – They asked and then we became such friends that they would not even break bread without me. Now a man from Orchosani is not allowed to freely walk on his own territory. Us? Who bothers us? We walk freely, the way we want...

We lost relatives in the 90's and in 2008... that love was lost, gone... even the villages do not have that any more... that order, no one trusts anybody, right? People do not visit each other... there is nothing to do in the villages and we cannot work, it is all pointless probably... every day I think about where to go and if anyone tells me to go with him as a beggar, I will. There is no income at all. We are going backwards, not forward. Our ancestors moved forward. My father died when he was 48. He fixed those huge houses all by himself, he worked as an electrician. An electrician with a salary. When I came back from the army I was paid a salary of GEL 110 (*refers to Soviet rubles*). I thought that... I changed cars every other day. I drove 03, 06, Volga... now I drive a minibus, I bought it through a loan... I scraped together the rest, I scraped together for six cars. Then I added

some money and bought this one... I cannot work now... there is no work. We want to work... when there is no water, we cannot work. Now we have a drip irrigation system and we can grow something for ourselves and for selling as well. Now we can see some more work coming. This year I will expand, enlarge and widen.

It would be good if tomorrow, or the day after, or in the near future, these relations between Russia and Georgia, Tskhinvali and Tbilisi improved and those closed roads opened. This will have an impact on everything, of course it will, I'll be able to go there freely... before, when I needed fish I would go there in the evening and in the morning I would have fish at home. I would go to Orjonikidze and come back. We would take our produce, like cabbages to Tskhinvali – then we would bring something home... flour or oil, or something like that.

If only the Russians had not stood between us, we would have become friends again and move towards improvements. Or at least we would go forward. It is not essential... if someone hit me yesterday, I would not hold grudge against him, nor retaliate. I was beaten too. Once I was beaten in Tskhinvali. Once I ran away from here, they were trying to take away my car and I left for Orjonikidze and stayed there for a month. I spent all the money I had with me and came back; I could not take it anymore. They beat me, because I had decided to come back. They beat me because of that... then I told him that there was no other way... what else could I have done? Then, when I was coming back... our village is called Saribari and Saribari. Do you know what Saribari means? It means freedom. Freedom like... you know, when one says that he is free. When I came back, my passport said that I was from Saribari, now such passports do not exist anymore. I came through Russian customs; through the tunnel... they searched me and told me I was free to go. I passed through that tunnel and there was an Ossetian checkpoint, a booth. They asked me, in Ossetian, where I was going, who I was, I said to Saribari... What is Saribari? And he opened fire, from a machine-gun, and broke my sidelights. This was during Gamsakhurdia's period. So they locked us there for an entire day, without any food... We had not eaten or drunk water for an entire day. There were three of us. Then a certain merciful old man came to us, who had already been to that territory and asked why they were keeping us there. They said that we were arrogant, we were still saying that we were free... these Georgians... they called us "gamsiks"... Georgian "gamsiks"... because of Gamsakhurdia's surname... Ossetians who had become Georgians... gamsiks, gamsiks... they are gamsiks, they called us gamsiks... I still despise such kinds of people. They kept us there for a while and then that man told them that we were actually from

Saribari and they had to let us go free and feed us immediately. Feed us? I said I just wanted to leave and instead of going to Tskhinvali, we went back. If we went to Tskhinvali, the Ossetians would eat us alive, they hated us so much... We went there when the peacekeeping APCs accompanied them, we would follow and go there. We would go back the same way... if you made it, you would be able to come back... if not... even if a young boy caught you in Tskhinvali, you would be lost, together with your car.

Now about the future... we should have peace again... they will become our friends again, now we should not irritate them... because, we should not say from the very beginning that the Ossetians will eat us alive from that side, or Georgians will eat them alive from this side. We should not talk about this anymore. What was their name during Gamsakhurdia's time? Militia, they used to come here, take their gold, cars, other things. These things happened, no one else bothered us, and the village still stands on its place. The only thing is that the youth have run away, left, there are no jobs, one cannot move forward. Only we remained here, and even I would want to leave, if I did not have this huge house. One might want to go to the city somewhere...I opened a co-operative, invested large amounts of money and then everything was lost deceitfully... seven people joined that co-operative, I was appointed a chairman. Although, a chairman of what? I don't even know... there was a moment when the entire village switched to drip irrigation, although I have not seen water in this village since the soviet times. We buy everything, tomatoes... everything, we go to Gori to shop for products. This year they bought tomatoes and vegetables from us... if we had more support the village would feed itself and others. Everyone loves hard work. Everyone... just give them work and they will work the whole day...

If there is more support, people will come back, won't they? They will come back for sure. If you tell my children... when they come to visit, they ask me what to do. Sometimes I let them chop wood, wash my car twice a day, to entertain them somehow... They ask "what can I do here?" all the time, then they run away – Oh, when we have peace we'll be fine too, I wish everyone a peaceful life, and people will move forward. It is essential to have peace.

* * *

*N.B. currently a resident of an IDP settlement in Karaleti
an internally displaced person as a result of the August 2008 war*

I was born in Eredvi, a village in the former Tskhinvali district. I finished Eredvi secondary school with honors. The same year I was enrolled in Tskhinvali Pedagogical Institute, majoring in Georgian Language and Literature. Of course I graduated with honors and took a job in an Eredvi school with eight grades, as a chief of the pioneers. And I enjoyed success after success because of my hard and dedicated work. I had been a permanent delegate of the Communist Youth League and the Party Congress. I was a recipient of multiple diplomas and certificates at union, republican, autonomy and district levels. I do not want to sound arrogant, but I was one of the exemplary activists, not only at the rayon but also district level, and well known by district authorities. I would receive awards, presents and often received a radio and TV spotlight. I used to be mentioned and shown on TV on numerous occasions. Some even thought I was a dairymaid because of all this publicity...

I had an excellent husband, a distinguished teacher. We had three children. My daughter and one of my sons are married and one son is single. My husband passed away because of a heart attack in 1988. His death was sudden. He was an amazing person, an excellent teacher and his former students still keep in touch with my family and whenever my children mention who their father was they have a green light there, so to say. I had lived many good years. I was granted the Medal of Honor for my outstanding achievements in youth affairs and a teacher's badge. At some point I worked as a director of a preschool and because of my achievements I was granted an honorary title of teacher-instructor. Certificates and awards are countless. I was also a laureate of an art festival and a member of the Tskhinvali branch of the Writer's Union. I was enrolled in the Union in 1989. I write, well, I used to write to be more exact. I had two publications ready for printing, but everything was left behind. I lost them to the war. I lost my history, not a single photo, or a piece of writing... I lost the history of my past and whatever is preserved I keep it in my memory. This is my fortune today.

And then I continued to work and as a result of my hard work I succeeded in a competition at the Ministry of Education and was appointed as a head of the Regional Department of Education. The agency was transformed into an education resource center and therefore I became head of

the resource center. Then I got a position of head of social service in the Gambeoba (*an executive branch for local authorities in Georgia*). But after the National Movement came into power I was dismissed as one of the “undesirable persons” for them. I have been involved in NGO activities since then. I am one of the peacebuilding activists within the organization called Women for Peace and Life. I am also involved in activities of the women’s association Tankhoba. I worked for the UN in Shida Kartli as a human and women’s rights activist for five years. I am still active [in this field].

The 1990s were the most difficult years. Since November 1988 to be more exact. At that time the bleakness had already started. We started hearing stuff from both sides. We already felt tension. And the 9th of April 1989 put every hope we had to an end. The 9th of April was a day you will never forget. We sacrificed for the independence of the country but we still cannot feel that we are an independent country today. What have so many young lives been wasted for?

The situation became complicated in the 1990s. Killings ensued. I remember Gundishvili and Somkhishvili being shot in a car in front of the Party Rayon Committee. It seemed like there was a competition. A Georgian would kill an Ossetian and then an Ossetian would kill a Georgian. Vengeance prevailed. And the situation grew tenser and tenser.

Up until 1991, we belonged to the Tskhinvali Rayon. I am talking about Kekhvi already. I used to live in Greater Liakhvi gorge. I was employed in the education system and had to deal with the department in Tskhinvali and would often visit the town. But in 1991 our relations were cut and for some reasons we were reassigned to the Gori district but it was all very confusing and people could not understand where to go.

There was a whole 18 years from the 1990s to 2008. Georgians who had lived in Tskhinvali had already left. And for 18 years, until 2008, we were trying to maintain a Georgian spirit and the Georgian jurisdiction with all our might. We stood there firm in both smaller and greater Liakhvi gorge but especially in Greater Liakhvi gorge as we did not have anywhere to go. We would be accompanied when we were going to Tskhinvali (*there were times when peacekeeping forces would accompany Georgians with armored transporter carriers*) or coming back. In spite of all these precautions we had not slept even a single night with a deep sleep. There were shootings [every night] and panic and fear made us feel worse. We were constantly alert for attacks. We would run back and forth with children in our hands to neighbors’ houses and elsewhere. We were struggling a lot but I would have been happy had we been able to maintain it as it was... had we managed to maintain our land, territory and keep it going as it was.

I would like to tell you a story. Lira Kozaeva was implementing a project in Tskhinvali and she had to involve Georgian children and Georgian women as it was about a women's club. Lira Kozaeva had been informed that I was an extremist fighting against Ossetians. Lira did not know that my daughter lived in Tskhinvali. And once she said she was going to visit me. I was the head of the Education Department back then. I saw an Ossetian car pulled up in the front yard... She asked for my name and surname... I met her as if she were my lost brother who had just returned from the war. The woman was taken aback. She was surprised by all the rumors she had heard about me. We connected afterwards. I would bring 15 children to participate in a Sunday school in Tskhinvali. Ossetian and Georgian children participated together. At first they tried to avoid each other, but then they became very good friends and fell in love with each other. We worked with our children, Lira and myself, so that the children would not hate each other.

I am a teacher by profession and I have no right to distort the child's soul. Nor have I ever been inspired to do so. Children maintained contact with each other by phone, would write to each other. We managed to implement the Sunday school project successfully.

They learned English, Georgian and Ossetian traditions, gender issues, painting, and writing skills in the Sunday school. We paid great attention to civic education and our priority was confidence and trust building. It was a central line of our work.

By the end of the 1990s the situation grew better and it seemed that people resumed relationships. Lira Kozaeva was organizing a series of meetings including the one with Kokoiti, and Georgian women were also invited to these meetings. Ossetians would also attend the meetings and we knew what they thought. Then after the Ergeneti market was opened, the relations were regulated to the effect that we would invite each other to weddings, visit each other and baptize each other's children. The waters got murky after the National Movement ascended to power.

In 2004 they shut down the market and the tense situation got even tenser after they set up Sanakoev's office (*Dimitri Sanakoev, head of the South Ossetian temporary administration set up by the Georgian Government in Greater Liakhvi gorge in 2008*). If they had to set it up, they should not have done so in Kurta because, after Sanakoevi came in, we had to take a route of 40km through woods like wild animals. All right, there was transport, but if there was no transport in winter we had to walk. Just imagine, you have a family and need a lot of stuff. You have nowhere to go and therefore we had to walk through the woods which was very dangerous especially in winter.

We were scared even in summer. Even though the trees were green we were still afraid that someone might jump out from behind the trees to rob us.

And here came 2008 and we failed to use wisdom against stupidity. Sadly we did not manage to do so. The public was already alert on the 1st of August. You heard stuff when you watched TV and listened to the radio. We had access to Tskhinvali based TV channels and radio and were hearing that they were taking out children and women. What is going on? I could not contact my daughter in Tskhinvali. I tried to call her a couple of times. She said they were still in Tskhinvali and we would beg each other to take care (*her daughter is married to a Tskhinvali man and during the war the mother and her daughter were on different sides of the divide*).

Few people were moving around in the village. We also hid. My son lived in Gori back then. He was unemployed. And the minute the situation got tense he immediately came to the village. It was the first day of August. People were running away from the village. He said he would not let anybody say that he was hiding away and he was not going to do so. He said he would stand next to his people. Two brave men. Can you imagine my situation? I was the mother and doting on my sons, trying to protect them from evil. We hid in my neighbor's cellar. There was nobody around. We did not know that people were running away, taking with them whatever they could carry.

There were four of us – my two sons, myself and several people from neighboring families. We did not know anybody, nobody knew anything and the village was empty. My youngster had a car and we got in it. There were eleven of us. He was driving very fast. At that point in time the village was already under bombing. It was midday and apparently they took a break. We were lucky to use that break... We did not know whether or not we were coming back. We did not take anything. I did not even go to my house. What I did, though, was that I stood there briefly and looked at my house. I wanted to remember it in case I would not be able to come back. I never took anything from there, not even documents or pictures... I wish I had...

We got in the car and left. We drove by Kurta, Achabeti and were about to turn to Kheiti road. There was not a soul and there are eleven of us sitting in the car. As we reached the place known as Tsveriakho, we saw that there was no checkpoint and everything was in ruins... at that point we saw a man running towards us. My son shouted at him and told him he had to go back. We reached Eredvi. It was horrible. Shootings from everywhere. We left for Gori from there and stayed there. So my son and myself stayed in Gori while my mother and my brother stayed in Eredvi as we found out later on... At three in

the morning my son left for Eredvi and my heart jumped out of my chest as I was seeing him off to Eredvi in the middle of the war... He could hardly take my mother from there as she did not want to leave.

We used to live on the fourth floor in a building in front of the house of culture and the first bomb hit the area right in front of the house of culture. Everything was shattered. We were scared and moved down on the second floor where an old Ossetian man lived. He told us that he was a veteran of World War II and said that no bomb was going to hit the area and we should not be scared. We stayed in Gori for couple of days and then moved to Tbilisi. That was it. We lived in degrading conditions...

You are asking about the cost of conflict. You know what? As time passes and years after years are gone, I feel the loss stronger and stronger... I am not talking about the economic loss here, no way... I long for my land, region and the ancient part of Georgia....I am least concerned with what I left in my house. I forgot it all. I worry about the distance which makes me feel so far away from somebody who is so close. This is a pain of the soul, this is a trauma and it should not be the way it is.

It's the 21st century today and I know that two superpowers are competing with each other, right? But human beings should not fall victims of their ambitions. A mother must have the right to see her children and the child must be able to see her siblings. I am not alone. I am not the only one who suffers. There are so many like me out there. There are people who have parents on this side while they are on the other side or vice-versa. This is a pain of the soul. This is a severe violation of human rights. I do not agree with the assumption that human rights are protected. The rights of women are not protected. It will soon be nine years since I last saw my daughter and my grandchild. Are my rights protected? No.

You know what? You cannot do anything with hatred. Hatred destroys and ruins everything. Love, if I have love inside me, I have to love loving... I love Ossetian people. I love people, not only my children and grandchildren. I love them all ... I was born among them ... For example, Iuza Tattaeva, who worked as a head of the regional committee of the Communist Youth League in schools and all these years that we spent together. I had been a leader of the pioneers for almost 13 years and I should tell you that this lady contributed greatly to my development as a facilitator. And there were thousands like me. I want to meet with her and talk to her. She has agreed to come here and other people as well, past activists, so we can sit together and talk about the past. The past gives birth to a future. Those who forget the past are destined to have no future and they will never have one.

Generally I am a very optimistic person... I am an avid optimist and I believe that green plums and almonds will blossom again in our gorge and so will Georgian-Ossetian relations. It cannot be otherwise. As you can never separate a mouth from a nose, likewise, Georgians and Ossetians can never be separated, because there are no other two nations in the world that are as entangled and entwined as Georgians and Ossetians. If you can imagine the number eight written down... Georgian and Ossetian relations resemble it. We cannot be separated no matter how strong the power trying to split us, is. People will never be able to hate each other... I talk to not only my daughter over the phone, but to many other people as well...

Water never loses its trace and our relations, these historic relations, go back into the deep past. Our friendship starts from the times unknown. There is no way they will not be rebuilt and blossom. I say to myself that I am among those who can put a brick of my own in the construction of Georgian-Ossetian relations. And the brick that I am going to put is the one which will start and complete the cementing of these relations. That is what I think and with all my heart and soul I crave for this. My children and grandchildren feel the same way. Who has the right to say she or he is an Ossetian? So what? I never differentiate people by their nationality. I always see a human in a human being. If I see a human being I am ready to die for him or her no matter if they are Ossetians, Russians, Tatars. Nationality has never mattered for me. I grew up with them. I used to dance in a dance troupe of the institute. The chief trainer was an Ossetian man, Otar Siukaev, may God rest him in peace. I never felt any pressure or insult. Even now Ossetians who I have known for a long time, who are still around, they want to have relations with us again. Nobody is going to make me believe that Ossetians hate us... The number one problem in both Georgia and Ossetia is education. The level of civic education is low and so is the level of classical education. I am not talking about everybody of course – God save us, but we have a very low level of education and I always stress that we need to work very hard. We need to make an effort to persuade each other, to make each other believe, encourage love in each other's souls... I love these two words so much “genatsvale³” and “sikvaruli” [love in Georgian]. Without them society is done for. And any nation who does not know what love is and does not understand the meaning and the value of the word “genatsvale” is doomed for destruction.

³ *Genatsvale* (in Georgian spelling), is an idiomatic expression which is not subject to translation. Literarily it means “me in your stead in death” or “I will replace you when the death comes”. The closes it can be translated is, “my dear”, “darling”.

* * *

M. M. resident of Dvani village, Kareli municipality, 47 years old

I was born in the village of Dvani, in the Kareli district. I went to a local school from first to sixth grade. From the seventh grade I continued in the N4 school in Tskhinvali. I served in the Soviet army. After completing my compulsory military service, I graduated from Tskhinvali Pedagogical Institute. I completed only the first year there, because shortly after this, the ethnic conflict broke out which later acquired an irreversible character and as of today, has led to this level [of relationship] between Georgians and Ossetians, these brotherly ethnic groups.

In general, the conflict started and fueled up... it was the 23rd of November in 1990. Zviad Gamsakhurdia was not yet the president and he was going to organize a rally... Yes, it was the 23rd of November, I remember it clearly. And we woke up in the morning of the 24th to find out that there had been picketing in the neighboring village of Muguti. It was improvised and spontaneous, set up by just few men. And there was also a responding picket on our side and then a so-called “picket era” ensued. It had not yet snowballed into a harsh confrontation. You know how people acted in those days? They were still afraid of the law. Some had gone beyond the law, but many still abided by the law. But you could see that this lawfulness was already starting to shake and move eventually towards an active phase of an ethnic conflict. And this [the phase] was heating up on both sides and it was growing and bringing about very negative consequences for both Ossetians and Georgians obviously, because conflicts never ever bring any good to anybody. And that is how it all started to become ruined, everything what we call love, kinship and relationships that had been cemented throughout centuries of shared lives among people of both ethnicities.

Georgians and Ossetians were two nations with great kinship bonds and as I was growing up I never heard that there was a line between Georgians and Ossetians. There were a great many mixed families and nobody experienced any discomfort because of this before. But at this point in time it turned out that these people were standing on opposite sides of barricades and this was truly blood-curdling for many people and it even caused many families to separate, you know, Georgian-Ossetian families with wives and husbands from different ethnic backgrounds. We witnessed cases when they separated for political reasons. Of course it was appalling for both Georgians and Ossetians alike, as I have already noted.

My village was affected the same way as all the other surrounding villages... to the effect that people's consciousness had switched to some unexplained and unclear fight mode. Psychologically, people were all saturated with negativity. It was the first time over the course of many years that people saw how ineffective the government was in regulating this conflict... people's mentality changed literally overnight and this transformation was not positive at all. On the contrary, it was very regressive because it was founded on rage, revenge and ethnic hatred. It was horrible. These roots then had malicious fruits in future generations and their mentality on both sides. I reiterate – on both sides.

There is no alternative to peace. I will always repeat these words. Everywhere I go, I say that there is no alternative to peace. And then the conflict slowed down and a quadripartite peacekeeping mandate contributed greatly to this process. It was the Dagomis accord, if I remember it correctly, and the conflict started fading away. When the dust settled, people eventually started rethinking what had happened between these two ethnic groups. And many of them, even though covertly, still admitted that it was a senseless conflict. Covertly, because there were reactionary forces on both Georgian and Ossetian sides, which actually were trying to block this information. Because they would benefit from the conflict coming back.

So these quiet, descent folks, and there were many on both sides, kept quiet. Because, they could not speak their minds, because they were afraid of that reactionary wing. Yes, they were afraid of them. But most importantly, against all odds, people started thinking that this was a senseless conflict... senseless bloodshed with victims of senseless actions. And relations began to slowly get restored. First, relations were established mostly because of trade purposes. And then people starting remembering old kinship ties – remembering godparents and godchildren, cousins etc. That's how the relations started to develop again. Roads were opened again and passions gradually faded away. Peace prevailed. And it seemed we had the moment when nothing would prevent reconciliation. But sadly, reactionary elements reemerged again. There were few, really, but they still managed to change the climate. They would pop up, make inflammatory statements on both sides. And these statements started destroying the peace that had been cherished for years and the fight for peace had to start all over again. This was the way the process was progressing.

Mostly, the disposition was such, at least with regard to most of the population, that they were going to reconcile. There was a psychological readiness for this and surely, the Ergneti market and economic relations with each other also contributed to this. Almost up until 2003. I remem-

ber that it [reconciliation] was almost finalized in legal terms when Chibirov was in office. They were talking about signing a treaty or something and I really hoped it would proceed this way. But sadly it was not the way everything went ahead.

The next phase starts from 2004. The incumbent Georgian government started talking about the Ergneti market being a black hole in the country's economy. They were talking about unregistered taxes and about the necessity to shut down the market. Tensions, provocations, mutual provocations ensued. Since 2004 we had seen cascades of tensions. Violence would erupt and snowball into crossfire, conflicts, bloodshed and it would go away eventually. And then after a few months of peace it would come back again. These spots of tension occurred in 2005, 2006 and 2007. There were confrontations bringing along bloodshed and casualties, rather than just spots of tensions. And what began in 2004 led us to what happened in 2008.

2008 is the most dreadful nightmare a human being may have. When this horrible war broke out in 2008 we left the village on the 7th of August, because we could not stay here anymore. We lived with our relatives for almost two months. Then after the Georgian police had entered the village and the Russian army left the village we returned. What we saw was the destroyed village in a horrible condition with around 50 burned houses, a robbed village almost erased from the surface of earth. There had been casualties. People had been killed. I lost my uncle, my father's brother, to this violent confrontation. Several people had died... what was most difficult for me to handle, was the death of my former student – I work as a teacher. He was serving in the Georgian army at that time. I was hurt with this death. The pain was piercing. He was just an 18 year old boy. My house had not been burned but there is no “mine” or “yours” in this situation. There was no difference if it belonged to me or to others... and I think that destroyed property, casualties and damage sustained by Ossetians and Georgians throughout this conflict was all mine. Because of the senselessness of this conflict.

In 2013, the Russian regime started borderization. And the borders established by our forefathers started to fall apart. The so called borders between our village and the neighboring village... There was a border between us and the Ossetian village Muguti, agreed by our forefathers. And these very borders were torn apart by the Russian occupational forces. And our lands, Georgian lands are now beyond the so-called border.

My own land, a piece of land, is now on the other side of this border and I was left without land. You know what a life without land means for

someone living in the village. And it was not only my land that was left on the other side. Overall 70 hectares of land have been lost. They took them beyond their barbed wires. And I think in this case it has been all illegal.

The cost of conflict is enormous. Everyone paid that cost. What I mean here is less personal, but personal costs were also high. I personally paid with my damaged psychology. I sustained an enormous trauma. The most precious part of what I had – the best period of my life – my young age was claimed by this conflict. This is going to haunt me all my life before it gets resolved. Thoughts on how it started and how it is going to be resolved will haunt me. This is the highest price by far. The cost was immense to the effect that it has badly affected my health. I sustained cardiac arrest last summer. I nearly kicked the bucket. I think that, rather I am sure that, this was due to the sufferings of many years...What I had to witness throughout all these years, it hurt me and of course it has affected my health.

As for the financial cost of the conflict: the material cost is of less importance... the material cost is, for instance, that my family was left without land, without income. But as I said, this is something we should be less concerned with. What we should worry about is broken bridges between brothers. What hurts me the most is that our children, a generation to come after mine, will grow up without ever setting foot in the streets of Tskhinvali. And a generation will grow up there without ever having walked here. They will be strangers to each other and they are not going to believe that there was love and compassion between Ossetians and Georgians. It hurts me to think that my beloved school, school N4 in Tskhinvali, was burned. I am connected to this school with the best of my memories. I will never be able to go to that school and remember the best years of my childhood. This is the cost, is not it?

And to avoid being biased, I should say that the cost sustained by the other side was the same. I am sure that there are many people out there who think just like I do and that they also think that there is no alternative to peace. This cost was huge for both sides. A war has a big stomach and we have to pay a lot to fill out this stomach. Both Georgians and Ossetians had to pay for this.

There was no line between Georgian and Ossetian and Russian before the war. There was no such definition as Georgian, or Ossetian. We had very amicable relations. There was school N2 in front of School N4 in Tskhinvali and we had strong friendly relations with each other. The same goes for School N6. We also had Ossetian neighbors... I worked in Electric VibroMachines for a year and I had excellent Ossetian colleagues. There was no confrontation. I do not know what force managed to destroy these

relationships. This should never have happened. And after the conflict I do not know... we do not have relations any more... they were cut, obviously.

Now we live in the village. And there are barbed wires around the village. Barbed wires... I do not know... Sometimes it feels like living in a ghetto...in some sort of fenced colony. It seems to me that love, relationships and kinship, roots, are not to be overcome by barbed wire. The time will come when the barbed wire will be gone and Georgians and Ossetians will embrace each other and forget that sinister past of ours. They will open their hearts to each other and resume their shared lives.

Now I work as a teacher and always try to tell my children that violence and war is horrible. I try my best to help them not to think that someone is their enemy. The enemy is the one who calls on violence, hatred. There will be no other enemy for them. A person, only because he or she is of a different ethnic background or political affiliation, cannot be an enemy.

We look at the future with hope. I am sure that it is just a matter of time before Georgians and Ossetians will live together again. There will be a great consensus. But it will take time. It also takes progressive people, progressive wings from both sides who will be able to lead their people to an overall reconciliation. The church may play a big role in this process, as well as non-governmental organizations, or journalists. Economy and trade relations may also play a role in here. We should try all possible ways and take all possible steps, reach out to everyone. All Ossetians and Georgians who think progressively should take these steps. We live in the 21st century. The Internet is accessible and we can resume relations at least virtually. I call on every progressively thinking Ossetian to stand together and tell each other that there is no alternative to peace.

N. M. resident of the village Nikozi, Gori municiplaity, 29 years old

I was born in Tskhinvali. My father passed away in 2010. I have a mother and two sisters. We are all married. Currently I live with my mom and grandmother with disabilities and in need of care. I am divorced and raising a son on my own. I graduated from Tskhinvali State University in Gori in 2007. In the spring of 2008 I got a job in the peacekeeping forces as a kitchen manager at Exmed. However, sadly, due to notorious events, I lost my job as each base had its own kitchen manager and I was not experienced enough to get a job at another base. I found a job in a local shop first and then I happened to attend an information meeting organized by the women's association Tankhmoba [Georgian word for "consent"] and I am still here.

My generation, the generation of the 1980s, is perhaps the one who suffered the most as we have had to witness a lot of conflicts. This includes the 9th of April 1989, the troubles of 1992, the constant fear, the pre-war events of 2004, the constant shootings, the ever-lasting tension. Children in my class even came up with a joke that we were bon in the war, grew up in the war, were receiving education in the war and most probably we would get married in the war. And it was truly like this. If we look at the attitudes after 1992, there were several years of tension. I do not remember this period very well. But I know about it because we had family friends [Ossetians]. But relations were warmer back then. People would visit each other. As far as I remember, people would move freely to and from Tskhinvali, and kept kinship ties before 2006, even 2007. In 2006 I baptized an Ossetian girl with whom I continue to keep in touch, by phone and the Internet for obvious reasons. She got married and gave a birth to a child. She now lives in Tskhinvali. Her mother is Georgian and father Ossetian. She cannot come here for certain reasons. Her brother works and she has to take into consideration [the kind of] work her brother does. Relations have become very edgy since 2008, the border was closed, when the border was open before that relations were starting to thaw. However, certain factors completely destroyed this... I do not really know... We can only expect that these relations will be restored in future periods.

But the period I remember, from around 1995 to 2005, was a good time. It was the time when the Ergneti market was working and people could enter and leave Tskhinvali. Because we live so close to each other that people would carry their goods on carts and buy products on the spot and carry them back... the relationship was very good. They would call each other by phone to order what they needed. Or, let's say, they wanted to buy something in Tskhinvali and did not have money. They could take whatever they needed and pay later, after

some days or even a month. Locals would sell their harvest right from here. They could take their goods to Orjonikidze and sell them there. The village was economically strong and wealthy. Local community had apples, a lot of them. They would lease land and you could hardly find poor people... perhaps only lazy ones would be worse off. My family, thank God, I do not remember any time when we could not rely on our harvest. My mother and father would do everything they could to provide for us. And the situation was favorable around us. Sadly I cannot say the same about the present situation...

That's how we lived up to 2008. I worked for the peacekeeping forces and therefore I had access to updated information every afternoon. They knew that my baby sister was pregnant and would warn me about upcoming shootings so that we could leave if we were too scared to stay. I always tried to walk her home in the afternoons. She's a very emotional person in general. My sister was 30 weeks pregnant in June, when Sanakoevs' car, you may remember that, exploded on a by-path [*Dimitri Sanakoev, head of the South Ossetian interim administration. His car exploded on Eredvi-Kurta en-route*] and then several guys from Avnevi were wounded. This was the situation. We heard shootings every night. During one of those shootouts my pregnant sister jumped off the bed very frightened. This never happened before. After two or three months she noticed that baby had not moved in a while. We took her to a doctor and sadly, we were told that the baby's heart had stopped. Unfortunately, she lost her baby. Thank God, nothing happened to my sister. She is well and in good health. She gave a birth to a healthy baby a year later. In the afternoon of the 7th of August I was on my way to Gori to collect my paycheck. They had planned a rotation some days ago and the Gori armor division was replacing the Nikozi unit on the peacekeeping base. Therefore, seeing tanks did not take me by surprise and I also tried to calm down my neighbors by telling them that it was a part of an ordinary rotation. One of the soldiers sitting on an armored vehicle, had parked his car in my front yard and asked me to keep it there till the 10th of August. Of course I said yes. It was when my elder sister and myself were driving to Gori that they called me to say that there was a danger that war might break out. They told me to leave the base, save everything I was doing at work on a memory chip, and take it to Gori... We returned. But before that I called home from Gori and asked my mother to get herself ready, and my sisters, so that we could leave for Tbilisi immediately upon our return to the village. My elder sister refused to come with us. Both of my brothers-in-law were serving in the army at that time. So my brother-in-law called my sister and told her loudly to leave by all means. When I arrived in Gori, a friend of mine called me. He told me he had snuck out of the army to buy some clothes and asked me if he could leave his backpack at my place. I agreed and called my mother to warn her that the guy's close friend would drive to our place and leave the backpack. And then it occurred to me

that we would not have time to catch a train on our way back and with tanks already on the move, there might not be any means of transportation. So I asked the guy if they could wait for us in their car, drive us to Gori, and then we would catch a train to Tbilisi. He said it would not be a problem to take us to Gori. So I quickly ran to the base. The guys who were there looked at me surprised since an area surrounding Avnevi had already been bombed and the fields were on fire. They told me it was dangerous to be there and something bad could happen any minute. I told them that I had to take some information to Tbilisi and left. Meanwhile my friend arrived and left his belongings at our place. So we drove to the Tedotsminda (*a village near Gori*) stop. The train arrived in about 15 minutes. People were panicking because they had to lie on the floor as the windows of the train were shattered because of shelling over Khviti. I just imagined what would have happened had we been on that train at that time... Thank God we managed to somehow miss that. That night I tried to reach my mom and called my neighbor's number. The screen of her phone was broken and she could not identify the caller. She thought I was her sister-in-law calling and said: "Khato Tsira's house caught a bomb and so I left for home to check on the house. We were all there". I thought she would not tell me the truth and asked her to pass the phone to my mother. She told me to call later on. When I called and heard her voice I realized that they were simply in the basement together with women from the neighborhood. There were around 14 women sitting in the basement. My dad could not move fast. Because of his disabilities he had to use a walking stick and he walked really slowly. My mom told me that everybody was all right but that our house had been badly damaged. But I could not worry about the house... She also told me that there would be some footage on Rustavi 2 so that I could watch it. I turned on the TV and I saw my house. It is paradoxical, but when the base was bombed my office was the first room to catch a bomb and my house was the first building to catch a bomb when they started shelling the village. Thank God, no one died. And the period before my mother and father could get to Tbilisi awfully dragged on. It was the 11th of August and my mom did not know that Gori had been bombed and there was nothing there. She struggled to get my dad out of the village. A guy from the neighborhood was loading his furniture on his moped and they somehow lifted my dad on the top while my mother walked behind because my dad could not walk. When they got to Gori station they called me from a police officer's phone. When I got a call from a strange number I immediately called back. And the guy told me that they had already left. I begged him to go back and check on them and see if they were still there. As it turned out, there was a taxi departing from the center of Gori with two passengers and they waited for them. The taxi driver charged 80 GEL and my mother said she was willing to share. But the guys did not have more than 35 GEL... They were very embarrassed and counted the money several times. My

mother said she would add 5 GEL and they left. Somehow they got to Tbilisi. And the taxi driver who they stopped in Didube refused to take money from them. "I would not dare to take couple of Lari from you. I know where you are coming from", – he told them. And when my mom told me they were already here... I will never forget the look in my father's eyes, a dreadful look. I thought to myself he must have seen horrible stuff on his way, which made him very scared. He was a very proud man. When he sustained damage to his brain from high blood pressure and could no longer work with his stick and saw that my mom was working hard and we did everything in the household, he wanted to be dead. But when he had to face that horror, he seemed to have suffered a lot. I believe he lost half of his life back then... when he saw his house so destroyed, the house he toiled so hard to build with his own hands, it put an end to him.

Grandma stayed at home. She never left. Later she told us that marauders came in on the 13th – 14th of August. They were Ossetians for sure, as there were no Georgians in our house since my grandmother was staying there. They took that young man's car. Before that I was calling my neighbors begging to get the engine started by a wire or something, to somehow persuade my grandma to get in there and take her out of the village, as there was gasoline in the car. Well, she never left anyway... You cannot oblige anybody in such a situation. My grandma could not drive either. My mother had put everything that was left after the bombing in boxes and these Ossetians took everything with them. Later on, my neighbor told me that they were very frightened. They stashed the army uniforms in the bushes. And when they [they Ossetians] came in they asked if the inhabitants had anyone serving in the army. My neighbor started crying and told the men that her son-in-law was in the army but that after the divorce his uniform was still there and that they were scared and that's why they had hid them [the uniforms]. So the Ossetians took all the uniforms. My neighbors' houses were emptied like this. They took bikes and other stuff from them. The Ossetians made recordings of themselves wearing Georgian army uniforms and doing nasty things. And it looked like that all those things are done by Georgians because uniforms had Georgian flags and names on them. It was hard to identify the nationality of those who wore the uniform. But my mom recognized the uniform of her son-in-law, even though she knew for sure that the person who is wearing it is not him. My grandma's sister was married to a man in Achabeti (*a village in a greater Liakhvi gorge*). They too, decided to stay, as the man had Ossetian friends and owned an Ossetian passport. Therefore, he thought nothing threatened himself and his family. They just sent away their children just in case. But sadly, Kazaks killed them through torture. Their children wanted to organize a wake in their memory and we wanted Grandma to be there as well... at some point they allowed mini-vans to commute... I should also say that His Reverence (*Mitropolite of Tskhinval-Nikozi Eparchy Isaia Chanturia*) tried his

best to protect the population who stayed there and Russian soldiers themselves would give people a glass of water, and if women were moving around the Russian soldiers would tie a white ribbon on their arms as a mark to show that they were peaceful civilians. A woman from my neighborhood would often check on her daughter's house and she told me that they would give her a white ribbon as a sign that she was a peaceful civilian. When we took Grandma to Tbilisi, my father was already finding it very difficult to stay in Tbilisi. And when they left for the village in the beginning of September, my father left with them. My mother would stay with us for a while and then take some food to Dad and Grandma. So one day she decided to leave. I think even before she got to Gori, there was an incoming call on my mobile. "Are you Gia's daughter?" – someone was asking from the other end. "Yes, I am", I said. "Who are you, what is going on? Why are you calling me?" "He was kidnapped, taken away", that is what I heard. "Who, where, when?", I was lost and confused and could not make a sense out of what I was hearing. Luckily I knew all these hotline numbers. I found out that my father was taken by the Russians. I called many people and explained the situation, and told that this is a verified information. As I found out, my dad was sitting in front of the house when some drunk Ossetians drove by in Vilis. When they saw him with a walking stick they asked if he was a tank crew. My father had a speech impairment and in Russian it must have been very difficult. "ya bil tankistom" [I was in a tank crew], he told them. So they took him towards Avnevi. The car broke down there and they walked him to Tskhinvali... as my father later told us, they would make him stand in front of holes, rattling with their machine guns, swearing at him, and he would also swear at them silently. Suddenly, a neighbor saw him and immediately notified His Reverence who in his turn called Kulakhmetov [*Major General of the Russian army and commander of the combined peacekeeping forces*]. Kulakhmetov ordered them to immediately bring my father down and release him. Where there is a Georgian checkpoint now, there were Russians standing there and so they released my father at that place. When some journalists found out what happened they started asking him questions which really made him upset as he did not want to go through this again and again. He would complain that they would ask him the same questions over and over. He was complaining that he was tired. We tried to talk to him and tell him that these journalists were not the same ones who had been asking questions before. There is some footage on my father. That is what we could keep of him. He suffered a lot and that's exactly the cost we paid. Our destroyed house, my father's deteriorated health conditions are the price. In 2010 his heart condition got to the point where he developed thrombosis and passed away. Although we tried to do our best, in the end we could see that Dad was not feeling good. We pulled ourselves together, saved some money and repaired the ceiling and wallpaper in at least two rooms so that if something hap-

pened to Dad we would be prepared in a cleaner house. There are eight rooms in our house and none of them had a ceiling. We are trying to slowly repair it. There had been some assistance after the war but we were told that we were not eligible for financial assistance and were only given some materials, which was not enough. Nobody paid for handymen for us and they are quite expensive. There are lots of things we have to do and we try to do it ourselves. It is hard to deal with all these memories but I also think that everyone should know what we went through.

I was in the tenth grade when my father sustained a stroke. My sister was finishing school that year. My mother did everything in her power for us even though my dad required extensive therapy. My mother did everything she could so that we could receive an education without missing a year... My sister became a university student that same year and I followed her next year. Against all odds, I can say that I lived a very happy life as a student thanks to my mom. My mother became a motivator for me, a role model to follow. I wanted to become successful with my knowledge and somehow lift the burden off my mom's shoulders, so that she would not have to take care of me and at least be able to do other things. My mother has inspired me a lot and continues to do so. As I said earlier, I took many steps after the war and in 2010 I found myself sitting at an introductory meeting organized by the women's association Tankhmoba (consent). They were introducing free computer courses. There was a high demand for this since knowing the basics of computer programs had already become a must. And as I had already had some work experience they offered me to undertake a re-training course so that I could train others afterwards. Of course nobody would turn down such an offer. So I accepted the offer so that I could learn something new and then get a good job. And they would pay me for training others. Of course I was happy to take the offer and started working in 2010. It feels like I have graduated from a second or third higher education institution while working here. I attended many trainings and seminars. I have learned how to help others, how to utilize my knowledge, how to identify problems, carry out an assessment or research or mobilize active people like myself. We set up an office with an internet connection, equipped with a copying machine and every service we offer is free of charge. Our experience and hard work won us the trust of the local community and we have grown into an intermediary circle between the local authorities and the central government. I believe that my experience and the path I have taken made me the person I am today. I do not want to sound arrogant but I consider myself successful. At least it seems like that from where I stand today. As for everyday life, of course my family also has problems like every family, but these problems are also relative. It is possible that someone, having much better standing than I do, may say that I have a lot of problems, but when I look around and see people struggling to survive, people in need and

without any income, people who cannot provide for their children, I thank God. I have an amazing mother, a wonderful child, a great job and I believe that I can be myself in what I do. I have no boss and no subordinates in my office. I have no specific job description. What I do is much needed for the community. As for life in the community: if there were middle class, upper middle class and the rich before the war, now we have middle class, lower middle class, the poor and the destitute. People struggle to survive, facing enormous problems. They need great financial support. It is great to have water 24/7, gas 24/7, electricity 24/7, but we have to pay for these at the end of the day. And if I have to turn off the lights or the gas so that I save some money on bills, it is not life, is it?

There is a powerful force between us – between Georgians and Ossetians, waging wars of various kinds including the information war. But I am more than sure that the human resources and kinship ties between us are a great strength. There is a direct exchange of information, let alone the fact that we are now in Nikozi. Once I remember His Reverence saying (*when Medvedev was visiting Tskhinvali*) that if we had a good enough discus thrower they would even manage to hit Medvedev with a discus. And this is the truth. It is true if we understand it properly. We are so close to each other that they will see, willingly or unwillingly, everything good that is being done and will be done here. They will see Nikozi, which is lit up, and a primary health clinic that can be spotted from Tskhinvali. When they see nice houses, a strong community working in orchards, blooming trees, attractions, fun events, busy people; when they see it with their own eyes rather than by word of mouth, it will contribute [to improved relations]. These barbed wires are like fences. It is not a barrier; it cannot be a barrier to our relations. I don't think so, even more so in light of existing kinship ties.

Of course both sides are to be blame and we cannot hold just one side responsible. We should also remember that nobody fired cotton wool in the war. Therefore, it is critical that we work with the youth on both sides as there is no way that relations are cut between the elder generation, between people who still keep in touch...I cannot tell you how much is being done to maintain these relations. Of course they are trying to keep a low profile for various reasons. Because they are also scared and we should all understand why. But I strongly believe that the time will come when Ossetian and Georgian youth will be discussing our future at a round table let's say here, in Nikozi. We will be talking about life in a peaceful country with a united and active youth. Thank God for the present and for those meetings that are being held. These bridges should never be burned and if there is even the smallest string we should all cling to it and make it into a ball so that we have something huge in the end.

* * *

T. G. resident of the village Zardiaantkari, Gori municipality, 70 years old

I was born in Zardiaantkari in 1945 when my father returned from the war. He spent four years in that war. I grew up here. Then I graduated from an agricultural school. I have always been a driver. I worked as a driver in many places including Gori and Tbilisi. We were in the war in 1992. And then there was a war again in 2008. We had to run away for four years. I would take my wife and children everywhere I went. We had horrible days in August 2008. We did not leave the village. There were shootings all the time. Look at the walls with bullet holes and the asbestos sheets on the roof are all broken. When they started setting Disevi on fire, it was the 13th of August. We got very scared. And when they started setting houses on fire here, and burned down my cousins' houses, we were forced to run away. We were afraid that they would burn us all. So we ran. We walked the whole day until we reach Satemo and then we moved to some place after that. Then we got to Tserovani and someone sheltered us there. And then we walked to Igoeti. Then my brother-in-law – he lives in Tbilisi, drove to Igoeti and took us to Tbilisi. Then we reached a preschool. From there they took us to Gori and gave us a room in kindergarten N1. Lali Baiadze was a director there. We spent quite some time there, at least three years or more. We stayed there. Sometimes we would sneak into the village, but there was nothing new there. Plants were burned. People were in very bad conditions. I am sorry for the village. Not only this village but other villages around – Koshka, Gugutiantkari, Mereti, they are all miserable. And food – there are no apples. The orchards are all burned. Now they are trying to fix the water, working hard, but I do not know if they will manage. People live in hardship. If they do not assist us socially, we will be this miserable for a long time. Although we have wine. I have wine, around a ton. It is true that we are not dying of hunger, but people need money to breathe, to be able to set saplings, or fertilize trees. There is nobody to help us out. At least they would distribute some flour during Saakashvili's times, or macaroni, or oil. It has been quite a while since anybody helped us, no one pays any attention to us.

You asked about the cost of the conflict, right? They took stuff, burned my car. They took household stuff, chairs. But they did not burn my house. The house was damaged and the orchards burned. That's what happens if you don't water or prune the trees for four years. That is how poorly we live. We have health issues, high blood pressure. It's not easy to leave

behind a big house like ours. Everyone was in a similar situation in Koshka and Gugutiantkari. There is a huge police presence there. They even outnumber people here. We hear shootings every day, every evening. How come they have military trainings every single day? We live in fear. The Russian army is deployed at the checkpoint within 100 meters from here. They are everywhere till Leningori. We even lost the feeling of fear. I am not going to run anywhere any more, even if they enter tomorrow. Where are we supposed to go to if a war breaks out? God save us from war and let it be peace.

I used to work in Tskhinvali for a whole 12 years. I was a driver at “Selkhoz Techniques”. I had excellent mates, good friends. We had very amicable relationships. I would often stay there to dine. Even now, I can share meals with Ossetians who stayed here in Zardiaantkari. We have this kind of relations with each other. They live at the checkpoint over there, I mean our checkpoint not the Russian one. They allow us to go, as they know that we are together. I do not even know how to put it. I worked and then I got married. I have children and grandchildren. We struggle to survive.

I do not know anything of them, there, on the other side. Perhaps some of them even passed away. The relationships have been lost. We do not know each other’s contacts. There is no way we can meet. Those who have relatives in Vladikavkaz they call them. I really want to call them [friends] and continue our friendship. I have friends in Tskhivali and would be happy to resume friendship there. I hope some of them are still alive. I assume they think alike. I could visit and host my friends. There are good people there too. Where there are bad people there are good ones beside them. It’s like this here. It’s like this everywhere. I should also tell you that if they open the roads now, there are many people who will not dare to come here and there are many who will go there. Those who feel guilty for something, they will not dare to go there. Decent men and people, they will all come and go. Bad men will not be allowed to come and go from either side. No Ossetian has crossed from there even now.

How do we do now? I am going to tell you what I do on a daily basis: I have a cow with a calf and I take care of them. I started budding grapevines slowly. We struggle, keep it slow. Everything was destroyed. As I said people do not even have apples to eat. There is no irrigation water. They [Ossetians] have blocked it.

I think we should move forward. We cannot move backward, can we? I do not know what the future will be like. They may regain some common sense so that we stay together and live well. Many people in the village have relatives on the other side. But these links are being lost since there

is no movement possible between them. Russians do not let them leave, let alone us. Only Russians and Ossetians go there and Georgians are not allowed to. Ossetian guys have bought apples here and taken them there via Vladikavkaz. They also struggle. They also suffer a lot. We have good relations with each other. We grew up together. We have been together for a long time. There has never been a fight between us.

Back then when they came here and started setting everything on fire, people would name different persons who participated in this. But we do not really know who they were. We had already left by then. Who knows who they were? We would not know if they were Ossetians from Khelchua or fighters from the Caucasus. The house over there, they also tried to burn it down, but some guys who were still there, they managed to save it. They also saved my cousin's house up there. They put out the fire when they saw that the house was catching. It's good that they were around, otherwise they would have burned down everything. They tried to burn my house when they burned my car.

You know what I think of the present situation? As far as I can see, they are eating each other in the Parliament and what can we do? If there is no peace in the parliament, how are they going to secure peace outside? What are we supposed to do? What is up to us? Is it only up to the State? Authorities have to decide on everything and we are the people in the state. Cannot farmers do anything? Does it really matter how much we talk? Why do not they listen to people? They just eat and fight. I am not afraid of them. What I am afraid of? I have no fear. I am not in the opposition [political opposition]. I go where good people are. The villagers are angry, man. They curse and swear. Who is going to vote for them? I do not really know.

A police checkpoint divides the village into two halves. Zardiaankari Ossetians live up there. We are very close. We are like family members. We are good together. They are very sensible. We would not say anything upsetting to each other. They too want peace. How long am I going to run back and forth? They are also people, man. What are they supposed to do? Run here and there. If the war starts, we will run and so will they.

We managed to care for each other in the 1990s. We covered them and protected their houses from being burned back then. We would also protect our local Ossetians, so that they did not rob them. Of course they remember all of it. Of course they do. If I remember, so do they. I think, if the is opened and we can move freely and will not be afraid that they will beat us up, then for sure I will meet someone, an old friend or relative, and you will buy something from him, will sell something to them, and little by little the previous relationships will be rebuilt. It all needs time.

They are now talking about opening a road in Khelchua. I think that they want it too. I am not talking about Tskhinvali, but at least villages want to have free movement. We would have feasts together, we celebrated weddings, shared sorrows and happy times with each other. We were all mixed up. May God give us peace. My son has a house here and in Gori too. This house will be enough for my grandson. I have been a driver for 64 years. I do not work now, as there are no jobs. But there are Russians [army] standing all along from Leningori to Abkhazia. We do not have that strong of an army. The Russians have so much equipment and manpower. I know this much, as I used to drive to Russia often.

All we want is peace. We should move forward and take care of ourselves, everyone who is full and who is hungry. I do not rely on the government any more. I do not want anything, but they should respect people, our people in Koshka, Gugutiantkari, Zardiaantkari. We need a little support, someone standing beside us, a little bit of compensation, even a thousand Lari or two would help us and this is nothing for them [the authorities]. I should not live like this. If I had been able to sell my apples for 7 years – I used to collect up to 800 boxes of apples – we would have been much better off. We have been here for three years and nothing has been done for us. That is the way we live and struggle. But God save us from war, son. There is nothing worse than war.

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R. M. resident of the village of Tsitelubani, Gori municipality

*(Georgians, Ossetians, repatriated Meskhs and
eco-migrants from Adjara call the village a home)*

I was born in the village of Sairkhe, Sachkere. I graduated from Tbilisi law school. I met my future spouse in Tbilisi and we got married. We had a daughter and a son. We lived in Tbilisi until 1989 when my brother-in-law (husband's brother) died and we could not leave his parents alone. So we stayed in the village. And then the 1990s came, to be more exact in 1989, that's when all these troubles started. Then it got quiet for some time and came back in 1990. It was winter time... And it was very hard for me: I would get upset if the Ossetians said something bad about Georgians and I would also get upset if the Georgians said something bad about Ossetians. It was very hard for me to hear all of this. But this was happening in Georgia and therefore, Georgians were not as affected as Ossetians.

Tsitelubani was an almost exclusively Ossetian village back then. It was all Ossetian, and they [soldiers] would come to the village – they would make their way to the village and shout “Ossetians, off you go!” They were militia. “Ossetians get lost!” “Why are you still here?” and stuff like this... almost half of the village left. But to be honest I did not want to leave.

So, here I was, not wanting to go. On the other hand, we were a mixed family. But once, they threw hand-grenades in three houses. But we did not leave for Orjonikidze (*Soviet name for Vladikavkaz*). Instead we went to my mother's in Sachkhere and stayed there for four or five months. But there was a horrible earthquake there either in May or in April. It was horrible. And when the quakes came back, we were scared and had to leave and move to Orjonikidze... I left too, but after three months we had to come back because my brother-in-law passed away... We did not take even a spoon with us because my mother-in-law would say, after my brother-in-law died in 1989, that if we took everything out, where was she supposed to put up her son's photo... and we stayed.

My mother and father in-law stayed. There was nothing serious here... those milita roamed around and one of them, we were talking about him just yesterday, was from Racha, and my family also originates from Racha. The man would often tell me that I was his compatriot, but I was so scared of this man whenever I saw him. I was even more scared [than of the others]. They walked around with machine guns all the time. What they [local men] did, was that they would block an entrance [to the village]. The Ossetians would go and block it. Those who did not have anywhere to go, they cut

down an old tree and used it to block the entrance at night. In the morning they would open the entrance again. But before that they still managed to take along [kidnap] a person. They were more hostile towards people who had money. Others would also be insulted. He was the only person who they took, who they tortured and killed. He was not rich or anything, not at all... The others would go after rich families, not families like us.

And then, after the 1990s, the conflict became frozen. A market was opened in Ergneti and many returned. As soon as the situation grew slightly calmer, most of the people returned. Because it was difficult for them to get used to the climate [in Vladikavkaz] and therefore, many returned. Relations were restored, people would visit each other and we would commute to Tskhinvali without any problem. I had Georgian ID documents but I could easily enter and leave Tskhinvali. It was a very good situation back then, trade, everything...

As long as there was the market in Ergneti. My shop is private, right? ... now it is almost empty but it was full back then. Because I could buy good quality products at affordable prices. It was excellent. Flour was cheaper there than it was here, gasoline was also cheap. Everything was cheap. And we all know that Russian products are of better quality than those produced in Turkey. Ossetians and Georgians were almost reconciled because... there was trade going on. Georgians from Adjara, Sachkhere would go there to buy or sell. There were large trucks full of tangerines from Batumi. Relationships were great back then.

Then when it [Ergneti market] was closed the relations became tense. This was the time when we could not go to Tskhinvali any longer. But if in 1990 people would be aggressive if they caught an Ossetian intonation while someone was talking, it was not the case now. On the contrary, the situation got better if I may say so.

In August 2008, first thing that happened is that they fired at Shavshvebi (*a village in the Gori municipality, close to Tsitelubani where Rusudan lives*), when they wanted to destroy the radar. Back then I tried to take my children out. They left for Tbilisi. But I did not really want to go. I had the elderly to take care of and cattle as well, lots of stuff to take care of and I did not really want to go. But then I left, since I wanted to bring in some products for the shop. People could not leave anywhere and the sales were going well. But as it happened, I left and this was the same day when tanks were deployed in Igoeti and I could not go back. Even though there were tanks in the village, people were still afraid. But nobody got hurt. There was nothing like this here.

I know a story which took place in Mereti. They burned a man's house because, at the time when the Ergneti market was still working, they had taken a large quantity of gasoline and after the roads were blocked in 2004 they did not pay for it. People from there [that side] would send their mes-

sages, begging or pleading them to pay... and then their house was burned down. I do not know what is going on now... I do not really know why it happened... they also burned others' houses, because, I think some people held grudges, but I do not know for sure... Nothing like this happened in our village. I do not know anybody owing something to them [people living on the other side]... Nothing like this ever happened here.

As soon as the tanks left and it was announced that everybody could return, I came back. I got back on the same day of course. It was a difficult situation here. I do not know what happened – maybe the Russians did it, but a field surrounding the village was all on fire. Everything had been burned... people did not have enough time to harvest. It was very difficult. There was some assistance delivered by NGOs and authorities as well and we managed to get by. But it was still hard. We could not collect hay for the cattle. The haystacks were all burned. Nor could we harvest wheat, as the straw was also burned down.

What was the cost we paid because of the conflict? First and foremost, it was fear. My husband is Ossetian. In the 1990s we were young. As I said, we spent some time in Sachkhere and as we were coming back, my father was accompanying us. So there was my husband, my father, my children and myself. They went up directly through Chertakhevi, a mountainous village on the Pass, and they said: “If there is an Ossetian person among you, you have to tell us”. We were scared... we did not dare to tell them [that my husband was Ossetian]. What if they took him with them to “take care” of him? We were more damaged morally than financially. Of course there was financial damage as well – when the Ergneti market closed I lost a source of income. I could not operate my shop. Though my husband could still work in Orjonikidze. It was still possible back then. But in 2004 the roads were blocked and he could not go to Orjonikidze. We found ourselves in a very difficult situation economically... and also we have relatives there. Closed roads... the sisters of my mother-in-law all live there. I lost my child and they wanted very much to come here... but back then it was not possible. Nowadays they allow visa free travel for those who have Russian passports, but it was not like that back then. It is very hard when your close relatives... We had one of the sisters of my mother-in-law visiting us. She badly wanted to come and mourn her grandson. My 11-year-old child... and all this, it's so difficult to deal with.

My daughter is married to an Adjarian man. Our village is a special village. Meskhs, Adjarians, refugees from Kheiti, Ossetians and Georgians all live here... Georgians bought some of the houses which were formerly owned by Ossetians and that's how my daughter happened to marry an Adjarian man. My son married a Georgian girl. The life is good here. We have excellent relations. Nobody says that... well, maybe sometimes someone

says that s/he is Ossetian or Georgian, but this happens very rarely, at least in our village. I do not know much of other places...

We have lost our land. It was left beyond the barbed wire. It is hard... it is good though that they installed gas pipes for free, which is excellent as the village has no means to... [pay for gas pipes]. A representative of the municipality visited the village the other day. We complained that we do not have water and cannot grow orchards. We cannot grow anything to benefit from so that people can stay in the village, so that the youth have some future prospects. There is almost no opportunity for development here. Everyone tries to put together some money and buy an apartment in the town so that they can leave and work there. People own cattle here. [Before] we could use the pastures of Tsinagara, a neighboring Ossetian village, we were free to do so, but since 2008 we have been restricted from using those pastures. Especially after they have installed border demarcation sign. Recently the government told us to not keep cattle any more. They advised us to have pigs instead. But pigs are difficult to take care of. You have feed them all the time and tie them up, while you could let cattle go and we did not have to feed them for several months a year... I do not know. There have been no promises made so far. They have just promised to help with ploughing the land. They did it in fall. They have been helping with the ploughing for three years, as they promised. Now we have been told they will do it again in the spring. Let's see.

Now when Putin has declared that he is going to allow for visa free movement, we are happy. I think it is possible already to freely... this is all about politics. Farmers have always been good [to each other]. If Ossetians from Tsinagara and Ossetians from Tsiteubani meet each other, they will hug each other. They will do no harm to each other. If governments decide to have positive relations, it will be great. Otherwise, farmers have very good relations with each other.

It would be great if a market similar to one we had in Ergneti could open. This is a priority. Otherwise nothing serious happened in 2008 (towards local Ossetians)... Nothing like what happened in 1990s. But reconciliation was still possible. People forgot everything. And they will forget everything eventually. It will take a little time for a similar market to be set up again. Look at these refugees, displaced from there: there are Ossetians and Georgians among them. They do not do anything bad to each other. And I think that if the government is supportive, the people will easily [reconcile]. People are easy to reconcile. Especially, brothers and sisters left on opposite sides, even more so... They are afraid now, but everyone wants to come here. People from Tsinagara would always come to my shop, but they are afraid now. But they have said they would come again with great pleasure and continue a relationship with us.

INTRODUCTION TO SOUTH OSSETIAN STORIES

This is not the first project in South Ossetia that envisioned the collection of stories from the residents of post-conflict zones. Right after the 2008 war, several organizations were engaged in such initiatives. Every time the journalists ran into the same issue – the respondents refused to talk about what they went through. This time as well, only the most courageous ones, those who were not shy to show their emotions, agreed to participate. Despite the fact that significant time has passed since the beginning of the conflict, the respondents had to relive the pain again. The journalist working with them can't remain indifferent to these sufferings, to their human pain, and always relives this pain with the respondents. And only when they saw empathy, they started trusting and began to describe the drama of the last years of their lives.

Things were much harder for the residents of rural areas, than for those living in the city. All this time the rural residents were the first ones to find themselves on the line of contact. In addition to this they also had much closer connections with the conflicting side: very common mixed Georgian-Ossetian marriages, everyday friendships and family ties. Therefore, their stories were infused with resentment towards their nearest neighbors and relatives, who, as they put it, “betrayed them” in the most difficult moment by not warning them about the visits of militants from Georgia to their villages. The betrayers left the villages quietly at night, leaving the rural residents at the mercy of the paramilitary mob.

At the request of the village residents, refugees, and city residents the majority of the stories do not mention the real names of participants. According to the respondents, they wanted to avoid being included on the black list of the government officials and secret service, who throughout the entire 2015 were fighting “corrupt NGO representatives”, “foreign agents” and “enemies of the state.” For an ordinary village resident, a conversation with a journalist not working for a state media outlet and participation in a project that is financed from abroad is a very bold step. This actions could have been “punished,” and the participants and their immediate family members and relatives could have been reprimanded. The other reason is that their relatives living on the other side of the border could have suffered this time from the hands of Georgian “showoff patriots.” Despite all of this, it was possible to recruit the necessary quantity of respondents.

The story of a young 34-year-old Tskhinval resident stands out in all these stories. He grew up on the barricades, and later took up arms himself and until now he is tormented by the questions of war and peace. In this passage

he is sharing his childhood memories: “We were desperate to grow up! Every day we were bringing food for the rebels and were asking “Is it already our time? Can we fight also? When can we fight?” They said: “Everything is fine, live your childhood. By the time you grow up the war will be over.” They turned out to be wrong. We grew up. And the war is still ongoing. It subsides and flares up again.” Here he talks about the resentment of the war: “We grew up in the war. We got used to it. It became part of our lives. At certain times we even feel more comfortable when fighting than in civilian life. During the fighting, we clearly understand how and what we have to do, as opposed to a peaceful life. This is wrong. It should not be. I do not want future generations, including that small child, also to grow up with arms and do the same as we did. I do not want it! And I’d better do more than allow him take up a gun.”

I would like to say that the heroes of these several stories, eight people with lives mutilated by the armed conflict, continue to believe in kindness, and human sanity. And most importantly they believe in a peaceful life.

Irina Kelekhsaeva

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E. J. resident of the village Dzau⁴, teacher

I was born and raised in Java. My father is a local man. During the Soviet Union he used to be the head of the police of the May First district in Tbilisi. It is the city's largest district. Then he became the head of the police in Khashuri. He lived among Georgians and we would often host his friends, elderly people and I would never think that something could have ever happened between us – that they would never come to visit us or betray or deceive us. However, the worst had happened. At that time my parent had already passed away, but my brother who was born in Khashuri, even though he spent his childhood and teenage years in Java, got sick with cancer and we wanted to take him to Tbilisi. But it turned out that we could not even consider this [option]. We had Georgian neighbors, I had friends in Tbilisi, young people with whom I had spent time in summer camps. And I, as a teacher of Russian Language and Literature would often take out my students. When they studied Lermontov I would take them to the Holey Mountain – Mtatsminda where he was buried. I am still struggling to understand how all this – this great love and friendship – could disappear that simply.

It was the beginning of the 1990s. They called us to tell us that there would be an attack on Tskhinval where two of my married daughters lived. And as soon as I realized that it was no longer possible to freely travel to town and I may not see my children for a while, I got paranoid. A road from Java to Tskhinval crossed the Georgian villages and they [local people] came to the motorway calling us names including those who had spent their entire lives selling greens and sunflowers. Even women who I knew very well would stop cars and express themselves in a foul language. Often I could not understand them. And so we had to take a route through the Zari motorway. And there was this incident on the Zari motorway, this horrible tragedy. One of my students was killed there. She had studied in our school for 10 years. When I heard about this, I could not get over it for a long time. Also, one of my student's mother-in-law was savagely cut into pieces in front of her eyes there, on the Zari road. She now works in Java, and because of the stress she gave a birth to a sick child.

Once, my neighbors came to me to say that we all had to get in a bus and leave towards Vladikavkaz because they were going to open fire at Java and Tskhinval. Somehow automatically I got in a bus together with

⁴*Geographic terminology was not edited. It is presented as employed by the narrators.*

the other women. When we got to the village of Ruk suddenly it struck me that my daughters were sitting in basements while I was trying to save myself. I stopped the bus, lied to the driver that I only wanted to get off and go to school while I hitchhiked back home. I was the only woman in the neighborhood as they were all told that they would distract the men from protecting Java. My husband found me when he came back home. I did not turn on the lights. He came in and found an open door. He thought that someone had already broken in and robbed us. But it was me. I did not shut the door. I did not know what to do, what awaited my children who were sitting in the basement of a multi-story residential building on Lenin Street. What was the most horrible was that we had Georgian students at school, children with Georgian backgrounds. And for some reason we are a different nation, with different views. I do not even know how to put it but we treated them as our own children. We did not take them hostages, we did not shout at them, nor did we beat them up. We just waited for when everything would be sorted out, thinking that everything was trickling down, that everything would soon end and that we would soon start studying again side by side. We had a neighbor married to an Ossetian man. I do not remember the surname. She worked as a janitor during and after the war. When her husband died she had to leave. She could not stay here and she was forced to move to Georgia. A teacher Nata Georgievna Iliashvili, I do not know where she was born, but she received higher education in our institute. She is a biologist and studied together with my brother. She is a wonderful person. She continues to work here raising her children. Her children are Ossetian. Some stayed, many more left. Most probably there were afraid for their children.

I was very proud to be an entrusted person of Sofiko Chiaureli (*a famous Georgian actress*) who was running for elections in Java district. They came to the boarding school and said that Sofiko Chiaureli was going to run for the upcoming parliamentary elections in Georgia and she needed a person to campaign for her. The director thought I could be that person and I considered it an honor. Even more so that I knew all her films, I watched them and I liked them. And when she was asked whether or not she agreed to entrust her campaign to a young person, she said she was very pleased. I knew that she was the face of Georgian cinematography, not only Georgian but Soviet as well, that she was an excellent actress and that we all loved her. She even had roles from novels written by Nodar Dumbadze (*a famous Georgian writer*). I was obviously very pleased with all of this and I delivered a speech in her support. I do not know whether the speech was good or bad but they liked it. At least she came up to me and hugged me. She said:

“thank you very much”. She said one day she would invite me to Tbilisi. The was our last meeting but she became an MP then.

All the funding had already been cut back then. So, I had to come up with something to feed children in a boarding house where I was the director. Some humanitarian assistance sent by Austria included canned and dry food. The assistance was delivered through Georgia, at least that’s what we were told and I had to go to the KGB every single day, sign a bunch of papers declaring that I brought this assistance from Tskhinval and that I had nothing in common with Georgia. It was under such appalling conditions that we managed to maintain our school and our team and thanks to this, the school operates to these days.

And then we had a horrible earthquake and everything happened suddenly. Back then my husband was a director of a school and he brought carriages from Volgograd, if I am not wrong. And the children used to sleep in them. Of course we did not have anything but these carriages and without them we would not have been able to maintain the school. We lived in dire conditions: we were scared to death for our children who were walking around trying to protect the settlement. A horrible accident happened to a son of Sanakoev, Genadi Sanakoev. When he learned what was going on, he came from Vladikavkaz. He was told to take some rest since he had just arrived. He said: “There is no time to relax when our guys are being killed!”. He went and the Georgians would call him “a person of Slavic origin” because of his blue eyes. They killed him with a horrible death. My neighbor Tskhovrebov from the village of Sakere, Tagiev... these are local guys from Java who were killed. There were no young men in the neighborhood who were not protecting their community. I would often think of feeding them but there was nobody was left to feed! As there were all standing on the line. I cannot say anything bad about any of them. There were those who had left for North Ossetia long ago, but they would bring us bread and say: “Please, distribute it if you can”.

It was very scary in 1989 when the first rallies began in Georgia. Tskovrebov Borik worked as a driver at the boarding school. He was my neighbor. Together with a few other guys he went to protect our frontiers.... He was the first victim from Java. Borik Tskovrebov, and the other victim was also Tskovrebov, my neighbor as well. They were protecting a village and he was killed from an enemy bullet. He was not even 20.

It was a horrible time. My colleague at the boarding school died. And there was no food to lay on the table at her wake. We only had fish cans and bread. That’s how we buried the poor woman.

My only niece, my brother's daughter stayed in Tbilisi. And the thought that I would never see her and hug her again scared me to death. And whenever we could talk on the phone, she would say that they were all right, it irritated me: how come they were all good while we were in such a condition?!

I cannot forgive the Georgians. We lived together, there were mixed families, we were friends, we taught their children. There was a time when 30 per cent of our students, I am not saying that they were all ethnic Georgians but at least from that side. And I cannot forgive them for the fact that there was not even a single person to warn us: you will be attacked in the evening! Protect yourselves or do something! They simply left. How is this possible?! After several years I participated in a quadripartite public diplomacy meeting in Turkey and as we were saying good-bye to each other a Georgian lady came to me and said: "Kalbatono (*Madam in Georgian*), next time when we meet, please bring me soil from my son's grave. He is buried in Kekhvi". She was beating her knees sobbing: "I am never going to see his grave! I will never be able to kiss his grave!" I am an emotional person and tears came to my eyes. Seeing the tears of another woman, a mother, I could not help myself. I asked her: "Why did you ask me?" And she replied: "I had worked in Java hospital as a nurse for 25 years and you are from Java. That's why I decided to ask you". When I returned home and relayed this to the people of Java, they told me: "As long as she worked with us, she was a wonderful woman, a good colleague. But when the war broke out, she would allegedly go out to the motorway to stop cars." And of course, I did not bring any soil for her. But the scene stayed in front of my eyes for a long time. I said to her: "Do you know what happened to your houses? Do you know what they look like now?" "After the war", she said, "they showed them to us. They made a documentary after two months". According to her, 300 persons died in a month's time after having seen their houses in such a condition. I was going to lose my temper and I told her: "If you could only see your 'clear field'!" She looked at me bewildered but I did not care anymore.

2008 was the most horrible year. 27 refugees lived in my house! Back then I was working on the project "Assistance to Sick Children". I was able to obtain funding for my project as I had concrete data on this: on the territory between Gufta and Khvtse, and we are talking about just three kilometers, there were 16 individuals with cerebral palsy and Down syndrome. I really wanted to do some kind of program for them. They called and said: "please collect the money." This happened on the 6th of August. But I did not have time. And besides it was somehow tense and charged. I thought:

they will wait and meanwhile the dust will settle. Then I will go and collect money, doing everything in its right way... The project was funded by the OSCE and of course, I could not go. The war broke out.

The whole family was sitting in front of the TV and suddenly Saakashvili said that there would be no attack. But we could not, of course, believe him completely. This would have been naïve. But it was calm anyway and we would never think that something like this was going to happen. Attacking a sleeping town, the town where your children and grandchildren are, this is... My husband stood up, grabbed his weapon and left. I did not see him for 48 hours. Then he came back, took some stuff and went again. I could not understand myself how I continued to live. I had refugees with me. They had been staying with me and they were in my house on the 8th as well. They wanted to leave, but it did not work out for some reason. They did not know how to be, what to do. We would ask questions but nobody could answer any of those questions. My house is located right on the road. You did not even have to turn to get there. And I could see cars bringing in refugees. They were full and some people would wave at me and I knew they were my acquaintances. They were heading to North Ossetia as it was the only way out for them. And most of the women and children from the neighborhood had left too. There was nobody around, as everyone was scared. Three bombs hit Java. But what is really surprising, it must have been God who saved us – is that the bomb hit a house where nobody was inside at that moment. There were three houses nearby. They were all demolished and destroyed but they were all empty. Thank God there were no victims. They had left too, taking their children along. When I was alone I would often think of the possibility that bombs would hit not only empty houses, but also the house where my children, or any children lived. And I would become paranoid because of these thoughts. I only had sedative drops in my pockets, nothing else to comfort myself. I did not know what to do, I could not concentrate. I was struggling with bad thoughts in my head. I did not think that everything would ever be over. And when Russian tanks started appearing on the motorway near my house, I started to relax little bit. I had some candy at home, slightly over a kilogram. We took it out and gave it to the soldiers in the tanks passing by. I would have kissed them all if we could. But we could not, of course, stop the tanks. One of them tossed me a piece of paper with a phrase: “we will protect you”. Later on I handed this paper to Leonid Kharitonovich, our president so that they could put it either in a museum or archive. Let it be there. Once something went wrong with one of the tanks, a mechanism broke and they had to stop near our house.

My husband helped repair it. We wanted to invite him to the house so that he could have a quick bite, but he refused: "I can't," he said: "we don't have time for that."

I remember going to Tskhinval from Java for the first time. Together with two girlfriends I left for the town, and we could not talk about anything as we were driving. We were just looking around and could not believe our eyes. We could not believe that what had happened was for real. All the houses were destroyed. We entered the town, looked into each other's eyes and cried. We could not say anything, absolutely nothing. I did not know where to go, whether I should find my aunt's house or visit others, people close to me. My sons-in-law lived there, my daughters lived there. I did not know where to go! Three of us were standing there, looking at the houses and crying. A lot of people who we knew had been killed. I met with my daughter but she did not want to tell me anything: Mom, everything's ok, it's over now. She saw my face, she saw me going through pain and she did not want to upset me even more. But anyway, what has "even more" to do in this case? I had seen it all with my own eyes. And I could feel and comprehend everything: what they had to go through and what they felt. Then I met with my aunt. And she would respond to each of my questions with sobs. She was crying and saying that she did not know what else was coming. She said she did not know how she would keep on living. Nobody mentioned that their houses had been destroyed and that they had to restore them. What they talked about was the sorrow that had befallen the town. How could they fire at a sleeping town?! Knowing that there were children, women, the elderly, the youth. I think that they all simply could not distance themselves from this pain. I talked to them and could see that they were distraught. I knew that all this could not be forgotten for a long time and that it would leave its traces on them. And when you live in such a small republic, there is no such thing as other's pain. It was shared sorrow. And often we would not even ask: "Do you happen to know the deceased?" It would not make any sense. There was not any point whether or not they knew them: the deceased were our compatriots.

Pain and sorrow prevailed. In fact, everything could have...as long as we have Putin and Medvedev, one can feel more or less safe. But what will happen afterwards? When I see in Vladikavkaz that Borjomi (*a Georgian brand of mineral water*) is the best water in the world, it hurts: why not our Bagiata? Or Dzau Suar from Java?! Why do we have to advertise what our enemies have?! Why not ours?! I am still scared. I do not feel good. When they talk about the free movement to Tskhival or Tbilisi, I do not like this.

I do not know what others think but I would not approve of it. I do not trust these people anymore. Though I have many loved ones and many relatives. Even more so. How can I be happy about the possibility that there will be a way to take us there? How am I supposed to look into eyes of Zhanna? Or Aza Konstantinovna? How can I look into eyes of Valiev's mother whose sons, only sons, had been killed?! What for?! I am scared even now.

A refugee from Georgia was enrolled in our school, here in Gufta, in the 7th grade. We were about to write an essay "My favorite place in nature". And he came to me and told me strictly: "I do not have a favorite place here in South Ossetia!" and I realized that young souls, that they took time poisoning children's souls. He had been told that this is not South Ossetia but Georgia, this is Georgian soil etc. I felt that the kid was poisoned and I petted him. I started telling him how we lived under the Soviet Union, how much I loved a novel by Nodard Dumbadze "I, Grandmother, Iliko and Ilarion". He was all beaming. And the following week he declared that not only did he now have a favorite place in South Ossetia, but that South Ossetia was his favorite place. I can only imagine what they do to Ossetian students in Georgian schools based on this very example.

My daughter used to work for a human rights committee. They were collecting statements at schools on moral damage inflicted by the war, damage that had been caused to our children by Georgia. I am already 62. There is an extensive experience of working with children behind my back and I am scared. If this process will ever end, if they decide that our children suffered and that they sustained immense moral damage, let alone financial loss, I will be more relaxed. Not before that. However, moral damage can never be reimbursed.

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I. T. resident of Znaur

In 1988 I graduated from the Institute of Economy, at the faculty of light industry in Moscow. I returned and married into a family with a Georgian mother and Ossetian father. Thus the family that I happened to join was mixed. I had heard back then that local Georgians would often gather at the house of one of their leaders. They gathered and discussed future actions. They had plans – this was happening during Gamsakhurdia's time. A slogan suggesting that Georgia was for Georgians, and that Ossetians, who were aliens, were welcome to use the Rocki tunnel, and those who want to live with us can stay and those who don't are free to go through Rocki tunnel because this territory belonged to Georgians. These were popular phrases and slogans, which had already penetrated South Ossetia. There were Georgians in our districts, nationalists, and they would also gather. I can even name you the village, for instance, Sunisi where one of them lived. He used to work here, in the district and they would gather at his place and talk as they were having dinner, which is expected from a Caucasian person. But the conversations they would have were about future plans, plans for a revolution, which they had been plotting on the territory of South Ossetia. Back then the conversations revolved around South Ossetia, an autonomous district within Georgia. There were mixed marriages, but they were more reserved towards these developments, because it was way more difficult for them as there were both – Georgians and Ossetians – living in these families. On the other hand, those who had little kinship with Georgians entered into disputes with the Georgian nationalists. These disputes often came down to fist fighting. There were lots of incidents. But back then the police were still around and they managed to intervene.

To be honest, we did not expect what ensued. We thought that it would have been much smoother. It was only later on when I actually realized what was coming. Why? Probably because, well, first of all I grew up in a family where my dad had very warm, friendly relations with Georgians. In our house where I grew up we used to host a lot of Georgians and I had an impression that Georgians were the same as Ossetians. Afterwards, when I got married and moved to a mixed family, we had our Georgian relatives visiting us very often. In other words, I had only seen amicable and warm relations [between Ossetians and Georgians]. Even when my husband said that we had to leave and save the children, and that the Georgians were about to come and we had to save ourselves and our children, I still kept

thinking that this was utterly impossible. I quickly grabbed my child who was then two years old, and I was seven months pregnant with our second child. I packed and thought to myself – this cannot be happening for real. I refused to believe until the very last moment. But we were tipped off by a local Georgian... A local Georgian man came over and told my husband that they were coming and that he had to send his wife and the child away just in case. I am still praying for this man. If it had not been for him we would have stayed and I think a tragedy would have happened. Because when they came, they set up a position very close to our house. And the room where myself and my child had lived, was full of bullets, the windows were smashed, and the cot was filled with shell casings. In other words, it would have been a tragic end. As I said earlier, we were tipped off by a local Georgian. They say he lives on the Georgian territory. I was curious to know his fate. How is he doing? I even sent him a warm message saying that thanks to him my child and myself managed to stay alive.

I left for North Ossetia to stay with my uncle. But the departure was like a torture. I remember it was winter and we had a lot of snow that year. We took the Road of Life – Zari motorway, walking for seven hours. A pregnant woman with a child in her hands. A relative picked me up in Java in a car and took us to Vladikavkaz. On the second or third day we had to go to the hospital because my child was sick. We spent two and a half months in hospital. Thank god, everything ended well. Then, I was really anxious for the health of my unborn child – just imagine: a heavy, two year old child in my hands while I am in the seventh months of pregnancy. You fall in a snow-drift, then stand up struggling only to fall in another one. Goodness... One time, I came back. What I saw there in my house, in my room with my own eyes, made it clear that it was not safe to stay there. Even more so with the sick child, and I had to leave him with my sister so that I could come back and collect some stuff. And of course, I had to go into labor in June.

After the peacekeepers entered [our community] in July, I came back with my two children. It was deserted because only very few had stayed to live. Some returned, others chose to stay in North Ossetia. Our Georgian neighbors also left. But what was the most interesting is that Georgian families who lived nearby had left quietly just before the Georgians came in. As it turned out later on, they were tipped off and told to leave a few days before, and that after the district was taken, they could come back and resume living. I remember Georgians, including our acquaintances, leaving quietly for Georgia. We were asking what had happened, why they were leaving and they would say that they were sick and wanted to visit a doctor, some were talking to their relatives, some to their children. In other

words, they would name various reasons. That's how quietly they were leaving behind their own houses, the district.

When we returned home, it was very difficult for us. We were used to living with our neighbors and it was difficult to see a deserted neighborhood. That's why it was so difficult and unsafe. Our Georgian neighbors never returned, they were afraid that what they had planned never came to life thanks to our guys who, with sticks in their hands, protected their land. I think this is the greatest heroism of our guys, our children.

It should be noted that the 1990s were very difficult. And we were affected twice as much. Our district had already turned into a conflict zone. Fear was constantly lingering in the air and the future seemed bleak. At dawn they started shooting from Alazani, or whatever they called it. I don't remember exactly, but they were launched every evening. Eventually it turned into a habit! Even my child who was two and a half at that time was sitting at the window all the time and counting Alazani as they flew towards us – they launched this many missile last night, and this many today. It eventually turned into his habit. Fear became the part of the everyday. There was no electricity, food was scarce and we were struggling to survive. Probably because it was a village – we would grow something in vegetable gardens, managed to maintain cattle. It was hard, very hard, but what was the worst, was the absence of electricity. There was also no gas and we had to boil and cook something for the children all the time. We would cook on an oven using firewood, but it was also hard to get firewood – it was dangerous to go to the woods: you never knew. 18 years of life in limbo, in constant fear – what will tomorrow bring? How will we be? – It is extremely difficult. I believed that sooner or later this would end and hoped that our voices would be heard. We were waiting for when our torture would end and the truth reign and we would start living normally again. That's what happened thanks to Russia and at that time thanks to Russian peacekeepers, who had made our lives safer and more secure.

I believe that Georgian farmers and village people were also victims of this conflict. Because it is all about politics. It was for a benefit of the few to poison the brotherly nations – Georgians and Ossetians. Because I knew for sure that my Georgian relatives would never go to war against me. Up to these very days, when I contact them, they have tears in their eyes. They did not want this either. They were also tangled into this dirty, political game.

And then, it seemed that everything quietly faded away and it was clam again. Things got sorted as years passed. By that time, 2004, there was a market place on the border also frequented by Georgians. In other words,

there was a market where Ossetians and Georgians traded together. This was a step forward towards confidence building between the two nations. And one would think that the conflict was being resolved peacefully. There was a hope that everything would soon come around and get to its place. However, together with Saakashvili ascending to power in Georgia – all the efforts ever made by both parties, of course were pushed backwards. I think he just put a big end to all these efforts. In 2004 it was relatively calm in our district compared to the city. But in general people were tense and intimidated: there were shootings again, victims again and everything seemed to be coming back. Surely, it was very difficult.

But for what happened in 2008 I cannot exonerate Georgians. Not even one percent. After the war of 2008 I met with Georgian women and they said themselves that they were very sorry for what had happened, and that they are our sisters, our brothers, and that they always wanted to live with us in peace, in kinship. I could not help myself but ask a question. I told them: In the 1990s we were both affected unequivocally. But you were affected even more as you lost your houses, your property, everything you had worked hard to acquire for decades, you lost it all. Georgians suffered even more than we did. We at least would receive some kind of assistance but them... I remember very well – back then I had already moved to town as I send my children to school in town – from neighboring Georgian villages they would carry diary on wheelbarrows early in the morning, sell their apples at a local market for living. They understood that without us they were not to survive. So I am telling them: How is it that you, having gone through all these sufferings and horrors, let this nightmare happen again in 2008?! They said no one asked for their opinion and that they had been deceived, thus making them victims of 2008. That's what ordinary people say.

On the 7th of August I was not home. That year my daughter was enrolled in an institute in Stavropol and I was there. But my husband, with my ten year old daughter, was home. My brother miraculously saved my child. My child... they woke her up at three in the morning and squeezed her in a car half-asleep in her pajamas. My brother drove her away on that Zari motorway, where his car came under fire. I cannot understand how – thanks to god almighty – that my brother managed to save my child. He brought her to me still in shorts and slippers.

On the evening of the 7th of August I arrived in Vladikavkaz. My daughter was accepted at the institute and we were all very happy. I arrived in Vladikavkaz planning to go home. But my husband's friends who I met with in Vladikavkaz said to me: You cannot go there now. We are going to send you home tomorrow morning.

It was 8 PM. I saw a bus full of people just driving in. I see that all of them are my neighbors. I ask them: What's going on? Why are you here? They said they had left because it was unsafe to stay there as Georgians had started a war again. But then they started calming me down: they said Saakashvili had just made a statement that on TV to say that Ossetians are our brothers, our sisters, and that there would be no war. Everything is all right. They say: you don't need to leave now. You'd better go tomorrow in the morning. Alas, next morning obviously, I could not go anywhere...and it was a miracle that they managed to bring my child. The child was very scared and it took us a lot of visits to a doctor – a psychologist – for her to recover, as she would wake up with nightmares for a long time.

I even wanted to leave on the 8th of August in the morning. I thought of leaving the kids here and joining my husband. But he shouted angrily at me on the phone: “The least I need is your problems! Stay there until I tell you to come back.” I got back five days after the war ended, even though my husband would not let me go back as he was staying here, in the district. I arrived. And of course it was horrifying what I had seen on my way. But back home it was more or less [calm], you could not even compare it to what was going on in the city. As we learned afterwards, they had planned to turn the city into a “bare field”. They were not as concerned with the district. They launched several missiles, a few houses were damaged, but the district as a whole, compared to the city, had survived.

Of course, it was dreadful. I thought: how are we going to live on? We had lived 18 years in a limbo expecting the resolution to come every day. When will my children, my relatives, my people breathe again? The best of my years were wasted in that limbo, in that fear. And today I feel bitter and angry that there is nobody that I can claim these years back from. And people around me feel the same. They had also lost years. We are talking about 20 years! This is a whole generation! And human life is very brief. I would have done so much for these 20 years. But I have fell behind materially, and morally and spiritually. Raising three children in a destroyed town, in a destroyed republic, is not easy at all. But what else can we do? How to sooth oneself? I personally comforted myself with thoughts that finally peace came. I finally came to believe that tomorrow will be better and the day after tomorrow is going to be even better. This incentivized me, made me hopeful that I would be able to overcome all the hardships and difficulties. And thank God, as of today, I enjoy positive results. It is no surprise that it badly affected my health but my children managed to find their own way. And all of this, of course, happened because of the great Russia.

I still have fear that the war may come back. When you read some loud, unthoughtful statements made by some of the Georgian mock politicians (this is the only way I can call them), who want the war to come back, everything comes back, all the memories come back to life and I feel dreadful. But there is hope that this will never happen again. It cannot happen as, after all, Georgian people have not yet lost common sense. Most probably they have also weighed the pros and cons. This war did not bring any good to ordinary Georgians. They too, suffered. And I think common sense will prevail between Georgians and Ossetians. I am hopeful that ordinary Georgian people will never allow the war to repeat, everything that happened between us to come back again. I call on both Georgians and Ossetians to nourish more peacekeepers among us so that we all wish for peace. There is a peace that follows every war. Let's remember, both Ossetians and Georgians, our deep and strong kinship bonds. And just for the sake of these bonds, for the sake of the future of our children, we all must think of and wish for peace.

* * *

L. K. civic activist, resident of Tskhinval

I dedicate this story to one of my closest friends, my sister, my partner in numerous projects, Manana Mebuke – my guiding star in peacebuilding. She is severely sick, and all of us, those who are close to her, are praying to God for a miracle to happen and for her survival.

Everything that happened in 1989 struck us all as sorrow falling from the blue sky. It was sudden and horrible. It was something that I could not comprehend. And this is something like an understanding of a naïve monarchism: I said it is just the authorities to be blamed, there is one person to be blamed. By and large, I would come up with numerous explanations, but I never evaluated this conflict seriously and from a global perspective. Only after all the atrocities broke out did I harden to the effect that, truth to be told, when one morning my husband told me that a family of father, mother and two children had been shot at a gas station, I said out loud: That's what they deserved! And only after I had pictured these little kids did I realize that I had stopped being a woman, a mother, a human being. I understood that if I did not save my own self, I would be over for good.

As someone who was raised in a mixed family, I found it very difficult to watch my mom, a Georgian woman, who had been a very dedicated activist all her life. She was beautiful and strong, the one who always stole the scene. And we, the whole family, adored her. But literally overnight she turned into a weak creature, a person who was in need of protection. She was lost and a sense of guilt was eating her slowly. She became full of complexes and my father was the only one who protected her. We also tried to do our best, but she would always look up at him and it was important for her to know how my dad, an Ossetian man who she loved so much, would react to what was happening outside our family. And what about our family? After the Zari tragedy she made a phone call to her sister in Tbilisi... I should say that my mom was the eldest of nine siblings and she was the first to get married so my father and mother raised the rest of her siblings. They used to live with us at times and my dad helped to facilitate all of their weddings. In other words, they were like children to my parents. So, after the Zari tragedy, my mom called her sister and said: pass this on to others that today I buried you all and you must also bury me because I no longer have you and you don't have me. This was the gravest tragedy for her. Before the war, during the times of peace, my father would always beg my mom to take his surname. But my mom would always say: No, Phillip,

my surname will always be Chkheidze! But once, when the conflict had already flared, a tragedy struck: a mother and her young boy, I think he was 14 years old, from the village of Dmenisi, I think it was Dmenisi, were trying to get away on an APC (*armored personnel carrier*). And in the village of Ergneti, Georgian militia⁵ captured the APC. They dragged the mother and her child out. The boy was trying hard to keep close to his mother, begging her to not let him go, and the mother was trying to keep him close. In this moment, one of the militias grabbed him, threw him down and broke his cervical vertebrae with his boots. After this tragedy, I thought my mom became even smaller and shrank in height. She told my father: Phillip, let's go to the City Executive Committee⁶ to change my surname. I do not want to keep my surname. I am ready to take yours if you allow me to do so! And my father said: "Nelly, this will be over soon! This madness cannot last long. And after the war is finished, if you still want to take my surname, no problem! But now, you have to be who you are! You have done nothing to be ashamed of!" And he hugged her and kissed her.

Such episodes were numerous and I won't recall them all. I just tried to briefly describe the background in which I started working and got involved in peacebuilding. Back then I did not think it was my calling. Rather, this was an opportunity that I was holding on to in order to get rid of my internal rage and everything alien that was growing inside me after the conflict broke out. After the first war, when everything got back to normal, I attended a training in Tbilisi and received a certificate. But this was somehow... I felt like I was living on my own and whatever I was doing, existed separately, in parallel. And suddenly, in 2004, Manana Mebuke emerged in my life. I do not even remember how it exactly happened. But my heart started melting together with her appearance. Her husband was severely wounded in Abkhazia and this wound had eventually killed him. She was, in fact, leading on two organizations: "Veterans' Union", once chaired by her husband, and the "Union of Wives of Invalids and Widows of Participants of Armed Conflicts in Georgia". And Manana, who was 10 years my junior, became like a mentor to me, a spiritual leader, who slowly but surely saved me from all my internal demons. I started telling black from white, a fullstop from a comma, I had a mess in my head: what I felt was one thing, but my mind told me that it was not good, that I had to get rid of it, but I did not know how, and using the method of probing I was

⁵ *The term is used to refer to unofficial military and paramilitary organizations that were active during early years of the conflict.*

⁶ *In the Soviet administrative system the governing body of the city was the Executive Committee of the City Soviet of People's Deputies or short – City Executive Committee.*

trying to understand this. And here came Manana, who, with her consistent proposals, actions, smiles, stories, questions, somehow managed to organized me into a structure and give me a direction. In other words, as I am speaking I can say that she introduced me to the culture of peace without any training. She brought peace to my soul. Manana was a true patriot of her country and she suffered a lot from what was going on there. She used to say that “My Georgia does not deserve what is happening there now”. She was very kind to us, to Ossetians and to South Ossetia. She was empathetic towards us. She felt embarrassed for everything, as she would often visit us and could see everything with her own eyes. Once she arrived in South Ossetia on the day of a funeral for elderly persons and children who had been killed as a result of a night shootout. The funeral was taking place on the central square. She arrived in the morning. I said to her: I know you won't agree to join me, but what has happened is horrible. And she replied: If they do not beat me up there, I would like to go with you. It happened in 2004. I advised her to not talk in Georgian and to keep close to me. In this case there would be no risk to her. So we went there. She witnessed a mourning rally, and conversations, and tears, and the tragedy that had befallen on relatives. She walked together with me to the very end. When we got back home, she said: If there was a glimpse of hope in me, it is all debunked now. This is the beginning of the end for our relations. Nevertheless, we implemented few peacebuilding projects. The title was symbolic – Women for Peace and Security. They ran in parallel: Manana did her job in Georgia and I did mine here. We would meet twice or three times a year on neutral soil.

2008 was a catastrophe for Manana! We were closely cooperating and I had great trust in her. I called her and said: the Oak Grove is covered with the bodies of Georgian soldiers. The stench has almost reached the town. They need to be removed from there, otherwise they are going to be buried in a mass grave. Do something! She called me back in the evening and said: I spent the whole day talking to people in the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Defense, but they just said there is not a single Georgian soldier killed on the territory of South Ossetia. What ensued we all know very well. Luckily, the South Ossetian side exhibited great deal of humanism, they ordered coffins rather than digging them into pits. They put them into coffins, called in a priest who administered funeral rites and buried them all together in a common grave. And only after Hammarberg was updated on the situation during his visit, did Georgian authorities send huge refrigerators and a priest from Nikozi who also administered relevant rites and they were taken away.

I remember an episode taking place in the summer of 2008. Manana had been offering for me to go to Batumi with the children for a long time. She had an apartment there. But I would always refuse to go. Finally, by the end of May, around the 28th, Manana was visiting me. At this time my youngest daughter with her daughter and son had also arrived. So Manana said: Now we are getting in my car and heading to Batumi! No excuses! And the kids started begging: let's go, please, just for a week! My daughter had to leave for Vladimir for an internship on the 10th of August and I also had relatives from my mother's side in Batumi. So I agreed. We got in the car and drove away. And when we were already there, I heard through the news that our town came under shelling on the night from the 1st to the 2nd of August. I am calling my friends, some of them worked in OSCE office: what is going on there? Should I leave immediately? They said it was just a casual shootout – they will stop eventually! And also reminded me that I should have long ago got used to this. But when it continued from the 3rd to the 4th, I started feeling bad. And I told Manana: that's it. No more holidays, we are going home. We arrived in Tbilisi on the night of the 6th. We stayed overnight at Manana's and in the morning she tells me: Lira, maybe you should consider staying? I said: what are you talking about?! I cannot – I could not fall asleep the whole night! And she said: "Lira, I just want to warn you that I will not be able to take you beyond the Gori bridge". I agreed. I called one of the OSCE drivers, who had often helped me out. But he said that this would not be possible this time: "No, if you knew what is going on here!" Then I called a more senior person at OSCE. He listened to me and said: At this moment I am in Gori, our staff is buying water for the Tskhinval office (this was on the 7th of August). He said they would take us home. "Where will you be standing?" – he asked. I said we would be waiting under the bridge. We arrived there with Manana. She stopped her car on the side. Maximum ten minutes passed and suddenly huge trucks started pulling off near us. They were closed but as if in movies about soldiers, the back of the trucks were open and I could see they were full of young soldiers chuckling, laughing and hailing. All in all, we understood that something horrible was going on. And my granddaughter asked me: "Granny, where are they going?" My mouth went dry because of fear. I told her: "Probably they are having some kind of military training." And Manana is sitting behind the wheel with all the color drained from her face! She looked pale to the effect that it was unnatural. We stood there for about an hour and the flow of vehicles and equipment never stopped. From the right, where there were bushes, extraordinary vehicles were approaching. Weird vehicles with machine guns on the top. After around an hour, a car drove around... I had never seen something like

that before: looked like an old Pobeda, but larger in size, snow white, with almost black, dark windows. It pulled off around 50 meters away. I asked Manana what car it was. And suddenly, with dead, pale lips she whispered: “Lira, be careful, they are listening to us!” It seemed someone had called them and told them that there was a car parked for quite a while and they decided we were some kind of spies. When I realized what was going on, my instincts of protecting my children immediately turned on and I started saying some stuff out loud, shouting, laughing, telling stories that were not even real. To cut it short, I went hysterical. It was like madness. Looking at Manana’s face I realized that I was going insane. I think this lasted for about 20 minutes. After that Manana drove back. We waited for another 15 minutes. OSCE’s car drove by full of coolers – who needed them?! We got in there, managed to squeeze in and they took us to the town. When we were entering Tskhinval, no one was on the border. I was surprised, because when we were leaving there were Georgian and Ossetian checkpoints, and a partition of concrete. And suddenly there was nothing! We entered the town, which met us with a ringing silence. The town was so quiet! It was quiet to the effect that it was ringing in my ears! It was very hot. I was overwhelmed with the feeling of something surreal, as if I am flying or... all in all, this cannot be explained. They drove us home and we got out of the car. It was 3 pm on the 7th of August!

Manana somehow saw that coming but could not believe to the end like the rest of my friends and colleagues. In other words, it was so wild and mad – the war and what followed afterwards – that she cannot explain it up to this day. What happened on the 7th of August we all knew: The President of Georgia sang us all a lullaby, and at 12 AM bombed us with cassette shells. Since the 8th of August Manana had been calling me non-stop. Non-stop! “Lira, how are you doing? What is going on with you? How are the kids? Hide somewhere, Lira! Lira, Lira, Lira...” She cursed everything and everybody in this world, cried through the phone. It went down to such an absurd situation whereby I ended up calming her down. I would tell her: “Manana, calm down! We will survive.” But at one point, and this was already in the evening of the 8th of August, our house literally started shaking because of shelling. I was already sure that we all were going to die out here. And when she called me I said to her: “Manana, I took all of our documents and papers, everything that we have to the backyard and hid them in an old, abandoned boiler room and covered them with garbage. And if you come here, find them and hand them over to my children.” Of course she started sobbing. On the 8th of August, 2008, even though it may sound horrible, I felt relieved. Probably because I would no longer have to bounce between Ossetians and

Georgians. Georgian blood, the Georgian culture, Georgian mother, love to my grandparents – I carried it all inside me. My whole conscious life had passed in the Soviet Georgia, I grew up in it, in Soviet South Ossetia. And my mentality was always different from pure blood Ossetians, which still is the case! And even now I cannot say that I hate Georgians, and I am not saying this to serve some interests. I know very well whom I despise. But back then I felt relieved and I told myself: “Here we go. I do not have to choose any more. All the dots were there. Never ever in my life will I have anything in common with Georgians”. This was a collapse of my internal state and this brought me a relief. I thought that was it. Thank God! First of all, everything fell into place for me. Second of all – I thought, the whole world now knows who is who. And now we will start building a new Ossetia. We will have a new future. As a historian, I am well aware that after every war there is a constructive process to ensue because tragic events always cement the nation. I knew it. I also knew right there and then that a new Ossetia was being born on those ruins and wreckages. And I was very happy for it.

After the war, in October 2008, Manana called me to say that some Georgian women wanted to meet with us. I thought she had lost her mind! This was a south Caucasian meeting. There were Abkhaz, rather, they were expected to be there, but they did not join as a sign of their protest. There were people from Nagorno Karabakh, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. I didn't want to go, but the minute I saw the list of participants from Georgia, I was happy and changed my mind. I was determined to go because I saw this meeting as an opportunity to tell them everything of what I thought, all the conclusions that I had made. This was an opportunity to put an end to all relationships within the sphere of peacebuilding. I decided to finish with peacebuilding! In fact, we were absolutely incapable of doing anything! When we started talking at this meeting, one of the participants of the Georgian delegation got very emotional and suddenly came flying at us. “Why are we talking to them?” she said. “It is evident that they are tasked by security services. This is not their narrative, but one of security services”. To cut it short, it came down almost to a fight. This was a nightmare. But I am not sorry that we decided to go to that meeting. On the contrary, as I wrote to my Abkhaz friends, it would have been even easier for us if they had also come. But if we had not gone there, they would have been sitting and talking about their “truth”. Truth, of course requires brackets here. Anyway, we had an opportunity to relay what we wanted to say. And our friends from other republics also heard us. This was in October and already in November our donors from Kvinna till Kvinna invited Manana and me to Stockholm. Kvinna till Kvinna had been funding our project Women for Peace and Se-

curity. I have great respect for this organization for their quest for objectivity and impartiality. They invited us to a large press-conference. In other words, there was me – an Ossetian and Manana – a Georgian. I could not refrain from telling the truth in Manana’s presence and Manana could not help but tell the truth in my presence. At this large conference attended by up to forty individuals we were asked very crucial, very fundamental questions. And when I put up a huge photo, portraying demolished Tskhinval, one of the journalists sitting in the room stood up and said: “I know this photo. This is Gori after shelling by Russian planes!” I was embarrassed and looked at Manana. Manana raised her head and responded calmly even though I felt that he was upset: “This is Tskhinval, not Gori”. Manana was a very descent partner. I could trust her with my eyes shut.

Manana was very kind and very caring to all our women who participated in our meetings. All our women simply adored Manana. There was humor, empathy and always an understanding. Even after our meetings, our women would sometimes travel to Tbilisi whether it be for health purposes or something else, and Manana, who owned a car, would personally drive them here and there for which I am very grateful to her. Manana has always been a person thanks to whom I believe that sooner or later there may be friendly, neighborly relations between Georgians and Ossetians. I do not know when exactly it will happen. It may take 50 years. I do not know. But people like Manana give us hope that one day we will believe in each other and one day we will become good neighbors. Manana is the very bridge between us, and may God let her be this bridge for many years to come. I can never stop talking about Manana, but right now I can only pray for her health.

P.S. Sadly, Manana Mebuke is no longer with us. She passed away on March 6, 2016. Memory eternal to her.

* * *

A. D. resident of Tskhinval, 34 years old

Do you know how the war started for me? It was in November 1989. I was seven. I remember it was a gloomy day. The whole town was alert. I was little and could not understand anything. What I would hear was that some Georgians came shooting. Back then I could not even understand what exactly “shooting” meant. I could hear some loud sounds around. And then everything started spinning: a blockade began, we would hear that they burnt a village and then another, kidnapped some people and shot some others. Barricades started popping in the town and cross-shootings followed. There were no barricades near our house. By the time I realized what the war could mean, they were already near the university campus where the first barricades appeared. There was a huge fire vehicle there, which, I think, we took away from Georgians. They were using some trolleybuses as barricades and to block the road. I remember fetching some food to members of the home guard. Everybody would gather in the yard to share what they could contribute, even though there was dire shortage of food. People would bring home grown stuff, some had canned food. Everything what they had would go directly, as they say, to the frontline – to guys standing on the barricades so that they were not hungry and could keep themselves more or less strong. Of course, there was no bread. I remember finding a lot of baking soda. We did not know what it was. And so they baked bread for us with it. All the kids in the neighborhood ate the bread with pleasure and even shared some of it with the home guard members.

And every time we brought food to the home guard members, we obviously chatted with them. They would always ask us: How are things going? Who are we? Where to find tobacco? You know – we were kids and we knew everything – what was sold where etc. They would also ask whether we needed something of what little they had. But what would kids want? We were asking for ammos, which were obviously few. They would give us shell casings, empty casings and make us insanely happy. We somehow managed to collect bullets to shoot in the air for New Year’s Eve and hear a salute. Back then we were allowed to shoot a bullet or two, even three and then we were happy for the rest of the year – hurray! Finally I fired! This is what our childhood was like.

We were always curious to catch a glimpse of the enemy. There, on the other side, close to Bogiri district, Georgians had their positions on the cross-road and some people walked around in helmets. They were well equipped.

We could not see them clearly and we were told that the people we were trying to see wanted to destroy us all. We knew they were enemies and we were here.

I remember having no water. You had to walk all the way up to springs in the Oak Grove to fetch water. You get up at 5 or 6 AM in the morning, grab a container, and put it on a make-shift wheelbarrow, roll it down and stand in a line for at least three or four hours. And snipers were constantly shooting, not targeting people but would fire very close to us. What was most important for us was to fetch water and come back. You wouldn't walk on a motorway but instead follow some trails running through yards and gardens in order to avoid open space. You fetch water and you feel good! You are going to have some tea and water to cook something.

There were no toys and we had to play with what we could find. We played war games, for sure. We tried to find empty shell casings and always played war: you are wearing a bullet-proof vest and I have a helmet on me. These were the games we played. Also, we were very excited to see Tracers being shot. Once they were targeting the Station Square. They were using some large caliber weapon including Tracers. Together with other children I went to see how beautiful it looked. But we were caught in crossfire. We were all scattered and thank God nobody got hurt. But we had to spend two days under home arrest.

Our parents were doing everything to protect us from all these hardships. Our relative would visit us and bring candies – many, many of them, whenever he could make it out from Moscow. And during these times we would have real fun in the yard!

Back then my childish mind perceived what was going around me as a fight between good and evil. I had a feeling that after what I had seen and heard, including those things that Georgian militias would say: how they dug people in alive, force women to step down from buses and stand in the river in freezing winter – I felt that we were on the right side, we were fighting for a good cause, and that it was not simply a fight for survival. It is true that other thoughts and rethinking came later on. Back then, when I was little, I saw all these happenings as a big, real game of war.

We all wanted to grow up fast! Bringing food to the home guard every day we would ask them: Is it still too early for us? Can we fight now? When can we fight? They would say: it is ok, you grow up. And as you are growing up, the war will be finished. They were wrong. We grew up. But the war was still around, on and off all the time.

I joined the home guard when I was around 17, at the same time as joining the army. Before that there was no active combat going on and it

seemed somehow quiet. It looked like peace coming again – but in brackets. Surely, people were still being kidnapped, murders and dreadful events were still happening. But as I started serving in the home guard around 2004, military actions broke out again followed by the war in 2008. I was protecting my home. What if a thief breaks in your house – you will fight them back, sure you will. This was exactly the feeling I had back then and it has not gone yet to this day. The feeling that I have to protect my family, my relatives, friends and people close to me. And somehow you never mused on why you are actually fighting. What for? Simply, you have to. Full stop. There was a feeling that if we did not protect ourselves there wouldn't be any “us” tomorrow.

I remember my first combat. It was in 2004. In the very beginning of the crossfire we were on the line and suddenly we saw a missile flying towards us. It exploded just above us and our guys started firing back. But mostly everyone was firing in the darkness following flashes. You know what it is below the line and you have to simply fire in that direction. There was no fear, just a rush of adrenaline in your blood. As if you are all exited and cannot sleep even after the battle is over. The first one didn't feel particularly overwhelming probably because I had grown up in this situation. The feeling that the war is a kind of life that you live and grow up in. This was pretty much an “as always” situation. You happen to witness many deaths from the time you are a child – deaths of close and familiar people. And as time passes, this fades away, which may be wrong but this is what happens. Yes, the heart eventually turns into a stone. I was awfully sorry for my dead friends, for strangers and those who I knew, for all who died. This is, obviously a tragedy and a loss no one can repair, but I had developed a kind of relationship with the death... you realized that you could be lying there, but there was no fear. There was a fear of dying simply and in vain, preposterously and somehow stupidly. If you are to die in a battle, die with a smile. But of course I tried to survive.

There were many interesting moments. In the times of calm, after 2004, you are standing on the line looking at your enemy. They are looking back at you. And somehow we started talking. We wanted to know why they were treating us like this, slaying us, why they came with a war. We once used to live normally. Did we not?! They did not know what to say. They all had their own conclusions, something like: we are protecting our territorial integrity. I am telling them: what is it about the integrity? You are Georgians and we are Ossetians! Where? Where from and where to? But what has always been and will always be is the hatred towards armed people on the other side. So that you know – an enemy is always an enemy whether they

sleep, are awake, fight or not, but you know that pretty much everybody on the other side is your enemy, not all of them but there are many.

Literarily everybody, all my friends served in the home guard. I know nobody within my circle of friends and acquaintances who had ever refused or avoided the service. On the contrary, it was an honor and the sooner you took a rifle in your hands and stood at the post, the sooner you would become a man. You were already capable of shouldering some responsibility. Let's put it this way: many people have their specific rites to celebrate coming of age. This was exactly the same, but our rite. For some, this came when they were 15, 16 or 18. And there was nobody who would not want this, who would not protect their own houses. I served in the home guard for about a year and a half or maybe two years and then I joined a peacekeeping contingent. But this was already during the times of clam without ongoing combat activities. While I was serving, my future seemed all unclear as I understood that, yes, peacekeepers keep peace, but this will never stop, not when there are still claims on South Ossetia and not until we gain a very strong support, like the one that Russia is providing for us now. I was very scared that our children would follow our footsteps, meaning that they would witness exactly the same: deaths, deprivation... I dreaded all this. I wanted it this way: I'd better do everything in my power to make tomorrow far more peaceful.

When I was serving in the peacekeeping contingent, I remember holding competitions on the Day of Peacekeepers. Russian, Ossetian and Georgian peacekeepers – all competed. At that time Georgian troops were serving in Kosovo or somewhere similar to that place. They had already had a reputation of being the coolest guys. I remember that we were petrified by looking at their supplies, from a knife to wrist watches, and all sorts of portable radios. Yeah, they had everything from NATO, very posh, beautiful, glittery, and expensive of course. They would look at us nonchalantly, from above. We had to compete in assembling and disassembling weapons, long distance racing, racing with hurdles, you know – usual army stuff which “brave” special force guys could not handle. At the end of the day the coolest guys turned out to be at the bottom. When we beat them, then, their looks changed and they looked panicked. They were very upset, to say the least. Their commanders were very angry, shouting in Georgian, even cursing if I am not mistaken. They left immediately. All our commanders were very happy walking around with wide smiles: here we go, here are our guys! They even organized a celebration dinner with cakes and all.

To be honest, I saw the war of August 2008 coming. I expected it in a sense that I did not want it to happen. But I knew it was coming. I knew that there would be yet another big war and I could not relax. How did 2008

start for me? I was not serving any longer. I was living somewhere doing my job. I was not a serviceman by profession. And again in 2008 Georgian troops became active. Killings ensued when snipers killed fellas and I knew it was about to start again. I got back to my friends in the home guard. I was given arms the same day, which was 7th August. Even after we had gone to the home guard headquarters it was still hard to believe that military actions were taking off again, for real. A lot of things were going on: some ministers came by, some negotiations were going on, so on and so forth... All in all, they finally gave us weapons, just to our group only. Our group was on duty, just to be at hand if need be. It was late evening when our president came by. Edward Djabeevich said: guys, it's over, Mishiko is taking his army away from the border, there will be no war and you can get back to your families. And as soon as he left, literally 30 minutes or an hour later, we heard the first blast. We were about to leave and many had already left, but there were a few of us, around 15 or 20 individuals still there. And here is the first blast. The first bang! And there came a wave of shelling, bloody shelling! I do not know why, but no missile hit our square. And so you just stand there and observe – bang, bang, bang – and a house catches fire, and then another, and another. You feel as if you are in a war movie – the war is all around you and you just stand and watch it in 3D. And then messages started coming through: a woman was killed, and someone else got killed. And just before the sunrise you already know that this is for real. And again, you have to fight. There was a moment when the communication was on and off all the time, and one of my friends managed to call me. Scared to death, they had run down to the basement of one of the houses to find children there. There were without water and food. They asked me: can you can bring us something to eat and a little water? We had plenty of combat rations so I picked up my backpack when it was still night and put combat rations and couple of bottles of water in it and set off. The shelling was still going on and as soon as I made two steps beyond the fence of our base, I immediately realized that getting to the place would be simply impossible. I called them to tell that they needed to hold on till morning when everything would be more or less clear. In the morning, at around 4 or 5 AM I managed to get back to them with everything. They wanted to know what was going on. People were scared and nobody understood what was going on. Everyone was asking when Russia was going to step in. I explained that it would take at least 24 hours for troops to get to us and that meanwhile everything depended on us: on our home guard, on our guys. Everyone seemed shocked, panicked and in disbelief: What? Why? What for? Everything seemed to be normal and they were saying there would be no war.

Even when I was a child I had decided to myself that a war is the worst of what could ever happen and that when people are in war both involved parties suffer. It does not really matter who is right and who is wrong. I knew that wars do not bring anything good, they push people back into a deep past, into the Stone Age, and this is evil. This is what I knew since I was a child. But what can you do?! I had to go to war several times and ... inside I am a man who loves peace, I despise war, but I had to take a weapon in my hands and protect my house. There was a moment when I was sitting in the headquarters but all I could think about was my home: how is my mother doing? How is my father? How are people I love? But getting to the district where I lived was impossible. And here runs a boy, all disheveled, covered in dust, in a torn uniform, with wild eyes and asks for water. I ask him: Where have you been? He appeared to be from my district. I started bombarding him with questions: How are the people there? Has there been destruction? And he tells me that the district is not there anymore and that they had erased it from the surface of the earth. I was just standing there: Are you sure? He says: Yes! Having observed the city being bombed and destroyed, I believed him. Somehow I got to the Heros Street to look around and I saw that there was smoke coming out of a block of apartments, a black smoke, which meant that the house was on fire. And I understood that what he said was real. My mom was there, and all my nearest and dearest were there. Everyone who I knew, who I grew up with, my neighbors, everyone, everyone was there. Your district, the place you live, your house. And suddenly you are being told that they do not exist! And suddenly that very moment came crushing... I do not know, something turned off inside. Estrangement, alienation. Suddenly nothing mattered. And at this moment I saw the enemy. There was a tank where now there is a cross erected on the spot. The tank and a man walking near it looking around. I thought that the Russian troops had finally reached us and I was very happy. But suddenly it fired at the residential building and I understood that this was the enemy. They were very close already. And then everything started... Many friends died, close friends. I understand that if they had not been killed, everything could have gone differently. Life would have gone in a different direction. My life and the lives of others. But I also realized that war of this scale, and such intense crossfire, would claim many lives including the lives of people I knew. And in fact this was what happened. There are no wars without loss. It may sound cynical but this is the way it is.

I vividly remember one episode. There was no battery life in our radio and while searching for a device to charge it (under crossfire), we passed by an apartment block. We went down to the basement to have some rest,

drink water and suddenly we saw a woman with a baby in her hands. The baby was very little, an infant of not more than three or four months. I am standing there in a state of shock and staring at the women thinking that this is surreal. I knew that all children were removed and evacuated before the commencement of military actions. I asked: Why did not you leave? She said that she did not have time to, she did not manage to. And suddenly, there came two young boys out of the basement in sport clothes, in a military cap and one of them had a machine gun in his hand with a single horn. The boys were not older than 14-15 years. I am shocked again: Who are you? What are you doing here? It turned out that one of them found the machine gun that belonged to his father. His father served in one of the home guards, in a battalion and did not manage to come home. So he found the machine gun with a single horn and came to protect his home. And he tells me: if someone walks up to the entrance, I will shoot them! I said: No, now you are going back to the basement and stay there! Because you cannot do anything on your own. If you fire even once they will burn you all. So, you'd better stay and not do anything! He seemed to have heard what I had said. This moment always stays on in front of my eyes. I understood that there were many women with children trapped in town. There were many people sitting in basements: the elderly, women, children. I did not manage to remember that boy. It was a day like this – I do not remember many moments because during military actions a person feels like “sitting on a machine-gun” and many moments never stay. You are not likely to remember who you were with, their faces. Everything looks like a gray, blurred mass. And plus I had a contusion. I am sure that if I ever meet the boy again, I will shake his hand very firmly and tell him that he is a real man! Because, being that brave at his age is something that not everyone can handle. Of course, this is inherently wrong that the child has a weapon in his hand in his own basement and is absolutely determined to protect the basement and fight off the enemy. But this is insanely audacious! I think there is a good future awaiting us as such children are growing. They are going to teach their own children what is the right way to live their lives.

Am I afraid that the war may come back? I have no fear and I never had one. But somewhere inside, in deep consciousness I still think there is a chance for the war to come back for real. What I mean is that I am not sure that this will never happen again. No one knows what tomorrow brings. My generation grew up in the war. We got used to it and we came to good terms with it. At times we even feel more comfortable during military actions than at the time of peace. When in military action we understand very well what we should do and how to do it, which is something different from what hap-

pens during the time of peace. This is wrong. This should not be the case. I don't want future generations, that little child, to grow up with weapon in their hands and end up doing what we did. I do not want this! And I'd rather do anything than let this little boy take up arms in his hands because if every generation grows up with weapons in their hands, a human being can never move forward; on the very contrary, they will go backward.

I have been having a lot of dreams lately. Sometimes they are just dreams about military actions. And sometimes I see something happening and those days when actual military actions took place. In these dreams sometimes I get killed, and often I am the one who kills those who are around me. I don't want to call these dreams names, I do not want to see them come true. Let them just be dreams. In your dreams you can be reborn as in computer games and you may not be worried about those who are around you. Let them just be dreams. But the thing is that I see these dreams more often than before and sometimes it makes me think that something may happen again, something that I do not want to happen – no, not at all!

* * *

M. K. resident of Tskhinval, 34 years old

I was born in Tbilisi in 1976 in a working class family. My mom worked in various factories: at the brewery, tea factory, champagne wine production. My dad was in construction. As a young man he was really into sports, athletics, he especially liked weightlifting. He had many prizes. My brother who is ten years my senior is a circus performer. He developed a passion for the circus when he was 13 and since then he has been working there. He graduated from the Tbilisi Circus School and has never left the circus since. Currently he lives in Kharkov, Ukraine. He leads on his own circus-variety troupe. My whole family is ethnic Ossetian. My mom was originally from Leningor while my dad's family comes from Tskhinval. My parents met in Tbilisi. They left for Tbilisi to study and met each other there. They decided to join their lives and stayed to live in Tbilisi. They received an apartment in a settlement of Tevza, which is a Russian name for Georgian Temka. The settlement is close to Tbilisi Water Reservoir also known as the Tbilisi Sea. My soviet childhood was very happy. I thought that my whole would be like a fairy tale. But the fairy tale ended abruptly.

We lived in a big multi-story block of apartments with friendly neighbors. The whole neighborhood used to gather in the yard at a *Birzha*⁷ where adults would spend time talking or dining together while children would play nearby. Or the men would play cards, backgammon or dominos. It was always cheerful. Most of the days were boring as everybody would be gone to work or to study, but the life would come back in the afternoon with everybody returning home. We had neighbors from various ethnic backgrounds – Armenians, Yezidi, Kurds, Georgians, Ossetians and Jews but there was no difference between them, ever. We were all equal. The fairy tale began to fade away when my mom got sick. It was in 1989. At that time troubles had already begun in Georgia, the events of the 9th of April, when a meeting was followed with bloodshed. This was the most difficult time. First of all, people turned into something... locked up within themselves. And my mom got sick. This was a very difficult time for everybody. I was 13 when everything started. 1989 was the most difficult for me, since I had to be taken to the hospital with appendicitis. I had an operation on the 7th of April. The rallies were being held, there was no transport, and roads were blocked. But my mom visited me every single day, walking to the hospital and back... She

⁷ *A place in a village or neighborhood where local people (mostly men) gather to discuss news, politics, everyday life*

went home early in the morning, cooked a meal, grabbed something for me, and walked back to the hospital. It would take her around three hours to get to me. And this went on every day – from 6 AM and again back to me close to dinner time. And I was already in pain to see my mom suffering like this, as she was already sick herself. My dad, one of the best specialists, worked hard. He was the best even in Moscow, during the Soviet times. He had titles like “master golden hands” and many others, I cannot remember now. A constructor’s work is a very hard one: off to work early in the morning and back home late in the evening all exhausted. At that time my brother had already been married. He served in Ukraine and decided to stay there. He happened to be taken to the hospital because of a trauma he sustained early on in the circus: he fell down from a bike and broke his collarbone as he was performing under a circus tent. And when he started his service he was sent to the hospital for an operation. They put some kind of a pin in. That is where he met a nurse and as he was finishing his service, he decided to get married. They got married and thank God they are still together.

My mom died in 1990. It turned out that she had cancer but no one knew about it yet...even doctors could not say what was wrong with her before they operated on her. They thought she had gallstones in the gallbladder. But when they cut her open they saw that she had cancer. We were told that she would live a maximum of a month. After her death, it grew very difficult to live with my dad. He started drinking because he found it impossible to live without my mom. He lost his job and it was over – he got lost. From that point on, no one saw him sober. My dad started snapping at me and my presence would make him upset. Back then I could not understand what it was about and why it should be my fault. It was only shortly before his death when I realized that he could not look at me because I reminded him of my mother. When my neighbors realized that I was left all alone even though my dad was alive, they grew afraid that I would choose a wrong path, as they did not know my character, and decided to help me get married. I ran away to Ukraine instead and lived for seven years with my brother.

I would hear that disorder had already started taking over Tbilisi. They started to treat Ossetians bad. Apartments owned by Ossetians were being seized. But we were lucky with our neighbors. They would not let anybody get close to our apartment. That’s why we were able to keep it. But my mom’s brother was not treated as well: they beat him up, and he was already aging. He was caught by some Georgians and they beat him to the extent that he became blind. He had suffered from multiple broken bones, including broken ribs. He had diabetes and apparently an increased level of sugar

also contributed to his blindness. He was picked up by a random passer-by on the street, who called an ambulance, and was taken to the hospital. As soon as he regained his ability to walk, he moved from here, leaving the city behind. Now his family lives in Russia. His wife, daughter, and grandchildren all live in Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia. As for our acquaintances... I know that there was a bus from here to South Ossetia from the Georgian side. They captured the bus and forced the passengers out. They made the men take off their clothes, poured cold water on them and chased them into huge refrigerated trucks, only to let them out once in a while, pour more water over them, and send them back in again. Of course, many of them could not survive, others have to live with disabilities to this day and their health could not be repaired. My aunt was caught in winter with a lot of snow and frost. They were forced to enter a river, ice cold water. This also happened close to Georgian villages, as the villages located in South Ossetia were mixed – an Ossetian village, then a Georgian one, and then again an Ossetian, to be followed by a Georgian village. So, stories like this were numerous. So, my attitude towards Georgians, even though they did not do anything wrong to me, grew extremely negative.

I returned to Tbilisi in 1998 because my father had taken ill and I had to take care for him. When I returned, I saw that the city had changed drastically. I don't know – maybe this was just my perception but it had become somehow estranged. By and large, I stopped perceiving it as a native town. Neighbors, it seemed, were kind to me. They would tell me something like: "It's a pity that you are Ossetian. If you were one of us, you would not have any problem getting married and settling here. But you are Ossetian. A very good person, though".

Many Ossetians who I know suddenly started calling themselves Georgians and God save us if someone tells them they are Ossetians. They have changed surnames and added "shvili" to the end, as if changing one's surname will change their personality. They have been integrated in this city for a long time, having spent all their lives here. They had good jobs, there were future prospects for those who studied here, they stood a good chance of "going into the world". And on top of everything, there were mixed families with Georgian mothers and Ossetian fathers. They have lived all their lives together and now they are getting divorced because of this? Really?! Or they should have left together. It seems they did not see any other option for themselves. That's why they chose to change their surnames. There were cases when Ossetians were dismissed from their jobs because of alleged minor misdemeanors, they were issued reprimands and kicked out if they refused to leave voluntarily.

My father died in 1999. After the anniversary of his death I decided to move here, to South Ossetia. First of all, all my nearest and dearest, my blood are here. Secondly, my parents are buried in South Ossetia. Thirdly, I find life here easier. I was not going to change my name. I have not even thought about this. This is a treason to me. Therefore, I decided that I'd better leave. I did not spend much time choosing. I wanted to be closer to the place where my parents are buried. I sold the apartment there – I had a two-room apartment and bought a three-room apartment here. I was told back then that this was a fair deal. But it turned out, as everybody would tell me, that it was quite cheap. But it was all right to me as what was important to me was to leave. Two years after I had moved here, I found a job. Nobody knew that I was about to leave in Tbilisi. I did it quietly and silently. Only when I was departing with my suitcases did my neighbors find out about this. I left furniture and everything there. I just took what I could carry. I would occasionally bring tableware and other stuff. The reason I had not told my neighbors about my decision was that I knew they would start talking me into staying and I did not want to listen to their convincing. At that moment I had already decided that this was the right thing to do. By the time I departed, Edward Shevardnadze was a leader in Georgia and everything seemed to calm down. I wanted to believe this, but I could not believe. Knowing the nature of Georgians, they were not likely to have changed. They would just change nothing for nothing: one left and another came who just happens to talk different but does the same thing. I do not believe to this day that anything will change. To tell you the truth, I am still waiting for yet another trick from them. And it was not unexpected even back then – that things like this were taking place, as they have always been sneaking around to harm the Ossetian people. I am not convinced that everything's over even now. In 2004 I lived in an outskirts of Tskhinval and we all, residents of the whole building, had to go to the basement and sit there while there was shootout outside. It got quiet, we got up and then we had to go down again. And always like this ... before they went silent again.

In 2008 I was here. Generally I had never left the area. And besides, I did not have a passport back then. I was granted a passport and citizenship only after the war of 2008 and therefore, I had no permission to leave. In 2008 when the war broke out, I was at home fast asleep. And only after they had started shelling, did my neighbors almost break in my house. They were afraid that I would stay here and that something would happen to me. They even tried to get me to the basement. Still half asleep I could not understand what was going on. Then I, together with my neighbors, got to the basement. The building was shaking because of explosions, and we could feel it even

in the basement. It was something like a powerful earthquake. We probably spent five days there. Even after the shelling was over, people did not want to get out. It seemed these people did not believe, to the very end, that everything had finished. We were not going to leave them alone in the basement, therefore, the whole neighborhood continued to sit there.

Afterwards, the local residents found the body of a Georgian near our block, and a Georgian tank was turning just in front of our entrance. At this very moment it fired at the lower building, the one that was closer to the Georgian border, to a village of Nikozi. And in that building, the sidewall of the fifth floor slightly parted from the building. They repaired it later on and somehow managed to rebuild it. Our building also caught a missile on the fifth floor but luckily it did not fall down. The missile few into it and got stuck there. Then the Ministry of Emergency Situations took it out.

During the times of calm, we would occasionally get out of the basement and walk beyond the entrance. I observed the town changing in front of our eyes. When we finally got out of the basement and walked around the district looking for our neighbors, young guys and men who served in a home guard, we wanted to know where and how they were. And we, the neighbors, decided to look them up and learn at least something about them. Thank God everyone turned out to be safe and sound. But many young men had fallen.

What was the most horrible was to see the ruins all around us, roads covered with holes. A hole after a hole and yet another dreadful moment: no sound and sight of children. No childish laughter, nothing. This is what was the most horrible. You literally felt that life had stopped completely.

I wanted to believe that life would come back, as we did not know how bad and dire it actually was and simply wanted to believe in better things. But the hope as such reappeared when we got to the central square, where, in the center of the square we found a child. The child was around two or three years old. When we saw the child we all started crying, and we believed that life does go on. He was cute, in a baseball cap with big cheeks and curly hair. He was a beautiful child with big eyes. And I believed. I could now believe that life was going on and that nothing is over! We will stand on our feet and everything will be fine with us, even better than it was before! After this, life really went on. We started renovating the city, roads, refurbishing houses. People have places again where they can live, there are employment opportunities. Life goes on. Of course we have to be patient. But I believe that our beautiful future is not far away.

I think that, for Georgians, it is quite all right to go to war against Ossetians. Because, I believe, many things that can be told, they do not want this

to be heard by others. [*They do not want stories to be told that would show Georgian actions in a negative light*].

I do not regret leaving Tbilisi. When I came here, my Georgian was proficient. As of today, I remember very little and I don't regret that.

When I lived in Tbilisi, I had a neighbor, a friend of mine. We had been friends almost since we were born. We keep in touch periodically through the internet. They seem to be all right. I have never asked her about these events – we were friends and I do not want to open up something new in her that I do not know. I am afraid of asking her. What if she also supports what the authorities say?! That is why we always discuss neutral topics. And she never asks me, as she knows that I will be straightforward about what I think. It seems she does not want to hear it either. We talk just about stuff like family, children, childhood. Politics is a no-no for us.

When my mom was dying, when she felt she was living her last days, she gathered us all and asked us to bury her in the village where my father was originally from. We had never thought we would ever have to move there, and even tried to talk her into changing her desire. We told her it would be easier for us to visit her grave here, in Tbilisi. And then she told us: “If you do not take me there, I will take you with me one by one”. This was her last wish and we buried her in the village. When my mother died, my dad arranged to fence off the grave in a way to make a place for him as well. He too is buried there. Sadly, during the 1990s, the village was erased from the earth by Georgians with nothing left there but this small cemetery and a shrine not far from it. And also, to my great sadness, I have no access to the graveyard as of today, as they made the territory adjacent to the graveyard into a military training ground with frequent drills. It was two years ago when I managed to visit my parents graves for the last time. All my attempts have failed since then. I have been long trying to bring this issue to the attention of everybody, authorities, agencies in charge for this, to make them understand that they should not be doing this. Because for Ossetians, the graveyard has always been considered a sacred place and no one should disturb it. But it seems that at this moment the authorities are not thinking about this. This is not important for them. Even if I lived in Tbilisi and grew up in the times marked by the denial of God, or anything sacred in general, nevertheless, my parents managed to instill the love of the Ossetian culture and traditions in me. They taught me a lot. It was important to us, very important. And today, as much as I can – I am not going to say that I have never sinned – even the purest person in this world is a sinner, but nevertheless, I try my best to stick to our traditions, our culture. I am very interested in this and I went to explore further to know more than what we were taught.

For instance, I tried to understand what messages our forefathers tried to convey, what was there in their will that we should know. Because, many of these messages are coded and it will take years of work to decipher them and understand their essence. I try to introduce into my life what I feel through these teachings, and decipher some of their meaning. I used to be very into branding with iron. I used to brand wood planks for baking Ossetian pies with Ossetian ornaments and sketches from the Nart sagas. I started painting bottles in an Ossetian style. I hope that I will go beyond that and will learn something new. I would like people to have a more serious attitudes towards the Ossetian culture and religion and start following it, as our religion is our culture. And then, I think, Ossetia will survive, get back on its feet and become stronger.

Most probably, people go to war when they are powerless. Wars are always waged by the weak. In my opinion, this is powerlessness and greed. One simply has to live with their own history, one should live as God intended. Only one true religion will cause all wars to stop. We just need to decode and rewrite the Bible in the right way to uncover its original purpose. I am sure that the Bible has been rewritten numerous times! Thousands and millions of times! And the church led this, trying to boost its authority. As always, where there is a religion, there is always interest from the kings and the church.

The Biblical “you shall not murder” is meant for ordinary people, for commoners, for I know no governor or ruler who has not murdered. All wars are waged because of authorities, aren’t they? They start all these wars, they purposefully take steps towards it, knowing at the same time that wars will claim not one life or two, but whole nations.

* * *

***S. A. resident of microdistrict Khurzarin, Tskhinval, teacher,
60 years old***

I was born in the South Ossetian village of Ortevi. I grew up here, in Tskhinval. I went to school here and finished math class in school N6. Then I was enrolled in the department of Physics and Math at a local university. After graduating [from the institute] I was assigned to work in Georgia. I was received very well there. The school director was an Ossetian man, Parastaev. They found me an apartment right away and I shared it with another woman. The team was very good. I started working there and it seemed I was liked by fellow teachers and pupils as well. I got married there, to a Russian man. I have two children. Their surname is Serdyukov. The school there was only for nine grades and after finishing we had to move to a Georgian school but my children never managed to learn Georgian, therefore I had to bring them here. My parents lived in Tskhinval. It was in the 1990s when I brought them here. I wanted to settle here with my children. My parental house was burnt to ashes in the 1990s and we were given a carriage instead, not near my house but close to where my brother lived on Tabolov Street. They lived in the carriage without descent living conditions. To cut it short, my girl graduated from the School of Economy in Tskhinval and the boy studied law in Vladikavkaz.

Our Russian village was in Georgia. Very often they would take us teachers to a village council where they talked at length about Russia being Georgia's enemy. There is also a village of Tsaniskari. They would gather us there and at those meetings, Georgians would speak to us. One man would say: let's cut off the heads of all Russians and send them via post to Russia. And then women protested: How dare you say such things out loud! It is not possible! Well, not everybody was like this.... All in all, there had even been cases where Russians were lining for bread, milk and they would insult them: you are Russian, what are you doing here? Get out to your Russia. Of course not everybody was like this, but nevertheless, there were moments like this for sure. I myself somehow went there by bus. When I was about to get off, a driver said something to me and I responded in Russian. And he says to me: What are you doing here? Get out of here! I just looked at him, got off and went away.

And then they started saying some stuff about Ossetians. Our director left his job. He was told that Ossetians must not work on high positions and those who do should immediately vacate them. And many did. They filed

resignation letters. My neighbor Semenikhina, resigned from her job in a kindergarten in Tbilisi because she was Russian. “File your resignation”, she told me that Ossetians were told the same: write a resignation letter voluntarily and indicate that you want to leave, and then they were discharged. There were shootings in the village. And we were afraid! I am Ossetian and my husband is Russian. Everybody was scared, but I think Ossetians were the most afraid. I had to climb into an attic and stay there overnight. It turned out that my neighbor killed his dog but I thought that they came... you never know! Marauders and many others were roaming around. I was scared to death! And besides, I did not know anything about my [family]: I did not know what was going on. It turned out that my house had been burnt and that my parents had left South Ossetia. To be exact, my mom moved to Vladikavkaz, she was wounded in her leg, but did not have the patience to stay longer and returned soon. The wound on her leg took a very long time to heal. My father, because he was taking what was going on and the burning of our house close to his heart, died a sudden death. My mom just managed to arrange for his funeral and died very shortly after: her wound got complicated and we also found out she had developed cancer.

In short, she also passed away. We were left with nothing here. My brothers stayed and they live here to this day. As for myself... I accommodated my children in Vladikavkaz in a rental apartment. My daughter married an Ossetian man there, and my son also married an Ossetian girl from Java. And they both live in their apartments. I returned to Georgia, to the village. To be honest, nobody touched us. We worked in school as normal. But our director was a Russian man – my former student, before the war in 2008. When, on the 8th of August, they reported that there was a war, oh, my goodness! I thought – what are we supposed to do? I was afraid to go, but I sent my husband instead. I told him: you are Russian, maybe it’s better this way. You will manage to get to Tskhinval. He only managed to get to Gori where he was stopped by Russians. They told him: you don’t have citizenship, therefore, you cannot go. By and large, he got back. But I had citizenship – I am a local girl. And after the war, I was thinking: here, in South Ossetia everything is over... No one is left alive.

On September 1st, I went to school and we were told that we all had to go out to a highway. They took us all, both teachers and students and local residents as well. We were arranged in the following way: from Lagodekhi towards Tsnori with a distance of stretched arms from each other, Georgian flags in our hands and banners with a “Russia Off!” slogan. They drove past us recording on a camcorder: look at those people – the whole of Georgia’s against Russia! We were basically forced to do this. We tried to resist: we

don't want to go! And our director said: if you want to work, you have to stand on that highway. Back then I did not know yet what I was supposed to do – stay there or leave? After the war of the 1990s my parents always wanted me to go back home. They wanted to buy even a small hut here, but had no money for that. And basically before of this we were stuck there. Then we wanted to move, but we somehow always dragged on making a decision. I even travelled to Tskhinval and applied for an apartment. I was offered housing in the village of Tsunar. I tried to talk to my husband into moving to the village, but he did not want the fuss and hassle just for moving from a village to a village. And therefore, we stayed there. And finally, after we had been taken to the highway, I came home, mused for a long time, and early on the morning of the 2nd of September grabbed my bag and off I went! I was thinking to myself: let's see if I can get there. I arrived in Gori and tried to negotiate with taxi drivers to take me as close as possible to Tskhinval. But they all refused. Then I went to some Russian soldiers standing nearby. They asked me to show them my passport. They looked at it and said: We will let you go but how are you going to get there really? There was no transport at all. I said: let me through and I will manage. And off I went. I walked and walked until I reached a certain place. There were Russian soldiers deployed there too. They too looked at my passport and felt sorry for me: how are you going to get to Tskhinval? I continued anyway. I walked and walked but I only saw one car – one of the Red Cross hurrying in a direction where you could hear explosions, but no one was on the highway. I was even scared: the earth is all black on both sides, shell casings, these large shell casings are all over the place. And you could smell something bad, some odor coming possibly from cadavers. But I did not stop, I just kept on walking and finally got to Tskhinval. I do not know how long I had to walk from Gori to get here. There, at a checkpoint there were our Ossetians and Russians. They saw me walking towards them all alone, without anybody walking by. They saw me from a distance and when I got closer they signaled me to go to them. They also called in a Russian officer. I explained to them that I was nothing special. From that place I managed to call my family who were looking for me. Before, I had agreed with my husband that I would try to get there and then we would see how we should go. When I got there, I called as the connection was still working. I said to him: here I am. My husband said: "What are we going to do now?" I said: "There is no way back for me. It's only possible for you to try to come here." But he said: "How am I going to leave my sick mother here?" To cut it short, he stayed there.

When I was still living there, they turned off Russian channels and started a powerful propaganda that Russia is our enemy. But everyone could un-

derstand that this is not the case. Educated people – doctors etc understood this better. But ... propaganda was really powerful ... Most of the villagers had left for Russia. Some departed to Kursk, some went to some other places. There was almost nobody left in the villages and there were no students at school. There were lots of Georgians. They occupied all apartments. All of them were Georgians from Azerbaijan and Gurjaani. A lot of people arrived from there. All local youth had left and only those who actually did not have anywhere to go stayed. Then I went to the Red Cross to talk about my husband. I was told that if there were several families who wanted to come here, they would arrange for this, but they would not be able to go there for just one person. I asked my husband to talk with our neighbors and find out if any of them wanted to come here so that the Red Cross could arrange for their travel. But he said that they were not going anywhere. As of today, elderly women and men, few who stayed, had started drinking and many of them have already passed away.

My children often call their dad. We send him money. There are no salaries there and you have to get by with what little you get from your vegetable garden. His sister visited him in summer. She herself lives in Krasnodar. She spent all summer with him helping out with harvesting. She told me this: your husband says that as long as he is alive, as long as he can, he is not going to leave. He wants to see his grandchildren and all so much and he hates to think that I may have remarried here. I have not! So he lives there all alone. His brother is also there. They keep in touch and help out each other. But he is alone.

I got an apartment in Khurzalin (Sunny) district in Tskhinvl. It was very hard. That is where I live. I also found a job.

Gamsakhurdia was the one who made the biggest mistake. He actually made the first mistake, which then started snowballing. When there was the war in 2008, I found out that young people who lived in our village also participated in the war. Georgians had already settled there. There were a lot of Georgians in the village. They were sent here in tanks. I know this because when they returned on the 8th, conversations started spinning off that Russia had attacked them so bad that they were running not being able to see anything before them, hiding in tunnels and returned home hardly alive. They told stories about the turmoil that Russians made, making Georgians run as fast as they could. There was a woman who worked in high governance structures in Lagodekhi who was saying that many Georgians died there. As if Russia had destroyed it, do you get it? And I asked: how many Russians have died? And then she shouted at me at the top of her voice... There was a Georgian woman, a teacher of the Georgian language. We started arguing

but she kept justifying Georgians. What they were saying on the radio was how our [Georgians] guys were being slain, shot, arrested at the hands of Ossetians and Russians. What about our guys who got killed? No one knew about them. As if only Georgians got killed. Now, if you ask Gori people – on the contrary, they say the Russians treated them well and Russian soldiers even shared their food with them as there was nothing to eat.

On the night of the 7th of August it was announced that Georgia would never fight with Ossetians, that they are brothers. Saakashvili was giving a speech and he was saying that Ossetians were the first to make melted butter from milk and that the Georgians learnt all this from the Ossetians. To cut it short, he praised Ossetians up to the seventh sky, and then at night he crept out to fight us. How can we understand this? In one of the Ossetian villages he even helped restore a monument of Kosta Khetagurov. They also renovated an Ossetian school there, even though after his departure, the building fell apart right away. The plastering came down and the teachers started complaining: what have they done with us? All in all, they just painted and that was all. The war broke out and nobody knew who attacked who first, whether it was Russia who attacked Ossetia and Georgians were fighting them off or Georgia had entered there and now there's fighting. Nobody knew anything before these guys came back. The version these guys were spreading was that Russia attacked Georgia and chased them like mice from the field.

I don't regret coming back here. You know, as soon as I got married and moved there, I had been working like a donkey. We had both cucumbers and tomatoes at the same time. Everything at a time! It was hard physical work. There was a factory producing ethereal oil and we processed geranium. The factory also fell apart afterwards. It is not there anymore. Thanks to this factory, we managed to survive even though the work was seasonal. And now there is no work there. I am happy that now I am here. My parents wanted me to come back here for a long time. When they visited us they saw us working hard, toiling, they saw the children in early childhood working with their little clothes that we had made for them. My mom would always be angry with me for making them [the children] work like this. But how should we do it otherwise? There was no other way: you only had something if you worked hard. No work – no income. The same with the school... eventually there were fewer and fewer students, Georgian children did not know Russian. In the department of education they told us that we had to switch to Georgian – set up the first grade on the base of the Georgian sector so that eventually there would be only the Georgian sector. That's what they did. Even though our director was Russian – from a Russian family who

had moved out from Rostov a very long time ago and settled there, his sisters married Georgians and they became Georgianized. He spoke excellent Georgian. That's how they work over there even though they live in another village, they walk three kilometers every day. This was the case back then. I do not know now – maybe they have got a car now.

We send my husband three thousand or five thousand. He still lives there. He even sent us a jar of fig jam from our tree through his sister. He said he made it himself with her help. But he did the cooking and decided to send it as a treat. He says he cannot stay there any longer...

* * *

T. M. resident of Leningor⁸, 40 years old.

In 1988 I was 12 or 13 years old. And that's what still remains in my memory: We had a next-door neighbor, a deputy head of police, and some people would often visit him. They called them "leaders". And this word – a leader, after around 20 years was the most horrible word for me. I thought of "leaders" as people who would insult and kick out others. My family had protected this man on several occasions as a result of which my father and my uncle, who was visiting us at that time were beaten. All in all, this family never left the district. His wife was Georgian and they stayed. But for them all this was an insult, as people would go to their house cursing and swearing and shouting at them, throwing stuff. I do not want to name a surname and give the names of those who would come to their house, but I remember this person very well. I personally saw him on the threshold of the house. I remember them from when I was a child – the leaders. They are untouchable even now. I remember children leaving my class. We tried our best to tell them that we were sorry to see them leaving. These were Ossetians. I remember of one my classmates saying that he did not want to go. But they left for Vladikavkaz anyway and their fate took a wrong turn there. His father died of a heart attack. Then he and his sister had a bad road accident. He and his wife and his sister, with her fiancé, were driving. The fiancé died and his wife has been in a wheelchair since then. She cannot walk and they separated.

In my school there were people who would put fuel to the fire and there were others who said that this was not the right way. But there was nobody to say that "you, kids, it's none of your business. You have to study. Minors have nothing to do with political developments and you should not be going to rallies."

Those were bad times. We could hardly find anything to cook. At least this was the way my family lived back then. We were experiencing financial hardship. I remember very well delicious meatballs of buckwheat! But there were positive sides to all this: I could knit around 50 patterns. I have forgotten all of them because you can buy everything today but back then we tried to do something ourselves to look smart and dressed up.

In the district rumors had it that these "leaders" had robbed one of the Ossetian villages. I even saw a house where stolen blankets, carpets and rags were put out for air. And we could see that after these robberies some fam-

⁸Geographic terminology was not edited. It is presented as employed by the narrators.

ilies here, in the district, appeared to have acquired cows and pigs. We had also heard about their cruelty. On the one hand, I was scared that they might come to us, too. On the other hand, I was not that scared as we were not Ossetians and also, they would only rob those who were living a wealthy life. We were not exposed to that risk as we were not wealthy at all and struggling for our daily bread. Our poorness helped because they did not really care who they robbed and sometimes nationality did not really matter, as they were said to be under the influence of drugs. In the evenings, we would hear machine guns being fired. By and large it was a mess for everybody.

Living in Leningor, we could not hear about what was going on in South Ossetia. I am an active person and now follow events through the Internet and printed media. But here, just like 20 years ago, the local community still has no knowledge of what is going on in South Ossetia. Local TV channels do not work here. I cannot even say that most of the Leningori community are interested in the developments taking place in South Ossetia, since many locals do not picture their future here and they are indifferent. Their primary goal is to work and earn some money. That's it. We had not heard about what was going on in 2008, let alone what was going on 20 years ago. I, for instance, would call my acquaintances in Tbilisi to tell them to come here. It was so quiet! War? What about it? We only knew what they aired on TV. And there were construction works ongoing at that time here, in the settlement on the 8th, 10th, 11th and 12th of August. People were building private houses for themselves.

I cannot say that our lives drastically changed after Saakashvili ascended to power. There were small changes at a self-governance level. He really liked performances and installations. He also visited us once just to demonstrate that our local authorities were just thieves stealing the budget and that they were uneducated. But in a month's time they suddenly became each other's supporters. And those who he had publicly denounced as pigs here in the district a month or two before, he praised as "heros of our time" while giving a speech in the Parliament.

One day, it was in 2006, were told that we were going to have elections and that we must elect a "temporary administration of South Ossetia." I asked one of my friends what kind of elections we were going to hold. I was also curious to know who Dimitry Sanakoev was. Administratively we belonged to the Mtskheta-Mtianeti region. We have a governor who we did not elect, but was appointed by the President. We do have a Gamgebeli (*head of a municipality/city administration*) of the municipality, a Sakrebulo (*a municipality/city council*) and a head of the Sakrebulo. And what is a soon-to-be-elected person supposed to do? What kind of subordination will there

be? Or will there be any? Why do we need all of this? My friend and I even tried to raise these questions with journalists. But apparently this did not go in line with the State's interest and nobody seemed interested to know what we thought about this decision. Back then I did not even know where Kurta and Tamarasheni were located. It was not long ago that I learned. I did not know which administrative unit they belonged to. We had never heard that they had anything to do with our district. Nor did we know anything about Dima Sanakoev. And then, as always these "leaders" or their heirs came by. They were standing around Dima. By that time he was no longer an Ossetian to them and suddenly they were all into supporting a South Ossetian district. Back then, we had a majoritarian MP who supported the idea of the restoration of the former South Ossetian district in its borders, including our district as it was in old maps, and the MP was for these elections to take place. And we would hear all the time: Dima arrived and donated something, arrived and donated, he has just arrived... By and large, Dima had turned into a messiah for the Leningori community.

I had never ever seen elections like we had then! And I do not think that something like this will ever happen again! I lived together with my parents in such a blind alley that nobody would have found it if they had not been there before. And even there they had put a special squad the night before the elections. The whole district was full of the special squad members. The deployment of armed people in the district came as a surprise to us. We had not seen them in years and now... And also, Dima was nominated in our very district, where he was never officially registered where he was not going to base his administration. By and large, this was a kind of performance. As for the armed people, we were told that there is a danger that some provocations may ensue from Tskhinval. To be honest, I wondered how it was possible to organize some kind of terrorist acts from Tskhinval? It was another planet to me. As expected, the elections went very well. Those who had voted for Gamsakhurdia, those who had voted for Saakashvili, all voted for Dima Sanakoev. And they keep on voting for everybody. Those here who observe, who are in commissions and who count ballot papers, these have been the same people for 22 years. The day of the elections was celebrated with music and festivities, and cakes delivered to voting stations. I remember my child, who was seven or eight years old back then, begging me to go and vote: "let's go mummy, let's go and vote..." There were slogans put up all over the district calling us to "Vote for Dima Sanakoev!" One of the Ossetian ladies asked us to vote for Dima Sanakoev. Of course we did go the elections. I have been an active voter for 22 years already and I think six or eight times I have voted "against all." It was only on two or three occasions

– now and before the war – that I actually voted properly. Dima Sanakoev himself was like a candy, and he did not beg for aggression, which is not true in relation to his circle – they did stir aggression in me. It was not exactly an aggression, but rather a dislike. Because I knew they were doing this because of money. The elections were over and that was it.

In 1993, I married an Ossetian man. I was kidnapped by one of local guys. I just knew that he lived there. I was underage when I got married. I do not want to talk about it. We could not work it out together and currently we live separately. But I have a daughter, beautiful Anna. I always feel that Anna, in spite of the fact that she grew up among Georgians and that we always talk Georgian at home, she always wanted to say: “That’s how gorgeous we, Ossetians are!” She had waited for a long while for a time when she could actually say this. Because on TV, they would always report something along the lines that Ossetians had kidnapped someone, taken a hostage for ransom. This was all she would hear. And one day, someone was saying that a guy with the surname Petriashvili was kidnaped from Gori and taken to Tskhinvali. But it was all business related rather than a political crime. He did not return some money to somebody, or something like that. And then they announced that Kokoiti himself handed over the boy to his father. And Anna said: “See, he is a good man!”. She was five or six years old back then. She was saying: “Now it is your turn to prove that he is not a good man! Cannot you see – he is special!” She was so excited about Kokoiti! I remember when she learned counting rhymes in a game. She learned the counting rhyme in Ossetian. She was so proud! She thought she knew all the works by Kosta Khetagurov. For her knowing the rhymes was equivalent to knowing all works of Khetagurov! She would often gather children and women from our neighborhood and tell them: “Now I am going to recite poems in Ossetian”. And our neighbors would always tell her: “What? Anna, this is not Ossetian, is it?” Just recently she told me that she wants, against all odds, to maintain her ethnic roots. She asked me: “How do you think I can change my surname to Zozirti?” Now her surname reads as Zozirova. Whether I like it or not I always support her. That’s why I told her: “We can find out how to do it and you can make yourself a present.” It may mean nothing for some people and they may tell me: why does not she know Ossetian? But when she lived in Leningor and went to school there, she could understand Ossetian. She would communicate with her grandma in Ossetian. By the way, her grandma always talks Ossetian with her. Anna’s grandma is Ossetian and this is something I appreciate and by the way, there are two Ossetian girls studying with her at the university in Tbilisi. But their surname ends with “shvili”. Anna once told me that one of her fellow stu-

dents had told her that she was the only Ossetian among them. But the two girls said they were also Ossetians! But Anna replied that they have “shvili” as the ending of their surnames and that they should not mention that they are Ossetians. These may seem as small things, but in our situation, in our time, I think this is something good.

I am really sorry to say that, after seven years since the war ended, officials visiting us here keep on telling us that we do not speak in Ossetian. Yes, it’s true we don’t, because nobody teaches it. It takes just one circle to be organized for this purpose. To everybody that I know, including leaders of political parties, after having read an appeal asking us to send volunteers to fight in Ukraine, I said: “Why do not you send volunteer philologist to Leningor? Why fight over there? You’d better send volunteers of the Ossetian language.” And I advise the same thing to political parties, as these are such global problems for them that they will never be able to solve. They’d better resolve [problems] at a local level.

And then 2008 came. There was a lot of propaganda going on here! I was in Tbilisi and they stopped our minivan, moved it to the other side, and said that we had to give way to the army. We were told that it was not safe there and we were not allowed to proceed. I even remember that I hailed to them. I thought that there was some gang of bandits killing people and they are going to set Ossetians and Georgians free! We lived on another planet! And then they would visit us and say that there was no reason to panic and that everything is as it was before. We did not even know that the war had already broken out. Even when we were told that there is an order to restore the constitutional order, I thought to myself: what is it about the “constitutional order?” And also, they told us that everything would soon be over – we are here. And it was not ordinary people who would say this but people who must, in such moments, take care of us rather than their own skin and families. Then we heard that at night, when everybody was asleep, they took away their families, belongings, everything valuable they had at home. Even cattle were taken. But we were told that we should stay here. There were authorities who took care of their own cattle: sheep, cows, bulls, but nobody was taking care of us. There was no point for us, there was no way we could leave even if there was a danger. I stayed there with my child. If now I am criticizing authorities, and there is something I cannot forgive them for, I am going to say even more to you: I cannot forgive the former authorities and my former friends for not warning me that they were going to leave that night. I cut off all contact with them. Thank God, nothing happened to my daughter, but I always think of what could have happened. They were not near me during my troubles and I do not need them now.

On the 16th of August 2008, we were in a church where a service was going on. And suddenly here runs in a woman, a head of a medical emergency service and she says: “they are coming!” simply “coming”. And we immediately understood who was coming. “Save yourself!” This meant that we had to run on our feet. Where? We had to walk to the woods. My mom was working in the bakery back then. I asked my dad to drop in at the bakery so that she would know not to stay there. But she refused to go. She said: “I cannot leave all the bread that I have?! It will go off! Even if I am going to be killed I am never going to leave bread like this!” So she stayed. So I, together with my father and daughter, went into the woods. But there, in the woods, it was more noise than quiet. There were kids who were crying and who some strange grandmothers were trying to sooth them by telling poems. They were discussing topics like rape and murder. These very issues were discussed on Georgian TV channels. We would imagine that everything was going to happen to us and that they would come and do all this stuff to us because of our ethnicity. Someone was sent to us to say that if we were not snipers or bandits we could go out of the woods. And that’s what I did. If I am afraid of something, I’d rather face it than keep on hearing gossip. And there was nothing extraordinary that I saw. I saw guys with beards, most probably Tskhinvalians, who talked to us. Some of them told me: I remember you. But I could not remember them. Because of coincidence, I was dressed all in black. And some people asked me who I had lost in the war. “Nobody” – I replied. “Why are you mourning then?” I told them it was just a coincidence. Then I decided that I had to take care of my looks even during the war. There were a lot of things you had to pay attention to.

I was left alone at work. When I tried to understand what was going on, I came to realize that there were no authorities. Those, who had big muscles would arrive and become heads of the administration. Then another one with bigger muscles would come and then he would become a head of the administration. By and large there was a mess. Even by the end of August and the beginning of September, they came up with an idea to set up a kind of a mixed commission to govern the district. They gathered people in the hall and asked: “Who do you trust the most?” I remember them saying that they trusted one of the “leaders”. Local Ossetians! Not only locals, but one was even from Tskhinval. And then one of the local Ossetians started shouting: “You trust these bandits again? They used to insult you!” And then, I do not remember exactly the date, the first head of the administration was appointed. He was local, but the mess continued anyway. People were standing on sacks, on ladders, distributing salaries.

Many people left during the August days. But in September, after they had found out that nobody was killed and nobody took others' property, they came back. But they left again when a refugee camp was built in Tserovani. I keep saying that these people left not because of fear but because of good conditions and comfort they had been promised. Because, from September, when schools started, and to January, or maybe mid-January, there were 200 students in the settlement. But now there are not more than 200 students in the whole district. They say there is nothing going on here that there are no talented kids in the district. Our children, those who left, excel in everything they do abroad. But the truth is that there are more opportunities for development for children there. These conditions can be created here as well but there is no demand for this and nobody wants to develop a headache.

Some of the Ossetians who left the district in the 1990s returned and still live there. These are the ones who had been given three or four jobs. But there were some, including my classmate's family, who returned at one point, but left again as they could not live there any longer. Because no matter where you went, nobody would respond to your questions. There is no interest in living there where you are not aware of what is going on and where there is no law. Law in fact depends on what type of relationship they have to you. For instance, the law strictly defines that you have to hand over your documents in order to be given permission to leave and enter Leningor from Georgia. If the KGB thinks that a person deserves the permit, they will get it. But, surprisingly enough, all these people also appeared descent enough to deserve a form N9 (*a passport slip*). But when they set up such bureaucratic barriers for my sister, who has not been able to come here already for two years, this is simply offensive. They trust us only during elections. I do not know how to put it, but our shared mistake is the war. The war in the first place. I think that I can give up my beautiful apartment without a war if someone needs it. It is not worth waging a war or killing somebody even for one's apartment. And not a single teardrop of a child, or a mother or father, should be shed for an inch of land. We will all die one day and there will always be a place to bury us. I have never run for an election, I have never had the ambition to be elected or given the opportunity to govern people. But let those, who are willing to take such a responsibility, do everything within their power to prevent ordinary people from suffering. One of my friends once asked me: "Who do you consider yourself to be – a citizen of South Ossetia or a citizen of Georgia?" I would like to voice my honest answer and may our authorities think about it as well – I would like to be a full citizen of South Ossetia but so far it is not working out.

* * *

Z. K. resident of Tskhinval, 55 years old

I was born in a purely Ossetian family. My grandmothers were Ossetians and so were my grandfathers. To cut it short, I am a true-blood Ossetian, who was born in Georgia and my family always respected Ossetian traditions. My mother was from the Dusheti district, also a true-born Ossetian. There were five brothers and two sisters in her family. The family raised large livestock. My father passed away when I was in the 9th grade. Like many others, we also had large livestock. There were no poor people back then, no one was hungry and destitute. All children received education. I used to take dance classes. My family did everything for me. It is said that immigrants tend to better protect their traditions. For example, we always celebrated Ossetian Zhauri bonta (*the holy days*), Ichyanta, Jeorgobata. There was a Georgian village in the vicinity. Let's say someone dies and special messengers are usually tasked to invite people to a wake. But we did not do that – both Georgian and Ossetian villagers were obliged to pay visits to each other without an invitation. The same happened on Zhuari Bonta (*sacred holidays*). We held memorials for the deceased according to Ossetian traditions. We shared school, a village council and a kindergarten. We lived amicably and well. On the other hand, to be honest, when I was growing up, we were ashamed to speak loudly in Ossetian. It was not considered to be nice, somehow. We had a complex. Why? It seems there was such an atmosphere, but I was a kid.

I was 21 when I visited Ossetia. Back then I did not understand when they talked about Georgia or Ossetia. We never studied this part of history at school, there was nothing on the 1920s – what was there in reality – our relationship. And they never taught us that. I myself went to a Georgian school and there was nothing on this. I never knew that David Soslan was Ossetian, I never knew that Queen Tamar's mother was Ossetian. We were not taught this. Nor did Georgians know about this in a Georgian school, a good one. What I learnt from them was patriotism and love of the homeland. I learnt all this in a Georgian school. For example, when a child goes to a kindergarten for the first time, the very first rhyme they have to learn goes like this: "I am a little Georgian, a son of the Caucasian mountains etc". Do you see the point? This is the very first rhyme they have to learn! That is why the Georgian school is the most powerful school. This is what I call patriotism: love your homeland, love your mother tongue, love your people – that is what I learnt from the Georgians. The reason we managed to preserve the Ossetian

language in my family is that we all spoke it at home. Even if a mother was Georgian, Ossetians would talk in Ossetian anyway. But when they opened the kindergarten, it was already the beginning of the 1990s. And this was the time when children switched to Georgian.

I finished school in 1977 and I became what I had always dreamt of being. I always dreamt of becoming a ballet dancer. And when I went to a dance class I thought they would teach me exactly this kind of dance. As a child I attended a dance studio, then completed a dance school and was enrolled in an ensemble, Simd. This was my dream. A calling of blood. I always wanted to dance in an Ossetian ensemble. But not in any ensemble, like Alan, but exactly in Simd. Right after finishing the dance school, I moved to Tskhinval and they immediately accepted me.

I remember that day: I entered the hall to meet the managers and thanks God, they were the great composers Dudar Khakhanov, Pavel Bitiev, choreographer – people's artist Aslan Kabisev. They were considered elite artists. Back then there was no dance school in South Ossetia, only dance circles and here I was, right from a professional school, trained by the hands of professional instructors. Of course I had a warm welcome. The head teacher would ask if there were other girls like me and if they would like to move to Ossetia. Let them come. And I'd like to think that I had never betrayed my team. And I think that it is up to a person how they are received in a new place – you will be receive according to how you behave yourself! And this is even truer in an artistic team. I worked for twenty years in that team – open to close (*laughing*). This is a professional work record. And if there had not been the difficult years of the 1990s, I would have surely worked five more years on the stage. Ballet dancers, whether it be conventional ballet or national dances, have a short, brief, ballet life. Artists of dramatic theaters, on the other hand, can work till old age, but we have to live a brief stage life.

I remember how this conflict began. I remember... three days of shooting and some negotiations on the fourth, some articles again. On the fourth day we would all dress up, put on high heels, take our stuff for rehearsals and go to the theater to work in the dance hall. We made performances. We had concerts, performances, worked with children. And then again – a week of tension and then a week of work. We were healthy and strong back then and very rich in soul. What could give us strength? Most probably patriotism, love of our nation, confidence that we are not obsolete people on this earth. And that we also had the right to live. Our women did not stop giving birth, doing hairdos in spite of the fact that there was no water – sometimes for months and years. With a kettleful of water we managed to do our hair and

be clean and neat. When journalist would come to talk to us they were always very surprised: they have no water and all women in town dress and look so smart!

There are people who can express their grievances through poems. Some cry. There are also people who start arguing, go hysteric and this is their way of expressing their emotions. When the Zari tragedy stroke, I just wanted – even though it seems stupid but... you remember when Inga Jioeva (*opera singer*) travelled from Italy, don't you? We had a chamber orchestra. We gave a recital. And just before the recital began, we were asked to dance one Ossetian dance, Glide. I was here and I had a costume. All our costumes were burned in the theater, but luckily, I happened to have mine at home. And, my partner was not here as he had already left for North Ossetia. I don't remember exactly how, I think it was through commuters [to North Ossetia] that we managed to pass him a message and he arrived with his costume. And at this concert I performed the Glide. I remember that the day was very charged but we still managed to give the concert. I remember dancing with tears trickling down my face, but I danced. I was wearing a sliver dress and it was catching in my thoughts and I could hardly breathe. And all those tears... what do I want to say by remembering this day? A dance may be a form of entertainment for some people but to me it is life, movement, patriotism, love of my country. I exist and acknowledge the world dancing.

How did we survive in the difficult times of the 1990s? For instance, if one of us had a birthday. We would bring some products and share a piece of bread. Back then you could buy butter only with a voucher. But I, for instance, would never eat butter but instead give it to my friends who had children. How could I eat butter when my friends had two and three children?! There was no heating – no firewood back then. Let's say you are going to visit a friend. You take some firewood with you. We managed to survive and believed in the future. I personally believed. I still do. I was thinking: now there will be some negotiations and everything will stop soon. There will be someone who will write an article and this article will bring an end to what is happening. Every time a small piece of information was voiced on TV in our support we would immediately think: That's it! One interview and everything will be over! We truly believed in all of this.

For two years I knew nothing about my family who lived in Georgia. One night I had a dream. It was raining and instead of raindrops, stones were falling down all over the village. I woke up – our house is built on a hill and stones kept falling. They were big ones. And then I felt something. It turns out that they had evicted our village. I felt it. I felt it instinctively. And one night I had a dream. In this dream my grandma, great grandma and all the

elderly people in my village who had passed away came up to me. “What are you doing here?” – I ask them. “They kicked us out” – they said. Then I remember that there were no salaries for nine months and I could not go to Vladikavkaz. Anyway, it was considered to be a treason. And my neighbor, a mother of two young children, was pregnant with a third child. How could I leave her? I had friends who would stand at posts every afternoon. I could not just walk away! I could not leave them like this! And then someone from Vladikavkaz told me that they had seen my family. By that time someone had been killed in the village where they lived, cars would drive in shooting every night to scare people off. One was killed. After these developments they somehow managed to flee. When I learned that they were in Vladikavkaz, I somehow, through Zari road, managed to get to Vladikavkaz. I found them in communal housing. My brother with four young children, my sister-in-law and my mother. They spent 14 years in a single room in that housing. They never returned home except for my mother. She went back in June 2008. She said she felt death approaching and wanted to see her house, and her village one last time. Just once! Let me do this – she told us. We somehow managed to send her back. Probably due to nerves she developed a cardiac arrest and became bedbound for three and half years. We renovated two rooms in the house and did everything for our mother so that she could die in her own house, which she had built from the very foundation. It was her dream to die in that house. All our Ossetian neighbors had left and only those who were married to either Georgians or Armenians managed to stay. There was not a single purely Ossetian family left in the village. By and large there was not even a single house in the village – belonging to Ossetians or Georgians – which had not been robbed. But nobody would touch our house. Not a soul. Because we had a reputation in Georgian villages and everywhere. We have friends everywhere. But this generation does not know us and they do not want to know us. I am telling you the truth: Georgians bought what belonged to Ossetians. They have already settled there, but even they are robbed. They are left with nothing. But nobody has ever touched our house. I stayed in Tskhinval and dedicated myself to my work. I lived like everyone did – no better, no worse. I never thought about my career and ambitions. Maybe, it is for the worse. But I always behave the way I was raised. This is the way I have always worked. What happened it happened by itself: career, title, etc. I have never been backed by influential associates. At the same time, I used to always work with children. More specifically, since 2000. I have already raised several generations. Three generations. Some of them choose to pursue this profession, others walk down other paths. Our alumni have been enrolled in the best Russian schools. Of

course it is always better to work with children. If a child does not pursue dancing, at least they know how to walk. There is more to dancing than becoming a professional dancer. When dancing, the child gets used to esthetics, ethics, develops physically. Traditions, costumes and patriotism are all intertwined in dancing. We teach not only Ossetian but Caucasian dances as well. We have just completed Dagestani and Abkhazian dances. Children are very keen on learning Adjarian dances. They like them very much. Art belongs to all people. If they like them, let them dance. But showing this on the stage ... it takes costumes, music and a lot of stuff to perform one dance on the stage. So we need resources, opportunities and willingness, and last but not least the political atmosphere. First things first, every nation has a responsibility to learn their own dances, and if there is a desire to learn about other cultures, this speaks to personal growth. It is not something that degrades, but contributes to personal development.

I adore Misha Saakashvili. When I was feeling down, there was Misha (forgiving me for calling him Misha, but his own people call their president Misha) giving a speech, and my stress would completely disappear. First of all, thanks to Saakashvili, and I am very sorry for those who died on both sides and it was only a fortunate coincidence that I could manage to survive, and may those who have lost family members forgive me for saying this, but thanks to Misha we are independent. The year of 2008... as a well known fact, dear Misha spoke on TV to say that there will be nothing. And then there was shooting for three days. Three days in a row! By August 11th we had already spent three nights in basements. I remember constant shootings for days without a pause. We all took to the basements of course. My neighbor Sanakoev was killed in his yard. I also saw Georgian tanks. I took them for Russian tanks. We were told that they were coming and coming and coming and we had to sit in basements for three days but there was on tank, no Russia. And suddenly I saw them – tanks! Meanwhile our basement was full with people. And then I told them (all colors were drained from their faces because of fear): don't be afraid, I speak fluent Georgian. I am going to stand here to tell them that we are all women and children. I told them I was not going to let them in. But could I actually do this? And then there was a woman who said she also spoke Georgian. But they did not stop. They continued driving up towards the central square and then towards building of the Labor Union Committee where they got blown up. No need to say that many people died. Many of my acquaintances. We do not have strangers in town. We are all friends and almost everyone is related. Everyone who died was familiar. There was a moment when my neighbors were saying that a corridor had been opened to Georgia, and that everyone could go to Georgia

from crossing point. And I am thinking: three days... we have not taken a shower for five days. We are all dirty, sitting in the basement, hair undone, and I am still in my slippers... For my entire life I could never wear out shoes and now, for five days I wore two pairs of shoes. And one of my neighbors gave me a pair of 42 size sneakers. The other one gave me a pair of socks and I was sitting in the basement like this. And suddenly I started picturing myself as a captive walking towards Georgia through the corridor. I thought to myself: I'd rather die (*laughing*). And there are my friends and relatives standing nearby while I am walking past them with my hands raised. I immediately went up to my apartment followed by my neighbor (*who sadly died shortly after*) who was asking me to go back to the basement. And I told him: No! No corridor!

On the 11th of August, on Hafez Street, there was no Russian tank to be seen! In the morning of the 11th, my neighbor, who had already lost a son before, and his other son, accidentally trapped in Vladikavkaz, was raving to him to get here, appeared to have a Gazel (*a vehicle*). He said he was going to drive away so that his son would not come here. He was the only child left in the family and that's why he did not want him back. But the son is raging in Vladikavkaz: his parents are here! My neighbor told me: "Let's go. What is to happen, will happen!". And the morning of the 11th of August seemed somehow calm. And all of us, and one more neighbor with his child and two other children, decided to take a risk. And we took off. But when we saw the town... It took us two hours to drive out of the town. Smashed glass everywhere... It was impossible to drive through the streets and the men had to get out and clean the way ahead. And again: the tires were torn on the glass, and we had to change them somewhere in a corner. We could hardly get to the Zari motorway. And another horror was awaiting us there: exploded cars and bodies everywhere. Bodies everywhere! The horror. I cannot relay what I went through there. I thought I was having a nightmare. I saw a foot dangling from somewhere, and then arms. We somehow managed to get to Java and then the car broke, while my neighbor's son had already reached Java. And finally, on the 11th of August, I saw tanks coming. I came back in a week's time. A roof of the block of apartments near my house was burning. Most probably a mine hit it and pieces of the mine were sitting on my bed. I could not do anything the whole week. I was just sitting there. I wanted to clean up and sort it out, but I was physically unable to do anything. As if I froze. My neighbors would anyway gather in the basement as we had literally everything there: candles, and even those who had electricity back home would join in the basement, there were some beds and blankets. We spent a week there with the neighbors. We could not go up to our apartments.

But life goes on, children are growing up, women keep on giving birth. In the winter you cannot notice that our women are pregnant. But in spring when it is warm, you look around and everybody is walking with prams. And you think to yourself: when were they pregnant? When did it happen? And when there is an event taking place in the park? You look around to see so many children! I have a feeling that soon the number of schools will be too small for them. Everything's going to be fine! Of course deep inside I am still alert, I cannot relax, I tend to be tense often. I still have this complex, this resentment.

Our generation may live to the day when they will see something. It may take years and maybe centuries. Because we lived together with Georgians and it broke down very quickly. But to restore all this ... Let's assume our children have no understanding of who they are – the Georgians. They are the enemy, and Georgian children grow up knowing that Ossetians are killers and horrible people. But what can we do to dissuade them? It takes many, many years before they forget all this. It will take generations. Most probably we will not be able to ever forget this. We have contact, I never wished them bad even during the war. I cannot wish Georgians bad, I just can't! Because I grew up among them and I was educated there. I will say again: love your homeland, love your nation – these are the lessons that I learned there. I cannot hate them, I cannot help loving them, I cannot wish Georgians ill, I could never do that. Even though there were times when people close to me were being killed. I had dreadful thoughts back then. But this also depends on the individual. I cannot solve all of the problems of the Ossetian nation. I am an individual who is telling stories about her life and expressing her thoughts while all this is up to the big politics and sadly not up to the small people. If I ever loved my Georgian friends and relatives, nothing has been changed in my heart. I continue to love them the same way, to keep in touch the same way and meet them not very often, but at least once a year. But when we meet, whether it is a planned or an accidental meeting, we try to not wake up the pain. We cherish each other. Because I am, too, an Ossetian woman from Georgia, and I have something that I have lost there. If nothing else, at least the graves of my forefathers who are buried in Georgia. And they lost things here. So we all have left behind something on either side, something important. And we try our best to not talk about past events that are likely to bring pain back to all of us.

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