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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.

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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-

curacy. 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 fellows 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 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 restored 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 tore 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.