

THE GORGES OF THE CAUCASUS

Visit to Georgia September 2013

Tam gdye morye vyechno plyeshchet na pusteniye skali....

In the land where the sea for ever splashes against barren rocks....

Pushkin: The Talisman

THE MINARET IN A FIELD

In one of the remoter regions of Abkazia in South West Georgia, an area not even covered by the Bradt Guide, there is a gorge between two mountains. The village on the summit of one can only be accessed by a cable car from the small town on the opposite mountainside. There are no roads or paths to the village, but people live there, and through binoculars it is possible to see lush meadows, well-tended vegetable gardens and orchards surrounding the few houses. In the decade before the collapse of communism the Soviets constructed a cable car, an impressive technical achievement because the cable is over a kilometre long. In case of illness or accident the cable car, which crosses incessantly, serves as an ambulance. Villagers use it to take their produce over to sell in the town market.

However the cable car is rusty, and the primitive machine operating it looks in urgent need of repair. The floor boards, worn with holes, allow for a spectacular if alarming view in to the gorge hundreds of metres below. The cable looks frayed and occasionally the electricity fails, leaving the cable car swinging in mid-air. I stepped briefly inside the unsteady vehicle, noticed the rust and the gaps in the floor and, being a coward, jumped out again. Donald allowed himself to be taken across the gorge and told me later that his nerves settled when the young man ferrying people and produce to and fro told him he made this journey dozens of times a day.

Abkazia, on the border with Turkey, has a substantial Muslim minority in a country that is predominantly Orthodox Christian. Abkazia's main city, the Black Sea resort of Batumi, still popular with Russian tourists despite recent political conflicts, puts money in the government's coffers. Despite the fact that fifty thousand plus Muslims comprise a substantial minority in the town, and are the majority in the hinterland, the Orthodox Church refuses to allow the building of a second mosque and has itself embarked on an extensive church building program, often raising churches on foundations of destroyed Muslim properties and putting crosses at the end of Muslim occupied streets. The Orthodox Church is the most powerful institution in the country and influences the government to such a degree that Georgia can be described as a theocracy in the same way as Iran. The government can protest at the Orthodox Church flouting the law and instigating violence against minorities, specifically Muslims and gays, but it dares not interfere and appears to have no power to stop it.

After Donald returned by rusty cable car from the mountainside opposite, our driver Taniel took us to Chela, a village five hours drive away in the middle of the South Georgia Caucasus mountain range, to visit a mosque where on August 16th the minaret had been forcibly removed on the order of the Orthodox Church. Police and militia arrived by helicopter and in armoured vehicles. They beat up the imam and anyone else who dared to attempt to stop them cutting the minaret down. Wrapped in blue plastic, it was taken to a field some miles away and has been lying there under armed guard ever since.

Chela is situated to the west of the autonomous region of Adjara, the predominantly Muslim part of Abkazia. The village lies on the dry side of the South Caucasus, where the land is less fertile, the labour hard and the people poor. Taniel stopped by the meadow where the shrouded minaret lay. A soldier, holding a large gun, sat next

to it. We then bumped over narrow stony roads along a valley bottom by a foaming river. On a hill stood the Orthodox monastery from where the bishop had seen the minaret being constructed and had complained to the authorities. Then the rocky road climbed over brush covered slopes to the village of Chela, where the mufti and a crowd of worshippers had been waiting several hours for us before starting Friday prayers. The harassed looking mufti, a young man, rushed us inside the mosque and the men and boys quickly knelt in neat rows and began to pray. A frail looking grey-haired man sang in a gentle voice, intoning cleanly, then, after the imam said several prayers, the men and boys proceeded to whisper their own offerings, rapidly and intently cupping their ears, falling to their knees, bowing low and then rising again, intensely serious and with an air of despair. Most did this many times, because they had much to pray about. After each obeisance they stood for a while, calling to mind another prayer, then went through the same athletic activity. Bishop Malkhaz, dressed in his purple hat and Orthodox robes, joined in. Next to him a young man performed his gestures punctiliously, almost with severity. This carried on for several minutes. Gradually the men and boys settled down, crouching or sitting cross-legged, their arms and legs muscular from hard labour, faces lined and sunburnt. The mufti invited Donald and Malkhaz to say words of encouragement. We were brought to the front and sat facing the congregation, rows of faces looking at us intently with large, expectant eyes. When Malkhaz spoke they clapped and cheered. When Donald spoke they watched him even more intently and their eyes filled with tears. The older men craned their necks and stretched forward as though to be as near as possible while the younger men stayed shyly at the back.

When Donald had finished and the prayers were over everyone crowded around him, wanting to shake his hand. They beamed and tears filled their eyes with joy at the fact that they had not been forgotten, that someone cared about their fear of being

attacked, of maybe even being killed. In Europe this had happened in Bosnia. When the Orthodox Church sets out on the warpath massacres and attempted genocide happen. Even the shy young men came from the back and insisted on embracing us with powerful hugs and wet kisses on both cheeks. We were giving them hope even if we could not restore their minaret.

It reminded us of our visit to the prayer room in the Islamic Centre in Banja Luka just five years after the Bosnia War ended. The Muslims had no mosque to worship in, with all of the city's mosques destroyed. Then too the men and boys had listened to Donald speaking and tears had streamed down their faces.

After the excited hand shaking and embraces the young mufti in Chela cheered up and, aided by several old men, rushed about to prepare a picnic lunch, consisting of freshly baked bread, bowls of local honey still warm from the hive and dried yellow raisins, cold meats, cheeses and jugs of fresh yoghurt. They told us their stories, one of the older men having been beaten up by the police and soldiers who had come to remove the minaret. The well-educated mufti turned out to be a farmer who still tilled the fields and tended cows and goats. He led the prayers voluntarily. The police had beaten him up also.

The story around the removal of the minaret had all the absurd but fundamentally nasty ingredients of authoritarian bureaucracy. Everyone knew the order came from the Orthodox Church, but the police, having arrested twenty-one people for trying to protect the minaret, said they were removing it for inspection of the materials used, claiming they had not been properly declared when imported into Georgia.

The young mufti felt so encouraged by our visit that he was impatient to drive to the meadow and investigate the situation with the guards. Our arrival in several cars which left the road and roared up the hill to where the minaret lay, alarmed the young soldier sitting outside a caravan, evidently bored out of his wits with nothing else to

do but to watch the wrapped minaret. He leapt to his feet and cocked his gun, banging on the caravan door which immediately opened and another older, heavily armed soldier, twice the size of the first, spilled out on to the meadow.

Overwhelmed by this unexpected visit including foreigners, someone dressed as an Orthodox bishop in blue robes, and an Anglican priest in a black cassock, they were too slow to stop us taking a series of forbidden photos. 'We know nothing about it,' seemed to be the gist of their explanation. They were simply ordered to keep guard. On being pressed by the bishop and Donald they could only suggest: 'Go talk to the police. It's political.' They spoke no more than the truth. For all the excuses about illegal materials, the removal of the minaret was little more than a demonstration as to who wielded the most power in Georgia: the politicians or the Orthodox Church.

The young mufti and several of the elderly Muslims ran around the minaret, inspecting what they could underneath the blue plastic, and Donald patted it as one would a pet horse, saying gently and repeatedly: 'Let them have it back! Go on!'

Getting nothing more out of the guards, who smiled in an embarrassed manner while resting their hands on their guns just in case, we drove off to Platte, a neighbouring mainly Orthodox village, where the Muslims wanted to show us a mosque that had been vandalised and destroyed. The Muslim minority lived on the edges of Platte and were too frightened to meet us or even approach the ruins of the mosque.

All the villages we visited in this region of Georgia were poor, with primitive housing and facilities, but none was as desolately ramshackle and filthy as Platte. Pigs ran round the stony streets which were covered in animal droppings. Broken fences surrounded dilapidated houses. Taniel followed the young mufti's car, heaving and shaking all its passengers as it negotiated the pot-holed streets up to the village centre where the mosque had once stood: now a pile of rubble.

Within seconds of our arrival two young men emerged from a neighbouring house, faces flushed with drink. The bolder of the two approached the bishop and Donald as though ready for a fight. The other one wore a hoody back to front. We asked them politely about the destroyed building in front of us, and they muttered something about it being a defunct shop or a disused nightclub.

Meanwhile the young mufti and the elderly Muslims had run round the back of the rubble to investigate the damage. Tariel observed the behaviour of the hooligans. They had not recognized him, and might not guess he was a Muslim, but the others were in danger, so when the mufti returned he went over and in a low voice advised them to leave immediately.

Upset by the emotionally charged meeting at the mosque in Chela, Donald was in no mood to be conciliatory with the young louts who crowded him in a menacing manner. A day's heavy drinking made them disrespectful of the elderly stranger in a black cassock, and they were not worried about being rude to Bishop Malkhaz, despite his purple robes. 'I know who you are,' the bolder one muttered threateningly to him. He had probably seen the bishop on television speaking out in support of Muslims, gays and other minorities. He may even have seen pictures of the bishop washing the feet of the mufti of Tbilisi, an act of penitence for the Christian persecution of Muslims in Georgia.

Donald regained composure and went into his Bosnia mode of conciliation, appealing to the man's better nature. But alcohol and the presence of his thuggish sidekick made the young man resistant to feelings of humanity. 'Muslims do not belong here. They must go.' Donald urged him to visit Chela and help the villagers rebuild the minaret. 'It is a matter of being good neighbours and of being human,' Donald said reasonably. The man momentarily softened, saying he had nothing personal against Muslims. It was just that they didn't belong in Georgia. Meanwhile

several pigs scurried around his legs and went snuffling for food along the roadside where their droppings lay in little steaming heaps; the scene as if an illustration of life in the Middle Ages.

The man went on to say he had lived in London for several years and intended to go back and get married, then asserted that there were no Muslims in England; that the English would not allow them to live there, so why should Georgians have to put up with them in their country. It was clear he had never been to England. The conversation became more nonsensical. Tariel had been speaking to several older villagers who did not know him and began by expressing the village's hatred for Muslims, aware that several Muslim families lived there. Tariel later told us that he somehow managed to soften their views. I wish I had understood that conversation.

He then turned to the ever more excitable young men, exchanged a few words and even shook hands with them, which is more than they were prepared to do with Donald and the bishop. When Donald stretched out a hand the pushy one presented a fist and refused to open it. 'Come on now!' Donald insisted, coming closer and trying to get the man to open his fist. 'We will never agree,' the man said and refused to be friendly. Suddenly I was looking into the faces of two Georgian men who were prepared to beat up and even kill Muslims if given the chance; the kind of people who had tortured and killed Muslims in Bosnia during the Bosnia War, also with blessings and urging by the Orthodox Church. I could see these two thugs driving to Chela as part of a posse, venting their frustration with life and general resentment on the mufti and the farmers we had met in the mosque. The process of reconciliation needed to happen before such violence even started.

Donald does not like to be defeated but as with fanatical fundamentalists of any religion or druggies in the grip of addiction, there was no talking or reasoning with

these two drunken louts, let alone appealing to their better nature. We had wasted time with them. Our attention only intensified their bigotry.

Tariel sensed danger and hustled us quickly into his car, then drove as fast as he could down the bone-shaking streets of Platte, passing an elderly woman looking beaten and careworn carrying a bucket of something mud splattered through an opening in a collapsed wooden fence. Otherwise the village looked deserted. Tariel told us that the few Muslim families who still lived there were too frightened to come out of their houses.

Depression and sorrow weighed heavy on the rest of the drive back to Tbilisi and in my case only intensified when the bishop and Tariel stopped at Rabati, a tourist attraction consisting of a newly restored ancient fortress with churches and a mosque inside. Police guarded the place which had become a place for visitors to admire the stone walls, shallow pools and views from the battlements. The place had been turned into an exquisite artefact, unused and just for show, making the beauty feel sterile. The grief and fear of the Muslim worshippers in Chela and the drunken anger of the dangerous men in Platte were in the foreground of my mind, dampening any interest in being a tourist. The bishop and Tariel meant well, but the stopover did not refresh me. It felt inappropriate. All I could think of were the tear-stained faces of the elderly beaten Muslims in Chela.

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There were several reasons for visiting Georgia: the first was to meet with persecuted Muslims who were being supported by Bishop Malkhaz, much to the irritation of Orthodox Church bishops who grudgingly respected him for his international connections, cosmopolitanism, qualifications, intelligence and mild but firm manner. They could not disagree with his theology, based as it was on thorough study and basic humanity, but being an aggressively nationalist institution they did

not love him for reminding them of the tolerance and love for humanity at the heart of their faith. During the Chechen Wars refugees fled to Georgia and the bishop raised money to open a hospital, the Beteli Centre, in Tbilisi, where they could come for treatment and stay till they decided it was safe to return home. This charitable work outraged the Orthodox Church which supports Russia and the patriarch of which considers Stalin to be a national hero.

Secondly we planned to meet with a group of persecuted gays who on May 17 this year had been attacked during a peaceful demonstration for gay rights by a baying crowd of homophobes egged on by priests from the Orthodox Church. Video clips on the internet showed the priests screaming for the crowd of a thousand and more to kill the small group of about two dozen gays who were being beaten and kicked and were then forced to run for their lives. The bishop had made two public statements defending Muslims and the rights of gay people in Georgia. These statements put him in the firing line of the Orthodox Church. The government might protest feebly, realizing that their hopes of being accepted into the European community might be jeopardized by such blatant bigotry, but the Church made pronouncements and, claiming to speak for the majority of patriotic Georgians, forced the Government into acquiescence.

One person, a woman, determines Orthodox Church policy now. The frail, aging patriarch's assistant and advisor, whom Malkhaz told us is known simply as Shorena, pushes a nationalist and bigoted agenda. She personally organized the attack on the gay community. Bishops and politicians fear her. She is the most powerful person in Georgia.

The two public statements are proof of Bishop Malkhaz's exceptional courage. He regularly risks his life in a country where the most powerful institution threatens violence and death to minorities. He needs all the support he can find, from within

Georgia and internationally. For our visit he organized meetings with Muslims and gays, who under the auspices of his own Church had formed themselves into the May 17 Group, meeting every week to support each other and work on strategies of survival and fighting for their civil rights.

The third main task on this visit was to establish a support group for the bishop so he too can survive. His Church which represents a minority faith within the Christian majority and where a number of people were expressing alarm and fear, also needs to understand and join in his brave stand. Our visit and Donald's sermon at his cathedral would hopefully educate his people and encourage them to back him.

Arriving at Tbilisi airport we looked in vain for the bishop and spent some minutes wondering where to go. The taxi drivers crowded round us, along with gypsy children who grabbed our legs as we held tightly onto passports and money. Eventually the bishop arrived, unhurried and laid back, walking slowly to look at the arrivals board, stroking his long white beard. Surprised at seeing us already there, he greeted us formally and throughout our stay in Georgia behaved as an archbishop, aloof, spiritual and calm. We were more used to his more relaxed and open manner in England, but I understood his need to be 'in role', even though it disconcerted me. Fortunately when he later joined us at the conference in Germany he returned to the Malkhaz I knew and could relate to.

Not wanting to impose on anyone, and disliking being billeted on families because of uncomfortable experiences in the past, trying to find toilets in the middle of the night etc, we had asked to be put up at a reasonable hotel in the city. After several suggestions of decent looking places on the internet, we were taken to a backstreet hotel in the city centre called the Penthouse: the exact opposite of anything that name might imply and the first hotel I ever visited where the guests were expected to make

their own beds. It took time to get linen and duvet covers from a staff of surly young men who lounged about watching Russian programs on TV and resented being disturbed by hotel guests, especially ones who could not speak Georgian or only poor Russian.

We found the reception penthouse part of the hotel up three flights of stairs. The narrow balcony outside the breakfast area offered a pleasant view of the old city with Orthodox churches dotted across a hillside, but the female staff members there cancelled out the charming view by being even more unfriendly than the male ones downstairs. Their sullen attitude said: ‘Don’t even think about asking us for anything.’

A simpering blonde receptionist, the only person to speak English, had been trained in the American manner. ‘I hope you enjoy your stay in our delightful hotel!’ she said with false brightness.

After a lethal supper in a city centre restaurant, where peering through the doors into a filthy chaotic kitchen should have warned me against eating anything, the poison rushed through our systems, laying Donald low first and then me for several days. The Penthouse Hotel staff refused to give us extra toilet paper, as though it were rationed. A grim faced woman, like a hotel guard in Soviet times, grudgingly took a break from perpetually sweeping the floor to give me a small bottle of water, even though I offered to pay for a big one. She pushed it contemptuously into my hands saying gruffly: ‘Malenki!’ ‘A small one!’

Despite feeling queasy, Donald, having prepared a sermon, made an effort to attend morning service at the bishop’s cathedral. First we visited the bishop’s home for a Eucharist in English. His kind, friendly wife Ala and a shy young dentist appeared along with a slim, tall young man called Achiko, who lived in the house and appeared to be the bishop’s chaplain. Staring ahead with a look of sadness, he prefaced each

prayer by singing the Kyrie in a focused tenor voice. Three German evangelical missionaries, a man, and what may have been his wife and son, arrived halfway through the service with Bishop Ilya, one of Malkhaz's assistants.

The small chapel in Malkhaz's home was tidily and cosily furnished, books neatly arranged in large bookcases on one wall, candles on the altar and a soft carpet covering the whole floor, like in a mosque. We sat on a cushioned seat that went round two walls. A fine modern painting of Christ the Saviour, in shades of rust red with delicate but bold white lines outlining his features, body and hands, covered a recess in the fourth wall behind the altar.

Ala looked serious, as if for worship. Achiko smiled seraphically and told us afterwards that he looked forward to the May 17 meeting of gays, hinting at his own orientation. The young dentist looked embarrassed and frightened, but squeezed our hands tightly.

We could not make the German missionaries out, and the bishop later confessed he didn't know what they were doing in Georgia.

A large congregation filled what the Evangelical Baptist Church called its Peace Cathedral, a shed-like building in the suburbs of Tbilisi. This former barracks built by German prisoners of war at the end of the Second World War was later turned into a warehouse before becoming the cathedral. The atmosphere during the service recalled the kind of Sunday worship Donald used to conduct at St Peter's Church in Morden back in the 1970s. A group of slim young women performed liturgical dance, waving coloured scarves, two Israeli girls with sweet voices sang close-harmony songs in Hebrew, and people processed with candles, bread and wine before the Eucharist; the atmosphere both formal and relaxed, with children running up and down the aisles and worshippers arriving late and leaving early, or taking a break

from the liturgy by walking outside, smoking and chatting. A group of elderly women sat together at the back of the church, whispering and stroking arms affectionately. They suddenly noticed that the Peace seemed to have been forgotten and decided to have one regardless, giving each good smackers, a striking contrast to the Anglican Church's polite embarrassed hand-shaking and half-hearted hugs.

Donald provided a dramatic moment. Half way through his sermon he suddenly stopped and sat down. The poison had attacked and was about to cause what could have been an embarrassing moment. He remained seated while some members of the congregation stood up in alarm and in the hiatus the bishop bent over Donald solicitously. Donald controlled himself admirably, something I would be unable to do when the same poison played havoc with my gut the next day. Donald eventually finished his sermon and even managed to give an interview to Georgia's main TV channel. A deaconess doctor, who spoke to me in Russian and looked like everyone's favourite babushka, gave advice. Back at the hotel Donald did the sensible thing, went to bed and stayed there for the rest of the day and night.

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Meanwhile the bishop drove me out into the countryside beyond Tbilisi to a restaurant which served only food that had been grown and produced on its own land. Walnut trees surrounded the place, shedding nuts on the ground. Vines shaded the seating area, grapes hanging in clusters. A table had been laid with home-baked bread, pies filled with cheese and beans, bowls of fresh fruit, salads and cold meats. Our table stood on a platform bridging a river channel where the cook netted and prepared a local fish that looked like a small trout and possessed a unique and delicate fresh water flavour. In Georgia food is rarely eaten hot. Meat and fish are prepared in advance and eaten either tepid or cold. This accounts for the danger of food poisoning; if I had run my Coffeehouse in this way the authorities would have closed

me down. Not thinking about the danger, I tucked into everything with an appetite for which I would be punished: a warning to people visiting Georgia.

The first symptoms began to rumble during a visit to a local historic monument, an ancient semi-ruined but still active church on top of a high hill that looks over the meeting of two rivers, like Belgrade on the Danube and Sava. Apart from the spectacular views, I was fascinated by the arrival of several brides in their wedding gowns, accompanied by grooms in black suits and guests wearing the latest fashions, beautiful young women, slim and long-legged, tottering up the steps to the church in their high heels. It is a tradition for weddings to end up here. The bride and groom light candles for luck. The guests made such a tradition seem even more incongruous: not just the women in sexy revealing clothes, but the men looking thuggish in their sharp suits and cropped haircuts. One would not want to meet any of them in a dark alley.

For the next two days the poison laid me low and I did not leave the hotel room. Outside the window the loud noise of traffic and shouting children playing boisterous football all day against the crumbling walls of a derelict house opposite never let up. The toilet leaked puddles over the bathroom floor, the shower head broke but no one from the hotel staff bothered to repair or help me. Russian TV programs blared in a small reception area outside the room where the young men lounged and stared at the screen. When I begged for more toilet paper their look in my direction said: ‘Aren’t you dead yet?’

Three small paintings, cheap reproductions of Degas, Cezanne and the Georgian naïve 19th century Pirosmeni, decorated the walls in my room and distracted me from the pain and the yells in the street outside. In the Degas two sinister men, a teacher and a patron, watch a girl give an audition during a ballet class, the title of the painting. They are appraising her, the one for her technique and the other for her

beauty. It is not clear who is the teacher and who is the patron, but probably the latter is the seated gentleman. His face is rapt with anticipation of what he will do with the girl afterwards. The other girls either look on with a mixture of admiration, pride, trepidation and envy, or do stretches at the exercise bar, paying no attention to the chosen dancer. They behave like grown up women, mature before their time, but with bodies still being formed. The empty chair in the foreground of the picture seems to invite our attendance at this scene, which is both charming and disturbing, ravishingly painted: the large room's subtle shades of grey lit up by the snowy highlights on the gauzy dresses and light glistening on the flexible limbs of pretty pubescent girls striking a variety of poses.

Ripe apples, pears and peaches in golden glowing autumnal colours tumble over a freshly laundered white cloth in the Cezanne Still Life. The folds of the cloth and positioning of the fruit have been carefully arranged. Why does the picture work? This is an over-familiar set-piece from every art school, to teach light and shade and the relationships of shapes. Cezanne is not interested in eating the fruit but in creating an abstract design. The wine is not to be drunk; the bottle might even be empty. The peasant table provides solid support for the still life against a smudged blue background wall. Cezanne creates intensity in shape, design and saturated colour. Even though the pear demands that our teeth sink into its flesh, we dare not. Look, but don't touch. Academic still lives tend to be drab and dispiriting, everything dead on the canvas, but the Cezanne is about the pleasure of looking.

Another table with a white cloth dominates the famous Pirosmanni painting in primitive folk-style hanging next to the Cezanne. Family and friends sit and stand around the table which celebrates a feast in traditional Georgian style: bread, cold meats and fish, which one of the standing men is holding up triumphantly, maybe having just caught it. A proud matriarch in a formidable hat sits opposite a smaller

submissive woman, who could be her daughter. Two large casks of wine standing in the foreground and two trees bending over on either side of the table frame the scene. Behind, hills undulate into the distance. Birds fly under a title and signature in the blue sky. The Cezanne may be a more sophisticated painting, but both have a sacramental quality. Cezanne blends the objects artfully, whereas the Georgian separates them. The bread and fruit lie in rows on the table. This feast is definitely waiting to be touched and consumed. On the other hand the stiff formality of the figures and each object gives a sinister edge to the picture; the family group does not look happy or at ease.

To care for us and drive us to appointments the bishop had appointed an attractive young business woman called Tamta and her boyfriend Mamuka, a fine artist, though not in the Pirosmeni vein. Tamta made sure I took imodium pills, which every traveller to remote countries outside Europe should pack, called a doctor and forced me to drink at one go an unpleasant salty powder in a litre of tepid water, a local remedy. No longer needing to visit the toilet every few minutes, I could lean out of the window and talk with the football-playing boys who were only too pleased to practise their English. They would soon be grown up and join the groups of handsome young men in tight fitting clothes who paraded the street corner outside a disco club and showed off their manly contours while competing for the attention of passing females as evening fell. The young men cracked jokes and waited for something to happen.

The bishop suggested we stay at the Beteli Centre where his staff could look after us. Taking advantage of my weak state of health, and despite us having to make our own beds, and use a leaking toilet and broken shower, the Penthouse insisted on charging an extra night, stating that we moved out of our rooms at 15.00 rather than 13.00. 'We

have to follow the rules,' simpered the blonde receptionist. This attitude summed up the character of a hotel I can heartily not recommend to anyone.

The Beteli Centre is an old people's home. Frail elderly old ladies and gentlemen shuffle around with the aid of Zimmer frames. In my desperation to get away from the Penthouse Hotel I felt grateful to be anywhere else; then saw the funny side. We might be elderly too, but neither of us had expected to be put up in a care home.

However, the tender ministrations of the deaconess doctor who ran the centre, prescribing large bowls of fatless mashed potato and wet rice, meant I could attend the May 17 Group meeting. Given what the gay community in Georgia had been suffering I was surprised to find that those people we met were not down-hearted or timid but were on fighting form, anger fuelling their resolve not to be persecuted. About two dozen young men and a few women sat at a long horseshoe shaped table, so people could look at each other. A few of them were understandably afraid to be identified as gay but most were belligerent and upbeat. Nothing, and especially not the Orthodox Church, was going to stop their campaign for civil rights.

The severity of the beatings and the extremity of hatred against them cast a pall over the meeting, despite their courageous determination to survive. We spoke about minorities supporting each other, because this is what the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s learnt: blacks, gays, women and minorities struggling together, somehow working through their differences and mutual suspicions. The group showed interest in joining forces with the Muslim minority of Georgia, whose leaders we were to go and meet in Batumi the following day. These leaders had supported the bishop in both of his public statements.

Two women helped set up the May 17 Group as part of a Peace Cathedral initiative: one of Malkhaz's assistants, Bishop Rusudan, educated, strikingly attractive and intelligent, and another woman who spoke little but seemed to be representing the

congregation's humane response to the persecution of gay people. The Church seemed to be divided on the issue, so these women helped educate the congregation. It is generally those who are not gay that turn out to be the ones who persuade and change people's minds. The bishop had warned us before the meeting not to 'out' the people there, because a number of them were closeted, and given the present situation in Georgia had every reason to stay unidentified.

After some suspicions about what Donald and I could do for them, the mostly young men gradually took a shine to us. We promised to keep in contact and put them in touch with gay groups in the UK.

To prevent the meeting ending in despondency, Donald, in his characteristic upbeat manner, insisted on forming a circle, everyone holding hands. Each person had to describe something nice that happened that day, and what they were looking forward to. This took time, because each person spoke at length with surprising optimism, an example of people in the depths more able to express hope. They laughed and encouraged each other. The effect was both exhilarating and moving.

Achi stood next to me and squeezed my hand tightly. Tamta and the bishop told us his story later. He had tried to commit suicide several times. On one occasion he almost succeeded. He walked into the hills, took an overdose and lay down waiting to die. Fortunately some friends realized what had happened, went on a search for him in the middle of the night, and miraculously found him, on the point of expiring. They managed to get him to a hospital in time. Later he told us he had recently been diagnosed with Aids and was under medical supervision. First he had to suffer persecution, then difficult relations with his parents who could not understand him; now he suffered the consequences of having sex with a man infected with HIV. Despite this catastrophe he managed to give us a radiant smile that lit up his handsome face, giving no hint of the turmoil inside, and the squeeze of his hand was

warm, not desperate. Afterwards he expressed delight with the way the meeting had gone.

I am keeping a regular correspondence with Achi, who has just told me in his last letter: *I think our correspondence is the most important thing in my life now, which gives me big strength, comfort, hope and etc. which is important for my emotional and mental skills, also for my health and future. I'm very grateful for all of it. Your letters are the best things that I can take from life now.*

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The following day we travelled to Batumi by train, preferring rail because it is relaxing, the views telling much about the country. I looked forward to talking to the bishop about everything. Unlike the dirty grime-covered third-hand rust buckets donated by the rich part of Europe to developing countries like Bosnia and Kosovo, which trundle at a snail's pace through the countryside, Georgia's Russian-style train to Batumi was clean and relatively quick. However we had to endure a piece of Soviet-style officiousness from the carriage guard, which reminded me of my incident-packed journey to Kiev over twenty years ago, when the guards took our passports and decided where everyone should sit. They had their eye on a young pretty Russian woman who they put alone in a compartment. The feisty woman dealt with them easily, so they didn't molest her. However they took their frustration out on me and others by being rude and unhelpful. The guard on the train to Batumi insisted we all sit in the least interesting seats, our backs to the engine, and refused to let anyone sit anywhere else, saying the rest of the carriage had been reserved for people 'getting on later in the journey'. The nice seats remained empty, including the best ones round a table. We were intimidated by the guard, which also reminded me of Soviet times. So we sat for several stations watching the guard enjoying conversation with friends at the other end of the carriage. Eventually two Iranian passengers next to

us, a couple of elderly businessmen, lost patience and moved to one of the tables. We followed immediately and bagged the other table. Not one person came on board throughout the rest of the nine hour journey, so the guard had been having us on – Soviet style.

The big-boned Georgian countryside rolled past: mountain ranges on either side of wide valleys along which wide rivers flowed in foaming torrents, grey green from melting snows on the high peaks. Ancient churches and castles looked down from the slopes and occasional hill tops. The train stopped at Gori, the birthplace of Stalin, whom the Orthodox Church is now declaring a hero of Georgia. We passed a mountainside covered in caves where people used to live, an ancient cave city.

Meanwhile we discussed issues of support for the Bishop, but he seemed reticent, as though preoccupied, as well he might with the extent of the problems he faced in his work. The Iranian businessmen shared nuts and chocolates with us. They were here on holiday. The fact that we came across many Israeli tourists confirmed my impression of Georgia as a significant central place in the region where people from countries, enemies with each other, came to visit, do business and spend holidays: Turks, Iranians, Arabs, Russians and Israelis. What with civil war in Syria and tense relations between all the countries in the Middle East, Georgia is a perfect place for peace processes to be hosted, and we wanted to propose this to the Bishop's politician friends. However, apart from the mayor of Tbilisi, we met no politicians. Since our return to England the mayor of Tbilisi awarded the Bishop the freedom of the city. This recognized his ability to communicate freely with all sides, including the Orthodox Church which respected him even if it did not like him. All communities and minorities, as well as the authorities, would benefit from the peace process. We are now in touch with the Coventry Centre for Reconciliation, where in 2001 we hosted our first major consultation between the ethnic communities in Bosnia,

bloodied by the recent vicious war. The same kind of consultation could work for Georgia. The bishop would be the ideal man to facilitate it.

The conversation with the holidaying Iranian businessmen turned to Nizami, the 13th century Persian Kurdish poet and author of my desert island book, *The Seven Stories of the Seven Princesses*. They both knew his work as did the Bishop, who said it was in the curriculum, part of every Georgian's education. This amazed and delighted me and I looked forward to discussing the work of a writer few people in the rest of Europe had even heard of. Nizami distils reflections on all the main issues that galvanize the world and human beings, from sex and love, to good and evil, hatred, violence, justice, reason, imagination, forgiveness and ultimately self-knowledge. The gem-like stories are refined and sophisticated versions of the Arabian Nights. I looked forward to talking about Nizami's skill at creating possibilities of harmony and resolution while understanding the self-destructive complexities of the human condition. He veers neither towards sentimental utopia nor nihilistic dystopia, although his stories come close to the latter, especially when he confronts the wickedness and cruelty that men do to each other. From the point of view of the Bishop and the Iranians I wanted to discuss Nizami's inclusivity, especially in matters of faith: the way he deliberately embraces the three main religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam in his writing. His book is not just a plea for tolerance and a world living in harmony with itself, but an affirmation of a cosmic order where such tolerance and harmony are an organic part of life, as much as to say: there is no other way. For this reason Nizami has always been my lode-star, an inspiration in my writing, art and also my work as a peace mediator. No other writer achieves such wisdom, beauty and balance in Nizami's all-embracing way.

I longed to talk about this, but the Iranians and the Bishop, once they had acknowledged their knowledge of Nizami, talked about something else and then fell silent.

Half way to Batumi on the Black Sea we passed through a mountain range, the views as dramatic as any journey through the Alps, and suddenly the landscape became lushly green. The climate in Georgia is as extreme as its social attitudes, either desert dry or luxuriantly wet. Cows grazed by the roadside, roaming freely. This is tradition in Georgia. They looked content and healthy, prompting me to comment that when I die and am transubstantiated I would like to be a cow in Georgia. The Bishop laughed, then told us that cows tend to get run over because they are forever walking into traffic. In that case I would probably be one of the unlucky cows.

The Black Sea came into view and the journey reminded me of the glamorously spectacular train ride from Nice through Cannes and Monte Carlo to the Italian border along the Mediterranean Cote d'Azur in Southern France. In this predominantly rain-soaked region of Georgia we were lucky to arrive on a bright sunny day, the sky and the Black Sea bright blue.

Tariel Nakaidze, Chairman of the Muslim Union in Georgia, waited for us outside the station and wasted no time in giving us a welcoming bear-hug, putting our bags in the boot of his car and whisking us off to a pleasant hotel owned and run by Muslims in Batumi. All the while he talked about the situation for Muslims in Georgia. Big and warm-hearted, Tariel would eventually open up with a smile as wide as his girth, but for now he expressed the stress and sadness of a community under threat, persecuted and vilified by the Orthodox Church. He spoke in a non-stop monotone flow, the Bishop skilfully translating everything.

Tariel ran three businesses and still found time to be a super-active chairman of the Muslim Council. Traditionally it is women who are expert at multi-tasking: running a home, cooking, raising children, counselling and pleasuring husbands, let alone holding down paid jobs etc. I never met anyone, man or woman, who could multi-task like Tariel. He drove us along the difficult roads, ran the three businesses from his mobile, kept in regular touch with his family, was a tour guide and explained the situation for Muslims in Georgia to us in detail all at the same time.

Out of the one hundred and sixty-nine thousand inhabitants of Batumi, fifty thousand are Muslim. There are nineteen Orthodox churches in the city, and just one mosque. Every attempt by the Muslim community to build another mosque in the city has been blocked by the Orthodox Church.

We met other members of the Muslim Union over lunch, where I enviously watched them tuck into a Georgian speciality which will be on my menu as soon as possible: a kind of bread baked in a hot oven, removed before fully done, an indentation made which is then filled with grated cheese, an egg broken over it and a generous knob of butter, then put back in the oven until the egg is set and the bread ready. Georgian bread on its own sustained me throughout our visit when I couldn't eat anything else.

Then we visited the mufti of Batumi's office and later the mosque. Depressing and grim talk about persecution galvanized Donald into impatience. The situation reminded us of Bosnia and the only way to make progress meant involving the Orthodox bishop, Metropolitan Dimitry. Malkhaz assured us he had made many calls to attempt to fix such a meeting, all in vain.

(We were used to this behaviour in Banja Luka, and also in Kosovo where one would have thought the weak Church would welcome support. A mixture of pride and politics meant that even these harassed bishops remained aloof and inaccessible. Pride and politics were responsible, because the Church in Kosovo still considered itself

part of Serbia, and therefore the majority religion. The monks, bishops and priests bided their time, fully expecting Kosovo to return to Serbian rule. They could not face reality. Meanwhile Russia and the Serbian Orthodox Church poured money into the churches and monasteries, turning them into fortresses, protected by European Union troops, KFOR. If we had waited for a response, let alone an unlikely invitation, we would have got nowhere in Bosnia and Kosovo.)

Donald insisted on being taken to the Metropolitan's residence.

One of Metropolitan Dimitry's priests sat guard in an office above what seemed to be a garage for the Metropolitan's car. Of course the Metropolitan was not free to meet us, and a young muscular man appeared whose physical presence prevented us from entering. Not intimidated, Donald engaged them both in conversation. The young man had two ambitions: helping the Metropolitan and training to be a boxer. He fixed us with a steady stare and remained adamant that we should not pass, relaxing only for a moment to let us enter the Metropolitan's chapel, next to the garage, where we watched a nun completing an exquisite mural that covered the whole interior. Then the Metropolitan's secretary emerged from the residence to say Metropolitan Dimitri could not meet us today. If free, he would ring us tomorrow.

Tariel observed Donald's persistence with admiration, but none of us believed the meeting would happen. Tariel then continued to be a generous host and guide, taking us to a smart coffee house in the city centre. The scrumptious cakes on display, the layout of tables, separated by shelves covered in books, made this place impossible to resist and difficult to leave. All the books were in Russian, published in Soviet times, and appeared to have come from a bookshop from over twenty years ago, so they had curiosity value. Even the toilets were crammed with these books, mostly fiction. Browsing, I came across volumes of jokes, which may have had satirical or subversive intent. However my Russian not being so good I could not tell. Despite

Stalin, Georgia always represented a rebellious region of the Soviet Union, as it had been for centuries in the days of the Tsars for centuries.

Later that evening, Tariel drove us up a mountain to meet colleagues and, most importantly, Zurab Tsetkhladze, another leader of the Georgian Muslim Union, who had invited us for supper at a restaurant overlooking the city. The weather broke. The clouds that had gathered over the high mountains beyond Batumi now covered the sky and released a deluge which gushed in torrents down the steep curving road. Zurab, a tall, friendly, striking-looking man in his 40s, embraced us, but we could not hear a word he spoke because loud pop music suddenly deafened us. Drums shattered our eardrums, electric guitars squealed and singers bellowed with the volume turned to maximum. So we quickly left and drove back through the storm to a restaurant reserved for Muslims in the city centre. A man at the door wanted to refuse entry to Donald and Malkhaz because they were dressed in cassocks. 'Only Muslims are allowed here,' he said. Zurab and Tariel dealt with him summarily.

The next morning Tariel took us on a tour of the city and beyond. We drove towards the border with Turkey where the beach gave way to rocks and cliffs. The seascape reminded me of Pushkin and I began to recite the prologue to *Ruslan and Ludmilla*:
Tam o zarye priklenut volni na bereg peschani I pustoy, I tridzat vityazye prekrasnixh cheredoy iz vod proxhodiya yasnixh: There at dawn the waves break onto the rocky deserted shore and thirty handsome bright warriors emerge one by one from the sea.... Tariel and the Bishop cheered. So they could speak and understand Russian! The Bishop had told me hardly anyone speaks Russian in Georgia, but I discovered that the nurses and carers at the Beteli Centre spoke it fluently, as well as the elderly patients. Only the young people of Achi's age were not taught the language of their powerful neighbour, for political reasons. This struck me as perverse, particularly as

Russians flocked to the Black Sea and Batumi for their vacations at all times of the year, and there were many of them in Tbilisi, including the Hotel Penthouse, where the only programs worth watching on TV were Russian ones. At least a splendid Batumi coffeehouse welcomed its visitors from the North with a library to keep them occupied for hours and days on end.

The rain had not stopped. It continued to pour as though it wished to empty an ocean on the streets. Used to these regular deluges, Tariel plunged in and drove through as though the water, several feet deep in places, was an everyday hazard. This would stop traffic in England, and I laughed hysterically as approaching lorries and other cars swerved, plunged and tried hard to avoid banging into each other. Meanwhile Tariel continued to answer his mobile and talk to us. We learned about the border town which consisted mainly of brothels, employing apparently not just dozens or hundreds, but thousands of prostitutes, women trafficked from all over Eastern Europe and Asia. They supplied the market of Turkish men who came regularly over the border for that purpose.

The public event of our visit to Batumi took place in a hall: a lecture to the Muslim Union in Batumi. The hall filled rapidly with men of all ages and a few women. Everyone looked at us with alarming intensity. They needed to hear us speak encouragingly about Islam, and the necessity for them to have at least one more mosque. Donald described the process of mediation that we practised in Bosnia, specifically around the controversial building of a memorial for murdered Muslims in the former killing camp of Omarska, a project I describe in more detail in our book: *the white house: From Fear to a Handshake*.

Zurab and Tariel seemed pleased with the lecture and its reception. The main TV channel also recorded it and interviews with Donald and Malkhaz were shown nationwide.

We were about to leave Batumi when, to our surprise, Metropolitan Dimitri phoned to say that he could meet with us.

Zurab and Tariel were not going to miss this opportunity of meeting their arch-enemy on his ground, so we entered together. Metropolitan Dimitri evidently expected only to see Donald and Malkhaz, so the presence of two powerful Muslim leaders, and another Muslim colleague, threw him off balance. The atmosphere remained cordial, however, and the Metropolitan looked constantly to Donald for reassurance. He spoke about the good works he did for Muslims, helping Muslim orphans and cracked a joke about one man he helped who was then scared 'of being forced to convert'. This amusing anecdote would take on a bitter note when photographs were later published of the Metropolitan baptising Muslim babies en masse. Tariel smiled with delight at the meeting taking place at all, which warmed the chilly atmosphere; but Zurab sat expressionless, watching the Metropolitan when he spoke, but then replying to Malkhaz, avoiding eye contact with the Metropolitan. Donald quickly realized the meeting should not develop into a discussion about the crucial issues about Christian Muslim relations in Batumi and the need to build at least one more mosque. In Bosnia such meetings needed to be carefully prepared, the agendas set in advance and decisions made about aims and what can be agreed, however few. Donald tried to end the meeting on a conciliatory note to keep the door open for future discussions and the possibility of regular meetings.

'One homeland, one people,' declared the Metropolitan, 'And all will be well'

He expressed shock at 'the minaret issue'. But he worded this carefully. In which way was he shocked? That the Orthodox Church had done wrong, or that the Muslims might be upset by having their minaret removed and were over-reacting?

The Metropolitan then told us he looked after a diocese in the States, and that he enjoyed travelling. He had been in Batumi since 1986, before the collapse of the Soviet Union, an appointment which disappointed him because he considered the diocese to be a backwater.

He then informed us of a new piece of history: Hitler had employed Georgian soldiers. 'They were not Nazis, but fighting communism.' At the end of the war Stalin decreed they should all be killed without trial, so they fled to the United States. The Metropolitan proudly told us he had established a Fatherland Summer Camp there to encourage the offspring of these soldiers to return home. Back in Tbilisi I discovered that Georgia as a whole did not have any qualms about its Nazi past. The main marketplace sold quantities of Nazi memorabilia, iron crosses with swastikas, weapons and uniforms, caps and flags all of which were banned in the rest of Europe, and if seen, let alone sold, would lead to prosecution.

The Metropolitan then described again all the good work the Orthodox Church did for children both Muslim and Christian, not just in Georgia but everywhere.

Donald had intuited correctly that this meeting might be counter-productive and tried hard to end it, but could not stop Zurab speaking at length and it became clear that the Metropolitan would not agree to any further contact.

I tried to lighten the mood by commenting on the large Pirosmanni tapestries decorating and covering most of the walls. Relieved at the change of topic the Metropolitan explained at length how the tapestries were painstakingly copied from original paintings. By now Pirosmanni's childish faces, all as similar and uncharacterized as Lowry's stick people, were beginning to pall. They emphasised the atavistic primitive spirit of a country at the expense of Georgia's sophisticated artistic, literary and political culture. For all Pirosmanni's idiosyncratic charm, it was as though England liked to represent itself through the works of Beryl Cooke and Lowry, rather

than the powerful, penetrating portraits by Francis Bacon, Lucien Freud and others who delved deeper into the national psyche.

The Metropolitan ordered wine, and several large glasses were brought, which of course the Muslim guests could not drink. The Metropolitan might have not been thinking, or it could have been a deliberate gesture.

We were ready to leave and realizing that this might be a unique opportunity, unlikely to be repeated, I proposed a group photo with the Metropolitan, Donald and the three Muslim leaders, standing in front of one of the Pirosmani tapestries. The Metropolitan, without thinking, agreed out of politeness, and fortunately I managed to snap one picture before he became aware of the consequences of such a photo. In the second picture he was already walking quickly away from the group. As we left he looked at me with consternation, barely able to say goodbye.

Outside, just as we were climbing into the car, the Metropolitan's secretary rushed out of the residence to convey a strict order from the Metropolitan that under no circumstances whatsoever must the pictures be published.

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We were running late and we quickly set off on a long journey into the Caucasus to visit an imam in Khulo, a town on the way to the mosque where the minaret had been removed. Along the drive into the Caucasus Mountains the Metropolitan's behaviour bothered me. Why did he not give us the order about the photographs face to face? Did he want to avoid our questions, particularly the one: what are you afraid of? The Orthodox Church held the reins in Georgia and therefore should have nothing to fear, but those who abuse their power have always to watch their backs.

However Taniel, upbeat and generous in spirit as ever, felt that the meeting went well, unlike Zurab who did not trust or believe the Metropolitan. 'He wanted to make out there is no problem,' Zurab commented later. 'He insists on saying that he met

muftis in his diocese but he never met me or knew me when I was a mufti. He says that he invites muftis to events, but I have to say politely that he is lying. He says that Georgia was originally a Christian county and they tolerate Muslims. The fact is there are no friendly relations between us. He even called people to demonstrate against plans to build a second mosque in Batumi and conducted prayers and a protest liturgy on the site planned for it.'

Tariel spoke in a different tone, describing the encounter as positive: 'Our first one. I hope there will be a follow up, even if he doesn't agree on anything it is good to talk, have regular meetings. We won't be able to achieve anything substantial, but it is profitable to meet even if relations are difficult.'

'He failed to talk about tensions between Muslims and the Orthodox Church,' said Zurab. 'In fact the tensions are between the Orthodox and all other religious groups. It will be helpful if these minority groups meet together to discuss the question of peace building.'

'Don't be too optimistic,' said Malkhaz. 'The Metropolitan represents an institution that looks down on everyone else. He met us out of politeness. The Church of England is the only other Christian institution the Orthodox Church respects.'

Had Metropolitan Dimitry known we were bringing Muslim leaders to the meeting he would certainly have cancelled it.

Then Tariel burst out laughing. He remembered something Donald had said as we entered the residence: 'If you notice the Metropolitan fiddling with his pectoral cross, you will know he is nervous.' The Metropolitan had been doing just that throughout the meeting.

Tariel pushed the accelerator and we sped into the Caucasus Mountains, the roads narrowing to ledges carved into precipices. I am a sucker for maps and atlases,

imagining driving or taking trains through distant landscapes, and the road along the southern border with Turkey is less well-known than the similarly dangerous ones on the northern border with Russia. Tariel and Malkhaz assured us that the road we now travelled was far more perilous. I looked to my right and noted the sheer drop into a gorge several hundred feet below. Occasional traffic met us on sharp curves, yet somehow neither vehicle left the road, crashing into oblivion. Mountains reared up on all sides, covered in forests and craggy rocks. Clouds tumbled down the slopes and lay in swathes over the gorges, turning the landscape into a romantic backdrop for an epic film or opera. Tariel kept the speed up and not even Lewis Hamilton could have driven with more precision, let alone simultaneously carry on conversations with his businesses by phone, using one free hand, and giving a running commentary about the political and social situation in this part of Georgia. Tariel's arms steered with powerful swings, and trusting him I delivered myself up to whatever happened.

As the light faded we stopped at a historic landmark, the Dandalo Bridge, which leaps over the gorge in a curve and reminded me of the famous Mostar Bridge in Bosnia, with its equally soaring trajectory. However the Dandalo Bridge had no parapet on either side. People with vertigo should tread carefully; there is nothing to prevent a fall into the cascade foaming over sharp rocks deep below. Legend has it that in ancient days Queen Tamara lived in a castle here. Every night she entertained a male visitor and seduced him. The next morning she would have her latest lover taken to the bridge and thrown to his death. This female precursor of James Bond, whose casual women lovers regularly come to sticky or guilt-covered ends, inspired artists. Balakirev composed a tone poem which captures the rugged Caucasus landscape exactly as I experienced it while standing precariously on Tamara's lethal bridge.

Night fell and the road became even curvier, narrower and bumpier, the precipices more sheer, the mountains closing in on all sides. Eventually we arrived at Khulo late in the evening, the town clinging to the mountainside.

Imam Aslan, a slightly built modest, kindly middle-aged man with large sad eyes in a lean, white-bearded face, greeted us at the entrance of a school next to a small mosque. Before we could catch breath or even receive refreshment after the hair-raising journey, he led us straight to his office where, crouching on a low stool, he proceeded to deliver a long lecture he had been carefully preparing about the history of the Muslims in the region.

Before the foundation of Islam, Christianity covered the region spreading from Byzantium. However Khulo became and remained a stronghold of Muslim tradition after the Ottomans conquered the Caucasus. Under communism the government pulled down all the minarets but kept the mosque buildings, converting them into warehouses or cinemas. However, Muslims were allowed to celebrate Bajram and Mohammed's birthday, and the mosque in Batumi was kept open. Imam Aslan's father and grandfather were also imams. Under the Ottomans literature had to be read in Turkish, so his grandfather translated it into Georgian. The government moved Aslan's father from one office to another trying to secularize him. The communists in Georgia forbade religious practice, a policy that had the effect of reducing antagonism between Christians and Muslims. Under Gorbachev's Freedom of Religion, other mosques opened up. After the collapse of communism Muslims began to practice their faith. However children continued to be warned of the danger from the North: 'The Tartars are coming!' Mosques that had been used as warehouses were brought back into religious use, minarets restored in iron or concrete, schools opened as well as several Orthodox churches, seminaries and kindergartens.

Khulo had been totally Muslim until 1989. Through inter-marriage, a few Christians lived there. For twenty years the town experienced no problems or confrontations. Then the Georgian government gave the Orthodox Church ownership of a large military base outside the town. The Muslims made no protest. The Orthodox Church's strategy was to resettle Orthodox people from elsewhere, the ultimate aim to remove the Muslim population and replace it with Orthodox families. Meanwhile Muslims spread across Georgia, working in agriculture and livestock. They turned domestic buildings into prayer houses and eventually mosques.

Five million Georgian Muslims live across the border in Turkey where they feel more welcome. Imam Aslen talked about their duty now to support the Muslims in Georgia. Like Taniel and Zurab, Muslims in Georgia went to Turkey for religious and secular education.

Meanwhile they try in vain to build new mosques, including a second one in Batumi. Because of the poor economic situation in the region, Muslims move to the city for work and have to celebrate Bajram in the streets. Places like Khulo are supported by Georgian Muslims living in Turkey, providing books and materials for education, so there is now a generation of scholars able to translate from Arabic to Georgian. There are also two newspapers for the Muslim population, but the government is suspicious of its relations with Turkey.

Imam Aslen told us about the boarding school in which we were sitting, teaching Georgian literature, languages and other skills to children from disadvantaged families, providing three meals a day and surviving on monthly contributions from local charities based in the town. He was keen to tell us that the schools had no ideological agenda, that the children were being raised to be good Georgians.

An important theme emerged from our meetings in Batumi and Khulo: the fear among indigenous Muslims in Georgia of persistent Orthodox persecution leading to

an unwelcome influx of extremist ideologues from other countries, particularly Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Bosnia provided a warning. During the war the only help Muslims received came from Mujaheddin, who came to fight the Serbs and Croats, claiming to protect Muslim women, the elderly and children, but were importing strict wahabi traditions and rules, alien to a predominantly secularized European society. The Orthodox Church in Georgia, as well as the government, need to be aware of this danger, felt most keenly at present by Muslims like Tariel, Zurab and Imam Aslen.

For the now, relations between priests and imams, though cool, are not antagonistic. But the conversion of the Khulo barracks into an Orthodox college threatened this uneasy peaceful coexistence, based on mutual awareness of the need among minorities to support and look out for each other. We had arrived at a turning point in Georgian history, when the tipping of such a balance could lead to civil war and the subsequent influx of all the extremist elements most feared by the Muslim community itself, let alone the Christian population of Georgia, which carried on persecuting Muslims unaware of this danger.

Zurab entered the room and raised another matter complicating these delicate social relationships: the tradition of mixed marriages which happened frequently under secular communism when people did not hold so tightly to their faiths, particularly between Georgians of all faiths and Russians when young men served in the army and were sent all over the Soviet Union. This now meant pressure on the Muslim community to convert to Orthodox Christianity. Zurab explained further that circumcision did not mean conversion. It is not a sign of being Muslim. Baptism as a form of initiation is the Orthodox Christian tradition. Zurab questioned the bishop of Batumi's stories about children being baptized. 'The stories did not sound right,' he said. 'Being baptised does not mean you are a Christian when you grow up. There are

cases when baptised Christians become Muslim. Circumcision is not a Muslim baptism.’ He then told us about his time as a mufti, studying with other muftis in Turkey who were surprised to hear that there were any muftis at all in Georgia.

By this time of the evening we were collapsing with exhaustion and wondering where we would sleep. First they had prepared a meal, which fortunately consisted chiefly of bread and rice, so I had some sustenance. Donald then slept on a sofa in the school headmaster’s study. Malkhaz and I shared the staff room, where two other sofas were made up for us. Downstairs the toilet was a hole in the floor and the taps provided only intermittent running water. Despite my exhaustion, the loud ticking of a digital clock on the wall and the howling of jackals in the forests around the town kept me awake for most of the night, as well as the regular need to vacate bladder and bowels. Malkhaz, who kept quiet and seemed embarrassed to be sharing a room, alternated with me in these journeys downstairs, but at one point we collided in the doorway, laughed and felt less awkward.

‘I would like to show you my home,’ Zurab said before breakfast the next morning. Bundling us into his jeep before we had time to answer, he drove towards a nearby mountainside where villages perched above the gorge. There were no roads, just muddy tracks where cows or goats might wander in single file, but Zurab ploughed on regardless of the jeep being twice as wide as the paths. The hillside dropped sheer on the right and rose vertically on the left.

Zurab had organized the building of a mosque in his home village and wanted to show us. He had not asked for permission, knowing it would be refused, but managed to persuade the president of Abkazia to attend the opening. The mosque occupied the only horizontal space in the village. We sat inside on the clean carpet under a decorated dome and looked out on to the mountains, houses scattered over the slopes.

Still unfinished, it had taken eight years to build. The collection every Bajram helped with adding a few more bricks and tiles. Zurab's father donated money for the land and started to build the mosque while making out to the authorities, in case they complained, that it was a house. We sat in the silence surrounded by the spectacular Caucasus and wondered how the president managed to attend the opening. Zurab said he came with a large retinue, but added, laughing, that the cars had difficulty getting there. I admired the president's courage and Zurab'schutzpah.

After this Zurab drove us to his home outside the village and suddenly the path disappeared completely. He swung the car to the left and appeared to drive vertically up a precipice. Somehow the speed kept us from tipping over and eventually we came to a halt by a house built into the hillside, a garden and orchard sloping steeply into the gorge below.

We sat in an upstairs room where guests could be entertained. We expected Zurab's mother to appear, but according to Muslim custom she remained invisible. He brought us a drink made from quinces, with a piece of cold cooked fruit in each glass, then homemade walnut cake served with milk fresh from the cow. Remembering warnings in the Bradt guide about non-pasteurized dairy products we politely excused ourselves, blaming our recent tummy upset, and Zurab drank our glasses, the filmy skin of the creamy surface clinging to his upper lip.

Before leaving, we stood on the rickety balcony of his house and looked down at the garden where pumpkins, maize and other vegetables grew between quince, apple, peach and pear trees. The family cow stayed indoors, in a shed below the living quarters. The village people could not keep poultry because of the jackals. In the winter heavy snow meant that people were trapped for up to five months a year, so everyone had to be self-sufficient. Zurab grew up here, like Taniel in a neighbouring village. It amazed me how these men managed to educate themselves, leave the

village and end up running several businesses, being muftis and leading the Muslim Union of Georgia.

As we stood outside his home while Zurab said goodbye to his mother, the smell of the wet undergrowth, the wild hillside and the earth beneath my feet, together, like Marcel Proust's famous madeleine biscuit dunked in lime blossom tea, revived a memory from the distant past, almost fifty years ago. After the student revolutions of 1968, young and even older people explored new ways of living together, either experimenting in city communes or moving to the country. Instead of taking advantage of a Cambridge degree to build a career either in academia, the media or the arts, I lived for a couple of years in a hut on a hillside in Snowdonia. The dank smell of vegetation both growing and rotting reminded me of my naïve and therefore futile attempts at self-sufficiency, scrabbling along the woodland floor collecting wild herbs, sorrel and foraging for mushrooms. My paltry skills meant there would never be enough to live on. Drop-outs and hippies also moved into the area erecting tepees in nearby fields, raising their children in the bracken infested wild among the large flocks of sheep, and reading the I Ching and tarot cards. Farmers looked on in amused wonder. Only a rare few of these communities became established along the lines described in Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau's film *Born in 68*, which tells the story of a group of Parisian idealistic revolutionaries who manage to survive political battles, local suspicion and bigotry to create a successful alternative way of working and living in the countryside.

It rained as much in North Wales as in Adjara, nothing ever seemed to dry out: a constant scent of lush fertility and sodden decay. In those sensitive late adolescent years I still had a sixth sense, what Hamlet tells Horatio about there being more things in heaven and earth than can be rationally explained. He was referring to his father's

ghost, and in those years I also felt haunted. My parents lived in a house called Bryn Coch which stood a couple of miles outside the nearest village, hidden in the fold of a hill with the name Moel Offrym, Hill of Sacrifice, where in Druidic times people were taken up to be sacrificed. Two spots depressed me in particular. The hill is not a big climb and my mother did it twice a day, once in the morning, then late in the afternoon. However one particular stretch of the way I could only walk with utmost difficulty, forcing myself to put one foot in front of the other. The spot lay just below the summit, and eventually I understood why. This was where the victims would have experienced the greatest panic and fear, knowing their lives were about to end violently. The heaviness of that sensation still hung over these few yards, and made it difficult for me to summon the energy to cross. The other place of terror I felt inside Bryn Coch itself. One night when my parents were away I could not sleep because a sudden sensation of choking overwhelmed me to the degree that I could not breathe and had to rush out of the house. For a long time I found no explanation for this particular haunting, but refused ever to sleep there again. That is when I built a hut outside, where I could sleep more easefully, and woke to the rushing waters of a stream along the garden wall, the bleating of sheep and the powerful smell of bracken and wet earth. Eventually the villagers told me that a family who lived in Bryn Coch in the previous century had died of starvation. I had picked up the symptoms of their agonising death, the sense of choking.

Then fortunately my life changed. I fell in love. My solitary life of failed self-sufficiency ended and I moved to London to other work, teaching and painting. The sixth sense is no longer as strong as it used to be and although I am sceptical about this kind of phenomena, I remain convinced of the power of past experience to haunt a place, not necessarily in spirit form, but as a sensation.

Outside Zurab's family house all these memories rushed into my mind. Here people are compelled to survive in self-sufficiency. The fossilized remains of an early human skull, a recent archaeological discovery in the village of Dmanisi in the South Caucasus not far from Zurab's home, proves that people have been living here for two million years. Zurab's land has been used and cultivated since the beginning of our existence. In those days the resources, watering holes and food, had to be shared with wild animals, 'giant cheetahs and sabre-toothed cats and other beasts' according to a Guardian report, so human beings needed to develop their brains fast to outwit such unbeatable and terrifying predators.

The writer, polemicist and art critic John Berger wrote a book called *Pig Earth* which describes this kind of subsistence, the close relationship of people to the land that can best be experienced and understood in farming communities like the ones I saw and smelt in the Caucasus. He shared this life and understood it from the mud upwards. I only dabbled in it as a callow teenager. Now I just observed.

The landscape before my eyes and which I could smell and touch held the memory and the mark of two million years of human existence. The fluctuations of ethnic groups, moving from one part of the world to the other, nomadic and then settling, had been going on longer by thousands of centuries than the changes of faiths and the claims of nationalisms. Whatever their religions and traditions, people remained part of the land and would be here until the sun's death burns up the planet and makes it uninhabitable.

Zurab assured us no one else from England had set foot in his village. But when we arrived back in Khulo the first person we met happened to be another Englishman, an adventurous hill-walker with a guide taking him across the Caucasus. We both looked at each other in horror, because there is nothing more dispiriting than embarking on

this kind of adventure in a distant foreign land than to meet a fellow countryman.

‘What on earth are you doing here?’ exclaimed the hill-walker, observing Donald in his cassock talking to Imam Aslen. ‘Not some bloody inter-religious nonsense!’ He could not disguise his disgust. The swarthy guide grinned with delight and then the two continued their trek over the mountains.

Over breakfast, Zurab and Tariel prepared us for the next destination, the main purpose of our journey: Chela, the village and the mosque without a minaret, a visit described earlier.

The local bishop had declared: ‘The minaret does not belong in Georgian culture and should not be here. Nor will it be returned.’

‘Why are you so patient?’ we asked Tariel and Zurab.

‘We don’t want war,’ they answered. ‘We are afraid that we will not be able to control the population. This could be another Bosnia scenario. There are socio-economic tensions between (the predominantly Muslim) Adjara and the rest of Georgia around property, land, movement of people including Orthodox into Muslim areas. But we cannot compromise.’

The Muslim call to prayer had become an issue and Tariel explained that the muezzin’s call pre-dated clocks. ‘The call itself is prayer.’

We set off for Chela.

‘For the next five hours the roads are going to be very bad,’ Tariel warned us, adding: ‘The countryside is very beautiful though.’

I am old enough to remember mountain trekking with my parents in relatively unknown parts of the Austrian Alps, before modernization and motorways brought chair-lifts, ski resorts and tourism. In those days farmers laboured in primitive conditions, driving cattle daily up and down mountains. The way of life in these remote valleys had changed little in centuries. We used to stay with a farming family,

and after scaling peaks in the day would gather round the kitchen table in the evening listening to how boring the long snowed-in winters used to be before radio and television. Life was work. Constant labour kept the family permanently busy, every child having allotted tasks. The house had three storeys. Guests were accommodated in the top storey, the family in the middle one, above the stable where piles of logs provided support and shelter. Each storey had its own toilet, a hole in the floor where crap and piss went in a cess pit below, just as shown in the opening scenes of *Slumdog Millionaire*. Country smells of manure and sweat were however pleasantly sweetened by the fragrance of pine wood, not only the mature seasoned house timbers but also from the surrounding forests.

Once again in Georgia I witnessed the same way of life as Tariel negotiated the heaving rough roads; basically rocky tracks. Farmers with heavily lined, sun-burnt faces drove cattle and looked at us with gleaming black eyes, grinned and displayed mouths of shattered teeth.

We climbed higher into the mountains, passing Tariel's home village and several spectacular waterfalls, a feature of the Caucasus. Looking back, we saw miles of mountain ranges and villages beneath us scattered across the slopes, each house with its own patch, minarets peeking above orchards, lush vegetation and woods.

After several hours we arrived at the high pass, the air thinner and alpine meadows above the tree line. Leaving the lush pastures and forests of Adjara we descended into the drier poorer regions, where villages were further apart and the landscape became ever wilder and more desolate, the gorges deeper and stonier. The car shook and rattled so violently that I expected it to break up around us.

Eventually we arrived at Chela, saw the minaret in the field, met the imam and congregation at the mosque, and from there to the police guarding the minaret and to the depressing encounter in Platte.

We met the mayor of Tbilisi on the day before our return home, the only politician free or happy to see us. In Bosnia we insisted on having discussions with the most influential political leaders, so were disappointed we could not manage the same in Georgia. The mayor belonged to Saakashvili's party, the present opposition, which used to be in power, more liberal and less nationalistic than the government. The mayor reminded me in appearance of Vladimir Bosovic, the Serb lawyer and politician who supported our project in Kosovo. Tall, charismatic and energetic he dominated the discussion and clearly admired Malkhaz. Shortly after our visit he presented the bishop with the keys of the city of Tbilisi, a deserved honour that probably stuck in the craw of the Orthodox Church. This gesture would give the bishop more freedom to speak out, and protect him from attack.

The mayor openly attacked the Orthodox Church. Its support for Stalin and Russia, Georgia's number one enemy, made this institution a fifth column. 'No exaggeration,' he said. 'The Church monopolizes all governmental issues. The bishops are aggressive, organizing mobs against the gay community and claiming that Muslims have no right to build mosques in Batumi.' He acknowledged the threat of renewed conflict on the issue about building a new mosque on a particular plot in that city. 'The Orthodox Church will always cause problems,' he said.

Donald tried to move the discussion on to the issue of islamophobia and our planned conference in Germany the following week, to which Malkhaz had been invited. Donald began to talk about the lack of any mechanism in Georgia for assisting inter-religious dialogue. The mayor constantly interrupted, on a roll attacking the Orthodox Church for blackmailing people under the previous Saakashvili government to vote for the opposition, and so bring down the president.

However the mayor admitted his helplessness. 'I can't change the situation of May 17. The government gave the correct response, but there was no action to follow it up. The situation remained unpunished, and could be repeated, also against the Muslim minority. At least we don't have mass killings,' he conceded and expressed sorrow for the passing of a once multi-cultural, multi-faith country. The Orthodox Church had taken over from the communists with a medieval structure and mindset, blended with a dangerous element of communist ideology, hence the idolization of Stalin.

Donald then talked about one of the most important issues to emerge from our meetings in Georgia, especially in Batumi and the region of Abkazia: the Muslim fear of the influx of jihadists. Malkhaz emphasised the point by asking the mayor directly: 'Are the authorities deliberately encouraging this situation?'

'They are flexing muscles,' the mayor responded. 'Muslims are essential to Georgian history and culture. This conflict is shaking the foundations of our society.' He then made the point I had been eager to raise ever since arriving in Georgia: 'They should look at the map of Georgia and see where the country is situated.' He was referring to Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan along its borders, and not far beyond: Iran, Syria and Iraq. Georgia could in fact be a crucial power-broker and peace mediator in the region. However the theocracy of the Orthodox Church was pushing Georgia into Russian dominion and away from any such useful role.

Donald proposed a process of reconciliation to be held at Coventry, along the lines of the consultation we organized in 2001 for the political, religious and community leaders of Bosnia.

'A good idea,' said the mayor and saw this as a way of countering the 'Arafatism' of the Orthodox Church, referring to the Palestinian leader's habit of speaking one thing to one side, his own political constituency, and something else to the other, the international community, on which he depended for financial support. 'But the present

Prime Minister doesn't understand transparency internationally. There must be Orthodox representatives at the consultation.'

'We need to be persistent and fearless,' Donald said.

'We are going in the wrong direction in Georgia,' said the mayor.

Malkaz reminded Donald to talk about the 12 Cities Network and to encourage a conference to be held in Tbilisi. The mayor was happy to host this, if he would still be in power.

The meeting ended with discussion about the influx of Syrian Coptic Christians into Georgia, fleeing persecution and civil war. 'The present government does not want investment by Copts, because the Orthodox Church is so xenophobic it doesn't even like other Christians. However we offer low taxes and a good business environment in Georgia.' He then spoke about President Putin continuing to threaten Georgia with cutting gas supplies and other crippling sanctions.

A long time ago a prince went hunting in the Caucasus. He shot a bird and sent his servant to fetch it. The servant found the bird in a pool of fresh water that gushed from a rock. The water was boiling so the bird came to the prince fully cooked. The prince named the spot Tbilisi in honour of its hot springs. We spent the last day in the city visiting them and other tourist sites which included the main mosque. The mufti, a Shia sheikh, whose feet Malkaz had washed in protest at recent Islamophobic attacks in Georgia, wanted to meet us. The sheikh gave us a warm welcome with plates of cream cakes, bowls of fruit, bread pies and juices. He only spoke Russian, and I noted that everyone could understand him and talked freely in a language they all insisted on telling me they did not know. He explained that in Syria the wahabees consider Shiite blood to be halal, so it is OK to kill anyone. He dreaded wahabee influence, because they insisted on beards but no moustaches or short trousers. Maybe

they did allow short trousers, but by that stage of the conversation my mind went numb. Bishop Malkhaz and the cheerful Sheikh sat close together in the mosque, laughing, gossiping and enjoying each other's company.

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We left Georgia with the possibility of two courses of action there: a consultation to bring the political and religious leaders together, preferably in Coventry, and so avert the possibility of a war. We would also create links between gay groups in the UK and Georgia.

Much depended on the bishop who introduced us to a possible assistant, Lela Jejeleava, a bubbly blonde lady with experience of administration who expressed fears about a clash of civilizations between Turks and Russians in Georgia.

Of the members of the May 17 Group, Achi despite his illness, has been in regular correspondence with me. At least these two links with Georgia are continuing. The Reconciliation Centre in Coventry is keen to host such a consultation, and a church in London will be in touch with the May 17 Group.

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Young Russian Orthodox priests stood out prominently at Tbilisi airport. Tall and well-built they looked deliberately intimidating, dressed smartly in full Orthodox gear, the air of menace so forbidding that I could imagine them in jackboots.

Russians crowded the departure lounge. Wealthy wives and mothers filled baskets with duty free scent, drinks and jewellery. Two glamorous middle-aged women queue-jumped aggressively and proceeded to pay the bill from thick wads of dollars.

The bishop and David, his driver, were saying goodbye to us, and just before we ascended the escalator to the departure lounge, Achi suddenly appeared to everyone's surprise. 'How did you get here?' we asked. 'Somehow! I wanted to see you again before you go,' he said triumphantly and smiled, his eyes beaming.

On all our travels and projects it is friendship that matters most. The success of our projects depends on these contacts. Achi's smile in defiance of his possibly fatal illness is my final indelible memory of Georgia.

Peter Pelz

October 25.10.13