

Once upon a Time

Extract from the novel

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We had already established a campus newspaper but we had also got some experience in rallies. That is why we felt like taking to the streets. However, it was not so easy. We were really few in number in the beginning and didn't have enough strength to show resistance to the police - police used to come to break up the rallies.

It was so hard (in the beginning) and we were so very few that girls, students of the same year or just friends, also used to fight so zealously side by side with the boys. It is worth mentioning that the police found it more difficult to defeat the girls rather than the guys.

Rarely but it chanced that our favorite lecturers helped us with their heavy briefcases. Rarely but it chanced that people (those who were scared) didn't say even hi to us at places which seemed to be overcrowded. I have just forgotten those people.

However, I remember even the lectures delivered by those who led their students into an absolutely different world and it is impossible not to associate the beginning of our freedom with those lecturers. It is impossible to forget the lectures delivered by Tengiz Kikacheishvili or Giorgi Japaridze but for truth's sake I think it is necessary to recall from memory what used to happen after those lectures... Unknown movies were showed on the third floor of the sixth building of the University in the evenings. Those movies were unknown because most people in the Soviet Union could see them neither at cinemas nor on TV and what is more they would never have an opportunity to listen to Gogi Gvakharia who commented on the movies. Gvakharia was a lecturer then.

Any student could choose any second department (simultaneously with the first one) and art history was not a random choice – lectures conducted at the sixth building of the University were no less interesting than the lectures given at the first building, however the very building once built by Niko Tskhvedadze and Simon Kldiashvili had always been called "University". The latter was the University for us too and when we missed the University, say, during summer holidays, we always missed that building built in Varaziskhevi. We more than once passed the night at the University in winter. One day we woke up in a university facility (together with Irakli Dochanashvili). Leo Menabde, a lecturer who had to examine us that day woke us up.

I doubt very much that people love the University so much now as to be lazy to go home after special lectures and steal into the building to take a sleep there. I don't believe because a few years ago the security at the approaches of the University was so strong that it was impossible to enter the building in the daytime as well as at night. This was when the University began to be called the temple of knowledge... There is no other temple in the world where it is required to submit a permit to come in... Besides, there is no grounded university which might be protected by police from students. A university must be the most accessible place in a country.

The University was established in Georgia chiefly to allow people to secure their freedom. In relation to Georgia, I first heard the word *Freedom* outside the University. It happened on Chavchavadze Avenue, near the University. Irakli Batiashvili's father, Dimitri Batiashvili lived there.

We used to gather at Batiashvilis' place once a week, on Thursdays. Georgian dissidents met there every Thursday. I first appeared at one of those weekly meetings on Irakli Batiashvili's invitation.

Irakli used to stand across the University, in front of Tea House cafe, at noon. He looked like a young philosopher dandy with his inseparable scarf around his neck... Girls were mad about him. However, there also were some exceptions: Mako Choghoshvili, she was a student of the same year, used to say that she didn't like boys like Irakli, all airs and graces. However, when rallies moved to Rustaveli avenue in November 1988, she politely asked a lady standing before us to step aside a little to let her see Irakli when the latter was making a speech before a hundred thousand people gathered there.

The lady filled with indignation (she filled with indignation immediately) and answered our friend quite roughly: "Dear, we are here to listen, not to see".

"Sorry, I've come to see Irakli Batiashvili", - coolly said Mako to the didactic lady. "Step aside a little if poss". The humor was so typical of that girl.

Earlier I first happened to hear a view on Georgi'a independence voiced aloud at the Batiashvilis' place. A few days later Zurab Chavchavadze shared a very simple truth with people at the assembly hall of the University and I'll never forget the reaction of the audience. He said that Georgia was going to become an independent state in the foreseeable future and there was nothing to be surprised about. That deathly silence was not exactly the feeling of surprise - I remember people took fright even of hearing the word *independence*.

It's my observation that most people in Georgia (and not in Georgia alone) are afraid of independence most of all and that is why we're so filled with aggression and hatred. An antediluvian story, you know... but most Georgians are simply incapable of hearing opposing ideas. Just imagine how astonished the then first secretary of the central committee would be to see what had been going on within the walls of the University.

After the first meetings which took place in spring 1988, Jumber Patiashvili* visited the University for the first time. It obviously turned out to be unexpected for him that we were courageous and had our point of view with regard to each problem which alarmed the country. Actually, Mr. Patiashvili wasn't as bad as his mission later on turned out to be. He bears the main responsibility for April 9 and no matter that the villain of the piece was a different man.

Till April 9 Jumber Patiashvili undoubtedly enjoyed popularity (especially among the generation of our parents). Unfortunately, he failed to take this opportunity. Jumber Patiashvili didn't believe that the breakup of the Soviet Union had already begun. The most important thing is that he didn't believe that the process was irreversible and simply lost his chance to become the greatest figure in the twentieth-century history of Georgia. He missed the chance.

It was quite clear that neither our advices nor the suggestions of his best-wishers would be of no use to Mr. Patiashvili. He simply wouldn't take them into consideration. However, Baltic countries had set a perfect example... I remember how I envied those peoples, especially Lithuanians. Brazauskas* was a communist. What is more, he was the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Lithuania but made a fearless and wise decision - Brazauskas turned into a leader of his people in the fight for freedom. He gave priority to the interests of his people and decided to be on the front line.

Unlike his Lithuanian counterpart, Jumber Patiashvili didn't realize that a new era was coming. He didn't realize that it was impossible to stop the flight of time and refused to become a leader. Later on (no matter whether or not it was conscious) the consequences of his decision, particularly April 9, turned out to be deplorable and tragic. If Patiashvili had patterned himself on the leaders of Hungary and Czech Republic...

* Georgian politician, the Communist leader of the Georgian SSR from 1985 to 1989

* Algirdas Mykolas Brazauskas - the first President of a newly independent post-Soviet Lithuania from 1993 to 1998 and Prime Minister from 2001 to 2006

Mr. Patiashvili made his first mistake in spring 1988 – he indirectly opposed Zviad Gamsakhurdia who was considered a candidate for leadership. Letters and lampoons against Gamsakhurdia appeared in Georgian press. Those publications were so weak and stupid that had a back reaction in the society. Even those who used to give Gamsakhurdia the go-by now turned into his advocates and defenders. Maybe some letters were published on initiative of editors just to flatter Patiashvili but it's a fact that Patiashvili did nothing to correct that mistake.

It is also a fact that the absolutely reckless campaign of the authorities turned Zviad Gamsakhurdia into a true hero. In any event, Georgian society did what it always does in similar cases – people came over to the one who was oppressed by the government.

When Patiashvili came to the University for the first time the opposition had already begun. That is why news of that visit spread fast throughout Tbilisi in spite of the fact that the meeting hadn't been broadcasted on TV (because of an obvious reason).

The second meeting was held by the end of September 1988. It was broadcasted and people in Tbilisi (and not only there) found out something that was absolutely unusual in that period of time: it turned out that it was possible to disagree and argue with the first secretary of the central committee. It was also unveiled that there really were those muddle-headed students at the University and there was a tendency about their heads to become more and more muddled (as one of the newspapers read).

More radical opinions were expressed in an article published in a different newspaper. According to that article it was necessary to react against the popularity of the kids or they would ruin their lives and lives of others (I think I really was a kid then because I didn't believe that simple truth then). However, it was late... (unfortunately) we had become well-known throughout Tbilisi and outside it. Besides, people had an exaggerated opinion of us and the then authorities were quite perplexed if not frightened because of the approach of spring.

As is known, spring in Georgia has a negative influence over the nervous and weak-willed. The Georgian are more or less accustomed to the peculiarities of spring in Tbilisi but foreigners have more than once been exposed to the adverse effect of that season in Georgia. Take for example Fyodor Cherenkov* who played for *Spartak Moscow*. That soccer player ran barefooted around the streets of our city because he was sure that his team-mate, Yuri Gavrilov, had stolen his boots right before a match. As Fyodor told party leaders, he was looking for his lost boots in the streets of Tbilisi.

Cherenkov had never been brought to Tbilisi after that incident. Leaders had no doubts that the spring of Tbilisi had a detrimental effect over the state of his mind

Apparently, part of the then authorities of Georgia was sure that in spring (because they didn't take us for normal people) the thirst for rallies would become stronger and as you know fear hath a hundred eyes...

They were sure we had planned something horrible, something that we had never thought about and in their turn they planned excellent weekend excursions for us, trying to make everything possible to please us with frequent tours on a university bus to the countryside.

They also had an alternative method – they broadcasted films earlier banned by them right when it was allegedly planned to conduct a rally. Those methods and efforts failed and the movement grew larger and larger day after day.

There was another significant and obvious threat that the authorities had to be afraid of – integration of the dissident movement and the movement of students. We were slow in uniting with the dissidents - we thought that the student movement would be much stronger without them. However, we communicated with them (including coordination) and we often met each other. There

* Soviet and Russian football midfielder who played for Spartak Moscow (1977–90 and 1991–94) and Red Star Football Club (1990–91).

were differences among them like there were differences among us and it often happened that a dissident had a character as complex any of the students.

It was the easiest to understand Irakli Tsereteli who used to frankly unburden his mind. He advised me that I should be less emotional and radical and while he was calling me on for being quiet and reasonable, students gathered around us. The more they were the more Irakli Tsereteli raised his voice which eventually turned into a desperate scream: "The Kajeti Fortress* must be destroyed"!

It goes without saying that the appeal had nothing in common with *THE KNIGHT IN THE PANTHER'S SKIN* and Kajeti Fortress meant simply the building of the central committee. I personally was more glad to see him at the University than others – first of all, it was because of his sincerity.

Some people made no concealment of their opinions and said that Irakli was crazy, mostly because he had been calling for Georgia's integration in NATO from the very beginning. A few years later I saw those who made fun of him on TV. They had gathered at Poti Port with flowers and balloons in their hands. Together with Georgia's political establishment they were ready to welcome a naval vessel of NATO.

A few years later when Georgia had turned into a legally independent country, those who had been fighting against Georgia's independence all their born days and sentenced Irakli Tsereteli to imprisonment because of his claims to independence, happened to appear in the authorities of the country. Irakli had never demanded anything in return what he had been doing and that is why when relations between the leaders of the national movement became strained, I always had more confidence in Irakli than others.

One day the integrity of the movement faced a grave danger and we invited opposing leaders to the University to make them reconcile with each other. Everyone came in time. Irakli Tsereteli was a bit late. He opened the door of the lecture room and closed it immediately. I stood up at once and went out. I saw Tsereteli in the corridor. He was very angry with Zviad Gamsakhurdia – Gamsakhurdia had come together with his wife. Irakli said that she had nothing to do with the men and he would enter the room only after she left it.

I entered the lecture room and whispered to Mr. Gamsakhurdia that probably Tsereteli wouldn't enter the hall unless he told Ms. Gamsakhurdia to go out. Zviad Gamsakhurdia looked at his wife, and indifferently, with that typical smile of his, whispered back to me: „Dear, tell that Tsereteli that if he wants so much he can tell Manana himself and we'll see who will have to leave". Then he burst out laughing and I began to laugh too. I went out once again but I failed to persuade Irakli Tsereteli to enter the room and of course the meeting failed to be successful.

I didn't think then that those wrangles (which sometimes were completely groundless) could lead to any serious consequences in the future - it often happened that controversies between the leaders were simply caused by fastidiousness.

Ronald Reagan still held his post when rumors spread throughout Tbilisi that the president of the United States was going to come to Georgia. The leaders of the national movement organized a special meeting at a safe house. Three student, I was among them, were given the opportunity to attend the meeting. Though we were not allowed to take part in the discussion, it still was our honor to be there. They talked about different things in a perfunctory manner and finally began to argue the main point: Ronald Reagan was going to visit Tbilisi together with the Secretary of State and they had to discuss too many details.

* Impenetrable fortress of evil spirits mentioned in Georgian epic *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*.