

David Turashvili

# Flight from USSR

Novel

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These blue days and this sunshine of childhood...

*Antonio Machado's last words*



## Preface

I didn't mean to publish this book naively believing that after the USSR disintegration the Soviet past of Georgia would become a bitter memory. I was wrong. It turned out that the past can come back with a vengeance, especially if we can't leave it behind.

We have distanced from the country and its times, but failed to alter the mindset acquired while being part of what was called the Empire of Evil, where benevolence was scarce. The space pioneer superpower failed to produce such a simple piece of clothing as jeans. What can be more innocent than a pair of jeans? But because they couldn't produce them, they just banned them.

The banned jeans became sweeter than the forbidden fruit. The Soviet youth was determined to get them at all costs and, not surprisingly, smuggling boomed. Occasionally, there'd be a pair of genuine US brands among the jeans smuggled from all over the world. In those days every pair of jeans was believed to be American and, as the Soviet propaganda was particularly set to destroying American values, many thought the happiness lay where jeans were abundant.

There was a grain of truth in such a belief because the Soviet state denied its citizens the basic civil rights, the right of property among them. One could truly be free only in one's grave or rather, the authorities stopped wor-

rying about your freedom and rights when you were safely put under the earth. Even the atheistic officials knew that sooner or later they'd be laid to rest in the same ground, so no one was denied the right to have a grave.

There might have been other reasons, but the fact is that a grave was the only property people owed. Such political attitude marked the start of altering Georgian taste for the worse. For centuries, the traditional Georgian graveyards were simple and modest, while in the Soviet times the graves became overly decorated, adorned with marble tables and benches, statues, bikes and even cars. The Soviet Georgians were confident in one thing only – the grave belonged to them, so they were taken care of and zealously protected. People built and decorated them as they'd do if they had real estate property. The authorities turned a blind eye to the graveyard eccentricities. The Soviet regime principles didn't extend to the Georgian graveyards.

The Georgian authorities demonstrated more respect to the dead than to the living. However, there was one prerequisite for a guaranteed grave – one had to die one's natural death. If one was executed for crime, the dead convict would certainly be buried but he or she wouldn't have a proper grave. Starting from the 1920s, thousands of executed convicts found their eternal resting place in various unmarked stretches of land across the country. Very often even the diggers assigned to the job of preparing a deep hole (not a grave) weren't able to identify with certainty the places, especially that there were no landmarks to guide them and the work was usually done in the small hours, in complete darkness.

It was uncanny that one of the diggers identified a barren field as a final resting place fifteen years after the burial. He was a mere grave digger. Had he been the killer, he would make sure to forget the immense, unremarkable field. He thought he remembered the exact place where Gega Kobakhidze was buried years back. As opposed to the poets shedding tears over the graves, he didn't weep that November night, trying to remember the spot in the moonlight. He had kept the secret for a long time only to share it fifteen years later with Gega's mother. God knows how many people had whispered to Natela they knew the precise location of her son's grave, but this time her mother's instinct told her the man wasn't lying.

The man couldn't be lying as he had no face. It was hidden under what he had seen and experienced throughout his life. Natela Machavariani immediately guessed he was dead himself, in a way, so he knew all about the other dead. For many years now Natela was approached by numerous 'well-wishers' claiming they could show her son's grave. And she followed each and every one on the wild goose chase only to discover that some were sent by the KGB, others demanded reward and some just abandoned her at distant railway stations on the way to the barren plains of Siberia.

It's hard to believe in death until one faces it. It's much, much harder to believe in the death of one's child, especially when the authorities hide the fact and there is no way whatsoever of getting an official explanation. But there are no bans on dreaming and hoping for the better. Hope belongs to you and only you, helping you through your life, driving you ahead, impelling you to go on with your life.

For many years various people nurtured the hope in Gega's mother, claiming he was seen in this or that prison or special Siberian camp. And the convicts' parents went to look for their sons. They went not because they believed it was possible to find a trace of their executed sons in this immense, unlawful, terrifying country, but because they feared their hope would die.

And the grave digger appeared when the hope was about to die.

Other parents too decided they preferred to face the truth however painful it might have been. They decided it was time to know where their sons found their final resting place. So when the grave digger approached them, Natela immediately guessed he knew much more than others before him. She knew immediately and unerringly he would be the one to bury their hope.

There were few of them. The small group went in secret. It was cold and wet, but the women weren't afraid of digging along with the men. The rain stopped from time to time, but the soggy soil was so heavy to dig that the men's rasping breathing carried across the immense, barren, nameless field. Natela was sure the man had remembered the precise place her son was buried, though the field had long been the mass graveyard for the executed political and criminal convicts of the Soviet regime. Those were interred at night, in utter secrecy, without coffins and indications of their names.

Even the grave digger was surprised to hear his cold spade hit the coffin. Only now he recalled it was an exceptional case when the executed was buried in one. He repeated with more confidence the phrase which brought

the parents to the site. He knew Gega Kobakhidze lay there. The coffin was metal as opposed to the traditional wooden ones and Misha, Gega's father, nearly fainted at the clanking sound. The women wanted to give him some water, but they didn't have any and the nearest village was miles away. Strangely enough, no one could say with any certainty which way they had come to the field at all. On their secret trip each was trying to memorize the road they followed, but the metallic sound erased everything else from their minds.

In reality, they were standing on the grassy field that covered a massive graveyard, as large as a city, underneath. Hiding the darkest history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Georgia, the field had accommodated those unwanted by the Soviet authorities, those brought from obscure underground dungeons to their final underground resting places.

The grave digger miraculously produced some water for Misha Kobakhidze. Now only several minutes distanced them from opening the metal coffin. Gega's parents were spared the last minute, though God only knows how many times they had lived through this very minute in their imagination. Others opened the coffin. Natia Megrelishvili immediately recognized the dead. It wasn't Gega Kobakhidze.

Before they found the burial, on that rainy 1999 day, while people with strained faces were digging, there was next to no hope of finding the grave on this open field. In reply to Natela Machavariani's silent question, the strange-faced man said loudly:

'This is the place, I remember for sure.'

'It's been fifteen years now,' someone remarked.



‘Gega’s grave is here, I remember for sure.’

The men continued to dig in silence. The sound of their quickened breathing seemed deafening to the parents standing around the hole. One of their spades hit a coffin and everyone froze at the sound, but only for a second. Then they dug the coffin out and lifted it onto the surface.

When the men opened the coffin lid, Gega’s mother turned away, waiting for their reaction. The men, deeply stunned, looked at the corpse which was difficult to identify due to the lapsed time. But it was Natia Megrelishvili who said with conviction:

‘This isn’t Gega. This is Soso, it’s his jeans, there’s the sun drawn on them.’

The others looked at the open coffin again and only now discovered the deceased was wearing the jeans, unaffected by the time and the soil. The jeans looked new and there was a shining sun drawn above the right knee.

Eka Chikhladze couldn’t have imagined she’d ever see Soso Tsereteli again. He was still in the same pair of jeans she last saw him wearing fifteen years ago, several days before the hijack...