

# **Requiem**

## ***for Base, Soprano and Seven Instruments, or Portrait of a Young Storyteller***

by

**Zaira Arsenishvili**

excerpt

We heard an unusual story at our rehearsal, something painful and moving for all of us... Fairness lay in ashes and human dignity was worthless. We were well aware of Mishutka's rich imagination and his talent for fibbing, yet we still believed him. It was partially because of the bitterness we harboured towards our concertmaster, it usually manifested itself in protests during rehearsals which grew into a desire for revenge.

Anyway, we were rehearsing in the foyer at Alio Chivadze's ballet. Our tyrannical concertmaster required an impossible fingering from us. It's like a tongue-twister, Mishutka whispered in my ear. Anything we said, especially if it was sensible or to the point, enraged our concertmaster, who was unable to take any smart remark from others. Who? His musicians, of course! Before the rehearsal, he had had a row with Gano who was an expert at choosing the most suitable, academic fingering. If it wasn't for Macedon and Rachel, he would have broken his bow over her head. Actually, we would have played much better with a better fingering option, and suffered less. But our concertmaster firmly believed suffering, even absolutely pointless suffering to overcome senseless obstacles, had to be our way of being. That's why he watched closely to see how uncomfortably but doggedly our fingers jumped from one string to another, while his protruding dentures, stuck in his shrunken jaws, jangled with pleasure...

Mishutka was staring at the opposite wall. Under a picture of the great Mozart was the photo of our former conductor, Mikeladze, (I always tried to avoid looking at this young, smiling man in tails. It was his last photo, and it brought home how close his untimely death had been.) Mishutka was always ready to joke. He was a happy soul. So, as soon as we got to the end of a particularly senseless passage, he said quite loudly, as if challenging the concertmaster, that he had heard about plans to open a memorial for the victims of the purges. Everyone was talking about it in the shops and on the buses. 'Thank goodness', I thought and wondered what Genadi would say to that.

Mishutka's words were received as a well-timed joke, so we all laughed. Mzia's laughter went on for a long time...

Our concertmaster and orchestra inspector, who had spent his younger days with a Mauser hanging at his side, seeking out Conservatoire students with potentially harmful thoughts, or checking whether they had relatives abroad, immediately flew into a rage and yelled at Mishutka for joking at any opportunity. He looked at him threateningly. His fanatical mind was wondering whether Mishutka's words were just ill-timed, or a deliberately venomous barb meant to mock him. *Iveria Sunrise* was the ballet we were preparing. Apparently, when he was rowing with Gano, he'd heard Mishutka telling me he doubted 'this celebratory nonsense' was worth the hassle.

Mishutka didn't back down. He said if Genadi didn't believe him he could go to the Red Foyer where the cellos were rehearsing and ask Arnold Lazarevich because they had taken the same trolley-bus. A respectable-looking man had told the other passengers that a memorial to the victims was to be opened in Soganlugi where, people believed, innocent blood had been spilt in the 1930ies. Moreover, the man said, it was to be opened soon. Now we all paid attention to Mishutka's words. It felt like a bolt of thunder, dispersing doubts and expectations. Everyone (even the miserable second violins) was suddenly very alert as those purges had broken the hearts of most of us.

Gano was the first to react. Until then she had been silently frowning at the hateful music, deeply resentful of Genadi's 'silly and unprofessional' fingering chart. Her henna-dyed eyebrows underlined the inner determination I could read on her powdered face. She turned to me and looked me straight in the eye. I knew exactly what she wanted to say.

Tears flowed down Mzia's cheeks: 'Is this really happening?! At least we'll know where to go to kneel and lay flowers.'

Eliko asked how soon before we would take a break because she wanted to phone Archil, her husband. He worked for a newspaper and didn't believe they had had any information about the memorial. In any case, she needed to talk to him. 'Oh God, poor Archil, raised without a dad, and his uncles executed...'

Confused, I looked at my friends. How come we hadn't heard of the memorial before or of any competition for its design? It hurt that we had heard about it so late and from Mishutka by hearsay...

'Because of the tour!' Mzia exclaimed. 'We've been in Leningrad for two months, and we only heard about deaths and weddings months afterwards!'

Genadi clapped loudly, and stamped his feet. 'We're preparing a performance for the jubilee of Soviet Georgia, and all you want to talk about is a memorial!' But we were so excited that we paid no attention to what he was saying. Especially Melita. She had spent years in the Kazakh steppes, digging the frozen ground, and where the relentless winds and the scorching sun had bleached her once peach complexion. When she returned from exile, she invited us to home concerts practically every weekend. After quartets and quintets by Haydn and Boccherini, she treated us to Kazakh *mantı*. Now she was extremely agitated, her skin went blotchy with dark red spots and her French accent affected her speech:

'Genadi Petrovich, do you think we should only mourn the victims of Buchenwald and Majdanek, and only take flowers to their memorials? No way! We have suffered enough, far too much, in fact!'

Even Rachel, our concertmaster's assistant who normally wasn't interested in anything but music, fried potatoes, and her loves (with her son Marek occupying a very high position on that pedestal). Like a spider to a fly, she clung to the present through energy and hard work, and counted all time from her son's birth, ignoring everything else that happened in the past. But now she was flushed and disturbed. Not all of the past has simply gone! Valya Volsky, an exceptional trumpeter and a wonderful man, who was the orchestra inspector in those years, was also arrested and he perished along with other musicians.

Rachel once told me, her eyes open just a slit, as if looking at a tiny boat at sea from the comfort of the beach: 'My dear girl, I love my affairs because I can tell my friends about them. The one with Valya Volsky ended suddenly. I was scared after what happened to Mikeladze, abandoned everything, and went to Kislovodsk. Once there, practically the same day I arrived, I began to play in the local orchestra and very soon married a trombone player who had gone, like me, as a musician for the season. Then we came back to Tbilisi, and we lived happily, but then there was the war... Anyway, there in Kislovodsk, I was newly-wed, and one fine day I was on the balcony brushing my teeth. The gate squeaked and I see none other than Valya Volsky, with a small case in one hand – he used to carry his trumpet and shirts in it – and a huge bunch of roses in the other. In his excitement, he had foolishly bought them at the station. We had an enormous rose garden and later I found out he had actually bought them from my landlady. My hand holding the toothbrush froze in mid-air. There I was, grinning stupidly, and staring at him. And all the while, my new trombonist husband was sleeping in the bedroom... I gestured to him, asking how things were. He stopped, shrugged his shoulders stayed where he was. He asked with gestures, if I were alone. I shook my head. He stood in the middle of the garden for a minute, motionless. We looked at each other. Then he turned and went away, without a word, retreating courteously... Several months later my sister wrote to me saying some musicians had been arrested, and Valya Volsky was among them.

‘I believe you’ve heard about Jerzy Khodarkovsky’s Requiem. I’m sure Valya Volsky wasn’t arrested because of that, but because of Mikeladze. No one has seen him since, probably executed...’

I was sure they had planned to escape together. It wasn’t hard to imagine Valya Volsky had arranged the whole thing with the inspector of the Kislovodsk orchestra, hoping to finish his business in Tbilisi and join Rachel later. Then they would settle there, and, engulfed by the sweet aroma of roses in the park, play their violin and trumpet. I suspected that while ‘retreating courteously’, the betrayed Volsky surely would have uttered a few strong words for his two-faced lover to hear. Anyway, their affair ended there and then, and Rachel could probably still see the huge bunch of roses dumped at the gate. And now she said with almost Biblical pathos:

‘A memorial for the victims? My God, I’ll write to my sister immediately. Let them hear about it in America!’ And she pulled edge of her cashmere shawl back over her shoulder.

‘*Et tu, Brute?*’ were the words written all over Genadi’s ashen face. It was all too much for him. He tapped the body of Rachel’s violin, casually, which reminded everyone of their affair – a day or two spent under one blanket, which wasn’t worth the trouble in Rachel’s view. With her usual sense of irony, she had once said that if Genadi was a frightful tyrant while standing, a blazing torch guarding the ideology of our orchestra, as soon as he lay down she was reminded of a soggy matchstick which dies as soon as struck. Fond of proverbs and aphorisms to describe her love affairs, she added with a giggle:

‘My natural tempo is *allegro con brio*. Could you doubt it? But, far from sweet, love is violent. But our Genadi is only an ideological bully!’

Genadi aimed a threatening frown at Rachel’s emerald eyes. Their mocking glitter enraged him even more. Our conductor, Nicos, must have meant those magnificent eyes when he asked me with some surprise: ‘You don’t know who Rachel is? How’s that?’ It was when I had first joined the orchestra. He sent me to her in the foyer so she could teach me to follow the music. Actually, he just laughed at my question. But it turned out I was well

aware who she was, I just didn't know her personally. As soon as I stepped into the foyer, her emerald eyes greeted me from the mirror and I recognized her immediately: I had seen her thousands of times, had noticed her aquiline nose, her Semitic, slightly prominent lower jaw, and flaming rusty-red hair.

'Shall we try a difficult part?'

'As you wish,' I replied obediently.

'Then let's take The Maid of Orleans and the Classical Symphony.' She brought the music from the library and led me to the harp room. 'It won't be the end of the world if you aren't very accurate, but do try to keep the tempo, as that is really important.' Rachel's emerald eyes flashed: 'If you take that advice into your life, you'll be fine.'

I laughed because she was absolutely right!

'What shall I call you?' I asked, and opened my violin case.

'Please drop Solomonovna. I hate formality!' she said, and opened the score of The Maid of Orleans.

Because Rachel hated informality, she moved her violin away from Genadi, drew herself up and addressed him with deliberation:

'I advise you not to put yourself into a ridiculous position. You've must know our musicians were completely innocent. Do you hear me? Sooner or later, you'll have to admit it!'

Genadi laughed, sarcastically, and ignored her. She was simply echoing others without realizing who or what she was defending: it was beneath him to respond to stupid women daring to teach him about politics!

Rachel looked at us, challenging us to oppose Genadi. Her eyes glared with the fire of combat, but after that ill-fated meeting (nearly two months ago now, and we had even remembered poor Samuel on the fortieth day of his death), I had no intention to fight, even for the sake of the memorial; something which excited me just as much as the others. It was useless because I had already told him what I thought of him, and had violated the commandment to respect one's boss. Had he not been so stubborn, or rigid, so sure of his firmly ingrained ideas that blocked any

chance of my reaching his mind, my words might have touched him like a gentle breeze, shifting something in his perception. No, let those who still hoped battle his chimeras and phantoms. Of course, Macedon was the one for the job. He was the oldest, gentle and cooing like a dove - our chronicler. Genadi was still laughing when Macedon tapped the music stand with his bow:

‘For God’s sake, stop it, Genadi,’ Macedon’s thinning eyebrows twitched in pain. ‘It’s been nearly half a century since that terrible event... Alas, our friends were killed unjustly and inhumanely... It’s unforgettable and unforgivable...’

‘Oh, Macedon,’ Gano’s voice sounded as if glittering drops of water hung from her vocal chords as from telegraph wires on a rainy day.

‘It’s our duty, Genadi. If nothing else, we’ve lost the best of our friends,’ said Macedon sadly.

Looking at Macedon, one couldn’t help thinking that ‘love thy neighbour’ wasn’t an empty phrase. His whole attitude matched the commandment. Here he was a living man: flesh and blood - elderly, grey-haired, highly ethical and religiously pious, maybe even to a certain degree, stubborn. He always wore unfashionable clothes but they were clean, even if he looked a little scruffy. He kept his dead friends lovingly in his heart, along with numerous stories from the orchestra’s past. Those of us, who had joined it comparatively recently, listened to his stories with interest. His tone was animated and he always spoke honestly, revealing a deep respect for the late conductor.

Sometimes he was perhaps too expressive, but mostly he pitched somewhere between mezzo-piano and mezzo-forte. In any case, his memories were a testament to sad remembrance and downcast joy. As we listened to Macedon, no one could have persuaded us that we hadn’t actually seen our late conductor at work, and experienced his expressive eyes and gestures. And we could easily convince anyone that we were completely committed to the hard work of making music not because of his status, but because, as young musicians, we sincerely believed we had

reached the heights of perfection at various performances and concerts with the great Mikeladze.

Thanks to Macedon's memories, I thought I had always been there both at cheerful artistic functions, raising crystal glasses under glittering chandeliers... as well as in the murky dungeon where there was neither music nor laughter...

If he had respect for anyone, it was Macedon. But now the sudden, unwelcome news about the memorial enraged him so much that he forgot all civility. He didn't wish to hear anything about the victims of the purges, and that was final! Even if the news came from God Himself! He must have thought that it would shatter the foundations on which the ephemeral tower of power rested. He was forced to recognize our excitement, but also had to maintain the ideological barrier between us. So he chose to wave Macedon away and turned his back on him. Then he went over to the music stands, scrutinizing our scores in his eagerness to catch us disobeying his instructions. Eager for revenge, he checked how closely we were following his prescribed fingering in our performance.

Macedon ignored Genadi's rudeness and continued with his sad, murmuring:

'I believe their martyred souls will respond to the unveiling of the memorial, while we, the living, will be able to consider ourselves a bit more human... as opposed to some,' and Macedon glanced at us meaningfully, 'as opposed to some poor souls who fail to distinguish between friends and enemies.'

With this Macedon shook his head, ruefully, without doubt to underline that our angry concertmaster, checking our scores with his red pencil and a furious expression on his face, was missing the precious opportunity to 'consider himself a bit more human'.

We smiled back at Macedon, all except Gano, his friend, sitting at the next stand:

'Please don't try to upset me, Macedon. Don't make me think your forgiveness is nothing but indifference. You can justify anyone if it comes to



it!’ She raised her shoulders so elegantly fitted into a burgundy dress designed by Sophie Ivanova. Melita and Rachel quickly backed Gano, whispering to Macedon from either side that they knew all too well who was a poor soul; he had to pity himself, as well as others...

Mishutka, who always turned everything into a joke, winked at us and reminded us how much pain and heartbreak Macedon’s compassion had caused him. He put his violin on his knees, raised his arms and flapped them like wings.

We immediately visualized Macedon as wet and miserable as the sparrow he had once saved from drowning. It happened like this: he had bought a new pair of shoes and was wearing them on his way to the dress rehearsal. He crossed the Opera House garden that was full of promenaders. Why was it down to this respectable, old man to save a sparrow that had decided to take a dip in the water but had underestimated its depth? Why did he have to be the one to jump into the pool without thinking twice?

‘You’ve ruined your new shoes, Macedon, but worse than that you could catch a cold. Let this be a lesson to you.’

Macedon justified himself to Gano by saying that no one else had seen that bird, adding he might also have jinxed it because he was looking at the sparrows sitting on the edge of the pool.

‘Oh, Mishutka,’ Melita raised her eyebrows, ‘we mustn’t turn the memorial into a joke. Flowers, we need lots of flowers, and we should get them from Mamulashvili, our famous florist,’ she added decisively, because nothing offended her aristocratic generosity more than miserly musicians. It’s worth remembering that our Melita was the descendant of the Komnenos Byzantine dynasty, and until the Bolsheviks expropriated her family tobacco plantations and lemon orchards, she had been very well-off. When we visited her home for our concerts, her ancestors looked down at us from framed photographs full of magnificent interiors, brightly lit Christmas trees, children sitting on leopard skins, sun-bathed terraces, and two little girls on thoroughbred horses.

No way would it suffice to collect just 50 kopeks from us! It wasn't an ordinary death or a questionable premiere. It was a memorial, the memorial to honour the victims of the terrible purges!

That's why we had to be generous and collect a rouble per head for the outstanding wreaths created by Mamulashvili. That was the only option, nothing less would do!

Our concertmaster was growing darker than a stormy cloud. No doubt, he had been listening to us, sniffing through his pointed nose, his gaunt jaws trembling. We meant to bury the immortal ideals of socialism with flowers and wreaths. How could he stop himself from attacking us?

'I know you lot,' Genadi shouted, in his usual tub thumping way. He stuck his red pencil behind his ear and continued: 'Who can you show some respect? No one! Never! But, if you absolutely have to, then, of course it has to be your late conductor! Just your late conductor!'

'You've got a nerve!' Mishutka muttered, directing Genadi's wrath at himself.

'Memorial, memorial! You invented it all just to disrupt our rehearsal for the jubilee of Soviet Georgia! You fool!' Genadi yelled back.

Mishutka froze, then bent his head awaiting a blow: our concertmaster was known for his cruelty. He didn't disappoint: just like a child, he stabbed his index finger in Mishutka's face and said mockingly:

'Funeral Lover! You don't even know what you're playing, if it could even be called playing! Go, tell your lies to your dead!'

Despite the blow, or perhaps thanks to it, Mishutka came to his senses, apparently hardened by the scrap with Genadi. To take a loftier moral position, instead of resorting to anger, Mishutka smiled, lopsidedly, raised his bow, and borrowed the tone of his opponent:

'Dear Genadi, Samuel was absolutely right when he called you the pulpit yapper? Get it and remember well...'

'You... all of you... you,' Genadi groaned and moved his jaws in a fury so violent he nearly dropped his dentures, so he quickly covered his mouth. His eyes – the colour of dried moss – turned white.

\*\*\*

Some shook his hand, praising his speech about Samuel, which highlighted his work and contribution. If not you, who could have said such words to such an aloof old man: 'Dear Samuel, you have given your life to music and Georgian art. Sunny Georgia has been your second homeland, no less dear to your heart than the first because the first and foremost principle of our socialist society - friendship among peoples and internationalism - has become an integral part of your nature!' Of course he also talked a lot about Samuel's integrity and professionalism, his performing talent and musical mastery. And his tone was firm and clear, as if he were tossing slogans to the crowd. He ended:

'Rest in peace, dear Samuel! Sleep peacefully in the soil of your beloved Georgia!'

Obviously, he was allowing it to happen, permitting the legally deceased Samuel to be able to remain forever in the small Jewish cemetery, under the acacia tree, just as Samuel had joked before his death, and reach out to the growing daisies.

Gripped by doubts, I had glanced at Samuel's dreadfully altered, blotchy face, refusing to believe his argumentative life had truly come to an end, and that the wheel of fortune had stopped, taking with it all the bitterness he had harboured in his heart. He must have overcome it all with a finality that had stopped him from waving his invariably well-cared for hands. They were now withered, crossed over his chest - his protest against insult and not being accepted. That finality had prevented him from sitting up in his coffin to glare at the proud speaker with his rat-like eyes and growl in his rasping voice: 'Yes, I'm dead without either your permission or your order, and indeed I'm going to rest forever'. Then lie down again, crossing his hands on his chest and closing his eyes, dying once more just to spite Genadi.

‘I’ve nothing to regret,’ Genadi told anyone who cared to listen. ‘Samuel was dying from cancer, so that encounter had nothing to do with his end.’

When he visited Samuel in hospital to reconcile with him, the old man attacked him, half-jokingly, but still...

We were there, Mzia, Sanato and I. Eliko couldn’t come because of her pregnancy, so she had given us a jar of cornelian jam to pass to Samuel. Just the day before, I had received some grapes from my Telavi vineyard. My uncle had sent them. They were delicious, beautiful to look at, sweet to the taste but with a hint of sourness. I’d heard Samuel suffered from nausea, so I thought he’d enjoy the grapes. Mzia brought some corn porridge with sour sauce, Sanato lemons and pomegranates. That’s how we visited Samuel in hospital.

‘Thirty years ago... when I first arrived... I immediately guessed there is no one better than a Georgian woman. I was smart, no?’ he sounded weak, his voice scratchy. ‘That’s why I married my Katuni.’

He always hated talking about personal feelings, so that use of his wife’s diminutive I put down to his illness. I knew they were happy together, and that they would have given their lives for each other. They even looked alike. But Katuni looked like a cute little rat with curly hair, who always wore lipstick as she toiled loyally beside her beloved Samuel. From the very start, theirs wasn’t a joyful life - far from it. To begin with, Samuel was among those rehearsing Jerzy Khodarkovsky’s Requiem, and he was arrested well before the actual performance. He spent four years in prison, first in Tbilisi, then in Yaroslavl... Poor Katuni had to take to the road... Nobody knows how or who helped save them by including Samuel in the frontline orchestra, so Katuni spent the next four years following the roads to war. Samuel was taken through Armavir by military train. The story was that he pleaded with his guards to let him go for two days so he could see his wife and kids, as well as collect his cello. But it wasn’t allowed. He was not a free man until he reached the frontline. What Katuni did was collect some food, take his cello, and find her way to the Armavir railway station. ‘You know I’m not

sentimental, Samuel used to tell me, 'but when I saw Katuni through the metal bars of the carriage, I wept.'

Now, loyal Katuni was sitting at his bedside, helping him to breathe oxygen. When we arrived, she put the oxygen pillow aside, thanked us for the food we had brought, and busied herself with putting everything away. Samuel gestured that he wanted the flowers on his bedside table. We hadn't seen him after that shameful meeting, mainly because we had been busy recording Paliashvili's *Daisi*, working day and night. In fact, Samuel had been taken to hospital the very next day. He was already gravely ill, dying in fact... He had changed so much in those ten days that it was hard to recognise him: his face was swollen, his neck was stiff, bandaged together with his shoulder, and he had difficulty breathing. His hands impressed me greatly: thin, mottled, yet they had only just skillfully moved his bow across the cello strings, those well-trained fingers, honed over so many years of practicing, and performing so expertly. Now they lay motionless, helpless, on the blanket. I heard his hands had been brutally smashed, his wrists viciously twisted, and nails driven under his fingernails. They had even trodden on his finger joints with metal-tipped boots. But who were they? They were the same young KGB officers who were appointed as supervisors of the orchestra, who had sat through all the performances on strategically placed chairs in the orchestra. However stupid they may have been, they must have known what those hands represented for Samuel. They achieved their aim, if only partially.

'Now I'm like that building,' Samuel used to mock himself, 'whose facade has been demolished, but it still stands and functions thanks to the back rooms.'

Years ago, he was invited to come from Kiev by the great conductor Mikeladze to be principal cello, concertmaster and soloist in our Philharmonic.

The torture that left him crippled psychologically and physically had struck most painfully at the place where Samuel's talent could have shone - his career as a soloist. However, first in prison, with the help of an

outstanding surgeon, then on his own, while playing in the frontline orchestra, and later with occasional hospital treatment, his hands gradually regained their original sensitivity, flexibility, and speed. He went back to his repertoire and recovered his lost technique, but felt he could never be a soloist again. That's why, when he returned from the war, this veteran musician became a concertmaster. He lacked the courage to step onto the stage as a soloist – his knees gave way, his heartrate increased, and he became covered in cold sweat. But, inwardly, he wasn't able to adjust to the more modest role of concertmaster. That tormented him to his very last day. Mzia, Sanato and I were shocked when he flatly refused to allow a nurse to take a blood sample from a tiny prick of his finger. Nor did he allow her to inject his arm, fearing it might get infected.

'You know, girls, when Samuel gets better, he's going to arrange a home concert and you're all invited,' Katuni told us with a smile, as she put one grape into Samuel's mouth and patted his small hands.

'Small hands!' Samuel had often exclaimed, clearly in response to some open or secret enemies who, because of ignorance or envy, considered the size of a musician's hands to be the measure of his or her success and skill. 'Haven't you seen cellists with hands like oars but no idea of what or how to play? Personally, I've seen loads. For playing, my dears, this and this are paramount,' and he would point at his forehead, then his heart and, finally, he would wave his hand with a mocking smile.

Samuel bit the grape suspiciously, unsure whether he'd like it, but when he had tasted it, he asked for more. He looked at us, then winked. He tried to speak cheerily but his voice sounded as if his vocal chords were covered by a mute:

'I'm falling downwards with *accelerando*... A devil might jump up any minute from the abyss and block my way... Otherwise, even Genadi couldn't stop me.'

Talk of the devil – there he was, Genadi in flesh and blood! He opened the door and when he saw us, he strode in quickly, glanced at us sitting on the spare bed then smiled smugly as if to say, ah, the younger

generation demonstrating a caring attitude towards an ailing older colleague dying from an incurable disease. Then he bent down and planted a noisy kiss on Samuel's cheek who stared at the open door with an expression of humble welcome, as if his visitor was going to be followed by Roman legionnaires to see him off on his long and final journey.

But instead, it was Genadi's wife, Tanechka, our ballerina, who came in. She was wearing an extraordinarily long, glossy grey trench coat she had bought in Japan and was carrying a tray of small cakes. Genadi had the habit of always walking ahead of her wherever they went together, while she followed behind, taking ballet steps. Among the innumerable mysteries of the world, for me, their marriage was one of its more inexplicable riddles.

'So, Samuel, how are things?' he began loudly.

'What's the health of a Soviet person who's been stripped of all self-respect? As for this ailing one, in this bedlam...' Sounding bitter, Samuel didn't finish.

'What kind of man are you?' Genadi asked in a more reconciliatory tone. 'You're so clever with words, but for some reason you chose not to say anything? How should I have guessed your condition? When we heard you were in hospital, we were in shock!'

'I don't know,' Samuel muttered, 'I was pale, thin,' and he glanced at Tanechka, apologetically. 'You shouldn't have bothered, Tanechka.'

'You're so spiteful,' Genadi interrupted Samuel. He gave no chance for Katuni or Tanechka, who was about to say something nice to Samuel to speak. Genadi was driven by a single aim: he wanted to put an end to disagreement by blaming a dying man, and perhaps settling the matter with a joke.

'Instead of telling your friendly collegial family the truth... You must know that everyone's furious. They want to see you and be able to say a couple of nice words.... They're preparing a generous feast when you get better. If we can't convince him to arrange it, we'll do it ourselves, is what they say,' Genadi hammered on.

Samuel's face lost all its expression. He looked at Genadi and then said after a short pause:

'I will... treat you to caviar and a funeral pilaf,' then let out a deep sigh and moved Katuni's hand holding another grape away.

'Oh, drop that nonsense,' Genadi uttered loudly. 'Here's a little something for you. Tanechka, serve your honey cake, will you?'

Samuel's eyes flashed with an anger that threatened to grow into an aggressive flame, just like when he was set to claw at someone.

'You always look ahead... just like Stalin who made people piss blood... and spit bile... He stood deep in piss and bloody pus... And instead of looking down at least once... he worried about revolutions in Europe,' Samuel became visibly agitated, breathing in shallow, rasping pants, and finally he coughed violently.

Katuni quickly gave him some water with a drinking straw, raised his head, and tried to soothe him, and apologize to Genadi:

'Please, Samuel, calm down. Forget about Stalin for once. This man has come to visit you.'

Katuni worried about Samuel and Genadi clashing over Stalin, each ready to rip each other apart, or break their bows over each other's heads. If it wasn't for Genadi's position as an inspector, and Samuel's devotion to work, they could have easily spent every single break in hot debate, or fist fights, because Genadi couldn't argue with Samuel who could have debated with Cicero. That's why Genadi shouted at the top of his voice, while Samuel had to make the best use of his raspy voice.

'Shut up!' Jeiran, our first trumpet, would yell from the corner and add a couple of stronger words he kept just for Samuel. He used to blow into the mouthpiece with all his might to stop the argument and demonstrate just how much his flaming patriotism was hurt.

But even if canons had been fired, Samuel and Genadi wouldn't have paid any attention. Jeiran would then approach me, threatening me like a tank, and scowling:



‘What does that kike friend of yours want? Do we have anyone better than Stalin? Just Shota Rustaveli and Stalin! Why can’t he just shut up for good? If he doesn’t, I’ll blow him away in a jiffy! Stinking kike!’

At such moments, my heart would thump loudly, and block my windpipe. Those words used about Samuel were absolutely unacceptable. I was ready to tear Jeiran apart, but because I couldn’t, I usually chose to step away from the open aggression coming from his broad shoulders and mighty chest, and his fleshy lips and pirate-like stare. But as soon as I turned to escape the conflict, he would add something that stopped me in my tracks, forcing me to retaliate:

‘You’re so unreliable! You won’t distinguish between aliens and your own! That’s very wrong. If we Georgians don’t stand up for each other, who will? If we don’t value ourselves, who will?’

He wanted to drag me into some kind of conspiracy, and join him in some kind of sect whether I wanted to or not. His words hurt. How could I let him call Samuel ‘an alien’?

‘Who’s an alien?’ I was ready to push his trumpet into his face. ‘Is Samuel an alien? Can a cello be an alien? Is your trumpet going to play its parts? Will your trumpet play Puccini’s Quartets, Saint-Saëns’ Swan, Tchaikovsky’s solos, Richard Strauss or many, many more? Tell me!’

Jeiran would then suddenly remember his respected role as protector of the young musicians in our orchestra, and so he usually gave in, but only grudgingly. Arnold Lazarevich, who never argued with anyone, would usually step in at such moments and say in a careful, pacifying tone:

‘Genadi and Samuel? They’re unbearable, they could drive anyone mad. It’s not the first time they’ve fought. Why can’t they understand that neither will convince the other? But they seem to need to argue until the Second Coming.’

That was exactly what Genadi and Samuel fought to do: the latter was trying to convince the former that Stalin was a proven tyrant, leading the country to total disaster as an oppressor of freedom, while the former argued that Stalin’s name would be forever written in golden letters in the

annals of history as the greatest military genius, politician and thinker, just to spite Samuel and anyone who thought like him. They would oppose one another until blue in the face.

As Samuel used to say, Genadi would slit his mother's throat for Stalin, maybe Tanechka's as well. Samuel abhorred all expression of idolatry, saying only music was worth adoration, but Genadi claimed his opponent had lost all feelings including respect.

Samuel took every opportunity to back his arguments with theoretical propositions, logic and his own rich personal experience. A Soviet person didn't deserve to be respected, he claimed, regardless of their social status. He had never met anyone worth respecting and the chances of doing so were nil. Maybe they looked fine on the outside, but they were hopelessly rotten within.

It wasn't Samuel's political ignorance and unwillingness to see and evaluate great historical facts correctly that infuriated Genadi, it was his scathing tone and the unrestrained way he debated that drove Genadi mad, or rather, insulted him deeply. 'Believe me, Genadi, until we analyze the scale of the disaster that befell us, until we free ourselves from the Stalin complex, or slavery, we are doomed,' Samuel used to say over and over again.

'Should I believe you and not Churchill?' Genadi would yell in response. 'You have no idea of politics, so why should I listen to you? Only when hell freezes over!'

'The father of nations! The one who swallowed his own children!' Samuel struck back. 'Our wise teacher! Deafening and muting us with applause and slogans for over thirty years!'

'Have you crawled out of a hole? Be careful or else you'll be forced back!' Genadi yelled back.

'What did he do for the country? Georgia specifically? To our orchestra? Killed our conductor! And he did it at every social level! If anyone survived, they were castrated.'

‘Don’t generalize! And wash your mouth out, better still shut up completely! Just like you did until now. You were silent, weren’t you? Didn’t have the courage, ha?’

‘I was forced to be silent given the conditions, but at least I didn’t sing praises like some. I haven’t been idle. I thought a lot and stored bile and poison, like a bee...’

‘That’s true, very true,’ Arnold Lazarevich would turn to me and speak with a kindly smile. ‘My dear girl, I’m worried you’re listening so attentively to Samuel’s spiteful speech. For him, the human race is divided into two groups: one irritates him, the other he simply hates. That’s why I’d warn you poison is contagious; it’d be a pity if you fall victim through naive admiration because you sit so close to him.’

The thing is that when Nicos, our conductor, returned from his Kiev tour, he seated us differently, like the Kiev orchestra: the strings sat not to his right, but to his left, next to the cellos, so Samuel was right behind me. I didn’t tell Arnold, because it didn’t matter, but once Samuel and Katuni invited Sanato and me to their summer house. We were meant to pick mushrooms, so Katuni used the opportunity to plead with him to relax and take it easy. Sanato and I joined in and even joked with him: we suggested looking at a score to find who he hated and who he liked. From piccolo to cymbals and gongs, Samuel scowled at everyone, with the exception of Macedon, of course. Not content with scowls, he found biting comments for each of them. As for those in charge of the score and the orchestra, our class enemies, he burned them alive, figuratively speaking. Musicians are nothing to them, he maintained, just instruments. They learn their trade on us, proudly spreading their arms. A shepherd’s crook would fit some of them better than the baton. They are as proud as peacocks, looking down on us as if they are blessed by Mahler and Toscanini directly from Vienna and New York. In reality, none of them is a true leader; as they can trade everything for their basic needs, - Samuel used to conclude.

I always contradicted him even when I agreed with what he said, mainly because, overall, I didn’t support his position. That time in the forest

near his summer house, Sanato and I argued with him, presenting the score in quite a different way, and we finally pleaded with him to relax, at least while on holiday.

‘Oh, girls, you’re so kind-hearted,’ he pretended to be heart-broken, gazing at us with those round, rat-like eyes, as if trying to establish whether our compassion was due to our lack of experience, and our naivety an inborn, incurable defect. Or was it seasonal malnourishment that could be treated with persuasion and his toxic ointment, and therefore easily cured? In the end, he winked at us, which meant he thought it was malnourishment.

Needless to say, no one could match Stalin on his scale of hatred and anger. Samuel’s impudence stretched as far as to question the most sacred aspect of Stalin’s greatness: his ‘world-renown genius as a military strategist’, which Samuel not only doubted, but considered the greatest disaster of all.

‘When are you going to understand that we could have won the war without his ‘clever military leadership’? More effectively, in fact, and with fewer casualties. If you don’t get it, all your books, maps and planes have been wasted!’ Samuel would wound cruelly.

Genadi used to fall into such a state of rage that he was ready to strangle Samuel, and once even grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him violently.

Jeiran muttered he deserved it: Genadi had studied military books all his life, scrutinizing maps. Who the hell gave him a bow instead of a gun, he wondered. He claimed that if you woke him up in the middle of the night and asked him about this or that battle, he could give you all the details from ancient history to the fall of Berlin, from Julius Caesar to Napoleon, the battles of Kursk and Oryol. So, who did that wretched Samuel think he was arguing with?

True, nothing interested Genadi more than military history. He had a rich collection of books on the topic, as well as lots of delightful model

fighter planes that he kept neatly hanging on cords of various length in a special glass cabinet,

Tanechka used to tell us, laughing as she did so, that when she was on tour, the only thing on her mind was model planes. 'And they're so expensive', she added. 'But if I don't bring back at least one, Genadi would surely kill me.'

But the 'wretched' Samuel didn't care at all about Genadi's military knowledge. He claimed he had spent four years at the frontline and though he played in an orchestra, he made good use of his eyes.

'Accept it, just accept it!' he used to shout at Genadi, waving his bow in his opponent's face. 'The military dictatorship of that executioner achieved just one thing: he killed millions of soldiers, and after the war he raised himself up to the height of the sun to claim he was the only organizer of the war effort, the one who inspired victory. And that's when he blocked the sun's light forever! He didn't answer for the 1937 atrocities the likes of which history had never seen. No one demanded revenge for the senseless executions, the crushing of human dignity, the trampling of justice, or the devastation he caused! He never answered for the groans of starving children. All those years of bloodshed! He drank our blood for decades but remained unscathed himself! Caesar was killed at 46, Napoleon was exiled to St. Helena at 46, but Stalin was a worm compared to them! Agha Mohammad Khan was assassinated at 55, Hitler committed suicide at 46, not to mention Nero and Caligula – just kids in comparison! But he, he was saved from retribution, no one's wrath reached him, neither citizens nor clergy, neither divine nor public! He lived for 73 years, leaving behind millions of victims and hoards of the destitute. He was able to force the entire, enslaved country to its knees in mourning for him and wailed, he, unaffected, took a road paved with the tear-stained flowers to Elysium in his generalissimos' boots, accompanied by Mozart, Grieg, Chopin and Tchaikovsky...'