

## Flight from the USSR

*"These blue days and this sunshine of childhood"...*

*Antonio Machado's last words*

### Preface

On publishing this book, I did not consider its relevance in today's current political climate, rather, I naively believed that after the disintegration of the USSR, the Soviet past of Georgia would become nothing but a bitter memory. I was wrong. As it turned out, the past can come back to haunt you, especially if we ourselves cannot move away from it.

We have distanced ourselves from a country and its times, but failed to alter the mindset instilled, while being part of what was called the Empire of Evil, where benevolence was scarce, the space pioneer superpower failed to produce a simple item of clothing such as jeans. What could be more innocent than a pair of jeans? Because these could never be authentically replicated, the Soviet Union decided to ban their existence.

The banned jeans became sweeter than the forbidden fruit. The Soviet youth was determined to acquire them at any cost and, unsurprisingly, smuggling flourished. Occasionally, there would be a pair of genuine US-branded jeans among the stock smuggled from all over the world. In those days, every pair of jeans was believed to be American and, as the Soviet propaganda was set on destroying American values, many associated happiness with where jeans were thought to be in abundance.

There may have been some truth in this due to the simple fact that the Soviet State denied citizens their basic civil rights, the right to property among them. One could truly be free only in one's grave or, rather, the authorities would stop worrying about restricting your freedom only once you were safely 6 feet under.

Even official "atheistic monitors" knew that sooner or later they, too, would be laid to rest in the very same ground, therefore no one was denied the right to their own grave. There may have been other reasons, but a grave was the only property people were allowed to own. Such political attitudes marked the beginning of an altered Georgian mentality, unfortunately, for the worse. For centuries, the traditional Georgian graveyards were simple and modest, while in 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, therefore they were zealously taken care of and protected. People built and decorated them as if they were real estate property. The authorities turned a blind eye to the graveyard eccentricities. Soviet regime principles had not extended 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 naturally. If one was executed for a crime, the convict would certainly be buried, but he or she would not be allowed a marked grave. From the 1920s, thousands of executed convicts found their eternal resting place in various unmarked stretches of land, all across the country. Very often, even the diggers assigned to the job of preparing a deep hole (not a grave) were unable to identify

with certainty the places, especially where there were no prominent features or landmarks to guide them and since the work was often conducted in complete darkness when they had laid the body to rest.

It was uncanny, therefore, that one of these very diggers identified a barren field as the final resting place fifteen years after the burial. He was a mere grave digger. Had he been the killer, he would have surely forgotten the immense, unremarkable field. He thought he remembered the exact place where Gega Kobakhidze was buried, all those years ago. Unlike the poets, who shed tears over the graves, he did not weep that November night, whilst trying to remember the exact spot in the moonlight. He had kept the secret for many years only to finally share it fifteen years later with Gega's mother. God knows how many people had whispered to Natela that they knew of the precise location of her son's grave, but this time her mother's instinct told her that this man was telling the truth.

This man could not be lying, as a shadow, representing all he had witnessed throughout his lifetime, was cast over his face. Natela Machavariani guessed that he must be death himself in a way, so he must know all about the dead. For many years, Natela has been approached by numerous "well-wishers" claiming they could take her to her son's grave. And she followed each and every one on wild goose chases, only to discover that some were sent by the KGB, others demanded rewards and some had 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 own child, especially when the authorities hide such dark cruelties and there seems no hope of ever getting an official explanation. But there were no restrictions on hoping and dreaming for the best. Hope belongs to you and only you, helping you through your life, pushing you ahead, forcing you to go on with your life.

For many years various people nurtured this hope in Gega's mother, claiming he was seen in this or that prison or in a special Siberian camp. And 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 may otherwise die. The grave digger appeared when all hope was about lost.

Other parents had decided they preferred to face the truth, however painful it might be. They decided it was time to find their sons' final resting places. So when the grave digger approached, Natela immediately knew that he was authentic. She knew unerringly that he would be the one to bury their hope. There were only a few of them. The small group went in secret. It was cold and wet, but the women were not afraid of digging alongside the men. The rain stopped from time to time, but the soggy soil was so heavy that the men's rasping breath carried across the immense, barren, nameless field. Natela was sure that this was the precise place her son had been buried, though the field had long been the mass graveyard for countless executed political and criminal convicts of the Soviet regime. They had been laid to rest at night, in utter secrecy, without headstones, nor any indication of their identity.

Even the grave digger was taken by surprise when they heard his cold spade hit the coffin. He thought it an exceptional case for the executed to have been buried in a casket. 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, had nearly fainted at the clanking sound. The women wanted to give

him some water, but there was none available and the nearest village was miles away. Strangely enough, no one could say with any certainty at that point, which way they had come to the field. 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 a grassy field which concealed mass graves, as large as a city, beneath. Hiding the darkest historical secret of twentieth-century Georgia, the field had accommodated those outlawed by the Soviet authorities, brought from obscure underground dungeons to their final resting places. The grave digger miraculously produced some water for Misha Kobakhidze. Only minutes now distanced them from opening the metal coffin. Gega's parents were spared the agony, though God only knows how many times they had both thought about this precise moment. Others opened the coffin. Natia Megrelishvili immediately recognized the dead body. It was not Gega Kobakhidze.

Before they had found the exact burial place, on that rainy day in 1999 while people with strained faces continued to dig, there had been little hope of finding anything in the open field. In reply to Natela Machavariani's silent question, the strange-faced man said out loud:

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

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

"Gega's grave is here, I remember." The men continued to dig in silence. The sound of their accelerated 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 to 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, they're his jeans, they have 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 time. 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...

Tina

Fifteen years earlier, on 18 November 1983, a young woman with a hand grenade in her hand was standing in the open door of an unsuccessfully hijacked airplane. Her face was streaked with raindrops in expectation of the final. She was standing there with the hand grenade to bring the end in sight, in order to persuade the authorities to comply with their demand. The end was anxiously awaited after the unbearably lengthy siege of the plane. By then, for everyone involved, the end could not have come soon enough: both, for those watching the events unfold from outside and those sitting in the inside. Some passengers and crew members were already dead in the bullet-ridden plane; their corpses were lying in the aisle. Some were wounded – the silence of the plane was interrupted by their moans. One of them begged Tina not to detonate the grenade. For a long time Tina gave no answer, but finally, as if to herself, she said, with a touch of regret:

“Calm down lady, it isn’t even real.”

But the lady looked beside herself with terror, just like the other passengers.

Among their faces Tina searched for the face which was most dear to her. Finally she found it and looked straight into Gega’s eyes, but only for a moment. Their eyes met only for a second as at that exact same moment Special Forces, which were positioned above, stormed in and the plane was simultaneously filled with white smoke...

Ever since her childhood, Tina was stunningly beautiful. Boys found her incredibly attractive, their eyes following her wherever she went.

But as she grew older, it began to irritate her. Her beauty was continuously commented on. It had seemed to Tina that boys were only interested in her beauty, while she believed she had far more interesting characteristics. Possibly for that very reason, before meeting Gega, Tina had never been in love.

Tina was already a student at the Fine Arts Academy when Gega saw one of her paintings hung on a wall, he made a mental note to find out the phone number of its author. The author of the painting had such a sweet, naive voice that he thought she would have believed anything Gega would have told her. He informed her that he thought her painting was unique and that he would like to meet her, but also that he wanted to tell Tina, right away, that he was physically disabled. For a long time afterwards Gega could not explain why he had decided to lie about his physical state, although Tina’s reply at the time quite simply stunned Gega.

“Why should it matter to me whether you are disabled or not?”

The girl, who had a very childish voice, was more like an angel than a student of the Fine Arts Academy, and Gega hung up immediately. He thought it must have been due to confusion and general surprise, as he really had never expected such an answer. He had not thought for one minute that a young girl living in Tbilisi would say such a thing and he instantly regretted his ugly joke. Still he comforted himself by the fact that he had not revealed his true identity whilst on the phone. Gega was a young actor, talented and good-looking and although only twenty-two, he had already played many successful parts in films, which meant he was well-known in Georgia and extremely popular in Tbilisi at that time, especially among teenage girls. And that was exactly what Gega was trying to avoid – he did not want to use his popularity to meet new people, and that was why, he supposed, he had invented the story about being disabled. Gega thought it over a little longer and considered that backing out would only worsen the situation, so he dialed Tina’s telephone number once again.

“Hello,” said Tina with that childish voice, which Gega was already starting to miss. He felt, once again, lost and awkward, so he coughed to clear his throat.

Gega was considered one of the most talented among young actors, but it was quickly becoming difficult for him to play this part. Suddenly he felt frustrated that his professionalism was being brought into question.

“This is me again,” he finally, very hesitantly, managed to say into the phone, before clearing his throat once more.

“Where did you go?” Tina sounded genuinely surprised.

“Nowhere. I simply lost connection.”

“What were you saying?”

“When?”

“Before the connection went.”

“I said I was physically disabled and that I can’t move without a wheelchair.”

“That’s ok, I can come to your place and bring my paintings, if you don’t mind that is.”

“Oh no, I don’t want to bother you and also...”

“Also what?”

“Also I’m at home all the time as it is, so I prefer to get out and meet you somewhere.”

“I see. I didn’t want to trouble you, but it seems on the contrary...”

“I prefer to come to the Arts Academy after your lectures.”

“How will you recognize me?”

“Well, you’ll recognize me easily. I don’t suppose someone else like me is going to have a date in front of the Academy.”

“I’ve already told you, I don’t care about your physical situation...”

“But I still think it isn’t particularly pleasant that some disabled person in a wheelchair is waiting for a beautiful girl like you, after lectures...”

“A beautiful girl like me? How do you know what I look like?”

“I don’t, but whatever you may look like, your friends will still be surprised to see your disabled admirer in front of the Academy.”

“That’s my business.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow what?”

“Can I come tomorrow?”

“Our lectures finish at three tomorrow.”

“I’ll come by at three. I’ll be standing at the monument, I mean sitting.”

“I’ll come as soon as lectures are over.”

“Till tomorrow then.”

“I’ve probably tired you.”

“Oh no, don’t worry, but I should go...”

Gega was not really tired, but he did not want to continue the conversation, or rather he couldn’t continue it, so he said goodbye to Tina and hung up. Then he smiled because of some strange pleasure or joy at discovering that apparently there were completely different girls living in this city, maybe very few of them, maybe only Tina, but still...

Gega also realized that Tina couldn’t be lied to anymore, it really was a bad joke and Tina seemed to be the last person whose feelings Gega wanted to hurt.

He spent the whole night thinking, listening to his favourite vinyl discs. He had already decided that the next day he would go to the Fine Arts Academy, meet Tina, explain everything to her and apologize. He had already made up his mind, but still he couldn’t sleep. He kept thinking of Tina’s strangely childish voice – the girl unlike any other.

At noon he came by Dato’s place. Dato Mikaberidze was Gega’s friend and had a real Wrangler jacket, which Gega liked very much, however he had never mentioned this to Dato, since he knew that Dato was incredibly generous and would have immediately taken the denim jacket off and given it to Gega as a gift. Dato was generous not because his father worked at the Ministry of International Tourism and would certainly never leave his beloved son without jeans.

No, that was not the reason. Dato was simply very generous, period.

But that morning Gega decided to ask Dato if he may borrow his Wrangler jacket for a day, more precisely, for half a day – he would meet with Tina, apologize and return the denim jacket to the owner in the evening.

He called loudly from the street and Vazha, Dato's younger brother, looked out the window. Vazha's nickname was Simpleton, but he was a young man with an enormous heart, like his elder brother. Gega greeted him with embracing arms:

"How are you?"

"Alright."

"Shouldn't you be at school?"

"It burned down."

"When?"

"This morning, it's still burning."

"Wow! Where's your brother?"

"Dunno. He wasn't home when I woke up."

"You were probably woken up by the fire engines..."

Both laughed loudly and heartily. Gega waved goodbye to Simpleton and turned round, but Vazha would not let him go:

"Did you want something?"

"No nothing, I'll come by later."

"Tell me."

"Nothing special. I just wanted to borrow the Wrangler jacket for a day."

"Wait."

Simpleton disappeared from the window and within a minute was standing in the street, in front of Gega, with the denim jacket in his hand.

"Take it, Dato usually wears it all the time, but for some reason today he left it behind. You're lucky."

"No, I'll get it from him later."

"Take it, it's really mine, Dad bought it for me, but it's too large for me right now. Dato wears it temporarily. It's going to be mine eventually anyway. It's a real Wrangler. It's not gonna wear out or anything..."

Gega smiled and stretched out his hand to Simpleton.

"I'll bring it back today."

"Whenever you want. It's still too large for me anyway. If you want, you can have it until I grow."

Gega laughed loudly at this.

"And what about Dato?"

"Dato's going to be a monk, he won't need denim anymore..."

Now Vazha laughed loudly along with Gega who suddenly remembered that Dato really had a friend at a monastery, who he lately often went to see. Once or twice he had promised Gega to take him with him, but so far these had only been promises. Gega did not have the time to think about this at the moment. He thanked Vazha and gave him a Tbilisi-style hug.

Meanwhile, Tbilisi had been the capital for fifteen hundred years and, like in any capital, many good as well as bad things had happened. The worst thing that could have happened to Gega on his way to his date, happened. As he started to climb the street that continued up to

the Fine Arts Academy, three guys with knives met him and demanded that he take off the borrowed jacket. In those days, the old-timers still used to stroll in that part of the city, and that's why it seemed strange for some young lad to say to Gega: "Hey, man, come over here for a sec, I've got some business to discuss with you" and invite him into a residential building entrance. Stranger still though, was that no one who knew Gega seemed to be passing by at that moment. The weirdest part for Gega was when he discovered two other similarly "happy" guys in the entrance, but he was not at all scared. Quite the opposite, he even found himself smiling and calmly telling them:

"Don't waste your time guys, you're not taking it off me!"

Gega was an actor, though only twenty-two, already quite accomplished. In the building's entrance he spoke very calmly, like a person who is deeply confident in oneself, and with such composure that Gega surprised himself. It surprised him because Gega never claimed to be a hero and knew perfectly well that in Tbilisi, at that time, it was not at all rare for denim to be taken off people and, like others, he had thought about how he would behave in such a situation. He had always thought he would never let himself be killed, since he was not a supporter of senseless heroism, and especially when there was simply no need for it. In another place and at another time he would probably have wordlessly, and with a smile, given up what they so desired, but on that day he acted differently, and that was probably because the denim jacket was not his. Also, this may have been because he was on his way to a first date with a girl he had never met, but who had the most beautiful voice...

Two of the three had knives and, before they ran, both of them managed to stab Gega. In Tbilisi, in those days, most stabs were aimed at the legs or buttocks, even during a fight. But apart from the legs, Gega was also wounded in the stomach and, without realizing it, they had also stabbed the jacket which they had simply failed to snatch away from Gega.

When Gega stumbled out onto the street, he managed to take a few more steps, but having lost a lot of blood, soon lost consciousness. He fainted right there, on the pavement.

When he opened his eyes he was lying in a hospital ward. His mother was crying at the head of the bed very silently, whilst carefully stroking Gega's hand.

"Where's Tina?" Gega asked, looking at his mother.

"Who is Tina?" his mother said, drying her surprised and wet eyes.

"I don't know, I haven't met her yet either," said Gega after a little while, and smiled at his mother.

Gega was right, as he really hadn't met Tina, who waited for a long time after her lectures in front of the Fine Arts Academy, where a handicapped boy in a wheelchair was supposed to be, but no one had come to meet Tina. How could Gega have made it to the date if exactly at that same moment, he was being operated on in the hospital? He was only able to call Tina after several days.

"I'm sorry I couldn't neither come nor call, because I'm in hospital."

"Oh good."

"What's that?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean that, I wanted to say something else: it's good you had a valid excuse for not showing up that day."

"I'll meet you as soon as they let me out of here."

“You know, if you don’t mind, I could come and see you at the hospital and bring some fruit, or tell me whatever it is you like, and I’ll bring that – “ “No, please don’t come here, they’ll soon discharge me and I’ll come and see you myself.”

“I hope you get better soon.”

Gega spent several more days in hospital and was visited by his friends and acquaintances who treated him like a hero. By then the whole city knew that they had failed to take the denim jacket off Gega, but Gega himself joked stubbornly:

“I was actually trying to give it to them, but they wouldn’t let me.”

To this stubbornly repeated joke he wanted to say that he was not a hero and then – a year later – on death row in Ortachala prison of Tbilisi, he often remembered those hospital days when they wanted to make a hero out of him, while he just wanted to be an ordinary person. They did not keep him in the hospital for long, though he still found walking difficult, which, according to the doctors, was only a matter of time until he would fully recover. After the operation, Gega’s friends, the Iverieli brothers, who were studying at the medical college, managed to get a wheelchair for him. In the evenings, when he was finally left alone, tired from praise, he would roll in this wheelchair to the end of the corridor where a black telephone hung on a pink wall and call Tina.

He met up with Tina the very day after he was discharged from hospital. He went to the Academy in that wheelchair as he really couldn’t move around without it, but Tina did not easily forgive him for the lie and would not talk to Gega for a whole week, though he called her every day. Gega attempted some kind of explanation, but Tina simply would not speak to him, though she did not hang up either. She was well-brought-up and would listen to Gega speak, but never answered in reply.

Gega tried to explain to Tina something he hardly understood himself. Indeed, what explanation could there be for such a joke which could not be explained by anything other than the irony of fate – the fact that Gega had been forced to go on the first date with Tina in a wheelchair. Soon enough, he gave the wheelchair back to the Iverieli brothers, who returned it to the hospital. Dato flatly refused to take back the Wrangler jacket (well-washed from blood and carefully mended by Gega’s mother) and, of course, promised to give Gega a new pair of jeans.

In the meantime, Gega did not want anything but Tina, thought about nothing but Tina. Only Tina – the most beautiful girl in the world...