

It was December. It was cold. From time to time, sparse snowflakes fell and then stopped again. The water froze in the puddles, and in some places, a thin layer of snow covered the slush which had frozen as hard as stone, and the fallen leaves. Vana and I were sitting in silence next to the stove. Neighbours came in silently too. Some of them brought chick-peas; some of them brought boiled potatoes and ham, as they usually do during as they would if paying their respects when someone has died. And as for Vana he just sat, not saying anything, his huge wrists on his knees, looking stupefied as he watched the burning coals going out. He didn't greet anyone. Nor did any visitors bother to speak. They stood by the wall for a couple of minutes, then they shook their heads, silently placed the gifts on the table and left. People were afraid. I never get tired of yacking, as you can see very well. And back in those days, the devil possessed me completely; I felt so much like speaking to somebody. But how could I dare to natter in the presence of my grandfather, I forcibly held back the words that had come to my mouth. But my tongue was itchy and my whole throat hurt from unsaid words. I don't know, even now, what I had to say, apart from cursing, of course.

That was the state we were in when the coach and horses approached our gates. A weeping Anichka jumped out of it and she headed towards me, all upset. And what did I see? Elichka Vakhvakhishvili and her nephew got out too?! It goes without saying that it wasn't safe for them to come to our family at that time! But nevertheless they didn't let my sister travel on her own. And can you imagine, Vana didn't even greet these guests from Telavi. The only thing he did was to stand up when the guests came into the room, and shake their hands. We sat on the chairs. Elichka undid her bundle and took out warm underwear, socks and knitted gloves. After that she looked at my grandpa and said, 'Vana, you've got to go to Tbilisi. The boy will need warm clothes, especially if he is to be sent to Siberia. As for this paper, leave it with the NKVD. It is an appeal for a pardon. I have written it for you. You've only got to sign it and take it to the office, but be careful, they have to register it in the log book and write a number on it.'

Elichka and Elizbari returned to Telavi the same day, and we started getting ready. We decided to leave Anichka at home. So, we went to go to bed early, but there was a knocking on the door. We became tense. We didn't expect anyone this time. I opened the door carefully. It was a neighbour, a guy who was former bandit and a

former convict. First, the Mensheviks caught him pick pocketing, and afterwards, the Bolshevicks. I did not even know when he'd returned to Kamechaantkari. We called him Gelaguta, he was someone who was messed up and spiteful. 'They told me about Titiko's arrest, and I was very sorry' is what he said. After that he took a bottle of vodka from his pea-jacket. 'I know you are on your way there and I want to bless your journey.' Vana wasn't pleased, but what could he do? Anichka laid cheese, pickles and bread on the table. We sat at the table. Each of us drank three shots. 'I know everything about prison, I was in the political prisoners' cell,' says Gelaguta. 'You better eat something with your vodka,' replies Grandpa. 'You don't believe me, Uncle Vana, when I say that I really was in the same cell as political prisoners. That son of a bitch wouldn't stop. 'We called them Kontriks. But we really pitied them when they returned tortured after the interrogations. We looked after them, we bandaged their wounds.' 'Tortured?' Vana raised an eyebrow. 'Yeah, and how those unfortunate ones were tortured. There's a bucket of cold water in the interrogation room and in the bucket, there's a chain wrapped in a rope. At first they beat them with the chain until their backs and bums became like mincemeat, and after that they pour the water over those who have fainted to bring them back to consciousness for worse tortures. Some interrogators put out their cigarettes on the wounds; some of them use pliers to pull out the nails and teeth". I looked at Vana. He was pursing his lips, his face was totally red, and his eyes gradually became bloodshot. And Anichka was the opposite, she is pale and her lower jaw is trembling. Vana struck the table with his fist and growled, 'What rubbish are you talking, you kid, don't you want to live, you are boring even yourself?' But the guy wouldn't stop and continues foolishly, 'I'm not lying, I swear, I'm telling you the truth. That's nothing, I will tell you worse. One former district secretary was nailed by his wrists to the desk and they hit him with hot skewers, and a university professor had a heart attack immediately when they were about to sit him on a bottle". And at that moment, I saw that Grandpa Vana had enough, he didn't even stand up and that's how he hit him with his open palm. Vana had a heavy hand and Gelaguta flew from the chair, hit the wall with his back and then fell on the floor. 'Look at this son of a bitch, he didn't even take his galoshes off when he came into the house! Get out of here.' Vana was growling. Can you believe he said 'galoshes'? After when I accompanied Gelaguta, who was a bit recovered, to the gates, I was asking god in my heart not to let him swear, or I would have finished the job that grandpa hadn't completed. And he, like

an idiot kept asking, 'What the hell happened with your grandpa, I came to bless your journey and he...'

And in Tbilisi a strange thing happened. We decided first to go to the NKVD from the railway station to leave the appeal for mercy, as Elichka had instructed us, and after that to Metekhi prison. But how do you go about finding anything in such a big city? We stopped people passing by to ask them the way to the NKVD. I will never forget their frightened faces, they would lower their voices and give directions like that, you know man! One of them told us rudely to clear off, who knows, perhaps he thought we were informers. And we found our way somehow like that, by tram or on foot. There is no snow in Tbilisi whatsoever. Sometimes a nasty wind blows from the river Mtkvari and goes right through your flesh and bones. Finally we got there. We saw a long queue along the iron palisade. There are a lot of people. Everybody has worried and sad faces. Nobody talks to each other. From time to time soldiers armed with bayonets open the heavy gates, let five people through and close them again. What can we do? There is no other way but to stand and wait for our turn to come. Sometimes the gates open, not for letting people in, but for the cars arriving outside. It was nearly our turn when, you know what, a black car came up and stopped at the main gates. I am standing near Vana with hunched up shoulders and I don't even want to think about those people whom these cars serve. We are different and they are totally different: sealed with power, all mighty and dangerous! I cannot even look in their direction. I don't want to be a plank in their eyes, I don't want to attract their attention somehow, meanwhile Gelaguta's stories go round and round my head. I don't look in their direction but I feel with my whole body, oh dear, how persistently that boss in the astrakhan hat is watching us from the car, I can't see his face and I don't want to see it either. My blood freezes in my veins, you man! What does he want, I wonder, that miserable guy? Finally the gates opened, that damned car sailed inside and I sighed with relief. I looked and saw that Vana hadn't noticed anything. He stands deep in his troubled thoughts and sometimes strokes his beard.

In a little while a young officer came out of the gates and, can you imagine, came straight in our direction. He is asking Grandpa: are you such and such? Yeah, Vana answered, surprised. 'Both of you follow me,' he said and went ahead of us. We suddenly found ourselves in an empty yard and approached the three story brick

building. The armed security guard stood up straight in front of this officer and opened the iron door. We went up the stairs, reached the second floor, passed a dark corridor and hung around at some door. The officer looked inside, then he moved to one side and told us, 'In you go, what are you waiting for?' I cast a glance at Vana. He still holds himself calm and unperturbed. With my heart thumping I followed him. We found ourselves in a longish room. At the end of the room, a gigantic man in NKVD uniform stood up from a table covered with a cloth and walked in our direction. His right eye is damaged, he has an obvious scar from the injury on the forehead and he limps slightly on one leg. Malakia Inakavidze! I did not know whether to piss myself with fear or to rejoice. He moved the chairs noisily towards us, made us sit down and sat down himself. 'Vana, my congratulations. Your son's case is separated from other cases, and the prosecutors will sentence him to eight years.' That's what he said to us. 'What? Aren't you happy?' Well, even if he had not been happy, what could he possibly have done? I saw a tear in Grandpa's eye for the first time in my life. 'God give prosperity to your family,' Vana muttered and reached to kiss his hand. Malakia did not allow him do it and said, 'Titikia should thank you, not me. Go now and try not to speak much about our meeting. Leave these parcels here and I'll send them to him in prison. Otherwise it will take a month before they allow you to send them to him.'

Iliko Jandierei and all the members of Land Committee were executed before the New Year. Only Tite was saved thanks to Malakia, and I think one more woman, a secretary survived too. Life went on. Elichka Vakhvakhishvili taught my sister to cook kaurma mutton and we sent it to Tite in the Mordovian Autonomous Republic which was where he was exiled. Kaurma, dear, is stewed boneless mutton, you add to it a bit of garlic, bay leaves and black pepper, you pour boiling fat on top of it, and after that you seal it. It travels well and doesn't go off. And obviously we included a lot of Georgian sweets and dry fruits in the parcel. 'Don't deprive him of vitamins or he will get scurvy,' Elichka kept saying. Once in a while we also received letters from my father from the camp.

Meanwhile Anichka completed her courses and returned to us in Kamechaantkari. She started working as a nurse in our surgery. She said she would somehow save money for a couple of years, would study with private tutors and would apply for to medical school. As for me, I remained uneducated. Tite wanted me to go to

veterinary college, but he was arrested and what could I do? And since I was not particularly studious or clever, I didn't care too much about it. I graduated from school with the pass marks given to me out of kindness. I was sort of okay in Georgian and history. Vana wasn't disappointed that I remained an illiterate villager. On the contrary, he was even happy about it, because he had in front of him the examples of the well-educated Iliko and Tite. An advanced and famous man was in more danger at that time, than a good-for-nothing uneducated one. And my Grandpa himself had become rather strange.