The Iron Theatre

On the 30th of August 1907, Ilia Chavchavadze travelled from Tbilisi to Saguramo, accompanied by his wife and valet. His wife had on several occasions tried to persuade him they should not go: “The whole country’s in turmoil! It’s too dangerous…” But Ilia did not share his wife’s concerns and as usually happened he eventually got his way. And why not? A man in his seventies, as Ilia was, has surely earned the right to go wherever he chooses to go in order to get back to his home. And Ilia’s home was nothing less than Georgia itself, and not just some house in Tbilisi, Kvareli or Saguramo. And anyway, no matter how much turmoil his country was in, it was inconceivable that anyone would turn against a father figure such as Ilia was. Summer was coming to an end. Svetitskhoveli Cathedral resembled a woodpile carved in stone. The carriage was leaving Mtskheta. It rolled steadily down the dusty road that ran through the sod-den, silent flood plains. On either side of the road the crickets voiced a tireless, inexhaustible song, and as the hum passed from one to the next it seemed to cloak the weary travelers in a soporific half-silence, the heavy tranquillity of this last, leonine gold day of summer. Both Ilia and his valet, Iakob, carried revolvers in their pockets; now, though, they gave no more thought to any danger, as they were already pulling into the village of Tsitsamuri, only a stone’s throw from home. Somewhere a turtle dove cooed, unseen. Every now and then the scent of azaleas cut through the dusty air, their flowers flashing yellow before vanishing again, hidden behind bare hillocks. “I have grown old and feeble and my hair is turning grey,” Ilia intoned as he was borne along in the carriage, as if he was reciting one of his own poems, as if at this very moment the words were rising up from his soul, his grief-ridden, sorrowful soul, because Ilia, unlike his wife, was not afraid of his country’s turmoil; no, it was old age he feared, for it troubled him greatly – nay, broke his heart – to think that he should bow out of life at just that time, at the moment when the very thing he had been striving for unceasingly for seventy years, toiling for like some sweat-soaked blacksmith, some ever-vigilant physician, was one way or another finally approaching. That was the reason for Ilia’s distress. “If I were but twenty years younger I might have lived to see my country’s freedom,” he thought, scowling, swaying in time with the carriage that bore him onward. A gnat crawled up his cuff but he did not even have it in him to move his hand slightly, so comfortably was he nestled down amongst his sad thoughts. The carriage juddered to a halt, unexpectedly, awkwardly, almost as if it had not stopped but rather died. The horses let out a fearsome whinny. Iakob leapt down from the carriage and ran for the forest. A gunshot thundered. “What’s happening? What’s happening?” Ilia sprang to his feet to find someone pointing a gun at him. Iakob was lying face down on the ground. “What’s happening? What do you think you are doing?!” Ilia shouted again and suddenly there was a bright light, a lightning flash, and in that instant Ilia saw the whole sequence of events again, just as they had unfolded before: the carriage stopped; the horses whinnied; “coachman” jumped down from the carriage and ran for the forest; Ilia found himself facing the barrel of a gun. But this time Iakob was face down in a pool of blood. And this time he heard his wife scream, and at that moment everything became clear. This time Ilia did not ask what was happening. He closed his eyes and death took its hold. Only moments later the regional governor and three village constables passed by on their way from Saguramo and found Ilia; it was as if they had been hiding there all along in the bushes, waiting for the killers to finish their foul deed. If they had only hurried their horses onward at the first sound of gunfire the dreadful tragedy might never have happened. But whether by fate or happenstance, it seems the governor and his constables had fallen deaf, so deaf that they heard nothing at all. The Cossacks at the guard post heard nothing either, and by the time they did it was too late. “I ran everywhere in search of them, everywhere….” the Cos-sack sergeant was reported as saying. The men riding past on their ox carts heard nothing either, having arrived at the murder scene at almost the same time as the governor and his men. Ilia’s wife shouted, raved, and then dropped, unconscious, into the bloodied dirt. Nobody heard a thing. It was as if all of Georgia had momentarily lost its hearing, as if men and women, young and old, laymen and clerics had fallen under some hellish curse. Even the coachman, the only witness, whom the governor and his constables found still sitting on his bench at the front of the carriage, could reveal no more than this: “There were four of them. They were swarthy, and dressed in black.” Bodies lay on the ground in pools of blood all around him, whilst he sat there on the coachman’s bench staring at the horses’ gleaming rumps. Nobody else knew anything. Ilia’s wife was still unconscious. Her entire face was a battered mass of bruises from a rifle butt. She was taken to Tbilisi, still unconscious, the very next day at the stub-born insistence of Doctor Kimonte. At five in the morning she came to, briefly, and raved in her sleep: “Tell Ilia not to go; it’s too dangerous!” But it was now a day since Ilia had died alongside his valet – or more precisely since he had been killed – and he was there, in the very next room, laid out with his arms folded across his chest. At that time the sight of a maimed and bloodied corpse was not enough to shock a man, but when a servant led the journalists into the room to see the murdered man they staggered backwards as if shot, as if they could not quite believe their eyes. They stood on the balcony, sobbing, clasping each other like orphaned cubs. Soon all of Georgia sobbed with them. Ilia had not just been killed, he had been stripped of his possessions. The newspapers reported that Ilia's overcoat, jacket, waistcoat, gold watch and spectacles were missing, along with the bag in which he kept his identity papers. His purse, too, was nowhere to be found. Even the boots had been stripped from his fellow traveler's feet. The revolvers that Ilia and his valet carried had gone, too. All that was left was a single jacket cuff, found at the side of the road in a pool of blood. "There were four of them," the coachman had reported, "dressed in white chokha cloaks, with officers' stripes on their epaulettes." According to the district doctor who carried out the autopsies, Ilia would not have lived for much longer even if he had not been killed when he was, for he had a "fatty heart" and "bad lungs". But none of that was any consolation to a people in grief. It is one thing for a nation's poet to die, another for him to be killed at the hands of robbers, with such treachery, in such an underhand manner. For in killing him that way they kill you, too, and what is worse, you become an unwilling collaborator in the murder, a traitor's accomplice, and you grant the traitor refuge within your soul, and you can neither root him out, nor distance yourself from him. For it was not from the forest that the traitor ambushed the poet, nor was it the forest he hid in afterwards; no, the traitor came from within you and it was to you that he returned. "Traitor, show yourself! Confess! Repent!" shouted the press, and the people bowed their heads further and further, became more and more engulfed by their feelings of guilt, of guilt and shame caused by their own blindness, in-difference, carelessness and helplessness, because they had not been able to protect the one whose care they had been entrusted with, to protect their poet from the wolf. "Three of them wore white jackets, and one wore an old coat and black trousers," the coachman had said, but there was point trying to determine whether these four bandits had been dressed in chokhas, Turkish jackets or waistcoats. What difference did it make? They had not come out of nowhere, they had not fallen from the sky, and no amount of punishment or torture would help the country to heal itself before it tore itself apart, and even if the country deserved a new beginning, it was not from its own ruins that it would be reborn. The political parties eyed each other with suspicion. Everyone eyed each other with suspicion. And as for the church, whatever anyone said, everyone knew that it was crumbling, collapsing in on itself. Every corner, every inch of Georgia turned its gaze towards Tbilis, which awaited the arrival of the poet's corpse from Saguramo. Bells tolled, black flags fluttered, candles flickered. A requiem was held in every church. Children's choirs sang songs; the monks of the Monastery of the Holy Mother in Mtskheta sang hymns and chants. The long, meandering procession, whitened by dust kicked up from the road, bent forward at the waist under the weight of the poet's coffin, a coffin so heavy they could bare-ly carry it, like an enormous decommissioned church bell, and as forlorn as an unlit chandelier. In deserted villages across the country dogs barked in agitation and cockerels crowed. And still the people came, hastening towards Tbilisi, crying, groaning, voicing their terrible grief and woe, like people forcibly uprooted and driven out of their lands. In every town shops and inns closed their doors, and any that did not do so for fear of the police found their fellow citizens closing them by force. Tbilisi was troubled, unsettled, in mourning. Everywhere the houses were draped in sackcloth. The poet's portrait gazed out from its cornice frame, suspended high among the flowers and funeral wreaths, like God gazing out from the clouds, pure and guiltless. The tips of flagpoles, crosses and icons glittered brightly in the sunlight. And then suddenly, at the head of the procession, the carriage pulled into view, the horses dusty and streaming with sweat, and behind it the moaning stream of people carried the coffin like an upturned boat into Tbilisi. They laid the poet's body to rest in Sioni Cathedral. The bells tolled their dull toll. Children, monks, choirs of young men and women sang their hymns. Georgia was in mourning. They hastened to Sioni from every part of Georgia, from the mountains, from the valleys, from the coast, to kneel be-fore their murdered saviour for the last – or indeed the first – time. He lay there in his coffin, as proud as he had been in life, haughty, calm, raised up on a mound of flowers, raised up by death, and even in death still shone with hope and with faith. Mothers carried their yowling nursing infants forward, raised them on high, as if they might somehow remember, might somehow find some of his grace and goodness transferred to them. A bird sang in the cathedral window. Photographers positioned and repositioned their cameras. And once again the bells tolled their dull toll, the choirs sang, the nursing infants yowled, once again the bird sang in the window, once again the kneeling people moaned, clawed their faces, once again they dashed their heads against the earth and once again felt proud to be mourning this man, this noble man, the man who had first told them to protect as they would protect themselves anyone who helped revive the vision of their homeland even after it had been carved up for consumption, any-one who brought their homeland back from the dead, gave it new life, washed it clean; anyone who put the words into their mouths, the fire in their hearts, the ideas into their minds; anyone who routed those who cursed and abused their land and under cover of darkness robbed and pillaged its treasuries, shrines, churches and burial places; anyone who steadied it as it began its ascent once more, who helped when it was laden down; anyone who placed a golden cradle on the floor of Lake Bazaleti and in it laid hope, wrapped in its swaddling clothes of stubbornness, endurance and resolve; anyone who kissed its bread and toasted its vines, who cherished its livestock and asked its out-buildings and cow-sheds to bless it with abundance and plent, who considered poverty as wealth, weakness as strength, and who ultimately belonged to his homeland in flesh and blood, who was both a child of it and a parent to it.

This was the man who had died, and it was only now that many of the people realised this, and now the wish to kneel and the desire to repent took even stronger hold. They were overcome by grief. Nothing – neither drought, nor hail, nor flood, nor conflagration – could rob them of hope as much as the death of this one, seventy -year-old man. A terrible feeling of immense, unquantifiable, irreparable loss engulfed them. All of Georgia hastened to Tbilisi: young and old, men and women, scholars and laymen. Even those who were in shackles and could not come made their voices heard nonetheless, and from their cells they as one let out a cry that was both sorrowful and uplifting, entrusting the grief, the heartache and the life-affirming tears of those left behind to the wind, to the birds, to the sun's rays. With his death the poet had achieved what Georgia's ill-fated kings had striven for in vain: all of Georgia stood united around the poet's coffin, just as in times gone by they had gathered round the royal standard, fearless, generous, to fight some other battle. They stared at each other from under furrowed brows, furtively, stealthily, unaccustomed to each other as they were, angry with each other only because of their common weakness, but at heart still close, inseparable, carved from the same block. Bell towers rang out across Georgia, from every tower whose bells had not been melted down for the empire's cannons. And the people kept coming and coming. From each of the city's seven gates people flowed through in seven unbroken streams, then met, mingled, turned into a restless, gusty sea. And as each rank of mourners filed through, they told of more who followed on behind. The funeral commissioner was forced to post-pone the day of the funeral. Tbilisi resembled a refugee camp. They came on foot, on horseback, by cart, raft and train, each bringing offerings to leave near the casket, as if this was a Saint's day, as if they were pilgrims visiting a shrine. The gardens at Vere, Mushtaidi, Ortachala, Alexander, the streets, squares, bridges, the fortress at Narikala, the banks of the Mtkvari and the rafts, rope-operated fery boats and ship mills moored upon it – all were shrouded in a black sea of mourners. Thousands of slender church candles flickered incessantly on every surface: on the coachman's seat on the carriage, on window sills, shutters on the front of inns, rams' horns, rocks, trees – anywhere it was possible to stick a candle. And whether they had travelled to Tbilisi or were from the city itself, people spent the night in the streets, under the stars, where they would be clos-er to him, closer to Ilia's soul, the soul that had been chased from his broken body by the bullet from a Berdan rifle. The people lit fires wherever they could, gathered around them and shared what they knew – true or false – about the deceased, about poor murdered Ilia. And as they sat there, swept up in the emotion and passion, they found themselves fabricating stories, inventing new leg-ends, and believing their own words. No sooner had someone at one end of Tbilisi told how Ilia had warned the Tsar to watch his step with Georgia, the tale would spread, until the people at the other end of the city were hearing it too, on the rafts moored up on the river under the Metekhi Church. They had even lit fires on the rafts, and huge shadows flashed and danced on the sheer rock face above them. In the waters below the fiery reflections swayed from side to side as if somehow tethered, like a small wineskin left tied to a raft in the water to cool, tugged at by currents that never quite managed to carry it off. Inexhaustible, the fires clawed at the pitch darkness, agitating it, finally ripping it apart, dragging the nursing infants from their dream, and another day of mourning dawned with their yowling cries. And so it carried on until the ninth of September, and on the ninth of September, they bore Ilia's body out from Sioni Cathedral to the sound of bells and wailing, and carried it up the steep slopes of Mtatsminda, just as Jesus had carried his cross to Golgotha. This was their cross, and their Golgotha. The bells tolled. The black flags fluttered. Incense wafted through the open doors of the cathedral. The choirs sang. And when the coffin appeared through the haze of incense, like the sun through the clouds, the people waiting in the street outside gave out a low moan, as if someone had laid a hand upon an open wound. The people at the front of the procession carried flags, crosses and icons. Behind them came the coffin lid, borne aloft. Behind that came the choir, be-hind the choir came the wreaths, behind the wreaths another choir, behind the choir came school pupils in groups of four, and then another choir; behind that choir came 150 deputations, from public institutions, schools, hamlets, towns, unions, publishers and newspapers, each with their own wreaths; after the deputations came the priests, and after the priests came a cart, covered in sackcloth and bearing the coffin itself, surrounded by mourners: famous men of letters, public figures and former colleagues from Ilia's own newspaper, Iveria. Then followed the rest of the mourners: noblemen and artisans, merchants and lawyers, performers from theatre troupes, the philharmonics and the opera, peasants and workers, young men and women from academic and trade schools, Georgian army officers and representatives of craftsmen's and workers' guilds. And people. People, people and more people, countless people, from every walk of life, speaking every language, people of every religion, every shape and size, na-tive Georgians and those from elsewhere in the Caucasian Babylon. The choirs sang in turns. Orchestras from several schools played the funeral march in turns. Stunned, saddened faces stared out from every open window. Balconies, rooftops, verandas were shrouded in a sea of black. Photographers climbed up onto the roofs to take photographs of a procession which had no visible beginning or end. So many people!, the newspapers noted the next day, so where had they been until now? And although the police were present, the vast sea of people managed itself, directing its own flow like some elemental force. There was so little space that people were issued with tickets allowing them onto the ram-parts around St. David’s Church, but others scaled the walls, too, so as to get one more glimpse of that bullet-pierced forehead, to see the man who had been their shield, now shattered, the guardian of their pride, their conscience. People hung off the walls and ramparts, until the church seemed to be covered by a frozen waterfall. The crowd stretched from the main gates of the church right down to the state theatre, and as the first clods of earth rained down onto the lid of the coffin the people kneeled as one.