The Pass of the Persecuted

Dedicated to my daughter, Salome

The pass began much earlier, oh, God, before I put my foot on it. My child and I, my parent, near relations, those dearest to me, the living as well as the dead, and even those who will be born in the future, we all, together have been following the road along the pass for many centuries. We walk in silence. It is snowing and it is freezing… How weary is the body, and how utterly exhausted is the soul. Even the heart seems to have stopped beating. Nevertheless, we keep on walking stubbornly and faithfully. But there is no end to the road… 'Help all the persecuted, protect all those who are miserable, oh, great Lord, oh, faith'… This is roughly the way I was speaking with God on that terrible night of the second of Octo-ber. It was perhaps the most terrible night on the highest point of the Sakeni-Chuberi pass. It was during that night that I saw sev-eral people die in my arms like birds.

I left my paternal house in the village of Machara on the evening of the twenty-seventh of September. There are four of us in my old Volga[1]: my mother, my brother, a friend of mine, Gela Mamporia, and me. Salome and my wife are in Tbilisi[2]. That is why I am rather calm. It was on the twenty-seventh of September that Sukhumi[3] fell. Corps and battalions with various numbers and formidable names have not been able to force their way over the Kodori[4] bridge. So people have to take the only possible way of saving their lives (everyone remembers Gagra[5], and not only Gagra). That way is the road to Svaneti[6]. The persecuted are in a hurry. Some of them go by car, others go on foot… You can even see people riding horses in the direction of the mountains.

Lined up soldiers are not marching in step. They are going to the village of Merkheuli. BMPs overloaded with soldiers make a great noise while moving. The Rus-sian abbreviation 'BMP' is a better name for them than its nice Georgian translation: 'in-fantry battle machine'. It is a brilliant sun-ny autumn day – 'bright, colourful, mild, queenly.' 'A chocolate day', the name I gave to such days at the seaside. Maize is ripening in the fields, and Isabella (a kind of grape) in yards. In short, it is harvest time. Tangerine and orange trees blossom, the rich odour of citrus plants fills the air.

The sea is blue under the evening sun. My mother is saying goodbye to her much-loved house and yard with tears in her eyes. 'It's a good thing', she says to my brother and me, 'that your father is not alive'.

The old battery makes one last effort and the car starts by some miracle.

I hurry, I must catch up with my friends. They are to share their petrol with me, I am running short. I leave a female relative of mine with my neighbour, he has room in his car. But I regretted it later, for she did not go with the neighbour, but she left on foot instead.

We cross Machara bridge, and I turn to the right. The road is packed with vehicles. Two BMPs are rattling in front of my car. Soldiers are sitting in every possible place on the BMPs. The expression on their faces is vague, their eyes staring. I am about to pass them when an open jeep appears unex-pectedly from the opposite side. Soldiers in black uniforms start shooting with sub-ma-chine guns, emptying their magazines, bul-lets whistle over our heads. I brake abruptly. 'Go back, damn you', the

black uniforms shout at the BMP drivers. ‘Go back, or we’ll kill all of you! Who gave you the order to leave the town!’

Somehow I manage to slip through be-tween the stationary BMPs and the jeep.

‘Another escape’, I say to myself.

Three days before the fall of Sukhumi, on the twenty-fourth of September, it was my birthday. As I remember myself, on my birthdays my mother would always kill a rooster, light a candle and pray to God for my health. Two of my elder brothers had died in childhood and my parents were al-ways afraid lest something should happen to me. And, as if to spite them, I was con-stantly falling ill.

Sukhumi was being bombed ruthlessly on that day. Fierce battles were raging at a distance of ten kilometres from us. It was the only birthday of mine that my sleep-less mother, her eyes full of fear, failed to remember. I did not mention it either. For some reason I never liked that day. Only my brother remembered it in the after-noon. My mother began to cry bitterly. She could not forgive herself for having forgot-ten. I tried to calm her, saying it was not the time for birthdays. This twenty-fourth of September might become the day of death for who knows how many people… That morning several bombs explode near our house. A neighbour standing by the gate of his house is killed. The shock wave breaks the windows on the ground floor of our house. Several machine guns, located in Machara, fire almost incessantly. Machara is firing and is being fired at… About twenty people are huddled in the basement – neigh-bours, friends and relatives, fugitives from Sukhumi. The basement walls of my pater-nal house are about a metre thick. My father was seventy when he began to build this new house. It took him five years to build it. The last thing he did was to varnish the floors of the beautifully con-structed clean building. He said we would live in a nice house from that time on. The next day, at daybreak, he died of heart failure. It hap-pened on the twenty-sixth of November, 1990. Three days later, when the varnish had dried, and the building had been aired, we laid Father in the hall. This is how he spent his last nights in the house built with such difficulty. My father was a military man, and in the last years of his life he delivered lectures on civil defence. He believed there would be a war between America and the Soviet Union. He thought it was inevitable. He feared that there would be a nuclear war, that is why he used a lot of iron construc-tions to strengthen the basement walls, he did not spare cement either, and left tubes with ventilation filters in the walls and the ceiling. When I asked him what they were for, he answered, if the house was hit and de-stroyed by an atomic bomb, and there was no exit left, we might breathe air through those tubes. In short, I used to tell that story to my friends as a good joke, but…

In spite of the Georgian-Abkhazian con-frontation, my father had so many friends among the Abkhaz that he would never have imagined the possibility of such a war; I say it again: he only feared that there might be a war between America and the Soviet Union.

So, it is the twenty-fourth of Septem-ber. We are sitting in the basement of my father’s house – men and women, children and adults, there is even a baby in its cradle. The cradle is rocking, Sukhumi is being bombed, the Georgian artillery keeps firing back. Now and then a fighter will whistle across the sky. The old ones remember my father, bless him and say that Niko’s base-ment has saved them. They intend to go to his grave after the war is over, to thank him, and then to lay a

rich table in his memory, in Machara. I have a premonition that something evil is awaiting us, but I can't share it with any-body.

My mother brings in wine in a three-litre closed jar – Isabella, made by my father two months before his death.

We have a glass each.

This is how my father said goodbye to us with his wine, as if blessing our way (which was full of mystery for us at that time). Who knows when I will see his grave… Who knows who lives in his house now.

The defeated army presents a pitiful spectacle.

The fighting men walk with their heads lowered. Their pride is hurt. They can't look anybody in the face. Some of them try to pass out of sight of their acquaintances, to look aside.

Exhaust gasses from cars, trucks, BMPs, 'Shilkas' (a kind of anti-aircraft weapon system), BTRs (the Russian abbreviation for 'APC') and tractors darken the route. We move forward slowly. Here and there the road is blocked by military equipment.

Soldiers are carrying 'Mukhas' (a kind of anti-tank rocket launcher), grenade launch-ers and mortars. Various pieces of military equipment can be seen in the dense smoke. I don't even know their names. People who see them are astonished. They can't under-stand why the army, not very badly armed, and not so small in number, was defeated.

In spite of the fact my father was a pro-fessional military man, and had served in the Soviet Army for twenty-five years, it is particularly now that I feel how I hate weap-ons. I hate 'Kalashnikovs' and 'Makarovs', 'Semyonovs'[7]… I am sure weapons have never done any good. They only kept on bringing about an endless series of deaths and vengeance. What concealed sadism is rooted in the names given by the developers of the art of murder to their handiwork: the 'Vasilyok' automatic mortar (I hope you know that this is a kind of a wild flower, the cornflower, that dots a meadow beau-tifully), 'Nona', a most beautiful woman's name, the ninth step of the musical scale, a stanza of nine lines; 'Edelweiss' is also the name of a rocket launcher like 'Nona'; 'Aca-cia' too, and the well known 'Limonka' (not a lemon, but a diminutive name for it).

I have seen children, old men and wom-en torn to pieces by 'Vasilyoks', 'Aca-cias', 'Nonas', 'Edelweisses' and 'Limonkas'. And that is why I came to hate weapons, the more so as today they fall so easily into the hands of crazy and vicious people, those who prove by their deeds how far away we are from the civilized world, how far and pitifully rejected. Miserable is the country where a bullet is valued more than a kind word, where hatred means more than love.

The traffic stops. The engine of the 'Shilka' ahead of me cut out, and the way is blocked. I stop the engine and get out of the car. A dispirited acquaintance comes up to me. 'Do you know what I saw?' he says in a trembling voice. 'A woman was crossing a bridge over the river Kelasuri, just now, about two hours ago… she was carrying a heavy bag, muttering something to herself. I sensed she felt unwell. I asked if I could help her. She opened the bag and still muttering showed me the dead body of her child disfig-ured by 'Grad' shrapnel.

In Merkheuli I caught sight of Nodar Natadze. He was wearing a soldier's khaki uniform. He was on foot. I was told in Gents-vishi[8] that he had been physically assaulted. Some women had even

struck him. I don't know whether it is true or not, but it is clear that women didn't like him much even in peaceful times. The persecuted attacked him, demanding: 'Why are you leaving Sukhumi? Wasn't it you who deafened us reviling Rus-sia on TV? Why are you fleeing now? Go, fight the Russians. Can you ever have had a better chance? Or help people leave the place first, and then go away yourself… Aren't you the head of the Georgian Parliament's Defence Committee? Who has ever seen an army running away with its commanders not caring a brass farthing for the misery of people? Where are you fleeing to?'

It must be said though, people find it easy to do bad things to Natadze. The sins of the others are added to his own, and whenever they meet him only he is held responsible.

We stop at Tsebelda[9] for half an hour, waiting for our friends' cars. A police of-ficer we know gets out of the Zhiguli[10] in front of us. He has a bleeding wound on his forehead. 'Some young rascals stopped us at the Merkheuli picket. They told me to give them my weapons as I was leaving the front. I got so angry, I beat my head against the wheel. I know very well that none of them is a fighter, they will sell all the weapons they confiscate from people'.

We move through the tunnels, the Kodo-ri flows noisily in the gorge to the right.

'Beyond this gorge Tkvarcheli[11] begins', my brother Gia says.

The cars leave the tunnels.

It is getting dark. In places the asphalt road is replaced by a gravel road.

We are approaching Azhara[12].

Suddenly a Moskvich[13] blocks our way. Two young people in military uniforms get out of the car briskly.

'Get out of the car', one of them shouts and aims his gun at me. 'If I find even a sin-gle bullet on you, I'll shoot you in the head!

We are to fight here, and you… and you are taking guns away with you…'

He looks my car over greedily as he says this.

I do not get out of the car, and try to tell him that I have no weapons, nothing but my father's sporting gun.

'Give us the gun, give it to us, what do you want it for? Give it to me!' he shouts, mad with fury.

Suddenly a column of cars approaches us from behind, their headlights light up everything around. The incessant sound of horns is heard.

'All right, go, go away quickly!' he mut-ters scared, lowers his gun and runs to-wards the 'Moskvich'.

Later on I saw him in Sakeni[14] bargaining simultaneously with several owners of new cars: 'I'll take you across the pass with the Ural[15], but you must leave me your cars'.

We are stopped in the middle of Azhara. They have a post there. Cars are searched. They are looking for weapons.

A sad-looking youth comes up to me.

'I have only my father's sporting gun', I say to him.

'All right. You needn't open your boot. What has happened? How did Sukhumi fall?' I am surprised that he used the Geor-gian word for 'boot' instead of the widely used Russian word

'bagazhnik'…

We move on.

Several minutes later the cars are stopped again. The sound of shooting can be heard. They take away Omar Anjaparidze's car.

We stop in Azhara for the night, in the Gujejianis' yard. We look for Omar's car, but cannot find it.

'Our clothes are in the car too,' says Omar, trembling with cold and anxiety. He has only a shirt on.

A neighbour of the Gujejianis has killed turkeys and chickens. He has laid on an enormous spread in a long hall and invites everybody. People have supper in turn.

We spend the night in the car.

The next day finds us in Sakeni, the last settlement in 'Abkhazian Svaneti'[16]. I look at the odometer. The distance between Machara and Sakeni turns out to be exactly a hundred kilometres.

It is here that the pass begins. Nobody can tell me its name. Only Ural military lor-ries, BMPs and tractors can cross the pass. So can Nivas. A car will not be able to go up these ascents without being towed. Es-pecially now that it has started to rain, and what is more, the heavy transport has dam-aged the road in places.

The distance from here to Chuberi[17] is about fifty kilometres. Some contend it is sixty-five. More than ten thousand people and thousands of cars are crowding Sakeni. The persecuted hold a consultation about what to do next. Some leave their belong-ings with local acquaintances, the majority leave it with strangers, and continue their way on foot. There are some who prefer to throw their cars down the rocks into the precipice, saying: 'You are not mine any longer, and I don't want you to be owned by anybody else!' There is no end to the stream of people.

While we are in Sakeni several BTRs come from Chuberi through the pass. They approach us on their huge rubber tyres so noiselessly that at first we don't even no-tice them. We also see Zeikidze, the chief of the Georgian police, surrounded by his colleagues, his wounded arm supported by a sling hanging from his neck.

On the twenty-eighth or twenty-ninth of September, Moscow radio announced that Zhiuli Shartava[18] had been shot. The perse-cuted wonder where and how he could have been taken prisoner, who else might have been shot together with him, and so on. In low whispered conversations rumours are slowly born, and spread with lightning speed.

I had several prophetic dreams in the mountains. My relative's child used to say that he was taken ill with a dream. I, too, was taken ill with several amazing and terrible dreams, different from any other dreams, distinct and coloured. Some mys-terious being showed me the whole way which I was to pass within a few days, in an instant, and as it were, whispered into my ear several things, all of which came true. It was that being who woke me up at dawn on the first of October, at about four o'clock, as though ordering me to cross the pass…

Svans warn us that it will begin snowing soon, and the road along the pass will be blocked by the tenth or fifteenth of Octo-ber. We are in a hurry. A few helicopters manage to transport a small

number of ba-bies with their mothers.

On the twenty-ninth of September I see Gia and Gela off. They are leaving for Chu-beri. I give them a bag each. 'Take these, and Mother and I will wait for a helicopter'. But I have already decided to leave my mother with relatives (they will not be able to cross the pass on foot either, and hope that some helicopter will take them). As for me, I am to start for the pass with my friends the next morning.

I don't want to walk along this road with my brother. I am afraid that my knee may fail me in the middle of the pass. My broth-er will never leave me, and God knows how all that will end…

'We'll go to Zugdidi[19],' says Gela. 'We'll send you a truck from there. I have friends and relatives…'

I know they will not be able to send a truck, still I agree with him thoughtfully, 'Well, boys, we rely on you. Don't stop anywhere on the pass. Don't rest till you reach Chuberi…'

I have beautiful bags in my car, but in spite of this I put my baggage, weighing about ten kilogrammes (mostly clothes), into a polythene bag (like most of the per-secuted. I don't want to differ from the oth-ers, especially not now). With great effort I manage to sew a thin clothesline to the sack to make it possible for me to pass my arms between the ropes, and a super-knapsack is ready.

It is the very polythene bag in which
America sent us flour during the war. A green peacock is painted on the bag; it looks very helpless and ridiculous now. In short, the green peacock embraces all my prop-erty.

Farewell, my dears, coloured bathrobes, shoes bought in Absoyuz, symbols of a great favour to me on the part of the shop man-ager. Farewell my dear, most respectable overcoat, snorkel masks, my honourable English and Czech neckties, my beautiful French coffee set, resembling a coquettish woman… You are no good to me now, and
I leave you in the car; I sacrifice you to the gods of thieves, but I will take this little doll, Salome's mascot, with me, this perfume too, this... oh, avarice, avarice, you inseparable demon of mankind – my baggage is about fifteen kilogrammes now. But, later on, it returns to its original weight. My old jacket, tried and tested in traveling… My scarf, my stick, even my cap which I will lose for ever in a few hours, are ready for action.

It is six o'clock in the morning. Guram Kakulia and I have a breakfast consisting of the bread my mother baked on a low fire by some miracle (very much like the bread Robinson Crusoe used to bake), canned meat and golden honey in a golden Indian tea tin. I am amazed at you, Rusiko An-japaridze, how you managed to take honey with you in such a panicky turmoil. We praise the honey, 'Oh, oh what honey, what honey!' Imitating Dodo Abashidze's[20]
'What a rifle! What a rifle!' If you want to walk in the mountains you must only eat honey. Khergiani[21] liked honey. In short, we try to cheer each other up and encourage ourselves. It must also be mentioned that we have not lost hope of returning to Sukhumi.

Before we set out I find a pretext and go to my car, my 'Tiger', raise myself into the driving-seat and say farewell to Tiger. 'I don't think, old man,' I say to him, 'that this is our last trip. I thank you for every-thing, Tiger, and for the last years, in partic-ular. You made me love Sukhumi and Gul-ripshi[22],

the sea and the whole world better. Nobody knows what you mean to me, how I love you. You are my magic pal, my con-fidant. Very often we would ignore the sad-ness of the world, run away to some out of the way place, seeking solitude, and a few hours later we would come back home quite calm. We have built a house together, we have helped others together. I have to leave you here, but you must understand me. You can't get over the pass. The situation would be different if you were a Niva, even though a Niva has sometimes to be towed by trac-tors on those damned slopes. Forgive me… Stay here for a while, in the Tsalanis' yard… and whatever may happen, even if a long time passes, I will find you. We still have quite a long way to go together. I don't say 'farewell'. Goodbye, my friend goodbye!'

I pat Tiger and thanked the factory that made it, a hundred times. For some reason I remember an old Georgian film, 'Spring in
Sakeni'.

My friends make signs for me to hurry up.

The first rise begins.

I must say here that wordless monologues and dialogues, irony and jokes became my fellow-travellers in one of the most terrible periods of my life.

It was raining all the night and there was lightning and thunder too. The shivering pine-forest, drenched with rain, was occa-sionally lit up by flashes of lightning. We slept in the 'Willys' covered with tarpaulin, or, to be more exact, we pretended to be sleeping. The rain filtered through the tar-paulin and at daybreak we crawled out of the car half wet.

It is still raining in the morning. In for-mer times rain was full of tenderness and romance for me, but now it has become a mistress of misfortune.

The beginning of the pass is jammed with cars: ZILs and MAZes, Urals and GAZes, Nivas and Willyses. It is impossible to enumerate these worthy vehicles hope-lessly waiting for their turn. It is pouring with rain, the road is blocked. The reddish plasticine-like mud can only be walked on by human feet.

The bodies of trucks are covered with polythene, tarpaulin and pine-tree branches. The crying of babies can be heard. People are sitting round dozens of fires in the for-est. They are warming themselves and cook-ing. A stout woman is carrying a plate full of hot rolls to one of the cars, someone is kneading dough, and someone is peeling potatoes. It seems that some of the families had been stocking up much earlier before Sukhumi fell.

Here is a bullock cart with a team of oxen, covered with cardboard. Frightened and wide-open eyes of children are looking at me from inside it. Here you have a gipsy encampment.

You can meet anyone here. Ramin Ni-nua and his family are here. I greet Ramin's dispirited girls. I try to comfort them:

'Cheer up, girls! Put on a good show!' 'I have been waiting for a tractor for four
days', says Ramin, 'but is it possible to clear this road? And if I am not able to take this
MAZ across the pass I shan't be able to sup-port my family'.

We walk along the road. It is difficult to move, to walk round the vehicles jammed into bottlenecks.

Helicopters flew over our heads sev-eral times. Each time they appear someone shouts, 'Abkhaz paratroopers! Abkhaz paratroopers!' People rush to the woods. The soldiers, walking nearby, aim rocket launchers and machine-guns at the helicop-ters. And the helicopters take the persecuted from Sakeni to Chuberi. At the beginning of October only a few helicopters are seen to fly. On the first or second of October, only one. The helicopter is chock-full of people and crashed into the mountain and exploded. The passengers and pilots were killed.

An old man in a peaked hat is having a rest by the roadside. He looks ironically at the walking soldiers and addresses someone loudly:

'Look! They don't even have shovels. They didn't like to dig trenches, son. Was it possible for them to win the war in this way?'

'Why didn't you help us?' shouted a lanky officer angrily.

'Do you want me to fight instead of you?'

'Shut up, or else…'

The soldiers try to calm the enraged of-ficer.

'I am not afraid of you at all, sonny. I haven't got anything left but my tongue,' says the old man with a bitter smile.

It is raining again. Our feet stick deep in the mud. My thin-soled shoes slip terribly. One step forward, two steps back! I am go-ing forward in the way Lenin did. I, a Stakh-anovite[23] of mountaineering. The pride of the advanced!

Wall-like slopes begin.

No, one must be mad to climb moun-tains in such shoes, but there is no way out for me. Later, having lost all my strength, I wound an elastic bandage round my shoes, and thus somewhat diminished the treach-ery of the soles.

Down with slipping!

I can't understand whether the natives here have different linear measures, or they try to cheer us up. Very often they tell us the distance is five or six kilometres instead of one. We were first told we would have to walk three or four kilometres uphill, and the way would be easier after that. After we had walked those three or four kilometres, a shepherd told us we would have to suf- fer seven more. Some would tell us we had to walk two hours to get to a camp, others mentioned eight hours and so on.

Our muddled minds become almost completely muddled. We almost lost our sense of time and distance.

'You shouldn't fuss too much in the mountains,' a hunter warned me not long ago, and I obediently follow the heartbro-ken stream of people going uphill.

The mud, waded by tens of thousands of shoes, is sliding down imperceptibly. Hav-ing walked about two kilometres we hear a woman screaming somewhere below. The persecuted shudder. The

heart of a man of thirty has failed. The poor man is buried on the spot.

'Yesterday a woman gave birth to a dead child,' says someone. 'The woman died too. One more old woman was buried in the for-est nearby.'

Nobody says, 'I know you,' or 'I don't know you,' here. Everyone is an acquain-tance of everyone here. More than that, a friend. A man comes up to you and says: 'Give me some bread, please'. If you have it, you must give it to him. And if you have it, and you don't give it to him, the moun-tains won't forgive you – in this situation it is the greatest sin. But still there are quite a lot of people here who think about them-selves in the first place. They walk and weep about their lost property, they look at their dying friends, but still they keep on think-ing about themselves. The war and the pass have taught them nothing. It is easy to no-tice such people in the endless stream of the persecuted.

Mountains are like great love. Great love makes a kind man kinder, and a wicked man more wicked, a niggardly man more niggardly, a greedy man greedier, a cow-ardly man more cowardly, and a naive man more naive...

Mountains are like war. They expose ev-erybody like X-rays.

Mountains are like a cathedral. Those who believe in God and love human beings will be cleansed here, and this very faith and love will make their road easier.

I walk and think that it is God who has brought me to the pass. My way could not have swerved elsewhere. It was not to be a comfortable way. I was not to leave my na-tive town either by plane or by ship. The pass was and is my destiny, my death and my life, my despair and my hope.

Amazing mutual aid and love are felt at the beginning of the road.

I have never walked on a similar road...

And notwithstanding the common misfor-tune, I feel that a happiness unknown be-fore is pouring into my being like love. It was evident to me on the pass that there was much more love and unity than hatred among us. Others saw it too. Almost every-one noticed it. Only a few persons felt the greatness of love in the time of peace. And the majority of people, to our misfortune, appear to need a great disaster to open their eyes. I took it all as a sign from God then, and I believe firmly today that if our father-land is to survive it will survive through the unconquerable power of love, wisdom and kindness.

'You should often listen to your body in the mountains" a handsome grey-haired man says to me.

'Mountains don't like much talk, you will lose your strength. You shouldn't eat much either. A sated horse is good for noth-ing, as is a sated man'.

And I begin to listen to my body and check it part by part. I examine it, so to say. Oh, my heart! Bless you! You have been working quite well so far, you have made no mistakes. You are like Tiger's engine. Oh, my liver and my kidneys! You malin-gerers! I don't want to hear you grumbling though I have very often dosed you with vodka and watery wine. Oh, my lungs! I have quite soiled you with the smoke of Astra war cigarettes. Forgive me! Forgive me! Be generous! Oh, my unsystematic ner-vous system! Be my friend, though I have let the war tear your metallic threads and have not spared you. Maybe I should have left Sukhumi for your sake and gone, like some Sukhumi people, to the big

northern city, lit by millions of electric bulbs, made green money, bought a milky white Mer-cedes, a dinner jacket, black like a northern night, and grieved about the instability of the times and the mountains of my father-land, surrounded in the restaurants by over-ly kind, laughing women. Could you have imagined our being in such desperate straits? Forgive me, forgive me now!

The road is narrow and the stream of the persecuted is smoothly moving up.

It is one o'clock in the afternoon. I am tired.

It is not raining now, it is drizzling, but one can see nothing at a distance of 20-25 steps. The rest of the world has sunk into the fog.

And the faces are fluttering, fluttering like yellow autumn leaves. I sit with a heavy heart, staring at this tragic fall of leaves like a stupid weatherman.

People are walking slowly. You can only hear the sound of footsteps made heavier by the sticky mud, the crying of exhausted children.

A sturdy young woman has thrown away her shoes and has wrapped her bare swollen feet in a piece of cellophane. A mid-dle-aged peasant is walking barefoot too. I ask him whether he is cold or not. A kind smile is his answer. A father is carrying his six- or seven-year-old crying daughter on his shoulders. One of the girl's feet is wrapped in a scarf, the other - in a hanky. She must have hurt it on the road. A young father sits down near me. He has a baby wrapped in a thin blanket in his arms. His wife with a worn out face is following him. A wide-eyed woman with a suitcase in her hand is asking again and again, 'Shall we get over the pass soon? Shall we reach Chuberi soon?' 'Take the medicine, dear, take it, Lali!' A mother begs her sixteen- or seventeen-year-old girl, sitting on a hillock, with her head in her hands, sobbing bitterly.

A young, one-legged, beardless soldier walks briskly, leaning on his crutches; his father walks beside him, saying something to him. He must be warning him not to hurry. The appearance of the one-legged youth somehow cheers up the persecuted; they draw themselves up involuntarily, pointing out the young man to one another, as if saying, 'Look, how bravely he is walk-ing!' The rector of the Subtropical Institute, Vakhtang Pruidze, is coming together with his wife. He walks leisurely. I see Tite Mo-sia, Karlo Izoria, Revaz Surmava, Leah Mi-kadze... Geno Kalandia with his white beard is here too. I can hardly recognize him.

I was told on the way that they had caught sight of Jano Janelidze in a truck.

They are coming and coming and there seems no end to the stream. Children and old men, men and women, professors and ministers, people of simple professions - peasants and fishermen, drivers and thieves, representatives of various political parties or societies, honest and dishonest people, kind and wicked people, the ones who are glad to see one other, and those who hate the sight of one another. I see upright fighters, I see marauders, corrupt, soulless military func-tionaries branded by the blood of war, a sunflower seed seller and a millionaire with a narrow forehead, who has already become a pauper; prostitutes are here, as well as timeservers. And it couldn't have been oth-erwise, oh God... One can't imagine either war or peace, or even persecution without them...

Priests are walking too. I recognize Fa-ther Anton, at some distance from me. He is a pleasant man, and if I may say so, a little too carried away by theatrical life... The most beautiful women of

Sukhumi are com-ing too, gentle and delicate. Their eyes are like flowers. They are proud women, and though their faces are pale, and their knees tired, I don't think that in the whole world there exist women more beautiful than them. Oh, how magnificent they are on this pass. I look at them and remember the time when they walked along the Sukhumi sea-shore on warm summer evenings, mysteri-ous and refined, chatting leisurely. Where has that time gone, oh, God, has it remained in Sukhumi for good, has it died, never to come back?

The participants in this infernal parade are marching – residents of Sukhumi, and Sukhumi district, residents of Gulripshi, tortured and exhausted, coming, coming...

With bowed heads they stare at the ground, the earth, the only lawful inspector and mas-ter of this parade. For a whole year these people had experienced the atrocities of all the weapons used in Afghanistan. More than that, there was no sea in Afghanistan, and military boats and ships did not bomb the towns and villages. Sometimes it seems to me that all the faces are familiar, that I have seen all of them before. But sometimes it is vice versa, familiar faces seen to be strange to me. On several occasions I even saw the faces of the deceased. I saw Guli Chaladze who had died together with his son when the village of Abzhakva was bombed; my uncle who had been tortured by brigands and killed in summer... What a lot of faces I see here, like autumn leaves – thousands and tens of thousands...

They are coming, but Moses is not lead-ing them, nor any other kind shepherd. There is no one whom they can regard as their leader, and they don't have any faith left... they don't even have any idea where they are heading. Their longing is beyond geography and the face of the clock, beyond any particular country and century. They, descended from the pages of the Bible, move about in the misty darkness, wander in the mazes of their own weeping souls, making their way to no-where! They are coming... I know it is difficult to say, still I must say it – they don't even remember God. In any case, I don't remember anyone mention God.

Nobody can feed them with five loaves of bread, nobody can give them a drink of pure water running out of a rock by striking it with a rod. The crucified people, tortured by the heaviness of the cross, are coming. They are coming... From time to time they raise their heads and look ahead. Their gaze is a question, 'Who, who is leading us? Who is being tortured together with us on this road? Is there any such person, or are we all alone? This is like children watching the engine while traveling by train, hoping to catch sight of the engine-driver at the bend of the track. The pass looks like the railway along which trains without engines and en-gine-drivers move screaming. I have never seen so many sad eyes, and God forbid that I should ever see them again.

I get up and continue on my way. I feel tired of watching faces. I am afraid of watch-ing the myriad of eyes. When we walk we can only see the backs, and this is much easier to bear.

On the whole way I felt that someone was punishing us, but the same invisible be-ing was protecting us, as if it was watching us attentively, eager to know how much we could still endure.

But why are we all fleeing across the pass, the adults as well as the children? Are we running away from death, avengers, and murderers? No, nobody is afraid of real soldiers, they follow the written or

unwrit-ten rules of war, but behind them there are bloodthirsty evil men! Can we be running away only from death!? Maybe from life as well, and our own selves? Maybe we are running away from our own memories, ha-tred, betrayal, and loyalty, from the sea and the mountains, men and God too? What is this that is happening, oh, God! What is the sin that does this to us? Have we, Georgians, experienced such a disaster in this century? Or in the previous one? I walk on, I cannot think, I hush questions, I, a creature charged with an instinct of self-preservation, a crea-ture with a super-knapsack and an aching leg.

I have just witnessed the first case of hys-teria. A desperate scream is heard, 'I wish the Abkhaz had killed me! I can't stand this any longer!' – a weeping woman, her whole body shaking, is sitting on her suitcase. Her husband more dead than alive, comes up to her slowly, raises her, takes the suitcase and throws it down into the ravine. He cries out, 'Have you made up your mind to kill yourself? How many times have I told you to throw away those rags?' The woman sit-ting in the mud whimpers: 'The children's clothes are there, and your coat too... We won't be able to buy them!'

By and by the pass becomes more severe. Suitcases and bags grow heavier and heavier.

Ten kilogrammes already seem to be a hun-dred. It is more difficult to walk as you go higher and higher...

People throw away their clothes, silver, expensive plates, family albums and antiques by the roadside, or into the ravines... They get rid of the last pieces of their property.

I come across a silver-plated drinking horn with inscriptions on it. Who knows how many toasts were drunk with this horn, how many weddings and feasts it wit-nessed, this horn persecuted together with its owner?

An unknown man tells me how six sol-diers who were killed in Sukhumi were bur-ied in Machara by the roadside, 'A Cobra medical vehicle brought them. One of them was cut into two parts as if he had been mown down by a huge scythe, I have been thinking about this for three days, and I can't imagine what weapon could have been used'.

The great road continues. We approach a shepherds' camp.

I rest before reaching it. It is not driz-zling now, but the place still looks gloomy.

I am extremely tired.

It is only a few minutes later that I notice a huge ox near me. I am a city-dweller, and I can't maintain that it was an ox of a su-perb breed that I saw, but I was charmed by this beautiful animal. It had the most beauti-ful eyes, a regal look. The ox, looking like its own monument, looked in amazement at the people moving up the ascent, at the people dirty with mud. Of course, the host of the mountains had never before seen so many men, had never before heard so much groaning and moaning, nor the heavy still-ness that is felt here from time to time. All our misfortune is reflected in the stiffened body of the ox, in its eyes that are the size of a fist. Our misfortune grows stronger and chokes me. I regret I have given up painting. Or else I would paint the Georgian Guer-nica. I am sorry I am not a film director. I would shoot a film and one of its episodes would be dedicated to the ox.

Suddenly the eyes of the ox become wid-er. A strange rustling is heard from round the bend in the

road. A group of about ten or fifteen people have made something like a cloak out of a new piece of polythene and covered their heads and shoulders with it. They are walking almost in step. Raindrops are shining on the silvery sparkling cloak that is very much like the overalls of a be-ing from another planet. The strange group is walking purposefully without making any noise. The ox and I follow this fantas-tic spectacle with our eyes. I look around searching for their flying saucer, but in vain.
The crew of the beings from another planet disappears round the bend with a rustle.

The ox with puffed out nostrils does not take its eyes off the people.

It seems to me that the horns of the ox are shining like candles.
So good-bye, my ox, my friend, our res-cuer and supporter. Forgive us, men, our cruelty, forgive us our sins. You see where all this has brought us. Do you think I don't feel your big heart shrinking with pity? I know you feel sorry for us, you kind being! We didn't treat you quite well. We gave you drink and food, but as soon as you stum-bled... we used to kill you. We were full of hatred: evil, quarrelsome beings.

My schoolmate, Jemal Dartsmelia, catch-es up with me. We are glad to see each other as usual.

The shepherd's camp consists of three wooden sheds with tin and tarred felt roofs. The buildings are crowded with people. Thousands of people move about. A young man is brushing trousers soiled with ashes: he seems to have gone to sleep by the fire and fallen into it.

It begins to snow. I find it impossible to stop.

'Shall we continue on our way?' I ask Je-mal.

'Yes, let's go to the end', I hear his reply. And here the road of life and death be-
gins – the alpine zone of the pass!

We see edelweisses on our way. They were pink in the lower zone. They are yel-low on the tops of the mountains.
'Pick us, oh, knight, pick us and present us to your beloved'. This is a bitter joke of the damned edelweisses. 'Don't you see I am setting a record? I'm walking directly into the Guinness Book, and with such dignity, so steadily. I don't swerve from the road even by a centimetre. Wait a little! I'll drive naughty journalists mad, and then you'll see how the most beautiful women'll go crazy.
Flowers of ten summits will not suffice then. You may laugh as much as you like, beauties, we will see who will laugh last.

A tractor appeared in the mist below, making a terrible noise. Someone says the tractor will make the road even, and cars will have a chance to move. An hour lat-er the tractor, with the same unbearable booming and screeching, reappears, towing a red Niva, fastened with a thick rope to it. I recognize the man at the wheel – Mito Chanturia. His mother is sitting beside him, and the back seat is packed with clothes and some boxes. The Niva catches up with me.

'I have no room, or I would take you!' Mito shouts, 'I gave a machine-gun to the tractor-driver, he'll take me up to the top, and then I'll take care of myself!'
A bit later I hear Mito's voice, coming from some distance, he is calling out to someone, 'I have no room, or I would take you'...

Jemal and I walk fast.

We, the people who live on the sea-shore, have come to know a thing or two about mountains. You must not stop on the top. Only grass and edelweisses grow there.

There's not a single tree to make a fire with, there. Stopping on the top means death.

The wind and the snow became stronger. While on a narrow path, the wind swung us so violently that we nearly fell into the abyss.

We are cautious.

Snowdrifts cover the road in a few min-utes. The edelweisses disappear. So does the grass. The coloured world turns into a black and white film. My hands are numb with cold. I have lost my cap somewhere. I have put it into a large pocket of my jacket. I ad-just my hood, but the frozen hood crackles when I touch it. My socks are frozen too. My shoelaces are covered with thick ice and swollen like cucumbers. They jump to and fro as I walk. My stick has also become heavier due to about a kilogramme of ice. I find it difficult to free the shoelaces and the stick of the ice.

Soon we come across the first dead man.

A tall man of about seventy is lying on his back by the roadside, with his old-fashioned cap on, his mouth and eyes open.

'Get up, uncle!' Jemal says to him, and taps him on the shoulder, but he withdraws his hand immediately as if bitten by a snake. He makes signs with his eyes to show me that he is dead. Only now I think of the man as a corpse. His mouth and eyes, his complexion, his clothes and even his hat be-come terrifying to me in an instant...

'Could he have been killed?' A short-ish soldier of about twenty, wearing a long overcoat, comes up.

We can find no bloodstains.

Svan fighters are coming down with quick steps, they are almost running.

'Go back! Go back to the camp unless you want to freeze', they shout.

'Look here, what's the matter with this man?' we ask them.

'He is frozen, frozen...Dead!'

The cold wind freezes us to the bones. I wind a long fluffy scarf round my head.

'What shall we do, Jemal?'

'Nothing can make me go back now. I can hardly move my feet. Have we walked so much in vain?'

Jemal takes two blankets out of his knap-sack. He gives one of them to me, and wraps himself in the other. I smile, Jemal with his long moustache, Jemal wrapped in his co-lourful blanket, looks like an Argentinian shepherd.

We are very cold. We can do nothing with the deceased, and it is impossible to stop. We go on walking with lowered heads. I feel guilty, very guilty. The dead man is my father's age, we shouldn't have left him like that. We ought to have thought of something, but what, I don't know... The shortish soldier is walking beside us. The wind becomes stronger.

After about fifty steps we catch up with the husband and wife. They are about sixty or sixty-five years old. Suddenly the stout woman drops her bags and falls dawn in the middle of the road at my

feet. She waves her hands, groans and...dies. I cannot believe my eyes. Is it reality?

'Auntie!' I shake her. 'Auntie!'

The husband stands still for a while. Then he drops his suitcase. He makes a movement with his head, like nodding. His cap falls down. He falls to his knees first, then convulsively, he falls beside his wife.

'What a good life we have had, and where do we die...' these were his last words, hard-ly audible.

We rush up to one of them first, then to the other. I have never before witnessed the soul of man leave his body. I did not think people died so easily.

The shortish soldier is weeping hysteri-cally, like a beaten boy.

'What is this I see! What is this?' he re-peats endlessly.

'Go ahead! Walk!' Jemal orders the sol-dier.

'Walk! Or else you will freeze'. The shortish soldier leaves us.

There are ascents ahead. Again ascents like walls.

Soon we see a frozen woman lying face downwards on a rock, then a bearded man who has a military belt round his jacket.

Our helplessness chokes us. We can help nobody. All we can do is to call out to our fellow travellers to encourage them.

'Don't stop! Keep walking! Keep walk-ing! Bear it until the forest begins. Don't stop! We're nearly there!'

An insane man with his head bandaged is led by his mother and brother. Every now and then the sick man falls down together with his fellow-travellers. The insane man does not utter a word. He looks up at the sky. His mother and brother weep.

A man of thirty is caressing his incon-solable mother who is sitting on a rock. He asks her to get up. The woman cannot rise. 'Stand up, madam, try to walk, please!' We implore her too. The young man asks us for some bread. He tells us they have eaten nothing for two days. We give them some bread and continue our way. We look back a minute or two later. The woman has got up. She is walking with great effort. Several days later I heard that the son and the moth-er had died. The woman died because she couldn't manage the pass, and the son died because he couldn't leave his mother.

Nobody has warned these people, no-body has told them what to do on the pass. On the whole way we never met a doctor or a rescuer, nor did anyone bring us any bread. And those authorities of higher or lower ranks whose duty it was to help peo-ple, at least by some slight encouragement, were the first to flee from danger. Destiny has made me a participant of a terrible mara-thon race of life and death. If you can pass through the ordeal of Destiny, you will sur-vive! If not...

The persecuted with torn nerves and heavy hearts died of hunger, thirst and heavy burdens. Exhausted people would stop to have a rest, close their eyes for a while to get some sleep and everything was over. People who had come on foot to the borders of celestial Georgia would leave us, their brothers, in a flash. Brothers who were betrayed by the pass, nature, man and fate. The heart, this gentlest and tenderest friend, the keeper of the most sacred secrets, was the first to stop, silencing

his miserable owner for ever.

Later, in Chuberi, I met a group of my acquaintances that had set out three days earlier than me. Being hungry they had eat-en some berries, unknown to them, on the pass. As a result they were poisoned and had a narrow escape. They could not recognize one other the next day. They told me they had been asking each other who they were.

In a Greek myth the hero eats the lotus of oblivion and forgets at once who he is and where he is going. An analogous flower is mentioned in Georgian fairy tales.

There is the cruelty of Destiny in all this, a logical and most severe verdict of Provi-dence, incomprehensible to us.

It is about ten o'clock. It is dark. We ap-proach the last ascent of the pass. I am ter-ribly thirsty. Springs are scarce on the top, that is why I scoop up handfuls of snow from the leaves of plants and high-voltage pylons and eat it as if it were sugar candy. The snow cheers me up, affects me like an elixir of life, fills me with energy.

I catch up with the shortish soldier. He is not crying. He tells me his fellow-fighter's story in a low voice. He was walking on the road, leading to the mineral springs. It is a short way to Chuberi, short and terribly exhausting. He overtook a woman walking with a heavy burden and two children. He offered her his help and tied the children to his back. The two children froze to death in about two hours...

I climb the last ascent earlier than Jemal, sit down on a rock and waited for my fel-low-traveller. Being exhausted, I fall asleep so soundly that I don't even want to wake up. I know I'll freeze, I know it too well, but this strange narcotic sleep plunges me somewhere far away, to the softest bottom of the summer sea. I assure you, this huge dose of non-existent sleeping pills, wicked and sly, but coquettishly caressing, made eyes at me like a beautiful witch.

Jemal wakes me up. He taps me on the face (and not very gently either).

'Get up,' he cries. 'Get up!'

'I need a little more sleep, chief. Only five minutes... and I'll catch up with you', and I try to express something like a smile on my face.

But 'the chief' is strict. He does not agree with me, and takes a small bottle out of his pocket.

'Smell it!'

'What the hell is it?'

'It is eau-de-Cologne 'Krasnaya Moskva' (Red Moscow). Sorry, I have forgotten to fetch cognac, or I would offer it to you...'

'It is Krasnaya Moskva that has ruined us, and still you...'

'Come on, smell it, perhaps it'll bring you to your senses, then you'll understand better what has ruined us'.

I smell the eau-de-Cologne, rub it into my face, and even swallow some of it. I have heard quite respectable people drink eau-de-

Cologne, and feel fine.

If the firm 'Krasnaya Moskva' knew our story, it would make an advertisement pre-senting Jemal and

me against the pass, and the announcer with his pleasant baritone, would address mankind – 'Buy 'Krasnaya Moskva". It will be your faithful friend in extreme situations and ethnic conflicts.'

Sometimes our own irony surprises us – you are a witness of such horrors, and still are able to joke... And once more we see how one is protected by the things that are thought to be only a part of carefree life... I notice a beautiful grey-haired woman at the beginning of the alpine zone. She is picking edelweisses. She has picked so many that she cannot hold them in her hands. She has even pinned them in her hair. Her friends wave their hands to her, shouting, 'Have you gone crazy? Is now the time for that? Come along!'

But she goes on picking them...

Don't hurry, my lady. There is time for everything. Pick some more flowers, share them with your friends; these small, spar-kling dewy stars will make your way easi-er...

I want to tell all those who have lost dear people on the Sakeni-Chuberi road that their death was blissful. The deceased I came across on my way had serene faces, with no traces of suffering. You can believe the author of these lines who nearly shared their fate. Sleep seems so sweet to a man, especially when it is freezing. He sleeps like a child on New Year's Eve whose mother carefully tucks in his blanket. I know my words won't console you, but I think it is quite different when, after a terrible jour-ney, you quietly return to your own house
– eternity, where everyone is to go sooner or later.

We walk on.

The muscles of our legs ache. The frost becomes more severe. The scenery of the infernal performance changes. The moon is rising, a glorious moon, a mysterious moon...
I feel my strength increasing. I feel the movement of invisible, mysterious crea-tures around me. I feel the shadow of my fa-ther following me, never leaving me... And the moon tries to calm me, to fill me with hope, to save me...

Rattling is heard from below. A BMP is coming up. We step aside. The BMP with people on it, their faces silvery, overtakes us. The moonlight changes everyone's faces. It seems to me that Jemal is quite a different person now. I feel as if I were a man from a picture by Bosch. It seems to me that rocks, stones and shadows are slaughtered men and animals.
An old man is tied to the muzzle of the BMP with a thick rope. He is smiling guiltily as if apologizing for something. The man has a familiar face; he is Shota Shartava, former president of the Abkhzian Trades Unions. A man who has lived an honest life. Noth-ing can surprise me on these ascents now. Even Shartava tied to the muzzle of a BMP like a god of victory. On the contrary, he reminds me of a finely carved figure of the invincible Atlas fastened to the bows of frig-ates and ships depicted on old engravings. The name of Shota Shartava's son was Shota too. He was a scientist. He was killed on the river Gumista, during the battle on the sixteenth of March. His body was brought from the battlefield only two days later.

They could hardly take the sub-machine gun from his hands. And it was impossible to straighten his forefinger, stiffened on the trigger. And he is lying in his grave, with his curved finger, as if shooting. He continues fighting in his tomb. Tears fill my eyes. I am sorry for Shota, sorry for

everybody, even for those who shot at him. How pitiful and small man is. And it is not the sentimental mood of a tired man. It is quite a different feeling, not known to me before, an elevat-ing one. As if I had found myself in a differ-ent dimension, as if I had left the material world and existed in quite a different sphere. The feeling didn't leave me for several days, it walked with me. It seemed to me that it protected me from something, took care of me in an odd way. The younger Shota Shar-tava and the leader of 'Aydgylara'[24], Sergei Shamba were childhood friends. They grew up in the same yard, they used to play war, study together in Tbilisi. They shared a flat.
And still they fought against each other. They shot at each other...

We come across some more frozen wom-en on the road. I am filled with the feeling that these women have always been here on this road, like these boulders and hillocks, that they had always been like this – dead and pale. The feeling of my own helpless-ness is no less oppressive than the pass and the cold. We don't even know what to do: to bury them, or maybe their relations will turn up tomorrow and know what to do. Shall we take the bodies with us, but how?

One more BMP catches up with us. We stop it.

'There are old people ahead. They can hardly walk. Would you give them a lift?'

'We have no room here, can't you see?' a young man sitting in the BMP taps me on the shoulder. He is crying.

'Why are you crying?' I ask him.

He points at a dead body wrapped in a soldier's overcoat.
'It's my wife... She was on a Ural… The Ural turned over... The brakes, the brakes...', he cannot finish the phrase, He cries loudly.

The BMP moves on. The young man does not take his eyes off me.

We walk along the moonlit slopes. My aching knee does not obey me. It does not like the descents. The fear of death has com-pletely disappeared. We can now see a for-est three or four kilometres away. There are scores of fires burning here and there in the forest.

We often come across springs. I drink from each of them. I fill myself with their energy. I speak to them as to old friends.

'Hello, spring! What has brought you up here? Blessed be your name! Are you perse-cuted too? Are you also running away with us, down these descents?' The 'chief' forbids me to drink so much water, but I do not obey.'

'Don't leave me alone, chief!' I shout to Jemal who is walking ahead. 'Don't leave me, or else I'll turn up before you as a ghost together with David the Builder[25], and ...

also with the director of 'Krasnaya Moskva'. 'Can there be a ghost more horrible than you are now?' 'Argentinian' Jemal laughs.

And indeed I look like a German soldier defeated at Stalingrad whom we have often seen in documentary films. My boots are wrapped in bandages, and my trousers and jacket are dirty with mud. Jemal does not look any better, either.

On one of the descents we are stopped by a soldier.

'What shall I do? A woman is dying!'

I look around, but I see nobody at first.

Then I notice a woman lying on a hillock. 'One woman has just died, and now this one is going to die...What am I to do?' 'Is she a relation of yours?' we ask. 'No, I ran into them an hour ago.'

Some minutes later the woman breathed her last.

'A woman is dying!' The soldier's words are still ringing in my ears.

A story is told on the way about a woman who has abandoned her baby and run away. Then I hear of the tragedy of another wom-an: her two children froze, she left her third child with the persecuted, walked ahead and committed suicide by jumping into the ra-vine. I am quite convinced that both stories are about one and the same woman, only the first one is a lie, and the other one is the truth.

It is impossible to believe that a mother will leave her child in order to find safety for her-self; if she runs away, it will be only to the next world, to the darkness from where there is no way back... She will do it not to see an-other child's death... She would sooner die herself than let death take her third child...

'Here I am, kill me, but spare by child!' Soon we begin to have hallucinations.

Huge rocks protruding through the snow seem to be the huts of nomadic tribes.

'What kind of people live here?' I ask Je-mal.

'Don't look back. Some people are watching us closely. They must be robbers', says Jemal and I feel him clutching the re-volver hidden in his chest.

Those 'people' turned out to be stones, and the huts of nomads, as I have already said, rocks.

But it turned out that, at that very time, below us, round a bend in the road, real rob-bers lay in ambush near real rocks and stones, and robbed the persecuted. They took away weapons from soldiers, and jackets, money, gold objects and the last remaining proper-ty from the others... Shining bullets, flying out from a turning in the road, made several semicircles in the air; now and then we could hear the distant rattle of machine guns.

We saw the dead body of a young man killed for a gun, and the dead body of a fro-zen fighter, with a metal helmet on, on the road, though he might have been killed too, and maybe also for a gun...

There is no one here to do anything about this, no one to defend the people. If you can endure the ugliness and cruelty of man, you will survive. If not...

My feet often slip on frozen stones, there are a multitude of them here, like mush-rooms. I fall down several times. My right side is badly hurt. I count my ribs with my hand. None of them is broken, or it would be more difficult for me to walk.

We reach the forest at midnight. We add one more fire to the others. Wet and sappy firewood burns lazily. We try to get warm in vain. We eat something. We get dry, and trembling with cold we try to go to sleep. All is pretence, even our lives and breathing.

I must recall an odd thing. During al-most the entire journey I felt the taste of salt in my mouth, as if I was a man who had just learned to swim, and had swallowed a lot of salty water swimming in the sea. I walked and, as if to spite somebody, remembered raspberry jam. If anyone had asked me what I

wanted most of all, I would have answered that I wanted raspberry jam. I am sitting by the fire. A man comes up to me. 'Would you like some jam?' he asks me and stretch-es out a jar to me. I am so tired that I don't even want to raise my head. I take the jam jar. It is raspberry jam... I eat the jam, clos-ing my eyes in bliss. 'Eat your fill, don't be ashamed', says the man. I comply willingly. Then I thank him. He disappears as sud-denly as he appeared. There are dreams that are not like any other dreams, there may be original people too. That man was original, very peculiar. I can't think what made him carry a jar of jam on the pass while people threw away valuable things to make their burden lighter...

Some distance from the fires several men are lying wrapped in a many-coloured cloth on the frozen ground.

'Why don't they come nearer to the fire?
Aren't they cold?' I ask somebody, stuttering. 'They are dead'. I hear his calm voice in answer.

'Ah', I say calmly, drinking some water from my flask, and I do not know why, but my calmness does not surprise me.

We get up at six o'clock next morning and go on walking. The day is colourful and sunny, cold and severe. On our way we still come across the dead. They follow us with their eyes, familiar, but already belonging to another world, icy. Our dear, persecuted dead. They are lying calmly, sheets of paper in their hands, with their names on them, like newborn children in a maternity hospital, where identity cards are attached to babies' wrists; the only difference is that there are the newborn in maternity hospitals, and here on the pass - the newly deceased. The race is over, so is the persecution, but... they still walk on, striving for a better Georgia where everything is all right, where people take care of each other, where man is faithful to the country, and the country is faithful to man. And nobody kills others, either with weap-ons or with persecution, words or hatred.

The sun warms everything around, chilled bodies, but does not reach people's hearts, that are almost desperate. A little noisy river runs along the road. I walk lost in thought and talk to the trees and the riv-er, to my kind old friends.

Reno Bokuchava and Romeo Jgarkava catch up with me. Reno and I used to be fellow-students. He is carrying an enormous bag, shifting it from shoulder to shoulder. We rest several times, divide a piece of bread into three equal parts, washing it down with spring water. I have seldom tasted such deli-cious bread.

We sometimes part on our way, then we get together again; strangers talk to each other as if they were childhood friends. The pass is already not so dangerous. The pass is breathing its last.

We come across less frequently the dead by the roadside and new graves.

A man with a sprained leg walks by my side, with a stick like me, his wife and chil-dren following him. He is speaking to me of Sukhumi. We walk slowly. We see the dead body of a woman of about seventy lying un-der a pine tree, a soldier's overcoat covering her body.

'Poor woman, she has come this far, and now this!' says the man.

Then suddenly he tells me to wait and walks up to the dead body.

The man grows pale.

'It's my uncle's wife,' he says almost in a whisper.

Some time later he decides to send his family to Chuberi, and he himself stays with the dead woman.

'I'll wait for a truck. I'll bury her in Chu-beri cemetery for the time being'.

From time to time Urals come up from below and pick up exhausted people.

Very steep descents are followed by less steep ones.

I run into Sergo Tsurtsumia, a young writer. His three young children are com-ing with him. Sergo says to me:

'We have been on the way for four days...

We made a fire somewhere. My mother-in-law began to bake small loaves of bread on a frying pan. The smell of toasted bread spread far and wide. A soldier who hadn't eaten for several days was the first to come up, he asked for a loaf. My mother-in-law gave him two. The soldier sat down beside us, had a short rest, felt stronger, and before leaving presented my youngest child with some money. The child was sitting in the lap of a woman we knew. The woman looked around furtively, took the money from the child and slipped it into her pocket. Then a young woman came and asked for some bread for her child who had not eaten any-thing for a whole day. My mother-in-law gave her two loaves as well. The woman turned round, hid behind a tree, and began to eat the hot loaves quickly. It was then that I felt the greatest pity for these people. My mother-in-law had given away all the loaves, and only then remembered the chil-dren, repeating all the time, 'God will help us, and God will help us'. I think God has really helped us, and we have reached the end of our way safely, though I can't imag-ine what awaits us. I have no idea where to go, or what'll happen to us...'

We are in Chuberi by the evening. We lie down on huge sawn logs, and feel how we fall asleep plunging into an ocean of end-less emptiness...

Then a trip on a container lorry to Zug-didi follows. There are about fifty of us in the vehicle. We are packed like herrings in a tin. Some sit, most of us stand. The exhaled air condensed into water falls on our heads from the ceiling, drop by drop. The perse-cuted, with overstrained nerves, annoyed, quarrel with each other easily, they have millions of reasons for that. The only bulb has a poor, heartbreakingly dim light, the symbol of our present situation. We some-times stop on our way and air the container. We are stopped several times in Khaishi and Jvari[26]. The exhausted passengers are searched. They are looking for weapons. A man threatens Reno with arrest – I see it from some distance. He says that Reno has a bomb in his bag; Reno tells him to go and see. The soldier produces a bottle from the bag. 'Damn you!' he mutters angrily. Some-thing goes wrong with our vehicle in the vil-lage of Lia. If I am not mistaken, it stopped before the Samushias' gates. The host comes out. He invites the people into his house. Women and children are invited to have bread and tea. Men taste his new wine. He raises his glass to our health, comforts us, sympathizes with us, sees us off, apologiz-ing. I spend three nights in the loving family of Bachana Dzandzava in Zugdidi.

Then in Senaki[27] followed the house of a jolly good fellow - Aleko Tskhakaya.

And then the Tskhenistskali River[28], the Georgians standing on its opposite banks shooting at each

other. We asked both sides to let us pass. They thought it over and fixed a time. The Georgians let the persecuted Georgians pass. As soon as we crossed the bridge, shooting started again. They were fighting bravely indeed. And somewhere up, higher than the clouds, Mother Georgia was crying bitterly... And the Satan was giggling.

I seem to have defeated the pass, slowly, step by step, but... it has stuck in all the three times. It has become a magic triptych of the past and the future and the present for me. It has settled in my soul and blood with its living men and the dead, with its 'beings from another planet', the amazed oxen, with old men tied to BMP muzzles, with moaning and groaning, and a deep feel-ing of regret... I know movement will never stop on it, because it is the Pass of the Perse-cuted, the only pass in the world that trav-els and travels all over the world, charged with the energy of the persecuted. It will go across the oceans, the seas, the continents and countries like great ships exhausted by cruel winds, cursed and great. It is a pass from death to life. It is an offspring of the bleeding, self-murdering Georgia, torturing her heart with her own nails. The crucified, crucified pass!

The Pass of the Persecuted is the high-est pass in the world. It is the pass saturated with the sacred air of our fatherland. It is superior to all earthly trifles and worries, money and treachery, hatred and stupidity, greed and cowardice. The pass is Calvary, carrying the sins of the whole Georgia...

And in the middle of it a young father is standing with his dying child pressed to his breast. He is cursing, cursing loudly, poli-ticians and non-politicians, those that were yesterday, and those that are today, Geor-gians and non-Georgians, men and wom-en… cursing us all with no exception! He is cursing everyone who, for whatever reason, has brought his share of clay and gravel, sins and disaster, who has created and built this pass, and aroused its rage. He is cursing me writing these lines now, and you too, my deeply respected readers, who are reading these words…

What are we to do? What path are we to take? How can we help the dying child, qui-et in his father's arms, still breathing, before whom we are all guilty, the whole world, the whole Georgia, each one of us is guilty!

15-27 October, 1993

COMMENTS

1. *A make of car.*
2. *The capital of Georgia.*
3. *The capital of Abkhazia, a region of Georgia.*
4. *A river in Abkhazia.*
5. *A seaside town in Abkhazia.*
6. *A mountainous region of Georgia.*
7. *Kinds of weapons.*
8. *A village in Svaneti.*

9. *A village near Machara.*
10. *A make of car.*
11. *A town in Abkhazia.*
12. *A village in Svaneti.*
13. *A make of car.*
14. *A village in Svaneti.*
15. *A military truck.*
16. *An Abkhazian mountain region where Svans live (Gulripsh area).*
17. *A village in Svaneti.*
18. *Chairman of the Board of Ministers of Abkha-zia.*
19. *A town in Samegrelo.*
20. *A famous Georgian actor.*
21. *A famous Georgian mountaineer.*
22. *A region in Abkhazia.*
23. *A follower of the Soviet miner Stakhanov, who initiated in 1933 an efficiency system in which workers voluntarily increased their piecework production. Mentioned ironically.*
24. *An Abkhazian party.*
25. *A Georgian king who ruled Georgia from 1089 to 1125.*
26. *Villages in Samegrelo.*
27. *A town in Samegrelo.*
28. *A river dividing the regions of Samegrelo and Imereti.*