



Tbilisi

Remembering an adventurous trip to Soviet Georgia



We crowded into our small seats on another rundown Aeroflot airplane, bound for Leningrad, our faces toward the windows, silent.

What was there to say? We were leaving Georgia. We searched through the little plastic windows for a glimpse of the mountains -- the beautiful brown and green mountains that surround Tbilisi -- or the people who smiled so readily, with their big, dark, honest-looking eyes.

We saw the grey runway instead; our view blocked by the outdated airport, and our thoughts turned to Leningrad. Another city, we thought, like Moscow. Huge, block-shaped grey buildings. Lifeless faces. No color. Herds of people shuffling along the city streets, each one much like the other. Just living.

How strange, we thought, that two Soviet cities could be so different. We remembered our initial shock seeing Tbilisi for the first time. It had taken only 2 1/2 hours to get from Moscow to Georgia, and yet the small republic seemed like an entirely different country.

The Georgians, we had learned, insisted that it was.

On our bus ride from a Georgian airport into the republic's capital city of Tbilisi, our tour guide Lolly asked a question that threw us off guard.

"When you take history classes about the Soviet Union, do you learn the history of the Soviet Union, or do you learn the history of Russia?"

We had never really thought about it. We supposed Russia.

Lolly asserted that the difference is like night and day.

Staring out the bus windows, we began to see that Tbilisi indeed was different. Very different.

Street signs were written first in Georgian, then in Russian. The houses were painted in colorful pastels; pink, light green, yellow and sky blue -- unlike the huge, pale white mass-housing units in Moscow. The buildings were shapely, influenced by Italian architecture, and were very old.

In Moscow we saw few cars. Here, they were everywhere; racing through the middle of intersections at high speed, horns blasting continuously. The constant action, the beautiful colors, and the warm Georgian sun gave life to the city.

Moscow, we thought, seemed very far away.

From the street, Georgians stared up into the bus full of Ameri-

cans. They smiled and waved while looking curiously at the foreigners. We were surprised by their friendly gestures. On the streets of Moscow most people frowned -- if they took any interest at all.

Lolly explained that Georgia is an ancient country; its roots date back to the third century. There are 5.7 million people in the republic, 66 percent of whom are native Georgians, she said. The rest of the population consists mostly of Russians, but includes people of several other Soviet nationalities.

While others in the group of mostly Kearney State College students spent the next three days touring, we -- two student journalists from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln -- went on alternate excursions, searching for people able to tell us about the current situation in Georgia.

We first interviewed Eka and Eka, two translators from Tbilisi's Institute of Foreign Languages. Like all Soviets, Eka and Eka worked for the government. Like many Georgians, however, they paid little attention to the possible ramifications of speaking out against their leaders in Moscow.

Our first night in Tbilisi, Eka and Eka took us to a small cafe in an older section of Tbilisi. The cafe, named the "Boomerang," was a

popular night spot for young adults.

Our short stay at the Boomerang would be the first of many strange experiences in Tbilisi and typified the cautious reactions many older Georgians had toward outspoken nationalists.

As Eka and Eka described the events leading up to the April 9th demonstration, which spawned worldwide concern over the nationality question in the Soviet Union, the small crowd in the cafe began to take interest in the two young American women with tape recorders and steno notebooks.

Seeing the attention our conversation had attracted, an old Georgian woman came to our table and announced that the cafe would be closing -- an hour before it was supposed to.

Later it became obvious that the old woman had been frightened by our open discussion of Georgia's problems, and had closed the cafe early to avoid trouble.

We continued our discussion outside, walking the streets of Tbilisi. We listened to Eka and Eka describe why many Georgians want their freedom; how the government has too much control over the republic's economy; how Russians want Georgians to stop their separatist, rebellious behavior and

help support the rest of the country.

They asked about America. Did we live with our parents? Did we have our own cars? Was it expensive to come to the Soviet Union? Were we married? Were we Christians?

Religion, they explained, is very much a part of Georgian life. Both women said they visited Georgian Orthodox churches several times a week, as do many others in the republic.

They said that because housing is scarce, they continue to live with their parents and probably will until they are married. They complained about the shortages of many basic necessities, especially clothing, though they dressed better than most Muscovites we'd seen. We continued the conversation until late that evening, and promised to meet again the next day.

The following morning, Lolly, Eka and Eka took our group to Georgia's ancient capital, where the republic's oldest church, built in the fourth century, stands intact.

The church, surrounded by ancient ruins and built on the edge of a steep hill, overlooks the village. Inside, a small group of

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