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Georgians dressed in dark colors lit candles during a church service.

The Georgian tour guides seemed very proud of the church. Another guide, Marina, who had followed the group from Moscow, seemed indifferent.

It became evident that part of Marina's job as a government employee was to make sure the Americans were kept busy during their stay in Tbilisi, and that their attention was not diverted from sightseeing.

Marina already had admitted on the plane ride from Moscow that she was skeptical of Georgian people, and seemed to view them as troublemakers in the midst of the many good changes she saw occurring in her country.

During the next few days, the group of 27 was herded around Tbilisi and its surrounding areas to witness "safe," culturally significant attractions. We separated from them often, hunting down nationalists with the help of Eka and Eka, and interviewing nearly everyone we met.

On the street, Georgians took instant notice of us. We were light-skinned women in Western clothing walking with notebooks and camera equipment. They stopped us and asked if we were American. They said they loved the United States and everything it stood for. They offered us rides throughout the city for free. In restaurants, they bought wine and champagne and toasted democracy.

Our second night in Tbilisi, Eka, Eka and a small group of student nationalists drove us to a massive meeting at Tbilisi's main university building. The meetings were held

nightly while the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies was in session, they said.

Cars jammed the streets as we neared the gathering. Everywhere, Georgians waved their flag of independence, which had been legalized only a few weeks before.

As we made our way through the crowd of more than 3,000, we listened to a student leader relay by megaphone the events of that day's Congress.

During the meeting, witnesses of the April 9th demonstration took the megaphone and shared horror stories. At one point, the crowd began to cheer, "Who ordered? Who ordered?" -- demanding to know who was responsible for ordering Soviet troops into the city April 9.

We watched the meeting, talking to people in the crowd, and listened as Eka and Eka translated what leaders said. We left that night excited from the intensity of the meeting and from the Georgian unity.

The following day, we were met in the hotel lobby by Eka, Eka and two male student leaders carrying bouquets of Chinese roses. The yellow flowers grow wild in the hills near Tbilisi. They gave us the small bouquets, wrapped in twine, and said they hoped we would remember Georgia's beauty.

Insisting that we had not yet tasted authentic Georgian food, our escorts took us to a small restaurant overlooking the Georgian countryside. Our multi-course meal lasted several hours. We drank Georgia's famous sweet wine and ate its spicy, Mediterranean food. We laughed and sang "Happy Birthday" -- one of the few American songs the Georgians

recognized. This was perhaps the lightest moment of our trip; and the only time during our stay that our Georgian friends seemed completely at ease.

We spent the rest of our time in Tbilisi in back-to-back interviews with several students and underground leaders. We managed to meet outspoken Georgians and kept out of trouble, until the night before we left Tbilisi.

We had been interviewing Irena Sarishvili, an outspoken Georgian dissident, and her husband George Tchanturia, the leader of the republic's largest unofficial political party, in their home in old Tbilisi.

Irena and her husband seemed relatively relaxed compared to others we'd interviewed, though they knew they were followed regularly by Soviet police.

When we left, Irena and her husband told us to be careful. They said we should fear Soviet police and "expect everything." We left the old apartment building with our escorts for the evening -- two Georgian students who didn't speak English.

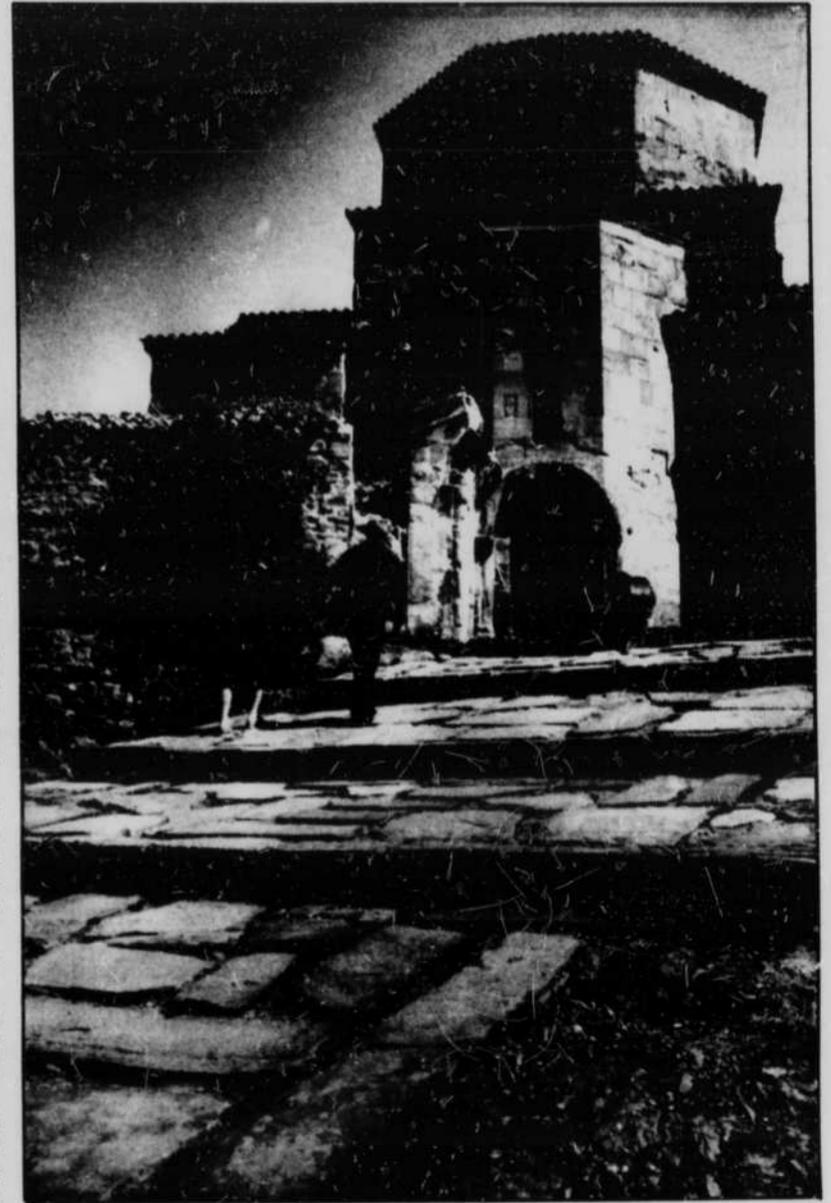
Out on the street, the students pointed to a car parked parallel to the one in which we had ridden. In Russian, they told us the man sitting inside the car was a KGB agent.

He followed us back to our hotel.

Though we were shaken by our "tail," we were exhausted from the excitement and eventually fell asleep.

We boarded our plane that next morning, leaving Eka and Eka in the airport terminal. Though our tour of Eastern Europe was not yet completed, for us, the trip was over.

-- Lee Rood



Jwari, a Georgian Orthodox church built in the fourth century, when Christianity first spread to the region.

