

## *The secrets of the "Florence of Caucasus"*

### **Gaumargios, Tbilisi**

*"Georgians are serious only when they cheer". Perhaps this is their secret: three years of civil war, seventy of communism, ruling Mafia, paralyzed economy, have not deleted the extraordinary hospitality of these people. Travel in a "friendly society"*

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TBILISI: Forty times destroyed and forty times reborn from its ashes, Tbilisi embodies the spirit of Georgia, its *genius loci*: a bomb-proof tenderness, literally, given that just four years ago from side to side of Rustaveli avenue, the main artery of Georgian capital, the two enemy factions fought for power with bazookas, tanks instead of the bus.

The power of both factions advancing inch by inch, the rest of the city awaits the end of the match, continuing a normal life as possible. The *zviadist*, supporters of Gamsakhurdia (mediocre poet become a megalomaniac hero with the collapse of Soviet Union), holed up in the great palace built by German government at the beginning of the century; the *mkhedrioni*, "knights" led by the bandit Joseliani and by Kitovani (architect already condemned of murder become commander of the National Guard) placed in skyscraper of "Iberia" hotel, currently occupied by refugees from another senseless war, the separatist one of Abkhazia (Georgian Chechnya).

Joseliani and Kitovani won, they supported the return to Georgia of Shevardnadze, Gorbachev's foreign minister. As a very powerful man, Shevardnadze began playing chess with the allies-enemies, resolved in three moves (they arrested Joseliani first and then Kitovani, they forced into exile Georgadze, the head of the secret service controlled by Moscow) and ended with his election as president of Georgia with an almost unanimous vote, exactly one year ago.

Anyway Tbilisi and its citizens have not lost their traditional hospitality, this quiet *joie de vivre* that reigns in every corner of the city, called by Russians the "Florence of Caucasus".

The old town center starts with the Muslim Quarter, Meidan, dominated by the fortress built by Persians and protected behind the huge botanical garden. A cluster of white, pink, blue, ochre houses divides the mosque from the Armenian Church of St. George: two minorities at risk, side by side but without any problem; on the other hand the very Christian Georgia has good relations with Muslim Azerbaijan (a little less with hypernationalist Armenia faithful ally of Russia).

A quiet square, Gorgasalis Moedani, represents the division between east and west Tbilisi, just as Georgia eternally suspended between East and West. This was the navel of the world, a few centuries ago, for caravans of camels chasing silk on the road Tabriz-Tehran-Tbilisi-Samarkand: a little like caravanserai, a little like a business center ("devil's market" for the massacre of children ordered by Shah Abbas from Persia in the fifth century), a melting pot of languages and ethnic groups (still now there are about 80 in Tbilisi, including Estonian and Kurds), symbol of peaceful coexistence that is more stubborn than violence. You just leave the mosque and Turkish baths (Tbilisi is a spa town, its sulphureous waters was told by Alexandre Dumas) and some old Jew with *kippah* on his head invites you to visit the synagogue. Many of them returned to Israel, but in the new homeland they die of nostalgia.

Georgians are too tied to their land: it seems to be no wellness illusion able to drive them away from here. The extreme poverty, political chaos, the war did not seem to have caused any moral failure: prostitution is almost non-existent, the tens of thousands refugees from Abkhazia have never felt abandoned, very few beggars.

"Yet we are changing, I do not know if we hold up the impact of capitalist development. The isolation made us definitely different, we are a nation that is emerging from infancy, and the impact will be very hard, given our backwardness": Professor Alexander Rondeli, a professor of international relations at the University of Tbilisi, already seems to regret the good old days (but certainly not communism, seen as a disaster by the most of Georgians), when people could really show the proverbial hospitality. Meanwhile, the professor paid our bill at the bar, he earns two

hundred dollars a month. It is what everybody wants to do, who can not is ashamed of it. Someone overdoes with the State Property (several times they did not let us pay for the call from public places), others content themselves with small gestures; if you do not believe, do the "test of glass of water": come in a random courtyard, one of a thousand courtyards surrounded by wooden balconies, verandas with vines, small porches covered with creepers, courtyards of old Tbilisi that rejects the modernization at the cost of falling into pieces; with a gesture let them know that you are thirsty; if you see disappear the woman or man you are talking to, it is only because they are going to take a glass.

However, water is the life of Tbilisi: hot water from the bowels of the earth, medical water from the thousand fountains scattered around the city, miraculous water that rains down from the Castle of Sachin, from the green hill beside the church of Metheki, watched by legendary king Vachtang, founder of the city.

Here "Soviet" cold is unknown; it never snows here; perhaps it is more difficult to be sad, when the sun shines and the wind carries the pines scent, but surely some faces you meet in the large metro station (shocking depth, compared to London, Paris or Milan) are visibly worried, anxious. The economy is steady. Georgia does not produce nearly anything, except food, and Turks are doing a roaring trade by exporting everything starting from beer (even though Georgia has always produced it) to electrical plugs. The service level is painful, sometimes worse than African standards (banks, post office, transport): few Georgians are confident that they can regularly receive letters and parcels from abroad. Many people complain about mafia and corrupt government, they also voted it for stark realism. There is a great passion for politics, newspapers are literally selling like hot cakes (ie, at every corner of the street) even though many people read newspaper and then put it gently away, but this does not mean a genuine democratic consciousness. "Communism was a great staging, in Georgia became so grotesque - Rondeli says - no one has ever believed in the ideology here. It is not in our character".

Soviet experience was felt mostly as a colonization, however, lived in the best position: Georgia had festivals of cinema and theater, it continued to churn out painters, musicians, writers (including Gamsakhurdia's father, Konstantin, considered a great novelist), architects and to host Moscow "nobility" on vacation. No, Georgians have never had the obsession with work: the electricity comes and goes, the heating does not work in apartment blocks, but the Opera House continues to sell out, and the company of drama "Rustaveli" to recite Shakespeare all over the world. "Ours is a paradoxical world, condemned to be extreme - complains Ivan Vapkhadze, painter - Georgians are deadly serious when they speak of their endless speeches for a toast, and quite comical when they should cry".

Humor is always the best antidote to depression. In Georgians it can become ferocious sarcasm, as the last movie by Otar Josseliani, "Brigands", a comic, bitter parable about power, filmed in Georgia thinking of Georgia. A country mistreated by history far beyond its demerits.

Georgia was the first country in the world where a moderate left party came to power with the popular vote: it was 1918, the *Mensheviks* (Social Democrats), who had very solid roots in the Caucasus, clearly won the first free elections in Georgia, which declared independence after the fall of the Tsar. The democratic dream lasted only three years: on February 25, 1921 Soviet red flag waved on the palace of Iberia square (later known as Lenin Square and Freedom Square today), following the invasion of eleven divisions of the Red Army.

During the years of USSR, Georgian Stalin never behaved considerately towards his compatriots, and in the Second World War, the fee paid by "*khartveli*" (who have never experienced Nazi occupation) was enormous: 300 thousand dead people, a tenth of the population). Russia and communism, two sides of the same nightmare for Georgia. But there is no hatred here: Russian minority has never suffered oppression, as in many other former Soviet republics, perhaps more developed and modern (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania).

Young people continue to speak Russian easily, and even if almost all writings in Cyrillic are lost (Georgian, which is not a Slavic language, has its own alphabet) the cultural and political ties with Moscow are still very strong. And the similarities, unfortunately, are too much: organized crime,

nostalgic revival (there is a monarchist party, which has a 10 percent of supporters), a conniving government, Yeltsin as Shevardnadze, Abkhazia as Chechnya (indeed worse, since Abkhazians were only one third of the population, before the "ethnic cleansing" against Georgians, a massacre that was almost unknown).

But the moral antibodies of Georgians seem to be much stronger, thanks to the mysterious power of tradition, the secret of Christian always threatened, always winning identity. A proud but sweet awareness looking scornfully at the "*homo novus*" who is being created in Moscow. In Tbilisi, many jokes about "new Russians" circulate. "A New Russian comes into a shop of religious art and he is fascinated by a crucifix with Christ. He decides to buy it, and tells the merchant: I like a lot the object, but could you please remove the athlete on it?".

Who knows if capitalist development will succeed where everyone failed, from Genghis Khan Mongols to the communists of state atheism. Georgia has always used the weapon of the hospitality and the tenderness. In the solemnity of the endless toasts, there is the whole spirit of a friendly society. Gaumargios (Cheers), Tbilisi.

**Cesare**

**Sangalli**