

‘Incinerated in the Flames of War’

Authentic English Version

In the summer of 2012 a collection of reminiscences of the Georgian-Abkhazian war of 1992-93 by some of those who had experienced it on the Abkhazian side was put together and an English translation of the Russian original text commissioned. The translation was duly prepared, and, at the last moment, an introduction by the commentator Spartak Zhidkov was submitted for translation. Though the translator stated her willingness to check the final revision before the manuscript went to the printers, the revised text was published without her being given a chance to proof the material. The Russian and English versions were published separately in the autumn of 2013. When the English text was finally seen by the translator, she immediately noticed inaccuracies for which no native English speaker could possibly have been responsible. Additionally, Zhidkov’s Introduction had been cut in its entirety and an unseen post-script added. The excision of the Introduction is particularly unfortunate, as it is referred to in Footnote 3 on p. 341 of George Hewitt’s *Discordant Neighbours. A Reassessment of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian Conflicts* (Brill, 2013). In view of all of these factors, the original English text as produced in the summer of 2012 is here offered to interested parties.

Translator of the collection

MEMORY AND PAIN

Tragedy

Abkhazia, right up to the collapse of the Soviet Union, was considered one of the most heavenly parts of a great and powerful state. The war cast it a long way backwards and for a long time turned the name of the republic into a symbol of instability. In international relations, the issue of a Georgian-Abkhazian settlement is being discussed at different levels. At the end of the day, the global interests of many countries in the Caucasus region are in favour of solving the Abkhazian question. The sticking point is the issue of national reconciliation, reconciliation between two peoples: the Georgians and Abkhazians.

The Georgian-Abkhazian war of 1992-1993 now, after nearly two decades, is often regarded as just another conflict, undistinguished for anything particularly shocking. Hence, it is often concluded that attendant problems can be relatively easily surmounted. For this reason, experienced politicians propose settlement-schemes which seem logical and feasible in themselves. However, this approach loses sight of the very circumstances that make reconciliation extremely difficult.

By and large, it is precisely the memory of the terror committed against the civilian population in 1992-1993 by the security-forces of the Georgian government in that part of the territory of Abkhazia controlled by them which renders null and void all the peace-initiatives put forward by both the Georgian side and intermediaries.

The Republic of Abkhazia has been in existence as an independent state already for two decades. All attempts to force (or convince) its government and society to agree to plans for a settlement that are disadvantageous for the country have each time come up against resistance, which it has seemed to many politicians and experts to manifest the personal ambitions of one or other of the leaders. In fact, at the root of them all lie precisely the sentiments of the overwhelming majority of the population of Abkhazia.

Georgians [*recte* Kartvelians¹] now represent one-fifth of the population of Abkhazia, which in itself is tantamount to a refutation of the thesis of ethnic cleansing, about which officialdom in Tbilisi often speaks. But the demand that the Georgian [Kartvelian] refugees be returned all at once to their former homes is of paramount importance when it comes to discussions about a political settlement. And this condition arouses opposition, not only amongst certain individuals or political groups, but amongst the entirety of the people who today are citizens of independent Abkhazia. Many times they have given their support to the hard-line policy pursued by the Abkhazian government — even under the most unfavourable international circumstances for the country.

Why have hundreds of thousands of the citizens of Abkhazia again and again preferred to risk losing the roof over their head and all or almost all of their property to agreeing either to a return of the refugees (viz. a mass-return, since a limited return to the Gal District of Abkhazia took place almost immediately after the war) or to political subordination to Tbilisi?

... It is conceivable that in Georgia, many people have only a one-sided information about the events of 1992-93, based solely on the stories and testimonies of Georgian [Kartvelian] refugees, forced to leave the territory of Abkhazia at the end of the war, and possibly with little knowledge of the crimes committed by the Georgians against the citizens of other ethnic affiliations.

Abkhazia does not seek to use the facts of terror against the civilian population as a political argument. But mentioning these facts in the political context is inevitable, because they are a clear refutation of those gestures of goodwill which the Georgian government is today making in the expectation thereby of a real and desirably speedy pay-back.

Ideologues

Everyone who studies now or in the future the various aspects of the Georgian-Abkhazian war of 1992–1993 will be unable to forget that this war was not an inter-ethnic conflict in its purest form. On the Abkhazian side there fought not only representatives from various allied nations of the North Caucasus and other regions of Russia, Georgians [Kartvelians] also even fought on the side of the Abkhazians, and not only those who were political opponents of the Georgian leadership. At the heart of the confrontation lay political causes, but mass-, ethnically motivated killings took place primarily as the result of the nationalist propaganda widely used by Georgian ideologues. During the collapse of the Soviet Union, when there was already a clearly delineated perspective of transforming the union-republics into independent states, the kindling of nationalism was considered the most effective way to rouse the will of the Georgian people to fight.

It is obvious to everyone that in any war on any continent there are criminals and there are victims. Even in those military campaigns in which from the outset the rightness or wrongness of this or the other side was clear, and in which there could be no doubt left as to who was the aggressor, there have taken place acts of brutality and violence on both sides. Today, in the era of political correctness, much is said about this. The deportations of Germans from Poland, Czechoslovakia and other countries in Europe, accompanied by abuse, violence and often murder are remembered. The post-war imprisonment in a concentration camp in Norway of five thousand women who had children by German soldiers and the forced placement of these children in psychiatric clinics are remembered. The hatred and resentment of the

¹ In Georgia since c. 1930 the speakers of all four Kartvelian languages (viz. Georgian, Mingrelian, Svan and Laz, which last is mostly spoken in Turkey) have been confusingly referred to as ‘Georgians’. Sometimes the author of this Introduction (as well as the eye-witnesses in their accounts) uses the term ‘Georgian’ in this extended sense, but, occasionally, he distinguishes between Georgians and Mingrelians and/or Svans. To avoid this confusion, it is advisable to use a different superordinate term for general reference to the speakers of the four languages in question, which is why I have introduced the term ‘Kartvelian(s)’ in square brackets on appropriate occasions in this Introduction to serve in this function. [Translator’s footnote]

people who experienced the horrors of Nazi occupation scarred the destiny of hundreds of thousands of Germans, Hungarians, Italians and other Europeans, whose only fault was often mere passive support of the military actions of the aggressor-states, and sometimes fault was even totally absent. Today, governments of victor-states formally recognise even such facts, but even today amongst the society of countries of the anti-Hitler coalition no consensus exists about how to evaluate these events, because on the other side of the scale are the killings of millions of people committed by the Nazis, and the attempt to destroy European civilisation itself.

The Nuremberg trials, in which the culprits were not people but their crimes and the ideas on which these crimes were based, created a significant precedent: although the main responsibility lies with the leaders taking this or that decision, also to be condemned are the ideas that in this or that situation prompted the masses to the realisation of xenophobia, intolerance and the urge to fulfil this or that political programme, regardless of the fate of others.

The Georgian-Abkhazian war of 1992-1993 was an example of just such a realisation of dangerous ideas which, having slipped out of control, started a chain-reaction of atrocities. It should be emphasised that, although the basic mass of the Georgian population even shared the popular slogans about creating an independent unitary Georgia, nevertheless not all Georgians [Kartvelians] were minded to encourage or even justify the atrocities committed in the name of the Georgian nation. Of course, among the Georgian fighters who took part in the war in Abkhazia, the vast majority of the soldiers and officers were in agreement with the programme launched by the ultra-patriotic Georgian intelligentsia. Also, not all of the Georgian military took part in terrorism (this was especially characteristic of the military of the older generation who had served in the Soviet Army). This was even truer for civilians. On the contrary, from the very beginning of the war, as is clear from the stories of eye-witnesses, some Georgian and Mingrelian families, with no small risk to themselves, saved Abkhazians and representatives of other nations from massacre. Some Georgians [Kartvelians] condemned the terror launched by their countrymen, though they were not able to prevent it.

In the events of 1992-1993 there merged together expansive ideas, the unruliness of Georgian irregular armed groups, and the anger of ordinary people against their fellow citizens; furthermore, this aggression was also reinforced by the promotion of ethnic hatred. It is principally on them, the ideologues of nationalism, that the primary share of the responsibility lies for the events in Abkhazia not only after 14 August 1992 but also during the previous conflict in 1989, as well as for the previous stoking of national hatred.

Anyone who wants to understand the causes of the mass-manifestations of atrocities that took place during the Abkhazian and South Ossetian military campaigns during the years 1989-1993 should become acquainted with the numerous publications in the Georgian press of the time. But few explore these texts, which are similar to each other, often emotional and sometimes even written in an academic style — one should also recall the political climate, which made these texts, sometimes fully proofed, a dangerous weapon. And this weapon turned out to be suitable both for the struggle for the independence of Georgia, and, to an even greater degree, for the terrorising of the civilian population.

In essence, the Georgian ideologues, who considered themselves the intellectual élite and the conveyors of an ancient culture, could not fashion at the crucial moment such an ideological framework that would help Georgia to pass through the dangerous period without dramatic events. They failed to formulate such slogans as would attract to the Georgian flags the Abkhazians, South Ossetians and other representatives of the population of Georgia. It is quite clear that to do this now, after all the turmoil and the victims of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian war, is impossible.

Atmosphere

Abkhazians in the Soviet period, despite the dominance of the Georgian [Kartvelian] population, which dominance was a direct consequence of the demographic expansion orchestrated by Tbilisi, continued even after the death of Stalin, always saw themselves the people who constituted the state. Consequently, they have never given up their right to decide the fate of the republic. But it was this desire which extremely annoyed that part of the Georgian leadership and intellectual élite, which saw Abkhazia as only an appendage of Georgia. And when, in 1988-1989, there was a growing nationalist and expansionist mood in Georgia, the response to this was the rapid consolidation of the Abkhazian national movement. This found reflection in the so-called Lykhny Declaration, adopted at a pan-national gathering of the people of Abkhazia in March 1989. In part, one reads: "It is time, finally, to start decisively reorganising political

institutions that have failed. How long will the mediaeval hierarchy that divides whole nations into ranks, subordinating some republics to others, survive? Even in the intra-party structure there developed such a state of affairs that placed the Abkhazian regional party-organisation in an intricate system of dual subordination ... Today the need to improve interethnic relations, friendship and brotherhood between the Abkhazians, Georgians [Kartvelians], and all people living in Abkhazia is of vital importance."

And the whole Declaration was infused with roughly the very same spirit. But here is Georgia's reaction: "The "Lykhny Declaration" is not only a letter to the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (perhaps, it is such to a lesser extent), it is a concentrated dose of poison released upon Georgia and the Georgians, and a concomitant cause of the events in Tbilisi; this is the conception of Apswa separatism in its entirety, the "Mein Kampf" of the Apsuaa, a summation of results, and the programme for a new stage. That which was previously spoken in hushed tones in the Abkhaz language was formulated in writing and for all to hear. By means of the "Lykhny Declaration" the Apsuaa have publicly slapped the Georgians on the cheek and declared the impossibility of living together in the future.' As we see, there were slotted into a few lines of text both the terms "Apswaa" [Apswa² people] and "Apswa" which are offensive to the Abkhazians, as well as baseless charges and an exalted tone, characteristic of many advocates of Georgian independence and "fighters against separatism."³

One may also recall the words of the Georgian writer Revaz Mishveladze, who in 1990 came out against the classical author of Abkhazian literature, Fazil Iskander, in such terms as these: '... In nature, there never and nowhere existed either the Abkhaz language or Abkhazian culture; rather the cursed Bolsheviks led the naive Circassians into confusion, inventing for them on the territory of Georgia an Abkhazian autonomy and in their passports wrote a non-existent nationality "Abkhazian".'⁴ And in the journal (then popular in Georgia) Lit'erat'uruli Sakartvelo [Literary Georgia] of 11 November 1988 the writer A. Silagadze wrote: 'In Georgia, there should be nothing non-Georgian. A non-Georgian is also Georgian in Georgia; he must be able to speak, read and write in Georgian, and he should sympathise with the Georgian spirit.'

However, more important in this case is not just the tone but the point of view expressed by the Georgian publicist A. Zarkua after the war, describing the consequences of the events of July 1989, which killed sixteen people: 'Georgian leaders found the easiest way out of the situation that had developed and took the decision to put a stop to demonstrations, to calm the populace, to avoid bloodshed in every way possible, and to achieve normalisation of the situation. In fact, the very same as demanded by the Apswaa! The Georgian leaders preferred a momentary peace, not in the least thinking about what consequences this might portend. They aggravated the disease. The Apswa separatists escaped retribution, and thus the events of the summer of 1989 proceeded according to the script of the NFA [National Forum of Abkhazia] "Aidylara".'⁵

We refrain from comment — the logic of the author speaks for itself; we only note that reproaches directed at a number of Georgian officials of high and middle rank of the security-services and even of activists of the national movement, accusing them of inaction and unwillingness to take tough measures against the Abkhazians, were expressed repeatedly. Did these allegations achieve their goals in the years preceding the Georgian-Abkhazian war? Naturally, they could not influence the situation. Thus was the ground prepared for the charge of betraying the national interests against any influential Georgian who tried

² 'Apswa' is the Abkhazians' self-designation (plural Apswaa). When it is used by Kartvelian authors, this is not a sign of respect, as might be assumed. It is seen by the Abkhazians as derogatory in view of the fact that there exists a pseudo-scholarly theory that argues that the 'true' historical Abkhazians were a Georgian-speaking (sc. Kartvelian-speaking) tribe ousted from their homeland (viz. Abkhazia) by the Apswaa, who are supposed to have penetrated from the North Caucasus a matter of centuries ago and to have adopted the name of the local Kartvelian tribe that they came to dominate. This is known as the 'Ingoroq'va Hypothesis' after its promulgator, P'avle Ingoroq'va, in the late 1940s/early 1950s. [Translator's footnote]

³ Circassian Culture Center: Abkhazia 1989. Preparation for the genocide of the Georgians, Russians and others. A. Zarkua, part I. <http://circassiancenter.org/general/4597-1989.html>

⁴ R. Mishveladze, Open Letter to F. Iskander, newspaper Axalgazrda Iverieli [Young Iberian], 11 December 1990.

⁵ Abkhazia, 1989. Preparation for the genocide of the Georgians, Russians and others. A. Zarkua, part II. <http://circassiancenter.org/feed/%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F/4596-1989.txt>

to act in relation to the Abkhazians judiciously and without aggression. It is necessary to say that in Georgian society, both before the victory in October 1990 in the parliamentary elections of the party "Round Table - Free Georgia" and after the loss of power by the Communists, there were people who saw the danger of a reckless struggle for "territorial integrity", under which at the time was raised the principle of the effective annulment of all three autonomies [viz. Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Ach'ara]. Such people existed even among the Georgians [Kartvelians] living in Abkhazia. These people knew that numerical superiority was on their side and that the Abkhazians were not seeking an immediate separation from Georgia but that they were only asserting their rights to relations based on equal rights. Consequently, there was no need to strain relations. At the turn of the 1980-1990s, compromise between the Abkhazians and the Georgians was not only possible but, in fact, every year clearly demonstrated the means possessed by both nations to reach such a compromise. This did not require a great deal: the proposition of real, not declarative, steps to strengthen the autonomous status of South Ossetia and the start of diplomatic negotiations with the Abkhazians on establishing relations on the model of a federation between equal subjects. It was also necessary to stop the ideological confrontation, and, finally, to withdraw from the autonomies all paramilitary and military groups. However, in real life, events unfolded according to a completely different scenario.

The armed coup which ended in the overthrow of Zviad Gamsakhurdia in January 1992 and in the creation of the illegitimate Military Council and thereafter the 56-man State Council, in which the right of a meaningful vote lay in the hands of the members of its presidium (Eduard Shevardnadze, Tengiz Kitovani, Dzhaba Ioseliani, Tengiz Sigua) fundamentally changed the situation in Georgia. In the post-Soviet space, the seizure of power by field-commanders was not a unique phenomenon, but its effect most clearly negatively affected the events in Georgia and, in particular, the war against Abkhazia.

It should be emphasised that, from the very beginning, neither the Abkhazians nor South Ossetians demanded from Georgia that it should provide them with full independence. The leadership of South Ossetia proclaimed the Autonomous Region a Republic and the referendum on withdrawal from the constituency of Georgia was held when the armed conflict was already at its height. As for Abkhazia, it declared its full independence only in October 1999, that is a full six years after the end of the war.

It is obvious that the annulment of the old, Soviet constitution of the Abkhazian ASSR⁶ and the restoration of the Abkhazian constitution of 1925 adopted by the deputies of the Abkhazian parliament on 23 July 1992 were, in a political sense, nothing more than a proposal to start talks on the signing of a power-sharing agreement between Georgia and Abkhazia. In fact, what was being spoken of was a transformation of Georgia into a federal republic, which in reality it actually was. No demands for full independence of the republic or its secession from Georgia were proposed by the Abkhazian leaders at the time. The fact that the State Council of Georgia decided to respond to the Abkhazian proposal by introducing troops was primarily connected with the purely domestic political problems in Georgia itself, and the purpose of this step was to unite the divided Georgian [Kartvelian] nation. On the one hand, the military campaign became the embodiment of the patriotic slogans, living proof of the resolve and determination of the new government in the matter of strengthening the unity of Georgia. On the other hand, it excused the numerous difficulties encountered by the new regime: chaos in the economy, lack of money, banditry, Georgia's complete dependence on foreign grants and humanitarian aid. In Tbilisi, they hoped that the Abkhazian campaign would unite and reconcile Mingrelians and Georgians, consolidating them in the face of a common enemy, i.e. the Abkhazians. At the same time, the State Council did not entertain a thought of the possibility of the war dragging on and, even less, of its ending in such a crushing defeat.

Therefore, the attempts to justify the terror carried out in the occupied parts of the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by a desire to save Georgia from collapse are unfounded. There were opportunities for negotiation with the Georgian side. The display of military forces in conformity with the position of the international community, which unconditionally recognised Georgia within the frontiers of the former Soviet republic [sc. the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia], gave Tbilisi good arguments at the negotiating table. However, the negotiations appear to have been deemed too drawn out and not to have been such an effective option for resolving the issue in dispute as military occupation.

⁶ In practice, all the union-republics at this time denounced their constitutions of the Soviet period, whilst the autonomous republics within the constituency of Russia adopted declarations on their state-sovereignty and became republics within the constituency of the Russian Federation, without causing any excesses.

But can the harsh measures taken in relation to Abkhazia be excused in any way at all? Now, twenty years on, we see that there were no particular reasons for Georgians to fear for their territorial integrity. Even in 2008, Russia decided to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia for the sole reason that it saw no other opportunity to extricate itself with dignity from the situation that had developed. At the time in 1992, the head of Russia's executive authority scarcely allowed the possibility of recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, much less their unification with Russia, to enter his thoughts. Among the Russian "derzhavniki" [advocates of a hardline projection of Soviet power], who prevailed at the time of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation, there were many people concerned about the fate of the Abkhazians and Ossetians and who tried as much as possible to help them — exclusively in the political sphere. Many of Russia's security forces also sympathised with the Abkhazians, Ossetians, the people of Karabakh and the Transdnistrians (Prednestrovians), sometimes providing them with arms and ammunition. But others saw the war in Abkhazia simply as good business, which facilitated the matter of organising the Abkhazian resistance. But to speak of the existence in Russia of some plan of action to wrest the autonomous republics away from Georgia is simply without foundation. We must bear in mind that in the period in question Moscow had lost control over large areas and, in fact, had returned to the borders of the XVI century. It is well known that the Kremlin was particularly concerned with the rise of national movements in the North Caucasus, and, for this reason, it did not encourage the activity of the Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus, especially in view of the situation in Chechnia.

As for the rest of the world, which could exercise but slight influence on the situation in Abkhazia, all the major powers, starting with the USA, were potential allies of Georgia; as for what was happening in Abkhazia (yes, and also Georgia), almost all Europeans and Americans had an exceptionally superficial notion. It was impossible to imagine that the Abkhazians' request for recognition of their independence in the case of their separating from Georgia would be satisfied.

Executors

Witnesses' memories are often in stark contrast to the enthusiastic descriptions left by these or those journalists and other visitors who described the war from the "Georgian" side. The Georgian government and the Georgian Army had sincere "fans" who thought the campaign in Abkhazia in August 1992 was a battle for democracy and a struggle against the "last bastion of the communist regime", in which the goals, of course, justify the means. Partly it is precisely in this way that one can explain the reckless use of power which the forces of the State Council and other military and paramilitary formations in Abkhazia allowed themselves to perpetrate during the campaign of 1992-1993. Reading the newspapers and magazines which fell (often accidentally) into their hands or listening to the TV or radio, which almost never referred to the atrocities or acts of looting or indeed spoke in conciliatory tones, the executors of terror could not but feel completely confident.

Paradoxically, not one of the western politicians and human rights activists even then gave a thought to international humanitarian law, which was grossly violated from the very first days of the war. Numerous killings of civilians (the elderly, children, women) were a clear violation of the Geneva Conventions, which require the parties to a conflict 'to distinguish between the civilian population and the direct participants of military operations (combatants), to ensure the protection of civilians and civilian objects. Prohibited are attacks on the civilian population as a whole and on individual civilians. It is forbidden to kill or cause damage to an adversary who surrenders or is unable to take part in hostilities' (Geneva Convention on the Protection of Victims of War, 1949).

We cannot say that the Georgian government in that period did not care about its reputation. On the contrary, many advocates of the military conquest of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from the beginning of the Abkhazian campaign expended a great deal of energy on trying to prove to the world how justified the war instigated by the Georgian government was. But in this sense, their opponents had a significant advantage even before the campaign began. Abkhazian ideologues managed to win over to their side public opinion not only among the peoples of the North Caucasus who are related to the Abkhazians: the massive influx of volunteers from many of the republics of the Russian Federation and the former Soviet Union, Turkey, and even some European countries was due primarily to the fact that the struggle for the independence of Abkhazia was considered by many to be fair and justified. The volunteers who arrived to help the Abkhazians, listening to the stories of people released from Georgian captivity, received clear confirmation of the moral righteousness of their cause. It became increasingly obvious that for the Abkhazians it was a

struggle for survival and the right to free development, against national intolerance, which fell well within the scope of common human values.

At the international level, neither during those years nor today, twenty years on, has there been a whisper of condemnation of the numerous violations of the laws of war committed by Georgian guardsmen and their associates. And this is hugely to be regretted, because prompt condemnation of the atrocities and killings on ethnic grounds could have prevented the dramatic consequences of the Georgian-Abkhazian war, and, in particular, the outcome for the refugees. For soon after the war began, Georgian forces and the local Georgian [Kartvelian] population began to be perceived as a single entity, since representatives of the latter often actively participated in the punitive actions, looting, torture and executions of civilians and prisoners of war. To a large extent, this explains why from the beginning of the Abkhazian offensive, many Georgians [Kartvelians] began to leave their homes. It is appropriate to note that many Abkhazians, Russians, Armenians and Greeks in the days after the Georgian invasion did not leave their homes. The mass-exodus of the non-Georgian [non-Kartvelian] population across the front lines (and these were for a while after the start of the war still permeable, and the evacuation of many of the refugees took place in precisely this way) did not begin until after the first acts of terror, when it became clear that flight was the only way to save oneself from death.

What sort of people were the main perpetrators of genocide, and how far is it possible to identify them with the army of the State Council? It is not appropriate to lay the blame for all the acts of violence and atrocities only on the Georgian troops. It should be noted that, although the calls to subjugate Abkhazia were very popular in Georgia, not all of the soldiers were aggressively minded. By no means all of the Georgian recruits who happened to be in the Republic were suited to what they were called upon to do: officially, the aim of the operation was declared to be the 'protection of the railway', but, with the start of full-scale military operations, this was consigned to oblivion, and completely different problems had to be solved.

At the same time, the ranks of the Georgian army who had appeared in Abkhazia were quickly supplemented by the local Georgian [Kartvelian] population. In this case, those joining the State Council's troops had different motivations: some were genuine supporters of the armed struggle for the territorial integrity of Georgia, others saw in the war an opportunity to enrich themselves, to earn the title of new home-owners, and others to settle old scores. Entry into any of the Georgian units was not difficult. There was no requirement to submit documents attesting to the absence of a criminal record or to psychological adequacy. In this way, the paths were open for the replenishment of the army of occupation by marginal and criminal elements, which actually played a fatal role for Georgia. Most witnesses unanimously agree on the fact that the greatest cruelty was exhibited by the squads of the "Mkhedrioni", Dzhaba Ioseliani's people, recruited by him in the criminal world. But in second, and sometimes even in first place, stood people from the local population, albeit, of course, far from its best stratum.

To draw a complete picture of the balance of forces in the areas that came at the beginning of the war under the authority of the State Council of Georgia is extremely difficult. Apparently, for a few months at the very start, in the "Georgian" zone there operated efficient and well-controlled units, which occupied key positions. In the rest of the occupied territories chaos reigned, and only gradually did there begin to be formed battalions and housing, whilst small groups were combined and joined larger ones. However, formal subordination still did not mean that the commander of this or that Georgian detachment complied with all orders of the higher command. If the Abkhazians, from the start of the war, strove maximally to regulate all the self-defence groups, the Georgians restored order in their ranks only very slowly. The Abkhazians, whose resistance began in barricades and guerrilla-operations, wanted to show the whole world that they were as capable at organising as, if not more so than, their opponents. To a large extent they succeeded. The Georgian command also had such goals, but, right up to the end of the war, it failed to bring elementary order to its own army, and, up to the end of the war, groups were fighting on the Georgian side which in general recognised the authority of no-one.

It is noteworthy that, at the beginning of the war, the Georgian field-commanders from the most efficient units, when engaging in talks with the Abkhazians, proposed that this or that populated locality be surrendered to them, warning, at the same time, that otherwise irregular elements would come in, and then no-one would be able to guarantee the safety of civilians, and especially that of their movable and immovable property. True, it should also be noted that cases of voluntary surrender were rare: it happened only when all possibilities of defence had been exhausted. The Abkhazian population was fully determined not to let the Georgian troops enter even small villages, and the reason was that they had been informed

about what had happened earlier beyond the borders of Abkhazia (in Mingrelia and South Ossetia), in those areas that were still under the control of the forces of the State Council.

The Abkhazian military, observing the Georgians, especially in the first weeks after 14 August 1992, agree on the fact that, for many Georgians (the rank and file and junior officers), Abkhazian war was for a long time a kind of game. Many did not expect that in this republic they could encounter strong resistance, and the drawn out campaign was for them an unpleasant surprise. They expected that the pacification of Abkhazia would happen quickly, and that it was only important to manifest firmness and pressure, not to give in to one's feelings, and, as quickly as possible, to demonstrate their own power. At first, the hunting-down of people was selective — its targets were the activists of the Abkhazian national movement, their relatives and friends. It was just they who were arrested and sometimes killed without trial or investigation. The practice of taking hostages for exchange became established only later.

If you will allow, the most expressive picture of the first month of the Georgian-Abkhazian war was left by the well-known Polish journalist Mariusz Wilk. At one time he was the editor-in-chief of "Solidarity" and the press-secretary of Lech Walesa; from 1981 he went into hiding underground, twice becoming a political prisoner. The evidence of this representative of a European country wholly allied to Georgia and favourably disposed to its leadership is very valuable material. Mariusz Wilk perfectly conveys the atmosphere and attitudes of mind of the new, though, as it turned out, temporary masters of Georgia.

Here is a conversation with one of the soldiers of the National Guard (it should be noted that guardsmen, under the command of Tengiz Kitovani, were considered the best-trained and more disciplined units, rather than the "Mkhedrioni" [Cavalry] or the squads made up of local residents). 'I asked him what he would do when the war in Abkhazia ended, because, as I understood, the war had become his profession and, his vocation was to live in war. He said that, they would in that case have to go back to South Ossetia, because by that time the Ossetians would have grown rich, and there would be stuff to rob. And, if not Ossetia, there would always be wealthy Adzharia [Ach'ara] to strip bare. And while they are robbing Ossetia and Adzharia, Abkhazia will grow rich. Thus, it seemed to me that in this war, and perhaps not only in this, the political objectives are of no concern to people with weapons. For them, the war means going into a town to loot all the shops, to rob the apartments, then to transport all this to Tbilisi to traders who are personal acquaintances...'

Of course, the detailed programme of permanent predatory war bore a hint of black humour and could not be sustained indefinitely. However, during the years 1991-1993, the Georgian army did wage war under precisely such a scenario; Adzharia was only saved by a special set of circumstances and the skilful diplomacy of its [then-]leader, Aslan Abashidze. The natural result of this approach to war and destruction by the Georgian army was its inability to control the situation, even in those areas where the support of the Georgian [Kartvelian] population strengthened its position.

'... In the morning I was told that, in actual fact, taking advantage of a storm, the Abkhazians had tried to enter the city (Sukhum(i)). At the station there was crossfire; 34 Abkhazians were captured, and on the Georgian side there were dead. True, all the reports about the success of the Georgian army then seemed to me unlikely; it seemed to me that they don't know how to fight; they are permanently in a state of chaos, screaming, running all the time for something to drink.'

'... When we returned to the battalion, there again terrible boozing was going on. Then the whole battalion went swimming; the men leapt out of their underpants and plunged into the warm sea. In a Greek cottage they left two guys "on lookout" so that they might shoot from machine-guns there. So it was thundering. The cottage was located near the Abkhazian positions, and therefore, to let them know of their presence, the battery fired a block away towards the river, where the Abkhazians were.'

'... I was surrounded on all sides. One of the men took me by the arm, led me aside and quietly said, "Brother, do me an invitation to Poland." I was surprised: war is in progress there, and I was being asked about an invitation. Such was the level of morality of those guys for whom war was not a serious matter but a kind of adventure. Wanting to know what sort of man he was, I adopted a serious expression and said, "Okay, I'll do it, just give me your details." He wrote down for me on paper his personal details in a drunken hand with clumsy lettering. So I found out that he was only a little over fifteen years-old. Just a boy, but already fully armed and drunk.'

Not a few sketches of this kind were left by the journalists who came to Abkhazia during the war of 1992-1993, and so it is easy to form an idea of what the situation was in the occupied part of the Republic. However, it should be noted that, for all the frivolity displayed by the soldiers of the occupation-army, the war was for them not just a fun-ride. Behind the atrocities and plunder, in the first place, it is possible to detect a money-grubbing nature and lack of discipline, but such behaviour had another base. The criminals

and ordinary people with no regular occupation who came to wealthy Abkhazia felt social hatred even towards those who were not the most well-off people of the prosperous "gold coast". These were those whom society had deprived of a place in the sun and condemned to prison-life, those who lacked cunning or success in making their fortune. And they used the opportunity that had fallen into their hands to take by force what they believed was taken from them. True, they could not but see that a significant part of the rich people in Abkhazia were Georgians [Kartvelians] (and a lot of these during the war were robbed by their fellow-countrymen [sc. in the sense that Mingrelians and Svans have been classified as "Georgians" since about 1930]). However, the rest could be robbed with virtual impunity, which was something actually carried out with great zeal.

Among the locals, who took part in the hostilities, the attitudes of mind were different: they understood that, after the violence started, there could be no turning back, for by losing the war, they lost everything. In the Ochamchira District Georgian detachments were formed on the same principle as those of the Abkhazians — these were village-militias; the units of Akhaldaba, Tsagera, Tskhentskar, Kindghi and other units were well-known. Here local battles often took on the character of a war of village against village, and, in such cases, mutual hatred often exceeded all limits. In the Gulripsh District local Georgians [Mingrelians] and Svans gathered together in one company, wandered about, drunk, through the streets of villages and towns, robbing and killing whomsoever they wished, terrorising all local citizens without distinction of ethnicity. This went on until representatives of the civil Georgian [Kartvelian] population finally gained an understanding from the high command that measures be taken against the uncontrolled groups.

If we consider the varying groups in terms of military discipline and respect for the rules of war, the behaviour of the soldiers and officers of local units differed but little from that of the regular Georgian army which came to Abkhazia in August 1992. Here is another piece of evidence, this time from a Russian journalist: 'Three times there was an attempt to exchange prisoners. The first time, the exchange did not take place, because the head of the Georgian squad, having gone to check the corpses presented by the Abkhazian side was incapably intoxicated and could not identify his friends who had perished. The second time, a young Georgian soldier recognised his dead brother at the exchange. Out of his mind with grief, he broke into the bus where the hostages were awaiting their fate, shouting: 'I'll find someone to be shot today!' He had already chosen his victim and dragged her to the door, when, blinded by pain, he was stopped by his very own comrades. And the third time, the residents of the village Saken gathered to take advice with the aim of deciding the fate of the hostages. They drank a lot of wine and argued loudly. The shrieks of those demanding revenge in blood reached the room where the prisoners were languishing. When the meeting broke up, the prisoners started imploring the guard to inform them of its decision. The guard took pity on them and said: 'We decided to give you life.'⁷

In this episode, we see not only spontaneous decisions made under the influence of emotions but also the absence of any higher authority or moral code by which all the soldiers and officers of the Georgian army would be guided. Each had his own sense of honour and humanity, and each one acted in accordance with these. Thus, in one and the same squad there could be completely decent people, capable of generosity and, simply, of fairness with regard to the enemy, as well as murderers who abused prisoners and hostages, mocked the corpses of the fallen, etc...

It is noteworthy that among the people who showed humanity to the Abkhazians were many Gal residents whose names bespeak an Abkhazian origin. Recalled as one such, in particular, is the officer from Okum(i), Tamaz Baalou, who served in the Samurzakan Battalion, made up of residents of villages in the Gal District, along with other Mingrelian militiamen with the surnames Dzhobava (derived from the ancient Abkhazian surname Dzhopua), Abkhazava, Apsava etc... However, the Abkhazian field-commanders found a common language not only with Abkhazians assimilated during the Stalin era, but with many Georgians and Mingrelians. Without mutual trust, contacts, agreements on exchange of prisoners, and treaties according to which the artillery of both sides refrained from targeting areas where the shells may have caused the deaths of civilians would have been impossible. Not only junior officers, but also higher-ranking Georgian commanders often exercised reasonable restraint and diplomacy. The respect of Abkhazian officers was earned, in particular, by one of the senior commanders of the Georgian army, Zaur Uchadze, an educated man, who stood out among his subordinates not only by rank, but for his erudition, a man who tried to tone down extremes where this was possible. It was noticeable to the

⁷ Dar'ja Aslamova 'Notes of a wretched girl'.

Abkhazians that, among the Georgian commanders, the most prudent and those who were no strangers to generosity were people of an older generation, most often, Soviet military personnel.

A revealing small episode occurred when, in the talks between the Georgian and Abkhazian officers, the latter raised the question of ending the single-minded shelling by the Georgian artillery of Bagrat III's church, a unique architectural monument of the tenth century (we note that Georgians have considered Bagrat a Georgian king and the church a monument of Georgian architecture). The initiator of those negotiations was Oleg Arshba, deputy chief-of-staff of the 3rd Regiment on the Eastern Front. The shelling of the church did not stop even during the negotiations. When an Abkhazian officer drew this to the attention of Uchadze, he replied with displeasure: 'Well, what can one do with him, with Gagua (battalion commander — S. Dzh.), do you imagine him capable of listening to anyone?' The reaction of the Georgian commander was very typical, and his words reflected the reality, for any ordinary field-commander could conduct military operations according to his own notions of the limits of what was permitted.

Shortly before the end of the war, Georgian representatives who arrived for talks with the Abkhazian military were negotiating the transfer to them of the Georgians [Kartvelians] who had died on one section of the front, where the Abkhazians had conducted a successful offensive. The Georgian delegates, looking at the dead, were saying: 'We'll take this one, and this one, and that one.' 'So, what about the rest?' asked the Abkhazian officers. 'They're locals; we have no need of them!' came the reply. It then fell to the Abkhazians to find people on the Georgian side who would be willing to take on the task of burying the dead Georgian [Kartvelian] soldiers.

However, instances of humane behaviour were still infrequent. One of the Georgian militia, a professional gunner, was again and again shooting at the famous Bedia church from a cannon at an elevation of 302 meters (from the mountain Eshkyt). The technical capabilities of the Abkhazian intelligence-service allowed them to hear drifting over in the ether the obscenities directed at his opponents' mothers with which he began the morning of each day, inviting the Abkhazians to wake up with his cannonade. In the selfsame area, at a height 251 meters, near the village of Bedia, the Georgians over several days fought a tough battle, with considerable casualties on both sides, trying to seize this mountain from the Abkhazian army. Later, when the fighting subsided, an Abkhazian officer tried to elucidate what lay behind the Georgians' storming precisely this high point with such ferocity. A Georgian commander, whether in jest or in all seriousness, said: 'We were told that in the house of a local resident there was some good wine.' The Abkhazians did not take seriously this explanation, but, by and large, it is perfectly possible to believe in such an argument ...

When swearing an oath of vengeance in Gudauta at the funerals of victims, Abkhazian fighters added: 'May this automatic rifle never shoot at an innocent Georgian!' When on 14 December 1992 the helicopter carrying refugees from the besieged city of Tkvarchal was shot down by the Georgians over the village of Lata, a resident of Gudauta, Valerij Tsurtsunia, who lost seven relatives in the helicopter, was the first to stand up in defence of local Georgians and Mingrelians, against whom some hotheads were calling for reprisal. And these acts were far from being isolated. Of course, no-one can deny that also on the part of the Abkhazian military killings and violence took place. But, at the same time, we must bear in mind that in such a conflict the main responsibility lies with those who started the war that led to a chain-reaction of violence.

The series of episodes to follow presents a picture of the situation obtaining on the Georgian side of the front. That, in turn, provides an answer to the question: why exactly was it possible for everything described in the stories of the eye-witnesses adduced below to happen?

Summation

.... Today in public-opinion polls a significant trend is noticeable: 17% of the residents of the Russian Federation (the figure coincided with surveys conducted around the same time by the All-Russian Centre for Research into Public Opinion (VTsIOM) and the "Levada Centre") named Germany the most friendly country. According to the findings of VTsIOM, ahead of Germany were Belarus, Kazakhstan, and China, whereas, according to the findings of the "Levada Centre", only China is deemed to be a friendlier country than Germany. At the same time, it is generally well-known that no country in the world has inflicted such damage on Russia as Germany, and that no regime in history, with the exception of that of Hitler, has set itself the aim of exterminating the Russian people. Nevertheless, after only half a century, the Russians speak of the Germans as a friendlier nation than the Americans, the Ukrainians and the Georgians.

Russian historians, writers, and film-makers even today remind their people of episodes in the war, and the Day of Victory over German fascism is still the main patriotic holiday in Russia. The word "fascist" remains a swear-word in the Russian language. But, in the public mind, the hostile attitude to everything connected with Germany, which was exceptionally strong during World War II, has practically disappeared. And this happened, in the first place, because the leadership and people of Germany found it within themselves to call a spade a spade and to renounce the atrocities that were committed by the war-criminals, without trying to find excuses for their own actions. Germany condemned its own crimes and took steps to ensure that they are not repeated in the future. And this, it seems, was enough ...

When calls resound for national reconciliation between Georgians and Abkhazians, some reflection is necessary: what about the people who personally witnessed and experienced what is described in this book? War-victims, their relatives and descendants even today well remember everything that happened, and to call upon THEM to repent is, at the very least, strange. It is precisely Georgian politicians and society as a whole that must take the first step and condemn what was done in the name of Georgia. Then it will be possible to count on a mitigation of enmity and, in the future, on a genuine mutual understanding between the sides to the conflict.

Spartak Zhidkov

Shaliko Erastovich Amichba, 65 year-old father-in-law.

Aleksandra Anserovna Iunisba, 60 year-old mother-in-law.

Varavara (Wardyshka) Timurovna Kapba, 80 year-old. Mother of mother-in-law

Maro Margania, 60 year-old neighbour.

Killed during the Georgian occupation of Ochamchira.

Narrated by Ludmila Amichba

When the war started, I was in Gagra with my two children. My husband's sister and brother's wife, who also had two children each, were with me. My brothers (cousins) lived there, but they, like my husband, fought during the war, leaving their wives, children and grandchildren at home. In the family there were about five-six children, so we couldn't load them with having to look after us as well, as such, like many others, we went to live in a boarding house.

This house where we find ourselves at the moment is Grandfather's - the house nearby is mother-in-law's and father-in-law's. They had two sons; my husband and his brother. My husband and I lived in his Grandfather's house with his Grandparents. Grandfather died one year before the war began. On 12 August we commemorated the one year anniversary of his death, and the war started 14 August. We couldn't get away, so we stayed in Ochamchira for one month and hoped, like everyone else, that if not today, then maybe tomorrow, the fighting would end and peace would return. The old folk did not want to leave and tried to persuade us not to go, they insisted that we stay; "Where are you going? Why? The last war didn't even affect Abkhazia, nobody killed us. Have the Georgians really come to destroy us? Our Georgian neighbours are here and they won't let us down". How did those Georgians, who came from Ingur, know that two brothers lived here in this house? Only our neighbours, with whom we used to share even a slice of bread, knew this. That means they told the guardsmen that my husband and his brother were fighting. So when armed guardsmen started asking me where my husband and brother-in-law were, I understood that I had to leave. Fortunately, they left, but promising to return. Taking advantage of this moment, my brother-in-law's wife and I took our children and literally ran away.

Not all the neighbours were the same, there was someone who was able to help us get out of the town. When I called Gela Dokhnadze in tears, he hid us in a small van "Pirozhkovoze" (now I just can't imagine how several adults and children managed to fit inside it) and drove to the port. This man was a friend of my husband's, and even during this terrible time he didn't refuse to help us. This all took place on 20 October. My sister-in-law was staying in Gudauta, my children and I - in Gagra

In February 1993 we heard that the guardsmen had killed my mother and father-in-law and another old mother. Our neighbour, and relative, Maro Margania was killed with them. Being afraid to stay at home, she spent the nights in our house. Her husband, Grigory Margania, who was about 65 years old, was shot by soldiers in December 1992

Unfortunately, one of our other neighbours, whose last name I can't recall, but her first name was Talina, was one of those who brought the Georgians to our house in the hope that her brother, who lived in the village, would come to live there when it would be made "free" of Abkhazians. She was sure that we would not return.

After our departure, the guardsmen continued coming to our house demanding answers from the old men as to the whereabouts of their sons. In one of these parishes they tortured father with an iron –They effectively "ironed" him. He was covered in terrible burns, and nobody had any medicine to ease his suffering. With such burns, father left the house trying to find some bread, but Mingrelian neighbours threw him out of the queue saying "Let Ardzinba send you bread".

One week later, following the torture with the iron, the guardsmen returned in the night killing our old men. Our neighbours told us that, in our yard there were footprints in the snow of Georgian soldiers' boots.

The guardsmen climbed through our Grandmother's bedroom window, shot her and covered her body with several mattresses. Maro used to visit one of her neighbours, Kvartskhava, in the mornings. When she didn't go round that morning, her neighbour began looking for her and entered our house with her grandchild. She helped her grandchild climb through the window as the door was locked, and she found Grandmother all blood stained and covered with mattresses. Then they went to my father-in-law's house, where they found another 3 people who had been killed – my father-in-law, mother-in-law and neighbour; Maro. Their bodies had been severed; there were bruises and a lot of gunshot wounds.

That is how our relatives were brutally killed. Their bodies were buried in our yard, but having returned home after the war, we reburied them in the cemetery.

Victor Selim (Yura)

Killed during the occupation of Ochamchira.

Narrated by Svetlana Gindia - Widow

The day the war started, my whole family was in Pakwash where we would gather nuts. When we returned home at lunchtime, all the neighbours were talking in horror about how war had begun. We didn't return home, we spent 3 days with our relatives in Tkvarchal. To be honest, we didn't want to believe that the war had started at all. I had already experienced terrible grief in my life - I lost my daughter one year before the war, and we still hadn't managed to commemorate the one-year anniversary of her death.

There were 5 of us in our family; me, my husband, 2 sons and my father-in-law. We travelled from Tkvarchal to Ochamchira several times in order to take my father-in-law away with us, but he was stubbornly refusing to leave. Only Abkhazians lived on our street and Georgians didn't appear in the beginning. We came to Ochamchira for the last time on October 6th to commemorate the anniversary of my daughter's death. We were able to prepare some food and lay a table of remembrance.

We heard that the war had started, but our grief and surrounding neighbours (only one Georgian family lived here) and the fact that no guards had appeared yet, didn't allow us to realise what was going on. However, Yura, my husband, said several times that his enemy had arrived and was somehow very afraid. That day he gave a memorial toast of apology for being unable to do anything for our daughter, and with that, he left. We still assume that our daughter did not just simply die, but that she was murdered. Maybe that's what he meant, or maybe he was talking about someone else. As such, he worked all his life in the police force. That evening, while we were commemorating our daughter's death, he insisted that we not stay in the house for the night and that we went to our neighbour's to sleep. We did so, but that night no-one came, and nothing had been cleared away from the table.

I've always lived here in Ochamchira, and though my husband was working in Dnepropetrovska, we met each other in Ochamchira. He came here in 1969 after we got married and then started working in Sukhum. He was one of the people who was investigating the case of the haberdashery factory - you should remember that, back then it was a very high-profile case. Now I think that he could have made enemies in connection with this business. To be honest, I didn't even know what he was working on at the time. After the details of the case had been made public, he told me on the second day that I had to leave with my daughter. Soon after that, he was appointed head of the *Department to Combat the Theft of Socialist Property* of the Republic, and of course, it was possible that he made enemies because of that. When the war started, he was 53 years old and he was working as the head of private security. He would always say that we mustn't stay here, so we decided that on 8 October, after our daughter's remembrance day, we would leave for Tkvarchal. Our neighbour - a Mingrelian woman, told my husband to give her our car so

that she could look after it for us. Although we didn't really want to do this, we gave it to her anyway. That day I had some things to do, and I went into town. On my return, my son told me that his father had been taken away. We tried to find something out from our acquaintances – nothing, only that he had been taken to the headquarters by some guards.

I spent the whole night in tears. I was unable to do anything. He didn't return, and I decided that something bad must have happened to him. The next day I decided to resume the search and I went to the local authorities where I saw a large number of Georgians. They were all so frightening, black, half-naked with machine guns. I was scared and walked passed them several times without knowing who to approach. It was terrible. Maybe it was due to the fact that I was in mourning that nobody said anything to me, so I went to the authorities. Two girls from Ochamchira were working there - Makvala Shamatava and Dodo, who also had a Georgian surname, which I can't recall now. A guardsman was standing in front of the governor's door, and he asked me what I wanted. I told him that my husband been taken the day before and I wanted to find out where he was and that, maybe, he had already been killed. He asked me for my husband's surname. I said Selim. He discussed something with the girls and then they told me that they had made calls to every headquarters, but he wasn't anywhere. One of the guardsmen told me to go to the police as I might be able to find something out there. At the police station I saw a member of staff, Shevchenko, who used to work with my husband.

“ Oh, Sveta, my dear, You know he's probably already been killed” He said it to me so directly.

“ What for?” I asked. To which he replied that the Georgians were now killing all Abkhazians, and he advised me to go to the prosecutor's office, where I could possibly be told something.

When he told me that, I felt so bad, but what could I do? I did go to the prosecutor's office, but I don't know how I got there. I couldn't even find the door as I felt so bad. I understood that I was standing near the office, but I couldn't go inside. I somehow pulled myself together and climbed upstairs. Kubrava was working as the prosecutor, Amiran, I think. Someone else was sitting there, I can't remember now, I couldn't stop crying and I couldn't even speak. I managed to tell them that my husband had been taken during the night and I wanted to know whether or not he was still alive. They asked me again for his surname. “Selim” I replied. They were saying something to me, and in the same moment I saw a piece of paper lying on the table with people's surnames; among them was the name of my husband. I asked if that meant he was dead.

“Oh! I don't know, they found him in the Morgue” Replied Kubrava, “but maybe it's not actually him”

I demanded that they took me there, and it was only at that point that I realised the war had really begun. I don't know what happened to us, neither Yura nor myself could admit that such a thing was possible. I was taken to the morgue. The medical examiner at the time, Shota Kuchuberia, was standing over my husband's body...

Sometime later, a girl from the neighbourhood told me that as soon as I went into town, a car approached our turning. Several people got out of the car and went into our house. She overheard how one of them said that they had come to look for weapons. They searched the whole house, but the weapons had been buried, so they couldn't find them.

...All in all, I saw my husband in the morgue, and I was told that he was found murdered near our 16-storey building. Then somebody told me that he put up resistance and fought with them. When I saw him he was still warm. Some Mengrelian man later promised to give me an ambulance, and I brought my husband home...

Part of his head had been removed. I think that he had been hit with an axe, had his ear cut off, eyes gouged out, 8 stab wounds and 12 bullet wounds. He was terribly disfigured. I was told later that 6 people were involved. I was even told the surname of one of them - Kutalia, but he is no longer alive.

I washed my husband's shirt which he was wearing that night. It was all pittered with holes like a sieve. We couldn't take him to the cemetery, so we buried him in the garden because somebody was shooting at us from that 16-storey building. On the fourth day, having not been able to accept the death of his son, his father also died – he was paralysed. We buried him here nearby. It was only after the war that we transferred them to the family cemetery.

I still feel guilty because we didn't leave immediately. My husband was the first to be killed in Ochamchira, then it was Nodara Ashuba. I stayed in Ochamchira until 4 January after which my twelve year-old son and I went to Tkvarchal, where my older son was.

**Tsatsa Kazanba and Zhenia Kazanba (86 years old)
Killed during the occupation of Ochamchira.**

Narrated by Tsutsa Kazanba – sister and daughter of the victims.

When the war started, all my family - sister, younger brother, mother, husband and daughter with her husband and child were in Ochamchira. One Georgian woman, Shanidze, who was the main railway hospital doctor lived opposite me on our landing. I can't say that she showed any open hostility toward me, whereas all the neighbours were Georgian where I lived with my mother and sister, and they showed themselves in the worst kind of light.

The guardsmen would repeatedly come to our house in search of something. They even climbed down the chimney. In one of those searches my husband (who was Mingrelian) asked them if they were looking for weapons and machine guns. They also came to my sister and mother, attacked and threatened them...

Tsatsa was always strong in character, and Georgians remembered very well how she was among those of who in 1989 put up resistance on Galidzga bridge in Ochamchira. She spoke out so openly against the Georgians that everybody knew about it. Eteri Buiuk-ogli who raised the flag on the bridge did it by standing on her shoulders. I know from her own words that the prosecutor, Abshidze, was preparing to arrest her.

...On that day, 29 October, Tsatsa said that she was going to work to get some documents (she worked at the Bureau of Technical Inventory), and would return in 30 minutes. She said that the office was turned upside down, but she finally managed to pick up the electoral rolls. She gave these papers to me telling me to hide them for anything could happen. For some reason my mother was most concerned about my sister, Tsatsa. She was always saying that she would be killed. Soon after that they came for her. The people who came were guys who worked in the first tea factory. My poor old mother called me and said "the guests have arrived about whom I'm well aware". Of course I quickly ran to my Mother's... My sister later told me that, one of the guys quizzed her as to whether or not she knew him. He was apparently Givi Lomaia, and it was he who was threatening her more than anyone else. Tsatsa, my sister, immediately called the then head of the city council; I think his surname was Guguchia. She asked if they had sent these people to her house. She was, after all, a member of their staff and Guguchia knew her. He told her to pass the phone to Lomaia. After they spoke, these people left.

Not one of our neighbours gave us any support at such a difficult time - not the Armenians, Russians, Abkhazians and especially not the Georgians. I'm jumping from one point to another, but this must be said - they were very painful moments. Somehow we were left without bread and I went in the hope of finding some at the bakery. They didn't give me any even though I saw the son-in-law of one of our neighbours, Shanidze, who recognized me. When I came back and told another neighbour about it, she replied that not only the son-in-law works there, but his brother too. "What do you expect? They're defending their Republic" And then I became scared. At that point my husband who was returning from town told us about how the Georgians were behaving and what was going on with Abkhazians. Everyone suggested leaving town, but I refused. I could not leave my mother and sister, who, by that time, were back in Ochamchira during a truce. So we hid my sister. We got stuck in town, and my husband wasn't even given a ration, which was being given to all the Georgians - because his wife was Abkhazian. He couldn't keep his mouth shut and was constantly arguing with them.

My sister was stuck in Ochamchira until October 1992. For some reason she was taken and we didn't know what had happened to her for a long time. However, she returned one evening in July 1993 at the time of the truce. Terrible things were going on in town; people were shooting, everything was collapsing, we were being bombed from above and from the sea and we were trying to calm each other down with doses of Velarian...

I couldn't speak to my sister properly for a whole week because what was happening was such a nightmare. Just at that moment, our fellow Abkhazians were trying to affect a landing from the sea.

My sister was brought back by some seemingly decent people, evident by the fact that she was brought back alive and unharmed. Our neighbours on the other hand were awful because when my mother came outside to feed the chickens she was at fired at left and right from the neighbouring gardens. My husband landed himself in the same situation, but he, in contrast to my mother, who was always scared of saying a word, began to argue with them.

He asked and begged us to leave saying that our neighbours were treating us badly and wouldn't leave us alone. He couldn't understand why we were against leaving; he, of course, didn't know that we were

hiding my sister. I can honestly admit that I didn't even trust him. All the neighbours were annoying us with constant questions about where Tsatsa was. I was here, but where was she? I don't know why they were so interested in her in particular. The first time when our house was searched I remember that the people wanted to know where a map was - she was, after all, working for the BTI. Maybe some political party wanted to hurt her. Think about it, they really wanted to get Rodonaia Lagvilava's wife as well. Sirbiladze also told her "Your time will soon come."

The following took place on 16 September September. The family of Nikoladze lived near us and they were always asking us where my sister was. At the same time my husband was pressuring us to leave. He was annoying us and wasn't backing down saying that everyone was being taken to the stadium and we would be taken and killed. I was left with nothing to say other than Tsatsa was here we were hiding her. I told him to go with me as I had something to show him. I took him to the room where Tsata was hiding and opened the door. The poor thing was sitting there going grey from her grief and horror. He almost hit the roof, he was furious, shouting "it would have been better if we had all died than to hide her here like this. What have you done?" I told him with an open heart that I didn't tell him because I couldn't even trust him. We couldn't believe in anyone because there was so much fear.

He changed her into men's clothes, put a hat on her and gave her a cigarette in her mouth. Then he took her away. I followed them. My mother called out "don't leave me here alone." I calmed her down and told her to wait. We would see Tsatsa off and return. She followed me and said "if you call yourself my daughter, don't go any further than the Brigade" (there is a small place near us with the name Brigade).

We didn't even get to that place, because from the house which we were passing, we heard a scream; "Look! They're taking an Abkhazian away" The voice was painfully familiar, but whose voice it was exactly, I still can't recall. I only managed to say; "that's it! We're finished". We didn't get the chance to finish what we were doing as several people started coming after us with machine guns. They caught up with us and started demanding documents. My husband began to argue with them in order to turn their attention away from us. While they were arguing, I told my sister that we should quietly go home. We managed to go 80 metres unnoticed. We got to our neighbours house where Tsketishvili lived - she's collapsing, she can't go on. We were relying on the fact that Tsketishvili's mother was Kutarba (an Abkhazian), so we decided to go inside. We were wondering if we would really be killed. All the doors were locked. So I said "Tsatsa come on let's split up, maybe we won't be noticed as much. I went to my neighbour's garden and hid in the barn. She hid in a different place where she fainted. Our neighbour Ubilava took her and wanted to hide her, but the guardsmen ended up getting rid of our neighbour taking my sister away. I heard her scream through the sound of gunshots: "Mother, don't be afraid, everything will be ok". They took the poor thing towards the train station, but I didn't know about this...

Three women and two men entered the garden where I was hiding and started interrogating the owner: "We've taken this one, now show us where you're hiding the other one". The neighbours told them that they weren't hiding anyone, and I was listening to all of this. The guardsmen then left.

I asked my neighbour to give me some kind of dark dressing gown and head scarf so I could hide my face. I lamented over the fate of my sister, but I was reassured and told that she'd probably just been taken to the stadium where they'd taken everyone else.

Crawling through the piggery, I got to the house of another neighbour, Lipartia Aksentia. It was suggested that I hid at theirs until the evening and then they would try to take me somewhere else. But how could I stay?

Hiding under the tall grass for about 7-8 hours, I crawled to the fence of our house to see what had happened to my mother. I noticed through the gate that two women had gone over into our house, and then I heard my mother's scream. From the horror, I began to scream as well, but they didn't hear me. One of these women, Okudzhava, was the wife of Kharchilava. To this day I can still hear the sound of my mother's cry in my ears.

Like a crazy woman I again went back to my neighbour's, Lipartia, and asked them to go and see what had happened to my mother. They tried, but they weren't let in and were threatened that anyone who tried to get in would be shot. Of course the neighbours were also afraid. I still hoped that my mother hadn't been killed, that she was just feeling bad.

In the evening, the landowner's son took me to the hospital through the backstreets. I even saw a big bonfire there in the yard. Back then, I was stupid and didn't understand what it was. There were so many guardsmen with machine guns all around. I didn't understand where I was going, but understood that I had to get to my husband in our flat or to my brother-in-law's. I lost my way home, but I saw lots of acquaintances, among them was a relative with the same surname as my husband, Gogokhia. It was too

frightening to talk to anyone, so I just ran frantically not turning back, and they naturally didn't ask me what was wrong. I got to my brother-in-law, who helped me get in contact with my husband in Ilor, but we didn't stay there, we moved to his relatives in Sheshlet where I found out the details about the death of my sister and mother. My husband's relative tried to keep the fact that they had been killed from me for a while, but when I saw my husband, he told me everything. Apparently, she was tortured for a long time in the hospital yard as she was beaten with sticks. She gave them her fist and said "that's for you, you won't get what you want"

My brother-in-law and some young man, who was a neighbour, but about whom I don't know anything, buried my poor mother. As for my sister's body, we were never able to transfer it to the ground, and we still don't know where it is. Back then one man told me that they saw her remains not far from the hospital. After our return after the war, I searched around but couldn't find anything. I was later told that a Russian who worked on the garbage truck took away her remains. I found him, but said he couldn't remember where he had thrown them since it was all so frightening and he was working with guns pointed at him.

...My sister and mother were killed, I would have also been killed if it hadn't been for my husband and his relatives who hid me in Sheshlet. My mother and sister lived near us and near the train station in the 9th district.

There, in Sheshlet, I couldn't even cry properly. I went out to a field and screamed there. But I was warned by the owner that she was hiding 50 Abkhazians there, and I shouldn't attract attention to my screams. All of my husband's relatives supported me in Sheshlet. After Sukhum was liberated, I went home.

Sergey Khalvash - killed during the occupation of Ochamchira.

Narrated by Julietta - widow

My husband was working at the tea factory as a driver. When the war started, for some reason, we hoped that if not today, then maybe tomorrow, it would all end. Only 3 families were Abkhazian in our building. Everyone else was Mingrelian or Georgian. We couldn't even get outside. Even before the war started things were very difficult. One of the neighbours, Igor Dzalamidze, was always reproaching me saying "Ardzinba is your brother". This Dzalamidze was always going to the authorities giving them the names and addresses of Abkhazians. It wasn't only him who was doing that kind of thing. All our neighbours were informing them about Abkhazians. There wasn't one neighbour who we could go to and ask for help. We didn't even have the right to look out of our windows. Now Mingrelians can talk among us freely in their own language, but we weren't allowed to talk in Abkhazian at all.

Our youngest child, who was 8 years old, was ill with inflammation of the middle ear and puss was coming out. On 2 December, the guardsmen came and took my husband away. I'd already lost hope of seeing him again, but my neighbours convinced me that he would be brought back. And he actually was brought back 2 hours later beaten and his arm broken. I felt as though I was among German fascists. They brought him back, left him and told us that we weren't to go anywhere because we didn't have the right. There was one man amongst them who spoke Abkhazian. We later found out that he was a local Svan, Marguliani, who was brought up in the village of Atara in an Abkhaz family. All in all, I realised that all the people who made up the group that had taken my husband were Svans, but that man was the only local one. All of our neighbours were standing outside and were talking something over. I was even afraid to look out of the window. Our neighbours stopped the guardsmen and started talking to them about something. At that point, they came back and called for my husband. The children returned in tears and said that their father had been taken again. I went outside to see for myself that he wasn't there. My neighbours just stood there laughing in my face saying that they had also taken another two of our neighbours as though they were passing on some good news. During the last twenty days, everyone was saying that they'd seen them here and there and that they would be brought back soon, but no-one came to bring them back. Some people came to one of our neighbours and said that her husband had been killed, but that mine was coming back. They simply mocked us.

A few days later, my neighbour, Khatuna, visited me and said that, some people had come for me and my children. One of my children was eight years old, the other was nine. At that moment, there was a knock at the door. When I opened the door I was met with the barrel of a machine gun. They asked for my surname and I replied that it was Khalvash. "Just the one" said one of them. They entered and ordered us to get ready. My children and I got dressed. We were taken to the half dilapidated sixth building where water was standing in the basement and where my children and I were locked up. I was told that I was there

as part of an exchange for the Golordava family from Kochara. We would be exchanged if they were still alive, but if they were dead, we would be killed too. Imagine what kind of state I was in, and also my children, who were listening to everything. It would appear that when a person is staring death in the face, he ceases to feel anything. It seemed that I had lost all sense of feeling. I was only thinking of how to save my children. I thought about what a person feels when he is killed, how a bullet reaches him. Then I realised that I wanted to be killed before my children died so that I didn't have to witness their death. I fell to my knees right in the water before one of those bearded people who had brought us to that basement, and I told him I understood that they had brought us there to kill us, so I asked him to kill me first as my husband was already gone, and the same fate was probably waiting for us. They left having put nails in the door. A woman with a thirteen year-old boy was brought to the same place after some time. We were sitting in that basement for 3 whole days without food or water. The children didn't ask for anything, they didn't say they were hungry and they didn't even ask for a drink. Only the younger one kept asking; "Have they brought us here to kill us, mummy?" Three days later someone started knocking and demanding the door to be opened. I didn't even get up from my place. I'd already decided that they were going to kill us, so why should I get up? Another woman went over to the door and asked who was there. She said that we were locked in from the outside. Then the people outside broke down the door and burst into the basement shouting "where are the men?" They were all frightening with beards. We told them that there were no men there and that we had been locked up by people who we didn't even know. Something made me say that we were relatives of Givi Salaqaia the director of the tea factory where my husband worked. I didn't even know him, but I just knew that he was Mingrelian. They approached Givi and told him that his relative was being held. He and his brother, Raul, came to find out which of their relatives was being held and asked me who I was. Having found out that I was the wife of Sergey Khalvash he didn't betray me and my children. When he also saw the state my child was in, he probably felt sorry for me and didn't want to betray us. I think his mother was Abkhazian. He took us and gave us a lift home. When I told him that I was afraid of my neighbours, especially that Dzalamidze, he called over to him and told him not to touch us.

There wasn't any furniture left in our house. I saw what was our bedroom in the entrance and the kitchen was effectively out on the landing. Two of the neighbours were arguing over a heater, which was on the balcony. I told them to take everything away, and just leave us alone.

On the first night I asked my neighbour, Mimoza Kharchilava (her husband was Gamakharia), to take us in because I was afraid to stay at home with the children. But she didn't let us in on the second night because her brother-in-law told her off saying: "We're fighting with these people and here you are helping them." As such, no-one took me in. The only thing was that they didn't physically abuse us, but they were still constantly putting us under psychological pressure. Several of those awful bearded men would come round every night. They would sit in my house and frighten us. I was only 27 years old. I was living in constant fear that my children and I would be killed. My husband still wasn't around and I didn't know about anything that had happened to him. As my neighbours told me, the brother-in-law of a neighbour had found the dead bodies of our men.

When the neighbours began shouting, I started running to them. When I learned that my dead husband and those two other men had been brought back, I seemed to have lost consciousness, I only came round at home.

Not far from here lived my father-in-law's step brother - Tsobekhia. He told us that we should bury my husband in the family cemetery. I want to thank aunt Dina's brother-in-law for not leaving us in the lurch and helping us to find my husband. If it wasn't for him, we would never have found our deceased husbands, and they would have been eaten by animals. I can't understand why our neighbours treated us so badly. They were even annoyed by those who brought back the dead husbands.

That very same Salaqaia helped me – in the factory, to build the coffin in which my husband was buried. Then I was told by witnesses that my husband's grave was shot out when they found out that an Abkhazian was buried there.

Dina, a neighbour, enters the conversation. Julietta's older boy, Lorik, came to my brother-in-law, Vengel, and asked for his help. "I don't have anything to take to my father in to the cemetery to bury him. Please help us" He requested.

It was only at the end of December that my brother, who was in Tkvarchal managed to exchange us for some hostages. The Georgians that came for the war to Abkhazia didn't know our names or addresses. Of course, those lists and addresses were given to the guardsmen by our neighbours.

Julietta continues. After my husband's funeral we stayed here until December. In the evenings 5-6 Georgian guardsmen started coming over. I sent my older son for our neighbour, Khatuna, a Georgian and

asked her to stay with me. Due to the fact that she was staying, I used to give her anything of mine that she liked. Then she refused to come, I asked another neighbour to take me in for the night, but she told me that she had no place to put me. I said that I was willing to sleep with the children on the floor, but she refused.

Before the war, we lived in peace and harmony with our neighbours. At the very least, they behaved in a way that made us think that they were well-disposed towards us, but when the war started, it was as though they had all gone mad. When they saw me with the children, they pointed guns at us like we were criminals, and they looked at us like we were caged animals. I saw in their faces undisguised pleasure. Not one of them stood up for us.

I don't even understand how we survived. My son still has his father's name written by pen near his heart. Of course, war is reflected in the character of children, I rarely see a smile on my oldest son's face. When he brought his dead father back, he started to count the number of bullets which hit him. My boy can't forget the horror he experienced when we washed his father's body, which was no longer living. He doesn't forget it for one minute and that is reflected in his character. One neighbour lived here with us, Eteri Gegia whose husband worked in the police force. Another Mingrelian woman lived in their house, Natela Saria, who hated Abkhazians. Even in 1989 she proved to be a fanatical Zviadist. Eteri told me that it was Netala who put together the lists of Abkhazians, who and where they lived. She was injured when Ochamchira was liberated, but she survived and left for Sochi with her daughter. Once better, she returned and lived among us. As far as I know, ammunition was found in the cellar of her house. She hated us. She was thrown out of that house where she lived, and then she changed her place of residence three times. Since 2004 she has been living in the house opposite, and has barred the windows to avoid seeing us. I wrote a letter to the security services about her because I still feel like a hostage when I see her. The security services took her away, but then she was even given an Abkhazian passport. Eteri Gigia, having heard that she was living near us again, came to us in indignation at the fact that Natela was still here. She still shows aggression towards the Abkhazian neighbours, she curses and threatens to throw us out of here. One day, unable to stand it anymore, I called the police and when they arrived, we started talking to them, naturally, in Abkhaz, and she started shouting at us not to talk in our own language.

Vardi Kapba and Saria, killed during the occupation of Ochamchira.

Told by Alisa Cholokua – daughter of Vardi

When the war started, my sons, mother and I stayed here until November. Then my sons and I had to leave as it was just hell. I was leaving my mother behind with a pain in my heart, but she was stubborn and didn't agree to leave with us at all. She was worried about what would happen to the house. But I had to leave because my children were Georgians and I was their mother - an Abkhazian woman. I could not allow them to be forced to fight against their brothers from either side. I somehow tried to send her money from Moscow so that she could buy food for herself.

While we were here, the guardsmen would come several times checking and searching every corner of the house. When we left, a group of guardsmen moved into the house making my mother live in the basement. Those guardsmen were living here and sometimes kicking my mother out or forcing her to serve them. The poor thing was held hostage several times, and when she was held at the house of culture, our neighbour Charkishvili somehow managed to get her out through a side door and set her free.

I didn't know that my mother had been killed for a long time, nobody told me anything. She and my aunt were buried somewhere near the railway hospital, but no-one knew where exactly because when they were taken from the train, they were on their way to their cousin's in Batumi; They were taken from the train in Gal and brought to a separate police station at the train station. There was an acquaintance there; the husband of one of my friends. My mother went up to him and said "Dato, don't you recognize me? I'm Alisa's mother". Surprised, he asked "Aunt Valya, what are you doing here?" She said that she didn't know, that they had been taken from the train and brought here, and she didn't understand what they wanted from them. He did what was necessary for them to be freed. It seems that they tried to get home by some back streets, but they only got to the music school. They seemed to have been going round and round although it would have been a much shorter way to go straight on.

They killed my mother first and my aunt was tortured for a long time as she was beaten with rifle butts. This took place on the 29 October, one day before the town was freed. They were killed right on the sea front near the music school. My mother was shot in the head.

The neighbours who saw it picked my mother up and brought her home, whereas my aunt, Saria, was taken to hospital in an ambulance by a driver who was Rauf Kvitsinia. She was still alive. Apparently, it was because of him that it was possible to find out where to look for my mother and aunt. The neighbours decided to bury my mother in the garden so that I would know where she was being kept. The guardsmen started making an awful fuss when they saw that the neighbours were bringing her back. "We weren't able to get rid of her, and here you are bringing her dead body back!" There was nothing else left to do for the neighbours, so they also took my mother to hospital.

Some neighbours lived here - the Buliskerias; their son worked as a doctor. He accepted both bodies. From his own words I know that it was he who closed my mother's eyes and put her body back in order. He said that she had a smirk on her face. My aunt on the other hand was in her last death throes and there was nothing he could do to help her, about which he was very sorry. The day this happened my heart was breaking into pieces, I had a feeling that something terrible had happened. Everyone who I called told me that they had gone to Batumi.

Mother worked as an accountant at a tourist resort where everybody loved and respected her. She was a very calm person, in contrast to my aunt Saria, who could tell you anything she was thinking right to your face...

An offensive attack then started there. In all the confusion, everyone dropped everything.

Poor Saria was lying on the operating table; my mother was somewhere downstairs. At that moment, some kind of brigade from Merkul entered the town and came into the hospital. Those men tore down the curtains from the windows, wrapped the dead bodies up in them and buried them right there in the hospital yard under the third palm tree. They placed them on top of one another and they were buried under one grave stone.

The army came in- took the town, and I was in Moscow. I was all over the place like a madman, I couldn't get through to anyone on the phone. I had a terrible feeling. As soon as aunt Saria's son, Guram, entered town with the Abkhazian army, he turned the house upside down shouting "mum, mum," but no-one answered him. He threw himself into our garden and started calling out for my mother, but no-one was there, the house was empty and quiet. The neighbours said that they couldn't tell him that his mother and aunt had just been killed. They finally told him about it, but they didn't know where they had been taken. Guram and our relatives; The Kvitsinias, Kapbas and Kogonias got everyone up and started searching. They found them and buried them in the garden of our house. I was only told about this at the end of October. Enver Kapba called me and told me to come back because my mother and aunt were dead. When I returned here, I cried for her in the garden. It was only in January when I managed to transfer their bodies to the family grave in Chlou...

It all started from the fact that we had neighbours, the Chitanavas, with two sons, one of whom I christened. That family didn't like Saria especially. They were clashing even before the war. Those two boys were constantly terrorising my mother and my aunt. When they were brought to the music school, all the neighbours came out to where they heard noise. Standing among the guardsmen was that neighbour, Otar Chitanava. All the neighbours were shouting at him to help the women. Alas... They say that Otar himself didn't shoot at them, but he was among those who brought them to the guardsmen. Vania Afendopul, our neighbour started telling him "Otar, what are you doing?" To which he answered that everyone should go home or they would be shot as well.

What on Earth did these two women over 70 ever do to our Georgian neighbours, and moreover, to the guardsmen? Apparently, out of anger from having to retreat from the town, it didn't matter to them at whom they shot.

Both brothers now live in Moscow. I saw the younger one, my God son, but what could I say to him? He's still sure that his brother wasn't involved. That one avoids me.

My poor unfortunate mother! While the Georgian guardsmen were occupying our house, they married several times and still forced her to lay the table and serve them. They destroyed and ate all the livestock we had in the house. Everyone told her to leave the house, but she thought that by staying there, she would be able to maintain her ownership.

When I returned and reburied my mother, the neighbours started telling me about the horror through which they lived. However, there were those who say that they didn't ever see the eyes of the soldiers. We also pretty much lived quite peacefully until October. Then awful things started happening.

When I was still there, before my departure to Moscow, the Gamsakhurdia family was almost shot as Zviadists. But someone told us that they didn't go to the right address, instead they came to the address of Argun Mushni. Then this all started. They started dragging and beating poor Mushni. His girls got in

through the fence in the garden of some Russian neighbours. They were afraid that they too would be killed for the same reason. And what was done to poor Uncle Kolya Ashkhatsava? He was tied up to a chair with a pile of his own waste lying on the table. They told him; “Now sit and eat that for all Abkhazians”

The Georgians and I clashed once, when they supposedly came to check our documents. There was one girl amongst them in a camouflage uniform. We were naturally horrified and told them that we didn't have any documents, but that our surname was Gadelia. We didn't mention the name Cholokua at all as we were too afraid. They began to look at everything in the cupboards. I had only just come back from Turkey. Holding us at gunpoint, she started gathering everything saying “this is mine, this is mine, it's all mine.” I wanted to throw myself at her, but my mother asked me to be quiet. It was better that they took everything rather than touch us. But I didn't care and I asked her why she considered that those things were for her, when I, myself, through my own hard work, had earned them. At that point she waved the gun in front of my face and said that I'd better be quiet or I would be shot with the rest of my family.

After all of this, I understood that we were unlikely to survive if we stayed at home, so I left with the children.

Narrated by Neli Mikhajlovna Kameneva, citizen of Ochamchira, neighbour

We gathered to listen to “Moambe”, the news[-programme in the evening on Georgian TV] — this was towards the end of the war, 28 August, somewhere around 9 pm. And immediately we heard shooting. Our neighbour raced to the window, and I said: “Zurik, don't go there, lest, God forbid, you suddenly meet a bullet!” He moved away, and then they left — our two neighbours. One was Zurik Vakhania (I don't know where he is now; a Mingrelian, but not involved in anything, and it was all the same to him to go out even at times when people were consumed with fear), whilst the other was Goga Paliants (he's still living at 4, Kalinin Street). These were our neighbours on Kalinin Street; I lived there before. We were sitting together in a neighbour's house to avoid the horror. They darted out and raced off towards the shore — there were shots from the shore. They saw two women lying. Neighbour Vakhania knelt down and recognised the mother of Alisa and his mother's cousin. Alisa's mother was already dead, but the other one was still alive and just managed to utter: “They've killed me...”, and that was all; she expired. As to who killed her, she didn't manage to say. They were lying there right in the centre of the road on the promenade. Vakhania ran up and said: “Neli, one of them is dead — it's Alisa's mother, but Saria, our neighbour (she lived on our street), is alive; come on, let's ring for an ambulance.” And I said: “I doubt that any ambulance will come.”

A neighbour had been drinking a bit — he rang and got them to come. They came and took her to hospital, but she died there. And they also took Aunt Valya (Vardi), Alisa's mother, and nothing is known about where they buried her, or into which pit she was thrown.

They were travelling to Gal, wanting to make their way from there to Batumi. They were captured on the train and brought here. They had set off but were intercepted when someone recognised them on the train, starting to yell that there were Abkhazians there... They were grabbed and taken away... and then they were brought here and shot on their own Kalinin Street not far from home.

Later Kvarchia's son found their bodies. Somewhere in the hospital they'd all been interred in a general pit, men and women there together. He recognised her by her slippers. He saw the slippers, and, when they began to remove the earth, he also saw Aunt Valya and his mother, Saria.

Shalva Bodovich Kuchuberia, born 1935.

Killed during the time of the occupation of Ochamchira

Narrated by Diana Bagratovna Pachulia - widow

On 2 December our neighbour, Sergey Khalvash, was taken away, but on the very same day he was returned. Having left him at home, the guardsmen went outside. They were standing around talking, but I don't know what they were talking about. Suddenly they returned, brought him out and put him in the car which had turned back. Having got to our house, it stopped. Several Georgian soldiers entered our garden, some others went to the Pachulias. I'm sure that our Mingrelian neighbours gave them our addresses because we are Abkhazian. How did the Georgians, who had come from Georgia, know where the Abkhazians lived?

They called for my husband and told him to go with them. When he started to get changed, they told him that it wasn't necessary as though they were going to bring him back quickly. In any case, he still got changed and put his army identity card in his pocket.

We were waiting and thinking that he would come at any moment, but the first, second, third day went by and there was still no sign of him; just was the case for 2 of our other neighbours. I got a message to my son-in-law (he was Mingrelian. His name was Vengel Torua), But he wasn't able to find anything out. My husband wasn't anywhere among the dead or alive.

21 days went by. My son-in-law didn't leave the search. He was told that someone called Grisha Nadaria, who lived near the tea factory found 3 dead men's' bodies in the forest and buried them. He was no longer alive.

When Vengel arrived at the place, he discovered his father-in-law's hat and understood that he had found him. He dug up the grave and having found the army identity card, he was convinced that these were the people he was looking for.

He came back and passed on the message that he had found my husband and neighbours, and he handed them over to their families. During the night, my son-in-law went for the dead bodies by tractors with trailers in tow. He loaded them onto the trailers and covered them with brushwood so nobody could see what it was he had. For the fact that he was transporting Abkhazian corpses, the Georgian guardsmen could have killed him.

But what had been to my poor unfortunate husband?! Is really one bullet not enough to kill a person? He almost left without a head - they had released a huge number of bullets into his mouth. Not one bone was left whole - everything was broken! The whole body was being eaten by worms, we didn't have time to wash them off and they were spreading through the house.

Our Mingrelian neighbours were standing at the corner and writing down the names of those Abkhazians who dared come to pay respects to us. At least I had people who were close to me there - my daughter and son-in-law, whereas my neighbour, Dina, had no-one, only her young children. Can you imagine what state we were in, when you're grieving over the loss of someone close and you're not even given the chance to bury them peacefully? We were even afraid that the corpses would be taken away from us. We were able to bury them the next day in the cemetery. My son-in-law was even shot because he was helping the Abkhazians, he brought them food, supported them, and today he is no longer with us...

In order to get out of Ochamchira, My daughter-in-law's relative helped me - a Mingrelian man, Zaur, who put me in a car. We were taken away in 1993. If it hadn't helped me, we would have never been able to get away from here alive. Before that I was told that my son had been killed, and I was left in an awful state. First I was taken to Bedia, on the border between Georgia and Abkhazia. Zaur saw me across the border and went another 2 kilometers with me towards the village of Reka. I went the rest of the way myself. He warned me to be very careful that I didn't fall into the hands of the Georgians. Suddenly, in the distance, I saw some people. When I got closer, I heard they were talking Abkhazian. They took me away, but I overheard them talking amongst themselves at a whisper about how unfortunate I was, as apart from what happened to my husband, I was unaware of what else had happened. I asked them to go with me to Reka as I had heard that my son had been killed. They asked me who he was. When I referred to his name, they told me that my Ruslan was still alive, and he was fighting. I was sitting there for two hours. For some reason they were sitting around me with sad, regretful looks on their faces. I asked them what was wrong. They told me that it has already been three days since my father died. Then the men who had been fighting returned, but my son wasn't among them. They passed on the message to him that I was there. When he returned, we didn't exchange any words. Our meeting was such - I embraced the son for whom I had already mourned and for whom I was preparing a gravestone. My grandchildren, the children of my son were in the town of Gal with relatives and my daughter-in-law. My son told me that I should go to Gal, take the children and my daughter-in-law away, and that he would try to exchange us for some Georgians.

I returned to Ochamchira. My son-in-law and I got in the car and went to Gal for the children and my daughter-in-law. My daughter-in-law was very surprised when she saw me, it had already been reported to her by some angry people that I had dumped her and gone alone to my son. I explained to her that I had come for her and the children, and that my son had promised to exchange us for some Georgian hostages. We all went back to Ochamchira together. My son warned us to gather as much food as possible because they didn't have anything at all there. We were taken back to Bedia, where we were made free in exchange for some Georgian prisoners. My brother, who lived in the village of Pakwash managed to put all the food he could onto a horse and, risking his life, brought it to us to the village Reka.

There was another incident that I want to tell you about. One evening, Neli Pachulia and I were sitting at home and heard how some dogs started barking. I went outside and saw that four Georgian soldiers had entered the garden. They asked if they could come into the house. What could I answer apart from, “yes, of course” or they would have just killed us. They came in and sat down. After some time, they asked for some tea. Terrible things were going on outside as tanks were rumbling and people were shooting. Someone was playing with the trigger of a gun. I realised that they wanted to eat, so I laid the table. Then they said that another four of their friends were outside and they asked if they could invite them in. Of course I gave my permission. But instead of four people, another fifteen people came in. They all sat down and started eating, they weren't preparing to leave. Then I said the house was incomplete and I had nowhere for them to sleep. They continued sitting there, so we put the children to bed and waited for when they would start shooting at us. They were sitting there until four o'clock in the morning. Fortunately for us, someone called them from outside, so they stood up went away. Having left the door wide open there was silence once again. That's how we also survived this time.

Konstantin Konstantinovich Pachulia, born 1934. Foreman of the railway
Killed during the occupation of Ochamchira.

Narrated by Dina Bagratovna Pachulia - widow

Our family, like many others, didn't leave at the beginning of the war. On 2 December 1992, 2 armed guardsmen came to our house, and took my husband, Pachulia Konstantin, saying that he would be taken to the headquarters. They allowed him to get changed, and while he wasn't present, they started asking me where our son was, who was only 14 years old at the time. I told them that he wasn't at home and that he was in Tkvarchal. I saw my husband off at the gate as the guardsmen accompanied him, and they said “don't worry, we'll bring them back soon” There were already two of our neighbours sitting in the car, 70 year-old Shalva Kuchuberia and 40 year-old Sergey Khalvash. Several days had passed, and there was still no sign of our men. We decided that they had been taken as an exchange for Georgians held by the Abkhazian side, as is the practice during war. I didn't know anything about them for 18 days. Apparently, my neighbours had already heard that all three of them had been killed. Their dead bodies had been found by one man (I still don't know his name). He buried them there in the woods wrapped in cellophane. He found their documents in their pockets, and told everyone to pass on the message to their loved ones that they had been killed and where their bodies had been buried. However, my neighbours did not dare tell me about it. Vengel Torua, a Mingrelian and son-in-law to Shalva Kuchuberia, one of the dead, continued the search. You already know how he brought the corpses back. It was just so scary and creepy, and there was no-one to help me, I was alone in the house. The body was swarmed with worms and I cleaned it with the force of water...

I was completely alone as none of my loved ones were nearby, only my son who was just 14 years old. That's why I was forced to bury my husband in the garden. The most turbulent period of the war came about after the funeral. We stayed at home, but we were scared to stay alone at night, so we snuck through the backyards to our neighbours without being noticed. I managed to send my son to Tkvarchal, to my parents, and my daughter and I stayed here alone. Around April-May 1993, my daughter and I were exchanged for a Georgian family from Tkvarchal which moved in to my house and, in turn, I was offered to move into their house. That's how we were able to get out of Ochamchira.

It was only when the war ended that we were able to return home. My children went to school – my daughter started her first year and my son continued his studies. Although it was difficult and I had no support, I got my children to stand on their own two feet and I raised them to be good people.

Pagava Uri Ionovich (Rudik), his wife, Valya and two daughters, Zhanna and Tea.
All four killed during the occupation of Ochamchira.

Told by Svetlana Pagava – sister-in-law.

When the war started, my husband and I were living in Russia, in the town of Shakhti. We were told that the family of my husband's brother had been killed, but we didn't know which of the children were

dead and which were alive. There were four children in the family; one boy and three girls. Lana was six years old and Tea was three. The two children who were still alive were brought to us and we found out that two girls had been killed, Tea and her twenty two year-old sister, Zhanna.

In the evening of 30 September, when the Georgian army left Ochamchira, someone knocked at my brother-in-law's door. The older daughter, Zhanna and her mother were putting the younger children to bed. Meanwhile, the father, Rudik, and his son, Edik, were sitting in the front room. The father took a seat at the end of the heater while his son was sitting on a sewing machine near the door. When someone started knocking, the father went and asked who was there. Apparently, it was Guram Shanava, our neighbour. However, just as Rudik opened the door, machine guns were fired at him. When he started to fall, he pulled the door onto himself and pushed his son from the machine onto the floor. When the soldiers came in they didn't see the boy behind the machine because they had capes with large hoods over them, which prevented them from seeing the corner behind the machine. Zhanna heard the shooting, took Tea in her arms and ran from the house. Valya and little Lana got under the bed. One of the guardsmen went into the bedroom, heard shuffling under the bed and shot at the target. The same guard jumped into the garden in pursuit of Zhanna, at that moment, Tea, who Zhanna was holding in her arms, began to cry. The guard caught up with the girls, took them to the neighbour's house, where their uncle lived, and killed them both there. Having decided that he had killed everyone, he left. When everything went quiet, the boy came out from behind the machine, went to the bedroom and picked up his mother; she was already dying, but Lana was lying beneath her alive. The mother managed to tell her son to save Lana. He took his sister in his arms and left.

After that, they were brought to us in Shakhti, and while we were living there, they stayed with us. Edik started working in Shakhti, got married there and Lana was with him. He and Lana have now returned home.

On the events in the village of Abkhazian Atara. Narrated by Zaira Kvitsinia and Mimoza Ashkharua

Zaira: When the war started, all our family were in Atara; My husband, children, mother-in-law and father-in-law. We were very worried about our children and what would happen to them, but we were forced to stay here at home for the duration of the war because we couldn't get away anywhere.

It was the middle of the night when we found out that the war had started. Someone came over and told us that the war had begun and we needed to leave. However, my father-in-law was an invalid (Veteran of the Patriotic War) and my mother-in-law was quite old and ill, so where could we go with them? We were taken hostage on 3 December at eight o'clock in the morning. My older and younger sons were at home. The soldiers surrounded our house, gathered us all up together and took us to the barracks where tea was stored. We were driven like cattle, and weren't allowed to set one foot out of place or talk. We were sitting in the barracks almost until the evening. It was very cold. The old men started collapsing from hunger and fatigue. My younger daughter, Zita, who was ten years old at the time started crying uncontrollably. The Georgians were walking around mocking us. They were making out as though they were pulling the trigger of their guns, they looked frightening. I can't say that anyone was beaten, they even sent a few old men home, but it was terrifying. When my daughter was being hysterical, I was also released, but on the condition that I would return. What was I supposed to do? Both of my sons were left behind with them.

My mother and father-in-law were in a different group of hostages where Mimoza was. They were released a little earlier than us. Arriving home, I saw that they were hiding under the bushes of Laurel. My poor father-in-law threw himself at me with the words "What have you done Zaira? You've brought this one back and left our boys there?" But when I had fed my daughter and was preparing to go back, they began trying to persuade me to stay, or at least not to take my daughter with me. But I was afraid for my sons, so Zita and I went back. But at that moment we heard the roar of a helicopter and the rumblings of tanks. I saw that in front of the columns Mimoza's husband and several of our villagers were travelling by tea-picking machines. Behind them, in front of the tanks, were those who had been taken hostage, including my boys. I still can't understand how I stayed in the field with my daughter; the fear and horror took hold of me. I didn't even go after the columns even though I knew my boys were there. My father and mother-in-law clung to the hem of my dress. "They've been taken, and you want this one to be killed too!" They shouted. Then our men told us that the Georgians wanted to reunite their units and somehow take over Atara. I don't know how it came about, but the hostages were somehow released and the Georgians weren't

able to take control of the village, although, on that very day, they were explosively celebrating their victory in the square in front of the village's administration. My husband told us that when the military columns got to the centre of town, all of our male hostages were planted near the school fence while the guardsmen were preparing a drinking party. They even forced our guys to drink with them for their victory. We later heard that although our men didn't partake in the drinking, the footage of this was shown on Georgian television.

My son went deaf, and is still deaf today, because the Georgians placed the automatic rifles right to his ears as they were shooting.

We lived through the entire war experiencing wild hunger and cold, but did not lose our human dignity. If someone managed to bake a cake, they would divide it between 10 people. And those, in turn, shared with his family. We were again taken hostage a couple of times, the village was constantly being bombed and shelled. We had to hide in the woods for most of the day, in the pits, completely exhausted, so we decided to move to besieged Tkvarchal, but my husband's parents didn't agree to leave the house. My father-in-law said that the Germans weren't able to kill him, and he wasn't scared of these thieves and robbers.

The journey to Tkvarchal by foot took my children and I several days. My daughter's feet were bloody and broken. I was afraid for her mental state as she was terribly frightened. All my children are still unwell after they experienced such stress. Their nerves had been shot to pieces, and I am still treating them for it.

But the worst thing was that a few days after we got back to Tkvarchal, my teenage boys went back to their grandparents without telling me (they knew that I wouldn't have let them go). So that the helpless old men didn't die of hunger, they milled corn in the meat grinder, cooked some kind of soup and fed them. When the bombing and the shooting started, they carried the men themselves barefoot through the snow in the forests. I only found out about the fact that my sons were again taken hostage and our old men had been killed much later than it actually happened. They came in the morning, surrounded the house and started taking away the boys and my husband. The old man begged that they be left alone, and then he started to ask them to leave the grandchildren only, then to at least leave one of them, he begged. But they were all loaded into the car and taken to Ochamchira. There was also Marianna Kvitsinia, who had fallen into the same group of hostages with her sisters and mother.

As for my father and mother-in-law, as we were later told by some Armenian neighbours, who heard their screams, they were brutally killed. My father-in-law had his arms cut off to the elbow; he was lying dead in the front room, whereas my mother-in-law was in a room further back in the house. They were probably tortured very badly because the Armenians spoke of how their screams were heard in the village. The poor unfortunate people possibly didn't even die immediately. Then the Armenians buried them on our site, but the Georgians drove them out with gunshots.

Mimoza: I was in a different group of hostages to Zaira, and her father and mother-in-law were with us. She was somewhere else with her children. We were driven to a dropping point (the warehouse for tea). My three children; Rusik, Masik, and Roman, and our neighbour, Dima and son Duda, were taken to an Armenian cemetery and were told that they would be shot. My poor son, Roma, was already very ill. We brought him back from Chelyabinsk before the war, where he served in the army. Nothing happened to him the first time, but he was later taken hostage again with Alyosha Kvitsinia. They were taken to the village of Kyndygh. My son was beaten, and struck on the head with a rifle butt. They said he was just pretending to be ill, and that he was actually fighting for the Abkhazian side. Alyosha put a lot of effort into convincing them that he was actually poorly, but they didn't want to listen to anything. They were somehow part of a prisoner exchange later and my boy returned home, but he was in a completely deranged state. His father was able to move him on to Tkvarchal, and from there they got a helicopter to Sochi. He was treated for a long time in hospital, but soon after the war, he died. Alyosha was a veteran of World War II and the last soviet camps, but even during this war he was put up against the wall several times as shooting was being simulated. He also died soon after the war from a heart attack.

...We were locked up in this place. We were completely horrified, but what could we do? - only cry and beg. Among us were some young girls. We took off our head scarves to put them on the girls to disguise them. Nothing really bad took place, but the oppressive environment and the behaviour of the Georgians didn't give us hope for a favourable outcome. One of the Georgians, whose last name, I think, was Kvarastkhelia approached the Georgian soldiers and started talking to them. He told them not to do such things because we had some of their hostages too, and we could kill them. "Come on, don't touch these people, at least for today." They returned the boys, but they were left standing in the field. A large car arrived, out of which poured scary, dark Georgians. One of them, with a canister, came to the place in

which we were locked up and started calling out loudly to the others “Pour them with petrol and set them on fire.” Zaira’s poor old invalid father-in-law, who had lived through the Second World War, started crying. “What are you doing? There are children and young people here.” Kvaratskhelia started trying to persuade them again; “They could do the same to our prisoners. You leave, we’ll sort it out ourselves” He said. Is it really possible for a human heart to endure so much in one day? In the end, they left. They decided to let us go, but before that they asked who had a car or a tractor. My husband told them that he had a tea picking machine, so they forced him to drive it. It seemed they were preparing to go in to the centre of the village, but were afraid that the road had mines. A couple of men and my husband got in the car and went in the direction of the village centre, and the Georgians followed them. We were told to go home. I was glad that my sons and I were able to go home unharmed and in one piece, but my heart was breaking from worrying about my husband. When they reached the front line of our people, they probably saw that our men were driving in front of the military columns of Georgians, so they had to stand back and let them go. We later found out that they could not get through Armenian Atara, where our men fought with them, so some of our men were taken hostage. My husband told us that they said: *You can go, we’ve done our business*. In a word, there was no bloodshed that day. As I said, I lost Roma, and my youngest was injured during the war.

We wouldn’t even wish our enemies to live through what we did.

On the burning of the Abkhazian State Archive and the Abkhazian Research Institute of Language and Literature (ABNII). Narrated by Arvelod Kuprava, doctor of historical sciences; Professor.

After heavy bombing, my father’s house was burned down in the village of Eshera, where my wife and I were when the war started. We, like many others in Eshera, took shelter in the military units. We hid in a bunker during the bombing, but after another wave of heavy shelling, the room where we found ourselves was destroyed.

After the Georgians broke the truce and hostilities resumed, in October my wife and I miraculously crossed the front line and got to Sukhum. Almost all my archive was burned in the house in Eshera, and I was worried about the materials that were still in our flat in Sukhum.

On my return, I got permission from the director and immediately went to the central state archive. I was interested in newspapers from the year 1924 (“The Voice of Working Abkhazia”).

I remember the members of staff were very surprised about the fact that I had come in search of some material. No-one had come to study the archive since the start of the war. They fulfilled my request, and I left.

One morning I found out that on the previous day (22 October), at the same time, the central state archive and ABNII had been set on fire. Leo Shervashidze (the late doctor of arts and a professor), who lived in the same block of flats as me, agreed that I would go to the archive and he would go to ABNII - he had been there several times before that. He found that the door to the library was open and books had been stolen and looted. Every time he took a hammer and nails, went back there and tried to hammer the door shut. The door was boarded up once again, and he said “I’ve sealed the door such that no-one will be able to open it”.

It wasn’t long after that, that we learned the library and archive had been burned down. As I approached the archive, I saw an awful picture; the buildings which formed the major archives of the 19-20th centuries, newspapers, the library, reading room and the administrative department had been burned. Original documents and materials on the history and culture of Abkhazia are gone forever. In actual fact, the entire documentary base of Abkhazia’s modern history was burned. The damage was immeasurable, no amount of money can equate to it.

The archive building was completely burned and destroyed. All the staff were standing around the burned down building, apart from Kurf Lomia, who was the director, and the neighbours from nearby houses. They said the archive had been set on fire in the evening, the building was surrounded by armed guardsmen, who did not let the people who were trying to save something at least through, and threatened to shoot them.

The neighbours also said that they could have managed to put out the fire, but they weren’t allowed through. Then the fire brigade turned up, which was also prevented from putting out the fire. That same evening, another centre of scholarship – The Abkhazian Institute of Language and Literature, which had the largest research library, and which possessed the largest scholarly library on Abkhazology and also the

largest archival collection in which were kept copies and slides of documents and materials that existed in the vaults and archives of the former Soviet Union. Unique material was kept there of field trips of historians, archeologists, anthropologists, art historians, soil scientists, many manuscripts of unpublished works and research results from all the working years of the institute.

No attempt was made to extinguish the fire in ABNII, the fire brigade didn't come, citing the lack of fuel, and the building, which was a stone's throw away from the headquarters of the commandment of the military garrison which was completely gutted under the watchful eye of armed (Georgian National) guardsmen.

When the firefighters were driving from the archive they said that there was nothing to do there - they weren't allowed. Gogi Khaindrava drove to the site of the fire who stated that he didn't control the forces that were engaged in this business.

It's difficult to say now who organized the action, but one thing is clear: It was genocide of the history and culture of Abkhazia. A major crime was committed against history. There is no doubt in the fact that it was an organized event. It was beneficial to the reactionary forces to aggravate relations between the peoples.

Diary Extract of A Kuprava;

Extremely radical Georgian forces will boast "Look, this is for you Abkhazians"; Extremely radical Abkhazians will persist; "Look, for us the Georgians staged a genocide, and they will have to answer" But that's a recipe for disaster.

I survived being in a terrible state. Starting from 1950 to the present time, all my work has been connected to the Abkhazian Institute, where I communicated with colleagues, close friends, had pleasure in working with such scholars like Georgi Dzidzaria, Shalva Inal-Ipa, Antelava, Anchebadze, Bgazhba, Olonetski, Soloviov and others.

I have already mentioned that Leo Shervashidze went to ABNII, Kolya Shenkao was also with him. When I came home, Shalva Inal-Ipa called me and passed on the message that they had been arrested and they needed to be rescued. But I had no way of helping them, just as he hadn't. Lev's wife, Aldona, was winding the chain of command all day and made sure that he was released in the evening, but Shenkao was left in prison. Leva said that when they came to the institute, it was already on fire and they tried to look inside. It was because of this that they were arrested.

In one day, two major historical and cultural centres of Abkhazia were destroyed.

Anna Plevako, scientific worker of the Sukhum Botanical Gardens.

Killed by Georgian guardsmen in the village of Warcha of the Gulripsh region.

Narrated by Illarion Vladimirovich Plevako, a retired colonel – widower.

It just so happened that I retired early in 1983, and was able to fulfil my dream of buying a house in a village by the sea in Skurcha. My wife and I lived there before and during the war. The war began strangely for us somehow. We weren't witness to any fighting, everything was calm on that front. We didn't even find out about the war starting on the first day. It was a one woman - a Georgian neighbour – who called out to me from the street; "our people have come." That really surprised me, and I even asked her; "What do you mean by *our*?" Then I realised that I was surprised by the incredible silence; not knowing what was happening, and to understand that the war had started, came about with great difficulty. We even talked in whispers to everyone in the neighbourhood. Posts were put all around to guard our Georgian neighbours, though ostensibly, they were to protect the village. I first encountered the Georgians when two people entered the yard. They produced identification. I can definitely remember one producing certification as an employee of some botanical institution. Our neighbour, a Georgian boy, saw them in. They told me that they wanted to eat because they were tired of surviving on tinned food. I understood that it was better to agree to their demands. They weren't rude or loutish, they didn't threaten us, but their look and behaviour told us that they were people to be avoided.

I said that I didn't know what to feed them. They said chicken at least, and that I should prepare it. I refused to cook having told them that I couldn't. They started taking over in the garden, gathering firewood, building a fire and then they cooked it themselves. The young boy from next door who was

escorting them was fifteen years old. He took their machine guns and killed all the neighbours' geese. It was terrifying; we didn't come out of our houses. Only occasionally we would go into the forest to collect wood.

My wife was killed on 25 February 1993. She shielded me, and it is thanks to her that I am alive today. They came to our garden for the second time that day. My friend's son and I had been busy with the stove as we didn't have anything on which to bake any bread. We were very tired and I felt bad at the end of the day, so I decided to lie down and have a rest. It had already got dark when the dogs started barking. Someone called out "colonel!" I had this as a nickname in the village. My wife went out to them but they demanded to see me. There were five or six of them. I threw a coat on and went outside. I don't even understand how it all happened. They started shooting and I fell. As I was falling I got mixed up in my coat, but I felt shooting over me. Suddenly everything went quiet and when I tried to get out from under my cloak, I saw blood on my hand. I took a look at myself; all my clothes were covered in blood. I understood that I was injured, but I was surprised; why didn't anything hurt? I shouted "Anya, Anya, where are you?" In the garden a large eucalyptus was growing and she was lying right in front of me under the tree. I checked her pulse, listened to her breath, and I understood that she was dead.

What could I do? I went to my neighbour's, but no-one was there. Everyone had run away as they were frightened by the shooting. They saw I was wounded and began to help as much as they could. They poured whole bottles of sea buckthorn oil on me as there was nothing else, and then they banaged me up. That's how we lived through that night. In the morning one boy went to my son in town by foot. I don't know how he got here, but my son came over in the evening by car and took me to hospital. We lifted up my wife and laid her down in the flat.

My injuries were minor and I survived. Anya shielded me herself. I didn't stay in hospital although my son was very insistent in this matter. But how could I when my wife had died? I was sitting, half lying next to her body. A lot of people from Sukhum came as many of them knew her as the scientific assistant at the Botanical gardens.

That's how it was...

Then I found out that many families in the village and in our neighbourhood had been killed. The word was going round that some Georgian bandit was killing anyone who had any sort of communion with the Abkhazians. I still remember how we went to get some bread at the bakery and were thrown out, as bread wasn't given to *non-Georgians*. I remember that all my friends were robbed, even the photographer, Akop. He and I had tried to hold the door shut, but they still broke in. Our neighbour, Katsia, was then appointed head of our neighbourhood watch. He warned us that if anything should happen, we should shout "Fire!" He came but said that he wasn't able to help in any way. The guardsmen took some kind of clothing of Akop's and anything else that they could carry off

Taif Adzhba, poet. Killed in the occupation of Sukhum.

Narrated by Rima Koghonia - widow

I don't know if you ever heard such things from the Georgians, but when the war started, my neighbours spoke to us as if we knew that the war would begin. I told them that if I had known that the war would start, I wouldn't have gone to Kwitol, sent my children to Gudauta and left my husband in Sukhum. We would have probably tried to go somewhere all together.

A few days after the start of the war, I came by foot to Sukhum from Kwitol; my feet were covered in blood. The Abkhazians had already left for Gumista and the front line ran along the river. Of course all my relatives from the village told me not to go to Sukhum as I could be killed there. But I had to return to where my husband was. I knew that he was worrying about our children, and at such a difficult time, I wanted to be alongside him.

When I got home to the New District [Novyj Raion], he almost went mad when he saw me. He said that everyone was leaving, and I on the contrary had come back! Taif was watching all the Georgian TV programmes, but I couldn't listen to what they were saying. But Taif said that he would act as a filter passing on all information and trying to draw conclusions.

He told me that judging by what he heard on Georgian television, the Georgians weren't in a very good position. Bit by bit we tried to learn as much as possible of the successes and failures of the Abkhazian troops, and when someone learned something encouraging, we immediately shared news with each other, we rejoiced and grieved on each occasion.

Those Abkhazians, who stayed in Sukhum, of course communicated with each other, and visited each other when there was the slightest possibility. We were waiting everyday for the fighting to stop, and we never thought that the war would go on for so long. I even went out to work in the beginning to the printing house, but then I stopped. We would go out to get water, but we stayed at home most of the time. Taif was worried about some manuscripts that were at work. One day he left and brought back some materials.

Of course, it's very difficult to talk about what we lived through back then. When Taif was making notes in his diary, I recalled the story of one Jewish girl (*The Diary of Anne Frank* – ed.) who used to do the same. Even when the Georgians carried him off, he managed to tell me in Abkhazian to clear away everything that was lying on the table. I understood that he meant his notes.

In general, Taif never kept a diary until the war started, and I can't really say that they were diary notes. He just wrote down what he saw, heard and experienced during the day. It's possible that he was thinking about using those notes in the future in order to write something. He was never involved in politics, but everything that was going on went through his heart and soul. He was worrying about everything that was happening in Abkhazia. I understood that if he'd been able to, he would have, with no regret, given his life for the good of his motherland. Any moment connected with unfairness caused him to worry.

If we hadn't been at home that day, perhaps he wouldn't have been taken away. We had a neighbour, Dzhota Amichba, he was a wonderful person. That day, Taif was at his place. We often visited each other, talked and shared news.

The day Taif was taken, Dzhota and seven other men were also taken. They were all our neighbours. There were also people from neighbouring houses. When the bus in which they were being taken got to the factory, "Sukhum pribor," for some reason, one man surnamed, Velichko was released. Having returned, that man told me it would be better if I left Sukhum because it wasn't worth staying there. When I asked why, he told me that they might return and take me away too.

But I couldn't get out of Sukhum until April. Velichko said that he had heard how the Georgians were saying "Mtserali, Mtserali" (i.e. "writer") and they were threatening to cut off that which he used for writing. Velichko knew Georgian as he grew up in Georgia. I don't want to commit a sin, but it seemed to me that Velichko knew what was happening and was connected to the Georgians, otherwise why did they only let him go? He left after the war and never came back.

I've only ever seen films about Fascists and their deeds. The Georgians behaved in exactly the same way.

I ran towards the noise and voices that I heard, but no-one was allowed near. I said that my husband had been taken and I needed to go through a different entrance. They didn't let me go, but I still broke through and got away. I climbed up to the fourth floor to the flat where Dzhota Amichba lived, and everything had been turned upside down. His wife, Neli Khashba, was sitting there terrified, (they were both extremely good people) and she said that they had been put on a bus and taken away. I ran down the stairs to the bus. Taif and Dzhota were watching me from the bus. It was at that moment that he managed to tell me to take his notes and stay with Neli. One of the Georgian soldiers told us not to talk "in our filthy language"

Dzhota asked me to get some different shoes for him as he was only in slippers. I ran back up to the fourth floor and told Neli, but she was in such a state that she couldn't understand what I was talking about. I tried to find some shoes in all this mess. We finally found something, but after that she was always worrying that she had given him shoes which would hurt his feet, and she always complained to herself; "Why did I give him the most uncomfortable shoes?"

Dzhota studied in Tbilisi, he knew a lot of Georgians, and worked on shore protection, where many Georgians also worked. The word was going round that either today or tomorrow, he would be released. But he didn't return. Taif only knew two Georgians who worked with him in the writers' union. One of them was Guram Odisharia, and I can't remember the other one. He knew Georgian, as he was one of those people who was forced to study in the Georgian language, when in the 1930s and 40s all schools were closed and tuition was transferred to Georgian. He was mocked because of his name back then; "what kind of name is Taif, you're going to be called Terenti". A female classmate of his recalled how Taif told her not to give answers in Georgian in the lessons. Despite the fact that he came across in appearance a quiet person, he made his protest in such a way. He persuaded everyone not to give answers in Georgian lessons. She said that she was delighted that she could learn the lessons, but he prevented her from answering. And

when he was called by the name Terenti, he didn't even get up from his seat, as if it did not concern him. Realising that he was impossible to deal with, they left him alone.

I tried to find at least something out about Taif every day, I went to Parliament, to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Neli and I went to the prisons where hostages were being held. She was always worrying that her son was fighting. She said that she had already lost her husband, maybe she would lose her son as well as she hadn't seen him at all. We were somehow able to get her onto a helicopter, I left later when I heard that my brother-in-law's son had been killed. I completely lost heart at that moment, I realised that I had no strength to do anything to find my husband, so I left by boat.

Taif was a very humane person and often said that he would never be able to kill a man. He said that when a person is at war, it's possible not to know whether or not he had got a bullet in someone, but to kill just like that, when taking aim - impossible. He always talked about how people had to remember everything that happened here, and tell everybody so that everyone would know, because later, a lot of people may not believe what went on. The acts carried out by the Georgians were no different to those of the Nazi Fascists. We lived in constant anxiety and fear. If a sound was heard, such as a knock at the door, we waited in fear for what would follow. When Taif was taken away, I completely lost heart.

By that time, I was the only Abkhazian left in the building of our house, and I still didn't know that my brother and his family had been killed in the helicopter. That was kept from me. I only found out about this after people started returning. I'll never forget the picture of when Mazhara Zukhba was taken. He was tortured so much before his death. All his nails had been ripped out and his ear had been cut off. He lived one house away from us, but the Georgians were constantly surrounding the houses where Abkhazians lived. He fell into their hands. When he popped outside in the hope of learning something about his son, he got the people mixed up.

Svans lived in our building. They would always openly say "Can it really be the case that we won't see the day when this house will be freed of Abkhazians? Let them burn!" In short, they didn't want us around and dreamt of getting rid of us. There were, of course, those who helped us. There was one Russian who said that he had hidden weapons that he would give to the Abkhazians when they returned. Little by little, He brought me and Neli canned meat. He had hands of gold, worked with Ioselani, but was always helping the Abkhazians. The wife of Kostya Anua was a Georgian, and she always pestered the guardsmen when they came to pick up Abkhazians: "Where and why are you taking them?"

...The reason I'm saying this – I suffered very much pain, but my neighbours never let me die of hunger, especially the wife of Kostya Anua and my sister-in-law, whose husband was Georgian.

I lost about twenty kilograms during that time. Grief can kill a person. Not one person who was taken with Taif returned. Among them was Salaqaia, a veteran World War Two, whose wife was Russian, a nurse. When he was taken, she cried out, "where are you taking a seventy year-old man?" And she reached out to grab them and they put her on the bus as well. They have children who are married to Georgians and live

There. They did everything they could, but couldn't find their parents.

When Taif was taken away, he was fifty five years old. There was also one Georgian woman, who lived on the same floor as Neli, and she helped us. We felt that she was afraid that our people could prevail. I noticed a certain level of double standards in the behaviour of the Georgians, but all the same she brought me bread even after Neli left. Who would have said anything to her even if she hadn't brought us anything? Then, when her son was forced to fight and later killed, she left. A different neighbour, Rezo Sigua, who lived opposite and worked as a driver for the guardsmen, never asked how we were. It used to happen that people would knock on the door at night, but I never opened it. One time, during the March-Offensive by the Abkhazian army on Sukhum, there was a constant knocking at the door. When I asked who it was, I heard Rezo's voice. He asked if I needed anything and said that he could bring me some bread if I wanted. It took so long for me to reply, as I had never heard a word of support, and whatever I might have been in need of, I never had need of anything from him. Then he asked me to say to our people, when they came, that he had helped me, and then he even asked if I would help him.

"Why on Earth haven't you remembered me until now?" I answered him. He replied that rumors were going round that Abkhazians were about to take the town.

In such hard times, people reveal themselves in all aspects. We had Russian neighbours, the Evstigneevs, who showed so much humanity during this dreadful and difficult period. We only said hello to each other before the war, but during the war, Ksenia was bringing me hot tea or food, and when I was ill they were concerned that might freeze. In good times, I did not even hope to have the support of these people because we couldn't maintain any kind of relationship even as neighbours. There was also a Mingrelian who didn't fight, but became very rich during the war. He even carried out a wonderful refurbishment for himself, but as soon as he heard that the Abkhazians could come back, he became alarmed, gathered all his best things and decided to leave. I asked him where and why he was going, he answered that if the Abkhazians would come back and started doing to them what the Georgians had been doing to the Abkhazians, then no-one would be left alive. One Russian female neighbour kept saying that Abkhazians, even if they had to crawl they would get through to Sukhum because this was their land.

For every attack we were together; Georgians, Abkhazians, Russians all gathered downstairs thinking that it was safer there. One time, even guardsmen came and huddled together with us in the basement. They were trying to escape, and one of them started shouting "Shevardnadze, damn you, that you failed, brought us here and dumped us! Abkhazians are going to their death and know what they are dying for. They go into attack in the name of Ardzinba, and for whom do we have to die?" One Jewish girl (her husband was Georgian) was also sitting with us. We were heavily bombed and shelled badly. Then she said "I don't understand these Abkhazians, if only they had left and gone somewhere else. It's because of you that the war started." The wife of Kostya Anua, Sveta, jumped in and said "show us the place that they could go to. They don't have another motherland. Why are you here and not leaving?" This Sveta had a brother, Zurik, who didn't have a family. He was hiding at his sister's out of fear that he could be forced to take arms against us.

We had neighbours, the Chitanavas, who had two children. The older son and his father fought on the front at Gumista, the wife was a Jew and she with her 12 year-old son stayed in Sukhum. The Georgians wanted to take that boy at the same time as they took Taif and Dzhota together with our men. His mother, on her knees, begged the guardsmen not to touch her child, and she somehow managed to get what she asked for. It was only possible, she had the support of two of our mingrelian neighbours who started trying to persuade them by saying "where are you taking this mentally deficient boy?". The guardsmen almost killed these Mingrelians, and started shouting at them for defending the Abkhazians, because "do they not know that in Gagra Abkhazians are cutting off Georgians' heads and playing football with them?".

I remember how scared those people, our neighbours, were. There were Mingrelian neighbours who resented what the Georgians were doing here with the Abkhazians. Once, I was told that even three generations later, Abkhazians would never forget what the Georgians did here and would never forgive them for it, and several Georgian generations would never be able to wash away the shame. Those very same neighbours admitted that practically all the Georgians in the *New District* had been supplied with weapons before the war. Someone else said that they weren't the army, they were bandits, and he would never allow his son to fight on their side.

I think that someone from our neighbourhood was giving the exact addresses of all the Abkhazians because in time they entered into each flat and took away all our men. One Svan woman from our building was always shouting that she couldn't wait for when the building would be free of us. That day, when they took Taif away, they all asked where Mtserali (the writer) lived. They have all disappeared from our lives, as if they had been swallowed by a swamp...

Georgi Arsanovich Tuzhba, 53 years old, Natella Pachovna Akhuba, 47 years old and their granddaughter, Rada Bagatelia (9 years old). Beaten in the village of Kyndygh.

Narrated by Inna Tuzhba – the daughter of Georgi Arsanovich and Natella Pachovna. Rada's mother.

I, myself, never encountered the cruelty of the Georgians, as so many others had experienced themselves. I only received a heavy blow of fate; I look at it this way. Why do I feel so terribly bad, and am still living with it? I did not have to run away from the enemy or experience the fear and horror of the guardsmen. If I may say so, I was lucky; I stayed on the side where there was no war. Right before the start of the war I went to Moscow to buy essential school items for the children. My children stayed with my mother in Kyndygh. It just so happened that Renata, the younger one, it seems to me, maybe had a feeling

about something, so she didn't listen to me and didn't stay with her grandmother. She gripped the steering wheel and that was it. She was eight then, and Rada was nine years old. She was always very obedient and understanding for her age. She told me not to worry and that she would stay with her grandmother. She wanted to show that she didn't want me to worry. Their father told Renata off, but then he felt sorry for her and told me to do whatever she wanted. I was worrying about everything, where would I take her when I had to leave? So my husband took her to his parent's in Pitsunda. As fate would have it, Rada was with my relatives and Renata with my husband's parents. I have no other choice but to say thank you that Renata was left in Pitsunda. After all, if he had agreed that she stayed with her sister, she would have shared the same fate. There would have been no other way.

I came back literally one night before the start of the war. I was going to get my daughter in the morning, and stay with her at my parents for three days. Renata was already with me. But in the morning, suddenly, shots were heard. At first I even thought – why are the sounds so real, I thought a film was being shot. There was, after all, no mobilisation of any sort, everyone seemed to be preparing to send their children to school. Then Renata and I were sent back to Pitsunda, from there, by boat to Sochi. This happened at the moment when Qarqarashvili threatened to lay down the lives of one hundred thousand Georgians in order to destroy all the Abkhazians. All our old folk started to worry that our children would be wiped out, and said that we should take them and leave. What mother could not understand me, and who could understand – what it means to flee with your younger daughter not knowing where your other child is and how she is. It was unbearable, but I was put on a boat by force and transported to Sochi, to the Shapsugh region, where we were very well received.

We were united by a common misfortune, and we shared our news. There wasn't any kind of contact, which made me really depressed. Then we ended up in Maikop – I went to where we were sent. I was reassured that nothing would happen to my relatives and children because the women and children were being taken away, and I was making plans about how I could get through the mountains to them. I was most of all counting on my mother – that she would somehow think of something and be able to get out with my child and father.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, my husband, Valera, turned up from the Front. I ran towards him, shrieking with joy that I was seeing him alive. He came to pick me up – he knew everything. He convinced me that everything was in order, and everyone was alive and well. I only later realised what it cost him to keep it all to himself and not let the mask drop. He only told me that Gagra had been liberated, we could go to Abkhazia, all was well and that he had signed up for a helicopter to go in the direction of Ochamchira. We arrived in Sochi, where my sister had taken a flat.

But I set down a condition to my husband that I would not go to Abkhazia until he brought my daughter to me – imagine the horror I put on him. There, in Abkhazia, it seems, they were already commemorating the 9th day (sc. after the deaths), and I didn't know anything about it. He began to prepare me gradually. At first he told me about my father, and I thought there could be no grief worse than that. We were all worried about my father, who became seriously ill before the war. Valera told me about him, that when everyone was running away, he couldn't go and he was shot. He was fifty three years old. Later it was really unpleasant for me to here that they spoke about them as an old man and woman with whom their grandchild was killed. How were they old? - Mother was forty eight and father, fifty three...

I couldn't deal with the death of my father, I was crying all the time. Valera once again came back having left his position in between battles. He began to tell me that everyone was waiting for me, they were preparing the funeral repast for my father and I was needed. I stupidly refused, and he, realizing that I would not agree to go, told me about my mother no longer being alive. I fainted. Having seen my reaction, he couldn't then tell me about Rada. It wasn't easy for Valera and his parents, they didn't know how to deal with me either. I was behaving completely inappropriately. I still remember that moment and worry, knowing how I tormented him. He was carrying it all on himself, fighting and still trying to cope with me. When he came again and I was still refusing to go without Rada, he started to reassure me that she was waiting for me there...I don't understand with what this doubt of mine was connected, but I always said that I wouldn't go to Abkhazia without her. I asked him all sorts of tricky questions, trying to figure out why he couldn't bring her here. It's possible that I subconsciously felt that something wasn't right, but I couldn't grasp what. I tormented him with questions, saying that he himself told me that everyone had been taken away, and now it turns out that my mother and father had been killed. How can that be? He excelled in coming up with all kinds of excuses...I finally agreed to go, and he met me on the border at Psou. I again threatened him in the car, that I had only come for three days for his sake, and, in any case, I would return to Sochi. I behaved like a slow-witted child. Today, when I think about it, I realise that I was just scared. I

wasn't in control of myself; the death of my parent's crippled me terribly. Perhaps I felt that I would hear something even more terrible than that. I just didn't want to let myself think about it.

We approached the house in Pitsunda, there is a huge bus standing there in which all of mother's relatives from Gudauta arrived as forty days had already passed. I even cherished the hope that the news of my mother and father might turn out to be a mistake; these things happen – a war is going on and things can get confused. When we got out of the car and approached the gate, he took me by the hand and told me about my daughter. In that moment, when he told me, he roared like a beast. I seemed to be in some kind of stupor, I can't remember anything, I couldn't think. Renata was still sitting in the car, she started feeling bad and I didn't even notice. She was shouting out her sister's name the whole time, she couldn't be calmed down. I can't remember how we turned up in the room where the photo of my girl and parents were standing. I started smashing and breaking everything, I was shouting how could they all believe in it, it was nonsense. The stress which Renata suffered back then still affects her heart – She's been left with neurosis.

My husband's relatives had a hard time with me. I refused to believe what had happened, I didn't want to light the remembrance candles, I kept saying that I just didn't believe it. I hoped that the war would end, and I would go to my parent's house and see everyone there alive. But no-one was mistaken, it all appeared to be true...

In February, my brother was found, of which we knew nothing, apparently he was on the Eastern Front. He got married literally one month before the war, and the day before the war, in his father's car, went to his mother-in-law's in Ochamchira. If he had been at home, maybe he would have been able to take everyone away and nothing would have happened to our loved ones.

Who was to know? If one could turn the clock back, maybe, they could have been saved. War is war, but apparently, my fate was such that the war was to destroy my family. Someone was saved, someone was killed and for someone, everyone was killed. At least I have a daughter that was left. My brother's mother-in-law, Maia Dzhopua, Sakania by marriage, really suffered the horrors of the war. She was repeatedly lined up for execution. One of the neighbours helped here – amongst the Georgians there were also normal individuals. And my brother was also taken away by his neighbours. They put him in a box for mandarins and carried him across; via Sochi he got to Gudauta. But he didn't manage to fight. He signed up for the same group as my husband, and was hit by a stray bullet where they were sitting. I buried him in Achandara at my aunt's where I moved with Renata.

I was already mourning the death of my brother when my husband failed to return from the March Offensive. What words can I use to explain my condition? I again hoped that it was a mistake, that maybe he was taken hostage. Someone told me that he was buried somewhere near the Republic's hospital with a large group of fighters. I was told that if I went there, I would be able to identify him. I was afraid to go there, my mind resisted it. I couldn't force myself for three days. But then I understood that no-one would be able to identify him without me – he had socks on which had a connection to me, next to him there was a broken comb, and only I knew how it broke, fillings in his teeth... Naturally, I went and identified him. I also buried him.

When the war ended, I went to Kyndygh. All my loved ones were buried there, but not deeply. I did everything that was necessary, but it was done as if it wasn't me doing it and I wasn't doing it for myself, but for someone else... I was told many versions of how my daughter and parents were killed. Even too many. I refused to listen. I just didn't want to listen to the details. I was more grateful to those who just sympathised in silence. People say different things anyway. One said that my mother got shot first, and my daughter hid herself in a cupboard, she was taken out and killed. And that was all done before my father's eyes. I don't think the neighbours saw anything before they heard the cries, nobody was there who could have been a witness to what happened. Someone said that they were buried in the garden and then pigs dug up the corpses and nothing was left of them.

In actual fact, no-one knows exactly what happened. The only thing I understand from the scraps of everyone's stories is that it wasn't the guardsmen, it was Georgian neighbours who lived in the same village as my parents. My parents were always well off. Maybe that's why they came – demanding money and valuables. But after my father's illness and his treatment in Russia, they didn't really have any valuables or money. The one fact, in which I am convinced, is that they were shot in the house – about this, speak the walls which are covered in blood and the mattresses soaked in it. When I was able to come back to my parent's house, I saw that with my own eyes.

Even after this, I continue to live.

Grigor (Georgi) Martikyan Killed in occupied Sukhum

Narrated by S... Neighbour of the victim, Sukhum resident, (Newspaper "Krunk", July 1994. "Abkhazian Tragedy in the testimonies of eye-witnesses")

22 March 1993, the Georgian police came to the coffee maker, Georgi Martikan, famous in the city, and took him to the military command. After that, he disappeared. His concerned family tried to find him, but to no avail. It was only thanks to his brother – Bishop of the Bulgarian-Romanian Armenian Church, who appealed to Shevardnadze, that the shot body of Georgi was returned to his family. The body showed signs of severe torture, one ear had been cut off, bones in both legs were fractured and the body had multiple stab wounds.

*Narrated by Michael Martikyan – Son of the victim
("In order to justify..." Newspaper "Krunk", December 1994).*

The tragic story of my father, the well known Sukhum coffee maker, brutally tortured by the Georgian police on the twenty something of March 1993.

I would like to add something. To do this we have to look at a document, published in the newspaper "Democratic Abkhazia" (See number 15 of March 27, 1993)

"...during the storming by Abkhazian formations of the city of Sukhum, hundreds of Abkhaz fighters fell on the battlefields. There were casualties among civilians. Gumista was stained with blood. Russians and North Caucasians participated in the battle along with Abkhazians, and to our regret, the Armenians⁸.

"Gudauta radio reported on the establishment of the Armenian battalion. It is not completely clear what its goals are, against whom it is directed to shoot at its brother Georgians?..."

"...the creator of the Armenian battalion; Mr Topolyan, doesn't want to understand that on this side of Gumista, tens of thousands of Armenians are living, who are not indifferent to the fate of the Republic of Georgia, their motherland, their native places, and that they will not allow anyone to violate the traditions of friendship and brotherhood established over centuries. But any patience has its limit. So what, if in response to the creation of one Armenian battalion in Gudauta, local Armenians form two battalions. What then? -Armenians will fight against Armenians for the ambitious, separatist goals of the Gudauta cabal who need Armenian blood also? These realities exist today.

"Among those killed on that tragic day of the assault on Sukhum, were Ephraim Isaakovich Eksuzyan, born 1960 of Gudauta, Andrew Ashotovich Trapizonian, born in 1954 in the village of Bzyp, Michael Grigorovich Martikyan, born in 1955, native of Yerevan. What caused them to take up arms, what paradise did their inspirers promise them?"

It is well-known to everyone, "what caused them to take up arms". It is also common knowledge that, the Georgian side cherished the thought of creating an alternative Armenian battalion and certain work on its organisation was even being conducted. But the fear of having an armed battalion of "unreliable" Armenians, ready at any moment to turn their weapons against the invaders, made it impossible to implement this idea. But we are not talking about that now.

It wasn't possible to conceal the murder of my father. It became known to the world community through the efforts of my uncle - the bishop of the Bulgarian- Romanian Armenian church. In order to somehow find some sort of justification, a lie was made up by the Georgian police about my own death during the March-Offensive on Sukhum. My friends brought to Yerevan one edition of the notorious newspaper "Democratic Abkhazia", where in the list of fighters killed in the storming of Sukhum my

⁸ Recall that this paper was published in Sukhum during the Georgian occupation [translator's footnote]

surname too is noted. We are well aware of the shoddy falsifications in the pages of the newspaper “Democratic Abkhazia” But this crossed all boundaries, if only because, the editor in chief, Yuri Gavva knew my father well, and knew me too.

Narrated by Felix Karapetovich Vartikyan – Neighbour of the victim.

The following happened in the most turbulent time, in March, I can't say the exact date, but this is what I know...

There was a neighbour with the last name Abzianidze, he didn't live far from Grigor on Station street near the water utility. This family had connections with the Mkhedrioni, they were always visiting them. They were either riding on the tanks or carousing, they were always together. They were very aggressive and very unresponsive to the Armenians. People on the streets were saying “Armenians must be destroyed.”

That day, their son Timur, who was 25-30 years old, said that one of these days he would drink Armenian blood. The next day a group of police officers came.

How they got to Grigor is hard to say. There were rumors that one Abkhaz female radio operator was hiding somewhere on “The Rise” (name of a stop) and he was sometimes bringing her bread. Incidentally, that particular area was very heavily bombed. Once a jet fighter flew over and bombs rained down. The journalist, Pachkoria, was still living there and a bomb fell on his house.

4-5 people came to us at home; they started digging into some books, probably looking for some sort of code, or encryption. Incidentally, Grigor used to write, and before the war, joined a literary group of Armenian writers in Abkhazia. He had a wife and children at home.

Those who came said, “come on, we need to sort this out” It was sometime in the afternoon, it was still light. And so, perhaps that was the reason they took him away. When he was leaving, he looked back and understood that he was unlikely to return.

Time went by and no-one knew what had happened to him, if he had been killed or not. They took him away and that was it – he had more than likely been killed. Then Mikael's, the son of Grigor sent a message to his uncle, Grigor's brother, the bishop of the Bulgarian-Romanian Armenian Church, that his father had been killed and the body wasn't being returned. Then, through his own channels, evidently through Ilya, he succeeded in getting the body of his brother handed over. Another neighbour, Egik, and I, went to pick up the body from the morgue.

Grigor had been shot by a machine gun from the bottom of his leg up through the body, so that one leg was shortened (I think it was the right leg). Prior to that, he was abused, there were traces of cigarette burns, one ear was half cut off and he had stab wounds.

We took him home, and then under gunfire, buried him in Lechkop. A completely innocent man was killed, he was a man of peace.

How did they get to Grigor? Maybe someone held a grudge against him. Someone stole some chickens from Grigor (Georgian neighbours), and Grigor found him. And the thief said “let's punish him”. But this is probably just a rumour.

One of the versions was that Grigor was providing food to a female member of the Abkhazian secret service (a radio operator), who was hiding somewhere in the area, by taking her bread.

Which café did he work in? In many places: in “Chernomoret's”, in Ordzhonikidze park, near the former cinema, Sukhum. An Armenian woman worked with him there and she was also killed in the war near the shop “Volna”. I must say his bosses were putting pressure on him, and he left his job, and his clients followed him. He didn't work during the war. Before the war he worked near “Volna.” There was a kiosk there, and he worked as coffee-maker.

He was more than 60, but less than 70 years old. They were “Akhpar” (Armenian repatriates – ed) from Greece, I think. They arrived in Sukhum in around 1955. He had been a builder, and before he became a coffee maker, he was hired and built houses for people. He even built his own house himself. He was a normal man, he was a normal person.

As the war ended and the roads opened, his family left (They recently sold the house to neighbours). Grigor had three children. Two daughters and one son, one daughter was in Armenia during the war.

On events in the city of Sukhum occupied by Georgian forces.

Narrated by Ardavast Saretsyan, Poet and Journalist and Felix Vartikyan.

Ardavast: Twenty people in uniforms and with bandages also arrived on our street, Semerdzhiev. On the pretext of looking for a female wireless operator, they searched houses. After uncle Grigor (Martikyan) was taken away, they came to our turning. They went into the house of my neighbour, Edik, looked around, and found his son's notebook with physics exercises, and asked what these coded messages were. One Abkhazian neighbour bought a house opposite me before the war. He was a military pilot, a Major, and came from Yerevan. He was naturally on the Abkhazian side during the war. His house was locked. So they went into his house and found a portable radio transmitter there. There was a machine gun hanging on the wall and they found a cellophane bag with cartridges (he was a military man, after all). Our neighbour, Kolya Davidyan, before that had assured them that no-one lived there, the house was locked and there was nothing and no-one there (they were looking for a female wireless operator). When they broke down the door, and found all of this, the shooting started. They came for Kolya and took him to be shot. This Georgian, in military uniform with a machine gun was dragging him. I went with Kolya. The gunner was a morphine addict and he was leading the way. We saw an open gate, rushed over to it and hid in the garden...

A little above us, closer to the shop "Kolos", while they were looking for the radio operator, one Abkhazian was caught and buried alive. As the story goes, he was betrayed by his Mingrelian mother-in-law, he was hiding there...

Our area was bombed twice. The second time, when the parents of the journalist, Pachkoria, were killed, Shevardnadze arrived. Just at that time, Grigor had bought some bread in "Kolos" and was going home. There was a crowd of people - Shevernadze came, and it is said that Grigor was passing on bread there to the radio operator. Once again, according to rumour, it was alleged that she was working with him in the café and he knew her from there.

Felix: 15 people in uniform also came to my house. One of them was 2 metres tall. They took mine and my neighbour's car. It was dark. They beat, abused and forced us to dig graves. They gave us the keys and said that if the car didn't start, they would kill me. I told them that "the car has been standing here for half a year, how should I know if it will start or not."

They were pushing the car with difficulty and took it away... I was so happy that the car had been taken because it meant that no-one would come for it again and there was no need to worry.

Then I went up to the village of Azant and stayed there. I later went down to Tsebelda and have been living there for 13 years.

On the events in the blockade of Tkvarchal. Narrated by Nana Arshba.

When the war started, I was in Sukhum. One week later I went to Tkvarchal on foot since my mother was there. I reached the junction where the road forks at Ochamchira and Tkvarchal, and there were already armed Georgians, surrounded by helicopters, tanks and armored personnel carriers, which were on their way to Tkvarchal. At the time, there was a rumor going round that the Abkhazians had surrendered Tkvarchal, and the Georgians thought that they could quietly enter the town without a fight. Of course, it was a miracle that I was able to get away from them unharmed. This happened thanks to the fact that two Georgians had literally shoved me into a passing car that was going to the village of Baslakhw and even told me that the sooner I got there, the better it would be for me.

There was no space in the car and I was travelling semi-laid down on the laps of the other passengers. From Baslakhw, I reached the village of Gup on foot. At the time, our people were mining the bridge over Aaldzga, right near the village, because rumours had reached there that the Georgians were going to Tkvarchal by armoured troop carriers and tanks. Our people decided to mine the bridge to prevent them from passing. I, literally at the very last moment, managed to pass over it.

Everyone was horrified at home when they saw me and could not believe that I was alive, and, unharmed passed all the Georgian positions. I spent the whole year in blockade with my loved ones in Tkvarchal. What could we do? – we helped the lads who were fighting, prepared food for them, shared everything that we had with them. It was good that that year had been fruitful as we had fruit and vegetables in abundance. That, of course, helped us survive as we didn't receive any humanitarian aid. Our boys went to their positions, including to the mountains along the road which ran past our houses, and, we, all the neighbours divided the preparation of food between us for the soldiers to take. It was a very severe winter, and it was extremely difficult to survive.

The town was under constant shelling. One of the helicopters had bombed a television tower. They tried to bomb the power plant [GRES] which provided us with electricity, and from November 1992 the town was left without electricity. It was so hard to live sensing our own lack of strength and the hopelessness of our situation. Few believed we would live to see victory.

We didn't care about what we were wearing, how we were sleeping or eating – all of these emotions were overshadowed by our hourly and daily fear and terror of what could happen now, or then, a little later with us and our loved ones, who were standing against the enemy.

The Russian population of the city, of course, did not have support from the villages, they were forced to go around the villages, and everyone helped them with what they could. They were in particular need of food. Of course, everyone should understand what it means to be in a blockaded town: No-one knows how the situation could change, and that it was necessary to survive and defend oneself. Our position was aggravated by the fact that Tkvarchal found itself isolated from the rest of Abkhazia. In addition, we were very depressed because we didn't know anything, did not have any information, and in such a situation, various rumors get spread quickly, and apart from that, it was difficult to physically exist in conditions of hunger and cold, one felt very weighed down, even one's morale .

We managed to connect some kind of receiver to a car battery and listen to the news. There were attempts to fly out on those helicopters in which they were taking people out. It must have been down to very good luck that our family wasn't on that fateful helicopter that was shot down over the village of Lata.

It was difficult for everyone, but the urban population found it especially taxing. They survived only because people were sharing their last crumbs with each other. The citizens couldn't help the military men with anything. You could only wait for the return of the men who were standing at their positions to feed them and keep them warm.

They didn't really spread much around about their successes or failures, perhaps that was out of fear that those who shouldn't would find out about it. The only piece of information which we got was about Georgian prisoners of war who were being transported to Gudauta in exchange for ours. Of course, we were all living with the hope that sooner or later the town would be released, it was only this that lifted our spirits.

So that we weren't killed during the bombing, my brother-in-law was digging pits for a week behind our house, and we hid in this trench during the raids.

Life in a blockaded city was monotonous – up in the morning, cook for the boys, and then wait for the bombing to start. We got used to the fact that we were constantly hungry and cold. Over time, we even got used to the fact that there was nothing more to our lives than the fear of being killed because we were being bombed every day, and each raid, for somebody, could have been the last. At first, this led us to a state of horror, but a person can even get used to this horror. Maybe that sounds strange, but we for us it was already a matter of no concern – maybe that's how a person is created, so he can get used to anything, even what is most unbearable and costly. But what wasn't taken away from us, even at such a difficult time, was our mutual support: Those who had at least something, shared with those who needed it more in terms of food and clothes. This gave us the satisfaction that we could do something for others, and in this way, we, to some extent, justified our inaction. We couldn't really do much more while sitting ringed in a blockade. Each day unfolded in fear and expectation that the Georgians would enter Tkvarchal, and we didn't even know from which side to wait for them because the forces were very unequal.

When we found out that Sukhum had been liberated, and victory was already being celebrated, we couldn't believe that this had happened in so far as we had become accustomed to this hopelessness and depression. We learned of it in the morning when I connected the radio to the battery.

Of course, our joy knew no limits, but at first I could not even respond to such joy as was expected. My mother jumped up and ran over to pass on the message to all the neighbours and relatives, and I couldn't even get up from my seat. My legs couldn't support me. Such a reaction to joy is also possible. We were really so tired of waiting...

But, in spite of the gravity of our situation, for the whole year of the blockade, the people established such warm mutual feelings towards each other, that it made it easier for us in our lives. We needed each other, we knew that at any moment, we would be able to find warmth and understanding from any citizen, even if we didn't know one another. The war united us and brought us closer together. The evil that encircled us did us good...

Now, unfortunately, that human kindness has disappeared somewhere, people don't understand, and don't even sympathise with each other, but back then, we were probably united by misfortune and deprivation. We quickly forgot about what happened to us. Sometimes, it seems to me that, everyone has

forgotten what our enemies were doing to the people of Abkhazia. But back then we lived only on the faith in our victory – this helped us.

On events in the village of Arakich during the period of the Georgian occupation

Narrated by Arshavir Minasian, artist, graduate of the Moscow School of Art, teacher of drawing in the Arakich middle school, author of the book “Arakich”

On 13 June 1993, three of the Mkhedrioni entered the house of Arsen Minasian, searched and found “Abkhazians”. When they began to open the bedside-table’s cupboard, Arsen jokingly said: “Is it likely that an Abkhazian is going to be lodged in there?” For uttering these words, the World War II invalid was so badly beaten that on the next day he was unrecognisable; he was all swollen and could hardly walk.

On 25 December 1992, robbers (they were not in military uniform) drove up and paraded about freely here with the permission of the Mkhedrioni; they burst into the house of 70 year-old Astkhik Zejtunian. She was alone at home; her husband was dead, and her children had left for Russia. They demanded gold and money. The band was headed by a woman. She was a Mingrelian, but she said that she was an Abkhazian. No-one knew her: obviously, she was not local and did not appear here again. She noticed that Astkhik had gold teeth in her mouth. She forced her to fetch pliers and to remove the teeth with her own hands. She extracted them and handed the crowns over to the robbers. And this “woman” said to her: “So, you gave them to them voluntarily, is that not so?!”

Members of the Mkhedrioni started living here in the school from the moment they entered, and then they left before the September ‘93-offensive. They were afraid to go out at night fearing Abkhazian secret service people. They tossed out all the school benches, and one classroom they turned into a toilet. They burned all the portraits including those drawn by myself and presented to the school. They left only the portrait of Shota Rustaveli. And the robber also came during the day because they were afraid at night.

On 2 December 1992, they entered the home of our neighbour Vladimir Krbashian (born 1930). He was at home with his wife. They demanded his car, but his car had been grabbed earlier in the day by others. They saw that there was no car and said to him that he was friendly with the Abkhazians. And they beat him so severely that his screams could be heard far away from the house.

On 31 December 1992, a “sensation” occurred in the village. Three robbers drove up, not in military uniform, with weapons and burst into the home of Sejrán Kirimov (his mother was Armenian, but he was a Lezgian). The young man was at home with his wife. This was during the day. The neighbours gathered to resist the robbers. Thereupon, one bandit tossed a grenade into the crowd. In a flash, a young man Arutjun Minasian (he was not local but from Georgia, who had come before the war to visit his mother-in-law and, when the war began, had been unable to get away) immediately reacted and hurled the grenade to one side, thereby saving the people’s lives. Then the infuriated bandits took out their automatic weapons and fired into the crowd of men and women. They wounded seven persons, one of the wounded remaining an invalid.

On 4 March 1992, seven persons were taken hostage from the village of Arakich: Valiko Gevorkian, Rafik Tovmasian, Tolik Eksuzian, Sergej Minasian, Asatur Minasian, and Vladimir and Oganés Krbashian. None were old; they were young men. They seated them in a vehicle and conveyed them to Tsagera. There they beat and abused them. Those who promised them a house, furniture and other goods they let go, leaving Tolik Eksuzian, who had nothing. They abused him, dowsing him in water, even continuing when he lost consciousness — the whole day. On the next day, they let him go. With great difficulty over the course of two days he managed to reach his home on foot. This demonstrates that hostages were taken to be robbed. Such were the members of the Mkhedrioni.

...One could cite many such examples.

The members of the Mkhedrioni, were basically criminals. March 1993 was a very cold March. On 3 March two members of the Mkhedrioni came to me and said: “Don’t be afraid. We are not bandits. We are living in the school. It’s very cold there, and we’ve decided to spend the night at your place.” It was impossible to refuse them, since they were carrying automatic weapons, and I assented.

We sat around the stove and spoke about the situation, about the reason for the war. One was a builder and spoke in Russian. The other spoke only in Georgian, and the first one translated. Here is what one of them, a student of the law faculty in Tbilisi, said: “We were told that there was no order on the railway in Abkhazia and that we had to restore order. For this we should receive payment, and we agreed. We were

brought to Ochamchira and then to Tsagera, and from there we were dispatched to the Labra front. We were there three months, and then they tossed us over to Arakich to be on the Otara front.”

That night they spent with us, but my wife and I did not sleep until the morning. They rose early and before departing said: “Uncle, is it possible for us to spend the night again with you today?” These people, in truth, had been deceived; they asked for neither food nor vodka. The one who spoke Russian translated from Georgian: “When will this nightmare be over?” This very same day, all of a sudden, they were transferred to another place, probably to Akhaldaba. Here, then, was the single instance of a normal relationship with us people of Arakich.

After the armistice and ceasefire, military actions were renewed on 16 September unexpectedly. Over the course of several days Akhaldaba, Arakich, Dacha, Skurcha, Kyndygh and Tamsh were liberated by the Abkhazian army. And on 30 September the war ended in spectacular victory for the Abkhazians. In these battles Batal Kvitsinia distinguished himself. He was awarded the title of Hero of Abkhazia. He was from Otara and now lives in Arakich...

Seven persons from our village fought in the Armenian battalion, including my son Setrak.

“In occupied Arakich”

*Arshavir Minasian, veteran of the Second World War;
Newspaper “Krunk” [Crane], June 1995*

The guardsmen were becoming daily more insolent, and, when they started already to demand women supposedly for laundry- and cleaning-duties, V. Chakrian, chairman of the state-farm, was obliged to make a complaint to General Qarqarashvili, which the general answered thus: “If you don’t give an assurance of compliance, I’ll have you stood against a wall. A military tribunal will decide your case.” The very next day, the band visited the chairman. They subjected him to an abundance of abuse and before leaving pressed with interest the question: “So, then, will you be complaining anymore?”

I too had guardsmen as guests, and they straightaway issued the advice: “Write a request to Topolian and Tsaturian — let’s see if they are going to help.” They placed all the loot in the hall, locked the door with the key and ordered that it be guarded until they came for the stuff. Some days later, two persons arrived, smashed down the door and took away the items. It transpired that they were from a different band. Well, perhaps there was an agreement between them and my first “guests”. I don’t know.

However that might have been, the next day the “owners” of the loot arrived, surrounded the house and fired on it. They killed the dog, then the cow, and wounded my wife. They dragged me into a corner and screamed that they would shoot all three of us. I did not know who the third person might be. But I then noticed that they had also taken with them the chairman of the state-farm, V. Chakrian, demanding of him a huge sum of money. We were saved from being shot by brave guardsmen returning from their position. The bandits thought that it was Abkhazians attacking them and fled.

On the events in the town of Gagra during the Georgian occupation.

Narrated by Valentina Nikolaevna Chachba, former head doctor of the central hospital of Gagra.

... As in the cowboy films – it’s summer, a hot summer August month, half-naked Georgians without shirts on. Their appearance made us so fearful that we preferred not to go out of the house. That’s why, the news we got about what was going on in town, was only gossip.

I worked in a hospital, but in practice, the chief physician was my deputy, Igor Dzhumberovich Darsalia. Now he is dead, he died in Tbilisi. Towards the very end of the occupation, before the liberation of Gagra, guardsmen came to the house, and asked me to go to the military headquarters. I was travelling in an ambulance, Igor Dzhumberovich met us. He stopped and asked, “where are you going?” I think he knew where I was being taken, or else why would he stop and ask where I was going. I replied that I had been summoned to the military headquarters, and he said “we’ll go together, come and sit in my car.” Having left me in the car, he climbed up to the military command. I heard a very loud conversation, then he came down and said we were leaving. As he explained, it was a misunderstanding, but I understood that they let me go only thanks to him.

I think that they left me in the hospital because the staff always listened to me. Of course they controlled our work in the hospital, because military brigades were coming from Tbilisi, they were changing all the time, and with them also came the deputy minister who represented them. This team had

all the specialists; neurosurgeons, surgeons, neurologists, and others. They brought their wounded, but we received ours as well, and we put them in hospital under anonymous names, hiding the fact that they were Abkhazians. For example, under the name Sharmatava, was Kuchka Aiba; if they had been taken, they were unlikely to have remained alive. Once, we put one of our own in hospital. We were trying to decide how to transfer him to Sochi, and then someone gave us away. The ambulance in which he was being taken from the hospital was attacked. I must say that, Darsalia, when he heard about it, went down and it was just thanks to his efforts that the ambulance was in any case released.

On a different occasion, we took in another wounded man who had a very severe skull and brain injury, and he was very badly beaten. The Neurosurgeon from Tbilisi looked at it and walked away, refusing any sort of help. I told that surgeon that we were physicians, there shouldn't be any politics for us, our job is to treat people and later justice would decide what to do with this person. He seemed to feel uncomfortable and he took him to the operating theatre. I went with him although I don't understand neurosurgery. I didn't understand anything, but I gave the impression that I was watching and would see what he was doing. Even though I didn't think that he would have harmed him deliberately, there were concerns. This patient recovered. Time passed, Gagra and Abkhazia were liberated and somehow or other I got home from work and on the table there was wine, fruit and sweets laid out. I asked my father-in-law where it was all from. He said "I don't know, some young man came and said that when the Georgians were here, you saved him." I think he came to thank me. When I remember this, I understand we were doing things which could have ended very badly for us, but at that moment, we didn't even think about it. We simply couldn't have acted any differently.

In line with civil defense, in case of emergencies, there have always been a certain amount of medications and dressings in hospitals. And when the Georgians entered Gagra, they, of course, immediately came to the hospital. For the medical teams that had been brought in from Tbilisi, medicines were being imported, and we gradually gathered them up. We didn't think that military action would last long, but we still organized the Bzyb medical centre where the wounded we received the wounded and gave first aid. I told the head of the Tbilisi team to store everything here, because there was nothing there. I had to take our head nurse, Ika Inal-Ipa, an Abkhazian, who often openly expressed her opinion about what was happening. Perhaps she spoke to the authorities and negotiated with them for me to be able to gather everything necessary and leave. We packed everything up, and, Ika, dressed in a medical gown, got into the car. When we arrived at Colchida, where the border was, we were stopped and asked who we were, why and where we were travelling to. They were very angry, I heard one of them say in Georgian that I was that good woman, the doctor from the hospital. I explained to them that the authorities had given us permission to pass and that they could ask them about this. All in all, they let us go. When we got over to the other side, our own people stopped us and weren't letting us pass. But we still ended up getting to this medical unit. At that time the Minister was Otar Osia, and with him was Lakoba, who works as the head doctor of the military sanatorium. Osia told me to go with them because he feared that I would be killed by the Georgians when I got back. But I said that if they let me go once, then, probably, nothing terrible would happen. I was hoping that they wouldn't remember that I was travelling with another passenger, as Ika had remained on the Abkhazian side.

In short, I returned to Gagra because I had my little grandchildren at home, 6 and 10 years old, who I was later able to send to Sochi with my daughter-in-law. I stayed at home alone, but I always had my neighbours nearby. 7-8 women stayed at my house everyday as they were afraid to stay by themselves. For some reason they were always calmer and more hopeful when they were with me, even though, I, myself, was very afraid. Every time we heard the noise of the cars, we expected that they had come for us.

One Abkhazian family, the Blabas, lived nearby; the wife worked as an accountant at our hospital, and one day their house was entered. None of us locked the doors, it was pointless because they broke them down and came in any way. They took everything from the house that they had, but not everything fit into the car. I called for our car, we loaded their things – the television, the fridge, and everything else into an ambulance and transported them to the hospital. That evening, those very same Georgians drove up to the house, they entered the house, but nothing was there. They started shouting and making a noise, but eventually decided that some other Georgians had taken the things. Living near me is Sveta Agrba, who saw them taking her car away from the bathroom window. Opposite lives the family, Damirdzh-Ipa, and they also had everything they had taken away. We feared even to go outside as it was so dangerous and pointless.

My house was visited five times. Once I was present. In the room there was a photograph of the landlord, my husband, who was no longer alive. They asked "is he fighting?" I answered, "well, yes, he's fighting from the grave".

I had a male hobby – in my collection of drinks there was more than a hundred different bottles. Of course, they took the whole collection, and the table silverware. I wasn't there the other times, but there were neighbours who heard how the fighters were regretting that the house wasn't very affluent.

Here in Gagra, TV did not work and we did not know about anything that was going on. The connection to all family and close friends had been lost, we didn't know who was where and if they were alive or not. But of course, our Georgian neighbours, except for one or two families who sided with the invaders, really helped us.

Some even made efforts to ensure our homes weren't robbed, but unsuccessfully. Of course, it's not worth talking about the things we lost compared to the number of loved ones we buried...I'm just talking about it so that people understand the hopeless situation in which we were living.

The Georgians behaved extremely insolently, they came to the hospital in armored personnel carriers (the gate remains broken even now). When wounded Georgians were brought in, about fifty guardsmen were always sitting in the hospital yard; they could fly into the operating room to demand someone jump the queue.

When Shershelia was brought in, they didn't even allow his dead body to be taken from the hospital grounds – he had been terribly abused, this wounded man had suffered a long and hard beating and was then burned. Igor Darsalia again went to talk to them so that they allowed him to be buried. Later, they looked for the place where he was buried for a long time, because the grave was near the morgue, and the people buried there were those who no-one had come to take or were simply not returned. I talked to those people who worked in the hospital during that period, and they know what I know. No-one knows anything exact because at that time, it was frightening to even glance out of the window. After the liberation of Gagra, Shershelia's son arrived wanting to know as much as possible about his father, but we couldn't tell him anything more other than what we had seen. The only person, who might know anything more, is our assistant manager, Roman Malanko, but he isn't here. They say he was involved in the burials, and, in general, helped a lot of people.

Gagra was liberated quite unexpectedly for all of us and very quickly. I was at the hospital and hear somebody asking for me. I go downstairs, and, I see, standing in the yard are our boys, with them, Aron Dzjapsh-Ipa, and some other man of small stature – and I very much regret that I don't know the lastname of this man. He embraced me and said they had been looking for me as they were afraid I could be killed. I asked Aron not to shoot in the hospital grounds so that no-one would say that the Abkhazians had behaved inappropriately in a medical establishment. He left six guys to protect the hospital and went away.

About one week before the liberation of Gagra, I was taken from my house and brought to the railway, to the exit. But, apparently, someone managed to call the hospital, because along the way, we met an ambulance with doctors - Georgians. They, incidentally, after they had come for me a few times, they took care of us and promised that they would come and spend the nights at my house so that I wouldn't be touched. And while they noisily sorted things out with my escort, I quietly got out of the car and got home without being noticed by anyone.

And it was not long before the liberation that there was another incident. I was in the office when I was called for. As usual, my office was open and as I was coming out, I saw four men – three with machine guns, one with a pistol. The one with the pistol gave the command to carry out a search. What could I be hiding in the office? Two pictures were hanging there and they gave the impression that there were cavities behind them. They took down the pictures and checked carefully.

They thought that recording devices were hidden there. They started rummaging in the cupboards. It was funny that when opening the cupboard doors, the man pointed his gun as though somebody was hiding there. I invited them to look at everything carefully so they wouldn't come into my office or home anymore. He replied that I should have been removed long ago. I asked him on what basis and if they really had some kind of information on me. He replied that I always hid Abkhazian men at home and passed on information by telephone to the Abkhazian side. I told him that not one man had been seen at my home, only women were there, and that his words offended my dignity as a woman, and with regard to the information by telephone, why should I pass on information when they are shouting to the whole world about themselves?

I later found out that the director of our school, Ada Leontevna Kapba, Enva Erastovich Kapba and I were going to be used as hostages, if necessary, in exchange for their own. On the day Gagra was liberated

we took 75 wounded – we worked as gynecologists, general practitioners, pediatricians and dentists since there was not a single surgeon in the hospital. Local Georgians worked together with us, but the Tbilisi team naturally ran away immediately. Dvaladze left with them, he was the head of the surgical department, who worked at the time when the Georgians were here.

When the whole of Gagra was released, our hospital was made the place for minor injuries. It was nice that our team never refused to work overtime when help was needed. It didn't matter that it was difficult for the employees and their families – we all came together as one.

I never heard of any refusal from any one of the members of staff. I want to make the point that, as a team, we cared for the wounded; it was really difficult with food, so the administration allocated us some money and we went to Adler for groceries. The Pitsunda fish factory gave us fish that the whole team cleaned and prepared for the injured. We brought grains from home and made grits and red bean sauce. We were busy with the collection of blood. While the war was going on, we prepared 636 litres of blood which was transferred to New Athos and the main hospital. After the war, our doctors went to Ochamchira for some time, where there weren't any of their own doctors. I worked in that hospital for 56 years, and very recently left my position.

Everything that concerns the month and a half presence of Georgian military forces in Gagra in the year '92 was of course a complete shock. These were the people who were saying "Abkhazians shouldn't be living like this" apparently living in decent homes, where it was clear that people were comfortably off, they drew the conclusion for themselves that, it was not appropriate for the Abkhazians to be living well. They had only one desire, to rob everyone, and take everything away that people acquired.

They were taking away all vehicles, so we hid our company car, but just before the liberation of Gagra, someone had given it up to them. They shouted at me that they were so in need of cars, but we dared to hide it. Of course, the atrocities were dreadful – in the valley, in old Gagra. We heard the people were brought there, shot and burned...and of course robbed. They probably would have liquidated many more people had they known that they were going to be expelled from the city so quickly.

On events in the town of Gagra during the period of the Georgian occupation

Narrated by Lamara and Aleksej Dzjapsh-Ipa

We heard about the start of the war by television. Our president was calling upon the people to take a stand in defence of the Motherland. We Dzjapsh-Ipa are three families from this clan, and we all lived next to one another: one cousin and two brothers (Aljoshia, Georgij and Anatolij). Five members of the family lost their lives — these were those who participated in the war. In our homes four daughters-in-law remained. Our lads told us not to stay at home, afraid that something would happen to us: they were the ones who were fighting, and everyone knew about this. On the fourth day, members of the Mkhedrioni arrived; we were then living in Colchida. A Jewish neighbour was hiding us. Machines drove up to our house. We could see from our neighbour's balcony how they made off with all our goods. When they had "cleaned up" everything — this would be on their third visit —, they also set fire to our houses. We were transferred, some to Pitsunda, some to Gudauta, and settled on relatives. I remember coming to KBRTS, where a man who had promised to help transfer us should have been waiting. There were Georgians sitting there in a circle, and we saw how they brought our guys, took them down to the basement and abused them.

We saw a terrible sight — the heart of a normal person would not bear this. What did it fall to our lot to endure?! Our young men were killed; only one son remained among the living, but even he was disabled.

When Gagra was liberated, we could no longer be anywhere else and went home, but could this really be called a home?! The garage remained intact, and there it was that we started living. Our neighbours took pity on us — Armenians and others: they brought materials, some chipboard, others plywood, and others something else. Was built onto the garage a little room, and there we lived with grandfather for five years. We had to live, but how?! We were advised to occupy a Georgian house and were even summoned to the administration. But grandfather absolutely refused to move into any. His son could still stand and went to work in Moscow. Five years later, in 1997, he had put together enough money (and in addition his friends helped him) for us to buy this house from an Armenian (Sanayan), for 150 thousand. And we have lived here ever since.

My family is obviously one of the many on which the war inflicted great damage. I'm not talking about wealth or a house. It wasn't just one son we lost in the family. They were all so young ...

The son of my husband's brother, Sasha — he was not yet 16 — also went off to the war, saying that he had neither home (it had been torched by the Georgians) nor father, for he had perished, and he had to be alongside those who were defending their motherland. We could not restrain him, and he went to take part in the last offensive against Sukhum. But he was after all still so young that the horrors of war affected his mind. A handsome youth, under two meters in height and, lo, the result of the war! When we drew attention to his inappropriate behaviour, relatives took him for treatment to Sochi. But, clearly, it was of no help, and one morning we found that he had hanged himself in the yard of the house. We buried him, and, soon after, there was a misfortune with our son too, for he was affected by the suicide of his brother [cousin], and, of course, this was a consequence of the war — he suffered a stroke. The war wounded him twice over: he was disabled, and now with difficulty drags out his existence. He had four children, one of whom last year, around New Year, went with friends to the mountains and was killed. Once again, sorrow visited our yard. Another son became a lawyer and works in the administration of the city — on him alone rest the hopes of us all.

Aleksej, husband of Lamara, enters the conversation:

When I heard on television that a mobilisation of all men between 16 and 60 years had been announced, I, along with my relatives began to find out where we needed to go. We were told that we should get to Gal so as to prevent the Georgians crossing the R. Ingur and to secure the border. When we got to Gal, Givi Kamugovich told us that he now had enough people, and that we should go home; if he should have need of us, we would be informed. We went back. Again a mobilisation was declared on the television and that the Georgians had gone to war against us. We went to Sukhum, but we had no weapons at all. At five o'clock we went to the Red Bridge and took up position there. Someone reported that the Georgians had set out by sea for Gagra. We rushed back. We reached the R. Bzyp and saw a crowd of people, our lads, but we were allowed no further. They explained that the Georgians had entered the city — from the sea there had landed paratroops. Somehow I still managed to reach home. In the morning, I went to Gagra, and near the Red Cross a car full of Georgians is standing. I was stopped and forced out of my car, one of them holding a gun to my forehead. "Your shop was closed," he tells me. At this moment, Ljonja Lakrba and his family drove up in his car. All the Georgians opened fire on his car, and the one holding me at gun-point also left me and began shooting after him. Taking advantage of this moment, I jumped straight over the fence and disappeared into the state-farm's mandarin-plantation.

From that day I entered military service under the command of Vitalij Chirikba, going wherever I was sent. One day during the March-offensive, in the morning, I was told that at night there had been a terrible battle in Sukhum which had resulted in many dead and wounded. I packed up and drove to the hospital in Gudauta. It turned out that at night they had brought my dead son there.

On events in the village of Abkhazian Atara

Narrated by Gunda Kvitsinia, poetess, Director of the State Fund for the Development of the Abkhaz Language

When the war began, it was a Friday; I remember it as if it was today. I, as usual, was at work and went home to my apartment in the New District [Novi Raion]. We could not get out from there to Gudauta either that or the next day, because we did not have on that side [sc. of the R. Gumista] any relatives or friends with whom we could stay. After all, no evacuation was organised, as no-one expected that a war might begin — each left as and when they could. My parents decided that we should go to their village — it seemed to them that that's where we'd be safe, because no-one thought the war would drag on for a long time or could become so widespread and brutal.

My sister, who was married in the village of Chlou, but who at this time was with us, my brother and I (my father could not get away, and my mother could not leave him alone) reached the station on foot. There many of our fellow-villagers met together, including women and children, fifteen persons in all. Together with some Mingrelians, we took a bus (they were taking the Mingrelian population to Zugdidi). And the most amazing thing is that, when the bus stopped at one of the posts where Georgian guardsmen were checking to see that there were no Abkhazians on the bus, our Mingrelian fellow-travellers did not give us up, though they were well aware of who we were. Maybe, in the early days of the war, they were not so embittered, as later happened.

In the village of Dacha, we got out and walked to the house where my brother, an eighth-grader, had gone for the summer.

Until October, it was relatively quiet. Attacks on Atara began after the Abkhazian army liberated the western part of Abkhazia from Gagra to the Psou.

Atara is a flat village and so situated that to protect it from all sides is almost impossible, and one could not form any sort of line of opposition, any position that could be defended. So it was very difficult for our guys to defend it. In the first attack, the Georgians went through the village of Naa and aimed to pass through the village of Armenian Atara, but their tanks got stuck there, and they decided to get there via the village of Dacha to collect their tanks. Early in the morning when we children were still asleep, the Georgians entered the village of Arakich, which bordered on our village. And when we got up, all of our neighbours had already gone to hide in the woods, beyond the tea-plantations. My brother, grandmother and I could see that some armed men in civilian clothing were moving in our alley. We heard shots from a distance; then they checked all the yards but did not find anyone, because all had fled. Of course, we were scared and did not know what to do; we wanted to pass on through the alley. But they began to ask us where we were going (I had the feeling that they were from Akhaldaba; later we found out that they had a map showing the place of residence of each family). They told us to go home quickly, that they would now be shooting — we had the impression that they did not want anything to happen to us. When we turned back to the house, they hid behind the trees; it was clear that they feared and maybe apprehended that there might be armed people in the houses. One of them again repeated to us: "Go home, quickly, for there was now they will be shooting." We went across our field into the forest, but none of the neighbours were to be seen there; it turned out that we had gone to the other side. We later learned that the Georgians heard them talking and surrounded them. They drove them to the barn where the tea was stored during collection, and locked them in there.

It was by the grace of God that we did not end up in either the one or the other group of hostages, made up of our fellow-villagers, among whom were our grandmother, Zurab Kvitsinia, the Ashkharua family, Slavik and Zaira Kvitsinia, and old Punta Kvitsinia with his wife, who were then shot — and all their grandchildren and children. Of all this we knew nothing. Later, we met by chance Marianna Kvitsinia's family, who also did not find themselves in the first group of hostages. But later, in December, they were captured when they returned to their home, unable to withstand the cold — after all, it was winter and snow lay on the ground. Until February, Marianna, her two sisters, her mother and nine other people, among whom were two babes-in-arms, were hostages of the Georgians.

Our father was still in Sukhum and hid from Georgians on the roof of the house. One day, at four o'clock in the morning, he and mother were able to get to the Gumista, where a Russian military contingent was stationed, and by their helicopter to reach Gudauta. The Russian military were able to manage matters such that the Georgians, who along with them let people on the helicopter, could not see their passports. From Gudauta, having learned there that we were all in Atara, father flew to Kabardino-Balkaria, and from there to Tkvarchal and then on foot came to Atara. He took us to Chlou, but the old folk stayed in the village, as they were unable to go on foot. Father went back to Atara for his mother. That night the Georgians occupied Atara, and all of our relatives and neighbours again fell into their hands. For two months they were hostages, only in February were we able to exchange father and grandmother for two Georgians. When we were meeting them, father, whom the Georgians had abused very severely and whom, along with our relative, World War II veteran Aleksej Kvitsinia, they were putting up for execution, was no longer able to stand and had to be carried on a stretcher. As for grandmother, who, as we thought, would not live to see us, seeing that her son was almost dying, forgot about her illnesses, regained her strength (from where is unclear), and resolutely walked alongside the stretcher, leaning on a stick.

On events in the village of Abkhazian Atara

Narrated by Marianna and Astanda Kvitsinia

When the war started, we were at mother's parents — in the village of Tamsh. As usual, the day before, on 13 August, my brothers and I had gone to the sea. I do not like to swim in the sea for a long time, but that day they could not get me out of the water, until uncle finally said to me: "Well, what's happened, Marianna, after all, tomorrow too we can come to the sea, so let's go home already!"

To say that our heads were burdened with some political problems is impossible — we were youngsters; I was only 16 and had just graduated from high school, and my sisters were even younger than me — 15 and 12 years-old. Everyone is calling me, and I'm standing knee-deep in water, staring, as if frozen, goodness knows where. And then, as if I had fallen from the sky, for no reason at all I say to them:

"Do you remember the movie 'Tomorrow Was the War'?" They probably thought that I was not right in the head — there we are, having fun, bathing, and suddenly I come out with my question. I am asked what kind of war it was. As to why it came to mind, even I myself to this day cannot understand. On the morning of 14 August, we were awakened by an explosion (they had blown up the bridge at Tamsh), and we lived quite close, only 500 meters from the highway.

Aslan and Zaza Zantaria, and other youths immediately gathered together the Tamsh militia and took up certain positions. The civilians hid in the woods.

Then we, through the villages of Armenian Atara and Naa, reached Abkhazian Atara, our village. On the way, we passed through Kwitol and saw all the men and young men gathered in a group trying to fortify some posts somehow to protect the village. ...

The first attack on Atara began on 30 September. Before that, it was relatively quiet. We would hear shooting, the firing of guns; there was shelling, bombings, but no-one entered directly into the village. The situation was very tense; we would sit by the TV and catch every word, any information. We lived in constant fear, not knowing what to expect or what would happen to us.

On that day, in the morning, we were still asleep when we heard my mother's voice — she called and asked us to come down quickly into the yard. We went downstairs and saw how Georgian guardsmen were moving along our alley — terrifying, black, bearded and armed to the teeth. They came into the yard, took me, stood me in front of them and went into the forest. When we entered the forest, we saw our neighbours hiding under every bush and tree. There were young men, mere boys, and also adult males there. It was to them that the attention of the guardsmen turned. They were evidently also afraid. And my mother came after us. Seizing the moment, when they were confused and distracted, my mother grabbed me, and we ran home. There my mother tried to shove all the children into the cupboards, and she herself stood behind the door. I remember the sounds and voices, hearing how our neighbours, hiding in the forest, had been gathered together and brought out through our yard onto the road. They were taken to the nearest tea-point, which stood on the central country-road.

All day we were hiding, now in the tea-plantations, now in the woods, now behind the house in the maize-field. Towards evening, the helicopters started flying, and we thought that it was all up, that here would be our resting-place. They flew straight, level with the rooftops. Then we heard how heavy machinery had moved to the centre of the village. Later we found out that they went and burned all the houses in a row. From that day, we had no more peace, not one minute, not one hour. They captured that day several groups of hostages; sometimes they would take out young lads to be shot, and then for some reason they would return them back. Then we realised why: it appears that the Georgians came to Atara from two sides, from the side of Dacha and from the side of Adzjubzha, and wanted to link up in the centre of the village. But they did not succeed, as our fighters put up resistance. Then they put the hostages in front of their armoured vehicles and drove them to the centre of the village. I now realise that we acted very foolishly, staying in the village, but then we thought that a day or two and it would all be over. We even went to Dzhgjarda in October but came back all the same, wanting to be at home.

Several times a day there were air-raids and bombings from the air; every time we would run to hide in the forest or cornfield, but then again we'd return home. In December, closer to the New Year, in the morning the father of Gunda Kvitsinia came running and warned us that once again the Georgians were on the move and that there were many of them. We all ran into the tea-plantation where we had prepared something akin to puppet-show booths for shelter, in which it was impossible to stand up straight — they were no higher than the tea-bushes. We spent three days and nights on our knees in the snow, without food and water. In our house, the Georgians organised their head-quarters, and we could see all this from our hideout.

One night, we went to some Armenians, our neighbours, with whom for many years we had lived side by side, to find shelter with them. Maybe one should not speak of it, but I cannot be silent about it — they endured our presence only one night, and then they declared: "You know what, our life is dear to us, get out!" Today I make an effort to understand them, but then it was very painful. We went into the woods; the snow was knee-deep; it was cold, and there was no food. We had old people with us who could hardly move their legs, and two small children — one of 18 months, the other of 8 months. The mother of Sergej Kvitsinia in general was unable to walk; he would carry her about on his back. We, the children, found it very scary, but now I realise the nature of the horror experienced by our parents, who could do nothing to help us, to save and preserve us from this nightmare, always worrying what would happen to us, if they were killed.

On 31 December, New Year's Eve, we were hungry and so stiff from cold that we could no longer bear it, and decided to get out. The Georgians had moved their headquarters from our house to another, across the street; we could even hear their voices.

We quietly entered the house; even if we had had matches, we could not have stoked any fire or lit a candle out of fear that we would be seen or heard. Fumbling around, I tried to find some rug, blanket, or even just a sheet. But the house was completely looted, not even a mattress on the beds. Suddenly, my arms came to rest upon something warm — I realised that this was not an object but thought it was a corpse and screamed as if I'd been cut. I do not know how they failed to hear my voice. It transpired that these were the skins of our cows, which, apparently, they had recently slaughtered. So, trembling with cold and fear, we sat it out until the morning — at the very least, we had a roof over our heads. I remember how some of us argued that the Georgians were human beings too after all, that they too had human blood flowing in their veins, and that they would surely not kill us on 1 January.

We looked out into the yard and saw that once again over night there had been a fresh snow-drift. We understood that we could not even go out anywhere — we would be found by our tracks in the snow. Mother went to the well to fetch water but came running back; it turned out, that a sniper had begun to shoot at her. We did not even notice how surrounded our house was. We saw how poor uncle Alyosha and Slavik Kvitsinia, who had fallen into their hands, were driven into our yard by the Georgians, urging them on with rifle-butts in the back, cocking their firing-pins, cursing, threatening to shoot them and demanding that they reveal where all of us were hiding. They responded that there was no-one in the village, that apparently everyone had left. We were in a state of shock; we understood that nothing good could be expected; there were twenty of them, all armed to the teeth, scary beards, black, walking around the yard, scouring about, and, of course, they came into the house, with us sitting there. One of the guardsmen was Demur Kvaratskhelia (his sister was my mother's friend) and another was a Svan whose sister had been my mother's classmate (their sister died and my mother, at their request, became their adopted sister). They both recognised us, began to lament, and promised that, as long as they were alive, they would not allow anyone to hurt us. They took me, my mother and sister to Sukhum, to some apartment in the New District on Lagvilava Street, with the expectation that later we would be exchanged for somebody, as they told us, but the other hostages were left in Atara.

And then, on 5 January, there began an offensive against Sukhum. We forgot what we had seen in Atara, when they began to bomb the New District. We decided that there was absolutely no chance that we could survive there, such was the horror — the word "dreadful" cannot encompass everything we were feeling. Everything was collapsing, flying about, shrapnel whistling through the air, but, despite all this horror, we sat and quietly rejoiced, thinking to ourselves that, even if something happened to us, at least our side would take the city. In the apartment we found a radio, and, covering it with several blankets so no-one might hear, we tuned in to the Abkhazian frequency and listened to the news. Ardzinba was just speaking on the radio. I shall never forget how I rejoiced at the voices of Vova Nikonov and Ardzinba. Vova was reading the news, and Ardzinba was giving an interview in which he said that we would free the city and win the war. Probably because we were hovering between life and death, we so desperately believed what he said.

Two weeks later, at precisely the time when the plane flown by Maisuradze was shot down over Atara, we were offered in exchange for his body. We were taken to one of the posts in our village. It was just a hornets' nest, there was such an incredible number there, and they were so confident that it was as if they had already taken the whole of Abkhazia. The exchange did not take place, because his body was not found. We were held there for several hours. Mother knew Georgian well and began to talk to the guardsmen. For some reason, they began to tell her where they came from (from Kakheti, Rustavi), and they did not know why they had been brought here, and one complained that his mother was waiting for him, and he did not know whether he would return, whether he would survive. She even dared to tell them that the Abkhazians were not going anywhere, that they had no other home, and they would fight to the last, that their efforts were in vain, and that they would not be able to win this war. She said that they needed to save themselves, that Georgia all the same would not achieve its goal, because the Abkhazians had nowhere to go, and that would defend their country and liberate it all the same.

The exchange still did not take place, and we were taken already to our home, in Atara, but we were under constant supervision and could not stick out even our nose — we remained their hostages.

On 10 February, Kutaisi mercenaries burst in. Among them there were even Armenians. Their commander was one Ali Baba, an ethnic Armenian — a gunman, all wrapped up in cartridge-belts, short in height, a real beast. His whole bearing spoke of there being nothing human about him. In general, almost

the whole of this group consisted of Armenians, but there were also Svans. They rounded up all those whom they found into a huddled mass and drove us on foot through the snow to the turning to Dacha, not allowing anyone even to turn their head to look to the side. Of course, we had no clothes, only rags, and our shoes leaked, and, while we were travelling over all these five kilometers, we got soaked and were dreadfully frozen. On the way, we saw local Armenians who knew my mother; it was obvious that they were looking at us with tears in their eyes, but, of course, they could not help us. They were put on a bus and driven away. Eleven of us were left: myself and my two sisters, Miranda (15) and Astanda (12), our mother, Svetlana Bargandzhia, who at that time was 50 years-old, Slavik Kvitsinia (40), his sons, Ruslan (17) and Adamyr (15), his wife, Rima Tkhaytsuk (30-35 years), his mother-in-law Nunu Tkhaytsuk (60-65 years), the youngsters Amina and Amra, one of whom was 18 months-old, and the other eight or nine months-old. The old men were left in the village, because they could not go anywhere on foot.

We were brought to Gulrypsh, to some rest-home. They had a bit of a major military headquarters there headed by General Datuashvili. This place was right on the beach. Around us these beasts, the guardsmen, black, bearded, clanked about with their automatic rifles, while a terrible storm raged out at sea. We were wet, half-naked, beastly cold, and the guardsmen were casting sinister glances at us. At that moment, mother was taken away for questioning, and then we were all interrogated in turn. Just imagine what state we were in! Everything that happened frightened us immensely – I do not know how we survived this moment; I do not know if in life there exists anything worse than this.

Again, we were taken to Ochamchira. When we were passing Tamsh and Kyndygh, we were always afraid that actually our own people might kill us. There was, after all, constant crossfire there, and the section of the road through which we were passing was exposed to fire from both sides.

Then, my mother remembered that, when we were coming out of Gulripsh, they several times wanted to stop the vehicle. So, who could prevent them if they stood us by some precipice and shot us? Mother knew not only the Georgian and Mingrelian languages but also Armenian, as she taught in an Armenian school. We were escorted by Armenian mercenaries, and it turned out that, while we were driving, they were bragging to one another how exquisitely they might kill us and what they might do to us.

You can imagine what it cost her to keep to herself this horror; after all, she had beside her her children, whom she could lose at any moment.

In Ochamchira, we were left in the family of Nodar Kirtskhalia, who was a soloist in the ensemble "Sharatyn". As we later learned, he had many Abkhazian friends, and he did everything, by fair means or foul, to take us to his home, and then exerted a lot of effort to save our lives — we saw and felt that this man really wanted to help us. Later he even told us that God would not forgive him, if he did not help us, although he was a Georgian guardsman. His mother began to yell at him: "Did I really bring you up for you to bring me Abkhazians? They are our enemies; God will punish you, and I will curse you, if you do anything good for them." I remember that he was in a terrible state, trying to calm her down, assuring her that he could not allow us to be killed, that he wanted to save us, because they wanted to shoot us, and that he had barely managed to persuade them at the head-quarters to be allowed to bring us to his place for a time.

To this day I do not know how he managed to wrest from their clutches eleven people and bring them to his home — we could simply have been finished off and thrown into any old pit. We were too many to be hidden and moved in secret — they might simply have killed him. The fact that he even managed to fetch us for a time to his place also falls within the category of miracles; only now do I understand what a risk he took.

The war had already been going on for several months, and we were all on edge; we were constantly shaking with fear and could not endure this constant tension. For some reason I began constructing escape-plans, pestering my mother that we should try to get to the station — it seemed to me that we could board a train and escape.

We were just kids, all the time pestering this Kirtskhalia with questions about how much longer we would be there, and when we'd be taken away from there. He, apparently wanting to calm us down, began to show pictures of Abkhazian friends. It was evident from his behaviour and his eyes that he deeply empathised with our plight.

One evening, as usual, the guardsmen, under whose control he evidently fell, arrived.

We are all sitting in the one room, and in the other were the military men. The door was half-open, and my mother heard them talking. We had no idea what they were talking about, but my mother heard it all – her face was simply expressionless. Later she told me that they were discussing where and how we would be shot, if an exchange could not be arranged. But there was one "problem" — they had to find two more

Abkhazians so that revenge for 13 Georgians recently killed in combat with the Abkhazians be complete. One whose brother had fallen in battle was especially keen in his desire to exact vengeance for his death. He wore on a string a piece of his brother's clothing soaked in his blood. They were saying that there was no difficulty in finding here two Abkhazians, and, once found, they should simply kill the lot. Seeing mother sitting petrified, I began to be alarmed, but she told us not to be afraid, and that they were preparing to exchange us.

I do not know why everything was so drawn out and why we were in Georgian hands for so long — it was simply a miracle that they did not shoot us. A week later, the guardsman (Kirtskhalia) sheltering us was sent somewhere, and he did not appear for some time; apparently, he faced some problems in connection with us, and we were moved to another family. The mother was an Abkhazian from Tkvarchal, Nora Ubiria, but her sons were Georgians, real thugs, who fought against us. In all the time that we clashed with the Georgians, we did not experience such inhuman treatment, even from the guardsmen, as from this Abkhazian woman. Perhaps we so keenly perceived her attitude because of the fact that she was Abkhazian and yet detested us so ferociously. She would say that we wretched Abkhazians could hope for nothing, that it was all the same as they would annihilate us all, asking who we were anyway and what need there was of us, and many other terrible things. The most terrible time for us was in this family — no words can express what we felt. The house was full of Georgians always talking about when they would shoot us.

Mother, poor thing, would sit half-dead from all these conversations that it fell to her unwittingly to hear, all the time having to keep our spirits up and constantly deceiving us into believing that they were discussing our exchange.

They were often visited by a certain Chuki (in Georgian 'rat') [*recte* in Mingrelian 'mouse'], as he was known to all; his surname was Lipartia. We understood that this was a criminal "authority", whose opinion was listened to by all. He was also engaged with questions relating to exchanges.

It so happened once that he was sitting opposite, cocking the firing-pin of his automatic weapon, and looking at me. Apparently, the look on my face was not a pleasant one, because he said, staring straight into my eyes: "What are you looking at? If you had this automatic weapon, what would you do with it?" And I replied: "I would shoot all Georgians." God, what reaction this provoked from my mother and the woman still suckling her children! They began to apologise, begging them, saying that I was too small to understand what I was saying, and that they should not pay any attention to me.

Even today, I still remember what state I was in — I did not feel the slightest fear, so strong was my hatred of them. At that moment, it was all the same what happened to me; I viewed them all as villains and devils. I remember how they were stunned by my cocky answer. And this Chuki said: "Yes, it's easier to swallow a live hedgehog than to win Abkhazia."

One day in February we were put on an open trailer, blindfolded and again driven away. We could hear machine-gun fire. The car stops. Kirtskhalia was escorting us this time too. He told us to be silent, not even to talk amongst ourselves. Some villain, who began shaking Kirtskhalia and yelling something at him, came and sat in our trailer. Mother later told us that he had asked him to find "just any Abkhazian", so that he could drink his blood by the glass in revenge for the killing of his brother: "Otherwise what shall I say to his mother?" he screamed. And right in front of him are sitting eleven Abkhazians; had he known about this, it is clear what we might have expected.

At one of the stations, where the line of confrontation ran, we were off-loaded. Some Russian came, who looked like a priest. We were divided into three groups; my mother and I were in different groups, and then we were taken away blindfolded. It was 15 February 1993. There, apparently, everything had already been discussed, because, at some point in the journey, our blindfolds were removed and we were released, being told to go directly to our own people, without deviating, as the road was mined. Apparently, the Lord once again had mercy on us, because it seems we passed right through the minefield. When our people saw where we were coming from, they could not believe their eyes, because they knew that we could reach them only across territory that was mined. We were exchanged section by section — we were in the first group, but mother came only on the third day. Until that moment, we knew nothing about each other's fate.

We were in a terrible state: we were like corpses, and we did not care any longer what happened to us. So much time has passed since then, but I cannot forget the effect that Georgian speech had on me — every word was like a shot from an automatic weapon. The situation was terrible. Throughout this state of affairs there were so many unbearable moments that I am now amazed how we got through it all.

Already after the exchange we got to know what had happened in Atara: old Panta Kvitsinia, a disabled veteran of World War II, along with his wife Taliko, had been shot by the Georgians; Uncle Alyosha

Kvitsinia, also a disabled World War II veteran, had been held hostage for several months and periodically stood up against a wall; we learnt about many other events which were told about by our fellow-villagers.

Then, in June, we walked via Chlou to Tkvarchal. Many recall this route as one of horror, but for me it was the greatest happiness. I remember how I felt enormous happiness when I saw our men in one of the headquarters and heard Abkhaz being spoken. I was impressed by their spirit and confidence in victory.

They looked at us as at resurrected souls — after all, many of them had already buried us in their minds. I cannot offend God, for he did, after all, keep us alive in these situations, from which there seemed to be no way out.

Until the summer we stayed in Tkvarchal, from where we were taken by the vans in which peacekeepers brought humanitarian aid to the Tkvarchalans. Having reached Sukhum, we were transported from there to Pitsunda by barges.

I think that mother was already not feeling well, and, although she did not say anything to us, she began to make hospital-visits. Our relatives helped to take her to Moscow, where a diagnosis was made and an operation in the cancer-centre speedily carried out. Of course, the impetus for this terrible disease was all those terrible events that she experienced during the war. A few years later she passed away.

While still in hospital in Moscow, we learned that Abkhazia had been victorious and liberated from the invaders. We were so happy, and mother even said that she might not have survived but for our victory. I am convinced that we were saved by the fact that we did not understand the Georgian language and did not realise the danger that threatened us directly at the moment these events were taking place.

In our house not even baby-pictures survived — it is as if we have no past. It is only now that we are able to tell the story, to remember the events, but, when we were in captivity, we reached such a pitch of desperation that we had no wish to live. But I recall the joy we felt when the Abkhazian army's offensives began in January and March. The war, in general, followed in our footsteps; I even remember two occasions when, exhausted, in Tkvarchal, we went to stay with relatives, and later, when they had already got us out, we went for passports to Gudauta, and on both occasions we came under gunfire. And this was where there was supposed to have been no military activity.

On events in the occupied village of Gumista

Narrated by Andronik Ervandovich Bostandzhan

Two weeks after the start of the war, on 29 August, on Saturday night we went to bed. I was awakened by a loud smash; glass was being hit, the door was being smashed in, there was shouting, there was noise. A tank is standing in the yard. They drove us to where the children's hospital was, over the Red Bridge, where they had some sort of division. We were kept on the third floor. They said that we were hiding Abkhazians. With me they spoke Armenian. There was another Abkhazian, Leonid Aiba; there was also there a Russian with his son. They came at night with their torments. Then they came and told us to get ready, as we we're going to Agwdzera. They took us to the street, and we sat under the bridge, under the overpass, waiting for the car. But there was no car. They took us back and shut us in. They told us not to go out from there and that they'd soon be back. That was all there was to it. No sight or sound of them. They simply disappeared altogether...

Already the next day; lunchtime. The windows are barred; it's hot. One of them comes. "I," he said, "do not understand why you're here." We answer: "We do not know. Yesterday in the evening they shut us in, saying they'd come." He said that they were bandits, but he was an Afghan war veteran. And he released us saying that we should go home." I said: "How shall I go home without papers, at the first turning I'll get caught and killed?" They had our documents on the third floor. We went to look for them, but there was nothing there. He wrote a note and said: "If you get caught, you'll be brought here."

In a word, they put me in a car, set off for the town, and took me to the market. Having returned home, I told my lot that we should go, and we left.

A house away, there lived my father's sister and her husband. Her husband was already 80 years-old. He was just machine-gunned for no reason at all. And before that, Grandma had died in a shelling; their names were Arut and Verzhik Tomasian. Our Taniel (his burned down house is next door) was killed in the basement; his head was smashed to pieces, and then his body was set on fire together with the house. Neighbours saw this, extinguished the fire and buried him. When the Bostandzhan were killed, I was with the Georgians. Taniel knew who was responsible for this deed, and even told the neighbours that if they

killed him, it would be this person. My brother Ardash says that he knows this guy but that he died in the war.

On developments in the occupied village of Gumista

Narrated by Misak Kjulian, worker at the TV-centre, participant in the Patriotic War of 1992-93

Here's what I saw from the first day.

On 14 August, I was working my shift at the TV-centre. I came off duty on the morning of the 14th and went home. Then I went down to the river, thinking I'd bathe and then come home. I went down to the river and looked around — a helicopter was flying over the town from the Sukhum side and from below, from the railway-bridge, set off upwards along the river, suddenly opening fire. The place was full of people, families and children. Everyone was bathing. And I'm thinking: "What an idiot to be frightening folk by shooting blanks!" But no! He's firing live rounds. He flew over my head at a height of maybe 50 metres. Could it really be so?! He made a second circle, firing again. I'm thinking that something's not right. So, I came home quickly and there heard Ardzinba's announcement on the television. I understood that the war had begun.

During the first days were still in a state of confusion, not knowing what would be, how it would be, to what extent all this was serious. We thought that this was just an incident, as had happened in 1989 (then too there had been skirmishes), and that after a day or two perhaps some peaceful solution would be found and everything would calm down. But, no, matters did not end in this way.

After some days — this would already be the 18th — when they had taken Sukhum, I was at home. When helicopters flew in and dropped several bombs over the universal store, they landed on a nine-floor building. And then our Abkhazian fighting formations withdrew, crossing the river Gumista. I was at home not knowing what to do. After some days, my son and I went to Achandara, where an Abkhazian regiment had been formed. I well remember how people from the village of Gumista travelled on whatever lorry they could get on. At that moment, the river was still not blocked. From the village of Gumista 200 people gathered together and said: "Give us weapons. We are going to defend Abkhazia; we'll defend Sukhum in the first instance." Topolian, Voronov and Natella Akaba arrived there. Topolian, I recall, said: "Go away, there are no weapons. There are so many of you gathered together here that you'll simply become cannon-fodder, having nothing to fight with." This was the 19 August.

Then we went home. What to do? I had already then sent my family to Russia and myself stayed at home. I was then 54. The children I had dispatched earlier, but my wife stayed here. On 25 October I wanted to send her off on a fishing boat. Several of our neighbours, women included, gathered there; they had paid their last money to send them to Russia. They went and were already seated on board, and I returned home unworried. All of a sudden at night they came and told me that my wife was in hospital, wounded. I was in a state of shock. After all, I'd sent her off, and the ship had, I supposed, left Majak. And, all of a sudden, they are here!

In the morning I went straight to the hospital. It turned out that, when they were sitting on the vessel, it left its moorings — they were Georgian vessels; they were moving further away from the shore and then setting sail, and at this moment from behind another Georgian vessel caught them up and directly opened fire on it. Then and there several people perished, and my wife took fourteen fragments in her back. I suppose that all the mafia-groups there didn't engage in the share-out, the commander of our fishing-boat not sharing with the rest, and they caught him up and shot at him resulting in his being forced to return. And then we dispatched her all the same once more.

When the Georgians occupied the village after 20 August, they began robbing and killing — it was simply horrible. I'm sitting here looking out: a group of automated machine-gunners is moving out from here. Well, I'm thinking, best-case scenario is that they are beaten up, worst-case scenario is that they're killed, because they are not human. I even wrote about this in one story. We were all simply at a loss to explain why they were behaving so inhumanely, so brutally, especially towards peaceful people, old folk, women. Opposite lived uncle Ardash, mother's brother, and uncle Khachik. The former was 72 years-old, the latter 85. They were people who had lived through the Great Patriotic War and seen many things, and now these bastards aged between 20 and 30, so-called national guardsmen, were beating with rifle-butts these old people — it was simply awful. They just beat and mocked them because they did not belong to the so-called elite Georgian nationality, because they were Armenians who had joined the Abkhazians. Already in the beginning how many times I was asked: "Why are you on the side of the Abkhazians?" I

said: "We are on the side of the Abkhazians not because they are smarter and more beautiful, but because their fight is just."

Defending this just cause, we automatically found ourselves on the same side of the barricades as the Abkhazians, because we saw what the Georgians were doing. In my house were living 24 people, so-called Georgian national guardsmen. They came and saw that this house was to their liking and decided to make it their headquarters, in the sense that they would rob it and then move on to another house. They came, and one of them told me: "I," he said, "was in prison serving a 12 year-year sentence. The investigator called those of us serving 10 years and above (well, it was for the most serious crimes, of course, that such terms are imposed) one by one into his office and said: 'Go to Abkhazia, for 2-3 months, to fight. What you plunder will be your reward, and after 2-3 months you will receive a full amnesty, or sit out the entire term from start to finish.' We all thought there was no longer any Abkhazia and that it was all ours. I decided to take my chance, go and, if I came out alive, I'd straightaway find myself a free man." He was drunk when he laid all this out for me. Well, I imagine they didn't get out — they got out in the short term, but then they were put back inside again.

I am alone in the house, when Georgian neighbours come beating on the door. I say: "What are you doing? I live here, I'm the owner of the house; one can't behave like this." And their response is: "Now all is ours." I said: "War is war, politicians make it. See to it that later we're not ashamed to look one another in the eye." Before the war, we valued the neighbourhood as something very sacred; we went to funerals and would help each other, too, in marking weddings. But this war demonstrated by their deeds who was who; what they had in the depths of their soul they poured out, and it appeared that they had no respect for the neighbourhood. They pointed out neighbours; hanging lights on our street, they told the guardsmen: "Beneath the lights live rich Armenians — it's possible to commit robbery there, but not above, for there Mingrelians are living." They even conducted them specifically pointing out the houses. Here there lived among us one Ambartsumian, dental prosthetist. They told them that he was a dentist in whose place there might be gold. And so, the guards taunted him and cut his hands. After the war, we found many of our things in our neighbours' homes. If they had not plundered them, by what means could they have ended up with them? There were also Mingrelians who provided help. Grisha Kurdulava's family was decent both before the war and during the war, but then, of course, they all left.

Sejran Ichmelian, resident of the village of Gumista, participant in the Patriotic War of the People of Abkhazia 1992-1993

If possible, I'll add something. When we came here, we lived with a woman who died recently. She told us that the son of this Grisha worked for a bread-delivery firm. He used to secrete bread and distribute it amongst neighbours so that they wouldn't die of hunger. I personally later helped him (Grisha), and the woman was still with them — I helped them with documents for crossing into Georgia.

Misak Kjulian

Those who were off their shifts, went around with metal rods looking for what was buried and hidden where. We had a kitten; they stepped on it and squashed it. I decided to bury it so that it would not smell. I'm looking and see that the next day they dug it up — they saw that maybe I had hidden something. Then I once again buried it, and they dug it up again. I then stopped burying it.

In the morning one day I came back dirty — it was winter. They screamed at me: "Come in, Uncle Misha!" I said: "My feet are dirty." And they said: "Never mind, come in." (They were inviting me into my own house.) Maybe it's not worth relating such an unpleasant experience, but I'll tell it anyway. Their commander was living in the house of uncle Khachik. He used to tell me all the time that, if there were any problems, I was to tell him, and he would put things right. One day I come and see they have been performing their necessary bodily functions all over the house — there is a rank stench. And they themselves were living here. Those who were living in my house had a certain Gia as their chief. I said: "Gia, may I have a moment?" "Tell me," he said, "Uncle Misha, what's happened?" He was a young man of 30, approximately. I took him there. "Look." I said: "Our five-year-old would not do this." "Now, I must clarify," he said, "who is responsible." He went inside, talked, and came out. "Uncle Misha, it's not our soldiers." I said: "Can it actually be that Abkhazians crossed over the river at night and surrounded you here?" Before this, Gia had said: "Uncle Misha, our Kakha is a university student; Murman is a graduate of the Institute; there is no-one here without an education — all the scientific council of Georgia is here." After this incident, I said: "Gia, something weird seems to be happening — given such a high level of

learning, you have such a low level of culture." After this, one of the guardsmen at our next meeting said: "Uncle Misha, what are the problems?" I said: "No problems, only a suggestion, Bat'ono Nugzar. I propose establishing in the yard a sentry-post and posting a sentry." He wondered why. I said: "The soldiers at night are afraid to go to the toilet, and so let them be accompanied by the sentry." He grabbed at his belly and began to split his sides laughing.

There was one Sergo Kavtaradze from Tbilisi. He came one day. I was sitting to the side, and they were cleaning weapons. Passing by, he struck me on the back with his rifle-butt. "What a coward!" he said. "Are you afraid, then?" I said: "Sure, I'm afraid — you all have guns, and I have not." "I am not afraid even without weapons," he said. I thought: "You bastard. I will tell you everything I'm thinking about you and about you all." I said: "There at the back of our road is a field that leads right up to the river. If you're such a hero, let's go out and go to the river; you'll only be going next to me." All were laughing, and he hit me again, started swearing and left. Such heroes were they.

Behind my house, 50 metres away is my sister's house. When they occupied my house, I went to live at my sister's place. Just before the New Year — it was December 28 — there came the latest round of threats and humiliations. They came, saying: "We are going to shoot you, wipe out all of you, and cleanse Gumista of all Armenians" and left. My sister was crying: "Brother, go away, they will kill you; at the New Year they'll come and get drunk." Okay." I said. "I'll go, but you're not to stay at home at New Year." On 29 December I left in the morning; it was snowing very heavily. I was thinking of going to my wife's relatives in Macharka. I said to my sister: "I am going to the market, if there's a bus; if not, I'll come back." I went there and stayed there; the New Year passed. On 2 January, I thought I'd go to Gumista — something was drawing me here. I wasn't able to do so on the 1st, but on the 2nd I got up early in the morning and said: "I'm going to Gumista." I reached Gumista from Macharka by foot. It was dangerous to travel by car, as there were Georgians there, all armed. I took a look: there was a line of burnt out houses. I looked and saw that the roof of our house was visible and thought: "Thank God, not all the houses have been burnt!" I'm looking and met a woman called Varsenik. I said: "Varsenik, I haven't been here for a few days; how are you all here, alive and well?" She answered: "Weren't you at home? this morning they shot your sister. In the yard of your house they killed your sister". Why did they kill her? She went (as she had a few chickens left) to feed her chickens, and, coming back, she decided to pass by my house. Something was being broken up above. Your sister asked what they were doing, saying that there was nothing to loot. For uttering these words they shot her point-blank. They shot from the balcony, and she was standing in front of my house. Then the neighbours were discussing it, and there on the road was heard the scream of a woman. She ran and fell on the snow. Uncle and aunt took her to the hospital; all her life, since the foundation of the Republican Hospital in 1964, she had worked there as a nurse. We buried her here in the garden, for there was no other way, there being nowhere to go. She was buried on 4 January...

Among them were also such, for example, there was one lad, who would take off his shoes, go up the iron staircase rises and say: "Uncle Misha, is it possible to play the piano?" We had a new piano standing upstairs, and he would come and play; I believe that he even studied at the music school. He also had a friend — there were some decent ones among them. Before leaving, when on 29 December I set off from here, in a flash, when I met them separately here, I urged them to look after my sister: "You should know, guys, that I'm leaving; my sister is staying here. I beg of you, keep an eye on her, as she is an old woman; don't abuse her." "Uncle Misha, we'd be happy to help, but we cannot help. If we take that position, our very own people are going to shoot us in the back' they will kill us if they find out that we are protecting Armenians." And then, when they came to the funeral, they said "We could not do anything; it was not within our power, for we too would have been killed." And after the funeral, I went to Macharka. I was put on a plane from there, and I was helped by Svans (my cousin had baptised their children); they put me on a plane to Adler, and from Adler I went to Gagra, where I immediately joined the Armenian battalion. And then I was with the fighters as far as the Ingur.

At the beginning, one group was living with me; then they left and were replaced by another group. The second group was smaller, I suppose 17 or 18 people. When they first got here, they knew nothing. The senior member of the group comes and asks me, how it is here, what's going on here, whether there's killing and shooting here. I said that Georgian soldiers were being killed every day. And I asked them why they had come here. "We were told" he said "there were some police-functions that we should perform, restore order to prevent people being robbed and killed, so that people might live in peace." This was in November 1992. "Over there," I said, "snipers are positioned and are taking out Georgian soldiers." They all gathered together and held a discussion in whispers. "We've been deceived," one said. "We shall not stay here," and they left.

No house was left intact — the houses were looted, or, in the worst case, burnt.

The Bostandzhans, brother and sister, were killed; he was 80 years-old. This was not an army but a gang of bandits. They emptied all the prisons in Tbilisi, dressed them in military uniform, armed to the teeth and sent them off to Abkhazia. One said: "If they cross the river, tomorrow I'll be in Tbilisi." Such were the heroes that were discovered. "I'm running away immediately," he said. "They won't catch me." Such were their warriors.

An interesting case was that of Setrak Zadikian. He worked as a navigator at our airport. He died after the war. They came and occupied his house. His brother had daughters in the house next door. "All these girls belong to us, bring them here," they said to him. He says: "I'll bring them now." He had a "little lemon" [grenade], took it, released the pin, threw it and blew up his house — for this these warriors all perished, and Setrak left here. This was sometime in October.

They humiliated women however they could. There was Aunt Martha, an 80 year-old woman; they dragged her off by the hair. I heard gunshots and a woman's scream. Back then, my sister was still alive. I watched and saw them kill a dog, saying to a woman that they would kill her. I said: "Merab, what's happened, what has this woman done?" "She," he said, "when she comes here, one of ours gets killed — she has the evil eye." We began to calm them down. "I," he said, "killed the dog in vain; I should have killed her." I said: "She will not come any more." He said, "May she appear no more in her own home!" ...

Guys from the New District then abused our lot and beat them with rifle-butts. My neighbours told the story: "We are standing in a queue to buy bread. They came and checked all those in the queue, beat us with rifle butts, saying we should go, as there was no bread for us, and, the next day, the same thing."

*On events in the occupied town of Ochamchira
Narrated by Shamil Chichikovich Gamisonia*

On the second or third day of the war, I don't recall, after lunch, our neighbour fetched an Ikarus. He lived next door, fetched the bus, parked it and said: "Come on, all of you gather together; while the road is open, we can reach Merkula." He was from Merkula. He gathered us all together and filled the vehicle to bursting. Ilya Nikolaevich Zarandia perished fighting, a Hero of Abkhazia.

Out of the neighbours, only one was left, Chichba, with his wife (today he is no longer with us). He and I wanted to get out the following day, but the road was already closed. So, we were thinking — soon it would all be over.

Then, when they had driven the residents of Kochara out from there and they all turned up here, they started to occupy the houses; if there were people in them, they expelled them. They were in uniform. They came to me too. "This house is ours; get out!" they said. But where was I to go? I went next door to the neighbour's, Ivan (Vanya) Lamshatsovich Tsvizhba and his wife. Elderly folk, they gave me shelter. He said that we'd live together as far as possible. For eleven days the people of Kochara found themselves here — they brought stolen property and traded it. Vanya and I decided to see what was happening in my house. There was nobody there, and Vanya left, whilst I stayed behind. After an hour, someone arrived carrying an automatic weapon. "Where did you appear from? You are not the owner. Go and get permission from the commandant's office." And I left. I was still at home when two young men arrived. "Come on, let's shoot him!" said one. "Oh, it'll make a noise," said the other. They took me upstairs, pointing the rifle at me. I took hold of the barrel and turned it upwards to one side, and they pulled the trigger. "Give us money!" they said. As if I had any money to give! "20 thousand!" they said. Where should I have money like that from? They went down to ten thousand. I didn't have even ten. OK, a neighbour had money — he had a son in Moscow; he gave me ten thousand. A shot rang out; everyone thought they'd killed me. They left saying they'd return in the evening. And they did indeed come in the evening, took the money and left. That's how they treated people and robbed them.

I again found myself with Vanya Tsvizhba.

This, I suppose, must have been the end of November. There was frost on the ground. This old man and I got up, and we see that the house is surrounded. They seized us. True, they let him go. Vanya was an old man. He had an Abkhazian surname, whereas mine was Mingrelian. As for me, they imprisoned me for eleven nights. "So, how did you become an Abkhazian? You don't want the Mingrelians; you don't want the Georgians — that's why we'll shoot you," they said. What could one do? "Go ahead and shoot," I said. Such was my imprisonment of eleven days. Then I was freed in a prisoner-exchange. They came from Kwitol. The two of us (myself and Shalodia Pshelia) were exchanged for twenty persons, residents of Kwitol.

They behaved very badly here in the neighbourhood. So, next door here are the Amichba family — wife, husband, grandmother and another neighbour, who was also an old lady. She came to them at night as she was afraid to spend the night alone at home. They shot her husband. So, four persons were in the house when they came and shot all four. If one is fighting, that is one thing, but peaceful people who are old — why shoot them? This was somewhere around October-November.

The first night they appeared here, they killed one of our neighbours. Why did they kill him? He had a nice Volga car. He was an Armenian, Kamo Karapetovich Sarebikian. They took him before the eyes of his family. They told him to start the car. Drove off with him, shot him and they took the car. He also lived on Komsomol street. He was a good builder.

A bit further on lived the Gvaramias (Abkhazians), father and son — they killed them. Then the Samushias (Mingrelians), husband and wife; they killed them both and even burnt them. Turks lived next door, and they killed them too and also torched the house. That very evening, in my estimation, they killed twelve persons. This was on the first day of the war or on the following day. The people were innocent. So what for? Samushia's wife was a beauty. People came in military uniform. They started raping the wife and then savagely killed her along with her husband. They took nothing but burnt them together with the house.

None of the neighbours in our row came to help; they only rejoiced. We had a Turk with us, Viktor Kiazimovich Selim, who also stayed, as he couldn't go anywhere. On the third or fourth day they came for him, killed him, chopped his head in two, and tossed it away. Then, somewhere around a week or more later, it was found a long way from here, on the railway-crossing.

For them it made no difference who you were — they were after money and gold...

This happened on the second or third day. Margania, an Abkhazian, an old man, his house was next door. They took him in front of his house on the street, sat him down and told him to tell them what he knew. But what to tell? So, they shot him. His poor wife, fearing to sleep alone at home, used to go to her Amichba neighbours, where later in their house she perished together with them when they came and shot everyone who was there. Kocharans took up residence in their house. Margania's house stands to this day abandoned. The Kocharans behaved disgracefully here — they knew in advance that there would be a war.

Raisa Gamsaratovna Toria, 73, Abkhazian woman, visiting-nurse, resident of the village of Tamsh
Zaur Nikolaevich Mania, 69, Georgian, resident of the village of Tamsh

Narrated by Anzhela Zaurovna Mania - daughter

My mother, Raisa Gamsaratovna Toria, 73, worked as a visiting-nurse in the Tamsh and Gulripsh hospitals. She was at home together with her husband, my father, Zaur Nikolaevich Mania, in the village of Tamsh.

My brother, Murtaz Mania, a Georgian, had been fighting on the Abkhazian side, in Aka Ardzinba's group.

And it just so happened that, prisoners-of-war were shown on TV, and Murtaz was amongst them. He had been taken prisoner as follows. He had lost consciousness during battle and lay for three days among the dead, until the Krishna-ites came across him — somehow or other, they managed to smoke out the living. Then, over a month, they nursed him back to life.

And then, for heaven's sake, Georgian guardsmen came to the house of my parents with the words: "Your son's been shooting at us."

They drove up in an orange-coloured Zhiguli. We (that's to say myself and my husband, Zaur Anchabadze) could see how the car drove up to the house, since we had just come out of my parent's house and did not have time to get very far, and the road to the house and the gates were still visible.

They maimed my father, shooting him in the legs — after the war, he first had one leg amputated and then the second also. In front of my father's eyes, they got hold of my mother, tied her to a chair. Removing the seat and leaving only the rim, they forced her to sit on it, sealed her mouth with sellotape, and beneath the stool placed a burning lamp. Mother began to burn. Father cried out, but no-one came to help. When her face already began to burn, mother let out such a scream from pain and torment that the tape split, and she gave them a sign that she would reveal the place where the money and gold were concealed, which is what they were after. They untied her. And, while they were busy with the robbery, mother and father, out of fear and sheer terror managed to overcome their pain and escaped from the house, but not one of their

neighbours took them in. They lived alongside Georgian neighbours, but not one interceded on their behalf. Before my parents' very eyes our house began to burn — it was totally burnt down and has to this day not been rebuilt. Hiding in others' gardens, my parents saved themselves and fled to the village of Mukhuri. This was at the end of autumn 1992, and the very day before all the bridges had been blown up.

On events in the occupied town of Ochamchira

Narrated by Otar Anchabadze

Members of the Mkhedrioni arrived. They came in two cars; there were seven of them. They went into every house in our street (formerly Komsomol street) one after the other. Our neighbour, Ilya Zarandia, whom everyone knew as Basmach, was on the eastern front, and they found out that he had been there the previous night. He had actually been there and not only that night - he used to gather data and take cigarettes and provisions for his men.

They burst into homes on the pretext of searching for partisans, but in truth they had but one aim — to rob. Making out that they were in search of partisans, they would turn over the whole house.

They came to us around 6 am. This happened at the beginning of October 1992. At home, apart from myself, were my pregnant wife, Anzhela Mania, and two young children, one aged four, the other aged two. We were still asleep. They at once started shooting at the house, grabbed hold of me, began beating me, saying: "Why aren't you fighting? You are a Georgian; you are collaborating with the Abkhazians. Where are you hiding the partisan Basmach?!" They threatened me and shot at my legs. They shot at the children and my wife...and then told them to clear off and that they were going to kill me. My wife fled with the children to the neighbours... and hid there. They jeered at us... and robbed us....

After this, we left. At first we hid with Basmach. We were in Tamsh with my wife's parents, and then we moved to Mukhuri, finally getting to the Vladimir District together with my wife's parents, who were subjected to dreadful torture.