

GEORGIA

sakartvelo

Friday, December 15--Sunday, December 24, 2000

Visit #21

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-Graduate of our program who has just returned to Georgia

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<http://www.emory.edu/MED/EXCHANGE/HKW/>

Friday, December 15, 2000

Off to New York and then an uneventful flight to Moscow. Arrived at noon on Saturday. Coming off plane met Trish Putnam, a former house officer, and her husband. She is a general internist and he is a gastroenterologist, in Griffin, Georgia. Coming to Kirov to adopt a two year old boy, adding to their three girls. Their first time over here. I was glad to hear they would be escorted from the Moscow throughout their stay. Even after multiple visits over here I would not like to be alone in Moscow. The impact of Moscow is that of immense power that might lash out uncontrollably and unaccountably at any moment--like a gigantic, untamed gorilla.

Saturday, December 16, 2000

Met by my friend Levan Vasadze. He has just been promoted to first vice president of Sistema, a Russian holding company with around \$16 billion assets: owns Moscow telecom, Intourist, banks, radios, insurance companies, etc. . There is a chairman, president, and then two vice presidents, then the heads of about sixteen operating divisions. His promotion went into effect just a few days ago, and yesterday one of the senior staff members of the infrastructure group came into his office and asked him what kind of nuts did he want placed on his desk each day? Entirely serious. Confined to the four senior officers, and I gather the only visible sign of rank of that level.

In the late afternoon we wandered down to the Kremlin and ate in the restaurant of the Metropol Hotel. Perhaps the most beautiful restaurant I have ever been in. Large, beautifully appointed room, with a domed glass ceiling. Designed by Eiffel, of Eiffel tower fame. Food of comparable quality. Visited GUM department store, one of my favorites in Moscow. Colorfully decorated for the holiday season, with hordes of prosperous looking shoppers. Then a brief walk around Red Square, cut short by gently falling snow.

Back and collapse in bed.

Sunday, December 17, 2000

Awakened by the sound of the driver ringing the entrance telephone, fourteen hours after going to bed! Couldn't believe it. Usually six hours. Outside Moscow had been covered by a blanket of soft snow overnight, about two inches. Across the street a lone lady was scattering salt along the sidewalk. The streets supernaturally quiet and desolate, for Moscow. All the Muscovites still abed. To Vnukovo airport and a good two hour trip to Tbilisi. New Boeing 737-500 belonging to Georgian Airlines. Went to VIP at Vnukovo, with someone from Intourist doing all the work of passports and baggage, then waiting for departure in a well-appointed lounge with tea and caviar. I scrounged up a report of my first visit over here, August 1992. Just like this time, I arrived in Moscow at noon, and later that same day flew to Tbilisi:

At about 6 p.m. we went to one of the domestic airports (Vnukovo Airport) for an Aeroflot flight of about two and one-half hours to Tbilisi. The two flights we had to and from Tbilisi on Aeroflot were among the more redoubtable aspects of our trip. There are no computers listing the passengers: 300 people line up and negotiate with a clerk wielding sheets of paper as to whether or not they are listed on the passenger manifest. We finally got on. We were taken out to the plane, a three-engine jet that resembles a 737. There were 300 seats on the plane; there were about 310 people and a dog who got

on. We could tell immediately soap and water were in short supply in Russia. Since we were "VIPs" we were put on last. This has an advantage: we only had to wait 45 minutes before take-off, in a cabin that approached 109° (not only does your shirt get wringing wet--so do your pants!). The downside: the only seats available then are the middle ones. Seat belts are never used by the Russians; after a 30 minute struggle one can usually be retrieved from beneath the seat. The seat in front invariably has a broken back, and pushes up against your face.

On the other hand, a 1100 mile journey only takes two and one-half hours, while the train--which goes directly through the zone of guerilla warfare in Georgia--takes a day or more.

We arrived at Tbilisi around 11 p.m., and were met by the Minister of Health and his entourage. We were put into two long black limousines, just like you saw Brezhnev and the like riding in on the news, and taken to the dacha reserved previously for visiting Communist leaders such as Gorbachev. This is a large airy building that is quite comfortable. Two people share a suite with two bedrooms (small short beds) and a large conference room; the furniture is elegant.

At midnight we sat down to a typical Georgian meal that lasted until about 3 a.m. We gather this is invariable when guests arrive.

Met at the airport by a host of longstanding friends: Archil Kobaladze, Giorgi Turkia, Paata and Giorgi Kervalishvili. To Betsy's Hotel on Gogebashvili St. Betsy as usual was completely full of herself. She has recently gotten into going to the Turkish port of Bodrum on weekends. She is in the process of buying a yacht (\$400,000), which she will lease to charters. Expounds at length about the beauty of the Turkish coast, which she supports with beautiful books. Sooner or later when I'm over here I shall go over there for a long weekend. To Archil's home for a light dinner. Then to bed, to awaken at usual at 3 a.m. for a couple of hours. Melatonin isn't working.

Monday, December 18, 2000

Breakfast with Miles from London, who supplies furniture to expatriates. The oil pipeline that is being planned is bringing him a lot of business. And Paul, Irish now from London, who is working on privatization of various components of the energy sector. Most places in Tbilisi now have electricity two hours in the morning and two hours at night. Just as bad as it was in 1992 and 1993. Corruption and an inability of the government to get its act together. A few weeks ago there was a big demonstration in the streets protesting the electricity situation.

George Keshlava came by. Trying to get into a U.S. residency program. We discussed him surveying the programs and specialties that did not fill last year and selectively applying. E.g., we think family practice and radiation oncology might be two good possibilities. Costs \$60 per specialty per ten programs, which limits him.

Irakli Khulordova dropped by. He is a third year resident with us, going into Infectious Diseases at Vanderbilt next year. Consistently scores in the 99th percentile on his internal medicine in-service examinations. Bright and able. His mother had a perforated bowel over here ten days ago, and died twelve hours before he was able to reach her. Father a retired geologist, no other children, obviously going to have a difficult time. We talked about him returning here in three years. "I will come back and see if I can practice what I have learned. If so, I will stay. If I cannot,

then I will leave after my obligatory two years.”

He and I discussed the state of medicine over here, and the crying need for a modern Western hospital. He is being asked to see patients. E.g., saw a patient with Graves diseases who had been treated with thyroid hormone, and almost went into thyrotoxic crisis! Seeing another patient this morning, a child said to have idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura, and who has been kept on 60 mgm of prednisone for a very long time. ITP often self-limited in children, and in addition platelet counts over here are notoriously unreliable.

Just before I left Atlanta I got the following email from Koba, who has just finished his three years in our program of general internal medicine. Another one who consistently scored in the 90's on his examinations, and who did quite well on his American Board of Internal Medicine examination in September of this year. His email:

Date: Fri, 8 Dec 2000 13:32:43 +0300
From: MERMISI <mermisi@ti.net.ge>
To: kwalk04@emory.edu
Subject: To Dr Walker

Hello Dr Walker, how are you doing. I hope you are in good health. This is Koba Lomashvili sending this mail from Georgia. Dr. Walker-thank you for everything whatever you have done for me during all years of my residency at Emory University. I learned so much at emory, I can say that everything I know, almost all my knowledge of medicine I acquired in the USA, because of all of you at Emory.

I would like to tell you about me and my future plans hoping to hear from you in near future. Right now I am staying in Georgia and probably will spend couple more months here. I live in city of Rustavi and situation there almost desperate. There is no electricity, no running water in the city with population of 150.000. Hospitals are in deep necessity, no medications, no facilities, and in addition, because of huge unemployment people aren't capable to pay for medications, doctors salary are miserable.

I am seeing patients in the city but there is not much I can do for them. As you know, educational level of most Georgian doctors is so low, they even don't know how to manage HTN or Diabetes, and there is huge work to be done everywhere, but nobody seems to be interested in progress and improvement of medical care. People struggling to feed their families and this is first priority and there is no money for real medicine. Situation is so bad, it would be difficult even to imagine 15 years ago. Most of men drink and smoke because of depression and many of them commit suicide.

Every Georgians dream is to escape, trying find jobs in Russia, Europe or in the USA, but most of them cannot get visas to reach the USA. I love my country and I want to stay in Georgia more than anything, but unfortunately there is no place here for hard working people. Mafia penetrates all aspects of life here and it seems to me that there is no way out. If I stay here, i will either go crazy or get mad. If i get visa, i will go to the USA for research position, that was my dream for long time. If not-to Europe or Arabia.

I don't want finish this letter in pessimistic mood, I think man can create his own fate with god's help and I always stay optimistic.

Dr. Walker, if you are in Georgia in next three-four months, please send me E-mail and I will meet you here and we can have a lunch with my sister's family who lives in Tbilisi.

Sincerely Yours

Koba Lomashvili

Every time I come here I promise myself I will devote myself to trying to find money to build a modern hospital, that people like Koba and Irakli can practice in, and that will be the base for establishing modern medicine in Georgia. The Georgian government doesn't have the money; US AID is completely focused on short term projects, at least in health care; the World Bank is centered on the need of barefoot people in the villages. A really difficult situation. We have now trained about thirty Georgian physicians like Koba and Irakli. The window of opportunity for Georgia for them to return is limited. I estimate at the most we have five years to get a hospital in place. If not, there is a good chance they will be forever lost to Georgia.

I found Georgia this visit to be in a state of disquiet. Electricity only 2-3 hours in the morning and the same at night. Contentious protests that blocked some streets some weeks ago about the electricity. Pensions unpaid for several months. Salaries, which probably average \$20 or less a month, are paid very late or not at all. People use impoverishment strategies in order to come up with a little money to provide food and heat. Widely held belief that the government has demonstrated itself incapable of reforming the country, diminishing corruption and bringing about any sort of market reform. Most insiders and outsiders agree that there was a precipitous decline from 1992 to 1995 or thereabouts, following by three years of hopefulness and an increase in indices of economic health such as GNP, followed in the last two years by either a plateau, or more recently, a regression. The birth rate is about 1.2. There are five million Georgians in Georgia, and their number is steadily shrinking. Perhaps about four million or less in the rest of the world. A two-fold decrease in the birth rate since 1987. In 1987 there were 100,000 births, with 58,000 in 1999, and 21,000 reported abortions in 1999.

A pervasive feeling that things are not going well, with no sign of improvement on the horizon. A palpable feeling I have been encountering for the last year.

Over to the National Information Learning Centre (NILC) to answer email. Lunch with Archil and Zviad. A lady from the Soros Open Society of London came over with Irina Chanturishvili to look at the NILC's distance learning setup. Wants to use distance learning for librarians in Georgia.

A chance meeting with Betsy, of Betsy's Hotel. Leaving tomorrow to go to Turkey then Washington for her usual two to three month winter stay. She has become infatuated with a Turkish port city, Bodrum. She flies there almost every weekend. About to buy a yacht that will accommodate nine or so couples for one week cruises. Gave me a book about the Turkish yachting harbors, most of which, like Bodrum, reek with ancient Greek history. Pictures were beautiful. Perhaps I'll take a cruise on her yacht sometime. I later discovered the staff

considerably worried about her venture. Yachts don't come cheap, and they have concerns about the people with whom Betsy is dealing.

To dinner with Archil at Stone's, a restaurant that serves small pieces of raw meat and a hot stone with which to cook them. No other people in the restaurant. Archil tells me expatriates have been advised to stay inside at night because of a couple of episodes involving Chechens. Archil has given up beef with the advent of Mad Cow Disease. I was reminded of the visit to Emory some years ago by Carlton Gadjusek, who won the Nobel prize for discovering the infectiousness of kuru in New Guinea. He remarked then, ten plus years ago, that the solution of the transmission of Creutzfeldt-Jakob and bovine spongiform encephalopathy (Mad Cow) would yield enormous benefits to science. Because the transmission is so bizarre--sporadic seemingly in many cases, but apparently (this word used advisedly) hereditary or vertically in others.

Long conversation at Archil's with him and his wife, joined later by Levan Kacharava. Sergo, Archil's son, is a freshman in college now at Emory. Showing great promise. Smart, charming, hard worker, outstanding grades.

To bed only to awaken at 3 a.m. and unable to go back to sleep, due to jet lag. Finished reading a great book, *Fat Man in a Middle Seat* by the reporter Jack Germond. Title refers to many rides in the middle seat of the coach class in airlines going to cover stories. A lot of really funny stories. E.g., a politician who had been manipulated by another one was asked if he had been manipulated. "Manipulated hell," he said, "I was fondled!" Or another one: "As much chance as a duck making love to a football." A lot of insight about politicians, politics and the U.S.

Tuesday, December 19, 2000

Slept late, went to Turkish bath with Levan Kacharava. The mistress of the establishment is Gulo, a generous lady of mixed ethnic heritage, with a contagious gusto for life. The bath from the outside is dome-shaped. Inside are five different compartments, each completely private. Each compartment has an outer room for undressing and for drinking Turkish tea, having caviar and the like, if desired. One circular vent to the outside, at the very top, about one foot in diameter. Levan pointed out a grill that had been added to it: young Tbilisi lads would lower a cat through the opening, who would grab the clothes on the table, and then be lifted out with them, leaving the bathers with no clothes. Then the bath itself. A large room, very high ceiling. Two showers to the left. Two slabs, much like old mortuary slabs, one on each side. In the back is the bath. Hot spring water continually entering it. Intensely hot water, reminding me of Japanese baths back when I took "R and R" in Japan during the Vietnam war. Off to the side a sauna. The bath begins with a rub down, using a hard sponge, which strips at least one layer of epidermis. Followed by being lathered with a very foamy lather, accompanied by a vigorous rub down. At one point the masseur walks up and down your back bone and legs. Hedonism at its best.

Lunch, then to the NILC to answer emails the rest of the afternoon. Dinner this evening with Zviad at Stones. Then out drinking and talking with Levan. He is struggling with a big deal, involving Borjomi mineral water, that is trying to go sour. Borjomi (**borJomi**) comes from springs in the mountains, and has a high salt content. Said to be Stalin's favorite. Not bad, except for the salt.

Wednesday, December 20, 2000

Breakfast at Betsy's, where I am about to be the only inhabitant. The driver Soso, took me by the newspaper kiosk to get a three day old copy of the International Herald Tribune. This actually is a lot of progress. Formerly didn't have CNN (which I do now in my room) or any outside newspapers.

To the NILC, where the Dean Dato Gordeladze of the Tbilisi State University medical school, was awaiting me with eleven medical students. My last visit, in October, I had finally agreed to become chairman of the Board of Trustees of Tbilisi State University Medical Center: a medical school; two hospitals; about to have a nursing school with Georgia State University. Archil is the CEO. Tbilisi State University is the university of Georgia, with about 30,000 students, eighteen or so faculties, etc. Founded in the early 1900's (I think around 1917). Initially had a medical school, which in the 1930's was removed and made a separate medical university. Soviets did this for all their medical schools, turning them into the hospital medical schools type of institution of England and France. In the early 1990's TSU had started another medical school, competing with Tbilisi State Medical University, the former medical school, and one with which we worked for a number of years. We also started working with the medical school of TSU about three or four years ago. A newly appointed dean, Alex Aladishvili, spent two months at Emory, and went back full of zeal for reforming the school. At that time the medical school was part of the biology faculty, and the powers in that faculty, all "former Soviet mentality" types, refused to brook any sort of curriculum change. So Alex gave up and founded a cardiac cath lab instead. The provost and rector of TSU learned from this experience and, wanting a modern Western medical school, established the TSU Medical Center (not unlike the Woodruff Center of Emory University), and got Archil to be CEO and me to be chair of the board. The biology faculty still teach the basic sciences; more about that later.

The eleven students were fairly typical of the medical students I've encountered over here. They go to medical school after graduating from high school, and stay in school for six years. These were fourth and fifth year students. They wished to talk to me, said their dean, "about medical education in the U.S." I decided I needed to begin by establishing my credibility, so I gave them a mini-lecture on "Teaching Medicine at the Bedside: 1600-2000." (I had just given this as a Grand Rounds in Pennsylvania a week ago, so this was no big deal.) I then asked for a biography from each of them. All spoke English quite well. All of them used the computer, browsed the Internet, and were identical to most modern youth elsewhere. They wanted to know in some detail about U.S. medical curricula, hours the students spent studying, USMLE tests, etc. An enjoyable experience.

Koba Lomashvili came to take me to his home of Rustavi in the afternoon. Zviad, Archil, Koba and I had lunch in a new Turkish cafeteria, one of the new eating establishments that are springing up all over the place. Really good food.

Then with Koba and his brother-in-law, Koba Turashvili (**yurawvili**), about 40, PhD in nuclear physics from Moscow, where he apparently had been an up and comer in the field until the breakup. He had come back to Georgia and started a currency exchange. Doing well until he was beaten severely by the Mafia for not cooperating with them. Sold the business, now not clear what he does. Wife is a pediatrician. He has become interested in economic theory and business,

and clearly was widely read in the subject. I pushed him about going to business school, but he said "I've read all the books." Yet another extremely smart and highly capable individual who is just floating around in Georgia like flotsam or jetsam on a cruel sea.

Rustavi, about twenty minutes from Tbilisi, ranks up with the Chechnyan border towns I visited last Christmas as one of the most depressing sights I've ever seen in Georgia. Built in the 1930's or so as a factory town, to accommodate the workers of a huge steel factory. At its peak somewhere around 130,000 or so. Block after block after block of workers apartment buildings, with few trees, nothing natural of beauty. Roads either gravel or deeply scarred with potholes. Automobile passage accomplished only by weaving from side to side, occasionally going at right angles, in order to avoid the holes. Gray, miserably penetrating cold day. Built on either side of the Mtkvari river, the principal river of Georgia; runs from the mountains through Tbilisi and to the sea. The 'old part,' on one side of the river, had 'Stalin buildings,' which were substantially better than the Khrushchev and Brezhnev buildings on the other side. No work for anyone. People still go to the steel mill, where they are given a pittance, often not paid, for doing nothing. Thousands of apartments. Fifty percent are empty. Able-bodied family members, comprising the missing fifty percent, are in other countries (Germany, Turkey, U.S.) working and sending money home.

We went to the apartment of Koba's family: mother, father, and twin sister (PhD in comparative literature in Moscow, trying hard to get fellowship in same in the U.S.). Clean and spartan. No electricity. Koba showed me a line he has surreptitiously run to another building which gets electricity a lot more often (politician lives there). Koba is scrupulously honest, however, and he showed me how he had wired it through his meter so he pays for it nevertheless. He has been back a month now. Told me how he goes home at night and there is no electricity. Cannot read. Can't do anything. (Koba is bright and an excellent physician. I noted a large stack of papers to be read by his bedside.) Visits his friends in the day time, plays chess with them. Plans to leave in a month or two and go elsewhere.

Back to Tbilisi. I asked Koba to wait for me while I visited Mrs. Shevardnadze. I make it a point to see her whenever I'm over here. She appeared to me to be in good spirits, but bemoaning all the problems faced by Georgia. Then to the home of Koba's brother-in-law Koba for a supra. No electricity, but a generator. Two sons, eight and thirteen. Spent all their time on the computer with the Internet, when the electricity was on. Being sent to a school that has most classes in English.

To the home of Levan Vasadze, who had come down from Moscow. His thirtieth birthday, and he was feeling no pain. About fifty guests, most of whom I've met one time or another. His mother Irina looked to be a wreck, having taken two days off from her job at the U.S. Embassy to get ready. No electricity, but a generator.

Ended the evening with Levan Kacharava, being instructed by him about doing business in Georgia. He had spent two days earlier in the week with the governor of Batumi, a southern coastal town. The governor is a foe of Shevardnadze's, and virtually runs Batumi as his own fiefdom, even refusing to collect taxes. Levan's company does a lot of work in Batumi involving transporting oil from Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, and then loading it onto tankers. Abashidze, the governor, and Levan are about to merge some of the business.

Thursday, December 21, 2000

Kakha Shengelia came over and had breakfast with me. He is the dean of the business school that Georgia State University has set up in Tbilisi, the Caucasus School of Business. A consortium supported by three universities, funded principally by USIA and the Eurasia foundation. President Carl Patton came over last May and visited it. The school languished until taken over by Kakha about a year ago. Now it is flourishing. About 32, has a master's degree from U.S., bright, able and ambitious. We talked at some length about higher education over here.

To the NILC where I saw a 17 year old student who had had what was said to be congenital glaucoma in his left eye, and now has an opaque cornea over his pupil. Zviad took some close-up pictures with a digital camera, which I emailed to Geoffrey Broocker, the chief of ophthalmology at Grady. Telemedicine. Geoff emailed me it was not possible to tell from the history and the pictures what was going on with the lad, and whether anything could be done.

Then a pediatric neurologist, Gia Melichishvili (**meliHiwvili**) and his daughter/translator Anna. About 45, has been doing studies on "deafness in newborns due to obstetrical trauma to the cervical vertebrae, causing basilar artery ischemia." Wants U.S. collaborators. I asked him to describe what he was doing in an email, and I would circulate it. I suggested to him he get the people at the NILC to do a Medline search, and see if anyone had reported similar findings. To my surprise he said he had searched both Medline and MD Consult on the Internet, using the computer in his office.

Archil and I went to TSU, where he, me and the dean were televised talking about the changes we saw in the new medical center, and in the curriculum of the medical school. I have learned before that Georgian institutions make full use of television in publicizing themselves. I began by saying the societal institutions of Georgia were under great stress, with the breakup of the former Soviet Union. This gave the people of Georgia a great opportunity to reshape their institutions in a form that would be suitable to the new millenium that was just beginning. I said there was a new medical center, and that in time it had the potential of becoming the best center in the Caucasus, providing research, medical education and the finest patient care. I spoke of the medical school as the "jewel in the crown" of the medical center, with two hospitals and a beginning nursing school, and hopefully schools of allied health and public health.

To Batonebbi for lunch with Archil. Then back to the NILC to review where we are and our plans for the next year.