# More Journeys: Georgia & Armenia 1997

**Tuesday, 10 June 1997**

Leaving Vienna on a Monday meant one arrived in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, early on Tuesday morning. This required a three-hour wait in Istanbul, Turkey.

The Istanbul terminal was small, tidy, and modern. So modern, indeed, that a few months before the airport authorities had heralded Turkey's entrance to the late twentieth century by declaring all her terminals smoke-free.

Thus, I sat securely beneath one of a dozen signs that read in loud letters, "Smoking Prohibited In The Entire Terminal." Half the travelling population and a significant section of the uniformed officers present, doubtless empowered to enforce the law, ostentatiously ignored such regulations.

On the Turkish Airlines plane, a woman asked, with that pleasant firmness unique to Americans, if she and her husband could be "relocated into the non-smoking compartment." Despite signs indicating a distinct divide between lung cancer and life, the stewardess looked mystified. Just then, smokers all over the aircraft lit up in response to the announcement, "You may now smoke in the smoking section." This section begins at the Turkish border.

After midnight, we landed in Georgia, and my colleague Trisha, Program Director for World Vision International's program in Georgia and Armenia, met me with Bacuri, our driver, who drove me to the guest bedroom.

The next morning, we went by the World Vision office near the centre of Tbilisi. I was impressed by the grandeur of the city, which has many elegant old buildings, ancient churches, and monuments arrayed haphazardly over the hills. An old fort tumbled down one ridge above the town. World Vision's office was in a simple building down an inner-city side street. Inside, someone's apartment had been converted into offices. However, traces of a family's former home were evident in the chandeliers and wide-opening glass doors between the big, high-ceilinged rooms.

There was some business to discuss, and then the whole staff had lunch together, cooked by Mary, the staff cook. There was a variety of dishes: tomato and cucumber salad, eggplant with a spicy walnut-flavoured sauce, a meat casserole, cheese and bread.

The staff discussed the Georgian flag. "It is cherry red, with black and white in the corner. Black is for the earth, and white is for the sky. And the red is for the people."

Another had a different explanation. "The black represents our past, which is bad. The white is for the hopeful future. And the red represents the present times we see all around us."

Our work in Georgia focuses on small business development. At first, World Vision gave grants to people to kick-start their small businesses.

"The time for grants is over," Trisha explained. "People are learning about free enterprise. They're ready for loans." So now the program, funded by USAID, is moving into loans.

Accompanying the program was extensive training, for here was a society in which the subtleties of capitalism were being learned.

During the day, we visited four people who had benefited from the grants program and were now running successful small businesses.

We visited a woman who had used her grant of a few hundred dollars to buy a machine that resembled a complex sewing machine. She was an engineer who became jobless when the State factory in which she worked went belly up. Fortunately, she was also an excellent dressmaker and turned her hand to this. She explained that this machine added professional seams to her work and saved her hours of laborious hand sewing.

Showing my ignorance of the craft, I asked what the machine was called. “I know the word in Russian,” said Kote, translating, “It is called *overlocker*.”

“Oh,” I said, “it’s the same in English.”

Kote paused for a moment, then was startled by the obvious. “It IS English!” We all laughed.

“Would you like coffee?” the woman asked politely. When we indicated assent, she ushered us into the lounge room and busied herself in the kitchen. A half-hour later, we were invited back into the kitchen for “coffee.”

The coffee was Turkish, rich, strong and tangy. Spread on an embroidered tablecloth were chocolate, walnuts, fruit juice and champagne. Fortunately, the champagne was unopened, and we persuaded her to save it for someone really important.

She had spent a little of her profit in getting the telephone installed.

“The phone system here is great,” said Kote, “the best in Tbilisi. It is brand new. It is from Korea.” The phone rang a few times while we were there, but each time, the line was dead.

I asked an innocent question that revealed more information than I expected. She told us that she did not need to advertise and had more work than she could handle. I asked if she had her personal label on the clothes. The idea seemed quite odd to her.

“Until recently, having your own label would have been illegal. So, she doesn’t feel comfortable with the idea.”

Next was a doctor who had used her first grant to modify a section of her lounge room by her apartment’s front door to create a consulting room. The front door now had a small window from which she could dispense medicines after hours.

“This woman is incredible,” Trisha explained. “She has an entrepreneurial heart. She began with a grant of a few hundred dollars, and soon, she was back with a plan to create an insurance company and a request for $80,000! We admired her pluck but suggested a thousand.”

Next, we visited two sites: the two workshops of a television repair team. They were applying for a loan to buy a vehicle so they could make house calls.

Our loan officer, Dato, explained, “The vehicle will cost half as much as public transport.”

“Is that just petrol, or have you factored in repairs and maintenance?” Trisha asked cautiously, aware from experience that full cost is a capitalist notion not always immediately grasped by post-communist entrepreneurs.

Finally, we stopped by a computer school (which also taught English as a sideline). Here, the use of the grant money was clearly in evidence, for the school had bought a generator, and with the power temporarily off, the generator was proving its value in keeping the computers running for the students.

Clients must present a business plan to qualify for a grant. The plan is then monitored for six months to ensure that it happens.

With the move into loan programs, there is more control and a lower risk of funds being misused, as clients must put up some collateral and, of course, make repayments.

Nevertheless, the Georgia program boasted a 100% success rate—not a single failure to follow through on the plan. This was the result of careful selection, training and reporting.

In the evening, Trisha suggested we walk to a restaurant. We set off around 7.30. After a half hour, I joked, “Are you sure there is a restaurant here? I want to be sure we eat before we reach the Caucasus mountains.”

Trisha laughed generously, but we soon discovered that her Plan A restaurant had closed. Short-lived businesses are a common phenomenon in a society still learning about capital reinvestment.

“Would you like to stop by one of these cafes,” asked Trisha, “or would you prefer to go somewhere I know.”

“Somewhere I know” sounded more inviting, so we retraced our steps to “someplace nice. I hope it’s still open.”

Plan B turned out to be spectacularly pleasant. We ate full-flavoured Georgian food and washed it down with salty mineral water and smooth Georgian wine. This part of Georgian society was still in good shape. And cheap, too—at least by international standards.

To my naive surprise, we were entertained by a spectacularly competent jazz combo. I say “naive” because any real thought on my part would have recalled the renown of Georgian music and arts in general. The band had a pianist who floated somewhere between Wes Montgomery and George Shearing, a cool guitarist, drummer and double bass player. After a half hour or so, Peggy Lee’s younger sister serenaded us and scat with the band.

She was received with enthusiastic applause by a sharp-looking man at the bar. Aged in his sixties, he was dressed in creams, including a cream Panama hat. He had curly hair around his collar and an Austrian moustache. As the band samba-ed into “Bésame Mucho”, he glided onto the dance floor with a young red-headed woman and flamboyantly danced tango-style to the bossa nova rhythm. Only in Latin America had I seen such displays of unselfconscious pleasure.

After our meal, we ordered dessert, or, as the menu said, “Desert.” Trisha and I discussed the unfortunate tendency of people from our cultures to consider the inability of foreigners to speak our language some depressing disability. Privately we commended the serious attempt to communicate the menu contents in English to we visitors. Nevertheless, I presumed that the “chocolate bar” listed among the desserts would likely offer more than its prosaic description implied. A chocolate and ice cream log with whipped cream and walnuts? Or a rich chocolate cake with hot fudge, cherries and Armagnac?

No. It was a chocolate bar. Belgian chocolate, admittedly. Presented elegantly on white china but still in its wrapper.

The walk back to the flat revealed more traffic at 11 p.m. than at 7 a.m. Tbilisi is a night city.

Starlings inspired me next morning as I sipped my first coffee. Hundreds of these birds darted and dived in a busy frolic over and around the rooftops of Tbilisi. They looked like small boys at play, dive-bombing one another for fun, pulling steep turns to miss the corner of a building, whipping around overhead cables. Despite their speed, you never see one of them make a mistake and hit something.

“It would be nice to be a starling,” I told Trisha. “They don’t worry whether they have satellite TV or clean socks. They just enjoy flight.”

An hour later, I was flying without much enjoyment on the World Food Program aircraft to Yerevan. A Twin Otter, the reliable aircraft World Vision used to such beneficial effect in Ethiopia during the famines of the 80s, flew the route to Yerevan and back every day.

Forty minutes after leaving Tbilisi, we were in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. The city is set on a wide plain that is already hazy in the morning heat. Through the haze, the huge figure of Mount Ararat looms impressively.

Robert Dira, our project manager in Armenia, was there to meet Trisha and me. We were ushered through a side terminal without anyone showing any interest in seeing our passports. In twenty years of travelling, I could not recall a single occasion when entry to a country had been so informal, courtesy of the VIP treatment given to World Food Program travellers.

Before lunch, we visited the Patriarch of the Armenian Orthodox Church, Karekin III, whom I had met a few years before when the Patriarch was, more or less, exiled in Bierut. Two years before, he had come home to Yerevan, and it was a pleasure to see him again in the historic home of one of the first Christian churches outside of Palestine. The church was founded in Armenia in 301, and a cathedral stood on the site of the Archbishop’s present home since 304.

Much more happened on this journey, except later in the day, I succumbed to a severe gastric complaint from Robert's cooking (or so I accused him regularly for years afterwards!). I do remember spending a few hours visiting loan applicants. It was interesting to see a cross-section of good and bad prospects. One was more fiction than fact. The colleagues were pleasant but firmly disparaging of her attempts to extort money from World Vision. Naturally, she did not get the approval. Or the money.

During that afternoon drive, we had the misfortune of knocking over a young boy who ran in front of the car. Fortunately, the car was doing less than 10 km/h, crawling up a busy market street. Nevertheless, the boy, aged about nine, bounced off the front of the car and scraped skin from his knees and elbows. The driver was visibly dismayed over the event, which somehow made me feel better.

When we returned to Georgia, I discovered that my visa, previously obtained in Vienna, was for one visit only. This was solved by standing around in front of the official and paying a large fee.