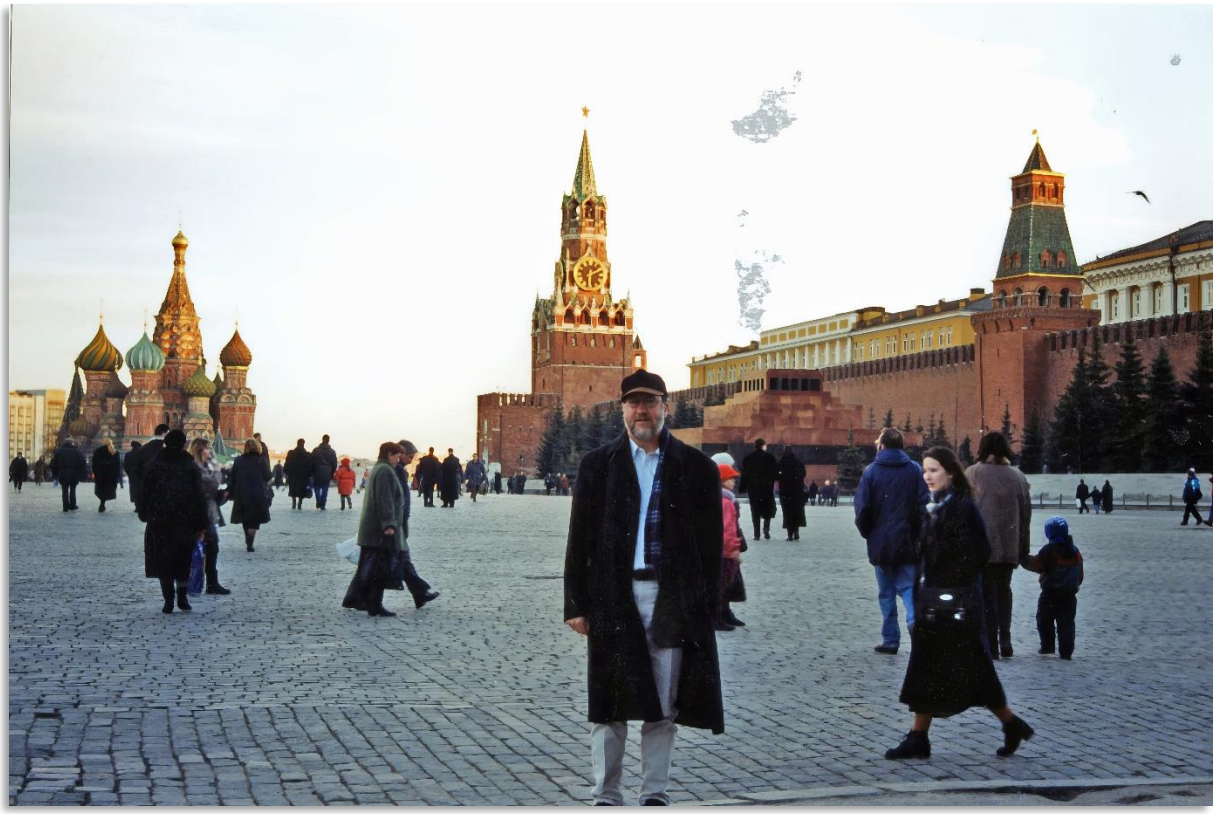

# Russia 1997

**March 1997**

**Heading for Moscow.** The taxi driver came early to our Vienna flat. I was catching 40 winks in the lounge chair when the front doorbell startled my reverie. I went to let him in, then thought it would be easier to go out onto the kitchen balcony and call down “Ich komme.” I could have added “gleich” but it didn’t occur to me. The traffic was dense, and he suggested a route through the 19th district about which I understood only enough German to know that he was suggesting a route through the 19th district. I said, “Das ist besser,” and he said no more until we arrived at the airport an hour later. Unlike taxi drivers in Australia, they don’t engage you in conversation here. Suits me.

I hate leaving, although I don’t mind travelling. The hurdle between where I am, and the airport always seems to be a high one. Once in the terminal, my mood lightens. This time I am going to Moscow. For the first time. Tigran, our man in Moscow, will meet me at the airport. I am thinking about one of his recent messages about taxation in Russia. The tax police, now headed up by the man who prosecuted the ferocious (and failed) war against the Chechens, have new vigilance. Or perhaps one should call it banditry. And bank accounts are not always safe. The relationship between law and justice is tenuous and often disconnected in Russia these days. One commentator says the Russian leadership these days is neither liberal nor conservative, neither democratic nor Communist, neither nationalist nor internationalist, neither progressive nor reactionary. It merits only two labels—greedy and rapacious.

The consequence of this frontier-style free-for-all is a legal structure in which an organisation will probably violate some law or some future law made retrospective.

Today, it is Moscow, and tomorrow, North Ossetia and Ingushetia. I have little idea what awaits me except “project visits”—a label covering many potential experiences—and visits to a Prime Minister and a President (of the provinces). Jukka, the Finnish guy working in the North Caucasus, hoped to take me to Grozny. Near there, six Red Cross workers were murdered before Christmas. His local colleagues assured him it would be perfectly safe if we took a local taxi. But last week, a Swedish journalist was kidnapped, and now the mood has changed. I cannot say I am displeased with this turn of events. Once, when I travelled, I never felt anyone was out to get NGO workers. Now, it seems we have joined the target group.

I try to read “The Brothers Karamazov” on the two-hour flight, but Dostoevsky puts me to sleep.

The flight attendant brings our customs declaration and I note there is a clear instruction about foreign currency, so I declare the whole USD38,000 that I am carrying. On the ground, the passport control is packed with 200 people, and we avoid eye contact yet maintain vigilance for queue rule breakers.

“Is that how you normally do business?” a tall German man angrily asks the shorter person beside him.

“What do you mean?” the shorter one asks.

“This is the booth I am going to,” he indicates to the one in front of them. Yours is over there.” He points off to the left. I am pleased when the man defends his right to stay focused on a shared booth strategy.

Passport control passes without a word being said on either side, although the young woman behind the counter stares fiercely at my face, attempting to reconcile it with the uncapped person in the passport photo. Smiling when a woman stares at you is normal, but flirting would not be an efficacious strategy here.

Tigran is there to greet me, and the driver goes and gets the car. While we wait, Tigran observes “certain people who murder other fellows. They must bribe the police, so they wear several gold chains around their necks. When they arrange a murder, they simply take off a gold chain and give it to a policeman.” I am not sure whether this is a folk tale, truth, or a story to impress tourists.

We have a few minutes, and Tigran wants me to get a sense of Moscow's beauty. I am not hard to be impressed.

The city feels European to me. And that feels good. The huge Stalinist buildings loom massively at various sites around the city. Although similar in style to the 30s skyscrapers of Manhattan, they offer more massive lines by being not nearly so tall. The city is a delight. Many pleasurable hours could be spent walking around during the day. One would need to take advice about the night.

We see the Kremlin from the outside, and I realise that it is a much larger compound in the flesh than I thought. “Bigger than the Tower of London?” suggests Tigran. “Yes, much”, I confirm. He also shows me the big grey anonymous apartment block on the embankment occupied by senior government officials. He tells me there is a famous novel written about it called “The House on the Embankment.” People lived there fearing “the knock on the door” in the night. Sometimes, and often, people and whole families just disappeared. No one wanted to be promoted so high that they would end up living in the house on the embankment.

We check into the Russia Intourist Hotel. According to Tigran, it has " Moscow-style service,” and the check-in routine is appropriately brusque. They take away my passport and loose-leaf visa as they must stamp the visa. And they ask me to pay in advance. But at least they honour, if not revere, my Mastercard card.

The room is basic but comfortable enough. The wood panelling and heavy lampshades create a sombre mood, but there is a big window at the end of the room, and everything seems to work.

We walk to the Red Square. It is one of the world's great cityscapes. A huge, cobbled rectangle entered through a recently restored gate, past a recently restored church, and out onto the main square. The hotch-potch of St Basils is at one end, but only the educated can recognise an architectural hotch-potch when they see one. I do not pretend. I sincerely think it looks fabulous. The wall of the Kremlin looms along the right side of the square, while a delightful French-style shopping arcade, which is reminiscent of the Queen Victoria Arcades in Sydney, fences off the left side. In between, groups of people wander around, taking it all in.

I ask about gypsies. Yes, Tigran has heard of them and perhaps has seen them at work as he graphically describes their method of surrounding their victim begging for money while other children pick your pockets. "You cannot beat them because they are children," Tigran says with unconsciously ironic double meaning.

We wander back through the shopping arcade, and Tigran flags down a taxi to take us to his apartment. This is on the 15th floor of a plain building. The entrance and the lift have an air of lack of care about them, but the lift works. The corridor outside Tigran's flat has a solid door halfway along its length, barricading off the three-end apartments from the rest.

"So, you have come to some arrangement with your neighbours about extra security?" I state as a question.

"No," Tigran smiles, "We live in this one Monday to Wednesday. This one Thursday and Friday, and this one on the weekend." Leaving my question unanswered.

We enter the weekend flat, and I refrain from pointing out it is Monday. Marina is there. Their 15-month-old daughter, Maria Lonna, is sleeping. We talk over a gin and tonic. Some business, some social and soon dinner is ready. The flat has one room for entertaining, but the dining table is now Tigran's desk, so we eat in the kitchen. This is also tiny, and while there is enough room for four people to sit around the kitchen table, there is barely enough room for the table to contain the vast variety of food Marina has prepared. Her Greek heritage generously influences it (they met while studying at Moscow University. Tigran, Armenian, and Marina, Greek).

Their hospitality is generous. We talk a little about hospitable people. Tigran wails about the Armenian generosity. "Someone can arrive at 2 am and ask for a meal, and they will always oblige without question. But, you know, it has its bad side. Since you can do this to them, they feel they can do it to you."

There is Greek salad, two kinds of bread including buns Austrian-style, three kinds of cold cuts, hard-boiled eggs spread with red (salmon) caviar, herring marinated in wine, trout, sturgeon, cheese and more. After half an hour, I remember they talked about "beef", which also appears with boiled potatoes and carrots. Then a fruit salad and Greek coffee. All this is washed down with various sips of Cypriot wines that Tigran brought back from the conference we had just shared in Cyprus, and chased with Mataxa. I carry the latter into the living room to conclude our business discussions.

By this time, Maria is awake and gradually becoming bolder with the visitor. Cute with chubby cheeks, dark brown hair and black eyes, she wants to copy every move we make with knife, fork and pencil.

I leave around 10 pm, and Tigran accompanies me to get a taxi. As we exit the lift, a man with a box of oranges appears around the corner. As he heads into the lift, a young boy of about 12 years enters. His eyes are ringed with darkness, and the skin on the rest of his face is white as death. Tigran appears not to notice. As we leave the building, the wife and a small daughter sit

on the edge of the steps, guarding a dozen plastic shopping bags that appear well past their use-by date.

“They have been somewhere,” Tigran says cryptically. There seems to be an interesting story here, but further questions of Tigran reveal less of interest rather than more.

At the curbside, Tigran says he will “hitch-hike.” I check to see if he is joking. “No. It is a common practice in Moscow. If a taxi stops, we shall take it, but people often give you a lift.”

A car stops instantly, and it is a taxi. It is an old Russian vehicle like a large Vauxhall Cresta—I suspect it is an old model Volga. It reeks of petrol fumes. The driver is smoking. If I knew how to do my “Hail Mary’s” I would have completed a set immediately. I try to wind down my window, but the winder merely takes the slack and refuses to budge.

We arrive back at the Russian Intourist Hotel without exploding. Tigran shakes my hand, and I head into the hotel quickly.

There is no water jug in my room and the water in the tap is suspect. I taste it to swallow my migraine prophylactic pill, and it tastes of chemicals. Perhaps this is an encouraging sign. I look at my watch, and it is midnight. If there is something in the water expect action around two-thirty. I sleep soundly and long.

In the morning, I wake with just enough time to shower, pack and check out. Thus, I forego breakfast. It would have entailed a search for the restaurant and a rushed coffee. I had no idea where the breakfast place was, even though Tigran had waved in its general direction as we traversed the lobby. All I see in that general direction is one woman having a coffee. It would have been enough, but now there is no time.

Tigran is there as I retrieve my passport and visa. I notice they have not stamped my visa and mention it to Tigran. He takes it back to the reception desk and insists they stamp it. In Russia, it is better to have the stamps verifying that you stayed somewhere than try to explain why you do not.

“The stamp is the thing here,” explains Tigran. “Sometimes it does not matter even what the stamp says. As long as it is a stamp.” He tells me a story of attempting to get service from a government agency only to be refused because “the document is not official” since it did not have a stamp. So, he made his own stamp, pressed it into service, and there were no more questions.

The drive to the airport takes us past an MCG-sized stadium over which a roof is being built. Tigran is amazed at the speed with which the work is getting done. “The power of capitalism,” he comments. Further along is a KGB complex with three tall, thin building towers. They were begun 20 years ago, and only recently was the middle one finished and occupied. “This is the normal pace in Russia.”

We go by Moscow University with its magnificent Stalinist central building. Tigran points out the building where he studied and even the apartment block where he lived. Just beyond, we round a sweeping bend, and my muscles tense as I register the presence of ice on the road and notice the driver's quick response. A Volga has slithered out of control a few metres along and is broken against a light pole. The full weight of the accident has crushed in the driver’s door. Two or three people stand by the car. At least one is a police constable, and two are women in bright overcoats and matching fur hats. I catch a glimpse of the body at their feet. One presumes the driver. “He’s dead,” intones Tigran. There is a momentary silence, and then, with that innate preserving capacity to avoid going deeper into a subject that will bring pain, we continue our conversation about university life. A great human tragedy disappears in the rear window, and we try to push it out of our consciousness quickly enough that it will not sink deeper into our souls.

A kilometre further on, a Mercedes suffered the same fate. The accident is identical. The result more violent. The car is now snapped at right angles around a light pole it brought to the ground. The accident is not fresh, and the removal of the people has dehumanised the scene—and, one presumes, bodies.

I ask the driver if this is common. “It happens once or twice a night when the water on the road becomes ice.”

It is my first time in an airport where I cannot read the departure board. It is a large modern affair, but entirely in Russian. As we stand in line, I work out the word for Vladikavkaz, knowing it starts with something like a “B” and has a distinctive ending. It is now 0830, and the plane is on time at 1015.

Beggars come while we stand in line. A young, attractive, gypsy woman with a cute baby asks something. Tigran gives her a hundred Rubles and she moves on.

“It’s a business, you know,” he says. “She has her targets for the day. It is income generating business for them.” Sadly, I do know. The face of need is not always to be believed. Another man has a sign. Tigran says he looks “very professional.” The sign tells us that his wife is dying from cancer. “Maybe he does have a wife,” Tigran says hopefully. An old lady appears more genuine, and she gets another hundred Rubles. Tigran says he knows paying is dreadful, but he cannot stand the moral pressure.

“Do you want to wrap your bag?” Tigran asks, looking at my almost brand-new Samsonite suitcase. These are designed to resist attacks by orangutans and drops from the roofs of Land Rovers, yet he thinks it should be wrapped for protection. The protection he has in mind concerns the quality of the case. Not as a protection against poor quality but as protection against good quality. “It is a foreigner’s suitcase.” Better to blend in if you want to arrive at the other end. It is always a good rule for travellers. We go to a special booth at the end of the check-in counters where a man quickly and expertly covers my suitcase with brown paper and secures it with white twine, the sort that has hundreds of fibres and cannot be removed except by cutting. He leaves a hole for the handle and the wheels, and we check it in.

Foolishly, I brought the wrong suitcase and put too much in it. It has been so long since I made a trip to a field location that I had forgotten my travel-light regime. I packed as if I were going to the UK or the USA. The bag weighs 28 kilograms! I can hardly believe it. Naturally, in Russia, they do not overlook overweight.

Tigran hears the announcement that the plane is leaving from Gate 2 but warns me to ask only an official for directions. “Do not trust the passengers, and do not believe the signs. Sometimes they say Gate 5, but the plane goes from Gate 2.” At Gate 2, a few people mill around. Someone goes and asks a question but is sent back. I hear “Vladikavkaz” in his question and am reassured I am at the right place. Soon, an announcement in Russian and English calls us through. They take the coupon from my ticket, but no boarding pass is issued. Slowly, people go downstairs, so I follow them out into the cold but sunny morning. We stand here for about 15 minutes while more and more people arrive. Then a bus comes, and we get on it. Before boarding, I ask the one official lady there if this is for Vladikavkaz, and she says, “Da.”

We are driven out in a bus that forms the back part of a semi-trailer to an Aeroflot plane about the size of a Boeing 757. A large stewardess made to look intimidatingly larger by her overcoat and fur hat is inside to meet us. It has free seating, and there are many more seats than passengers. There are no overhead lockers, just a shelf. A few seat backs are broken, but the plane seems in working order. At least from the inside. I see people dumping their carry-on bags on seats next to them, so I commandeer a whole row near the front and take the window seat. Outside the arm between the seat and the wall are dobs of pre-chewed gum. I notice it is the

same on the seat in front. They bring mineral water and Fanta. I take the Fanta. Later, they come with snacks, but you need Rubles to buy them.

About 25 minutes from Vladikavkaz, the Caucasus mountains loom on the aircraft's right side. It is a clear, sunny day; the mountains are Rockies-like and spectacular. Snow still covers them in March, and a huge peak thrusts out from the midst of the already high range. It appears to be higher even than our present flight path. Jukka later told me that I had seen the highest mountain in Europe. My atlas tells me it is Mount Elbrus. 5642 metres.

On landing, Jukka and Lilian are at the airport gate to meet me. It is already lunchtime, but we wait 30 minutes for the bags to arrive. We stand outside the terminal and chat. A new, clean Mercedes E class arrives, and Lilian says, “Mafia.” Moments later, an equally well-washed and polished Mercedes S class glides in. Three men straight out of a gangster movie spill out. There is no doubting their chosen calling. They have the close-cropped haircuts, the clean shaves, the Italian suits and overcoats, and the confident stride of the successful criminal class. One can almost smell the Drakkar Noir from across the footpath. The ostentatious display of wealth and power is blatant and shocking.

Later in the evening, when I am about to turn in, Lilian says “It is peaceful now, there are no bombs.”

“Bombs?”

“Oh, perhaps you didn’t hear. So, you don’t need to worry.”

“What didn’t I hear?”

“Well, there was that really big bomb last year that blew out all the windows downtown. It cracked one of ours, too. You’ve no idea what it sounds like.” I didn’t want to find out. “Three weeks ago, there was another one.” Three weeks ago! “Some shopkeeper must not have made his payment to the mafia, so they blew up his shop. It was quite a boom. Just a hundred yards down the road.”

“Let’s hope everyone has paid their bills,” I suggest.

Jukka and Lilian have a lovely four-wheel drive Mitsubishi Pajero courtesy of a generous donor. It has front seats that are suspended like the car itself. Bigger oscillations are evened out comfortably. It is a simple system that works. The car has a wood-rimmed steering wheel and matching fake wood on the dashboard. A thermometer on the dash reads “Outside Temperature-70 Inside Temperature-240.”

We go to the hotel, and I check in and change into my suit since we plan to meet with the Prime Minister of North Ossetia. Then, to the office where we meet Ellina, the office administrator/interpreter; Natasha, Ellina’s number two; the cook, Zaira, and another young woman with a girl’s face who is introduced as “one of our refugee family.” She has some news of being registered locally and possibly moving to some part of Europe. I only pick up bits of conversation, but there is no doubting her joy, which Lilian absorbs and enhances with exclamations and hugs.

It is now after two, and I already suffer from a lack of coffee and food. My head aches slightly, but I think a proper meal and coffee will fix it. The first restaurant we go to is closed after 2 so we try a second. The food is great. A kind of coleslaw salad with mushrooms is thick with sweet mayonnaise. Then, there is a thing that they call a pie, but it looks like pizza, except the filling is in the middle. It is a salty cheese filling and is delicious. Lilian says they usually order three.

“It is OK to order one,” advises Ellina.

“Shouldn’t we order two or three?” Jukka asks.

“No, one is OK. You only order even numbers if you are sad. Like at a funeral. Otherwise, you order odd numbers to make everyone happy.”

I take a second slice, thinking this is lunch. Now completely stuffed, I find all this is merely appetisers. The main course comes, and it is french fries and carrots with steak wrapped around some delicious filling and baked. I want to eat it all, but I have exceeded my limits. I ask for coffee, and we have that thick, sweet, gritty coffee that is known variously as Greek or Turkish. Doubtless, it is known as Ossetian coffee here.

We are late for the Prime Minister, and Jukka is worried. Ellina, whose father happens to be the Director of Administration in the government and is therefore close to the Prime Minister, has advised us it will be OK to be late. We discover this is because the Prime Minister himself is even later than us.

“They are at a funeral,” says Lilian. “They will just now be having the second toast. They will be coming for a long while yet.”

There is much apologising all round and we head off for my “Surprise”—thus it is described in the itinerary.

It is clear soon enough that I am in for a musical treat. We go to a concert hall and are introduced. One man is dressed in an evening jacket with a black bow tie. Lilian introduces him. “This is Nicolai Kaboev, the nation’s foremost compositor.”

“Composer,” corrects the Nicolai. “At least I hope I am not a composter!” he adds with great laughter.

Not all are present yet, so Lilian takes me onto the stage where a white grand piano, branded “Estonia”, awaits use. I play a few tunes while Lilian sits beside the piano, clearly enjoying it. The piano has nice action but needs a tune.

Soon enough, everything is ready, and we go into the foyer where five young boys and one girl aged about 7 give us a too-short display of Ossetian folk dancing. It has all the fire of the Cossack dances combined with the rigidity of Riverdance. Later Lilian tells me that the people of Ossetia travelled to England and Ireland in the Dark Ages and that London is an Ossetian word. The British and Irish will surely say such things need to be verified. The young dancers are terrific. Precise, enthusiastic and fully committed. The dance itself is exciting. Done by young men, it would cause women to faint.

This is all over in five minutes, and we are invited to hear a girl’s quartet. Their conductor/teacher, Lena Kaboev, accompanies them on the piano. Four 16-year-olds begin with spirituals. They are stunning! Andrew Sisters Plus One in their tight harmonies, with a heavy blues influence. It is a glorious, heavenly experience for one so appreciative of harmony. Added to this is the appealing excitement of young people stepping out with uncertain confidence and finding the excitement of performance. It is a place I recognise, even if the memory is faint these days.

We do not want them to stop, so we encourage them to perform more of their repertoire. The concert goes on for an hour. Spirituals give way to Ossetian folk songs, Evergreens, and Jazz. Finally, they invite the “composer” over to play the piano, and they scat for a while, with the woman taking over the left hand to allow the composer to improvise in the upper registers of the keyboard. Quite a performance.

Later I ask how the group came to be formed. I discover that the conductor and the composer are married. Their daughter is one of the quartet members, and the other three are her friends. The parents teach in the university music department, and the mother, the arranger, is head of the jazz department. All four girls are studying music at the school. The stand-out performer in the group is a slim, dark-haired girl with big dark eyes who throws herself whole-heartedly into the performance. She is the only one studying singing. A coloratura soprano, she is disciplined and voluptuous, yet in that proper way, she gives full expression to all of her youth and exuberance. Here, there is none of that forced precociousness that we see on other Western countries' Young Talent Time stages. This is not teenagers showing how they can be adults: it is new talent, neither fully formed nor jaded through overuse.

It is a lovely surprise, despite my suffering from a migraine brought on by the late lunch and all the excitement. I wish I felt better, but the experience is better than the discomfort. We say our goodbyes and drive Ellina and Natasha to their respective homes.

As we turn a corner, we see the New Moon. Instantly, both Ellina and Natasha in the back seat say, “New Moon!” and reach into their purses, grab a handful of money and hold it up to the moon. “What will I do with these mysterious girls?” Lilian asks rhetorically.

As Ellina walks to her apartment's front door, I ask if it is safe at night for women. “No,” Jukka and Lilian say together. “Rapes and assaults. But nobody is safe after 9 pm. There are sometimes concerts. They begin at 4 or 5 pm so people can get home before dark.”

Jukka and Lilian have invited me to their apartment for supper, and once I am there, they ask me whether I would prefer to stay with them. I would, as they clearly would, too. Jukka returns to get my suitcase while I sleep off the migraine for an hour.

Around 7.30 we have supper. In the European tradition, it is merely a snack, but after lunch, it is enough. Our conversation is prompted by Jukka asking me when or how I came to the Lord. I cannot recall his exact words, but it was a standard Evangelical leading question, and I answered it in my standard way: I had the good fortune to be born into a Christian family and, in some ways, knew Jesus from the beginning. Of course, there have been times, and they continue when I affirm my awareness at an intellectual decision-making level, and there are times when He affirms His presence through signs and wonders. Then, it occurs to me that Jukka may have been asking me this question because he wanted me to ask it of him.

Their story is a long and amazing one. In short, a rocky time in their marriage 23 years ago catalysed Lilian’s conversion. She earnestly sought God for nine months, and then, in one miraculous moment, God spoke to her. She describes it as if “twang” her hearing was changed. She was rehearsing an argument she had just had with Jukka when “twang” the voices in her head were taken away, and she heard the sound of eternity and then the final words of the priest’s homily.

This led to Jukka’s conversion some months later. In both cases, they discovered that, although it is important for us to do the work of knowing Jesus, in the end, knowing him is something he does for us. He chooses the moment and the method to make himself known to us. We can do nothing to make it happen.

This led to their re-entry into the local church in Cocola, Finland and a dramatic charismatic revival that swept the church and shocked the priest more than anyone. A prison ministry followed.

By now, it was 10, and Lilian had made me a bed on the sofa in their office, so I retired to write and to sleep.

A day of waiting into which we, nevertheless, managed to cram a lot of activity. I woke while it was still dark to the sound of a basketball being dropped in the flat above. Or that is what it

sounded like. At 6 am, the first of the half-hourly trams rumbled along outside. When my alarm sounded at 0740, I was ready to get up. We had breakfast around the kitchen table, which consisted of toast, cheese, yoghurt, juice, and coffee. It was much to be enjoyed and more than I needed.

We stopped by the office early as others were arriving. There are only two 3-person lifts operating in a 12-story building. Our office is on the 10th floor. On the way back down, Lilian stands by the lift door and knocks irritably. It does not come, and then she says, "They have a bar on it", meaning, I discover later, that the UN people on the floor below prop the door open so that they can have sole use of it. Beggar the rest of the tenants. Lilian gives them a piece of her mind, and the lift miraculously appears.

But now we are late again for the Prime Minister, and Jukka drives "like an Ossetian" to get us there. This was our first time waiting, but it was not too long, and we were soon ushered into his room. A man of about 60 years sits at a desk across a large room. The Prime Minister rose from his desk, surrounded by the usual office regalia, and we sat along one side of a table while his team sat opposite. I was opposite the PM, then sat his Minister for Health and two other senior officials. The Prime Minister, Yurij Gregorovich Biragov, handed me his business card printed in gold on a teal background. I handed him mine.

These encounters tend to be set pieces of compliments and hollow words. Finding the wheat among the tares requires local political knowledge and acumen. Much of the conversation, conducted in Russian and translated by Ellina, was confusing to me, especially when I asked about the results of the conflicts and the Prime Minister inquired which ones. Ellina translated, "Do you mean the original or the English one?"

"English one?" I asked, trying to determine if this was a Russian metaphor for some specific kind of conflict.

"No," said Ellina, "not English, Ingush."

"What is the main obstacle to achieving your vision of the future," I asked, sounding like a strategic planning consultant.

"Time" is his simple answer. "You know many people (Ingush) left before the conflict. They knew it was coming, and the sense of betrayal for those left behind to endure the bombings and killings is great. Today, they must return to their houses, but it is hard. You cannot value people differently. People ask us to guarantee the same thing will not happen tomorrow. We cannot. Only time will heal and make people closer."

"The other obstacle is the territory border discussion." I asked if there is a process for these discussions, but there is not. He is obviously talking about discussions only in some ideal sense. "We need to finish these discussions." Or maybe start them?

Russian law provides a moratorium on border questions and requires mutual agreement for any changes. "Of course, the Ossetian position is quite definite." Maybe that's part of the problem.

We drive to Ingushetia, the country between North Ossetia and Chechnya. Ingushetia has a population of about 630,000 and another 200,000 refugees, mainly from the Chechnyan conflict. The burden on such a small country is immense.

Along the way, Jukka mentions that he has heard on the grapevine that the Russian-speaking Chechnyans will have a political demonstration. They plan to walk to Moscow en masse (it's 2000 kilometres) and then set themselves on fire in the Red Square.

We pass three or four checkpoints, but we only stop at the first one, and it soon becomes clear that the soldiers merely wish to flirt with Ellina. "What's your name?" they ask, and she giggles

and turns away from them. Lilian, like a scolding mother, playfully tells them to behave themselves, and, happily rebuked, the soldiers let us go on our way.

We pass through the Prigordny area where once Ingushetians and Ossetians lived peacefully as neighbours. In 1992, the Ingushetians were advised of an impending attack, and many of them left to stay with relatives in Ingushetia. The attack destroyed nearly all the buildings in the area, and the conflict was finally subdued in favour of the Ossetians, who pushed the border back into Ingushetia. Now, thousands of Ingushetians can come to the border and look across to see the houses they used to live in but cannot go to anymore.

Beyond the checkpoint is a two-kilometre stretch of tree-lined avenue. “This is dangerous here”, Lilian advises, “we never stop for anyone here, even the police. Two Med-Air people were killed when a Russian tank ran over them here. Another Med-Air car was stolen at gunpoint from the driver. Our own driver was held up here, but he had a toy grenade in his car, which he showed to the bandits threateningly. They fled in fright.”

We get to a fork—the road to the right goes across Ingushetia towards Chechnya. The left takes us into Nazran, the capital of Ingushetia.

“A journalist was kidnapped down there. About 500 metres.” Lilian casually mentions.

We drive into Nazran, and I am impressed by the size and decorative brickwork of the Ingush homes. Along the roof lines are Islamic-influenced cut metal art. Everyone wears ankle-length overcoats, many in good-looking leather. $500, says Ellina. It’s more than I want to spend on an overcoat right now, but it's clearly a bargain. Many men wear black felt hats.

“They are special to Ingushetia,” explains Ellina. “They even wear their hats inside in meetings here.”

Our World Vision office is one room within the Red Crescent building, a block from the city centre. Nazran is a big country town, not unlike many African towns, with wide streets, roadside markets and a dusty, provincial feel. At the Red Crescent office, we meet the director, Lisa. She is an Ingush woman who personally knows the sufferings of this place. The facts of these sufferings are hinted at but never revealed. She has laughter lines by her eyes but laughs too rarely.

Lilian and Jukka tell me about Rosa, the second in charge here. She said, “I hate Ossetians. They killed my brother. My soul left with him. If I meet an Ossetian, I will surely kill them.”

One time, Jukka and Lilian visited without Ellina as their interpreter. Since Ellina, although having lived in Ossetia her whole life, is Russian, she does not count as an Ossetian to these people. However, Natasha is Ossetian in her looks. When Natasha accompanied them for the first time, Lilian and Jukka wondered what would happen when she met Rosa. They entered the room, and immediately, the tension was palpable. Natasha, who is little more than a girl, giggled something, and they softened towards her. Then, there was a little conversation in which Natasha’s bubbly personality overcame the tension. Suddenly, Rosa stood up from her place, walked over and warmly embraced Natasha.

“Forgiveness is beautiful when you see it,” said Jukka, as if speaking from his own heart.

We moved to the President’s place because it was easier to front up than to telephone. He was in official meetings and then had another meeting to attend, but he would be back about 5 p.m., and we should come then for an appointment. Lilian stayed with the car during this visit, paranoid about the car being stolen, having already lost one to thieves during their two years here.

Now we went to the hospital. Lisa told us the terrible story about the wounding of a surgeon the day before. He had operated on a man who had died. The surgeon said that he only died

because the hospital lacked adequate equipment. The brother of the patient took his gun and shot the surgeon. Now, the surgeon lay gravely ill, and the whole medical community was in shock that such a thing could happen. But this is a country in which everyone has a pistol. Sometimes, the gun is too handy. Lisa adds that her uncle, a retired surgeon, became so agitated at the news of this vicious attack on the innocent surgeon that he himself had a heart attack and was now in hospital. “He felt so insulted,” Lisa says.

We were to meet a group of doctors who were setting up an independent medical clinic because of their frustrations at the inadequacy of the State system. No one was available to meet us. Then we found out why. The surgeon had died from his wounds.

The guilty party here is the medical system, full of corruption and without adequate standards of medical care and administration. Equipment is stolen when delivered and sold for cash to line someone’s pockets. There are no computers. No cardiograph. Doctors only get paid $100 a month in the State system. Many doctors do double shifts to get more salary. A quick look at the market reveals that commodity prices here are not too different from those in the West. How do they survive?

This is why the small group of doctors tried to set up their medical point. They had used their own savings to buy more adequate equipment. They had rented a place not too convenient but affordable. They worked two shifts: one for pay in the State system and another for free here at the clinic. With four doctors, the demand for services was overwhelming. They wanted to challenge the State system to improve its standards.

“We hoped to change something,” one doctor, Mila Yevloyeva, says, “but now we don’t hope.”

They had run out of money, and their dream seemed shattered. Now, World Vision had arrived in the form of Jukka, excited by their vision and with the possibility of providing them with funds and other resources. We agree to ask the President to support this medical work and to permit the free carriage of medical goods if we import them.

“Unless there is a challenge to the medical system,” Mila tells us, “no one will survive.”

They ran a mobile medical clinic until their money ran out. They found a high incidence of tuberculosis in the mountain communities—six times the national average. And no easy access to medical facilities. “If you get sick up there,” said Mila, “you die.”

“Ingushetia is just so poor,” admits Lisa, “ninety per cent of the income for this government is a donation from the Federal government.”

Teachers teach without salary. Thirteen hundred children go to the local school designed for 250. They work three shifts (all by the same teachers) from 0700 to 1900 every day. The school does not have heating.

From the clinic, we go to the nurse’s school, housed in a nondescript apartment block. Here, in dingy surroundings, a serious blonde woman, Elsa, is teaching English classes. Her spoken English is predictably excellent, but she struggles to understand my unfamiliar Australian accent, even when I put on my best international accent.

One girl is early for class, and she stands as we enter the room. A few minutes later, she is still standing. Ellina explains, “In Ingush society, a woman cannot sit while a man remains standing.”

“So should it be!” I joke and momentarily catch Ellina’s blazing eye until she realises I am joking.

“I don’t think so,” she says.

Back at the Red Crescent headquarters, we meet a woman from a Chechnyan town who had been teaching children with World Vision help. Then, the winter set in and made it too cold for the children to come to school. Now, she has come to pick up second-hand clothes from Canada. She has arranged a truck.

“You can come any time,” she urges us. “I have my fighters. They will protect you.”

Yeah sure. We’re on the way.

Jukka and Lilian discuss whether to offer her a salary to coordinate project work in her area of Chechnya. Jukka wants more details on what she plans to do, but Lilian is persuaded by her assessment of the woman’s character. They make no decision.

Now it is time to go meet the President, but when we arrive, he has not arrived. We are met by a pleasant woman official who introduces herself as the President’s advisor on health, education and other matters. She thrills when she hears I am from Australia, saying it is her dream to go there someday as she was a geography teacher and loved to study Australia. I say, “You should go. You will be most welcome.”

We will not easily see the President today, and I tell Jukka, "The President will be disappointed to have missed us. And now he will owe us a debt.” Jukka agrees that sometimes having an official with an obligation to you is useful.

We are instead offered the “Chairman of the Government.” He meets us within ten minutes and performs well for a man without briefing. He is a young man who listens carefully and offers golden words that indicate political savvy. Jukka pushes the point about free access through customs for our medicines, and he assures us that provided all the laws are complied with, he will ensure there is no problem.

It is getting dark, and these are unsafe roads at night. Or any other time, is the impression I have been getting. We wheel out of town past an icy lake surrounding by what looks like a Scandinavian village! “It is a Finnish company. They are building the sports complex over there. We met the people accidentally last month and could not believe other Finns were in this area. They said, ‘Come and enjoy the sauna’, so we did. It was heaven.”

We drop Lisa, our Red Crescent partner, near her house and continue past the refugee camps where people live in containers. “They have been there for two years. Some longer. Imagine living in one of these and walking up there and seeing your house over the border. Or what is left of your house. But you cannot go there.”

We drive back across the border and drop Ellina home. Her brother is waiting in the gloom for her near the entrance. Jukka, Lilian and I enjoy conversation and dinner back at their flat. We discuss the place of Israel in post-Messiah theology. Jukka and Lilian have strongly supported the “Friends of Israel” movement in Finland. They have been to Israel a dozen times, often as tour group leaders. Jukka’s attitudes toward Israel were challenged and transformed by reading “Blood Brothers,” Abuna Elias Chacour’s book. I tell him I had the same experience.

They begin at a point where the promises God made to Israel about restoring them to the land are now being fulfilled in the modern State of Israel, and this is a portent of end times. I allow this interpretation to be possible and do not say it is wrong, even though I believe it might be. Instead, I suggest there is another interpretation strongly supported by Paul in Romans 9-11 and Hebrews 7 & 8, namely that the definition of “Israel” was changed by Jesus. God made a new covenant with Israel. When they rejected it, he said that Israel would henceforth be those who entered the new Kingdom of God through his atonement. So, all the promises given to Israel are now given to his church since this is the true Israel. And the new land he promises us is no longer a physical place but the Kingdom of God, a place we can live wherever we happen to be and for eternity. That’s the essence of the Good News.

Israel's return to the physical land of Israel might be a fulfilment of Old Testament theology, but it is not what the New Testament teaches. At least, that's how I read it.

We retire.

Today, I leave North Caucasus and fly to Moscow. At the airport, a man in his thirties catches our eye and says in good English, "Are you Christians?" I reply that we are, and Jukka says, "Why?"

His name is Albert, and he is an Estonian pastor who has been invited to a local Protestant community for bible study and preaching.

"A hundred and fifty people were saved during these past two days," he enthuses.

We say "Good," and Jukka and Lilian ask about this Protestant Church since they did not know such a thing existed in Vladikavkaz. I can see that I am going to have a companion on the two-hour flight to Moscow, whether I like it or not.

As he moves off to farewell his hosts, Jukka turns to me and asks, "How do you feel when you hear that 150 people are saved?"

"I think that he will grow out of it."

Lilian says, "I think I am too old sometimes."

We all have the same reaction. Jukka says, "When I was a young ablaze Christian, I enthusiastically wrote to my uncle since he was a wise, old Christian. He replied, 'Just wait'."

It turns out that Albert is not an unpleasant travelling companion. We sit together on the small jet taking us back to Moscow, but I read, and he sleeps. On alighting, I introduce him to Tigran, who mentions the one Estonian person he knows from his university days. It turns out that Albert and Tigran's friend were high school classmates!

The afternoon in Moscow is mostly business. Tigran and I have a late lunch at a pizza parlour next to the hotel. The menu is printed in US dollars, but they only take roubles or credit cards. The salad bar is varied if tired, and the pizza is nice.

We go to the office in a modern medical research building. World Vision has two rooms. I meet Lena, the office secretary-administrator. We discuss a few issues and then go to Rebecca's house. Rebecca is the finance person in the office. Her husband, Peter, who arrives later, is in the importing business for a Hong Kong-based company. The main imports are tea and rice, but sometimes they import electronics.

"But you know, electronics are too easy to steal," explains Peter. "One container of electronic equipment and a thief is set for life. We even have instances of the shipper stealing from himself!"

The food is from South India, and the curry is mild, the curry curd hotter, and the company warm. I remind them that Jesus loved to eat with people, and so do I. Unfortunately for me, I admit, "it is one of the few things Jesus and I have in common." Michelle, their six-year-old daughter, goes to bed at 1930 as we begin our evening meal.

At 2200, we finally leave, and Peter drives us down to the main road to "hitchhike" back to the hotel. He has a Lada, which looks like an old Fiat 124. It is crude and rough.

At the main road, we stand ready to hitchhike. Someone calls out to us from a Lada on the access road. Tigran waves him away. "He will not be reliable," he says.

A policeman has stopped a motorist at the intersection.

"He may not have done anything wrong", explains Tigran.

“Just unlucky.”

“Yes. Sometimes the policeman says, ‘We have family’. They are quite blatant about it. Other times, it is not exactly clear. You may be stopped and told to pay a fine at a bank, not cash to the policeman. But of course, there isn’t a bank nearby, and you are in a hurry, so you say, ‘I am in a hurry. Please help me out, and I will be happy to pay double the price.’ Sometimes this works. But sometimes the policeman says, ‘What! Are you trying to bribe an official?’ So, you don’t know whether he is serious or you have offered him too little.”

“What do you do?” I ask. “How do you resolve such a situation.”

“I don’t drive,” Tigran answers pragmatically.

A large black Volga with dark windows curves around the corner, and Tigran says, “I hope this one will stop for us.” It does. A soldier is driving the car. His jacket with one pip hangs on the coat hook. Tigran explains that these military or official vehicles are more reliable. I am left bemused by all this and ask, “Is this man giving us a lift out of the goodness of his heart, or are we paying him?”

“No, we are paying him.”

“Have you negotiated the price?”

“It is a set fee. These people are making some money for themselves in between official jobs.”

It is a commonplace and well-understood service.

My room at the Intourist Hotel is identical to the last one except for a few floors higher. I leave the gold neck chain and my Ethiopian cross hanging on the bathroom door. Usually, I hang it somewhere that I cannot miss seeing it. Like on the door to the room or around my wallet. Indeed, I had done this and put it on, then realised I hadn’t cleaned my teeth, so I placed it “for a moment” on the bathroom door. Doubt I’ll ever see it again. The gold would be worth a few bob, but the cross had sentimental value as a souvenir of my first visit to Africa almost twenty years ago. Of course, I was on the plane en route to Vienna by the time my hand casually felt my throat and wondered what was missing. If asked, I could always say I gave it to a policeman to buy his silence about a murder (Remarkably, the hotel returned it a week later).

At the check-out, I help interpret for a German man to whom the receptionist was giving English instructions. This was a small but exciting victory for your humble German student.

Tigran meets me and we go to the USAID office to meet the people who are our main contacts (and bosses) for the Nurses’ Federation project. Security conscious, they check our papers thoroughly and I must return to the car and get my passport. Carrying your passport in Eastern Europe is common practice, but it is not yet common for me. Our meeting is in a rabbit warren of two stories behind the main building. Tigran does most of the talking as he knows these people well and is confidently across his subject matter. I merely give my greetings and the vague ill-informed answers of a still green regional director, but this is probably more than they want from me. And undoubtedly more than they need.

From USAID, we drive around the zoo block to the World Bank. The zoo is a massive affair right in the heart of Moscow. Tigran says it has been recently renovated, with the old-style cages removed and animals given more freedom—insufficient to deprive customers of theirs, we hope. I wish I could visit, but there is no time, and it does not appear to be open.

Coming behind the US embassy building, Tigran points out the massive structure that had been built for the Americans, only for them to find out it was riddled with secret surveillance devices and, therefore, not able to be occupied. Tigran says he has heard they intend to build two more secure floors on top of the old structure (which looks to be about eight stories high) and only use these top two floors.

The World Bank is different. Like the US embassy, the building has no direct entrances from the street. A small side entrance is guarded, although our papers are not checked here. Tigran pushes the intercom by the door, and when nothing happens, I push the door and find it is open. Tigran is surprised at the lack of security. The building has wide corridors and very large offices. Obviously, the World Bank is doing well enough in Russia. We meet Michael Carter, who turns out to be an Englishman, or perhaps Welsh. Here, I do most of the talking. At first, I presume this is just a matter of status and protocol, but later, Tigran confides he found the man's accent very hard to understand. The contact proves useful as Michael invites a Russian colleague into the meeting to set up a further meeting for Tigran to discuss project possibilities. It may have been time well spent. Carter knows James Goering from World Vision's Washington DC office from the time they worked together for the USAID in Ethiopia. James had made the introduction for us by mail.

Then, it is time to make for the airport and the flight home.