

Hunger Journal

Working Toward Food Security in Georgia

Georgia & the Legacy of the 'August War'

by Davit Belqania

Editor's note: Much of the material you will read in this journal is related to food insecurity caused by the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, known in Georgia as "the August War." You will read stories about people who are still displaced in the area around Gori, where the Hunger Journal staff visited a soup kitchen. Below, Davit Belqania gives us some historical and personal context for the ongoing crisis in his country.

Eleven years have passed since the 2008 Russo-Georgian "August War." The Five Day War, which was the shortest in the history of Georgia, had a devastating effect: children were orphaned, women widowed, territories were lost, and today 20 percent of Georgia is occupied by Russia. Because of this war, many families lost their homes and the country now has 263,598 Internally Displaced People, 26,000 as a result of the August War.

After the 2003 Rose Revolution,¹ Georgia started to develop and focus its course based on Western values. Our country was learning to be an independent, peaceful country and implementing European standards. After the

USSR and the so-called "Dark 90s," there had been a huge leap. The August War came like lightning on a clear sky. It was an unexpected tragedy that filled people with despair and fear.

Tensions in Georgian-Russian relations started way back in history, but one of the most influential steps was the Treaty of Georgievsk between King Erekle II of Georgia and Catherine II of Russia in 1783. Hoping to be protected, Erekle repudiated all former ties and submitted to Russian supervision. The essence of all this

Please see "August War" on page 3.



Above: A Map of Georgia showing what most of the world sees as Russian-occupied territories (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) in pink.

The Story of the Gori Soup Kitchen

from Bishop Rusudan Gotsiridze
as told to Nini Pirtskhalava



Above: Bishop Rusudan Gotsiridze, standing in the worship area of the Gori Baptist Church, relates the history of the church and its soup kitchen.

Rusudan Gotsiridze, the bishop in the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia for the region around the town of Gori, said the Baptist church in Gori was founded 40 years ago. Rusudan's grandfather was the priest here. The church carries a legacy of giving not only spiritual aid, but also material aid.

To have a soup kitchen run by this church was, to them, like giving water to the thirsty. The church saw starting this ministry not just as a wish, but as a necessity.

When people had to leave their homes after the war in 2008, a refugee camp was set up right next to the church, and the idea of a soup kitchen started from there. This is the poorest area of the city. It was bombed in 2008. After the initial government relief project ended, the church members felt that it was even more necessary to keep the soup kitchen open.

The church members are doing this now because government isn't helping the people. These guests especially need help because they have had to start all over again twice. While others only had to rebuild their lives once after the first South Ossetia conflicts, these people had to do it all over again after 2008.

When the government funding was stopped, people at church started collecting food and money. Some days were worse than others, and they didn't always have enough food to offer the people who needed it. Rusudan says that, if it weren't for the persistence of Liana Svianadze, the woman who runs the soup kitchen, this place would have been closed a long time ago.

—Nini Pirtskhalava (pictured below, with Rusudan Gotsiridze) is a high-school student and a member of a theatre group in Tbilisi. She loves to read in her spare time. After high school, she plans to continue her education at the university.

Editor's note: Most of the guests at the Gori Baptist Church soup kitchen where the *Hunger Journal* staff visited in late June are Internally Displaced Georgians from South Ossetia, one of the two regions that Georgians (and most of the rest of the world) claim are part of their country and occupied by Russia.

Abkhazia, in northwestern Georgia, claims, with Russian backing, to be an independent republic. The Georgian government and most United Nations member states officially see Abkhazia as a Russian-occupied part of Georgia. This dispute goes back to the breakup of the Soviet Union. Ethnic tensions in the region erupted in 1992 and 1993, in what Georgians refer to as the Abkhazia War, during which ethnic Georgians were attacked and/or expelled from the region.

South Ossetia, just to the north of Gori (see the map on page 1), has also declared itself independent. During the "August War" of 2008, Abkhaz and Russian forces joined with South Ossetian separatists to fight against Georgian troops and carry out ethnic cleansings against Georgians. Georgian villages were destroyed and ethnic Georgians were expelled. Ironically, until 2008, Russia had been playing a peacekeeper role in the region.



Mother & Daughter Help with Soup Kitchen

by Natia Aroshvili and Nini Pirtskhalava



Above: Natia Aroshvili and Nini Pirtskhalava interview Anano and Eka through the soup kitchen window.

Most of the people we met at the soup kitchen at Gori Baptist Church were of the older generation, but there were also children in the church. We interviewed a 12-year-old girl, Anano.

Her mother, Eka, told us that Anano was 3 years old when they came to the soup kitchen and they have been living at the church ever since. They help Liana Svianadze [see the story on page 4] in the soup kitchen. Eka said that they are serving people and serving God there. In this part of Gori, it is difficult to reach the educational or entertainment services for children in the inner city.

In her free time, Anano paints and helps her mother. She is also a member of the church choir. She said that when people thank her, she feels very happy.

For both the mother and daughter, life is for making other people happy. If they had one wish, they would ask the government for more soup kitchens like this one for people in need.

—Natia Aroshvili is from Tbilisi, Georgia. She is studying law in Ilia State University. It is her first year studying there. “After this,” she says, “I think I will protect human rights.” Nini Pirtskhalava is also from Tbilisi. She is a high school student and a member of a theatre group. In her spare time she loves to read. After high school, she plans to continue her education at the university.

August War

continued from page 1

was that Russia would be our great friend and would always defend Georgia, but those expectations were not fulfilled. We have been fighting for freedom from Russia since that date. And perhaps from that date the ground for Russia’s occupation of Georgia was laid.

I was 11 years old in 2008, and I remember my village filled with people running away from bombings and finding shelter in their relatives’ homes. We were afraid of Russian soldiers, who held position just a few houses away from us. Everyone was afraid.

Today we have an economical and political crisis in Georgia. The country has not made much progress in the 11 years after the war. It is important to mention that people who were displaced received some amount of compensation and housing at first, but the occupation still continues. Russia is even today occupying Georgian territories.

—Davit Belqania is 22 years old. He studies journalism at Georgian National University in Tbilisi with the faculty of social sciences. Music is a big part of his life and is one of his hobbies. He also loves animals, especially dogs. He aspires to become a professional journalist and through his work help people to have access to knowledge and information.

Endnote

1. The Revolution of Roses, or “Rose Revolution,” began in November 2003 with widespread demonstrations concerning disputed parliamentary elections. At one point, protestors stormed the Parliament building with red roses in their hands. It culminated, after 20 days, with the removal of Eduard Shevardnadze, the president of Georgia and de facto Soviet leader for the country. Georgia has experienced increased tensions with Russia ever since.

An Interview with Liana Svianadze

by Matthew Saralishvili

Editor's note: Liana Svianadze is the volunteer director of the Gori Baptist Church's soup kitchen.

SARALISHVILI: Liana, I would like to know why you started this project and how you became part of it.

SVIANADZE: I became a part of it long ago. I have been here for 37 years. I do my best to work for the word of God. It happened in the 2008 war in Georgia. At that time, all the villages were emptied and people started to migrate towards Gori. They didn't have homes, water or clothes. They were hungry. And I decided to start this project as a child of God to give these people food. At first, it wasn't much, because it was from my family. The number of people, of course, grew. It became home for 50 to 60 of them. In Gori, people struggle against poverty. That's why, if you ask them, they'll tell you that they're very happy that this

church exists. They would tell you that this church saved their lives. I do what I can.

SARALISHVILI: I'd like to make something clear. It has been more than 10 years after the war, right? But still the number of people is increasing.

SVIANADZE: Yes. It has been more than 10 years. You would think that they would get back on their feet, but more people are hungry. They search for food in garbage cans.

SARALISHVILI: What do you think is the reason?

SVIANADZE: There are no jobs for them. People need to work. Russia is still fighting against us by occupying more than 20 percent of our country. What can people do?

SARALISHVILI: Does your government help?

SVIANADZE: No. They're not even interested in it. Many times, I have taken my own pension and given it to the people who are hungry. (She starts crying.) If I had anything at home, if my family members had juice or something that the people needed, I used it for helping people too. I have emptied my fridge for them and whole city of Gori knows it.

SARALISHVILI: Do the people change? Or is it the same group of people who come here?

SVIANADZE: Many of them have died, but two times more come. When they come they take food home, too.

SARALISHVILI: What about their ages? Are there only old people, or do young people come for food, too?

SVIANADZE: Young people, too. Because of the jobs that don't exist. They come. People of any age.



Left: Liana Svianadze has been in charge of the Gori soup kitchen for 37 years.
Photo by Matthew Saralishvili.

SARALISHVILI: This soup kitchen works six days a week, doesn't it?

SVIANADZE: Yes! We rest only on Sundays.

SARALISHVILI: Who helps you now?

SVIANADZE: No one. The government does nothing. It's mainly on us.

SARALISHVILI: What is the name of the church which is doing the soup kitchen project?

SVIANADZE: The Baptist church. We want to share love. We feel responsible for everyone. That's how I see our church.

SARALISHVILI: Thank you.

—Matthew (Mate) Saralishvili is a 20-year-old student from Tbilisi, Georgia. He studied at Waldorf School and is now studying at Ilia State University. He will have books published in July and December of this year. He works as a facilitator at the Peace Academy, a project for youth from different cultures to learn about living together. He also leads a non-professional theatre group called Mzia Gotsiridze Theatre group. 'I'm part of the Evangelical Baptist church in Georgia,' he says, "and that's how I managed to connect with Seeds of Hope. I'm trying to gain knowledge to help people in any way possible and this project is a good place for me to begin."

The Man Who Lost Everything

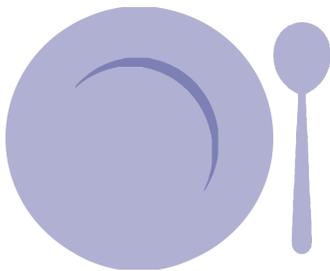
by Elene Kaltozishvili

One of our respondents told us that he lost everything because of the August 2008 war, when Russia invaded what is now known as South Ossetia, near Gori. Before that, he said, he was a victim of the Abkhazia war. He lost his home and family. He had two sons. One of them died in the Abkhazia war, and the other one died in 2008. His wife died shortly after that.

Now he is alone and his only hope is this soup kitchen. He comes here every day and has a hot meal. It is not enough sometimes. He needs medicine but he is not able to afford it without help.

People at the soup kitchen help him. Sometimes he gives them his clothes. They wash them and give them back to him. He has nothing now, he says, besides the help from the soup kitchen in Gori.

—Elene Kalatozishvili is from Tbilisi, Georgia. At this writing, she had just graduated from Ballet High School. She is interested in psychology and loves dance and theatre. She is a member of the Evangelical Baptist church in Tbilisi and participates in the church's activities.



Right: Members of the Hunger Journal team interview a man who told them he had lost everything to the Abkhazia War and the August War.



A Woman of Courage

by Sophie Tabagari

Mrs. Izo is from Gori. She has been an Internally Displaced Person since the August 2008 war in Georgia. She is 81 years old and lives alone, since her son has left to go abroad and she is divorced. She had a house, but her relative sold it. Now she is living in a shelter with others, and she has to cope with very poor conditions. She does not even have a restroom.

She is one of the people who visits the soup kitchen every single day and also worships here at the church. This is the only place where she can come for food, as well as medicine. Although she is very poor (she gets social assistance from the government and her main income is her pension), she tries to be helpful to oth-

ers. She provides some poor people around her with a small amount of money and sometimes with food.

She goes to different Baptist churches and participates in gatherings as well as their charity. She likes to go to every church she can to listen to God's words. Mrs. Izo considers that, in spite of the fact that she is extremely poor, it is her duty to help others as long as she is able.

Mrs. Izo is one of the women living in Gori who live in desperate situations. However, she is still an example of courage, strength and optimism. The way she talks cheerfully and the way she looks at problems shows that she is never afraid of life and is very determined. She also stresses that although her life, like that of many people around her, is very hard, she finds her hope in God.

—Sophie Tabagari is 24 years old. She is from Tbilisi, Georgia. She is a master's student at Tbilisi State University, studying international law. She wants to go abroad to get one more master's degree and become a doctor of international law.



Left: Guests of the Gori Baptist Church soup kitchen enjoy a hot meal in the same room where worship takes place. Above, back left: Members of the Hunger Journal staff interview a guest (see "The Man Who Lost Everything" on page 5).

Nana's Story

by Matthew Saralishvili

In late June I traveled with people from Seeds of Hope to Gori to visit the soup kitchen at the Baptist church, where we met a lot of interesting people. When we went into the building we saw more than 20 of them at the table eating food. One of them was Nana, a woman with a scarf around her neck, red lipstick and beautiful make-up. We decided to interview her. She was very open to our questions. She said that she's been going to this church for five years.

She ended up at the church because of her husband's death. She said that she felt very negative at that time and her neighbor told her about the church. She also said that this church gives her everything that she needs: food, medicine, money. They are needed because she and other people from Gori cannot afford to buy these things. Some of them cannot make food by themselves. She feels that the 2008 war had a big impact on people, and it was one of the reasons why she connected to the church and soup kitchen.

—Matthew (Mate) Saralishvili, pictured below with new friend Nana, is a 20-year-old student from Tbilisi. He studied at Waldorf School and is now studying at Ilia State University. He will have books published in July and December of this year. For his full bio, see page 4.



It's the Same in Any Language...

ხორღ როდესაც მოვა კაცის ძე თავისი ღიღებით და ყველა მისი ანგელოზი მასთან ერთად, მაშინ დაჯდება თავისი ღიღების ტახტზე. და შეიკრიბება მის წინაშე ყოველი ერთი და გამოარჩევს მათ ერთიმეორისაგან, როგორც მწყემსი არჩევს თხებს ცხვრებისაგან. და დააყენებს ცხვრებს თავის მარჯვნივ და თხებს – მარცხნივ. მაშინ ეტყვის მეფე თავის მარჯვნივ მდგომთ: 'მოდი, ჩემი მამის კურთხეულნო, დაიძვინდრეთ სამყაროს დასაბამიდან თქვენთვის გამზადებული სასუფეველი. რადგან მშობლა და საჭმელი მომეცით, მწყუროდა და მასვით, უცხო ვიყავი და მიმიღეთ, შიშველი ვიყავი და შემომსეთ, სნეული ვიყავი და მინახურეთ, საპყრობილეში ვიყავი და მომაკითხეთ.' მაშინ მიუგებენ მას მართაღნი და ეტყვიან: 'უფალო, როდის გიხიღეთ შენ მშობერი და დაგაპურეთ? ან მწყურვადი და გასვით? როდის გიხიღეთ უცხო და მიგიღეთ? ან შიშველი და შეგმოსეთ? როდის გიხიღეთ შენ სნეული, ან საპყრობილეში მყოფი და მოგაკითხეთ?' და მიუგებს მეფე და ეტყვის მათ: 'ჯეშმარტად გეუბნებით თქვენ: რაც გაუკეთეთ ერთს ამ ჩემს უმცირეს ძმათაგანს, მე გამიკეთეთ.' და მაშინ ეტყვის იმათაც, ვინც მარცხნივაა: 'წადით ჩემგან, წყეულნო, საუკუნო ცეცხლში, რომელიც გამზადებულია ეშმაკისა და მისი ანგელოზებისათვის.

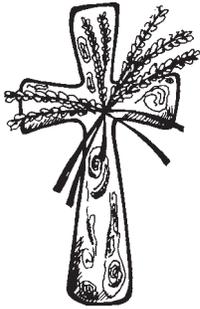
"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'" (Matthew 25:31-41)

Hunger Journal

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The stories were written by high-school and university students who participated in the workshop.

The workshop was part of the Seeds Creating Hope Project, which also includes a “Theatre of the Oppressed” workshop.



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*Above: Hunger Journal staff (back row) at the Baptist church in Gori, Georgia. Guilherme Almeida (back row, far left), a member of the Seeds of Hope Council of Stewards, conducted the “Theatre of the Oppressed” workshop. People on the front row are volunteers at the soup kitchen.
Below: Participants in the Creating Hope project at the wrap-up session in Tbilisi on July 31.*



Seeds of Hope is a private, independent group of believers responding to a common burden for the poor and hungry people in God’s world, and acting on the strong belief that biblical mandates to feed the poor were not intended to be optional. Seeds is housed by the community of faith at Seventh & James Baptist Church, 602 James Ave., Waco, TX 76706; 254 /755-7745; seedseditor1@gmail.com; www.seedspublishers.org. Copyright © 2019; ISSN 0194-4495. Seeds of Hope, Inc., holds the 501(c)3 nonprofit tax status.