

Hole

Kidnapped in Georgia

Peter Shaw

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Extract

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PREFACE

The people of Georgia are warm, welcoming, spontaneously humorous, intelligent and naturally gregarious. They are famed for their ability to organise feasts for their guests – the ubiquitous Georgian ‘table’ – and eventually bore the pants off them by the interminable rounds of toasts delivered by the ever-present *tamada*, the Georgian toastmaster. Participants at the tables invariably end up enjoyably inebriated. Georgians have long been labelled by their Russian neighbours as incorrigible liars, cheats and rogues, and they are rather proud of that. This is not meant to be a criticism of the Georgian character, simply components of the survival techniques imposed upon them by the economic and social environment in which they have had to live. They are also proud of their culture – they are great singers, dancers, musicians, poets and artists – their language, and their independence. During my time in Georgia, they were not sure from whom they wished to be independent – the West or Russia – or how to achieve it. They simply knew it was out there somewhere and they wanted it – urgently!

There was no real infrastructure in Georgia, at least not as we know it in the West. During the winter, schools closed because there was no heating. There was no heating because there was no consistent electricity or gas supply, and even if there were, the radiators within the schools may well have been removed and sold as scrap metal. Officially, Georgia’s biggest export was and is scrap metal. Salaries to teachers, police, judges, and government ministers were paid, at best, sporadically. The police existed by taking money from drivers who paid up rather than risk being thrown in jail. Judges thrived by taking bribes – the highest bidder won the court case. Government ministers existed by stealing money from international donor organisations. Teachers had no chance and depended upon family support, and direct international aid, as did surgeons, doctors and nurses. University degrees and driving tests were easily purchased.

I spent six years working in Georgia, living in the capital city of Tbilisi, and working under contract to the European Commission. I was Project Team Leader for four and a half years of my time in Georgia – with intermittent responsibilities in neighbouring Azerbaijan – the last three years of which were spent establishing and helping to manage the Agro-business Bank of Georgia. With the financial and technical support of the European Commission, the bank was dedicated to providing credit to the privatising agricultural sector of Georgia and its associated rural agri-businesses. In other words, the bank provided basic financial services to small farmers, processors and traders when no other bank in Georgia would. It had been very difficult to establish and thereafter to manage, but nothing prepared me for what was to come a few days before I was due to leave Georgia at the end of my contract.

The Pankisi Gorge

The Pankisi Gorge – where I was held captive for most of my incarceration, although I did not know it at the time – is a 40km-long, hook-shaped river valley in the north-east of Georgia, from which numerous mountain passes run north and east to Georgia’s border with the Russian republics of Dagestan and Chechnya. Average elevation in the valley is four hundred metres rising to more than three thousand metres in the mountain ranges to the north. Vehicle access to the valley is almost impossible, apart from the main road from Akhmeta. The surrounding dense forests further isolate the area. Once out of the valley itself, the terrain quickly becomes inhospitable and virtually impossible to traverse.

Following the outbreak of the second Chechen war in 1999, as Russian forces pushed to the south, groups of Chechen refugees fled across the border into Georgia. Some eight thousand refugees were thought to have taken up residence at that time in the Pankisi valley. The refugees were taken in by the seven thousand local Kists – Chechens who settled peacefully in the Pankisi at least two hundred years ago. With the refugees came a number of Chechen fighters who saw Georgia as a convenient rear-retreat position. From that time until the present, they have used Georgia for rest and recuperation and as a base for their logistics support networks. The Pankisi area, already in 1999 a criminal hotspot seen as beyond the powers of the Tbilisi Government, and home to their Kist cousins, represented an ideal bolthole for Chechen fighters. A census in 2002 put refugee numbers at about four thousand. The refugees refused to return to Chechnya while the Russian armed forces remained there. The Gorge was also home to a small number of Arab facilitators who were thought to have provided logistical, financial and technical support for the fighters in Chechnya.

It is estimated that, since 2000, several hundred anti-Russian fighters have come to live in the Gorge. These militants are thought to be dispersed in among the refugee population, and to the north of the Gorge within seasonal settlements. Russia has brought concerted pressure to bear upon Georgia to eliminate the rebels harboured on its territory, further aggravating the difficult relations between the two countries.

At the same time, the Pankisi valley was home to a thriving organised crime community, specialising in anything from car theft to drug-trafficking and kidnappings. These criminal activities were most often thought to be carried out by Kist gangs, for financial rather than political gain. Weak central government control, prevalent throughout the whole country, had all but disintegrated in the Pankisi, leaving the gangs free to act with impunity. Between the refugees, the Kists and corruption within the Georgian security bodies, the Pankisi Gorge became a lawless area in which criminality was virtually unchecked. Added to this was the Georgian Government's fear that any attempt to bring order back to the Pankisi Gorge would result in a violent Chechen backlash, which it could not control.

I wouldn't recommend a holiday in the Pankisi Gorge

Chapter One

It was 6.00pm on Wednesday, 18th June 2002, an unusually wet and windy day for that time of the year in Tbilisi, Georgia, but I was a happy man. Having worked in Georgia for six years, I was going home for good on 20th June. A wonderful prospect!

All preparations had been completed. My partner, Diana, had packed the accumulated debris of our time together and had successfully negotiated with local contractors to fly out seven crates of domestic accoutrements to arrive in South Wales somewhere near to our own arrival date. That was no mean feat, given the dislocated and confused nature of customs administration in Georgia. The final pieces of the logistical jigsaw had been put into place over the past few days, including the transportation of three of our pack of feral cats to the UK by Austrian Airlines. There were many tears shed over the ones we were going to leave behind, but so it had to be.

Following a lot of hassle involving the payment of various “fees” to the airport and customs officials, by 9.30am on the morning of 18th, Blacky, Whitey and Panther were finally on their way. My last telephone call from my office in the Agro-business Bank of Georgia a few minutes earlier had been to Phil Morgan, the “cat man”, who confirmed that he was *en route* to meet them at Heathrow Airport and would then transport them to his quarantine centre at Bridgend.

I had enjoyed and survived a series of farewell parties given by my friends and colleagues in Georgia, and all that remained was to attend a final party organised by the local Delegation of the European Commission. This was to be held at the home of the Senior Counsellor at the Delegation, Jacques Vantomme, on the evening of 19th June. I hoped the weather would improve as I knew the intention was to dine *au sauvage* in his splendid garden just outside Tbilisi. It’d be a pity if the weather led to another postponement: we’d already changed the date because of an unexpected trip that Jacques had to make to Armenia. I’d immediately agreed to delay my departure from Georgia from the 18th to 20th June in order to fit in with Jacques’ amended timetable. It seemed churlish to refuse, given the support I’d received from the EC Delegation during my time in Georgia. All that remained for today was to leave the office in a few minutes’ time and link up with a couple of colleagues for a final pint of local lager in the Toucan Bar on the way home to the apartment I shared with Diana and Danny, our son.

As I closed my laptop for the penultimate time, I looked around for the diminutive figure of George Kalandarashvili, our Head of Credit. He was not at his desk, but on inquiring with George Kankava, Head of Public Relations and a fellow director of the bank, he assured me that Kalandarashvili would meet us in the bar shortly. He was simply interviewing a customer at nearby business premises. I offered Kankava a lift in my car but he was already striding purposefully toward his own ancient Lada and confirmed with eager anticipation that we would meet in the bar in fifteen minutes’ time. Great, I thought. I could do with a pint.

As I nodded my farewells to the security guards who opened the door to let me out, I cast a glance around the front office of our modest little premises, and made a mental note to ask Eka to tidy up the papers surrounding her desk the following morning, a request I would not have to repeat. As I crossed the road toward my aging Skoda Octavia, I noticed a white mini-bus pulling slowly from the kerb about one hundred metres down the street from the bank premises. As I opened my car door, the mini-bus stopped. When I retraced my steps to pick up the local English newspaper I’d forgetfully left behind on my desk, the vehicle had come to a halt in the middle of the road. On re-emerging from the bank with my newspaper, I was surprised to find that the mini-bus had returned to its original parking place. Strange, I thought, but no more than that, as I settled into my car and buckled up. I really fancied that pint.

Chapter Two

I have always been rather proud of the fact that I was born in my granny's parlour at number 11 Church Street, Maesteg in South Wales.

My father was called Ron and, like me, was an only child. He was a native of Sheffield and had spent his formative and early adult years in the coal mining village of Langold, Nottinghamshire. My birth certificate describes his occupation as a colliery blacksmith at Firbeck Colliery, Langold. I suppose he was, but he was a quiet man and never mentioned that part of his life to me. He did tell me that he was a bit of a sportsman in his youth. He played tennis and soccer and was captain of the Sheffield Wheelers Cycling Club. Until his death in 1989 his full-time occupation in Wales was wagon repairer at the Steel Company of Wales at Port Talbot, just over the hill from Maesteg. His real enthusiasm however, was music. He was an accomplished pianist and in his early life obtained a degree at the Victoria College of Music in London and seriously considered pursuing a career as a professional pianist. His aspirations were, fortunately for me, thwarted by his meeting my mother during the pre-war years – an introduction made by a family friend who had himself migrated from South Wales to the Nottinghamshire coal-fields in the 1930's. This meeting led to an extended courtship and ultimately marriage in 1942. My father's musical ambitions were thereafter partially fulfilled by playing piano with various local dance bands in the South Wales valleys. No doubt, to him, a reasonably enjoyable means of augmenting the family income. He could certainly make a piano bounce.

My mother is the eldest of four sisters – there was also an older brother – and was born and raised in the coalmining village of Caerau near the top of the Llynfi Valley. A neighbour was the grandmother of Kylie Minogue. The family eventually moved down the valley to Maesteg. The valley was then, and remained throughout my early life, a community dependent almost entirely on coal and the steel works at Port Talbot. There were seven working deep mines in the Llynfi valley in those days and virtually every family had a male member who worked either in the coalmines or in the steel works. The Davies family was no exception. My maternal grandfather was a collier, as was the only son, Desmond, until the outbreak of war from which he returned minus one arm and one eye. During the war, my mother worked in the munitions factory – the “arsenal” – at Bridgend. She is still quite proud of that.

Following my parents' marriage, there was apparently an abortive attempt to make a home for themselves in Nottinghamshire. They tried for a short while, but my mother's homesickness won out, as did her very natural desire to have her child born in Wales, close to Mam. My father had no choice but to up-sticks and move to Wales.

In those days home ownership was not a venture entered into lightly by a working-class family in the South Wales valleys. Usually the only choice was to live with Mam and Dad. And so it was that my childhood was most happily spent living in a large, comfortable rented house with four bedrooms, a huge scullery, a living room, middle room and parlour, and a large back garden in which my grandpa kept chickens, and which had direct access to Maesteg's cricket field and the river Llynfi. Ours was an extended family consisting of my grandpa and granny, my mam and dad, Auntie Nance and Uncle Tom, Auntie Iris and Auntie Shirley; the latter only fourteen years my senior and more like a sister than an aunt.

I had an idyllic childhood punctuated by the occasional “clip” handed out to me by that member of the family who happened to be in closest proximity to my most recent misdemeanour, and by the frequent visits of cousins from their nearby homes. My memories are of happy schooldays at Plasnewydd Primary School, big, boozy Christmas parties shared with similarly large neighbouring families at which we all had to do a “turn”, of festive Guy Fawkes' bonfire nights – my grandfather was a council employee in his later years and was able to collect old tyres which made a terrific blaze, of Sunday nights in the parlour where my father played piano and the family took turns to sing. I spent a lot of time with Shirley, who

encouraged in me her love of cinema, film stars and numerous boyfriends, with whom I often shared the back seats of local cinemas.

I don't think we were a poor family. All male members of the family were generally in full-time employment – the pits were going full swing after the war – and my mother worked at nights as an usherette at the Plaza cinema. I think I saw every film for many years at least once and without ever having to pay. I've loved old films ever since. At an early age, my father indoctrinated into me a lifelong love of music, particularly jazz.

Gradually, and inevitably, the family split up. Shirley went off to university at Cardiff; Iris married a posh fellow and moved to Cardiff; Tom and Nance moved house, initially just up the road to number nine Church Street, and subsequently to Cymer, a colliery village over the mountain in the next valley. Some years later, following a horrendous colliery accident which my Uncle Tom survived, suffering very severe burns, they returned to Maesteg on the back of the compensation monies paid out by the National Coal Board. At forty years of age my uncle never worked again.

When I was about nine years old, my parents finally decided to leave the family home at Church Street and move to a new council house at Turberville Estate, a few miles down the valley from Maesteg town. I remember that there was a difficult settling-in period. My mother in particular was not happy living at this distance – about four miles – from her mam and dad. My father was in his fifties before he bought his first car and we lived some distance from the nearest bus-stop. After a few years, we moved again to a council house at Maesteg Park, within walking distance of Church Street and across the road from Maesteg Grammar School. I attended that school after passing the eleven-plus examinations in 1956.

By this time, Shirley had completed her degree course at university and had successfully landed a job teaching at Maesteg Grammar School. Iris had divorced and returned, temporarily, to the family home, and my father had become an established member of a local dance band and was happily undertaking two or three gigs each week at local clubs and dance halls in addition to his day job. It was the nearest he got to Ted Heath. During the whole of this period, the entire family – including Shirley until her marriage – always came together at the family home, eleven Church Street, every Saturday night. There my granny and grandpa would provide acres of food and lakes of bottled beer, and welcome any passing friend or acquaintance to join in the weekly celebrations. My grandfather, a successful amateur boxer in his time and a boxing referee thereafter, had a large number of drinking friends – he was a bit of a character – all of whom were very happy to take advantage of the free hospitality. The address was well-known in Maesteg for many years as “Fred's half-way house”. It was a very good place in which to grow up. Later I played a bit of rugby for Maesteg Youth, cricket for Maesteg Wednesdays and, with a friend, Clive Lewis, came runners up at the Welsh under 16 doubles tennis championships at Neath. I really had a smashing childhood in the heart of a large and loving family.