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Young Stalin

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Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

Extract

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PROLOGUE

THE BANK-ROBBERY

At 10.30 a.m. on the sultry morning of Wednesday, 13 June 1907, in the seething central square of Tiflis, a dashing moustachioed cavalry captain in boots and jodhpurs, wielding a big Circassian sabre, performed tricks on horseback, joking with two pretty, well-dressed Georgian girls who twirled gaudy parasols – while fingering Mauser pistols hidden in their dresses.

Raffish young men in bright peasant blouses and wide sailor-style trousers waited on the street corners, cradling secreted revolvers and grenades. At the louche Tilipuchuri Tavern on the square, a crew of heavily armed gangsters took over the cellar bar, gaily inviting passers-by to join them for drinks. All of them were waiting to carry out the first exploit by Josef Djugashvili, aged twenty-nine, later known as Stalin, to win the attention of the world.[1]

Few outside the gang knew of the plan that day for a criminal–terrorist 'spectacular', but Stalin had worked on it for months. One man who did know the broad plan was Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Party,* hiding in a villa in Kuokola, Finland, far to the north. Days earlier, in Berlin, and then in London, Lenin had secretly met with Stalin to order the big heist, even though their Social-Democratic Party had just strictly banned all 'expropriations', the euphemism for bank-robberies. But Stalin's operations, heists and killings, always conducted with meticulous attention to detail and secrecy, had made him the 'main financier of the Bolshevik Centre'.[2]

The events that day would make headlines all over the globe, literally shake Tiflis to its foundations, and further shatter the fragmented Social-Democrats into warring factions: that day would both make Stalin's career and almost ruin it – a watershed in his life.

In Yerevan Square, the twenty brigands who formed the core of Stalin's

*In 1903, the Russian Social-Democratic Workers Party split into two factions, the Bolsheviks under Lenin and the Mensheviks under Martov, who fought one another but remained part of the same party until 1912 when they formally divided, never to reunite. Lenin organized and led a secret three-man cabal called the Bolshevik Centre to raise money using bank-robbery and organized crime rackets.

gang known as 'the Outfit', took up positions as their lookouts peered down Golovinsky Prospect, Tiflis's elegant main street, past the white Italianate splendour of the Viceroy's Palace. They awaited the clatter of a stagecoach and its squadron of galloping Cossacks. The army captain with the Circassian sabre caracoled on his horse before dismounting to stroll the fashionable boulevard.

Every street corner was guarded by a Cossack or policeman: the authorities were ready. Something had been expected since January. The informers and agents of the Tsar's secret police, the Okhrana, and his uniformed political police, the Gendarmes, delivered copious reports about the clandestine shenanigans of the gangs of revolutionaries and criminals. In the misty twilight of this underground, the worlds of bandit and terrorist had merged and it was hard to tell tricks from truth. But there had been 'chatter' about a 'spectacular' – as today's intelligence experts would put it – for months.

On that dazzling steamy morning, the oriental colour of Tiflis (now Tbilisi, the capital of the Republic of Georgia) hardly seemed to belong to the same world as the Tsar's capital, St Petersburg, a thousand miles away. The older streets, without running water or electricity, wound up the slopes of Mtatsminda, Holy Mountain, until they were impossibly steep, full of crookedly picturesque houses weighed down with balconies, entwined with old vines. Tiflis was a big village where everyone knew everyone else.

Just behind the Military Headquarters, on genteel Freilinskaya Street, a stone's throw from the square, lived Stalin's wife, a pretty young Georgian dressmaker named Kato Svanidze, and their newborn son Yakov. Theirs was a true love match: despite his black moods, Stalin was devoted to Kato who admired and shared his revolutionary fervour. As she sunned herself and the baby on her balcony, her husband was about to give her, and Tiflis itself, an unholy shock.

This intimate city was the capital of the Caucasus, the Tsar's wild, mountainous viceroyalty between the Black and the Caspian Seas, a cauldron of fierce and proud peoples. Golovinsky Prospect seemed Parisian in its elegance. White neo-classical theatres, a Moorish-style opera house, grand hotels and the palaces of Georgian princes and Armenian oil barons lined the street, but, as one passed the Military Headquarters, Yerevan Square opened up into an Asiatic potpourri.

Exotically dressed hawkers and stalls offered spicy Georgian *lobio* beans and hot *khachapuri* cheesecake. Water-carriers, street-traders, pickpockets and porters delivered to or stole from the Armenian and Persian Bazaars, the alleyways of which more resembled a Levantine souk than a European city. Caravans of camels and donkeys, loaded with silks and spices from Persia and Turkestan, fruit and wineskins from the lush Georgian countryside, ambled through the gates of the Caravanserai. Its young waiters and errand-boys served its clientele of guests and diners, carrying in the bags, unharnessing the camels – and watching the square. Now we know from the newly

opened Georgian archives that Stalin, Fagin-like, used the Caravanserai boys as a prepubescent revolutionary street-intelligence and courier service. Meanwhile in one of the Caravanserai's cavernous backrooms, the chief gangsters gave their gunmen a peptalk, rehearsing the plan one last time. Stalin himself was there that morning.

The two pretty teenage girls with twirling umbrellas and loaded revolvers, Patsia Goldava and Anneta Sulakvelidze, 'brown-haired, svelte, with black eyes that expressed youth', casually sashayed across the square to stand outside the Military Headquarters, where they flirted with Russian officers, Gendarmes in smart blue uniforms, and bowlegged Cossacks.

Tiflis was – and still is – a languid town of strollers and boulevardiers who frequently stop to drink wine at the many open-air taverns: if the showy, excitable Georgians resemble any other European people, it is the Italians. Georgians and other Caucasian men, in traditional *chokha* – their skirted long coats lined down the chest with bullet pouches – swaggered down the streets, singing loudly. Georgian women in black headscarves, and the wives of Russian officers in European fashions, promenaded through the gates of the Pushkin Gardens, buying ices and sherbet alongside Persians and Armenians, Chechens, Abkhaz and Mountain Jews, in a fancy-dress jamboree of hats and costumes.

Gangs of street urchins – *kinto*s – furtively scanned the crowds for scams. Teenage trainee priests, in long white surplices, were escorted by their berobed bearded priest–teachers from the pillared white Seminary across the street, where Stalin had almost qualified as a priest nine years earlier. This unSlavic, unRussian and ferociously Caucasian kaleidoscope of east and west was the world that nurtured Stalin.

Checking the time, the girls Anneta and Patsia parted, taking up new positions on either side of the square. On Palace Street, the dubious clientele of the notorious Tilipuchuri Tavern – princes, pimps, informers and pickpockets – were already drinking Georgian wine and Armenian brandy, not far from the plutocratic grandeur of Prince Sumbatov's palace.

Just then David Sagirashvili, another revolutionary who knew Stalin and some of the gangsters, visited a friend who owned a shop above the tavern and was invited in by the cheerful brigand at the doorway, Bachua Kupriashvili, who 'immediately offered me a chair and a glass of red wine, according to the Georgian custom'. David drank the wine and was about to leave when the gunman suggested 'with exquisite politeness' that he stay inside and 'sample more snacks and wine'. David realized that 'they were letting people *into* the restaurant but would not let them *out*. Armed individuals stood at the door.'

Spotting the convoy galloping down the boulevard, Patsia Goldava, the slim brunette on lookout, sped round the corner to the Pushkin Gardens where she waved her newspaper to Stepko Intskirveli, waiting by the gate.

'We're off!' he muttered.

Stepko nodded at Anneta Sulakvelidze who was across the street just outside the Tilipuchuri, where she made a sign summoning the others from the bar. The gunmen in the doorway beckoned them. 'At a given signal,' Sagirashvili saw the brigands in the tavern put down their drinks, cock their pistols and head out, spreading across the square – thin, consumptive young men in wide trousers who had barely eaten for weeks. Some were gangsters, some desperadoes and some, typically for Georgia, were poverty-stricken princes from roofless, wall-less castles in the provinces. If their deeds were criminal, they cared nothing for money: they were devoted to Lenin, the Party and their puppet-master in Tiflis, Stalin.

'The functions of each of us had been planned in advance,' remembered a third girl in the gang, Alexandra Darakhvelidze, just nineteen, a friend of Anneta and already veteran of a spree of heists and shootouts.

The gangsters each covered the square's policemen – the *gorodovoi*, known in the streets as *pharaoh*s. Two gunmen marked the Cossacks outside the City Hall; the rest made their way to the corner of Velyaminov Street and the Armenian Bazaar not far from the State Bank itself. Alexandra Darakhvelidze, in her unpublished memoirs, recalled guarding one of the street corners with two gunmen.

Now Bachua Kupriashvili, nonchalantly pretending to read a newspaper, spotted in the distance the cloud of dust thrown up by the horses' hooves. They were coming! Bachua rolled up his newspaper, poised …

The cavalry captain with the flashing sabre, who had been promenading the square, now warned passers-by to stay out of it, but when no one paid any attention he jumped back on to his fine horse. He was no officer but the ideal of the Georgian *beau sabreur* and outlaw, half-knight, half-bandit. This was Kamo, aged twenty-five, boss of the Outfit and, as Stalin put it, 'a master of disguise' who could pass for a rich prince or a peasant laundrywoman. He moved stiffly, his half-blind left eye squinting and rolling: one of his own bombs had exploded in his face just weeks before. He was still recuperating.

Kamo 'was completely enthralled' by Stalin, who had converted him to Marxism. They had grown up together in the violent town of Gori 45 miles away. He was a bank-robber of ingenious audacity, a Houdini of prison-escapes, a credulous simpleton – and a half-insane practitioner of psychopathic violence. Intensely, eerily tranquil with a weird 'lustreless face' and a blank gaze, he was keen to serve his master, often begging Stalin: 'Let me kill him for you!' No deed of macabre horror or courageous flamboyance was beyond him: he later plunged his hand into a man's chest and cut out his heart.

Throughout his life, Stalin's detached magnetism would attract, and win the devotion of, amoral, unbounded psychopaths. His boyhood henchman Kamo and these gangsters were the first in a long line. 'Those young men followed Stalin selflessly … Their admiration for him allowed him to impose on them his iron discipline.'[3] Kamo often visited Stalin's home where he had earlier borrowed Kato's father's sabre, explaining that he was 'going to play an

officer of the Cossacks'.[4] Even Lenin, that fastidious lawyer, raised as a nobleman, was fascinated by the daredevil Kamo whom he called his 'Caucasian bandit'. 'Kamo', mused Stalin in old age, 'was a truly amazing person.'[5]

'Captain' Kamo turned his horse towards the boulevard and trotted audaciously right past the advancing convoy, coming the other way. Once the shooting started, he boasted, the whole thing 'would be over in three minutes'.

The Cossacks galloped into Yerevan Square, two in front, two behind and another alongside the two carriages. Through the dust, the gangsters could make out that the stagecoach contained two men in frockcoats – the State Bank's cashier Kurdyumov and accountant Golovnya – and two soldiers with rifles cocked, while a second phaeton was packed with police and soldiers. In the thunder of hooves, it took just seconds for the carriages and horsemen to cross the square ready to turn into Sololaki Street where stood the new State Bank: the statues of lions and gods over its door represented the surging prosperity of Russian capitalism.*

Bachua lowered his newspaper, giving the sign, then tossed it aside, reaching for his weapons. The gangsters drew out what they nicknamed their 'apples' – powerful grenades which had been smuggled into Tiflis by the girls Anneta and Alexandra, hidden inside a big sofa.

The gunmen and the girls stepped forward, pulled the fuses and tossed four grenades which exploded under the carriages with a deafening noise and an infernal force that disembowelled horses and tore men to pieces, spattering the cobbles with innards and blood. The brigands drew their Mauser and Browning pistols and opened fire on the Cossacks and police around the square who, caught totally unawares, fell wounded or ran for cover. More than ten bombs exploded. Witnesses thought they rained from every direction, even the rooftops: it was later said that Stalin had thrown the first bomb from the roof of Prince Sumbatov's mansion.

The Bank's carriages stopped. Screaming passers-by scrambled for cover. Some thought it was an earthquake: was Holy Mountain falling on to the city? 'No one could tell if the terrible shooting was the boom of cannons or explosion of bombs,' reported the Georgian newspaper *Isari (Arrow)*. 'The sound caused panic everywhere … almost across the whole city, people started running. Carriages and carts were galloping away …' Chimneys had toppled from buildings; every pane of glass was shattered as far as the Viceroy's Palace.

*The distances in this urban village are tiny. The Seminary, Stalin's family home, the Viceroy's Palace and the Bank are all about two minutes' walk from the site of the bank-robbery. Most of the buildings in Yerevan (later Beria, then Lenin, now Freedom) Square that feature here remain standing: the Tilipuchuri Tavern (now empty of any princes or brigands), the Seminary (now a museum), the City Hall, the HQ of the Caucasus Command, the State Bank and the Viceroy's Palace (where Stalin's mother lived for so long) are all unchanged. The Caravanserai, Pushkin Gardens, Adelkhanov Shoe Warehouse (where Stalin had worked) and the bazaars are gone.

Kato Svanidze was standing on her nearby balcony tending Stalin's baby with her family, 'when all of a sudden we heard the sound of bombs', recalled her sister, Sashiko. 'Terrified, we rushed into the house.' Outside, amid the yellow smoke and the wild chaos, among the bodies of horses and mutilated limbs of men, something had gone wrong.

One horse attached to the front carriage twitched then jerked back to life. Just as the gangsters ran to seize the money-bags in the back of the carriage, the horse reared up out of the mayhem and bolted down the hill towards the Soldiers Bazaar, disappearing with the money that Stalin had promised Lenin for the Revolution.[6]

* * *

During the ensuing century, Stalin's role that day was suspected yet unprovable. But now the archives in Moscow and Tbilisi show how he masterminded the operation and groomed his 'inside-men' within the Bank over many months. The unpublished memoirs of his sister-in-law Sashiko Svanidze, in the Georgian archives, record Stalin openly acknowledging that he presided over the operation.* A century after the heist, it is now possible to reveal the truth.

Stalin revelled in the 'dirty business of politics', the conspiratorial drama of revolution. When he was dictator of Soviet Russia, he referred enigmatically, even nostalgically, to those games of 'Cossacks and bandits' – *kazaki i razboyniki*, the Russian version of 'cops and robbers' – but never gave details that might undermine his credentials as a statesman.[7]

The Stalin of 1907 was a small, wiry, mysterious man of many aliases, usually dressed in a red satin shirt, grey coat and his trademark black fedora. Sometimes he favoured a traditional Georgian *chokha*, and he liked to sport a white Caucasian hood, draped dashingly over his shoulder. Always on the move, often on the run, he used the many uniforms of Tsarist society as his disguises, and frequently escaped manhunts by dressing in drag.

Attractive to women, often singing Georgian melodies and declaiming poetry, he was charismatic and humorous, yet profoundly morose, an odd Georgian with a northern coldness. His 'burning' eyes were honey-flecked when friendly, yellow when angry. He had not yet settled on the moustache and hair *en brosse* of his prime: he sometimes grew a full beard and long hair, still with the auburn tinge of his youth, now darkening. Freckled and pock-marked, he walked fast but crookedly, and held his left arm stiffly, after a spate of childhood accidents and illnesses.

Indefatigable in action, he bubbled with ideas and ingenuity. Inspired by a

*Stalin would not have thanked the Svanidzes for their frankness. They were close family for thirty years. His sister-in-law Sashiko, who left this memoir in 1934, died of cancer in 1936 – or she might have shared the fate of her sister Mariko, her brother Alyosha and his wife. Sashiko Svanidze's memoirs are used here for the first time. Some of the bank-robbers, such as Kamo, Bachua Kupriashvili and Alexandra Darakhvelidze, left unpublished, if incomplete, memoirs, also used here for the first time.

hunger for learning and an instinct to teach, he feverishly studied novels and history, but his love of letters was always overwhelmed by his drive to command and dominate, to vanquish enemies and avenge slights. Patient, calm and modest, he could also be vainglorious, pushy and thin-skinned, with outbursts of viciousness just a short fuse away.

Immersed in the honour and loyalty culture of Georgia, he was the gritty realist, the sarcastic cynic and the pitiless cutthroat *par excellence*: it was he who had created the Bolshevik bank-robbery and assassination Outfit, which he controlled from afar like a Mafia don. He cultivated the coarseness of a peasant, a trait which alienated comrades but usefully concealed his subtle gifts from snobbish rivals.

Happily married to Kato, he had chosen a heartless wandering existence that, he believed, liberated him from normal morality or responsibility, free from love itself. Yet while he wrote about the megalomania of others, he had no self-knowledge about his own drive for power. He relished his own secrecy. When he knocked on the doors of friends and they asked who was there, he would answer with mock-portentousness: 'The Man in Grey.'

One of the first professional revolutionaries, the underground was his natural habitat, through which he moved with elusively feline grace – and menace. A born extremist and conspirator, the Man in Grey was a true believer, 'a Marxist fanatic from his youth'. The violent rites of Stalin's secret planet of Caucasian conspiracy would later flower into the idiosyncratic ruling culture of the Soviet Union itself.[8]

'Stalin had opened the era of the hold-up,' wrote one of his fellow bank-robbery masterminds, his hometown friend Josef Davrichewy.[9] Stalin, we used to believe, organized operations but never took part personally. This may have been true that day in 1907, but we know now that Stalin himself, usually armed with his Mauser, was more directly involved in other robberies.[10]

He always kept his eyes skinned for the spectacular prize and knew that the best bank-robberies are usually inside jobs. On this occasion, he had two 'inside-men'. First, he patiently groomed a useful bank clerk. Then he bumped into a schoolfriend who happened to work for the banking mail office. Stalin cultivated him for months until he proffered the tip that a huge sum of money – perhaps as much as a million roubles – would arrive in Tiflis on 13 June 1907.

This key 'inside man' afterwards revealed that he had helped set up this colossal heist only because he was such an admirer of Stalin's romantic poetry. Only in Georgia could Stalin the poet enable Stalin the gangster.[11]

* * *

The runaway horse with the carriage and its booty bolted across the square. Some of the gangsters panicked, but three gunmen moved with astonishing speed. Bachua Kupriashvili kept his head and sprinted towards the horse. He was too close for his own safety, but he tossed another 'apple' under its belly,

tearing out its intestines and blowing off its legs. Thrown into the air, Bachua fell stunned to the cobbles.

The carriage careened to a halt. Bachua was out of action but Datiko Chibriashvili jumped on to the coach and pulled out the sacks of money. Gripping the money-bags, he staggered through the smoke towards Velyaminov Street. But the gang was in disarray. Datiko could not run far holding the weight of the banknotes: he must hand them over – but to whom?

The drifting smoke parted to reveal carnage worthy of a small battlefield. Screams and shots still rent the air as blood spread across cobbles strewn with bodyparts. Cossacks and soldiers started to peep out, reaching for their weapons. Reinforcements were on their way from across the city. 'All the comrades', wrote Bachua Kupriashvili, 'were up to the mark – except three who had weak nerves and ran off.' Yet Datiko found himself momentarily almost alone. He hesitated, lost. The success of the plan hung by a thread.

* * *

Did Stalin really throw the first bomb from the roof of Prince Sumbatov's house? Another source, P. A. Pavlenko, one of the dictator's pet writers, claimed that Stalin had attacked the carriage himself and been wounded by a bomb fragment. But this seems unlikely.[12] Stalin usually 'held himself apart' from everyone else in all matters for security reasons and because he always regarded himself as special.[13]

In the 1920s, according to Georgian sources, Kamo would drunkenly claim that Stalin had taken no active part but had watched the robbery, a report confirmed by another, questionable source connected to the police, who wrote that Stalin 'observed the ruthless bloodshed, smoking a cigarette, from the courtyard of a mansion' on Golovinsky Prospect. Perhaps the 'mansion' was indeed Prince Sumbatov's.[14] The boulevard's milkbars, taverns, cobblers, hairdressers and haberdashers crawled with Okhrana informers. Most likely, Stalin, the clandestine master who specialized in sudden appearances and vanishings, was out of the way before the shooting started. Indeed the most informed source puts him in the railway station that mid-morning.[15]

Here he could keep in easy contact with his network of porters and urchins on Yerevan Square. If these artful dodgers brought bad news, he would jump on a train and disappear.

* * *

Just as the robbery was about to collapse, 'Captain' Kamo rode hell-for-leather into the square driving his own phaeton, reins in one hand and firing his Mauser with the other, like a cowboy in a Western movie. Furious that the plan had failed, cursing at the top of his voice 'like a real captain', he whirled his carriage round and round, effectively retaking possession of the square. Then he galloped up to Datiko, leaned down and, aided by one of the gun girls, heaved the sacks of swag into the phaeton. He turned the carriage pre-

cipitously and galloped back up the boulevard right past the Viceroy's Palace, which was buzzing like a beehive as troops massed, Cossacks saddled up and orders for reinforcements were despatched.

Kamo noticed a police phaeton cantering along in the opposite direction bearing A. G. Balabansky, the Deputy Police Chief. 'The money's safe. Run to the square,' shouted Kamo. Balabansky headed for the square. Only the next day did Balabansky realize his mistake. He committed suicide.

Kamo rode straight to Vtoraya Goncharnaya Street and into the yard of a joiner's shop behind a house owned by an old lady named Barbara 'Babe' Bochoridze. Here, with Babe's son Mikha, Stalin had spent many nights over the years. Here the robbery had been planned. It was an address well known to the local police, but the gangsters had suborned at least one Gendarme officer, Captain Zubov, who was later indicted for taking bribes – and even helping to hide the spoils. Kamo, exhausted, delivered the money, changed out of his uniform and poured a bucket of water over his sweltering head.

* * *

The shockwaves of Stalin's spectacular reverberated around the world. In London the *Daily Mirror* announced 'RAIN OF BOMBS: Revolutionaries Hurl Destruction among Large Crowds of People': 'About ten bombs were hurled today, one after another, in the square in the centre of town, thronged with people. The bombs exploded with terrific force, many being killed …' *The Times* just called it 'TIFLIS BOMB OUTRAGE'; *Le Temps* in Paris was more laconic: 'CATASTROPHE!'

Tiflis was in uproar. The usually genial Viceroy of the Caucasus, Count Vorontsov-Dashkov, ranted about the 'insolence of the terrorists'. The 'administration and army are mobilized', announced *Isari.* 'Police and patrols launched searches across the city. Many have been arrested …' St Petersburg was outraged. The security forces were ordered to find the money and the robbers. A special detective and his team were despatched to head the investigation. Roads were closed; Yerevan Square surrounded, while Cossacks and Gendarmes rounded up the usual suspects. Every informer, every double-agent was tapped for information and duly delivered a farrago of versions, none of them actually fingering the real culprits.

Twenty thousand roubles had been left in the carriage. A surviving carriage driver, who thought he had got lucky, pocketed another 9,500 roubles but was arrested with it later: he knew nothing about the Stalin and Kamo gang. A jabbering woman gave herself up as one of the bank-robbers but turned out to be insane.

No one could guess how many robbers there had been: witnesses thought there were up to fifty gangsters raining bombs from the roofs, if not from Holy Mountain. No one actually saw Kamo take the swag. The Okhrana heard stories from all over Russia that the robbery was, variously, arranged by the state itself, by Polish socialists, by Anarchists from Rostov, by Armenian Dashnaks, or by the Socialist-Revolutionaries.

None of the gangsters was caught. Even Kupriashvili regained consciousness just in time to hobble away. In the chaotic aftermath, they scarpered in every direction, melting into the crowds. One, Eliso Lominadze, who had been covering a street-corner with Alexandra, slipped into a teachers' conference, stole a teacher's uniform and then nonchalantly wandered back to the square to admire his handiwork. 'Everyone survived it,' said Alexandra Darakhvelidze, dictating her memoirs in 1959, by then the only member of the ill-fated gang still alive.

Fifty lay wounded in the square. The bodies of three Cossacks, the bank officials and some innocent passers-by lay in pieces. The censored newspapers kept casualties low but the Okhrana's archives reveal that around forty were killed. Dressing-stations for the wounded were set up in nearby shops. Twenty-four seriously wounded were taken to hospital. An hour later, passers-by saw the funereal progress of a ghoulish carriage carrying the dead and their body-parts down Golovinsky, like the giblets from an abattoir.[16]

* * *

The State Bank itself was unsure if it had lost 250,000 roubles or 341,000, or somewhere between the two figures – but it was certainly an impressive sum worth about £1.7 million (US$3.4 million) in today's money though its effective buying power was much higher.

Bochoridze and his wife Maro, another of the female bank-robbers, sewed the money into a mattress. Svelte Mauser-toting Patsia Goldava then called porters, perhaps some of Stalin's urchins, and supervised its removal to another safe house across the River Kura. The mattress was then placed on the couch of the Director of the Tiflis Meteorological Observatory where Stalin had lived and worked after leaving the Seminary. It was Stalin's last job before he plunged into the conspiratorial underground, indeed his last real employment before he joined Lenin's Soviet Government in October 1917. Later the Director of this weather-centre admitted he had never known what riches lay under his head.

Stalin himself, many sources claim, helped stow the cash in the Observatory. If this sounds like a myth, it is plausible: it transpires that he often handled stolen funds, riding shotgun across the mountains with saddlebags full of cash from bank-robberies and piracy.

Surprisingly, that night Stalin felt safe enough to go home to Kato and boast of his exploit to his family – his boys had done it.[17] Well might he boast. The money was safe in the weatherman's mattress and would soon be on its way to Lenin. No one suspected Stalin or even Kamo. The swag would be smuggled abroad, some of it even laundered through the Credit Lyonnais. The police of a dozen nations would pursue cash and gangsters for months, in vain.

For a couple of days after the heist, Stalin, it is said, unsuspected of any connection to the robbery, was secure enough to drink insouciantly in riverside taverns, but not for long. He suddenly told his wife that they were leaving

at once to start a new life in Baku, the oil-boom city on the other side of the Caucasus.

'The devil knows', reflected *Novoye Vremya* (the Tiflis *New Times*), 'how this uniquely audacious robbery was carried out.' Stalin had pulled off the perfect crime.

* * *

The Tiflis heist turned out to be far from perfect. Indeed it became a poisoned chalice. Afterwards, Stalin never lived in Tiflis or Georgia again. The fate of Kamo would be insanely bizarre. The quest for the cash – some of which, it turned out, was in marked notes – would be tangled, but even these astonishing twists were far from the end of the matter for Stalin. The heist's success was almost a disaster for him. The robbery's global notoriety became a powerful weapon against Lenin, and against Stalin personally.

The gangsters fell out over the spoils. Lenin and his comrades fought for possession of the cash like rats in a cage. His enemies spent the next three years launching three separate Party investigations hoping to ruin him. Stalin, *persona non grata* in Georgia, tainted by the brazen flouting of Party rules and this reckless carnage, was expelled from the Party by the Tiflis Committee. This was a blot that could have derailed his bid to succeed Lenin and spoiled his ambition to become a Russian statesman and a supreme pontiff of Marxism. It was so sensitive that even in 1918 Stalin launched an extraordinary libel case to suppress the story.* His career as gangster godfather, audacious bank-robber, killer, pirate and arsonist, though whispered at home and much enjoyed by critics abroad, remained hidden until the twenty-first century.

In another sense, the Tiflis spectacular was the making of him. Stalin had now proved himself, not only as a gifted politician but also as a ruthless man of action, to the one patron who really counted. Lenin decided that Stalin was 'exactly the kind of person I need'.

Stalin, his wife and baby vanished from Tiflis two days later – but it was far from his last heist. There were new worlds to conquer – Baku, the greatest oil city in the world, St Petersburg the capital, and vast Russia herself. Indeed Stalin, the Georgian child raised rough on the violent, clannish streets of a turbulent town that was the bank-robbery capital of the Empire, now stepped, for the first time, on to the Russian stage. He never looked back.

Yet he was on the eve of a personal tragedy which helped transform this murderous egomaniac into the supreme politician for whom no prize, no challenge and no cost in human life would be too great to realize his personal ambitions and his utopian dreams.[18]

*In the 1920s, before he was dictator, Stalin went to remarkable lengths to conceal his role in the expropriations. In 1923–4, his chief gangster, Kote Tsintsadze, by then in opposition to Stalin, published his memoirs in a small Georgian journal. They were republished in 1927 but afterwards the pages involving Stalin's part in assassinations and robberies were removed, a process continuing in the 1930s under Beria. Today, they are extremely hard to find.

PART ONE

Morning

The rose's bud had blossomed out
Reaching out to touch the violet
The lily was waking up
And bending its head in the breeze

High in the clouds the lark
Was singing a chirruping hymn
While the joyful nightingale
With a gentle voice was saying –

'Be full of blossom, oh lovely land
Rejoice Iverians' country
And you oh Georgian, by studying
Bring joy to your motherland.'

SOSELO

(Josef Stalin)

I

KEKE'S MIRACLE: SOSO

On 17 May 1872, a handsome young cobbler, the very model of a chivalrous Georgian man, Vissarion 'Beso' Djugashvili, aged twenty-two, married Ekaterina 'Keke' Geladze, seventeen, an attractive freckled girl with auburn hair, at the Uspensky Church in the small Georgian town of Gori.[1]

A matchmaker had visited Keke's house to tell her about the suit of Beso the cobbler: he was a respected artisan in Baramov's small workshop, quite a catch. 'Beso', says Keke in newly discovered memoirs,* 'was considered a very popular young man among my friends and they were all dreaming of marrying him. My friends nearly burst with jealousy. Beso was an enviable groom, a true *karachogheli* [Georgian knight], with beautiful moustaches, very well dressed – and with the special sophistication of a town-dweller.' Nor was Keke in any doubt that she herself was something of a catch too: 'Among my female friends, I became the desired and beautiful girl.' Indeed, 'slender, chestnut-haired with big eyes', she was said to be 'very pretty'.

The wedding, according to tradition, took place just after sunset; Georgian social life, writes one historian, was 'as ritualised as English Victorian behaviour'. The marriage was celebrated with the rambunctious festivity of the wild town of Gori. 'It was', Keke remembers, 'hugely glamorous.' The male guests were true *karachogheli*, 'cheerful, daring and generous', wearing their splendid black *chokha*s, 'broad-shouldered with slim waists'. The chief of Beso's two best men was Yakov 'Koba' Egnatashvili, a strapping wrestler,

*The memoirs have lain in the Georgian Communist Party archive, forgotten for seventy years. They were never used in the Stalinist cult. It seems Stalin neither read them nor knew they existed because, as far as this author can learn, they were not sent to Stalin's Moscow archives. He did not want his mother's views published. When Keke was interviewed *Hello!*-magazine style in 1935 in the Soviet press, Stalin furiously reprimanded the Politburo: 'I ask you to forbid the Philistine riffraff that has penetrated our press from publishing any more "interviews" with my mother and all other crass publicity. I ask you to spare me from the importunate sensationalism of these scoundrels!' Keke, always strongwilled and unimpressed with her son's power, must have recorded them secretly and in defiance of him on 23–27 August 1935 shortly before her death.

wealthy merchant and local hero who, as Keke puts it, 'always tried to assist us in the creation of our family'.

The groom and his friends gathered for toasts at his home, before parading through the streets to collect Keke and her family. The garlanded couple then rode to church together in a colourfully decorated wedding phaeton, bells tingling, ribbons fluttering. In the church, the choir gathered in the gallery; below them, men and women stood separately among the flickering candles. The singers burst into their elevating and harmonic Georgian melodies accompanied by a *zurna*, a Georgian wind instrument like a Berber pipe.

The bride entered with her bridesmaids, who were careful not to tread on the train, a special augur of bad luck. Father Khakhanov, an Armenian, conducted the ceremony, Father Kasradze recorded the marriage, and Father Christopher Charkviani, a family friend, sang so finely that Yakov Egnatashvili 'generously tipped him 10 roubles', no mean sum. Afterwards, Beso's friends headed the traditional singing and dancing procession through the streets, playing *duduki*, long pipes, to the *supra*, a Georgian feast presided over by a *tamada*, a joke-telling and wisdom-imparting toastmaster.

The service and singing had been in the unique Georgian language – not Russian because Georgia was only a recent addition to the Romanov Empire. For a thousand years, ruled by scions of the Bagrationi dynasty, the Kingdom of Sakartvelo (Georgia to Westerners, Gruzia to Russians) was an independent Christian bulwark of knightly valour against the Islamic Mongol, Timurid, Ottoman and Persian Empires. Its apogee was the twelfth-century empire of Queen Tamara, made timeless by the national epic, *The Knight in the Panther Skin* by Rustaveli. Over the centuries, the kingdom splintered into bickering principalities. In 1801 and 1810, the Tsars Paul and Alexander I annexed principalities to their empire. The Russians had only finished the military conquest of the Caucasus with the surrender of Imam Shamyl and his Chechen warriors in 1859 after a thirty-year war – and Adjaria, the last slice of Georgia, was gained in 1878. Even the most aristocratic Georgians, who served at the courts of the Emperor in St Petersburg or of the Viceroy in Tiflis, dreamed of independence. Hence Keke's pride in following Georgian traditions of manhood and marriage.

Beso, mused Keke, '*appeared* to be a good family man … He believed in God and always went to church.' The parents of both bride and groom had been serfs of local princes, freed in the 1860s by the Tsar-Liberator, Alexander

*The Ossetians were a semi-pagan mountain people who lived on the northern borders of Georgia proper, some becoming assimilated Georgians though most remain proudly separate: in 1991–3, south Ossetians fought the Georgians and are now autonomous. When Stalin's dying father was admitted to hospital, significantly he was still registered as Ossetian. Stalin's enemies, from Trotsky to the poet Mandelstam in his famous poem, relished calling him an 'Ossete' because Georgians regarded Ossetians as barbarous, crude and, in the early nineteenth century, non-Christian. Djugashvili certainly sounds as if it has an Ossetian root: it means 'son of Djuga' in Georgian. Stalin's mother says Beso told her the name was based

II. Beso's grandfather, Zaza, was an Ossetian* from the village of Geri, north of Gori.[2] Zaza, like Stalin, his great-grandson, became a Georgian rebel: in 1804, he joined the uprising of Prince Elizbar Eristavi against Russia. Afterwards, he was settled with other 'baptized Ossetians' in the village of Didi-Lilo, 9 miles from Tiflis, as a serf of Prince Badur Machabeli. Zaza's son Vano tended the Prince's vineyards and had two sons, Giorgi, who was murdered by bandits, and Beso, who got a job in Tiflis in the shoe factory of G. G. Adelkhanov but was headhunted by the Armenian Josef Baramov to make boots for the Russian garrison in Gori.[3] There young Beso noticed the 'fascinating, neatly dressed girl with chestnut hair and beautiful eyes'.

Keke was also new to Gori, daughter of Glakho Geladze, a peasant serf of the local grandee, Prince Amilakhvari. Her father worked as a potter near by before becoming the gardener for a wealthy Armenian, Zakhar Gambarov, who owned fine gardens at Gambareuli on Gori's outskirts. As her father died young, Keke was raised by her mother's family. She remembered the excitement of moving to unruly Gori: 'What a happy journey it was! Gori was festively decorated, crowds of people swelled like the sea. A military parade dazzled our eyes. Music blared. *Sazandari* [a band of four percussion and wind instruments], and sweet *duduki* played, and everyone sang.'[4]

Her young husband was a thin dark figure with black eyebrows and moustaches, always sporting a black Circassian coat, tightly belted, a peaked cap and baggy trousers tucked into high boots. 'Unusual, peculiar and morose', but also 'clever and proud', Beso was able to speak four languages (Georgian, Russian, Turkish and Armenian) and quote the *Knight in the Panther Skin*.[5]

The Djugashvilis prospered. Many houses in Gori were so poor they were made of mud and dug out of the earth. But for the wife of the busy cobbler Beso there was no fear of such poverty. 'Our family happiness', declared Keke, 'was limitless.'

Beso 'left Baramov to open his own workshop', backed by his friends, especially his patron Egnatashvili, who bought him the 'machine-tools'. Keke was soon pregnant. 'Many married couples would envy our family happiness.' Indeed, her marriage to the desired Beso still caused jealousy among her contemporaries: 'evil tongues didn't stop even after the marriage'. It is interesting that Keke stresses this gossip: perhaps someone else had expected to marry Beso. Whether or not Keke stole him from another fiancée, 'evil tongues', later citing the best man Egnatashvili, the priest Charkviani, Gori's police officer Damian Davrichewy and a host of celebrities and aristocrats, started wagging early in the marriage.

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on the Georgian *djogi* or 'herd' root because they were herdsmen and were driven out of Geri by marauding Ossetians. The real relevance is lost because, by the time of Stalin's birth, the Djugashvilis were totally Georgianized. Stalin himself wrote about this: 'What is to be done with the Ossetians … becoming assimilated by the Georgians?'

Just over nine months after the wedding, on 14 February 1875, 'our happiness was marked by the birth of our son. Yakov Egnatashvili helped us so very much.' Egnatashvili stood godfather and 'Beso laid on a grand christening. Beso was almost mad with happiness.' But two months later the little boy, named Mikheil, died. 'Our happiness turned to sorrow. Beso started to drink from grief.' Keke fell pregnant again. A second son, Giorgi, was born on 24 December 1876. Again Egnatashvili stood godfather, again unluckily. The baby died of measles on 19 June 1877.

'Our happiness was shattered.' Beso was manic with grief and blamed 'the icon of Geri', the shrine of his home village. The couple had appealed to the icon for the life of their child. Keke's mother Melania started visiting fortune-tellers. Beso kept drinking. The icon of St George was brought into the house. They climbed the Gorijvari mountain, towering over the town, to pray in the church that stood beside the medieval fortress. Keke fell pregnant for the third time and swore that, if the child survived, she would go on pilgrimage to Geri to thank God for the miracle of St George. On 6 December 1878, she gave birth to a third son.[6*]

'We sped up the christening so he wouldn't die unchristened.' Keke cared for him in the poky two-room one-storey cottage that contained little except a samovar, bed, divan, table and kerosene lamp. A small trunk held almost all the family's belongings. Spiral stairs led down to the musky cellar with three niches, one for Beso's tools, one for Keke's sewing-kit and one for the fire. There Keke tended the baby's cot. The family lived on the basic Georgian fare: *lobio* beans, *badridjani* aubergine and thick *lavashi* bread. Only rarely did they eat *mtsvadi*, Georgian shashlik.

On 17 December the baby was christened Josef, known as Soso – the boy who would become Stalin. Soso was 'weak, fragile, thin', said his mother. 'If there was a bug, he was sure to catch it first.' The second and third toes of his left foot were webbed.

Beso decided not to ask the family's benefactor Egnatashvili to be godfather. 'Yakov's hand was unlucky,' said Beso, but even if the merchant missed the church formalities, Stalin and his mother always called him 'godfather Yakov'.

Keke's mother reminded Beso that they had sworn to take a pilgrimage to the church at Geri if the baby lived. 'Just let the child survive,' answered Beso, 'and I'll crawl to Geri on my knees with the child on my shoulders!' But

*Stalin later invented much about his life: his official birthday was 21 December 1879, over a year later, an invented date. He generally stuck to 6 December 1878 until an interview in 1920 with a Swedish newspaper. In 1925, he ordered his secretary Tovstukha to formalize the 1879 date. There are several explanations, including his desire to recreate himself. Most likely, he moved the date later to avoid conscription. As for the house where he was born, this is the hovel that now stands alone on Gori's Stalin Boulevard, surrounded by the Grecian temple built during the 1930s by Stalin's Caucasian viceroy and later secret police chief, Lavrenti Beria, next to the cathedral-like Stalin Museum. The Djugashvilis did not live there long.

he delayed it until the child caught another chill which shocked him into prayer: they travelled to Geri, 'facing much hardship on the way, donated a sheep, and ordered a thanksgiving service there'. But the Geri priests were conducting an exorcism, holding a little girl over a precipice to drive out evil spirits. Keke's baby 'was horrified and screamed', and they returned to Gori where little Stalin 'shuddered and raved even in his sleep' – but he lived and became his mother's beloved treasure.

'Keke didn't have enough milk', so her son also shared the breasts of the wives of Tsikhatatrishvili (his formal godfather) and Egnatashvili. 'At first the baby didn't accept my mother's milk,' says Alexander Tsikhatatrishvili, 'but gradually he liked it providing he covered his eyes so he couldn't see my mother.' Sharing the milk of the Egnatashvili children made them 'like milk brothers with Soso', says Galina Djugashvili, Stalin's granddaughter.

Soso started to speak early. He loved flowers and music, especially when Keke's brothers Gio and Sandala played the *duduki* pipes. The Georgians love to sing and Stalin never lost his enjoyment of the haunting Georgian melodies.* In later life, he remembered hearing the 'Georgian men singing on their way to market'.[7]

Beso's little business was flourishing – he took on apprentices and as many as ten employees. One of the apprentices, Dato Gasitashvili, who loved Soso and helped bring him up, recalled Beso's prosperity: 'He lived better than anyone else of our profession. They always had butter in their house.' There were later whispers about this prosperity, embarrassing for a proletarian hero. 'I'm not the son of a worker,' Stalin admitted. 'My father had a shoe workshop, employing apprentices, an exploiter. We didn't live badly.' It was during this happy time that Keke became friends with Maria and Arshak Ter-Petrossian, a wealthy Armenian military contractor, whose son Simon would become infamous as the bank-robber Kamo.[8]

Keke adored her child and 'in old age, I still can see his first steps, a vision that burns like a candle'. She and her mother taught him to walk by exploiting his love of flowers: Keke would hold out a camomile, and Soso ran to grasp it. When she took Soso to a wedding, he noticed a flower in the bride's veil and grabbed it. Keke told him off but godfather Egnatashvili lovingly 'kissed the child and caressed him, saying, "If even now you want to steal the bride, God knows what you'll do when you're older." '

Soso's survival seemed miraculous to the grateful mother. 'How happy we were, how we laughed!' reminisces Keke. Her reverence must have instilled in Soso a sense of specialness: the Freudian dictum that the mother's devotion made him feel like a conqueror was undoubtedly true. 'Soselo', as she lovingly called him, grew up super-sensitive but also displayed a masterful confidence from an early age.

*Stalin the dictator became a keen gardener, growing lemons, tomatoes and above all roses and mimosas. His favourite Georgian songs were 'Fly Away Black Swallow' and 'Suliko'.

Yet at the height of Beso's success there was a shadow: his clients paid him partly in wine which was so plentiful in Georgia that many workers received alcohol instead of cash. Furthermore, he did some business in the corner of a friend's *dukhan* (tavern), which encouraged him to drink too much. Beso befriended a drinking partner, a Russian political exile named Poka, possibly a *narodnik* populist or a radical connected to the People's Will, the terrorists who were at that time repeatedly attempting to assassinate Emperor Alexander II. So Stalin grew up knowing a Russian revolutionary. 'My son made friends with him,' says Keke, 'and Poka bought him a canary.' But the Russian was a hopeless alcoholic who lived in rags. One winter, he was found dead in the snow.

Beso found he 'could not stop drinking. A good family man was destroyed,' declares Keke. The booze started to ruin the business: 'his hands began shaking and he couldn't sew shoes. The business was only kept going by his apprentices.'

Learning nothing from Poka's demise, Beso acquired a new boon drinking companion in the priest Charkviani. Provincial Georgia was priest-ridden, but these men of God enjoyed their worldly pleasures. Once church services were over, the priests spent much of their time drinking wine in Gori's taverns until they were blind drunk. As an old man, Stalin remembered: 'As soon as Father Charkviani finished his service, he dropped in and the two men hurried to the *dukhan*.'* They returned home leaning on each other, hugging and 'singing out of tune', totally sozzled.

'You're a good bloke, Beso, even for a shoemaker,' drawled the priest.

'You're a priest, but what a priest, I love you!' wheezed Beso. The two drunks would embrace. Keke begged Father Charkviani not to take Beso drinking. Keke and her mother beseeched Beso to stop. So did Egnatashvili, but that did not help – probably because of the rumours already spreading around town.[9]

Perhaps these were the same 'evil tongues' Keke mentioned at the wedding because Josef Davrichewy, the son of Gori's police chief, claims in his memoirs that 'the birth was gossiped about in the neighbourhood – that the real father of the child was Koba Egnatashvili … or my own father Damian Davrichewy'. This could not have helped Beso, whom Davrichewy calls 'a manically jealous runt', already sinking into alcoholism.[10]

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In the course of 1883, Beso became 'touchy and very careless', getting into drunken fights and earning the nickname 'Crazy Beso'.

Paternity suits develop proportional to the power and fame of the child. Once Stalin became Soviet dictator, his rumoured fathers included the celebrated Central Asian explorer Nikolai Przhevalsky, who resembled the adult

*These Georgian inns 'provide nothing but unfurnished and dirty rooms, bread (with cheese), tea, wine and at best eggs and poultry', warns Baedeker. 'Those who wish for meat must buy a whole sheep (4–5 roubles) or sucking pig (2–3 roubles).'

Stalin and passed through Gori, and even the future Emperor Alexander III himself, who had visited Tiflis, supposedly staying at a palace where Keke toiled as a maid. But the explorer was a homosexual who was not near Georgia when Stalin was conceived, while Keke was not in Tiflis at the same time as the Tsarevich.

Leaving aside these absurdities, who was Stalin's real father? Egnatashvili was indeed the patron of the family, comforter of the wife and sponsor of the son. He was married with children, lived affluently, owned several flourishing taverns and was a prosperous wine-dealer in a country that virtually floated on wine. More than that, this strapping athlete with the waxed moustaches was a champion wrestler in a town that worshipped fighters. As already noted, Keke herself writes that he 'always tried to assist us in the creation of our family', an unfortunate but perhaps revealing turn of phrase. It seems unlikely she meant it literally – or was she trying to tell us something?

Davrichewy the police chief, who helped Keke when she complained about her husband's unruly drinking, was another potential father: 'as far I know, Soso was the natural son of Davrichewy,' testified Davrichewy's friend Jourouli, the town's mayor. 'Everyone in Gori knew about his affair with Soso's pretty mother.'

Stalin himself once said his father was really a priest, which brings us to the third candidate, Father Charkviani. Egnatashvili, Davrichewy and Charkviani were all married, but in Georgia's macho culture, men were almost expected to keep mistresses, like their Italian brethren. Gori's priests were notoriously debauched. All three were prominent local men who enjoyed rescuing a pretty young wife in trouble.[11]

As for Keke herself, it has always been hard to match the pious old lady in her black nunnish headdress of the 1930s with the irrepressible young woman of the 1880s. Her piety is not in doubt, but religious observance has never ruled out sins of the flesh. She certainly took pride in being 'the desired and beautiful girl' and there is evidence that she was much more worldly than she appeared. As an old lady, Keke supposedly encouraged Nina Beria, wife of Lavrenti, Stalin's Caucasian viceroy, to take lovers and talked very spicily about sexual matters: 'When I was young, I cleaned house for people and when I met a good-looking boy, I didn't waste the opportunity.' The Berias are hostile witnesses, but there is a hint of earthy mischief even in Keke's memoirs. In her garden, she recounts, her mother managed to attract Soso with a flower, at which Keke jovially pulled out her breasts and showed them to the toddler who ignored the flower and dived for the breasts. But the drunken Russian exile Poka was spying on them and burst out laughing, so 'I buttoned up my dress'.[12]

Stalin, in his elliptical, mendacious way, encouraged these stories. When he chatted in his last years to a Georgian protégé Mgeladze, he gave him 'the impression that he was Egnatashvili's illegitimate son' and seemed to deny he was Beso's. At a reception in 1934, he specifically said, 'My father was a

priest.' But, in Beso's absence, all three paternal candidates helped bring him up: he lived with the Charkvianis, was protected by the Davrichewys and spent half his time at the Egnatashvilis', so he surely felt filial fondness for them. There was another reason for the priest rumour: the Church School accepted only the children of clergy, so his mother says he was passed off as the son of a priest.[13]

Stalin remained ambiguous about Crazy Beso: he despised him, but he also showed pride and sympathy too. They had some happy moments. Beso told Soso stories of Georgia's heroic outlaws who 'fought against the rich, stole from princes to help peasants'. At hard-drinking dinners, Stalin the dictator boasted to Khrushchev and other magnates that he had inherited his father's head for alcohol. His father had fed him wine off his fingertips in his cot, and he insisted on doing the same with his own children, much to the fury of his wife Nadya. Later he wrote touchingly about an anonymous shoemaker with a small workshop, ruined by cruel capitalism. 'The wings of his dreams', he wrote, were 'clipped'. He once bragged that 'my father could make two pairs of shoes in a single day' and, even as dictator, liked to call himself a shoemaker too. He later used the name 'Besoshvili' – Son of Beso – as an alias, and his closest Gori friends called him 'Beso'.[14]

Weighing up all these stories, it is most likely that Stalin was the son of Beso despite the drunkard's rantings about Soso as a 'bastard'. A married woman was always expected to be respectable, but it is hardly outrageous if the pretty young Keke, a semi-widow, did become the mistress of Egnatashvili when her marriage disintegrated. In her memoirs, Egnatashvili appears as often as her husband, and is remembered much more fondly. She does say that he was so kind and helpful to her that it caused a certain 'awkwardness'. Some of the Egnatashvili family claim there was a 'genetic' connection with Stalin. However, Egnatashvili's grandson, Guram Ratishvili, puts it best: 'We simply do not know if he was Stalin's father, but we *do* know that the merchant became the boy's substitute father.'[15]

Rumours of bastardy, like those of Ossetian origins, were another way of diminishing the tyrant Stalin, widely hated in Georgia, which he conquered and repressed in the 1920s. It is true that great men of humble origins are often said to be the sons of other men. Yet sometimes they really are the offspring of their official fathers.

'When he was young,' testified a schoolfriend, David Papitashvili, Stalin 'closely resembled his father'. As he got older, says Alexander Tsikhatatrishvili, 'he looked more and more like his father and when he grew his moustache, they looked identical.'[16]

By the time Soso was five, Crazy Beso was an alcoholic tormented by paranoia and prone to violence. 'Day by day,' said Keke, 'it got worse.'