



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

The Roll of a Wedding Ring

Dr. Gloria C. Duffy

President and C.E.O.

Cultural stereotyping is not generally a good practice. But as I have puzzled in the past few weeks over Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili's move against Russian forces in

South Ossetia despite being dramatically outgunned by the Russians in his own backyard, an experience I had years ago in Georgia keeps coming to mind.

In 1977, a college friend and I were taking a "grand tour" of the Soviet Union, a country we'd studied but not had the opportunity to visit until a couple of years after graduation. Our train pulled into Tbilisi, Georgia, at midday, having passed through the town of Gori, where I had been astonished to see a giant banner of Josef Stalin on the wall of the train station in his home village. Throughout the USSR, Stalin's presence had been officially expunged.

My friend Chip and I checked into our hotel and headed downstairs to the restaurant for a bite of lunch. The vast room was empty, except that we became increasingly aware of a rollicking group of people at a table at the far end of the restaurant, laughing and shouting. In the sad, drab Soviet Union, this was highly unusual behavior.

Suddenly, we were surprised by a small object rolling under our table, and diving down, one of us came up with a gold wedding band. As we puzzled over this, we heard even louder shouts from the far side of the room. A waiter appeared at our table with a bottle of champagne, and in its wake came a young couple and their friends, explaining that they had just been married and wanted us to join them in celebrating. The rolling ring was the icebreaker to make contact with us.

Even knowing that contact with foreigners was highly discouraged for Soviet citizens, we were drawn into their merriment. Soon, they insisted on taking us to the opera house downtown to experience Georgian opera, then to a typical Georgian restaurant to eat Khachapuri, a Georgian bread smothered in cheese and egg. There were frequent stops to taste excellent Georgian spirits, including champagne, wine and cognac.

As we parted for the night, our new friends insisted that we come on a trip into the mountains with them over the next couple

of days. We explained that our visas to stay in Georgia expired the next day, and we could not. In Soviet times, every move by tourists was controlled. Our arrival and departure times from each city; the hotels where we stayed; the trains, planes or ships we would take, were all approved in advance by the Soviet Intourist agency and were not subject to change. The Soviet police and intelligence agencies were on the lookout for foreigners, especially Americans, who defied these rules, interpreting any deviations from approved movements as likely to involve spying. We had no wish to be locked away in a Soviet prison, so we politely declined.

And declined, and declined. But our jovial young hosts would not take *no* for an answer. Don't worry, they said. One of their uncles was an official in the Georgian Communist Party, and would "fix" our visas. We would see; everything would work out all right. We noted that we had to check in at a certain time at our next stop, Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. Wouldn't we risk trouble there if

we were a couple of days late? Don't worry, they answered, everything will be arranged. After deciding that the chances that we were walking into a trap were diminished by the degree to which the young people had been

openly critical of the Soviet system in our conversations, we surrendered our visas and allowed ourselves to be swept along.

The next day, they picked us up in a jeep and off we went, touring ancient Christian churches high in the Caucasus Mountains, ending up at a hunting lodge. More merriment ensued, with roasted lamb shashlik, guitar-playing and dancing.

When we returned to Tbilisi, sure enough, our visas had been magically reissued with new dates for our departure from Tbilisi and arrival in Yerevan. After many hugs and kisses, we were allowed to depart for Armenia.

I am sure it is a generalization, but I took away from that experience a lasting impression of Georgians as warm and outgoing, bold, sometimes overconfident, sure that anything can be arranged, defiant of oppressors, ready to bend the rules. They were the state whose wheeler-dealer citizens dominated the Soviet black market, and their people took to the streets to protest the teaching of English over Georgian language in the schools, when such protests were sure to produce deadly Soviet response.

When musing about Mr. Saakashvili's gamble, I somehow ascribe it more to Georgian impulsiveness than to any rational calculation. Ω

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