

# Travels with Cornelius

1980

## Moscow, Georgia, September 24 – November 21, 1980

In 1977 I had met Merab the only laser physicist at Tbilisi State University. He would become my and later our most faithful and generous friend. He introduced me to his cousin Manana, "Call me Sophie, my second baptismal name." Sophie spoke fluently German with a Goethean vocabulary. We named her *Sophiko* (pronounced *Sop'iko*).

In 1979 Merab invited me, Barbara, and Cornelius to spend a year teaching in Tbilisi, a political, technical, and financial impossibility. In the end, Cornelius swayed me to accept a two-month invitation.

We flew first to Moscow then to Tbilisi. During the 2 months in Georgia we spent a week in Kiev and in the end another in Erevan as guests of the Armenian Academy.

## Moscow



As always we stayed at the Academy Hotel



Barbara and Cornelius

We explored my favourite Moscow, the Kremlin and Novodeviche for two days



Novodeviche



Cornelius feeding the fish at Rostov Veliki



Pilgrims in Zagorsk

On another day Genya and Soya drove us to Zagorsk and Rostov Veliki

## Two Months in Georgia 1980



Old and new Tbilisi meet along the Kura

Merab and Sophiko awaited us at Tbilisi airport with a huge bunch of flowers. We were given two rooms in Hotel Adjara, Cornelius slept on a sofa bed in the sitting room, Barbara and I in the bedroom.



Cornelius doing his math Barbara our laundry



Moonshine view from our hotel window

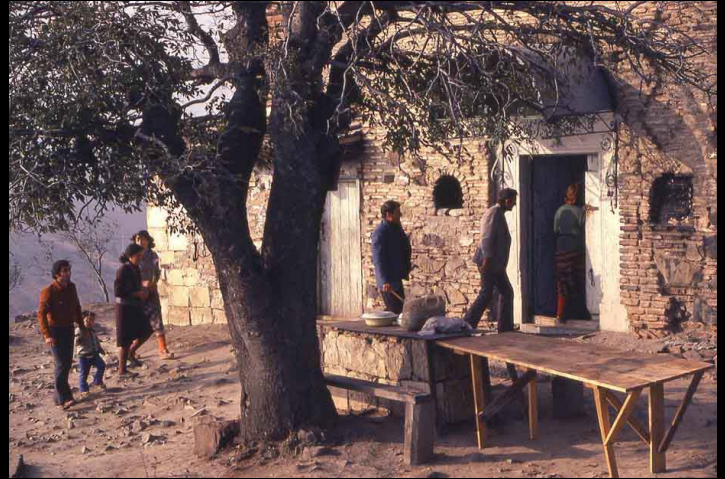
Merab had arranged my four hours of teaching to coincide with his to leave whole days free for excursions. Indefatigable Merab drove us two thousand kilometers in his Zhiguli all over his beautiful country and introduced us to scores of interesting people. Sophiko provided the commentaries and taught Cornelius Georgian.

The one thing we could not do was to ask Merab to take us to a specific place, it would spoil his pleasure. One had to mention the name of some place casually in conversation – and sure enough one morning he would cheerfully announce, “tomorrow we go Svaneti for three days” or to David Garedja, or to Kacheti.... Occasionally he came up with destinations I didn't know, like Shavnanbada one late afternoon.

## Mysterious Shavnanbada

"Let's go to another *cherch*," said Merab when he drove up with Sophie in the car one late afternoon. Where to? He was evasive: "You'll see!" He crossed town and after the sulfur baths continued along the right Kura embankment. After a couple of kilometers Merab turned up a side valley. A couple of destitute villages, a sinister looking Armenian church, the flank of a long bare hill with the tilted stele of a Moslem cemetery - a sweeping view of town from the crest. At a distance stood a dilapidated church and a tower, nothing of

architectural interest, a weathered brick structure with a steep roof - a gnarled oak with a bell hanging from one branch and a sacrificial stone altar.... And yes, of course, the defunct tower, in the bottom of which Cornelius discovered a messy room. A broken window, the door ajar, on a dirty, wine-stained table, pieces of molded bread, a half-finished bottle, an encrusted plate, knives and forks... in the dark rear a soiled, unmade bed. The place looked as if its inhabitants had fled in the middle of breakfast that morning.



From somewhere the caretaker materialized. Merab asked questions, Sophie translated. Cornelius holds his Georgian language notebook. Behind the care taker is the mysterious room. "Yes," he explained, "for years a woman healer and medium lived there, and people came from all over Georgia to consult her. But she had recently taken in a veteran from the Afghan war, and the kolkhoz to which the land belonged had evicted her. - She was now living somewhere in Tbilisi..."

A power spot, if I have ever seen one. We inspected the interior. The bare walls were hung with naive drawings and religious paintings. A copy of Raffael's Sistine Madonna above the altar, which was piled with bottles, food items, cans, and a carton of American cigarettes... offerings of grateful pilgrims....



Suddenly a group of pilgrims arrived led by a shrewd old witch. They circled the church three times and then unpacked kebabs, wine, and bread loaves to have their supper. Merab was the driver and Cornelius too young to drink the clear lightning - I was the only other man who had to finish the two glasses offered to the foreign guests....

## Alaverdi and Shuamta in the Vineyards of Kakheti



The 11th century cathedral of Alaverdi

## Alaverdoba in cold November



Plucking chickens



The Great Feast



Skinning the sheep

It was the week of Alaveroba, the saints-day to which since hundreds of years the shepherds come down from Pshavi to dance with the peasants of the Kakheti valley. Alaverdi had been turned into a motley camp ground for the cars of the "rich" peasants and the horse-drawn wagons of the shepherds. Everywhere people were drinking and eating or dancing to impromptu fiddle-and-accordion music.

Later Cornelius discovered that the sheep and chicken were not just simply slaughtered, but were properly sacrificed in the ambulatory of the church by a *khevisberi*, *mountain-man*, "shaman" (my Georgian friends strenuously object to this title) from Pshavi who still practiced the magical animist rituals. The *khevisberi* burns a cross in the wool of the sheep's forehead. My friends tell me that he burns some other sign into the wool if nobody is watching - which is the reason why they don't like outsiders to stand around.



The *khevisberi* muttering some incantation also breaks the large round bread loaves and wrenches the necks of the chickens.

### Shuamta in the Fog



On a meadow in the woods high above the Kakheti Valley hide three 5th-century churches. Unexpected laughter and singing greeted us when we arrived there in deep fog: a cheerful group of students from a teachers college in Kutaisi. Look at the dramatic tableau they arranged themselves into when I asked to take their picture. Theater is the original Georgian talent. Their professor with his long hair and stunning outfit could be taken for one of the Romantic Georgian poets of the 19th century.

## The Desert of David Garedja



The desert near Udabno

The southwestern corner of Georgia is "desert," a place for hermits, who came there very early from Syria, Cappadocia, and Georgia to live in innumerable caves. The most famous and accessible cave complex is near the Lavra of David Garedji in Udabno very close to the border with Azerbaidjan.

In Soviet times the area was a training ground for the Red Army, it was therefore closed to foreigners. Merab never explained through what connections he got the permits to take us there. That day became one of the heights of our two months in Tbilisi.

I had seen Rolf Schrade's photos and had begged Merab for years to take me to Udabno. This surprising request from a German-American physicist was one of the reasons why he had invited us in 1980: He was going to show us Georgia - and Sophiko was to spend hours in her mother's library reading up on Georgian art-history.

Nobody knew where the treasured caves were. The local cowherds spoke only Azery and were more interested in Sophiko's bleach-blond hair. We erred around among rocks full of snake skins - and then called it quits and had...



...Tbilisi Torte that Sophie had brought

Finally Merab found a Georgian-speaking woman, who showed him the way, and across another steep ridge there they were, dozens of painted caves.



A Deesis...



Entry into Jerusalem



...another Deesis

The single hermitages have only a Deesis behind a simple altar, one or two show more elaborate frescoes from the Life of Christ. The exciting cave is the refectory of the small community of monks.



The Refectory with the Last Supper on its right wall (barely visible)



The Last Supper with 11 Apostles and a twelfth only in outline

The argument about the shadow of the twelfth Apostle began already on that night's drive home and has not found an explanation since. Merab finally put an end to it by turning on a recording of *Jesus Christ Superstar!!* - He was, of course, Judas.

Later researches have shown that he is not. Judas is the sixth person from the left who is reaching for the bread on the table. This is eastern, Syrian Christianity could the ghost be Peter? There exists no other Last Supper which singles out Peter in this way....

I have never been back, but the desert and the frescoes in its caves have remained a part of my dreams: not only are there many more, but now that the Soviet Army has decamped, a number of new ones have been discovered in the wastelands east of David Garedja.

## The Blue Frescoes of Khintsvisi



St. Nicholas Khintsvisi



Frescoes



Apse of the older church

The church of St. Nicholas at Khintsvisi lies far off the beaten track. Because of the



exceptional beauty of its frescoes on lapis-blue background, I had long prevailed on Merab to take us there. He had been evasive until one day in 1980 he appeared in our hotel with the necessary permits. The church dates from the 13th century, and there are ruins of an apse of an older church with earlier frescoes.



Merab, always in form, saying goodbye to the wife of the caretaker

## Svaneti in the Snow

At the end of November 1980 Merab drove us to Mestia, the capital of mythical Svaneti in one of his more heroic driving efforts.



On the road we met this sled-like transportation, which the Svans use winter and summer because the roads are unsuitable for wheels. You see that this is Christian land, a smiling *Deda* (Mother) and *Biji* sit in the basket, while *Mama* (father) leads the oxen. In Islamic countries their roles would be reversed.

We spent the night in the "hotel" of the Georgian Alpine Club at Mestia, where the only source of heat were cups of tea we brewed in the hotel's tooth-mugs with an immersion heater bought in New Dehli. The restaurant offered only Russian style cold cuts.... Next morning we set out on a break-neck drive across a pass to Iprari where we hoped to see one of the old churches. On the pass it began to rain and in Iprari the rain turned into snow - besides the school teacher who had the key to the church was in no mood to unlock it. Meanwhile the children sang derisive ditties on the foreigners and threw stones at us..... With a heavy heart I persuaded Merab to turn back. His car skidded and slipped on the rocks of the unpaved road to the pass. We heated lots of more tea that night. Next morning the world was white....



The towers of Mestia in the first snow

The towers are the landmarks of Svaneti and the symbols of the Georgian sense of Freedom and Independence. Like in San Gimignano and the Mani they were clan towers, the last defense in bloody family feuds.



Sunrise on the way home

Merab insisted that we had at least to see Mt. Ushba, the double-peaked Matterhorn of Svaneti and took a narrow side road into a valley below Betcho Pass, where we waited for two hours in the freezing cold - for the clouds to lift. They never did, and we never saw Ushba - but the continuously shifting clouds produced a drama all of their own.



Meadow below Betcho Pass



Mount Ushba in the Clouds