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***A. A. Resident of the village of Chvrinisi of Kareli Municipality,
80 years old***

Right now I am in the village, doing housework. I have a cow, two hens and I cultivate some grapes, wine... I am 80. I was born and raised here; I started working in 1959, sometimes I happened to work near Kareli, in Akhaltsikhe, then in Znauri, etc... I worked in Znauri for a long time, around 32 years.

I was working in Znauri when the unrest began; I did not like that mess. Georgians and Ossetians were separately muttering among themselves. I did not have anything, my words were not considered significant, but sometimes I told them not to do it, or else everything would end badly for both sides. Who would believe me... in the insurgent country... no one besides Stalin would be able to calm them down. In the end, they still messed everything up. I spoke mostly with Georgians, not with the Ossetians. There was a judge named Kako, who led his own group; by that time I was working at “NTS”, when they talked about those events I told him: Please stop. At least *you have* to stop, you are a judge. Don't do this thing, do not complicate everything, do not mess everything up, I know this won't end well. People will suffer and be exterminated. They said I was a Stalinist. I was a Stalinist, but who were they? Neither the judge, nor the prosecutor could scare me. After all, they would not believe me. Anyway, they messed everything up: burned things down, threw people out and now there are so many refugees and Tbilisi can barely accommodate so many people, while very few people are left here. Villages were depopulated... I was detained four times... I went to Tskhinvali and beyond, to Java. Everything is ruined... particularly Georgian villages (Kekhvi, Achabeti and others were less affected)... not even the ruins of houses have remained. Nothing is left. I have no idea who will restore those villages. This is the result of the 90's, villages were destroyed, people died of stress and other reasons. There is no one left to save us.

I left in the 90's, when the unrest began; I left my home hoping that everything was temporary, and soon people would make up. I closed my office, I was working in the storage unit in Znauri. Then they robbed that storage unit, destroyed it, took everything what was mine, and theirs – the government's. Then I tried to save my property; I left it with my friend. I moved here and started living in this village. I have been here since then; I did not go anywhere. Then militia, Adamia (Vazha Adamia – Chairman

of Merab Kostava Society in the 90's) came here with his broken cannons. They left and walked on, we did not let them stay here. Had we let them stay, they would have soon started shooting us from the other side. They went to Kaleti (*it was a mixed village before the conflict, bordering Chvrinisi*) and stayed there. After 5 days the Russians came in our direction... with Russian weapons, maybe some of them were Ossetians. After hearing the sounds of Russian weapons they ran away. They left their plane there. The plane and cannon were burned down and afterwards they came back just to steal from people. When someone from our side went there, they stole different things. Those villages became empty. Nothing good happened. Everybody stole – both us and them. Everyone stole except for me. I did not want anything from them and stayed put, so that they would not take anything from me. They had already taken everything I had and now I would not let anyone take anything else.

One day in 90's, our side once entered the area known as "Seri Balta". There was only one family living right at the edge of the village and they burned their house down. It turned out that these were exactly those people who happen to live in my house. Their commander came... He was from Znauri. He was talking to his guys about how they burned the house. As soon as I found out I had an argument with them. "Because of you all of Kaleti was burnt down". I immediately threw them out of my house. Then they came for the Imeretians... Half of Kaleti was populated by Imeretians and another half – by Ossetians. The houses of those Imeretians were burned entirely, because of that one house. Although, no one came to Chvrinisi, neither Ossetians, nor Russians, nor Tatars, no one.

I was still here in August 2008, my wife was quite ill, still in a wheelchair. And neither Russians, nor Ossetians came in our direction. The Ossetians came to Atotsi (*neighboring Georgian village*) and burned one house. I saw them walking by wearing masks, but I identified one of them...my friend's son. He asked me whether I recognized him and I laughed. I, together with other older people, met them... How can I not know you, I said, you are wearing a mask, but I can recognize your voice, you are my friend's son. He told me, that they are not going to harm Chvrinisi "...you have not robbed or burned anything. Now we are going to Koda". The residents of Koda had offended them too. Thus, we survived. We had a ruined school and they burned it down, although it was already burned. Once, when I was shepherding, I heard that the Russians had arrived. I could not believe it, but I still came back. I had left my wife in her wheelchair on the balcony. I had to come back by noon, to feed her. When I came home I found out that they had already been there and stolen my property. I asked my wife where

they had gone. She said that they had probably gone up the village. I caught up with them. They were wearing masks. They were Ossetians, I realized that quickly. They recognized me themselves, and said that my stuff is in the sack, and that I can take it. It turned out that they took my chainsaw. Chainsaws were hard to get those days. They had taken my drill as well, and everything I kept in the shed. I took everything back, then I realized who he was, but what could I do... Afterwards they returned my things. Nothing like that happened again. Russians did not enter our village; and those Ossetians left us alone, no one came back and this is how we have lived until now. Unless some unrest starts again...

Nowadays, we would not go to their side without a particular purpose. We know they will detain us. Sometimes cattle go there and do not come back. No one except me goes there. If we lose the cattle, what else can we do? I have to go. There was a one person, Ali... Ali was a Lezghin from Makhachkala. He caught me several times with the cattle; then he let me go, at least 5 times. They detained me and then let me go... Previously, when they detained me, I paid them 1500 rubles and they would let me go... They would detain me in the evening and let go in the morning and they detained me again... they detained a local girl once. People came to me and asked me help get her released ... I went to the fir-grove, near the banner. She was standing there and crying. She was afraid. It is very difficult. It is hard when you don't know their laws, quite hard. Then Ali came and told me to go; I refused to go unless they let the girl go, and said I would leave only after that. They refused and said that they had already reported her (*reported information about the detention*). I told them to detain me as well. They told me to go. I refused to go unless they let her come with me... they did not free her, so I went with them. When we arrived to the detention facility I told the head of the military division that I needed him to lend me four thousand rubles, which I would give back the next day, then... I could see that he did not have the money; probably... maybe he had, but he could not trust me. Then I told him to call my friend Seva from Kaleti, who would get the money. He called him! He was a very good man... He called him and he brought me 4000 rubles; now I had money in my pocket, they took us, we paid the amount in the morning and they let us go. We came back via Gori. Another incident happened as well. We sent the cattle to the field, some of them came back. One cow did not return; it belonged to that same girl, Lali. It was pregnant and we had to do something to make sure it did not go into labor there (*on their territory*). If it stayed there a wolf would kill it. A week ago a wolf had eaten the girl's heifer. So we went there and started looking for the cow. I had a new

flashlight, which was quite strong, and I happened to turn it on in a very bad spot, a crossing point, and they noticed and caught us. They detained us and told us that we had gone there for products. I said “What did we need your products for? We already had plenty...” It is actually true; one can find anything here. Everything is abundant. They still took us to the garrison, completed the paperwork; we told them that we came to find a cow and a calf... there was an Ossetian from Beslan... he was called Godo from Balta, we are somehow related... he found the cow in the bushes... we had gone up instead of going down to the swamps, where we would have found the cow and... they found it and took it to a local (Georgian) girl who was married there. By then they were convinced that we were there to find a cow, although they still detained us. I had some money in my pocket; I knew that they might detain me so I kept 5 thousand rubles... although... they made us pay a lot, 8 thousand. The judge said that if they caught us once more they would make us pay twice as much, which appeared to be true.

We are farmers and we are broke, aren't we? Freedom is expensive on both sides. I lost those 8 thousand rubles. 8 thousand Russian rubles is about 300-400 Lari, isn't it? Right? In addition, my cow almost dried off. It did not let anyone else milk it. So I was not able to milk the cow on Saturday evening, Sunday morning, another evening and another morning. It fed the calf... but when I came back it had almost dried off. I barely managed to get it back on track. It is also a loss, isn't it? It is a loss for a farmer... it is my loss. Although, it is not the only loss I have sustained. Just look – we lost our relatives, we live in tension, we can't move freely. There are so many mushrooms there, but we cannot go there to gather them. If you sneak in, they'll catch you. We cannot go to the forest, we lack wood. If only they made up... both the mushrooms and wood are so close. This is what we lost: relatives, nature, even nature is sad without us. Their side has gone wild, they do not have many cattle, and cannot take care of them; they do not plough – we do, we sow crops. If the cattle go into nature it becomes cultured, otherwise it goes wild, that's it... this is a loss, isn't it?

I take all these things quite painfully. Worse things have happened in the past, everything that is written in ancient Georgian history. They used to destroy and burn us and this is exactly what happened. Brothers burned, destroyed, and killed one another. I had some relatives from Borjomi region, and our side threw them out, they had to go to Orjonikidze. I have another relative... after my wife passed away, I wanted to see that relative, but I can't. I have to go via Larsi, which is very time consuming and I have no one to leave at home. I need a visa, money, time. If it was possible, I

would to Tskhinvali, stay there for a while... I would travel to Tskhinvali in a day, stay overnight and come back the next day. They might detain me and now... The way they detain people nowadays – one day they catch me, the next day they let me go.

We still live the same way in Chvrinisi, cultivate what needs to be cultivated, take care of our families, take care of the cattle, whatever we have... and... if a cow goes to their side I don't go after it, sometimes they send the cattle back. Sometimes their cattle come to our village. Just yesterday their cattle followed ours here. But when I went there... now I won't go beyond the posted sign, not again. I cannot fall into their hands again. Sometimes I stay here and watch how our cattle return and 5 of their cows follow. Then they come, follow them to our village and I send them back. This is what we do, we send their cattle back. They do the same.

Our future depends on the government. Reconciliation and everything is up to them. I hope that... there were times in the past, when the country was in trouble, then... we would suffer a great deal and someone, a kind person would appear... currently, there are no kind people within the government, no one. I had hopes for Ivanishvili, but nothing works out, he has many opponents. The way I see it on television, everyone wants to be a boss, and everyone wants to achieve their own goals. But in reality, this is not how it works. The boss is there because he is the smartest and his words should have some power. There is no rule of law; otherwise no one would talk this much. Maybe a truthful person will appear who will reunite us, let us go there, let them come here. That's all that is needed, life will go on the way it did before.

Now listen to me. I have been detained and taken to isolation four times. I went twice to get my cow and the Russians caught me. Another time my Ossetian friend passed away. We went to express our condolences and everything went fine. Second day, I had to attend the funeral; he was my friend after all. I took some money for making a donation and paying the fine, in case they caught me. And they did catch me in the fir-grove. I told them I was going to my friend's funeral. They did not believe me at first, then they did, but they still detained me. I asked them to let me go faster, I would pay the fine – they could take me to the court. They took me to the investigator and afterwards to Java. They fined me and wanted to send me home. But, I did not want to go home, I had to attend my friend's funeral, this was the reason why I went there. They said it was impossible. Their president, Tibilov was attending the funeral. My friend's sons told him that their father's older friend had been detained, while trying to come to the funeral. He called them and arranged everything. They drove me to the

funeral in his car. I attended the funeral and stayed for another half hour for the repast. Then they drove me back. That's it, I won't go there again, I won't let them catch me again, enough...

You are asking whether I want to reunite. Of course I do. Is reconciliation possible? Of course it is. There are people on their side, at least my acquaintance's children who are quite eager. They want this as well... the older people. The youth does not want reconciliation, and it is the same on our side. It is the same there. But I think they'll make up after all. Otherwise, what are they going to do with our territories? All this, until Java and beyond, is ours, it is Georgia... What are they going to do with this land? Our people and governments must make up... there is no other way.

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L.Ch. resident of the village of Ergneti, Gori Municipality, 60 years old

I was born in the city of Tskhinvali and graduated from middle school and university there. Those days Tskhinvali was a city where the doors of houses were never locked, there was such intimacy and enormous trust. We played in the street and did not know the nationality of our friends: there were Ossetians, Russians, Jews, one Armenian... I was raised in such an environment, where the people were not segregated by their nationality... I did not know who needed this, although, probably everyone knows who did... who needed that hidden mine in Tskhinvali, which was put into operation from the 90's.

I remember the edgy situation which began in 1989, when our roads, our links with one another, started to weaken. When the conversations regarding sovereignty began – the Ossetian side started talking about separation, independence... although, Zviad Gamsakhurdia also contributed to that process by his policy and actions. Now, when I look back, this seems to be such a big mistake, the biggest, which brought nothing but misery and unrest to our side, our region. At any rate, it did not bring any good.

By that time, 1991 was the worst period since 1989, when the large-scale military actions began.

As for my family, these events definitely affected us: my husband died during the first battle, which took place close to Ergneti. My husband died on the 23rd of November 1991. This is when my alienation from Tskhinvali started. Before that we had a normal relationship, exchanged visits, everything... We had a house in Tskhinvali, where I was born... born and raised. I had friends, relatives. Within 10 years I lost virtually all connection with them. For ten years from 1991 I never visited Tskhinvali. Although, I remembered every house and stone, every street; I missed all of that.

The first time I visited Tskhinvali since 1991 was in 2000. I went there in 2000 and saw that this city was not the same anymore, many people, including those creating the cultural and political atmosphere, had left... many people... I remember a particularly well-respected individual, an ethnic Ossetian, who had been raised among Georgians; I won't say his name, definitely. He consciously left for Vladikavkaz or some other Russian city; he said that he did not want to be shot by his friends, nor shoot them himself and consciously walked away from the situation.

In 2000 Tskhinvali was quite alien; I walked in the streets and did not have the opportunity to meet my old co-citizens, as the situation was somehow different, tense; we were not able to interact with each other... although, even-

tually, these relationships started to heal. Spontaneously opening the Ergneti Market played an active role in the restoration of these relations.

The existence of the Ergneti Market on that territory was... I don't know how to say... it was well planned... you had to come up with such an idea, a form of relationship, leading to the reconciliation of close but alienated nations. One had to come up with this idea, but life and coexistence, which continued during years and centuries, led to the restoration of relations, closeness and confidence-building by itself. I'm not saying that only Georgians were guilty, the Ossetian side had also committed great sins, so many innocent youth were killed; after all, there was the Dzara tragedy, Eredvi tragedy, when they buried them alive and... this was a grave sin, but it was not a state policy; there were those people, known as milita... those dark people, who, instead of uniting people's grief and joy, kindled everything further, which led to the deterioration of the situation.

I remember it very well, that during one of the meetings they claimed that Georgians had to apologize to Ossetians; but if Georgians had to apologize, then Ossetians had to do the same. My family experienced a horrible tragedy in 1991, which was followed by others. Every three years one of my family members passed away due to the pain, anxiety and misery caused by the tragedy. I will apologize, but will they? Society should have worked on this particular issue, although there was a third party involved quite seriously, which would not benefit from our reconciliation, which aggravated the situation even more, this led to negative developments between two sides; but people are wise, they do not get confused with attitudes, relationships, never...

I remember the situation in Tskhinvali, when the children of intelligent Ossetians were enrolled at Georgian schools, as those schools demonstrated higher levels of culture, in comparison with the Russian ones. I'm not trying to diminish Russian culture, but Georgian culture was closer and more acceptable for them... they were raised in this culture and did not lose it, on the contrary... Georgia supported them as much as it could... the newspaper was being published, they had their own magazine Fiduag and everything else. There was theatre and most significantly, Georgian and Ossetian actors worked side by side, Georgians and Ossetians were never distinguished from each other.

The Joint Control Commission was the only legitimate body in terms of regulating the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. Those issues were addressed on the level of State Ministers. The meetings took place not only in Tskhinvali, but also in Tbilisi, Moscow, Vladikavkaz, abroad... I participated in all the meetings, I saw virtually all the documents. I worked in the commission as a journalist from the Georgian side. There were fights, arguments, controversy,

but eventually common sense always won and achieved some balance. The Georgians offered many things. I remember a meeting in Ljubljana in 2006, where the European states, not only the EU, but also the OSCE and other European countries allocated about 8 million Euros for the infrastructural development of the region. Yes, this amount was quite handy for the economy, which had been destroyed and devastated since the 90's. It was beneficial not only for the Ossetian economy, but for ours as well. It was planned to go toward the development of infrastructure, to put the factories into operation, rehabilitate the systems of potable and irrigation water, organize sports events, improve state structures on the national level, etc. But in the war in 2008... The funding was terminated, although some amount was still left after the war. I remember a personal meeting when the OSCE representatives travelled to Ergneti. Boris Chochiev (*currently the head of Tibilov's Administration*) came from their side and they arranged a meeting... the main issue was the unspent amount, about 2 million, which would be sufficient for putting the Ergneti channels into operation, which had been closed down after war. A consensus could not be reached and as a matter of fact, that money was lost for the entire region. Someone probably used it somehow afterwards.

The decisions of this commission contributed to the establishment of peace and stability. Although, sometimes certain groups complicated the situation, there were ongoing shootings, provocations from both sides; I cannot deny that. But the peace, however fragile, was there. At least, the situation had not reached war.

The Ergneti market was very successful until 2004; it practically led to the reconciliation of two nations. Ergneti was attended not only by Ossetians, but also by the residents of North Ossetian republics.

In general, I believe that business and economic relations have the best effect in terms of reconciliation for these two nations. And they had made up to some extent... I did not have a good income then, we did not have any connection with that market; although I had a small hotel, where different peoples from North Caucasus would gather and trust hundreds of thousands to each other. E.g. Ossetians, Kabardians, Balkars from Rostov would arrive and leave those large sums of money with Georgians, without any fear of losing it. You may remember that half of Georgia depended on Ergneti market. It certainly had some disadvantages, those black holes and smuggling and so on; although it could have been regulated on a state level; they could have established some control, put a customs system into operation. After paying the taxes, all that money would have accumulated in the budget of Georgia. This should have led to the activation of a very good corps of Georgian economists and lawyers. But unfortunately, Saakashvili's and Okruashvili's ad-

venturism led to the closure of the market. The system broke down. Although on the other side, not in Ergneti, but in Mamisaantubani (*small area between Ergneti and Tskhinvali, at the entrance of Tskhinvali*) the market, founded in the 90's, still exists. But certainly, now without Georgians' participation.

Although Ergneti market was shut down in 2004, travel was still possible. Although, both our and the Ossetian side increased strict control, this did not prevent people from exchanging visits, as most of the populated areas close to Tskhinvali were located, in the south. They came to Tbilisi to see doctors, for trading purposes, for purchasing construction materials, various goods, everything... They came to see doctors in Tbilisi, this was a good thing. I cannot say that those things continued automatically, such things never continue by themselves. Thus, there is a prehistoric period, which leads to the establishment of connections to the opposing side. This had its historical roots, relationships, everything... more than a half of the Tskhinvali population had graduated from universities in Tbilisi. There were scientists, who had completed post-graduate studies in Tbilisi, e.g. in the Academy of Sciences. These people did not lose those connections. Under no circumstances. And from 2004 to 2008 all roads were purposefully closed and shut down and the war tore us apart completely. As of today, we have reached a dead end; let's say that no negotiations can solve these issues. Our enemy used this very well. They used it and certainly, this is neither good, nor natural, nor regular. I am certain that maybe after one, two, ten years the time will come and communication will be restored by all means. I would like to recall a particular fact, when the roads were closed and Tskhinvali had a prime minister appointed from Russia, a certain Brontsev. I saw some documents signed by him, published in the Ossetian media claiming that Ergneti was one of the checkpoints allowing unrestricted travel. This was after the war, i.e. this meant that they still believed (and we did as well) that our relations would be restored by all means. And the Ergneti checkpoint was one of many others in different locations. And naturally, they should not close the Transcaucasian Highway. It is a part of big politics. This is the place where Georgian and Ossetian interests intersect, and not only theirs, there are other South Caucasus countries as well, Armenia, Azerbaijan... all of them used this road, as it is the shortest, shorter than Larsi and much safer in every way possible, even in that period.

If we talk about 2008, I'll add that this village sustained the biggest damage. My family was harmed and our house was virtually destroyed. Although, for us, the war did not start unexpectedly. That war was ongoing for several years and tense incidents took place every day. A car was parked in front of my gate all the time, during those tense moments, they were on watch.

These were certain agencies and so on. Step by step we came to that war, step by step. And August 2008 was a turning point, when there was no way back and large-scale war began, and during the previous days... we were as involved as possible. And when everything grew calm, I was surprised why they had stopped shooting; we had become so accustomed to living under these shootings, sounds of explosions, that, to be honest, silence started to scare me. The war, August 8th, concluded everything. I don't know whether I can refrain from evaluating the war and that situation, but it was the last straw for us and... but time passed, six years passed since the war and from today's perspective me and probably entire Georgian side, and I'm sure the Ossetian side as well, regret many things, which led to our isolation from each other. There were moments when my friends called and said that living there without us made no sense, Tskhinvali was not the city it used to be.

After the war, Ergneti was certainly a midpoint, 160 houses were burned there; I cannot claim that all of those houses were destroyed as a result of explosions and cluster bombs, this was also a result of the actions of certain groups of separatists, who walked around throwing Molotov cocktails at the houses, burning them down. It was very hard for us... e.g. as soon as the fight was over, I returned home, I did not know in what condition my house would be, since we had fled without even taking our documents with us. I simply had to save my children, there was no other way. This happened on August 9th and when I returned on August 19th I saw an empty village, where every house had been burned down, especially in our neighborhood... Ossetian and Russian cars were still patrolling on the highway and seeing those cars was so hard for me, that when they approached us I would close my eyes thinking that they might shoot us from there and I did not want to see who was shooting me.

When I came back to my village, in my neighborhood, each and every gate was open, I cannot say that anything had been stolen, in the yards... there were still chickens and dogs running in the yards... but the silence was unbearable. A gentle wind was blowing, shaking the tin roofs of those houses, which emitted squeaking sounds, those terrifying sounds... All this was definitely very hard. But still... somehow we survived everything. Although there were victims, several people in Ergneti were burned inside their houses and shot, not by Russians, but by Ossetians...

Those wounds are healing gradually, slowly... the houses have been restored already. The Danish Refugee Council helped us a lot, they built two-bedroom cottages, where we could find shelter and stay overnight, and then, two years ago, our houses were rehabilitated. Life got back on track and people's lives went back to normal.

I want to tell you a story, which I will never forget in my life, which left a certain impression on my life and personality. It was already a closed period and a friend of mine, an ethnic Ossetian, working for the police, or rather militia as a high rank official, called me from Tskhinvali at 6AM. He was crying and saying that he had had a horrible accident. His 60-year-old brother from the village of Tbeti was bitten by wolves and he was in a terrible condition – the wolves had bit off the tip of his nose, his entire ear. He was completely mutilated and had been transferred to Tskhinvali hospital in a coma. But the doctors told them they did not have any means for saving him and he had to be taken to Vladikavkaz, although they did not know whether he would survive the trip to Vladikavkaz. They could not even administer serum. And that man called me crying and saying: you have to help me transfer this man. I asked if they would come with him, but he refused. “The government has warned me that if I leave the adjacent territories of Tskhinvali, I won’t be able to go back and I will lose my job”, he said. So he trusted me entirely. Well, obviously, it was very hard for me to complete this task, since the road had already been closed... a closed road, security measures, that dying man... they might accuse me of multiple provocations, so I coordinated with some people, called the Ambulance of Tkviavi and told them that we were going to transfer a man from Tskhinvali. The doctors answered that unless we gave them security guarantees, they would not go there. Then I used my official status, my position as a journalist of the Joint Control Commission and called Kulakhmetov (*Marat Kulakhmetov was the commander of the joint peace-keeping forces deployed in Tskhinvali*) directly, explained the situation and he agreed. They contacted him from the Tskhinvali side as well, Kulakhmetov sent us the security guard, who came here, to this closed checkpoint; he sent the guard, and the Tkviavi ambulance, accompanied by his guards, went to Tskhinvali. We took that man, who was already dying, in a coma, and transferred him immediately to Gori hospital, as we would not be able to make it to Tbilisi.

I am so grateful to Mr. Nukri Jokhadze, who then was a head doctor at the hospital, who mobilized the entire hospital. In a couple of minutes after admission that man was transferred to the surgery unit and was operated on. Of course I was in touch with his relative over the phone, explaining the situation... and that man survived, he regained consciousness, started eating, I fed him myself, let him use my phone... People from Tskhinvali feared that someone might hurt him on purpose, and he always told them on the phone that he was in good hands, he was not afraid of Georgians, everyone took good care of him, treated him well. All this was done entirely free of charge... but... that ominous August 8th came and the war began... We had to save ourselves and

run and to be honest, during those couple of days I did not even remember that person. We had to think about ourselves, where and how to go. When we finally settled down and regained some reason, I asked about this man. The hospital had been immediately evacuated and the patients, wounded people and others, had been transferred to different hospitals in Tbilisi. Everyone who had the slightest opportunity to go, was discharged and that man had been transferred to Tbilisi Hospital of Infectious Diseases. We mobilized all of Tbilisi, started looking for him, and found him in the Hospital for Infectious Diseases. Although, unfortunately he was no longer alive when I found him, he had died and before passing away, while he was still conscious he asked them to take him to Ergneti, where there was a woman who would save him and take him to Tskhinvali. The head doctor, with whom I spoke, gave me his passport and medical history. I called his brother in Tskhinvali, I was in a very bad situation too. I did not want them to think that this had happened on purpose, due to the war and the tense situation... this was out of the question! No medical staff would consciously allow a person's death, even if it were their enemy. And... then, as a result of negotiations, that man's body was transferred to Tskhinvali on a vehicle from the Red Cross. By that time our soldiers were being held hostage in Tskhinvali and he was exchanged for three Georgian hostages. These are the rules of war. Although, it is still very hard for me to remember that, war has its laws too.

You are asking about the cost of conflict. I paid a very high price in this conflict. Besides the fact that my husband died and as a result of this stress and other subsequent events my family members died every three years, and to be honest, their funerals and everything... all this was on one woman's shoulders, on my shoulders. Human victims, this was the hardest part, and it was completed by August 2008, when only ashes remained from my 80-year-old family. When nothing was left, no history, everything was destroyed. This was... I don't know what else a person can experience? I do not have anything left except for my children, but thank God, my children survived. This was very hard. I am nobody, I am one common Georgian, a regular person, who had to pay the price of conflict started and kindled by bad politicians, which grew into large-scale war, which was not beneficial for anyone, neither Georgians, nor the Ossetian side. And nowadays, it seems to have healed... we have not forgotten, the wounds caused by war have healed and we still long for those days, when we used to live together.

I am a total optimist and I believe that after some time these relations will be restored. Sometimes, when I go deep down in the roots of this conflict and compare it to others – this was not an ethnic conflict between Georgians and Ossetians, this was not... e.g. a conflict for seizing territories; it was creat-

ed artificially, an artificially kindled conflict between each other, which was used very well by a third party. I often think that solving this conflict today is not in someone's interest, otherwise... I think that people around me are ready to make up with those people, meaning the Ossetian side, forgive everything that happened between us and start from a clean slate. The currently unused great resource of mixed families gives me good grounds for thinking so. Although, certain powers do not want to solve this conflict. It is better for the conflict to continue like that for many years, rather than have some positive changes. There are certain channels, which, if put into operation, would lead to very good results, I am not saying that the road will be opened tomorrow, thousands of our refugees, who were forcibly displaced, will go there and see their restored and rehabilitated homes, which they left behind and you know it very well that people left huge properties there, Georgian properties. Today, they are still fighting to rehabilitate those houses in Tskhinvali. And I heard it many times that they asked why they had burned those houses, if they would have to live in the streets six or seven years after the war, they could have settled in those houses and lived there. This was a very short-term politics for removing Georgians entirely and everyone knows from different published photos that the houses were completely demolished, lanes and vineyards were cut down. But vines will grow again after one or five years. Vines will grow, those gardens will be restored and everything. It is essential for the people to find each other again. People should be able to visit each other.

I once read in one of the Ossetian publications that people in Tskhinvali demanded from their Government to officially prohibit Georgian songs, music, dance, everything, they even banned Gandagana, it is a well-known fact, it was even published in the media. I live so close to the boundary line and Tskhinvali, that whenever there is a wedding here the sounds of music go in their direction and often they dance to the sounds of Shalakho, we can often hear the sounds of Georgian song. This gives me hope that they have not forgotten Georgians and if... even today, according to my friends' rumors, if they want to tell each other secrets, they speak in Georgian, this means that history still lives among them and it cannot be erased, it is not natural to erase such things. These are the rules of nature. I remember a friend of mine, my classmate of Ossetian ethnicity, who graduated from a Georgian school, telling me: they forbid me to speak in Georgian, but I still think in Georgian and then translate it into Ossetian and Russian. And this would mean changing their entire consciousness and mentality, which is inadmissible. It is not easy to change person's consciousness, this has been accumulated in their consciousness over years and centuries and cannot happen so easily.

* * *

G. V. resident of the village of Saribari of Kaspi Municipality.

Village consists of 8 households and is entirely populated by ethnic Ossetians

I was born in the village of Saribari. I graduated 10th grade here; I've been working since then. After my army service, I worked as an electrician. Then, before the unrest began, I worked everywhere, in farms, drove a bus. I drove people to excursions. Even today I serve the village as a mini-bus driver. Sometimes I go to Tbilisi for the sake of two passengers, sometimes to Gori. I have one working day per week and I serve the village.

In the beginning of the 90's... the danger of invasion came from Kodistskaro... or from the side of the Georgians. Residents of Kodistskaro protected the village, they did not let anyone pass... If there is anyone to be "eaten", we will be the first ones to "eat" them, they said.

Georgians protected us, local Ossetians. And we did not let anyone go there. No one ever came from Orchosani to rob somebody or steal somebody's car from Kodistskaro, nothing like that ever happened... nothing... we had cars as well and they were protected from us, and they protected us from there. We've been like that since then. We are still on good terms. But, if only the Russians had not stood between us. Sometimes we want to share a meal, and talk about some things... they are afraid of Georgian militia and we are afraid of the Russians.

Such things have happened. There is a water channel there, and we sat in that channel, their shepherd was sitting in one side and I was sitting in another. I took some food there, he, the shepherd, had his own, I brought mine too... They do not have as much wine as we do, they do not have so many things, alcohol. Sometimes we have a feast there.

I left many relatives over there. My cousins, children of my father's brother, they already have grandchildren and I don't know any of them. They left, one of them was only one year old, and another one was two. It has been 17-18 years, hasn't it? My son is now seventeen and does not know anyone. He cannot speak a single word in Ossetian. He is being raised in Kaspi and here, with me.

2008 was a horrible time for the entire country and this particular village, of course. We were hiding. There are some shelters here, old pools and other things. All the men and women gathered there. We spent the nights there and tried to avoid those spots from where the light was coming. They knew where we were hiding. And during those days we stayed there. Who would spend the night at home – no one. And we would take turns;

one, two or three men would go outside and make sure that no one came in from this or that side. And during that war the Georgians did not bother us at all. Once, when we were having dinner in the evening, a commander came to my house. When the bombing of Gori began, probably on the 9th, Georgians hid in my house. Once, when the Georgians were running away from Orchosani, I went outside and they said: "Uncle, please give us some water." "There is no water," I told them, "come in, have some wine, no time for water..." They were tired, six-seven men, from Kakheti. I had Kakhetian boys at home. I spoke with my children in Ossetian and asked them to bring some water... when I looked back no one was there... they had run away. When they heard Ossetian language, they thought that they had managed to escape from Ossetians and now they had met another Ossetian here... not everyone knows our story. From the beginning of times, we did not have any animosity towards neither Georgians, nor Ossetians, nothing like that... even now, they have not detained anyone, I have not heard of any such thing.

Although, there were cases when the Russians detained people. They took two young men, who went there for water; they went there to get water and got detained. There was an old man with them and they left him alone. There, on the hill close to the ravine; "he is too old, to hell with him," they said and left him alone... they get bonuses, they get paid for doing this.

Sometimes we have joint meetings. Once we had a meeting with Ossetians in Yerevan... in the beginning they were surprised: you are from here, you have an Ossetian surname and how did you end up like this? – They asked and then we became such friends that they would not even break bread without me. Now a man from Orchosani is not allowed to freely walk on his own territory. Us? Who bothers us? We walk freely, the way we want...

We lost relatives in the 90's and in 2008... that love was lost, gone... even the villages do not have that any more... that order, no one trusts anybody, right? People do not visit each other... there is nothing to do in the villages and we cannot work, it is all pointless probably... every day I think about where to go and if anyone tells me to go with him as a beggar, I will. There is no income at all. We are going backwards, not forward. Our ancestors moved forward. My father died when he was 48. He fixed those huge houses all by himself, he worked as an electrician. An electrician with a salary. When I came back from the army I was paid a salary of GEL 110 (*refers to Soviet rubles*). I thought that... I changed cars every other day. I drove 03, 06, Volga... now I drive a minibus, I bought it through a loan... I scraped together the rest, I scraped together for six cars. Then I added

some money and bought this one... I cannot work now... there is no work. We want to work... when there is no water, we cannot work. Now we have a drip irrigation system and we can grow something for ourselves and for selling as well. Now we can see some more work coming. This year I will expand, enlarge and widen.

It would be good if tomorrow, or the day after, or in the near future, these relations between Russia and Georgia, Tskhinvali and Tbilisi improved and those closed roads opened. This will have an impact on everything, of course it will, I'll be able to go there freely... before, when I needed fish I would go there in the evening and in the morning I would have fish at home. I would go to Orjonikidze and come back. We would take our produce, like cabbages to Tskhinvali – then we would bring something home... flour or oil, or something like that.

If only the Russians had not stood between us, we would have become friends again and move towards improvements. Or at least we would go forward. It is not essential... if someone hit me yesterday, I would not hold grudge against him, nor retaliate. I was beaten too. Once I was beaten in Tskhinvali. Once I ran away from here, they were trying to take away my car and I left for Orjonikidze and stayed there for a month. I spent all the money I had with me and came back; I could not take it anymore. They beat me, because I had decided to come back. They beat me because of that... then I told him that there was no other way... what else could I have done? Then, when I was coming back... our village is called Saribari and Saribari. Do you know what Saribari means? It means freedom. Freedom like... you know, when one says that he is free. When I came back, my passport said that I was from Saribari, now such passports do not exist anymore. I came through Russian customs; through the tunnel... they searched me and told me I was free to go. I passed through that tunnel and there was an Ossetian checkpoint, a booth. They asked me, in Ossetian, where I was going, who I was, I said to Saribari... What is Saribari? And he opened fire, from a machine-gun, and broke my sidelights. This was during Gamsakhurdia's period. So they locked us there for an entire day, without any food... We had not eaten or drunk water for an entire day. There were three of us. Then a certain merciful old man came to us, who had already been to that territory and asked why they were keeping us there. They said that we were arrogant, we were still saying that we were free... these Georgians... they called us "gamsiks"... Georgian "gamsiks"... because of Gamsakhurdia's surname... Ossetians who had become Georgians... gamsiks, gamsiks... they are gamsiks, they called us gamsiks... I still despise such kinds of people. They kept us there for a while and then that man told them that we were actually from

Saribari and they had to let us go free and feed us immediately. Feed us? I said I just wanted to leave and instead of going to Tskhinvali, we went back. If we went to Tskhinvali, the Ossetians would eat us alive, they hated us so much... We went there when the peacekeeping APCs accompanied them, we would follow and go there. We would go back the same way... if you made it, you would be able to come back... if not... even if a young boy caught you in Tskhinvali, you would be lost, together with your car.

Now about the future... we should have peace again... they will become our friends again, now we should not irritate them... because, we should not say from the very beginning that the Ossetians will eat us alive from that side, or Georgians will eat them alive from this side. We should not talk about this anymore. What was their name during Gamsakhurdia's time? Militia, they used to come here, take their gold, cars, other things. These things happened, no one else bothered us, and the village still stands on its place. The only thing is that the youth have run away, left, there are no jobs, one cannot move forward. Only we remained here, and even I would want to leave, if I did not have this huge house. One might want to go to the city somewhere...I opened a co-operative, invested large amounts of money and then everything was lost deceitfully... seven people joined that co-operative, I was appointed a chairman. Although, a chairman of what? I don't even know... there was a moment when the entire village switched to drip irrigation, although I have not seen water in this village since the soviet times. We buy everything, tomatoes... everything, we go to Gori to shop for products. This year they bought tomatoes and vegetables from us... if we had more support the village would feed itself and others. Everyone loves hard work. Everyone... just give them work and they will work the whole day...

If there is more support, people will come back, won't they? They will come back for sure. If you tell my children... when they come to visit, they ask me what to do. Sometimes I let them chop wood, wash my car twice a day, to entertain them somehow... They ask "what can I do here?" all the time, then they run away – Oh, when we have peace we'll be fine too, I wish everyone a peaceful life, and people will move forward. It is essential to have peace.

* * *

*N.B. currently a resident of an IDP settlement in Karaleti
an internally displaced person as a result of the August 2008 war*

I was born in Eredvi, a village in the former Tskhinvali district. I finished Eredvi secondary school with honors. The same year I was enrolled in Tskhinvali Pedagogical Institute, majoring in Georgian Language and Literature. Of course I graduated with honors and took a job in an Eredvi school with eight grades, as a chief of the pioneers. And I enjoyed success after success because of my hard and dedicated work. I had been a permanent delegate of the Communist Youth League and the Party Congress. I was a recipient of multiple diplomas and certificates at union, republican, autonomy and district levels. I do not want to sound arrogant, but I was one of the exemplary activists, not only at the rayon but also district level, and well known by district authorities. I would receive awards, presents and often received a radio and TV spotlight. I used to be mentioned and shown on TV on numerous occasions. Some even thought I was a dairymaid because of all this publicity...

I had an excellent husband, a distinguished teacher. We had three children. My daughter and one of my sons are married and one son is single. My husband passed away because of a heart attack in 1988. His death was sudden. He was an amazing person, an excellent teacher and his former students still keep in touch with my family and whenever my children mention who their father was they have a green light there, so to say. I had lived many good years. I was granted the Medal of Honor for my outstanding achievements in youth affairs and a teacher's badge. At some point I worked as a director of a preschool and because of my achievements I was granted an honorary title of teacher-instructor. Certificates and awards are countless. I was also a laureate of an art festival and a member of the Tskhinvali branch of the Writer's Union. I was enrolled in the Union in 1989. I write, well, I used to write to be more exact. I had two publications ready for printing, but everything was left behind. I lost them to the war. I lost my history, not a single photo, or a piece of writing... I lost the history of my past and whatever is preserved I keep it in my memory. This is my fortune today.

And then I continued to work and as a result of my hard work I succeeded in a competition at the Ministry of Education and was appointed as a head of the Regional Department of Education. The agency was transformed into an education resource center and therefore I became head of

the resource center. Then I got a position of head of social service in the Gambeoba (*an executive branch for local authorities in Georgia*). But after the National Movement came into power I was dismissed as one of the “undesirable persons” for them. I have been involved in NGO activities since then. I am one of the peacebuilding activists within the organization called Women for Peace and Life. I am also involved in activities of the women’s association Tankhoba. I worked for the UN in Shida Kartli as a human and women’s rights activist for five years. I am still active [in this field].

The 1990s were the most difficult years. Since November 1988 to be more exact. At that time the bleakness had already started. We started hearing stuff from both sides. We already felt tension. And the 9th of April 1989 put every hope we had to an end. The 9th of April was a day you will never forget. We sacrificed for the independence of the country but we still cannot feel that we are an independent country today. What have so many young lives been wasted for?

The situation became complicated in the 1990s. Killings ensued. I remember Gundishvili and Somkhishvili being shot in a car in front of the Party Rayon Committee. It seemed like there was a competition. A Georgian would kill an Ossetian and then an Ossetian would kill a Georgian. Vengeance prevailed. And the situation grew tenser and tenser.

Up until 1991, we belonged to the Tskhinvali Rayon. I am talking about Kekhvi already. I used to live in Greater Liakhvi gorge. I was employed in the education system and had to deal with the department in Tskhinvali and would often visit the town. But in 1991 our relations were cut and for some reasons we were reassigned to the Gori district but it was all very confusing and people could not understand where to go.

There was a whole 18 years from the 1990s to 2008. Georgians who had lived in Tskhinvali had already left. And for 18 years, until 2008, we were trying to maintain a Georgian spirit and the Georgian jurisdiction with all our might. We stood there firm in both smaller and greater Liakhvi gorge but especially in Greater Liakhvi gorge as we did not have anywhere to go. We would be accompanied when we were going to Tskhinvali (*there were times when peacekeeping forces would accompany Georgians with armored transporter carriers*) or coming back. In spite of all these precautions we had not slept even a single night with a deep sleep. There were shootings [every night] and panic and fear made us feel worse. We were constantly alert for attacks. We would run back and forth with children in our hands to neighbors’ houses and elsewhere. We were struggling a lot but I would have been happy had we been able to maintain it as it was... had we managed to maintain our land, territory and keep it going as it was.

I would like to tell you a story. Lira Kozaeva was implementing a project in Tskhinvali and she had to involve Georgian children and Georgian women as it was about a women's club. Lira Kozaeva had been informed that I was an extremist fighting against Ossetians. Lira did not know that my daughter lived in Tskhinvali. And once she said she was going to visit me. I was the head of the Education Department back then. I saw an Ossetian car pulled up in the front yard... She asked for my name and surname... I met her as if she were my lost brother who had just returned from the war. The woman was taken aback. She was surprised by all the rumors she had heard about me. We connected afterwards. I would bring 15 children to participate in a Sunday school in Tskhinvali. Ossetian and Georgian children participated together. At first they tried to avoid each other, but then they became very good friends and fell in love with each other. We worked with our children, Lira and myself, so that the children would not hate each other.

I am a teacher by profession and I have no right to distort the child's soul. Nor have I ever been inspired to do so. Children maintained contact with each other by phone, would write to each other. We managed to implement the Sunday school project successfully.

They learned English, Georgian and Ossetian traditions, gender issues, painting, and writing skills in the Sunday school. We paid great attention to civic education and our priority was confidence and trust building. It was a central line of our work.

By the end of the 1990s the situation grew better and it seemed that people resumed relationships. Lira Kozaeva was organizing a series of meetings including the one with Kokoiti, and Georgian women were also invited to these meetings. Ossetians would also attend the meetings and we knew what they thought. Then after the Ergeneti market was opened, the relations were regulated to the effect that we would invite each other to weddings, visit each other and baptize each other's children. The waters got murky after the National Movement ascended to power.

In 2004 they shut down the market and the tense situation got even tenser after they set up Sanakoev's office (*Dimitri Sanakoev, head of the South Ossetian temporary administration set up by the Georgian Government in Greater Liakhvi gorge in 2008*). If they had to set it up, they should not have done so in Kurta because, after Sanakoevi came in, we had to take a route of 40km through woods like wild animals. All right, there was transport, but if there was no transport in winter we had to walk. Just imagine, you have a family and need a lot of stuff. You have nowhere to go and therefore we had to walk through the woods which was very dangerous especially in winter.

We were scared even in summer. Even though the trees were green we were still afraid that someone might jump out from behind the trees to rob us.

And here came 2008 and we failed to use wisdom against stupidity. Sadly we did not manage to do so. The public was already alert on the 1st of August. You heard stuff when you watched TV and listened to the radio. We had access to Tskhinvali based TV channels and radio and were hearing that they were taking out children and women. What is going on? I could not contact my daughter in Tskhinvali. I tried to call her a couple of times. She said they were still in Tskhinvali and we would beg each other to take care (*her daughter is married to a Tskhinvali man and during the war the mother and her daughter were on different sides of the divide*).

Few people were moving around in the village. We also hid. My son lived in Gori back then. He was unemployed. And the minute the situation got tense he immediately came to the village. It was the first day of August. People were running away from the village. He said he would not let anybody say that he was hiding away and he was not going to do so. He said he would stand next to his people. Two brave men. Can you imagine my situation? I was the mother and doting on my sons, trying to protect them from evil. We hid in my neighbor's cellar. There was nobody around. We did not know that people were running away, taking with them whatever they could carry.

There were four of us – my two sons, myself and several people from neighboring families. We did not know anybody, nobody knew anything and the village was empty. My youngster had a car and we got in it. There were eleven of us. He was driving very fast. At that point in time the village was already under bombing. It was midday and apparently they took a break. We were lucky to use that break... We did not know whether or not we were coming back. We did not take anything. I did not even go to my house. What I did, though, was that I stood there briefly and looked at my house. I wanted to remember it in case I would not be able to come back. I never took anything from there, not even documents or pictures... I wish I had...

We got in the car and left. We drove by Kurta, Achabeti and were about to turn to Kheiti road. There was not a soul and there are eleven of us sitting in the car. As we reached the place known as Tseriakho, we saw that there was no checkpoint and everything was in ruins... at that point we saw a man running towards us. My son shouted at him and told him he had to go back. We reached Eredvi. It was horrible. Shootings from everywhere. We left for Gori from there and stayed there. So my son and myself stayed in Gori while my mother and my brother stayed in Eredvi as we found out later on... At three in

the morning my son left for Eredvi and my heart jumped out of my chest as I was seeing him off to Eredvi in the middle of the war... He could hardly take my mother from there as she did not want to leave.

We used to live on the fourth floor in a building in front of the house of culture and the first bomb hit the area right in front of the house of culture. Everything was shattered. We were scared and moved down on the second floor where an old Ossetian man lived. He told us that he was a veteran of World War II and said that no bomb was going to hit the area and we should not be scared. We stayed in Gori for couple of days and then moved to Tbilisi. That was it. We lived in degrading conditions...

You are asking about the cost of conflict. You know what? As time passes and years after years are gone, I feel the loss stronger and stronger... I am not talking about the economic loss here, no way... I long for my land, region and the ancient part of Georgia...I am least concerned with what I left in my house. I forgot it all. I worry about the distance which makes me feel so far away from somebody who is so close. This is a pain of the soul, this is a trauma and it should not be the way it is.

It's the 21st century today and I know that two superpowers are competing with each other, right? But human beings should not fall victims of their ambitions. A mother must have the right to see her children and the child must be able to see her siblings. I am not alone. I am not the only one who suffers. There are so many like me out there. There are people who have parents on this side while they are on the other side or vice-versa. This is a pain of the soul. This is a severe violation of human rights. I do not agree with the assumption that human rights are protected. The rights of women are not protected. It will soon be nine years since I last saw my daughter and my grandchild. Are my rights protected? No.

You know what? You cannot do anything with hatred. Hatred destroys and ruins everything. Love, if I have love inside me, I have to love loving... I love Ossetian people. I love people, not only my children and grandchildren. I love them all ... I was born among them ... For example, Iuza Tattaeva, who worked as a head of the regional committee of the Communist Youth League in schools and all these years that we spent together. I had been a leader of the pioneers for almost 13 years and I should tell you that this lady contributed greatly to my development as a facilitator. And there were thousands like me. I want to meet with her and talk to her. She has agreed to come here and other people as well, past activists, so we can sit together and talk about the past. The past gives birth to a future. Those who forget the past are destined to have no future and they will never have one.

Generally I am a very optimistic person... I am an avid optimist and I believe that green plums and almonds will blossom again in our gorge and so will Georgian-Ossetian relations. It cannot be otherwise. As you can never separate a mouth from a nose, likewise, Georgians and Ossetians can never be separated, because there are no other two nations in the world that are as entangled and entwined as Georgians and Ossetians. If you can imagine the number eight written down... Georgian and Ossetian relations resemble it. We cannot be separated no matter how strong the power trying to split us, is. People will never be able to hate each other... I talk to not only my daughter over the phone, but to many other people as well...

Water never loses its trace and our relations, these historic relations, go back into the deep past. Our friendship starts from the times unknown. There is no way they will not be rebuilt and blossom. I say to myself that I am among those who can put a brick of my own in the construction of Georgian-Ossetian relations. And the brick that I am going to put is the one which will start and complete the cementing of these relations. That is what I think and with all my heart and soul I crave for this. My children and grandchildren feel the same way. Who has the right to say she or he is an Ossetian? So what? I never differentiate people by their nationality. I always see a human in a human being. If I see a human being I am ready to die for him or her no matter if they are Ossetians, Russians, Tatars. Nationality has never mattered for me. I grew up with them. I used to dance in a dance troupe of the institute. The chief trainer was an Ossetian man, Otar Siukaev, may God rest him in peace. I never felt any pressure or insult. Even now Ossetians who I have known for a long time, who are still around, they want to have relations with us again. Nobody is going to make me believe that Ossetians hate us... The number one problem in both Georgia and Ossetia is education. The level of civic education is low and so is the level of classical education. I am not talking about everybody of course – God save us, but we have a very low level of education and I always stress that we need to work very hard. We need to make an effort to persuade each other, to make each other believe, encourage love in each other's souls... I love these two words so much “genatsvale”³ and “sikvaruli” [love in Georgian]. Without them society is done for. And any nation who does not know what love is and does not understand the meaning and the value of the word “genatsvale” is doomed for destruction.

³ *Genatsvale* (in Georgian spelling), is an idiomatic expression which is not subject to translation. Literarily it means “me in your stead in death” or “I will replace you when the death comes”. The closes it can be translated is, “my dear”, “darling”.

* * *

M. M. resident of Dvani village, Kareli municipality, 47 years old

I was born in the village of Dvani, in the Kareli district. I went to a local school from first to sixth grade. From the seventh grade I continued in the N4 school in Tskhinvali. I served in the Soviet army. After completing my compulsory military service, I graduated from Tskhinvali Pedagogical Institute. I completed only the first year there, because shortly after this, the ethnic conflict broke out which later acquired an irreversible character and as of today, has led to this level [of relationship] between Georgians and Ossetians, these brotherly ethnic groups.

In general, the conflict started and fueled up... it was the 23rd of November in 1990. Zviad Gamsakhurdia was not yet the president and he was going to organize a rally... Yes, it was the 23rd of November, I remember it clearly. And we woke up in the morning of the 24th to find out that there had been picketing in the neighboring village of Muguti. It was improvised and spontaneous, set up by just few men. And there was also a responding picket on our side and then a so-called “picket era” ensued. It had not yet snowballed into a harsh confrontation. You know how people acted in those days? They were still afraid of the law. Some had gone beyond the law, but many still abided by the law. But you could see that this lawfulness was already starting to shake and move eventually towards an active phase of an ethnic conflict. And this [the phase] was heating up on both sides and it was growing and bringing about very negative consequences for both Ossetians and Georgians obviously, because conflicts never ever bring any good to anybody. And that is how it all started to become ruined, everything what we call love, kinship and relationships that had been cemented throughout centuries of shared lives among people of both ethnicities.

Georgians and Ossetians were two nations with great kinship bonds and as I was growing up I never heard that there was a line between Georgians and Ossetians. There were a great many mixed families and nobody experienced any discomfort because of this before. But at this point in time it turned out that these people were standing on opposite sides of barricades and this was truly blood-curdling for many people and it even caused many families to separate, you know, Georgian-Ossetian families with wives and husbands from different ethnic backgrounds. We witnessed cases when they separated for political reasons. Of course it was appalling for both Georgians and Ossetians alike, as I have already noted.

My village was affected the same way as all the other surrounding villages... to the effect that people's consciousness had switched to some unexplained and unclear fight mode. Psychologically, people were all saturated with negativity. It was the first time over the course of many years that people saw how ineffective the government was in regulating this conflict... people's mentality changed literally overnight and this transformation was not positive at all. On the contrary, it was very regressive because it was founded on rage, revenge and ethnic hatred. It was horrible. These roots then had malicious fruits in future generations and their mentality on both sides. I reiterate – on both sides.

There is no alternative to peace. I will always repeat these words. Everywhere I go, I say that there is no alternative to peace. And then the conflict slowed down and a quadripartite peacekeeping mandate contributed greatly to this process. It was the Dagomis accord, if I remember it correctly, and the conflict started fading away. When the dust settled, people eventually started rethinking what had happened between these two ethnic groups. And many of them, even though covertly, still admitted that it was a senseless conflict. Covertly, because there were reactionary forces on both Georgian and Ossetian sides, which actually were trying to block this information. Because they would benefit from the conflict coming back.

So these quiet, descent folks, and there were many on both sides, kept quiet. Because, they could not speak their minds, because they were afraid of that reactionary wing. Yes, they were afraid of them. But most importantly, against all odds, people started thinking that this was a senseless conflict... senseless bloodshed with victims of senseless actions. And relations began to slowly get restored. First, relations were established mostly because of trade purposes. And then people starting remembering old kinship ties – remembering godparents and godchildren, cousins etc. That's how the relations started to develop again. Roads were opened again and passions gradually faded away. Peace prevailed. And it seemed we had the moment when nothing would prevent reconciliation. But sadly, reactionary elements reemerged again. There were few, really, but they still managed to change the climate. They would pop up, make inflammatory statements on both sides. And these statements started destroying the peace that had been cherished for years and the fight for peace had to start all over again. This was the way the process was progressing.

Mostly, the disposition was such, at least with regard to most of the population, that they were going to reconcile. There was a psychological readiness for this and surely, the Ergneti market and economic relations with each other also contributed to this. Almost up until 2003. I remem-

ber that it [reconciliation] was almost finalized in legal terms when Chibirov was in office. They were talking about signing a treaty or something and I really hoped it would proceed this way. But sadly it was not the way everything went ahead.

The next phase starts from 2004. The incumbent Georgian government started talking about the Ergneti market being a black hole in the country's economy. They were talking about unregistered taxes and about the necessity to shut down the market. Tensions, provocations, mutual provocations ensued. Since 2004 we had seen cascades of tensions. Violence would erupt and snowball into crossfire, conflicts, bloodshed and it would go away eventually. And then after a few months of peace it would come back again. These spots of tension occurred in 2005, 2006 and 2007. There were confrontations bringing along bloodshed and casualties, rather than just spots of tensions. And what began in 2004 led us to what happened in 2008.

2008 is the most dreadful nightmare a human being may have. When this horrible war broke out in 2008 we left the village on the 7th of August, because we could not stay here anymore. We lived with our relatives for almost two months. Then after the Georgian police had entered the village and the Russian army left the village we returned. What we saw was the destroyed village in a horrible condition with around 50 burned houses, a robbed village almost erased from the surface of earth. There had been casualties. People had been killed. I lost my uncle, my father's brother, to this violent confrontation. Several people had died... what was most difficult for me to handle, was the death of my former student – I work as a teacher. He was serving in the Georgian army at that time. I was hurt with this death. The pain was piercing. He was just an 18 year old boy. My house had not been burned but there is no “mine” or “yours” in this situation. There was no difference if it belonged to me or to others... and I think that destroyed property, casualties and damage sustained by Ossetians and Georgians throughout this conflict was all mine. Because of the senselessness of this conflict.

In 2013, the Russian regime started borderization. And the borders established by our forefathers started to fall apart. The so called borders between our village and the neighboring village... There was a border between us and the Ossetian village Muguti, agreed by our forefathers. And these very borders were torn apart by the Russian occupational forces. And our lands, Georgian lands are now beyond the so-called border.

My own land, a piece of land, is now on the other side of this border and I was left without land. You know what a life without land means for

someone living in the village. And it was not only my land that was left on the other side. Overall 70 hectares of land have been lost. They took them beyond their barbed wires. And I think in this case it has been all illegal.

The cost of conflict is enormous. Everyone paid that cost. What I mean here is less personal, but personal costs were also high. I personally paid with my damaged psychology. I sustained an enormous trauma. The most precious part of what I had – the best period of my life – my young age was claimed by this conflict. This is going to haunt me all my life before it gets resolved. Thoughts on how it started and how it is going to be resolved will haunt me. This is the highest price by far. The cost was immense to the effect that it has badly affected my health. I sustained cardiac arrest last summer. I nearly kicked the bucket. I think that, rather I am sure that, this was due to the sufferings of many years... What I had to witness throughout all these years, it hurt me and of course it has affected my health.

As for the financial cost of the conflict: the material cost is of less importance... the material cost is, for instance, that my family was left without land, without income. But as I said, this is something we should be less concerned with. What we should worry about is broken bridges between brothers. What hurts me the most is that our children, a generation to come after mine, will grow up without ever setting foot in the streets of Tskhinvali. And a generation will grow up there without ever having walked here. They will be strangers to each other and they are not going to believe that there was love and compassion between Ossetians and Georgians. It hurts me to think that my beloved school, school N4 in Tskhinvali, was burned. I am connected to this school with the best of my memories. I will never be able to go to that school and remember the best years of my childhood. This is the cost, is not it?

And to avoid being biased, I should say that the cost sustained by the other side was the same. I am sure that there are many people out there who think just like I do and that they also think that there is no alternative to peace. This cost was huge for both sides. A war has a big stomach and we have to pay a lot to fill out this stomach. Both Georgians and Ossetians had to pay for this.

There was no line between Georgian and Ossetian and Russian before the war. There was no such definition as Georgian, or Ossetian. We had very amicable relations. There was school N2 in front of School N4 in Tskhinvali and we had strong friendly relations with each other. The same goes for School N6. We also had Ossetian neighbors... I worked in Electric VibroMachines for a year and I had excellent Ossetian colleagues. There was no confrontation. I do not know what force managed to destroy these

relationships. This should never have happened. And after the conflict I do not know... we do not have relations any more... they were cut, obviously.

Now we live in the village. And there are barbed wires around the village. Barbed wires... I do not know... Sometimes it feels like living in a ghetto...in some sort of fenced colony. It seems to me that love, relationships and kinship, roots, are not to be overcome by barbed wire. The time will come when the barbed wire will be gone and Georgians and Ossetians will embrace each other and forget that sinister past of ours. They will open their hearts to each other and resume their shared lives.

Now I work as a teacher and always try to tell my children that violence and war is horrible. I try my best to help them not to think that someone is their enemy. The enemy is the one who calls on violence, hatred. There will be no other enemy for them. A person, only because he or she is of a different ethnic background or political affiliation, cannot be an enemy.

We look at the future with hope. I am sure that it is just a matter of time before Georgians and Ossetians will live together again. There will be a great consensus. But it will take time. It also takes progressive people, progressive wings from both sides who will be able to lead their people to an overall reconciliation. The church may play a big role in this process, as well as non-governmental organizations, or journalists. Economy and trade relations may also play a role in here. We should try all possible ways and take all possible steps, reach out to everyone. All Ossetians and Georgians who think progressively should take these steps. We live in the 21st century. The Internet is accessible and we can resume relations at least virtually. I call on every progressively thinking Ossetian to stand together and tell each other that there is no alternative to peace.

N. M. resident of the village Nikozi, Gori municipality, 29 years old

I was born in Tskhinvali. My father passed away in 2010. I have a mother and two sisters. We are all married. Currently I live with my mom and grandmother with disabilities and in need of care. I am divorced and raising a son on my own. I graduated from Tskhinvali State University in Gori in 2007. In the spring of 2008 I got a job in the peacekeeping forces as a kitchen manager at Exmed. However, sadly, due to notorious events, I lost my job as each base had its own kitchen manager and I was not experienced enough to get a job at another base. I found a job in a local shop first and then I happened to attend an information meeting organized by the women's association Tankhmoba [Georgian word for "consent"] and I am still here.

My generation, the generation of the 1980s, is perhaps the one who suffered the most as we have had to witness a lot of conflicts. This includes the 9th of April 1989, the troubles of 1992, the constant fear, the pre-war events of 2004, the constant shootings, the ever-lasting tension. Children in my class even came up with a joke that we were born in the war, grew up in the war, were receiving education in the war and most probably we would get married in the war. And it was truly like this. If we look at the attitudes after 1992, there were several years of tension. I do not remember this period very well. But I know about it because we had family friends [Ossetians]. But relations were warmer back then. People would visit each other. As far as I remember, people would move freely to and from Tskhinvali, and kept kinship ties before 2006, even 2007. In 2006 I baptized an Ossetian girl with whom I continue to keep in touch, by phone and the Internet for obvious reasons. She got married and gave a birth to a child. She now lives in Tskhinvali. Her mother is Georgian and father Ossetian. She cannot come here for certain reasons. Her brother works and she has to take into consideration [the kind of] work her brother does. Relations have become very edgy since 2008, the border was closed, when the border was open before that relations were starting to thaw. However, certain factors completely destroyed this... I do not really know... We can only expect that these relations will be restored in future periods.

But the period I remember, from around 1995 to 2005, was a good time. It was the time when the Ergneti market was working and people could enter and leave Tskhinvali. Because we live so close to each other that people would carry their goods on carts and buy products on the spot and carry them back... the relationship was very good. They would call each other by phone to order what they needed. Or, let's say, they wanted to buy something in Tskhinvali and did not have money. They could take whatever they needed and pay later, after

some days or even a month. Locals would sell their harvest right from here. They could take their goods to Orjonikidze and sell them there. The village was economically strong and wealthy. Local community had apples, a lot of them. They would lease land and you could hardly find poor people... perhaps only lazy ones would be worse off. My family, thank God, I do not remember any time when we could not rely on our harvest. My mother and father would do everything they could to provide for us. And the situation was favorable around us. Sadly I cannot say the same about the present situation...

That's how we lived up to 2008. I worked for the peacekeeping forces and therefore I had access to updated information every afternoon. They knew that my baby sister was pregnant and would warn me about upcoming shootings so that we could leave if we were too scared to stay. I always tried to walk her home in the afternoons. She's a very emotional person in general. My sister was 30 weeks pregnant in June, when Sanakoev's car, you may remember that, exploded on a by-path [*Dimitri Sanakoev, head of the South Ossetian interim administration. His car exploded on Eredvi-Kurta en-route*] and then several guys from Avnevi were wounded. This was the situation. We heard shootings every night. During one of those shootouts my pregnant sister jumped off the bed very frightened. This never happened before. After two or three months she noticed that baby had not moved in a while. We took her to a doctor and sadly, we were told that the baby's heart had stopped. Unfortunately, she lost her baby. Thank God, nothing happened to my sister. She is well and in good health. She gave a birth to a healthy baby a year later. In the afternoon of the 7th of August I was on my way to Gori to collect my paycheck. They had planned a rotation some days ago and the Gori armor division was replacing the Nikozi unit on the peacekeeping base. Therefore, seeing tanks did not take me by surprise and I also tried to calm down my neighbors by telling them that it was a part of an ordinary rotation. One of the soldiers sitting on an armored vehicle, had parked his car in my front yard and asked me to keep it there till the 10th of August. Of course I said yes. It was when my elder sister and myself were driving to Gori that they called me to say that there was a danger that war might break out. They told me to leave the base, save everything I was doing at work on a memory chip, and take it to Gori.... We returned. But before that I called home from Gori and asked my mother to get herself ready, and my sisters, so that we could leave for Tbilisi immediately upon our return to the village. My elder sister refused to come with us. Both of my brothers-in-law were serving in the army at that time. So my brother-in-law called my sister and told her loudly to leave by all means. When I arrived in Gori, a friend of mine called me. He told me he had snuck out of the army to buy some clothes and asked me if he could leave his backpack at my place. I agreed and called my mother to warn her that the guy's close friend would drive to our place and leave the backpack. And then it occurred to me

that we would not have time to catch a train on our way back and with tanks already on the move, there might not be any means of transportation. So I asked the guy if they could wait for us in their car, drive us to Gori, and then we would catch a train to Tbilisi. He said it would not be a problem to take us to Gori. So I quickly ran to the base. The guys who were there looked at me surprised since an area surrounding Avnevi had already been bombed and the fields were on fire. They told me it was dangerous to be there and something bad could happen any minute. I told them that I had to take some information to Tbilisi and left. Meanwhile my friend arrived and left his belongings at our place. So we drove to the Tedotsminda (*a village near Gori*) stop. The train arrived in about 15 minutes. People were panicking because they had to lie on the floor as the windows of the train were shattered because of shelling over Khviti. I just imagined what would have happened had we been on that train at that time... Thank God we managed to somehow miss that. That night I tried to reach my mom and called my neighbor's number. The screen of her phone was broken and she could not identify the caller. She thought I was her sister-in-law calling and said: "Khato Tsira's house caught a bomb and so I left for home to check on the house. We were all there". I thought she would not tell me the truth and asked her to pass the phone to my mother. She told me to call later on. When I called and heard her voice I realized that they were simply in the basement together with women from the neighborhood. There were around 14 women sitting in the basement. My dad could not move fast. Because of his disabilities he had to use a walking stick and he walked really slowly. My mom told me that everybody was all right but that our house had been badly damaged. But I could not worry about the house... She also told me that there would be some footage on Rustavi 2 so that I could watch it. I turned on the TV and I saw my house. It is paradoxical, but when the base was bombed my office was the first room to catch a bomb and my house was the first building to catch a bomb when they started shelling the village. Thank God, no one died. And the period before my mother and father could get to Tbilisi awfully dragged on. It was the 11th of August and my mom did not know that Gori had been bombed and there was nothing there. She struggled to get my dad out of the village. A guy from the neighborhood was loading his furniture on his moped and they somehow lifted my dad on the top while my mother walked behind because my dad could not walk. When they got to Gori station they called me from a police officer's phone. When I got a call from a strange number I immediately called back. And the guy told me that they had already left. I begged him to go back and check on them and see if they were still there. As it turned out, there was a taxi departing from the center of Gori with two passengers and they waited for them. The taxi driver charged 80 GEL and my mother said she was willing to share. But the guys did not have more than 35 GEL... They were very embarrassed and counted the money several times. My

mother said she would add 5 GEL and they left. Somehow they got to Tbilisi. And the taxi driver who they stopped in Didube refused to take money from them. “I would not dare to take couple of Lari from you. I know where you are coming from”, – he told them. And when my mom told me they were already here... I will never forget the look in my father’s eyes, a dreadful look. I thought to myself he must have seen horrible stuff on his way, which made him very scared. He was a very proud man. When he sustained damage to his brain from high blood pressure and could no longer work with his stick and saw that my mom was working hard and we did everything in the household, he wanted to be dead. But when he had to face that horror, he seemed to have suffered a lot. I believe he lost half of his life back then... when he saw his house so destroyed, the house he toiled so hard to build with his own hands, it put an end to him.

Grandma stayed at home. She never left. Later she told us that marauders came in on the 13th – 14th of August. They were Ossetians for sure, as there were no Georgians in our house since my grandmother was staying there. They took that young man’s car. Before that I was calling my neighbors begging to get the engine started by a wire or something, to somehow persuade my grandma to get in there and take her out of the village, as there was gasoline in the car. Well, she never left anyway... You cannot oblige anybody in such a situation. My grandma could not drive either. My mother had put everything that was left after the bombing in boxes and these Ossetians took everything with them. Later on, my neighbor told me that they were very frightened. They stashed the army uniforms in the bushes. And when they [they Ossetians] came in they asked if the inhabitants had anyone serving in the army. My neighbor started crying and told the men that her son-in-law was in the army but that after the divorce his uniform was still there and that they were scared and that’s why they had hid them [the uniforms]. So the Ossetians took all the uniforms. My neighbors’ houses were emptied like this. They took bikes and other stuff from them. The Ossetians made recordings of themselves wearing Georgian army uniforms and doing nasty things. And it looked like that all those things are done by Georgians because uniforms had Georgian flags and names on them. It was hard to identify the nationality of those who wore the uniform. But my mom recognized the uniform of her son-in-law, even though she knew for sure that the person who is wearing it is not him. My grandma’s sister was married to a man in Achabeti (*a village in a greater Liakhvi gorge*). They too, decided to stay, as the man had Ossetian friends and owned an Ossetian passport. Therefore, he thought nothing threatened himself and his family. They just sent away their children just in case. But sadly, Kazaks killed them through torture. Their children wanted to organize a wake in their memory and we wanted Grandma to be there as well... at some point they allowed mini-vans to commute... I should also say that His Reverence (*Mitropolite of Tskhinval-NIkozi Eparchy Isaia Chanturia*) tried his

best to protect the population who stayed there and Russian soldiers themselves would give people a glass of water, and if women were moving around the Russian soldiers would tie a white ribbon on their arms as a mark to show that they were peaceful civilians. A woman from my neighborhood would often check on her daughter's house and she told me that they would give her a white ribbon as a sign that she was a peaceful civilian. When we took Grandma to Tbilisi, my father was already finding it very difficult to stay in Tbilisi. And when they left for the village in the beginning of September, my father left with them. My mother would stay with us for a while and then take some food to Dad and Grandma. So one day she decided to leave. I think even before she got to Gori, there was an incoming call on my mobile. "Are you Gia's daughter?", – someone was asking from the other end. "Yes, I am", I said. "Who are you, what is going on? Why are you calling me?" "He was kidnapped, taken away", that is what I heard. "Who, where, when?", I was lost and confused and could not make a sense out of what I was hearing. Luckily I knew all these hotline numbers. I found out that my father was taken by the Russians. I called many people and explained the situation, and told that this is a verified information. As I found out, my dad was sitting in front of the house when some drunk Ossetians drove by in Vilis. When they saw him with a walking stick they asked if he was a tank crew. My father had a speech impairment and in Russian it must have been very difficult. "*ya bil tankistom*" [I was in a tank crew], he told them. So they took him towards Avnevi. The car broke down there and they walked him to Tskhinvali... as my father later told us, they would make him stand in front of holes, rattling with their machine guns, swearing at him, and he would also swear at them silently. Suddenly, a neighbor saw him and immediately notified His Reverence who in his turn called Kulakhmetov [*Major General of the Russian army and commander of the combined peacekeeping forces*]. Kulakhmetov ordered them to immediately bring my father down and release him. Where there is a Georgian checkpoint now, there were Russians standing there and so they released my father at that place. When some journalists found out what happened they started asking him questions which really made him upset as he did not want to go through this again and again. He would complain that they would ask him the same questions over and over. He was complaining that he was tired. We tried to talk to him and tell him that these journalists were not the same ones who had been asking questions before. There is some footage on my father. That is what we could keep of him. He suffered a lot and that's exactly the cost we paid. Our destroyed house, my father's deteriorated health conditions are the price. In 2010 his heart condition got to the point where he developed thrombosis and passed away. Although we tried to do our best, in the end we could see that Dad was not feeling good. We pulled ourselves together, saved some money and repaired the ceiling and wallpaper in at least two rooms so that if something hap-

pened to Dad we would be prepared in a cleaner house. There are eight rooms in our house and none of them had a ceiling. We are trying to slowly repair it. There had been some assistance after the war but we were told that we were not eligible for financial assistance and were only given some materials, which was not enough. Nobody paid for handymen for us and they are quite expensive. There are lots of things we have to do and we try to do it ourselves. It is hard to deal with all these memories but I also think that everyone should know what we went through.

I was in the tenth grade when my father sustained a stroke. My sister was finishing school that year. My mother did everything in her power for us even though my dad required extensive therapy. My mother did everything she could so that we could receive an education without missing a year... My sister became a university student that same year and I followed her next year. Against all odds, I can say that I lived a very happy life as a student thanks to my mom. My mother became a motivator for me, a role model to follow. I wanted to become successful with my knowledge and somehow lift the burden off my mom's shoulders, so that she would not have to take care of me and at least be able to do other things. My mother has inspired me a lot and continues to do so. As I said earlier, I took many steps after the war and in 2010 I found myself sitting at an introductory meeting organized by the women's association Tankhmoba (consent). They were introducing free computer courses. There was a high demand for this since knowing the basics of computer programs had already become a must. And as I had already had some work experience they offered me to undertake a re-training course so that I could train others afterwards. Of course nobody would turn down such an offer. So I accepted the offer so that I could learn something new and then get a good job. And they would pay me for training others. Of course I was happy to take the offer and started working in 2010. It feels like I have graduated from a second or third higher education institution while working here. I attended many trainings and seminars. I have learned how to help others, how to utilize my knowledge, how to identify problems, carry out an assessment or research or mobilize active people like myself. We set up an office with an internet connection, equipped with a copying machine and every service we offer is free of charge. Our experience and hard work won us the trust of the local community and we have grown into an intermediary circle between the local authorities and the central government. I believe that my experience and the path I have taken made me the person I am today. I do not want to sound arrogant but I consider myself successful. At least it seems like that from where I stand today. As for everyday life, of course my family also has problems like every family, but these problems are also relative. It is possible that someone, having much better standing than I do, may say that I have a lot of problems, but when I look around and see people struggling to survive, people in need and

without any income, people who cannot provide for their children, I thank God. I have an amazing mother, a wonderful child, a great job and I believe that I can be myself in what I do. I have no boss and no subordinates in my office. I have no specific job description. What I do is much needed for the community. As for life in the community: if there were middle class, upper middle class and the rich before the war, now we have middle class, lower middle class, the poor and the destitute. People struggle to survive, facing enormous problems. They need great financial support. It is great to have water 24/7, gas 24/7, electricity 24/7, but we have to pay for these at the end of the day. And if I have to turn off the lights or the gas so that I save some money on bills, it is not life, is it?

There is a powerful force between us – between Georgians and Ossetians, waging wars of various kinds including the information war. But I am more than sure that the human resources and kinship ties between us are a great strength. There is a direct exchange of information, let alone the fact that we are now in Nikozi. Once I remember His Reverence saying (*when Medvedev was visiting Tskhinvali*) that if we had a good enough discus thrower they would even manage to hit Medvedev with a discus. And this is the truth. It is true if we understand it properly. We are so close to each other that they will see, willingly or unwillingly, everything good that is being done and will be done here. They will see Nikozi, which is lit up, and a primary health clinic that can be spotted from Tskhinvali. When they see nice houses, a strong community working in orchards, blooming trees, attractions, fun events, busy people; when they see it with their own eyes rather than by word of mouth, it will contribute [to improved relations]. These barbed wires are like fences. It is not a barrier; it cannot be a barrier to our relations. I don't think so, even more so in light of existing kinship ties.

Of course both sides are to be blame and we cannot hold just one side responsible. We should also remember that nobody fired cotton wool in the war. Therefore, it is critical that we work with the youth on both sides as there is no way that relations are cut between the elder generation, between people who still keep in touch...I cannot tell you how much is being done to maintain these relations. Of course they are trying to keep a low profile for various reasons. Because they are also scared and we should all understand why. But I strongly believe that the time will come when Ossetian and Georgian youth will be discussing our future at a round table let's say here, in Nikozi. We will be talking about life in a peaceful country with a united and active youth. Thank God for the present and for those meetings that are being held. These bridges should never be burned and if there is even the smallest string we should all cling to it and make it into a ball so that we have something huge in the end.

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T. G. resident of the village Zardiaantkari, Gori municipality, 70 years old

I was born in Zardiaantkari in 1945 when my father returned from the war. He spent four years in that war. I grew up here. Then I graduated from an agricultural school. I have always been a driver. I worked as a driver in many places including Gori and Tbilisi. We were in the war in 1992. And then there was a war again in 2008. We had to run away for four years. I would take my wife and children everywhere I went. We had horrible days in August 2008. We did not leave the village. There were shootings all the time. Look at the walls with bullet holes and the asbestos sheets on the roof are all broken. When they started setting Disevi on fire, it was the 13th of August. We got very scared. And when they started setting houses on fire here, and burned down my cousins' houses, we were forced to run away. We were afraid that they would burn us all. So we ran. We walked the whole day until we reach Satemo and then we moved to some place after that. Then we got to Tserovani and someone sheltered us there. And then we walked to Igoeti. Then my brother-in-law – he lives in Tbilisi, drove to Igoeti and took us to Tbilisi. Then we reached a preschool. From there they took us to Gori and gave us a room in kindergarten N1. Lali Baiadze was a director there. We spent quite some time there, at least three years or more. We stayed there. Sometimes we would sneak into the village, but there was nothing new there. Plants were burned. People were in very bad conditions. I am sorry for the village. Not only this village but other villages around – Koshka, Gugutiantkari, Mereti, they are all miserable. And food – there are no apples. The orchards are all burned. Now they are trying to fix the water, working hard, but I do not know if they will manage. People live in hardship. If they do not assist us socially, we will be this miserable for a long time. Although we have wine. I have wine, around a ton. It is true that we are not dying of hunger, but people need money to breathe, to be able to set saplings, or fertilize trees. There is nobody to help us out. At least they would distribute some flour during Saakashvili's times, or macaroni, or oil. It has been quite a while since anybody helped us, no one pays any attention to us.

You asked about the cost of the conflict, right? They took stuff, burned my car. They took household stuff, chairs. But they did not burn my house. The house was damaged and the orchards burned. That's what happens if you don't water or prune the trees for four years. That is how poorly we live. We have health issues, high blood pressure. It's not easy to leave

behind a big house like ours. Everyone was in a similar situation in Koshka and Gugutiantkari. There is a huge police presence there. They even outnumber people here. We hear shootings every day, every evening. How come they have military trainings every single day? We live in fear. The Russian army is deployed at the checkpoint within 100 meters from here. They are everywhere till Leningori. We even lost the feeling of fear. I am not going to run anywhere any more, even if they enter tomorrow. Where are we supposed to go to if a war breaks out? God save us from war and let it be peace.

I used to work in Tskhinvali for a whole 12 years. I was a driver at “Selkhoz Techniques”. I had excellent mates, good friends. We had very amicable relationships. I would often stay there to dine. Even now, I can share meals with Ossetians who stayed here in Zardiaantkari. We have this kind of relations with each other. They live at the checkpoint over there, I mean our checkpoint not the Russian one. They allow us to go, as they know that we are together. I do not even know how to put it. I worked and then I got married. I have children and grandchildren. We struggle to survive.

I do not know anything of them, there, on the other side. Perhaps some of them even passed away. The relationships have been lost. We do not know each other’s contacts. There is no way we can meet. Those who have relatives in Vladikavkaz they call them. I really want to call them [friends] and continue our friendship. I have friends in Tskhivali and would be happy to resume friendship there. I hope some of them are still alive. I assume they think alike. I could visit and host my friends. There are good people there too. Where there are bad people there are good ones beside them. It’s like this here. It’s like this everywhere. I should also tell you that if they open the roads now, there are many people who will not dare to come here and there are many who will go there. Those who feel guilty for something, they will not dare to go there. Decent men and people, they will all come and go. Bad men will not be allowed to come and go from either side. No Ossetian has crossed from there even now.

How do we do now? I am going to tell you what I do on a daily basis: I have a cow with a calf and I take care of them. I started budding grapevines slowly. We struggle, keep it slow. Everything was destroyed. As I said people do not even have apples to eat. There is no irrigation water. They [Ossetians] have blocked it.

I think we should move forward. We cannot move backward, can we? I do not know what the future will be like. They may regain some common sense so that we stay together and live well. Many people in the village have relatives on the other side. But these links are being lost since there

is no movement possible between them. Russians do not let them leave, let alone us. Only Russians and Ossetians go there and Georgians are not allowed to. Ossetian guys have bought apples here and taken them there via Vladikavkaz. They also struggle. They also suffer a lot. We have good relations with each other. We grew up together. We have been together for a long time. There has never been a fight between us.

Back then when they came here and started setting everything on fire, people would name different persons who participated in this. But we do not really know who they were. We had already left by then. Who knows who they were? We would not know if they were Ossetians from Khelchua or fighters from the Caucasus. The house over there, they also tried to burn it down, but some guys who were still there, they managed to save it. They also saved my cousin's house up there. They put out the fire when they saw that the house was catching. It's good that they were around, otherwise they would have burned down everything. They tried to burn my house when they burned my car.

You know what I think of the present situation? As far as I can see, they are eating each other in the Parliament and what can we do? If there is no peace in the parliament, how are they going to secure peace outside? What are we supposed to do? What is up to us? Is it only up to the State? Authorities have to decide on everything and we are the people in the state. Cannot farmers do anything? Does it really matter how much we talk? Why do not they listen to people? They just eat and fight. I am not afraid of them. What I am afraid of? I have no fear. I am not in the opposition [political opposition]. I go where good people are. The villagers are angry, man. They curse and swear. Who is going to vote for them? I do not really know.

A police checkpoint divides the village into two halves. Zardiaankari Ossetians live up there. We are very close. We are like family members. We are good together. They are very sensible. We would not say anything upsetting to each other. They too want peace. How long am I going to run back and forth? They are also people, man. What are they supposed to do? Run here and there. If the war starts, we will run and so will they.

We managed to care for each other in the 1990s. We covered them and protected their houses from being burned back then. We would also protect our local Ossetians, so that they did not rob them. Of course they remember all of it. Of course they do. If I remember, so do they. I think, if the is opened and we can move freely and will not be afraid that they will beat us up, then for sure I will meet someone, an old friend or relative, and you will buy something from him, will sell something to them, and little by little the previous relationships will be rebuilt. It all needs time.

They are now talking about opening a road in Khelchua. I think that they want it too. I am not talking about Tskhinvali, but at least villages want to have free movement. We would have feasts together, we celebrated weddings, shared sorrows and happy times with each other. We were all mixed up. May God give us peace. My son has a house here and in Gori too. This house will be enough for my grandson. I have been a driver for 64 years. I do not work now, as there are no jobs. But there are Russians [army] standing all along from Leningori to Abkhazia. We do not have that strong of an army. The Russians have so much equipment and manpower. I know this much, as I used to drive to Russia often.

All we want is peace. We should move forward and take care of ourselves, everyone who is full and who is hungry. I do not rely on the government any more. I do not want anything, but they should respect people, our people in Koshka, Gugutiantkari, Zardiaantkari. We need a little support, someone standing beside us, a little bit of compensation, even a thousand Lari or two would help us and this is nothing for them [the authorities]. I should not live like this. If I had been able to sell my apples for 7 years – I used to collect up to 800 boxes of apples – we would have been much better off. We have been here for three years and nothing has been done for us. That is the way we live and struggle. But God save us from war, son. There is nothing worse than war.

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R. M. resident of the village of Tsitelubani, Gori municipality

(Georgians, Ossetians, repatriated Meskhs and eco-migrants from Adjara call the village a home)

I was born in the village of Sairkhe, Sachkere. I graduated from Tbilisi law school. I met my future spouse in Tbilisi and we got married. We had a daughter and a son. We lived in Tbilisi until 1989 when my brother-in-law (husband's brother) died and we could not leave his parents alone. So we stayed in the village. And then the 1990s came, to be more exact in 1989, that's when all these troubles started. Then it got quiet for some time and came back in 1990. It was winter time... And it was very hard for me: I would get upset if the Ossetians said something bad about Georgians and I would also get upset if the Georgians said something bad about Ossetians. It was very hard for me to hear all of this. But this was happening in Georgia and therefore, Georgians were not as affected as Ossetians.

Tsitelubani was an almost exclusively Ossetian village back then. It was all Ossetian, and they [soldiers] would come to the village – they would make their way to the village and shout “Ossetians, off you go!” They were militia. “Ossetians get lost!” “Why are you still here?” and stuff like this... almost half of the village left. But to be honest I did not want to leave.

So, here I was, not wanting to go. On the other hand, we were a mixed family. But once, they threw hand-grenades in three houses. But we did not leave for Orjonikidze (*Soviet name for Vladikavkaz*). Instead we went to my mother's in Sachkhere and stayed there for four or five months. But there was a horrible earthquake there either in May or in April. It was horrible. And when the quakes came back, we were scared and had to leave and move to Orjonikidze... I left too, but after three months we had to come back because my brother-in-law passed away... We did not take even a spoon with us because my mother-in-law would say, after my brother-in-law died in 1989, that if we took everything out, where was she supposed to put up her son's photo... and we stayed.

My mother and father in-law stayed. There was nothing serious here... those milita roamed around and one of them, we were talking about him just yesterday, was from Racha, and my family also originates from Racha. The man would often tell me that I was his compatriot, but I was so scared of this man whenever I saw him. I was even more scared [than of the others]. They walked around with machine guns all the time. What they [local men] did, was that they would block an entrance [to the village]. The Ossetians would go and block it. Those who did not have anywhere to go, they cut

down an old tree and used it to block the entrance at night. In the morning they would open the entrance again. But before that they still managed to take along [kidnap] a person. They were more hostile towards people who had money. Others would also be insulted. He was the only person who they took, who they tortured and killed. He was not rich or anything, not at all... The others would go after rich families, not families like us.

And then, after the 1990s, the conflict became frozen. A market was opened in Ergneti and many returned. As soon as the situation grew slightly calmer, most of the people returned. Because it was difficult for them to get used to the climate [in Vladikavkaz] and therefore, many returned. Relations were restored, people would visit each other and we would commute to Tskhinvali without any problem. I had Georgian ID documents but I could easily enter and leave Tskhinvali. It was a very good situation back then, trade, everything...

As long as there was the market in Ergneti. My shop is private, right? ... now it is almost empty but it was full back then. Because I could buy good quality products at affordable prices. It was excellent. Flour was cheaper there than it was here, gasoline was also cheap. Everything was cheap. And we all know that Russian products are of better quality than those produced in Turkey. Ossetians and Georgians were almost reconciled because... there was trade going on. Georgians from Adjara, Sachkhere would go there to buy or sell. There were large trucks full of tangerines from Batumi. Relationships were great back then.

Then when it [Ergneti market] was closed the relations became tense. This was the time when we could not go to Tskhinvali any longer. But if in 1990 people would be aggressive if they caught an Ossetian intonation while someone was talking, it was not the case now. On the contrary, the situation got better if I may say so.

In August 2008, first thing that happened is that they fired at Shavshvebi (*a village in the Gori municipality, close to Tsitelubani where Rusudan lives*), when they wanted to destroy the radar. Back then I tried to take my children out. They left for Tbilisi. But I did not really want to go. I had the elderly to take care of and cattle as well, lots of stuff to take care of and I did not really want to go. But then I left, since I wanted to bring in some products for the shop. People could not leave anywhere and the sales were going well. But as it happened, I left and this was the same day when tanks were deployed in Igoeti and I could not go back. Even though there were tanks in the village, people were still afraid. But nobody got hurt. There was nothing like this here.

I know a story which took place in Mereti. They burned a man's house because, at the time when the Ergneti market was still working, they had taken a large quantity of gasoline and after the roads were blocked in 2004 they did not pay for it. People from there [that side] would send their mes-

sages, begging or pleading them to pay... and then their house was burned down. I do not know what is going on now... I do not really know why it happened... they also burned others' houses, because, I think some people held grudges, but I do not know for sure... Nothing like this happened in our village. I do not know anybody owing something to them [people living on the other side]... Nothing like this ever happened here.

As soon as the tanks left and it was announced that everybody could return, I came back. I got back on the same day of course. It was a difficult situation here. I do not know what happened – maybe the Russians did it, but a field surrounding the village was all on fire. Everything had been burned... people did not have enough time to harvest. It was very difficult. There was some assistance delivered by NGOs and authorities as well and we managed to get by. But it was still hard. We could not collect hay for the cattle. The haystacks were all burned. Nor could we harvest wheat, as the straw was also burned down.

What was the cost we paid because of the conflict? First and foremost, it was fear. My husband is Ossetian. In the 1990s we were young. As I said, we spent some time in Sachkhere and as we were coming back, my father was accompanying us. So there was my husband, my father, my children and myself. They went up directly through Chertakhevi, a mountainous village on the Pass, and they said: “If there is an Ossetian person among you, you have to tell us”. We were scared... we did not dare to tell them [that my husband was Ossetian]. What if they took him with them to “take care” of him? We were more damaged morally than financially. Of course there was financial damage as well – when the Ergneti market closed I lost a source of income. I could not operate my shop. Though my husband could still work in Orjonikidze. It was still possible back then. But in 2004 the roads were blocked and he could not go to Orjonikidze. We found ourselves in a very difficult situation economically... and also we have relatives there. Closed roads... the sisters of my mother-in-law all live there. I lost my child and they wanted very much to come here... but back then it was not possible. Nowadays they allow visa free travel for those who have Russian passports, but it was not like that back then. It is very hard when your close relatives... We had one of the sisters of my mother-in-law visiting us. She badly wanted to come and mourn her grandson. My 11-year-old child... and all this, it's so difficult to deal with.

My daughter is married to an Adjarian man. Our village is a special village. Meskhs, Adjarians, refugees from Kheiti, Ossetians and Georgians all live here... Georgians bought some of the houses which were formerly owned by Ossetians and that's how my daughter happened to marry an Adjarian man. My son married a Georgian girl. The life is good here. We have excellent relations. Nobody says that... well, maybe sometimes someone

says that s/he is Ossetian or Georgian, but this happens very rarely, at least in our village. I do not know much of other places...

We have lost our land. It was left beyond the barbed wire. It is hard... it is good though that they installed gas pipes for free, which is excellent as the village has no means to... [pay for gas pipes]. A representative of the municipality visited the village the other day. We complained that we do not have water and cannot grow orchards. We cannot grow anything to benefit from so that people can stay in the village, so that the youth have some future prospects. There is almost no opportunity for development here. Everyone tries to put together some money and buy an apartment in the town so that they can leave and work there. People own cattle here. [Before] we could use the pastures of Tsinagara, a neighboring Ossetian village, we were free to do so, but since 2008 we have been restricted from using those pastures. Especially after they have installed border demarcation sign. Recently the government told us to not keep cattle any more. They advised us to have pigs instead. But pigs are difficult to take care of. You have feed them all the time and tie them up, while you could let cattle go and we did not have to feed them for several months a year... I do not know. There have been no promises made so far. They have just promised to help with ploughing the land. They did it in fall. They have been helping with the ploughing for three years, as they promised. Now we have been told they will do it again in the spring. Let's see.

Now when Putin has declared that he is going to allow for visa free movement, we are happy. I think it is possible already to freely... this is all about politics. Farmers have always been good [to each other]. If Ossetians from Tsinagara and Ossetians from Tsitelubani meet each other, they will hug each other. They will do no harm to each other. If governments decide to have positive relations, it will be great. Otherwise, farmers have very good relations with each other.

It would be great if a market similar to one we had in Ergneti could open. This is a priority. Otherwise nothing serious happened in 2008 (towards local Ossetians)... Nothing like what happened in 1990s. But reconciliation was still possible. People forgot everything. And they will forget everything eventually. It will take a little time for a similar market to be set up again. Look at these refugees, displaced from there: there are Ossetians and Georgians among them. They do not do anything bad to each other. And I think that if the government is supportive, the people will easily [reconcile]. People are easy to reconcile. Especially, brothers and sisters left on opposite sides, even more so... They are afraid now, but everyone wants to come here. People from Tsinagara would always come to my shop, but they are afraid now. But they have said they would come again with great pleasure and continue a relationship with us.