

February 4, 2006

## **Dear Friends and Colleagues,**

I am sure you are interested to hear what is happening here in Georgia. The news has already been spread that that Gas Pipeline has been restored. And gas has reached the Capital city of Tbilisi. All this is true. But the problem is that it is only certain parts of Tbilisi has been supplied with gas. Yesterday I spoke with the Mere of Tbilisi, Mr. Gigi Ugulava who told me that a number of districts of Tbilisi still do not have gas and he did not know how soon entire city of Tbilisi will be covered with gas supply. The Mere looked indeed tired and exhausted. Yet he was very keen to know how the Betheli Center was doing.

“How are a you heating!” has become a kind of greeting word instead of “How are you doing” in Georgia. In the past we did have a lot of crises but this time it was unusually sever winter that has made things very difficult. At my place I have a nice fire place where I usually go after the strenuous day and relax in the chare looking at the fire. in the beginning of October I bought enough wood for the fire place. But since the crisis started I can not burn the fire in my room. It seems unfair to enjoy the fire place while a lot of people have nothing to worm themselves up and I keep visiting them seeing their desperate situation. I return usually very late to my place and dive into my bed with trousers on. It is all right to sleep in the freezing room after you have wormed up your bed but getting up in the morning is terrible. Every day I wake up with feeling of a boy who is lazy to go to school.

## **The Center Has Survived**

The Beteli Center and especially the Home for the Elderly unit did manage to survived the crisis owing to courage and creativity of entire Betheli community. Mr. Gia Labadze our technician worked very hard sometime even by night to keep the home at least minimally warm on diesel and wood heating system. The Fire place proved to be most reliable partner for coping with freezing cold. Mr. Dato Giorgobiani, our gardener brought his guitar every day and sang for the elderly in the large common room to lift up their spirit. The elderly also sang with him and had a great time. Sometimes they were so loud that I could not work in my office which is exactly on the top of the common room where they sang. But I did not mind. It was very important that the elderly would not panic like some of the nurses and doctor Nana Zurashvisli who were not sure whether some of the elderly would survive the cold. Luckily everybody survived. The gas was supplied yesterday to our district and we were able to worm up the building again. For a while the house was full of joy and jubilation like after winning of war. But very soon we realized that there were other people in Tbilisi who still were suffering in the freezing blocks of flats.

Even though the crisis has been largely overcome, the crisis has left us with dreadful consequences. A lot of people are dying. The health conditions of thousands of aged citizens have damaged for ever. The Orthopedic Institutions are full of the elderly who have broken their legs or arms while going for cereals or food on the icy roads of Tbilisi. After yesterday I visited some of those people and I can share my experiences with you.

## **Elderly Couple**

The Revd Meliton Khechuashvili, 83 has been known at the Cathedral Baptist Church as a great man of prayer. His wife Eter Jimsheleishvili, 82 is still considered a genius expert in finances in Georgia. Just last year President of Georgia awarded her with an Order of Dignity. Both Etheri and Meliton came to the Church when they were young and being a Christian was extremely dangerous. They went through the trial of their faith. In Communist time they were persecuted by the authorities. This is a period of their life they hate to speak. But what we know is that the KGB kept them taking to their headquarters at 1 am and after interrogating and insulting them they let them go at 4 am. It continued for a few years. Meliton developed a nervous illness that was partly healed later. There was time when he gave up even attending the church. After having recovered from emotional depression he became the most committed member and then a minister of the Church. Etheri, his wife proved to be much stronger a character and the KGB was not able to break her spirit. Etheri worked for the Ministry of culture as a chief Finance manager for a number decades. At the same time she was a choir director of the Cathedral Baptist Church. She was an active supporter of the Baptist Orthodox dialogue in 70-es and sang along with her Baptist Choir in the Sioni Orthodox Cathedral during the Divine Liturgies.

Meliton, being very committed to the daily prayer in the Cathedral last week when it was freezing cold went to the church for prayer. In front of the Cathedral Baptist church he fell and broke his hip. Mrs. Esma Mazmishvili our chief accountant at the Cathedral took him to the hospital. When the doctor insisted that they would operate him immediately. But Meliton refused the operation. When Merab the President of our Church and I visited him at his place we learned why he refused an operation. "I do not have such a money" told me Meliton. I wanted to cry. Life is so unfair!

We immediately made a contact with a famous doctor in Tbilisi and asked his opinion. We realized that he had to be operated immediately but there was another way to treat the broken hip. The doctor promised to do help him under the condition that he would have spatial care. Etheri who is very feeble herself could not offer such a care. The Betheli Center would be an ideal place for him but all the rooms are already occupied there. Ultimately we decided to move both Meliton and his wife to a room that has been reserved at the Betheli Center for guest lecturers. Yesterday I visited them in their Betheli home and saw their doctor. I wanted to thank Dr. Tamaz for taking responsibility over Meliton. But much to my amazement he started thanking me for taking Meliton to the Center. "In Tbilisi I know all the places for the patients but nothing can be compared with the Betheli Center." told me the Doctor, "recently Patriarch Ilia II asked me to take care of two elderly professors who also broke their legs. The Patriarch gave them a place but

it was a dreadful place to have patients. Thank you for building such a place in Tbilisi.” He was genuinely excited. “I am going to tell everybody what a place is here. Meliton is very fortunate.” he kept saying. We can agree with the Doctor Meliton is fortunate now to be in the Betheli Center but there are a lot of people who have no access neither for medical treatment nor for human care.

## **Celebrating the Gas Arrival**

With a couple of my colleagues I visited one of the oldest members of the Russian Baptist Congregation in Tbilisi. Mrs. Roza Azikova. Her ancestors came to Tbilisi from Shwabia, South Germany. She lives alone in her flat close to the Cathedral Baptist Church.

She was a trained nurse and worked for a number of year a very prestigious hospitals for World War II veterans. In Soviet time it was one of the best medical institutions in the Caucasus. At the same time she was a very committed member of the Russian Baptist Church. He had to suffer a lot for her faith in her younger age. She is still very active in the church life. Her memory is remarkable she know remembers all the stories of our church in Soviet and post Soviet time. She was wise enough not no leave her home during the recent crisis. She stayed at home being taken care of by some people from the Russian church

As soon as we entered her flat she declared us solemnly “Now I have gas to heat the flat!” She was very happy tow welcome us. “If this is the case we should celebrate” was my answer. Roza immediately disappeared in her kitchen to put on a tea-kettle.

It did not take much time before we sat at the table awaiting our tea. Ultimately Roza produced a tea pot. Before pouring tea she stood a step back from the table and started saying something like school girls do when they die to say something yet they pretend to be shy. “I have something more to celebrate today,” uttered Roza.

I started thinking what it could be. She had her 79<sup>th</sup> birthday in January so it should not be her birthday to be celebrated. I could not figure it out what was she referring to. “Tell us what is it?” I asked her.

“Today we should celebrate the 52<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of my arrest.” declared ‘the school girl’ proudly. Obviously I could not guess it by any means. In 1953 she was arrested along with other 29 Baptist leaders under the allegation of the Anti Soviet Propaganda. In accordance with article 52a she was to sentenced with 10 years of imprisonment. Others were to sentenced with 25 years of detention. Than she was 26 years old young and absolutely beautiful girl. In March 4<sup>th</sup> 1953 Stalin died and very soon both Roza and other Baptists were realized from the KGM Detention Institution.

Roza was so happy to tell us stories about her time in the prison, people she met there, experiences she had. Every now and again she would stop and say “now I can already tell

you this.” I am glad those days are gone when neither she nor others were not allowed to say certain things but unfortunately the legacy of Stalinist regime is still here in this country as well as in other former Soviet countries. I was sorry I could not stay with her as long as I wanted. Instead I have promised her to send somebody professional who can record her memoirs that are very important for the history of Christen struggle under Stalin.

## **Hospitality in the spirit of St. Francis**

During the crisis I tried to be with the people at the Betheli Center and organize some support for the suffering. One day I went to my office very early. It was still very dark when I got to the gate of the Center. My car stopped. I thought it was because of the heavy snow. I looked at the driver. He was sitting in the car very calm. Very soon I realizes we were stopped by the sheep driven by a couple of shepherd and a few shepherd dogs. I opened the car and spoke with the shivering shepherd. I was wondering why on earth they were bringing the sheep to the Capital city.

“Well, you know,” told me the shepherd, “we had nothing to feed the sheep in the mountains and bring the sheep to Tbilisi with the hope that they can find some grass in the parks and gardens of the city.” The sheep looked really very hungry and miserable. I felt sorry both for the sheep and the poor shepherd. I somehow identified myself with the shepherd. I know very well what it means to be responsible for the “sheep” without enough recourse to help.

I shared my concern with Mr. Benjamin Bakuradze, a teacher at the Betheli Center, who managed to get some hay from somewhere. This was hoe we invited special guests to the Betheli Center. The sheep were led with gats who volunteered to enter the Betheli Center first. With the help of Mr. Valery Buidlishvili, the Director of the Home for the Elderly and other colleagues we “set a table” for the guests. In the flock there were goats, rams, mother sheep and a lot of lambs. The flock was accompanied by Bora a very experienced, wolf fighting shepherd dog that was also welcomed and well fed at the Center.

Very soon we were joined by those elderly who were courageous enough to walk out from the building first time since the crisis started. They immensely enjoyed the company of the gats and were generous to share some food with Bora.

There are a lot of stories I could write for you but I can not because I have to preach instead of Cardinal Casper, the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting

Christian Unity. Today we are Having the Ecumenical Prayer hosted by the Cathedral Baptist Church. Cardinal who is visiting Georgia was to preach. Yesterday the Cardinal apologized to me that he has to leave the service before the end of the service since he has an appointment with the Chair of the Parliament. The Cardinal will only greet the congregation. As soon as I finish this report I will have to prepare my sermon and dash to the Cathedral.

## **Gratitude**

Before finishing this report let me tell you once again that you do not understand how important is your support for me personally and for a number of people in Georgia. I have had had three very difficult years. Than last year was particularly difficult since we had to finish the Betheli Center and it involved a lot of emotional energy from me. I should admit that by the time the crisis came I was already a basket case at English say. But your support, letters, phone calls, prayer not the least have helped me to keep going. To be inspired to work and be an inspiration for others. The financial contribution you gave made or are going to make is very significant for us. Like the support of the shepherd with hay. You help me and my colleagues to help the most vulnerable in the society. I will keep you informed about the further work that we will carry out in this land. The situation in Tbilisi is improving but in West Georgia its worsening. Your prayerful support is still extremely important for us.

Sincerely yours,

+Malkhaz