FROZEN WAR

by Jeremy Boo

An edited excerpt for the International Committee of the Red Cross

THE STRUGGLE Many Georgians like Nino Shergelia live in a past they cannot find closure for. And as the country inches forward in a suspended state between conflict and peacetime, both young and old struggle to move on.

As in any other Orthodox Christian church, there are two places in the Dadiani Family Church in Zugdidi, Georgia, where believers light their votive candles: on the left, where prayers are said for the living, and on the right, where pleas are made to bring to heaven the souls of the dead.

Nino Shergelia stands between the icon of Theotokos, the mother of Christ and giver of life, and the icon of Christ, the righteous judge of the departed.

She hesitates.

She walks first to the left, and lights a candle.

A wish that her husband is still alive.

Then she walks to the right of the church, and lights another candle.

A plea to carry her husband's soul to heaven.

Nino's husband, Murtaz Okhujava, took up arms in 1992 against Abkhaz separatists who were attacking his village.

A short time later, to protect them from the fighting, Murtaz brought his wife and children to Darcheli, a village close to the administrative boundary that divides Abkhazia from Georgia. Without even entering the house an acquaintance had agreed to lend him, he returned to Gali to continue fighting.

Sixteen days later, the leader of a militant group came to tell Nino that her 23-year-old husband had been abducted. No one knew exactly what had happened. Later on, some militants said that they had seen her husband alive.

Nino wanted to kill herself. She did not know where her husband was or how to help him. She had no one to turn to.

For two years, she and her children stayed in the same house. When the owner finally returned, they had to move on. Not knowing what to do, Nino brought her son, Rati, who was

almost four, and her daughter, Khatia, who was almost three, back to Zugdidi.

After wandering the streets for a while, the three moved into a morgue that had been converted into a collective centre. They have been living there ever since.

In her heart, Nino still nurses a tiny shred of hope.

"I beg you, Father, come back"

Khatia was five years old when she noticed something unusual: in the playground, when it was time to go home, there were sometimes men who came to pick up the children. "Father," her friends would call them. These men would kiss them and hug them. *How strange.*

Khatia does not know what a father is. To her, Nino has always been her mother and her father.

Her brother, Rati, tries his best to fill his father's shoes. He does not want his sister to feel like she grew up without a father. Last year, Rati joined the army as a full-time soldier to support his family.

Many internally displaced men join the military for the same reason. And even as America pledged to withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan, Georgia announced plans to send more troops to the two nations.

While Nino is happy that her 20-year-old son's career is progressing, she did not want him to join the military. The stakes are too high. "I am proud of my husband and my father," she says. "But if they did not fight, they would still be around."

Khatia was only eight months old when her father went missing 19 years ago. This is what she says to him in her heart:

"I want very much to see you again. I want very much to hug you. I love you very much, Father." Her voice turns gritty and breaks. "Look at how

we have grown up without you. Look at how much we miss you. Look at the tears that roll down my mother's cheeks every evening. Look at how much suffering we have endured without you.

"I beg you, Father, come back and be with us, with me, with Rati, and with Mama. Please come and see how your daughter has grown, come see your grandchild. Come back, Father. We miss you."

Khatia's two-month-old child is sick. The jaundice started in his eyes, then spread to his limbs and the rest of his body. When Khatia and her husband brought him to the clinic a week ago, the doctor did not know how to help and told them to go to Kutaisi, a city two hours away.

But they do not have the money.

Khvicha Kvirkvelia, Khatia's husband, got off the phone with their landlord earlier that day after imploring him to lower the rent. The landlord agreed to reduce their back rent from four to two months, but only if they paid immediately.

Khatia's husband takes a bundle of notes—money that they have saved for their son's medical expenses—out of his pocket and counts them. It is just enough to cover the rent.

Khatia married her husband two years ago when she was 17. She had met Khvicha Kvirkvelia in the hospital yard when he was visiting her neighbours. She thought he was handsome, even though he was 14 years older. When she got to know him better, she liked how honest and deliberate he was.

Two months later, they married.

Khatia's mother is angry with Khvicha because Khatia stopped studying shortly after she married. "He's jealous," says Nino. "That's the only reason why he doesn't want you to continue studying."

The Murat family, of royal descent, employed

Nino to clean their house in the past. They had noticed Khatia's academic performance and promised to send her to France to study if she completed her secondary education.

"No, Mama." Khatia defends her husband. "Khvicha does not want me to study because he does not want you or Rati to pay for my education." She tugs at her twinkling chandelier earring. The deep rose-coloured polish on her fingernails is chipped.

Siamake means pride in Georgian and it is an integral part of the national identity. It permeates the culture and underlies the Georgian tradition of hospitality. It explains why hosts will always offer visitors something to eat, even if there is little to go around, and why Georgians dress presentably, even if all they can afford are made-in-China imitations bought from a second-hand store for 10 laris.

It is because of *siamake* that a woman would rather starve than sell her wedding ring. And it is because of *siamake* that a husband like Khvicha feels that it is his sole responsibility to provide for his wife and children. There is a Georgian saying:

Men are not true men until they have a good wife. The head of a body is like a man and the rest of the body is like a woman; a head without a body is nothing and a body without a head is nothing.

"Yes, your husband wants to feed the family himself but he does not know that he is damaging the family by not allowing you to study," says Nino. "You are young, so you feel that you can give this up for him. But you will regret it later on." Khatia has dreamt of studying in France since she was eight years old.

Because of this problem, Nino visits her daughter less often than she would like to. That way, she can avoid seeing Khvicha.

Khatia moved in with her in-laws soon after

her son was born because they felt that it would be unhealthy for the boy to grow up behind a hospital, where the risk of getting infections is high. But there is only one heated room in the apartment, and Khatia's mother-in-law sleeps there. Khatia and her son spend their nights in an unheated room throughout the winter months.

In addition to Khvicha and his mother, Khatia and her son share the apartment with a brother in law. The family, none of whom is employed, rely on allowances paid out to internally displaced persons, which add up to 160 laris a month, for rent and food.

In the summer, Khvicha and his brother, Gocha, worked as day labourers for a month before the company dismissed them. A few weeks ago, they went to Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, to find work but returned home after three days because they had only a few laris left after paying for bread and lodgings.

"I'm hungry. I haven't eaten," laments Gulnaz Chkhetia, Khatia's mother-in-law. She drags her feet and wrings her hands and repeats her appeal for money.

Generational inheritance Nino Shergelia carries her grandson in her arms beside her daughter, Khatia Okhujava. Even though Khatia was only a few months old when her father was captured, she feels the loss as keenly as if she lost her father yesterday. This hurt passes from one generation to the next as they are unable to move on.

Last reminder The only physical reminder that Nino Shergelia has of her missing husband is a set of T-shirt and trousers. He had shared all his other clothing with fellow militants when he fought against Abkhaz separatists, leaving behind only a spare set at home. But these bear painful memories.

Soso Kharkheli was not fighting when he lost his arm at age 14.

He was walking to his third dance lesson with a friend. They were learning traditional Georgian dance, which both males and females are expected to be proficient in, for his secondary-school graduation party.

About 200 metres away from their school, Soso's friend spotted a bullet beneath a flowering bush. It was several months after the war and Georgian boys love collecting shell casings strewn all over their yards.

"Look what I found!" shouted Soso's friend. He passed it to Soso for a closer look.

The bullet was about 5 cm long and fitted his 14-year-old palm comfortably. It was heavy, golden, and beautiful. Entranced by its beauty, Soso asked to keep it.

He brought it everywhere he went for the next two days and he showed it whenever he could, once during his kickboxing class. On the third day, he rolled it on his table during math class.

Back and forth. Left and right. Back and forth. Left and right. He put his head on the table and listened to it rumble.

After class, he walked out and fidgeted outside the classroom, waiting for a friend. Soso inserted a thin rod into a dimple at the base of the bullet and began spinning it round and round.

After two minutes, maybe three, the bullet fell to the floor. Soso bent down to retrieve it, probably dislodging the percussion cap. The bullet blew up.

Thousands of tiny brass fragments buried themselves in his lips, nose, fingers, chest, and stomach. The force of the explosion threw him backwards.

Soso was taken to a military hospital, where he was operated on immediately. He felt doctors

cutting his clothes but he could not see anything. He did not feel any pain. Doctors amputated his left arm and removed as much shrapnel as they could.

Soso runs his right hand over his torso. "There are still many pieces of metal under my skin," he says, pressing his fingers on purplish irregular bulges on his chest. "It was uncomfortable at first but I am used to it now."

He still can't see properly through his right eye. "It is like seeing through water," he says.

But it is the appearance of his prosthetic arm that bothers the 16-year-old – who is at an age where acceptance means everything – the most. Wear and tear have turned the natural shade of the prosthetic arm into a dirty beige, emphasizing what makes Soso different from a "normal" person.

"In the past, Soso used to be cheerful and calm, but he became very nervous after the accident," says his mother.

Before the accident Soso, who was very good at kickboxing, dreamt of becoming a professional athlete to support his family after his father died in a robbery attack on their home in 2000. Now, Soso looks lost when asked about his future.

"I am not normal. What dreams can I have?" he asks helplessly. "I am sad about it. But what can I do?"

Soso's 13-year-old brother, Zura Kharkheli, wants to take up kickboxing to fulfil his brother's dreams. More than 10 years ago, when he was a toddler, Zura watched as masked robbers broke into their home and fired point-blank into his father's chest.

Beside their house lies a field sown with corn seed as golden as the bullet that altered Soso's life forever. The family bought the seed with assistance from the ICRC. Come spring, the seed will sprout, sending out tender green shoots.

To be normal again Soso Kharkheli lost his arm when he picked up a live bullet two years ago. At 16 years old—an age when acceptance means everything, the former kickboxer hopes to get a more natural-looking prosthetic left arm to look "normal".

Beqa Giorgishvili, 15, has many dreams. The one that is most important to him: to speak properly again.

Beqa was pumping air into a bicycle tyre with his neighbours, Vako and Tsira Urjuvelashvili, when Russia flew bomber planes over Gori, the region closest to South Ossetia, in retaliation for Operation Clear Field launched by Georgia on 8 August 2008.

The bomb blasts instantly killed Omar, 50, and his son Malkhaz Bedoshvili, 15, who were watching Beqa and his neighbours. Fourteen other people who had gathered at a central meeting place in the village were injured.

Beqa remembers getting up and running and falling down again. He touched his head and felt the stickiness of blood, but he did not feel any pain. When Vako, his neighbour, started crying, he laughed: "Why are you crying like a girl?"

Then he blacked out.

When Beqa's mother, Khatuna Giorgishvili, heard the shelling, she ran out of the house and tried to find her son. But there were too many faces covered in blood, all looking alike, too many voices calling out in pain and fear, all sounding the same.

Khatuna ran to the people hiding in their houses and asked for help.

Doctors say that Beqa fought hard. The explosion blew away part of Beqa's skull and left metal shards embedded in his stomach, leg, and spine.

Beqa was furious, even when he was in a coma. His hands moved tensely and he frequently pulled out the tubes that kept him alive. To calm him, his father, Davit Giorgishvili, would sit beside him and stroke his hands gently. But when Davit turned to leave, Beqa's hands would resume their angry dance.

Beqa went into a frenzied rage when he awoke from his coma nine days later. Nurses thought he had lost his mind and restrained him. They thought he had lost his memory too until they realized that he still recognized his parents.

The first time Beqa tried to walk again, he walked like an infant. He could not lift anything heavier than two kilograms. When he realized he could not speak properly, he started counting to check if he was still as intelligent as before.

A month after the accident, Beqa drew a picture. In his drawing was a boy with red eyes. It meant that he was very scared, psychologists told him. A missile flew overhead. But a big, blistering sun meant that Beqa was optimistic about his future.

"Don't worry, Mama," Beqa told his mother. "I will walk again. I like playing soccer. I will play it again in two months."

When Beqa found out that the explosion had killed his friend, he drew the exact same image. Except this time, the missile was heading straight for the boy's heart. And in place of the big, blistering sun there was an empty, echoing void.

Beqa does not like anyone looking at him as if he's different so he tries very hard to be like any other boy.

Today, Beqa is not yet as normal as he would like to be. He sometimes gets headaches. If he stands under the sun for too long, he starts to bleed through his nose. If he sits still for too long, his back hurts.

And he still cannot speak properly; his parents are the only people who can understand him.

When Beqa was in a coma, he saw Ilia II, the Catholicos-Patriarch and spiritual leader of the Georgian Orthodox Church, and Theotokos, the mother of God. He dreamt of Theotokos pleading with God to save his life.

Beqa believes that if he sees Ilia II, he will be

able to speak again. So he has applied to visit the Catholicos-Patriarch through his local church.

Two months ago, Beqa dreamt that a doctor in Tbilisi helped him recover his speech. That doctor, people say, would be the best one for him. He worked in Germany before. But he is very expensive.

To add to his father's income, Beqa is learning how to make enamel jewellery parts in a rehabilitation centre. "He is an extraordinary learner," says Zviad Zviadazde, his teacher. "He not only learns fast, he also suggests better alternatives for doing things."

Beqa never used to like the rehabilitation centre. He changed his mind after a girl named Anna stole his young heart. "I love your eyes, I love you, Anna," he writes in a poem. Besides dance, poetry is another common method of expression in Georgia, which has a profound history of arts, literature, and culture.

While Beqa's previous creations are crosses – part of a church-sponsored project – his current project is a flower. The circular piece will be adorned with a kaleidoscope of colours.

"It will be beautiful," says Beqa, as he colours it with a dropper and pincers. "It will be like a rainbow."

Red eyes and a yellow sun Beqa Giorgishvili, 15, holds a picture that he drew a month after he was hit by a bomb blast in 2008. The sun in this picture symbolises his optimism, say psychologists. He drew a similar image when he learnt that his friend was killed, this time with the missile flying straight to the boy's heart and without the sun.

Ground zero Beqa stands at the spot where he stumbled to before blacking out. Just before that, he remembers laughing at a friend who was crying: “Why are you crying like a girl!”

Crosses of dreams Beqa makes enamel pieces that sells between US$10 to $15 apiece, depending on size. He wants to help his father make enough money to hire a doctor whom they hope can restore his speech.

The Dadiani Family Church looks like any other Orthodox Christian church: shafts of sunlight filter in through long windows, illuminating the shadows. When a choir sings, their voices echo past the chandelier and up into the soaring dome.

For nine years, Nino Shergelia, the woman whose husband went missing in 1993, actively sought news of his whereabouts. She had heard that Georgian fighters sometimes captured Abkhaz separatists to exchange them for their own.

For nine years, she implored that they do the same for her husband. "Wait a little, Nino. Wait a little," was the reply. "We don't know where he is or whether he's alive." Now, notes Nino, these former fighters lead normal lives. "My husband," says Nino, "is forgotten."

When Nino visits the church, she usually lights a candle for her husband on both sides. But on the second day of Easter—*Khsovnis Dghe*—a day when the dead are commemorated in Georgia, Nino walks away from the left and stands before the icon of Christ, the righteous judge of the departed.

Wherever you are, be blessed and know that your children have grown up well. Brave, bold, and courageous. There is not a day we don't remember you. Every day, every minute, every second.

But still, why did I have to witness our daughter's marriage alone?

She lights a candle and, softly, lets her tears fall.

About the author

Jeremy Boo is a 22-year-old Singaporean and one of five winners of the inaugural ICRC Young Reporter Competition. He travelled to Georgia in February 2011 to photograph and write about the 1993 and 2008 conflicts.

Frozen War is a 8,500-word anthology of memories and dreams that Georgians have shared in their recollections of a past they are unwilling to let go, in their poignant thoughts about life, and in their tenacious march into the future with dreams as their shields and beacons in a country that is still suspended in a vexing predicament that is neither war nor peacetime.

About the International Committee of the Red Cross

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), established in 1863, works worldwide to provide humanitarian help for people affected by conflict and armed violence and to promote the laws that protect victims of war.

An independent and neutral organization, its mandate stems essentially from the Geneva Conventions of 1949. Based in Geneva, Switzerland, it employs some 12,000 people in 80 countries; it is financed mainly by voluntary donations from governments and from national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies.