

Take care of time

Ageing in Georgia seen through the eyes of its older citizens



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Introduction

Georgia is a country of great writers and poets. Most ordinary Georgians freely recite their national heroes, at family events or to enrich everyday conversations. Many ordinary Georgians also write themselves. The older generation especially – witnesses of the Soviet Union, independence, war and peace – has a good many things to tell. An essay contest about ageing in Georgia asked them to share their experiences about what it is like to become older in Georgia, and about their advice for the younger generation and for policy-makers.

At the beginning of 2014, 43 older persons participated in the essay contest, launched as a joint project of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). A small committee selected 10 winners who each received cheques for 50 Lari at an awards ceremony organized in the UN House in Tbilisi in July 2014. Many of the older writers travelled across the country to take part in the event. Angelina Phurtseladze, who is in a wheelchair, made her journey from Sagarejo, one hour's drive away from the capital. In her story she writes how she can't get to the community centre without help and how happy she was to become a member of the centre's knitting group even though she can never meet them in person. Many of the participants at the ceremony prepared speeches and read poems they had written especially for the occasion. They made the event a truly moving occasion.

"Life is an interesting book if you are a good reader", writes Dodo Tchanturia-Alania, 74, from Senaki. Many of the older people have lived through personal tragedies, losing loved ones or their homes. Their stories highlight the daily difficulties to make ends meet. "We would like to buy a small birthday present for our grandchildren, but how?", asks Tsiala Ugrekheldze-Zhordania from Tbilisi. Others are concerned about families that live apart as many younger people leave to work in the cities or abroad. The stories talk about helplessness and isolation. In the end, however, optimism prevails. There is gratitude to families and friends that are there to help in times of hardship, to help find a new sense of life. The stories are full of appreciation for community organizations that organize home-based care, give company, affection, a reason to get up in the

morning. The body may wrinkle, the hair may turn white, the strength may fade, but the heart is still in place, “that can hear happiness”, as Lili Zhorzholiani from Kutaisi writes in her beautiful poem.

“Take care of time”, advises Natela Zhghenti, 77, from Kobuleti. And so this wisdom is for all of us. Older people guide us to look at the broader questions of life that we, the younger generation, may easily miss. Who will be there for us when we are old? How will we live? What do we still want to learn before we retire? What are our essential values?

To see the characters behind these stories, award-winning Georgian photographer Mzia Lekveishvili visited them to capture their images. Her photos show people who are happy and sad, thoughtful, energetic, all of them embracing their lives, as a part of families, communities, workplaces and civil organizations. The images and stories combined provide a snapshot of reality for older people in Georgia. They are as diverse as Georgia itself. We hope that this book will help to give Georgia a face beyond its borders.

The essay contest took place as part of an evaluation of Georgia’s policy-framework on ageing, requested by its government in 2013. Several field visits took place, with interviews and focus group discussions among policy-makers, employers, non-governmental organizations and older people themselves, leading to the development of a catalogue of recommendations which the government agreed to adopt and translate into an action plan. The evaluation was carried out against the commitment made by member States in the 2002 Regional Implementation Strategy of the Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing (RIS/MIPAA), which provides a holistic approach to policy-making on ageing. It includes areas as diverse as health and care systems, independent living, housing and transport, education and the labour market, public perceptions and the media, gender and intergenerational solidarity. The Road Map is prepared by UNECE, in collaboration with the UNFPA Georgia Office, the Georgian Government and in consultation with stakeholders from civil society, the private sector and academia. The Road Map for Mainstreaming Ageing in Georgia is a step towards giving older people in Georgia a better life, and more opportunities to contribute to society and to receive the recognition they deserve.

Acknowledgements

The essay contest was undertaken jointly by UNECE and UNFPA. At UNECE, Viviane Brunne, Vitalija Gaucaite Wittich, in collaboration with Jean Rodriguez and his team, and with assistance from Viktoriya Ereshchenko, Michelle Gonzalez-Amador and Birte Ifang, worked on realizing the project. At UNFPA, Anna Tskitishvili and Lela Bakradze facilitated the logistics in the country and organized the ceremony of the awards ceremony. We are grateful to the support received by the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs, in particular Mariam Jashi, Deputy Minister, and Ketevan Goginashvili. The project would not have been possible without the support of a number of organizations who disseminated the call, helped participants to submit their contributions and organized transportation for participants to the awards ceremony, namely the ATIP Fund and Management of State Elderly houses in Tbilisi and Kutaisi, the Georgian Red Cross Society, the Koda Community Education Centre, Caritas Georgia, the Older Women's Association "Deserving Old Age" in Kobuleti as well as DVV International. We thank Ms. Ketevan Vachadze-Sen for translating the essays and Nicki Chadwick for editing them.

Foreword

Population ageing is advancing rapidly in Georgia. In 2010, out of its 4.4 million people more than 14 per cent were 65 years and older and about one third were 50 years old and above; by 2030 these shares are expected to grow to 21 per cent and 40 per cent, respectively. Life expectancy at birth, which in 2010 was 78 years for Georgian women and 71 years for Georgian men, is predicted to rise to 80 years for women and 73 years for men in 2030. This is indeed good news.

Acknowledging the challenges related to population ageing but also willing to better use related opportunities, the government of Georgia requested the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) to prepare a Road Map for Mainstreaming Ageing. Based on a desk study and several field missions, interviews with various stakeholders and focus groups discussions, a comprehensive set of recommendations was prepared and is currently under consideration by the government. The framework of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and the UNECE Regional Implementation Strategy provided the foundation for the Road Map.

The findings of the Road Map project confirm that society is changing. Traditionally, older people were taken care of in the context of a multigenerational family. With growing urbanization and labour migration abroad, combined with other factors, the feasibility of this model is eroding, creating new challenges for families and society. The essay contest sought to anchor the Road Map for Mainstreaming Ageing in the realities of the people whose lives it is designed to improve.

This brochure, which includes English quotes taken from the best essays submitted in the contest, provides a good tool for raising awareness about ageing and its related challenges in Georgia, while also showing the positive contributions of older people to society, portraying them as individuals with feelings, dreams and ideas. It also shows how community initiatives help to create new networks of intergenerational solidarity. As such, it provides a source of inspiration, not only for Georgia but for all countries in the UNECE region. I believe that it will contribute to a more positive image of older persons in general while also helping the reader to appreciate the richness of Georgia's people, culture and society.

Christian Friis Bach
Executive Secretary
United Nations Economic Commission for Europe



The photographer

Mzia Lekveishvili was born in Tbilisi, Georgia. She is a member of the prestigious Federation of European Photographers and the Association of Photographers of Georgia as well as a teacher at the Online Photoschool of the Eastern Partnership. She specializes in Social Reportage and Portrait.

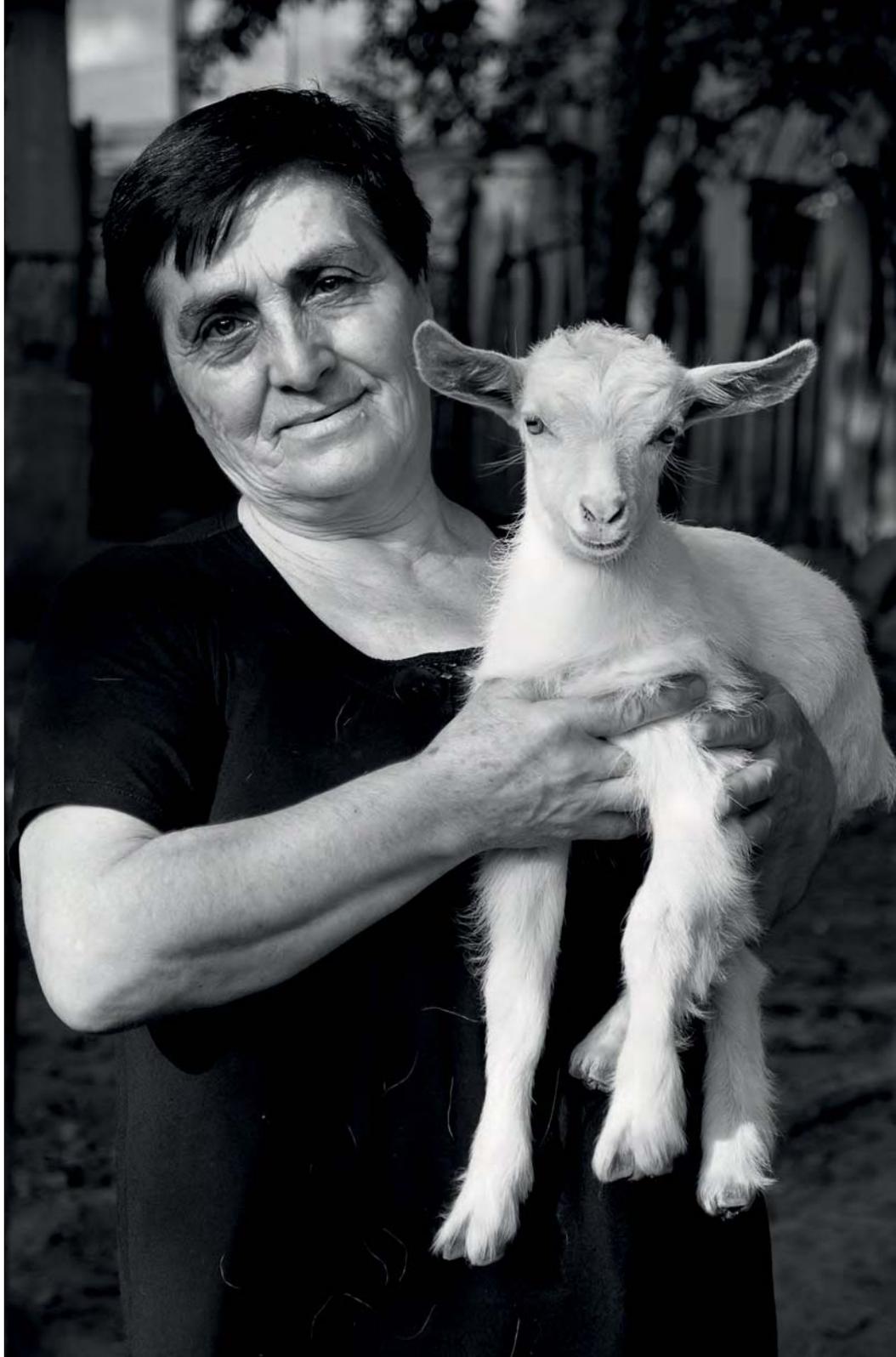
She has won three gold medals for reportage and a series of portraits in the international competition "Planet of Children". Her personal exhibition "Religious tolerance in Georgia" was shown in Toronto (University of Toronto, Canada, Caucasus House 2009). She has participated in numerous group exhibitions, such as the international competition "When photojournalism becomes art" and the International Photo Salon "Panorama of my Earth", both in 2013. Her works have appeared in several books, including "Photography in Georgia" (by Yuri Mechitov and Tamar Sulamanidze) and "Everyday Life in Art – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia – Activate Museums as lifelong learning spaces" (Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association – DVV international).

For more information:

<http://mzialekveishvili.wix.com/mzephoto>

**Lamara Mamaladze,
67, Chokhatauri**

"I particularly remember one time when we visited an old woman, how surprised she was and asked us if everything was OK. The children said that they came simply to visit her. We were there for almost two hours with this woman, who was alone at home. She saw us off at the door though it was difficult for her to get there. We were concerned when we saw tears in her eyes. She saw this and said not to be worried as these were tears of being alive."





Dodo Tchanturia-Alania,
74, Senaki

*"A life is an interesting book if you are
a good reader."*

Lamziri (Izolda) Tsintsadze,
71, Chokhatauri

"Some people achieve everything easily, while you may need more time – but nevertheless you can achieve your goals, but do not get angry with others or yourself. You may want to think for a moment and see why God does not want something to happen [...]. I would like to repeat that all jobs and tasks have a positive and negative energy. You should find a way to develop positive energy and make it happen. When you develop a positive energy, you are not envious, jealous or cruel - this has a positive impact on performance, diligence and life expectancy."





Tsiala Ugrekhelidze-Zhordania,
Tbilisi

"We would like to buy a small birthday present for our grandchildren, but how? The pension is GEL 150 so how do we manage to pay for electricity, gas, water, garbage and the telephone? Even if you are healthy enough, you still need to buy some medicines each month. If you want to visit your children, you need money for transport. [...] What to do?"

**Angelina Phurtseladze-
Sarukhanasvili, 85, Sagarejo**

"As soon as I found out that there was a knitting group in the centre I immediately wanted to go there, to teach others and to learn new things, as I like knitting very much ... but in Georgia there are not many places you can go in a wheelchair. Even if you manage to do it once, with people's help, what will you do the next time? [...] my initial happiness suddenly disappeared but then I thought it would be possible to bring materials to my home and I could knit there, and afterwards my finished knitting could be taken to the centre. [...] The centre agreed and included me in its knitting group. I knit socks and scarves, which are taken to exhibitions, where they are sold. You can't imagine how I would like to see things I've knitted at exhibitions but... When they are sold, the volunteers tell me about it and tears of joy flow down my face..."





Tamar Magaldadze,
61, IDP Settlement in Koda,
Tetritskaro Municipality

“Old people do not have a happy life in Georgia. [...] There are some cases when an old person would like to buy something for himself but can't afford it as his family needs his pension for something else. Sometimes, being an old person in Georgia also means being a breadwinner for the family. If the government could hear my voice, I would ask them to help family members of old people to get jobs and then old people would not have to share their scanty pensions with anybody else.”

Lamara Mildiani, 72, Tbilisi

“Antoine de Saint-Exupery said that the relationship between men is the greatest luxury. This motto will help you a lot in your life. Enjoy your relationships with elderly people, who are all around you. Try to become familiar with their life experience and wisdom, which they have a lot of, and that will be very useful in your future life. People are the biggest treasure in each and every part of Georgia.”





**Murmani Khatchapuridze,
73, Tbilisi**

"Nowadays, we very often, unfortunately, have to face facts when it is difficult to support an older person. It is true that older people have always been supported at the expense of an economically active population in all formations of a society but in terms of social relations "the mass of older persons" is in no way a burden to be carried by society. Allocation of pensions for older people should not be regarded as charity or mercy from society but compensation for their work during their whole lives."



Nelly Bakuradze, 84, Kutaisi

"Generally speaking, ageing is a very unpleasant concept as it is a big change in life. An old person is happy if his children are healthy. He enjoys looking at them and is happy through their happiness. In this case an old person easily endures his own pain and peacefully passes away. Such old people are never forgotten."



Zaira Orjonikidze, 80, Tbilisi

"These older people don't look as beautiful as young people but they are still attractive as they are brightened with knowledge and wisdom."



Akaki Makaridze, Khelvachauri, Autonomous Republic of Adjara

"Our life shall be based on love and mutual respect. All shall remember that elderly people shall value youth, shall see our future in them, teach and mentor them, share knowledge and experience with them. Youth, on the other hand, shall show care and love for the elderly.

We shall remember: if younger generations do not respect the elderly, it will be a tragedy. If older generations do not value the younger generations, it will be a comedy. If both respect each other, it will be a symphony. Up with the symphony!"

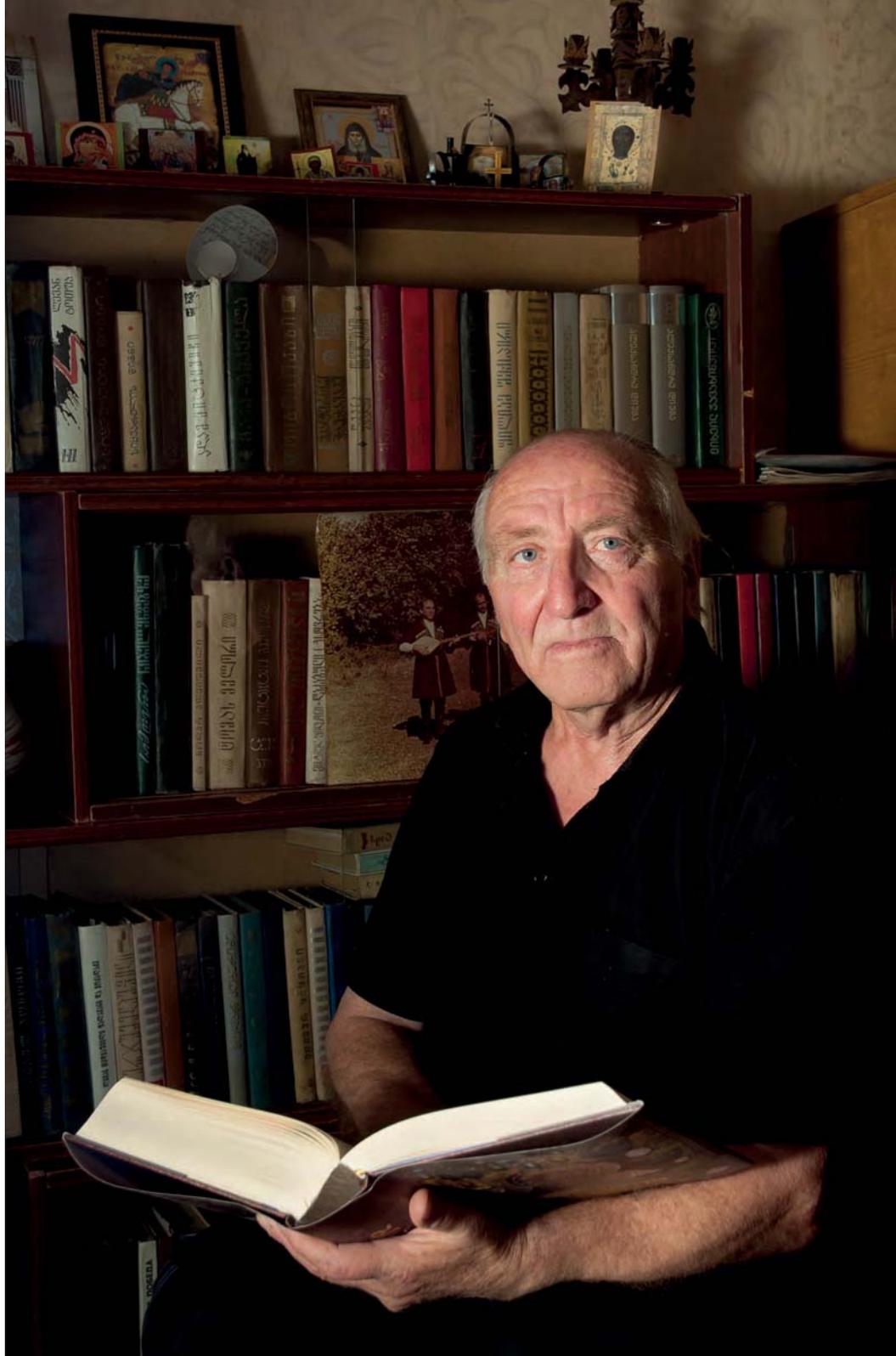


Eter Asaturova, Tbilisi

“Let us dream a little and imagine a Georgia where pensioners are occupied, where the pension is about GEL 700-800 and where pensioners are given vacation vouchers; they do not need to think or worry about their future or about whether the pension will last a month; that medication is given for free, and that they [the elderly] are respected. It is a dream and may the Lord help our government to be able to make that dream come true.”

Ioseb (Soso) Vardiashvili,
70, Sagaredjo, Manavi village

"Once I became of retirement age, I lost my job, got depressed, and had a heart attack. [...] Fortunately, my friend soon came to my rescue when he took me to the Sagaredjo Social Centre for Elderly People where they planned to stage the play Six Spinsters and One Man. I accepted a role and was ready to do my favourite job without any remuneration. [...] I got out of depression at that time and in the centre... interaction with people helped me... [...] I was again given an opportunity to use my skills and abilities and that gave me a lot of satisfaction."





Tamaz Evgenidze, Khelvachauri, Autonomous Republic of Adjara

"Life gives lessons until death. Some people achieve their goals, others do not. I have honestly worked my whole life and advise the younger generation to do so. Every job is a good job. Respect your families, be actively engaged in public life and contribute to the care of the elderly, the poor and the disabled. Love your country and do not forget your roots and ancestors. Always think how you can do good things for your family, children, parents and society."

Luiza Khachiuri, 68, Tbilisi

"I am proud of being a child of the land where our prominent ancestors were born. I like all spheres of Georgian culture that are created by the hands of Georgians. I am proud of Georgian architectural monuments that silently and truly tell us the centuries-old history of my country."





Manana Gigauri, Tetrtskaro

"A person with common sense does not think too much about old age or early death but tries to live his life positively and to contribute to society. We should look for solutions not only by thinking about improving our financial situation – this will only make us old. Men, women, young and old should be actively engaged in activities to save the country and to change the current approach to old age for the better."



Revaz Abuselidze, Khelvachauri, Autonomous Republic of Adjara

"You don't feel your age until you meet a person of your age, you look at their grey hair and understand that you look similar and you perceive them as they were years ago, and they tell you that you look the same as before. You know that is not true, but it still makes you happy. That's why it is not difficult to get old in Georgia."



**Rusudan Berishvili,
68, Chokhatauri**

"The wife of a man who died in Abkhazeti got in a very difficult situation and she had to leave her children with her elderly parents to go to Greece. When her mother died, her relatives put a mobile phone to the dead mother's ear for her to hear her daughter's wail from Athens.

If I could I would change the law to stop this kind of migration. We are in a difficult situation! A very difficult situation! But we should bear our pain at home."



Tsitsino Khutsishvili, 63, Sagaredjo

"I would like to share my concerns. Once I retired, I was not well as I felt helpless and useless. There was a gap between society and me and I felt isolated. When I got involved in the centre's activities, I understood that things were not that bad. I am happy to come to the centre, which is now my true home and where I feel happy. Interactions with youth and a new environment made me more active and optimistic. They really saved me. Thanks to everybody who helped me to again find my place in society."



Lili Zhorzholiani, Kutaisi

"I am single, old, with nobody to look after me. I was morally broken and was on the edge of life and death. [...] After many hardships, I had to go to live in the older people's home as I had no other way out. [...]"

*I won't give up,
My heart can still feel happiness,
Go away old age,
What do you want from me?*

*Why have you whitened my hair,
Or what did you want from my skin?
Tell me what I have done to you,
Why are you after me?*

*I won't become your slave,
Even if you take away all my strength.
I have my heart still in place,
That can hear happiness."*

Magdana Otinashvili, 68,
IDP Settlement in Koda,
Tetrtskaro Municipality

“Older people face a lot of daily problems. Half-abandoned regions and older people looking for food in rubbish bins or with stretched out, trembling hands, begging for coins, clearly shows all the hardship they have to face.

The lives of educated older people who have no functions at all are most unbearable and humiliating. Nobody needs them today and their work is in vain.”





Nina Burchuladze, Kutaisi

"Man's state of mind is very interesting as it does not matter how old he may be, he still has a lot of hope for his remaining years. No doctors can prescribe any better medicine for a tortured soul than hope."



Natela Zhghenti, 77, Kobuleti
"Take care of time."



**Elene (Lena) Megreldze,
87, Kobuleti**

*"A message to younger generations:
love each other and respect the past.
Believe in a happy future!"*



Gulsunda Mdivani, 80, Kobuleti

"I hope someday people will not be refused work due to their age; the pension does not include work experience. I personally have 50 years of working experience as a doctor. I live alone and I do not know what I would do if there were no relatives and friends to help."



Natela Chelebadze, 81, Kobuleti

"Almost every day we encounter people of our generation who are in need, both material and moral. Young people find it difficult to comprehend and understand that ageing is accompanied by a melancholy and nostalgia for the past, for the remainder of a person's life. That is why they cannot feel sympathy for us."

Inga Chikovani,
Kutaisi

*"I had a dream where a train
carried me somewhere far but I
still had some time left to think, to
remember, to caress, to be useful...
But whom, when, how...?"*





**Elene (Lena) Mamegeishvili,
86, Kutaisi**

"I am an old person and you won't believe me if I say I like it... I have a feeling that we are travelling on a very long train, standing in the front, with carriages taking my memories far away and losing them."



Tsiala Matcharashvili, 81, Bolnisi

"I found out that my husband had gone away with his lover. The landlord said that my husband had taken away his luggage and had left me. [...] I had two children, no apartment, no money and nobody to support us. I took my children to a kindergarten and started working at the canteen. My food was leftovers which I used to take home for my children and so we made both ends meet. [...] To make a living I sang at restaurants, played the panduri and participated in concerts. I spent 30 years working and singing, and bringing up my children. They got married, had their own places to live... By that time, old age had knocked on my door."



Inna Kordzakhia, Tbilisi

"I do not know why, but since my childhood I have had many grey days and I am tired - but some bright things have happened [...] After all these years I think that my life started when I came to this centre. Thanks God, that kind people do exist!"



Ludmila Lordkipanidze, 67, Batumi

"The wind took away my happiness. My husband and child died in a car accident. I was left alone. I went to live with my sister but it was very difficult for me to live there. I didn't want to be with her or anybody. I wanted to be alone. And now I am here... [...] Earlier I did not want to tell people my story but now I am ready to open my heart and tell them small stories from my life to keep memories of my husband and son alive."



Tatiana Siradze, 90, Kobuleti

"We would like the lives of older people in our country not to be filled with the expectation of life ending but for old age to be seen as a logical phase of a normal life. We want to support each other, to create warmth and joy, to care for weak and elderly women. We would like to have a feeling that the community needs us."



Nonna Kokhia, 80, Kobuleti

"In 1993, during the war in Abkhazia, when Sukhumi fell, my husband and I spent two days and nights in snow and wind in the woods and travelled through the Tchuber-Sakeni Pass on foot with two little children. Our daughter-in-law was pregnant, she could not come with us, and she went by helicopter. Unfortunately, the helicopter exploded at Babushera Airport. After that, we lived in Kobuleti. [...] Soon my husband died. I brought up my grandchildren alone. I did everything to make sure that my little ones did not go hungry. I cleaned houses, baked and sold pies. It was very difficult to make ends meet."



Eter Chkhaidze, 83, Kobuleti

"The gender issue is very real today. [...] Our society believes that women are mostly mothers and housewives, which leads to injustice."

**Svetlana (Sveta) Sapharidze,
Kobuleti**

"I often meet talented, intelligent and purposeful women. Still, men often scoff at women's public activities. They think that their job is cooking and childcare. The elderly suffer from being severely cut off from society and not being supported by young people, they lack the warmth and attention. No one cares about our opinions, no one asks us to share our rich life and professional experience. If there weren't these problems, life for the elderly would be very interesting."





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