

Georgia

Note: This translation is still represents a draft.

Nino Nadibaidze interviewed **Besik Kharanauli**.

Interview date: August 2019

My mother loves poetry, and especially, Georgian poetry, so, I was familiar with Besik Kharanauli since childhood. It happened that my life intersected with literature and I have been working in this field for 11 years already, making contacts with different writers all the time. I first met Besik Kharanauli in 2018, in Leipzig, when we planned a tremendous literature programme for Leipzig Book Fair, the same year he was the honorary guest of Georgia at Frankfurt Book Fair. [guest of honour].

He was very calm and I remember his incredibly watery eyes. Leipzig was followed by Frankfurt Book Fair. Gradually, I got acquainted with the writer's wife, who was accompanying her husband during his literature tours and I had a very warm relationship with her as well. So, when I was looking for the right person for my interview, I immediately thought of Besik and his wife – Asmat. I messaged Asmat via Facebook; we agreed on everything very quickly and scheduled the meeting. And as it was summer then, we scheduled our meeting in the village of Besho, Tianeti region – the place, where the writer always spends his summers. I've never been in Tianeti before and I was planning to find my way via map, but Mrs. Asmat explained the direction so well that, actually, I didn't use the map. So, on Saturday morning, I hit the road. Tianeti is pretty close to Tbilisi, situated up in the mountains. I worried whether the road would be in good condition or not, though, fortunately, the road was fine, safe and beautiful. As the altitude increased, I enjoyed more and more beautiful surroundings, as my ears popped. If I were not driving, I might have ended up with hundreds of photos for every kilometre I passed. But there was no time for that, as I was late; Mrs. Asmat was calling me, checking whether I was on the right path or not.

I arrived.

Asmat and Besik met me at the gate.

And I was thinking about remembering, recording this moment in my mind to, one day, tell my grandchildren that I visited Besik and they met me at the gate. They welcomed me warmly and we walked through the yard. It was summer and there was terrible heat in Tbilisi unlike Lisho, where there was sun and cool air. We sat in the open. "Have a rest" – Besik told me. They have a lovely and peaceful green yard. The house is situated right at the foot of the mountain. There was an apple tree in the yard and a cattle-shed next to it. They showed me around and prepared Khinkali for me. I am also from Mtiuleti (highlands) and Khinkali is a sacred thing for me; I've never tried such a delicious Khinkali before. We also drank some beer and then went in to record the interview.

Nino Nadibaidze: I am Nino Nadibaidze and I am in Georgia right now, in the village of Lisho, house of Besik Kharanauli. It's a shame that it's my first time in this part of Georgia and I'm in awe of the beauty around me and thank you for hosting me. I shall interview Besik Kharanauli – to say bravely and sincerely - the most distinguished name in modern Georgian literature, modern Georgian poetry.

Besik Kharanauli was born in 1939, in Tianeti. He studied philology and he is the author of many poetry books. He worked for various magazines and newspapers, he has received many awards and rewards; his poems are translated into many languages, such as: French, Czech, German, Azerbaijani and others; last year, his collection of poems was published by the publishing house Dagieli, in Germany. Besik Kharanauli is the one of the most prominent representatives of modern Georgian literature.

I thank you once again for the interview and your warm welcome.

Nino Nadibaidze: My first question is about your home, your origin, and your childhood in general, and I would like to ask you to tell us briefly about your childhood and your childhood memories. As far as I know you were born in Tianeti, perhaps you can tell us something you remember from this period.

Besik Kharanauli: Yes, my name is related to the name of the Georgian poet poet Besarion Gabashvili [also known as Besiki]. We [Georgians] had a great poet¹ in 18th century and when we hear this name, we are reminded of him, right away. But in fact, I was named after my uncle – the brother of my mother. He was killed during some uprising, so I was told, in the '20s and I was named after him. His name was Beso, so I am also Beso, Besik, Besarioni. That's how I recognise myself. The period of my childhood fell into hard times, and you know what, if you saw something good, life had to sleep for you to catch it. Even nature was involved in this, nature also had to sleep to give you the chance to take something from life. You see? So it continued; sometimes I say to myself that there were three "F"s in my life: fear, famine and firewood. I had all three Fs in my childhood. After the '50s, the villages started to strengthen. that was the first time we saw sugar. The children of my generation had neither seen nor tasted it before. Sugar was humid, formed into fist-sized balls and we ate it. That was the story.

Nino Nadibaidze: When you were a kid, what did you think the future would be like? Or what did you dream about as a child? What were you interested in then?

Besik Kharanauli: Somehow, nothing can beat childhood. No matter how cruel life is; the child still looks at it like a theatre. And life is cruel, no matter the level of cruelty, it

¹ **Besiki** (full name – Besarion (Zakaria) Gabashvili) (born in 1750, Tbilisi — died on 4 February [O.S. 24 January], 1791, Iasi, Moldova county) — was a Georgian poet and politician. He was a son of Zakaria Gabashvili, royal priest of the King Teimuraz II. Besiki has a special role in the history of Georgian lyrics. He set new heights to Georgian romantic lyrics. The deep essence of his poems, high virtuosity of his words and tune of the poem provided that his poems were spread as songs in the second half of the 18th century; and the author became very popular among his contemporaries.

is cruel to itself and yet for a child, it is a theatre. Childhood must slip away, because it cannot catch the child, do you understand? Like restrictions, and obligations, right? We know that there are strict obligations, very radical ones, including religious, moral obligations, but the world does not have the power and the rope is not long enough to catch and hold back the human; so is the child, the child slips away from the life [and these obligations] in many possible ways, no matter how dark it is. I don't really remember that I was seeing something dark, I always brightened the darkness, with my eyes wide open. For example, I saw many visual [imaginary] scenes on the ceiling. Our living room had a fireplace and extraordinary things were painted with the smoke and flames on the ceiling; it was so beautiful you can't even imagine ... and now, I don't understand why children need toys, as they have so much power to create and imagine their own things.

Nino Nadibaidze: Can you tell us anything about your grandparents?

Besik Kharanauli: By the way, I'm the relative of Vazha-Pshavela². Vazha's granny was the daughter-in-law of Kharanauli family. It's a long story. My grandfather was the alderman [of the village]. He was a young man, when he arrived here, like a migrant. He bought a small piece of land as the lands were not sold then; it was a prehistoric society. If you ask me now, I'll tell you that I'm from a prehistoric society. My grandfather not only increased his lands, he had agricultural pieces beyond the village, and it seems that he was so just and kind that he was even chosen as the alderman; he also has a picture with Vazha –Pshavela in Khincha, during Khatoba celebrations [religious celebration, each village has its own]. My grandfather was a very well respected person. A new system was called as "they" [reference to the Russians] only with the pronouns, with no identity. She used to say, "They came, when your grandfather was elected as the alderman; your granpa came in secret, like she was a stranger" – my grandmother tells me, it's her quote and told them, that Kito Kharanauli [grandfather] was a bad man, he won't fit, he is against you. The village chose my grandfather, didn't believe that secret stranger, who was my grandfather himself.

My grandmother was a master in weaving. Everybody could weave then, but my granny had a serious business, she was producing material, which was then used for sewing clothes. Well, she was the best at it. My granny had a small plant, she had pupils [apprentices?], and so, she had a really strong background.

Nino Nadibaidze: Can you tell us of any unforgettable memories of your childhood? Or any image that was so important that you have kept it all your life?

Besik Kharanauli: It was the period of hard work and flourishing for my granny. Then there was some kind of accident, she was injured, fell from something and became handicapped. She could not move. I remember two moments from my childhood. [My nan and I], we were inseparable until I finished school. My granny was my first friend until 17-18. We spent all our time together. You know, what I remember from my childhood, as a real image? We were in the bazaar. Generally, I have sweet memories regarding the bazaar. It was something extraordinary. It filled our boring and colourless

² **Vazha-Pshavela** (real name Luka (Patronymic Pavle) Razikashvili) born on 26 July [O.S. 14 July], 1861, Chargali, presently under Dusheti Municipality — died on 9 August [O.S. 27 July] 1915, Tbilisi) — Classicist of the Georgian literature, poet, writer. <https://bit.ly/2legYXU>

life with joy and buzz. It seemed as if our region showed itself up, how cool it was; people were coming from surrounding villages, so Tianeti was a kind of the regional centre. It was the only market in Tianeti. Imagine such scenes in my memory – we had a very famous kind of apple then, two cows and I and my mother took care of them. My granny is handicapped, can't walk and simply, imagine this scene, where my granny wears sheep skin in summer and we are standing at our counter in the bazaar and selling apples and Matsoni; so, suddenly, animators enter the bazaar and bring a bear with them. The bear is a trained one and will not harm people, but who knows that? And this bear wanders around, inspecting the counters. I'm sitting there and think that this Matsoni jar neck is so narrow that it cannot put its nose in it, so, it won't try and it doesn't like apples either. I'm nailed, but I know, I will survive. The bear approaches and takes an apple; it turns the head around and I'm sitting there, completely frozen. Thank God, my granny is in sheep skin. So, this bear is not alone. It has an instructor. Seemed the seen boring to them and took it away. I suppose, my granny was also shocked and said that that was all for that day and it was time to go home. So, it was. I don't know where this scene is from.

And there is a second scene, where my granny also wears sheep skin. It's evening. My mother is a teacher, deputy head of the educational department, a great teacher and a great woman. And the thing is that, we can't help granny; there were many fortunetellers around, even I know what they would say and I could act as a fortuneteller. [trief the fortuneteller]. It was evening and there was one shepherd, from Matura, from the foot of the Caucasian Mountains. He was somehow related to us. He brings the horse and we, famished and almost naked, take the sheep to sacrifice during the Khatoba celebration. It was such an extraordinary and unusual scene, like we were so rich that, we were taking a sheep for sacrifice. These are two scenes I remember so vividly.

Nino Nadibaidze: Do you remember the time when you first went abroad?

Besik Kharanauli: Every time I was leaving Georgia, I drank.

Nino Nadibaidze: What was the first destination?

Besik Kharanauli: My first flight was to Moscow. I also drank there, drank much, what else should I have done there? I have never expressed my feelings in the capital of the Soviet Union, there was everything what the Soviet Union was and there was no other choice for me but to drink. And the whole trip would be worthless if not for my son, who was painting already, and we went to the Pushkin Museum, more precisely, he took me, where we also enjoyed the exhibition of Pirosmani³, totally by chance. It was the first exhibition of Pirosmani of such a scale. Generally, the Pushkin Museum is the place [in Moscow] for the greatest artists and I saw their works there [before?], that's why we went there. We didn't know that the Pirosmani exhibition was on. It was so massive and diverse and thank God, we visited the Museum and saw it. You know, there are two types of evaluation of an artist, whether a writer, painter or musician. The first is when you evaluate through your education, scholarship and culture and note that they are a great artist, Pirosmani is a great artist and the other [type of evaluation] is, when like wild and naked, you exclaim: who is this? [he refers to an evaluation being from the heart, immediate without thinking]. It was like a fairy tale. We came out and were

³ About Niko Pirosmani https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niko_Pirosmani

standing outside, the Pushkin Museum on my left and I have the entire Museum under my left eye. We saw great artists there. The greatest ones. I cannot even list them all here; I had an instinct even from a distance, if I liked something, I approached and I was never disappointed, can you imagine? For example, El Greco, Goya, I nailed them all, you see? I was standing and watching, I, El Greco and Goya. I love these artists, you know - since my childhood. So, I'm looking at it and think that [the Pirosmeni?] Pirosmeni is the best of them. I was shocked and from then on, I feel freed by Pirosmeni. I shall not say that he is great or something, I just protect him now. As they turned Pirosmeni into a decadent, when he was on top of everybody. Do you understand? He didn't want anything. Following his free will, unheralded, he chose to paint and nothing more, but those cultural, educated and talented people interfered even in this. They were searching for something, to find out what was wrong with him; nothing was wrong with him, he had the brightest mind of all. He was living by himself; flats were not available then like now. He lived as he wanted to live and he is the only man in Georgian reality, who declared that art and painting were the principal things for him. Nobody was brave enough to do the same then. Nobody was able to do it openly and he is among those Georgians, who managed to disappear with their cemeteries from the Georgians [we don't know where the cemetery is], seems Georgia does not deserve it. Sure there are many great people, whose tombs we have, but Georgia has lost many. Georgians have lost [the graves] Rustaveli⁴ and Pirosmeni.

Nino Nadibaidze: Let's get back to childhood again. Do you remember if they discussed war in your family, your parents, and grandparents? Were they talking about the [second world] War?

Besik Kharanuli: Of course, I do remember the War. We had blankets, you know and also bedcovers above them and we used to hang these bedcovers as curtains, in order to block the light from our windows to avoid bombing. It was such a period. I remember the sound, the sounds; I also remember the German captives here. We had very good relations, I was very sociable, and I had good relations with everyone.

Nino Nadibaidze: Did you have the feeling of safety in your childhood? Despite that you don't remember everything from your childhood; did you feel safe as a child? Or did you recall all of the terrors of war?

Besik Kharanuli: It was a time of absolute fear, the most powerful fear. It filled everything around, the air ... everything. For example, my mother was a teacher, other teachers often visited us and when they talked, they used to tell me to look outside and check whether there was anyone or not. Well, we had a balcony outside our room, so there might be someone on the balcony listening to us. It was fear, you see. I was always against it. I hated fear; there was one NKVD unit, a tenant in our neighbour's house, and I got so close that she could not live without me. She was a good woman. They were from Kakheti, making grape preserves and some other things and treated me; then I stole cartridges from them, can you imagine? I don't know why the hell I needed them, but it was a cool thing to steal them and then there was a great operation to return them to the patron, oh, God ...

⁴ About Shota Rustaveli https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shota_Rustaveli

Nino Nadibaidze: When did you hear about Europe for the first time or when did you have an understanding of what Europe meant for you?

Besik Kharanauli: ... nobody appreciates the educational potential of radio. There were two of us – I and my granny. She was my audience and I was performing something or I was an actor and my granny was my loyal audience. She didn't clap, but she understood me. So, there was a radio. A radio. One black and round radio, hanging on the wall. It was on day and night. You know what, praising the Soviet Union was a funny position, but I remember Shalva Dadiani, a very sweet man He was the host and used to say the Soviiiiiiiiet Unioooooon and was praising and praising. He was so sweet and lovely, thereby being so fake, with his fake voice, well, he was Shalva Dadiani, the prince, a tamed prince [a descendent of royals], who was accepted for showing that we are not that wild, that we did not kill every noble, that origin does not matter. For example, Titsian Tabidze [Georgian poet and one of the leaders of Georgian symbolist movement] could not understand that they were planning to capture him. He wrote such poems for them that no soviet poet could do. But they missed one thing. Culturally he did not belong to them [the soviets]. He had a tulip on his ear, his extraordinary hair style, he was not a soviet guy, you know? Do you know how they looked? Terribly boring, like soviet writers. And even Galaktion [Georgian poet] had a kinda company.

Nino Nadibaidze: So, you've heard things about Europe on Radio?

Besik Kharanauli: Hell no, nobody talked about Europe on Radio.

Nino Nadibaidze: How was Europe in your imagination?

Besik Kharanauli: Well, I always felt that what they said was not correct. It was not just a political vigilance. I just knew. I myself imitated that "Sovieeeeeet, Sovieeeeeet", that it was a total lie, right? And I felt that lie. I didn't perceive the ideas, the idea is a terrible thing, Soviet ideology did not include ideas, it was the caricature of idea and the notion of idea was lost, I don't believe in any ideas.

Nino Nadibaidze: What is home for you, where is your home and do you have any ritual or rule, which makes you feel at home?

Besik Kharanauli: The hardest thing is to find your home. You may even fail to find one [at all]. Now I'm here, and the distance is 7-8 km to my house⁵. When I go home, every inch is familiar to me. I know what happened and what is happening there, in every square, where the nettle and hogweed are overgrown, etc. I know all of them by heart, with my eyes closed. When I'm approaching it, I am just a like blind man; these external walls are more close to me, than others, because there were stairs before and now they are different. So, it's very hard to find home. I am homeless now. This place is of my cultural origin. I know that this is my land. I was almost tempted once to buy the land in different gorges, with different rivers, but God didn't make it happen. Every time I planned to buy something, something happened and then, all of a sudden, I settled here. But if anyone asks me where I want to be laid to rest, I am a little confused. It was the last place of my grandmother, grandfather, my uncle, my mother who gave birth to me. I belong to them. I rely on this, it is beyond everything. So, how is this gonna

⁵ House of Besik Kharanauli in Tianeti, where he was born and grew up. Presently, his son lives there.

happen now? It's good you reminded me and now, I'm saying it again that I should lay to rest like this. This couch must be here, I have to be laid there before my funeral. And now, they have changed things, renovated and I keep saying to leave things in this room as it is. Don't take the space from this room, where our rituals took place. Our rituals. And this will be my house, real house and I leave that one, nothing more. So, I am a homeless poet and nothing more.

Nino Nadibaidze: And how do you think, is this house and your village "Europe"?

Besik Kharanauli: Why the hell it should be? And then I am starting to think, whether Europe is good or not. Is it better than Kharan? Where my ancestors originated, as I am Kharanauli; there is also one more surname – Misriauli, a name which originates from Egypt, there are some proofs about it, but there is nothing about Kharanauli, though it is said that Kharanauli is an ancient surname. Do you understand? And how do I know, what is outrunning Kharan? Is there anything? Is there something ahead the South? Mesopotamia? There is nothing, they cannot even imitate the listed. So, I started to think that the human being is ... you know, this even led to lose the way of development to humanity. I'm European, says one, I'm American, - says the other ... Americans are proud of their origin, maybe they have a reason for that; but the American is a breed, Americans are human, do you understand? But it is not so. So, I decided to find a person, who came from Kharan. Oh, we are fed up, Europe, Europe, Europe, come on! Whether Europe or Asia, I don't see anything better than us, nothing is better than human beings and humanity is not yet completed, when the human is complete, then they can say that this is that very Promised Land. Kharan is first and biggest.

Nino Nadibaidze: Let's get to the school period, what was the most important thing that you learned at school?

Besik Kharanauli: The most important thing was when translations of Shakespeare by Machabeli⁶ were published. I have to tell you the truth that I was very well familiar with the Knight in the Panther's Skin, as my mother was a teacher of Georgian language and literature and I was reading the Knight in the Panther's Skin in easy language. But then, I wanted something new and I was 14, when these translations were published and I read Shakespeare. 4 masterpieces of Shakespeare; and Machabeli. by the way, when I'm saying Shakespeare, I remember Machabeli right away. I mention them together, because the translations before Machabeli were disgusting, not just bad, but disgusting. This Samachablo language, it is very surprising for me, when I visited Samachablo and heard their language, it is not the same language and what on earth empowered him to translate with such language? Genial, I don't know if such translation exists, because his Shakespeare has become native for me.

Nino Nadibaidze: Describe your ordinary day at school or the road from the house to school, how was it?

Besik Kharanauli: By the way, I think that boredom and things like that were brought through literature, theatre and films - for being sad and bored. Even now you can be bored, but you should not kill someone/something, right? You cannot kill what is preserved in humanity, that thing called life, you definitely cannot kill it. For example, the

⁶ Georgian writer, translator and public figure of XIX c. One of the most famous translator of Shakespeare in Georgia.

writer has no right to plant despair in you, as there is plenty of despair around. Despair is beautiful and handsome and if the writer pushes you towards it, this is a crime.

Nino Nadibaidze: How were your years at university?

Besik Kharanauli: Studentship was the most frozen period and you know why? For example, I was independent, when I was at school, I read what I wanted to read. I had some artistic tasks as well, I played something, I was in love. I was in love with thousands of girls and I had thousands of adventure, see? Kinda chivalrous adventures. As for Tbilisi, everything died here. Nothing was left. I lived on campus. I didn't contact anybody, because I didn't like anyone, at all. That is why many people of our mountainous regions, Tushetians, Mokhevians, Pshavians, Khevsurians – mountain communities, many lived here, 12 campus buildings were stuffed. And I suppose, plus 2 building people lived illegally. It's so strange that it was not a good period for anyone, studentship was a dead period.

Nino Nadibaidze: Was it your decision to take philology as your major? Or was it fueled by love of literature or the role of your mother?

Besik Kharanauli: I chose it, because I didn't think much. Tell you what, I have children, grandchildren, right? loved by everybody in the family, loved by their parents, I was loved, right? And something strange happened, I grew up with my granny through my entire life, I was everything for her and my grandmother didn't remember my mother and I didn't remember my mother either, we were friends. I always told her that, when a person is growing up a child, he/she knows that something will come out of this and why, I was growing up with my granny, I don't know, for what. Thousands of things and stories are connected with her . . . so to say, stupid things. So . . . what did you ask?

Nino Nadibaidze: Why did you choose the faculty of philology?

Besik Kharanauli: Right. yeah, the faculty was not important for me. It was the simplest, because I knew German well, then I didn't have a good teacher and I stopped learning. She was not demanding and I also didn't try much; but I finished school with a gold medal and nobody believed that I deserved the gold medal. So, it turned out that the teacher kept my notebooks, quite by chance, it was so nice to read that I couldn't even recognise my writing. That's it. And as for Georgian, I was totally fluent, full of words and I was happy with that; for example, I wrote "Sab", right? and I should have written "San" instead of "Sab" and I was glad I could create something from it, I was like a fish in the world of words. And you know what's important? When I look at the kids today, I think that if I hadn't left the village, my village, my home and that environment, I could have gone crazy and done something terrible. I could have done something terrible.

Nino Nadibaidze: Why?

Besik Kharanauli: I couldn't stand it anymore; do you know how tired I was? And so what? The only thing, I was worried about was that I was leaving my grandmother in bed. My grandma, my beloved, died on September 18, do you understand?

Nino Nadibaidze: When you were in Tbilisi or soon after?

Besik Kharanauli: I had so little time, you know. I left on the 30th, but meanwhile, I visited twice. I also visited on weekends, so, it was not, as if I didn't see her for a long

time. And when she died, I felt everything at the same time – joy, happiness and unhappiness, it was the first time that I saw sweetness and feelings of being happy and unhappy. It is cruel.

Nino Nadibaidze: And when you left to study, did they help financially?

Besik Kharanauli: That was a very funny moment. Very funny. We were used to it, right? That as soon as the life falls asleep, we get it. Thus, cheating life is the sacred law and nothing more. I'd just come to the University and the thing was that, if you had 60 Rubles income you were deprived of scholarship. Can you imagine that? So I would not feel myself a stranger, my mother decided to lodge me with my relative, as a boarder. They provided me with food and a bed; they gave me food once per day and I was responsible for the rest. Can you imagine? We were very poor. Everyone around was poor and why shouldn't we be? So, I couldn't live like that. It was just impossible; if we divided my mother's salary, we would be in a bad condition; so, we decided to separate. Recently, I saw that paper [the document]. See what's written there? How joyful our disputes are, because she has taken a better room for her.

Nino Nadibaidze: And did you receive scholarship after this separation?

Besik Kharanauli: Yes, I did. Once, I received a bad grade and everyone else received a bad grade. Unlike them, I thought that I deserved it, though they were more uneducated than me. We failed grammar. Well, I couldn't overcome grammar ever, so, I always tried to be pleasant to the teachers, because I couldn't ever learn that damn thing.

Nino Nadibaidze: Did you ever have the case either as a student or in your childhood, when you doubted or disagreed with what you'd been taught? That you suspected that what they taught you was not really the truth?

Besik Kharanauli: Once, I went to the attic, at school. It was the attic my grandmother fell down from. This attic was like a black hole. So, I put the ladder up one day. I was a very naughty guy from childhood. I couldn't stop peacefully in one place. So, I went up to the attic, I didn't know, what I would see there. I made many discoveries, the discoveries that belong only to me, it's my story. So, I did it recently and I saw many books, books, and books; see, our Robakidze⁷, Mikheil Javakhishvili⁸ and Galaktion Tabidze and I brought them here, and except Galaktion Tabidze, everything vanished away on the third or fourth day. Seems, my mother noticed that I read them, though, she never asked me not to go up to the attic, but when these books appeared, she understood that I went there, brought down the books and read it, which was forbidden then. And the book of Galaktion Tabidze had handwriting, it was a very cool edition, maybe 1928– “To my sister Varas, from Mirza Gelovani⁹” and it is slightly deleted, you know, you can still read but softly. Right and aunt Rusudan was my teacher, she was sister of Mirza. She came and saw the book of Galaktion Tabidze, “my God, is it Reso's gift to you? They called him Reso sometimes. She was so glad to see it, like she saw her brother. So, she opened up the book and regretfully asked me, what I have done with the book, why I have deleted the writing. Then my mother reminded her that, when

⁷ About Grigol Robakidze - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grigol_Robakidze

⁸ About Mikheil Javakhishvili - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikheil_Javakhishvili

⁹ About Mirza Gelovani - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mirza_Gelovani

Mirza was hiding, they deleted it together; and was worried in vain. So, I had such stories.

Nino Nadibaidze: What did you want to become in your teen hood? What was your dream or aim?

Besik Kharanauli: I was desperate. I was desperate that I didn't like things; I was the nothingist. I liked some books. I was never so alone like I was during studentship; I was even unlucky in romantic relations, unlike Tianeti.

Nino Nadibaidze: and why?

Besik Kharanauli: You know why? Because it was a strange surrounding. Strange. I knew people here, like the characters of a play. I talked to them as with the characters. Hooray, a lie-game; a game requires a lie and you know what, one has ambitions, right? And suddenly, he discovers that everyone around has the same ambitions. Tonnes of ambitions. And you see that, they are nothing, right? and what can any person do without ambition? Nothing. They cannot develop. So, I stepped back, I considered new ambitions shameful, do you understand? I didn't have any ambitions. I lost my appetite for everything. As I said, these people were writing all the time, there were groupings, formations, either physical, mental, intelligent. Then I was laughing at them, telling them that I was awarded with the Rustaveli premium and now, I am the only one to have this award among so many people from these five mountainous regions. It doesn't mean that I am more talented than you, I am more of a damned bastard than you. You didn't even congratulate me; let's end up with the corners of Georgia, they are sacred for us, let's not say Pshavi, Khevsureti, Mtiuleti, Mokhevian, leave it. There were so many people in the campus, but I was the only one who got it, because I am a damned bastard and you are the real people.

Nino Nadibaidze: I wonder if you remember the geography lessons, what did you learn there?

Besik Kharanauli: The geography lesson was our greatest happiness, because we had a geography teacher who fought even in Manchuria and do you know how frustrated he was? Like a chalk, he was holding in his hands. Chalk is nothing, right? Without energy, emptied, so was he. During our geography lessons, we played all the time. It was a joy for us. He also taught us to draw and that was the thing, it was full of surprises. And it's like, you know, he enters the room, with a ruler in one hand and a map stick in another and we can't guess, what do we have today, drawing or geography? Our teacher couldn't give less than 5 (excellent); he used to write the biggest 5. We knew geography perfectly. For example, we knew how to load a ship in Vladivostok and then take it to America or Africa, if we were on the wrong path, he used to shout, "You will blow up there". Who knows the Japanese islands now? Do you know?

Nino Nadibaidze: Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu.

Besik Kharanauli: Wow, cool. Seems your teacher was also from Mtiuleti. Yeah, he was really sweet, lovely and I could not imagine that we would be friends afterwards. So, I was already working in Tbilisi and he and his wife only had a single daughter; his wife was also a teacher, of botany; where the hell did he find her? They were afraid of everything; so, they were raising this little girl and this girl learned to play on the piano and so, they planned to enroll her in the college and my beloved teacher (*he laughs*)

remembers me. So, he found me in Tbilisi; I and the brother of Mirza Gelovani were together. He had just returned from his exile. He was captured during the war with Germany, then he was told that it was good in Georgia and invited him, where he was arrested again and was exiled to Siberia. When he came back, he was a quite an aged man. We drank together and we were friends, he was a very cool man. He recovered the theatre; he was acting there as well. So, I met him on Rustaveli and he told me, "Man, you are an intelligent person" (such a funny word, an intelligent, I burst into laugh, because I didn't know whether it is a food, or a drink maybe), why aren't you wearing a hat? Hey, I've never had a hat, so, I thought, I might try it. So he bought me a hat and we went together – I, my teacher Valodia and the one, who was the protégée in terms of the colleges. Do you understand that? Such a success. This man hosted us, we drank there, enjoyed the party and afterwards, I and the teacher Valodia left. It was winter then, it was freezing outside, everything was frozen, and when my teacher slipped on the ice, I slipped too and we both fell on the ground and on each other and he told me "Soldiers are so drunk, they can't recognise each other, right?"; So, I forgot my hat there. Their floor was flooded, because a pipe broke, and the ceiling collapsed, where my hat was hanging in the house of our host and it was used as a floor cloth afterwards. That was the end of my intelligence. I had the same story with Papka¹⁰. So, I thought, I had to have Papka. I bought it, put the notebook and pencil in it and went to my first lecture. The first lecture was finished, and I left my papka there. And that was the end of my papka era.

Nino Nadibaidze: Didn't you find it then?

Besik Kharanauli: No, I couldn't and I didn't.

Nino Nadibaidze: You mentioned that you were learning German at school, didn't you continue it?

Besik Kharanauli: No, I gave a try before. There is a poem by Goethe - *Ich ging im Walde so vor mich hin (I walked the woodland, A lonesome man¹¹)* and I and my teacher tried to translate it in Georgian:

I walked the woodland,
A lonesome man.
To look for nothing-
That was my plan.

I saw a flower
Deep in the plants:
It gleamed like starlight,
Glowed like a glance.

¹⁰ Papka – from the Russian word *nanka* - leather folder for keeping books and notebooks.

¹¹ <http://poemsintranslation.blogspot.com/2010/12/goethe-found-from-german.html>

I reached to pluck it
When its dear lilt
Said: Would you snap me
To see me wilt?

So up I dug it
With roots and all
And brought it home to
The garden wall.

Once more I lay it
Half in the shade
To see it blossom
And never fade!

..... or something like that; but do you know what Goethe is doing? He acts properly. He takes it, moves [it] to the yard, where it flourishes. And then I don't really remember how it was, whether I translated or not. I don't remember. [include English translation?]

Nino Nadibaidze: Did you have any alternative source of education other than school and university? Or it was just family/home?

Besik Kharanauli: I don't know. Even now, I am eagerly listening to you, trying to learn something from you, really. Sometimes, I might be angry at you, but then I pinch myself, why should I be? One can't learn, as he/she is a little child. One is learning constantly. If I do not learn anything from the other person, then I'm not interested anymore. There were a lot of good people, some hit this wall, others hit that wall, and there was a lot of knowledge coming out of these walls, and no matter how hard you hit your head against this wall, you won't succeed because, unlike you, they hit fairly and honestly, you understand? Yes, there were such cases, including books and people. Earlier I started working for a publishing house and I had very good contacts, because I knew many classicist ancestors /classist writers very well.

Nino Nadibaidze: Right, that's exactly my next question. I would like to ask you about your first job or your first head, supervisor.

Besik Kharanauli: My first position was a junior corrector at the Publishing house; though in fact, I was not a junior corrector, but a junior editor. So, I was reading books and after one or two books, they considered me reliable. However my salary was not suitable to my position. Salary was low, but I learned a lot there; we had discussions all the time, because the writers visited the house. It was the publishing house of the

Writers' Union. There were writers all the time and I was learning everything, including drinking and thinking.

Nino Nadibaidze: When did you start writing?

Besik Kharanauli: Well, I was writing all the time, during my studentship or after work. But, I got off the rail, while in Tbilisi. It was 1954, when I published my poems in the magazine "Drosha" and when you see those poems, you'll say that I'm different, you'll already catch that this is the path of this guy. But as I already mentioned, we are all sacks full of nut shells and I don't want to be like that. I didn't like what I was writing and I also didn't like any poets, including our great poets. I didn't like them either. The only poet I liked was Baratashvili¹², because he was thinking and playing with fourteeners. You see? So, Machabeli and Baratashvili were irreplaceable for me. I can't say that the poems are good, or bad – no, it was just a solid wall for me. I was leaning on and I felt that I existed. Imagine I was like a drunken person leaning against the wall, with just a simple feeling that I am leaning, and just like that, I was standing on them and I felt that I existed. However I was nothing yet and I started everything later on. Our mourning poems are great. There are no single mourning words without poetry. When I published my first book, people liked it very much. How could they? Some things just can't happen, some things were allowed, but not beyond the line; Soviet Union was still active then and free verse was anti-Soviet. There was no free speech then. And I was so satisfied that I was writing those things, that I was interested in what my mom thought and also about aunt Rusudan. I wished and prayed she would not see it; look at the cover – Poems by Besik Kharanauli, what could be more shameless? It's called poems. So, I started like this.

Nino Nadibaidze: What are you most proud of in your life?

Besik Kharanauli: From my achievements?

Nino Nadibaidze: Yes, or generally, from your experience.

Besik Kharanauli: You know what? I'll explain it to you. It's true that self-admiration is good artistically i.e. when a person admires the self it is not beneficial, but vice versa, a person falls down, how on earth can the person admire itself? Such notion should not exist at all. A human being might know that this thing is right and that is not. Besides, this right thing is playing, not standing in one place, right? Their right thing – what does it mean? They have questions about it. Sometimes, I got angry or somebody gets on my nerves or when I have hard times, I do think that the most proper thing is that I made a new pair of shoes for the Georgian language. Whereas I put the old ones on the shelf of eternity; and from then on, it shall not bend down, laces will be well tied up and it will walk bravely, with its head up. Understand? Yes, it does exist, and I'm saying it unbiased. And why on earth do I need lack of bias or any achievement whatsoever, it brings no benefit for me. I did tell you that boasting is one of the best forms of expression. Self-expression is one of the mystic things. What is it about, this self-expression? It is some kind of a fleshless word. Just like a moss.

Nino Nadibaidze: Is there anything in your life that you would have done differently?

¹² About Nikoloz Baratashvili - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikoloz_Baratashvili

Besik Kharanauli: No, how can I do differently? If I try to talk differently today, it will go 1-2 weeks ahead, it will keep walking, walking and will visit my mother, my grandmother ... Besides, there are so many things that people do not do properly. Do you know what my life is like? I'm used to the fact that life is good, and all I have left is a bad part. Also, I don't want to win any court at all, and deep inside, I'm not winning any court on earth, I might go to the court, express myself there, but winning is not in my plans, i.e. to come out and say that I won the court, it is not a solution for me, where there is court, there is no place for winning against the self.

Nino Nadibaidze: Did your work, your poetry affect your family or those around you?

Besik Kharanauli: No, nothing special. Good thing is that I don't put them in awkward situations. It's very bad, when a parent creates something and puts his/her children in awkward situations. I remember the times, when the children suffered from what their parents were writing and what else they could do? They feed their children this way, and they were mocked and called a lackey of the Communists, and then, come and try to find the truth, that we are right. A man must not claim the truth.

Nino Nadibaidze: What would you advise to young poets?

Besik Kharanauli: Well ... advice for young poets? I don't know what to advise... now I feel that poetry has deep roots in language. Yes poetry is in language and one must not forget it. For example, my poems are not easy to translate. I thought that it was easy, but because of the rhymes, it was a very difficult job for the translator. Even young people asked me, how I managed to write such Georgian poems, they are absolutely Georgian – they told me; - we are reading it like the old Georgian classists. They were very surprised. I know how I'm doing that, like a swallow, only a swallow manages to built its nest, because of its spittle And one more thing is necessary, many alloys, including pathologic, every kind of alloy; I have never seen an even, proper poet.

Nino Nadibaidze: If we talk about political awareness, do you remember any moment from the political life of the country that pushed you to express your opinion publicly?

Besik Kharanauli: You know what? There are some episodes in Georgian reality, when there were protests. We had Alexander Batonishvili revolt against the Russians, Qaqutsa Cholokashvili, who also revolted against the Russians, who killed people and destroyed the villages, provoked the neighbours to fight against each other and the revolt ended. They are my enemies, I don't like them, do you understand? And those people, who fought for Stalin? I knew that this Stalin was some kind of a substitute for the Georgians. Georgians were always fighting, they always wanted freedom, but now, they don't know what to do with their freedom. See, I have freedom and I don't know what to do with it. One of the greatest moments was the defense of the Georgian language. It was very interesting, which is very natural, but I am what I am, you know. I was working for the magazine "Mnatobi", and there was a student rally for defending their mother tongue, because the officials planned not to use the Georgian language in state laws, official instruments. Georgia was at risk. It's been ages since the Soviet Union existed and why now? So, everyone came out, the writers, good writers and they were all united. So, watch what's happening out there, the demonstration is flowing, the demonstration of the students, it flows on Rustaveli Avenue towards the Parliament or whatever it is. I also came down to join them, because I also worry about the issue very

much. I'm telling you, I've never told this to anyone before, I don't need to talk about it, I'm not boasting that I was worried about it; so, I came down and I saw that it is their show. It is their scene, do you understand? They put their efforts, they created it and now, I'm the one who sticks on them and walk about 100 meters together with them. No, I followed them, on their side, I didn't go deep in the crowd, I supported them from the side and I underlined that they were genius people and I was only a spectator. And yet again, today the young generation of Georgia showed their good features¹³. They were almost apolitical, but the fruit of politics is the homeland, right? And honesty is not the fruit of politics, right? So, these young people were on the side of honesty and love of their country. And then, politicians stuck to them. And they don't know that they must not touch the sacred. They are always striving towards the sacred. They won't even let you to the sacred tomb.

Nino Nadibaidze: Do you go to elections?

Besik Kharanauli: Oh, I don't know. I have not been there for ages.

Nino Nadibaidze: When was your first election?

Besik Kharanauli: When? I don't know, maybe during the Soviet times, I don't know, as we didn't know what we were choosing then.

Nino Nadibaidze: And when did you go to Europe for the first time?

Besik Kharanauli: When? I went to Hungary.

Nino Nadibaidze: During the soviet times?

Besik Kharanauli: I went to Hungary and you know how it was? It was half Soviet then. I don't remember the year. Hungary was a large step forward than us. It was more developed than us. There, you could visit what was Europe. See how good Europe was, where there is order and ducks are freely swimming in the lake.

Nino Nadibaidze: Do you have the feeling that people hear your voice, your thoughts?

Besik Kharanauli: I'll tell you what, someone called me yesterday from Samegrelo¹⁴. I thought someone was playing with me, some girl, maybe a far friend of mine. No, she was a stranger; and there are many cases, when I am something important for some people. So, someone called me and told me that I have a poem with the title "The soil will warm you, the soil will feed you, the soil will cover you" and so, she told me that she wanted to inscribe these words on the grave stone of her father and she asked for my permission for it. Well, I don't know, but I told her that I felt a little shocked and, you can do what you want, I cannot say thank you or anything, I have nothing to do with these words or with you.

Nino Nadibaidze: If we get back to Europe, what do you think about the European institutions, European associations, European Union?

¹³ The events taking place in Tbilisi in the summer of 2019 when Georgian youth protested the arrival of the Russian Duma deputy to Georgia and chairing one of the international forums from the chair of the Chairman of the Parliament, which was followed by forceful dispersion of the rally. This caused several months of youth protests demanding proportional parliamentary elections and the resignation of the minister of Internal Affairs.

¹⁴ One of the regions of Georgia

Besik Kharanauli: We were striving towards Europe all the time, because it was culturally more developed. Heraclius II¹⁵ went against Persia and joined Russia, because it was ennobled by Europe. Russia had nothing. They never had their culture, it was European culture, do you understand me? Russia was strong because its monarchs were not 100% Russian; language united Russia, culturally they depended on Europe. It has vanished in Persia, after the reign of Shah Abbas, the Persian culture has died. So, he chose Russia; besides, it was not known as a terrible, politically heavy, cruel country then. And often Heraclius II is judged because of this move. He knew, how developed Europe was and Sul Khan-Saba¹⁶ knew before him. Everyone knew about Europe.

Nino Nadibaidze: When did the phone or TV or the Internet first appear in your life?

Besik Kharanauli: Anyone raised on fairy tales is not surprised by anything. I am not surprised at all. Now, for example, I have a sense that poetry has created everything to this day. Everything is created by poetry, even astronomy. Everything that exists, mathematical fields or whatever, all comes from poetry, but now poetry has enemies. This is a technology that has surpassed everything. It's not even a fairy tale anymore, it destroyed our fairy tales, right? And something is happening now, something big is happening. A human being is scanned now, because they are so developed that they can do all the bad things, they can do all the evil in front of you. Do you see what they are doing? They destroyed cities, whole cultures, can you imagine that? They did it in front of us. They can step over all the sacred things and we are nothing compared with them; when they cut the nose of the child in front of you and you are not making a move, it means that we know who you are. Today, we are verifying a human being. This technology is created by humans. This technology created by genius people, who are fucked up by the rest of the world.

Nino Nadibaidze: Which day of the year do you celebrate the most, which day is the most important to you that you really enjoy, or want to celebrate, or love the most?

Besik Kharanauli: And you know what? A human being has a respectful nature; they respect thousands of things and there is one day, when every person is born. This is Easter. Nothing can beat Easter. There is nothing that can surpass the Easter in human's mind. Christ who resurrects - the human being who was tortured by everyone and who was alone.

Nino Nadibaidze: Share your opinion about freedom? What is freedom and how the idea or notion of freedom has changed in terms of time? Is it different from the notion existing in the past?

Besik Kharanauli: You know freedom exists in a person. The universe is being enlarged by something and now, the universe is full of so many empty spaces that it can bear more, but there will still be emptiness. So too with the person, a person has no boundary. Don't ask me anything about a human being, because it has no limits. There is no rope, rope is not enough to catch or tie up; a human being is limitless like a universe.

Nino Nadibaidze: What are the boundaries?

¹⁵ About Heraclius II of Georgia - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heraclius_II_of_Georgia

¹⁶ About Sul Khan-Saba Orbeliani - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sul_Khan-Saba_Orbeliani

Besik Kharanauli: Boundaries? Finally, boundaries will turn into a funny thing. It will be entertaining. Do you understand the significance? Every disaster happening now, the boundary between the rich and poor, this country or that country. We have the most difficult time now, very difficult. We are seeing the bad sides of humans like we've never seen it before, because we didn't have such capabilities before. So, nothing is finished for the human, it has not even started yet. That's the point. These are the ancient ruins and we see lively pictures of Easter in these ruins. It is so fresh. The rest are the ancient ruins. They failed to escape the fact that the holy monk from China is like our monk because both are sacred and holy, like the servant of a deprived church is like the servant of another deprived religion.

Nino Nadibaidze: Quite a relevant point, as I was going to move to religion; how do you perceive religion? What are your feelings about his word?

Besik Kharanauli: I do worry about religious differences. It limits me very much. I cannot imagine that the human being is a religious creature. The thing that limits humans? Nothing. Do you understand me? It is nothing. The human being must not be limited. Of course, we have to regulate some things. This is bad, this is good, this is on the left, that is on the right. It is necessary. But this is so simple, it doesn't harm or damage a person. Sometimes I have very evil thoughts about what people consider to be bad and good things, but I keep it for myself. I do not speak about it.

Nino Nadibaidze: What do you think about the future of the country? What will it look like in 50 years?

Besik Kharanauli: Georgia? – oh, poor thing. Remind me the year, when a Georgian enjoyed happiness? Tell me when was it? Which day isn't the day of offence in Georgia. Every day is offensive; but we have something good – we don't like our misfortune, desperation. You know why? Because it's not artistic. I'm surprised with lots of things, but our people, without any agreement tries to respect life, honours life and they feel ashamed of misfortune in front of life.

Nino Nadibaidze: How about Georgian poetry, what will it be like?

Besik Kharanauli: Up to now, Georgian poetry looks good. I think there is no one greater than Rustaveli. I think there are only 3-4 people on the level of Rustaveli. I'm saying it as a person, who loves Homer, Shakespeare, as their native geniuses. I am saying that these three people are really cool. There is the European novel, the Eastern novel . . . I can't remember the passage now. Don't you remember Asmat¹⁷? Rustaveli did it perfectly. It's about this topic, as I remember, my girl, its about love Oh, Rustaveli opposed the eastern courtship ... courtship is the eastern thing and thereby, courtship is also a European thing, right? Chivalrous one.

"Pitiful fainting shows the love of a boy who toward manhood speeds." – this is the east, "It is better to show your beloved truly heroic deeds."¹⁸ – this is European, he¹⁹ knows (laughs) things; and he has lots of such passages. He doesn't believe in fairy tales, because his world is bigger and there he believes. Do you understand? I cannot even say about Rustaveli that he knows Christianity, moreover, I cannot say that he is a

¹⁷ Asmat – beloved wife of Besik Kharanauli, who was sitting there during the interview and listened to us.

¹⁸ Translation copyright - Lyn Coffin

¹⁹ He means Shota Rustaveli, the author of the Knight in the Panther's Skin from where he took the quotes.

fanatic believer-writer. I cannot say that. Because Christianity exists in this big world for him, and it is not a boundary for him. It is awkward to shout “I am a Christian”, because he/she is the child of this Universe, see? It’s good that I pointed out from his masterpiece “It is better ... your beloved”, - no, *“Pitiful fainting shows the love of a boy who toward manhood speeds. It is better to show your beloved truly heroic deeds.”* Isn’t it life? And after all, nobody was ever able to be a loved one, beloved, love was not realised, neither in western writings, nor in eastern, after the story of Romeo and Juliet love is not realised anywhere, because they don’t know what to do next.

This age, life, seems like the characters are stargazers in the end, in their sunset years. I had a nice poem about it “I cried for Taniel”, it’s about courtship; Rustaveli had code of courtship – how was it? “”

“A lover’s aspect should be bright, like the sun under which we dwell.”²⁰

Young and at leisure and generous; wise and prosperous as well.”

Five, right? I also listed them and two are left; I’ve never seen a man equipped with all five.

Nino Nadibaidze: And my last question refers to the future. Do you think the future should be connected with Europe or should it try to preserve its identity?

Besik Kharanauli: No, now is not the time. Europe must wake up and accept us. We will be the best in Europe. We shall beat all the Europeans because it is a historical fact, our guys have always been better than anyone else. So, they have to accept us. And we don’t have two ways and there is only one window, the source of light, education and so many other useful things. As for Europe, it has lost the reason to judge properly for many times and in most cases, it lost its conscience as well and didn’t even dare to make a brave move, timely. Didn’t they feel sorry for Georgia? The entire Georgia was looking at the west, with its neck turned, waiting for the French, German, or Englishman to come and help, and where were they? Russia could do nothing, if they provided us with just one battalion, they could beat them, but they didn’t do it. You know why? Because they counted. Counting was never a good thing. They never counted in a way that might be successful. They have lots of mummies in Versailles or the Louvre. They have so many mummies and artefacts that they don’t know where to keep them. As for me, I have never kneeled to any culture, because I felt free and I didn’t oppose anyone. There is only one point for me – that we are all human. Humanity is the boundary. Humanity is everywhere, up or down; anywhere you look, there is humanity. It’s not only about how to hold a fork, right? I eat such fish that was suitable to eat with hands. I’ve never eaten sturgeon or others; can’t we skip the moment of understanding with how to deal with it?

Nino Nadibaidze: Thank you for the interview.

²⁰ Translation copyright - Lyn Coffin