Landslide - Interview with the Descendants of Titsian Tabidze

Rebecca Gould
I do not know what to expect when I climb the dark stairs to the former home of Georgian poet Titsian Tabidze on a cold March afternoon. The building is situated on an elegant street in downtown Tbilisi, Georgia, not far from Freedom Square, scene of multiple revolutions. As I climb, I wonder whether the walls resemble the prison in which Titsian had been confined before his execution during the 1937 purge of Georgian intellectuals.

Child of the fin d’siècle, Titsian and his friends (Paolo Iashvili and Galaktion Tabidze) were inspired by literary modernist movements across the world, and formed their own in the years following the 1917 Revolution. They called themselves the Blue Horns. The name signaled a love of feasting and life, as imbibing from horns was a custom at Georgian feasts. For a few brief years, Titsian played a leading role in making the ambition of the Georgian avant-garde to transform the poetics and politics of their time appear within reach.

Titsian’s generation of poets saw its most brilliant representatives die, almost without exception, before full maturity. Already in 1925, Titsian prophesied his own death in an elegy to his friend and fellow poet Sergei Esenin:

My friends, if our heads roll somewhere into a deep pit, may the world know: among the poets, Esenin was the brother of us all.

Like every poet with a conscience in Russia at that time, Esenin had been infected with enthusiasm for the revolution. Propelled to despair, Esenin had killed himself shortly after returning to Moscow from a sojourn in the Caucasus. Although they died twelve years apart, the reasons for Esenin’s and Titsian’s deaths are hardly unrelated. Titsian could not have known for certain that his head was destined to roll “into a deep pit,” as were those of his fellow poets, Paolo Iashvili and novelist Mikhail Javaxishvili. But already in 1925 he could detect signs boding disaster.

Luckily for us, fear did not keep Titsian from writing. If anything, fear emboldened him with greater clarity and courage. If he was going to die anyway, Titsian knew he had little to lose by honesty.

In the poem “Gunib,” Titsian protested a double treachery: first the Russian colonization of the Caucasus, which resulted in the brutal subjection of Chechens, Dagestanis, and other indigenous
mountain peoples, the effects of which are still felt today. Titsian and his people were directly implicated in the second, the aid that Georgians, including poets such as Grigol Orbeliani, provided by serving in the Tsarist army, participating in conquest, and helping subdue the mountaineers. “Gunib,” named after the site where the colonial war was officially decided in Russia’s favor, reads, in part:

But this battle moves even me to ecstasy.  
I don’t want to be a poet drunk on blood.  
Let this day be my penitence.  
Let my poems wash away your treachery.

Georgian literary modernity was liquidated by the Soviet state from the nineteen thirties onwards. The first casualty was Titsian’s close friend Paolo Iashvili. Knowing he was doomed to be executed, Paolo brought a hunting gun with him to a meeting in the Writer’s Union in downtown Tbilisi and shot himself. Even more than Esenin’s, Paolo’s suicide was a statement. If he had to die, Paolo decided, let it not be silently, in forced labor camps or prison, cursed by the state.

Those who survived Stalin’s regime, like Titsian’s cousin Galaktion Tabidze, were no less wracked by despair; Galaktion ended his life at the age of sixty-nine by jumping out the window of a Tbilisi psychiatric hospital. Only one Georgian fully escaped the despair that enveloped the times: novelist Konstantin Gamsakhurdia, Titsian’s one-time rival for the love of his wife Nina. Gamsakhurdia, however, had to write novels glorifying Stalin, never producing poetry comparable to the other modernists.

Russia’s Nobel laureate Boris Pasternak had been so taken by Titsian’s poems that he translated many into Russian, garnering fame for his friend. One of the poems Pasternak helped make famous in Russian runs:

I don’t write poems; poetry writes me.  
This poem walks with my life.  
A poem is a landslide which carries me away  
and buries me alive.

At the top of the stairwell, I knock; the woman who opens the door has a question in her eyes. Who am I? Has she forgotten she lives in a museum? It turns out they have not had a visitor for years. As museums go, Titsian Tabidze Museum is unconventional in that it is the private residence of Titsian’s descendants, home of his daughter Nitka, now eighty-four, and his granddaughter, Nina (named after his late wife). The Titsian Tabidze Museum is more shrine to this legacy than institution.

Nitka and Nina sit across from me at a large mahogany table in the center of the room. Despite three decades that divide them, the resemblance between mother and daughter is striking, and the fact that they are both wearing blue silk only heightens it. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Tbilisi was a cultural capital, and Titsian’s home was its epicenter. Luminaries flocked from all over the world to pay their homage to the poets of Tbilisi’s avant-garde. This was the table, Nina explains, behind which Osip Mandelstam and Boris Pasternak sat with their wives when they came for visits. Almost every major Georgian and Russian of the twentieth century has sat at this table, Nina announces, proud of her grandfather’s literary connections. So I begin with these.

—Rebecca Gould for Guernica

Guernica: Can you talk about Titsian’s friendship with Boris Pasternak?

Nina Tabidze: In 1931, Pasternak came to Georgia to stay with Paolo Iashvili. He had met him in Moscow. When Titsian saw him, he knew at once that they would be friends for life. When Titsian was taken away by the KGB to be shot, Pasternak sent a telegram to the Tabidze family. He wrote: “My
heart is torn in two by this news. I wouldn’t be able to endure it, if I didn’t have a family of my own.” Pasternak supported Tabidze’s wife, Nina and her daughter Nitka, when they were in financial straits, by sending all the royalties from his translations of Georgian poets to Nina, who had helped him in his translations of Baratashvili when he was in Tbilisi. He also dedicated *Ne ia pishu stikhi* [I don’t write poetry], his book of translations from Tsiis and other poets, to Nina.

Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize you know, in 1958, and though he was forced to refuse it at the time, his son Evgeny accepted the prize thirty years later. So they had money from this prize and used it to help us survive.

In 1945, Pasternak came to Tbilisi for the jubilee of Baratashvili’s birth. When he arrived at the airport, he said that he would not go anywhere unless he was taken directly to Titsian’s house to see Nina. The officials assented to his request. It was through Pasternak’s influence, partly through his insistence on reading his translations of Titsian’s poems in public, that Titsian was gradually rehabilitated. Pasternak traveled to Georgia for the last time in 1959. At the train station when he was saying goodbye to Nina he said to her, “Nina, find me a home in the Caucasus. I want to stay there for the rest of my life.” That was the last time Pasternak saw Georgia. He died one year later.

Nina also visited him many times in Peredelkino. Pasternak died in the arms of Nina and of his own wife, Zinaida. The friendship between the Pasternak and Tabidze families continues even to this day. When times were hard for us, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Pasternak family sent us money. Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize you know, in 1958, and though he was forced to refuse it at the time, his son Evgeny accepted the prize thirty years later. So they had money from this prize and used it to help us survive.

Titsian was also close friends with the Russian writers Andrei Bely, Konstantine Balmont, Osip Mandelstam, and Sergei Esenin, all of whom visited him here in Tbilisi, and who sat at the table we are now sitting at.

**Guernica:** What was his friendship with Esenin like?

**Nina Tabidze:** He had a very special friendship with Esenin, who came to Georgia for the first time in 1921. In 1924, he wrote a poem called “To the Poets of Georgia” in his own blood. In this poem, he called upon his readers to remember him and the Blue Horns together. Esenin was a blond-haired, pale-faced man, and when Nitka saw him, she immediately called him “Zolotaya Monet” [gold coin] because his hair was like gold. The nickname stuck. Even to this day, there is a framed gold coin hanging in the Esenin Museum in Ryazan [Esenin’s native city], in honor of Nitka’s epithet.

Titsian wrote a poem about Esenin as well. Usually, when Titsian wrote poems, he would tuck them away inside his books and wait a few months, after which he would return to them and revise them. The Esenin poem, however was published right away.

Titsian went to his daughter’s bedside one night and whispered in her ear: “Something bad may happen to me soon. I want you to know, Nitka, that your father never did anything to make his daughter ashamed.”

**Guernica:** It is said that even to this day no one knows where Titsian was buried.

**Nina Tabidze:** That is the truth. I hope some day we will find his grave, but at this point it’s a mystery. He was shot in a trench, three days after his arrest. The only thing he has which resembled a grave is a plaque on Nina Tabidze’s grave. The plaque gives her husband’s name. Nina is buried in Didube cemetery.
Guernica: What do you know about the circumstances of Titsian’s arrest?

Nina Tabidze: It happened after his best friend Paolo Iashvili was taken into custody. Nitka received a phone call from Paolo soon after he disappeared forever. He begged her not to leave his daughter without someone to look after her. Nitka was young at the time, only sixteen. She did not fully understand what Paolo meant, but it is clear now that he knew he was going to die.

Titsian was summoned to an interrogation with Beria, who told him to sign a document denouncing his friend as an American spy. Tabidze refused. They let him go home, but Titsian knew that he would not be let off as easily as that. During those days, Titsian went to his daughter’s bedside one night and whispered in her ear: “Something bad may happen to me soon. I want you to know, Nitka, that your father never did anything to make his daughter ashamed. Always remember, Nitka, that your parents behaved with dignity and refused to betray their friends.”

Then at 3 A.M. on October 10, 1937, Titsian was arrested. None of his family ever saw him again. In the room next door, a clock is frozen on the hour that he was taken away.

As soon as the museum was opened, the sparrows returned again.

Guernica: So could it be said that, strictly speaking, Titsian did not die for his poetry, but rather for his loyalty to his friends?

Nina Tabidze: Yes, he was a very brave man. He was taken away and killed in 1937, but we only learned about the circumstances of his death—that he was tortured and that he died so soon after being arrested—many years later, after the fall of the Soviet Union, and after the archives were opened. At the time, all they said was that he had been sent to a gulag “without the right of correspondence.” For over ten years they maintained this lie. Both Nina and Nitka continued to believe that Titsian was alive somewhere far away in Siberia. When Nitka entered the university here in Tbilisi, she chose the Russian department, because she hoped this would enable her to search for her father in Russia.

Nitka Tabidze: [who had been listening quietly until this point]: All my teachers gave me 5’s [A’s] because they knew whose daughter I was and they wanted to help me find my father. It didn’t matter whether I studied or not, they all gave me the highest grades possible.

Nina Tabidze: [smiling at her mother] After Titsian was taken away, this apartment was turned into a communal apartment. Every family was allotted one room. But the people living here were Georgians. They respected Titsian’s memory. No one ever took anything that belonged to him from these rooms.

Until Titsian was taken away, sparrows used to live on the roof of this building. They made a nest which Nitka gathered. It is preserved in the room next door. After Titsian was arrested, the sparrows stopped coming. Nina once discovered a poem Titsian wrote soon before his death. In the poem he writes that the sparrows will stop coming to the window. It seems that he foresaw the fate that awaited him. This museum was finally opened on April 9, 1985, exactly one week and ninety years after his birth. As soon as the museum was opened, the sparrows returned again.

April was a significant month for the Tabidze family. You know the poem “I Don’t Write Poems. Poetry Writes Me”?

Guernica: [nodding]

Nina Tabidze: Well then you know that he wrote in that poem, “I was born in the month of April.” His niece also died in the massacre of the Georgian people on April 9, 1989.

When father was taken away, mother did not show her grief. Without her strength, I might have given up.
Guernica: How did he meet Nina?

Nina Tabidze: Nina had been reading Titsian’s poems a long time before she met him. She used to read the journals published by the Blue Horns everywhere she went, even when she went to the dentist. However, they did not meet until Titsian moved to Tbilisi. One day, he was walking down Rustaveli Avenue with the Russian poet Konstantin Balmont. Titsian had helped Balmont translate Shota Rustaveli’s [epic classic] “The Knight in the Tiger’s Skin” into Russian for the first time. Balmont passed by an attractive young girl who happened to be Nina. He went up to her and asked her if he could read a poem to her. That was their first acquaintance. After that, they met in a local café. Konstantine Gamsakhurdia was courting Nina at the time. He had given Nina a bouquet of roses. One day someone walked up and snatched the roses from Nina’s hands. Titsian saw this, and as he never went anywhere without a rose in his breast pocket, he went up to Nina, took the rose from his jacket, and placed it on her breast. Then, one day, Nina got sick with tuberculosis. She was sent to a sanatorium to recover. Titsian sent her telegrams every day, and sometimes even more than once a day. That was how they fell in love.

Nitka Tabidze: When father was taken away, mother did not show her grief. She refused to despair and showed no signs of fear. Without her strength, I might have given up. Mother kept us strong.

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