

A Journey Through Georgia

C. E. Bechhofer Roberts



Sketch of Gurdjieff in Tiflis 1919.

Journalist Carl Eric Bechhofer Roberts, spoke Russian and travelled widely in Russia and the Caucasus. He was acquainted with Ouspensky as a fellow journalist, when he went to report on conditions there in 1919. Roberts describes a series of engaging meetings he had with “a curious individual named Georgiy Ivanovich Gourjiev” as well as an informed assessment of the volatile social and political situations he encountered throughout the Caucasus. His skeptical but admiring observations provide the first published account in English about Gurdjieff, who gave Roberts an insider’s tour of Tiflis. Excerpted from Robert’s *In Denikin’s Russia and the Caucasus*, (1921).

With the gradual ruin of life in Russia during the last years, Tiflis, which had been almost outside the danger zone, had become a centre for what was left of Russian society. One found the strangest people there. Poets and painters from Petrograd and Moscow, philosophers, theosophists, dancers, singers, actors and actresses. Paul Yashvili, the leader of the younger Georgian poets, was once moved, after a hearty meal, to climb on a chair in the Café International, in the chief boulevard of Tiflis,¹ and declare, in a loud voice, that ‘Not Paris, but Tiflis, is the centre of the world’s

culture.' Yashvili, an excellent fellow, was, after midnight, the king of Tiflis. You would find him in the underground cabaret, the 'Chimerion,' a huge hall decorated by the modernist painter from Petrograd, Sergei Sudeikin. The cabaret belonged, I believe, to the Tiflis Poets' Guild, of whom Yashvili was the chief; and Sudeikin had worked their portraits into various parts of his mural decoration. The cabaret was not bad; indeed, for this part of the world, very good. There were gipsy songs, of which the Russians are fond; American Negro rag-time singers—Heaven only knows how they got there!—dancers (like the charming 'Lydia Johnson,' who sent all Tiflis mad for a month); impromptu verse-makers, who composed couplets about the people in the room, not always kindly; and short satirical plays. The show would finish at about four in the morning. During the day you went to numbers of new cafés, owned by private individuals or associations of ex-officers or waiters' unions. Here one could meet the most interesting people. One afternoon I sat at a table with Yashvili, two or three other Georgian poets (among them, Robakidze), painters and sculptors; Sudeikin, Sorin (another well-known Russian painter); a certain Sokolov, who had taken a prominent part in Kerensky's Government in 1917; and a curious individual named Georgiy Ivanovich Gourjiev.

The last was a Russian subject of Greek origin. He claims to have spent much of his life in Thibet, Chitral, and India, and generally in Eastern monasteries, where he studied the ancient wisdom of the Orient. He had had a circle in Moscow in the old days, and many members of it had followed him to the Caucasus in 1917 and had wandered about with him ever since. He was still surrounded by this strange entourage of philosophers, doctors, poets, and dancers. He was not exploiting them; on the contrary, several of them were living on his diminishing means. And by them all he was esteemed, almost worshipped, as a guide to the eternal mysteries of the universe. His admirers were by no means fools; some of them were distinguished men, and these especially insisted that Georgiy Ivanovich, as they called him in Russian fashion, had taught them more about their particular art than they had ever learned before. He had peculiar notions about music; others about the ballet; more still about medicine and philosophy; all of which, he said, were based upon secret mathematical mysteries in which he had been instructed in the remote hills of Central Asia! He was a man of striking appearance. Short, dark, and swarthy, with penetrating and clever eyes; no one could be in his company for many minutes without being impressed by the force of his personality. One did not need to believe him to be infallible, but there was no denying his extraordinary all-round intelligence. I brought introductions to him, and, fortunately, instead of talking theosophy to me, as I had feared, he was good-natured enough to show me some sides of Tiflis that not all visitors see. First of all, we went to many obscure

restaurants, Georgian and Persian, where we ate appetising food in sometimes unappetising surroundings. One of these, however, became my favourite restaurant. It was a cellar—the Georgians love underground rooms for eating—through the windows of which one looked out upon the swift and muddy waters of the Kura River. Georgiy Ivanovich spoke Georgian or Persian to the waiters, which procured us unaccustomed and piquant dishes, and discoursed reminiscences to me in his curiously broken Russian. Russia is a great country for professional mystics, and Georgiy Ivanovich seemed to have been in the most varied circles there. His enemies called him a ‘Rasputin *manqué*,’ though they had no authority for the evil insinuations that this title suggested. One day we went to the famous hot baths of Tiflis, from which in ancient days the town took its name. A tall, bearded Persian led us into a bare chamber of stone, where two jets of sulphurous water poured into great basins in the floor. The water was of blood-heat, and for some time we sat at our ease in the pits. Then the Persian returned with a kind of pillow case of thin linen, and, taking the soap which we had bought before entering the baths, he dropped it in the bag, filled the latter with air, and squeezed it out until all the air had disappeared in a vast lather. With the suds he washed and scraped me, and then, throwing many basins of the hot water over me, he put me back in the pit while he attended to my companion. Afterwards he pulled me out again and massaged me in an unaccustomed manner, until I felt several inches taller, much leaner, and very tired indeed. Then we dressed, paid some small sum for the use of the baths, and passed out where the washer-women of Tiflis wash their clothes in the overflow of the natural warm springs of the mountain-side. We went to a Persian restaurant near by, and afterwards went home to sleep off the effects of the bath.

In the evenings, I used to call at Georgiy Ivanovich’s ‘Institute for Harmonic Human Development’ and watch him rehearsing a ballet which he had himself invented, composed, and set to music. The story was a Manichaeian theme—the strife of white and black magicians. The dances, he declared, were based on movements and gestures which had been handed down by tradition and paintings in Thibetan monasteries where he had been. The music, also, was of mysterious tradition. He himself could not play a note, and knew nothing of composition; but the academician who interpreted his ideas assured me that he had learned more of the theory of music from Georgiy Ivanovich than in any of the schools. The decorations and costumes were also the work of Georgiy Ivanovich; he had even painted and sewn them himself. I do not know if the ballet has yet been presented; there was talk of the Tiflis Opera House being lent for it; but, when I was last in Tiflis, Georgiy Ivanovich had become a little weary of his pupils and was looking forward to a journey without them to Europe or to Egypt and the East.² In any other

man I should have been sceptical of most of his tales; but certainly Georgiy Ivanovich was out of the common theosophical ruck. If he really wanted to go anywhere, were it even to his mysterious monasteries in Thibet—in one of which, he said, echoing an Indian tradition, Jesus had studied!—I cannot see who would be able to prevent his going. He certainly knew Russia and the Transcaucasus excellently. He knew of strange ancient temples and pagan holy places there, which made me look forward to the journey we proposed to make to them when peaceful conditions returned to the land. In his interesting company my time passed quickly in Tiflis.

Notes

¹ The name of this street, the famous ‘Golovinsky Prospect,’ was now altered to the ‘Rustaveli Prospect.’ (Rustaveli is the Georgian classical poet.) The names of many other streets also were Georgianised, to the confusion of the inhabitants.

² He reached Constantinople late in 1920, and I hear that he now proposes to produce his ballet in Paris.