DISPLACED, BUT NOT DESTROYED:
The Life and Work of Irina Yanovskaya of South Ossetia

By Devon Haynie, Peace Writer

Edited by Kaitlin Barker

2007 Women PeaceMakers Program

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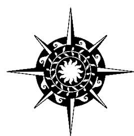

Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice
University of San Diego

Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice
Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies
University of San Diego
5998 Alcalá Park
San Diego, CA 92110-2492
http://peace.sandiego.edu

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ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM

Made possible through a generous grant from the Fred J. Hansen Foundation, the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights – as generally there is no time or, perhaps, they do not have formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories. Selected peacemakers join the IPJ for an eight-week residency.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. The peacemakers' stories are also documented on film by the IPJ's partner organization Sun & Moon Vision Productions. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women – those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation – must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.[1]

BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER – IRINA YANOVSKAYA

Irina Yanovskaya, of South Ossetia in the Georgia-South Ossetia conflict zone, is a journalist, lawyer, chair of the NGO Journalists for Human Rights, children's advocate focused on post-conflict healing and peace education for children, as well as the mother of four, grandmother of one and a singer in her church choir. Devoted to resolving the conflict between Ossetians and Georgians that began with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, she is an outspoken critic of media that abuses and distorts public opinion.

Yanovskaya was recognized in 2005 among the 1,000 women nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for her work to help war-traumatized children and women to overcome the horrors they witnessed, and for her efforts to reopen doors in mixed communities of Georgian and Ossetian people torn apart by hate and suspicion. She has given seminars and facilitated discussions among various groups within Ossetian and Georgian civil society, created summer camps for Georgian and Ossetian children and works with War Child International in Holland. A primary emphasis in all of Yanovskaya's work and extensive writing has been to find ways to open minds to peace and respect, especially those of children and young people who have only lived in an environment of conflict and revenge.

NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF IRINA YANOVSKAYA OF SOUTH OSSETIA

The Apartment

There is an apartment in Tbilisi, Georgia, that Irina Yanovskaya fears she will never see again. Out of her home now for almost 10 years, and too afraid to return, she visits only in her dreams – walking the tired wooden floors of the living room where her four children once played, climbing the creaky stairs to the loft where she put them to sleep.

A brick one-bedroom with high ceilings and a view of a garden terrace, the apartment sits in Mtatsminda, one of the most politically charged neighborhoods in the city. Right around the corner are Freedom Square and Rustaveli Avenue, where in 1991 thousands of Georgians gathered to demand independence from the Soviet Union, and then later – during the 2003 Rose Revolution – to call for an end to President Eduard Shevardnadze's regime.

For Irina, thoughts of the apartment conjure up images of change: waving flags and slogan-painted signs in the final moments before one government ceded control to the next. But there are also images of continuity: Sunday walks with her children in Vake Park, a sip of Turkish coffee with her husband, Uri. The apartment reminds her of friendships: talks with neighboring Georgian and Armenian women about children and careers, late night debates with journalism colleagues in Tbilisi's corner cafes. On some days, though, it reminds her of hardened faces, and of the nationalistic sentiment that turned Georgia from the country she once loved into the country she now fears.

Irina has lost much in the conflict that has pitted her own region – South Ossetia, a self-declared independent republic – against Georgia, a state determined to keep South Ossetia within its borders. But it isn't just the apartment. She has lost friends, a father, two homes and a sense of connectedness to Tbilisi – the Georgian capital city where she spent most of her childhood and adult years. Her children's losses are hers as well. They too have lost much: the ability to play among the oak trees and springs of Kohat, their grandfather's village in the South Ossetian hills, the opportunity to grow up aside Georgian neighbors and the chance to know a mother rarely overcome with tears.

In the midst of the conflict and the tears, Irina became a journalist and then a lawyer – and an effective and experienced advocate for equality, women's rights and children's rights. She has pushed for just restitution laws for the internally displaced, advocated for balanced, informed reporting on the conflict and used her own writing to demand protection for battered women under South Ossetian law. She has waged these campaigns for others while raising children, enduring personal hardship and fighting for her own family's right to justice.

Though her father is gone, his spirit of devotion and determination lives on in Irina. The dream of her apartment is a vivid and hopeful one. And it hasn't all been loss.

Tears of the Soul

There was a time when Irina's world was much simpler. Conflict still existed, but they were the small battles in the world of a child. Irina Kumaritova sat tall on her living room couch and shot her mother a defiant, blue-eyed stare. The 6-year-old wore light, athletic clothes and a waist-length ponytail, secured by a favorite oversized, white bow. It was late summer in Tbilisi, and Irina's golden hair was streaked blond from months of playing in the beating sun.

On most days Irina treated her family's cozy, three-room apartment like an indoor playground, but today it felt increasingly like a prison. Irina and her mother, Anna, were engaged in a rare dispute, and negotiations were not going well – at least not in Irina's mind. After a few minutes of fruitless arguing, her fair cheeks turned pink with frustration. It was time for her ultimatum.

"If you're not going to listen to me," she told her mother matter-of-factly, "I plan on running away."

Anna raised her eyebrows at her impassioned daughter and turned to look out the living room window. Outside, the sun was sinking behind St. David's mountain. The Kumaritovs could see almost all of Tbilisi's autumn-colored rooftops from their eighth-floor windows. Old European buildings that perched atop Mtkvari ridge lay to the north. The southern suburbs rested on other side of the Mtkvari River, where concrete apartment buildings known as *khrushchevkas* stretched 10 stories toward the sky – castles to the eyes of a 6-year-old.

The Saburtalo district, where the Kumaritovs lived, was a tidy, middle-class suburb with a hospital, market and a few khrushchevkas of its own. It was a safe neighborhood, but Anna knew that if given the choice, Irina would rather sulk in her bedroom than navigate its dark streets.

Anna turned and looked back at her daughter. "Fine then – go," she said. "But keep in mind that your father and I are the ones who put the clothes on your back."

Irina took in the words and winced. *Yes,* she thought, *my parents have given me clothes – and food and toys and a bed to sleep in. But isn't that what parents are supposed to do?* For a moment she was struck by how dependent she was on her parents. Her mom and dad could easily control her by taking away her privileges. *That's not fair,* she thought. She had rights too.

"Fine, you can have them back!" Irina yelled as she kicked off her shoes and peeled off her socks. "I'm leaving now!" She tore off her shirt, shorts and underwear and hurled them onto the wooden floor.

Irina sat on the sofa with her arms crossed, her pale, athletic body naked and fuming. Several moments passed. Then, without a hint of expression, Anna lifted a finger and pointed to Irina's head.

"We gave you the bow, too," she said calmly.

Irina ripped off her bow and threw it on the floor beside her underwear. Her hair cascaded down her face, hiding her tears as she began to sob. She curled up on the couch, turning her head

toward the back pillows. Her small body heaved as she struggled to suck in air. She cried hard, as only a child could cry, and for the first time in her life the tears came from her soul.

Irina's staccato breathing continued late into the night, until it was finally quieted by sleep. The next morning she woke up in her own bed – her clothes back on and white bow in place.

Small Treasures

Irina spent her school days in Tbilisi and her summers in Kohat, a village of about 40 mostly gray, stone cottages in the central South Ossetian hills. That's where her father, Artem, was from, and his parents still lived there. Unlike the gray cottages that dotted the hills, Irina's grandparents' home was newer and crafted of red stones from nearby Armenia. Their home's red coloring stood out warmly, always beckoning.

Stretching over 1,500 square miles in the North Central Caucasus highlands, South Ossetia is bordered to the north by the snow-capped Caucasus Mountain Range, which separates South Ossetia from the Russian republic of North Ossetia. Alpine glaciers feed South Ossetia's numerous rivers. Dense forests of beech, hornbeam, oak and maple cover half of the land. South Ossetia's shepherds and farmers use the remaining fields for grain cultivation, livestock grazing and dairy farming.

Irina became enchanted with the highlands at a very young age, and was fond of playing among the oak trees and swimming in nearby ponds. Her favorite childhood game was "Treasure," which consisted of collecting colorful shards of glass and burying them in the ground for others to find. She loved the way the earth sifted through her fingers as she buried the glass – and the way the sun's pastel reflection bounced off the pieces when others retrieved them.

The years passed, but Irina still spent her summer months in Kohat, even her adolescent summers. For a few years she worked on a collective farm in Eredvi, a small Ossetian village a few miles down the road. She learned how to grow beets and potatoes, and fell in love with the rhythms of the hoe and plow. At night she would look up at the starry sky, bewildered and awed. And rain always made her particularly joyful – whenever raindrops fell on her skin, she felt as though she had been touched by God.

Irina was a happy, upbeat girl, more outgoing than Karum, her older brother of two years. Growing up, Karum would often demand the latest jeans or jacket, but Irina was always content with what she had. She was close with her parents – Anna, a native Russian, and Artem, a South Ossetian – and tried her best to show appreciation for all they gave her. When she worked on the farm in her early teens, she would often save up money to buy clothing, handicrafts and other presents, not for herself, but for her family.

A pensive, independent teenager, Irina also had an affinity for writing poems and short stories. She loved learning and took her studies seriously. History was one of her favorite disciplines – she particularly enjoyed reading about the American and French Revolutions, and would often fantasize about living during such a dramatic time of change.

But while she was contemplative and poetic, Irina also had a fighting spirit and a passion for social justice. Perhaps her 6-year-old clothes-stripping protest had been the first sign of it. In high school she dreamed of being a lawyer, but was discouraged by her father. She should pursue a career in medicine, he said, a less competitive field. By the time Irina reached her 10th school year – the final year in secondary education – she decided to put her goal of law school on hold and pursue a more pragmatic degree in information computer sciences.

She had the grades to get into a good college, but she needed more than grades. To be accepted by a top school, she needed to perform well on two daunting exams. In the Soviet system, students with average grades were required to take four exams to get into college, while exceptional students could have their test requirement waived. Irina's school record was impressive enough that she was only required to take two exams. If she did well on both – scoring either two fives or a four and a five – she wouldn't have to take the other tests. But two fours would mean taking all four exams.

The night before the first exam, Irina, then 17, struggled to fall asleep. The next morning she joined 20 other sweating, anxious students in a small classroom where the test was administered. For two hours she poured over seven advanced math questions – diligently checking and double-checking her answers. When the exam was finished, she met her father outside the classroom to wait for the results. An hour later, the scores were posted on a bulletin board in the hallway. As Irina and Artem waited nervously, a speaker began to call out names and scores.

"Irina Kumaritova" he said, finally.

"Three."

Irina and her father gasped. They couldn't remember the last time she'd earned a three, if ever. Irina drew her eyes to the ground, too ashamed to look at her father. Artem had always expected her to do well in school, and this, she feared, was the ultimate disgrace.

Irina took a deep breath, going over each problem again in her head. She was almost certain she'd written the correct answer for the first six questions, which would have given her a score of at least four. They had to be wrong. Her heartbeat slowed a little and she looked back at her father. "It can't be true," she said. "I need to talk to the appeals board." And she marched toward the man announcing the results.

Moments later, Irina was following the man down a dimly lit hallway, which led to a basement full of humming computers. She took a seat at a table, while another man went over her test, question by question, comparing Irina's answers to the ones on the screen before him. When he finished, he looked up. "You're right, you should have gotten a four," he said simply. "We apologize."

Irina breathed a sigh of relief and went up to tell her father the good news. Most likely, she thought, the instructors had intentionally changed her score. It was not uncommon for students to bribe test administrators for high scores. And thus non-bribed scores had to be lowered to prevent high scores from seeming too suspicious.

The next day Irina took her second test and earned another four. She went home frustrated, but with her sense of pride intact. She may have two more exams ahead of her, but at least it was fair. At least she'd stood up and said something.

Dusty History

Growing up in the 1960s and '70s, Irina rarely thought of the 1920 massacre. Though history was her favorite subject in school, she, like many other South Ossetians, put that piece of history away on a dusty mental shelf, refusing to let it interfere with her Georgian relationships. But in the 1980s and early '90s, nationalistic rhetoric was coupled with action, and stories of the earlier unspoken tragedy became increasingly difficult to ignore. Irina would later call the events of 1920 the "first genocide" and carry a book full of black-and-white photos of South Ossetians killed that year. In her mind – and in the minds of many South Ossetians – the brutal attacks of 1920 were a heartbreaking reminder that South Ossetians may never be safe from Georgian aggression.

Competing desires for independence fueled much of that chapter of tragic, often-shelved history: Georgia trying to declare national independence and many South Ossetians wanting no part in it. Rebels capturing cities. Retaliation, burned villages, thousands killed. Thousands more forced to flee and seek refuge in then-Soviet Russia.

Much of the conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia, though complicatedly woven, can essentially be unraveled down to one central issue: who lived where, and who lived there first. History. And thus certain aspects of Ossetian history are particularly controversial. Most historians agree, however, that modern-day Ossetians are distant relatives of the Alani people, descendents of the Scytho-Sarmatian tribes that inhabited the Southern Russian plains from 800 B.C. to 300 A.D. South Ossetians and North Ossetians are culturally and ethnically distinct from Georgians, and feel closer ties to Russia than to their Georgian neighbors.

In the 1920s, the Georgian Soviets passed affirmative action measures that gave South Ossetians and other minorities a relative degree of protection from Georgian dominance. But when Stalin came to power in the 1930s, he switched strategies and forced minorities to assimilate into Georgian society. All native schools in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were closed.

Minority rights were restored after Stalin's death, but despite efforts to promote affirmative action in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and elsewhere, non-Georgians still felt culturally and demographically threatened. Many felt trapped in a system that penalized them for their linguistic differences, and complained of unequal access to jobs and other opportunities.

So even in the midst of rather serene and good years, like the 1970s, South Ossetians and other minorities within Georgia associated much of the 20th century with social inequality and political exclusion. And memories of the 1920s would soon be forced off of that dusty shelf when the relatively peaceful relations between Georgians and Ossetians began to deteriorate once again.

A Father's Blessing

Irina and Marina became friends a year after Irina graduated from Tbilisi Faculty of Computer Sciences. After graduating in 1984, Irina started working as the chief X-ray engineer at Tbilisi Central Hospital. And while working, she also completed a year-long program in electronic equipment management – where she met the quiet, timid Marina.

Irina, on the other hand, was flirtatious and outgoing, but at 23 had not dated anyone seriously. She had met many men her age, but few inspired her. She had always wanted a mature, older man – preferably someone in his early 30s.

One summer day, Marina suggested that Irina meet her brother, Uri. Marina knew he fit Irina's age requirement – 30 exactly – and knowing them both well, she thought their personalities would be a great match. But weeks passed and soon Irina forgot Marina had even mentioned Uri's name.

Irina's childhood love of swimming in the ponds of Kohat had not faded with age. Only now she enjoyed spending her weekends tanning and splashing at the Saburtalo pool with Marina. A few weeks after their conversation, Irina and Marina were driving to the pool when Marina realized she'd forgotten her swimsuit. They decided to turn the car around and when Marina pulled into her driveway a few minutes later, she invited Irina inside. A knot of anxiety formed in Irina's stomach. She suddenly understood why they were there. Afraid of appearing unfriendly, Irina climbed reluctantly out of the car and followed Marina into her house.

Sure enough, Uri was inside – folding his laundry. Irina took a quick look at Uri and all of her usual confidence evaporated. Marina introduced the two and they exchanged quick pleasantries, but Irina was too timid to look Uri in the eyes. She left without the slightest impression of his face.

A few days later, Marina asked Irina what she had thought of her brother. Irina wasn't sure how to reply, so she went with simple and neutral. "Normal," she said. Marina assumed "normal" was Irina's nice way of saying "not interested" and never brought up Uri's name again.

Autumn came, and then winter, and Irina and her friends stayed warm during their weekend nights inside boisterous house parties and dimly lit pubs. On the way to a party one cold night, Irina and a friend were pushing through crowds near the subway when Irina noticed a man with a pair of vaguely familiar electric blue eyes. Her eyes met his, and she struggled to catch her breath. For a moment Irina thought the man was Uri, even though she'd been too shy to really catch the color of his eyes. But he passed by too quickly to tell.

Later that evening Irina found herself on the front porch of another suburban house party – this one thrown by Nana, one of Irina's fellow students in the management program. Enjoying herself and her company, Irina suddenly noticed Uri standing in the doorway – as if he'd materialized out of nowhere. He wore a sweatshirt and a pair of dark Levi's, and his tall, muscular frame fit snugly into the frame of the door.

Uri moved from the doorway toward Irina and sat down on the porch beside her. The two began to chat, and this time the conversation flowed. While months before Irina could barely look at

Uri, now she couldn't take her eyes off of him. His serious yet calm face. His light brown hair, short and slightly curly. His strong nose and arresting blue eyes, just like hers. The attraction was instant, like his appearance in the doorway. At one point in the evening Uri turned to Irina and jokingly said, "You know that someday I'm going to be your husband."

The two spent the next few weeks getting to know one another over ice cream and trips to the movies. Irina felt like a young girl again, always giggling and nervous in Uri's presence. And by the end of the month, Irina had already fallen in love, confident that Uri was the man for her. His joke just a few weeks earlier was no longer a light-hearted prediction. It was quickly becoming reality.

There was only one problem with Irina and Uri's rapidly blossoming love: Irina's father had always wanted her to marry an Ossetian man.

Irina knew of her father's dream and, fearful of his reaction, she decided not to mention Uri in front of him. But one day her uncle Aslan stopped by the house for a visit. He playfully took Irina's palm and read her fortune. His prediction: Irina would soon meet and marry a Russian man. Irina started to worry. *Had he seen her around the town with Uri?* Perhaps his prediction was a sign. Irina decided it was time to tell her father. She had met the man she wanted to marry – even if it wasn't the man he wanted her to marry.

But Artem's reaction was even worse than Irina had prepared herself for. Under no circumstances, he said, could Irina marry Uri. He was disturbed that Uri was Russian, and, on top of that, frustrated that his daughter had decided to marry after only knowing someone for a month.

Irina was devastated, and she cried all the way back to Uri's house. This was far worse than the sinking feeling she'd had so many years ago when her exam score of three was announced. But as distraught as she was now, Irina was not ashamed. She was still determined to spend the rest of her life with Uri. After a brief discussion, Irina and Uri decided to get married in a public court. Irina went through with the plan, but she still wasn't satisfied – in her mind the only proper marriage took place inside a church.

Irina kept their courthouse wedding a secret from her father, but she still wanted his seal of approval. In an attempt to win him over, Uri and his father went to Artem's house to introduce themselves and become acquainted. But Artem would not be wooed. He still refused to condone the marriage.

Then, in the middle of Artem's protests, Uri broke their fragile secrecy – he blurted out that he and Irina were already married. Artem began to cry. "Why did you two have to go get married so quickly?" he asked. Most adults, he continued, usually waited at least a few months before making a decision of that magnitude. By the time Uri and his father left the house, Artem still did not approve of their decision.

It took a phone call from his wife, then in Kohat, to calm Artem down. There was nothing he could do about it, Anna told him, and if he didn't accept it, he would simply lose his daughter. It

wasn't a blessing, but eventually Artem let the matter go, though it took him years to really accept Uri as part of the family. Irina found her father's protest both touching and perplexing. He had, after all, married a Russian himself.

In 1986, the year the church sanctioned Uri and Irina's life together, the old Soviet order was beginning to crumble. Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost* [2] signaled a new era, and while hope hung in the air, so did a great deal of apprehension. But Irina and Uri were oblivious to the changing political climate. In love and focused on their future, they would never have anticipated that the political forces around them would soon swell and crest, casting their lives in unexpected directions.

Boiling Point

It was not until the late 1980s, with the breakup of the Soviet Union on the horizon, that simmering tensions between Georgians, South Ossetians and other minorities finally began to boil over.[3]

As central control from Moscow waned in the mid-'80s, South Ossetians and other minorities in Georgia began to feel particularly uneasy about the power vacuum emerging in its absence. Inspired by Gorbachev's talk of glasnost, they began to demand greater autonomy, educational equality and political representation. But Georgia was determined to gain independence at any cost, and was not willing to compromise. Most Georgians interpreted minority demands as threats to Georgia's national and territorial integrity. Instead of nodding to minority concerns, Georgian leaders ratcheted their national rhetoric up several notches and began supporting legislation that curbed minority rights as opposed to expanding them.

In November 1988, the Communist Party of Georgia alarmed minorities by publishing a draft State Program for the Georgian Language, which called for increased Georgian language instruction and for students to perform well on a Georgian language test before being accepted into higher education institutions. Few minorities could speak Georgian well – if at all – and they interpreted the proposed legislation as a way of robbing them of future opportunities.

In response to Georgia's quickly spreading nationalism, South Ossetians began to mobilize in opposition to Georgian authority. In 1988, Alan Chochiev, the leader of the Ossetian popular front Adamon Nykhas, published a letter in an Abkhazian newspaper advocating independence, an action many scholars consider the first sign of South Ossetian assertiveness. That same year, South Ossetia lobbied Moscow for removal from Georgian jurisdiction.

And, raising the temperature on an already boiling pot, the media pulled the dusty chapters of history off the shelf and began republishing accounts of 1920 – reawakening historical memories and reinforcing ethnic stereotypes.

During the months of 1989, it wasn't strange for Irina to hear a loud, rumbling noise coming from the street outside of her Mtatsminda apartment. On the way to the grocery store, she would often pass men waving megaphones on the parliament steps. Her children grew accustomed to young adults holding signs and yelling slogans. On some days, she couldn't even think straight because of the constant hum of hundreds of excited voices.

Irina rarely gave the protests much thought. But by the end of 1989, after a decade of demonstrations, as the protests grew in size and frequency, she could no longer ignore that change was in the air.

At first, Irina didn't find the Georgian independence movement threatening. She had never had anything but positive experiences with Georgians, and never felt as though her Ossetian identity had been a disadvantage. But from the way Uri reacted to the protests, she could tell that he felt

otherwise. He seemed disturbed by the fervor of the demonstrators. And one day, as they were talking about the protests, he told her why.

Uri, like Irina, grew up in Tbilisi. When he was a young child, his family took vacations along the Abkhazian coast. During one of the trips, Uri was playing in the Black Sea when a current pulled him under water. He struggled to reach the surface, but was powerless against the tide. He lost consciousness, but was rescued in time to be resuscitated.

Fearful of being in that position again, Uri set out to become a great swimmer. He had a natural talent for the sport, and excelled on his school swim team. At 12, he started to play water polo, at which he was also gifted. He started training to be a goalkeeper at Tbilisi's Physical Education Institute when he was 18, and soon joined Georgia's junior level swim team – one of the best in the USSR. But his Georgian coach often kept him out of the games. One day, the coach suggested that Uri and the three Russians on the team "Georgianize" their names. Uri's name, the coach said, should be changed from Yanovski to Yanovskashvili. He was completely offended and quit the team the day after the insulting request.

Irina was shocked by Uri's story, and suddenly fearful of a world she'd never known. She refers to that time as the days "the worrying started."

By 1990, "Georgia for the Georgians" had become a popular political slogan, and Zviad Gamsakhurdia – nationalistic leader and chairman of the Georgian parliament – was known to speak of South Ossetians as "guests" within his own country. That summer, Gamsakhurdia went even further – promoting a citizenship law that limited citizenship eligibility to those who could prove their forebears' history of living in the country.

Irina continued to listen to the unfolding events on the Georgian streets. And she continued to worry.

But the Boots

1990 was a year of declarations.[4] In September of that year, South Ossetia declared itself the South Ossetian Democratic Soviet Republic – a move it believed would put it on equal footing with the autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, also within Georgian jurisdiction. In response, Gamsakhurdia's parliament abolished South Ossetia's autonomous oblast[5] status and renamed it "The Tskhinvali[6] Region" after the region's capital. The name "Ossetia" too strongly connoted ties with North Ossetia, in Russia.

The Georgian Supreme Soviet, also in 1990, declared that its incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1921 was the result of force, and therefore illegitimate. And, at the same time, the Georgian Soviet claimed that it had the right to annul all laws passed during the Soviet era. Many Ossetians, including Irina, interpreted the declaration to mean that South Ossetia was no longer under Georgian jurisdiction.

A few days later, 50,000 Georgian militants[7] tried to enter Tshinval but were held back by South Ossetia's National Home Guard. Fighting broke out among Georgians and Ossetians on the outskirts of the city – South Ossetian villages were burned, and at least 20 people were injured.[8] People create their own personal historical markers, and in Irina's mind, that first attack marked the beginning of the modern-day conflict.

Shortly before the collapse of the USSR, on April 9, 1991, Georgia officially declared its independence. Within a few months, on the night of January 5, members of the Georgian militia and National Guard launched another attack on Tshinval. South Ossetians weren't able to repel the Georgians this time, and the damage was far more devastating. Hospitals were ransacked, cultural artifacts were desecrated, and homes were looted. Many South Ossetians were murdered and wounded during the siege.

Gamsakhurdia was elected president of Georgia on May 26, 1991, and Georgian military aggression immediately amplified. In December, South Ossetia declared itself an independent republic, and on May 29, 1992, South Ossetia officially proclaimed its independence from Georgia.

Heavy fighting had continued through May of 1992, when Georgians, Russians and North and South Ossetians signed a quadrilateral cease-fire agreement in Sochi, Russia. In July, a mixed peacekeeping force from the same four regions deployed in South Ossetia, and the fighting stopped. The conflict remained, in effect, frozen for the next 12 years.

It was frozen, in part, because though the fighting had stopped, thousands of displaced people did not want to return home. Around 60,000 Ossetians were displaced by the violence between 1990 and 1992 – as were 10,000 Georgians who had lived in South Ossetia. Only some 40 percent of the nearly 100,000 Ossetians living within Georgia remained after the violence subsided.

Three thousand Ossetian civilians died in the conflict, according to Irina, and 300 South Ossetians went missing. An estimated 100 villages in South Ossetia were destroyed. But there are specific stories behind numbers and estimates.

One of the most horrifying tragedies of a war was the day in May 1992 when more than 30 women and children were killed on a mountainous, backcountry road – the Zar Pass. During the war, the road that South Ossetians usually took from Tshinval to North Ossetia became nearly impossible for Ossetians to travel. It passed by several Georgian villages, and residents would sometimes attack and kill Ossetians. In attempts at safer passage to Russia, Ossetians would instead take the Zar Pass – a northwest loop that started in Tshinval – and travel around the villages to join the original road going east.

On May 20, Moscow's Soviet tanks were escorting a group of South Ossetian evacuees to North Ossetia on Zar Pass. The evacuees – mostly women, children and elderly men – were huddled together in the back of several open-air trucks. As they turned to go up a steep hill about 6 miles from the Georgian village Kekhvi, they were suddenly attacked by machine-gun fire. Georgian militants had been hiding uphill, around the bend. They systematically fired at the evacuees, killing 39 people and wounding more than 30.

Irina remembers hearing the story of one child who survived because his mother had thrown herself on top of him as the gunfire began. He listened, helpless, as she moaned and died above him.

Kohat was also affected by the war, but the Kumaritovs, safe in Tbilisi, learned of the carnage there later. Most villagers left Kohat during the war, but those who stayed behind were often elderly and couldn't imagine why they would ever be harmed.

In 1991, Georgian militants attacked Kohat using Vanati, a neighboring Georgian village, as a base. Most villagers had evacuated by that time, but several elderly and a few stubborn villagers refused to leave. One middle-aged farmer who stayed behind was shot in his home, as if it were an execution. An 80-year-old funeral home embalmer was killed the same way. Several homes were ransacked and burned to the ground.

Irina's family learned of the tragedies through word of mouth, but had heard nothing of the fate of their own summer home. Anna was finally able to return to the home in the summer of 1992, just shortly after peacekeepers had been deployed. As she pulled up to the home, she was thankful to find it still standing. But the windows were shattered, and the metal gate that used to surround the house was gone.

She walked inside, slowly, and found the house almost entirely empty – furniture, pictures, clothing and even kitchen supplies had been taken. The vandals had even snatched an old pair of muddied rubber boots full of holes. Later, when Anna walked down to the basement, she found one of the only things that the robbers couldn't take: a large wooden bucket used for sorting wine. It was too large to carry up the stairs or fit out the iron door, so they had left it on the basement floor.

The altar in the corner of the family room upstairs was also still intact. For some reason, the robbers hadn't touched the family's framed pictures of Christian saints. On the floor below the altar, something caught Anna's eye. A stick, covered with cloth, was lying on the floor. Anna moved closer to it. From the fabric's smell she could tell it had been covered with kerosene. Part of the cloth was charred. The stick must have been lit, but went out too quickly to complete its task.

In the middle of the altar was a framed picture of Saint Nickolas – the saint of miracles. Later, when Anna would tell the story about what she found in her Kohat home, she always said it was the saint of miracles who had protected it from burning to the ground.

Irina and Uri were visiting their family in Saburtalo, waiting for Anna to return. Irina cried when Anna told her the news. Her parents seemed depressed, but collected. "Other people's things never make you happy," Irina remembers Anna saying. "Perhaps it was God's will." Although the family questioned why this had happened to them, at least, they agreed, they had only lost material possessions. But the boots – the boots always bothered them. Had the looters simply left the boots, the Kumaritovs could have pretended that the raiding was out of need, not out of cruelty.

"They're going to keep killing people," Uri told Irina after hearing Anna's story. "We won't be safe." There was no longer a life there for them. But the Kumaritovs, ever optimistic, decided to furnish the house again. When Irina and Uri came to visit later that summer, the glass windowpanes had been replaced with tin, and in place of the metal gate Artem had built a wooden fence.

But they still remembered the boots.

Heartbreak

Artem Kumaritov was born in the small village of Kohat, Irina's beloved summer haven, but spent most of his life in Tbilisi, Georgia. He had moved to Tbilisi in his early 20s, just after finishing his university studies in agriculture, and immediately fell in love with the city's dramatic landscape, cultural diversity and narrow cobblestone streets. He got a job delivering papers with a publishing house, where he met and courted Anna, a Russian who was working as a typesetter. In 1950 the two were married. Later that same year, they moved into the tiny two-bedroom on the eighth floor of the khrushchevka in Saburtalo. Artem found the place comfortable and cozy, but Anna, fearful of heights, grew frustrated with her new home.

Artem, a tall man with fair, thin hair like Irina's and warm hazel eyes, charmed his Georgian neighbors with his quick, easy humor. He was emotional, also like his daughter, and had many close Georgian friends. He cherished Georgian dancing, Georgian food and Georgian arts as much as anyone in the city.

But in 1993 – two years after Georgia's independence – his long love affair with Tbilisi came to a heart-wrenching end.

The troubles began with the phone calls. Members of the Georgian Independence Foundation would call the apartment and politely tell Artem, then in his mid-60s, that he and Anna would be happier if they left Tbilisi. "This is not the best place for South Ossetians," they would say in a tone suggesting they had the family's best interest in mind. "It's best if South Ossetians move out of Georgia. You'll be safer that way." Artem didn't think much of the calls at first – he didn't even know if the foundation was real. But as the calls continued and voices on the other end grew more menacing, he began to worry.

One day, a month and a half after the initial phone call, Artem answered the phone and was told he had to leave his apartment right away. As usual, he refused, but then the voice on the other end made a threat it hadn't before: *Leave or someone will force you to go.* Artem was shaken, but determined to stay in his home. He loved Tbilisi, he felt safe in his apartment, and he got along well with all of his neighbors except for one: a heroin addict who lived in the one-bedroom apartment next door.

Artem later learned through apartment gossip that this neighbor was planning on starting a business with a friend, a man with close ties to the armed nationalist group known as the Medhodroni. According to the rumors, the two wanted to move in together. Artem feared that the men wanted his apartment – two bedrooms – and had asked the Medhodroni to drive out his family.

Artem and Anna said very little about the phone calls – they didn't want to worry their family and friends. The following Friday, Irina dropped off her younger daughter at her parents' apartment for the weekend. Christina was only 1 year old, and her grandparents could not spend enough time admiring her. The three spent most of Saturday running errands and changing baby diapers. At night, Christina slept curled up in her grandmother's bed.

On Sunday at 6 in the morning, Anna got up to go to church. Afraid of waking Christina, she carried the sleeping baby over to Artem's bed. On most Sundays, Artem would get up with Anna, brew coffee and sit on a bench near the apartment door where he could best hear the radio. On that morning, though, he decided to spend the early morning hours dozing with his granddaughter.

Anna was making breakfast in the kitchen when she heard a series of quick, piercing submachine gun shots that seemed to shake the walls around her. She stood still, stunned. She heard Christina begin wailing in her husband's bedroom – and then Artem's footsteps moving quickly across the wooden floor.

Artem surveyed the living room for damage, but everything looked fine. Then, as he walked toward the apartment entrance, he looked up at the radio, which was mounted on the wall above the door, slightly to the right. The radio's plastic casing was shattered; red and blue wires dangled toward the floor. Artem glanced at the front door. Five or six bullet holes made a line from the top right corner of the door to the radio. The rest of the door was untouched. *Perhaps the gunman had aimed to frighten*, he thought, *not to kill.*

Still, the Kumaritovs were petrified. Quickly, they each packed a small suitcase, gathered the baby's possessions and took a taxi to Irina's. When Irina opened the door, she could tell immediately that something was wrong. Her parents' aging faces looked not only tense, but afraid. Anna put Christina into Irina's arms and told her briefly what had happened. They had to leave. After hugs and kisses goodbye, Anna and Artem loaded into another taxi and took a two-hour ride through the hills to a relative's house in South Ossetia.

That Sunday was the last day that the Kumaritovs saw their home. Too afraid to return, they asked Irina to retrieve their valuable possessions and sell everything else – including Artem's cherished apartment. A few days later, when Irina went back to sift through their cabinets and drawers, many Georgian neighbors expressed their dismay over what had happened to her parents.

Anna handled the transition better than Artem. She had never liked the apartment much anyway – it was small, and she often worried that her grandchildren might wander out onto the balcony and fall. She was a strong woman, and religious – capable of leaving the world's tragedies to God. But Artem took the events hard. He had lived in his apartment for 40 years and took pride in every creaking wooden floorboard and cabinet crack. During perestroika, when privatization was introduced, he had been thrilled to call his apartment his own. It wasn't just an apartment. It was his home – a place of memories and comfort, a place that reminded him of everything he had achieved. After Artem was forced to abandon it, he was never the same.

During the first few years he lived back in South Ossetia, Artem would ask Irina about his Tbilisi friends, but eventually the inquires stopped. It was as if something shut off inside him. His health failed – first his eyesight and then his lower intestines. He spent his last years battling prostate cancer. Toward the end of his life, Artem could not even bear to talk about the life he'd left behind. Georgia had broken his heart. He simply could not fathom how a country he'd loved so fiercely could betray him as it had.

Telling the Stories

By the mid-'90s, Irina had been raising her children for several years and was eager to get back to work. Always wanting to do something practical – and always changing her mind about what that was – she enrolled in a course on marketing and management of market economies. And she discovered something unexpected.

During one class, she met a man who was working for a news service called BGI. They spoke briefly about his profession, and Irina thought the work sounded interesting. The man suggested that Irina apply for a job at BGI, and she immediately found herself back at work when she was hired as a reporter.

Though she'd always loved writing, Irina had never wanted to be a journalist. But it didn't take her long to acclimate to the profession. She loved talking to people and found that her sense of humor allowed her to become close to her sources. Her ingrained sense of fairness, the one that had sparked her childhood inclination to protest, was sharpened as she strove to uphold balanced reporting of the conflict – always interviewing as many people from both sides as possible.

After a year of writing print news focused largely on the ongoing peace negotiations and remnants of the conflict, Irina got a job in 1998 with Internews, an organization focused on promoting understanding and community involvement through independent media. Irina became a television producer for a show called "Crossroads," a program that told human-interest stories about Georgians and South Ossetians. Essentially at the helm of the program, Irina was able to focus on any story she found interesting or important. Irina knew that people's stories held deeper meanings – meanings that translated to both Georgians and Ossetians.

Irina's favorite segment had focused on a famous Ossetian dancer, Alsan Kabisov, who had once preformed in Georgia's well-known national ballet group Suhishvili-Ramishvili. Although the man was in his 60s at the time of the interview, Georgians and Ossetians still knew him as the highest jumper in the troupe's history. Then in Tshinval, Alsan spoke about how the war had broken up the dancing troupe – and how he longed to see his old Georgian dancing friends. But his story wasn't just about dancing. Irina believed it was important for Georgians and Ossetians to hear him speak about his friendships. If they heard his story, she thought, perhaps they would be reminded of the relationships they had cherished before the war.

As she worked at Internews and told people's stories, Irina began to feel a specific pull – a sort of magnetism. She noticed herself drawn to creative people – artists, dancers, actors – anyone who used and cultivated imagination to enrich their life and the lives around them. They saw beauty in places that others did not. It was an admiration for beauty that she identified with – a respect and awe tied to an appreciation for life.

From 1992 to 2004 – the years of frozen conflict – most South Ossetians and Georgians living in the conflict zone were able to enjoy a relative level of stability. Most knew the conflict was far from resolved, but at least they could move around the region free from fear. In 1994, a Joint Control Commission of Russian, Georgian, North Ossetian and South Ossetian representatives

formed to negotiate a comprehensive political settlement in South Ossetia. For a while, things seemed to be progressing: In 1996, South Ossetian and Georgian leaders signed a confidence-building accord. And in 1997, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) opened a mission in South Ossetia.

But in 2004, events took a turn for the worse. According to the terms of the peacekeeping agreement, Georgian, Russian and Ossetian battalions were given certain areas within South Ossetia to monitor. Each force had about 500 personnel, and Georgians, for the most part, were stationed near Georgian villages. Every six months new troops would rotate in. The rotation worked fine until 2004, when then Georgian Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili violated the agreement by bringing in an additional 200 men during his scheduled rotation.

His extra troops began to fire on Tliakan, a nearby South Ossetian village. Fighting escalated and several civilians attempting to defend their village were killed. A police officer, Gennady Sanakoyev, was wounded in the stomach by advancing Georgian troops. He was captured near Tliakan – then tortured and killed.

Irina heard the ghastly stories of his torture, the details that made a person wince to hear. They dented his skull. They broke off his ribs and cut off his penis. Sanakoyev's body was shown on all the Georgian television news programs – but with accompanying text identifying him as a Cossack mercenary. The media reported that he was one of eight Cossacks killed that day in the fighting, though the other seven bodies were never shown.[9] At the time, Georgia was accusing the Cossacks of aiding the South Ossetians. It was believed by many that the Georgian military elaborated the story about Sanakoyev to create evidence of Cossack involvement.

His torture was certainly horrifying, but Irina also found the media's treatment of the Sanakoyev incident particularly appalling. In Georgia, a so-called democratic country with a free, independent press, journalists didn't flinch before broadcasting highly disputable, unverified information. In Irina's mind, the Sanakoyev incident was the result of a media culture that put a low priority on high quality, dependable journalism. She was frustrated by media reports that time after time cited "unofficial sources." Irina knew exactly what the phrase really meant – rumors that reporters were too lazy to substantiate.

The fairness that Irina held to in her own reporting was not common practice. Journalists rarely seemed to get both sides of the story, and they seldom questioned the word of Georgian officials. Under these circumstances, Irina thought, the media acted more like a propaganda tool than a trustworthy source of information. One role helped to incite anger and assumptions. One helped to increase understanding. In most cases, she believed, the media did more to inflame conflict than diffuse it.

Five Tons of Spice

While Irina had been ardently telling other people's stories, a plot had been developing in her own life that she would not have written herself into – nor did she see it coming. And each time it seemed the terrible chapter would end, the pages continued to turn.

The shooting incident in 1993 had shaken Artem to the core, casting doubt on everything he once believed about Georgia's capacity for tolerance. But Artem's trauma was also his daughter's. Her father's displacement haunted Irina more than any other event in the war. Her heart broke as she watched her father's health slowly deteriorate.

Irina's resistance against fear had been deteriorating as well. A sense of fear gradually seeped into the cracks in her defense system, and settled into the commonplace of everyday life. Peacekeepers had been deployed for a year by then, but the fact that Irina's parents had been all but forced out of their home made her feel she was no longer safe in Tbilisi. For the first time, she and Uri began to talk seriously about leaving the city.

The Yanovskas owned two apartments at the time – one in Mtatsminda and one in Gldani district, a Tbilisi suburb. The Gldani home was more spacious and modern, with more room to raise a family. The Yanovskas had planned on relocating there permanently, but the area's spotty electric and gas service made them reconsider. Georgia was in the midst of an energy crisis then, and sometimes even subway service to Gldani was suspended. Irina and Uri weren't quite sure where to move, but they thought it would be fairly easy to sell both apartments and buy one in North Ossetia and a smaller one in Tbilisi.

One day while out at a local market, Uri met two Abkhazians selling a red Fiat. The Yanovskas were driving a green Zhiguli, but their children were growing and they soon would need another car. Uri struck up a conversation with the Abkhazians and learned that they had been displaced from their homes and were looking for a place to settle. On a whim, he struck up a deal: They could use his apartment in Gldani, with a surcharge, if he could use their car. Uri explained that the apartment was about $5,000. The car, they said, was worth $3,000. The Abkhazian man didn't have the $2,000 difference at the time, but would pay Uri shortly.

Uri took him at his word. Another man, known to both of the men, was standing by and watching the exchange, which, to Uri's mind, made the agreement official. Among two honorable men in the Caucasus, the presence of a third party legitimized all deals.

Uri took the Abkhazians back to the downtown apartment to meet Irina. He told her the basics of the agreement but gave her the impression that nothing was official. During the introductions, Irina noticed the Abkhazian's eyes widen as they scanned the Mtatsminda apartment. *Might they have that apartment instead of the one in Gldani?* But Irina assured them it was not for sale.

A few days later, Irina left to search for a home to buy in Vladikavkaz, in North Ossetia. She told Uri not to finalize anything in terms of selling their homes until she called him and confirmed she had found a place. She searched and searched, but found nothing. The day before she was supposed to return, she called Uri and told him to rescind his offer. He paused on the phone before giving her the bad news: He had already given his word. He had issued them a letter of

authorization, and the Abkhazians had given him a car authorization in return. They had not, however, given him a letter of debt acknowledgement, and Uri was embarrassed to ask for it.

The Yanovskas waited anxiously for their money to arrive – until the Abkhazians finally visited them in Mtatsminda and admitted that they were completely broke. They didn't have the money, but they did have spices. They offered to give the Yanovskas five tons of spice that could be sold to earn back their money. Irina and Uri didn't know what to do. Shocked and confused, they drove to Tshinval to spend the summer visiting with Artem and Anna.

But the problem didn't go away. Devoid of options, Irina and Uri eventually decided to accept the spice. Uri had a friend living in North Ossetia who said he'd found a buyer in Astrakhan – in Russia. So the Abkhazians took the five tons of spice to Vladikavkaz to be transported to the buyer in Astrakhan. But due to travel restrictions caused by the crisis in Chechnya, it was impossible to get the spices to Astrakhan. The buyer lost interest and the deal died. Irina and Uri grew increasingly anxious about the unsettled situation with their Gldani apartment: Still they had not received any acknowledgement of debt, the Abkhazians were living in their Gldani apartment, and the spices had yet to be sold. All the Yanovskas had of the deal was the use of a red Fiat.

The Yanovskas tried canceling the deal – returning the car and the spices in exchange for their apartment. But the Abkhazians, quite happy with the current arrangement, refused and stalled. Their next plan was to sell the car and buy a small flat in Vladikavkaz with the money. But real estate had drastically shot up in price, and, in the meantime, Uri discovered that the Abkhazians had greatly exaggerated the worth of the spices. The Yanovskas were still stuck.

Uri's friend eventually found another buyer, but at midnight the night before the load was to be taken to the buyer, they awoke to the turn of an ignition followed by the rumbling of a car driving away. Someone had stolen the truck.

When Irina went to Tbilisi to tell the Abkhazians that the sale of the spices had again failed and the theft was being investigated, they immediately reclaimed ownership of the spices. Perhaps the spices were more valuable then they'd thought. Frustrated, Irina left. But the next time she returned to Tbilisi to visit her Mtatsminda apartment, her key wouldn't turn in the lock. Someone had been there. Someone had broken in and changed the locks. Irina had her suspicions. She called the Abkhazians, and indeed, they had replaced the door locks. But, they assured her, they would bring her a new key.

The second time she called demanding the key, they insisted that Uri now owed them $1,000 – approximately the price to be paid by the last potential spice buyer. Uri and Irina refused to pay the money, and again suggested that they simply reverse the exchange. The car and the spices for the apartment. But the Abkhazians refused. After all, the Yanovskas could hardly have found spices of such good quality on their own.

And then the full story of the changed locks came to light. The Abkhazians had borrowed money to buy the five tons of spice to begin with. The time had come to repay that debt, so they had simply sold the Gldani apartment. The locks on the Mtatsminda apartment had been changed because they intended to live there now – until the Yanovskas paid the debt that the Abkhazians now insisted they owed for the spices.

Irina knew immediately that what they were attempting was illegal. There was no agreement, and according to local regulation, this kind of transaction implied a wife's consent – and Irina had not given hers. She was outraged but confident that Georgia's legal system would support her case. She would win her property back with the law. The Abkhazians' actions had been so plainly egregious that Irina couldn't imagine that they would get away with their plan.

Out of Desperation, Opportunity

The Yanovskas' legal fight to reclaim their homes did not prove to be the simple case Irina had hoped for. They sued the Abkhazians in two different courts, but the trial process was painstakingly slow. Though the law was in Irina's favor, the Abkhazians continued to bribe the judges for a favorable verdict. One court decision was finally made in favor of the Yanovskas, but it was later denounced when the Abkhazians made an appeal and bribed the judge – who was later dismissed from his position for corruption.

Irina spent the next few years in and out of courtrooms. Much of the '90s are catalogued for her in terms of which judge was working on her case at a given time. They were years of frustration not only because of her own distressing situation, but also because she heard so many similar stories of others unfairly displaced from their homes. In 1989, before the violence and displacement had really begun, approximately 164,000 Ossetians lived in Georgia. By 2002, the Ossetian population in Georgia dwindled to 38,000.[10] By the best of estimates, 60,000 Ossetians were internally displaced over the course of the conflict.[11] Despite the staggering numbers, the Georgian Parliament refused to adopt a restitution law.

By 1998, the year she started working for Internews, Irina understood that her battle in the courts wasn't working. She was determined to keep fighting, but she was looking for alternative means of influence. The Georgian government could ignore the displacement issue, Irina believed, largely because the Georgian media ignored it as well. Irina hadn't found the support she and others needed, so she decided to create it: She gathered a group of concerned people and started Journalists for Human Rights (JHR). Irina quickly spread the word of her new organization, and about 60 friends and colleagues expressed willingness to join her. But they weren't just journalists – they were also teachers, government workers, church members. A handful of Georgians living in South Ossetia signed on as well.

Originally, the goal of the organization was to spread the word about displacement and demand restitution for those forced out of their homes. She hoped her organization could begin to fill the gap of silence in the Georgian media by promoting more coverage of the issue and using its own written articles to speak out and shed light on the massive displacement.

But Irina didn't want restitution to be JHR's sole fight. When she eventually drafted a statute for the organization, it had three specific goals: to lobby for better, more equitable law; to raise public awareness of human rights violations; and to do all in its power to protect human rights.

For the first few years, Irina spent a great deal of time working – in vain – for a solution to the internally displaced persons (IDP) problem. In addition to encouraging others to cover the issue and writing about it herself, she started to hold meetings with Georgian representatives who had influence. When someone refused to speak with her, it only made her try harder. "The definition of a good journalist is someone who isn't let in through the door," she would say, "but crawls through the window."

But Irina eventually came to the conclusion that JHR was not going to single-handedly fix Georgia's displacement problem. While still keeping that issue alive, Irina's next human rights campaign looked deeper beneath the surface. She began to focus on a kind of violence that was

often overlooked during the war: the abuse of women in South Ossetia. Irina was shocked to learn that in many villages in the late '90s, women as young as 14 and 15 were pressured into getting married. Uneducated and therefore unable to provide for themselves, they often feel as though marriage and motherhood will give them stability. But often, Irina found, those women – girls still in many ways – find themselves trapped in abusive relationships.

In some cases, young women would even get married in so-called "traditional marriages" that take place outside of the law. In these instances, the South Ossetian government doesn't recognize the marriage. If a man decides to leave his wife, in other words, she's left with nothing – including the protection of any law.

To illuminate these issues, Irina's organization conducted a study and published a report in several local South Ossetian newspapers called "Documenting Women's Rights Violations in South Ossetia." Irina also spread awareness through media – because she knew that, as a culture, people didn't care about violence against women. Irina found it a shameful apathy.

One of Irina's main goals was to convince the South Ossetian government to pass a law that would specifically address domestic violence. As of now, she says, women have inadequate recourse when husbands beat and abuse them. She was also determined to convince local authorities to create women's shelters in the region. As of 2007, South Ossetia did not have even one.

Scattered Memories

In 2004, about the time the third judge took over Irina's apartment case, her organization was in full swing and she still held out hope that the lawsuit would resolve in her favor – and that she'd eventually be able to reclaim everything inside her apartment. Irina was living in Tshinval, but she would occasionally travel back to Tbilisi on reporting assignments. She still kept in touch with her Georgian neighbor, Nana Kurdiani, and would sometimes give her a call when she was in town to catch up and get updates on her Mtatsminda apartment. Their conversations usually went well, but one fall day Nana's news made Irina's stomach clench, and then sink.

Irina was in town covering a story and gave Nana a call in the middle of the day. They exchanged the usual pleasantries, asking about each other's children and life during the past few weeks. Nana went through the motions, not eager to tell Irina what she'd seen. Finally Irina asked how her apartment was, expecting to hear, like always, that everything was fine. Nana paused.

"The other day," she started slowly, "I went outside to the street and saw your family pictures blowing in the wind." Nana had tried her hardest to save the photos, and was able to catch a few pictures of Irina's children. But much of Irina's belongings, Nana feared, had either been thrown out already or lost to the whipping wind. A wave of grief washed over Irina as she thought of everything she'd left behind in the house: baby pictures, photos of her mother and father, her wedding pictures, dress and veil. For the first time she realized that she may never see anything in her apartment again. Tears started to wet her cheeks. She barely said goodbye to Nana before hanging up the phone.

All of her children's memories were in that home. Her voice broke whenever she tried to talk about it. She knew that they would never be able to have them back. *Memories are memories and walls are walls, but memories are something different,* Irina would tell herself. *The walls are just stone and brick. They're not alive. But memories are something spiritual, something inside you.*

Irina's emotions had exhausted her too much to stay at work longer that day, so she took a van back to Tshinval. She felt completely broken inside and tried, unsuccessfully, to choke back tears as her ride neared its end. When she arrived back home, she kept the news to herself. Uri, she knew, would be devastated. She wanted to pick the right time to tell him. She didn't tell her parents either. They were both ill, and she didn't want to risk upsetting them.

Irina had immediately suspected that the Abkhazians were to blame for her lost memories, but she learned later that it was another family living in the aparment who had thrown out her belongings. The Abkhazians had actually sold each apartment twice, so the current owners likely had no idea they were illegally living in Irina's home. Irina hadn't considered going to the Mtatsminda apartment for quite some time. As part of the trial process, she'd once had to confront a man living in her Gldani home – a Georgian professor at Tbilisi University. The Abkhazians had told him awful things about Irina, so when she approached him he was very rude and dismissive.

But Irina told him her whole story, everything that had happened because of the Abkhazians, and when she'd finished he was beside himself with guilt. Irina regretted putting him in that situation. The guilt was not his. He hadn't known what he was stepping into when he moved into her home. And, like so many others, he had nowhere else to go.

Although Irina had a hard time taking in the news about her Mtatsminda apartment, she still wasn't ready to accept it and give up her fight. She decided the best way to fight for her own rights – and the rights of others – was to learn the law herself, so in 2005 she entered a one-year law program at South Ossetia University. JHR was expanding rapidly, and in addition to her work with women's rights, she had also been working with children since 2001.

Irina had realized that many children born during and after the war had been scarred by the violence – and had lived the entirety of their lives in a state of fear, danger and instability. Even those who managed to escape loss still harbored negative stereotypes about Georgians.

As a way to help young children heal, Irina and her colleagues began conducting creative sessions in South Ossetia's kindergarten classes. With the teachers' permission, they would come in for an hour per day to play music, act out plays, perform puppet shows or lead the students in art projects. The goal was two-fold: to distract them from their sadness while helping them better express themselves through art.

For Irina, creativity and harmony were not separate forces. There was a connection. Irina believed deeply in other forces too – like justice and fairness – but she also believed in those inner forces of the soul. "Creativity is close to harmony," Irina would say.

Most of the students Irina worked with went to boarding school, which meant they either had lost parents in the war, had learning problems or came from economically disadvantaged families. JHR sponsored essay and artistic competitions for these students, and often took the winners to summer camp in the South Ossetian hills, where they hiked in the hills and swam in the ponds. Both at camp and at school, Irina and others would teach the children about human rights, including children's rights, and conflict resolution.

Irina loved working with children, and of all her many projects, her work with young people made her the most happy and proud. They were the ones who would build tomorrow. But it wasn't only about the children. One of the great things about working with children, Irina believed, was that both adults and children benefitted from it. Many of the artists, musicians and actors that Irina was working with had also experienced their share of war trauma. And in some ways, that was worse than only knowing a life with war – they knew there was something else, something that had been lost and needed to be recovered.

Zarina Tedeeva, a 51-year-old widow, was one of the women Irina worked closely with. Her husband had been on a bus in 1992, passing through one of South Ossetia's Georgian villages when Georgian militants pulled the bus over and took everyone hostage. The women, children and elderly on the bus were eventually let go. But Zarina's husband, along with several others, was brutally tortured and then buried alive.

The pain and loss ran through each generation. Twenty-six-year-old Sergey Hugev, one of JHR's guitarists, lost a grandfather during the war. Like many of the elderly, his grandfather chose to stay behind when other villagers fled. While Sergey's grandmother was hiding in the house, Georgian militants shot his grandfather, in the style of an execution.

Though Zarina's loss was great, Irina says she found friendship in JHR and fulfillment in her involvement with human rights education – so much that she went on to form a human rights organization of her own. Sergey stayed with the organization, and Irina watched as his work with children seemed to alleviate his sadness.

Though the wounds of each generation were in some ways different, they had ways of assisting in one another's healing.

A Chapter of Peace?

Even as old chapters of Irina's life remain to be concluded, pages of new chapters still begin to turn. "The Faces of Women in Ossetia" is a project that Irina has already started – but she hopes that, in the next chapter of her life, most of her work will focus once again on the status of women's rights in South Ossetia. As part of the project, JHR interviewed women in villages about the kind of violence that they faced in the home. Portraits of the women were also included in a photography exhibit – a cumulative means of exposing the problems women face and raising public awareness.

Irina also published an analysis of the interviews with village women and extracts from other countries' legal norms – Sweden, Croatia and the U.N. – focused on domestic violence in a booklet called "Let's Think About How to Help." That booklet was then distributed to participants of a roundtable, where representatives of executive and legislative bodies, NGOs and media convened to address physical, emotional, economic and sexual violence. Irina also hopes to talk about the need for women to be represented in South Ossetia's ministries – and to adopt a law that deals specifically with domestic violence.

But Irina isn't quite sure where her life and work will take her after that. She also doesn't know how the conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia will conclude, though she hopes, of course, it will end with an independent South Ossetia. She's certainly not satisfied with current President Mikheil Saakashvili. At least with Gamsakhurdia, she says, she knew what she was getting. But while Saakashvili talks about democracy and peace, he continues to sends troops to fight in South Ossetia.

In the past year, Saakashvili has propped up an alternative South Ossetian government based in a Georgian village, largely, many believe, to undermine the authority of President Eduard Kokoity. Though South Ossetians elected Kokoity in 2001 and re-elected him in 2006, Saakashvili has publicly pledged to work with his own leader, Ossetian Dmitri Sanakoev. Irina calls it a silly strategy, and says the new leader has virtually no support among Ossetians.

When thousands of anti-Saakashvili protestors flocked to the streets right by her old Mtatsminda apartment in the fall of 2007, Irina thought the demonstration was a positive development for two reasons. First, she believed the incident exposed Saakashvili for what he was: an autocratic leader who allowed his police to beat protestors and shut down the independent media. She also suspected it would spark an emboldening of the opposition.

Irina hopes to see Georgia become a truly democratic country. She also hopes that Georgia will find a way to improve the social and economic standing of its own citizens. An economically sound Georgia would make its attempts to win back Ossetians much more appealing.

Irina doesn't sleep much these days. People often ask her why she chose to give up so much to do the work she does, but she insists that it's not a sacrifice.

"People probably do think that women who do peacemaking sacrifice things, but in reality I don't think I sacrificed anything," Irina says. "I am an accomplished woman with a family and a career, and whatever I do I equate this not just with sacrifice but with growth."

Nevertheless, she admits that sometimes – oftentimes – her job can be emotionally difficult.

"It's natural for humans to transfer the pain of others to themselves," she says. "And if next to you someone is killed or is suffering because of the conflict, you can never exclude that it will happen to you."

Irina also confesses that she cries easily, but she still thinks of herself as a strong woman: "I think whatever God gives me is for the better. Whatever doesn't kill us makes us stronger."

In addition to strength, Irina possesses other qualities she's constantly trying to instill in others – the gifts of imagination, creativity and appreciation.

"I look at the flowers, I look at the birds and the sun, and I am happy," Irina says. "For me, it's very important that we don't have conflicts inside ourselves. If I have a conflict within me, that's a problem. We need to learn how to find peace inside."

As the conflict swirls around her, taking away homes, friends and loved ones, Irina has managed to hold on to the only thing she can: her own inner peace. That has proved untouched – and undeterred. No one can scatter it, change its locks or force it out.

Irina hasn't been back to Kohat in three years. The village is flanked to the north and south by Georgian villages, making the road to her old home too dangerous to travel. The last time she saw Kohat she was on her way to her mother's burial in 2003. Since the fighting broke out again in 2004, she hasn't been able to see either of her parents' graves. The OSCE promised to accompany Irina, but if the Georgian military were to stop her, the OSCE could do nothing to help.

Irina thinks about Kohat often – her childhood sanctuary of peace and serenity. When she does so, she imagines herself driving her red Fiat through the hills. Then suddenly she's on horseback, galloping so fast she can barely hold on. Moments later she becomes a hawk with a view so expansive she can see across the mountains – beyond her apartment in Mtatsminda with all of its memories, beyond the unresolved struggles – and onto the vast Russian plains.

BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER – Devon Haynie

Devon Haynie grew up in Fort Wayne, Ind., and earned a B.A. in peace studies at Colgate University in Hamilton, N.Y. As an undergraduate, Haynie studied abroad at the University of Cape Town, South Africa and at the European Peace University in Stadtschlaining, Austria. After graduation she volunteered with a nongovernmental organization in Shkodra, Albania and traveled throughout the Balkans. She has since been a press officer at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and Amnesty International USA. In 2007, Haynie graduated from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. Her work has appeared in several newspapers and magazines, including the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Philadelphia Daily News* and *Connecticut Magazine*.

JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE & JUSTICE

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice (IPJ) is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. Through education, research and peacemaking activities, the IPJ offers programs that advance scholarship and practice in conflict resolution and human rights. The institute, a unit of the University of San Diego's Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, draws on Catholic social teaching that sees peace as inseparable from justice and acts to prevent and resolve conflicts that threaten local, national and international peace.

The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the University of San Diego to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice. Programming began in early 2001 and the building was dedicated in December 2001 with a conference, "Peacemaking with Justice: Policy for the 21st Century."

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In Nepal, for example, for nearly a decade the IPJ has been working with Nepali groups to support inclusiveness and dialogue in the transition from armed conflict and monarchy to peace and multiparty democracy. In its West African Human Rights Training Initiative, the institute partners with local human rights groups to strengthen their ability to pressure government for reform and accountability.

In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute has several ongoing programs. The Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series is a forum for high-level national and international leaders and policymakers to share their knowledge and perspective on issues related to peace and justice.

WorldLink, a year-round educational program for middle school and high school students from San Diego and Baja California, connects youth to global affairs.

Community outreach includes speakers, films, art and opportunities for discussion between community members, academics and practitioners on issues of peace and social justice, as well as dialogue with national and international leaders in government, nongovernmental organizations and the military.

In addition to the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies includes the Trans-Border Institute, which promotes border-related scholarship and an active role for the university in the cross-border community, and a master's program in Peace and Justice Studies to train future leaders in the field.

UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO

Chartered in 1949, the University of San Diego (USD) is a Roman Catholic institution of higher learning located on 180 acres overlooking San Diego's Mission Bay. The University of San Diego is committed to promoting academic excellence, expanding liberal and professional knowledge, creating a diverse community and preparing leaders dedicated to ethical and compassionate service.

The university is steadfast in its dedication to the examination of the Catholic tradition as the basis of a continuing search for meaning in contemporary life. Global peace and development and the application of ethics and values are examined through campus centers and institutes such as the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, the Values Institute, the Trans-Border Institute, the Center for Public Interest Law, the Institute for Law and Philosophy and the International Center for Character Education. Furthermore, through special campus events such as the Social Issues Conference, the James Bond Stockdale Leadership and Ethics Symposium and the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series, we invite the community to join us in further exploration of these values.

The USD campus, considered one of the most architecturally unique in the nation, is known as Alcalá Park. Like the city of San Diego, the campus takes its name from San Diego de Alcalá, a Franciscan brother who served as the infirmarian at Alcalá de Henares, a monastery near Madrid, Spain. The Spanish Renaissance architecture that characterizes the five-century-old University of Alcalá serves as the inspiration for the buildings on the USD campus. The architecture was intended by the founders, Bishop Charles Francis Buddy and Mother Rosalie Hill, to enhance the search for truth through beauty and harmony. Recent additions, such as the state-of-the-art Donald P. Shiley Center for Science and Technology and the new School of Leadership and Education Sciences building carry on that tradition.

A member of the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa, USD is ranked among the nation's top 100 universities. The university offers its 7,500 undergraduate, graduate and law students rigorous academic programs in more than 60 fields of study through six academic divisions, including the College of Arts and Sciences and the schools of Business Administration, Leadership and Education Sciences, Law, and Nursing and Health Science. The Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies opened in Fall 2007.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IPJ	Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice
JHR	Journalists for Human Rights
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
USD	University of San Diego

ENDNOTES

[1] A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article "'Women Cannot Cry Anymore': Global Voice Transforming Violent Conflict," by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

[2] Mikhail Gorbachev was general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1985 to 1991 and president of the Soviet Union from 1990 to 1991. Perestroika, "restructuring," and glasnost, "openness," were both part of Gorbachev's efforts to increase political liberalization and reduce corruption and inefficiency.

[3] The following historical account (page 14) is part of a period of disputed history, and does not necessarily represent the opinion of Irina Yanovskaya.

[4] The following historical account (page 16) is part of a period of disputed history, and does not necessarily represent the opinion of Irina Yanovskaya.

[5] An oblast is a region or province.

[6] Tskhinvali is the official Georgian name of the city; Tshinval is a preferred usage for many Ossetians and what is otherwise used throughout the narrative.

[7] Some, including Irina, believe they were organized by Gamsakhurdia; numbers from Irina's accounting.

[8] Numbers from the Armed Conflict Database: www.iiss.org/acd

[9] Caucasian Knot, "Victims of clashes buried in South Ossetia," Aug. 23, 2004. www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/3563/

[10] International Crisis Group Policy Briefing, "Georgia-South Ossetia: Refugee Return the Path to Peace." April 19, 2005. Appendix C.

[11] International Crisis Group Policy Briefing, "Georgia-South Ossetia: Refugee Return the Path to Peace." April 19, 2005. Page 4.