

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

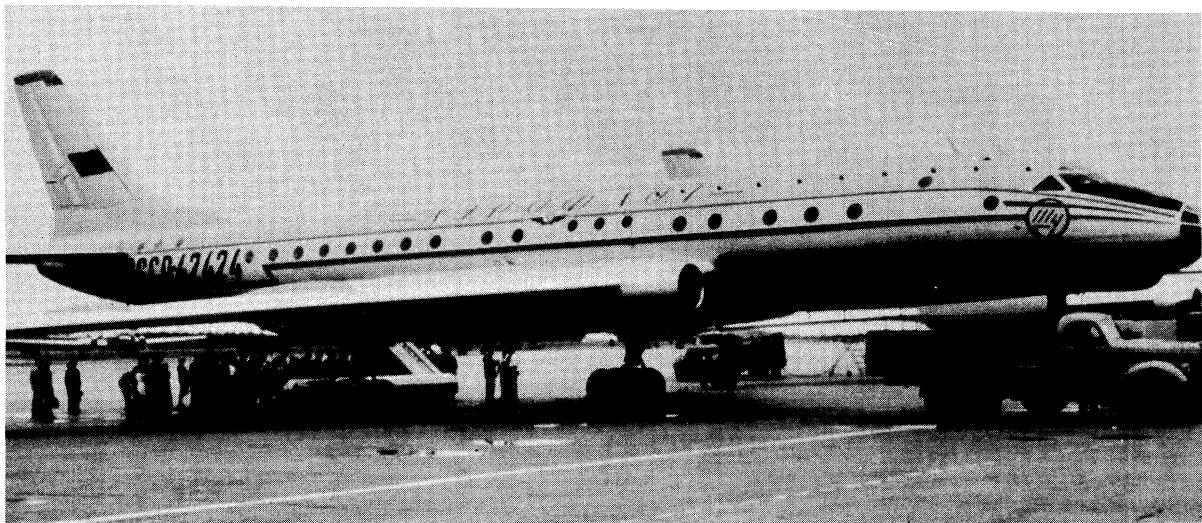
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Questions in Transcaucasia

7 August, 1959  
Hotel Intourist  
Tbilisi, Georgian S.S.R.  
U.S.S.R.

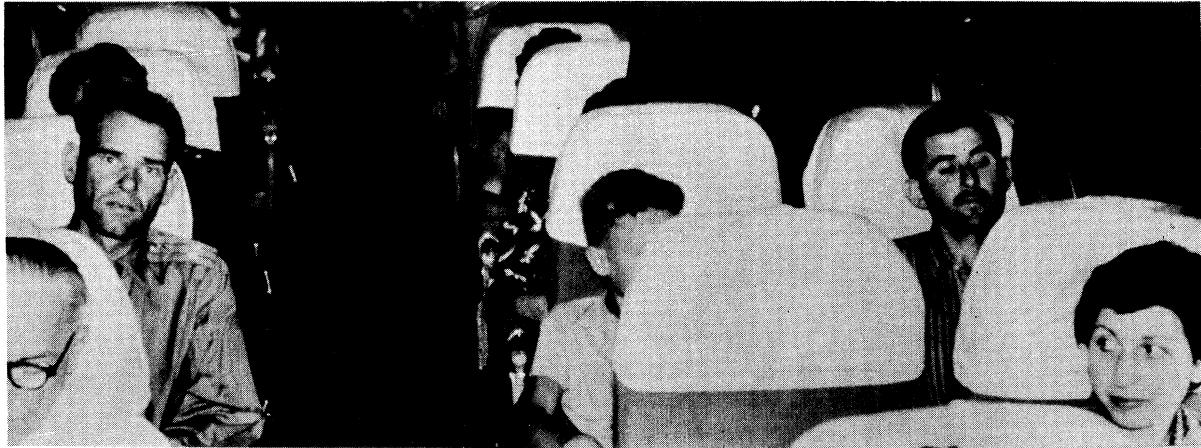
Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

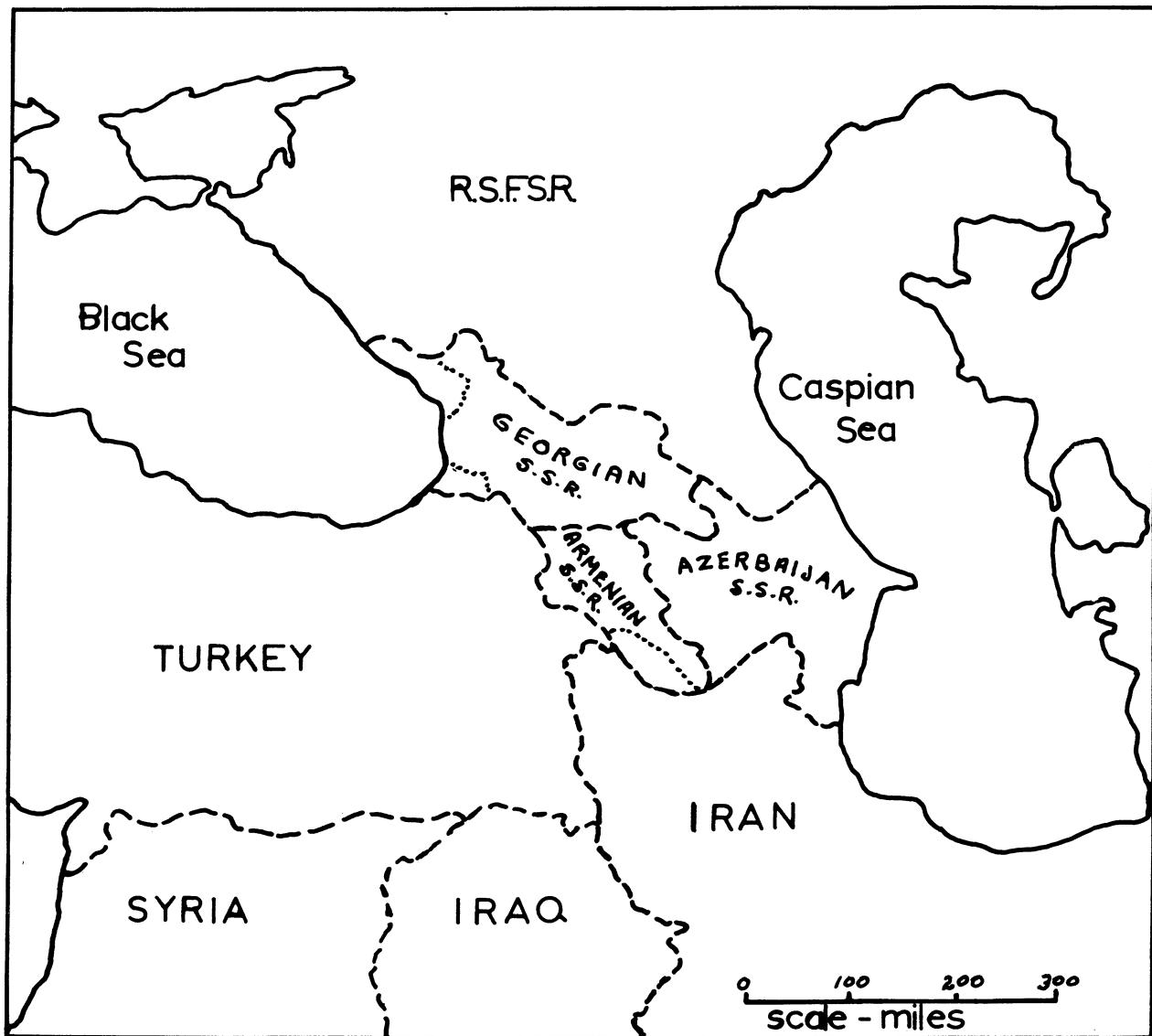
Two days ago we flew over the snow-topped Caucasus Mountains on our way to Tbilisi, the ancient capital of this country, which is now named the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Viewing the striking scenery from our super-new Russian pure-jet (100 passenger TU - 104) we were curious as to what we would find on our arrival at this, the second largest city (population 680,000)\*in Soviet Transcaucasia.



Soviet Jet TU-104 & Flight Moscow to Tbilisi



\* Most statistics quoted in this and subsequent newsletters from the U.S.S.R. are obtained from the most recent edition of the Soviet encyclopedia. These figures rarely agree with those cited in Western publications, which appear to use out-of-date information on Soviet Transcaucasia.



## TRANSCAUCASIA

Although we were in the air a scant two and one-half hours from Moscow we were about to drop into an entirely different culture. Tbilisi (Tiflis in pre-Soviet days) was founded centuries ago and flourished on the banks of the Kura River along the historic route leading from Europe to Asia along the Kura valley.

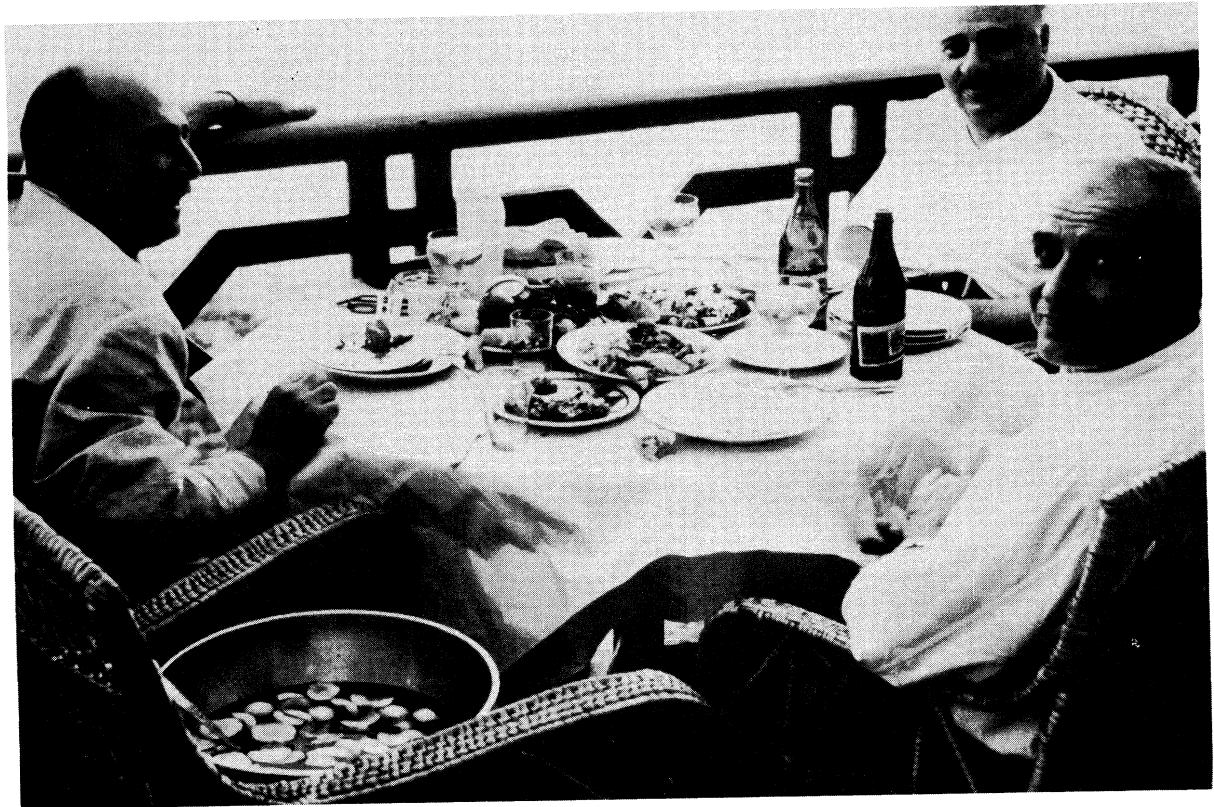
We were met at the modern airport by an Intourist representative (a pleasant relief after Moscow, where we always had to struggle through bureaucratic red tape,) who whisked us through the formalities in a few minutes. Travelling along a broken road we soon arrived at the Hotel Intourist, situated dead center along the city's main street.

Our large, corner, two-room "suite" (reserved for the occasional Western tourist) is complete with cracked ceilings, heavy red velvet drapes (just the thing for the humid, warm summer weather) and the most ingenious bedsheets I have ever seen (slotted in such a way as to allow the insertion of a varying amount of bedding.)

We rejoined our guide Alexander Vatchnadze. A third year Observatory opera student, he is spending the summer with Intourist in an effort to improve his English. He led us by car to the top of a large hilltop, on which is situated a restaurant-pavillion with a veranda affording a magnificent view of the entire valley in which the city is situated.

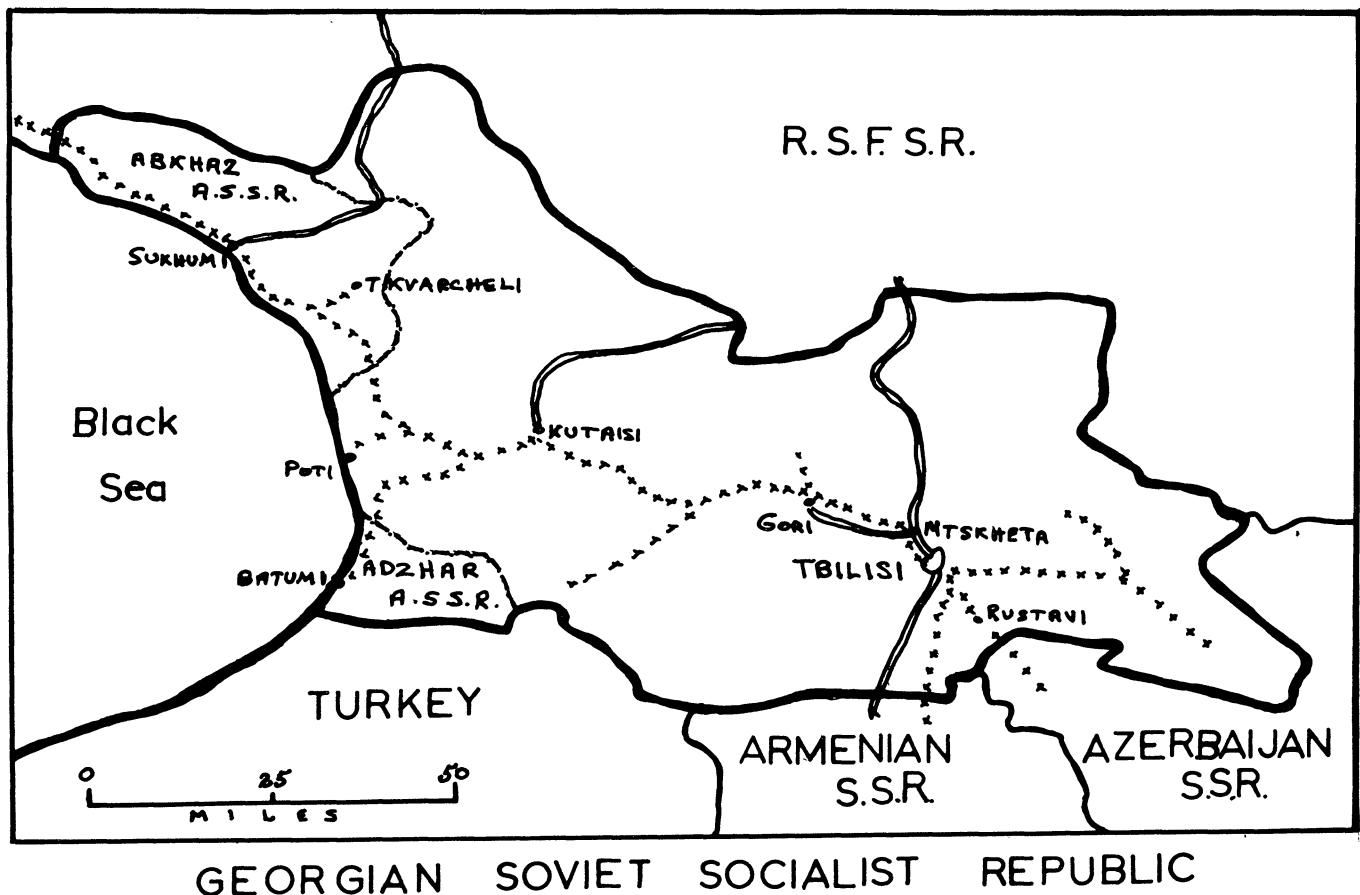
Here we met an Armenian and two Georgians, who immediately invited us to join them in drinking from their huge bowl of "Khrushoni." This delicious concoction is roughly composed of the excellent dry Georgian white wine, Armenian cognac, raisin juice, peach nectar and brandy. Iced and with bits of fresh fruit floating around on the surface, it makes a most tasty libation on a hot afternoon.

"Khrushoni" Drinkers on a Hot Afternoon



We took the funicular down the side of the hill, managing to return to the hotel in time for dinner. Alexander promptly disappeared,\* forcing us to converse with the hotel restaurant manager in broken German - the only foreign language he knows. This has been quite an appalling experience, but the manager was patient, finally rewarding us by plunking an American flag on our table along with some rather second rate shashlik.

Georgians constitute only 61.4% of the population of the country (total 3,555,000 in 1951.) The most numerous minority are the Armenians



(12.2%), most of whom live in Tbilisi. Other national groups include Russians (8.9%\*\*), Ukrainians, Greeks and Kurds. An interesting factor is that the Russian population has more than tripled since 1926.

\* Intourist guides are extremely reluctant to work more than a few hours a day. If one were to follow their wishes, touring would be limited to from about 9:30 A.M. to noon and from 3:00 to 5:00 P.M.

\*\*By 1947 some 300 out of the country's 800 secondary schools were Russian, although many were only partially filled.

Small (29,400 square miles) but strategically located along the Soviet frontier, Georgia has played an important part in Russian political moves in Transcaucasia for many years. Humid and subtropical western Georgia embraces the principle agricultural region of the country. Here in the Black Sea littoral is the only area in the U.S.S.R. where such crops as tea and citrus fruits are grown in industrial quantities. Although Georgia produces some manganese and has an important oil refinery, her chief exports are the first quality dry, white wines which are produced in the Kakhetia area in the northeast.



Old Tiflis Along the Kura River

It wasn't long before we determined that we were the first Armenian-speaking Americans to visit the city for some time. The last two evenings have been an experience we shall never forget. Each time we have started out from the hotel for an after-dinner walk - not to return for almost four hours. Literally besieged by question-hungry hordes, we were soon surrounded by hundreds of people milling around the wide sidewalk and spilling over into the adjacent park.

Although we had been tabbed as Americans almost immediately, it took the passing throng just barely another five minutes to determine that we had Armenian ancestry. As soon as the news was out, the questions began to come in Armenian - first one by one, and then in a torrent. Alice and I were split for hours - each with a self-appointed crew of translators for those who spoke only Georgian or Russian.

These translation arrangements were elaborate and effective. Most questions were asked directly in Armenian, with our sidewalk interpreters translating replies into Georgian and Russian. Those speaking only the latter two languages would phrase their questions directly to our battery of interpreters, who would then relay the question to me in English or

Armenian and then retranslate back to the questioner.

Our two most consistent interpreters were both English students at the Philological Institute of the University of Tbilisi.\* One, Valeri Kogeen, who stayed with me both evenings, is a young physicist turned language student. The other, Georgi Viktorovitch, is a journalist. Both are avid listeners to the daily English-language broadcasts of the Voice of America from Tengier.\*\* Both have belonged to the Pioneers, are now members of Komsomols, and both hope to become Party members. Valeri subscribes to the USIA publication "Amerika", and has read an occasional copy of Time magazine. Neither has ever seen the New York Times.

The questioners in the beginning were mostly young people - in their twenties and early thirties. Included were many students, but also many ordinary working people: a barber, an airport mechanic, a chauffeur. The second night, as our "reputation" grew, women were in the group and some young couples. However, we rarely spoke with professional people.

The following is a typical transcript of an hour's rapid-fire question and answer session: "How much money does the average American earn?" (my guess was about \$3800 per year or the equivalent of 2530 rubles per month - as compared to 800-1000 rubles in the U.S.S.R.)\*\*\*

"How much is spent on food each month?" (25%) "What is the cost of an American car?" (six-eight months salary of the average working man - a reply which surprised them, and we were asked the same question over and over again.)

"How many hours a day, a week does the American work?" (national average is perhaps about 40 hours weekly, although some work only  $37\frac{1}{2}$ .) "Did Alice work?" (no) "Why not?" (she stays home managing the house and bringing up the children. Alice was asked many times about the kind of work that American women were allowed to do; what schooling did they have; what opportunity for professional work?)

"Are American girls beautiful?" (many are, some are not) "How many cars per family?" and "what kind?" (almost all American families have a car - some have two. We found that the brands of cars were well known to the teenagers.)

"What is the cost of your shirt, pants, shoes, watch?" (during all such questioning all my clothing was fingered, my watch and shoes examined in great detail. The answers evoked surprise - but never disbelief - time and again. Some of the questioners would first ask me and then Alice the same question, hoping to trip us up - but fortunately not succeeding.)

"How many kilos does Joe Louis weigh? And Floyd Patterson?" "How much would my watch cost in America?" (my guess was 40 rubles - a reply which upset the questioner, as he had paid five times that amount.)

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\* We were told that there are some 400 students of English at this Institute of the University, which has a total student population of 5,000.

\*\* Interestingly these broadcasts are never jammed, although Russian language programs very rarely get through, according to Valeri.

"Is Tbilisi more beautiful than New York? Would you like to live here?" (yes, Tbilisi is a beautiful city - but so is Washington, where we have our home, and where we are quite happy.) "Are there many Georgians in the U.S.?" (no, I didn't think so.) "But, isn't there a State named Georgia?" (yes, but there are probably very <sup>few</sup> Transcaucasian Georgians there - this answer was never satisfactory, heads being shaken in incomprehension.)

There were many questions about American jazz, especially from younger University students. I told them we had been unable to purchase any Soviet jazz records. Yes, they agreed, it was a terrible thing.

"Are you going to Soviet Armenia?" (yes) "Good, you must visit Etch-miadzin." (the seat of the Armenian Apostolic Church) "Do you know anyone in Soviet Armenia or have any relatives?" (no, but we hope to meet as many people as possible.) The crowd repeatedly insisted that we not miss visiting the Armenian cathedral and church headquarters.



Tbilisi Watermelon Market

"Where have you been in the U.S.S.R.?" "Where are you going?" (they were extremely curious about our itinerary, not surprised when we said that we were not allowed to visit many parts of the U.S.S.R. Much of their curiosity is due to the fact that very few of them have ever been out of Georgia.)

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\*\*\* After some study, my purely arbitrary conversion rate is 8 rubles to the dollar. This compares to 4 rubles to the dollar granted to the traveller by the Soviet Government when prepaying for one's trip in the U.S.S.R., and the much more favorable rate of 10 rubles to the dollar granted for conversion within the Soviet Union - but used only for incidental purchases.

"How do you like the Soviet Union?" "Is it not a beautiful country?" "How much does your trip cost?" (Tbilisi can only be visited at the \$30 per day rate. The price is set by the Government and must be paid in advance. This reply met with general incredulity as domestic travel expenses for Soviet subjects are considerably cheaper.) "How much would it cost to travel in the United States?" (except for New York and the larger cities perhaps \$12 - 100 rubles - per day plus transportation.)

"Have you played basketball?" (yes) "Professionally?" (no) "Football?" (yes) "Do you have an American dollar bill?" (yes) "May we see it?" (yes - it was passed around carefully from hand to hand.)

The people were generally friendly, and, we feel, believed all our answers to their questions. There were, however, a few agitators, who seemed determined to embarrass us. One fellow shouted, out of any context to the immediate discussion, that Lenin was a far better national hero than George Washington. The crowd growled at him and pushed him back. He kept up his remarks and air of general disbelief for perhaps a half-hour before capitulating to the group.

Last night the crowd was suddenly dispersed by the police. They had been watching our performance for some time. Swooping into the swarm of people with billy clubs (we never saw a Soviet policeman with firearms) five police officials quickly pushed them aside, telling them to let us have some air and go about their own business. I protested, saying that we had plenty of air. The police paid no attention at all to us. The crowd fought back, refusing to leave. Violent arguments took place. Three minutes after the police left the crowd had re-formed.



Classic Georgian Architecture

Sometimes the questions were a little more complex: "What about unemployment in the United States?" (yes, we do have some unemployment, usually it is below 5%. Recently it has been somewhat higher. No it does not disrupt U.S. economy. No, there has not been a tremendous increase in labor strikes. These were popular questions - reflecting the information passed on to them via newspapers and radio broadcasts.)

"What about the negro situation?" (yes, we do have a problem. I reviewed for them the Supreme Court decisions of the past several years, saying that it may take some years before the aims of these decisions were fully carried out.)

"Are schools free?" (yes, through secondary school) "What about Universities?" (they all cost money in America, private ones being more expensive; but, most States have public universities with very low tuition). I told them that the United States had more than 600 accredited universities and colleges, and that every qualified student had the opportunity to attend. I touched on the availability of scholarships. During the following spirited discussion it soon became evident that, although they were proud that all Soviet universities were free, they fervently wished that such institutions were more numerous.)

"How expensive is medical treatment in America?" (very expensive, physicians being among the most highly paid professional workers in the country. Nevertheless, anyone in real need may obtain free clinical treatment in most American cities. Here they had us. They tirelessly repeated the fact that in the Soviet Union all medical treatment is free. As a postscript I added that American people by and large preferred the present system to any form of nationalised medicine. Also that private health insurance plans were beginning to quite widely used.) However, peering into our mouths, they voiced their approval of American dental work, saying that it was much better than theirs.

"Do you own your house?" (yes, since the war the majority of American families now owned their own homes) "How big is it?" (after replying, I was asked the number and size of the bedrooms, the materials of construction.) "How did you finance it?" "How much do you pay each month?" (they were quite interested in the mechanics of house-buying and mortgages.)

"Is it possible to travel and work anywhere in America?" (yes, in fact Americans are extremely mobile) "Can you travel to any other country?" (yes, almost all. Upon my questioning they stated that they could leave Georgia only with certain rigid formalities, but some had been to Moscow or to the Black Sea areas adjacent to Georgia. None had ever been outside the Soviet Union or ever expected to go.)

And so went the questions.....

We have returned to our ornate, but curiously shabby, hotel room each night in a state of utter collapse, but, somehow with the warm feeling that we have contributed in our small way to a better understanding of things American by the people of this Soviet outpost.

Yours sincerely,

John Hanessian, Jr.