

Friday, June 25, 1993  
Over Canada

Dear Erik, J.P., Mike, Jimmy & Nancy:

Off and running to Tbilisi. Just had the same sort of decadent meal described on the trip to Japan. Eight to nine hours flying time to Frankfurt, a two hour or so stopover, then on to Tbilisi. I am looking forward to seeing what we find there. Two days ago we got a fax from them that basically said for one year we had been promising hospital equipment, and had not delivered anything. And they were fed up. The person over there for AIHA (American International Health Alliance) told us the following: the economy has gotten worse, with rampant inflation; a gallon of gas costs over \$4, and most people average \$10 salary a month; food is hard to get. And we really haven't produced anything.

The truth is we haven't. When this started a year ago Grady Hospital was made the lead institution. Our part was the medical school, and not the hospital and equipment. Grady has wallowed around the last year, and finally three weeks ago told them that Grady could not, as a charity hospital, give anything away, even scrap metal. (I personally have my doubts about whether this is legally correct, but that is what the current administration believes and is saying.) So that broke the camel's back, and Tbilisi wrote a vituperative letter. For the last two days I have been scrambling with the dean to make up for Grady's lack. I am taking a letter promising them: a CT scanner; a portable x-ray unit with battery; a fluoroscopy unit. This will come to well over \$1 million, so hopefully there will be some quiet and a decent welcome.

Given their views I am not sure at all what reception we are going to get when we arrive at Tbilisi. There are six of us going: Angel Leon and John Merlino, cardiologists; Jack Shulman, associate dean for curriculum of the medical school; Bob Coney, general internists; Sheri Carlin, RN with coronary care unit experience and an MPH in Public Health; me. I suspect the politics will be substantial.

Sunday, June 27, 1993  
Tbilisi

Arrived 2 a.m. this morning after 7 hour lay over in Frankfurt. Four hour flight on Russian jet very much like a 727 (or 737; whichever has 3 engines). Inside frayed around the edges, but clean. Pilot "flew it into the ground" to land it, just like a military pilot and totally unlike our pilots who let their planes sort of float down. A bit scary.

Got up at 10 a.m. (here we are 8 hours ahead of the east coast of the U.S.) and met with Deputy Minister. Then Minister of Health. Then a big dinner tonight. I am exhausted now and going to bed. Details tomorrow.

Monday, June 28, 1993  
4 a.m.

Note the confounded time. Went to bed at 11:30 p.m. and now wide awake. Will probably be sleepy as everything when time comes to get up. Yesterday at 11 a.m. I met with the Deputy Minister of Health. At 2 p.m. we had a meeting scheduled with the Minister, and clearly the 11 a.m. meeting was to see what I had to say, which in turn would determine what the Minister had to say. I was presented with the statement similar to what I said above: they had spent a lot of scarce resources on changing their building plans to suit what the Grady Hospital engineer had suggested in order to accommodate equipment, both electrically and structurally. Now they had been told Grady could give them no equipment. All other hospitals in the country have had their budgets put on hold while City Hospital #2 was being brought up to western standards. I felt the need to steer among several difficulties:

Convincing them we will start working very hard to get equipment. The problem with this, of course, is that I can't just go out and buy several million dollars worth. We have to get surplus equipment that is being replaced at our hospitals, and from any other source we can find.

Trying not to trash Grady Hospital, with whom I have to work every day, in front of other people. At the same time I have to be credible in convincing them that things will change.

The fact that this job is something I have taken on for the pleasure of accomplishing something that seems to be important to do: help a people in severe need in another country.

The tendency to promise things that cannot be done, simply because you like the people with whom you are dealing and want to please them.

Their expectations, which are unreasonably high. They see us as representatives of the incredibly wealthy U.S., and think we can do anything.

I started out by saying the appropriate courtesies: our pleasure at being here; greetings from my dean; how impressed we were with the abilities, character and talents of their people; how important it was to us to work with them; how we saw this as a joint project--we would learn from them as they learned from us; how our goal was to put things up for their consideration (not tell them what to do; they have a *lot* of pride, just as we do).

The business of dealing with another culture is incredibly fascinating. I view these people as being very much like us, and that is the image they project. And I would not spend much time on the courtesies-pleasantries in dealing with Americans (no b.s., just get down to business in a frank fashion). On the other hand, the Georgians are an incredibly old culture that has much Arabic influence, and in the Arabic culture, just as in the Oriental, the rituals are vastly important.

The conversation with the Deputy Minister went like a minuet: he made several careful statements while I listened; then I would make statements and he would listen. I made these points:

We needed to learn in detail their expectations

We both needed to divide these expectations into three groups: (1) things we could commit to doing without fail; (2) what we might be able to do, but could not commit to; (3) what we could not do.

Our project could similarly be divided into three parts (like Caesar and Gaul in the Roman empire): (1) what we ourselves were

capable of bringing off, such as surplus/retired equipment, advice and consultation; (2) what we could do, in conjunction with the Georgians, with large organizations such as Coca Cola. E.g., I told them one was idea was to invite Eduard Shevardnadze to Emory in October to give a speech to the partners of the American International Health Alliance at our second meeting, and then he and the Dean go and have a talk with the executives of Coca Cola (which has made Tbilisi their center for the entire Soviet Union; later this week we will go to the inauguration, apparently); I said this had the potential of bring large dividends, but on the other hand nothing at all might come of it; (3) what Jim Smith was trying to do for all the partnerships; e.g., the visit two weeks ago to Japan, where his goal was to get Japan to contribute money to AIHA that can be used for common things with all the partnerships, such as pharmaceuticals.

The conversation went well from my standpoint. As I watched the translator I kept my eye on the Deputy Minister. He is one of these people who almost imperceptibly nod their heads when a point is made they agree with, and I kept up with the points at which he nodded and those for which he did not.

We then went to the home of the Dean of the Pediatric Faculty and had a lunch punctuated with frequent toasts. I let the cognac touch my lips in what I hoped was a convincing fashion each time, but there was no way I planned to have any alcohol molecules running around during the meeting with the Minister.

We met the Minister after lunch, and once again there was a ritual minuet in which he said things, then me, then him, etc. I have discovered that interpreters are wonderful: I can say something, watch how the other person takes it, and think about what I am going to say next. I made the same points I had made earlier, but added two other things: I introduced everyone at some length, mentioning for example that one of our faculty over here is a world famous spelunker--it turns out Georgia has one of the most famous and deepest caves in the world; I added at the end of my opening statement the sentence that "we appreciate that Georgians, as exemplified by Mr. Schevardnadze, are people of great realism, people who face things as they are and not as they wish them to be." The Minister comes across as an

exceedingly shrewd and tough person, and I suspected the word realism would resonate the chords in him that were important to me. This meeting also went well, and at the end I was reassured that the situation was at least retrievable.

I was impressed especially by a point made by the Minister. I said we were here to work hard. He said there was time on our itinerary (which I have attached) to see his country and people, and that it was quite important for us to do this: "In this way you will begin to understand our culture and our people, and this is an important part of our relationship."

I was quite touched by a fax they had sent before they arrived. In it an American woman (Betsy Haskell) whom I know well over here made the point that they would provide the usual bountiful table for us every night in separate houses, but they could not really afford it: it was "*their custom*." This is a place of great economic deprivation now, and the point about providing expensive meals because it is *their custom* although they really cannot afford it is quite moving--and I see no way of getting around it, just as they feel honor bound to do so.

At night we went to Andro's mother's house for an elegant meal that consisted of many courses, punctuated by the usual frequent toasts. Andro is a young cardiologist working with us, and I will tell you more about him in another letter. Also Mike will meet him when he comes down in July or August.

Tuesday, June 29, 1993

Today we went to the hospital and met with everyone about the equipment. I made again the point that I will make a lot: "We hope for a lot, but can promise nothing." We visited the new hospital addition, and the new outpatient building. I made a list of all the relevant statistics: rooms, sizes, equipment needed, furniture needed. I met with the gastroenterologists, who also presented me with a page of equipment that they wished to have. We started off their meeting at noon with cognac, then sweet cakes, then strong coffee. I despair of not gaining about 15 pounds during this visit.

At night we went to dinner at the head of preventive medicine. The places they live are interesting: outside they are cold, forbidding, undecorated

buildings that are not unlike our slum housing projects. The stairways are unlit, cement. But open the iron or steel door that barricades each one of them, and inside is a warm large lovely apartment with awesome antique furniture, many pictures and Persian rugs, and every one has inlaid parquet floors. I was proclaimed the *tamadan*, or individual to preside over the table and give all toasts.

A digression about toasting. Every formal Georgian dinner has this *tamadan*. One day a year the tamadan is the woman; otherwise the man of the house, or a designated guest. It is a mark of honor for the wine glass of every guest to be kept constantly filled. Every five minutes there is a toast. (Fortunately the wine is very low alcoholic content, or they would all be alcoholics.) There is a prescribed ritual for the toasts that is complicated and subtle, and it is taught to every son at a very early age. As far as anyone knows, no other country has this highly developed quite ancient ritual. All sorts of things happen at the table: emotions are displayed, political subtleties played out. It is really quite an experience.

I did my best to live up to their expectations. I did have to be reminded occasionally it was time to give another toast. And as *tamadan* I could designate others to give toasts, which I often did. Toward the end of the evening they brought out the horns. These are large ram's horns that they fill with wine, and each person around the table in turn makes a toast, then drains the horn of wine. After this I was expected to give some more toasts. Andro had told me the Russians, whom the Georgians hate, describe Georgians as "the men with hairy (behinds)." After feeling the effects of the horn, I proposed a toast to "the men who the Russians call the men with hairy (behinds)." One of the older physicians at the table, the vice Dean, promptly said loudly "Don't let him get near the horn again!"

Wednesday, June 30, 1993

Today I went to the medical school. I first met with the faculty in physical diagnosis, a course which I teach at Emory. They were mostly quite old, with a few young ones. It turns out the medical students virtually never perform complete physicals: e.g., they only look into the eyes when they take ophthalmology. It turns out none of them have instruments: there is only one ophthalmoscope in the school. Then I visited the pathology department, which is presided over by a 69 year old woman who is quite a presence. For over

one hour she talked constantly, and I barely got questions in--only when she had to breathe. But I liked her a lot, and respected what she has accomplished with very little. She also gave me a list of what she wanted, which I dutifully put in my briefcase.

In the afternoon we went to the opening of the new Coca Cola plant in Georgia, which Scheverdnaze attended. They plan for it to provide Coke to all the non-Russian former Soviet Union. Clearly it was the politically correct place to be this afternoon. We saw the plant, etc. At night we went to the Opera Hall, where a special program in honor of Coke was performed. The building was put up in 1905, and it is one of those older style phenomenally beautiful places, just reminding you of what Tbilisi used to be like. A lot of singing, Coke signs, ballet dances.

Thursday, July 1 1993

Today I went to the Institute of Cardiology and created bit of a stir when I insisted the two cardiologists who came with us go there also. The medical school-hospital people with whom we are dealing don't get along with the Institute, so had scheduled no visits. But it is ridiculous for us to try to set up a modern cardiology service in the hospital and know nothing about the cardiology institute. At 11 I gave a lecture there--everyone patiently listened, asked decent questions--I wondered if it was one of those *de rigueur* performances they were dragged to, but one of them told me it was highly unusual to hear someone lecture on a medical topic who comes from another country.

In the afternoon I met with a dozen students, with one faculty member present. They all spoke very good English, and were quite moving. Each one explained to me why they wanted to be a physician: about 80% came from physicians' families, and cited filial devotion as a major reason. They start medical school about 18, just after high school. Medical school lasts 6 years, and in the early years they have languages and literature just as we do in college. So they are about four years younger than I am accustomed to. I asked them at length about their experiences, and confirmed my impression that they have little hands on experience during their schooling. The students have no books themselves, and no instruments. They go to the library, which has about one copy of each book. In fact, each department chairman we visited proudly showed us their U.S. texts: every one was in the seventies,

with one or two in the eighties. The students xerox whatever they can afford. One lad proudly showed me his neuroanatomy xeroxed material, which cost him \$2--about 10% of his parents' monthly salary.

In the evening we had another one of those dinners, this time at the home of the woman who is head of the infectious disease department. Jack Shulman, who is with us as associate dean but also former head of infectious diseases, said she could hold her place around the table of any academic person in the world. It is really heartening to know there are people here who are at that level, in spite of what one of them said was "a total vacuum--medical information, contact with the outside world, everything."

Friday, July 2, 1993

In the morning we met with the chairs of all the departments of the medical school and discussed our collaboration. We agreed to accept three medical students every four months from them. They will pay the transportation, and we will do the room and board--we will go to people in the community, perhaps the "Atlanta-Tbilisi Sister City" group. I have some small concerns about this, but think it is doable. I told them the students had to meet several prerequisites: English language; interpersonal skills; motivation; hard work ("80 hours a week"); be at or near the top of their class and have outstanding academic potential. I had talked to a number of people about the problem of selecting the students. All of them pointed out there would be intense political pressure to pick children of the elite, and we needed to be the final ones to choose. So I told them that politics could not play a role: "We would as soon take the child of a homeless alcoholic if the child met the other qualifications." However, one of my favorite phrases is the one attributed to Frank Lloyd Wright: "God is in the details." So I told them they would propose to us ten students for each group of three, send us all the information *without* any names (we have gotten to know most of the top medical school people by now, and they would expect us to know and favor their children), and we would choose. We will see how this works out.

In the afternoon we visited Mtskheta. This is a small town about 20 miles from Tbilisi. It is the earliest capital of the Republic--somewhere in the first few centuries A.D. A magnificent old church on a high mountain. And in the town "the most sacred place in Georgia," a church from the sixth century or so, that the Georgians consider the heart of their country. Stone, rulers

from 1000 A.D. buried there, etc.

Afterwards we were taken to a sort of inn, where we had another huge meal, this time with all the faculty chairs of the medical school. The sheriff of the province had lunch with us, complete with his retinue of bodyguards with machine guns. Something I haven't dwelt upon is that there was a huge amount of fighting going on during this time in Abkhazia, which is around 300 miles from Tbilisi. This is a very fertile area of about 400,000 people, 80,000 of whom belong to a separate ethnic group the Abkhazians. The land borders on the Black Sea, and Russia is highly desirous of having the port, since she has very few ports. So Russia has armed the Abkhazians with weapons and a few fighters. Also she has supplied a fairly large number of mercenaries, who the news says are paid with U.S. dollars. Everyone speaks of the war continually. Russia has agreed publicly to cease and desist, but has not done so. The tale is that the Russian military are doing what they wish in spite of Yeltsin, and that they bitterly hate Schevernadze, blaming him for the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Republic has few antibiotics or other drugs, almost no anaesthesia, and is having a very difficult time.

Saturday, July 3, 1993

This morning another day at the medical school, this time in the Department of Anatomy. Chairman in his sixties, also head of the publishing division of the medical school. Showed us books and handbooks they had published. Also introduced us to his two sons--you guessed it, they are medical students. We visited all the labs and classrooms--an old fashioned place with all sorts of specimens. They had an actual body (of an executed criminal) that had in some fashion been totally preserved by painting varnishes on it, that stood in a corner. They have a few cadavers: the faculty say they have a lot and use them extensively, but the students deny this. They can only use them in the winter time, when the buildings are unheated. No air conditioning in the summer.

In the afternoon we went to the celebration of July 4th holiday at the U.S. Embassy (don't ask me why it was on the 3rd). Met the Ambassador--early fifties, Kent Brown, nice man. His wife Irene is a nurse, and reminded me of Nancy.

Another huge dinner with plenty of toasts in the evening.

Sunday, July 4, 1993

Three of our group left for the airport to go home today, leaving myself, Bob Coney of general internal medicine, and Sheri Carlin, the MPH person who is staying for the year. We three went on a trip to Gori. About 70 miles along the Georgian Military Highway. This highway was used by the Romans, and is *the* highway in Georgia. Potholes, dirt/gravel in many places, people driving like crazy.

Gori is Joseph Stalin's birthplace. We saw the tiny wooden cottage he was born in, which as you might imagine is surrounded by a structure of marble. Gave a feeling of eeriness to see it, where he was born in 1879. His private Pullman car is there. Also a huge museum which was closed. It appears the people of Georgia are bitterly divided upon whether or not he should be recognized as a hero, or as a criminal who should have no traces. There is a huge statue of him in the town center, which is said to be the only statue left of him in the entire world. My guidebook says "rednecks" are the only ones left who revere him (reminds me of my Georgia and the days of segregation, and the rednecks).

We did have another huge meal in Gori. One of the faculty has many family and friends there, and they put on the meal for us. Sure enough, just like the guidebook says, there was a toast to Stalin. About half of the table sat in silence and did not toast him, while the older people did so, even standing up and making a point out of it.

(This paragraph is not in the letter to your mother.) I, of course, was asked to give a toast. On the ride down an old fortress where young men of Georgia had successfully defended the Republic against a horde of Iranians (=Persians then) in the 16th century. I asked the name so I could look it up in my guidebook. There was a long silence, and finally I was told it was "untranslatable." I persisted, and was finally told what it meant. So at lunch I gave this toast:

This is a toast to the brave young men of Georgia who are engaged in a deadly fight with the Abkhazians and Russians. I toast to the hope that they will say to their enemies what the young men of Georgia in the 16th century said at the end of

every day when they had defeated invading Persians: *Klemom Chama!* (= eat my prick!)

As you might imagine, in this land of fervently nationalistic and ardently Stalinist rednecks, this toast brought the house down. They all jumped up and shouted. Four people promptly gave a highly emotionally charged "supporting toast." I was hugged and kissed on the cheek. Several people told me it was the best toast they had ever heard.

There might be something to this toasting business, after all.

Monday, July 5, 1993

Today I visited the Institute of Psychiatry. Found some very forward looking people, which I found to be a rarity in the medical school--most of the chairs are in their sixties, and all the juice has run out of them. They have planned an American type of residency education program that begins next year. The chairman told me "the people of Georgia think in very strange ways." I asked if anyone had written about this, but they haven't. I tried to get him to elaborate, but he said it was worthy of a book, not a brief conversation. Had several other meetings at the medical school and with the people at the hospital.

In the evening Archil Kobaladze, the clinical pharmacologist who is the primary person with whom we work, gave a dinner for us and the American ambassador at his home. Another huge meal. I liked the ambassador a lot. He was quite interested in the project, and led us in a detailed description of it. Promised to help in every way possible.

Tuesday, July 6, 1993

We met again with the medical school chairs and the Dean today. Another talk about how we would work together. Then we went to the home of one of the famous artists of Georgia, Merab Berdzenishvili (-shvili is a very common ending of names; means *child of*). He has many huge sculptures in cities of the world everywhere. We were much impressed. I made a lot of pictures of the copies in his yard, as well as of his paintings. A particularly impressive part of the visit was his studio: a part of his home; a huge room about 4 stories high; a partially completed sculpture of David the Builder, the most

important King of the Republic of Georgia--12th century, I think--on his horse. Gigantic. All the tools of the sculptor were lying around: scaffolding; plaster of Paris; models.

That night I had dinner with Vladimir ("Lado" is the nickname) Gurgenedze. I got to know him in Atlanta this year, as he was the youngest graduate ever of the MBA program at Emory. He arrived back in Tbilisi a month ago, is 22, lives with his parents just as everyone else under about 35 years of age. Another large dinner, but an enjoyable evening. I made another toast that I enjoyed, one that I modified from a joke told to me by my brother. The toast was "to a fine old English word, *perspective*:

A man was walking by the Black Sea and came across a rock, which he rubbed, and a genie appeared. "You may have two wishes," the genie said. The man pulled a map from his pocket. "I am a Georgian," he said. "This map is of Georgia, Russia, and Abkhazia, where there is today a huge amount of fighting. I wish these peoples to live together in peace and harmony." The genie said: "Put that map back in your pocket. No one could achieve that. I wouldn't even think of trying. What is your second wish?" "When I get home tonight," the man said, "I would like for my wife of 40 years to come out and kneel in front of me, tell me what a wonderful husband I am, and tell me she will make love whenever I wish to."

The genie looked at the man for a few minutes, then said: "Let me see that map again."

Wednesday, July 7, 1993

This morning I met with the Deputy Speaker of Parliament, a woman named Rushdan Beridze. I had met her a week ago in Atlanta, when she had led a parliamentary delegation to the U.S. Very nice, and quite sharp. We talked about the need to reduce the number of physicians and medical schools (in the past year 20 have been started; most by faculty of the state medical school, who moonlight doing this; for money), the need to produce more generalists and fewer specialists, and the acute shortages of drugs and supplies.

At noon we went to the American Embassy, where the Dean of the medical school and I, to the accompaniment of the American ambassador, signed the agreement between Emory and the Republic medical school. TV, etc., which broadcast the event and our comments that evening. Then lunch hosted by the Ambassador, who turned out to like champagne quite a lot.

In the late afternoon the Dean and I were interviewed by state TV. I was asked a question about why so many students wanted to be physicians in the U.S. From the smile on the interviewer's face I knew the question was aimed at money. I said because of two things: medicine combined people and science, and that few other professions did that. End of interview.

At night we went to dinner at the home of Andro's in-laws. Beautiful house; many works of art; swimming pool--just as seen in Guilford or certain areas of Atlanta. A wonderful evening.

Thursday July 8, 1993

Today I went to the Institute of Neurology and gave a lecture of Stroke. I started out by saying Georgia was paradise for physicians interested in stroke: everyone smokes; hypertension is not treated; there is a high level of stress; the diet is awful; and there is no exercise. I really enjoyed a tour of the Institute. They took me into two operating rooms where big neurosurgical operations were occurring--just with a mask and a white coat. I felt the American neurosurgeons I know were probably fainting. The director told me at one time they had been the premier location in the Soviet Union for the study of epilepsy--now they existed in a vacuum: no information; no drugs; no technology.

Friday July 9, 1993

Today I worked feverishly on my report, finally finishing it by noon. In the afternoon I met with the hospital people, who took exception to some of my stronger recommendations: e.g., I recommended a young man with an MBA become the administrative director of the new outpatient clinic. We had a big discussion, and at last they at least publicly agreed with me. I am not optimistic about what finally happens. But in the afternoon I had a final meeting with the Minister of Health, and told him my recommendations. So at least they will have to discuss with him any way they wish to change the

recommendations.

This afternoon I went sightseeing with Levan Kacharava, Andro's brother. He is a painter. Twenty four years old. He has offered to take Mike and J.P. skiing when they come, if there is snow. Apparently you go up to the mountains and a helicopter takes you to the skiing area.

Saturday July 10, 1993

More sightseeing with Levan this morning, then departure for the airport. A four hour flight to Frankfurt. Then home Sunday to Atlanta.

In going over this I am not sure you will get much out of it. But I have greatly enjoyed writing it down, and it has helped me a lot to put everything into perspective.