

Overlooking Krebalo Village

Uncle Leo arrived in Krebalo in 1978. After returning from the army, they made him stay in Tbilisi for a while. Possibly, they were watching him; he suspected the same. What if they found out I'd escaped to the other side of Berlin and now they're keeping an eye on me, thinking I'm a spy? He believed the Soviet power was great, even greater than the Soviet government thought of itself, or, let alone, about Uncle Leo.

'What is your profession?', asked the military commissar when he was called in for the last time. 'Electrical engineer', was his answer. Leo has said the same words to the same man already for the tenth time. Yet he showed no irritation. Ask me as many times as you want, he thought, I'll keep answering and never get tired of it. The commissar gave him a sidelong glance, as if hoping to catch him saying something different - at least once.

After that, they assigned him to Krebalo. It was a small village near a little valley in Imereti, West Georgia. A massive hydroelectric power plant was built. It supplied electricity to Chiatura, and there was enough left for Krebalo as well. Leo was treated as just another insignificant bolt in the machine—attached to that power plant. He couldn't refuse, nor could he do anything about it.

His wife refused to move there: 'I can't live in that place,' she said, and stayed in Tbilisi with their child. That was hard on Uncle Leo. Every Saturday morning, he'd get up early to jolt all the way to Tbilisi in a yellow *Pazik* bus, and every Sunday, he'd rattle back to Krebalo. Since the child was born, his wife no longer worried much about him.

'Now you're free, right? You'll stay home all the time?' asked ten-year-old Petre when his dad lifted him up after his return from the military service. Leo hugged him so tightly that Lela got scared. 'You'll smother the child, Leo!' his wife pleaded.

'You're free now, right?' the boy asked again after Leo set him down.

'Yes...' Leo answered half-heartedly. 'But as long as the Soviet Union exists, son, we will never truly be free.' The bright lights of Berlin - West Berlin - were still in front of his eyes.

His wife threw a sharp look at him, worried: 'What are you saying in the presence of a child? What if someone hears us? She looked around the railway station in fear.

'Just don't say that to anyone, okay?' Leo asked his son, and Petre fell silent - he knew some people would get angry at his father for such words.

Leo met Lela in Tbilisi when he was a teenager. He was seventeen then, wandering the streets, hanging out with tough bad boys, drinking in Kirov Park till late, getting into trouble, running from the police. Lela, like many other girls of her age, was drawn to those reckless boys.

One day, she met Leo together with her friend - she wouldn't have dared to go alone to see a guy. The girls pretended to be out for a walk and 'happened' to pass by the corner where

the 'bad boys' hung out. They talked a bit; Leo's friends, realizing what was going on, slipped away one by one, leaving the two alone.

They talked for a long time, and Leo even gave her her the first cigarette. Her friend later scolded her bitterly for that, but it was pointless - Lela and Leo had fallen in love, and soon after, they got married.

At first, Lela was happy and satisfied that Leo had somehow 'settled down.' He'd stopped hanging around with his idle friends, and thanks to her father's help, he even enrolled in a technical vocational school. He started studying electrical engineering and struggled much; he studied hard, sat buried in books, and from time to time would exclaim, 'No, I don't understand a thing!' and tried to solve the problem all over again.

As time passed, something changed - their love seemed to have quietly slipped away. The first cigarette at the corner of Kirovi park, in the dusk, and those tingling sensations had dulled. As soon as Leo finished the technical school, he enlisted in the army. Tired of his academic life, he wanted, for a while, to do something real, something manly. 'I'll learn to shoot,' he thought to himself. He was still only twenty-two and longed for those tingling sensations. In technical school, he studied German and even received good grades, but he believed he could not speak any German since he had never spoken to a German in his life, even though he had received a high mark. He knew that even if he were sent to Berlin, no one there would let him talk to a German anyway.

Meanwhile, Petre was born, and mother and child were inseparable day and night. Leo thought the army service would be a way to distract himself from the routine. The Soviet army, however, turned out to be anything but entertaining. The brochures and newspapers painted a completely different picture; in reality, they lived like savages. He endured a month or two, completed the young fighter's course 'Maladoi Baetsi', and started thinking, if his father-in-law could pull him out of the army. But then his evaluation paper was delivered, and he was informed that they were going to send him to Berlin. He crumpled up the letter he had written to his father-in-law and threw it away.

Serving as a guard in Berlin turned out to be easier than the scourgings during the drills in the barracks. The food was better, and there was almost no hard work. The experienced soldiers defended the area; Leo and others like him were just given minor, extra duties. In the evenings, he would sit on the watchtower, looking around, gazing at Berlin from above towards the line dividing the East and West parts of the city. At first glance, there wasn't much difference, except that for in the evenings, West Berlin began to shine; as if it produced some steam, colorful mist set on its streets and rooftops. More than once, he even wondered if a parade or some event was going on - maybe that was where the smoke came from.

There was a Georgian captain at the base, though his name was Eugene. For several days, he observed how Leo stared toward the West.

'Want me to take you there?' Leo didn't even notice the captain approaching the post.

'Take me where?' he asked, too stunned to give a proper military salute.

‘To the other side of Berlin,’ Eugene replied.

Leo was terrified. His heart sank. His superior officer, a real captain, was suggesting something equivalent to treason. *Maybe it’s a test? What does he mean, ‘do I want to’? Since when do I have a choice?* If he refused, he’d be doomed; if he agreed, he’d be branded a traitor. Overwhelmed by these thoughts, he stood frozen, unable to take his eyes off Captain Eugene, who was smiling.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ said the captain. ‘We’ll just go and come back. I know the way. Tonight, put on your civilian clothes and be ready - I’ll come for you.’

And he did. Leo hadn’t slept a wink. He had no civilian clothes, only his army T-shirt with black stripes and an inside-out camouflage pair of pants. They crossed the area; Eugene signaled to someone in a tower, who then signaled to another, and the guards shifted positions along the fence. The captain carefully lifted a section of the cut wire from the wall as if it were a flower vase from a shelf and placed it on the ground. They crawled through, ran a bit, and slipped into a narrow alley through a gap in the wall.

From complete silence - where they could hear each other’s breathing - they suddenly emerged into a swirl of colors and motion. Eugene stopped at the edge of the alley and gestured for Leo to not go any farther. But Leo couldn’t take his eyes off the neon glow - violet, blue, green lights flickering and shimmering along the street. So that’s what the mysterious ‘smoke’ had been that he’d seen from his post. Stalls overflowed with fruit, some of which he had never even seen before: bananas, avocados, mangoes, kiwis. On the other side, colorful magazines were being sold, and the smell of real coffee drifted through the air. Beautiful cars glided silently down the street, reflecting the dazzling lights. People laughed; passersby smiled. Everyone was dressed differently, stylishly, like in Soviet films, or perhaps even better. For just five minutes, he stepped into something that felt like a scene from a very exotic, imported movie. Then Eugene placed a hand on his shoulder and said:

‘That’s enough. Let’s go.’

‘Dad, are you free now?’ his son kept asking him, starting right from the railway station, when Leo returned from the army.

Krebalo was an old-fashioned village. The Soviet industry had built only a single hydroelectric station, paved the area, set up a bus stop, and moved on. Houses clung to the valley slopes, some leaning on each other, others clinging to the cliffs. Higher up, in the bright green forest, a few small cottages stood scattered among the trees.

The power station was like a concrete fortress. The building looked down upon its enormous turbines the way parents stare at a newborn. This steel giant bent the flow of nature to the will of mankind. At the entrance hung a large metal poster reading: ‘The People’s Energy.’ But Leo knew it wasn’t people’s at all. Everything went to Chiatura -

yet it didn't belong to its inhabitants either. It all went to the mines, and even the mines didn't belong to the people of Chiatura. Only a single power line reached Krebalo, and each family could light a single bulb in the evenings. Some preferred to turn on the radio instead of the lamp. Over time, the station began to fail more and more often.

Like many others, the people of Krebalo stole from their own workplace. They took whatever could be taken from the station. By the 1980s, the stealing had increased. Once, Leo even got angry at his coworkers when they grabbed an important spare part. When his supervisor asked what the fight had been about, he excused himself, saying, *'If the main turbine breaks, it'll take months to get a replacement.'* The boss said, *'Alright, alright,'* and sent him home calmly. The next day, the spare part was gone.

Leo stopped showing up for work regularly. Someone else would pull the 'rubilnik' switch. Toward the end of the '80s, he spent more time in Tbilisi, keeping an eye on Petre so he wouldn't wander the streets. His father-in-law was about to retire and told him, 'The last thing I can do for you is make you the chief engineer of the Krebalo station. You'll be your own master - you're too old for someone to keep standing over you.' So it happened. When his father-in-law died, they buried him in Krebalo. Everyone came, everyone paid their respects, and everyone spoke of what a generous man he had been. None of his debts was ever repaid.

Petre went to Moscow to study. His parents stayed in Tbilisi. Everything seemed fine, yet the husband and wife had grown distant. Leo thought a lot, drank a lot. Many times he reached out to touch his sleeping wife affectionately, then turned away again, thinking, 'No, I don't understand anything.'

His son sent him a rare book from Moscow titled *The Solar House* - almost impossible to buy in the Soviet Union. It was all about solar energy and its methods of conversion, the use, and function of panels. But before the communists could assemble their solar panels, the Soviet Union collapsed. The Berlin Wall fell, and Georgia, too, was torn apart by *civil war*. *Petre immediately returned and went to fight in Abkhazia. From there, he wrote, 'Just a little more, and we'll be free.'* But both the country and life itself moved backward. Petre did not return.

Mourning turned Lela into a ghost. She vanished completely from Leo's life - she lived in Tbilisi, but felt somewhere in the other land entirely. She came to Krebalo only to bury their son. Just after the funeral, she left and never came back. She looked Leo in the eyes once, and in that one look, she conveyed the boundless pain both of them carried inside, the kind that would never heal.

Leo kept working at the station. Sometimes he went, sometimes he didn't; sometimes he slept there. He drank with the villagers. He was still considered the chief engineer, though every turbine and the whole station were shut down. When sober, he worked as a handyman - fixing generators, roofs, old tractors, and television sets. Sometimes people couldn't pay him, so they gave him beans, flour, or sugar instead. Leo never complained.

'I'll take whatever you give me. I'll accept whatever you pay me with.'

After the war, the new regional governor declared the station defunct and dismissed Leo. A letter arrived - a month late - saying: 'You are hereby relieved of your position.'

Leo wanted to be released from many things; maybe this was a good beginning.

When the 1990s ended, another government came, bringing new promises. They found some spare parts somewhere, and with Leo's help again, the station was restored. The village lit up again. But soon after, Leo was fired once more, and the station was put up for sale. 'It costs too much to run, and the country can't afford it,' they said. 'We need to find an investor.'

None was found. The station kept breaking down, and Leo kept fixing it without pay. The new police chief, seated in his shiny Skoda, even told him, 'You've got electricity in your house, haven't you? What more do you need? When will you finally be satisfied?' Without even stepping out of the car, the fat man lazily waved his hand and wiped the sweat from under his double chin.

Another ten years passed. Yet another government arrived, though the same governor stayed in office. The investor was never found, and on TV, they announced the station's dismantling. 'It will be taken apart and sold. Krebalo will get power from Chiatura,' they declared. 'But we used to supply Chiatura, what can they possibly give us?' Leo thought.

At that very moment, news was spread. Journalists announced that manganese had been discovered in Krebalo's ground, and that was the real reason for dismantling the station. Leo knew well what manganese mining meant - blasting the ground, destroying homes, emptying and erasing the village. At the end of the program, the reporter added that this was the channel's last broadcast - the station was shutting down forever, by government order. Darkness everywhere!

Thoughts about East Berlin occupied Leo's mind. It felt as though somewhere, someone was building a wall again - not in Germany, but here, in Krebalo, where the lights had just gone out. Out - and never came back. Days and weeks passed. Once again, the generators of the '90s roared across the valley.

The power station stopped for good. The water got clean. No one came to dismantle the station, so once it stopped, the valley grew clean too. Fish even returned to the river. Groups of young people began visiting Krebalo for hiking, fishing, hunting, and sightseeing. Leo met some boys from Tbilisi and offered to show them the station. There was nothing else worth seeing in Krebalo but nature and that Soviet relic. They took many photos inside the old building, and before leaving, one of them asked:

'Why don't you get solar panels?'

'That takes money, son.'

'My friend runs an NGO - they used to have plenty of panels. The government shut down this organization by a decree...'

'...I'll ask him, he can probably send you a few.'

Leo grew thoughtful. He remembered a book, *The Solar House*, that his son once presented to him. When he got home, he took it down from the shelf. On the first page, it was written: *To my father - a man of light and freedom. With love, from Petre.*

He sat with that book all night. It was old, but it was better than nothing. The next morning, the young man from Tbilisi actually called: *'A minibus will arrive, and if you meet it in Krebalo, they'll bring the panels.'*

Leo didn't know what to say, whether to thank him or to apologize for not believing his promise initially. Soviet Georgians were known for talking a lot, making promises, swearing brotherhood, and forgetting everything before they'd even finished their sentence. But this young man said, *'I'm really sending the panels.'*

'Son... please, tell me your name,' Leo finally managed to ask.

'My name is Petre,' the young man said on the phone.'

The panels arrived. They stacked the boxes neatly in Leo's small yard, shook his hand, and left. Each box had an instruction manual - in English, though the diagrams didn't really require a B2 level proficiency in the foreign language. At first, Leo unpacked them clumsily, pulling out wires and parts, not quite sure what he was doing. But gradually, everything began to fall into place both in the yard and in his mind. When he looked down toward the valley, he saw men in red uniforms and helmets heading toward the station, others stringing safety tapes - the demolition had begun. Krebalo was to be erased forever.

By noon, Leo's yard was crisscrossed with cables and wiring. The shiny panels spread across the ground like water plants. The children gathered by the fence, watching, shouting questions. Busy at work, Leo sometimes managed to answer. By evening, everything was in order. Exhausted, he lay in his hammock and fell asleep.

He dreamed of Berlin - the barracks, the wall, the dividing area. In his dream, he stood again on the watchtower beside Eugene, though now Leo was the captain, or maybe a major - older and higher in rank. Eugene was unchanged.

'Eugene,' Leo smiled kindly at the soldier, 'do people from the other side ever sneak over here to look around?'

'No,' Eugene answered, head bowed. 'What's there to see here?!'

Leo awoke to the children's voices and then to the noise from the station. The sun was directly overhead, scorching even through the trees and leaves of Krebalo. The village was still and serene. Cows in the meadow, frightened fishermen in their houses, the agora-type place where usually the idle men of the village stood and talked endlessly, was now deserted, only children ran about. It was the kind of summer day when adults vanish like shadows and the whole village belongs to the children. And now they were all gathered in Leo's yard.

'When will it light up?' one of them shouted.

‘This evening...’

Leo checked the inverter, followed the cables again, making sure everything was connected properly - panels, connectors, inverters, trackers. He had assembled it all according to his intuition, and now he was afraid - what if he had made a mistake? He had to be careful; there was a real fire risk. The worst would be burning this precious equipment. Then he pulled out ‘*The Solar House*’, read it again, and compared it to the panels’ English manual. By the evening, he felt confident – it seemed he had fixed everything right.

As the sun began to set, the noise from the dismantling grew louder - all day they had been hauling parts away, the sounds of metal and tin reaching the village. ‘Dismantling,’ it turned out, meant stripping the metal. Only the bare walls and concrete shells were left. Leo switched his house’s electricity line to the solar panels. With one press of a button, his modest home lit up over Krebalo like a star. In several homes, the tortured hum of generators faded, and only the children’s voices rang through the village: ‘It’s on! It’s on! Uncle Leo lit it up!’

Meanwhile, Leo sat quietly in his yard, breathing in the cool evening breeze, eyes closed, the old Berlin tingling in his memories. Those ugly walls, remains of the old power station, as a result of despotism, stood half a kilometer away. But he was on the other side now, not of the Berlin wall, but of his own house - sitting in the light he himself had obtained. He drifted off again and dreamed of having extended the power of light to the neighbors, then to the market, and then to all of Krebalo, until the village glowed whole again, independent, without help from the faceless and powerful men.

‘Are we free now?’, he heard Petre’s voice in his sleep.

‘No, son..., Leo whispered, but we’re on the right path.’

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