
Jason Tashea

Distance Learning

Today was a big day for a forgotten place. Full of forgotten children taught by forgotten teachers run by a forgotten bureaucracy on a forgotten longitude that history barely remembers in the forgotten Republic of Georgia was Samtredia's Public School Two. Samtredia had a Public School One, but what was left of it burnt down eighteen months ago and with the population already hemorrhaging (the boys to the capitol Tbilisi for work, the girls to Turkey or Russia to lose their innocence as they were now likely prostitutes), there was little pressure to rebuild it. No one discussed revising Samtredia PS 2's name.

As billed, today's event was going to be big. The Prime Minister would be there, the Minister of Education, local and international press, ambassadors from the coveted West, and captains of industry from the more coveted future would all be in attendance. This story is told by me, Aaron, a driven, listless American teaching at PS 2.

Georgia and I met serendipitously. In 2008, Georgia was invaded by the Russians during the Beijing Olympics. While Georgia lost the war, they were more successful against the Russian language, and sought to flood the country with English. No longer was Georgia going to be a kept country to Russian history; they now looked West. At the same time, my then girlfriend left me—not before pillaging my meager checking account. While I lost my savings, I realized that my university internship with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting was never going to materialize into something more, and being left with nothing I needed a change. Georgia and I were broke but not broken and looking to start over. I now make about \$400 a month teaching English in Georgia. I'm not sure I love it here, but my English degree is useful and more importantly, I don't make enough for my loan servicer to expect anything.

The school is simple. The plaster is chipped, the windows are wood framed and often cracked. The glass has a wavy and honest charm that you rarely see in the developed world. The glass is beautiful and welcoming. The front door is large, especially considering the entrants are between five to twelve years old. This door is easily eight

feet tall or three meters-ish; it's ostensibly blue, but so badly chipped and worn that you can see at least four other chromatic iterations of this same, heavy, medieval door. Blue, white, black, white. The floor is also wooden. Without intention and on account of age, it's now a floating floor. This is great for concert venues, it's less ideal for a school house. The floor wasn't always like this, but mold took its toll. The building is musty and undeniably pushing up the cases of untreated asthma amongst Samtredia's youth. The walls are whitewashed.

Outside certain classrooms, art hangs proudly. These masterpieces are lit by fluorescents that, according to the exposed wires, didn't come with the building. Crayon on construction paper was the popular medium. Many of the pictures, in bright colors, reiterated Georgia's independence from Russia. Many of the pieces utilized maps showing the Republic's physical closeness to the U.S. in a way that even Mercator would not approve. Some renditions didn't even waste the time on maps and merely illustrated a Russian tank on fire. It had been a few years since Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, but public schools are incubators for nationalism, after all.

Samtredia was not a city, or a town. It was more of a stop off. During the Soviet era, the town was supported by state industry producing, amongst other things, boxcars and jam. Now, any sign of industry was a relic of the past. Outside of the school, media and government officials had generators running to power their lights and microphones to better magnify themselves. The reason for all this fanfare was simple, the Republic of Georgia, a nation with few known deposits of minerals, gas, or oil, was going to embark on becoming the world's next tech startup. Today, starting with Samtredia PS 2, every public school student was going to receive a laptop. Computer literacy was the future. In the absence of natural resources, Georgia was going to will its economy into the Twenty-First century.

Funding for this alchemy was provided by the Dutch government, a Scandinavian tech firm, and of course, the United States Embassy. With compulsion, children plastered cars, walls, and themselves with the blue and yellow stickers handed out by the firm's boosters before the speakers took to the stage.

The war tempered Prime Minister gave his big speech. It was about the future of Georgia and how he will not

let his nation be left behind in an ever changing and globalized world economy. I kept waiting for the Prime Minister to inform me that peoples of the world were closer than ever before and that technology had made the world flat, as he was not hiding the fact that he was cribbing Thomas Friedman. "Coding is this generation's currency," he emphatically declared. Applause.

There were fidgety young children behind him on a makeshift platform that was too shiny not to have come from the capital. As he wound down his remarks, a chicken ran through a tear in a fence adjoining the school's grounds to remind the proud group of delegates where they were. With the chicken as a segue, the tech CEO began to speak. Speaking through a translator, he didn't seem as rhetorically agile as his slim fit suit and slick hair had me predicting. Perhaps the Prime Minister had stolen all his good lines. In fact, after listening to the Prime Minister, the CEO's speech was nothing new. "Georgia is showing the world the future." Applause. "Today, Georgia is not catching up, but leading the developing world." Applause. "Nations can follow or be left in a dust of zeros and ones." Confusion. Binary code was not a popular reference point in Samtredia. A farmer stopped his mule drawn cart with old tractor wheels in front of the school's worn and weathered gate to get a glimpse of the commotion.

The CEO wrapped up and to my surprise none of the foreign governments present, the Dutch, the Swedes, the U.S., said a public word. Maybe the diplomats were too excited to hand a Georgian child a new laptop. There was an expectant night-before-Christmas vibe in the air, a popular reference understood in this Christian nation. Handing out computers would be a better photo-op for their various Twitter feeds than another action shot of another public address.

I learned to like Samtredia; however, when I first got here the facilities were enough to move up my return date. For example, PS 2's toilet is a hole in the ground in a rudimentary structure about fifty yards from the

school. Plastered with decades of congealed diets, the room was only bearable in the unheated throws of a Caucasian winter and abhorrent during any other season. The bathroom also boasts no door, no privacy. The teacher-student dynamic is fundamentally altered when a pupil sees you in the throws of what a colleague called "Georgian Gut". But I got over the infrastructure around the same time I'd come to terms with my on-again-off-again relationship with food poisoning. Or was it water poisoning?

Whatever the malady, I loved these kids. For many, I was the first American, neigh, foreigner they'd ever met. They were happy to have me and I was happy to have them. However, things were elementary if not convoluted. I spoke German with the English teacher I worked

with because it was more efficient. The teachers try, but with no resources or continuing education credits or motivation on account of low pay and worse morale this is what it was. It wasn't great, but it was something, and I was happy to be here.

The Prime Minister and Dutch Ambassador now sat inside PS 2 at a table with some students. The tables

and chairs were meant for children, not statesmen. It was both humorous and endearing to watch proper and gilded men crunch their knees into their chest to take a seat. Press gathered behind the sitting students. While the Ambassador spoke with one of the children, the Prime Minister's eye and right index finger traced the four quadrants of the British infused Georgian flag that a student had carved into the desk. The Prime Minister was less concerned by the vandalism on the desk or the missed lesson it took to render the flag and was more enthralled that the youngster felt inspired to make permanent the nation's flag. It was a flag that unified a group of people known to the world as Georgians but internally had little in common except for this flag and that every parent had just inherited a child with Internet access. The flag was designed by the Prime Minister.

The crowd moved on to the teacher's lounge, a simple room with the school's one wall clock, some chairs,



Sunrise 5

Zachariah Bryan

and a painting of St. George, Georgia's namesake. The Prime Minister was now with the CEO sitting at a more appropriately sized table across from a tired teacher unamused by all this attention after a career of neglect. The Teacher was my partner at this sanitarium. She was picked to meet the Prime Minister out of ignorance, yes she was the English Teacher, but I hoped the CEO remembered some of his German. The Teacher wore a long, plain skirt as she did most days, and her hair frizzed due to the over use of a cheap hair dye she hoped would hide every birthday since thirty-eight. She was a peasant that beat the odds. Feigning a smile, the Teacher said she was excited to teach from a computer. She was visibly uncomfortable. It's not that she lives in a cave and doesn't know how to use a computer. She actually loves access to the internet, especially Russian news. However, raking in the equivalent to four-hundred dollars a month does not allow her a computer at home, so her experience is minimal. She frets about how she will lesson plan or even pretend to know more than her students; it's not as if the government is updating the teachers alongside the new hardware. Now that every student in Samtredia has a computer, she no longer controlled knowledge. Her limited English would be exacerbated by every YouTube video and Google Translate assisted assignment. She knew it, and everyone else overlooked it. This event at Samtredia PS 2 was supposed to be a celebration. Instead, for her, it was a funeral to the career she had donated her life to. A few years ago, after the revolution and the war, she was asked to change her focus from Russian to English. She had learned minimal English at university back when Brezhnev was Premier of the Soviet Union. A nation ago, *Russkiy* was in Georgia to stay. Now she was expected to code, a term she didn't even know in Russian.

In the open space between the classrooms on the second floor, the Prime Minister spoke with a student. The conversation was in Georgian, and I could only make out the Prime Minister's inane questions about what the student will search first on her new computer. The girl didn't know, she flushed with embarrassment. Unabashedly self-promoting, the Prime Minister asked her if she's on Twitter, the student is eleven and didn't respond, but the press got a laugh. At this point, I hung back in the corner while the press moved forward. Being in sparsely populated Samtredia for the past seven months has left me with little taste for pageantry and a creeping agoraphobia. I fiddled with the collection of

Orthodox icons always on display in the corner when a diplomat from the U.S. Embassy noticed me and awkwardly waved. He must have remembered me from a brief orientation six months ago. With a memory like that you can see how this guy passed the foreign service exam. He seemed to move on when he sheepishly reversed course and came over to talk. I wonder how he passed the personality test.

Next to stoic faced, orthodox icons of men fighting dragons, the Diplomat asked about how these computers will change my job at Samtredia Public School Two. I began to answer but he cut me off. Without any instigation from me, he dove into a diatribe about how this nation is first and foremost of the post-Soviet states. "Georgia is truly modernizing at a rate we could not have foreseen just a few years ago. I mean, you know this, since the Rose Revolution, democracy is a reality and corruption has disappeared from the lives of ordinary Georgians. For the first time in twenty years, there is predictability and investment. I mean just look at this event: computers for every youth in a non-oil producing country?! It's just unheard of." As his platitudes continued, the grin on his face became insurmountable.

I imagined this Diplomat as a precocious college student lecturing his bored roommates about the idiosyncrasies of Iran-Contra, just wanting to be in the middle of international affairs. And here he was, a generation later rambling to another half listening acquaintance about how you can invest in the right man with revolutionary ideas to change a country. He continued, "Six years ago, this country had nothing but wind and snow," he punched his fist into his palm eliciting a soggy smack, "What does he do?" he pointed to the Prime Minister, "He decides he's going to actually treat his country's youth as a prized natural resource. To him, these kids are gold, and they should be. It's not like Georgia has anything else." Fair enough to his point, Georgia's closest relationship to natural resource development was a gas pipeline running east-to-west through its southern provinces from Azerbaijan to Turkey. This pipeline garners a meager royalty for the nation's coffers.

The Diplomat continued, "He is doing for these kids what lamps did for whale fat."

I returned to the conversation at the right time, "To promote a non-renewable energy harvest?"

"No, the lamps gave the fat purpose. Value that otherwise wasn't there before."

I think the whales would differ.

"I wish we had leadership like this back in the States." His tempo slowed and his smile became more stern. "This guy secured a computer for every kid in the country. I just saw on *al Jazeera* that U.S. test scores are down another year in a row. I think we're tied with Slovakia or some other agrarian backwater we should be dominating." He tilted his head to the side to let the sweat, his exuberance, slide past his tightly fitted collar.

During our conversation, the event's planned agenda and glad-handing had ended. The youth had their computers, the Prime Minister had his requisite talks with one local student of average Georgian appearance and one local teacher of average Georgian expectation, and so the group of dignitaries and press was moving into another classroom that had out treats and drinks. Before the Diplomat was able to dislodge from our conversation and move with the group, one of my students hustled up next to me with her shiny computer and a dejected face. The Diplomat asked the girl what was wrong in Georgian. While I appreciated his effort to speak in Georgian, he and I both knew he was not going to understand the response. The student looked at me and shoved the computer into my gut. She told me the battery was dead, and I relayed this tragedy to the Diplomat. The Diplomat looked at me quizzically,

"Did she already lose her power cable?" he said incredulously, "Every student got one."

"No," I said, "she still has the power cable."

"Then I don't get the problem." His mood turned on a dime, "These developing-staters, they have such a sense of entitlement. They want everything given to them. As if giving a new laptop isn't enough, this gift just doubled her family's net worth!" I allowed him a moment so he could soak in his dismay and frustration over a lifetime of good intentions with minimal results.

My agitation with his smug, bourgeois bigotry seethed off of my tongue, "That isn't the problem either." I looked through the door into the first form classroom. "You see that there," I said pointing at the pot belly stove in the

classroom, "That's the first form class, it has the youngest kids we've got and so they get the wood stove, because their little bodies can't handle the winters. That's the only stove in the building."

"That's great, but unless you know something that I don't, that stove isn't going to charge her computer. Even she knows that." With his arms now crossed, he motioned to her with a jerk of his right elbow. My student stood in front of us displeased at both the bitter tone and inaccessible language of the conversation. Her laptop was in my hand.

"Right, it won't charge her computer, and that's the point. You don't have a wood stove in a building with central heat and you don't have computers in a building without electrical outlets!"

Every so often you see someone take unbelievable information and process it correctly, this was not one of those moments. Thinking I was bullshitting him, he scanned the wall, about six inches off the ground. He stepped into an empty classroom repeating the process. Each inch, or meter or whatever, of wall he saw without an outlet furled his brow deeper leaving his forehead resembling the rutted mixed medium roads of dirt and concrete that were the tired arteries of Samtredia. "What the hell? What the . . ." he emphasized his syllables all wrong, like how a boxer speaks after losing a bout.

"This is the Republic of Georgia, and you just realized that this program puts an expensive, digital cart in front of a traditional, analog horse . . . and for reference's sake, the horse cart is still a popular mode of transportation here." The Diplomat's eyes continued to scurry around the school as if I tricked him. From the adjoining classroom you could hear the reverie of a job well done. The Prime Minister was sipping on a Coke from a flimsy, opaque plastic cup, which was doubly sweet because just a few years ago he convinced Coca-Cola Global to open Georgia's first bottling plant. The CEO was updating various social media feeds with photos of himself and local children to give visage to his altruistic acts. There was back slapping.

I looked back at the Diplomat. He expected a reprieve, a solution to appear. People *were* celebrating. He expected a bunch of pig snout outlets to thrust their way through the wall like a surprise party for Tesla. But this was it; he saw what he saw. This was Samtredia Public School 2, and today was a big day. 