

INTRODUCTION TO SOUTH OSSETIAN STORIES

This is not the first project in South Ossetia that envisioned the collection of stories from the residents of post-conflict zones. Right after the 2008 war, several organizations were engaged in such initiatives. Every time the journalists ran into the same issue – the respondents refused to talk about what they went through. This time as well, only the most courageous ones, those who were not shy to show their emotions, agreed to participate. Despite the fact that significant time has passed since the beginning of the conflict, the respondents had to relive the pain again. The journalist working with them can't remain indifferent to these sufferings, to their human pain, and always relives this pain with the respondents. And only when they saw empathy, they started trusting and began to describe the drama of the last years of their lives.

Things were much harder for the residents of rural areas, than for those living in the city. All this time the rural residents were the first ones to find themselves on the line of contact. In addition to this they also had much closer connections with the conflicting side: very common mixed Georgian-Ossetian marriages, everyday friendships and family ties. Therefore, their stories were infused with resentment towards their nearest neighbors and relatives, who, as they put it, “betrayed them” in the most difficult moment by not warning them about the visits of militants from Georgia to their villages. The betrayers left the villages quietly at night, leaving the rural residents at the mercy of the paramilitary mob.

At the request of the village residents, refugees, and city residents the majority of the stories do not mention the real names of participants. According to the respondents, they wanted to avoid being included on the black list of the government officials and secret service, who throughout the entire 2015 were fighting “corrupt NGO representatives”, “foreign agents” and “enemies of the state.” For an ordinary village resident, a conversation with a journalist not working for a state media outlet and participation in a project that is financed from abroad is a very bold step. This actions could have been “punished,” and the participants and their immediate family members and relatives could have been reprimanded. The other reason is that their relatives living on the other side of the border could have suffered this time from the hands of Georgian “showoff patriots.” Despite all of this, it was possible to recruit the necessary quantity of respondents.

The story of a young 34-year-old Tskhinval resident stands out in all these stories. He grew up on the barricades, and later took up arms himself and until now he is tormented by the questions of war and peace. In this passage

he is sharing his childhood memories: “We were desperate to grow up! Every day we were bringing food for the rebels and were asking “Is it already our time? Can we fight also? When can we fight?” They said: “Everything is fine, live your childhood. By the time you grow up the war will be over.” They turned out to be wrong. We grew up. And the war is still ongoing. It subsides and flares up again.” Here he talks about the resentment of the war: “We grew up in the war. We got used to it. It became part of our lives. At certain times we even feel more comfortable when fighting than in civilian life. During the fighting, we clearly understand how and what we have to do, as opposed to a peaceful life. This is wrong. It should not be. I do not want future generations, including that small child, also to grow up with arms and do the same as we did. I do not want it! And I’d better do more than allow him take up a gun.”

I would like to say that the heroes of these several stories, eight people with lives mutilated by the armed conflict, continue to believe in kindness, and human sanity. And most importantly they believe in a peaceful life.

Irina Kelekhsaeva