

(This story is a memoir based on recollections of actual events. Events and conversations have been recreated to the best of the author's memory. The names, details and identifying characteristics of some people and places have been changed to respect the privacy of individuals.)

## Caucasus Charter

We toasted the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, three years ago. “Down in one!”, Paul instructed. “No sipping!”

Mike obeyed. And far from burning his throat, the ice-cold vodka tasted delicious. Mike grinned in delight.

“See, I told you”, Paul said. “This is how you drink vodka after caviar. Always so in Soviet Union.”

Our afternoon flight from east coast USA would arrive in Geneva at 3 in the morning. We were comfortably seated in first class. The navigation display told us that we were over the middle of the Atlantic.

“Thanks for the lesson Paul”. Mike smiled. “That’s just the sort of interpretation this mission needs! We’re lucky to have a genuine Russian who knows his way around.”

But Paul looked serious. “Mike, I am sure I will like working with you. But please, will you make me one important promise?”

“Sure”, Mike agreed, “what is it?”

Paul pulled an envelope out of his pocket. “If anything happens to me and I do not come back with you, please take this letter to my wife. But tell no one about this promise. It is okay?”

Mike was taken aback. “Of course Paul.” He put the envelope carefully into his briefcase. “But nothing like that could happen. You’re with an international mission.”

Paul didn’t brighten up. “Okay, I explain.” Mike listened closely. Paul had left the Soviet Union just before it collapsed, walking off his job as an interpreter at the United Nations and claiming asylum. After that he had gradually regularised his legal status – getting a divorce from his estranged wife back in Moscow, changing his name, marrying again, and recently obtaining a travel document to support his work as a skilled interpreter for multinational organisations. His application for United States citizenship was in process now.

Mike was puzzled. “So what’s the problem?”

Paul spoke earnestly. “Mike, to apply for US citizenship I must first ‘otkazivat'sya’ – in English, I think the word is renounce – my Soviet citizenship. But there is no Soviet Union. I go to Russian Embassy instead, but they would not help me. Now we are going to former Soviet Union country. I will say I am Paul Shoemaker, almost American. But maybe they will say I am still Pavel Sapozhnik, Soviet citizen. Who knows, they may arrest me! So of course I am worried.”

Mike patiently repeated his assurances. Paul relaxed a bit. After another round of vodkas, they

settled back for a few hours' rest.

Arriving in Geneva half asleep, they gathered with the rest of the team – two from their own plane, and three who had landed in Europe earlier. “Mission Chief” Ernesto, a dapper Latin American, gave a quick briefing. “As you know, we will fly to Arbaigeor on a charter aircraft. But after that, don't expect to be comfortable. Remember, there's a war on there. The last mission found no telephones, power or running water at the hotel. And no heating – in winter! Luckily, it's only autumn now. So we can hope the weather will stay mild.”

Ernesto looked around the group. “Mostly, I expect you to work directly with the authorities in your individual expertise area. They have promised to provide interpreters, and we have Paul for our group meetings and as backup. Sleep on the plane if you can. We should land at about 10 AM local time, and then settle in at the hotel. You can rest up and study your background papers. We'll meet up at dinner and plan next steps after that.”

With accreditation from an international organisation and a private charter, departure formalities were minimal. The charter plane was configured to seat a much larger group, so everyone got a few hours of comfortable sleep....

Someone shook Mike awake. “We're landing soon. Take a look.”

Mike looked out. They were dropping fast. An airport loomed ahead, on a wide plateau surrounded by mountains. Yerbakisi, the capital city, was visible too.

The airport looked normal from a distance – runways, parked aircraft and a terminal. But closer up, it looked odd. As they circled back to land, Mike could see that the “parked” aircraft were actually crashed aircraft! Most had pieces missing. “Paul, look at those planes”, Mike hissed. Paul laughed. “Don't worry Mike, is just normal for Soviet Union. They leave old planes outside and use them for spare parts.”

Landing was smooth and formalities were friendly. A minibus and driver transferred the mission team to a downtown hotel. It was the best in town – eight stories high and spotlessly clean in a heavy old-fashioned style. The manager met them personally, beaming. “Welcome! I hope you will enjoy our country. I am pleased to say that our hotel offers good comforts – telephones, hot and cold water all day and night, and electricity from 6 hours to 20 hours each day. Also excellent security. Please check in now. According to our local regulations, please to pay in advance in US dollars, for all 11 nights you will be here.”

The team gathered in the hotel restaurant at 7 PM. There were no menus. The waiter explained why. “We have no meat, just small fish. Also potatoes, salad and vegetables. And beer.” Ordering didn't take long...

Ernesto handed around a schedule with contact names, meeting times, office locations and phone numbers. “The minibus will pick us up at nine each morning. We start with a protocol meeting tomorrow. Then this work plan should cover the first four days. At the weekend, we will assess progress and plan further ahead. Any questions?” A short discussion and a hurried dinner followed. Mike was already in bed, flashlight at his side, when the power went out at 8 pm. It was quiet outside – no wonder, with no power. Tired, he quickly drifted off to sleep...

Mike woke with a start. Shots outside! And not far away either. His watch told him it was almost midnight. The gunfire stopped, resumed from another direction, and stopped again. And that louder burst was an automatic rifle! Mike's fears died away as he grew used to the pattern of

silence punctuated by occasional shooting. Sleep reclaimed him.

Breakfast didn't need a menu either. But the standard fare of fresh brown bread with rich jams and honey, followed by (very!) hard-boiled eggs was tasty and nourishing. Davit, the American on the team with Arbaigeori parentage and language skills, joked about the shooting. "Just like Washington or New York, guys. Local gangs duking it out. Stay off the streets at night and don't worry."

After a short ride to the central bank, the mission team was seated outside the President's office. A long line of staff, each clutching paperwork, went in and came out again, one at a time. Obviously needing some kind of operational authority before they can do their work, Mike mused. He knew a highly centralised control system was normal in the former Soviet Union.

Almost an hour later, Governor Davidov emerged. With Paul interpreting, he apologised for the delay and welcomed the mission. Ernesto responded, and entered Davidov's office. Other senior staff arrived and the team split up to follow their individual contacts and responsibilities. Mike was introduced to a local independent interpreter. Armin had been engaged to work with him throughout the visit, to arrange meetings as required and act as interpreter during discussions.

Mike's approach to advising on institutional governance and management was simple, based on his FORM approach:

- Functions – what roles did the central bank perform, by law and in reality?
- Organisation – how could organisation structures best support those roles?
- Resources – how well did resources match operational requirements?
- Management – what systems needed to be in place to monitor result delivery?

Mike's work plan was familiar too. First review core documents (legislation, reports and so forth, all in English translation), then interview managers and groups of staff using a structured questionnaire, and finally try to optimise what structures and processes might work best in the practical situation the central bank faced. In this case, the practical situation included the undeclared wars going on between the nation and its neighbours, the many economic legacies of the shattered Soviet system and a feverish political atmosphere. Mike dived into documents that had been translated already while Armin translated others that he would need later.

There was a cheerful mood around the dining table that evening. Everyone was glad to get work underway. The "menu" was the same again, but the small salty fish were tasty and the beer was cold. Paul entertained the team by explaining who was who around the dining room. "Don't look right now, but that tall waiter near the door is the one who really works for government spy agency. You can tell by the way he watches certain tables. And that small man sitting near the window with the two big guys is a local "businessman" – which around here means smuggler and gangster. Not to be messed with. Those are his bodyguards."

Work continued busily for the next three days. Mike attended the Friday afternoon meeting with the Prime Minister and Minister of Finance to officially close the first week's work under protest. He had lots else to do and the technical work of banking regulation was right outside his field. But as Ernesto explained, "It's protocol Mike. We must all attend, to show full respect."

After introductions and opening speeches, the mission team handed around copies of proposed new banking legislation. At first Mike tried to tune out the discussion and make notes on other topics. But hearing the translation of the Prime Minister's negative reaction to what was being proposed and noting a hostile glare from one of the government party, Mike instead looked

attentive and read the proposed new law. The sticking point seemed to be an early clause that would open up the banking system to overseas competition. As debate continued, Mike leafed further ahead. A misprint caught his eye – clause 67 referred to Poland, not Arbaigeor. And all further clauses repeated that error! Not really a surprise – the draft was a “cut-and-paste” template from a word processor. It certainly had not (as Ernesto was just then claiming!) been especially developed for Arbaigeor’s unique circumstances. Mike passed a note along the table, and Ernesto smoothly explained away the error as an indication of how the mission team was working to bring “best European practice” to Arbaigeor’s future. The discussion ended amicably. One of the government’s protocol officers invited the team to dine at 9 PM that night “at our best restaurant. You can walk there from your hotel.”

“Isn’t he forgetting something?” asked Davit when they got back to the hotel. “The power goes out at 8 PM and it’s dark outside. How do we walk anywhere?” Once again, Paul was reassuring. “It’s okay, we will have a guide. We can leave at 8.40. Just bring your flashlight.”

Ernesto was last to arrive in the lobby. “Sorry everyone, I had to phone headquarters to check on something.” Paul introduced Adil, their guide for tonight. “He tells me everyone calls the restaurant “Mafia”. It’s close by, just follow Adil. Mostly along the street, but we must walk through two long tunnels under the main roads. So keep up close.” Adil spoke briefly in Russian, and grinned. Paul translated, also grinning. “They will have guys with guns on the door, and also inside. For security. Don’t worry, you have friends in the government.”

Travelling through pitch-black tunnels by flashlight felt adventurous, but the trip to Restaurant Mafia passed without incident. Unlike other arriving diners, they weren’t even frisked by the armed heavies on the door. Soon the team was enjoying excellent meals, chosen individually from a real menu. The contrast with the bread queues they passed every morning, stretched along avenues lined with stumps where trees had been cut for firewood, was sobering. But imported French wine enjoyably banished sobriety for the evening.

Mike spent Saturday developing FORM-driven conclusions and recommendations. Much of that work was easy: a list of the central bank’s current and future functions and outputs, to set goals for (the F), a tentative organisation chart (the O), and initial simplifications to the bureaucratic and top-heavy administrative controls inherited from Soviet times (the M). The hardest part was R - resources. Three of his interviews with departmental heads raised particular concern.

The head of Financial Supervision Department was clearly capable, but (understandably) depressed. Mike’s “MTQQ” questions about his staff revealed good Motivation (“they believe strongly in their work for the national good”), but major deficiencies by Type (“they have no market or business background”), Quality (“they are inexperienced graduates”) and Quantity (“as soon as they become skilled, they leave for better pay elsewhere. Half my positions are vacant.”). Asked about analytical tools, he had displayed a few calculators - and an abacus!

The head of Information Technology Department had been a pleasant surprise. He outlined personnel, roles and goals for his small unit that would be good practice anywhere. But again resources were the issue. “Mr Mike, please tell them to stop sending us teams of economists who write long reports and make recommendations that our central bank cannot implement. Instead, please send me some PCs. Even just some spare parts, so we can build our own.” Crunching the numbers supplied to him, Mike realised that the annual salaries of the entire unit barely added up to the US\$ cost of a single good PC!

But the most worrying interview had been with Personnel Department. Its head, an ageing

lifelong employee, seemed to have little expertise in most aspects of human resource management. His answers about recruitment, promotion and reward decisions had been evasive, and tended to emphasise loyalty and seniority as the key traits to develop and prize – not talent, energy or creativity. No systematic performance management existed and under this manager they never would. But he was probably too firmly ensconced and well connected to remove. Mike decided to develop an organisation chart that would sidestep the problem.

Sunday would be a day off for everyone. Mike had enjoyed working with Armin, and the feeling was mutual. So he quickly took up Armin's offer to visit the morning art market before the afternoon's official sightseeing trip for the full team.

The art market was a revelation. High-quality oil and watercolour landscapes and portraits jostled with Soviet-era souvenirs, antique icons, hand-knotted carpets and other crafts. Armin warned him that many of the souvenirs and icons were fake in some way, so Mike concentrated on the carpets and crafts. Armin helped with bargaining.

Mike's first purchase was an exquisite small carpet from a vendor furtively hanging around the edges of the market – a real bargain at US\$80. Then he spotted a large and superbly intricate wooden carving. The seller grew loud and vocal after Mike's opening gambit of US\$100. He explained (via Armin) that the carving was from very rare "rosewood", and had taken him many weeks of work. He could not possibly accept less than US\$1000, and began to explain the meaning of each symbol and pattern. A crowd gathered as the bargaining continued, and pressed tightly around them. Armin assured him that they were curious, not dangerous or criminal. Eventually an agreed price of US\$400 brought appreciative exclamations and smiles all around. But when a large and noisy crowd started to follow them to the next stall, Mike decided to call it a day and get back to the hotel.

After the sightseeing trip, the team headed to the hotel dining room for a late dinner. The dining room had been opened out into a large ballroom where live music and lively dancing was in progress. Wine bottles were popping, not just the usual beer and vodka. And instead of offering just the usual little fish, the waiter proudly flourished a special menu including meat dishes. After a brief conversation in Russian, Paul explained what was going on. "It's a wedding for the daughter of a local 'biznizman'. He's showing off his money. But not everyone is happy about it. One of those sour-looking guys sitting over near the wall was her previous boyfriend. And dad's friends near the window are security guys. We shouldn't hang around too long."

Paul wasn't joking. As Mike was signing off his bill, shouting and a struggle erupted on the dance floor. Revolvers were drawn before the ex-boyfriend was pulled away by his friends and roughly escorted to the exit by dad's. Dancing resumed as the team hurried back to their rooms.

Ernesto had arranged for Mike to have a private meeting with Davidov first thing on Monday, for the full morning if necessary. Impatiently, Mike waited outside Davidov's office while the staff hurried in and out to get their daily paperwork signed off. "Paul, we're wasting time here. What is that paperwork that's being signed? Can't it wait?" Paul reported back quickly. "Those are the photocopying requests for the day." Mike was taken aback. "I think you misunderstood. Ask again please." Paul raised his eyebrows, and did. "Same answer Mike. These are the photocopying approvals. Remember, under the Soviet system information was mostly secret. Every photocopy must be accounted for!"

Finally they got in. Davidov, a weary figure in his 50's but looking much older, apologised for the delay caused by regulations. Mike responded vigorously. Davidov listened closely to Paul's translation, and seemed uncertain. "Mike, he wants to be sure. Is it really true that photocopying



approvals are unnecessary under modern management? Can he make that change to procedures?” Mike nodded rapidly. “Yes, of course. It will save trouble for everyone and make time for more important matters.” Davidov smiled broadly, clapped his hands and spoke decisively. “Mike, he will make that change this afternoon. Now, what should we discuss?”

Mike walked a receptive Governor through his findings and recommendations. A fast learner, Davidov quickly grasped the concept of defining and measuring the central bank’s functions and outputs. A few quick questions, which Mike answered with practical examples, convinced him that was the right way forward. Discussion was quick and smooth despite the need for Paul to translate everything back and forth between English and Russian.

But Davidov frowned when shown Mike’s proposed organisation chart. “Mike, he wants to discuss that later in more detail. Go through your other recommendations first please.”

Mike began to talk about resources and management systems when a knock came to the door. Smiling apologetically, a man Mike had not seen before placed a long list in front of Davidov and appeared to make an urgent request. Speaking rapidly, they ticked some items on the list but changed others. Paul explained in a low voice. “Mike, they’re allocating the bank’s special potato quota. Davidov is making sure staff with young families get a bigger allowance than other staff.”

After approving the final list, Davidov apologised for the interruption. “Maybe it is hard for you to understand, but we are on a war footing and have high inflation. So basic foods are distributed free of charge to employees of essential organisations, and I must personally give approvals. Many things here are like that!”

Continuing, Mike outlined what should be done to modernise management systems. Davidov was receptive, but the real world was not. For example, every member of staff was already receiving the maximum salary legally available for exceptional performance – and even that was not enough to live on. So reward-driven performance management was impossible. Public services were in chaos and some key items were obtainable only for cash through the black market. So resource management through budgeting was virtually impossible. All Mike could practically do at this time was outline important concepts such as human resource development, and develop a roadmap for how the central bank could move from bureaucratic and top-heavy administration towards more flexible and decentralised management over time.

They returned to the organisation structure. Many departments were already organised around specialised activities such as bank supervision and foreign exchange management and required relatively little change. Mike explained his proposals for administrative areas, particularly elimination of the “special section” that had provided party oversight and transfer of most aspects of human resource management from Personnel Department to a new section within Corporate Services Department. Davidov interrupted him. “First you tell me that a unified approach to human resource management is the most important supporting activity for everything, and then you want to place most of it below the top management team. Why?” Mike began an evasive rationale, but Davidov quickly interrupted, banging his fist on the table. “I know why you are saying this. Because the head of Personnel Department is a Communist, who cannot be trusted to do his job properly in a modern organisation. Am I correct?” Mike nodded.

Davidov spoke decisively. “All right. Here is what you will do for me please. Change the organisation chart to the way it should be, and show the current department heads on the chart. Then assess the potential of each of those department heads to be capable modern managers.”

Mike was taken aback. “Paul, please tell him that type of assessment requires a thorough analysis over a period of time. I have met these people only once, and I have no formal assessment tools here.” Davidov was adamant. “Mike, he says you are the expert, so you must do this for him. Return to this office Wednesday morning with your assessment report.”

There was no escape. Mike first spent a busy afternoon and evening writing up his main report. Then he developed a simple table of eight criteria and a marking scale to assess managerial potential. He spent Tuesday morning developing the assessment of the individual department heads, acutely aware that his inevitably subjective judgements might make or break their future careers. By lunchtime, he had a scorecard and a short commentary ready for each one, and could join a shopping trip to the carpet factory.

Eric, the colleague who had organised the trip, was a keen shopper and trader. He spoke glowingly of his purchases so far: boxes of Cuban cigars (“the very best brands, for almost nothing in US dollars!”), large cans of the best caviar (“you can’t find this in the West any more at any price!”) and a range of Soviet militaria (“just imagine me in this major’s uniform and cap, with a chest full of medals!”). “These carpets will be the real deal too. Just wait and see.”

The group of five toured the factory first, to watch skilful loom operators at work. The carpets weren’t quite handmade, but the looms provided only the most basic automation and the results were clearly first-rate. They finished up at the showroom, waiting for the sales manager.

He soon bustled in. And Mike knew him! It was the man who had been selling carpets at the art market, apparently as a private individual. But those carpets must be stolen from this factory!

Recognition was mutual. The sales manager widened his eyes at Mike, and when no one was looking he nervously put his finger to his lips. He spoke English, though not very well. “Good sirs, you are here to help our country. So I can give you good price. Please, say what kind carpet you look for and we will lay them out to see.” Mike decided to say nothing, and bargaining proceeded. The discounts were indeed generous and every member of the party left with one or more carpets.

There was more entertainment to come. Their central bank hosts had sent them tickets to a concert by the National Orchestra that evening, with a note that explained electric power would be maintained until 10 PM this evening to make the concert possible. Mike studied his ticket – the original price of three roubles had been overprinted to read 800 roubles, reflecting the hyperinflation that had followed independence. The conductor spoke briefly before beginning the music and Paul translated for them. This was the first concert the orchestra had played in almost two years. No wonder some audience members were almost in tears as the orchestra and a solo violinist delivered vivid performances.

Mike’s meeting with Davidov on Wednesday morning started right on time, and then immediately stopped. An angry woman charged in, banging the door open and shouting at Davidov. Two secretaries tried to take her back outside, without success. After a few minutes she broke down crying, and was led away. What had that been about? Davidov raised his eyes to heaven, shook his head and spoke briefly. Paul translated first – “As you can see, the people here expect me to solve every problem for them”, and then explained the whole episode. “She’s married to one of the central bank staff. He’s run off to live with another woman, and she wants Davidov to order him to return to her.”

After a shared smile, they were ready to start work. But Davidov held up his hand. “Before we discuss your analysis, I make a request please. At the end of our discussion today I will ask you

to personally perform one task before you leave our country. I will not tell you what the task is until then. But you must agree now that you will perform that task for me.” Mike tensed. What might the task be? For a disturbing moment, the thought that Davidov might ask him to shoot the Communist flew through his mind. But surely not! “All right, I agree.”

Mike explained the overall system and each of the criteria, emphasising that the assessments could only be hasty. So these confidential judgements could not be part of his written report on the central bank. Davidov quickly grasped the system, and a lively discussion proceeded for the next two hours. For eight of the 10 managers assessed (including the head of Personnel!) they agreed on most scores and confirmed key points of Mike’s commentary. In one case, where Mike had been doubtful about potential, Davidov explained some additional factors and history that changed Mike’s mind. And in another case where the Governor initially had strong doubts about the manager’s inexperience and skill gaps, Mike explained how those weaknesses could quickly be remedied and persuaded Davidov that manager could make a major contribution in a changed working environment.

Everyone sat back satisfied, as a secretary brought coffee in. After she had left, Davidov leaned forward. “Now you must keep your promise to perform a task for me. I want you to use your assessment system to evaluate me as a manager. You must do that objectively and professionally please. Then come here again tomorrow at the same time, with your translator, and tell me the result.” This brave and completely unexpected request startled Mike. Sure, he had done many one-to-one evaluations of top executives, but never through an interpreter! Having no choice, he consented.

After an early dinner at the hotel, Ernesto convened an extended team meeting in his room to plan completion of their work. He asked each team member in turn to present the key conclusions and recommendations for his own specialist area, and invited everyone to contribute by sharing relevant impressions and questions. Ernesto concluded with a short summary of the positive overall outcome. Then he looked around the team, and spoke quietly. “I am sure we all look forward to going home. But I have some bad news for you. Our charter flight will not arrive on Friday as scheduled. Headquarters has decided to save money by combining us with another mission now working in Azmangia. A larger charter plane will pick us up first, on Sunday evening. Then we will fly to Azmangia, overnight there, and collect that mission.”

Angry voices broke out: initial exclamations of disbelief, then complaints of unfairness, and finally demands to change that decision and suggestions about how to do that. When the tumult had subsided a little, Ernesto spoke again. “I am equally unhappy. I have tried everything to change that decision. I have sent fax messages and made telephone calls. I even spoke personally to our Managing Director. Unfortunately our technical assistance to former Soviet Union countries has been very expensive and budgetary concerns are taking priority. The accountants are now in charge. I’m sorry.”

A silent gloom descended. Mike spoke first. “Ernesto, I’m sure you’ve done your best. But maybe as a group we can think of something that will make a difference. The accountants, and the Managing Director, are afraid to spend too much money. Is there something we could do that would make them more afraid not to spend the money?”

Ideas quickly emerged, mostly centred on the obvious risk of flying a charter aircraft between two countries that were fighting an undeclared war. Ernesto wearily recounted the discussions he had already had. “Headquarters actually organised this change a week ago, without even telling us. Remember, we are a respected international organisation. All the necessary air traffic control clearances for this flight have been made, with special agreement from both countries.”



Davit snickered cynically. “So they won’t shoot us down. Instead they will just shoot me after we land. After all, I was born in Arbaigeo when my parents visited here many years ago, so I’m probably a spy.” Glad of a joke to ease the tension, everyone laughed.

Mike had a brainwave. “Wait a minute! Let’s take that thought further. Instead of arguing with the decision to change our charter, let’s accept it. But let’s also remind headquarters that our mission includes an American citizen with Arbaigeo parentage. We certainly can’t guarantee his safety once we’re on the ground in Azmangia. Probably even the government there can’t guarantee that. Anything could happen...”

A buzz of happy chatter broke out. Ernesto held up his hand. “Okay, I will try it! Let’s go to bed now. Please deliver your sections of the report to me by 2 PM tomorrow, and finish any other activity that you still have to complete with the central bank. Meet back here at 4 PM.”

The next morning found Mike (and Paul to translate) meeting privately with Davidov in his office. Mike handed Davidov his own assessment. The numbers, mostly high scores, needed no translation. After asking for a few clarifications, Davidov thanked Mike for performing his requested task. “Actually you give me a better assessment than I give to myself.” He paused. “But you have not told me your commentary.” Mike looked straight at him. “Governor, my commentary is just one sentence. I will read it. ‘A highly capable Chief Executive who is trying to do far too many things, creating an unsustainable workload that will endanger his health.’”

Paul hesitated and looked at Mike. Mike nodded, and Paul translated. Davidov listened closely, then shrugged. “I will not disagree. I do what I must. Thank you for your work for our central bank and for our country.” They shook hands warmly.

As soon as they were alone outside the office, Paul looked around and spoke quietly. “Mike, that discussion seemed very strange to me. Was it normal?”. Mike took a deep breath. “No, that was not normal. Even for a private conversation. And to have such a personal discussion through an interpreter is something new for me. Thank you for your help.”

Returning to the hotel to finish his report, Mike walked carefully around a tarpaulin on the steps. It covered what appeared to be a human body. Collecting his key, he asked the desk clerk what had happened. “No problem sir, just some criminal who was shot by someone. The police will take the body away soon.” Heading for the left, he ran into Eric. “Hi Eric. Did you see what was on the front steps?” Eric shrugged. “Yep, just like Los Angeles...”

The team gathered in Ernesto’s room at 3 PM. He looked solemn. “Gentlemen, I faxed to headquarters just as we agreed. And I just received a fax back.” He held it up, smiling. “Our charter flight will arrive on Friday morning as originally scheduled, for our return flight to Geneva.” A cheer broke out! The rest of the meeting was a happy buzz as everyone completed work and headed back to their rooms to pack.

Mike still had one commitment though. His local interpreter Armin had invited Mike to his home for dinner, and Mike had been glad to accept. 6 PM found Mike with his packing complete, waiting on the hotel steps as Armin drove up outside. As they drove to a suburban destination, Armin apologised for the dilapidated state of his small car and its occasionally misfiring engine. “You see Mike, this car – a Lada – is copied from a very old Italian model. And now we have no spare parts.”

Arriving at a tall apartment block, Armin carefully locked up the car in a small garage, chaining

the door shut with a padlock. He apologised again. “Mike, I am sorry. The elevators here are always broken – no one fixes anything anymore. We must now walk up six floors to my apartment.” They climbed grimy concrete stairs in twilight. None of the lighting worked. Every window in the stairwell was broken, and some had no glass at all. Armin unlocked a door and ushered Mike to pass through. “Welcome to my home!”

Mike stepped into Aladdin’s cave! Every wall of the small apartment was covered with two or three levels of paintings. The utilitarian furniture was topped with rich fabrics and magnificent carpets covered the entire floor. Armin’s mother and sister greeted him warmly, and the party was soon seated at the dinner table. Mike’s hostess proudly unveiled the main dish – spiced mincemeat swimming in butter. “This is a traditional food for honoured guests”, Armin explained. Mike had a strong aversion to fatty food, but he knew his hosts had paid dearly for it. Manfully, he ate two portions and showed great appreciation. They had dessert by candlelight as the power went off at 8.

Dinner over, Armin proudly showed Mike his collection of Soviet brandies and vodkas. “Some of these bottles are many years old – see the date on the label. You must taste them!” The ladies said good night and left them alone in the lounge. Tasting by candlelight began. Mike pleaded that he still had work to complete before departing and insisted on small measures for himself. But Armin made up for that, pouring himself large glasses. Every time Mike hinted that it was time to leave, Armin poured a new offering.

It was after 11 before Armin gave in. They stumbled down the stairs by torchlight. Weaving his way to the garage, Armin struggled with the padlock and chains. Finally they set off through the darkened streets. Mike was concerned. “Armin, the streets are empty. Is there a curfew?” Armin nodded. “Yes of course. Do not worry. No police at night, just maybe criminals if we are unlucky.” But apart from a few distant gunshots, the only danger came from Armin’s increasingly erratic driving. Arriving safely at the hotel, Mike bade Armin a fond but much relieved farewell.

An excited group loaded the minibus the next morning. But with all the purchases, there wasn’t enough room for everyone. Mike and Paul reluctantly agreed to follow the bus, and the hotel recruited an informal taxi for them. Ten minutes behind the bus, they left for the airport.

The trip passed uneventfully until the driver exclaimed loudly in Russian and braked hard. Paul paled. “What is it, Paul?”, Mike asked. “Police roadblock!”, Paul replied. He looked ill as two armed policemen approached the car. “Mike, remember your promise on the plane.” They waited tensely, trying to look calm, as the police ordered the driver out of the car and examined his papers. After a few words, they walked away. The driver got back in, raised his eyebrows, and spoke in Russian: “проверка лицензии”. Paul exhaled slowly. “License check”. They laughed together for several minutes.

They arrived at the airport to find Eric waiting outside the terminal door. “Everything okay?”, Mike asked breezily. Eric frowned. “Not sure. They say there is no private aircraft scheduled this morning, just two normal domestic flights. Ernesto is still talking with them. Everyone else is waiting over there outside the terminal. With no plane to board, they won’t let us in.”

The team waited nervously for half an hour. Then Ernesto emerged and joined them. “Sorry fellows, but I can’t get anywhere with them. Their English is not good, but we sorted out the facts. Yes, they originally had approval for our plane today, but then they received further information. That flight was cancelled and there will be a replacement flight two days later. And they are air traffic control – it is not their job to check further. We will have to go back to the hotel so I can follow up and find out what’s gone wrong. Paul, find us some taxis please.”

A groan went up. Mike gazed skyward. He saw a large aircraft a long way up – or was that a smaller aircraft at a lower height? It didn't look like a commercial airliner. "Look up there!", he shouted. "Could that be our plane?" Ernesto took one look, and sprinted towards the terminal entrance. "Paul, come with me! I need an interpreter!" Paul raced after him. The plane soon disappeared.

Forty long minutes later, they came back smiling. "All sorted! We were just in time. Our charter is waiting."

A happy team quickly completed migration and customs formalities. Boarding didn't take long, even though their extensive baggage overflowed into the passenger area. The crew – a pilot, co-pilot and stewardess – were welcoming. The pilot, a lanky American, grinned and shook hands with everyone. "I don't mind telling you, I was feeling pretty nervous up there for a while. My international flight plan tells me land here to pick you guys up, and local air traffic control tells me I'm an unauthorised aircraft and must leave the area immediately. And there's a war going on around here. Good job you spotted me – I couldn't have kept circling much longer!"

After a smooth take off the stewardess served a champagne breakfast. Hilarity abounded as the seven team members swapped seats and stories. Stumbles over the luggage increased as the champagne kept coming. The flight monitor showed their flight path over the Black Sea. A cheer resounded 30 minutes into the flight as Eric announced that "by my precise calculations, we have just passed beyond the range of ground-to-air SAM missiles!" A collective groan followed 20 minutes later as the stewardess announced "I am sorry, we have just run out of champagne", followed by another cheer as she added "but we still have some nice red wine".

Darkness was falling as they landed at Geneva's private aircraft terminal. Eric had told them not to worry about customs, and he'd done similar trips before. Looking around at all the luggage, Mike wasn't so sure. Anyway too late now, he thought. But Eric knew the ropes. After a cursory passport check, they walked out the door onto an empty corridor with two signposts – left for Switzerland, right for France. After fond farewells, the team disbursed to their next destinations. Mission accomplished!

A year later, Mike's contacts with the team had faded away. Armin had written once to say he was still hoping to leave Arbaigeo one day, and was surviving okay on freelance work. Paul got his American citizenship, and moved to a lucrative job with a multinational company keen to expand into Russian-speaking countries. Everyone else was busy with other projects in other places.

One morning Mike noticed on the office schedule that a mission had recently returned from Arbaigeo. What had they found there, he wondered? He organised an informal lunch with Stefan, chief of that mission, to catch up with events. Actually yes, a lot of progress had been made, he was told. Mike asked about the Governor. "Yes, he's quite good! A bit young for the job in his 30's, but he's a Western-trained economist and has started really well." Mike persisted. "What happened to the previous Governor – Davidov?" Stefan looked a bit blank. "I don't know. We were focused on technical topics and no-one mentioned him much." He thought hard. "Oh yes, I remember now... Apparently he had a heart attack and died suddenly."

Mike felt no surprise, just a pang of regret. He mentally saluted a forgotten hero.

