

Aleksandre Cheishvili in Emigration

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Abstract: In the period of Aleksandre Cheishvili's (1903-1962) life and activity in Georgia, his novel "Lelo" (1938) became the most significant specimen of his literary legacy. In it the process of establishment of collective farming in the countryside was reflected with tendentiousness widely characteristic of Georgian literature of the Soviet period. However, "Lelo" was not an exception, and the main purpose of the majority of Cheishvili's literary works lay in the laudation of the reality of the period. The government of the time appreciated Cheishvili's loyal service, showering him with honours. Bearing this in mind, it is hard to explain what made him leave his family and become an emigrant. As is known, in 1958 the writer crossed into West Germany and asked for political asylum there. In the opinion of a large part of Georgian society, Cheishvili was sent to Germany by the Soviet intelligence service. The validity of this view is confirmed by the letters sent by the writer in emigration to members of his family and various officials, without any restrictions. (The letters are preserved in the Giorgi Leonidze Museum of Literature in Tbilisi)

Apart from the cited material, search for his manuscripts in Germany and bringing them to Georgia will be extremely significant for an in-depth study of Cheishvili's emigre life. They will help to form a clearer idea of the real circumstances that determined his going into exile and the German period of his life.

Key words: Aleksandre Cheishvili, emigration, intelligence service, Germany, Zittermann

In the period of Aleksandre Cheishvili's (1903-1962) life and activity in Georgia, his novel "Lelo" (1938) turned into a rather sensational most significant specimen of his literary legacy of the

1940s-50s Georgian literature. This work, written in conformity with the ideological principles of socialist realism, in which the process of the establishment of collective economy in the countryside was depicted with tendentiousness, broadly characteristic of our literature of the Soviet period, earned the author great literary success not only in Georgia but in the entire Soviet Union as well.

Thus, modified versions of Cheishvili's novel were printed several times in Georgia; the work was published in Russian too, and in 1950 the author was awarded the Stalin Prize for it. In the view of the critics of the period, Cheishvili's "Lelo" was not only "a notable triumph of Georgian prose" (S. Chilaia) but it was also a gain of the entire Soviet literature.

Today such appreciation of Cheishvili's novel is unacceptable not only because of the outmodedness and falsity of the epoch-making events described in it but from the angle of literary mastery as well. In particular, with its literary merits and skill of writing it is clearly short of such works, written on the same theme, as "The Abduction of the Moon" by K. Gamsakhurdia, "Gvadi Bigva" by L. Kiacheli, and "The Dawn of Kolkheti" by K. Lortkipanidze.

Furthermore, Cheishvili's work fails to evince – even in disguised form – the trend of antiutopian depiction of the epochal reality with which the cited novels (especially "The Abduction of the Moon") are more or less characterized.

From the above standpoint, in the writer's works, "Lelo" is not an exception, and the principal aim of most of his writings was primarily glorification of the epoch-making reality with ideological tendentiousness, for which the government of the time rewarded him generously. This is confirmed by the fact that the writer was frequently sent abroad on missions, which was a rather rare occurrence in those days.

Taking the above-said into account, it would seem to be hard to explain and at first sight incomprehensible what made him leave his family and go into exile. By this step he not only severed his links with his homeland but actually deprived all his earlier work of value:

his works the main objective of which was laudation of the socialist era would be of little use for one emigrated to Western Europe.

The writer himself stressed that the step taken by him should by no means be assessed as betrayal of his home country. This is made clear by an excerpt from a letter he sent from Germany to his family: "Most difficult for me is to ask you the first question: "How are you?" I think that you and our people from there will view me disapprovingly and will retort with reproach: How can we be, what do you yourself think. Indeed I have put you to a hard experience. But God is my witness, I have done nothing in bad faith and evil intentions. All this is a continuation of what I sacrificed throughout my conscious life to myself and frequently your interests too."

As is known, in the autumn of 1958 Cheishvili was on a literary mission in Berlin, the capital of the German Democratic Republic, from where he moved to West Germany and asked the authorities for political asylum.

In the opinion of the writer's German friend Evgenia Zittermann, in taking this step the writer acted primarily "with the best intention and good will, and wished to acquaint the people of the East with the West, find common language, which was gradually facing the threat of disappearance. Yes, he took this step in order to support and help all persons, for the benefit of all representatives of the intelligentsia, bypassing the tyranny and dictatorship of the Soviet apparatus and its unreasonable government." By taking this step, he not only abandoned his family but cut all relations with it. He also gave up a decent income of a university lecturer, life of material security, and broke this "golden web" into which the stratum of intelligentsia living in the Soviet Union was being enmeshed. Now he could share his views with the West without obstacles".

Unlike Zittermann, a sizable part of Georgian society considered Cheishvili's decision to stay in West Germany as the result of pressure of Soviet intelligence. One of the decisive factors in Cheishvili's decision must have doubtless been his good mastery of European languages, especially German.

As is obvious from the letters written by Cheishvili during his emigration (for Cheishvili's private letters see: A. Cheishvili's private fonds, #27102, G. Leonidze Museum of Georgian Literature), the writer did not consider the step taken by him as betrayal of his homeland and relatives but, on the contrary, as a cause in favour of the country. He repeatedly assured his wife and children that this decision, as a result of which he broke with his fatherland only for a definite period of time, was taken by him primarily in the interests of the country rather than to improve his well-being.

If the writer was sincere in his letters sent from Germany in discussing similar matters, and he did not write such things as an eye-wash for the "shepherds" of his family here, then these letters strengthen us in our suspicion that he was indeed sent into emigration by special organs of the government to carry out a definite task.

In confirmation of this I shall adduce a fragment of his letter of 11 March 1959 to his children: "I am sending you this letter as serious, rational young people prepared for life. You remember how many times you wrote the topic: "Patriotic Motifs in the Works of Ilia, Akaki and Vazha" when you prepared to enter the University. Our writers always strove for the welfare of their fatherland, placing the interests of the country and people before their personal well-being. It was so in the past and it is so and must be today too.

I begin in this tone because I felt wounded by Rezo's words: "Daddy, for such a long time you took care of us so well, and what has happened to you now?" My love, thought and care for you have not diminished in the least. Today I experience this more acutely than ever. But at the same time I am thinking about our people, and especially our youth. When I wrote anything, I always had our youth before my eyes; I endeavoured, as a writer, to make my small contribution to the shaping of the consciousness, thoughts and sentiments of our young people.

But you will naturally ask what has this to do with my coming here. The point is that I always felt it acutely that some of our youths do not have a right and clear idea of the reality here,

which has a hindering influence on the moulding of their consciousness. And if I could be of any use in this, I should not spare myself”.

Proceeding from the foregoing, in his letters to his family, Cheishvili occasionally tried to represent the Western world, idealized, by a sizable part of Soviet citizens, with tendentiousness characteristic of socialist ideology, depicting its dark sides in contrastive colours.

For example: “Here one person does not think about the other. The unslaked thirst of getting rich, making money determines here the relation between men, morality and taste. I have already written to you how awfully alienated people are here from one another. People living in the same house, working in the same office are here distanced from one another more than casual acquaintances are in Georgia. Of course they do not lack outward courtesy but they do not care absolutely for one another ... Now I felt acutely how depressed and callous this society is ... Real fellowship, comradeship, sharing sorrows and joys are alien to people here ... It is so in Germany, and all say that this estrangement of people from one another is felt more acutely in England and America, even France is no exception in this respect. Till today I had not seen Western life from this angle and standpoint. From the psychological and spiritual point of view this has been a real discovery for me and I hope to use the results of this journey especially for our youth. I think, this will be very useful.”

As is clearly seen from Cheishvili’s letters sent to his family from Germany; he was so fond of his family that physical separation from his wife and children caused him great mental pain, which was aggravated by the fact that his elder son was a gravely traumatized patient from birth. While the writer was in Georgia he took his sick son to renowned clinics of the Soviet Union, and when in emigration he constantly sent medicines and advice and instructions from German physicians.

Taking the foregoing into consideration, I shall stress finally that Cheishvili's going into exile was not a step taken on his own will but an assignment received from organs of Soviet intelligence.

The systematic and unrestricted correspondence that the writer in exile maintained with his family in Georgia and with officials here may primarily serve as evidence of the view expressed by me above about the cause of his emigration. Furthermore, the writer's correspondence with these persons did not cease from the first days of his going into exile, the same is true of his telephone links. He frequently sent his family members articles of everyday use and medicines, which could obviously not happen without permission of the appropriate organs. We should not overlook the fact that all this took place at the zenith of Soviet dictatorship – at the time when Cheishvili was already declared enemy of his own country and traitor.

I shall cite a couple of fragments of Cheishvili's letters of his period of exile in support of the above statement: 1. "I have sent medicines to Gia (his son – *A. N.*). I am also looking for the medicines for Rezo's (his son – *A. N.*) friend" (fragment from a letter of 18 January 1959, sent to his wife). 2. "I am sending you a few things, and shall send more (man's checked shirts: I am told you should not boil them, or the elastic will get spoiled)" (letter sent to his family on 11 March 1959).

The writer urged his spouse that should their family face any problem she should by all means apply to Irakli, Isidore and even Vasili Pavlovich.

For example, 1. "I need the editions of "Lelo" in Georgian and Russian ... perhaps you could tell Irakli to send these to me" (fragment of a letter sent to his wife on 31 December 1958). 2. "I have written to Irakli that you should be given the royalties of the books. I asked him that I should not be released from the Academy. Tell Irakli and he will help you in sending the letter. I hope everyone will help you, before I arrive" (excerpt from his letter of 18 January 1959). 3. "I have sent the newspaper clippings to Irakli, Isidore and Vasili Pavlovich too" (fragment of an undated letter). 4. "Why didn't you

write anything about the publishing-house and the Academy? I wrote to Isidore and Irakli about this. Let me know, so that I could take measures from here, before I arrive (26 March 1959). 5. Books, send me the books through Irakli. 6. Books, I asked you about the books in every letter. Lately, I wrote to Irakli and Vasili Pavlovich about this (24 May 1959). 7. "Apply again regarding this (implied is help in sending his own works to him – *A. N.*) to Irakli, Isidore, and if necessary to Vasili Pavlovich" (24 May 1959). 8. "Tell Irakli, Isidore and Vasili Pavlovich too that this is necessary for my speedy return" (24 May 1959). 9. Apparently anxious over the delay in the financial support to his family from relevant organs, promised to him before he went into exile, he wrote to his family: "Today I am sending several letters to Tbilisi and Moscow ... I have no news from you. Have they really cut all supplies off from you ... or you receive something from somewhere? I am writing to the leaders then about it" (15 May 1959).

I think it is not at all difficult to ascertain the identities of the persons referred to by their first names in the letters. In particular, there is no doubt that Irakli is Abashidze, the then first Secretary of the Union of Georgian Writers; Isidore is Dolidze, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party, who also proved a relative of the writer, while Vasili Pavlovich is Mzhavanadze, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party.

Cheishvili not only warned his spouse to ask these persons without any constraint for assistance in settling her family problems and in publishing his works but himself wrote to the cited persons letters of analogous content.

To prove that Cheishvili took the decision to stay in exile on the order of relevant organs, here are further fragments of the letters to his wife sent by him from Germany:

1. "My sojourn here for this period of time will be given official status at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow. This takes some time and I beg you to view this affair calmly and dispassionately" (26 March 1959). 2. "It is not my fault, God: "My situation resembles that

of a fly that steps on a saucer with honey and gets stuck to it; removing one leg with difficulty, its other leg gets stuck". 3. "If I linger here and cannot return for such a long time, it is because I could not do otherwise. My entire biography, my background, the entire trend of my nature and character made it necessary for me to work in this line. For this I renounced much that was personally pleasant and useful, conditions of peaceful and ordered work, and caused much pain to you. But this happened involuntarily ... You should stand in my shoes. I too have much pain and woe."

Bearing in mind that the letters sent to Georgia by a writer having become an emigrant would be read by the special organs before the addressees, he could naturally not open his heart to the end and, notwithstanding his exile abroad on a special mission, constant thought of and anxiety over his family left hostage in his homeland, compelled him to choose every word with special care in letters sent to his close relatives and friends.

To give a correct and well-argued answer to questions connected with the life of the writer in exile special interest attaches to the following letter sent by him to his wife on 31 December 1958 (the writer always refers to her with her nickname Kutka), entitled "Kutka, my dear beloved!"

I received your letter and shed many tears... I have no one dearer than you in this world. *How can I do anything that will sever me from you, Liako and Rezo (the writer's children - A. N.) our relatives and friends, our land and country, our friends and comrades, that will wipe out and do away with my work and the little service I have done to my people* (here and elsewhere the bold is mine - A. N.). How much joy we have experienced together, how many years we have been harnessed to the yoke of life. I felt grieved and my eyes were filled with tears to learn that you thought for a minute or a second that I can desert you, or do something that can sever me from you. Everything I did I did for a good cause and I assure you it will not end badly. Fear nothing. Here too I am working for our culture and nothing will change in our family life. Neither will I be expelled from the Academy (I am sure of this) nor will they

discontinue publishing my books, and I shall find you well and in good health. I have sent quite a lot of medicines to Gia (as noted above, the writer's elder son was suffering from a congenital trauma) and shall send home more. I shall send you some other things too. When you write, give the sizes and wishes ...

I need the Georgian and Russian editions of "Lelo"... perhaps you could tell Irakli and he will send them to me" (Museum of Georgian Literature, Private fonds of A. Cheishvili, case # 27102).

Although very soon after Cheishvili went into exile, he was declared traitor to his own fatherland and was expelled from the Union of Writers, he not only said nothing about this in his letters sent from Germany but, on the contrary, he asked his spouse and chiefs of relevant departments to take active measures towards issuing his works and giving him appropriate royalties, e. g. "Has the second volume of my Selected Works come out?" Has the *Zarya Vostoka* published my books. Does the *Mnatobi* continue printing my "Golden Cobweb" (title of the writer's work – *A. N.*) (from a letter of 26 March 1959 sent to his wife).

The first and greatest request, repeated urgently in almost all the letters he sent from Germany was to have his books published in the Soviet Union sent to him. For example, "send me all the Russian and Georgian editions of "Lelo". I need the selected Works" too, my book of essays, "Vazha-Pshavela" ... I wrote to Irakli too about this but have not received a reply. Perhaps you could arrange it through Irakli" (from a letter sent to his family on 11 March 1959).

Cheishvili persistently requested his books to be sent to him primarily because he intended to revise his works basically. From this standpoint he seems to have spent much effort on rewriting "Lelo". Thus, in a letter sent by him to his cousin A. Cheishvili, who resided in Argentina, in connection with the above-said, he wrote: "I worked continuously on my novel "Lelo". I rewrote it entirely, so that even I cannot recognize it. This took all my time, energy and money. I have not finished this work yet."

Despite the obstacles encountered by Cheishvili on the road of establishing himself in a foreign country, he still managed to pave

his way in the literary arena, and his works and related material were printed from time to time in the press of the host country and was broadcast on radio. In an undated letter sent to his wife he writes: "Two days ago, my article was published in the major European newspaper *Die Welt*. The article, entitled "Thoughts in front of a billboard post", took up almost half a page; it dealt with local cinematography. It had a great response in the local literary circles. I have sent its clippings to Irakli, Isidore and Vasili Pavlovich too."

The writer in exile proves to have engaged in active and successful negotiations with leaders of German publishing houses on the issuing of his books. However, at the same time the writer often expressed his doubt whether the publishers might not abstain from printing his books because of their socialist content. Nevertheless, he did everything in order to deliver on time the books contracted for printing. In one of his letters the writer wrote, "The Publisher may not print these books and reject them owing to their socialist content. Yet I shall submit them and do my duty. If I submit the books and they refuse to publish them, I shall not be obliged to return the royalties I have received. But it is necessary to fulfill this formal-judicial side, that is submission of the books and translations... Here I cannot act irresponsibly and leave outstanding debts. This will be an unseemly act on the part of a Soviet writer".

According to the speculations spread in Georgia in connection with Cheishvili's going into exile, the secret plans of the writer sent to Germany by Soviet Security with a special task were exposed before long by the local intelligence. Along with other factors, German intelligence had ground to doubt the sincerity of the writer who sought political asylum in this particular case, for this step was taken not by a person inwardly opposed to Soviet power but a winner of the Stalin Prize, a writer whose almost single theme was tendentious laudation of Soviet reality.

According to the information of Evgenia Zittermann, a friend of the writer in Germany, the fact that during the entire period of his sojourn in the country the writer was officially given "only two months, extended at the expiry of this time to another two

months, with no other guarantee. The Nuremberg Federal Office explained this decision by their "lack of knowledge of the motive of his flight from the Soviet Union".

The non-stable life of Cheishvili in Germany is accounted for by Zittermann by the persecution and harassment suffered by him on the part of Soviet intelligence notwithstanding his coming to this country. According to her, the writer, turned emigrant, "was forced to break with the outer world, as the homeland left by him with good intentions, more precisely, his political homeland or the country called the "Big Brother" gave him no respite – at times by request, and at others by threat: by request – through official routes, and by threat – secretly. He was obliged to change his address often, to avoid persecution, he was ready to write demands and conduct negotiations, for he thought that in this way he could ward off persecution of his innocent family members. The opposite side took these attempts on his part with mistrust, giving rise to new suspicions".

In the Soviet Union, harsh punitive measures were taken on the initiative of the relevant organs. In this case it did not matter whether Cheishvili had taken this step of his own free will or at the request of the intelligence service. Such punitive measures were necessary in either case: if the writer indeed left the Soviet Union, given the reality of the time, such action on his part could certainly not be left unresponded: but if he was an agent sent by the authorities of the Soviet country to a hostile and ideologically opposed state, such measures were the more relevant to screen it.

And indeed, within a month and a half of the writer's going into exile, on 7 January 1959 on the decision of the Presidium of the Union of Georgian Writers Cheishvili was unanimously expelled from the Writer's Union (Cheishvili's private fonds №27106).

The writer, who stayed in West Germany for residence, actually failed to settle at some one place for a long time, moving from city to city. In particular, at various times he lived in such cities of Germany as Bonn, Frankfurt, Munich, Cologne, Wiesbaden, Ansbach, Hamburg, Nuremberg...

Cheishvili spent the last period of his life in Essen and Alsfeld. According to the information supplied by his son Rezo, there he had established close, friendly relations with a local teacher of Russian, Evgenia Zittermann, frequently referred to above. She helped the writer to gain a deeper mastery of the Russian language. Their friendship was facilitated by the fact of Evgenia not being married and living alone.

Unfortunately, due to premature death, Cheishvili had no time to carry out his great plans in literary work. He died of heart attack in Alsfeld on 6 September 1962, at the age of 69. His friend and virtually only caretaker Zittermann had him buried there, keeping his writings in her own archive. In the words of the writer's son Rezo Cheishvili, within almost a year of his death Ms. Zittermann sent their family (on 1 August 1963) an extensive (19 pages) obituary written by herself. The obituary describes Cheishvili's literary activity in detail.

Ms. Zittermann, saddened by the tragic death of her friend and her own personal loss, concluded the obituary with the hope that "thanks to the new works he had written in the West people would take at least a slightly more compassionate attitude to Cheishvili's move and that his works would vindicate him in the eyes of his homeland and the people on whom he inflicted such unrelieved pain".

Conjecturally, Evgenia Zittermann died some ten years ago and her private archive, in which Cheishvili's materials too must be preserved, is kept at the home of her niece Lotar Model living in Aachen, Germany. According to Mr. Rezo Cheishvili, he was supplied with this information by Evgenia's niece by telephone.

Apart from letters sent to his family, three letters (two fully, and a fragment of one) sent by the writer to Sasha (Alexandre) Cheishvili, son-in-law of the émigré Georgian writer Akaki Papava, who lived in Buenos Aires, Argentina, are kept in the G. Leonidze Museum of Georgian Literature. Interest in these letters is primarily due to the fact that, unlike the letters sent to Georgia, in which the

author was especially careful in expressing his views, he evinced much more freedom in conveying his secret thoughts.

The study of Cheishvili's archive has shown that the materials traced by me in connection with his life and work in exile are incomplete and they give only a fragmentary picture of the main points of the writer's life in Germany, far from his homeland.

The first and foremost to be done in the future is to track the archival material connected with his émigré life in Germany and to bring it to Georgia. Apart from shedding new light on the real circumstances that compelled Cheishvili to go into exile and the German period of his life, it will give a deeper insight into the *weltanschauung* of the writer's literary world, at least partially freed from the restrictive ideological dogmas of Soviet censorship.

Archival Material:

1. Private fonds of Aleksandre Cheishvili: №27102, 27106. G. Leonidze Museum of Georgian Literature.