The Little Polish Book of Tbilisi, 2022.

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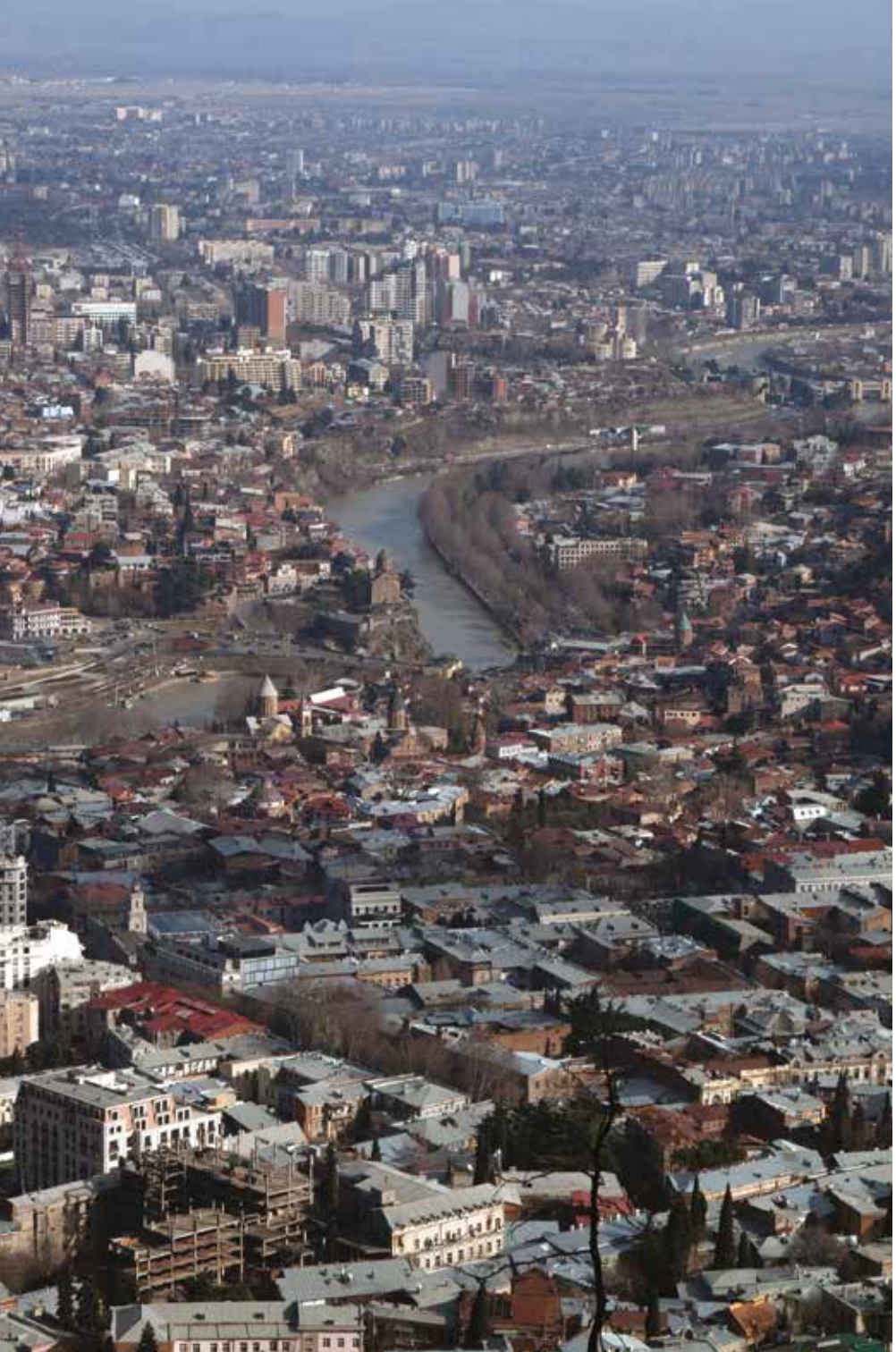
POLISH INSTITUTE TBILISI

I welcome you, Tiflis, delightful with your orchards and springs. Hello, the towns that have spread over the Kura river, whose memories go back dozens of centuries, changing their form seven times after seven demolitions! I welcome you, pride of the nation, telling its thirtieth century history!...

Several small rivers cross the road to Tiflis, which during the floods drown carts, horses and people in their currents, becoming dangerous for travelers. They have been considering building bridges across, which was probably already done to facilitate military communication.

On the larger river Hram, since Persian times there has been a very old bridge. Travelers usually stop here and go down to the lower corridors and to the gallery arranged under the bridge and, as a memento of their stay, they write their names, poems and sentences with a pencil on the walls in different languages. I found only one inscription in Polish: "Poland has not died yet."

– from the memoirs of Mateusz Gralewski, detailing his years spent in exile in the Caucasus, published in Lwów in 1877.



1905. Tbilisi is rapidly transforming. Builders are busy in every part of the city, as the Russian authorities have made substantial efforts to ensure it is the largest city in the Caucasus, with the most developed infrastructure, as their administrative, economic and cultural centre, With more than 160,000 people, it is also a migrant city, less than half of its population having been born here. A majority of newspapers and journals of the Caucasus are printed in the city, among them 19 Russian, 10 Armenian, 6 Georgian, 2 Azerbaijani and 1 German language edition. By 1913, there will be 150 different educational institutions established, with gymnasiums for women as well as men. The city has 5 theatres, 8 cinema halls, 10 hospitals, 37 hotels, 10 public libraries. There are Orthodox, Armenian, Catholic and Lutheran Churches, 2 Synagogues and 2 Mosques, and some 600 manufacturers and factories.* They say that the character of this city lies in the fact that it has none, but rather it contains a multiplicity of identities.

In February of this year, the Polish architect and long-term resident, Aleksander Szymkiewicz (Russified as Shimkevich), is in attendance as members of the Technical Commission of Tilfis Governate arrive to examine the new funicular on Daniel Chonqadze street, checking the conditions of operation, questioning the city engineers. They note the carriages will take six minutes for ascent and six more for descent and Iveria newspaper reports that they are 'also pleased with the machine-brakes designed to stop the carriage on its way from the top. After using the brakes, the carriage stopped immediately'. Permission is granted to open in one month.

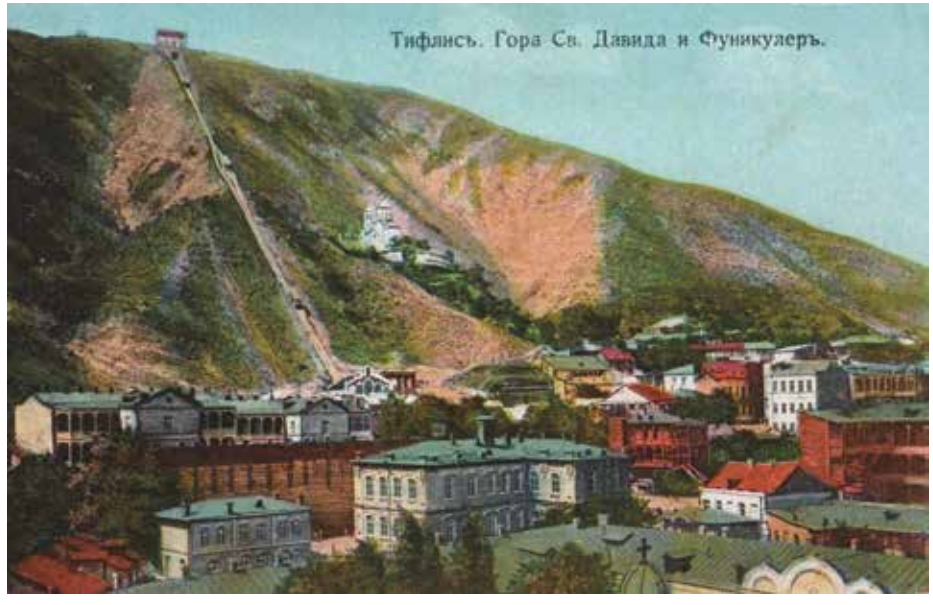
**Revaz Gachechiladze, Tbilisi at the Beginning of the 20th Century.*

It's a welcome distraction from the increasing social chaos, the ever growing discontent with the shortcomings of the Romanov autocracy. Recently, in St. Petersburg, Imperial troops opened fire on workers attending a demonstration led by a priest, with hundreds reported dead, provoking massive protests across the Empire. Demanding change, there seems no end to these strikes and stoppages, as the proletariat is boldly and resolutely preparing for battle. The Tsar's uncle, the General-Governor of Moscow, Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, is assassinated in broad daylight, a bomb tossed into his carriage by a poet born in Warsaw.

Robberies, murders, mob law are becoming commonplace, public officials targeted for assassination. Here in Tbilisi angry railway workers cause disruption by toppling over a locomotive at the depot. There is disagreement between the Governor-General and the municipal councilors on how to deal with this increasingly tense labour situation, as Cossacks charge into the large crowds of demonstrators on Golovinsky Prospect.

Imperial soldiers are being sent to Guria to deal with a Menshevik inspired insurgency there. The peasants are demanding abolition of bondage to the aristocracy, the church and the state, the confiscation of princely and monastery lands, free transfer of agricultural resources to the peasantry. Where will this all end?

In Baku, there has been bloody slaughter in fighting between Tatars and Armenians. In the Far East, after a long siege, Port Arthur has fallen to Japanese troops; before long the Tsar will soon lose almost his entire Pacific and Baltic fleets to that conflict, as the Russians suffer humiliating defeat. Many are predicting there is far worse to come. The United States consul in Batumi reports home: 'As far as can be



seen we are on the high road to complete anarchy and social chaos...'

As officials gather on March 27th, it's too pleasant a morning to think about such things, as a priest from St. David gives thanks and bestows his blessings on the funicular, as the Mayor cuts a blue ribbon, the assembled crowd applauds and cheers, and the inaugural official passengers – among them the Vice-Consul of Belgium – step on board the carriages for the journey to the top. As one crowded carriage rises, the empty one descends to gather more guests. When they reach the upper station, with its two white towers topped with onion domes, the dignitaries are offered breakfast and champagne on the second floor of the building. There are, of course, many toasts.

For the event to run smoothly, later it is revealed that it was deemed necessary to bring in passengers in coaches and pay them to use the funicular – as so many members of the public had voiced misgivings, fearing that the cable rope would easily break. No mishaps occur this day; soon enough there are long queues to get tickets and it becomes a popular and enduring attraction.

From the heights of Mtatsminda, they behold a tremendous vista. The hills around the city are bare but there are fine views of the mountain ranges towards of Tusheti and Kazbeg, with their snowcapped peaks. In the immediate vicinity, to the right there is the 'Oriental' quarter, situated within the old city walls, crowded narrow steep streets and wooden houses – 'perched one above the other on the mountain-slope, like the steps of a staircase' as Karl Baedeker puts it – under the fortress of Narikala, which dates from the 4th century, sitting crumbling atop the peak of a ridge. (On the other side of the ridge lies the Botanical Gardens, recently expanded.) Across the far bank of the river from the Meidan, on an outcrop of rock, the ancient Metekhi Church sits alongside the forbidding walls of the Tsarist prison. Szymkiewicz can easily picture the water collectors and sellers that congregate below there, the camel caravans once resting by the river crossing in their thousands before the opening of the railways ushered in the modern age.

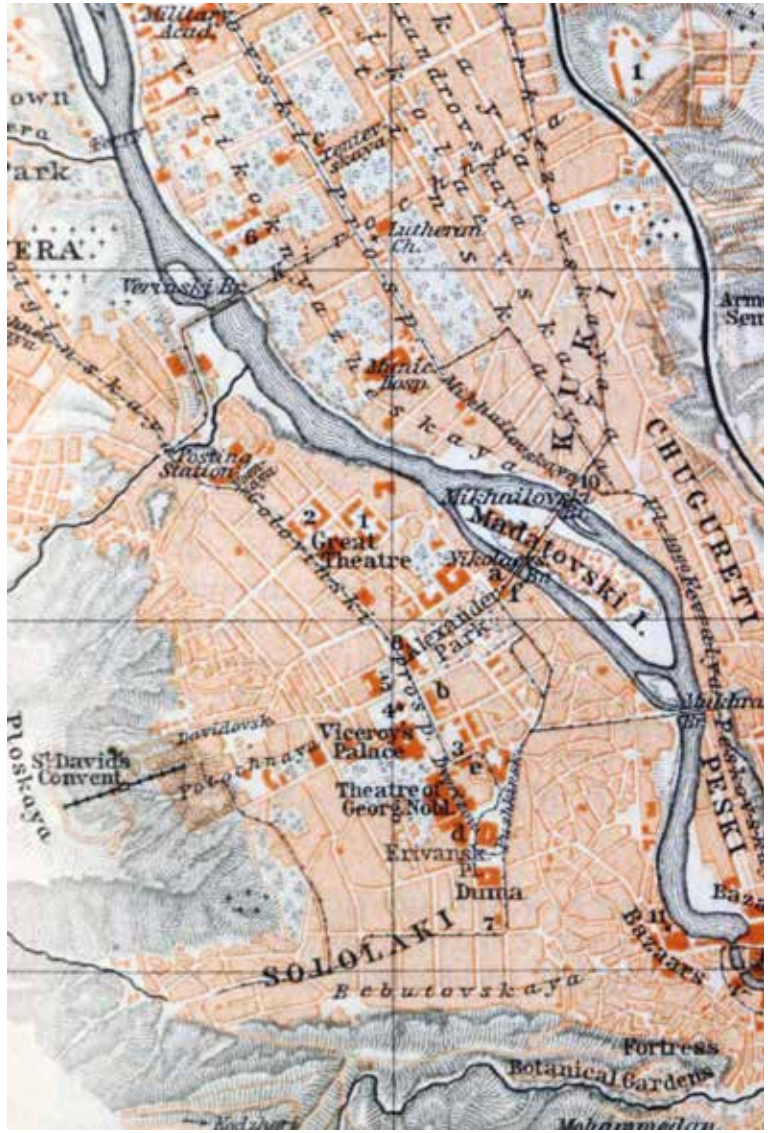
Of the old town, the Italian traveler Luigi Villari notes: 'The most interesting feature of the bazaar, and indeed of the whole of Tiflis, is the population... At Tiflis you find specimens of all these races, and in the bazaars you can hear all their languages spoken, with the addition of such extraneous tongues as Polish, German, French, Italian, Hindustani, Sart, and sometimes even Chinese.'

It is a Belgian engineer, Alphonse Roby, at the end of the 19th century who proposed to construct a cable railway to ascend to the top of the Mount Mtatsminda. At first there was some opposition in the council, worries that it will be simply an expensive luxury, only to be afforded when the city has full prosperity – probably in a 1,000 years time some cynics forecast. Nevertheless, the project was approved in 1900 and the Belgian consortium began work in September 1903, with the help of French and Italian expertise. (They hope to reap a handsome profit on their 45 year lease, after which time they will pass the funicular over to the city council.) It will consist of three stations, the midway point offering access to St. David's Church and the Pantheon of Writers and Public Figures.

These stations are designed by Aleksander Szymkiewicz. He lives nearby, in a modest townhouse also of his own design, some 500 metres down the street from this location, past the city water reservoir. As the funicular opens, Szymkiewicz is 46 years old. This will be his last project, as he has only a few more years on this earth.

Born in St. Petersburg to a noble Polish family, he came to Tbilisi in 1885, working as City Architect. (He is not the first Pole to hold this position – that particular honour goes to Narcyz Zborzewski, there some 40 years before, whose work here is little known.) Elected as a deputy of the City Council between 1897 and 1901, more recently Szymkiewicz teaches at the Academy of Fine Arts. From the top of the funicular, 727 metres above sea level, here he will find a cool breeze while the air stands still in the streets below. Here he can see a familiar and captivating panorama of the city, in which he has played a significant role in shaping. His role as an architect has surely been to create 'something beyond finite perfection... lofty, aspiring and mysterious'. He might well agree with the opinion of writer Charles Marvin: 'Tiflis is thus a place of the future.' It is also, as he will be well aware, a city of unrest and subterfuge, of discord and militancy.

Adjacent the old town, Szymkiewicz can see the substantial new buildings of Sololaki district, homes of successful merchants and artisans, mostly Armenian. The European architects working in the city demonstrate their influences: Neo-Renaissance, Neo-Baroque, Italian Gothic and Art Nouveau. Almost directly below, as he stands at the summit of the funicular, looking due east, he spies the main square of the city – then called Paskevich-Erivansky Square (the modern day Freedom Square), named after a General who suppressed the Polish Rebellion of 1830-31. Here stands the city hall with its central clock tower, where the architect has spent many working days and nights. (It is the only original building in this locale that remains today.) He can also see another of his fine buildings, Tbilisi Passage, which will survive until demolition in 2003. Putting pen to paper, the city planner and architect may well be concerned with posterity, thinking about



function and use, blending practical purpose with aesthetic beauty, yet still their great works can be easily undone. While they hope to create buildings and public spaces that will endure, they cannot said to be fortune tellers. From the so-called square, which is more of a circle, whose name will change several times, the main thoroughfare of the city runs north. Golovinsky Prospect (Shota Rustaveli Avenue today) is intended to be the heart of Tbilisi, a broad tree-lined boulevard host to a number of institutions of governance, finance, commerce and culture, as well as the location of the Viceroy's palace itself – now the Georgian National Youth Palace – and its luxuriant gardens. (It is there that all the decisions are made that determine the fate of the country, and there that Georgian independence will be declared years later, in 1918)

The first Viceroy, appointed in 1844 at the age of 62, was the Russian nobleman and field-marshal, Mikhail Semyonovich Vorontsov. He brought with him a Polish wife, Countess Katarzyna Branicka – though she was said to prefer the society life of Odessa or the climate of Crimea. He encouraged tea plantations in western Georgia, introduced new fruits and vegetables. His many reforms, along with economic and cultural developments (even bringing an Italian opera company to perform in Tbilisi), were popular enough for a monument to be erected to him in 1867, entirely paid for by public subscription.

Next to the Viceroy's palace, stands Saint Alexander Nevsky Military Cathedral (a Neo-Byzantine structure to be demolished by the Soviets in 1930, the national parliament building standing there today) and opposite is 'The Temple of Glory', the Caucasian Military History Museum intended to glorify the Tsar's army; that is yet to

open (and will later house the Museum of Fine Arts). Tbilisi has just installed an electric tramway, though many of the older quarters have no running water, and only the central streets are paved, yet this area is considered to be comparable to the great cities of Europe in its elegance. As Mateusz Gralewski recalled: 'Next to the houses with cloisters and flat roofs, there are buildings that seem to have been taken from Dresden or Paris.'

On the far bank of the river, the city continues to expand. One bridge across leads to the military barracks – with some 35,000 troops, men in uniform are everywhere – and beyond those lies the arsenal; another bridge leading from Alexander Park crosses Madatovski Island.* There he can see the municipal hospital, the area of 'Neu Tbilisi' around today's Marjanishvili Square where the German settlement was established over 80 years before, the Gothic spire of the Lutheran Saints Peter and Paul church an impressive landmark, and further beyond that the train station and railroad depot, with the less salubrious housing for the workers.

The first (and only) Russian Imperial census of 1897 tells us that there were 14,903 Poles living in the Caucasus, with 2.1% of the population of Tbilisi registered as Polish (over 6,000 individuals). Armenians were in the majority in the capital, closely followed by Georgians and Russians. As the city thrives, drawing in more and more people, the urban population will double by 1914. As will the number of Poles. Individuals like Aleksander Szymkiewicz are part of the fabric of the city, in his relatively short life span making a substantial contribution to Georgian history and culture. Though, in the times that lie ahead, who's to know that simply having a Polish name will prove to be a curse.

**Alexander Park is still there, renamed 9th April Park; the island is not, with a bridge now spanning a road, and is thus now known as the Dry Bridge.*