

Archival Studies about the Disappearance of Ivane Machabeli

Tea Tvalavadze

Giorgi Leonidze State Museum of Georgian Literature, vice-director, 0108, Gia Chanturia N8, Tbilisi, Georgia

Abstract: The disappearance in 1898 of Ivane Machabeli, a versatile figure of the 19th century Georgia, writer, incomparable translator and publicist, journalist, theatre actor, one of the founders of the new Georgian literary language, active participant of the national liberation movement, director of the Bank of Nobles – shook Georgia. Contemporaries pointed out that the conscience of the Georgian people would be calmed only when this crime would be solved and the guilty would be punished. Even today, this issue worries the society, but it still remains an open question.

This disappearance was shrouded in mystery, the topic was taboo, and censorship was vigilant. Many of the contemporary writers knew the reason for the disappearance of Ivane Machabeli, but remained silent. This sad story was also related to one of the best poets - Akaki Tsereteli, who, as a close friend and frequent guest of the family, was there on the night of the writer's disappearance. It was no secret that the poet loved his friend's wife and dedicated his poems to her.

There were other considerations as well. The agents of the Gendarmerie of the Russian Empire blamed Iliia Chavchavadze, an all-time outstanding figure of Georgia, for Machabeli's disappearance due to the scandalous polemic related to the local bank. There were legends that he was hiding in Canada with the Doukhobors or in a monastery with monks. The secret of almost a century and a half has not been revealed until today. Many letters were printed, books were published about the writer's life, but Ivane Machabeli still remains missing.

Innovative digital technologies introduced in recent years have allowed us to search for comprehensive information and shed more or less light on the story of the disappearance of a great figure. The research considers the analysis of the correspondence about Ivane Machabeli and the memories of contemporaries preserved in the Museum of Literature of Georgia, the Center of Manuscripts and the National Archive around this issue. Among the tracked materials, the most significant were the newly arrived and still unknown letters to the author of the monograph on Ivane Machabeli. Readers scold him for hiding the truth and reveal the identity of the culprit.

This research is relevant, because the interest in the mysterious disappearance of the multifaceted creator, which made many feel guilty and has not been erased from the nation's memory to this day, has not faded away.

Keywords: Georgian literature, archival studies, textual scholarship, Ivane Machabeli

Archival sources are important to study writers' biographies. These materials are reliable to study Georgian literature, translation history, socio-cultural or Georgian-foreign literary relations of different periods. They require special attitudes and different methods of research. Therefore, a creative approach (right method and technology) is especially effective while studying archival materials.

In the second half of the XIX century, Ivane Machabeli (1854-1898) held one of the honourable places among those figures who selflessly sacrificed their work and experience to improve the life of Georgia. After graduating from the Faculty of Natural Sciences in St. Petersburg, the Oppenheim Agricultural Academy in Germany, and the Sorbonne University in Paris, Ivane Machabeli, who was fluent in English, French, German and Italian languages and taught in a European manner, returned to his homeland in 1879 and started a fruitful creative and public work.

Ivane Machabeli was a versatile figure – a writer, unparalleled translator and publicist, journalist, theatre artist, founder and secretary of the Society for Spreading Literacy among Georgians, editor of magazine *Iveria* and newspaper *Droeba* ("The Epoch"), member of the commission defining the text of "Knight in the Panther's Skin" and the editor of the 1888 publication, one of the founders of the new Georgian literary language, active participant of the national liberation movement, director of the Bank of Nobility, and the head of the Kartli Agricultural Syndicate. The study of the personality of Ivane Machabeli, as well as his public activity is of great importance for the study of the cultural, political and economic life of the Georgian people of that period.

The disappearance of Ivane Machabeli in 1898 shook all of Georgia at that time. Contemporaries pointed out that the conscience of the Georgian people would be calmed only when this crime would be solved and the guilty would be punished. Georgian society is still concerned about this issue, but it still remains an open question.

This disappearance was shrouded in mystery, the topic was taboo, and the tsar's Russian censorship was vigilant, although officially, it was only responsible for "protecting state secrets in the printed word". Many modern writers seemed to know the reason for the loss of Ivane Machabeli, but remained silent. This sad story was also related to one of the best Georgian poets – Akaki Tsereteli, who, as a close friend and frequent guest of the family, was there on the night of the writer's disappearance. But his letters published in the press about Vano Machabeli seemed to dispel all doubts. Yet, the doubt still remained a doubt, because it was no secret to anyone that the poet was in love with his friend's wife and dedicated his poems to her, and after the loss of Vano Machabeli, he always repeated – being dead or being unable to come home is the same.

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Innovative digital technologies introduced in recent years have allowed us to search for comprehensive information and shed more or less light on the story of the disappearance of a great figure. The research considers the analysis of the correspondence about Ivane Machabeli and the memories of contemporaries preserved in the Museum of Literature of Georgia, the Center of Manuscripts and the National Archive around this issue. Among the tracked documents, the most significant were the newly arrived and still unknown letters to the author of the monograph on Ivane Machabeli. Readers scold him for hiding the truth and reveal the identity of the culprit.

As we have mentioned, Ivane Machabeli disappeared on June 26, 1898. In those days, the quiet life of Tbilisi was disturbed by a strange statement of the famous actor, theatre expert and publicist – Valerian Gunia, published in the newspaper *Tsnobis Purtseli* ("The Factsheet") [1]. The author reported that Prince Ivane Machabeli left the house at four o'clock in the morning on June 26 and had not been seen since. He left his wallet, watch and gold buttons on his shirt at home, that is, he did not take any valuables with him. The publication mentioned that this news greatly upset the family and they immediately started searching, but on the third day they could not find a trace of him. Some acquaintances mentioned to have seen him at 9 o'clock in the morning near the Treasury Theatre and at 10 o'clock in Fraulein Street. But nobody knew what actually happened.

As if nothing unusual had happened, people were lost then and are still being lost, but the "lost" was 44-year-old Ivane Machabeli, a recognized and invaluable figure. In connection with this story, the press of that time informed the public of various information every day. According to the order of the police chief, 200 policemen on horseback or on foot were constantly looking for Ivane Machabeli throughout the city, in the Mtkvari river, in every ravine or canyon, but they could not find a trace of him. Some were sure that the prince was alive, because his strong character would not have allowed him to kill himself, but it was possible that someone killed him. A couple of weeks later, the newspaper *Tsnobis Purtseli* reported that the search for so long was unsuccessful, the body of the missing person was still nowhere to be seen, and no one knew whether he was alive or dead. Specially invited swimmers found a lot of sunken things at the bottom of Mtkvari as a result of several days of searching, but they could not find Machabeli's body anywhere. The government issued a strict order to investigate the disappearance of Ivane Machabeli, and the secret police entrusted the case to a prominent investigator, Babalov, but to no avail [2].

16 years after the loss of the writer, the famous translator and playwright Davit Meskhi noted: "A lot has been written and will be written again because of the incredible fate of Vano Machabeli". The "saint" death of Vano is such an acute tragedy for the Georgian life... It is so different and intense in nature that Georgians has rarely seen such an event and cannot reconcile with its uncertainty and mystery. Vano Machabeli was a young man, but he was a great man with great knowledge and talent. He was a great man for the society as a skilful and hard-working man, eloquent speaker and master of writing. He was a great man for his motherland, as its lover, selfless for it, diligent, a rare person and a worker..." [3].

Part of the society associated the loss of Ivane Machabeli with Ilia Chavchavadze (1837-1917), the Georgian writer, publicist, public and political figure, the leader of the national liberation struggle, known as the father of the nation, due to the intense disagreements on the issue of the Bank of Nobility.

It is known that Ilia Chavchavadze, who came to St. Petersburg to approve the bank's charter, met the student Ivane Machabeli and, fascinated by his talent and knowledge, offered to translate William Shakespeare's "King Lear" together, which was successfully implemented. Ilia Chavchavadze had high hopes for the European-educated young man. Ivane Machabeli also considered it his duty and a great honour to work with the nation's best figure and leader in a literary or public arena. Returning to his homeland, Ivane Machabeli stood up for public figures, with his knowledge and experience he contributed to the welfare of the Georgian nation.

The disagreement between Ilia Chavchavadze and Ivane Machabeli related to the Bank of Nobility was not due to personal goals or a principled difference in their views. Both of them wanted the success of the bank, so that the profit would be used for the national cause. This controversy shook all of Georgia and divided society into two camps – “Machabelists” and “Chavchavadzists”. In 1896, the struggle ended with the defeat of Ivane Machabeli, and he resigned from the directorship of the bank, headed the agricultural syndicate of landlords, and returned to literature, journalism and translation.

In the same year – 1896, Ivane Machabeli fell seriously ill and was ill for two years, but he survived thanks to a talented doctor who was the only one who dared to operate on him. Although he did not regain his old health after the operation, he continued his public activities after recovery.

Considering these circumstances, a part of the society of that time or the following generations, because of the defeat against Ilia Chavchavadze, considered it possible that Ivane Machabeli fell into the Mtkvari river and ended his life by suicide.

Public figure and writer, Ivane Machabeli’s friend and unbiased researcher – Tedo Sakhokia in memory makes the following conclusion due to Ivane Machabeli’s mysterious disappearance: “1. Iv. Machabeli did not end his own life with his own hands; 2. Ivane Machabeli did not drown himself in Mtkvari; 3. As for the idea of robbery, no one came to him and laid hands on him, and 4. Machabeli had many opponents (on the grounds of the bank), but none of them could raise his hands against him and kill him” [4].

Since the body of Ivane Machabeli was not found in Mtkvari, other versions emerged as well. It was at that time that the Doukhobors (a sect called “Fighters for Souls”), who had moved to Georgia from Russia in the 1840s, left Shida Kartli and left for America. Although there were many rumours about the disappearance of Ivane Machabeli (some said that the seconds took him and killed him in a duel, or others killed him and buried his body; some thought that he went to some Russian monastery with monks, he was also being looked for in England), but the investigator Bablov insisted until the end that Ivane Machabeli was alive. It was that he accompanied the Doukhobors to America at the request and influence of the Russian writer – Leo Tolstoy, as the best connoisseur of European languages, especially English. The reason for going secretly was that the government would severely punish him and others if it found out that he was helping the Doukhobors.

The main doubts were related to Akaki Tsereteli, a poet who was exceptionally beloved by Georgians and recognized as a symbol of the nation along with Ilia Chavchavadze. The poet was visiting Machabeli’s family on the night of his disappearance.

Akaki Tsereteli responded to this strange and tragic story with a letter in the newspaper *Tsnobis Purtseli* (“The Factsheet”) to dispel rumours. The poet wrote that due to the spread of different versions regarding the loss of his friend, he was forced to restore the truth by recalling that after arriving in Tbilisi from Imereti (the part of Georgia where the poet lived), he visited Ivane Machabeli, who made him happy by his complete recovery: he no longer felt pain, he was working and walking freely. During the backgammon game, the host also talked about his future plans. Akaki Tsereteli was planning to go home at ten o’clock, but Ivane Machabeli asked him to stay. The poet went to the guest room to sleep and the host soon fell asleep. The last time his wife – Anastasia Bagrationi-Machabeli saw him was at two o’clock in the morning when she made sure that he was fast asleep. Akaki Tsereteli was woken up by a noise and an unpleasant feeling at four o’clock in the morning, he was going to enter the host’s room, but changed his mind. In the morning, Ivane Machabeli did not come to greet Akaki Tsereteli in his room. The missing man’s wife was also alarmed by this news, they started searching and informed the city police officer. He said that he saw the prince leaving the house at 4 o’clock, asked him where he was hurrying to in the morning, and he just shook his head and ran towards Golovin avenue. The poet repeatedly mentioned that on the night before his disappearance, Ivane Machabeli was of sound mind, very happy and relaxed [5].

Despite this statement, doubts about Akaki Tsereteli were not dispelled, nor did the Georgian people calm down in expectation of truth.

Two decades later, on the 60th anniversary of Ivane Machabeli’s birth, in response to the article ‘Ivane Machabeli’ published by Akaki Tsereteli, the newspaper *Chveni Azri* (“Our Opinion”) printed “An open letter to the pride of the Georgian nation, poet Akaki”, which was signed by 76 people. The authors of the appeal asked the poet to reveal the truth:

“Blessed poet! Sixteen years have passed since Vano Machabeli, one of the greatest and most excellent public figures, disappeared unexpectedly. Sixteen years have passed since the most talented leader of a small group of young people who had entered the field of life-and-death battle, who was engaged in public service, was kidnapped by some magical force... And for a long time, not a single man appeared who dared and fearlessly opened the veil to this mysterious fairy tale. You are also silent, famous old man! Vano Machabeli had a pure heart, a pure soul. I have many examples to prove this, but I don't dare to reveal myself as someone weak, because I remember the proverb: “A fish once said: “I have a lot to say, but my mouth is full of water” – as is written in the newspaper *Temi* (“Community”). No, our pride, our poet! The fear does not suit you... Your

silence in this case will be a crime that cannot be redeemed by any “weakness”... We expect an immediate answer, and that answer will be the disclosure of the complete truth of Vano Machabeli’s disappearance through the world press” [6].

Akaki Tsereteli left the appeal unanswered.

Due to the disappearance of Ivane Machabeli, interest did not wane for ten years.

In 1955, the biographical novel of the great writer, Vakhtang Chelidze “The Life of Ivane Machabeli” was published. The fact that there are six editions of the book demonstrates its popularity, and it is still considered a bibliographic rarity. In 2004, Liana Peradze published the scientific-popular work “Interrupted Life” dedicated to the 150th anniversary of Ivane Machabeli’s birth. Jemal Mchedlishvili’s “Machabeli without Legends” (2007), Lasha Bugadze’s play “Murder of the Century” (2000), Rostom Chkheidze’s “June 26 Secret” (2011) were released. Nevertheless, the secret was not completely revealed anywhere.

Among the documents we tracked down, the most significant was found in the Museum of Literature. According to the will of Vakhtang Chelidze, his archive was transferred to the Museum in 2018, together with letters unknown to this day and addressed to the author of the only complete monograph on Ivane Machabeli, Vakhtang Chelidze. Readers scold him for hiding the truth and reveal the identity of the culprit. We will cite three documents as an example.

A letter from Sharashidze, one of the readers, sent to Vakhtang Chelidze in the year of the publication of the monograph on Ivane Machabeli (1955) was added to the archive under the title “It is impossible, we are silent!” [7]. The author notes that he admires the language and title of Vakhtang Chelidze’s book, but the end of the monograph caused great anxiety. 57 years have passed since the death of Ivane Machabeli. This disaster spread all over Georgia and caused great sadness in the heart of every conscious Georgian. However, this story was nearly forgotten until the son of Ivane Machabeli – Nikoloz lost his mind on this ground. Akaki Tsereteli, after his death, left a letter in the name of the Society for Spreading Literacy among Georgians. This will, or rather confession, was not publicized and mysteriously disappeared without a trace. After the death of one of the Georgian public figures, Ilia Zurabishvili, a friend of Ivane Machabeli’s wife, a sensational news spread in Georgia: he was considered to be responsible for Ivane Machabeli’s disappearance. The addressee accuses the young author of the monograph that he found out a terrible thing, as if Ivane Machabeli had died in battle with Ilia Chavchavadze (without whose efforts Georgia could not have gained independence or become a state, he was killed in 1907 by order of the Russian Social Democratic Party). This news actually killed Ilia Chavchavadze for the second time and destroyed him morally, since there were no descendants of Ilia Chavchavadze and no one could be requested to answer to this accusation. The author of the letter asks the addressee why he connects Ivane Machabeli and Ilia Chavchavadze’s banking polemic with the death of Ivane Machabeli, why he tries to blacken the innocent and cover up the real criminal, which is severely criticized by the modern society and the next generation will not mention it with gratitude as well.

In 1975, the writer Rodion Korkia recollected (“Dark Recollection”) that in 1930, in Tbilisi, in Alexander’s Garden, writers – Shalva Dadiani, Leo Kiacheli, Niko Lortkipanidze, Sosiko Merkviladze and himself – were talking about the disappearance of Ivane Machabeli. Sosiko Merkviladze, Akaki Tsereteli’s trusted person, sighed heavily and said that Ivane Machabeli’s sin was Akaki Tsereteli’s fault. Shalva Dadiani confirmed that Machabeli invited Akaki to dinner that day, after dinner the host went to his office to sleep, and offered the poet to rest in the guestroom. After a while, Ivane Machabeli entered the bedroom, where he saw his wife – Taso and Akaki in bed together. During the fight, Machabeli had a heart attack and died. Akaki Tsereteli went to Sosiko Merkviladze the same morning (Sosiko Merkviladze’s recollection about this is stored in the Museum of Literature), informed him of Machabeli’s death and asked him to hide the body somewhere so that no one would know about it. The corpse was burnt in a nearby kiln. The author notes that the newspaper “Literary Georgia” published lies about the death of Ivane Machabeli in previous years, but he did not consider it necessary then to publish this recollection, although he was sure that this was the truth. Rodion Korkia left a recollection to his son – Jilda Korkia and asked to give it to Vakhtang Chelidze after his death, who wrote a brilliant work about the life and work of Ivane Machabeli [8].

Dr. Toma Chikvanaia’s letter to Vakhtang Chelidze is preserved in the same archive. The letter states that Ivane Machabeli did not disappear, but was killed and his body was burnt in a kiln. The culprits were Ivane Machabeli’s wife and Akaki Tsereteli, who were blinded by passion and committed terrible evil. A book dealer and copyright holder of Akaki Tsereteli – Sosiko Merkviladze helped them. The society kept silent so that not to besmirch Akaki Tsereteli. Yet, Ivane Machabeli was destroyed, murdered, his body was cut into pieces, put in a bag and burnt in a kiln. The author of the letter thinks that a pristine human spirit requires modern Georgians to expose and condemn the murderers. The addressee informs the writer that the writers – Vasil Barnov, Konstantine Kapaneli, Tedo Sakhokia, Davit Kasradze, Giorgi Leonidze, Ioseb Grishashvili and others know about this murder. He asks the author to reveal his secret, because silence is tantamount to a crime [9].

These facts prove how acutely the Georgian intelligentsia felt the loss of Ivane Machabeli. The distance of a century does not slow down the intensity of this event and the shame caused by this fact, and people are still looking for the key to solve the mystery.

We think that the time has come for the dawn of Ivane Machabeli's work to shine again, because as his biographer Vakhtang Chelidze wrote: "Ivane Machabeli was a true son of his people with his hard work, amazing discipline, honesty, showmanship, directness, kindness and passionate love for his native country and people" [10].

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