

## **Congratulations to Julia Kharashvili**

by Marten von Harten, Bertha von Suttner Peace Institute boardmember

Dear Julia, dear friend,

The International Day of Peace on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2020 is a proper occasion to congratulate you again with the Georgian Bertha von Suttner Peace Prize.

Speaking on behalf of the Bertha von Suttner Peace Institute in The Hague, I will not recall my personal memories of you during the past 24 years. And I don't need to repeat the motivation of the jury at the award ceremony. Instead, I will mention some aspects that you have in common with the spiritual mother of the Prize, the Austrian baroness Bertha von Suttner, who in 1905 was the first woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

The first aspect is the road from Sukhumi to Zugdidi and Kutaisi. Bertha was living with her husband in Georgia between 1876 and 1885, as guests of Princess Dadiani. This was a voluntary exile, in order to avoid the family scandal of having married below her proper rank of high nobility.

In those years, Georgia was at the buffer zone of war between the empires of Tsarist Russia and Ottoman Turkey. From her house, Bertha witnessed the troops marching over Kutaisi and Zugdidi to the frontlines, and the returning transports of the dead and wounded. This experience of the atrocities of war inspired Bertha to write her great novel 'Lay Down Your Arms', published in 1889.

Julia, you keep vivid memories of that road in 1993, with thousands of people escaping from the war atrocities in Abchazia. Families and individuals, desperately searching for their lost beloved ones, amidst panic, grief and exhaustion. Many of them went all the way over the mountains by foot, like your colleagues Liana and Marina. Yourself arrived with the last train with children. Your husband still missing. That took more than two days, stopped on the way by armed gangs.

A second aspect that you share with Bertha is acting together. Back in Europe, she became leader of the international pacifist movement for disarmament. In Tbilisi, you started organizing mothers in the IDP Women's Association. Today, the term IDP seems just one category of humanitarian assistance. With the Association you keep reminding us that it is about Persons, who have lost their homes, their work and normal life. 'Displaced' means that they, like you, are still nowhere at home. And 'Internally', means that even in your own country, you still lack full citizen's rights, that injustice is going on.

A third aspect, we can read in 'Lay Down Your Arms'. The heroine of the novel, Martha, decides to go to the battlefields herself, in search of her beloved who is missing in action during the Austrian-Italian war. After witnessing the sufferings and killings, Martha refuses to accept her personal loss, and returns with a message of peace through justice and disarmament. Your message is about peace through compassion with the most vulnerable victims of war, as a basis for reconciliation.

One personal memory. In the 1990's, when the humanitarian agencies moved into Georgia, the displaced communities received truckloads of rice. That was the routine, as they do in African and other disaster areas. Then you told our Western programme managers: 'Please, keep your sacks of rice, we wish to have sugar'. And when they objected that sugar is bad for health, you explained that it is most needed to receive guests, offering them tea and sugar. Thus, you were teaching us a lesson about hospitality and dignity.

A fourth aspect in common is your personal style of civil diplomacy. Bertha became an international peace leader but was denied access to the diplomatic Peace Conferences in the Hague in 1899 and 1907 for being a woman. Then she invited the diplomats to her hotel suite, offering hospitality and connecting them with activists and scientists who advocated peaceful solutions of international conflicts.

Julia, you went up and down the same road over Kutaisi and Zugdidi to Sukhumi numerous times, in sensitive civic diplomacy about peaceful solutions, always showing personal respect, despite strong political differences. Like Bertha, you widened your scope in international platforms, in particular the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly in 1996 in Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina, after the Dayton Peace Agreements. With mothers from Srebrenica and other places in the Balkans, you shared the deep belief, that victimized people should not remain objects of assistance, but become actors of peace-building.

Two memories, related to the Netherlands :

With your Association, you created the beautiful Azerbaijani 'Yuva` magazine (with financial help of the 'White Crane' and Petra Kerk), publishing drawings and stories of the children in those terrible IDP Centers, educating them to overcome trauma and hatred. You produced and distributed it with modest means, a gift of the Petra Church in The Hague covered a full year. With your Armenian and Azerbaijani colleagues in the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, you set up joint peace camps for children from all conflict areas.



In 1998, also together with your Armenian and Azerbaijani colleagues, you sent a collection of children's paintings to Lisse, the center of Dutch flower culture, for an exhibition in the church. In return, the local churches donated a ton of Dutch tulip bulbs, for planting in and around the IDP Centers and refugee camps all over the South Caucasus. This was not humanitarian assistance, but a fair exchange of colours.

One final aspect: In the end, Bertha witnessed the arms races and mobilizations in July 1914, on the eve of the Great War. Her final call was: 'Persist, persist, and continue to persist! '. This persistence you have shown during so many years, and keep showing during the present re-escalation of armed violence and ethnic-national hatreds in the Caucasus region. In all these respects, you share the Bertha von Suttner Peace Prize with the displaced women and children who have accompanied you all the way in the same spirit.

Gaumarjos!

Marten

*Marten van Harten is board member of the Bertha von Suttner Peace Institute in The Hague. In the 1990's he served as liaison officer of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly in the South Caucasus*

