



A **journalist's story** of a long human life

Thursday, December 7, 2017

DONATE

Sometimes a journalist will come up with a story that spans an entire human life, stretching from the darkest periods in recent history to the present day, in bright colours. Such a story was produced by journalists at JAMnews, our partner in Georgia. It is a story that shows how important it is for media not just to report on the big political issues, the economy, sport and celebrities but also the news from around the corner, the little people, minorities, new immigrants and, as in this case, old immigrants.

Dimitri Avaliani at JAMnews: “This is a story in a series we made about Crimean Tartars, Moldavians, the Ingush and Baltic Germans, all peoples who were deported by Stalin in the Second World War. We wrote articles and recorded interviews on video.”

Deportation

This story is about Seyfat Dursunov, aged 94, a Muslim and a Meskhetian. He led a very ordinary life until the age of 19. At that time, he was living on the border between the then Soviet Union and Turkey (in what is now Georgia). Josef Stalin distrusted the minorities in the border area, especially the Meskhetian, who speak a language related to Turkish. In 1944, he had them all deported to Uzbekistan and other distant lands, sometimes beyond the Urals as far as Siberia.

Mistrust

Dimitri Avaliani at JAMnews describes how difficult it was to approach Seyfat and persuade him to tell his story: “The Meskhetians are often incredibly wary of journalists. Other media have misrepresented their history so often. Sometimes they have been called ‘Turks’ and have been accused of complaining too much. Our reporter in the region returned many times to the village where Seyfat lives now and built up a relationship of trust with his family. This helped her to get him talking about the shocking events in his life.”

Death voyage

Stay involved

First name *

Last name *

E-mail address *

Submit

One day all of a sudden, Seyfat and his family were driven onto a train by Russian soldiers to embark on a horrific journey. They had to leave everything behind. They spent 25 days travelling east, right across Kazakhstan to Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. Some of the family died on that journey. “At first, the people in Uzbekistan thought we were cannibals but relations improved later,” recalls Seyfat. They ended up in a completely alien environment where they could not understand anyone.

Second deportation

But Uzbekistan was not the final destination for the Meskhetians. When the Soviet Union collapsed, nationalism revived among the Uzbeks. It reached such extreme levels that in 1989 there were pogroms against minorities. Seyfat had to be rescued by Soviet troops that had been sent by Gorbachev. His people and his family were split up for the second time in their history. He fled to Azerbaijan.

Understanding

“It is important to tell these stories,” says Dimitri Avaliani at JAMnews. “In this way, the Georgians can learn what their old/new neighbours have gone through. That cultivates understanding. But it’s also good that people like Seyfat get the attention they deserve. The interview brought back all the memories and emotions. Seyfat’s story could be told properly for the first time. When he saw it replayed on video, he cried for the fate of his family.”

Only after 2000 did the government in Georgia give the Meskhetians permission to return to their original villages on a very limited basis. And now, with family members spread across the globe and with children and grandchildren of different nationalities, Seyfat is back in the place where he originally came from. Not that this has resolved all his problems. Seyfat is still stateless and is therefore not entitled to health care, nor does he have the right to take out a bank loan or own property.

Accountability

Dimitri Avaliani at JAMnews: “These articles and interviews give us a good basis for following the Georgian government and questioning them about their policy on the repatriation of minorities who were deported. The national government has good intentions but so far the municipal officials are claiming that the return of the deported Meskhetians is not their responsibility. We will continue to produce stories about Seyfat, his people and other deported ethnic groups. If we carry on asking questions and publishing reports, the authorities will have to arrange for their return and be accountable for their actions. That is good too for the Meskhetians, who can return to the district and the roots they have been yearning for almost all their lives.”

Prize

There is proof that JAMnews is on the right track with this kind of reporting. The Georgian Ombudsman awarded JAMnews' story in a journalism competition with the first prize in the category 'Stories promoting tolerance'.

SHARE THIS PAGE:



PROJECTS

Digital security courses for journalists & activists

Empowering media through collaborative crowdfunded journalism

Together for reliable information in Africa

NEWS

Call for proposals: submission for a documentary

The impact of COVID-19 on the global struggle for freedom

Insiders info: Fact-checking journalist over fake news

ABOUT US

About us

Publications

Vacancies

Disclaimer

Privacy statement

Subscribe to newsletter

Complaints and reports

CONTACT DETAILS

Weesperstraat 3

1018 DN Amsterdam

The Netherlands

T: +31 20 8000400

E: info[at]freepressunlimited.org

IBAN: NL92 INGB 000 000 7676



PARTNERS

greenhost.



CERTIFICATIONS

