

Joseph Jordania (1999). *The Story of Mars, The Siberian Tiger*. Unpublished Memoir.

# The Story of Mars, The Siberian Tiger.

I am grateful to Peter,  
who asked me several times  
to write it down. I gave him a promise  
so here is the story.

This is a true story, based not only  
on my memory, but my diaries as well.

I wrote most of this text in 1999,  
and then had been adding details of my later life.

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On Tuesday, November 5th, 1974, Mars, a huge and beautiful Siberian tiger, the pride of Tbilisi zoo, refused to eat his food for the first time in his life.

Zoo personnel took a serious note of this and observed his behaviour as Mars always had a great appetite. Mars refused to eat on Wednesday and then on Thursday, so his careers became more concerned. They gave Mars minced meat to make the eating process easier for him, but Mars neglected the minced meat as he had the earlier offerings. The worst part of Mars' behaviour was that he was almost all the time lying in the corner of his cage with closed eyes.

On Friday the zoo personnel had a serious discussion on what might be the reason for the strange behaviour of an otherwise healthy Siberian tiger in the prime of his life. One of the zoo staff members suggested that a zoo visitor who was banned from the zoo just a few days ago could have poisoned the tiger in revenge, but another staff member did not agree with this suggestion. No one could actually explain what was wrong with Mars.

On Saturday and Sunday Mars was still lying in the corner of his cage with closed eyes, without paying any attention to the provided food. The tiger seemed as though he had lost interest in life.

It was clear that Mars was dying.

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Fourteen months before these events, in September 1973, I became a student of the Tbilisi State Conservatory. My decision to become a musician was more due to family tradition – both my parents were musicians. I loved music, but I actually wanted to become a zoologist, biologist, or geographer. From my early days I collected animal photos. This collection is still in Tbilisi, in my mother and brothers flat on Griboedov Street. I always liked cats the most and the photos of big cats were my favourites. Particularly the tigers.

When I became a student of the Conservatory, our family lived in a suburb of Tbilisi called Saburtalo. The building of the Conservatory was (and still is) situated at the very centre of Tbilisi – near Rustaveli Avenue. If you travel from the end of Saburtalo to Rustaveli Avenue, it takes about 20 minutes by bus or by trolley bus. Somewhere in the middle there is a zoological park.

I became a very frequent visitor to the zoo. The admission fee was really very small – about 20 cents per person, so I could visit it as much as I wanted. The lectures at the Conservatory used to begin at 12 noon. Future professional musicians were supposed to spend their morning hours at home, practicing with their instruments. I often left for the Conservatory much earlier. Instead of going directly to the Conservatory, I used to get off the bus at the Square of Heroes and call into the zoo.

I loved being at the Zoo. I would spend hours walking around the whole perimeter, collecting fresh grass and giving it to the antelopes. But I spent most of the time at the long old building which housed the big cats – lions, leopards, jaguars, pumas, and tigers. Usually I would stand there for a long time, just watching them walking, or sleeping peacefully.

On one of these occasions I saw a remarkable scene – two young fellows were actually petting a leopard! This was beyond my wildest dreams. I went over to them and asked them how they had built up such a relationship with the leopard. I discovered that these fellows names were Boris and Vakhtang, and that they sometimes came here to pet some of the big cats in the Zoo, and that they also knew all the big cats names. The leopard they were petting was named Rose and they considered petting her to be a normal part of their relationship. They encouraged me to come closer and to join them. "Just mind her paws". They advised me to pet her when her back was against the iron bars.

I should explain to the readers here, that safety measures were few and the conditions that the animals were kept was shocking, or at least very different from those of western zoos. Cages, where the big cats were kept, were not covered by safety nets. Visitors to the Zoo could easily go beyond the low fence and go right up to the cages. Cases of injuries to visitors were not rare. (By my estimation 4 to 5 per year.) These were mostly minor injuries to palms and fingers, although cases of more serious injuries also happened. A female lion cut the phalange off a finger of one visitor; another lioness seriously injured the arm and shoulder of a worker. The most notorious case happened

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in the second half of the 1960s when a huge Siberian tiger tore off the forearm of a drunken visitor. The whole of Tbilisi heard about it.

Let us come back to that day in 1973, when I first met Boris and Vakhtang. That very day I touched a leopard for the first time in my life. The same day I was introduced to a lioness, named Bagheera, and to an old tiger, Tamasho (in Georgian: "he who likes playing"). You can imagine how happy I was! After that day my visits to the Zoo became more frequent. Eventually I got to know all the dwellers of the big cat's building. The highlight of my visits was petting my "friends" – Rose, Bagheera and Tamasho. I also learned their characters as well. Rose and Bagheera were young females, and when petting them you had to know their habits and be very careful. They liked to be petted, but they also liked playing – like catching moving objects. This game was very dangerous, as their claws were razor sharp. I remember Bagheera once caught my Conservatory bag with her claws, while I was waving it in front of her cage. I had these claw marks on my bag as a souvenir from her for several years. Tamasho was a very old tiger with a very kind character (you could even touch his fangs and pull his whiskers).

During my meetings with Boris and Vakhtang, I met some other boys who also visited the Zoo to pet the big cats. Some of the names I have forgotten, but one of them – named Spartak Chetartian – I remember particularly well. I met him at the zoo quite often. The last time I saw him in the Zoo was in 1991, before he moved to Moscow. My mother and brother also knew him very well as he came to my house.

These were exciting days and months. I was visiting my "friends" almost every day, enjoying close contacts with them. Once I remember my lecturer from the Conservatory – Ivane (Vano) Zhgenti came in the big cat's building with his children, while I was petting Rose (the leopard). Vano, as we called him, was our favourite lecturer at the Conservatory (he taught us harmony). He was deeply impressed seeing me there.

There were many other big cats as well, not only Rose, Bagheera, and Tamasho. There was an old blind male lion, named Demon, a former Circus artist of the famous Russian lion trainer Irina Bugrimova. Demon was in a cage together with a small white dog, named Tuzik. In the 1970s they were one of the best-loved attractions of the Tbilisi Zoo. There was a very good species of jaguar – Iasha, an old leopard – Levan, two lion cubs, Aida and Naida, a gracious Cheetah with the same name – Cheetah, a young female tiger "Lamazo" (beautiful in Georgian) and a huge Siberian male tiger – Mars.

Mars was the most impressive "star" of the Zoo. He was very large and weighted about 700 pounds, and was very athletic. He had an untamed character and was claimed to be the most dangerous among the big cats. Even staff members of the Zoo were afraid of Mars. It was him, the hero of a notorious story, when the whole population of 1 million Tbilisi learned how the tiger torn off the forearm of a visitor.

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Of course, I noticed Mars from the very beginning. It was impossible not to pay attention to this excellent species. Actually, most of my time was spent watching this huge and beautiful animal walking to and fro in his small cage. The cages were very small even for leopards – 5 by 3 metres approximately, and particularly small for a huge Siberian tiger.

I heard several scary stories, connected with Mars, from the staff members of the Zoo, and some of my new "zoo friends". These stories should help the readers to understand the image Mars had among the staff members of the zoo. Let me retell two such stories, told to me by the victims.

Valodia, a dwarf worker of the big cat's department, was ordered to clean the windows above the animal's cages. All the animals had two cages – summer and winter. Half were outside and the other half were inside the big cat's building. A metal door connected both cages. Valodia was supposed to clean the windows from the insides. The windows were just above the tops of the winter cages, so to clean them Valodia had to step on the tops of the cages, which also were covered by iron bars (but not the safety net).

First of all Valodia was supposed to empty all the inner, winter cages. He opened the metal doors between the winter and summer cages. Some cats went out themselves. Valodia, who had a long metal tool for such occasions, pushed others. All the big cats were afraid of this metal tool, as they might have been beaten if they did not submit. Beating the animals was, I would say, unusual (I've never seen this myself) but I guess all of them had some experience of it. So in a few minutes all the animals were locked in the outer, summer cages. All but Mars. As Valodia told me, he opened the metal door between Mars' cages, but Mars did not want to go outside. Mars was the only animal who was not afraid of the metal tool. If somebody tried to scare him with it he would roar loudly and fiercely defend himself. The attacks were so strong that you could easily believe that the iron cage might collapse. That's why Valodia just left the metal door open, hoping that Mars might go outside himself while Valodia was busy with all the other big cats. But Valodia forgot about Mars. It was already evening, Valodia was tired, and there were no other staff or visitors in the building.

So, feeling safe, Valodia went up on the top of the first cage and began to clean the windows, using a bucket of water and a simple piece of cloth. One by one he cleaned the windows, moving from the first cage to the next, and so on. Mars was in the last cage. This is how Valodia described to me what happened.

"I stepped onto the iron bars on the top of Mars' cage to clean the window. How could I forget that Mars was not locked outside! I just went on cleaning. Suddenly I felt something strange had happened to my right shoe. It felt as though I had stepped into some kind of sticky substance. I felt that I could not move my shoe. I looked down and I saw Mars' eyes just a few centimetres from my foot. He was holding my shoe with his claws, so I was unable to move it".

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Here I should explain two things. The cages of all the big cats were approximately two metres in height. All the big cats could reach the top of their cages if they jumped. Mars could easily reach the top of the cage if he just stood upright. When he stood on his hind legs, his big head was touching the top of the cage. That's why Valodia saw Mars' face so close to his foot - there were only iron bars between them. Another detail. All the big cats at the Zoo could easily push their paws through the iron bars of their cages. That's how most of the injuries were caused at the Zoo. Mars' paws were too big for this. He could only push his claws (but not the paws) through the bars. Valodia was very lucky. Otherwise he might have lost his foot or even been killed, as there was no one in the empty building to help him that evening.

Valodia continued: "I was horrified. The first thing I did was to try to free my shoe. I pulled very hard but it did not move. Moreover, when Mars felt I was trying to free my foot, he clenched my shoe much tighter. His claws easily went through the thick leather into flesh. At this point I panicked and pulled so hard freeing my foot that it tore my laces. As I jumped up onto the windowsill my shoe fell down into his cage. He ignored it and just paced back and fourth staring at me.

He attempted to get me several more times by rising himself up onto his hind legs. Fortunately he could not reach me. I did not know what to do. My right foot was bleeding and drops of blood were dripping into his cage. I could not move from the windowsill, as the only way was to step down onto the iron bars on the top of Mars' cage. How long could I stay there? The windowsill was not broad enough to keep me there for a long time. Besides, I was wounded and extremely scared. I called for help but nobody heard me. I do not know how much time I spent there, sitting on the window sill above Mars' cage. Maybe 20 minutes? Finally I decided to break the window so that my call for help could be heard outside of the building. I broke the window with my elbow. This helped me a lot. When Mars heard glass splinters fall into his "summer" cage, he immediately rushed out to see what was going on there. During these couple of seconds before Mars came back from his "winter" cage, I jumped down from the window sill and rushed onto the top of the next cage, which was empty and safe. Then I went down and bandaged up my wounded foot. I then got my damaged shoe back from Mars' cage by using the long metal tool, put it back on and went home limping. I have lasting scars on my right foot to remind me of that scary accident".

Another story is not so dramatic, although the results could have been more frightening. Everything happened within five or ten seconds. Another staff member (I think his name was Igor) was washing his hands near Mars' cage. The tap was approximately one metre from the cage. This is how he described to me what happened: "Suddenly I felt that something (or somebody) was pulling my uniform (it was a long blue dust coat). I was standing with my back to Mars' cage. So the force that was pulling me towards the cage must have been Mars himself. Without looking back, I grabbed the bars of the fence, which was designed to keep visitors a safe distance back from the cage. I quickly realized that I was loosing the tug of war. Holding desperately on to the fence

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with one hand, I frantically undid the buttons on my gown with the other and slipped out of it a split second before Mars pulled it inside the cage".

Such stories together with the notorious event when Mars torn off the arm of a drunken visitor only helped to strengthen the image of this huge and aggressive tiger.

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One day I was standing outside the big cat's building with several of my Zoo friends and the dwarf worker Valodia, watching Mars and talking about him. I do not remember exactly who was saying it, but the consensus was that as Mars had torn off the arm of a visitor, he had therefore become a man-eater. That was the main idea of the discussion. I was against this supposition, arguing that Mars was provoked by the visitor. The discussion was fairly long. Let me retell that tragic story which happened about 3 years earlier as told by the staff members and my Zoo friends.

A young fellow from Kakheti (which is the central region of east Georgia) returned from military service. Military service was obligatory in the former Soviet Union. He and some of his friends celebrated this event with many glasses of wine. Then they went walking in the city and entered the Zoo. There were three of them, two fellows and a young lady. Eventually they came to Mars' cage. He had been brought there several months before from another Zoo in Siberia. They must have been impressed by the tiger, as they stopped and began to talk about him. The young fellow who had just finished his military service told his friends he would extinguish his cigarette on the tiger's nose. I do not think that his friends took what he had said seriously, but the fact is that the drunken fellow went beyond the low safety fence and approached Mars' cage.

The fellow began to tease Mars, who was lying down in the far corner of the cage, looking at him carefully. Interestingly, Mars did not roar at the offender or attack the iron bars. This would always happen when I met him two years later. The young man tried harder to tease him, going closer and closer to the cage. At some point he got his cigarette-butt in his right hand, put his hand through the iron bars and threw it at the tiger.

We already know that Mars could not push his huge paws through the iron bars. Maybe this was one of the reasons he did not do anything whilst the offender was outside of the cage. But the moment, when the fellow pushed his hand through the iron bars and threw the burning cigarette at him, was crucial. In a twinkling of an eye the tiger waved his long paw and caught the man's hand with his sharp claws.

The scream of the victim and those, who witnessed this scene, blended in a horrible choir. Several men rushed to the fellow's aid and tried to pull him back. The tiger was pulling the fellow's hand inside the cage. The competition was not fair. Soon most of the arm was inside the cage. At that moment some other staff members came running with the long iron tools. They began to beat Mars with them, trying to free the arm. The roaring tiger grabbed the arm with his teeth. Some staff members were beating the tiger's head and body with the iron tools. Another was spraying water at the fierce tiger, but he was absolutely insensitive to it all. As the struggling reached its climax the tiger tore the arm off up to the elbow. He threw the arm on the floor of the cage and went roaring to the outer cage.

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As I have already mentioned, one day my Zoo friends, some staff members (Valodia among them) and I were standing outside Mars' cage discussing that horrible accident. I was arguing that Mars had acted only as a provoked and offended wild animal, nothing more. "He is not a man-eater", I said, "he did not actually eat the arm. If you throw a burning cigarette in the face of a man, he will also do something in response. So what do you expect from a tiger?"

As our discussion went on, somebody asked me "If you are so sure that Mars is not a man-eater, why don't you try to become his friend and try to pet him?" We all laughed at this idea.

Some time later Valodia said he had to pour the big cats some water. All the cats had simple water bowls in their cages. Staff members would go up to the cages and pour water from a long rubber pipe.

It had always been a problem to pour the water for Mars. Staff members were afraid of him and would keep way back from his cage. As a result, they would pour the water from a much longer distance. Water usually spilt out over a much bigger area of the cage. I often watched staff members pouring water in Mars' bowl. Water would go on the floor of the cage, and also on Mars as well. He would roar and threaten the person pouring the water. Most likely Mars had a memory of the shocking moment when he was beaten with iron tools and poured with water when he tore an arm from a zoo visitor. Mars was so used to this unpleasant procedure that he used to begin roaring just seeing a person coming close to his cage with the rubber pipe. An idea came to me.

"Listen, Valodia", I said, "could I pour the water into Mars' Bowl?" My reasoning was pretty simple - "Mars would roar at the staff members with the pipe, because he did not like the way they were pouring the water; Staff members would pour water from a long distance, because they were afraid of Mars, and that's why they did not go closer. I will go closer and pour the water normally, just in his bowl" - I thought.

All the company of boys became silent and looked at me. It was only a few minutes after their joking suggestion that I became Mars's friend. Everybody felt I was going to attempt to make the first move.

"OK," Valodia said reluctantly, "you can pour the water if you want, but don't go too close".

I took the rubber pipe. It was a very old one, without any control mechanism to open or close the running water, so the water was running all the time. I approached Mars. He looked at me, then at the running water, and roared. I moved closer. He roared more and made a threatening movement towards me. I did not feel comfortable seeing a huge roaring Siberian tiger so close to me, but I moved even closer and poured water into his bowl. Mars stopped roaring and emptied his bowl in a couple of minutes. All this time I was standing there and saying in a kind of motherly way, "Good Mars. Nice Mars. Beautiful Mars. Do you want some more water, Mars?" Mars growled deeply a

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couple of times while drinking. When he finished, I refilled his bowl. He drank it as well, this time without growling.

I put the pipe down and went to the boys. They were a bit surprised. I had a wonderful feeling that something positive had taken place. "Wait for me a few minutes", I told them. I hurried off out of the zoo, crossed the street and entered a small shop under the well-known 11-storied building at the Square of Heroes where I bought a small piece of meat. Five minutes later I returned to Mars' cage and gave him the meat. He ate it slowly, then looked at me. All this time I was standing not very far from his cage. I went out of the Zoo again and bought another piece of meat using all the money I had with me. The piece was about a kilogram. I asked the butcher to cut the meat into small pieces.

When Mars saw me coming back to his cage, he definitely recognised me. He was moving along the iron bars, looking at me. I gave him all the pieces.

I felt uplifted and inspired with hope. After this first small success, I decided to gain Mars' loyalty and to become his friend. I was so excited that on that evening I began to write my very first diary, all about my meetings with Mars. I still have this diary with me. This first day, according to my records, was Monday, July the 8th, 1974. In order not to be detected by my parents what I was up to, I was writing my diary in English.

I began to visit Mars every day and would buy him a piece of meat and a bottle of milk. I was going to his cage, pouring milk in his bowl and giving him pieces of meat. I was talking to him in the same kind of "motherly" way as adults talk to babies and animals. He would recognise my voice instantly, and greet me with his unforgettable "frrr". Tigers give this kind of chuffing sound when they meet someone (human or animal), to whom they are friendly. Try to say "frrr" loudly without the voice to the tiger at your local Zoo and you might get the same friendly response from the tiger. I was writing all the details of my meetings with Mars in my diary, such as – how much milk and meat I brought and how Mars reacted. For most of July and August I was out of Tbilisi for summer holidays. Then our meetings were resumed. On my ninth visit, on August 29th a remarkable thing happened. I gave Mars all the milk and meat, as usual, then I stayed at his cage for a while. On that day Mars lay down close to me, with the left side of his back against the iron bars. His huge striped back was so close to me! I felt an immense temptation to pet his back. I knew no one had done that before and I knew Mars might become angry.

A staff members of the big cat's department, (I think it was Igor) told me a brief story of how he attempted to touch Mars a few months earlier. It was on one of Tbilisi's hot summer afternoons. Igor saw Mars was sleeping. The end of his tail was hanging out of the cage. This was the only part of Mars' body that could fit through the iron bars. "I went close", he told me, "thinking should I touch his tale or not. Maybe he will not even feel my hand? I stretched my hand out and slightly touched the end of his tail. In an instant Mars' roaring jaws were at the iron-bars! I immediately jumped back. Mars was

fiercely attacking the iron bars".

That was the only attempt to touch Mars I had ever heard of, and it did not go well. Now I was standing close to his back and he was not sleeping. Should I touch him? I felt I could. "Why should he be angry", I thought, "we are friends, or at least, he is obviously happy to see me. So maybe he will be even happier if I touch him! Maybe he had even laid down especially to encourage me to pet him?" Thoughts like this were mixing around in my mind. All this time I was standing there, talking to him in a very calm way. I was not afraid of his roaring. I just did not want to spoil our friendship with any clumsy attempt of undesirable physical contact.

But the temptation was too great. I raised my right arm and gently touched his striped back with the tips of my fingers.

He moved slightly away from the iron bars. Simultaneously he breathed in deeply and growled a bit, not turning his head. A couple of seconds later he leaned back against to the iron bars. I touched him again. He did not move this time, or make any sound. I went on petting his back through the iron bars.

That was one of the happiest moments of my entire life. I was petting Mars! The live legend, the huge, beautiful and fierce Siberian tiger! Interestingly, at that moment I did not have any feelings like "I did it". It was something much more symbolic and I would say, sacred. It felt like touching a God. Especially the fact that there was no one around that morning. Only me to witness that magic moment. Several minutes later a staff member of the big cat's building appeared. Mars growled at him and stood up.

After that day, for the next two months, our relationship entered a new golden phase. I was going to his cage almost every day (sometimes twice, or even three times a day), giving him a few small pieces of meat and a bottle of milk. I could not afford much as it had to come out of my own lunch allowance. Sometimes milk was unavailable in the local shops and I had to travel to another suburb of Tbilisi. Mars was meeting me with his "frrr" greetings, running in his cage and looking at me. Then I would pour him some milk, and give him the pieces of meat. Those days I used to have a small Swiss army knife in my conservatory bag to cut the meat into small pieces. Of course, I was also studying at the Conservatory and not unsuccessfully, too.

Mars was drinking the milk and eating the small pieces of meat I was giving him. Then sometimes he would lie against the iron bars in a petting position. In those moments I would pet him. At first I was only petting his back. Later I moved closer to his head and would pet his withers and neck. My old friends – leopard Rose, lioness Bagheera, young lionesses Aida and Naida obviously enjoyed petting. They would push hard against my hands. Sometimes painfully trapping my fingers against the iron bars. Rose liked to display her smooth stomach, my friends and I would all pet her there. Aida and Naida were enjoying petting so much that they often quarreled to be closer to me. Later I was able to pet both of them simultaneously.

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What about Mars? Did he enjoy my petting? I am pretty sure he did enjoy it, but he was far too proud to show any sign of that. He would just ignore my hand. I could only hear his "frrr" sometimes.

After I began to pet Mars I appreciated how well he controlled his wild instincts. Cats are always very clean when they are in their natural environment. But at the Tbilisi Zoo, in shocking conditions, where their life was limited to within the two 15 sq.m. cages, and without access to running water for swimming most of the big cats became less concerned about their neatness. My friends and I always had some dirt on our fingers after petting Rose, Bagheera, Naida, Aida and particularly, the old tiger – Tamasho. But after petting Mars my hands always were absolutely clean. Moreover, if I had been petting Rose, Bagheera, or Tamasho first and then petting Mars, the dirt would vanish. After I noticed that, I used to wash my hands before petting Mars.

Mars would never lie down if the floor of the cage was wet. Even a drop of water or milk on the floor would prevent him from lying down in that place.

On most of the spring and summer days the big cats were kept in the outer cages for the whole day. It was torture for Mars if it was raining. He could not lie down and have a rest because the floor of the cage was wet. So he would walk too and fro for a whole day, until the door between the outer and inner cages was opened. The big cats were brought to the inner cages every evening about 6 pm. I remember sometimes, if it was raining, I would get off the trolley bus, enter the Zoo and go straight to Mars' cage, open the door between the outer and inner cages, then continue on my way to the conservatory. In those days sometimes I would go to the Zoo two, or three times a day. I remember, one day an old lady, who was selling the Zoo admission tickets, said to me "Go in for free. You come here so often, you must love the animals very much". So from that day on I no longer had to pay to enter.

I also found a better way to purchase the meat for Mars. I could purchase the meat... from the staff members of the Zoo.

I think it is hard for people from the western world to understand the peculiarities of animal feeding at the Tbilisi Zoo. Animals were fed every day (save Sunday). I often witnessed how the staff members would take the larger pieces of animal's meat for themselves. That does not mean that the animals were constantly hungry. They usually had enough food. How, you may ask? The answer is simple – the Zoo was receiving much more meat every day, than the animals needed. But why? Because all the figures were artificially increased. For example, it could be written in official papers that the lions needed 10 kilograms of meat every day. In fact they needed only 6 or 7. So the figures were unofficially designed to suit the animals and staff members too. If it wasn't for this system of falsifying the figures, low paid staff members would simply quit their jobs. This kind of semi-official stealing was quite normal in the former Soviet Union. There were lots of jokes about what people of different professions could bring home from their jobs for free. It was a kind of "permitted stealing", well-

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known more or less across the entire Soviet Union.

The meat for the predators was not always fresh and good. On such days all the big cats had a lot of food. If the meat was good quality the greater portion was taken by the staff. Predators were never given milk, or any vitamins. Meat was the only item of their daily food.

Staff members of the big cat's building used to keep their "own" meat in an old green bucket. Once an idea came to me. "Could I buy some of this meat?" I enquired and in a few seconds I had a large piece of good quality meat for a reasonable price. Later I was doing this quite often - buying animal's meat for them again - mostly for Mars, or for jaguar Iasha, who never refused to eat more.

I hoped that my daily idyll with Mars would continue on for a long time, however about nine weeks later troubles began. On October 31st I was at Mars' cage as usual. I had two bottles of milk and some meat for him. A couple of Zoo visitors were watching Mars who was running back and forth excitedly. I was just about to open the first bottle of milk when I suddenly heard an angry voice. "Hey what are you doing there?" I looked around and saw Margot Kapanadze, the head of the predator's department. All my Zoo friends were a little afraid of her because she was not happy about visitors touching the big cats. We usually made sure she was not around. But I was so engrossed with Mars that I got caught red handed. She called me over. I went to her feeling guilty. "Look, Soso" (she knew most of us "Zoo boys" by name, and "Soso" is a short nickname derived from "Joseph" in Georgia), "I have heard that you and some other boys sometimes stroke Bagheera and Tamasho. This is not good, of course, but Mars is very different. He is extremely dangerous. You know that when he tore off the arm of a visitor the police investigation of that accident lasted for several months. We all might have been fired. Some of the staff members have also been injured by Mars. Do you want something like that to happen to you? Do you want to lose your arm? Or die?"

"But I do not tease him", I pleaded, "and I am not going to extinguish a cigarette on his nose" - I made a timid attempt to acquit myself.

"There is no excuse for this", she said, "take these bottles of milk home and do not go near Mars ever again."

What could I do? I had to obey and go off to the conservatory.

Now I understand, of course, that Margot was absolutely right. But that day I had a terrible feeling that she was ordering me to do something that I simply could not do. I might have found it easier to be expelled from the conservatory, that to quit coming to see Mars.

But what could I do? I decided to visit Mars only in the evenings, after Margot had already left. The administration members of the Zoo would leave at 5pm. So, I could

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see Mars after that time.

Maybe it is hard to believe, but I came back to see Mars that very same evening of October 31st. Mainly because I had not given him his meat and milk. I had kept them in my conservatory bag all day long.

I entered the Zoo at 5.20pm. I asked at the entrance if Margot had already left. "I think she did" was the reply. I went directly to the big cat's building. I took out the milk bottles and the pieces of meat. There was no one in the building. Mars was happily running in his cage. I moved Mars's bowl closer and opened the first bottle of milk.

Suddenly I heard footsteps. Somebody had entered the building. I looked around and my blood froze. Margot Kapanadze was coming directly towards me, with a big fat policeman by her side. Believe me, I would have preferred to have been thrown into the lions cage than face her that moment.

"So you are here again with Mars", said Margot angrily, "Come along with us. Gogi, watch him. Do not let him escape"

I was not going to escape, of course. I packed the milk and meat (for the second time that day) and followed Margot and the policeman. You can imagine how I felt.

We entered the main building of the Zoo Administration and went up to the first floor. We entered the Head of the Department of Predator's Office. Margot and the policeman had not uttered one word all the way. Without saying a word, Margot gave me a pen and paper. I sat down, understanding that I was supposed to write something.

"Write", she ordered. Then she dictated slowly: "I, Soso ...Wait, what is your surname? "Joseph Jordania", I replied. "Ok, I, Joseph Jordania, was warned several times by Margarita Kapanadze not to come close to the cage of Mars, the Siberian tiger. I have chosen to disobey this order by being caught at his cage. I confess my guilt and I promise not to enter the territory of the Zoo ever again".

"I will not write this", I told her, raising my head from the paper. "I will not."

Margot stared at me in surprise. "Look at him!" she said, and paused for a moment before adding. "OK. Write this way: "I promise not to enter the Zoo without the permission of the Zoo officials".

I wrote this, signed, and handed it back to her.

"Tell me your home telephone number" she ordered. "I want to speak to your mother".

What could I do? I answered feeling terrible. "What is your mother's name?" "Nelly", I replied.

Margot dialed the number.

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"Hallo. Is that Nelly? Very good. Listen, Kalbatono ("miss" in Georgian) Nelly, I am calling you from the zoo".

There she made a long pause. I knew my mother's character. She may easily have collapsed and died at that moment. Later she told me that when she heard that someone was calling from the zoo, she immediately imagined that something terrible had happened to her son and she was being informed, or even worse, would have to go and identify the remnants of my body.

"Has something happened to Soso?" My mother finally replied, in a cracked voice.

"I am calling you to prevent something from happening to him", said Margot, "We caught him feeding a tiger who had bitten off a visitor's arm some time ago".

"So, is he all right? Is he alive?" enquired my mother.

"Of course! He is sitting here at the table right now".

"Can I talk to him?"

"Sure". Margot gave me the phone. "Talk to your mother", she said, sternly.

I took the phone. "Soso, do you hear me? Hello, Soso, are you there?" I heard my mother's voice. I wanted to reply, but I could not. I felt as though something was blocking my throat. "Soso, talk to me!"

I gave the phone back to Margot.

"Sorry, Kalbatono Nelly", said Margot to my mother, "He can't talk to you. But believe me, this is because he feels guilty. He is fine. Without a scratch".

Then they went on talking for several minutes. But I could not hear that part of the conversation, as the policeman, who was sitting there all the time, began to talk to me.

"Where do you work?" He asked me.

"I do not work. I study" I replied.

"Where?" He was obviously suspicious.

"At the conservatory".

"Show me your conservatory ID", he ordered.

I tried to find my student's ID in my bag but I could not. It was not so easy to find it among the bottles of milk and the meat. Instead I found a record book of my study results, which had my photo and the results of examinations. I gave it to the

Joseph Jordania (1999). *The Story of Mars, The Siberian Tiger*. Unpublished Memoir.

policeman.

He examined it carefully.

"So you do study. And look, you have very good results – high distinctions!" He was obviously puzzled, "So why are you coming to the zoo? Why are you coming to this tiger?"

"I am bringing him some milk and meat". I explained.

"Why? Do you think the tiger is not being given enough food?"

"No, of course not. I am giving him milk and meat because I want him to know that there is someone out there who cares about him and who is friendly to him. And I want him to be happy to see someone. And he is really happy when he sees me. That's why he is so friendly to me. That's why I come to see him."

The policeman looked at me carefully. I imagined he must be thinking that although I was harmless, I was still slightly crazy.

"So you think he is grateful to you? If you want somebody to be grateful to you, give me some money and I'll be really grateful".

"I do not expect the tiger will be grateful to me. He has no one in his life who he is happy to see, and that's terrible. It is really terrible to know, that there is nobody who really cares about you. I just want him to enjoy seeing me".

I think the policeman still thought I was a bit strange. Margot was finishing off her conversation with my mother.

"We have a policeman here", she told my mother, "and he will take your son down to the police department right now".

"That's excellent", replied my mother, happy that I was alive and well, "Take him down to the police station! Thank you very much".

Margot hung up the phone and turned to the policeman.

"Listen, Gogi, take this young man to the Police Department".

"All right", replied the policeman and stood up. I stood up too.

"May I leave this milk and meat here?" I asked.

"Why?" she answered, "Just take it home".

"No. I do not want to take it home. I want it to be given to Mars".

"All right. Leave it here. I'll make sure it's given to him".

Joseph Jordania (1999). *The Story of Mars, The Siberian Tiger*. Unpublished Memoir.

I went out of the office building with the policeman by my side. I do not know what Margot had told the policeman to do to me, but I know what he did a couple of minutes later.

The policeman stopped me while we were walking along a Zoo alley, "Listen, it seems to me she is a bit of a nervous woman. My name is Gogi. I am here at the Zoo every third day for the whole day. You may come in the evenings when I am here and go to this tiger. All right? You can go home now. Bye".

I was very grateful to him. Anyway, I could not go to the Zoo in the evenings, as my mother told me she would be totally upset if I did so. Also, I did not have lectures at the conservatory in the evenings, so I could not go there when Gogi was there.

What could I do? I decided to visit Mars on Mondays only. That was the only day Margot was not at the zoo. One day a week. That was a very hard and cruel decision, but that was the only possibility I could think of at the time.

That unpleasant event, when I was caught at Mars's cage twice on the same day happened on a Thursday. Four days later, on Monday (November 4th) I went to the zoo. I did not have anything with me, milk or meat. I checked that Margot was not there and went to see Mars. When he saw me he became very excited. He was moving fast in his cage, looking at me and chuffing "frrr". It was the first time since we had become friends that he had not seen me for longer than two days. I went to the shop on the Square of Heroes and bought a big piece of meat. I came back to the zoo, cut the meat into small pieces and gave them to Mars. He was very happy and excited. I spent several happy minutes with Mars, feeding him by hand. I did not stay there for a long time. I was still wary of my last meeting with Margot.

This was Monday, November 4th. When I came to the zoo a week later, I did not know that it would be the most unexpected and the dramatic day of my relationship with Mars.

Because the very next day after I left, on Tuesday, November 5th, 1974, Mars, huge and beautiful Siberian tiger, the pride of Tbilisi zoo, refused to eat his food for the first time in his life...

\* \* \* \* \*

Joseph Jordania (1999). *The Story of Mars, The Siberian Tiger*. Unpublished Memoir.

A week later, on November 11th, Monday, I entered the Zoo in the afternoon. I did not have any milk or meat, just my conservatory bag. I was approaching the big cat's building, when I met Spartak, one of my Zoo friends, who knew very well about my friendship with Mars, and the trouble I got into a week ago.

"Hello, Soso", he told me, "Listen, do not go there, please". He looked worried.

"Do not worry," I told him, "I do not have anything with me. What's wrong?"

"Mars is dying."

"Dying?!" I could not believe what he was saying, "What happened to Mars?"

"No one knows. He has not eaten any food since last Monday. He is lying in his cage barely alive. Two days ago they had a discussion about Mars and someone said that maybe you gave him poisoned meat... So, do not go there."

"Me? Poisoned Mars? That's crazy! Why?"

"Because you were banished from seeing him several days ago".

"That's ridiculous! I must see Mars".

"No, no, do not go there, please! Everyone is at the zoo. Margot is also at the zoo. So, do not go there, please. Maybe Mars is already dead"...

"I do not care if Margot and other are there. I am going to see Mars."

I really did not care in that moment about Margot, or anybody else. I just wanted to see Mars.

I entered the big cat's building from the far end and approached Mars's cage. He was lying in the corner. He was not dead. I could see his back rising and falling, so he was breathing. His eyes were closed. He looked terrible, with his formidable skeleton clearly visible under his striped skin. I saw pieces of stale minced meat in the cage. If predators stop eating, staff members give them minced meat to make eating easier for them.

I went up to the cage. "Mars", I called softly, "Mars!"

Mars opened his eyes, raised his big head and looked at me. We were looking at each other for a few seconds in silence. "Mars, it's me" I called again. Mars was looking at me for a couple of more seconds, then he pronounced "frrr", and stood up. He came closer to the iron bars, looking at me and pronouncing "frrr". He really looked terrible.

I took some pieces of stale minced meat from the floor and gave them to him. He smelled it, but did not eat. He looked at me again, pronouncing "frrr" again and again.

I rushed out of the Zoo and ran to the shop across the street. I did not care about

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my ban, so I decided to buy him a piece of meat. A few minutes later I returned with a big piece of meat in my bag. I did not care about anyone seeing me with meat. When approaching the big cat's building, I saw several staff members approaching the building with a big trolley full of meat. It was feeding time. Margot was also there. I stayed way away from the building. I knew this procedure would last about 20 minutes.

Half an hour later I approached the big cat's building. I saw Spartak again. He also saw me and came over. I could see he was beaming.

"Everything is all right!" he told to me, "Mars seems to be better! He ate his meat for the first time this week! But don't go there, everyone is still there at Mars' cage, Margot, the physician and others."

It was such a relief! I left the Zoo and went off to the conservatory feeling much better. The whole day I was at the conservatory thinking only about Mars. I was trying to work out if Mars stopped feeding because he was upset as I had not visited him that week. It seemed to me very unlikely, as you do not expect tigers to behave like dogs, who sometimes stop feeding when they are distressed because of suddenly losing their masters. "That's impossible! Tigers are not dogs!" I was repeating to myself. But on the other hand, how to explain why he had stopped eating when I disappeared, and then he begun to eat just few minutes later after he saw me?

Also, Mars stopped eating on Tuesday, after my Monday visit, and he could not have known that I was not going to come, as he saw me the previous day. How could he know I could not come the following days? Of course, I had a terrible feeling on that Monday that I was going to be absent for a whole week, but how could Mars know about this? Possibly he could feel something was wrong, could feel my profound inner anxiety and sadness? Possibly all these talks about the cat's "sixth sense" is right? I know that big cats can easily live without any food for much longer than a week, but Mars had something different – he had food, of course, but he refused to eat it as he seemed to have lost his interest in life.

Questions, questions... I do not think I shall ever really understand what happened with Mars during that November week of the 1974.

After that day I would visit Mars every Monday. He recovered remarkably well. Several weeks later I began to visit him on some of the evenings as well. It is hard to believe, that at that time I knew how to enter the big cat's building, as I knew the place where the key was kept. I could enter in the evening, lock myself inside, and spend an hour or even more absolutely relaxed. I remember once I took my Conservatory friend, Sandro Savitsky (then a principal of one of the musical schools in Tbilisi) with me there on one such evening. I was giving Mars milk and pieces of meat from my hand. It is amazing to think that several times I was standing at the iron bars actually stroking Mars' jaw and neck while he was eating. I remember very well how the huge round muscles on his lower jaw would row around while he was chewing the meat. Sandro

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was well known among my friends as a passionate storyteller with unbound fantasy, and his account of his visit to the night zoo was filled with fantastic element, for example, that as if I opened the cages and took tigers and lions for a stroll...

Mars was always very kind to me, although he was still just allowing me to pet him, not showing whether he enjoyed it or not.

At the end of the next summer I was away for four weeks. I was a bit worried how would he react, but he was fine. I remember the day when I came back to the Zoo for the first time after my summer holidays. There were lots of children at Mars's cage. Several kindergartens must have been brought there that day. Mars was sleeping. It must have been difficult, as the children were very noisy.

"Mars!" I called out. I could barely hear myself speak above the din. But cats have much better ears than humans.

Mars raised his head instantly. In one bound he was up on his legs, looking at the huge group of children and adults surrounding his cage. Everybody became silent in an instant. The tiger was obviously looking for somebody. After several seconds he saw me behind the group of children, and as usual, began to run up and down the cage looking at me. I quickly entered the building and let him inside the winter quarters. That day he was extremely happy.

Our relationship lasted for several years. Fortunately, without any further incidents.

In the Autumn of 1975 I decided to take Mars' photo. I did not own a camera myself. I asked several professional photographers to go to the Zoo with me and take Mars' picture, but they all refused. Those photographers were mostly working with very old and heavy stationary equipment, so it would have been a little difficult to sneak a 700-pound ferocious tiger into their studio. Perhaps this is why they all refused my strange request.

Later I purchased a Russian camera "Zenith" from my older colleague, the singer Sergo Torelli. The first shot I ever made with this camera was the photo of Mars. I took it when he was lying in his cage, leaning against the wall. I pushed the lens of the camera between the iron bars and took the photo. The light was poor, and there was nothing except the dirty wall and floor of the cage. Despite this it is the most poetic photo I have ever taken in my entire life. Mars's eyes are slightly open, and I wondered if he was unconsciously dreaming of being in his natural environment, living a free life, which he had never experienced before.

Later I gave this photo, together with the photos of other animals to Margot. She liked them and seemed to be very happy.

"That's excellent!" She told me, looking at the photos, "It is much better to take

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the animals pictures than to go close and endanger yourself. Wait a minute", she suddenly became concerned about something and looked a little closer at the photo of Mars. "Why are there no iron bars in this photo? Did you go right up to Mars' cage again?"

She looked at me. Oops!

"No, no, of course not", I replied, thinking quickly what to answer "I just used a special zooming lenses to bring the picture closer". I was lucky that Margot did not know the technical abilities of a zoom lens. Or possibly she knew but did not tell me anything?..

During the same dramatic autumn of 1974 I became a friend of a Russian tiger trainer, Nikolay Pavlenko. He went on to become one of the best tiger trainers of the world. He was decorated by President Putin and also won the biggest International Award for Circus artists, The Golden Clown in Monte-Carlo. From the 1980s onwards he has toured many western countries, including the USA, Germany, Japan, France and China. Back in 1974 he spent several months in Tbilisi after his arm was badly injured by one of his tigers. He was (and still is) one of my dearest friends, although currently we live on different continents. After Nikolai came out of the hospital, I brought him to Tbilisi Zoo several times. I showed him Mars as well. Nikolay appreciated the beauty and size of Mars. He was deeply concerned that I was petting him while eating. "Never do that", he told me "Even the kindest tigers can get very angry if somebody goes too close to them while eating".

I asked him how to explain Mars's strange behaviour when he deliberately stopped feeding during the whole week. Nikolay knew tigers extremely well and loved them dearly. He was the only big cat's trainer in the former Soviet Union, who had become a predator's trainer from the Zoo and not from the Circus. He always considered tiger's health to be his first priority and was very knowledgeable. That's why his tigers were breeding every year (for tigers in captivity this is relatively rare). "The tiger might have had a mild digestion problem", he told me, "and this problem may have been worsened by your absence during that week. So possibly his behaviour had been the result of both factors."

I became a friend of some of Pavlenko's tigers as well. Most of all I liked the mighty old tiger Sultan, who was a very rare South Chinese tiger. Also a very kind and gentle Bengal tiger called Tonny. Our friend Niko shot a few photos of myself with Tonny and Nikolay Pavlenko at Tbilisi circus on the 17th of February 1975.

In 1976 I began to work with a children's ensemble called "Saplings". The ensemble was well-known in Georgia and the Soviet Union. I was teaching them guitar and piano, and doing arrangements of songs. I graduated from the Tbilisi State conservatory in 1978. The same year I began my PhD studies.

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In the summer of 1979 my father, a prominent Georgian ethnomusicologist, Mindia Jordania, died at the age of 49. The same year I became a lecturer at the Department of Georgian folk music at the Conservatory and also a lecturer at the Araqishvili Musical College. My visits to the Zoo became rare, although by this time they were no longer restricted to Mondays. I bumped into Margot Kapanadze occasionally. She was always very kind and would ask me about my studies. Fortunately she never saw me feeding or petting Mars again. She later became the head of the Herbivorous Animals Department.

I felt guilty that I could not afford to visit Mars very often, although he was always very happy to see me.

I remember the day in 1980, when I visited the Zoo and saw that both of Mars' cages were empty.

I learnt that Mars died two weeks earlier. He was about 15 years old. His death still remains a mystery. He did not die in his cage behind the iron bars. The veterinarian noticed that one of Mars' claws was growing wrong and cutting into his paw. The veterinarian decided a surgeon needed to operate to remove the claw. They gave Mars an anesthetic. Mars went to sleep and never woke up again. As it was written in a newspaper "Communist" (the central newspaper of Georgia during the Soviet period), Mars and a few other animals, the jaguar Iasha and a pregnant Kangaroo among them, were deliberately killed by some staff members of the Zoo. It was written that they did so because they wanted to get rid of the new director of the Zoo, who had attempted to eliminate the Zoo Mafia. Later I met the director of the Tbilisi Zoo, Alexander Kapanadze. He confirmed that he had been threatened several times and once was severely beaten and almost killed. So, Mars had fallen victim to the dirty human politics of some Zoo staff members. I heard another version of Mars's death several years later, from the new Zoo veterinarian, whom I already knew from the Youth Club Amirani. According to him, Mars' death was caused by incorrect anaesthesia. "They just could not wake him up," he told me. "No one would want to kill Mars".

So, according to this version Mars died of a tranquilliser overdose. I can easily imagine how the surgeon would give a much bigger dosage to this huge tiger during the operation. Just to be on a safe side. So, Mars might have become a victim of his own image of a fierce and dangerous tiger.

Sometimes I think Mars was lucky to die peacefully during his sleep. Although he spent his whole life in a small space, behind the iron bars, at least he died out of his cage, in freedom.

In 1989-90 (during the "Perestroika" period) there were a lot of changes at the Tbilisi Zoo. All the big cats were moved to a new bigger territory where they were better treated (although it is still very far from western standards...).

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In 1982 I finished my PhD. In 1984, 1986, and 1988 I organized the international conferences "Problems of Folk Polyphony". In 1988 I became the head of the musicological section of the Centre for Mediterranean Studies at the Tbilisi State University. In 1989 I published a book about Georgian folk polyphony and the origins of part-singing phenomenon. In 1991 I became a Doctor of Music and later – a Professor of the Tbilisi State Conservatory. In 1995, after the civil war and the war in Abkhazia, I migrated with my family to Australia. Currently I am an Honorary Fellow of the Faculty of Music at the University of Melbourne. While in Australia, I wrote a couple of other books. One of them (published in 2006) received the ethnomusicological prize in Japan. In 2014 I published a book on the history of interaction between big cats and humans (with the title "Tigers, Lions and Humans: History of Rivalry, Conflict, Reverence and Love") which was dedicated, of course, to Mars. On June 13, 2015, a tragedy unfolded, as flood virtually wiped out a big part of Tbilisi zoo and left 20 people and countless animals dead. As the big cat's territories were next to the flooded river, they all drowned or were shot dead by the special forces. This tragedy was on the international news for several days. I visited in September 2016 Tbilisi zoo and talked to the Tbilisi zoo director, who himself barely escaped death when his car, with him inside, was taken by flooded waters. I could not recognize the territory where I spent so much time with Mars, as it has been irreversibly changed by the flood. The place where Mars lived is now buried under thousands of tons of soil.

In our first Melbourne flat in Northcote, then in a house in Reservoir, and now in Preston, you can always see a blown up picture of Mars. My first and best loved photograph.

I often think of Mars. I remember, a Zoo visitor asked me once, seeing me petting Mars: "Could you enter the cage of this tiger?" I am not sure of this. Although Mars was obviously very friendly to me, I knew that he still was a real predator with naturally sharp instincts. I loved and respected him as he was. For instance, I could never put my hand through the iron bars of Mars's cage and close my eyes, as we could do with the old tiger Tamasho.

Lots of other stories come to mind from those years when I visited the Tbilisi Zoo during the 1970s. Some of them are sad, like the story of three home-reared and very friendly bears, who escaped from their cage and were machine gunned down by the soldiers, who were brought in to track them down; Some are embarrassing for humans, like the story of a small kitten, which was thrown into the lions cage by a zoo visitor (somebody wanted to see how the lions would kill the kitten), and how sister lions – Aida and Naida licked the kitten all over the body instead; Some are strange, like the story of two home-reared female lions – Inga and Therese, one of whom remained very kind to the people, whilst the other became one of the most dangerous and fierce animals in the zoo; Some are cruel, like the story of how a lioness got into the leopards cage, and killed and ate most of him; Some are very romantic, like the story of a very calm and nice female tiger, who got crazy when her cubs were taken away from her and

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who escaped from her cage and went out searching the Zoo for her cubs.

In the Summer of 1999 our family visited Georgia. Of course, I went to visit Tbilisi Zoo (on June 20th). Amazingly, I met there two of the heroes of this story from the 1970s – Valodia, a dwarf worker who's foot was injured by Mars, and Margot Kapanadze, the fearful head of big cat's department in the 1970s. It was Margot, who caught me at Mars' cage on October 31st 1974 and made me write an official letter that I would never come close to Mars. She recognized me instantly, although I have obviously changed during these long years, losing moustaches and a big part of hair. "Soso! This is my Soso!" said she the moment she saw me. We talked a lot about the zoo, about Georgia, Australia, and of course, about Mars. Despite her senior age, Margot vividly remembered everything connected with Mars, even the name of a poor fellow who lost part of his arm in that tragic accident about thirty years ago. "It is pity that the letter I made you to write in my office has been lost during the zoo renovation" said Margot to me. After a while I asked Margot a question I always wanted to know the answer to. "You may remember when Mars stopped feeding", I said. "Of course, I do", replied Margot. "I was told that somebody from the zoo officials said that it could have been me who poisoned Mars. Is this correct? Did someone really say this?" "Yes, this is correct. I remember somebody saying these words, because this happened very soon after you were banned to come to see Mars. But you know this could not have been me. I knew very well how you loved Mars."

Then in return I told Margot something she did not know all these years: "Do you remember that a few days later Mars started to eat again?" I asked. "Yes, of course, I remember this very well. We actually never understood why did he stop feeding for a whole week, or why did he suddenly start feeding again." "I must tell you something. Although I was banned to come to the zoo just a few days earlier, and I was not coming there during the whole week, I actually came and saw Mars on that very Monday, just a few minutes earlier before he started eating again." "Really?" Margot looked at me and did not say a word for a few seconds in amazement, "So now it is clear for me why he started to eat again..."

I saw Margot twice while I was in Tbilisi in 1999. At the end of our second meeting (on July 3rd) we did something we had never done back in the 1970s – we were photographed together (see the photos).

I did not realize that the story of Mars would be so lengthy. To finish this story I must also mention that I had several very vivid dreams about Mars. In those dreams we were both in the forest and I was enjoying looking at him being free and happy. I did not have an idea that Mars was already dead in those dreams. Actually, some of those dreams I had in the 1970s, whilst Mars was alive, during my summer holidays, when I was out of Tbilisi. But in one later dream I knew he was already dead. In this particular dream Mars was not a tiger. He was in the form of a big strong man. We were sitting at a small round table on an open balcony. He was dressed in a white sleeveless vest. We

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were sitting there for a long time. I asked him only one question "Mars, how did you die?" He did not answer me. And I somehow knew he would not do this. I believe that Mars also saw me in his dreams too.

I feel honored to have met this remarkable animal. Although I am coming to the end of this story, it is (and always will be) constantly with me. Nothing gives me more pleasure than being asked to retell the story of Mars, the Siberian tiger. Although I have to confess, that as time goes by, I am increasingly becoming overwhelmed by emotions when I talk about Mars.

It is also comforting to know that for Mars there was at least one person in his joyless life in the cage, whom he was always happy to see.

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**MARS, SIBERIAN TIGER, AT TBILISI ZOO. 1975.**

## PHOTOS

I regret I did not take as many photos as I could have back in the 1970s, but there are a few photos that accompany this story:

- Mars in his cage, my first photo (1975) I do have some other photos of Mars (I took even color photos of Mars and printed them myself in 1976, but they are not so good quality. I believe my first black-and-white photo you see here is the best one.)

- Nikolay Pavlenko (the Russian tiger trainer, my friend from 1974), his tiger Tony and myself. Photo taken in Tbilisi Circus, on February 17th, 1975, by Niko - I do not remember his surname.

- Two photos - I with Nikolay Pavlenko's tiger cubs outside of the Tbilisi Circus. Photos taken on 16.8.81. I do not remember who took these photos - maybe Nikolay Pavlenko himself?

- Photo of myself feeding one of Pavlenko tiger cubs from the bottle. 2005, Russia, Siberia, city Irkutsk at lake Baikal.

- Photo of Boria (Boris) and Vakhtang, my "zoo friends" from the 1970s, who introduced me to animal petting at Tbilisi zoo in 1974. Photo taken in 1976-77 by Sergo Torelli.

- Myself and Valodia Kazarian, dwarf worker of the Tbilisi zoo, who's foot was injured by Mars in the 1970s. Photo taken on June 20th, 1999 by my son, Sandro (Alexander) Jordania.

- Nikolai Pavlenko with his tigers (poster, 2003)

- Myself and Margot Kapanadze. Photo taken on July 3rd, 1999 by Tina Tsomaia, Zoo veterinarian.

Sorry, at the moment you can see one photo only in this file. Other photos will be added later. I need to digitize them first.