

Igor Burtsev, *PhD (Hist)*
Head of the International Center of Hominology
Moscow, Russia

In the Quest of Zana – Wild Woman in Abkhazia

(First article)

The story of Zana is that of a wild woman caught and habituated by people in Abkhazia at the end of the 19th century. She not only lived with people, but also was the mother of children by human fathers. I had also read that information in Boris Porshnev's book, *"The Struggle for Troglodytes"* (1968, in Russian. Translated into French and published as a half of the Bernard Heuvelmans book *"L'Homme Neanderthal est Toujours Vivant"*, Paris, PLON, 1974). By that time, I was not only acquainted with Porshnev, but also helped him in his research. The story of Zana is also written about in the book by Dmitri Bayanov, *"In the Footsteps of the Russian Snowman,"* 1996. In this book, a more developed version is presented since the study has continued.

Dr. Boris Porshnev held the excavations thrice in 1964-65 but couldn't find Zana's remains as he supposed. I came to Abkhazia in 1971 and continued with the searches. Earlier during my expeditions in Talysh, I learned that a well-known zoologist-paleontologist from Tbilissi, Georgia Republic, Dr. Nikolay Burchak-Abramovich, had also searched for homins in that area. I was told that he had found their tracks and made casts of them (Dr. Burchak-Abramovich was known as the discoverer of the tooth of a fossil primate in the Caucasus, *Dryopithecus*, named by him *Udabnopithecus*). When I intended to continue the searches in Talysh, I received a letter from him stating that he was in Abkhazia at that time consulting the Historical Museum in Sukhum. Thus, I decided to meet him there and at the same time, in a quest to learn more about Zana. In July 1971, I met him in Abkhazia, high in the mountains where he was taking part in looking for ancient bear bones deep in a cave. He supported my interest in the cause of Zana and later on, attended in my searches for the grave of Zana in Abkhazia.

In the beginning, I met with a couple of eyewitnesses to Zana in the village of in Tkhuin (one of them was 130 years old). I also found the eldest daughter of Khwit (Zana's son), Tanya who now aged 53, living in Kochara village. Tanya allowed me to copy a photo of her and her father Khwit when she was young. Tanya had three daughters.

I also visited another village called Tagiloni to meet Khwit's youngest daughter Raya with her mother Mariya and daughter Manana. They gave me a photo of Khwit's son Shaliko (late). By the way, Mariya, their mother, was of Russian nationality, and had twin daughters, Lyuba and Natalia, from her previous husband.

After having visited these descendants of Zana and having received from them and the local authorities the permission to do the excavations, I began to dig on the old cemetery hoping to find Zana's remains. One local man, Zenob Chokua, showed me where he buried Khwit, thus I knew the place of his grave. In reasoning that Khwit had been buried close to his mother, I explored the area around his tomb and found a very old burial site next to his. I excavated it and found that it was of unusual type in that the grave was too long, with the body seeming to be buried in a sitting position, galoshes (rubber footwear) were on the feet of the remains exhibiting the year of their production, 1888. The skull was evidently that of a woman which caused me to think at first that this could be Zana herself. But later I came to realize that the remains were not those of Zana. The skull of that woman revealed a quite thin outline of her face, she had lost many teeth during her lifetime, and died of old age. All this was contradictory to the appearance of Zana as described by eyewitnesses.

During that trip in 1971, I discussed the question with paleontologist Dr. Burchak-Abramovich. We came to conclusion, that it would be interesting to study Khwit's bones in order to be convinced that the entire story would be interesting enough to warrant continuing its investigation. Thus, we then excavated Khwit's skull. Dr. Burchak was very impressed, even excited by the peculiarities of the skull. It was very massive, covered with rude relief, which signified the strength of the muscles of the face and neck, with a slopping forehead.

This inspired me to arrange a well-prepared new expedition to look for Zana's remains. I wished to attract the attention of the Ethnology Institute, the Archaeology Institute (both under Academy of Sciences) and the "Вокруг света" (*Around the World*) magazine to arrange the common expedition which took place in the Summer of 1975.

I came then to Abkhazia with a small group which included anthropologist Leonid Yablonski (later on PhD, chief of the Dept in Archaeology Institute) and three young assistants. We cleaned the wide surface of thick brushes and grass, divided it to the squares (2 x 2 meters) and excavated seven old graves. Lastly, we found an unusual burial of a woman, not of the local type. Her grave site was next to the woman previously exhumed in 1971 yet also close to Khwit's burial site. The grave was short and wide, not too deep. Furthermore, she had not been buried in a traditional manner as she had been placed into the grave on her left side with her legs bent.

After exhumation, the bones were brought to Moscow. I restored the female skull (as it was splashed in the grave) in the laboratory of plastic reconstruction. The laboratory was headed, after Mikhail Gerassimov's death, by anthropologist Galina Lebedinskaya. She was consulting me during the restoration and highly praised the quality of my work. She also made a drawing of the woman's face, based on her skull, and that portrait clearly shows African features. At the same laboratory,

Khwit's skull was examined for the absence, or presence, of a pathological condition called acromegalia. It was revealed that no pathology was present.

The study of the female skull showed its similarities to African features, whereas Khwit's skull, according to anthropologists, looked very much of Australian type. To check of the African version, I studied several descendants of Africans brought to Abkhazia in previous centuries whom I found in various districts. Yet all those who had seen Zana insisted that she was not of African type. Her body was covered with thick hair and she remained wild despite all attempts to civilize her.

The next time I visited Abkhazia was in 1978. At that time, I arrived with a group of parapsychologists hoping that they could help me to find Zana's remains. I again met with Raya, Khwit's daughter, who had at that time a second child, two-year-old son Robert (see the photo). Raya provided me with blood for analysis at this time. Unfortunately, the result of that analysis was unknown to me because of the ethnic war and conflict that engulfed Abkhazia, making it difficult to conduct further research in that area.

During that study, I contacted well-known archaeologist Yuri Voronov who participated in Dr. Porshnev's searches there and assisted me in 1971. Our group visited him at his excavation site in Tsebelda. I need to mention him here as he is a courageous man who put his life on the line for the reconstitution of the history of Abkhazia. Yuri became a Vice-premier of the Republic of Abkhazia in the 1990s yet sadly in September 1995, Yuri was shot to death in front of his apartment door.

I should also mention that the process of excavation was connected with some mysterious phenomena. An unexpected heavy rain storm occurred when finishing the excavation, my personal hard illness with unknown diagnosis followed in two-three days after and continuing for three weeks, the worsening of the health of a person with ESP capability who visited the place of the burial, and so on. The woman with ESP was vomiting when being close to Khwit's grave, though she was not informed of who the grave belonged to.

The story of Zana is not simply a fascinating tale about a surprising contact of people with a wild humanlike creature. This story is one of a number of episodes remarkable from the point of view of the theory of parallel existence of Homo sapiens and non-sapient hominids and their crossbreeding throughout the course of history. There are other cases of probable crossbreeding of this kind as, for example, in the Sungir excavation, of twenty-three-thousand-year antiquity, in central Russia, where in a sapiens burial bone with Neanderthal features have been found. The Zana case could indeed shed more light on this problem if Zana appears to be either a Neanderthal woman or another species of non-sapient hominids. The point was, we had the skull of Zana's son. Besides, Zana's

descendants live in Abkhazia and DNA analyses of their blood could be of much help in verifying the Zana story.

Later on, the bones were analyzed in 2006 at New York University. The analysis did not determine any distinguishing characteristics from human DNA however, we need a more thorough investigation of the remains. The opinions of an anthropologist and a geneticist were contradictory in regard to the kinship of the owners of these remains. The geneticist Todd Dissotel affirmed that they are of relatives, but anthropologist Shara Bailey disagreed citing the high difference of the shape of both skulls. That is why we intended to continue the DNA analysis of the bones and the blood samples of Zana's descendants.

Unfortunately, Raya died in 2009 of electric shock at the age of 72 but we have found some other descendants of Zana living there in other villages. This story should be continued.

Later on, Oxford professor Dr. Brian Sykes became interested in this story and tried to study the DNA of descendants. But as I see, his analyses were not deep enough, and the mystery of Zana has not yet been solved.

Up to now, I have found some three dozen of Zana's descendants spread all over Abkhazia, along with some in Central European Russia, and even in Moscow city. Their study yet continues.

Recently, this story had new impetuses for further study. The Centre of Geo-Genetics of Copenhagen University (Denmark), headed by Dr. Tom Gilbert, became interested in the DNA analysis of the both skulls. This was in order to finally determine if both the skulls are of close relatives or not and to find which is the species of Zana.

At the same time, the Laboratory of the Anthropological Reconstruction (headed by Dr. Elizabet Veselovskaya) of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences continues to conduct analysis of the sculptural reproduction of the skull belonging to Zana's son Khwit.

Soon, we hope to obtain new and important results.