

The following tale of woe from the Republic of Georgia does not represent the usual pleasant bazaar experience, and it is in fact its departure from the norm that renders it retellable. Feel free to co-opt this anecdote for your own use.

The setting: two male volunteers (shoutout to Nicholas & Seth) and I were strolling through the bazaar looking for cheese to put in the chicken parmesan we were making that evening with five other American friends. We successfully found our way to Cheese Row, where a long line of ladies bearing cheese wheels of varying salinity awaited us. We selected a suitably saltless cheese and answered the saleswoman's casual questions about our home country.

Woman: Are you German?

Us: No, we're Americans.

Woman: How nice! Do you like Georgia?

Us: Yes, we like Georgia. The people are very warm and hospitable.

Woman: How nice!

At this point, it usually ends. We buy our cheese, a few extra bazaar saleswomen inch closer to hear our funny accents, and then we leave to the buzzing soundtrack of their pleased chatter. But not today...

We were paying for our cheese when the saleslady next to ours began to rant in Georgian, directing the full power of her scowl against us but clearly under the impression that we didn't understand what she was saying.

"These foreigners, these Americans come to our schools and take our jobs! There are Georgians in the street, and so many Georgians have no jobs, and the government brings in these Americans to do work that we could do. So many Georgians have no jobs!"

It's true; so many Georgians have no jobs. However, part of our presence here is ameliorated by the fact that we work in tandem with Georgian counterparts, so we're not replacing-- or stealing-- anyone's job. Usually I ignore people who rant against me, but the fact that she was so angry due to the lack of one piece of information-- and the fact that none of the rest of the bazaar ladies were backing her up so it was unlikely to turn into an ambush-- not to mention the fact that I was leaving in 5 months and was thus becoming more brave/careless, led me to try to explain the above caveat to her. Being an idiot, I began with the fact that we're unpaid.

"OH! So the foreigners come in and steal our jobs by working for free! How can a Georgian work for free and still feed their family?!"

I waited for a pause between words, and then I broke in with the fact that we

work with Georgian counterparts.

"AND?"

Good point. I made a valiant attempt to explain that we work with counterparts so that we're not stealing any Georgian jobs, but I didn't know the word for "steal," so that mostly failed.

"Why do you work with Georgian counterparts?"

I'll mention quickly that this type of interrogation is not unusual, only this is the first time I'd ever heard it delivered in a hostile manner. I told her that we teach the counterparts methodology.

"We have plenty of methodology here! Why do we need the foreigners to come in and make us use their methodology while they steal our jobs!"

Having thus aggravated the problem, we paid for our cheese and left, the woman's diatribe echoing loudly as we tried to get out of earshot. At least we had our cheese.

We arrived home, where my host family was sitting around the woodstove. I mentioned we'd fought with a saleswoman. My host mother Rusiko, not usually the leaping type, leapt to her feet and demanded to know the whole story, which we relayed with the help of my host sister, the translator. She was a reluctant translator, as she could already tell her mother was getting ready to go on the warpath, which would inevitably lead to embarrassment at school for the 16-year-old daughter of the Crusader. Nevertheless, my host mother pulled on her fightin' boots, threw on a matching black coat, and dragged Nicholas, Seth and I back to the bazaar.

"You're our guard," I said.

"You're a member of my family," she told me, "and I have to be your protector. Who gave her the right to say bad things to you in public? If I don't talk to that nasty woman now, you won't be able to go peacefully to the bazaar again."

We stormed triumphantly into the building that housed the cheese saleswomen. Rather, my host mother stormed while we volunteers debated which expression we should wear. We went for 'solemn,' which seemed more likely to win sympathy and support than did 'proud and offended,' or 'hurt.' The cheese ladies saw my host mom stomping down the aisle and called out to us helpfully, "The end! The one at the end!"

She approached The Cheese Lady at last. If I had expected that she'd lose her

temper and start flailing her arms and making matters worse, I was mistaken. And I had, so I was. My host mother did indeed give The Cheese Lady a forceful piece of her mind, but Nicholas also noted the proficiency she exhibited in persuasive public speaking. She directed her angry statements toward The Cheese Lady, but then she'd swivel her shoulders out to address the gathering crowd of other cheese ladies and meat ladies and pickle ladies, explaining the mission of Peace Corps. As you'll notice, she also threw in some compliments that may seem irrelevant but actually are crowd-pleasers over there. It was a proud moment, and she said something like this:

"This is a member of my family, and who do you think you are to insult her and her guests? You said you're upset that they're stealing jobs. They're not here to steal jobs, they're here to help for no salary! They work in Kareli, in Chiatura, and here in Samtredia for no pay, and they work with Georgian teachers so that your children can learn English. They're good boys and girls—there are eight of them visiting my house right now. There are four very pretty girls, and they know how to make delicious food. They made delicious food for me this morning. They work very hard, and they should be able to come here and buy cheese in peace! Do you understand?"

I've never loved my host mother so much.

In a double-tier attack of both hard and soft power, Nicholas and Seth were simultaneously the subjects of an impromptu press conference, wherein about ten of the spectators drifted over to bask in their clean-cut glow and ask questions about Georgia. Half the thrill was hearing Nicholas and Seth answer in Georgian, so all the answers were well-received. One woman asked if Nicholas would marry her daughter.

In the end, flushed with triumph, my host mother informed me that I would be able to shop in peace from then on. Waving goodbye to our newfound supporters, we turned heel and followed my host mother home.

I don't know if there is a moral to this story, other than that: 1) Sometimes it's okay to restart an argument, and 2) My host mom really does know what I'm doing here. As she explained to me on the way back, and as I mentioned above, it is a rare occurrence to be on the receiving end of so much hostility here. Using one of my favorite Georgian words, she told me that some people are "blooey" in Georgia, just like some people are blooey in America. So maybe that's the moral of the story.

Some people are just blooey.