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Persecuted Georgian Writer, Peace Activist to Perform Oct. 4 at “Voices of Freedom”

Russia’s attack on the Republic of Georgia, the tiny Eastern European country to its east, grabbed headlines this August. But Georgia’s biggest enemy is the idea that war is the solution to the territorial conflict—or any conflict—says Irakli Kakabadze, a Georgian writer, poet, and playwright who fled his native country in 2007 when his life was threatened as the result of his writing, antiwar, and human rights activism. “Peace is a dangerous idea to some people,” he observes.

Kakabadze will give a free public reading of his work this year’s **Voices of Freedom** event, scheduled for 3:00 p.m., Saturday, October 4, at the Unitarian Church of Ithaca. Every year Voices of Freedom celebrates National Banned Books Week. The event is sponsored by Ithaca City of Asylum (ICOA), a nonprofit volunteer organization that supports writers whose lives have been threatened and whose works have been suppressed. The group’s efforts are essential as long as “there are places in this world where, if you honestly put pen to paper, someone will put a gun to your head,” comments novelist and Cornell professor of creative writing Lamar Herrin, an ICOA board member.

In addition to Kakabadze’s reading, this year’s program includes an electronic music performance by Gogi Dzodzuashvili, who in collaboration with Kakabadze has produced his European hit song “Postindustrial Boys,” involving diverse voices and sounds that Kakabadze calls his “polyphonic blues,” and the presentation of a City of Ithaca proclamation by Ithaca mayor Carolyn Peterson.

Kakabadze, who was born in Georgia’s capital, Tbilisi, in 1969, describes himself as an equal-opportunity “political hooligan.” In April 1989 he was beaten up by Russian soldiers for opposing the ruling Soviet government. In 2005 after he had publicly criticized human rights violations and the militarism of the regime of the Georgian head of state, Mikheil Saakashvili, he suffered a concussion when he was attacked by unidentified thugs. In 2006 Kakabadze was arrested by Georgian police multiple times for taking part in nonviolent public protests against the government, including a concert dedicated to the peaceful resolution of ethnic and political conflicts within Georgia. Ironically, the pacifist concert was broken up violently by the police.

Finally, in January 2007 Kakabadze was forced to flee his native country with his pregnant wife after receiving anonymous death threats following his newspaper editorial calling for the government to apologize for the persecution of the people of western Georgia during the 1992-94 conflict in that region.

“There’s still a Soviet-Stalinist thinking in all these places,” says Kakabadze of Russia, Georgia, and other former Soviet Union regions. “They don’t have any way to work out their problems other than going to war with one another. What we’re not hearing but need to hear is the voice of

nonviolence.” He calls for the establishment of “peace zones” – or nonviolent zones in all areas in dispute.

Kakabadze, whose writing is often deeply political and sharply satirical, has published five books and more than 50 short stories in Georgian, Russian and English publications. He is Ithaca City of Asylum writer-in-residence for 2008 through 2010, as well as a visiting fellow in the Peace Studies Program at Cornell University.

ICOA is affiliated with CRESP Center for Transformative Action at Cornell. Supported entirely by private and community donations and grants, it works in partnership with Cornell, Ithaca, Wells, and Hobart and William Smith colleges and is part of a national network of cities of refuge. Voices of Freedom is made possible in part with funds from the Community Arts Partnership of Tompkins County/NYS Council on the Arts Decentralization Program.