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Migrant Culture in Sweden with Focus on Georgian-Swedish Literary Contacts[1]

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Abstract

The paper takes as its point of departure approaches to the maintenance of language and culture in immigrant communities in Sweden and how members of these communities are encouraged to preserve their home language and cultural identity while also acquiring Swedish. This includes the opportunity for children of Georgian immigrants in Sweden to study Georgian as their home language at school, including the teaching of Georgian culture.

Sweden today is a country that has received large groups of immigrants, mostly after World War II. The Georgian community in Sweden is relatively small and primarily formed during the post-Soviet period.

However, Sweden is not only a country of immigration. In earlier periods, from the mid-nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, Sweden was characterized by extensive emigration from its rural population, primarily to the United States.

The paper briefly introduces the Swedish emigrant literature with its most prominent representative, the author Vilhelm Moberg (1898-1973). He has become internationally renowned for his four "Emigrant novels": (*Utvandrarna* (The Emigrants), *Invandrarna* (The Immigrants), *Nybyggarna* (The New Land), and *Sista brevet till Sverige* (The Last Letter Home).

[1] I am grateful for Manana Kobaidze's valuable consultations throughout the preparation of this paper.

The paper notes that the Georgian-Scandinavian literary contacts date back to the end of the nineteenth century. Amid increased Scandinavian interest in the Caucasus during this period, the Danish explorer Olaf Lange included an introduction to Georgian literature and translations of Georgian poetry in his travelogue from the Caucasus (1891), intended to introduce a Danish and broadly Scadinavian audience to the classics of Georgian literature.

Despite its relatively small numbers, today's Georgian community in Sweden actively promotes Georgian-Swedish literary contacts. This involves original literary production, with Georgian poet Zurab Rtveliashvili as its best-known representative. He lived in emigration in Sweden from 2010 to 2020. Members of the Georgian community in Sweden are also actively working on translating Georgian literature into Swedish and Swedish literature into Georgian.

The catalogues of the central libraries in both countries – *Kungliga biblioteket* (The National Library of Sweden) and *Sakartvelos erovnuli bibliotek'a* (The National Library of Georgia) – have been explored to make an inventory of literature translated from Swedish to Georgian and from Georgian to Swedish. More translations have appeared in recent decades, based on translations directly from Swedish and Georgian, the languages of the originals. Some works translated in the Soviet period, used Russian as the mediating language.

An important hub for presenting Georgian literature in Sweden is the Malmö-based publishing house *Smockadoll, founded by poet and translator Kristian Carlsson*. It has published thirteen Georgian titles in Swedish, partly in collaboration with Georgian partners. Smockadoll's Georgian publications include two books by the emigrant poet Zurab Rtveliashvili, *Poesins diktatur* (2015) and *150.000 Megahertz* (2016). Another central publication is a collection of translations of works by 28 modern Georgian poets, *Den kaukasiska fallenheten (2018).*

Swedish literature is well represented in translation to Georgian. Many of the Swedish books in translation have been issued by *Sulakauri Publishing* in Tbilisi, founded by Bakur Sulakauri, a translator and Swedish specialist. *Sulakauri Publishing* has a special focus on children's literature in Swedish, with authors such as Astrid Lindgren, Tove Jansson, and Sven Nordqvist.

Keywords: language and culture maintenance, migration, migrant literature, childrens' books, poetry, translation

1 Introduction: Sweden – a country of emigration and immigration

1.1 Where is Swedish spoken?

Swedish is spoken as the main language of Sweden, with a population of 10,6 million (Official Statistics of Sweden, 2025). Swedish is also spoken by around 290,000 people in Finland (Folketinget, 2023), which was part of the Kingdom of Sweden before it was lost to Russia in 1809. Swedish is a national language of Finland, along with Finnish. Several central figures of Swedish literature belong to the Swedish-speaking community in Finland, such as Johan Ludvig Runeberg, Zacharias Topelius, and Tove Jansson. In the United States, approximately 55,000 people are estimated to speak Swedish at home (United States Census Bureau, 2025).

1.2 Sweden and Swedish language policy in the context of immigration

Since the Second World War, Sweden has experienced extensive immigration. Today, approximately 20 percent of the population was born abroad (Official Statistics of Sweden, 2025). It goes without saying that questions of language and culture pose a challenge in modern multiethnic Swedish society.

The official approach in Sweden is to promote active bilingualism in Swedish and the immigrants' home language. Swedish is the country's main language, but according to the language law, anyone with a mother tongue other than Swedish shall also be given the opportunity to develop and use their mother tongue. (Språklag 2009). The aim is thus integration, rather than assimilation. All children who have a home language other than Swedish are offered the opportunity to study their home language for a couple of hours per week, provided there is a group of five pupils. The aim is to strengthen the mother tongue/home language and to provide opportunities for pupils to develop their cultural identity, including the study of literary texts and other cultural domains (Statens offentliga utredningar, 2019, 18, pp. 65-66).

1.2.2 *Georgians in Sweden*

The Georgian diaspora in Sweden is not large. According to official statistics on the Swedish population 2,791 persons were born in Georgia[1] (Official Statistics of Sweden, 2025). Official statistics do not include data on languages spoken by the population in Sweden. However, statistics on the number of pupils entitled to home language classes paint an interesting picture. For instance, in the greater Stockholm

[1] Immigrants from Georgia before 1991 are included in the total number of immigrants born in the Soviet Union. In 2025, a total of 4868 persons in Sweden were born in the USSR (Official Statistics of Sweden, 2025).

area, according to last year's statistics, 264 schoolchildren were entitled to study Georgian as their home language (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2025), and most did so.

1.3 Sweden in the context of emigration

In contrast to the contemporary situation, from the mid-19th century to the 1930s, Sweden was a country of emigration. Only during the period from 1840 to 1930 did around 1,3 million Swedes emigrate, mainly to the US (Vamling, 2007).

Although only a fraction of the descendants of the Swedish migrants to the US have been able to maintain their heritage language today, the large Swedish-speaking community in the US in the late 19th and early 20th century produced an extensive Swedish emigrant literature (cf. Barton, 1998, Skårdal, 1977).

1.3.1 *"The Emigrant novels" by Vilhelm Moberg*

In the context of Swedish emigration literature, one of the classics should be mentioned: Vilhelm Moberg's novel *Utvandrarna* (The Emigrants) (1949). The book's theme is emigration from Sweden in the mid-19th century and the new life in America. *Utvandrarna* is the first volume in Moberg's series "The Emigrant Novels" of four volumes: *Utvandrarna* (1949), *Invandrarna* (1952), *Nybyggarna* (1956), and *Sista brevet till Sverige* (1959). Moberg (1898-1973) was not an emigrant writer in the usual sense of having settled abroad, but made extensive field research for his books among Swedish emigrants in the US, documenting their lives and experiences of emigration (Moberg, 1966). A particularly important find was a diary kept by a Swedish emigrant, which inspired Moberg to create the novels' two main characters, Karl-Oskar and Kristina (cf. Andrew Peterson Society).

Moberg's books reached a wide international audience through translations into many languages, including Russian. Films based on Moberg's books further added to the books' international popularity. The films *The Emigrants* (1971) and *The New Land* (1972), directed by Jan Troell, featured Liv Ullmann (Kristina) and Max von Sydow (Karl-Oskar) in the leading roles, two actors well-known from earlier films by director Ingmar Bergman.

2 Georgian-Swedish literary contacts

In this study on Georgian-Swedish literary contacts, the main sources used for available translations in the respective languages are the national library catalogues of both countries. Data on books published in Sweden have been collected from *Kungliga biblioteket* (The National Library of Sweden, www.kb.se/eng.html). *Kung-*

liga biblioteket is one of two libraries in Sweden that receives and archives all items published in Sweden. The Georgian source is *Sakartvelos erovnuli bibliotek'a* (The National Library of Georgia, www.nplg.gov.ge/eng/home). Sections 2.1–2.1.3 are devoted to publications translated from Swedish to Georgian, and sections 2.2–2.2.3 focus on translations from Swedish to Georgian.

2.1 Swedish literature in Georgian

2.1.1 *Literature and Swedish films*

Interest in Swedish film has been reflected in the literature translated into Georgian. A couple of books by and about the Swedish director Ingmar Bergman have been translated into Georgian, including his autobiographical work *Laterna magica,* which appeared in 2011 in Georgian translation by Lika Chapidze, and *Gulakhdili saubrebi* (2008), translated by Nato Kvaratskhelia.

Three books by the Swedish author Stieg Larsson are available to readers in Georgian*: Gogona drak'onis t'at'uti* (2011), *Gogona, romelits tsetskhls etamasheboda* (2012), and *Gogona, romelmats krazanebis bude daangria* (2014), all translated from English by Nika Samushia. The three volumes, known as the *Millennium trilogy*, were adapted for the screen into internationally successful films (Film & TV Producenterna, 2009).

2.1.2 *Children's literature*

The dominant genre of literature translated from Swedish into Georgian is children's books. Actually, children's books account for half of all Swedish titles translated into Georgian listed in the Georgian library catalogue. Notably, Astrid Lindgren's books are highly popular (in translations by Tamara Chikovani, Nato Kvaratskhelia, Tamar Maisuradze, Medea Mtvralashvili, Bakur Sulakauri, and others). Among these could be mentioned books about Astrid Lindgren's heroes, well-known to both Swedish and Georgian children, such as *Pepi Grdzeltsinda* (Pippi Långstrump), *Bulerbieli bavshvebi* (Bullerbybarnen), *Bich'una da sakhuravis binadari K'arlsoni* (Lillebror och Karlsson på taket), *Lot'a aurzauris kuchidan* (Lotta på Bråkmakargatan), *Q'achaghis asuli Ronia* (Ronja Rövardotter), *Emili* (Emil i Lönneberga), *Madik'eni* (Madicken), and others. Translations to Georgian of Tove Jansson's books about the Moomins also stand out (in translations, among others, by Lika Chapidze, Davit Gabunia, Bakur Sulakauri), such as *Mama da zghva* (Pappan och havet), *Uchinari bavshvi* (Det osynliga barnet), and *Jadokris kudi* (Trollkarlens hatt). Sven Nordqvist's books about the cat *Pindusi (Findus)*, who lives with the man *P'et'soni (Pettson)*, translated by Dimitri Gogolashvili *and* Davit Gabunia, have also become known to Georgian children.

2.1.3 *Classics*

Several literary classics are available in Georgian translation from Swedish, for instance, by August Strindberg (*Ts'iteli otakhi*, 2020; Sw. Röda rummet, 1879), Selma Lagerlöf (*Ierusalimi*, 2013; Sw. Jerusalem, 1901), Hjalmar Söderberg (*Seriozuli tamashi,* 2015: Sw. Den allvarsamma leken, 1912), Karin Boye (*K'alok'aini*, 2016; Sw. Kallocain 1940), Pär Lagerkvist (*Baraba, Sibila*, 1989; Sw. Barabbas, 1950, Sibyllan 1956) and Tomas Tranströmer (*Sanakhevro samotkhe: leksebi da p'roza*[1], 2013) Several of these prominent Swedish authors represented in Georgian translation were awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature: Selma Lagerlöf (1909), Pär Lagerkvist (1951), and Tomas Tranströmer (2011).

2.2 Georgian literature in Swedish

2.2.1 *Georgian poetry in Swedish*

In Georgian titles translated into Swedish, modern poetry is the prevailing genre. The publishing house Smockadoll's volume *Den kaukasiska fallenheten* (With an aptitude for the Caucasus region) presents 28 contemporary Georgian poets (Fig. 1), translated by Manana Kobaidze and Kristian Carlsson (2018), with support from the Georgian National Book Center and the Ministry of Culture. Smockadoll has published several other Georgian poets in translation into Swedish: Lia Likokeli, Maia Sarishvili, Lia Sturua, Giorgi Lobzhanidze, Dato Magradze, Nika Jorjaneli, and Zurab Rtveliashvili.



Fig. 1. Publisher Kristian Carlsson with Smockadoll's volume *Den kaukasiska fallenheten (Photo: screenshot from Roundtable on Georgian and Swedish Literature, Caucasusstudies 2021)*

[1] The volume includes poetry from different books and also prose. The title of the book in Georgian translation is the title of his collection of poetry "Den halvfärdiga himlen".

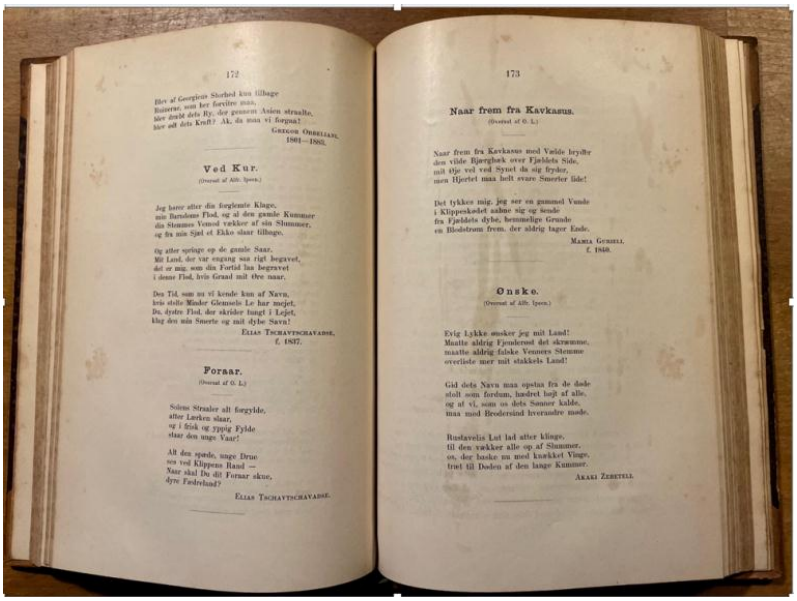
2.2.2 *Georgian prose in translation into Swedish*

Smockadoll's production includes not only poetry, but also prose, such as Ekaterine Togonidze's *I din sömn* (2024, Geo. *shin – shen*) or Archil Kikodze's *Man och fågel* (2017). In the post-Soviet period, some other Georgian novels have appeared in Swedish translation: *Antonio och David* by Jemal Karchkhadze (2013) and *Spegelriket* by Aka Morchiladze (2013, Geo. *Dzveli gulebisa da khmlisa*). One Georgian classic novel available in Swedish is Chabua Amiredzhibi's *Data Tutashkhia*. It appeared in 1978 under the title *Den fredlöse: en roman om georgiernas uppror*. Translations of Georgian literature into Swedish are much fewer than the number of Swedish books that have appeared in Georgian translation, despite Georgia's smaller reading population.

2.2.3 *The first introduction of Georgian literature to Scandinavian readers*

The first introduction, to my knowledge, of Georgian literature to a Scandinavian audience[1] appeared in the 1890s (Fig. 2). In his book about the Caucasus and his travels in the region, *Kavkasus, rejseminder og skildringer*, the Danish author Olaf Lange (1891, pp. 168-174) included a presentation of Georgian literature, which he illustrated with translations into Danish of poems by Ilia Chavchavadze; *Ved Kur* (Mt'k'vris p'iras), *Foraar* (Gazapkhuli); Nikoloz Baratashvili: *Min hest* (Merani); Grigol Orbeliani: *Foran Dronning Thamaras Billede* (Tamar mepis sakhe betaniis ek'lesiashi), Ak'ak'i Ts'ereteli *Ønske* (Survili*), Endnu er Kærligheden ikke død (*Avadmq'opi), and a few other. Most of the Georgian poems in Lange's book were translated by Alfred Ipsen (1852-922), a poet and translator. H.C. Stibolt and Olaf Lange also contributed with translations. Lange provides no further information or references for the sources of the published poems.

[1] The Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian languages are mutually intelligible. The translated poems in Lange's book are thus easily understood by Swedish readers.



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Hev af Georgiens Skarhed kun tilbage
Ruinerne, som her forvitre maa,
hine ærede dets Ry, der gammen Asien strualte,
hine ødt dets Kraft? Ak, da maa vi forgaa?

GRIGOR ORBELIANI.
1801—1883.

Ved Kur.

(Oversat af Alfr. Ipsen.)

Jeg hører atter din forglemte Klage,
min Barndoms Flod, og al den gamle Kummer
din Stemme Vemod vækker af sin Slummer,
og fra min Sjæl et Ekko slaar tilbage.

Og atter springe op de gamle Saar.
Mit Land, der var engang saa rigt begavet,
det er mig, som din Fortid laa begravet
i denne Flod, hvis Grund mit Øre naar.

Den Tid, som nu vi kende kun af Navn,
hvis store Minder Glemslen Le har mejet,
Du, dystre Flod, der skrider hurtigt i Lejet,
klag den min Smerte og mit dybe Savn!

ELIAS TSCHAVTSCHAVADSE.
f. 1837.

Foraar.

(Oversat af O. L.)

Solens Straaler alt forgylde,
atter Lærken slaar,
og i Blink og yppig Fylde
slaar den unge Vaar!

Alt den spæde, unge Drue
sea ved Klippens Rand —
Naar skal Du dit Foraar skue,
dyre Fædreland?

ELIAS TSCHAVTSCHAVADSE.

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Naar frem fra Kavkasus.

(Oversat af O. L.)

Naar frem fra Kavkasus med Vælde brydter
den vilde Bjørgbæk over Fjældets Side,
mit Øje ved ved Synet da sig fryder,
men Hjertet maa helt svare Smerter lide!

Det tykkes mig, jeg ser en gammel Vandre
i Klippeskodet aabne sig og sende
fra Fjældets dybe, hemmelige Grunde
en Blodstrøm frem, der aldrig tager Ende.

MAMIA GURIELI.
f. 1840.

Ønske.

(Oversat af Alfr. Ipsen.)

Evig Lykke ønsker jeg mit Land!
Maatte aldrig Fjendesnud det skræmme,
maatte aldrig falske Venners Stemme
overliste mer mit stakkels Land!

Gid dets Navn maa opstaa fra de døde
stolt som fordum, hædret højt af alle,
og af vi, som os dets Sønner kalde,
maa med Brodersind hverandre møde.

Rustavelis Lut lad atter klinge,
til den vækker alle op af Slummer,
os, der hauke nu med knækket Vinge,
tvinge til Døden af den lange Kummer.

AKAKI ZERETELI.

Fig. 2: Georgian poems in translation into Danish in Lange (1891).

3. Teams of translators and collaborations

As we have seen, *Smockadoll Publishing* in Malmö and *Sulakauri Publishing* in Tbilisi are the leading publishers in terms of the number of translated Georgian-Swedish titles. It is interesting to note that the founder of Smockadoll, Kristian Carlsson, is himself a productive poet. He has been translated into Georgian and participated in literary festivals in Georgia (cf. Carlsson, 2018, Akhali Saunje, 2016). Georgian poetry in translation published by Smockadoll relies to a large extent on the creative collaboration between Kristian Carlsson and Manana Kobaidze.

The person behind Sulakauri Publishing, Bakur Sulakauri, took an early interest in studying Swedish and has himself translated many books from Swedish, including titles by Astrid Lindgren and Tove Jansson. Thus, the asymmetry in genre distribution between the two publishing houses, as observed in the profiles of their Georgian-Swedish titles, seems to have been influenced by the interests and profiles of their founders.

Several translators are working transnationally, such as Tamara Chikovani, Manana Kobaidze, and Anuki Stura, who have been resident in Sweden for many years, and collaborate closely with publishers in Tbilisi.

The Centre for Scandinavian Studies at Tbilisi Ivane Javakhisvili State University is an important hub in Georgia that has been the basis for many specialists in Swedish since its establishment in 2005. Many of the active translators have, at different periods, been affiliated with this Centre, among them Lika Chapidze, Tamar Maisuradze, Nato Kvaratskhelia, and Dimitri Gogolashvili (p.c. Kakhaber Loria).

Tbilisi-based *Merebashvilitykesson Publishing,* with translator Natia Merebashvili, is another important actor on the scene of Georgian-Swedish literary translations.

4. The role of Russian as a mediator-language

As a consequence of restrictions and more limited direct Georgian-Swedish contacts during the Soviet period, Russian came to serve as the main language mediator in translation. This is observed in both translations of Georgian literature in Sweden and Swedish literature in Georgia. The earlier mentioned translation of Amiredzhibi's *Data Tutashkhia* by Hans Björkegren in 1978 was translated from Russian. Another example is Selma Lagerlöf's *Nilsis da gareuli bat'ebis saotsari mogzauroba* (Sw. Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige, 1906) that was translated from Russian to Georgian.

5. Georgian emigrant writers in Sweden

5.1 *Georgian poet Zurab Rtveliashvili in Sweden*

Emigrant writer Zurab Rtveliashvili was a poet and multimedia performer, often called the "dada-king." Born in Kazakhstan, he grew up in Tbilisi. He lived in exile in Sweden from 2010 to 2020, where he became a Swedish citizen. He returned to Georgia one year before his passing in 2021.

Rtveliashvili collaborated closely with the Center for Literature in Stockholm and contributed to anthologies. Following his early death in 2021, the International Sound Poetry Festival in Uppsala (Sweden) was organized in his memory. As noted on the festival's website:

> The festival was introduced in 2021 to commemorate internationally known, Zurab Rtveliashvili from Tbilisi, Georgia. He was a guest writer in Stockholm and was heavily involved in Uppsala Centre for Literature's activities. The festival features poetry reading, music, discussion and placard poetry manifestation on streets in Uppsala city centre (Litteraturcentrum).

Rtveliashvili often appeared in media performances with his sound poetry. An example of this is the performance *Zvigeni/Hajen; Rug+Carpet Live Edition* that Rtveliashvili performed together with Kristian Carlsson at Uppsala City Library in 2019 (Smockadoll TV, 2019).

Zurab Rtveliashvili's collection of poetry *Poesins diktatur* was published in Swedish translation in 2015 by Smockadoll Publishing, translated from Georgian by Marina Jobava, Kristian Carlsson, and Manana Kobaidze. Rtveliashvili's book *150,000 Megahertz* appeared the following year. The team of translators was Kristian Carlsson and Manana Kobaidze.

5.2 *Georgian poet, translator, and Kartvelologist Manana Kobaidze*

Manana Kobaidze is a Georgian Kartvelologist, who has been affiliated with Lund and Malmö Universities since 1997, where she has been working as a researcher in Kartvelology and a lecturer in Georgian. She moved to Sweden in 1996. In parallel to her research in Kartvelology in Sweden, Manana Kobaidze is a poet and translator of poetry. In 2018, her collection of poetry, *Akhali agvist'o,* was published in Tbilisi.

6. Conclusion

This paper highlights the close Swedish-Georgian literary collaboration in translation, promoting further cultural understanding and contacts. The publication of Swedish literature in translation, particularly children's literature, is extensive in Georgia. It notably exceeds the output of Georgian literature published in Sweden. We observe an asymmetry in the profiles of the leading publishing houses in the two countries, with the broad, popular genre of children's literature standing out among published titles in Georgia. In contrast, the more narrow genre of poetry dominates among the Georgian titles appearing in Sweden.

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