

“MY PHOTO HEROES”:

AN INTERVIEW
WITH JOURNALIST
AND ZAVENTEM
SURVIVOR
KETEVA KARDAVA



*On 22nd March 2016 special correspondent for the Georgian Public Broadcaster, Ketevan Kardava, was standing at the Brussels Airlines ticket desk at Zaventem Airport when two bombs detonated just metres away from her. In the minutes that followed, Kardava, miraculously unscathed, took twelve photographs of her fellow survivors, which were circulated internationally on social media and in the press. These iconic images quickly became synonymous with the terrorist attack on Brussels, and gave the world unparalleled insight into the nail bomb explosions and their victims. In an interview with **Alexandra James**, Kardava discusses her experience, the effect it has had on her since and the criticism she has received for taking the photographs.*

22nd March 2016

“I was going to Switzerland, to Geneva, to cover Georgian-Russian international talks,” Ketevan Kardava explains during our conversation. “I missed the first flight. I was waiting for a call from my office and then I was trying to get some information about the second flight... It was just a chain of events which led to me being there at the time of the first explosion.”

On the morning of the 22nd March 2016, the departure hall of Zaventem Airport was crowded and bustling. Kardava recalls seeing people standing around, checking their flights and drinking coffee. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, except perhaps for one thing: “When I looked to my right, I saw something black. It was a... I don’t know, a suitcase or some luggage. It was a bag and no-one was standing near it... I was thinking about it because the armed soldiers and police were walking around... When the police questioned me that day in the airport,

I told them that maybe it [the device] was the suitcase.” I ask her whether they thought it was a possibility at the time. “It was possible, yes.”

We now know that the attacks were carried out by suicide bombers, but Kardava’s awareness of the unattended bag and the presence of armed soldiers and police serve to highlight the context of the attack and the prevailing tension in Brussels. Just four days earlier, Salah Abdeslam, a key player in the Paris attacks of November 2015, was arrested in Molenbeek, 11 miles from Zaventem Airport. For Ketevan Kardava, a journalist living in Brussels, this was all the more relevant: “The day before, I covered the Molenbeek story so these details were all around me... that’s why the first thing I thought was that it was a terrorist attack.”

The Brussels Airlines ticket desk where Kardava was standing was located directly in between where the two nail bombs were detonated. The closest (the second bomb) was just a few metres away. Fortunately, Kardava did not run from the site of the first

explosion as this would have meant running directly towards the second bomb, which was detonated eight to nine seconds later.

“The second explosion was much stronger. The sound, the voice; I had never, never, never heard anything like it before.”

The explosions, which killed 11 people and injured over 100, left Kardava shaken but, incredibly, without injury.

“The most shocking moment for me was that I was standing and looking seconds before and there were so many people, and in one minute, less than one minute, I was looking in the same direction and... nobody was standing there. Nobody. Everything had changed.”

After the second explosion, Kardava tells me she ran to a photo booth where she sought shelter from debris falling from the ceiling. She spotted a Japanese woman nearby, uninjured but clearly in shock, who she dragged into the booth with her. “I think we were standing for maybe one minute, maybe one minute

and a half. Everything was very quick. And then... we were waiting for the third blast." Kardava had correctly assumed that there would be a third bomb but, fortunately, it failed to detonate and was later neutralised by the bomb squad after evacuation. While taking cover in the photo booth Kardava also assumed, fortunately incorrectly, that the bombs would be followed by gunfire: "Maybe terrorists will come with their Kalashnikovs and

kill us," she remembers thinking, "because everyone is talking about it.... we remember what happened in Paris."

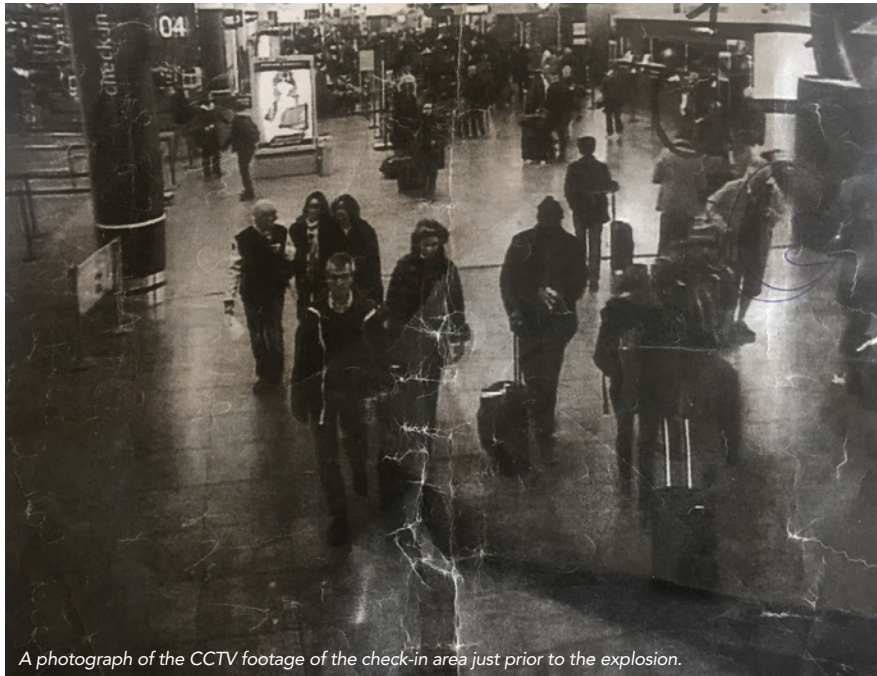
It was at this point inside the photo booth, precisely five minutes after the bombs had been detonated, in shock and believing that she was about to be shot, that Kardava reached for her iPhone and started to take the now all too familiar photographs that would illustrate to the world what occurred at Zaventem that morning.

"...the Brussels Airlines ticket desk where Kardava was standing was located directly in between where the two nail bombs were detonated..."

"My first photo on my iPhone is at 8:03, so I started to take photos at 8:03 and the last photo is at 8:04. So I had only one minute – only 60 seconds – to take photos and to save my life...". During this minute, Kardava left the photo booth and took in the scene that was unfolding around her. Nearby was a bench on which two women were sitting in shock and covered in dust and blood. They were the subjects of the first photograph taken at 8:03 that morning. Kardava later discovered that one of these women was Nidhi Chapekhar, the Jet Airways inflight manager who would spend the next month in a medically induced coma. Chapekhar's friend and colleague, Amit Motwani, who suffered eye injuries from the blast, and basketball player, Sebastien Bellin, were also among those Kardava calls her 'Photo Heroes'.

"...at 8:05, a mere seven minutes after the bombs were detonated, Kardava posted her photos online..."

Kardava spent the next moments crying and shouting for help, and rushing from person to person. Not knowing how to administer First Aid, Kardava was afraid to do anything more. "What could I do? I was doing the only thing I could do: calling for doctors and asking, 'How are you, how are you?' " One minute later, soldiers opened the gates and evacuated the terminal, telling those who could to run. At this point Kardava was forced to leave her Heroes and join the other survivors in another part of the airport. It was here, at 8:05, a mere seven minutes after the bombs were detonated, that Kardava posted her photos online and informed the world of what had happened.



A photograph of the CCTV footage of the check-in area just prior to the explosion.



The iconic image of Nidhi Chapekhar, the Jet Airways inflight manager, taken by Ketevan Kardava.

Since the Attack

In the days following the attack, Kardava's photographs appeared in publications and websites all over the world and, like many, she was keen to find out the identities of the subjects of her photos. Prior to the 22nd March, Kardava had not known of Sebastien Bellin but over the course of the next few weeks, Bellin and his family would become close friends with Kardava. Bellin, who was thrown 20 metres by one of the blasts, was being treated in hospital for severe wounds to his hip and leg.

"When I met with Sebastien, that was very emotional for me and we talked a lot. He told me, 'you saved my life. Your picture saved my life.' And even today, even yesterday he told me that, 'if not for you, this story in history would be something different.' I am in touch nearly every day with his wife and children. Last week I visited him and I took Georgian wine..."

I ask Kardava about Nidhi Chapekhar, the first of her Photo Heroes. "She is of course the most iconic of the pictures. I read many articles about her and it's very, very important for me to meet with her. She was in a coma for more than one month and she couldn't speak, even with her relatives and husband and daughter, so not of course with me. Then she left the hospital and went directly to Mumbai and I want very much to meet with her in Mumbai."

There has been much controversy surrounding the photo of Chapekhar whose clothes were left in tatters by the blast, exposing the upper half of her body. Publications, particularly the Times of India, were heavily criticised for featuring this picture as it was felt to be insensitive and disrespectful to the 42-year-old mother of two, who sustained burns to over 15% of her body and who remained for a month after the attack unconscious and, presumably, unaware of her 'celebrity' status.

Kardava also received heavy criticism for taking the photographs in the first place, with some accusing her of capitalising on the tragedy. "When someone asks me, 'why did you take photos?' This is my answer: this action, to take my iPhone from my pocket, it was instinct... the instinct of the journalist."

Presumably, I ask her, if you hadn't been at the airport at the time of

explosion, it would have been your job to go there and to cover the story, to take photographs...? "If I were at home, I would have had to take a car, taxi, even a bicycle, and I would have gone there..." If that had been the case, I conclude, no-one would have batted an eyelid.

Kardava then tells me about an article she read in which she was criticised for intervening in the victims' private lives. "Terrorists attack and terrorists intervene in their lives!" she exclaims,

indignant. "Take, for example, Nidhi. Yes, of course it's not the best picture in their album, but it's reality. It's reality, and we have to show this and don't hide. Don't hide."

Alongside the criticism, however, Ketevan has also received a far greater measure of praise. On her first visit back to Georgia following the Brussels attacks, she was presented with an Order of Honour from President Giorgi Margvelashvili in recognition of her "productive and highly professional



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Kardava is reunited with Sebastien Bellin in hospital.



"...this action, to take my iPhone from my pocket, it was instinct... the instinct of the journalist..."

for them – to come to terms with what happened. Most importantly however, is Kardava’s determination not to let the bombings turn her or anyone else, injured or not, into a ‘victim’ of the 22nd March. Instead, her commitment to journalism, to communication, has allowed her to turn the attack into something that has brought people together rather than alienate them.

Despite the criticism hurled at Ketevan, after talking to her it is apparent that she had no thoughts whatsoever of how the situation she found herself in might progress her career or lend itself to any kind of gain, financial or otherwise (evidenced by the fact that she did not charge any publications, including Aviation Security International, for the use of her photos). It seems to me that she was a person in a state of shock who managed, despite everything, to continue to do her job, and to do it well. ■

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Alexandra James is a sub-editor of Aviation Security International. She has a first-class degree in English and Creative Writing from the University of London, is currently studying for her Masters in Curatorial Studies in Bristol and provides editorial and proof-reading services on a freelance basis. She can be contacted at allyjames@avsec.com

journalistic work” and her “professional commitment to quickly spreading information”. Kardava beams with pride. “He told me, ‘you are brave because you are an inspiration for young journalists in Georgia, and you are an example to them.’”

In the weeks and months that have followed the attacks, however, Kardava is still recovering from the scenes she witnessed at Zaventem, and now defines her life as ‘before 22nd March’ and ‘after 22nd March.’ I ask her whether she has suffered any prolonged psychological effects and she tells me that now she cannot wear headphones in case she ‘misses something’.

“Very often I have nightmares during the night and I wake up thinking about the 22nd March and it’s terrible. It’s still very terrible.”

What Now?

Towards the end of our interview, Kardava tells me about her plans for the future. Her priority, of course, is to travel to Mumbai to meet Nidhi Chapekhar. She also tells me about a documentary she is planning: “It will be my story, the story of the airport, and twelve small stories about my photos.” She also plans to organise an exhibition next March for the one-year anniversary of the attack. “All my heroes – my Photo Heroes – I hope that they will be ok at the time and will attend this exhibition.”

It is clear from the way that Kardava speaks about the subjects of her photographs that she has formed strong emotional attachments to them all. Her friendships with them seem to be a way for her – and



Kardava receives the Order of Honour from Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili.

