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**LEADING IN THE TIME
OF PANDEMIC**



Gyumri Ceramics

Revival of Armenian ceramics in the 21st century

The Family Care Foundation and the Muscari Association are working together to improve the life conditions in Armenia. Their activities are concentrated especially in Gyumri, which has an invaluable historical, patrimonial and cultural wealth.

After the earthquake of 1988, which caused the death of tens of thousands of inhabitants, this city tries to get up and regain its once undeniable radiance.

Following this tragic event, the Family Care Foundation was created by the will of implementing projects for the economic and cultural development of Armenia in the fields of tourism, art, handicraft and restoration of traditional values with a strong ethical requirement.

Regarding Muscari, created in 2016, its purpose is to valorise Armenian culture and French-Armenian exchanges. It works for education in France and Armenia and it promotes a better knowledge of peoples, cultures and languages.

This complementarity gives life to projects such as the ceramics workshop in Gyumri, which allows currently many families to live with dignity, thanks to arts and crafts inspired by among others Armenian potters from Kütahya in the former Ottoman Empire, the golden age of their activity being in the 18th century. Always having the desire of revitalizing and valorisation of Armenian material and immaterial heritage, special energy is devoted to the architectural restoration of the city's historic buildings.

The ceramics of Gyumri's workshop are on sale in the following addresses in Armenia:

- o Villa Delenda : 22 Yeznik Koghbatsi Str., Yerevan*
- o Villa Kars : 182 Abovyan Str., Guymri*

www.familycarearmenia.org / www.muscari.fr

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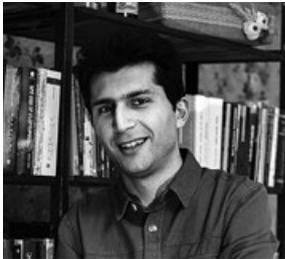


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THE BRAVE NEW WORLD

As we march our way out
of the pandemic

Currently, we live in quite an erratic world, where “unpredictable” is the new “go-to” word for every situation. Recently, we sat with Marian Salzman, a highly recognized communications expert, the trend-spotter and the senior vice-president of global communications at Philip Morris International to discuss and to try to outline the steps that the humanity and the businesses should take to pop up onto the surface of the water when this flood is over and to do it with dignity and compassion towards their stakeholders.

TEXT : ARSHAK TOVMASYAN
PHOTO : PHILIP MORRIS INTERNATIONAL





PREDICTING THE FUTURE IN THE TIMES OF A PANDEMIC

At this moment, we are standing at the crossing of a new world that might soon become a reality as the pandemic slowly withdraws. Several countries try to return to normal life, meanwhile other countries still continue the struggle with stopping the spread of the virus with around 10 million cases of coronavirus infections in the world.

Despite the future perspectives, businesses and various communities on all the continents try to come up with strategies and plans in order to overcome the crisis and ensure the well-being of their employees and communities. The problem here is that no one knows what will happen next. Many scientists claim that the virus will have a new wave, which means the situation might worsen, and it might be extremely hard to return to normal life in the future not only financially and physically but also psychologically.

Certainly, the situation with the global pandemic caught people off-guard, and from now on, as Mrs. Salzman mentioned, life on earth will be divided into “before COVID-19” and “post-COVID-19” or “PC19” eras. New norms will emerge and lead to numerous social and cultural changes. But the main question remains whether or not we will be able to predict the future. Mrs. Salzman pushes forward several possibilities saying “There is a promise that, for all its devastation, this global pandemic may serve as a sort of reset – shepherding towards a new era marked by the new 4 Cs: Compassion, Camaraderie, Civility, and Community.”

HE SITUATION WITH THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC CAUGHT PEOPLE OFF-GUARD, AND FROM NOW ON, AS MRS. SALZMAN MENTIONED, LIFE ON EARTH WILL BE DIVIDED INTO “BEFORE COVID-19” AND “POST-COVID-19” OR “PC19” ERAS

THE “SOCIAL” DISTANCING

In Mrs. Salzman’s opinion, this separation from the outside world and other countries and cultures might, unfortunately, lead to a lack of socialization on global levels. However, it’s already visible that the digitalization of the world has taken over the lead and the social distancing has become unexpectedly “social” at least for families and friends. People virtually get together to drink some wine, play games, celebrate birthdays, weddings, and other important life events. The amount of downloads of different communication platforms has drastically increased in the previous months. We, too, conducted the interview with Mrs. Salzman via Zoom conference, following all the safety measures. The role of internet has become crucial for everyone as it’s a substitute for workplace, schools, doctor’s appointments, and sports. Different media channels also experience fantastic increases in user numbers. For instance, Netflix added 15 million subscribers in the first quarter of 2020, meanwhile acknowledging that the organic growth in the post-pandemic period might significantly decrease. In Mrs. Salzman’s opinion, e-Commerce,

remote learning and online dating will reach their momentum in the post-pandemic world. Her friend and colleague Aaron Sherinian and his son have launched Quarantine Academy (QA), which enables around 300 people to simultaneously Zoom in and learn about various topics from different experts. Mrs. Salzman herself has always dreamed of being able to carry her work in her laptop one day and perform her job from any place in the world. Mrs. Salzman indicated that “Previously, we had around 8-hour work-day starting from 8 or 9 AM to around 7 PM”, “Today, we have 24 hours a day and we can decide how to do our work and at what time of the day. As a communicator, it feels very empowering”, she adds. Philip Morris International recently conducted a poll among its employees of whom 75% indicated that they enjoy working remotely. They want to show up at the offices, socialize, attend relevant meetings but not show up with the sunrise and return home after the sunset. One of the shortcomings of the pandemic is the situation with parents who have kids, or employees who don’t have the appropriate equipment at home.

ACTS OF KINDNESS IS THE NEW “NORMAL”.

Another positive “advantage” of the pandemic, according to Mrs. Salzman, is the fact that the acts of kindness are no longer a rarity in many areas: neighbors helping each other, communities supporting local small businesses, and larger corporations serving as dignified examples for helping and sustaining their employees. Celebrities and influencers share their knowledge and experience via social media lives and Zoom broadcasts. Additionally, the current state of things illustrated the importance of female leaders in our society as the countries that are already turning the page to the post-pandemic period are led by women. In the beginning of June, the 39-year-old prime-minister of New Zealand, Jasinda Ardern, announced that the lockdown they put in March can end now because they have already overcome the coronavirus wave. Another example is Germany – led by Chancellor Angela Merkel – which has significantly lower death rates than Italy, France, Spain and Britain. The female president of Taiwan Tsai Ing-wen managed to introduce one of the most successful cases of containing the virus without full national lockdown.

THE HEROES OF THE PANDEMIC

Mrs. Salzman’s main advice to the brands is to get into practice. Step up instead of speaking up. At the beginning of the pandemic, many com-



MARIAN SALZMAN

Mrs. Salzman is recognized as one of the top five trend-spotters in the world and she’s also the most-awarded female public relations executive in the world, listed in PRWeek’s Global Power Book, in Business Insider’s 25 Most Powerful PR People, etc. Her name can be spotted in such news outlets such as Forbes, where she elaborates on topics related to businesses and marketing, Daily Mail, who called her the person popularizing the term metrosexual, and The New York Times, who put her under the headline “A Woman in the Men’s World”. Mrs. Salzman herself is an author of more than 15 books, the more prominent of these being the “Buzz” and “Agile PR: Expert Messaging in a Hyper-Connected, Always-on World”. Mrs. Salzman has an extremely impressive track record, taking on the marketing lead of various famous companies. She’s the co-founder of the first online market research company called “Cyber dialogue”. Since 2018, Maria Salzman has been the vice-president of global communications at Philip Morris International (PMI) heading the transformational crossing of the company to a smoke-free future, bringing to closure the era of cigarettes.

panies came up with various announcements, however, very few of them put those words into action. “We want to see you behaving in ways that show you’re concerned about protecting your employees and communities from the pandemic and the economic tsunami it’s generating,” says Mrs. Salzman. There are many ways in which companies can show their full involvement starting from supporting small businesses ending with helping those in need. The key is to vividly illustrate their presence. “While building the stability of the brand you should be flexible with the people you care about – your employees,” says Mrs. Salzman.

Mrs. Salzman outlines several directions those companies might take. To start, companies should put people first and protect them, i.e., the possibility of remote work and ensuring all necessary medical measures can be one of those examples. Her next motto for companies is “to be the business we need you to be”, bringing the example of LVMH which proved itself to be a compassionate business leader by converting three of their perfume manufacturing facilities to make hand sanitizer long before other brands began thinking of taking such steps. Another option she suggests is helping those who can help the rest of the world. Namely, if the business’s profile

doesn’t coincide with the needs emerged by the crisis, they can provide resources to those companies (for example, hospitals or companies that produce medication and vaccines) whose activities are relevant to this particular situation.

PMI EXPERIENCE

The global lockdown had a huge negative impact from an economic perspective. The closure of factories and offices, various restrictions on economic activities as well as traveling adversely affected businesses in general worldwide. But many companies, and Philip Morris International in particular, took the responsibility of making the best out of the situation and moving forward despite the obstacles. For example, since the first day of the outbreak, Philip Morris International has come up with various community initiatives in more than 60 countries where their employees live and work. The company also actively worked not only on supporting the physical and mental security of its employees all over the world and ensuring a full paycheck for each of them but also offering facilities for the production of face shields, masks, and sanitizers. The company did so while also supporting crisis response teams and delivering all the first-aid products to at-risk communities, as well as donating various equipment to be used in this battle. The company addressed all relevant communities and asked how and in what ways it could reach out and assist them. For some communities it was money for food, for others – it was respirators. “From communication efficiency perspective, PMI overdid its 5-year digital plan in just five days. Every employee was set up and well-equipped in their homes and it felt like opening up 4000 new offices,” says Mrs. Salzman. I think the past two months showed that if you do your work well, it doesn’t matter where your office is located. Now your office is your screen.” Mrs. Salzman believes that the current moment is the best time for the brands to show why they are here. “Think: Action over words. Think: People over short-term profits. Think: Vision over self-interest,” says Mrs. Salzman.

When asked about her opinion as a trend-spotter concerning the most interesting marketing behavioral trends we can expect in the post-Covid era, Mrs. Salzman answered that people will celebrate a new style of heroes – everyday nurses and everyday teachers and that we will witness more polarization, namely, people defining what they like and staying loyal and settling with these things. ◆



MANY COMPANIES, AND PHILIP MORRIS INTERNATIONAL
IN PARTICULAR, TOOK THE RESPONSIBILITY OF MAKING
THE BEST OUT OF THE SITUATION AND MOVING FORWARD
DESPITE THE OBSTACLES



“Organic Agriculture” Master’s Program Starts Soon

Organic agriculture development steps in Armenia were undertaken in early 2000s with active participation of local NGOs and the international organizations. Several international agencies and the Armenian government were jointly implementing projects aimed at boosting organic sector development in the country. These efforts, however, were not supported by the simultaneous creation of skilled labour force of farmers and employees involved in the organic sector.

TEXT / PHOTO : ICARE FOUNDATION



◀ Stakeholder committee meeting at Nairian farm

The Armenian government, in collaboration with European Union (EU) and the Austrian Development Agency (ADA), has completed the Organic Agriculture Support Initiative (OASI) project promoting organic agriculture in Armenia to mitigate marginalized people in impoverished areas, better handle small farm sizes within the country and ensure the conservation of water, soil and biodiversity in the country. There have been projects and support for awareness and implementation of organic agriculture in the country, however with the recent developments in the organic sector in the country, came a demand for trained and skilled Armenian organic practitioners in research as well as in practice. Building Organic Agriculture in Armenia (BOAA) project has been initiated with the intention to support the Armenian organic sector by closing the gap between farmers and science through the education and training of young professionals ready to enter the workforce.

The main objective of the project is to develop and implement the “Organic Agriculture” master’s program at Armenian National Agrarian University (ANAU). This trans-disciplinary project is being implemented in cooperation with ANAU, The University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna (BOKU) and with the International Center for Agribusiness Research and Education (ICARE) Foundation in Yerevan. The project started in 2017 and the 3 years of project implementation went through 3 main phases: Phase 1: Stakeholder need assessment: Considering the participatory nature of the project, stakeholder need assessment study was carried out through focus group discussions and interviews. This phase helped the project team to identify the professional needs existing in organic agriculture sector in Armenia and to create a network of organic practitioners that would later collaborate with the teaching team and the students for the master’s program.



^ Field training at organic apricot orchard



> Student visit to "Bari Farm"

Establishment of a stakeholder committee for the BOAA project was initiated, when the need assessment study was carried out and the professional needs in organic sector were identified. Previously conducted research projects and the focus group discussions organized in the scope of the project were particularly helpful for identifying the right people in the committee. BOAA stakeholder committee is composed of 20 people including students, lecturers, organic producers, processors, representatives from international organization, certification body, and Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of RA.

1-2 meetings annually were organized with the stakeholder committee to keep the committee members updated about the project progress and to involve them in discussions that were critical for curriculum development. Stakeholders' input was particularly useful in developing master's program course list and for identifying the priorities in the sector. Phase 2 of the project encompassed the development of the organic master's program curriculum and the training of the ANAU instructors not only in organic theory, methods and practice, but also in modern teaching approaches. The development of the curriculum was completed through many reiterations with different stakeholder groups – students, faculty and staff (from both ANAU and BOKU), project coordinators and organic stakeholders – with each lecturer responsible to incorporate suggestions and changes to their respective courses as they saw fit. The training of the instructors was originally conceptualized in two parts: 1) an Armenian partner team visiting BOKU's Division of Organic Farming at the Department of Sustainable Agricultural Systems as well as attending in-field visits; and 2) a BOKU teaching team visiting ANAU to both understand the Armenian agrarian context and help train and develop staff and curriculum. Finally, there were four 1-2 week long trainings and additional funding made possible for individual Armenian lecturers to receive specialized trainings throughout Europe, including additional BOKU visits.

More importantly, the group decided on a common pedagogical philosophy and what direction they wanted the program to head in terms of using modern teaching approaches and methods focused on real-world challenges, stakeholder integration and student-centered education. The final three trainings all took place in Armenia with many BOKU lecturers and professors giving theoretical and practical organic specific trainings on various subjects. These trainings also included one-on-one time with Armenian lecturers to go over their course curriculum for improvements. 14 courses included in Master's program were developed throughout the project actively collaborating with BOKU University in Vienna. The courses cover a whole spectrum of organic agriculture starting from the conversion to organic agriculture and finishing with the marketing of organic produce. Master's program also includes summer internships during which the students will have the chance to "get their hands dirty" in Armenian organic farms. Organic agriculture modern literature and lab equipment has been acquired during the project to make sure that the Master's program students receive up-to-date practical knowledge. Phase 3 of the project included the finalization of the "Organic Agriculture" master's program and its curriculum, which was officially accepted by the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of RA on December 24th 2020. This phase also included the Program's dissemination and implementation. In addition to a stakeholder committee devoted to the implementation and management of the program, project dissemination occurred through social media, newspaper articles, student outreach events and a large public event including organic stakeholders. All the events were primarily aimed at raising awareness about organic agriculture and the upcoming master's program. "Organic Agriculture" master's program will start in September 2020 at ANAU and the program team will continue collaboration with BOKU University to offer exchange programs to students and teaching staff. ♦

PLANTING WILLOWS: The New Socio-Economic Asset in the Times of Pandemic

In the frame of the 15th measure to neutralize the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, the Ministry of Environment has initiated a planting of almost two million willow cuttings in 7 regions of Armenia. Regional Post talked with the Deputy-Minister of Environment Vardan Melikyan about the program and how it can be a lifebuoy for the socio-economic crisis that Armenia currently faces.

TEXT : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN / PHOTO : MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT OF ARMENIA

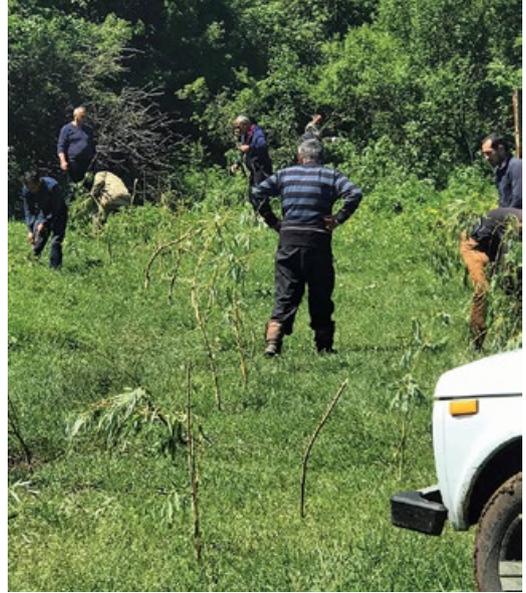


In the past several months, many countries in the world have implemented anti-crisis programs to eliminate the socio-economic repercussions of the pandemic. However, Armenia is probably the only country that started planting trees as a solution to the issue. Within the past two months, over two million willow cuttings were planted in the regions of Syunik, Vayots Dzor, Gegharkunik, Tavush, Lori, Shirak, and Kotayk by the efforts of the local workforce. The program became an income source for over 1000 people. On average, each employee received 8000 to 10000 AMD per day, which estimates 50 AMD for each tree cutting with over 200 trees planted per day. At first, the program received some criticism, arguing that the price set for a seedling is very high, but according to Mr. Melikyan, people who are aware of the huge efforts this work requires confirm that 50 AMD is quite fair. Many people had to travel long distances from other communities to come and work in the frame of the project and during this period it might have been their only source of income.

In all regions, the program was brought to life in partnership with Hayantar SNCO, except for the Vayots Dzor, where the work was carried out by the Foundation for the Preservation of Wildlife and Cultural Assets (FPWC) and in the Gegharkunik region, where Armenia Tree Project also participated in the program. "Initially, this was a socio-economic project aimed at providing a source of income to the local people who had lost their jobs due to this global situation, but taking into account the specificity of our work, the project should have an ecological context," says Mr. Melikyan. "And as we had to start the work immediately, the only tree we could plant at this season was the willow."

The Ministry chose areas located at 1800-2400 meters height where there wasn't any vegetation yet and it would





be possible to carry out the plantings. Additionally, the locations were identified according to the remains of the willow tree “population.” Consequently, they didn’t change the environment specificities of these areas, they just restored the previous condition and the plant cuttings were taken from the willows right on spot.

Geographically, Armenia has an issue with strengthening its riverbanks, and the program has initiated plantings in those specific areas creating the so-called riparian forest/zone.

The presence of these trees at the riverbanks is also important in terms of filtering the water quality. Also, the riparian zone protects the river from the pollution that comes with the rain, reducing the temperature of the water, which creates suitable conditions for fish reproduction, particularly – meases.

In terms of climate change, Armenia has a 10% reduction in water resources, and now the government needs to be ready to resist and stay away from disasters in the future by protecting and rehabilitating the riverbanks. Another positive “shortcoming” of the willows is going to be the flow regulation. Being partially saved at the roots of the trees, the water will be evenly distributed. The final key advantage of willow trees and one of the main reasons why it was chosen for this project is that willows don’t need further maintenance once the seedling gets into the ground. There might be a need for fencing in some areas, but in the rest of the cases, the willows will receive all the water they need from the rivers.

Armenia is a country which has made its living at the expense of its nature for dozens of years. This issue is relevant not only to Armenia but to many other countries, which took nature for granted, making it a permanent source of income. For a very long time, it was set in people’s minds that the main function of the forest zones is to provide fuelwood to the locals so they can sell it or get warm during the wintertime. This program, on the contrary, proves that it’s possible even to make the local environment a source of income without hurting it, moreover, via protecting and developing it. In other words, it is possible to find a mutually beneficial solution, where people receive income and simultaneously, contribute to the environment. Usually, we have the opposite image when we have human benefit and environment on the two sides of the scale. ♦

DON'T PANIC, OR YOUR GUIDE TO THE AMULSAR CRISIS

The story of Amulsar gold mine prospect is a very complex and interesting one on many levels. Activists blocking the roads to Amulsar, blocking Lydian Armenia – a gold-mining company – from exploiting the gold prospect they heavily invested in. Lydian threatening legal action. The prime minister saying there's 99.9% possibility that the mine will be launched. Activists and certain MPs, some, like Varazdat Karapetyan, claiming that “the law of moral right is above any other law, including the Constitution”. Eco-activists claiming that opening the mine will pollute Jermuk, including the hot springs and the Kechut reservoir, and through Kechut – lake Sevan, one of the most important freshwater reservoirs in the region. And that they won't back down. Police clashing violently with protesters in front of the National Assembly and at the location of the prospect. Seems like the End Times are upon us. Or are they?

TEXT : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN / PHOTO : ECOFRONT.ORG, WIKIPEDIA.ORG

A NOTE ON ARMENIA

Armenia is a small landlocked country in the Southern Caucasus region. The First Republic of Armenia declared independence after the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1918, in the years following the Armenian Genocide, and was incorporated in the Soviet Union in 1920 as Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1991, Armenia declared independence from the Soviet Union and became the Republic of Armenia of today.

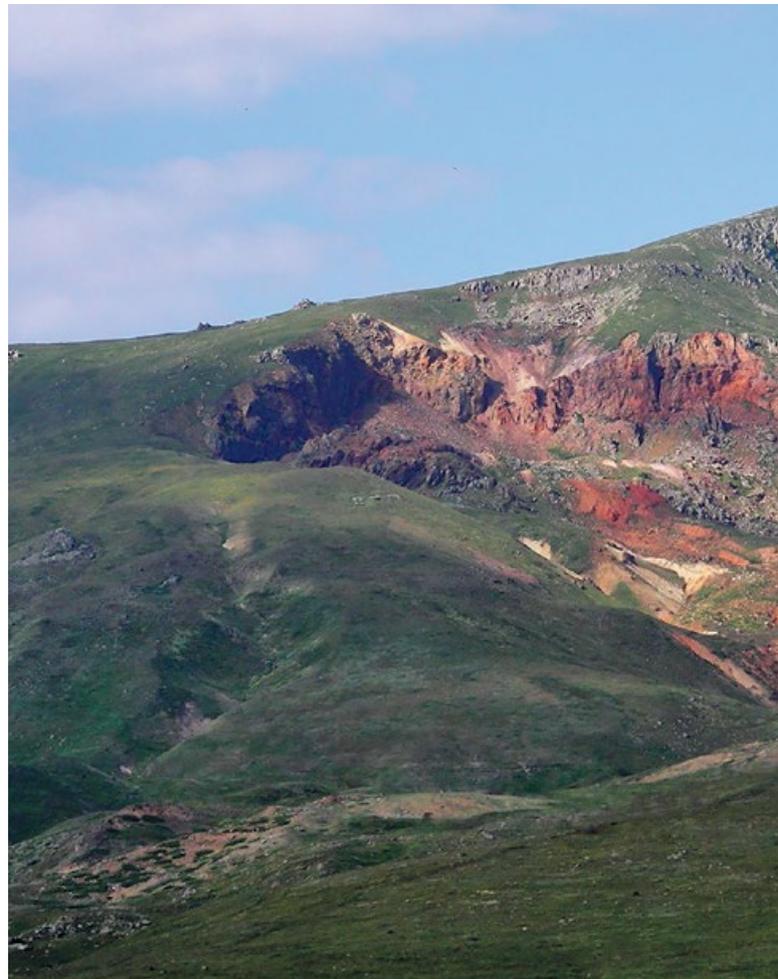
Armenia borders Georgia on the North, Turkey on the West, Iran on the South, and Azerbaijan on the East. Georgia has a conflict with Russia, a major power-player in the region, regarding its occupation of Autonomous Republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the aftermath of Russo-Georgian war of 2008.

The Armenian-Turkey border is closed since 1991, the situation complicated by Turkey's denial of Armenian Genocide and its military and political support for Azerbaijan (more on that later). While Armenia and Turkey did see a thaw in their relationships in the 2000s, when the Zurich protocols were signed, the thaw was halted in later years.

Iran is another problematic country – with its long history of authoritarian practices and human rights abuses, and its ongoing conflict with the West.

As for Azerbaijan, the territorial dispute between the two countries grew into the Nagorno-Karabakh war which is not over yet and ceasefire violations – the most recent being July 12-16 clashes of this year – threatening to reignite hostilities and even an all-out active war.

Armenia does not have oil reserves, but it's rich in reserves of fresh water and metal ore.



The top exports of Armenia are:

- Copper Ore (\$693M)
- Gold (\$344M)
- Rolled Tobacco (\$266M)
- Ferroalloys (\$196M)
- Hard Liquor (\$195M)

The top imports of Armenia are:

- Petroleum Gas (\$340M)
- Refined Petroleum (\$227M)
- Diamonds (\$175M)
- Cars (\$174M)
- Broadcasting Equipment (\$140M)

Mining is a major sector of Armenian economy, with ore concentrates and metals accounting for about half of the country's exports.

GEOTEAM, LYDIAN AND LYDIAN

To avoid confusion with naming, let us understand that currently we are dealing with two legal entities named Lydian: Lydian International Ltd., a British mining corporation founded in 2005 with prospects in Armenia, Kosovo,

Georgia, trading on the Canadian stock market as TSX:LYD, and Lydian Armenia, a mining company registered in Armenia, with Lydian International Ltd. owning 100% of its shares.

Lydian International Ltd. got financing from investors like the US-based Orion Mine Finance and Resource Capital Funds (around 325 mln. USD), with Resource Capital Funds owning 32% shares in the company at the time of this writing, Orion Mine Finance owning another 11.7%.

Dr. Armen Sakrissian, the current President of Armenia, was appointed as the president of Lydian International Ltd., and claims to have resigned after three months of collaboration. At this point in time, the Armenian part of Lydian International is operated by Dr. Hayk Aloyan.

Lydian International created an Armenian company named Geoteam CJSC in 2005 to carry out mineral exploration and mining operations in Armenia. In 2016 Geoteam CJSC was renamed to Lydian Armenia CJSC.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The story of Amulsar is but another chapter in Armenia's history of both irresponsible exploitation of natural resources and environmental action without solid scientific understanding of environmental science and economics by most involved. It's a story of economic policies undermining the ecology of the country, and eco-activism bordering on economic sabotage.

To understand it, we have to go way back – 1910, to be exact, when an Armenian engineer named Sukias Manasserian published his book “The evaporating billionaire and the stagnation (lit. trans. “lakeification”) of Russian capital”, where he proposed to drain lake Sevan, the largest freshwater reservoir in Armenia and one of the largest high-altitude freshwater lakes in Eurasia, by 50 metres and use the water for irrigation and hydroelectric power. In truth he was echoing the sentiment of Aleksandr Voeikov – one of the most influential Russian climatologists – and the person often considered, through his influence on Soviet science, the architect of the decline of the Aral sea.

On the surface, Manasserian's plan sounded reasonable: Sevan lake is divided into Major and Minor Sevan, with Major Sevan having much larger surface area yet being shallower than Minor Sevan. Manasserian calculated the amount of water evaporating from the surface of the lake, calculated how much money could be made if the evaporated water was used for irrigation and electricity. >

THE STORY OF AMULSAR IS A STORY OF **ECONOMIC POLICIES UNDERMINING THE ECOLOGY OF THE COUNTRY, AND ECO-ACTIVISM BORDERING ON ECONOMIC SABOTAGE**





During the Stalinist era, the Soviet administration decided to bring Manasserian's plan into action. The project was launched in 1933 – the riverbed of Hrazdan river was excavated, and a tunnel was dug 40 m. under the lake's surface. The added water outflow was used to power the hydroelectric power plants of Sevan-Hrazdan Cascade, and to irrigate a large amount of land in the Ararat valley. The tunnel itself was finished in 1949, leading to the water level dropping at a rate of 1 metre per year.

And everyone lived happily ever after.

Except they didn't.

It is important to understand how such massive projects create complex co-dependent systems deeply entrenched in the overall infrastructure of the country which makes them almost independent to halt or dismantle when something goes wrong. And wrong it went.

Turned out Manasserian and his successors did not understand the complex ecology of large freshwater lakes like Sevan, and did not plan for the changes the lake would undergo once it lost a significant volume of water. Aeration and biodiversity changed dramatically, eutrophication of the lake became too fast for the lake's self-purification mechanisms to deal with it. The water levels continued to drop rapidly until 1962, and over time it became evident that Manasserian's idea had resulted in a disaster – eerily similar to Voikov's other legacy, the Aral sea.

In 1964 the Soviet administration decided to divert part of the water from the river Arpa into Sevan – the Arpa-Sevan tunnel, starting with the Kechut reservoir near the city of Jermuk, going 49 kilometers and connecting with Sevan near Artsvanist.

In the 1970s the lake's eutrophication caused its first algae bloom. In 1981 the Council of Ministers decided to accelerate the rise of the water level by diverting water from Vorotan river through the 21.6 km Vorotan-Arpa tunnel.

All these actions helped stabilize the situation of the lake, but led to other complex ecological changes – including, but not limited to invasive species that threatened the biodiversity of the lake – but that's a story for another day.

In the context of our story, what happened to lake Sevan has two important impacts: it connected the water basins of lake Sevan and river Arpa, and made the Armenian public much more sensitive to ecological problems and more distrustful towards industrial projects.

The latter factor would severely undermine lake Sevan in the coming years.

Nobody could predict the perfect storm – the Chernobyl disaster of 1986 raising concerns over nuclear security, and the 1988 Spitak earthquake creating an all-out panic. The Karabakh movement and the overall socio-political destabilization of the region, with the prospect of independence from the USSR and the threat of full-scale war against Azerbaijan on the horizon.

An eco-activist movement started gaining traction in Armenia, protesting both against the chemical industry and the Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant.

Eventually, the movement achieved many of its goals – the closure of the Nairit PVA production plant in 1988 and of the Metsamor NPP in 1989. And the closure of Metsamor NPP caused the so-called "dark and cold days" of 1990s, increased the country's reliance on petroleum products and

the hydroelectric output of Sevan-Hrazdan cascade – the one I mentioned earlier – and the restoration of Sevan was set back by continued loss of water. The deterioration of Sevan was a major factor for people’s distrust in industry and technology; the said distrust caused Sevan to deteriorate further.

NO, BUT REALLY, HOW DID WE GET HERE?

As mentioned earlier in our notes on Armenia, mining has long been a large part of Armenian industry – while Armenia does not have oil, unlike Azerbaijan, it has large reserves of gold, copper, molybdenum and multi-metal ores. The Armenian government has also been notably accused of large-scale corruption and negligence, and a profitable sector like mining was not an exception. Transparency International included Armenia’s case in its 2017 study of corruption in the mining industry. In 2018 Fact Investigation Platform, an Armenian watchdog organization, published a research including drone footage of the Akhlata mine tailings leaking into the Debed river and polluting it, which is allegedly the result of criminal negligence during the construction of the dumping site.

THE ARMENIAN ECO-ACTIVIST MOVEMENT ACTIVELY TARGETED THE MINING INDUSTRY AS A MAJOR POLLUTANT OF THE ENVIRONMENT – INCLUDING THE KAJARAN COPPER-MOLYBDENUM MINE



On the opposite side of the spectrum, the eco-activist movement became increasingly more active after their 2011 victory against the hydroelectric power plant allegedly threatening the Trchkan waterfall. This was followed by the “Save Mashtots Park” movement, fighting against the occupation of a public park by shops and boutiques. After 90 days of peaceful protests and police violence, the Mashtots Park movement was successful too.

After Mashtots Park, the civic and eco-activist movements had a few setbacks – protests following the allegations of electoral fraud weren’t successful enough to topple Serj Sarkissian’s regime, the Covered Market of Yerevan was converted into a part of the Yerevan City supermarket chain, controlled by a state-backed oligarch.

It was also a time when the civic and eco-activist movements had a schism, with a large group of activists forming the Armenian Ecological Front, an organization allegedly aligned with Pre-Parliament – a radical opposition political group that was a side in the 2016 Yerevan hostage crisis.

The Armenian eco-activist movement actively targeted the mining industry as a major pollutant of the environment – including the Kajaran copper-molybdenum open-pit mine, the Sotk gold mine, and most importantly the Teghut copper-molybdenum prospect, which was set to be exploited by Vallex group.

The fight against the Teghut prospect was something the eco-activist movement was building up to, and when the construction of the mine began in 2007, it was a bitter defeat. Only in 2018 the exploitation of the mine was halted amid concerns for environmental pollution, with operations resuming in 2019. Aren Mkrtychyan, a member of Armenian Parliament, commented to Azatutyun: “I want to emphasize, that the way the mining industry was in Teghut – which caused a social and ecological disaster – is unacceptable to us, and the Government will take upon itself to watch the relaunching of the mine. I hope and am sure that there will be completely new approaches and a new quality of mining industry here.”

Allegedly one of the major factors of the Save Teghut movement was the fact that the local villagers actually supported the construction of the mine – the economically challenged rural community was attracted by promises of work and investments. Geoteam CJSC, a company owned by the British Lydian International Ltd., had started mineral exploration in Amulsar in 2005, which had attracted the attention of the eco-activists. Amulsar does not seem like a good location for a mine: it’s located midway between the Kechut and Spandaryan water reservoirs, around 8.5 km from each, and 10 km from Herher State Sanctuary.

The city of Jermuk and the Jermuk mineral water sources are located next to Kechut reservoir. And Kechut reservoir is the entry point for the Arpa-Sevan tunnel, connecting the water basins of Sevan and Arpa river.

The Jermuk mineral water and the bottling plant are important to mention, as it’s here that Lydian and Geoteam stepped not only on the toes of eco-activists, but also a very rich and

powerful man – the former mayor of Jermuk, former member of Parliament Republican Party – the ruling party until the 2018 Velvet Revolution – and the owner of Jermuk Group – Ashot Arsenyan.

While the local villages had cooperated with Geoteam and Lydian, and even protested a few first visits by eco-activists, the latter had learned their lesson in Teghut and weren't willing to take the same chances. Thus a PR-war began between the eco-activists, allegedly backed by a local Armenian oligarch, and Lydian International, a foreign company.

The Lydian narrative was that their industry was up to the international standards and would not threaten the affected regions. Which wasn't anything other mining companies hadn't promised.

The eco-activist movement preached doomsday scenarios for Sevan, Jermuk and all of Armenia if the Amulsar prospect was exploited.

For full disclosure, I had been a member of the eco-activist movement since Masthots Park, and the 2012 anti-Lydian protests in Jermuk became the breaking point for me. I noticed one of the more notable activists telling the villagers that gold mine was only a front for an uranium mine – and when I expressed confusion, I was pulled to the side and told that uranium wasn't the true issue – the mine tailings were, but uranium was much more effective at scaring villagers.

When I returned to Yerevan, my faith in us activists being “the good guys” was shaken. This, and collaboration with a representative of the regime, would mean one of two things, or maybe both: either the threat was serious enough for the people I knew and trusted to sacrifice their integrity to it, or this was an issue of principle, a payback for Teghut. In either case, both sides weren't beyond bending the truth to push their agenda. It had become a war – victory at all costs, and neither side was going to be trustworthy.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

From a certain perspective, the story of the Amulsar mine plays out like an ancient Greek tragedy. There's the tragic hero – the eco-activist movement, hunted and haunted, with its share of adventure, triumph, failings and its fatal flaw.

This story has its villains – the system that cares only about the enrichment of certain individuals, the predatory world of venture capitalism, the local people who can be coerced into cooperating with the mining companies for a promise of work and investments in the regional infrastructure. People who just won't listen to the cries of Mother Nature.

From another perspective, this is a story of social struggle, people trying to stand up for themselves against the oppression of capitalism, the global financial system, the story of self-determination and struggle for self-governance. A fight against evil central government. Quite a heroic tale, if you're into this stuff.

There's also the perspective of an international mining corporation finding a profitable gold prospect in a developing



FROM ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE, THIS IS A STORY OF SOCIAL STRUGGLE, PEOPLE TRYING TO STAND UP FOR THEMSELVES AGAINST THE OPPRESSION OF CAPITALISM, THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL SYSTEM

country with suitably lax mining legislature, coming to agreements, making investments and then facing roadblocks in the form of anti-mining activism, change of government and other misfortunes. A corporation that has made promises – which hold legal weight – to its investors, creditors, partners. They want to be seen as a respectable, responsible enterprise, which understands the risks and responsibilities associated with mining.

There's also the perspective of a struggling country that suffers from corruption, political strife, is blockaded by two of its four neighbors, the third one is in conflict with its main economic and political partner and the fourth one is subject to international sanctions, with growing unemployment and poverty, and with mining being arguably its largest single export.

And there's the perspective of a political party – My Step – that came to power backed by all the groups who were dissatisfied by the actions of the previous government –



including the anti-mining activists – and is now torn between the legal obligations inherited from their predecessors and the often uncompromising activist groups. Each perspective has its own narrative. Each narrative has endings with “win” and “lose” conditions. The “win” condition for eco-activists can be summarized in their slogan – “Jermuk shall never become a mine”. The “lose” condition of the narrative, the doomsday scenario is if the mine is opened, the toxic waste from the mine pollutes water sources and gets into lake Sevan through the Arpa-Sevan tunnel, and Armenia loses most of its fresh water. There are also concerns for Jermuk’s springs and tourism, the health of the surrounding populace and so on. Lydian Armenia has its own doomsday scenario. It was created specifically to exploit the Amulsar gold prospect. If the mining deal falls apart, the company will be forced to liquidate its assets and sue the government of RA for damages as per local and international law. A win scenario sees the company resume its mining operations. The scenarios for the current government are even bleaker. It’s an either-or scenario. Either they support the eco-activists and revoke Lydian Armenia’s right to mine the Amulsar prospect, or support Lydian Armenia’s claim and face rabid opposition from hardline eco-activists and their supporters. Before the Velvet Revolution which saw the ruling Republican Party replaced with the opposition, negotiating with

Lydian and enforcing tighter safeties around the mine was not viewed as a possibility. Paradoxically enough, eco-activists don’t seem to view it as a possibility to this day. The supporters of each narrative see only facts supporting theirs, and interpret facts to fit into their narrative. High cancer mortality rates in Armenia? Mining industry is to blame, the eco-activists will say. They won’t talk about the incidence of cancer, or that life expectancy after a cancer diagnosis is 30% lower in Armenia than the world average, with people are most often diagnosed with cancer on 3rd and 4th stages when treatment is less effective. About a fourth of the population lives under the poverty line. Cancer treatments are often beyond the financial ability of an average Armenian and funded through public fund-raisers and charity. Low trust and corruption of the healthcare system. Asbestos-lined roofs inherited from the Soviet era. Air pollution, particularly by partially burned carbohydrates from the Yerevan Thermal Energy Plant. Smoking. Jermuk mineral water, promoted as being beneficial for health, could be a part of the cancer debate too. It’s the most popular sparkling water in Armenia and the one Amulsar mine is threatening, if we trust its critics. Khachik Stamboltsyan – an eco-activist from the 1980s – claimed exports of Jermuk could sustain Armenian economy and be an alternative to mining. Except in 2007 the FDA issued a warning that arsenic levels (a substance known to cause cancer in humans) in Jermuk imported to Pennsylvania were more than 5300% above safe levels. In 2017 the FDA sampled Jermuk in California – finding arsenic levels 4500% above the safe maximum. How did Jermuk Group react? With an interesting statement. “This is intentional and directed against the mineral waters of Armenia. Jermuk mineral water isn’t the property of the “Mother” plant or Jermuk group, but the property of Armenia, as it flows from its depths. This is a transgression against the property of Armenia.” Did this lead to boycotts and protests, investigations, pausing the production of the mineral water? Not really. You see, Jermuk is a valuable location in the country’s underdeveloped tourism infrastructure and most eco-activists see tourism as an alternative to the mining industry. They need that alternative to counterbalance the economic impact of mining, and they aren’t going to cut the branch they are sitting on, even if that means potential arsenic exposure for people who come to Jermuk’s resorts. On the other hand, seemingly eco-activist pages started popping out on social media, like “Green & Clear”. Those were supporting Lydian Armenia’s agenda and led a smear campaign against major eco-activists and other associated people, including yours truly (who was accused of being the co-owner of Panarmenian Media Group, one of the largest media holdings in Armenia, and I truly wish I was that rich and powerful). One could only assume those were guerilla tactics employed by Lydian Armenia’s PR team. ➤

MOSTLY HARMLESS

After Armenia's "Velvet Revolution" the eco-activists who took an active part in the change of the regime expected the government to be supportive of their agenda. A prominent eco-activist – Arthur Grigoryan – was appointed head of Inspectorate for Nature Protection and Mineral Resources.

The Investigative Committee of RA started a criminal case to investigate the alleged willful concealing of information about pollution of the environment, related to the exploitation of Amulsar gold mine.

A quick search in Datalex.am, the online database for court cases in Armenia, shows that Lydian was involved in extensive litigation against various Armenian government bodies (most notably, administrative cases against the State Revenue Committee, the Ministry of Economy and the Police of RA) to various success, many of the cases pertaining to the inaction of the police when Lydian demanded to remove invaders from their property. There is also litigation against eco-activists, almost exclusively accusing them of slander, but those cases are less successful and some are ongoing to this day.

And then strange things started to happen. Arthur Grigoryan's Inspectorate declared that an endangered species of the Apollo butterfly had been discovered on Amulsar. Vice-PM Tigran Avinyan later declared that further research had shown that the Apollo butterfly does not live at that altitude.

Arthur Grigoryan was removed from his post and made statements claiming that his dismissal was under Lydian's pressure. Then he claimed his removal was connected to the illegal whitefish (siga) business of lake Sevan. At some point, RA prime minister Nikol Pashinyan made a statement claiming Arthur was fired because of "severe incompetence".

On March 11th, 2019 Lydian International formally notified Armenia of disputes with its government under the country's investment promotion and protection treaties with the UK and Canada, in connection with the ongoing blockades of road access to the Amulsar Gold Project. The statement released by the company also warned, that "under the UK BIT [bilateral investment treaty], Lydian UK may submit the dispute to international arbitration three months after such formal notification, and under the Canada BIT, Lydian Canada can do so after six months".

The Investigative Committee funded an expensive review of Lydian's Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) by an independent firm – Earth Link and Resource Development (ELARD). ELARD finished its review on July 22nd, 2019, and presented it to the Investigative Committee on August 7th. On August 14th it was made publicly available. Many people read it and... didn't know what to make of it.

While the Investigative Committee found that the review provided no basis to be used in the criminal case on willful concealing of information about pollution of the environment, the review contained worrying data on the flaws and incompleteness of ESIA/EIA documents provided by Lydian Arme-

nia. It also recommended additional measures to control the risks presented by the findings.

The government made a statement that the new risks were controllable, and that they would oversee their enforcement. You should keep in mind that Lydian Armenia's operations had been halted. Not by court decision, but by activists blocking the road to the mining site. And the government did not interfere, as seen in the court cases against the RA Police.

You can imagine the impact of the report on society and especially on social networks – it is a predictable process, when a large amount of highly specialized information is dumped on the general populace. People started talking of acid drainage, water pollution, the review was both quoted and discredited by representatives of the same sides of the debate. It was reinterpreted and fitted into each existing narrative. Without providing any constructive input, it was turned into fuel for the dumpster fire the Amulsar public debate had deteriorated into.

Most recently, even if the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic had slowed down developments, another series of incidents happened, very descriptive of the ongoing conflict.

Lydian had demanded that two trailers used by the activists to monitor and blockade the prospect, were removed from their property. The Administrative Court decided the case in Lydian's favor (ՎԴ/9786/05/18). Thing is, Lydian had provided specific coordinates for the trailer houses, and the Jermuk Police and the local administration declared the points did not represent their accurate locations. In response, on June 30th, 2020, Lydian's armed guards reportedly invaded the area guarded by activists, ran over their three puppies and started patrolling the area. In July, Lydian declared it had received the results of an examination of the area proving that the trailer houses were on their land, and on August 4th they announced they had removed those from their land.

The eco-activists called for a nation-wide mobilization, which led to a potentially explosive standoff with the occasional scuffle (which included the police chief of Armenia being assaulted by Lydian guards, being arrested by the police, several activists arrested and claiming police brutality, and so on).

WHAT TO MAKE OF THIS

If you want my honest opinion, I don't know. Everybody lies, everybody bends the truth, everybody fits everything into their own narrative. From a certain point of view, this article is a narrative in itself, even if unintentionally. It is impossible to represent every fact, every point of view without writing tomes on the topic.

Ara Ghazaryan, a lawyer unaffiliated with any side, has given a long interview representing the legal side of the problem. He claims this is essentially a trade dispute between a private company and the Republic of Armenia, which is forcefully made into a political dispute. He claims the problems began when the government compromised with the eco-activists and did not pursue the rule of law.



Except a representative of the legislative power, a PM, a member of the ruling party Varazdat Karapetyan claimed that there's a right above formal law, and even the constitution: "the right of natural morals". This is a sentiment echoed by many activists.

The government claims the risks of the Amulsar mine are controllable. "Mostly harmless".

And there are members of the extra-parliamentary "Citizen's Decision" party who see this as a dispute that should be solved in the context of direct democracy, even if there is no legal procedure for that.

And there are people in the eco-activist movement who claim that opening the mine would be the end of Armenia, and that every method is justified to fight against the mine. In the end, we can know several things for sure: angry mobs are still influential in Armenian politics (the fight against the Istanbul convention is another example), and that widespread government corruption and lax mining regulations have directly caused this crisis.

The tragedy is – the government has changed, and corruption is on the decline. But the obligations made by the previous regime are still in effect.

On one side, the government is accountable to the public, and the mining industry is accountable to the government, and the eco-activist movement is so decentralized it is not generally accountable to anyone at all.

So who should you believe? Make your own opinion. Because this is a serious question, and whichever answer you

THE TRAGEDY IS – THE GOVERNMENT HAS CHANGED, AND CORRUPTION IS ON THE DECLINE. BUT THE **OBLIGATIONS MADE BY THE PREVIOUS REGIME** ARE STILL IN EFFECT

find, whichever choice you make, you should be ready to bear the consequences.

On one hand, the alleged potentially catastrophic damage to the environment. On the other – the very real risk of Armenia being successfully sued for damages, loss of trust by international investors, more poverty and economic decline. Proponents of both scenarios claim their case will affect thousands of people, both say the other scenario is avoidable. You might think a reasonable compromise would be the solution, but no side seems interested in such a compromise, and even talking of it among the eco-activist community would likely get you branded as someone on Lydian's payroll. And as time goes on, the viability of the Amulsar prospect for sustainable mining practices dwindles, as the losses of Lydian International mount up.

As I said in the beginning, the story of the Amulsar gold mine prospect is a very complex and interesting one. And anyone proposing a simple solution is likely either mistaken or lying. ♦



FREE ARTSAKH IS WAITING FOR YOU

Like a straightforward resident of Artsakh, I suggest that we start with raw numbers. Did you know that 60% of people living in Armenia have never set foot in Artsakh? We suggest changing the situation at the first opportunity. Art historian Emma Harutyunyan, who has been traveling the country since the beginning of the pandemic, explains why.

TEXT : EMMA HARUTYUNYAN / PHOTO : LILIT KOSTANDYAN, ARNOS MARTIROSYAN, EDUARD DANIELYAN, SMBAT AVETYAN, ALEXEI YAKOVLEV, SAHAK MURADYAN, DAVID HOFFMAN, AREG BALAYAN, HAYK MELKONYAN





^ Erits Mankants church

< Jermajur in Karvachar



SOME TIPS BEFORE THE VISIT

Talk to the people of Artsakh, listen to their conversations, which may be a little difficult to understand because of the dialect, but it will seem sweet and you will capture everything. The texts that have been passed down to us through history books will take on a whole new meaning and will come alive in those stories. I assure you, no matter how sad the “msslhats” (“thoughts” in Artsakh dialect) are, you will find in them all expressions of life. Let the Artsakhian grandmothers call you “matagh”, let the grandparents offer you the mulberry vodka of their own production, let the children be interested in you and try to attract your attention. By the way, the eyes of Artsakhian children are huge and bright, you will see it yourself. So, to get a complete impression, try to ask around and discover your own Artsakh.



^ Nikol Duman museum

KARVACHAR

Now let's move on to the actual journey.

Well, you know that there are two main ways to arrive in Artsakh, both of which are in good condition. I suggest taking the upper road through Karvachar and return via the road that goes through Goris. The recently built upper road leads through beautiful and picturesque landscapes. Pay attention to how the symphony of the soft waves of Sevan transition into probably the strongest but virgin and liberated mountains of Karvachar in the territory of Artsakh.

At first, of course, you'll be amazed, then you'll find out that the nature of Artsakh here differs from the nature of its other parts you've seen before. The Dadivank Monastery lies in the dense mountains of Karvachar. You should visit it especially now that thanks to the efforts of two devoted restoration masters – Ara Zaryan, Kostan Zaryan's grandson, and Kristin Lamoure, a Belgian – the unique frescoes of the monastery have been reborn. The images survived till our days just because the Kurdish herdsman who'd been living in the church for decades simply hadn't noticed the Christian images under the layers of mud, soot and dust.

In 1993, when after a long pause Armenians set foot in Dadivank, only the ruins of a half-diminished building was left there, but recently it has got filled with a new spirit thanks to the abbot of the monastery, Father Hovhannes.

A father of five sons, with a powerful posture he reminds you of the heroes of Parajanov's films. If you meet him, he will kindly tell you how he has spent nights at the monastery for months with a gun in his hand defending the monastery.

From this point the journey can be continued in two ways; both accompanied with water, both running through impressive nature. You might already have guessed, I am talking about the mineral and healing reservoirs. For tens of millennia, river water has exposed the mineral springs in the gorge, creating those hot, sometimes very hot pools, and now all we can do is enjoy. So, the first option is Jermajur (1.5-2 hours from the highway), where in addition to a good bath you can see the ruins of the famous Soviet resort Istizu. People come here to treat their kidneys and livers, or just to have a bath. Currently the ghost of communism lives in this area which has gone through a lot; you can still see Lenin's huge stone head lying on the ground and the half-ruined hospital and a club.

The second option is "Hot water" near the village of Zuar (1 hour from the highway). The huge jacuzzi with a diameter of a few meters has its visitors even in winter. The locals are sure and have a hundred proofs that the water clears off all the stress. It's worth trying especially after the lockdown and the sufferings brought by the virus.

MARTAKERT

One of the directions that is hidden and mainly left out of the tourist routes is Jraberd fortress and Yerits Mankants church. They are both located in the gorge of the Trkhi River, which is almost uninhabited and in a very organically dazzling nature. Jraberd fortress has been a symbol of strength and stability since the early Middle Ages. The 6-kilometer road from Maghavuz village leads to Jraberd, one of the most interesting fortresses in Artsakh. To reach the castle, you need to go through a tunnel dug by spy-geologists in the 50s and to climb a steep path to the castle. After all, it's the impregnable Jraberd you climb to and the road cannot be an easy one. Here lie also the fragments of Mejlum melik's palace together with several other buildings, while the Church of Yerits Mankants is wonderfully well-seen from the fortress – like in a palm of a hand.

They say the latter was built to counterbalance the monopoly of Gandzasar. Well, you can also visit and dig at some overlooked and neglected corners. Churches that are silent and do not have an asphalt road leading to them are of a special charm to me. The desperate pride of Artsakh is felt in those forests. In 1993, the Azeris, thinking that Armenians were sheltered in the church, opened a fire on the monastery, knocked down the cross of the dome and damaged the walls. The very next day, a detachment of Armenian soldiers who arrived here promised to restore the cross. Unfortunately, in the difficult conditions of the war, many of the boys fell, but 21 years later, the promise came true. Those were the boys of the "Eghnikner" special detachment. To visit these places, you'd better come accompanied by a local who will be able to point out the right roads and decide how to act if you meet border soldiers – Armenian border soldiers, of course. I hope the difficulties won't stop you. Additionally, it's very easy to make friends with a local in this area.

To feel the union with nature, one of the best routes for the tourists is the ascent to Kachaghakaberde, where the outline of the fortress merges with the clouds. Let me warn you that at first it may seem that the fortress is very close and small, but after a few hours of seeing the same and almost unchanging scene, you will begin to believe in visual illusions, but I am sure that the purposeful tourist will not stop halfway, but will climb to enjoy the "all Artsakh in the palm of your hand" view; only by climbing to the end of the road will you see how huge the ruins of the rock fortress really are.

At the sunset of a long day, you should visit the authentic museum of Nicole Duman, a member of the liberation movement. Once here, it feels like you have entered a stranger's house of a couple of centuries ago. And if they serve you coffee, ask for their traditional *gata*; it is very tasty. >





◀ Tigranakert fortress

▶ Stepanakert farmer's market



▼ Askeran fortress



STEPANAKERT

Just like in Yerevan, most of the population is concentrated in Stepanakert. First, I would recommend exploring the city without using Google Maps to feel the rhythm of the city, which, going a little further, I must tell will surprise even many archaic people with its slow carelessness. Stepanakert is a small but lively city, and the center with its square is clean and attractive for evening promenades. One of the most beautiful buildings in Stepanakert is the Vahram Papazyan Theater which, unfortunately, is now in an emergency condition and no longer operates. It is in the heart of the city and before the Artsakh war it really was the heart of the city. The staff says that up to 70 performances a month used to take place at the theater, and the residents of the city went to the theater at least ten times a year (this was mandatory because everyone had a theater abonnement).

The building is very impressive both inside and out and it was built by the petite female architect Margo Balasanyan, under her daily supervision. It is not always possible to enter the theater, but with the director's permission and supervision of a guard the chances are great.

The Stepanakert market is, of course, one of the coziest and tastiest places. Right at the entrance, an old Artsakhian grandmother will greet you, put a *jengyalov hatz* in your hand and send you to the "PR specialists" – the sellers of fresh and hand-grown vegetables and fruits.

Of course, I do not believe that any of the readers doesn't know about this vegetarian and whole-green bread, so let me just add that they may tell you there are up to 40 types of greens in your *jengyalov hatz*, but you'll never know. The people of Artsakh marinate and pickle everything – from onions to *zker* and all kinds of greens. By the way, be sure to try Artsakh capers, which are called "kapar" here.

In Stepanakert, in a smaller market, you will also find the local "turnav bread" made of whole grain wheat. The flour for this bread, by the way, is brought from the only old mill operating in Artsakh.

In the evening, visit winemaker Iosif (Joseph) who has a small but very colorful guest house in the district called Khndzor Bagh (Apple Yard), although he himself is more colorful. Alchemist Joseph (as his friends call him) has worked all his life on creating alcoholic beverages and his cellar is always full of his own wines, blueberries, cherries, various berry tinctures, his own fruit vodkas and brandy, about which he can talk endlessly seasoning his speech with toasts full of Artsakh wisdom.



ASKERAN

I think it goes without saying that there are many old castles and fortresses in Artsakh. The most famous of them is the Askeran fortress. This relatively young fortress is in a quite good condition with its strong and 9-meter walls still conveying a clear sense of protection. I would advise you to walk and cross the corridor from one end to the other and look from the observation points. By the way, the whole length of the construction is about 1.5 kilometers and the fortress was a reliable barrier during the mass collisions both in the 18th century and at the end of the 20th century.

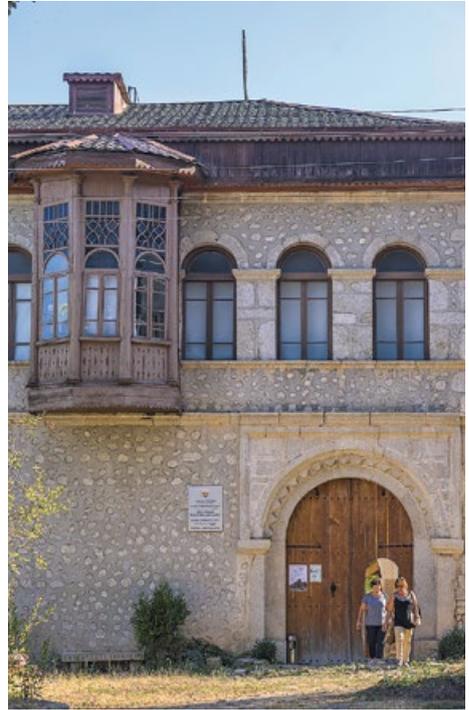
I understand that it may sound trivial if I offer to visit Tigranakert, but here I am going to especially mention Tigranakert, as many visitors go to see only the museum, forgetting about the eloquent ruins of the huge and rich city, where under the leadership of the fascinating Hamlet Petrosyan excavations have been carried out for many years. I am sure that Mr. Petrosyan will be very busy, but if you meet him at the excavation site and ask him interesting questions, you will have an unforgettable conversation with him that will remain in your mind for a long time. Surprisingly, in a few years an entire city was excavated, which, by the way, was established in the first century B.C. Here, too, some imagination will be needed to see this white city scattered in the gardens through the fragments found from the excavations, which used to occupy an area of about 70 hectares. After enjoying the cultural day, let's give a boost to the adrenaline. Here is how; at the airport of Artsakh, you can fly over Stepanakert, Shushi, even the whole of Artsakh on an American CH701 plane, but of course, according to the content of your wallet. You will be alone in the cabin with the pilot – Samvel, who will represent you Artsakh from above. >



^ Shushi mosque

> Shushi history museum

v Shushi fortress



> Hadrut city





◀ Shushi history museum

SHUSHI

In my opinion, one should love Shushi in the morning. It is beautiful when early in the morning you walk across the houses that are only waking up. Everyone has their favorite buildings in Shushi, you will have yours, too. Of course, the mood of the city can be contrasting – on the one hand, there are the remains of the half-ruined and once very rich houses where huge trees are already growing, on the other hand, there's the image of the victory and the reborn white Shushi giving birth to different thoughts in your mind and making you ponder over the future of the city.

Shushi is a cultural capital, so museums should be studied here as well. Be sure to visit the Shushi Art Center, which has a permanent carpet exhibition on the ground floor. By the way, the center is located in the printing house dating from the beginning of the 19th century. There are museums of history, fine arts, geography and money in Shushi.

After cultural doping, you should head in the direction of the mega-famous Jdrduz, Zontikner, Hunot Gorge. I will not stop here, I will just say that Hunot is really the most beautiful gorge in Artsakh, all the people are aware of that, so many meetings with the locals are inseparable from this place.

I think you will love the village of Karintak, which is located right under the rock where the impregnable Shushi was built. It is called "Under the rock" just like that. It is a sweet village with a difficult past. From above, Karintak has an open, strategically unprotected and vulnerable position. This fact, however, did not prevent the villagers from organizing a heroic resistance and counterattack during the liberation struggle. The center of the village is relatively well preserved. Here you can walk through the narrow streets, study the old buildings, follow the spirit of the village, when the women bake tonir bread and the neighbors enthusiastically discuss the events of the day.

▼
Hunot canyon,
the famous
"Umbrellas" in Shushi



MARTUNI

I will not talk about the Tnjri tree from Skhtorashen a lot. The oldest, tallest, all-seeing plane tree in the region (there is a huge blower in the tree, which can accommodate more than a hundred people), surely hosted inside of it all the people of Artsakh, and not only. It is not just a tree for the people of Artsakh, but a symbol of the homeland with a history of thousands of years. As mulberry first ripens in the Martuni region (and here is where the most delicious is), and the huge mulberry orchards are spread over an area of several hectares, here you can enjoy a windy walk through the orchards.

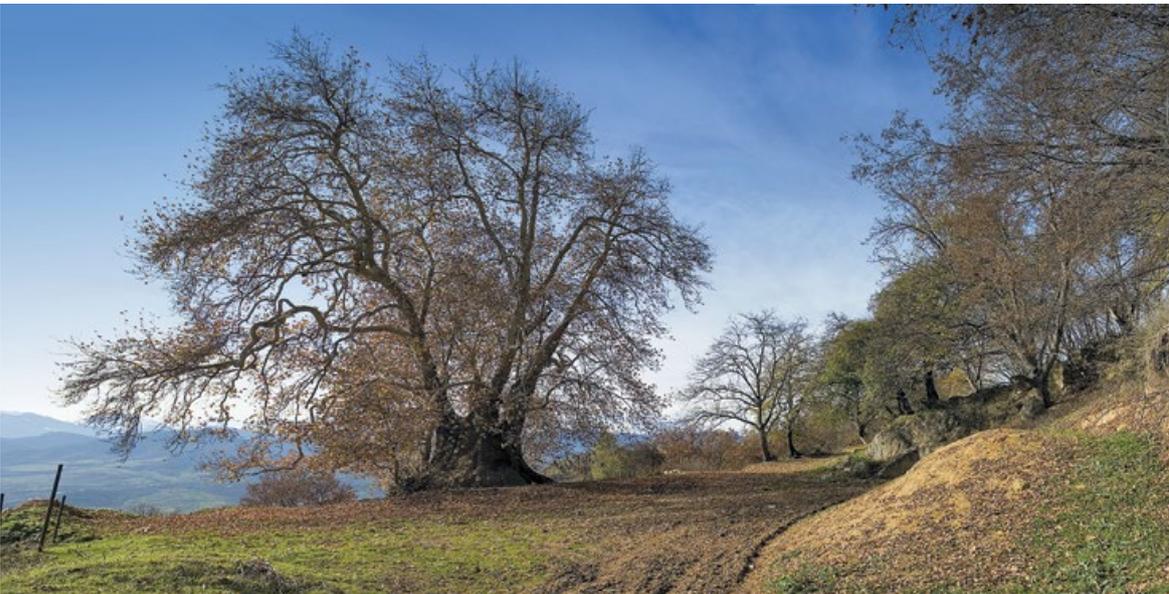
You may happen to see a fun mulberry-shaking ceremony when the whole family gathers around the tree, each grabbing the end of the big piece of cloth, and sending the youngest one up to the mulberry tree to shake it, after which they sit around the cloth and taste the sweet fruit of the orchard.

These gardens start from Machkalashen village and reach the Amaras church, where for the first time in the first Artsakh school founded by Mesrop Mashtots, the Armenian children started writing and reading in Armenian. Auxiliary and residential buildings stretch along the walls of the church, where lovers like taking their photographs near the figures placed on top of the stone fireplace.

If you want to climb 2724 meters, the best option is Mount Kirs, the outline of which is depicted on the coat of arms of Artsakh. It is sublime, infinitely beautiful, and in Artsakh only mountains can be more beautiful than mountains.



^ Amaras monastery



> Tnjri tree in Skhtorashen settlement



∨ Hadrut mountains



HADRUT

Hadrut is a very beautiful region with its charming nature, fresh greenery and culture. The actual Hadrut city requires separate time for walks and exploring. The memories of the previously actively developed craft city can still be found here.

There were about 25 handicrafts in the city, due to which the city was developing unprecedentedly. Pay special attention to hand-painted posters and billboards everywhere in the city. In the past, such billboards used to exist in every city; now their copies can still be found in Hadrut.

When talking about Hadrut, it is necessary to mention his intelligent past. Most of the population was literate in the 19th century. Thanks to the active youth, here in 1976, the first disco called "Armat" was established in Artsakh, where people could listen to the Beatles and have some cultural recreation.

Let me say that until recently this was the only disco precedent in Artsakh. And if we talk about more serious achievements, the preconditions and fermentations of the Artsakh movement lay right here – from where the victory was born.

I was very impressed by the small village of Tyak, which is almost completely abandoned, but it reminds me of a big cultural monument. The village was established when in the 19th century, in the frames of the development of the city of Hadrut, some rich people arrived and began to settle at the foot of the nearby magnificent mountains building beautiful and strong houses. Tyak is one of those settlements, some of the buildings of which, by the way, were once considered be given the status of a cultural monument. In my opinion, the village has a huge potential for the development of the Armenian creative spheres. Walk in this small village – I am sure you will have many ideas. If you won't get tired, go up to Gtchavank, which, like many Armenian churches, is in the wilderness of nature. Let me say that for centuries, it has been the main center of the meliks established here and the place of creation of large manuscripts.

Since the abbot here was Melik Yegan's father, who is also known as the landlord of Togh village, it is logical to come down from here to see the restored remains of the melik's mansions. The distant descendants of the melik still live near the palace, and will kindly tell you about the melik's family and show you the fragments left from the glorious mansions. This is where the Artsakh Wine Festival has been organized for several years. The biggest reason for holding the festival here is the "Kataro" wine factory, located a few steps away, which has been brought to life according to high international standards, and where you can have a quality tour and taste their wine assortment.

After tasting the traditional Khndoghni grape wine of Artsakh, Katarovank is waiting for you, which is the highest church in Artsakh (2480 meters above sea level). It is surrounded by rocks and is located on the top of Mount Dizapayt. The Kataro monastery leaves an astounding impression not only on the pilgrims, but also on every visitor.

After a rather challenging journey, it will be very blissful to find the time-worn walls of the monastery and to look down on the steppes of the Artsakh mountain-range and Iran; but, provided the weather is good. And if there are clouds, they will be under your feet. When you return to Togh, you can spend the night here at Marie's guest house, which is situated in a village house built at the beginning of the century and conveys the breath of time.



KASHATAGH

Before leaving Artsakh, be sure to visit the Artsakh's part of the pine reserve-park. I say Artsakh's part, because another section of the park is in the territory of Armenia and is included in Shikahogh reserve. The Artsakh part of the park stretches for 17 kilometers along the Basutajur River. Without exaggeration, it is a paradise. According to experts, it is one of the oldest and longest pine groves in the world. Here you feel like a child wandering among giant trees. Especially in autumn, when these hundred-year-old trees turn yellow and leaves start to fall and the labyrinths of the roots become more expressive against the background of the deciduous leaves, there is an inexplicable excitement. Here you can easily forget about time and just walk endlessly passing from one bank of the river to the other. The park starts from Vorduak village and stretches to Ditsmayri, where you can go down from Kovsakan village.

Artsakh can be loved only by empathizing and understanding its difficult but bold history. Free Artsakh is waiting for you. Start packing. ♦

THE SACRED LAND:

AN ULTIMATE TOURISM DESTINATION

Recently, Artsakh canceled the mandatory coronavirus testing with a significantly small number of cases in the country. Regional Post talked to Artak Grigoryan, the head of the Tourism Department, about the tourism sector in the country, about how the global lockdown affected it and what to expect in the future.

INTERVIEW : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN / PHOTO : ARTSAKH.TRAVEL



Who comes to Artsakh and what tourism services the country can provide to its guests?

— Let's divide our visitors into two groups: tourists from Armenia and tourists coming from abroad. According to the data of 2019, the top 5 countries with tourists visiting Artsakh are Russia, United States, France, Germany, and Lebanon. Both groups come to Artsakh for mainly cultural tourism, however, in the past one-two years, adventure tourism is on the rise as well. The reasons for this tendency are several. These are tours mostly created by the Armenian tour operators and, additionally, there is a new internal tourism trend in Stepanakert. The residents of the capital started visiting places that were undiscovered before. Usually, these locations are hard to reach, thus the visitors have to go there on foot, which turns the trip into a hiking tour. I cannot say that we have a huge segment of adventure tourism lovers but recently the "Janaparth Trail" project, which goes from Vardenis to Hadrut city in Artsakh, attracts more and more visitors.

So, can we say that internal tourism is also increasingly active in Artsakh?

— The numbers of internal tourism upscaled incomparably; the main difference with the internal tourism opportunities in Armenia is that here in Artsakh it's mainly about tours and excursions; while in Armenia there are many options of overnight stays in different regions, here we don't have them much. Now, new guest houses are being established and developed at the locations where people want to spend their active rest.



PART OF OUR INTERNAL TRAVELERS PREFERS TO STAY AT A VILLAGE SETTLEMENT AND ENJOY THEIR REST THERE, CONSEQUENTLY, THERE SHOULD BE CORRESPONDING CONDITIONS

Artsakh is not a large country and if, for example, you live in Stepanakert, there's no need to find a place for a sleepover as the distances between your home and the hiking locations are much smaller than in Armenia. However, a small part of our internal travelers prefers to stay at a village settlement and enjoy their rest there, consequently, there should be corresponding conditions.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE TOURISM DEPARTMENT IN ALL THESE PROCESSES?

— Up to this moment, all our efforts were directed to the capacity building, including the organization of trainings on various topics related to guest house management. We have a very attractive loan policy for the entities and organizations aiming to establish guest houses in village settlements.

For example, if a guest house is opened by a physical entity in the regions, then the business pays only 1000 AMD a month for a single room. This approach, adopted in 2019, promoted the guest house business in various settlements of the republic. Additionally, I should mention that the guest house business is developing quickly because the demands of the guests also are changing. The numbers of visitors increase, consequently, the number of different segments also goes up. The ministry also initiated indirect financial support mechanisms for the businesses working in the regions. To avoid a chaotic situation, we are not going to look through all the initiatives. We've identified several primary regions which have different potential. At one place there is an opportunity for the development of wine tours, while at the other settlement



there are possibilities for adventure tourism, etc. We plan on creating such development clusters at 4-5 settlements. But it doesn't mean that there won't be support programs in other regions. This is a pilot project and we plan on implementing it at all locations which have potential.

Do you cooperate with any organizations from Armenia and maybe even from abroad?

— Unfortunately, the status of Artsakh doesn't let us have wide cooperation with international and state agencies, which are largely active in the territory of Armenia. But there are private European foundations supporting the development of tourism in Artsakh. These co-operations are aimed at both the development of infrastructures and creating alternative income opportunities for the residents of the regions. We closely cooperate with the State Tourism Committee of Armenia, constantly exchanging the data, co-organizing visits of foreign bloggers and journalists and promoting Artsakh tourism products on

different social platforms. Recently, we've reached an agreement with the Yerevan Municipality to present the tourism opportunities of Artsakh at the information centers across the city. We also cooperate with the private sector. One example is the Artsakh Air Fest organized in cooperation with the Ministry of the Economy and the Yell Park. The same company also supports us in marketing operations.

Coronavirus put the tourism on hold, how did you spend this time?

— From the beginning of the quarantine it was obvious that this year we wouldn't have tourism, but as I always say, even though this is a huge challenge to overcome, we can also dedicate this time to review our strategy and to do such works which wouldn't be possible to accomplish in a normal situation due to the lack of resources. For example, we began the development of new tourism products such as the idea of "Melik's ways" themed route related to the popularization of the areas holding the

heritage of meliks (governors) in Artsakh and the development of a tourism product from the latter. We also actively worked towards the adoption of the village tourism concept, putting diversity into our tourism offers for the international market. Artsakh has a very rich culture and many historical monuments, but we must understand that today tourism strives for a variety of offers, in various directions, and mainly with community-based approaches. We have also started working on the legislative regulations currently, with a focus on the hotel services. We're also working on our two support programs. One program is related to the hotels, transporting companies and tour guides, as well as connecting them and acting as a mediator. The second program provides a minimal salary to all specialists working in the sectors of tour operators, hotels, and guest houses. We have also organized several meetings with tourism sector representatives and conducted a number of researches trying to identify the primary needs of the sphere.



UNFORTUNATELY, THE STATUS OF ARTSAKH DOESN'T LET US HAVE WIDE COOPERATION WITH INTERNATIONAL AND STATE AGENCIES, WHICH ARE LARGELY ACTIVE IN THE TERRITORY OF ARMENIA



Recently, Artsakh canceled the mandatory testing at the entrance of the country. What is your expectation from the tourism perspective?

— The number of tourists from Armenia will essentially increase and by saying internal tourism in Armenia we consider Artsakh as an inseparable part of it. However, we must take into account that soon it will be the low tourism season with cold weather, the beginning of the school year and the end of the vacation period. Still, we anticipate a larger tourism flow than usual. We know that currently there are many reservations in the local hotels and guest houses, and we can see tour buses traveling from Armenia to Artsakh. This is a good sign. ♦



TANGIBLE CONSEQUENCE

The war doesn't pass without a trace- consequences are inevitable. Sometimes, they are vivid the same way as the bombarded metal roof or the car blasted from an explosion, and sometimes they are unnoticeable from the first glance – hidden inside, buried somewhere, but still living in the memory.

In February, the complex work "Consequence: Artefact" was presented in Yerevan and in Artsakh prior to that. It included dimensional objects created from materials that had been forever deformed because of the war, as well as the photo story of 12 people who, while living in the shadow of the war, continued their journey. In the frame of the project, a film was also produced, illustrating the whole process of the project. Regional Post talked to photographer Areg Balayan visual artist Edik Boghosyan, as well as the producer and operator Hrayr Sargsyan.

INTERVIEW : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN / PHOTO : AREG BALAYAN, HRAYR SARGSYAN



THE CORE

“To create with metals that have been eroded as a result of war” is the idea of the “Consequence: Artefact” project, as Edik Boghosyan states. After an interval of 20 years, he returned to fine art and started working with metal again. Edik was born in Iran, where he witnessed the Iran-Iraqi war, then, 13 years ago Edik moved to Armenia, which on its turn, was struggling to recover after the Artsakh war. According to him, when you live in a militarized reality and your identity forms in times of conflict, your thoughts often return to these themes, especially if you have moved to a place that lies within another conflict. Edik already knew Areg, so he decided to meet him and discuss the idea. A year after the first conversation, they met again and started the work on the project, but in a new and expanded version. It was essential for them to understand how to connect photography and the damaged metals. They came up with a solution of combining human stories and dimensional metal objects. They were planning to also produce a documentary, but it was clear from the second visit that the film was going to become a full part of the project. The production was entrusted to Hrays Sargsyan. It took about half a year to do the research. The authors started with collecting metals, exploring the area and meeting and talking with people. Edik’s vision was the first impulse which united Areg’s and Hrayr’s perspectives and, through long discussions, it led to what we currently have. As the authors say, this project is not about Artsakh. It’s about the impact resulting from military actions. It’s true, the dimensional objects and the human stories presented in the project relate to Artsakh conflict, but the problem is universal.



QUESTION

Edik: “A metal of five or even two or three millimeters seems rather solid and invulnerable. The question is, if this seemingly invincible material can get to this state, what could have happened to a human.”

THE TURNING POINT

Areg: “When we first travelled to Talish, we met with Lyova – the head of the local administration. He has served in “Yeghnikner” for years, so one can imagine his restrained and quiet demeanor. All three of us went into his office. After greeting him, I started to tell him why we were there and what we wanted to do. I keep talking, he keeps quiet: I know though that it’s the way they all are in Artsakh; he is waiting to see what’s on my mind – taking me through his X-ray. He isn’t answering, so he wants me to tell more. I can feel Edik is getting a bit anxious, thinking, perhaps, that we won’t succeed in persuading him. I said a few more words and then he says, “What will you drink?” Thus, it went on. He took



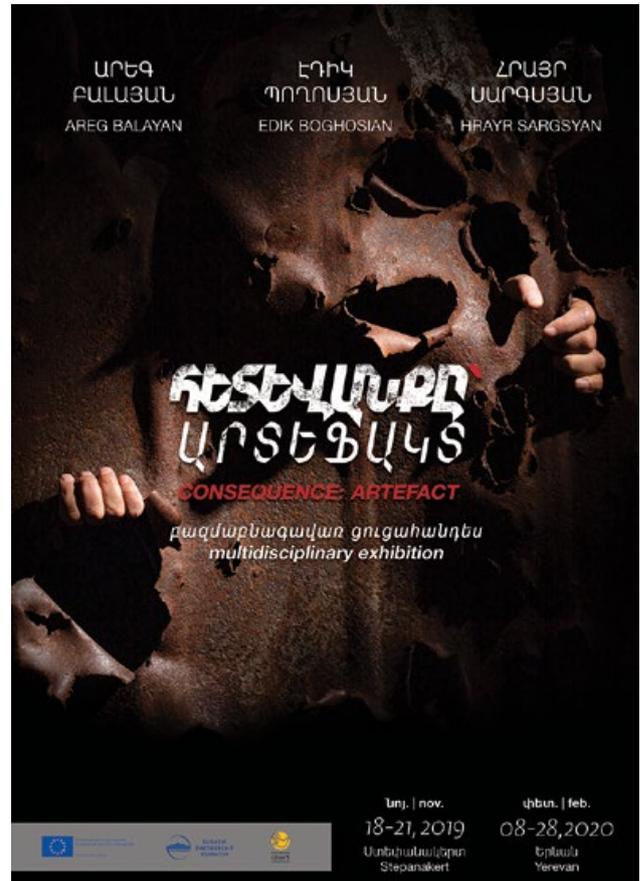


us around Talish, showed us the points which were safer and the ones that were in the enemy's field of view. We went up to the Talish school".

Edik: "As we were walking through the school, I spotted a piece of cracked roof, looking like a huge helmet. I decided to put it on. Areg quickly stopped me in front of the wall to take a photo before I could collapse under the weight: the situation looked like a sketch, then suddenly, the look and the voice of this man changed. He goes, "Guys, I just got your idea: nothing can be more powerful than this." From then on, I believe, everything fell into its place for all of us, and I realized that the wall of mistrust and suspicion collapsed right then. But to obtain that legitimacy and the right we had to go a long way".

BECAUSE IT HAD TO BE

Areg: "The most complicated shootings were those with the two brothers. One can't find the words to explain to the boys that the third barrel is there to replace their brother. But you have to explain why you have made up your mind to shoot it exactly that way; they aren't mannequins, you know? They are the ones doing everything, so they've got to agree with you, but they must first understand it in order to agree. During that whole time, we were interacting openly, and they were showing us things on their phones. This is the way they live, but the absence of their brother also lives in them. From the beginning we were in contact with their father but we didn't know the mother's opinion about all of this. During the film's screening in Artsakh, their mother didn't go into the auditorium, she was standing in the corner of the exhibition hall, leaning on the wall. I approached. She noticed me but didn't raise her head. I felt lost and apologized to her. There was nothing more to say. And I added: "I'm sorry for digging and going so deep with this but I fully carry that responsibility because ..." and we said together, "It was needed". All doubts and fears disappeared, and we understood that this was really needed.



THE FILM

Hrayr: "I knew from the beginning that my main characters were going to be these two – Areg and Edik. It was also clear that we would show the effects of the war, whereas all the subtexts formed as a result of the transformation taking place throughout the entire process.

The challenge for me was trying to not cross the fine line of their private space. The film's Areg and Edik are just the way as they appear in their personal lives: I presented them the way I had seen them during this journey. The atmosphere during the proceedings were, you could tell, relaxed and positive but I knew the jokes were just a way of dealing with all that heaviness. When in the evenings we went and sat down to share some food together, you could see that they



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were trying to make sense out of all that had happened, sometimes not even being able to say a word. Appearance was not important, what really mattered was how they felt inside, how they bore the whole responsibility and the related fears. I myself tried to maintain some space with the people in my camera lens: we were still in this together, but we needed this space as I had to do my job, produce the film and they were my main characters. With the other characters also, the approach was the same, I kept the contact with them through Areg, as I didn't want to be noticed, while they trusted Areg – they took him as one of themselves.

I was trying to detach myself from the emotions, because if just for a second you emerge into the lives those people have lived, you may throw the camera aside and fall into deep contemplations, and that's not what the documentarian's profession is about.

At first, I was thinking of creating the film around conversations – without interviews, having them just talk while I shot, but it turned out to be very hard to do so, as at some point they stopped talking and the conversations continued inside their minds. It was interesting how everyone was so eager for the project to come to life. They didn't say anything, but it was clear without words. There were very many layers, and another reason for me to observe distance was that if I had allowed myself to go deeper into those layers, the film would have lasted several hours.

THE NARRATIVE AND THE WAR TABLE:

Edik: “We didn't try to show the aggravation, the author's existence or his rebellion to make the film more appealing. We adhered to reality. I didn't want to create a conceptual work; I am more of an advocate of the abstract, although you wouldn't attri-

bute the presented works to classical abstraction. There was a work which was in the realm of conceptual art, too. The “table” standing in the center of the exhibition hall (like the self-made tables of wartime) with some crumbs of bread on it, also has its own narrative. The idea sounds like eating bread at the table of war, with bread presenting the opportunity for life, and the pierced metal – the everyday fear of war.

As an art theorist Yelena Aydinyan states, it may seem very frontal, but it suggests proficiency, and when you come and stand by that table, you conditionally appear in the same situation, and it doesn't matter on which side of the conflict you are – the picture is the same. The table became an element for performative art. In Yerevan, as well as in Artsakh, during the opening ceremony, we shared bread on it and all our Yerevan discussions took place around that table.

THE HERO:

Areg: “After the opening, our team with their families got together to share some food and drink. Then, we found out that someone had written some criticism on our project. I decided not to pay much attention to it, but one can't help thinking that perhaps something hasn't worked out well. One of our characters, Aro, was sitting in front of me. I asked him somewhat frustrated, “Why did you participate in the project?” He stared at me for a while and said, “I'll tell you, Areg, I wanted to take part so I wouldn't get lost, so my child wouldn't think his father is someone lost but would know instead that his father is a hero. The catalog you've given to him, he keeps showing it to his friends and telling them ‘my dad is a hero’...”





EPILOGUE

Margarit: From my perspective, this project is not about the past but about the far-going future. But in order to move forward one must openly consider the reality, as well as the history with its relevant consequences. We must give answers to all the questions which we theoretically knew before but avoided to understand more deeply. In Armenia and in Artsakh, you'll hardly find a family where one of the men, or even the women, hasn't participated in this or that military action: World War II, Artsakh Movement, April War. It's a common thing, passing – like a red line – through every household. But we usually talk about such things with a deep sigh, while we never try to comprehend it in all its depth. Nevertheless, no war ends in the battlefield and almost every one of us somehow carries the effects of the war. This project was about trying to understand the things on which songs have been composed and films have been shot so far but no question has been asked to these people who are the living example of those effects. To me, they are the ones who know the real value of happiness, they know what's beautiful and why one needs to move forward. What concerns us, we need to look, learn and start our inner dialogue.

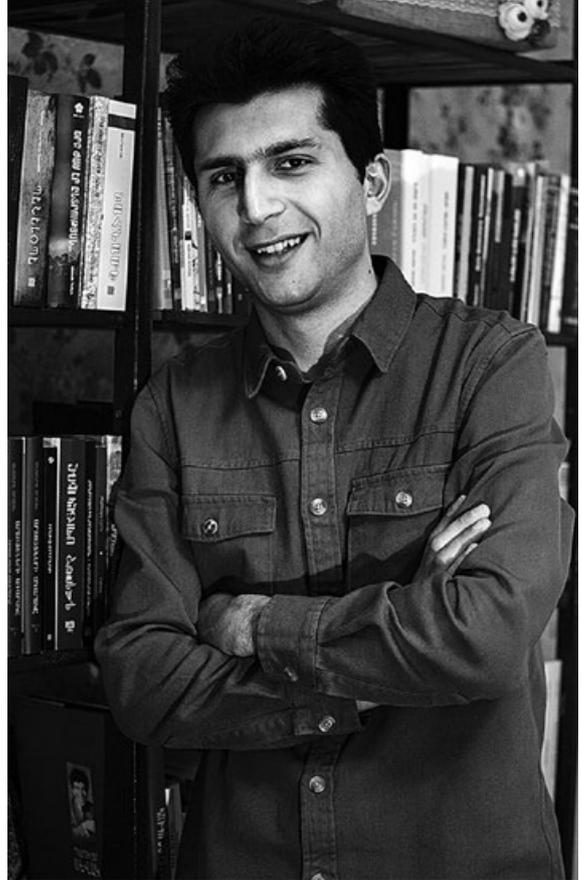
Talking about the project, Areg says, " By understanding the journey of other people you cross your own path, you get slashed, dissembled, then built-up again, something in you may crack, but another part may get recovered instead. This is an interesting process through which you pass and grow. ♦



THE STATE AND THE BOOKS

Lately, contemporary Armenian literature has become a hot topic in media and society. Many of us are still in the process of getting acquainted with the modern faces of the local literature. Regional Post talked with Armen Sargsyan, the chief specialist of Literature in the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia, to find out about the perspective of the state regarding the development of the field

INTERVIEW : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN / PHOTO : ARMEN SARGSYAN'S ARCHIVE



What challenges does Armenian literature face today? What are the priority issues that need to be addressed urgently?

— Armenian literature has undergone a wide range of changes. The opportunities brought by the post-independence period, especially the new times, have had a positive impact on literature.

Today, when contacts with foreign literature are constant, there are open doors for the local literature. If ten years ago talking about the sale of a contemporary author's book in Armenia was unbelievable and works were published only for presentations, today we have a different situation. The books, actually, are being sold. And, I wouldn't say that the numbers are discouraging. The population is small; thus we are not losing in terms of numbers. Of course, the dream of Armenian literature is to conquer foreign literary markets. Here is where we should put all our efforts. Everyone should work in this direction: the writer, the publisher, the literary agent, the state. Everyone must do their job well in this chain so that we have results in years to come.

What do we need most to achieve that goal?

— First, we need qualified translators – specialists who have been trained abroad and are willing to dedicate themselves to the translation of the classic and contemporary Armenian literature in the languages that are accessible and comprehensible for the outside world.

The next important issue is the creation and activation of literary agencies in Armenia. I know only two such agencies that are actively operating: "ARI" and "Arajin". The mentioned processes cannot be carried out without the establishment of this institute. One or two agencies, no matter how hard they work, are not enough to present the whole literary field. There's a need for more. Besides, I do not even mention that potential writers may be left out of the preferences of those one or two agencies. This is a problem. Not to mention the absolute neglect of poetry. But I must admit that this problem exists everywhere; poetry is not of commercial interest in the foreign literary market. At the best-case scenario, the works

of local poets are available in Armenian and are read in Armenia.

Some representatives of the sphere claim that the active participation of the state hinders the establishment of healthy market relations. What do you think of that? What are the advantages of interactions between the two?

— The support for the creators comes not only from the programs of the Government of the Republic of Armenia, the cultural policy of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports but also from the provisions of the UN Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, the international legal instruments adopted by UNESCO on the exercise of cultural rights, in particular from the provisions of the 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. The Convention member states should implement measures to promote creative freedom, i.e., funding for creative activities, support in promotion, artists' right to social and economic protection, etc. The Armenian Law on the Fundamentals of Cultural Legislation defines as goals of the state cultural policy the

creation of conditions for the reproduction and development of the creative potential of the society, the support of the expansion of the international creative contacts of the artists, prioritizing the national cultural values of international importance.

This policy reaffirms that literature, literary projects, independent cultural figures who are excluded from commercial or publishing preferences should find their place in the literary field. The Ministry is guided by the conviction that the development of each circle is equally possible, starting from the creative ending with the library and the reader.

Can we say that the buzz of recent weeks over literature textbooks turned into a PR, good or bad, for contemporary Armenian authors?

— In general, we should try to bring back the interest of art lovers and readers to contemporary cultural developments, processes, and trends. Over the years, during these difficult times for culture, the rift between the creative community and the consumers of the culture it creates has deepened. We must try to close that gap, to unite the cultural community and art lovers on the same platform again. The result of that rupture was the noise around subject standards of literature. As they say, you should try to turn the bad course of events in your favor. Of course, this was a good PR.

Many learned that there is modern literature and that's not a small thing. They also learned about modern art. The problem here is not only literature. Modern art in general needs to prove its importance. Writers like to complain that people do not read modern literature. Musicians also complain that people do not listen to modern music.

Why is this happening?

— The reason is that the highly politicized media field has been guided for decades – and today it continues to be guided – by non-cultural interests. There



I AM CONVINCED THAT ARMENIAN LITERATURE IS LIVING ITS BEST PERIOD. IT'S FREE. IT'S NOT BASED ON IDEOLOGIES (AND THAT'S GOOD). IT HAS DROPPED THE FUNCTION OF UPBRINGING FROM ITS SHOULDERS

is no time or place in the media for the proper presentation of culture. The media does not provide time and space for its proper presentation. As a result, the current cultural life of Armenia is not covered, thus important and interesting cultural events are left out of sight.

What are the prospects of contemporary Armenian literature, for example, in the next 10 years?

— For the past three years, the Ministry has been implementing the “Armenian Literature in Translations” grant program for foreign publishers in order to take Armenian literature out of Armenia and publish it in other languages. The Ministry supports the latter by allocating the necessary money for the translation of the books. To date, 29 book applications in 15 languages have received support from this program. It is here that literary agents and publishing houses, pro-Armenian structures abroad, and embassies are of great help to the ministry. All together we must put our efforts to reach the desired results. We have already started, all we're left to do is to succeed. The state has a lot of work to do here. There are

very few resources allocated to literature. It is necessary to double, triple, and even quadruple them. Introducing yourself to the world and gaining popularity through literature is the most effective, shortest, and cheapest way.

What are your favorite works by contemporary Armenian authors?

Due to my professional and reading interests, as well as the opportunities given by my job, I read a lot. I can assure you that today we have wonderful contemporary literature. I am convinced that Armenian literature is living its best period. It's free. It's not based on ideologies (and that's good). It has dropped the function of upbringing from its shoulders. It is different. It is competitive. I know that when given many names it's hard to memorize them. However, if you want to read good literature, find and enjoy Lusine Hovhannisyan's “The year has a lot of weather.” Also, ask each other for advice on what to read. Literature will help you to get to know yourself, understand yourself, and finally to live in peace and self-sufficiency. What else do we need to be happy? ♦

THE NO SECRET AGENT

The concept of a literary agent is quite innovative for the Armenian reality. The same way, the Armenian contemporary literature is still at its dawn both in the local and international markets. Regional Post met with Arevik Ashkharoyan, the founder and literary agent at “Ari” Literary and Talent Agency who puts her everyday work at the promotion of the contemporary faces in Armenian literature.

INTERVIEW : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN / PHOTO : “ARI” LITERARY AND TALENT AGENCY

Armenian audiences are still unfamiliar with the literary and talent agency concept. What does “Ari” do and how did you come to the idea of starting such an initiative?

— “Ari” is a literary and talent agency and works with local contemporary authors and scriptwriters. Part of these people live abroad and don’t write in Armenian, but many of them live and create in Armenia and have gained a certain level of popularity here. We present our clients all around the world, offering foreign publishers to buy the rights of our writer’s works and translate and publish them in their own countries. Risking sounding pompous, I personally came to this profession due to my great love for literature. I worked in different spheres, mainly at managing positions of local or international organizations but at some point, I understood that I wanted to do a job that I love and to work for myself. With one of my colleagues from the publishing sphere, we decided to integrate the agent concept, thus, we made our first steps about 10 years ago. At that time, we didn’t know what it meant to be a literary agent, but with time, we did some research and elevated our skills. This is not a job; one should have an extreme affection for literature and a desire to move forward because this is not a field where you can make a lot of money or achieve success on every step. The agent is a very subjective person who’s guided by his/her own opinion and sometimes considers the tendencies of the literary market. We



try to both present intellectual and in-depth literature and also tackle the commercial part of the industry. The latter is a little bit harder to find in Armenia – for example, fantasy or detective stories – but still, we do our best to explore and promote new materials. For the future, my dream is selling movie rights to a filmmaking company abroad.

What does it mean to be a literary agent in Armenia?

— The work of an agent is to be a mediator between the author and the publication. The problem is that publishers in Armenia are not used to having a mediator between them and the author and vice versa, the publishers are not used to working with the author directly without a mediator

and we are stuck in between. But the hardest part is not working in Armenia but being an agent from Armenia as you are to represent yourself as an agent from a country they know very little about. They might know that we’re a post-soviet republic, as well as a couple of names such as Charles Aznavour or Serj Tankian, but unfortunately, they have no idea at all about the Armenian literature and the Armenian authors and that is a huge obstacle on our way. We start from zero, telling them about our history, and only after that, we present our contemporary artists. The publishing houses abroad don’t know how to position us in their audience, and this is one of the reasons why we are obliged to do our best and provide them with extremely entertaining

and interesting materials. But what is considered interesting also differs from country to country and each publishing house has its own approaches. Some prefer quality content but with a limited audience, while some of them focus on the commercial value of the piece.

What dynamics have you noticed during the past ten years?

— There are certainly positive dynamics that might not be visible in the circulation numbers of the books we've managed to publish abroad. I am usually asked about the numbers, meanwhile, there's no such notion in the sphere, especially when it comes to writers that are not popular yet and have to be presented to the foreign audience for the first time. My main job takes place during books' fairs abroad and fortunately, I managed to attend most of them and that's also a positive dynamic as this way you enhance your visibility. During the past years, we became more recognizable and we established some ties with foreign publishers who are willing to systematically present our literature; for example, in Britain, France, and several other countries.

Do you have a lot of inquiries from local authors?

— There is a great number of authors approaching us, and we receive many letters and calls. This is a very good tendency, but the problem is that most of the time the authors send us raw materials which require a lot of editing, and sometimes a huge potential can be seen in these materials, but we're not the ones to do the editing. I would love to refer these authors to specialized independent editors who would help them out. Authors mostly write about how they feel, whereas none is taught how to write as we don't have this culture in Armenia. Even the large publishing houses don't have many editors; just one or a maximum of two do. Each author should find his own editor and the editor should have his own signature style.

I see many familiar faces on your bookshelves, contemporary authors that are quite popular within the country and people do read them here. What is the situation abroad?

— We've sold Pachyan's works in several languages: English, French, Bulgarian, and Ukrainian. I should say that the feedback was very positive both from different journals and blogs and just regular readers. They see a novelty in his works and in the overall style. For example, his "Goodbye, Bird" and "Robinson: Short stories" gained huge popularity in Ukraine. We indicate this based on the feedback received rather than on the number of books sold, and we consider this more important. Even today, 4-5 years after the publication, we can see a new article or a post on Pachyan's works. We received dozens of positive feedbacks from France about Hovhannes Teggyozyan's "Fleeting City". This means that these books are competitive, comprehensible and interesting.

How did COVID affect the field and what is the future outlook of the agency?

— Unfortunately, many book fairs got canceled. In March, we were planning a huge event during London's book exhibition. We were going to travel there with Aram Pachyan and present our authors to the British-Dutch "Glagoslav" publication. They have published Susanna Harutyunyan's "Ravens before Noah", Karine Khodikyan's stories, Aram Pachyan's "Goodbye, Bird" and "Robinson: Short stories". They also published Grig's "Jesus' Cat". To me, this is a huge success. We've worked with "Glagoslav" for five years and we have already published a series of Armenian authors. From the recent initiatives, we initiated an international forum of women writers with a New-Mag publishing house called "Zabel". This was going to be a festival, but we will have to go with the online format. We are doing our best to stay active and promote the Armenian contemporary literature as much as possible but it's essential, especially for small coun-



tries with a small language exposure, to have state support programs. The state provides translation grants to foreign agencies for publishing Armenian literature – which has almost got canceled this year due to the Coronavirus crisis, however, in order for literature to succeed the country should have two to three similar programs.

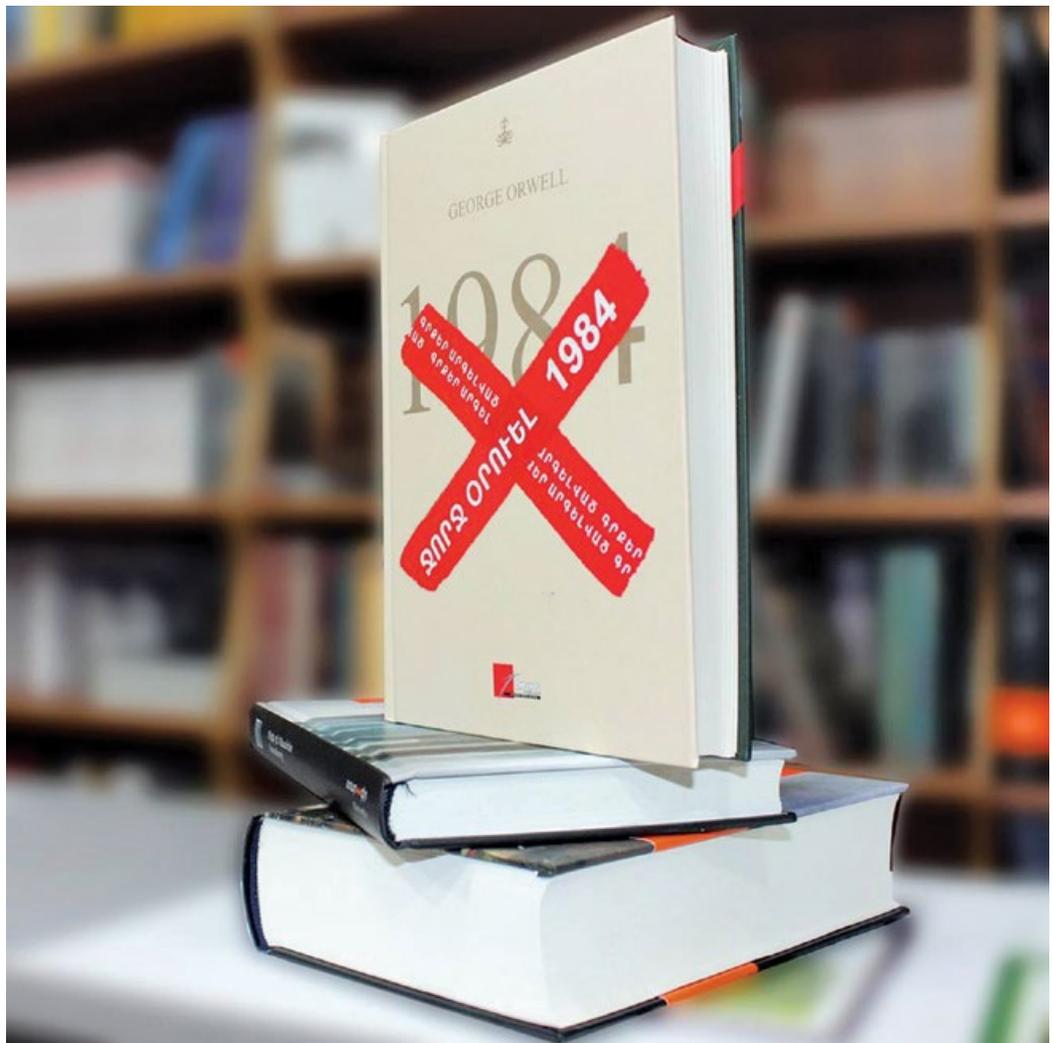
What do you think about the last situation regarding literature textbooks? Was it somehow beneficial for the Armenian authors?

— In my opinion, the government has made the right decision. The new program is not perfect and there is a lot of work still to be accomplished, but the direction that the ministry has chosen is right and I really appreciate this approach. These changes aren't going to make our work with foreign publishers easier but on the internal level this might be a tipping point. We have the "Ari" literary foundation which implements an initiative called "Let's read". During some of our camp activities, Aram Pachyan himself came and read some of his works for those children. Trust me, they can understand much more than we or the teachers think they can, and even in case they don't – it still makes them think. I used to be asked, "Does Armenia have contemporary literature?" "Who are those authors? Where are they?" After three authors appeared in the textbook, it turned out there are over 30 contemporary writers and many started to complain about why this or that author's name was not on the list. This means that there is Armenian literature, there are contemporary authors and they have their readers. ♦

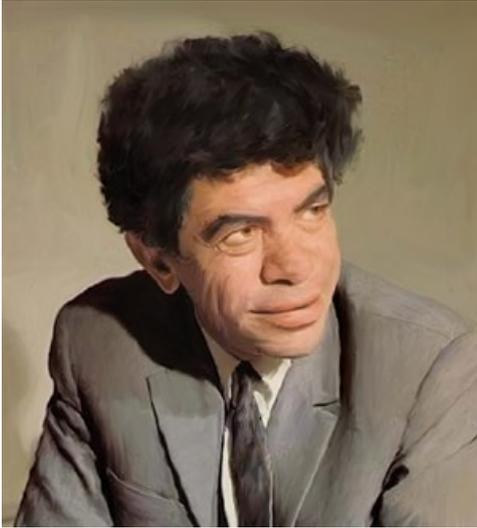
INDEPENDENT BESTSELLERS

Literary critic, chief editor of “Antares” publishing house Arkmenik Nikoghosyan tells about the recent trends in the Armenian literary market and its main bestsellers.

TEXT : ARKMENIK NIKOGHOSYAN



> George Orwell's "1984" translated by "Antares" publishing is constantly among bestsellers in Armenia



◀ One of the most popular Armenian poets of XX century Paruyr Sevak, a hero of Hovik Charkhchyan's non-fiction

▼ A story of a prominent thief in law Svo Raf was sold in tens of thousands copies



During the first years of the Armenian independence, the series of books initiated by “Apolon” publishing house – “Five novellas”, “The Trial” by Franz Kafka, “Within and Without” by Hermann Hesse, “The Plague” by Albert Camus, etc. – were in fact the last books released with a large circulation typical of Soviet times, 40.000. In the years that followed, books in Armenia were not only pushed to the backburner but they also got published less (for different reasons, but first and foremost – financial). Later, more in the end of the 1990s and in the beginning of the 2000s, these printed copies not only drastically dropped in quantity beyond comparison (500 or 1000 at most) but also the numbers on the last page indicating the circulation gradually disappeared. Also, the books, especially those by contemporary Armenian authors, were circulated and spread out not as much due to sales but for the most part, due to being given as a gift. In this case, perhaps the most essential question arises; what must the sales quantity be for a book to be considered a bestseller? Especially, since at one point there was a situation when selling 30-50 copies of a book was considered a great success. And, in the 2010s, when the “Armenpress” news agency launched its “Yerevan Bestseller” project, which operates to this day, one could often see books appearing on the top ten list which had been sold by just 8-10 copies during the past week or month. Given the fact that there are no accurate statistics, and also because the sale of the books weren't always carried out at the bookstores alone (the number of which, by the way, was dropping with each day), bestsellers of especially the late 1990s and early 2000s should be assessed based on circulating news and facts, and in this assessment, data presented by the booksellers working in the underpasses are of especially greater importance.

THE BEST-SELLING BOOKS OF THE 2000S ARE CONSIDERED **TWO NON-FICTION PUBLICATIONS** – ONE ABOUT A FAVORITE POET, AND THE OTHER ABOUT A FAVORITE THIEF IN LAW

Therefore, a bestseller of the 1990s can be considered Dale Carnegie's "How to win friends and influence people", which was first published in Armenian in 1991, and later republished many times. The best-selling books of the 2000s are considered two non-fiction publications (surprisingly so, since that category has not gained much momentum in Armenia up till now) – one about a favorite poet, and the other about a favorite thief in law (professional dignitary). So, Hovik Charkhchyan's book “Sulamita; Sevak's big love” in two volumes (2004, 2006) has been sold in over 9000 copies according to various data, and the sales of Sergey Galoyan's “Svo Raph... a bio of a legendary man” (2007), is counted by tens of thousands. The next factual bestseller is “The Little Prince” by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, which repeatedly published and sold by different publishers, in different translations, even without copyright (an exception is the 2012 publication by “Antares” publishing house). The sales of “The Little Prince” surpasses 100,000, if not more. >

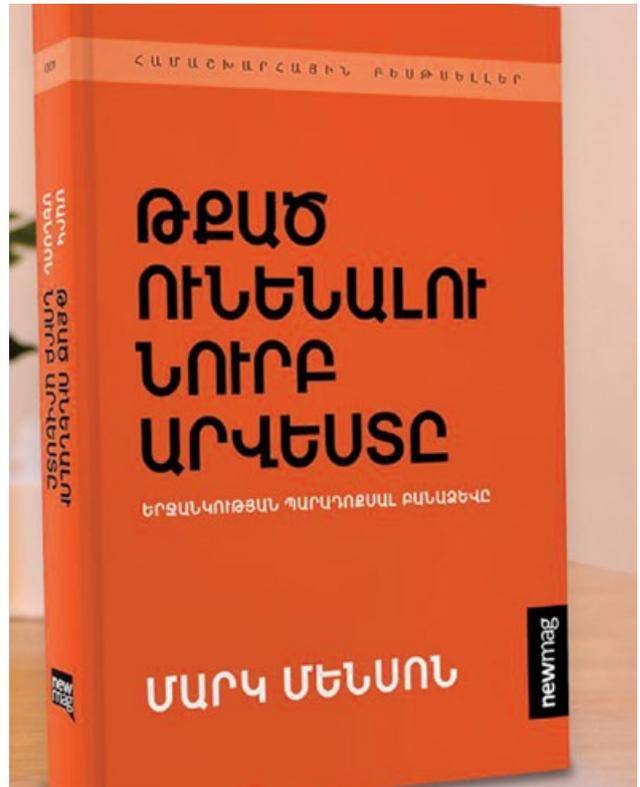
As for the fiction books of Armenian authors, we should of course mention Vahram Martirosyan's novel "Landslide", which was constantly advertised on TV and in newspapers, and it paid off.

In the last 5-6 years, it is possible to reveal the data of best-seller books more accurately, as on the one hand, there is the "Yerevanyan bestseller" project which announces definite numbers every week, in addition, the publishers themselves occasionally come up with unique reports; and on the other hand, the bookstore managers and those in charge are not reluctant to announce numbers, a phenomenon which in itself was not something common in the past. In the light of what has been said let's try to understand the Armenian bestsellers of the last 5 years according to different so-called nominations.

ARMENIAN CONTEMPORARY AUTHORS

Since the early 2010s, there has been a noticeable activity in this field. Even long-forgotten things took place; thus, 155 copies of Aram Pachyan's novel "Goodbye, Bird" were sold in two hours, Hrachya Saribekyan's novel "The Sun of the Twins" was sold in two hours – 178 copies in total, Armen Ohanyan's "The Return of Kikos" – 268 copies, and Levon Khachyan's postmortem published novel "The book of Mher's Door" – more than two thousand copies in one day. In general, among the modern authors, Aram Pachyan's books are in high demand. His books "Robinson" and "Goodbye, Bird" have had three editions each and "The Ocean" has had two, while the printing of the first two books has already excelled 3000 copies, which is a very good indicator.

↓
Darak Publishing republished Vardges Petrosyan's novels recently



↑
newmag published "The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck" in 2018

Grig's collection of short stories "Jesus's Cat" had three editions and a total of 2000 copies published. At one point, Edgar Harutyunyan's books, "The Art of Devotion or a Dedication to the Rose" and "Chamomiles not Found" were of great demand, each of which, according to different data, has had sales of more than 5000 copies. Thus, combining different data, Edgar Kostandyan's "Orphanage", Aram Avetis's "Blind Punctuation", and David Samvelyan's "Roden's Winter" have achieved a bestseller status. For the last one or two years, Syune Sevada's collection of stories "Addiction" and Levon Ness's novella "Balzac; a Story about a Dog" have become bestsellers. The situation is a bit different in the case of poetry books. They generally do not record large sales. In any case, although the number of sales does not exceed 400-500, we should mention Hovhannes Grigoryan's "From a New Line", Armen Sargsyan's "Instead of Unread Books" and, especially, Husik Ara's "And Love Said" collections of poems, which had a second edition. If we consider Nikol Pashinyan's novel "The Opposite Side of the Earth" in this category, we should acknowledge that it is the absolute leader in the Armenian market not only in this nomination, but also in general. To date, more than 8,000 copies of this book have been sold.



^
Third edition of
Aram Pachyan's
"Goodbye, Bird"

Perhaps, in this category we should also consider the books of Armenian authors composing in foreign languages, of which Mark Aren's "Where Wild Roses Bloom" and Narine Abgaryan's "Manyunya" novels have also had best-seller sales.

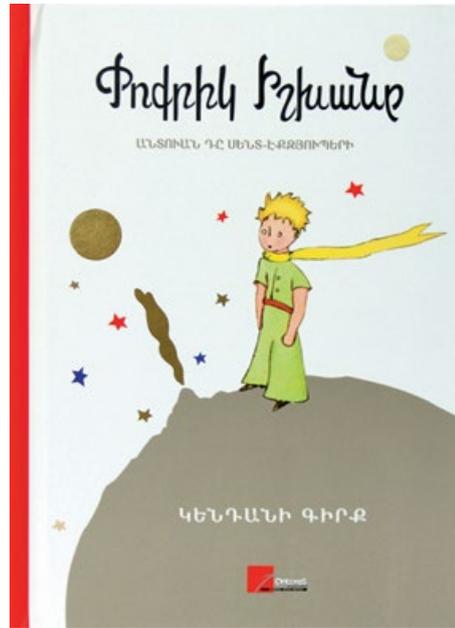
ARMENIAN CLASSICAL LITERATURE

There are many and varied editions of Armenian classics, and it is difficult to single out specific books. In any case, let us state that especially the publications of Hovhannes Tumanyan's works are leading in this nomination. The collections of Yeghishe Charents's and especially Paruyr Sevak's works are also bestsellers.

TRANSLATED LITERATURE

There has been a real boom in translated literature in Armenia during the recent years, which in turn contributes to the growth of book sales. Since there are so many books in this nomination, it is very difficult to trace the sales trend, but our surveys and calculations show that the leader among translated fiction books is Paulo Coelho's novel "The Alchemist".

Bestseller sales are recorded also by the Armenian translations of the following novels; George Orwell's "1984" and "Animal Farm", Francis Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby", Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451", Richard Bach's "Jonathan Livingston Seagull", Daniel Keyes's "Flowers for Algernon", Abba Prevo's "Manon Lesko", William Saroyan's "Dad, You're Crazy" and "Mom, I Love You", John Green's "The Stars Are to Blame", Hermann Hesse's "Steppe Wolf", Oscar Wild's "The Portrait of Dorian Gray", and Joanne Rowling's Harry Potter book series, etc.



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One of many
Armenian editions
of "The Little Prince"

THERE HAS BEEN A REAL **BOOM IN TRANSLATED LITERATURE IN ARMENIA DURING THE RECENT YEARS, WHICH IN TURN CONTRIBUTES TO THE GROWTH OF BOOK SALES**

NON-FICTION BOOKS

Especially within the last 2-3 years, books of this nature started to be more frequently translated into Armenian, and most importantly, many of them recorded big sales data. Leading in this category is perhaps Mark Manson's book "The Subtle art of Not Giving a F*ck", which sold thousands of copies in a short period of time.

In the last few months, Robin Sharma's book "The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari" has also recorded exceptional sales. William C. Rempel's "The Gambler", Spencer Johnson's "Who Moved My Cheese?", Og Mandino's "The Greatest Salesman in the World", Charles Aznavour's "Clinging to Life", Napoleon Hill's "Think and Get Rich" and others also achieved a bestseller status.

In conclusion, we'd like to emphasize again that the accuracy of the data provided is not unbiased and there may be some oversight, but in general, this is what the overall picture of bestsellers in Armenia looks like.

Book publication in Armenia is on its peak currently, and in the near future, we expect that these records will be surpassed, and new bestseller records will be set. ♦

SWEET BROMANCE OF LITERATURE AND CINEMA

Film critic Karen Avetisyan describes the complicated relations between literature and cinema - in the world and in Armenia, from literature-based "Namus" to Parajanov's "non-literary" approach to the narrative.

TEXT : KAREN AVETISYAN



Hitchcock once said, “A good film needs three key components: script, script and script.” It is said that the American Guilds, screenwriters and writers began to exploit these words while raising royalties, much like cinematographers in the Soviet Union who turned Lenin’s words about cinema into a banner as “the most powerful of arts.” Hitchcock’s words, at the same time, are very conventional as the script in cinema has at least as much to do with directing as it does with literature. However, the most important component – the dominance of visual storytelling, has often been overlooked in the history of cinema, where the screenplay has been seen as a link between cinema and literature, just the way the adaptation has often been seen as literature on the screen, and which often failed because these are two very different coordinate systems.



◀
Alexander
Shirvanzade

◀
Still from Sergei
Parajanov’s “Color
of Pomegranate”

▼
“We and Our
Mountains”

THE DOMINANCE OF VISUAL STORYTELLING, HAS OFTEN BEEN OVERLOOKED IN THE HISTORY OF CINEMA, WHERE THE SCREENPLAY HAS BEEN SEEN AS A LINK BETWEEN CINEMA AND LITERATURE



However, literature – as an elder brother – has always been a “watchable” cinema and, as it is typical of an elder brother, it has sometimes helped and sometimes hindered.

Back in 1908, Gabriel Sundukyan considered screening a musical comedy based on his own script. Sundukyan is the father of modern Armenian theater who aspired also to become the father of Armenian cinema when, in 1935, his play “Pepo” (directed by Hamo Beknazarov) became the first Armenian sound film.

Sundukyan’s penman colleague Alexander Shirvanzade was even more successful in that sense. His “Namus” was first screened in 1913, in the studio of the pioneer entrepreneur Alexander Khanzhonkov (by Georgian director Ivan Peristiani) and then, in 1925, in Armenia, by the one and only godfather of the Armenian Cinema, Hamo Beknazarov.

At the beginning of the last century, accurate screenings of authored works were of high value. The reason was that the directors and

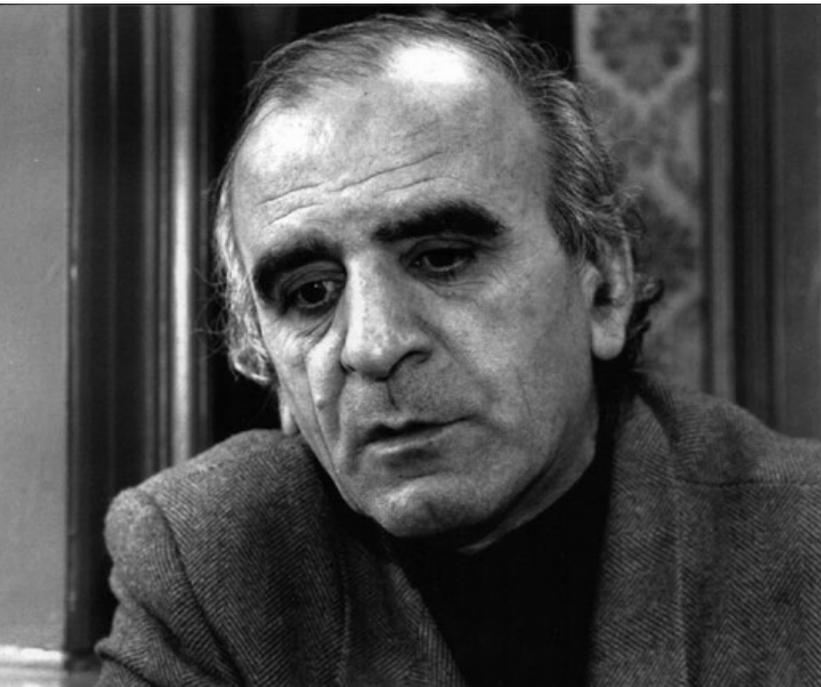
> Hamo Beknazarov
on the filming of
"Pepo"

the public had firm and unshakable respect for literary sources. Also, the cinema was a considerably young art then which was developing next to another art of much more respectable age – his majesty literature. The child often imitated the idol, appreciating and respecting his greatness and contribution. Then, the times of cinema's self-affirmation entered another stage.



THE 60S FINALLY ESTABLISHED CINEMATOGRAPHY AS
A SELF-SUFFICIENT AND **FULL-FLEDGED ART FORM** THAT
COULD BE USED BY ANY OTHER TYPE OF ART WITHOUT
"BENDING THE NECK"

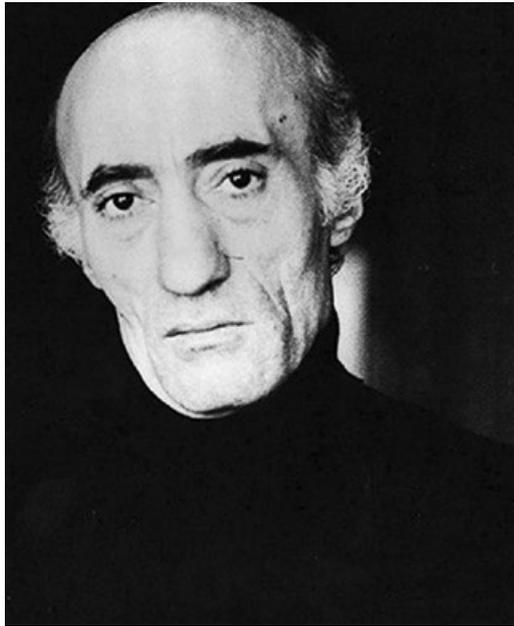
▼
Artavazd
Peleshyan



Some screenings of literary works were quite different from their literary basis. For example, the film "Madame Bovary" failed because of its title. Had it had a different title, it might have been considered a successful film, whereas it was perceived as the shadow of the same-titled novel. This general perception was also typical of Armenian cinema; literature was often perceived as a sacred source, which was not used and was, thus, left in the shadow.

The 60s became a period of significant changes both in the world and in Armenian cinema. A scientific guarantee to these changes can be the famous French literary theorist Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author" which argues against "what the author meant" focusing instead on "the reader's perception" as the highest priority.

In cinema likewise, the director, as a "reader of a dead writer," pursued only his own interpretation which could be more connected with the language of cinema than with the language of



>
Hrant Matevosyan

▼
Henrik Malyan



literature. The 60s finally established cinematography as a self-sufficient and full-fledged art form that could be used by any other type of art without “bending the neck.”

Frunze Dovlatyan’s “Hello, It’s Me!” (1966) became one of the best examples of that symbiosis: famous scientist Alikhanyan’s bio-notes, Arnold Aghababov’s cinematographic script and Frunze Dovlatyan’s self-sufficient film language were unified into a masterpiece. Another wonderful example is “We Are Our Mountains” (1969) where the author of the screenplay Hrant Matevosyan, being a novelist (probably the greatest Armenian prosaic of the XX century), creates a screenplay in which a clear cinematic tempo is reported. Matevosyan succeeds also in a more difficult case when he turns his own novel “Autumn Sun” (1977) into a movie script, extending his hand to the director rather than focusing on his own literary work.

But since the director has the last word in the author’s cinema, the stages that preceded him did not always guarantee the film’s final success. Thus, the dominance of visual storytelling continues to be fundamental. To put it bluntly and a little exaggerated – only two filmmakers have succeeded in embracing the legacy of world cinema – Sergey Parajanov and Artavazd Peleshyan, and if we try to put our finger on the similarity among many differences between these two artists, it will be their completely “non-literary” approach to the narrative.



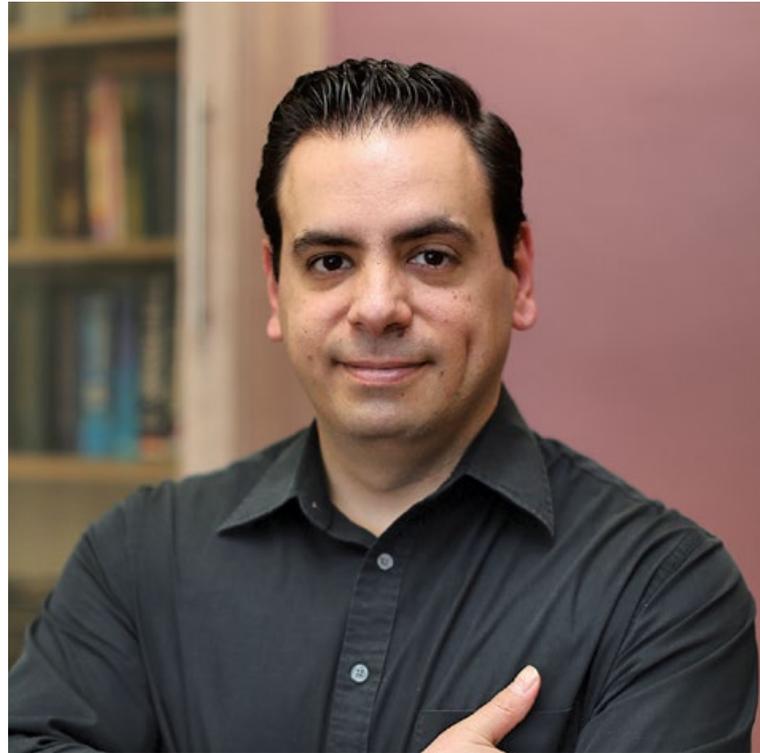
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Poster of Frunze
Dovlatyan’s “Hello
It’s Me”

Exaggerating in the same way and pressing the whole Soviet cinema into one name, we may come to Tarkovsky, who also did not repeat but fermented, and sometimes opposed literary sources trying to prove, and finally proved, that cinema is an independent art. The similar mission on world cinema was carried by Stanley Kubrick. Thus, returning to Hitchcock’s quote, we can conclude that “directing-directing-directing” or, as the inventors of cinema elegantly call it, the “mise en scène” still has no less, if not more, power in cinema. ♦

LITERARY TRANSLATION: ARMENIAN CONTEXT

Translation is the medium in which different cultures and contexts merge with one another, conveying new meanings and themes. A CSR and social entrepreneurship professional by day and a literary translator by night, Nazareth Seferian told the Regional Post about the peculiarities of translating Armenian literature and his personal views on the field.

INTERVIEW : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN



What does it mean to translate texts written in your native language?

— I'm not a professional literary translator. In fact, my background is in a completely different area, but this is something I greatly enjoy. I used to live in India and moved to Armenia when I was 18, which means that I learned Hindi but, growing up there, my whole schooling and social life was in English, so I consider the latter as my first language. I also consider Armenian as my native language as we kept practicing it at home in Delhi, but I hadn't read a single book in another language other than English before I moved to Armenia. Consequently, I translate pieces from one native language of mine to another.

How do you translate the language thinking that is specific to the Armenian language and context?

— I think, when it comes to translation into English, first of all, it's extremely important that the specialist is a native speaker. English is not as complex as Armenian, but it has some nuances

and details that should be taken into consideration, and literature has a lot of fine details.

I grew up with the language thinking of an English speaker, but as we spoke Western Armenian in our family, I have the language thinking of this side too. When I moved to Armenia, I also learned Eastern Armenian and developed my language thinking in this branch of Armenian as well. When you have an insight into how the native speaker thinks, both in Armenian and English, it makes it easier to overcome any translation difficulties. You understand the word the author has used, which implies a way of thinking that is common in Armenia, and try to find an English word or a phrase or an approach which, at least to a large extent, will be equivalent to that thinking. So, it's not only about translating literally, it's about transmitting the sense of how the person thinks from Armenian into English.

What are the difficulties when translating Armenian authors in particular?

— From a technical perspective, Armenian texts tend to have very long sentences compared to English. Even in literature, English authors prefer writing in short sentences. In some cases, I choose to leave it the way it is, but sometimes I break them down. The way we Armenians construct paragraphs with long sentences might be a huge turn-off, driving the English-speaking reader away from that text. The important part here is to understand what the author tries to convey and translate accordingly.

Which writers are harder to translate, the contemporary ones or the classics?

— I've mentioned the technical difficulties but we also have context and delivery-based issues. I think contemporary authors are harder to translate. I've had only one difficulty with the classics. For example, the author writes in Western Armenian and uses Turkish words; these words, in turn, no longer exist in contemporary Turkish, so understanding that word alone is already an issue.

And with contemporaries?

— Firstly, contemporary authors tend to be much more layered and complex in their thinking and delivery. When they say something, there are often several layers of meaning. Authors like Aram Pachyan, Armen Hayastantsi, they refer to events and ideas that sometimes make sense only to Armenians. The references they make in their sentences and language are hard to translate in a way that would make sense in English as well, especially if the reader has no idea or knowledge about the relevant context, history, and culture. The other difficulty is that contemporary writers tend to mix Russian words with the Armenian. I know Russian, I learned it when I first came to Armenia, but the difficulty is conveying the purpose behind these words into English. I say this, because the author intentionally chose to make a character use more Russian words – that tells the reader of the original text something about that character, as opposed to one that uses pure Armenian. Conveying this “hidden message” is a bigger challenge than simply translating the Russian words into English. Quite interestingly, modern authors do this more often than the ones who wrote during the Soviet period. The modern Armenian authors I’ve translated so far have all been very inwardly focused, they have all been Armenia-centered. The themes of their books are sometimes broader, but the context is very deeply Armenian. In contrast, the Eastern European and South American authors, whose works are familiar to the Armenian reader through their Russian or English versions, feature themes and messages that are very universal, even if the contexts are within their own countries. Being Armenia-focused means that many foreign readers will not relate to our literature the same way that they have to the Eastern European or South American authors that are addressing universal themes with only a light focus on their own context. But there are also benefits to the inward focus of our authors. Anyone

reading these books in English might get interested in and attracted by Armenia and want to learn more about it. The message will be an invitation to explore the Armenian context, but in order to get to it and understand it better, one will have to dig deeper. Of course, none of these authors had intended to target a global audience when they were writing in Armenian. Perhaps the main target for an English translation in such cases will consist of Armenians that don’t speak their native language, and that’s fine as well.

How did you begin translating?

THE FIELD OF TRANSLATING ARMENIAN LITERATURE TO OTHER LANGUAGES IS VERY SMALL, AND **ALTHOUGH QUALITY-WISE IT IS GOOD,** THERE’S A QUANTITY ISSUE

— When I moved to Armenia in 1998, I was a student and a couple of years later, I had the opportunity of earning extra money by translating some reports. In 2001, I made my first steps in translation, and this continued as a side job for 10 years. So, I already had this experience under my belt and a certain expertise in translation when, in 2011, Arevik Ashkharoyan approached me and asked me to translate Gurgun Khanjyan’s novel *Yenok’s Eye*. It was an interesting challenge for me because I had done a lot of translation but I had never tried literature.

What do you think about translation in Armenia?

— I’m very happy to see the large amount of foreign literature being translated into Armenian, both modern classics and brand-new writers. The quality in most cases is quite good. We’ve already had access to these books in their Russian translations but, unfortunately, the new generation is feeling less and less comfortable reading in Russian. The field of translating Armenian literature to other languages is very

small, and although quality-wise it is good, and the translators I know are very good, too, there’s a quantity issue. If you want to do a substantial amount of translations, it will definitely take time.

And what about literature? Do you track new books, new authors here in Armenia?

— I’m very happy to see how literature is developing in Armenia right now. I think there are very good Armenian authors out there, I’ve already mentioned some of them. The sphere is getting better and I think that the emphasis on the Armenian context is understandable

for the time being. But we already need authors exploring newer genres, such as fantasy, or other areas that are more universal and suited for a wider audience. I’m not a literary critic and I don’t want to judge literature in any way; these are just my views as a reader. I think this area of work requires a lot of patience, and we have great agents working in this area like Arevik Ashkharoyan, who has put in a lot of work to promote Armenian literature abroad. This is not something you do overnight. I believe that in the near future, there will be a breakthrough book that will become popular and will bring more attention towards Armenian authors.

And if one day you decide to take up writing a book, what language would it be?

— I’m very comfortable with Armenian, but I feel like there are many other authors who could do a better job than me in this language. I have this Armenian background, the history and my different life experience, but my ability to express my ideas in English is still on a much higher level. ♦

TOP ARMENIAN WRITERS ABROAD

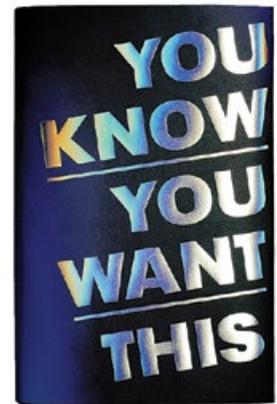
When talking about Armenian writers on a global scale, Armenians usually mention William Saroqan and Sergey Dovlatov. But that's past. And who are the most successful authors with Armenian descent today?

TEXT : ARTAVAZD YEGHIAZARYAN



Kristen Roupenian

Country: USA



Roupenian is probably the hottest writer of Armenian descent right now, though her bibliography includes only one collection of short stories, “You know you want this,” published in 2019. But to Roupenian, who was born in 1982 and grew up in Boston, world fame came in 2017, when her debut story, “Cat Person,” was published in *The New Yorker*. A first-person story about toxic relations between a girl and her boyfriend, it became a sensation. Particularly it happened due to the social networks, where it went viral. Twitter users shared it virally – parallely discussing their own dating experiences.

Not so long after Roupenian secured a seven-figure deal with Scout Press publishing for her book, which was re-named “You know you want this.” Then, even before the book was published, HBO bought the development rights for the collection to create an anthology drama series, and one of the leaders of the independent movie market, A24, acquired the rights for Roupenian’s horror screenplay “Bodies, Bodies, Bodies.”

Sunday Times describes Roupenian’s style as “a new literary genre” where “Supernatural horror meets bedroom politics.” In two years, the book had over 55 editions both in English and translated.



Narine Abgaryan

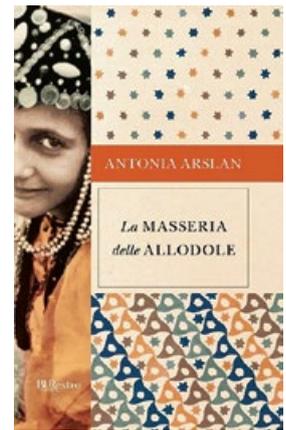
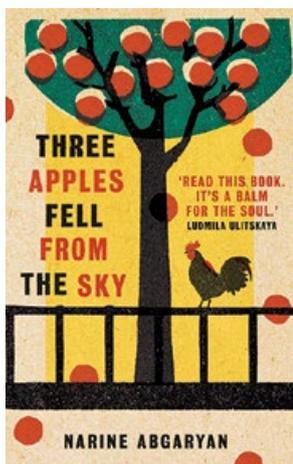
Country: Russia

Unlike many in this list, Narine Abgaryan was born in Armenia, in 1971, and only in her 20's moved to Moscow. Her speaking language was Russian, so it didn't take her long to start writing in Russian. Her first stories were published in her blog in LiveJournal, where they gained huge popularity. In 2010, many of the stories were included in a collection of short stories, "Manyunya," which is mainly an autobiographical book that tells the stories of the author's childhood in the small city of Berd in Armenia. With this book, she became a laureate of the Russian National Literary Prize "Manuscript of the Year" in the nomination "Language" and entered the long list of nominees for the 2011 Big Book Award.

The debut book brought Abgaryan and her characters huge popularity. She later published other books about Manyunya, then another book about her experience as an immigrant in Moscow in the 90's, "Ponayekhavshaya," as well as other novels – "Three Apples Fell from the Sky" and "Zulali" – which are mainly about the people of Berd.

Right now, Abgaryan is one of the most influential Russian writers. Her books are constantly being translated

to other languages, including Armenian, while the latest one – "Three Apples Fell from the Sky," has been published in English this year. The secret of her success is her unique style. Sparkling with sumptuous imagery and warm humor, Abgaryan's works are usually vibrant tales of resilience and bravery, and the miracle of everyday friendship.



Antonia Arslan

Country: Italy

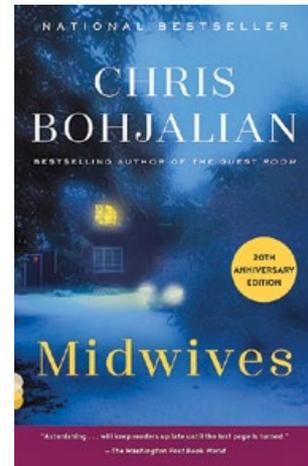
Born in 1938 to the father of Armenian descent (her grandfather, Yerwant Arslanian was born in 1865 in Kharpert in

Western Armenia), Antonia Arslan became a professor of modern and contemporary Italian literature at the University of Padua and published copious studies, inter alia, on Italian popular fiction and Italian women writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Her primary concern as a literary critic is the Italian literary canon.

She turned to fiction only in the 2000's, in her 60's, and from the beginning started to explore her Armenian heritage. Her first novel, "La masseria delle allodole," ("The Lark Farm") was published in 2004. Drawing on the history of her own recent ancestors, it tells of the attempts of the members of an Armenian family caught up in the Armenian Genocide to escape to Italy and join a relation who had been living there for forty years. The novel got several literary awards in Italy, was translated into numerous languages (including English and Armenian) and inspired the Taviani brothers' 2007 film of the same name.

Her second novel, "La Strada di Smirne" ("On the way to Smyrna") was published in 2009 by Rizzoli, and again explores themes of the fate of Armenians. Her latest novel "Il libro di Mush" ("The Book of Mush") is again based on Armenian history, exploring the story of an Armenian manuscript, the biggest one survived to our days. During the Armenian Genocide it was miraculously saved by two Armenian women who divided it into two parts and brought to Eastern Armenia. Arslan is much praised in Armenia. She has received the Narekatsi Medal (2010) and the Movses Khorenatsi Medal (2012) for her cultural contributions. >





Chris Bohjalian

Country: USA

New York Times bestselling author of 21 books, Bohjalian graduated from Amherst College Summa Cum Laude. He later moved to Vermont, where he began writing weekly columns for the local newspaper and magazine about living in the small town. The column ran in the Burlington Free Press from 1992 through 2015 and won a Best Lifestyle Column from the Vermont Press Association. Bohjalian has also written for such magazines as Cosmopolitan, Reader's Digest, The New York Times, and the Boston Globe Sunday Magazine.

Bohjalian's first novel, "A Killing in the Real World", was released in 1988. His third novel, "Past the Bleachers", was released in 1992 and was adapted to a Hallmark Channel television movie in 1995. Groundbreaking for his career was 1997's "Midwives". The novel focuses on the rural Vermont midwife Sibyl Danforth, who becomes embroiled in a legal battle after one of her patients dies following an emergency Caesarean section. The novel was critically acclaimed and was selected by Oprah Winfrey as the October 1998 selection of her Oprah's Book Club. It became a #1 New York Times and #1 USA Today bestseller. In 2001, the novel was adapted into a Lifetime Movie Network television film starring Sissy Spacek in the lead role.

As many writers of Armenian descent, Bohjalian too, explored the topic in his works. "The Sandcastle Girls" (2012) is about the Armenian Geno-

cide and its century-long denial by Turkey. The novel includes two stories folded into one: the story of Elizabeth Endicott and Armen Petrosian, lovers who meet in Syria during the genocide, and the story of Laura Petrosian, their granddaughter, who, after a century, tries to understand why they have been silent about their youth. Soon she realizes that her suburban existence is quite different from the violent setting in which her grandparents have met and fallen in love. USA Today proclaimed that Bohjalian makes "a near-century-old event come to life in a way that will make readers gasp with shock that such a terrible event – Turkey's determination to kill all the Armenians in their country – is such a small part of our knowledge of world history." Oprah Winfrey chose it as a Book of the Week: "This rendering of one of history's greatest (and least known) tragedies is a nuanced, sophisticated portrayal of what it means not only to endure but also to insist on hope." Bohjalian's 2018 novel, "The Flight Attendant," debuted as a New York Times, USA Today, Wall Street Journal, Publishers Weekly, and National Indiebound Bestseller. It is currently being filmed for an 8-hour HBO Max limited series, starring Kaley Cuoco (who is also an Executive Producer), Rosie Perez, Michiel Huisman ("Game of Thrones" and "The Haunting of Hill House"), Zosia Mamet ("Girls"), and T.R. Knight ("Grey's Anatomy"). It is expected to start streaming in late 2020.

Peter Balakian

Country: USA

Poet, writer and academic, Balakian was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2016.

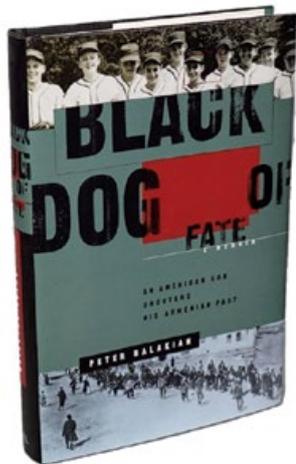
Peter Balakian is the author of seven books of poems. Although he is also known for his academic work and prose, it was poetry that brought him the Pulitzer Prize.

"Ozone Journal" is a 55-section poem set mostly in Manhattan in the 1980s when a young man is going through a crisis in his personal life and encountering his cousin who's dying of AIDS. This set of events is reflected on by the persona's older self in 2009 when he's in Syria excavating the remains of his ancestors who were murdered during the Armenian genocide.

Armenian Genocide is often in the center of Balakian's works. In 2004, he published "Burning Tigris," where, using rarely seen archival documents and remarkable first-person accounts, Balakian presented the chilling history of how the Turkish government implemented the first modern genocide behind the cover of World War I and how America reacted to the events. Few years later, his memoir "Black Dog of Fate" was widely praised. The book charts Balakian's growth and personal awakening to the facts of his family's history and the horrifying aftermath of the Turkish government's continued campaign to cover up one of the worst crimes ever committed against humanity.

In 2009, Balakian translated from Armenian the memoirs of his ancestor, priest Grigoris Balakian, who was arrested along with some 250 other intellectuals and leaders of Constantinople's Armenian community on April 24 of 1915 and witnessed massacres.

Translations and editions of Balakian's work appear in Armenian, Greek, German, Dutch, Bulgarian, Turkish, Russian.



Mariam Petrosyan

Country: Russia/Armenia

Great-granddaughter of painter Martiros Saryan, Mariam Petrosyan is not a typical participant of this list. Firstly, she mainly lives and works in Armenia. But on the other hand, like Narine Abgaryan, she is Russian-speaker and her literature was published in Russian and is considered as part of the modern Russian literature. And besides, Petrosyan is not very active, at least not published often. Her main heritage is a debut novel "Gray House."



This over 700-page novel tells a story of a boarding school for disabled children, situated in a mysterious Gray House. As told in the book's Goodreads page, "Bound to wheelchairs and dependent on prosthetic limbs, the physically disabled students living in the House are overlooked by the Outsides. Not that it matters to anyone living in the House – a hulking old structure, that its residents know it's alive. From the corridors and crawl spaces to the classrooms and dorms, the House is full of tribes, tinctures,

scared teachers, and laws – all seen and understood through a prismatic array of teenagers' eyes." A book that was being written by Petrosyan for years just for herself, became an instant sensation and bestseller. It was nominated for the Russian Booker Prize in 2010 and received several awards and nominations, among them the 2009 Russian Prize for the best book in Russian by an author living abroad. It was translated to 9 languages (including English, but not Armenian), and in 2013, excerpts from the book were narrated by Stephen Fry in the film Russia's Open Book: Writing in the Age of Putin.

The only other book by the author to date is a short fairy tale, "The Dog Who Could Fly," published in Russian in 2014, with illustrations by painter and animator Naira Muradyan. ♦



READING TIME

SELECTED WORKS
BY MODERN ARMENIAN AUTHORS

HRACHYA SARIBEKYAN

ARPI VOSKANYAN

GRIG

SYUNE SEVADA

ARAM PACHYAN

HOVHANNES YERANYAN

PROVIDED BY ANTARES PUBLISHING AND EDGE PUBLISHING HOUSE
PHOTOS BY UMAR TIMOL, GERMAN AVAGYAN, HAMLET VARDANYAN, MARAM AVA

THE PERPETUAL MOTION MACHINE

HRACHYA SARIBEKYAN

TO ARAM PACHYAN, WHO WROTE THE STORY JOURNEY BY BICYCLE

TRANSLATED BY NAZARETH SEFERIAN

Perpetual motion machine (perpetuum mobile): An imaginary device that can function without any loss of energy. Its existence contradicts the first law of thermodynamics. According to the law of energy conservation, any attempts to create a perpetual motion machine are doomed to failure.

I was spinning the pedals, but my bicycle was not moving an inch. I was pedaling harder and harder. As powerfully as my feet allowed. I was sweating, my legs grew tired, but my bicycle stayed in place. The front wheel was not moving. The harder I pedaled, the brighter a lamp hanging from the ceiling burned. My father, who was a successful inventor of household devices, had found a thick volume on perpetual motion machines among the books in my mother's library, and he had been reading it the whole day. He was thinking of creating an engine that would supply itself with energy and thus function interminably. My mother, who was a physics teacher, snickered and shook her head, telling my father that this was all theory, that it was very unlikely for a perpetual motion machine to exist, simply because energy loss was a fact. My grandfather objected to my mother's words.

"It's possible," he would say. He would tell them about the clock that stood at the square in Prague, running since time immemorial without any human intervention, displaying the correct time without the need for winding. Nobody had yet learned the secret of the perpetual motion machine



inside the clock. He would say that the huge face of the clock had large windows on top – as big as the door of our house – and that both the windows would open once an hour and the twelve apostles would roll out, look out into the square and then go back. An evil skeleton would come out and ring the bell it held in its hand, a rooster would crow, and the windows would close behind them. My grandfather had been to Prague. My father believed him. The clock in Prague filled my father with hope that a perpetual motion machine was possible after all.

It was raining in Prague, people held on to black umbrellas. Human figures stood immobile behind the windows of bleak buildings. I raced along Prague's paved streets on my bicycle. People would raise their eyes from under their umbrellas in surprise for a moment, looking at me with wonder as I drenched myself without an umbrella or a hat under the thin drizzle in Prague. I finally reached the square.

My father called. On the square in Prague, standing near the tower, I was looking at the wonderful clock, the skeleton came out and rang the bell... The room was buried in darkness. >

“Poor thing,” my mother said, “Drenched in sweat.”

“Enough,” my mother said, “We can light a candle instead.”

It is only now that I understand how they never allowed me to stop. They’ve always woken me up – my mother in the morning, my teacher during the day, my father in the evening – they’ve woken me up and ended my dream, they awoken me as I dreamed, the alarm clocks, phones, doorbells, school bells, car horns, my father’s voice as he demanded that I keep pedaling. I kept pedaling. My mother continued doing the laundry, rubbing our clothes in the tub, my father continued drawing his plans for the perpetual motion machine, my sister hung upside down from the couch so that the blood would rush to her head, and she was reading a book. My mother would stop doing the laundry from time to time, tiredly wiping off the sweat and sighing. My father would use the moments when she sighed and say that it was more pointless to use a bicycle and try to catch up with a bus. I had been trying to overtake a bus in my bicycle for a whole day, but I had not yet succeeded even once. My mother was quiet and went back to her laundry. One evening, the chain in my bicycle slipped off and the house was plunged into darkness. My father put the chain back on only several days later and when the lamp on the ceiling once again burned brightly and gave off light, I noticed that my father’s eyes were wet. The Prague rain poured through his eyes.

“Why did your mother leave you, hm?” he cried quietly, “Where did she go, hm? Where?”

My father then connected my bicycle to the device he had made, and the device to the washing machine. I pedaled and the washing machine worked, and every time I recalled that my mother was no longer with us, I pedaled harder, panting, short of breath, but without dropping the pace. I had a dream once. My mother was in Prague and she got onto a tram. I tried to catch up with her on my bicycle, and I pedaled and pedaled to reach the tram, the tram’s bell rang out and I woke up in our room. I realized that I had been pedaled my stationary bicycle and understood that the tram had been a dream within my dream. When I woke up in the morning, my legs still felt tired. Forty days after my mother had gone without a trace, my grandfather announced that my father would be bringing home a new wife; my father had understood that my mother would not be coming back. That evening, I found a back wheel for my bicycle and, as soon as my father had fallen asleep, I took the bicycle out of our home. My sister sat backwards on the rear seat, her back to me and her eyes to the road growing longer behind her, our house growing more distant. Finally, I had overcome the immobility of my bicycle and had moved it from its place. The house remained buried in darkness, my father sleeping alone. My sister had taken her piggy bank with her, her modest savings inside. She regretted it but allowed me to break open the hollow cat – we needed to rent a place. I would

unload cargo at the railway station. One evening, our doorbell rang. It was our grandfather. I saw him wearing a tie for the first time, and the thought crossed my mind that it could be a Czech tie. He entered. He looked at the bleak walls of the place we were renting and felt sincere sorrow, or so I thought, while my sister felt that he had faked that sadness. He said that our father’s wife had had a child. He said that the wife would go to work and our father would take care of the child at home. He then said that my father had added an engine to the baby’s crib so that he would not need to rock it manually and could get to reading his book; the perpetual motion machine was still on his mind. And it would probably always be there. Our grandfather took down our phone number, folded the paper, put it in his breast pocket and disappeared. One day, the phone rang. I picked it up. It wasn’t our grandfather. Our grandfather never called us. It was my father’s wife. She was panicking, asking us to come over to their place. My sister cried. She hadn’t seen her father for six years. When they opened the door to us, a tall and large woman stood before us. My father would probably only reach her waist, or perhaps I felt this way because he had dimished in my memory of him. The woman cried and I noticed her miserable child next to her who was seeing me for the first time, watching me carefully, as if he had seen my father’s features repeat themselves on my face.

“You know, don’t you,” my father’s wife said, “That your father has not spoken to me yet?”

“He did not talk to use either,” I replied.

I was unable to spot my father there.

“Where is he?” I asked my father’s wife.

“Your father?” she asked.

“Yes,” my sister responded.

“He’s taken a rope and gone to the cemetery to hang himself.”

My father’s youngest child embraced his mother.

“Why?” my sister asked.

My father’s wife shrugged her shoulders and offered her guilty look in my direction, she must have felt that my sister did not know how to forgive.

“Has something like this happened before?” I asked my father’s wife.

“No,” she said, “But your father is like a two-year old cranky child. He once took offense before we fell asleep at night, and I looked for him in the morning only to find him curled up in the crib.”

It was past midnight. We set off for the cemetery to find out father. The cemetery was not far from home.

“I know,” my sister said, “Where my father must have gone.”

We went to my mother’s grave. All four of us were quiet.

“He won’t do it,” my father’s wife said, “I’ve gotten to know him well. He won’t do it. Extracting a tooth is nothing, right? He tied one end of a string to the tooth, the other end

to the doorknob, but then he told me to close the door. He didn't dare do it himself."

"You only commit suicide once," my sister noted.

"There isn't a decent tree here that would take a rope," my father's wife said, "What would he use to hang himself?"

We arrived at my mother's grave, but my father was not there. I looked at the portrait of my mother. She was unaware of all this. My father had not been there. My father's wife sat down at my mother's gravestone and lamented her fate. She complained about my father. She asked for my mother's forgiveness for having slapped my father. I could not understand whether she knew that my mother had been a forgiving woman, or whether she just assumed that the deceased are quick to forgive. She asked for forgiveness because we did not live with them. My sister cried too. The six-year old little boy's eyes filled with tears. He had not seen my mother. It seemed strange that I had never known him, it felt like he had always been my little brother and that my mother had concealed his existence from me. That my father's wife had nothing to do with his existence. I understood from their tears that they were going to bide their time at my mother's graveside. I left them at my mother's gravestone and went alone to look for my father in the cemetery. I had begun to take the situation so seriously that I had grown scared of looking at the other gravestones for fear of suddenly spotting my father's photograph on one of them. I don't remember how far I had gone when I suddenly noticed a shadow in front of me that was not mine. I turned around in fear. It was the little one, he had been following me. When we were alone in the darkness of the cemetery, I noticed for the first time that he resembled my father. He was looking around carefully at the gravestones. Perhaps he was trying to understand why there were the faces of people etched into the stones, and who they had been. I was afraid that perhaps this might make him grow wary of strangers. I felt for a moment that I had lost him. Then I turned around and saw him bending over an open sewer and looking at his own reflection in the water. I grabbed his arm and continued to look for my father. My father was nowhere to be seen. We walked up to the highest point in the cemetery. We looked downward and saw our house, buried in darkness. There was a dull silence in the cemetery. The gravestones were silent. We turned back. I tried to remember anything that my father may have said to me, but I was unable to hear his voice in my mind. We walked all over the cemetery. I thought for a moment that my father was really short, probably up to my waist, and that he was hiding behind the gravestones, slipping from behind one to the other. We walked past the same sewer again. My brother once again hung his head above the sewer water and was surprised – perhaps he felt that his reflection had remained in the sewer's underground waters even after he had left. We turned back toward my mother's graveyard. The darkness behind the burning end of a cigarette was hiding someone.

It was not my father's wife. It was my sister. I was seeing her smoke for the first time.

We returned home. My father's wife tried to pull open the door, but it did not seem to relent. She pulled harder. The door opened. An unusual sound came from inside the house. I noticed a rope tied to the inside knob of the door. Afraid, I walked in carefully. My father's wife turned on the light in the corridor after I had entered. Entering the house after me, my sister and father's wife screamed. My father had tied one end of the rope to the inner knob of the house door, and the other end to the leg of a chair. When she had opened the door, the woman had pulled the chair out from under my father, who had been standing there with a noose around his neck. Who knew how long he had been standing that way, waiting for someone to open the door. The corpse was swinging. The pendulum on the wall clock swung to and fro, the cuckoo coming out of its nest at a very awkward moment to call out four artificial times –

Cuc-koo!

Cuc-koo!

Cuc-koo!

Cuc-koo!

Even now, I cannot shake the feeling that I saw my six-year old brother's hair turn white at that moment.

At the funeral, my grandfather shared with me the secret that he was the one to blame for my father's death. He was to blame for installing the door of the house such that it would open outward. As the coffin was lowered with ropes into the pit, my sister turned and slapped my father's wife. The coffin clunked dully at the bottom of the pit. My father's wife put her things into some suitcases and left the house. I watched as the woman walked away with her suitcases and my brother trailed beside her. Who was that strange woman, where had she found my little brother, how had she found us and why was she taken my little brother with her? My sister and I returned to our house. Before going to bed, I hug a picture of my thoughtful father on the wall and broke the motor of the clock so that the cuckoo would no longer come out and we would not hear it make a sound. The cuckoo no longer emerged but continued to call out from inside the clock. That first night, I got up in my dream and my bicycle was still in the room. It was shining and I caressed its handles, spinning the wheels with my hands, before suddenly noticing that my father was still hanging from the ceiling. He was pale. I sat down on the bicycle and started to pedal. The color of my father's face grew healthier. I began to pedal harder and I felt like my father smiled slightly. I pedaled even harder. I recognized his smile and added more pace to the pedals. He blinked his eyes. I pedaled as hard as I could. He winked. Then he smirked at my little mischief. I was pedaling as hard as I could, I was sweating, panting, but pedaling harder and harder. My father did not think of freeing himself from the noose. My legs were growing tired, my strength was slowly abandoning me... ♦

VICIOUS BONDS

ARPI VOSKANYAN

TRANSLATED BY LIANA SHIROYAN

EDITED BY LAURIE ALVANDIAN



The house he rented resembled a train carriage. The reason, probably, was the bunk bed, over which we had many battles over the lower bunk. Sometimes he ceded the lower bunk and sometimes he didn't, and I had to climb up to the top one. And sometimes we fit together on the lower bunk, but every time he reminded me that the bed was too narrow for two to sleep.

The words every time, sometimes, and often may give the wrong impression about the frequency and periodicity of our meetings. Maybe they just express a secret desire, like the demand exceeding the offer, or perhaps the opposite, the offer was more than the demand. We had only met a few times, but it was still a lot, especially taking into account how precious these meetings were. Something was always happening either before the meeting or after it. It happened that something was happening during the meeting, even though we only found out about it afterwards. It may seem that there was nothing strange, moreover extraordinary about it, since something always happened, but all the happenings were because of our meetings. I can't say for sure what made me think like that but I can insist with confidence that it was like that. And if that was not the case, we would probably never meet. If it hadn't have happened at least once, we wouldn't have met the second time. But something always happened, and that something inspired hope of it becoming the leitmotif of the meeting and the topic of conversation, only it turned out to be inca-

pable of supporting us because we never turned what happened into the subject of our discussion.

The hardest was to communicate with each other. You can't say that we didn't have common interests. All our interests, in fact, were common. Our friends were also. We were doing the same kinds of things, and finally we lived in the same city. I'm not even going to speak about the country. It was not difficult to find a topic for conversation, but it was difficult to talk it over. We were carefully and scrupulously choosing every single word, pronunciation, tone, duration of preceding or following breaks, accompanying gestures, complimentary mimics. We didn't know whether to speak in literary or informal language. We were constantly trying to be unconstrained and natural, but the literary language was more appropriate to our steady protected distance and we behaved courteously toward each other, like distant acquaintances gathered around a glass of beer, and it was difficult to believe that something could be going on between us. But suddenly, an informal word was inserted into our high-brow conversation and we shamefully tilted our heads.

We were getting tired very quickly, even before starting the conversation. Sentences, which were formed with quite difficulty and were on their way out of our mouths, suddenly seemed unimportant, unnecessary and meaningless. We kept silent, giving our visual and auditory attention to the TV, which couldn't cover up the silence and

only made it more bare and explicit. It was not the kind of silence that was more expressive than words, because it is comprised of words that were too precious to utter. It was the kind of silence that was totally comprised of the absence of words and a vivid demonstration of the fact that we couldn't speak.

We couldn't manage to create a relaxed and intimate atmosphere, and we behaved either reservedly or unnaturally free, which is the same. And when the silence became too unbearable, and even more unbearable the necessity to speak and inability to do so, we turned off the light, got undressed and laid on the lower bunk. Frankly speaking, he didn't take off his t-shirt, but since he never took it off and it was on him all year long and became an indispensable part of his body, one could say we were as naked Adam and Eve before transgression. What was happening was what was inevitable when the desires of people differ by one hundred and eighty degrees; if one of us wanted something, the other didn't want it, and if one of us didn't want anything, the other would definitely want something, and as a result one of us would appear on the upper bunk where we had unlimited possibilities to watch the other from the perspective of God.

That perspective was probably the reason why on the upper bunk you could reflect and contemplate, which inevitably gave birth to winged ideas. It is possible that the winged ideas were just going for a walk out of their collections, which were abundantly set on bookshelves, because he was a big fan of aphorisms. He used to read them before going to bed instead of drinking yogurt, and after waking up instead of a cup of coffee, and before going to the bathroom, as well as in the bathroom. Some aphorisms helped him to relieve himself, just like cigarettes do. He used to read aphorisms while having dinner, breakfast and especially before lunch; the aphorisms, as he used to say, helped the secretion of gastric juice and the regulation of acid-base balance. Before turning off the light, he also, as one may guess, took a few minutes to read aphorisms, advising me to join him. He used some of the aphorisms for prophylactic-preventive purposes, and some aphorisms had therapeutic significance. He had aphorisms against headaches, the flu, gastritis, heartburn, hemorrhoids, nephritis, cystitis, meningitis, hepatitis, diabetes, atherosclerosis, hypertension, and heart failure. There were aphorisms that were able to cure infertility and sexual impotence. He abundantly used the aphorisms of the Great and his own, considering them absolutely harmless for health and not worrying about their side effects. Whereas because of the abuse of aphorisms one could observe the symptoms of the above mentioned ailments as well as many other diseases against which he hoped to fight with them.

I don't know why the aphorisms preferred the upper bunk, maybe they wanted to demonstrate the strength of their wings and, as a result of constant fluttering, they

appeared under the ceiling. The most effective way to combat them in an organized manner was recording them, which could bring some moral benefit in the morning, either in the form of gratitude or, why not, love, but it was necessary to use a piece of paper and a pencil, and that was impossible without coming down from one's own heights, which could have caused doubts and could have given room for arrogance to the one who was on the lower bunk. And that would be the most desirable for him and would provide growth of his own cost. Undoubtedly, to prevent the increase in market prices a person preferred to sleep under the noise of the wings rustling. Nevertheless, the winged thoughts were soaring, flying and jumping around you, walking on you, pulling an extruding pump into your capillaries with such a vigor that one had to land from his own heights to turn on the lights and kill them with the first book at hand, and that, of course, would be the book of aphorisms.

Here, our key ideological clash began, since he had only two loves in his life – aphorisms and insects. Or insects and aphorisms, since it's hard to say which one was primary for him. He treated both the winged thoughts and winged or wingless insects with the same warm affection, though if he tried to use the love towards the aphorisms for the benefit of his own health, the affection towards the insects was absolutely unselfish, conditioned by aesthetic perceptions. He didn't believe much in insect-related superstitions; one could say he didn't believe in them at all. For him, the spider was dear and precious not because he could bring wealth, although, during our quarrels he would mention that important ability, which others do not possess, and I reserved the right to raise a hand, or a book, which is doubly mean, against a poor insect. He threatened to hit my head with the book of aphorisms if I didn't put it down. Then he proved that the blonde, shaggy spider, the green mosquito, and especially the black cockroach, which enjoyed his special love, were more beautiful than me, and that the multiped living in the shower had more of a right to run from one corner of the tub to another than for me to bathe there. And if it kindly does not complain about the anxiety I cause, what moral right do I have to demand expelling it from its legal apartment, or, even more inhuman, causing it violent death? He considered himself the defender of insects' rights and their good friend. He treated the title that he had given to himself with a limited responsibility. He didn't consider it a matter of his own life, since it would be necessary to limit his irresponsibility, and that could spoil or diminish the pleasure that the insects were granting him. He lovingly fed, cared for, and protected insects, devoting his free time to studying their lifestyle and improving their quality of life. Most of all, he liked watching the insects' crossbreeding, finding enjoyment and satisfaction in it. I even have vague doubts that somewhere in the basis of his unselfish love towards

insects very vicious inclinations are hidden; it is possible that the reason for his affection for them was the possibility of watching their cross-breeding without being punished, or possibly something even more terrible.

It is quite possible that I also had affections which seemed strange, bizarre and disgusting to him, but unfortunately only he can speak to that. So, my story cannot avoid unilateralism and bias. Nevertheless, I will try to be impartial; as I have already said, the hardest thing for us was to fill the time of our meetings with something. We used every opportunity so as not to leave it unoccupied, and every second that we wasted in silence or speaking, sleeping or awake, together on the lower bunk or apart on different bunks, was precious for us because it brought us closer to the end of the meeting. Thus, in seconds, we became more tolerant, pleasant and even friendly, and by the time of separation we began to love each other for the happiness we were about to give the other.

After each meeting, we separated feeling relieved and happy, assured that, if not for forever, we at least wouldn't be seeing each other for some time. Not to prolong the expectation of happiness, we parted without sentiments, with short regards at the door, and if one of us was about to take the elevator, the other chose to use the stairs, and vice versa. I have no idea why we kept on meeting. From time to time I thought that our vicious bonds were one-sided and that if it were up to him to decide, he would not hesitate to stop them. At that time, I thought about the endurance, courage and heroism of my own thoughts and made a decision to release us of those meaningless and unbearable bonds, but exactly at that moment the bonds from the symbolic, indefinable word turned into a vicious reality, not only undeniable but also unbreakable.

We came to a point where he started claiming shareholders rights, eliminating the monopoly he had on our relations, announcing that he also was bound and concerned over the quality of our bonds, just as I was, or maybe even more so. I was thinking, it's worth mentioning, very logically, that if the final judgments are strengthening the bonds, the monotonous indecisiveness and neglect should weaken, ruin and finally unnoticeably and painlessly cut those bonds off. It was not yet possible, however, to create a more monotonous and neglectful bond, or a more stable and justifiable one.

Judging from the momentum he adopted, it could have lasted till death, or perhaps even longer.

We were hiding our vicious relations from our neighbors and relatives, from the tax service, law enforcement bodies, mass media, government and opposition, one may even say from the homeland and emigrants, from others eyes in general and even from our own. At first sight this cautiousness may seem absurd, since we were not violating any native moral boundaries or laws; moreover, we

were so far from those boundaries that they could not even be seen in the distant horizon. Consequently one couldn't talk about any boundary violations, which was one of the reasons for our vicious bonds, but not the only one. We, in general, had many reasons to be engaged in shady activities, or at least attempt to spread a little shadow over widespread transparency. But our bonds were vicious mainly because they were principally epistolary.

After each meeting, there was a new impetus to our correspondence, which, if published could have been added to the best examples of renown love letters. We used to write long, extensive and insightful letters imbued with great feelings and subtle language. The most surprising thing was the fact that we were able to express so many things to each other. I can't explain the really unexplainable phenomenon of how our communication in person was so unbearable, but our letters were so subtle, sincere and frank. Perhaps the reason behind it was that we were scrupulously working on them, editing and proofreading them, bringing the letters up to a stylistic and linguistic commonality, not leaving room for a single unnecessary word, whether colloquial or literary. Maybe writing letters gave us the opportunity to hide something that needed to be hidden, something that appeared in all its unprotected nudity like an open, wet wound when we sat in front of each other. I don't know what that something was, or if there really was such a thing or if it was just my obsession to find an explanation for everything. It's quite possible that I was leaning toward the extreme, paying tribute to my creative imagination. If you take into account that this text is being written long afterwards, when a lot has been forgotten and, most importantly, probably the most important thing was forgotten, can it be considered reliable and credible at all?

I want to draw your attention to some patterns of our vicious relations which can be concluded by a comparative analyses of our correspondence and meetings. From meeting to meeting, the quality of correspondence was characterized by a declining curve, the lowest point of which marked the need for a new meeting. Therefore, it was neither us nor the events taking place, but rather the quality of the letters, or more precisely, their literary value, that was determining the date of our next meeting, and therefore the date of the incidents, and the meetings in turn added some fire and gave a boost to our correspondence. They helped to refresh the addressee's memories, since they were fading and losing clarity over the course of the long correspondence. Unfortunately, I should note, the loss of memory was irrevocable, since the long periods in between meetings exposed them to the destructive power of time. Thus, during each meeting the necessity of getting reacquainted was recognized since we were seeing each other with unrecognizably modified features and it took time, actually the whole time of the

meeting, to bring back the familiarity of those features. After each meeting our correspondence entered a new phase, since the addressee was at the same time an old friend and a totally new acquaintance who you had to get to know closely. Hence, every letter was preparing us for the next, that is the second, more intimate meeting, which never actually took place because the next meeting became like the first one again.

I should have noticed that other couples who were having meetings and writing letters to each other were totally different. We never touched upon the incidents that took place during the meetings or the impressions we had of them and we never talked during the meetings about the topics which we touched upon in the letters. During the time scheduled for meetings, there was nothing that would indicate that we had another connection through correspondence, and reading our letters didn't invoke any suspicions that we were dating in reality. True, there were often expressive manifestations of a desire to meet, but they could not be considered a testament to the future implementation of the meetings, especially those that were lyrical effusions.

Nevertheless, some of the letters talk about the fact that some of the meetings took place, but an attentive, inquisitive eye would nevertheless find something that presupposes a preliminary meeting, and both of us kept insisting that it was not something to be discussed through letters, and that is why we devoted our last meeting to its discussion, during the course of which, as one may guess, never touched upon the topic, bending under the weight of filling the time scheduled for the meeting with silence and conversation. The doubt was overwhelming when I looked at his face. "Was there really a bond of correspondence between us?" Maybe he wasn't receiving my letters, maybe some other person was receiving them and that other person was responding to me. Of course, I could ask him a test question, but I couldn't find the right strategy. I couldn't, or rather didn't dare to; it seemed to be a gross violation of the rules of the game. The game was adopted by silent, though mutual, agreement, at least that's what it seemed to me. In asserting it, it seemed to me that it seemed to him as well.

Thus, the only betrayer of the amphibious nature of our relations remained in our correspondence and didn't become a verbal debate, probably because it was the creation of our corrupt communications correspondence. In subsequent letters, by the way, it found its continuation, though it was not as obvious, in the form of secret hints, repetitions, and bitter tones, although the above-mentioned phenomena absolutely had some other motives.

When our last meeting came to an end, at that very moment an unspecified, light nostalgia surfaced because we were happily anticipating that this was our last meeting. There was no guarantee or assurance, however, that

that was so. There was an incident during the meeting, and as we would later learn, another one after the meeting. The collection of aphorisms was settled quietly on the bookshelf, insects lived their everyday lives running from one corner to another, searching for their lost shadow, but both of us felt that the train had reached the last station, and for the first time we were delaying getting out of the carriage that was tightly packed with winged thoughts and insects. Nevertheless, as usual we parted dryly and practically. I went down with the elevator, he used the stairs, or vice versa. And there was no sign suggesting it was the last stop.

Even now I'm not sure if it is so, though it's been a long time and his features are erased from my memory and most probably my features are erased from his memory since occasionally when we would meet in the street we hardly recognized each other. In our correspondence, which we continued with the same vigor, there was no sign of a forthcoming meeting; it stuck out from the framework of our healthy notions about the correspondence and there was no need to check the identity of the addressee. This is correspondence where the addressee is a subject and could be any person you want. Nevertheless, I cannot get rid of the feeling of continuity, and when I suddenly see him in the street it seems to me that he is making nervous gestures. It may happen that the train, due to technical malfunctions, stayed a bit longer at the station, but it doesn't mean that this station is the last one. There is nothing in our correspondence that will shed light on this matter, though it preserves its long breathing, wide volume and deep penetration. This is the correspondence of people who lived in different times, died in different countries, never knew each other and never even met that much, surprisingly filled with mutual understanding and harmony. When I accidentally recognize him in the street it's hard for me to believe that this is the man who sends the letters addressed to me. He seems to be absolutely unaware of the content of those letters. Every time, I can hardly restrain myself from making clarifications. More accurately, I wouldn't restrain myself if only I knew how to make these clarifications. But it seems to me that it is just a trap, and the winner is the one who will endure the temptation to make clarifications longer. I guess I discovered the essence of the game and it seems to me that I am the only player, of which I hope to win without violating any rules. I also think that he left the game long ago, of course, only if he was aware of the game, which seems to be a possibility because it seems to me that I invented it. It even seems to me that those occasional meetings are only seeming to me. It's quite possible that those several meetings were the figment of my imagination. And it is possible and probable that the letters addressed to me were written by me. Though, apparently, this all only seems to me. ♦

“JESUS’ CAT”

GRIG

TRANSLATED BY NAZARETH SEFERIAN



I was in the fifth or sixth grade when I got involved in this story. The teacher and girls weren't in the classroom, and the boys had crowded around one of the seats, laughing. I came closer to find out what had caused such hilarity and saw Narek sitting in the middle of the group, patting a gray cat that was peering fearfully out of a half-open backpack.

“What’s going on?” I asked with excitement.

“Someone’s tricked Narek and sold him a cat,” Tigran replied, with pink eyes that had teared up with laughter.

“Nobody’s tricked me,” Narek said.

“Someone probably picked it up from the trash,” Tigran continued, “And they told him it was Jesus’ cat, and he believed them.”

“Nobody’s tricked me, nobody’s tricked me. There is a breed of cat like that, it’s very rare. It’s called Jesus’ cat because it doesn’t drown, it can walk on water,” his eyes blinked rapidly as he spoke.

A new wave of laughter broke out. I wasn’t sure what was going on, but the pervasive laughter was infectious.

“That’s what you were told by the person who sold it, right?” Karen jumped in, “You’re such a moron.”

“...”

“...”

He kept patting the cat and insisting that he had not been tricked, that this breed of cat really could walk on water. Things got to a point where Narek and Karen almost end up hitting each other, after Karen had reached out to the cat but Narek hadn’t let him touch it. They grabbed each other by the collars, but we pulled them apart.

“Idiot, you ripped it,” Karen said, running his fingers over his collar, his cheeks covered in tears. “Are you crazy?”

Narek didn’t make a sound, he was caressing the cat with his head hung low, as if nothing had happened.

“Hey man, check if Screecher is near the main door,” Karen said, turning to Grigor, his green eyes shining with anger.

Screecher was what we called Ms. Adibekyan, one of the vice principals. She’d earned that nickname for her high-pitched voice and her tendency to often speak loudly. She’d stand near the central entrance of the school during the breaks and check to make sure that the children wouldn’t slip out.

“She’s near the door,” Grigor confirmed after he’d returned.

“We’ll get out through the bathroom door, then,” Karen decided and, looking at Narek, he added, “You’re coming too.”

It was only when we turned to the street that led down to the gorge that I realized what Karen was thinking. Something told me that I should go back, I didn’t want to be a part of what was about to happen, but I was also consumed with curiosity, and turning back halfway would have been awkward – what would the guys think? As I walked, I looked at Narek, tightly holding on with both hands to the yellow backpack, and an image flashed in my mind of his mothers’ tired hands...

At the end of every month, an opaque plastic bag would appear at our teacher’s table, and everyone would understand that Narek’s mother had stopped by. She would never let a holiday go by without expressing her gratitude to our teacher, and the latter knew her job well; during the breaks, from time to time, she would ask Narek to leave the room and she would tell the rest of us,

“When he gets up from his seat during class and walks around the room, or when he does other weird things... ignore all that, pretend that you don’t notice it... Narek has a nervous condition, he’s getting treatment, this is all temporary, it’s nothing serious... We have to help him, but if you laugh or react to each of his actions, then you’re making it worse, pretend not to notice.”

And she would add, “Not a word of this in Narek’s presence” before leaving.

And so, his mother kept visiting from the first grade and personally thanking all the teachers, and I would look at the bulging veins on her hands, reminiscent of the soiled roots of trees, and it would make me sad. What was it about those hands, why did I find them so captivating? On the first day of school in first grade, all of us wore white and stood in the school yard while our teacher, whom we had just met for the first time, told us to stay quiet during the principal’s speech. Nobody was listening to what the principal was saying, or perhaps they were. But I remember that I was gazing absently at Tigran’s dark purple coat; he stood out from everyone else, like a black pigeon among white doves. While I was taken by the golden buttons on the coat, a thin woman, holding her son by the hand, walked up to us. It was them. Even at that very first meeting, her hands had not escaped my notice, the bulging veins demanding my attention, suggesting something sorrowful in the whole thing...

Tigran and Karen walked ahead of me as the hot wind slipped for a second time over the sweaty back of my neck, and it was only then that I realized how I had kept looking at my feet to predict a possible attack by that treacherous snake. They said that, the previous year, when the hot air had hung low in the gorge, and when silence had risen to the sky from the scorched rocks, an amazingly beautiful snake had come out and bitten a boy. He had reached out his hand in an attempt to grab the snake by its head, but the snake had bitten him. Nobody had been down in the gorge that day except for the boy, and by the time his friends had dragged the injured boy out, his hair had turned completely white. The venom had turned his hair white, but his body had fought back, and the boy had been lucky, he had lived...

We walked along the downhill path, and small pebbles slipped out from beneath our feet. I kept imagining the boy with white hair. I would see him every day in the school corridors, he was a grade older than me, and he would no longer go down into the gorge, he would never go down there again...

“It’s going to rain for sure,” Grigor said to me.

“What makes you say that?”

“My arm is throbbing. When you have a fracture, you become more sensitive to coming rain, the fractured location starts to hurt before it starts. My arm’s throbbing now.”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“Could he be right, that there’s a breed of cat like that?” He asked in a voice that only I could hear.

Grigor didn’t ask any more questions. Throughout our walk, he talked about his fractured arm and the coming rain. I wasn’t listening, his words slipped out into the air, while my attention was focused on the snake that was hiding somewhere close by. I was scared. When we got to the river, the water reflected the light and seemed to be winking at me, trying to hint that I should go back, that I didn’t want to be a part of what was about to happen; but I stayed...

“Nobody tricked you, right? All right, then. Drop the cat in the water,” Karen said. “Let’s see it walk on water.”

Narek didn’t make a sound, he stared back and blinked.

“Can’t you hear me? Are you deaf? I said, drop it in the water...”

Everything happened quickly – I saw Karen reaching out to grab the backpack, and then it was in the river. The backpack floated on the silvery surface, bobbing up and down as if trying to grab hold of a rock. But the water flowed quickly, very quickly. For a moment, Narek stood immobile, watching the departing backpack as if hypnotized, doing nothing. Perhaps he couldn’t believe that he no longer had it, that his fingers had handed them over so easily to someone else, with no resistance. He knew, he had felt that there had been resistance, his fingers had not given up quickly; they hurt now, there was a prickly feeling in his palm, but he was doing nothing... Perhaps he understood well what was going on, perhaps he was simply waiting for something to happen, watching and waiting...

When the backpack was already at such a distance that it looked like just a yellow down, he regained his senses, as if the fog that had been gathering around him had suddenly disappeared, and he rushed after the bag with teary eyes. I watched as Narek ran along the river’s edge, and I saw the hands with veins like soiled roots, they seemed even more sorrowful...

Yesterday morning, when the thought had occurred to me to go to church, I had the most unexpected of meetings. Narek stood there before me, wearing a black vestment all the way down to his shoes. I kept staring at him, I couldn’t look away. It had been years and nothing seemed to remain of the Narek I had known. He was tall, wearing glasses with narrow lenses, a thick beard covering his face. I wouldn’t have known who he was if he hadn’t recognized me and walked up to me. Nobody had seen him after the incident in the gorge. They said that his mother had taken him to a different school... During our brief conversation, I managed to tell him that I had become a writer, that I wrote stories. I don’t remember what else I told him, but I remember that I kept saying how good it felt to talk to him, and I kept saying thank you. He smiled and expressed surprised that I was thanking him, but at that moment it felt like a huge burden had fallen off my shoulders, and I was truly grateful. ♦

HERWAR

SYUNE SEVADA

TRANSLATED BY LAURA HOVAKIMYAN AND
SILVIA KHACHATRYAN



In Martakert, blankets were being used to transfer either corpses or fruits during the last days. The women of the village were shaking the mulberry tree when a projectile falls nearby. Only one of them lets go of the blanket, covers her head with her hands, and a few mulberries roll onto the ground. Vanush aqa¹, who was standing next to her, manages to count: exactly 17. Then, she stares at the woman. As if, at last there is no corpse in the blanket. As if, at last mulberries have ripened. As if, all of us have done the laundry at the same time to shake the mulberry tree and you are soiling 17 of them. The little one who climbed the tree freezes for a second after the explosion, then continues to shake it.

“Well, it’s a shell attack, and I...did this,” she would never say “I was scared”, letting go of the blanket is already unforgivable.

“As if you haven’t seen it,” said Vanush aqa and continued to gaze at the mountains without blinking. Looking to the right, without turning her eyes to the post-explosion hole. As if, our mountains are our target. As if, at last there is no corpse in the blanket, and you dare to fall nearby. As if, all of us have done the laundry at the same time, for you to explode, to raise dust, and as if it isn’t enough “this clumsy woman left the blanket in a way, that the mulberries rolled onto the ground.”

Two hours after the blanket was taken home, the hole from the shell was not there. Hranush aqa said: “Damn your head, burn in hell,” blessing she covered it with boards, spread the wool on it, and brought the “beating rod.”

War makes you count whatever you would not count in peace. For instance, mulberries. Or legs. In times of peace it does not matter how many legs are walking on the street. War makes you count, and often you get an odd number instead of an even one.

When harvesting mulberries, Varsenik remembered that last night there were two pairs of legs in her bed and felt ashamed of it. She was ashamed because after last night the red spots on her breast were not because of her old tight bra, that the moans were not because she was crying. She was ashamed, because yesterday she was not missing anyone. In such circumstances when many women in the village would dream about seeing their husbands, even one-legged, once, she has the time to be a woman, with and for her husband whose shoulder has been hit by a bullet but who firmly stands on his feet. And yet for another month smell of cheap cigarettes and mild smell of sweat left from the night will come from their house and bed. It does not bother her that she should ventilate the house every day from the smell of tobacco, and free the linen of the bedroom from the smell of love. The important thing is: she is not going to carry the wood anymore, there is someone to help open the heavy door of the barn, there is someone to make tea for in the middle of the night and cut fruits for, keeping the ripest ones for the children.

When harvesting mulberries, she was looking at the women and feeling ashamed because she was going to have one month of happiness in the middle of war: when the mountains are overshadowed by cannon blasts, there should be no fireworks inside. Or should there? Maybe little moments of happiness are what help one endure the unendurable. Now the fight of internal loneliness has signed

¹ Aqa – sister

a month-long ceasefire. She has the time to argue, fight because of small things and reconcile bringing heavy evidence, she can finally find a silly excuse to frown and complain saying, "You do not love me, you have become inattentive," to hear the opposite. There is a reason to wear her brightly colored clothes, to dye her hair with henna, and, to her happiness, hug Sisak's shoulder instead of the pillow.

But Narine's husband has been killed. There is no news from the old man who owned Vanush aqa's heart. While she has Sisak, and she can't stop thinking about the part between his neck and shoulder. That is why, when the projectile exploded, she let go of the edge of the blanket and the mulberries hit the ground. Because she remembered that she doesn't know when she will wear colorful dresses ever again, when a man's hand will help her open the door of the barn, when while making the bed and shaking the pillows she will feel the scent of her husband's body and smile. But it was better to say that she got frightened from the explosion, or more exactly 'did this', than let her red face give away that her mind is still in her (for a month in their) bed, and she thought that the fireworks inside her were so loud that neighbors could also hear them. And she was guilty, because she soiled 17 mulberries, because she was going to cover the white in her hair the next day, because Narine's husband has just got killed while she has a man's shoulder to lean on. Wounded, but it's hers. Still.

There was only one way of taking a leave from the war at your own expense, at the cost of wounds or broken limbs. The returnees often joked: We want to win as soon as possible, to go back to our women, don't you know that it takes love to win a war? The girl Sako liked had said, "Come back and we will be forever together, we will get engaged, just come back." They saw that the war kept dragging on, so they brought happiness before peace. Sako got engaged, with his beloved wearing his military hat on her head, and his comrades congratulated him with festive gunfire. Moustache Hayk's wife had said: "We are going to have three sons and give them the names of your killed friends." Hayk imagined playing football with his little boys in the liberated territories, imagined them falling on the stones, getting hurt, and him saying: "Men don't cry." And before going cold he had pulled the shirt of one of his comrades and said: "Tell my wife to get married, have four sons, she knows the names of the first three, the fourth one is mine. And a girl, a beautiful daughter to be her brothers' weakness."

Sisak was telling in a way as if he had not sung at Sako's engagement, or he had not closed Moustache Hayk's hoary eyes. His stories had only one difference from the movies. You don't talk about movies with wet eyes and constant smoking.

The neighboring nation had hid their weapons in the altar of the Holy Savior Cathedral of Karabakh, covered their bullets with the sand on which candles were being lit, and set aside their guns to compete over whose shoe would more accurately hit the icons. They played giving fifty points for Virgin Mary's face, twenty-five for baby Jesus's, and five points

for the angels'. They knew that our men would not open fire on a church even in a time of war, they are safe. When Shushi was liberated and Sisak noticed the muddy traces of shoes on the icons, he started to hit the faces of the captives against the walls and curse. He thought that a good beating would help him calm down. It didn't. Sisak's friend Usta wanted to stab Vagif and Ahmed with a knife right next to the altar: Sisak was the one to stop him by clinging to his arms. Varsenik was listening to her husband's stories and squeezing the thread coil in her hands, imagining strangling the vagifs² that have been hitting the icons with their shoes and earning points. Then, the thread coil was turning into Usta's arm and as if she was clinging to it with her husband and saying, let me take away your pain, do not do it, do not act like an animal, they are animals, if you kill them, you will become like them, do not do it, Usta, Usta dear.

Varsenik had a month of tangible happiness with Sisak, in the literal sense of the word, listening to stories about his friends, accompanying her husband's long silence, reacting to news from the front, gently pulling children away from her sleeping husband's underarm, so that he could sleep peacefully, so that his shoulder would not hurt. Yes, when getting married they vowed to be together even when there is too much salt in the soup, in case of fever, even while fighting for the last piece of baked gata³ then war knocked their door, pressed itself tightly against the door and didn't let to neither shut the door in its face, nor to properly open it, solve it. Sometimes she thought that the war was death itself, which came to split them apart. But if it's death and splits them, the fear of whose shaving razor made the mirror sweat. And if it's death and came to split them, whose shoulder is she tenderly leaning on. One does not give birth to such beautiful children and kiss between closed doors and curtains before death; it is not a sign of separation. But, in that case, why is there no addition in the marriage vow: "Until death do us part, and if there is no war." There is no such addition, because from the very beginning war was not a part of people's plans. It is not a lifestyle, a need, or a demand. Then why do wars happen?

Varsenik has been searching for the definition of war for a long time, but she couldn't find one. At last, she found it: war is the period, when you live more in the future than in the present. All those whose minds live in an imaginary future are in a war, a physical or a mental one. And if the war is both physical and mental, it means that not a war, but a battle is going on. Hence, Sisak hadn't gone to war. Sisak was fighting in a battle, the Artsakh battle. Just now his shoulder is injured and he is going to stay home for a month, in the afternoon to liberate children from the housework that was supposed to be his responsibility, and seize every part of his beloved wife's body at night, and then Varsenik would plant kisses on the bandage of his wounded shoulder. >

² Vagif – a common given name in Azerbaijan

³ Gata – an Armenian pastry or sweet bread

After the wound turned into a scar, Varsenik asked caressing Sisak's forehead and watching how the apricot juice that her husband was drinking was running from his chin, "Now that you've got up, what do you want me to make for you?"

"Ah, what should I want", Sisak thoughtfully scratched his head, "zhingyalov hats⁴, stuffed chicken, And.. A baby ."

"Cooked?" Varsenik smiled widely.

"Ah, no, no, fresh."

"You see? I can't live without you."

"That's exactly why I will always be there"

"To make babies and zhingyalov hats?"

"No, because you can't be without me, and I can't be without you."

But then Sisak went back to war and Varsenik's cease-fire of happiness was violated. Varsenik and the kids helped start Sisak's comrade's car and at the end all of them were looking at each other with a lost expression on their faces; the kin and keath were looking at Sisak, while Sisak and the vibrating car were looking back at them. He didn't know what to say. That's why he scratched his head saying, "Varsik, keep the door of the barn closed, so that the livestock won't run away...and I...will get going now."

The car was slowly going down the street, leaning on one wheel, then the other and, whichever house the car passed by immediately lit up. Vanush aqa poured water⁵ after them, while Narine stopped the car by her house and passed them gatas that were wrapped in a cloth. Akub dayi⁶ shook his cane in the air, and as a sign of respect, the children demolished their "qarktik"⁷ for the car to pass without any obstacle. Sisak smiled at the children and thought to himself that the war itself has become a "qarktik", for a country going through a path which is though indefinite, turning from one wheel to another, and hard to start, but at least walking. There is no one who would destruct and destroy it, instead, they force you to walk over them.

Varsenik was slowly following the car, greeting the neighbors with a nod, fixing her shawl, and sighing. She walked until the night spread over the village when she remembered that she had to put the beans in the yard and then spread the bedsheets for the children. She turned back to go, but suddenly noticed a dog sitting in the corner with its sparkling eyes. Their dog died two months ago and the children missed it a lot; she decided to take the dog home. The children were in a bad mood, so they would at least play with the dog. She called the dog and it approached her wagging its tail. The children expressed their love towards the dog by not eating the potatoes in

their meals and giving them to the dog. As a dessert, the children offered the dog fruits, but as the dog had a small appetite and was educated, it kindly rejected the apricots. Thinking about the name didn't take much time, the name itself was evident, Sevo⁸.

Sisak left, Sevo came, and Varsenik was happy that the children would have something to busy themselves with. The dog adapted very quickly. It was running with the children in the yard, and, when shaking the mulberry-trees, it was barking at each mulberry falling out of the blanket.

Then, one day a hen from Narine's house was found strangled. Such a thing hasn't happened for a long time. "There are no foxes in this area," said Vanush aqa doubtfully during the snap meeting on the hen issue.

"Dear Varsik, don't be offended, but it seems like this is something your dog would do. You don't tether your dog, so it entered Narine's house and strangled the hen," said Vanush aqa fixing the tablecloth with her palm.

"All my dog did was bark all night under our window, it's not possible," answered Varsenik, trying to recall that night, but then was convinced that the dog was definitely in the yard that night.

"What do I know? A black dog comes with black sorrow. You don't know what it could've brought, it's not a dog from our neighborhood."

"It's a well-behaved dog, the children love it a lot, Vanush aqa, it must've been a fox."

"Maybe, we'll see."

The news coming from the border was grey, a mixture of white victory and black defeat. Women continued shaking the mulberry-trees and the sounds of explosions coming from afar already weren't reasons for letting go of the blanket. Because none of the young men stayed in the village to warm their women up. There wasn't any reason to hide the warm memories under the veil of fear.

Small talks were tiptoeing under the walls about the fact that it's possible that the enemy will soon reach Maghavuz too, they are getting ready for that. This talk has been spreading like milk foam over the village starting from the first days of the war. The village, that had such a positive and victorious mindset. Well, obviously, as the village is close to the border, sometimes the villagers had concerns too. The talk is as natural as the foam of boiling milk at the edges of a pan. But for the past few days it seemed like the talks that were tiptoeing in the past started banging their feet on the ground, changing their pace from walking to jogging. It felt like someone had forgotten to make the heat lower under the pan, so the foam was gradually going up and the calm surface was going to curdle any minute in this violent situation.

The foam of anxiety kept rising, but their faith was strong. Despite the news with "bared nerves" coming into

⁴ Zhingyalov hats – a type of flatbread stuffed with finely diced herbs and green vegetables

⁵ To pour water after somebody – ancient Armenian way of wishing someone luck, so that everything goes well

⁶ Dayi – uncle

⁷ Qarktik – a game for children that is played with stones

⁸ Sevo – from the word black, almost the same as Blackie

the village, women were still sure that it was impossible. Because Grigor is at the border, in whose hands every useless object becomes usable. He even repaired Hasmik's lamp and Hambik's stairs. Don't you remember? Then there's Serob who knows the lambs with just a glance and can categorize them based on houses. There's also Armen, Gayane's husband, whose toasts are the spice of every celebration. You can even forget to put spices on the table, but you must not forget Armen's spicy toasts. It's important to drink in a particular succession, keeping a particular ritual, under Grigor's newly repaired lamp and with khashlama⁹ chosen by Serob. Our guys are at the border, the border is ours. Who would let the enemy come to our lands and reach their repaired belongings, cherished animals and houses built with their own hands?

The tension in the air was rising more and more. One morning news spread that Varsenik's Sevo bit Aghun's child, as if the tension wasn't already enough. Aghun came to Varsenik's house holding the child's hand. She showed the child's foot and Varsenik noticed that the foot wasn't bit, it was just slightly scratched. Maybe the dog simply pawed to play and scratched the hand a little, it's a well-behaved dog and it's playing with her own three children every day. Why would it bite the child? When the country's at war, every scratch feels like a bite and a wound. They didn't come to an agreement. Next morning, as a sign of protest, Aghun didn't even come to the women's regular coffee gathering. Varsenik wasn't talkative that day, she was more of a listener. She was listening to the women's discussions. They said that the number of the victims is high, our guys were still withstanding, but part of the men from the neighboring villages were killed. What if our guys' turn comes? Varsenik couldn't bear being on bad terms with Aghun anymore. A few days later, when Varsenik was done with the chores, she made visali, hot mincemeat rolls. She took those rolls and decided to go to Aghun's house. No matter how much she tried to send the dog that was wagging its tail home, she couldn't do it. Okay fine, let the dog come to the reconciliation too.

She opened Aghun's door and went in. Aghun's daughter, Zarine, ran towards the dog forgetting about the past. She caressed the dog and then started pulling its ears. Seeing all that, Varsenik smiled. A child's wounds are more painful for the parent. See? The child is playing with the dog, forgetting that she cried because of it days ago. The child has forgotten, but the mother still remembers. It's obvious that she would, because she's a mother, because it was war, and every scratch hurt like hell.

They reconciled and drank coffee together. When Varsenik was about to leave, Aghun sighed, "From the moment this dog came to our village everything has been upside down, I don't even know what it is. God, protect

our men, our children. We're humans after all, we can't bear this anymore."

But they were still bearing it, because they couldn't otherwise, this wasn't a choice. The village continued to live, even though the atmosphere was heavy, Maghavuz was suffocating, the nights were getting dark heavily, lugging, moaning and holding their backs. The number of coffee gatherings decreased, the mulberries were falling down, the children continued to run and play war in the yards, while Sevo was still kindly rejecting apricots.

One day Varsenik noticed that all the windows of the village weren't getting dark. She put the children to sleep, went down to Vanush aqa's house together with Sevo. Vanush aqa was beating his knees, he had been notified from the border that Serob said to send the children away from the village, because the Turks were coming. The elderly of the village gathered together to decide what to do. They decided to wait, it was just news, our guys are there; Sisak, Serob, Hakob, Armen, Valo, brothers Karo and Kamo. There's at least someone from each family, they won't let that happen, the Turks won't reach us, they won't be able to. But maybe they should send the children away, huh? No no no, we have stayed and we will stay.

"Nara, go and make some tea, Akob dayi sing a song so that we can gather ourselves. Oh, my poor baby, you have woken up. Hey Lena, are you here? Come and take care of your child, damn your carelessness, this black dog of sorrow has flipped the plate over. You, idiot, why can't you sit still?"

Varsenik went to bed restlessly. In the morning she jumped from her sleep as Narine called, "Wake up, we're going."

"Where are we going?"

"We're leaving, don't you understand the explosions, don't you understand that they're near?"

"But, Narine, I can't. What about the trees?"

"Are you a fool, woman? Get up and gather your things."

She gathered the important belongings and then went to the yard to water the trees. Sevo was playing with a sparrow. She looked at the dog and thought to herself,

"What if what they say in the village is true? What if it's the dog that brought the war to our doors? But how is the dog at fault? But then again, they say a black dog comes with black sorrow. Maybe it's true? But it was her who found the dog. Does it mean that it was her who brought the war to Maghavuz? What if...there's no dog anymore...maybe... What if it works?"

Only a yelp was heard from the strike of the shovel. For a moment everything was silent and it seemed to Varsenik that she won against the war. When the sound of her heartbeat got lower, she heard the shots and Narine's cry, "They're coming, the Turks are coming, we have started the car, hurry up Varsik, Nadiik, Hranush, Akub, kids."

Two years later Varsenik and Sisak had a girl and a black dog. ♦

⁹ Khashlama – a traditional Armenian vegetable and lamb stew

OCEAN

ARAM PACHYAN

SHORT STORY

TRANSLATED BY NAIRI HAKHVERDI



They were going to the military base in an old, plodding bus. He was sitting in the penultimate row of the bus by a window the size of a box, next to a guy with bulging eyes. Whenever the bus hit a pothole and rumbled, their shoulders touched. The head of the guy with bulging eyes wasn't properly shaved. Here and there, behind his ears and on his temples, there were patches of long hair. The rookies laughed and joked, stuck their head out of the windows, spat and pointed their fingers at grazing cows in the fields. The guy with the bulging eyes took a candy out of his pocket, tapped him on the shoulder with his finger, and offered it to him. He declined, lightly shaking his head. Like a moving picture, the images rapidly changed. Barley fields. Houses. A horse with its foal. Hills. Flowers between rocks. Hills. Buckets full of mushroom. Corn cob skewered on rose-hip twigs. Birds. Hills. A bicycle in a fenced-off courtyard. Hills.

The guy with the bulging eyes put the candy in his pocket. He was told from the back seat that his hair wasn't properly shaved. A chortle. He didn't turn around. His cheeks turned red. The bus was passing through deserted fields, vanishing into cliff openings, coming out into what seemed like newly born nature, where grass began and ended space. Every now and again a completely secluded tree appeared in a clearing. He would turn his head as far back as he could to see off the tree that had suddenly appeared and melted in his window, then he would close his eyes and hang on to it for some time.

They had been standing indecisively for a long time on the square of the base overlooking a village from above. The newly formed battalions were doing drills. The lieutenant appeared, counted them a couple of times, read out their names and last names, counted them again, took notes in his hand-held journal, ordered "Attention!" and took them to the military uniform warehouse.

He saw how his jeans and shirt got mixed up with all the other clothes, gradually becoming covered and left under the mound. When the subordinate officer of the warehouse opened up the mouth of a soiled bag and started to fill it with the civilian clothes, he fixed his gaze on the movement of his hands, wanting to see his jeans one last time, but the subordinate officer worked exceedingly fast; he did not pick up the clothes one by one. He rolled up a few at a time with his big hand and pushed them into the bag grumbling. Then he threw the bag over his shoulder and walked out of the warehouse. His feet instinctively moved after him, but he shakily stopped at the lieutenant's bawl, went back, and continued to stand. His body in the military uniform pulled him back with the same surprise as a child touching hot iron for the first time. With his finger, he touched the beret, the jacket, the pants, he tried to feel the presence of his axed feet in the boots. There was emptiness in the military uniform. It was as if his body had irretrievably left behind his jeans, together with his shirt and the handkerchief in his pocket.

His hands sunk to his elbows in cold, cloudy chlorinated water by the entrance of the mess hall. He raised his arms, turn them around, and looked at his palms. The tiny undissolved chlorine particles in the water covered every single line of his palms. He did not eat the cauliflower soup. Whenever he put a piece of bread in his mouth, it was as if, instead of the bread, his hands sank to his elbows in the pan filled with cold, cloudy chlorinated water.

He stood in line for a long time at the tea-house. The hunger, jostling, and hubbub confused him, and he kept losing his turn. He didn't have the courage to block those cutting in front of him. He bought a raisin roll and some pear juice. There weren't many soldiers in the training area. He went and leaned against a leather pommel horse.

He ate the roll carefully, crumbling it between his index finger and thumb, then putting it between his tongue and palate. When he was sure that there was no taste of chlorine, he swallowed.

Everyone in the barracks was already getting settled. He walked past the bunk beds one by one. The bottom bunks were taken. His heart started to pound. He turned around again. He found one near the end, he hurried to the bed, he was about to sit, but was grabbed by his belt. He turned around. It was a guy with a towel over his shoulder. "This one's taken. Find another one," the guy curtly shot at him. He walked around the barracks a couple of times. He walked back and forth past the beds, looking at the soldiers who had settled on the bottom bunks. He wanted to approach them, to ask them to give up their bed. He would buck up for a moment, but as soon as he approached a soldier sitting on a bed, he quickly turned around and walked away. The lieutenant walked in and said that he was giving them ten minutes to fall asleep, and if he saw anyone still standing in ten minutes, he would employ special means. He walked up to the lieutenant, introduced himself, and quietly said that he couldn't sleep on a top bunk. "What? Say that again!" The lieutenant tilted his head. He repeated it even more quietly: "I can't sleep on a top bunk." The lieutenant's slap made his beret fly. His lip split. "You've barely arrived and you already want to play good guy." The lieutenant grabbed him by the collar and started to shake him. "Tomorrow you'll ask your battalion commander to show you where the real bunk is. Now, quick, you have five minutes to get undressed and lie down. If I come and see you're not sleeping, I'll slaughter you." The lieutenant turned off the light of the barracks and walked out.

He stood in the dark and stroked his cheek with his fingers.

The slap continued to reverberate in his ears. "Come, there's a place here. The top bunk is better; it's cooler and quieter." He walked to the voice. He slowly got undressed, folded his clothes on a chair, climbed up the top bunk, and slid under the sheets. "It'll be light in a few hours," he repeated to himself, opening his eyes as wide as possible. The lieutenant entered and turned on the light. He quickly closed his eyes. He turned off the light and left.

After all the exhaustion that day, his peaceful body completely numbed in bed. He pulled back the covers, turned his back to the guard rail, stretched his muscles, and tightly clenched his lips. "It'll be light in a few hours." He heard loud clanging outside. It took the form of running water. His eyelids gradually felt heavier and his consciousness waned.

The circulation of his body stopped, he widely opened up his eyes, rubbed his temples, and shook his head. He held onto the top rail, hopped to the floor almost noiselessly, groped for his shoes, put them on, and started to tiptoe around the barracks. His eyes adjusted to the dark and all the beds, chairs, and seams of the wood flooring became clearly visible. He leaned his head close to a soldier sleeping on the bottom bunk and moved on to the next. It was only by seeing

the sleeping soldiers that he was convinced that there were no more free spaces on the bottom bunks. Suddenly he saw the guy with bulging eyes who was sitting next to him on the bus and who had offered him a candy which he had declined. He couldn't believe it. He bent over and looked again more closely. It was him. His head – above the covers. On his badly shaved head – long hairs here and there. His childish face was peacefully dozing and his bottom lip stuck out a little. He gently put his hand on his back, wanting to wake him, but he pulled his hand back. Deep down he was confident that if he asked the guy with the bulging eyes, he would definitely give up his bed. His hand extended again a little and again pulled back. He straightened up, stood by the guy's bed for a few minutes, then turned around.

"A little more and it'll be light out." He stretched open his eyes to the point of pain and put his head on the pillow. He tried to remember something sharp, something that would keep him awake. The images of the road came to mind. Barley fields. Houses. A horse with its foal. Hills. Flowers between stones. Hills. Buckets full of mushroom. Corn-cob skewered on rose-hip twigs. Birds. Hills. A bicycle in a fence-off courtyard. Hills.

He jumped up, it was as if he were seeing those images in a dream. He drew his hands from under the sheets, took a few deep breaths, and put his head back on the pillow. "Two hours and it'll be light out."

arrac'h – arrache...

Kamac'h – monarc'h... Kerarc'h Jevac'h...

Tamana – gavow... Va – Voovla – Via...

Mia – mine sea

poo

Nothing like this had ever happened. This was the first time that the ocean was not visible. This was the first time that its blue boundlessness was substituted by its sound. Lying in bed, he was still in charge of his body. He moved his head, his feet, his hands, he touched the pillow, the bed sheets, the bed cover, but he couldn't block out the path of the sound. The sound of the ocean was pouring inside of him through his wide-open eyes, and if he closed his eyes, he would see it. With his last shrieks of consciousness, he tried to keep his eyes open and was lost in the velvet roll of the ocean.

The shriek woke him up. It was light out. He briskly pulled back the covers. His legs were in a pool of urine. He looked down. The soldier lying on the bottom bunk was standing naked, holding on to the iron frame of the bed with a petrified look on his face. His head and his face were covered in urine. The soldiers were shouting and swearing. He didn't see how the guy picked up a chair, how he hit him on the head, how he pulled on him, threw him off the bed, took out his knife, and started to stab him. The first stabs that entered his body caused him sharp pains, but the rest of them, happiness. Then he didn't feel anything – he only knew that he was rocking on the ocean, and he knew that on the ocean nothing was visible. ♦

ROPE OF SIN

HOVHANNES YERANYAN

EXTRACTS FROM NOVEL

TRANSLATED BY NAZARETH SEFERIAN

You'd be mistaken if you thought that only they cared about how and when your father and grandfather died.



THE SON

My sister was the only one in our family who, both in their presence and in her conversations with us, blamed those who left the country, considering them greedy and treacherous, but perhaps she had given meaning over half a year to what happened to her, our family, and the country and she had grown convinced that our mother's efforts to change something had all been in vain, everything was going from bad to worse, and she had lost hope. She thought that it was too late to try anymore, but the first thing speaking within her was her family's buried sorrow and the death of her brother. She believed that the country dealt a shameful slap in the face to our family not just through the savage murder of her brother, but also the insolence of covering it up.

My numbed mother had not reacted at all at first, but two days later she made it clear that she would not leave her daughter alone and would go with her. At that time, we thought that she had found a way to hold Ani back from her decision, because there was no role for a caretaker in the rejection and solitude that my sister was seeking. Besides that, it was difficult to imagine the two of them living together in a foreign land. It was strange, but Ani did not complain, instead she was even happy. I thought this meant that she wanted to take her mother to another country, to save her.

A year-and-a-half after the incident with my brother, my fifty-year-old father, in despair after my sister's and mother's

exile and tired of idle solitude, had spent the past three months reading and tearing up everything he had written and not published during thirty-five years of his life. Every one or two weeks, I would come home and see the papers – discolored, yellowed or still fresh, their corners nibbled by mice. Papers – the usual A4 size, or school notebooks of varying thickness, where my father the writer had started something in one corner and then another piece in another, both ending up unfinished or facing each other like the troops of two combating camps, who had then retreated to other notebooks to seek a more peaceful continuation. Sometimes, the etiolated letters and words had jumbled into each other, attacking each other and spilling red ink like blood with the author's arrows and other symbols, intending to help him make sense of his own rough drafts, resembling a general's campaign map and the traces of a bloody battle. There were pages that had been arranged by computer, a larger part had been typewritten, but a much bigger portion consisted of handwritten sheets – older and almost illegible. He would gain satisfaction to the point of joy from the analysis of the ones that were particularly difficult to read, except for his concern that he might come across one of the official texts on the incident that had occurred with his son. He would be overcome with such fury that, even after the text had been ripped to pieces and trampled upon by his feet, those words would

still peep out of the various corners of his imagination. He was even more afraid of such a revelation at this point than the physical appearance of an official document. But this uninvited panic did not appear every moment, or even every day, in his shriveled brain. The enjoyment was more long-term. And it was not just from the acerbic smell of the old documents that reminded him of a happier time, but also the faded descriptions and the appearance of the letters. Before he managed to analyze a word or a sentence, their miserable and discolored nature already provided him with a kind of preliminary enjoyment. His own handwriting reminded him of his youth – from his days as a young man to the birth of his son, on the occasion of which he was given a typewriter as a present but continued to write with a pen for a long time. In fact, of the nineteen years in which his son had come and left this world, he had used that typewriter for only four or five, after which he already had a computer.

The pleasure he gained from the handwritten texts would continue as he managed to discern words and read sentences from the semi-faded letters. His brain would suddenly awaken the hidden meaning that he had conceived at the time and his soul would churn with the past emotions that had forced him to pick up his pen. The memory of those feelings could be both exhilarating and painful. He would sometimes shine with the memory of the emotions that had served as the opportunity to compose one line or the other, or churn with the years he spent writing about his losses, to the extent that they earned him an intestinal condition, but the memories of deprivation and heartache, sorrow and suffering were sweet and wistful as they came to him when he communicated once again with the words that had been born of his irregular handwriting on these papers so many years and decades later.

None of this had been about the greatest of his pains. He had written very little after that, not including the hundreds of letters requesting an investigation into the crime and a restoration of justice. They had been sent without a copy being made, so there was no danger that any of them would appear in a drawer and ruin the writer's happiness. Before he tore it up, my father, Tovma Terteryan, could spend days not so much because of the difficulty of reading each document or reliving his emotions at a calm and unhurried pace, but because he was mentally editing its contents and often recreating it into a completely new image and text. The writer Tovma Terteryan would rewrite only a negligible portion of his texts before tearing them up, and those would often end up being completely new stories. He thus stubbornly, slowly and unashamedly destroyed his own creations.

I decided to secretly read the pieces that were waiting in line for dismemberment. I was acquainted with my father's old books, I read them several times and had found nothing remarkable in them. For some reason, I wanted to learn more about his unpublished pieces and the first thing I read had content that was completely different from his books.

THE FATHER

At that moment in the ceremony of the Holy Resurrection, the celebrant took on a luminous form and the congregation kneeled down in awe, as a few curious people standing near the doors simply slipped out of the church. The rest proceeded as expected. The holy father realized where he was and continued celebrating mass.

When the people had already embraced in a symbolic gesture to pass on the good news, the Archbishop isolated himself in a cell in the church and dialed the ambassadors home number in a state of indescribable panic. An automated message said that he was unavailable.

The archbishop plunged into thought. Had something unreal happened to him, or perhaps there had not been a promise or a condition, it had all been a hallucination, deception, fantasy, or some kind of trick of the imagination. Had he just made up the Promise of the Smiling King? His trembling fingers found the academic's number and he pressed the phone's button in fear, hearing his heart beat for half a minute until a response could be expected, when he suddenly remembered that he had never called the academic's phone before, nor had he even had his number! A slight hope was born that somebody would now respond and say that he had the wrong number, that the person speaking was not a prominent researcher. It was also possible that just hearing the voice at the other end would be enough to realize that he had dialed the wrong number, so he would not have to ask for the academic at all. But the person who picked up the phone was a woman, and she said without hesitation,

"Holy father, we're in an ambulance. My husband has lost consciousness. Please pray for us, holy father."

"What happened? Was it a stroke? An accident? Something else?" the archbishop asked, simply in order to say something and with the hope that this would soften the shudder that had overcome his body and the throbbing that had enveloped his soul.

"No, no, holy father. It's not a stroke, or an accident," the academic's wife sobbed, "The doctors are unable to figure out what happened to him."

"Please let me know as soon as he regains consciousness. Can I visit him?" the archbishop pleaded.

"Of course, holy father. In fact, he wanted to see you."

"But did we know each other? Do you know if we'd met?"

"I don't know, holy father. He spoke of you with such warmth and he was waiting to see you with such impatience, that I thought you were quite close."

The holy father did not know when the three of them had seen each other – had they been there a long time ago, or had they met at that moment? But he recalled that none of the three had considered it important because they had actually wanted to know where they were, or rather, they were in awe of the incredible beauty of their location. Anyone who had tried to reason would have immediately lost their mind because the three of them were seeing so

far that the immensity of their field of vision would blind the mind and turn logic to ashes without an unreasonable means to simply be, to exist in that moment. Without beginning or end, the enormity of the reality that surrounded them had forced reason to hide behind nothingness, peeping out from there and returning bit by bit. The ability to feel and sense emotions had also ended up betraying its masters, leaving them only to return in fragments, so that their hearts would not burst with sudden and irresistible joy.

THE SON

His other papers, books and even the essays he wrote in school about the homeland and his family home, in all the writings he had put together until a year ago when my brother died, all featured the dusty road that went from our suburban home to the bus stop that would take one to the capital, a path of a hundred paces that was covered by my father's characters, desperate or excited, happy or miserable. In an interview, my father had called it the path of life.

"This is truly the path of my life," my father whispered inappropriately, but overcome with emotion at the veracity of the statement, as he read it before tearing it up. He quartered the twelve-page school notebook and threw the pieces into a box, or rather that is where he stacked them, because he was using a wooden fruit crate where he would delicately place the slices of the fruits of his first harvest, for some reason. "This is the path of my life, but I have never measured it, nor have I counted the number of times that I have crossed it," he muttered out loud during that first stage of his self-destruction, when he was still in a state of mental stability but had recurring bouts of depression.

"But why are you saying such foolish things," I recalled how my mother had complained when she had read this. "Why is this your path and not, say, old man Grish's or Zakare's, who is led along it every morning by someone taking him to the store?"

"You see, you unctuous traitor?" my father said to the old man sitting slightly crookedly in a corner of the room, watching him while simultaneously falling asleep and waking up, "Yevgenia thought that the paths of our lives were the same. How was I to know back then that she was not wrong, that you would end up being my most faithful friend."

Every time my father talked to Grish that way, he would open up his gummy eyes, realize somehow that he was being addressed and, without bothering to find out what had been said, he would repeat, "Oh, you son of a bitch, I have no idea what you want. Why are you doing this to me? I don't know."

The real panic that Grisha had felt the first time he had asked that question was gone, when my father had started to take the dirty clothes off the rotting body of the old man.

Months later, Grish, or Khrisha as my father would call him, began to display incomprehension instead of panic, "Why are you doing this to me? I don't know."

There was no asphalt, it was a muddy road. It would get so dusty in the summer that if a car suddenly passed by you when you were walking that road, you would have to turn back and take a shower, change your clothes and walk those 100-120 meters again, hoping that no other cars would turn up. It was snowy and icy in the winter, and if it was not unusually warm, causing mud and slosh, then the only danger would be of slipping a little, and we would cross that path, that frozen road. During the fall or spring, it would become almost impassable because of the mud, but you had no way of avoiding that experience because the way around it would be much longer and once again inconvenient. Forty to forty-five of those hundred meters from our home to the main road passed through our property, and that part had always been covered in concrete, even in nineteen ninety two, before I was born, when my father quit journalism and build a greenhouse on that field to grow flowers. It is difficult during the muddy days of spring to convince people that the concrete path had not been built for them and, in fact, that it covered the patio of someone else's house. My father's thinking had been – if they are walking across the path of my life, let them cross this part as well. But my mother had insisted and, submitting to his wife's complaints, he had put a wooden door at the entrance to our property on two occasions. But passers-by stole the first door and burned the second one down, and my father had warmed his hands at the fire along with our neighbors during that stinging winter.

"You, Khrisha, began to walk across the path of my life after you were driven out of Baku. But I have been walking it almost all my life," my father continued his long-distance argument with my mother, without expecting a reply from the old man who was already snoring in his slumber.

THE FATHER

Before turning sixty-one, Grisha had never walked that path. From sixty-two to eighty-two, which meant that for the twenty years that follows his move into the house on the left side of the dusty road, perhaps he had walked on more occasions along that path than I had during the fifty years of my life. Ten or eleven times every day, he would go to the store at the other end of the path, next to the bus stop.

His own children had expelled Grish from Baku, and twenty-eight years ago, the wife, daughter and son he had abandoned in Artashat refused to forgive him and offer him a roof above his head in their home, so he had to settle in a house to which the Norwegians added another room made of stone two years later. At that time, old lady Rippie's store had not yet opened, there was an insignificant kiosk in its place that had been built by Rippie's husband, who had then gone blind and later spent twenty years sitting in the store, recognizing his regular customers by their voices, hoping to start a conversation with them that would kill time, and feeling offended at the fact that people were always in a hurry, providing curt replies before they left.

Old lady Rippie would curse her husband with the eclipsed eyes, because his dialogue would cause confusion in the store. At first, it was only a kiosk. Five years after Grish had settled into the house, what was only a kiosk began to grow and it was now difficult to think of a kind of food or household item, or even hardware, that could not be found there. But it was difficult to find whatever you thought of, because the place was a mess, with everything stacked on top of each other, such that a customer visiting the store every day would think each time that there had been a robbery attempt since the last visit. Although Rippie was fined by the state once or twice a month for not providing a receipt to her customers, she continued her stubborn refusal to do so. Her customers were no less headstrong. Although they knew that anything that could be found in the store, except the bread, was past its due date and spoiled, they would continue to do their shopping there. They knew well that they were paying a higher price there than in another store for food that they would soon be throwing in the trash, but they continued with unconquerable desperation to spend their money foolishly and risk poisoning the members of their family. It was a lie, it was beyond belief that they felt sorry for Rippie's husband and his blindness. The majority of the customers at Rippie's store hated Zakare, which is why they abruptly refused his veiled invitations to engage in conversation. When asked "How are you? What's up?" they would curtly reply, "Nothing much, man, we're getting by" and leave the store. It was beyond belief that they did not like Zakare for the eleven years that he spent selling drugs to minors and then, when betrayed and sent to prison by his partner, managing to emerge unharmed. It was more likely that they were jealous of Zakare's blindness. Because, although he had a store where everything was stacked on top of each other in disarray, he lived in wealth and received a high state allowance for his blindness on top of all that. They were even jealous of his pathological paleness, which was the result of several years spent sitting inside the store, while the rest of them had, in contrast to the pale Zakare, worked under the all-burning, all-melting, all-dissolving summer sun, turning ashen-red and gaining a skin color that suggested the appearance of a new race on the planet. They were jealous, and perhaps they hated him a bit, but they continued to stubbornly go to his store for their shopping, because their hate or indignance manifested as desperation, "I don't care if we're paying you more for this, we don't have enough money anyway. What difference does it make if we kick the bucket one day because of a spoiled sausage or bootleg vodka that we bought at your place? The fact that we're not dead right now does not really mean that we're living."

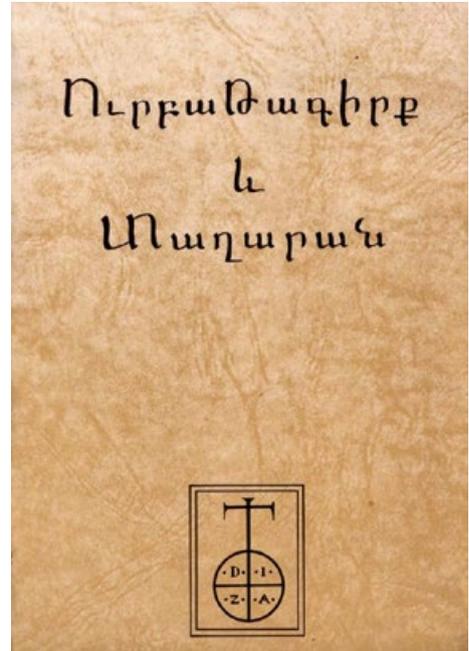
In reality, they had bid farewell to life a long time ago, because they hated but kept reelecting the same village mayor; they were mere phantoms for a long time now, because they felt contempt for their local prosecutor, police chief and chairman, but kept voting to keep them in power, as they had in fact earned punishment in a dark corner a long time ago

caused by their desire to commit suicide, but they had not guessed that they wanted to die because they did not know whether or not they would ever live. This was how wise they were. The phantom of death never scared them, with the sharp scythe it held in its hand, because they simply existed or they did not, with no dreams or desires, no aspirations or longing. They were so wisely empty-minded that they did not pursue any objectives, they simply worked at home or in a greenhouse [four illegible words] one [two illegible words] that [three illegible words] protect the children from the cold and hunger, with the same instinct that occurs in any creature living on the planet Earth. They existed, but they did not live. They simply stopped breathing one day and their coffins were carried out of their houses in the appropriate way, spun around in the air three times in accordance with tradition, and then taken along the only path that led to the cemetery—the path of my life—where they were buried. And the dust would rise under the feet of the hundreds of bereaved family members, coming up and settling on their faces—but more so on that of the deceased—if one of the unliving people had already become a corpse in those summer months of drought.

On one warm summer funereal day, the priest had worn boots and concealed them under his vestment as he walked slowly in front of the procession through the melting ice water. The young people carrying the corpse weighing ninety-two kilos tapped him slightly on the shoulder and one of them whispered, "Father, walk a little more quickly, we're running out of strength, our feet are wet and are turning to ice." The priest continued to walk ahead of the funeral procession in a slow rhythm towards Rippie's store, from where the women were supposed to turn back. They had long made it a tradition that the women would not go to the cemetery on the day of the funeral, they would only have the right to visit the grave of the deceased and burn incense there the following day, because their participation would make the burial ceremony grow twice as long since there would be those who would lose consciousness during this process due to the heat or the despicable rays of the sun during the dry months of summer and the members of the funeral procession would catch cold or pneumonia during the winter, no matter how hard they tried to push their frozen blood to their feet by stomping on the ground.

[Four illegible words] were changed, [three illegible words] from the store, the women would turn back, while [three illegible words] the men would continue [one unintelligible word] the heavy or light coffin until the next turn, where a car would be parked in expectation of its deceased passenger. Along with the women, Zakare would turn back as well, going into his store, where there would be many customers at that moment – the women who had turned back and the men who had felt it unnecessary to get to the cemetery, who would nevertheless find it necessary to buy a liter or half of vodka, drinking the first two shots to the deceased and the rest to no special cause. Grish would also not pass up the opportunity, and he would enter the store. ♦

FIRST ARMENIAN PRINTED BOOK



About eight decades after the introduction of movable printing type to Europe by Johannes Gutenberg in Germany, in 1512 first ever Armenian printed book was created. "Urbatakirk" (The Book Of Friday) was printed by Hakob Meghpart in Venice. It had 124 pages, red ink used in some of them. Its content was partly religious, partly secular, consisting of cures and prayers for the sick, ancient writings, myths, long quotations from Grigor Narekatsi's Book of Lamentations, the Prayer of Cyprianos of Antioch, the story of the Virgin and Justinian, etc. In 1512-13 Meghpart printed four more books, and later Armenian publishers in different parts of Diaspora continued his work. In the 16th century there were published 31 books, in the 17th century – 164 and in 18th there were 824 Armenian books printed. Copies of "Urbatagirk" are shown in The Museum of Printing in Yerevan and the Mekhitarist Congregation at the San Lazzaro degli Armeni near Venice. It is also available online in the archive of The National Library of Armenia.





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