

REGIONAL POST

CAUCASUS

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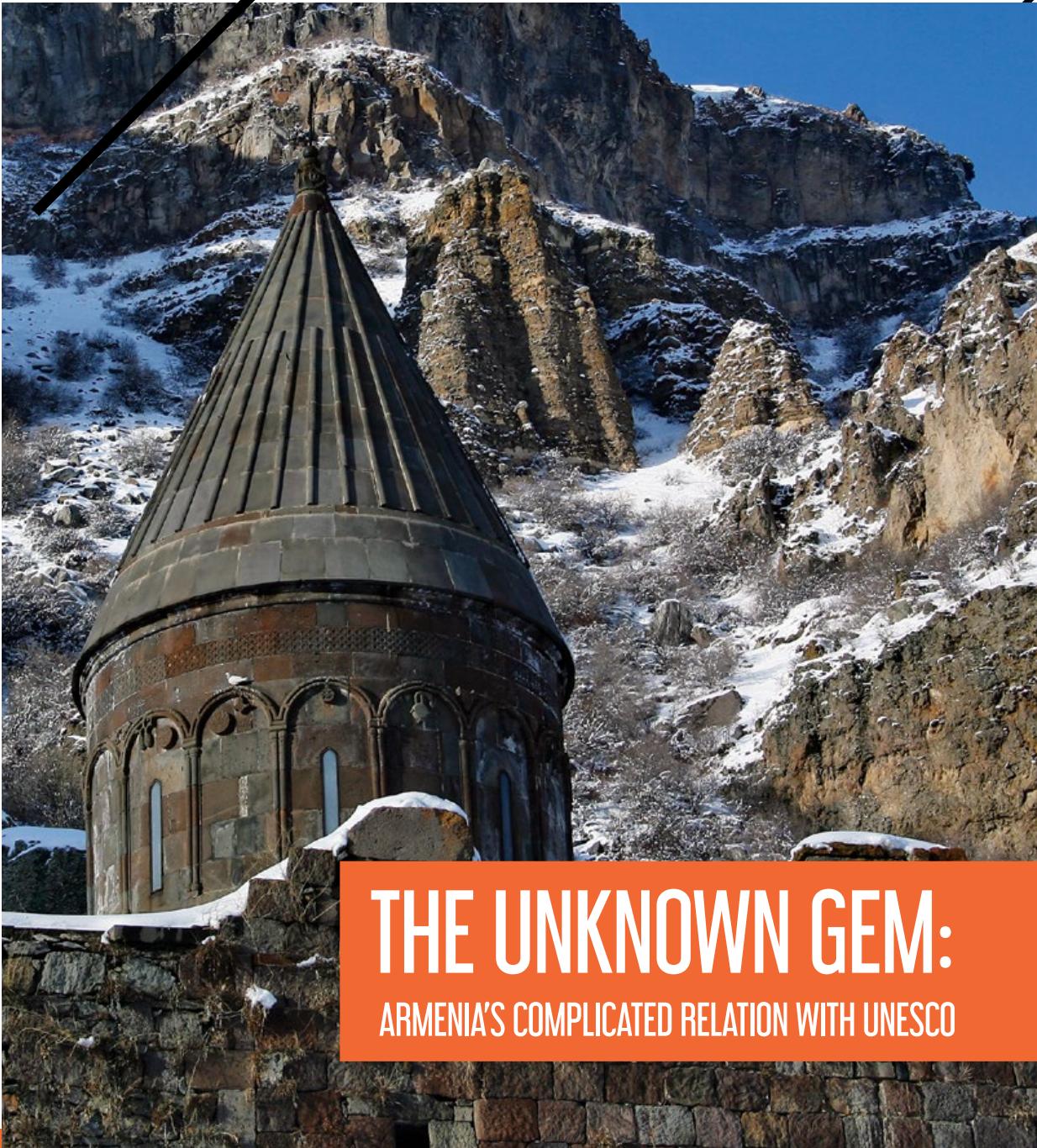
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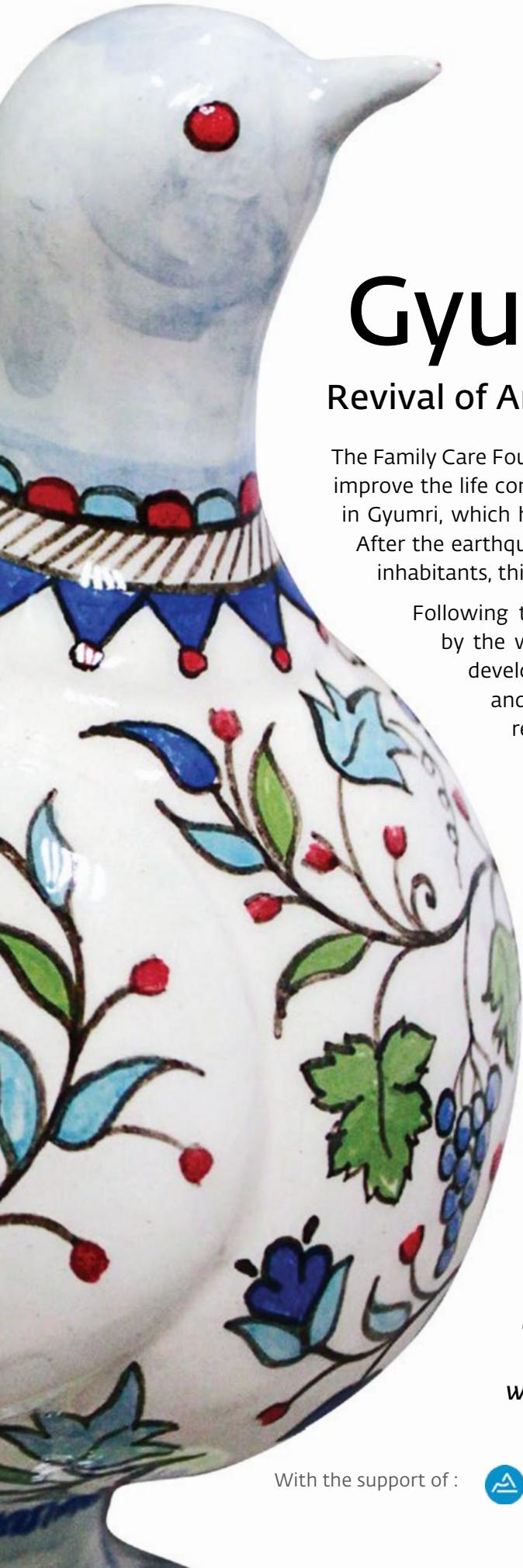
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THE UNKNOWN GEM:
ARMENIA'S COMPLICATED RELATION WITH UNESCO



MUSCARI
Caring for Land, People & Culture

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., Gyumri

www.familycarearmenia.org / www.muscari.fr

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Cover Photo: Hayk Melkonyan

Executive Director
ARSHAK TOVMASYAN

Art Director
NONA ISAJANYAN

Editor in Chief
ARTAVAZD YEGHIAZARYAN

Layout Designer
ARTAK SARGSYAN

Proof Editing
SILVA HOVAKIMYAN

Contributors

MARGARIT MIRZOYAN, TIGRAN ZAKARYAN, HASMIK CHAKARYAN, VIKTORYA MURADYAN, EMILIO CRICCHIO, ARMIN SARGSYAN, HUSIK ARA, EMMA HARUTYUNYAN

Photos and illustrations
WILLIAM KARAPETYAN, SUREN MANVELYAN,
EMMA HARUTYUNYAN, ARNOS MARTIROSYAN,
HAYK MELKONYAN/YEREVAN MAGAZINE, DIEGO DELSO/
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Regional Post LLC
Address: Augedzor 62/1
regionalpost.org
email: contact@regionalpost.org
phone: +374 55 387887

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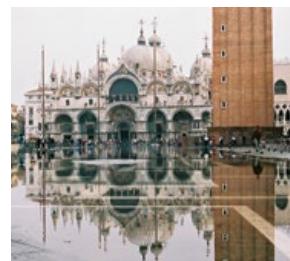
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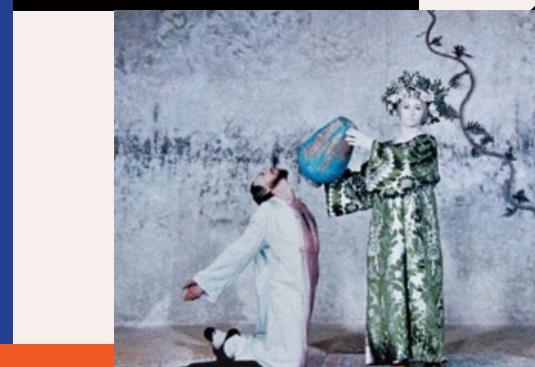
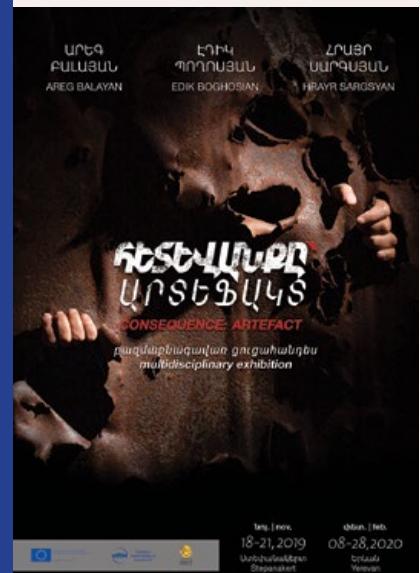
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ARMENIAN TRACE AT UNESCO: 9 ITEMS IN UNESCO HERITAGE LISTS

Armenia has a lot to offer to the world – both locations and sites, which hold the spirit of the rich heritage, practices and traditions remaining actual and transcending time. From the glorious Kochari dance to the magnificent Upper Azat Valley, Regional Post writes about the symbols of Armenia represented in UNESCO World Heritage Sites List and Intangible Cultural Heritage List.

TEXT : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN



UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITES

GEGHARD MONASTERY AND THE UPPER AZAT VALLEY

Year: 2000

Geghard Monastery is one of the oldest monasteries in Armenia with two-storey stone temples and an adjacent church. The complex of medieval buildings is set into a landscape of great natural beauty at the entrance to the Azat Valley. Halfway down the western side of the fence is a small rock chapel, the oldest monument in the monastery, with some scripts on the wall, including several from the 12th century. Geghard Monastery landed its well-deserved place on UNESCO World Heritage List in 2000. The latter describes the site as an exceptionally complete and well-preserved example of a medieval Armenian monastic foundation. Also, in December of 2018, UNESCO granted the Monastery of Geghard and the Upper Azat Valley "an object of enhanced protection" status as a value of exceptional importance to humanity. The decision was made in Paris during the 13th Protocol Committee meeting at the headquarters of UNESCO under the Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict of 1954. As a result, Geghard became the first cultural value on the territory of Armenia to be granted a status of "objects of enhanced protection".

Carved in a monolithic rock, originally the monastery was called Airivank (a monastery in the rock). From the 13th century on, it was also called Geghard in honor of the Spear of Destiny (also known as Holy Lance) which pierced Jesus. The Spear has been kept in the monastery for nearly 500 years and is now preserved in the Echmiadzin Cathedral Museum. According to legend, Gregory the Illuminator (Grigor Lusavorich) founded the Geghard Monastery in the place of a pagan temple at the beginning of the 4th century, following the adoption of Christianity as a state religion in Armenia.

Many myths revolve around the history of the monastery but the most interesting one is about the precious treasure preserved in the northern wall of the Geghard Cave Monastery. In fact, using the natural light which penetrated through the opening in the roof, the architects of the monastery had managed to give it a somewhat round shape similar to that of a diamond. When conqueror Tamerlane tried to take the treasure away, the moment he went closer to it, his shadow covered the light, and the treasure "disappeared." But just as he decided to leave and took a step back, he saw the treasure again. After the earthquake in Garni in 1679, the diamond disappeared forever. ➤





MONASTERIES OF HAGHPAT AND SANAHIN

Year: 1996 and 2000, respectively

The monastic complex of Haghpat and Sanahin has quite an interesting structure, combining asymmetrical but volumetric forms, beautifully fitting into Lori's picturesque nature. The two monasteries are the most vivid example of Armenian religious architecture between the 10th and 13th centuries. They functioned as spiritual, cultural and educational centers, covering such areas as philosophy, medicine, rhetoric, music, etc.

Originally, in 1995, the State Party submitted a nomination to the World Heritage List for both Haghpat and Sanahin monasteries. However, at that time, there were some difficulties related to the ownership of the Sanahin and there were still restoration works going on at the site. Thus, in 1996, the Committee decided that only Haghpat should be inscribed at the time. Haghpat Monastery comprises several churches and auxiliary buildings, with the main St. Nshan Church built between AD 976 and 991 (architect Trdat). Distinguished by its integrated interior and vast dominating dome, the church is a complete and brilliant example of new stylistic trend of Armenian architecture of the 10th and

11th centuries. The Monastery Complex is also very rich in khachkars (cross-stone), one of which – the Amenaprkich (Redeemer) (AD 1273) – being probably one of the most famous and iconic khachkars of Armenia.

However, considering the great cultural importance of both monasteries, the fact that two of them are located in a very close distance and that they were founded as part of the same movement of national regeneration, the Committee realized that it was logical to consider them as a single complex for inscription on the World Heritage List, and eventually, in 2000, they decided to approve the extension of the inscribed property, and Sanahin also received its well-deserved place on the World Heritage List of UNESCO.

Sanahin Monastery Complex was founded by Queen Khosrovanush (wife of King Ashot III the Merciful) in 966 and includes several churches and other buildings representing the richness of Armenia's medieval architecture. The main churches of the complex are St. Astvatsatsin and St. Amenaprkich which are considered the finest examples of classical Armenian medieval architecture. More than 50 khachkars are preserved in Sanahin illustrating the evolution of Armenian khachkar throughout the decades.



CATHEDRAL AND CHURCHES OF ECHMIADZIN AND ARCHEOLOGICAL SITE OF ZVARTNOTS

Year: 2000

Vagharshapat is located in Armavir Marz (province) of Armenia. It is one of the most important cities for the followers of the Armenian Apostolic Church as its spiritual and administrative center – Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, is located there. The settlement has existed since ancient times, which is proved by the archeological sites of Stone, Bronze, and Iron Age preserved in and near the city. The town had several names referring to the period of each ruler, however after the adoption of Christianity (AD 301) the city was called Echmiadzin along with its original name Vagharshapat. In 2000, Cathedral and Churches of Echmiadzin and Archeological Site of Zvartnots were inscribed on the World Heritage List. The decision was based on several criterias. Namely, the exceptional architecture of the Churches at the site and Zvartnots, and the huge influence they had on the archaeological trends and manners over a wide region. Additionally, the nominee had vividly illustrated not only the spiritual achievements but also the innovative artistic gainings of the Armenian Church since its inception. The inscribed property consists of three separate areas: the Mother Cathedral of Echmiadzin and St. Gayane Church (7th century), St. Hripsime Church (7th century) and St. Shoghakat Church (17th century). The third area is the archaeological site of Zvartnots. The latter is believed to have been the indigenous marvel of Armenian architecture. According to the proposed reconstruction the height of the church was about 45 meters, which is extremely unusual for the 7th-century architectural approaches. St. Gayane and St. Hripsime were nuns martyred in the period when Armenia was about to adopt Christianity as its state religion. After the conversion, they were sanctified, and the churches were built on the location of their martyrdom. Shoghakat Church on its turn was built later in dedication to martyred nuns.

The Churches of Echmiadzin and Zvartnots have witnessed the inception of Christianity in Armenia and are extraordinary examples of the unique Armenian architecture, practically illustrating its evolution and blossom. Thus, their inscription in UNESCO's World Heritage was no surprise. ➤



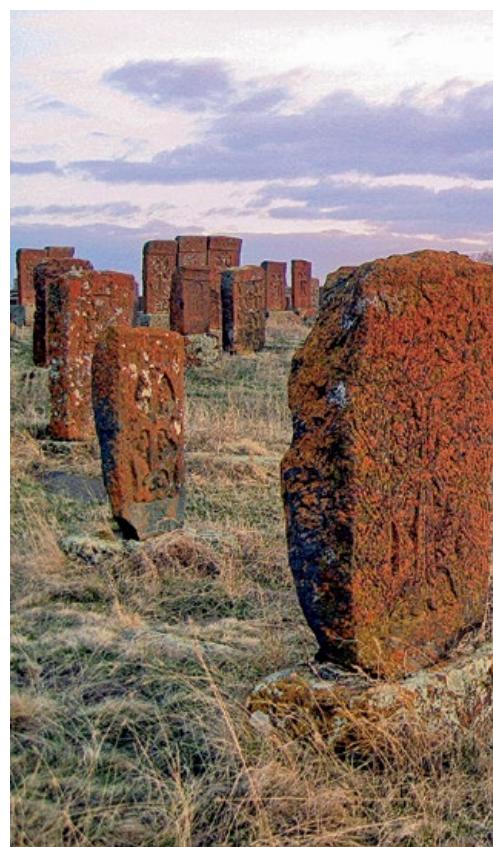
UNESCO'S INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE LIST



PERFORMANCE OF THE ARMENIAN EPIC OF "DAREDEVILS OF SASSOUN" OR "DAVID OF SASSOUN"

Year: 2012

In 2012, the performance of the Armenian epic "Daredevils of Sassoun" (Sasna Tsrer in Armenian) was inscribed into UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List. The piece tells the story of David of Sassoun, who defends his homeland in an unequal fight against external enemies. The performance of the epic is presented with a lyrical voice with rhythmic pronunciation, in a peculiar – typical to Armenians – poetic style, usually accompanied by the sound of duduk. The presenters usually wear national costumes during the performance and there's no age or gender limitation. The performances may last up to two hours. One may come across the epic at different celebrations in the villages: during weddings, birthdays, christenings and major national cultural events. Mostly in rural communities, the epic is passed from generation to generation through verbal recitation. It was first captured in writing in the XIX century. Eventually, after decades since its inception, there are 160 variants of its telling. The epic is a part of an educational program at all local schools and is considered one of the most important works of Armenian traditional folklore, constituting an encyclopedia and repository of the entire range of knowledge about the heritage of Armenian people, their regional peculiarities, mythology, philosophy, religion and other practices. The epic has inspired many works of art by Armenian artists and sculptors and was presented gazillion times in theatrical performances.



ARMENIAN CROSS-STONES ART: SYMBOLISM AND CRAFTSMANSHIP OF KHACHKARS

Year: 2010

Khachkar (cross-stone) is an extraordinary and unique piece representing Armenian traditional art. Carved from stone and believed to convey holy power, khachkars served as objects of religious worship and rituals, standing at the edge of the secular and the divine. Their height is usually 1.5 meters, including ornamental symbols of the sun or the wheel of eternity accompanied by the portrayal of saints, animals or other relevant elements. Khachkar craftsmanship is passed on through generations or through the master's teaching his apprentice. Khachkar implies both regional distinctiveness and individual improvisation, and as a result, there are no repeated designs and patterns. Over 50,000 completely different khachkars can be found in the territory of Armenia, and there are also thousands of those hand-carved beauties in the historic territories of the country – in present day Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Iran.

In 2010, Armenia submitted an application to UNESCO titled “Armenian Cross-Stones Art: Symbolism and Craftsmanship of Khachkars”. Azerbaijani representatives complained to the committee over Armenia’s bid, demanding a change in the application, arguing that the Khachkar was not only Armenian. However, the claim was declined and the same year Armenian khachkar was involved in UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage List.



DUDUK AND ITS MUSIC

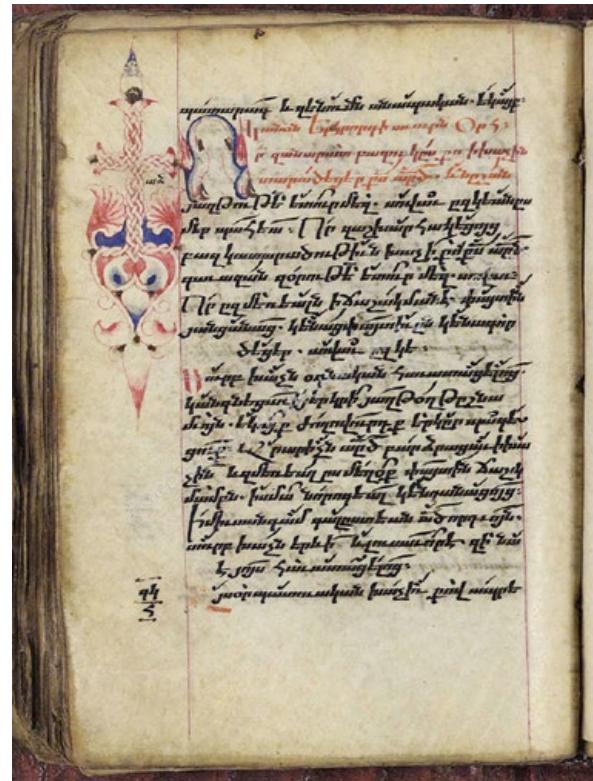
Year: 2008

Many Armenians often equate the sound of duduk with their identity. Duduk accompanies almost all traditional Armenian events of any mood, starting from festive celebrations of weddings and ending with funerals. Popular Armenian traditional songs and dances of various regions include the soft and melodic sound of duduk. It's a woodwind instrument usually made of apricot wood. It can replenish any mood, used in lyrical, sorrowful or dramatic compositions as well as folk dances and songs. From the first sight the instrument is simple, however it can play a wide spectrum of tunes. In the past decade, duduk found its fame outside of Armenia's borders. In recent years, duduk music was widely popularized not only in Armenia but in other countries as well. For instance, world famous film composer Hans Zimmer used duduk when creating the soundtrack for the Oscar-winning “Gladiator”. The roots of Armenian duduk music go back to the times of the Armenian king Tigran the Great (95-55 BC). The world knows duduk and its music through the world renowned duduk player and musician Jivan Gasparyan. Duduk and its music were inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008, but already in 2005, the latter was proclaimed as a “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity”. From 2006 to 2009, UNESCO implemented a state-developed Safeguarding Action Plan with the support of the Japan Funds-in-Trust, in order to preserve the marvel of Armenian culture in the “difficult modern social, cultural and political context in Armenia.” ➤



KOCHARI, TRADITIONAL GROUP DANCE**Year: 2017**

Kochari is an Armenian dance, originating more than 2 thousand years ago, which has hardly changed during several decades. At first, it was a part of a ritual dedicated to the worship of a ram as a symbol of strength, fight and victory. Kochari has also been used as a military ritual dance that serves to raise the morale of the army. There are many varieties of Kochari dance practiced in different parts of the country. One can witness everyone joining on the dancefloor for the unifying Kochari dance at any wedding, celebration or festival to bring in the spirit of their ancestors. In 2017, UNESCO Committee included the Armenian folk dance Kochari in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In 2018, Azerbaijan presented an application for the inscription of "Yali (Kochari, Tenzere), traditional group dances of Nakhchivan", which could be viewed as an indirect aggression towards Armenia, and which, later on, caused some controversy around the question among the international audience. However, we must remember that Armenia had already received the inscription of Kochari as its national dance. Additionally, there have been several cases when UNESCO registered the same or almost the same intangible cultural heritage from a few countries. Finally, the case has to do with a "Yali" dance which has many variations and Azerbaijan may consider kochari as one of its types.



ARMENIAN LETTER ART AND ITS CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS

Year: 2019



The roots of Armenian letters date back to 405 AD when Armenian alphabet was created. Armenian letter art and its cultural expressions resembles the ancient art of Armenian letters, scripts and their unique decoration. The creation of the Armenian letters became a tipping point for Armenian history, resulting in the rise of Armenian culture and science. It's an integral part of the cultural identity of Armenia. The letters carry the religious approaches of the Armenian people, starting with A, which stands for God (Astvats in Armenian) and ending with Q for Jesus Christ (Qristos in Armenian). It's used in all areas – carpet weaving, embroidering, sculpture, linguistics, calligraphy, jewelry making, and more. The Armenian alphabet managed to remain unchanged for more than sixteen centuries. After the 12th century, three more letters (Ւ, Ո and Ֆ) were added.

2019 was also a flourishing year for the UNESCO-Armenia co-operation. The Armenian bid titled "Armenian letter art and its cultural expressions" got inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It is said at the UNESCO website "Armenian letter art and its cultural expressions constitutes the centuries-old art of Armenian writing. Beyond its primary function to record and communicate information, Armenian letter art has penetrated almost all layers of society, particularly folk art."

LAVASH, THE PREPARATION, MEANING AND APPEARANCE OF TRADITIONAL BREAD AS AN EXPRESSION OF CULTURE IN ARMENIA

Year: 2014

Lavash is a traditional thin bread widely used in Armenia that constitutes an integral part of the traditional cuisine. In ancient times, lavash was prepared in different settlements of Armenian highlands in order to have fresh bread for a long period of time (Lavash can be stored up to six months). The receipt is quite simple (water, flour and salt) but the preparation is like a ritual, typically undertaken by a small group of women, and requires great effort and experience.

Lavash is one of the symbols of prosperity in the Armenian culture. It even serves its role during the traditional wedding ceremony. In 2014, an application was submitted to the Committee by the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, RA Ministry of Culture and UNESCO National committee of Armenia titled "Lavash, the preparation, meaning and appearance of traditional bread as an expression of culture in Armenia." Interestingly, two years later, in 2016, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Iran presented a collective nomination titled "Flatbread making and sharing culture: Lavash, Katyrma, Jupka, Yufka," which was eventually accepted by the Committee. ♦



THE ARMENIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE IN FOREIGN LANDS

Armenian culture has its peculiar presence not only within the borders of the country, but it also left its trace across the globe. Here are several sites of Armenian origin, included in UNESCO Cultural Heritage List from other countries.

TEXT : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN / PHOTO : WIKIPEDIA.ORG

▼
North wall of Ani,
Turkey

➤
Chapel in the Monastery of the Hripsimian Virgins in Ani, Turkey

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF ANI

According to the UNESCO procedure, countries cannot nominate for the inscription at the UNESCO Cultural Heritage List if the sites are located in other countries. Nevertheless, for each state the registration of its historical/cultural heritage at UNESCO Cultural Heritage List is extremely important from the conservation perspective, even if it's done by another country. The international recognition transfers the site from the national level to the international one, inviting the attention of much wider publics. This was the case with the Archaeological Site of Ani inscribed by Turkey in 2016.

The ancient Armenian metropolis Ani is located in Kars province of Turkey and used to have over 100,000 residents by the 11th century. The "City of Forty Gates" flourished in the period of the 10-11 centuries CE, when it became the capital of medieval Armenia under the rule of Bagratide Kingdom. In the initial UNESCO inscription application, the Turkish government mentioned few words about the Armenian origin of the site. "However, we made some serious efforts and managed to update the application and ensure that the Armenian trace is present," says Artashes Arakelyan, the chief specialist at the Department of International Relations of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports.





Ani was an important meeting point at the route controlling trade between Byzantium, Persia, Syria and Central Asia. It's worth noting that Turkish side preferred to use the term "Anatolian silk road" refusing to mention the "Western Armenia" term. The cross-cultural interactions emerged into a new cultural style which was specific to the city of Ani, however, the Armenian trace was a central motive in the city. Ani was known to the world as the "city of a thousand and one churches" and all of them of Armenian origin, except for one. One could witness the evolution and innovations of medieval architecture all at one place just visiting the site, enabling them to look behind the curtain of time and appear in the heart of Medieval Armenia. The city was always at the spotlight of the Turkish government which used it as lever in the problematic relationship with Armenia. Last year, the Turkish government representatives visited the site and made several announcements but they didn't mention the name Armenian in any of them, despite the fact that the latter was once a renowned capital of Armenia.

Armenia left its trace at yet another site, which was inscribed at the UNESCO Cultural Heritage List by Turkey. Standing as a crown on the highest peak of the Taurus mountain chain of Turkey, Nemrut Dag was built by Antiochus I of the Kingdom of Commagene (69-34 B.C.), an Armenian King whose lineage connected him to the Seleucids, Ptolemies, and Macedonians. The mortuary complex – including sculpture, temples, inscriptions, and reliefs at the site, represent a mixture of local religions such as Armenian, Greek, and Persian. Mount Nemrut Archaeological Site was rediscovered in 1881, inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1987 and established as a National Park the following year. Master sculptors immortalized the king seated among the gods, including Greco-Roman deities such as Zeus, Apollo, and Heracles. According to some historians, these sculptures of divine entities could be considered as the representatives of Armenian and Persian pantheons. Interestingly, the statues appear to have Greek-style facial features but Armenian clothing and hairstyle. ➤



Turkey has another Armenian cultural marvel at its tentative list for inscription at UNESCO's cultural heritage list since 2015: the church of the Holy Cross located on Akhtamar Island, also known as Akdamar, Aghtamar and Ahtamar, built between 915 and 921 A.D. by Armenian king Gagik I Ardzruni. The UNESCO website says "Akhtamar Church represents a unique accomplishment in Christian architecture, displaying for the first time sculpted imagery on the exterior of a church in such an elaborate profusion," the UNESCO website said. The church was restored in 2005 and after 95 years of break has started serving divine liturgy since 2010 by the initiative of the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople. UNESCO also highlighted that the inclusion of the site at UNESCO's World Heritage list would contribute to the Van becoming a tourism center. Interestingly, Turkish government declared about their application

for Agdamar on the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide but in order to add the site to the tentative list, they had to add "Armenian Church" on board of the Akhtamar Holy Church.

The Armenian Monastic Ensembles of Iran is yet another particle of Armenian heritage in Caucasus region. The site is located in the north-west of the country and consists of three monastic ensembles of the Armenian Christian faith: St Thaddeus and St Stepanos and the Chapel of Dzordzor. The oldest St. Thaddeus Church is considered as one of the few known Christian holy places, where the remains of Twelve Apostles of Jesus Christ are known to rest.

"We should note the level of professionalism by which the Persian side continuously preserves the site," Mr. Arakelyan noted, "they've even requested experts from Armenia when preparing the applications for nominations."





▲
The Saint Stepanos
Monastery, Iran

Another important religious relic of Armenian origin was inscribed under the general application by Palestine in 2012, namely the Birthplace of Jesus: Church of the Nativity and the Pilgrimage Route. The latter is located not far from Jerusalem on the site identified by Christian tradition as the birthplace of Jesus. The site also includes Latin, Greek Orthodox, Franciscan and Armenian convents and churches, as well as bell towers, terraced gardens and a pilgrimage route. In the beginning of the year, Prince Charles visited the Armenian church at the Church of the Nativity, driving the attention of the international audience once again. Yet another religious trace of Armenia can be found in Ukraine, inscribed into UNESCO's list as a part of Lviv Historical Center. The city was founded in the late Middle Ages, and up to these days saved its multicultural atmosphere with high artistic value of Renaissance and Baroque traditions. Since its establishment, the city has blossomed due to its favorable geographical position for trade and political development. Today, the surviving architectural and artistic heritage reflects a mishmash of Eastern European traditions. The presence of different cultures and ethnic communities is seen in the surviving buildings, including a mosque, a synagogue and a variety of religious buildings from the Orthodox, Armenian and Catholic churches.

According to Mr. Arakelyan, the 70% of Armenian historical/cultural heritage is outside of its borders, conveying the Armenian spirit across the world. Some of them we know, some of them don't but it's a proven fact that at almost all spots of the world one can see the footprints of Armenia. ♦

◀
The Cathedral of
the Holy Cross in
Lake Van, Turkey



SHARE WITH THE WORLD: Bidding National Heritage Into UNESCO Lists

UNESCO and Armenia have almost 30 years of successful collaboration, with the inscription of most prominent Armenian sites and cultural traditions. Regional Post met with Naira Kilichyan, Chief Specialist of Cultural Heritage and Folk Crafts department of the RA Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport and Artashes Arakelyan, Chief Specialist of International Cultural Cooperation of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora department and asked them some general questions regarding the journey of Armenia and UNESCO.

TEXT : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN

FIRST STEPS AND GENERAL REMARKS

Intangible Cultural Heritage

First of all, we need to know that the sphere of Intangible Cultural Heritage in the world and in Armenia, in particular, is regulated by the UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The treaty was adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in 2003, and entered into force in 2006, after the ratification by the UNESCO Member States, includ-

ing Armenia. In 2009, already after the ratification of the convention, Armenia also passed a law on Intangible Cultural Heritage. By all these legal regulations Armenia aims to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage in its territory. What does this phrase imply? It refers to the whole oral history, the traditional culture, and folk masterpieces passed down orally from generation to generation – national songs and dances, folklore, languages, dialects,



folk crafts, and theatrical style – which is subject to being vanished as they are not recorded anywhere. It's not about the final product, as it would already enter the realm of tangible heritage, but the knowledge, abilities, beliefs related to these crafts, the way this cultural treasure is created by the master and passed down to his apprentice. Preparing an application is a constant process that never stops. If not every year but once in two years Armenia presents applications to UNESCO. There are many proposals from individuals and communities and soon they will be put to the discussion at the councils.





World Heritage List Sites

Armenia ratified UNESCO's World Cultural and Natural Heritage Convention in 1993 and since then has undertaken commitment to present the cultural heritage sites located in its territory. The convention recognizes three types of monuments. The first one refers to historical-cultural monuments and ancient sites, the next one refers to the natural heritage, which includes sanctuaries, oceans, reserves, while the last is the combination of these two, including both monuments and natural treasures. After 1993, Armenia presented three groups of monuments. The first was

Monasteries of Haghpat and Sanahin inscribed in 1996 and widened in 2000. After this, Armenia registered the Monastery of Geghard and the Upper Azat Valley followed by the Cathedral and Churches of Echmiadzin and the Archaeological Site of Zvartnots in the same year. We also have four monuments in the tentative list, all nominated in 1995. They are the archaeological site of the city of Dvin, the basilica and archaeological site of Yererouk, the monastery of Noravank and the upper Amaghou Valley, the monasteries of Tatev and Tatevi Anapat and the adjacent areas of the Vorotan Valley.

BIDDING PROCESS

Intangible Cultural Heritage

The Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport, as an authorized coordinating body, receives proposals from different communities, public organizations, groups, and individuals, who present letters to the Ministry suggesting to bid for this or that intangible cultural heritage. But first, the elements are to be registered in the RA Intangible Cultural Heritage lists as, according to the convention, countries can bid only for the elements registered in the state lists. When we receive the proposals, we put them to the discussion of the Professional Council for Intangible

Cultural Heritage under the Ministry. If they approve the proposal and the RA Government confirms the list, we implement an inventory of the intangible cultural heritage in the country. There are three state lists and we already have 47 elements registered in them. The first one is the Viable Values list including elements that are currently not endangered. The next list is the Immediate Protection list, and the last one is the list of Intangible Heritage Cultural Sites which refers to the viable centers of living cultural values. The Professional council also discusses whether to submit the suggested application to UNESCO. We simultaneously approach the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to see the political aspects of the question and view the expediency of the question from that point of view. After the final decision, we begin preparing the application which assumes the creation of a working group of experts. The final application package includes the application form, letter agreements, a short film, and the state document proving that the claimed element is registered at the state lists. We provide this package to the UNESCO National Commission at the RA Ministry of Foreign Affairs and they pass the application to the headquarters of UNESCO in Paris. We already have six elements registered on UNESCO's list.

World Heritage List Sites

Before 2005, the Convention didn't have a guideline on presenting sites and each country was free to prepare the application the way it wanted. But in 2006, the Operational Guideline was introduced together with several consulting manuals indicating how the monument should be presented. Additionally, ten standards were set and when presenting for nominations, the country should comply with at least one of them. But the most important merits refer to integrity, authen-

ticity, and the management of the site. So, when choosing a site for nomination, the country should consider also these three aspects: for example, whether the ancient fragments of the monument are still existent, and if they are not – the country is to present a clarification and include it in the package. We're also obliged to conduct a comparative analysis with other similar monuments in the region. Overall, this process requires a lot of hard work and may take several years to achieve success.



According to the procedure, when you present the nomination package, the World Heritage center sends its advisory body representatives. One is the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the second one is the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the third advisory body is The International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM). The experts give their opinion on the compliance with the standards. Their opinion is presented to the government and it either accepts and conducts necessary procedures or withdraws the application.

PROBLEMATIC CASES

Intangible Cultural Heritage

Quite interestingly, in 2015, immediately after Armenia submitted an application for Kochari, the Azerbaijani government submitted their own application for Yalli – the traditional group dances of Nakhchivan, mentioning over 20 dances but with an emphasis on Kochari and Tenzere. They presented the dance as an extinct element, claiming for its registration at the Urgent Safeguarding List. The same scenario was with the application for Lavash. I have to mention that they succeeded causing a large-scale stir in the Armenian media and society despite the diligent work of the Ministry. Unfortunately, as a result of lack of information and major misconceptions we've received some negative reactions. Meanwhile, the Armenian application for Kochari was registered in 2017 and their application was registered only last year.

The political context and intentions are obvious, and as a dance expert I can tell that the group dances of Nakhichevan might be of Armenian origin as for decades Armenians have resided in the area. We've also viewed their application, and the dance which they presented under the name Kochari didn't have anything in common with the Armenian dance even though there are around 40 types of Kochari. They managed to cause the same stir within the Armenian society in the case of dolma as well. Sadly, people forget that UNESCO doesn't grant ownership of the element to the applying country. They simply register the existence of the viable cultural heritage in the area, in order to create favorable conditions for the preservation and transmission of the latter.

World Heritage List Sites

When we first heard about this application by Turkey, we were extremely happy for one simple reason: Ani, at that point having only national importance was in the field of Turkey, and only Turkey could interfere conservation processes of the city. But when the



monument entered the cultural heritage list, its preservation value increased and it became the problem of not only one or two nations but of the whole world, which gave an opportunity to another country interested in this monument – in this case, Armenia – to raise its voice on the international level and to present its views and approaches. We've prepared information booklets and a short film about Ani's history because when we received the preliminary application of Turkey, there were very few mentions of the Armenian trace. We made several amendments and the current application indicates that Ani is an Armenian monument.

The Ministry managed to make these edits in the situation of closed borders and complete absence of diplomatic relations. Ani had several cultural layers and crossroads of various nations, but it reached its peak under the rule of Armenian Bagratid Kingdom when it became the capital city.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATIONS

Intangible Cultural Heritage

We're closely cooperating with UNESCO's two regional centers out of five – in Sofia, Bulgaria and Tehran, Iran. For example, in 2017 and 2018 we organized an international training on raising awareness among the society regarding the convention and the participation of local experts in the preparation of applications in other countries, and last year we had a training on the inventory of intangible cultural heritage. We always

invite international experts approved by UNESCO. For example, last year, one of the speakers of our training was Janet Blake, who's an extremely professional expert from Scotland who currently works at one of the central universities of Tehran. We also invited the expert Sasha Srejkovich from Serbia, who conducted an 8-day training for our local experts, the holders of intangible cultural heritage and other specialists in order to conduct the inventory of the elements more successfully. With Sofia's center, we always participate in their exhibitions and we also constantly provide articles for their Viable Heritage Magazine.

World Heritage List Sites

We had large-scale cooperation with Iran because when they were registering the Armenian Monastic Assemblies of Iran, they requested experts from Armenia to come and assist in the preparation of the application packages. So, Armenian professionals traveled to Iran and participated in the processes related to all the monuments. I have to emphasize that the Iranian government has always managed to restore Armenian monuments on a very high level, keeping all the standards. On the other hand, we have the Blue Mosque in the center of Yerevan and in the past years there has been some work done towards its inscription and, currently, we're discussing the case with the Iranian side in order to understand whether in case of comparative analysis it will prove its universal value. ♦

UNESCO in South Caucasus

In the extremely complicated region of South Caucasus, culture stays one of the most controversial components of national identity. South Caucasian countries have been battling for the ownership of dolma and bakhlava for decades. In this extremely competitive environment, how does UNESCO manage to identify and preserve tangible and intangible cultural values of South Caucasian nations?

TEXT : VIKTORYA MURADYAN



◀
43rd session of
the World Heritage
Committee in Baku,
2019

▼
Petroglyphs of Go-
bustan, Azerbaijan



ARMENIA

For many years, UNESCO has been an important platform for the promotion of Armenia's cultural heritage in the world. So, it is not surprising, that one of the greatest cultural icons of our nation, Charles Aznavour, has been the Head of Armenia's permanent representation in UNESCO. Armenia signed the UNESCO Convention back in 1993. Since then, Armenia has had three sites that were inscribed in the World Heritage List: Cathedral and Churches of Ejmiatsin and the Archaeological Site of Zvartnots (2000), Monasteries of Haghpat and Sanahin (1996, 2000) and the Monastery of Geghard and the Upper Azat Valley (2000). In 2016, the World Heritage Centre Advisory mission visited all Armenian World Heritage properties and developed a set of recommendations for the management and preservation of these cultural sites. UNESCO implemented also a technical assistance project with the Shirak Museum in 2002.

Kochari, as well as the Armenian Letter Art and its Cultural Expressions have been the most recent recipients of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity title. Other Armenian non-tangible cultural values inscribed in this list include lavash, khachkars, duduk and its music, as well as the performance of the Armenian epic of "David of Sassoun".

In July 2019, Djulfa, a sacred site for Armenians which represents world's largest collection of exquisitely-carved medieval khachkars, was disqualified as a potential candidate for the World Heritage list, because Azerbaijan, who was also the host of that year's UNESCO session had completely destroyed all the traces of the presence of Armenian Christians and their legacy in Djulfa.

On the other hand, another neighbour of ours, Iran, made every effort to inscribe the Armenian Monastic Ensembles in the northwest of the country in the World Heritage List. The Monastery Ensemble, which includes St. Stepanos Monastery and the Chapel of Dzordzor, has been inscribed in the World Heritage list site since 2008.

Last year, during his visit to Iran, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan gave an interview to IRNA, saying that Armenia has prepared a complete package to submit the Yerevan Blue Mosque for the UNESCO World Heritage List. This will be an expression of gratitude to the Iranian friends for their efforts to preserve Armenian cultural heritage within their borders.

AZERBAIJAN

Azerbaijan's Gobustan Rock Art Cultural Landscape (2007), Historic Centre of Sheki with the Khan's Palace (2019) and Walled City of Baku with the Shirvanshah's Palace and Maiden Tower (2000) are the only sites included in UNESCO's World Heritage list. However, Azerbaijan has a record number of 13 representative items in UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Some elements attributed uniquely to Azerbaijan's ownership such as Yalli (Kochari, Tenzere, traditional group dances of Nakhchivan), dolma making and sharing tradition, a traditional Karabakh horse-riding game, craftsmanship and performance art of the Tar and traditional art of Azerbaijani carpet weaving are already raising huge questions about UNESCO's judgement. These cases are obvious demonstrations of the political statements that Azerbaijan tries to convey under the mask of "culture". In the case of the Karabakh horse-riding game, Azerbaijan demonstratively used the wording "the

Republic of Azerbaijan" to represent Nagorno Karabakh as a part of Azerbaijani Republic. Some other entries in the Intangible Cultural Heritage list include copper craftsmanship of Lahij, traditional art and symbolism of Kələghayi (making and wearing women's silk headscarves), art of Azerbaijani Ashiq and Mugham. Some other elements in this list, such as the art of crafting and playing the Kamancha, Novruz, flatbread making and sharing culture – Lavash, Katyrma, Jupka, Yufka, Azerbaijan shares with Turkey, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and other countries. This is a perfect demonstration of how Azerbaijan tries to take ownership of the cultural heritage of other countries.

Azerbaijani Government seems to be obsessed with UNESCO, titles given by this organization and by their approval. But only a few understand that most of the time this attention towards Azerbaijani culture is bought. UNESCO, as an organization caring about cultural tolerance has never

condemned Azerbaijan for the destruction of cultural values in Nakhichevan. Instead, Azerbaijan was titled the status of a "Land of Tolerance" in a special photo exhibition in UNESCO HQ in Paris. Azerbaijan has never hesitated to buy benevolence with money. UNESCO is an intergovernmental organization who always struggles to provide necessary funding for its activities. In 2013, Azerbaijan donated \$5 million to UNESCO. When Guardian's investigation broke out the news about Azerbaijan's ruling elite's secret \$2.9bn bribe scheme in Europe, UNESCO was one of the involved stakeholders. Kalin Mitrev, a board member of London-based European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the husband of then Director general of UNESCO Irina Bokova received €425,000 for private consulting work from a local Azeri company, Avuar Co. With a surprising coincidence, Bokova gave UNESCO's highest honours, the Mozart Medal to Azerbaijan's first lady and VP, Mehriban Aliyeva.



Armenian khachkars in Julfa, Nakhichevan, destroyed by Azerbaijan

GEORGIA

Georgia has less scandalous relationship with UNESCO. Like its neighbours, Georgia is represented in the World Heritage list with three cultural sites: Gelati Monastery (1994, 2017), Historical Monuments of Mtskheta (1994) and Upper Svaneti (1996). Georgia's Historical Monuments of Mtskheta were inscribed on the Danger List in 2009, but they were removed from that list 7 years later. Georgia also has 4 cultural elements inscribed in the Intangible Cultural Heritage List, including Georgian wrestling called Chidaoba, Georgian polyphonic singing, ancient Georgian traditional Qvevri wine-making method and living culture of three writing systems of the Georgian alphabet. In the nearest future, Georgia is planning to submit the Georgian Supra (traditional feast) for placement on the Intangible Cultural Heritage List. UNESCO named Tbilisi the World Book Capital of 2021, which means that a series of events will take place about the use of modern technologies as powerful tools for promoting reading among the youth. Armenia was granted this status in 2012. ♦

Con tro ver sia culture



In the aftermath of the World War II, 44 nations gathered in London to create an international body under the umbrella of the UN. The newly created body, UNESCO, would be responsible for educational, scientific and cultural cooperation, as well as for the post-war reconstruction and rehabilitation of the UN member states. Over the course of the 75 years, UNESCO has implemented numerous activities in the domains of education, science and culture globally. Its World Heritage Center has enumerated over 1000 sites and monuments all over the world, with an intention to preserve their cultural or natural significance and save those sites from destruction. But has UNESCO always been successful in its mission? Could it stick to the values and principles promoted by the UN? The status of an intergovernmental organization makes UNESCO extremely bureaucratic and dependent on political influence. At the same time, the labels that UNESCO gives to different cultural and natural treasures are being used as a powerful marketing tool that end up more harming those treasures, than actually preserving them.

TEXT : VIKTORYA MURADYAN



Save the Venice

In 1966, Venice was almost destroyed by floods, that have brought up a torrent of dirty water through the canals and resulted in the damage of cultural treasures valued at \$6 billion. UNESCO obviously started a campaign to raise funds for saving Venice and the cultural treasures of the city. This has been one of the most ambitious campaigns ever led by UNESCO. But 50 years after the disastrous flood, which had been caused by industrialization, the future of the city is still hanging in the air. The growing tourism and developing transportation is bringing a lot of cash to the city, but it is also destroying it with the same speed. The International Council on Monuments and Sites has reported that while the Italian government uses the UNESCO World Heritage brand extensively to attract tourists, it rarely sticks to the recommendation and necessary actions to preserve the cultural value of the city. Moreover, despite all the existing proof that the city is in danger, UNESCO never put Venice on its list of World Heritage in Danger which is explained by UNESCO's very close relationship with Italy. ➤





WikiLeaks

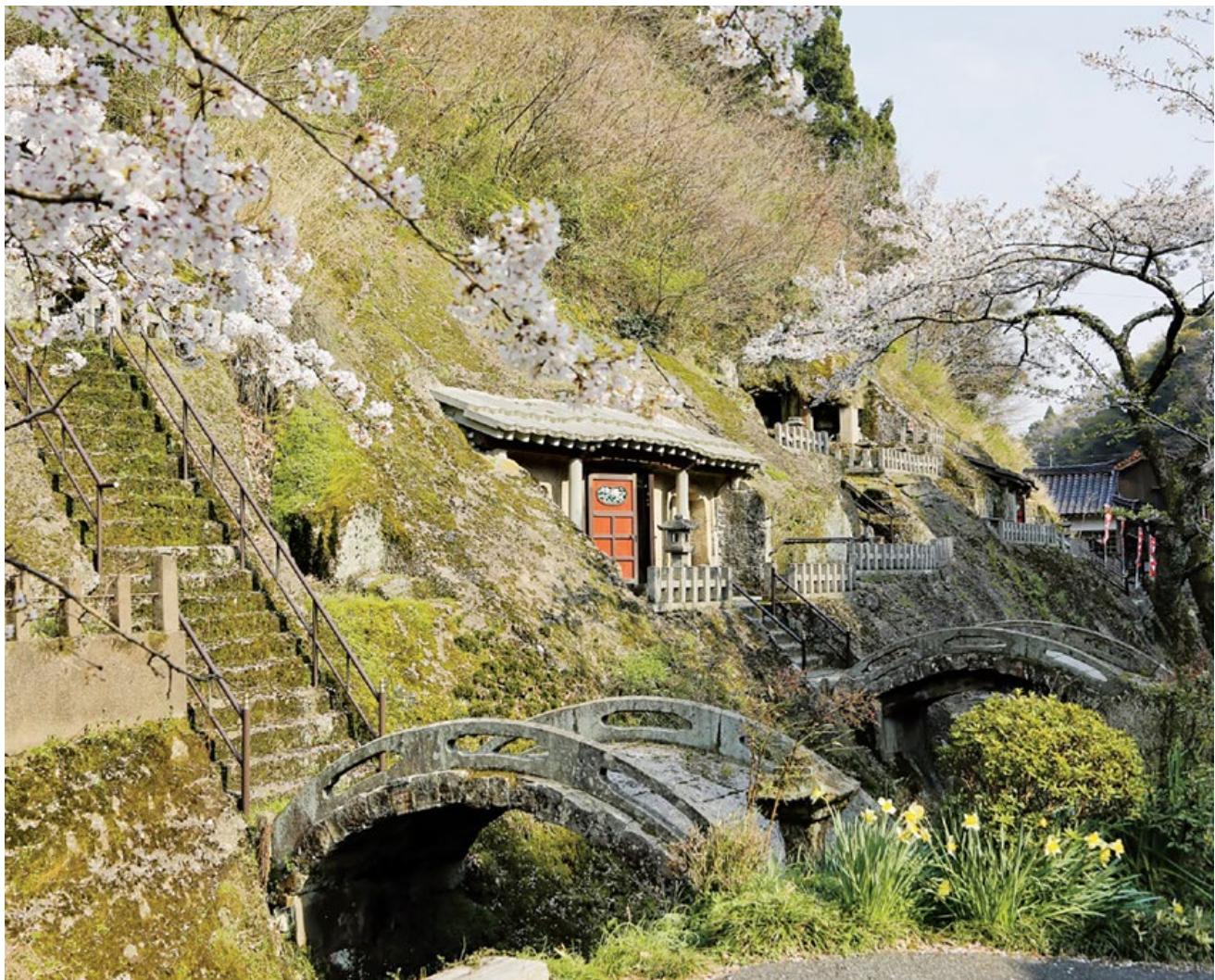
In February 2012, UNESCO organized a conference called "The Media World after WikiLeaks and News of the World" in Paris. As the UNESCO website said, it aimed "to explore a wide range of new questions for traditional media and journalism posed by the WikiLeaks phenomenon." Among the 37 speakers listed, actually, none represented WikiLeaks. Moreover, WikiLeaks representatives were banned from the conference and none of them had a chance to speak up or become a part of a panel. The conference, that was supposed to be about free speech, became a center of a scandal about freedom of expression. In fact, UNESCO never picked a side in the WikiLeaks affair for diplomatic reasons. In an interview with a French media organization Cafbabel, the UNESCO representative said that "It's extremely difficult to take the side of freedom of expression in the face of the most powerful member states. UNESCO experienced a very difficult, negative period when the US and the UK withdrew from the organization." Which meant only one thing: UNESCO was ready to close eyes on many of its principles for the sake of financial contributions of the member states.

The prize in the name of a dictator

In 2008, UNESCO created an award called the UNESCO-Obiang Nguema Mbasogo International Prize for Research in the Life Sciences to recognize "scientific achievements that improve the quality of human life." The award, which has been named after the dictator of Equatorial Guinea and funded by his \$3 million contribution to UNESCO, has been heavily criticized and protested by around 270 organizations. During Obiang Nguema Mbasogo's administration, the people of Equatorial Guinea suffered from corruption and from lack of access to clean water. He has executed his predecessor and arrested and tortured his political opponents. 75% of the country's population was living in poverty while he was enjoying the benefits of the country's oil wealth.

The prize has been awarded to three scientists despite the recommendations to suspend the implementation of the prize. The Obiang prize was eventually suspended two years after, in October 2010.





The Iwami Ginzan silver mine

The Japanese Iwami Ginzan town, which once was a very rich and lively community, became a ghost town after its silver mines closed in 1923. The local businessman Toshiro Nakamura wanted to bring life to the town again. Thanks to his connection with some diplomats in Tokyo, he could make Iwami Ginzan one of UNESCO's World Heritage sites even if according to an independent assessment by ICMS, it did not correspond to any of the 10 selection criteria. After appearing on this list, was flooded by hordes of tourists without having the proper capacity to host them. Not only the town disappointed curious tourists, but also local people found themselves in extremely inconvenient situations. According to one news report, one of the residents of the town came home and found three strangers sitting in his living room, thinking that it is a part of the town tour. The marketing action, composed of developing tourism through the "World Heritage" labelling (which is used quite often by different governments and local authorities), has been described by an Italian writer Marco d'Eramo as a "Unesco-cide". ➤



Commemorating sites associated with violence

Although UNESCO formally promotes values such as integrity, diversity and respect, very often the organization's decisions raise huge controversies about the level of commitment to those same values. In 1978, the island of Gorée in Senegal was listed among the World Heritage sites. The site has been a center of human exploitation and international slave trade. Similarly, in 1979, the former Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, and in 1996, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial have joined the World Heritage list in spite of their painful history. In 2016, despite the Armenian Genocide, the medieval city of Ani in Turkey became a World Heritage site. The latest case has been observed when Thailand was seeking endorsement for the Burma-Siam Railway as a Word Heritage: it was constructed by Japan using forced labor and prisoners of war. The worst thing about listing those places is that they are being intentionally exploited as touristic attractions.

Hiroshima Peace Memorial



Maison des Esclaves on Gorée Island, Senegal



US-Israel-Palestine triangle

In 2011, UNESCO member states voted to admit Palestine as a full member of the Organization with 14 votes against and 52 abstentions. The United States was one of the 14 states to vote against the admission alongside Israel. In order to respond to UNESCO's action, the Obama administration froze its annual financial contributions to the organization (around \$80 million). Since then, the US has not paid around \$600 million in dues. The resolutions about the cultural sites in Jerusalem and the West Bank have been constantly debated because of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. In 2012, UNESCO established a chair at the Islamic University of Gaza in the field of Astronomy, Astrophysics and Space science. Israel was furious with this decision. They had previously bombed one of the wings of the university fueled by suspicions that Palestinians develop and store weapons there. Eventually, in 2019 both US and Israel officially left UNESCO 2 years after announcing their intention, causing huge financial damage to the organization. Both countries justified their decision by saying that there is an obvious "anti-Israel bias" within the organization and the US called UNESCO a "tool for Israel's enemies". The interesting fact is that the US has been more offended by this "anti-Israel bias" and according to some reports, the US has not even informed Israel about its decision to leave the organization.

After all, it was just the last episode of a very complicated history of the UNESCO-US relations. In 1974, US president Ford froze payments to UNESCO, because the latter recognized the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Under Ronald Reagan the US left UNESCO in 1983 and only regained a full membership with the Bush administration.

Honoring Che Guevara & Atatürk

In 2013, UNESCO took a decision to include 431 manuscripts and 567 documents about or related to Cuban Revolution leader Che Guevara called "The Life and Works of Ernesto Che Guevara" in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. This register regroups documents that are considered to have "world significance and outstanding universal value." Different parties, including the American Government and UN Watch, heavily criticized this act calling it "disrespectful toward the families of the people who have been executed by Che Guevara." This was not very surprising, as in 1981, UNESCO and the UN celebrated the Atatürk Centennial, without considering his involvement in the Greek genocide. UNESCO's choice of "cultural and historic values" does not have any coherence with the values that the organization tries to promote. ♦



ARMENIA REPRESENTED IN IOV/UNESCO ON AN INTERNATIO- NAL PLATFORM: *An Interview with Anahit Khechumyan*

The objective of the UNESCO's International Organization of Folk Art (IOV) is to "further promote folk art, customs and culture around the world through the organization of festivals and other cultural events, thereby contributing to international understanding and world peace" which is directly related to UNESCO's mission of "Building Peace in the Minds of Men and Women". IOV has had its presence in Armenia for many years, however, Anahit Khechumyan's journey with this international organization started in 2001, when Valeri Paranyan, an active cultural event and festival organizer and a writer known widely during the Soviet Union times, got to an age of retirement and decided to pass the torch to a more dedicated and enthusiastic person. So, he found Anahit Khechumyan.

INTERVIEW : HASMIK CHAKARYAN / PHOTO : ANAHIT KHECHUMYAN



ANAHIT KHECHUMYAN

Mrs. Khechumyan, who has graduated from Romanos Melikyan College of Music in 1988 followed by the Komitas State Conservatory in 1993, has studied piano and musicology obtaining the specialty of a folklorist. She has had 33 years of active career representing Armenia on various platforms, both nationally and internationally. She has established the Vaspourakan Dance and Song Ensemble in 1987 which she leads to this day. The Ensemble has been the home to hundreds of children coming from mostly lower socio-economic backgrounds for whom this educational establishment has been an escape from hardship and an opportunity for shining of their many talents.

Vaspourakan has participated in several international festivals in countries like Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Egypt, Jordan, Belarus, Iran, Turkey, Syria and the Baltics. They have participated in two State Festivals organized by the Ministry of Culture of Armenia during both of which the Ensemble has taken the Second Place (Children of Armenia, 1992, and Debut 95, 1995). In other State level international festivals, Vaspourakan has also obtained distinguished prizes, such as a First Place in Zolotoy Delfin Festival/Competition in Batumi, Georgia, 2017, and Jerash Festival organized by the queen of Jordan, where they won the Best Folk Ensemble category. In the framework of UNESCO festivals, Khechumyan's Ensemble has participated in several international festivals including those of Georgia and Syria.

Based on her many publications, years of dedication and work in the framework of cultural representation, and presenting as a member of IOV of UNESCO, Anahit Khechumyan was invited to serve on the jury of several international festivals in many cities of Georgia, Egypt and Armenia.

What does it mean to you to be a member of IOV/UNESCO?

— It is a great honor and privilege. Not everyone gets to represent their beloved country on such a level, at such a prestigious organization.

What has it been like for you to bring Vaspourakan to a UNESCO Festival Competition?

— It's a spectacular event for the kids and they never complain of the long travels and endless hours of practice. You burst with pride when your kiddos take the stage. But you raise your head even higher when your ensemble, an Armenian team, wins the Original Style category. This was in Tbilisi, at the UNESCO Festival of 2003.

So, is it because of all these festival participation and awards that you started getting invitations to serve as a jury on these international festivals and competitions in all these countries for the last 5 years?

— Well, there is certainly a rule that only a member of an international organization can be a juror of an international cultural festival in addition to having earned your place among best folklorists and cultural activists. It's certainly a great honor to serve on the jury representing Armenia but more so a huge responsibility. I do, however, carry it with pride.

What are some recent events you participated in that have stood out to you in one way or another?

— I just returned from an international festival in Egypt which was organized by the International Association of Performing Arts in which 10 countries were presented. I represented Armenia among these 10 jurors. I am invited to serve on the jury of international festivals representing Armenia for at least 5 times a year.

I know you recently returned from Borjomi, Georgia. What was the cause?

— I'd love to. I was invited to serve on the jury of the international festival and exhibit of handmade works where we presented Armenia through various talented Armenian artists. Among them, Maya Dali, the only female vitrage jeweler, presented her works of leather and gemstone-composed jewelry. We also had Tatev Grigoryan presenting her NGO and the participating artists' handmade dolls and needle works, as well as Silva Hovakimyan, who among other handmade works, presented her unique compositions with flower-petals which is a unique branch of Japanese Oshibana art. Maya received the title of an International Master, while Silva and Tatev received the title of National Masters. It's a great honor to come to these international festivals with so much unique talent representing Armenia.

What are some other great achievements that you remember taking away from these international festivals that were remarkable for Armenia?

— Well, I can think of Yegishe Gevorgyan, a master vocalist in folk song genre who took the Grand Prix in Egypt, 2020, and Khachik Khanzatyian, who took the First Place in Borjomi that same year as a master clarinetist. These are just the very recent ones. It's hard to remember all the winners and achievements after 33 years of busy schedule and activities.

So, what's next for you?

— Oh, well, that brings me to this very recent assignment I received by the World Association of Performing Arts. I am in charge of organizing the Conference in the framework of the International Festival Superstar

during which there will be a new genre category presented for the first time – literary art, and many writers and publicists from Armenia and Diaspora will bring their participation. I will also be presenting my research on folk art during this conference. My work is dedicated to Komitas' Interpretation of Horovels and Armenian Liberation Folk Songs. The festival will take place in Batumi in June of this year. This is a new endeavor which is pushing me to continuously advance both my research and cultural representation.

What is the most significant thing about being an IOV/UNESCO member for you and doing this work for so many years?

— You know, I hate politics, everything about it, really. That's the one thing I could never be involved in. But I do find myself lucky as I get to live in this, sort of, parallel reality, where people from all these countries get together to celebrate art and culture, cheer one another, appreciate each other's work, value a cultural representation of a life lived somewhere else. It's quite a unique place where we are connected through art and get to honor, appreciate and respect each other's work and stand on the ground of more similarities than differences that tear us apart everywhere else. These are people from countries that are war-torn and generations who have only seen life through a lens of armed conflicts. We just all come together and speak art. We can, for a moment at least, forget about the madness of the world that has infected many of our homes and believe, if even for a second, that we are all connected through art in the various forms of cultural expressions. UNESCO, after all, stands for "international understanding and world peace" while "building peace in the minds of men and women". This is my life dedication! ♦

The Disappearing Armenian Churches of Tbilisi

Many travelers will be in awe of Tbilisi's historical buildings, and the numerous church spires which sprout up from the city. The city itself has been a crossroads for empires, religions and peoples. But, the Armenian contribution to the city's history seems to be on the wane, and nothing exemplifies this more than the neglected Armenian churches which once dominated the cityscape.

TEXT : EMILIO LUCIANO CRICCHIO

According to censuses conducted during the Russian Empire, for much of the 19th century, Armenians were the largest ethnic group in Tbilisi. Naturally therefore, numerous Armenian churches were constructed throughout the city. Much of these churches remain today, however many have been left derelict and ruined, with the municipality of Tbilisi seemingly interested in their restoration, leaving this rich corner of Armenian history under threat.

One of the major affronts to the Armenian churches of Tbilisi started during early Soviet rule, where throughout the union, many places of worship were demolished. Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior, Baku's Bibi-Heybat Mosque, as well as many of the major Armenian churches in Tbilisi were destroyed as part of the USSR's anti-religion campaign. Between 1937 to 1938, churches like Saint Sarkis, Kamoyants St Gevorg, Zrkinyants St Gevorg and Jigrashen Avetyats, were all 200-year-old churches that were destroyed by the Bolsheviks. Even the 14th century Pashavank Monastery, a major Armenian landmark, was brought down completely, with only the bell tower remaining today.

There are two major Armenian churches, however, which are still functioning today. Echmiadzin Church, right by Avlabari Square, is an 18th century church that escaped disuse or destruction. The church in Avlabari is also the final stop for many minivans and buses coming into Tbilisi from Armenia. The other is Saint George's, at the base of the tourist hotspot and historical citadel, the Narikala fortress. Some historians even pinpoint the original construction date of this church to be as far back as 1251. Saint George's was even renovated between 2012 and 2015, with over \$3 million spent on the project. But unlike Saint George's and Echmiadzin churches, many other churches have met less fortunate fates; here is a compilation of a few of the Armenian churches in Tbilisi that were either left derelict, demolished, or even reconsecrated as Georgian Orthodox churches.



NORASHEN CHURCH

Located in the old town, Norashen has been subject to a great deal of controversy. In the early 90s, the process of reconsecrating the church as a Georgian church and the removal of the Armenian characteristics began.

However, due to Norashen's prominence within the Armenian community in Georgia and abroad, the issue even became a cause for tension between the Armenian and Georgian governments.

But it wasn't only Armenians that protested about Norashen; Sozar Subari, a prominent ombudsman and human rights activist, openly stated that it was common knowledge in Tbilisi that Norashen is an Armenian church.

Regardless, activities to remove Armenian characteristics from Norashen were started, but due to outcry from different sectors of Armenian and Georgian society the project was abandoned and the church became defunct.

Although, the dispute continues to this day as to whether Norashen is under Apostolic or Orthodox jurisdiction, some positive developments have occurred, with the Armenian gravestones returned and a renovation of the church taking place. Armenian church and community leaders still continue to fervently campaign for the full return of Norashen to Armenian Apostolic jurisdiction. ➤





CHURCH OF THE HOLY SEAL

The Church of the Holy Seal was built between 1703 and 1711 and was reconstructed in 1780. To many Armenian residents of Tbilisi, it represents a more hard-hitting example of Anti-Armenianism in Georgia.

In 2002, a fire broke out at the church, which local Armenians describe as taking an unusually long time to put out, after which the building was closed to the public. In 2012, two more fires broke out successively, making arson the most probable cause. This combined with the fire damage from the first fire, as well as 10 years of disuse, left the church utterly bereft of its former self, with even the columns collapsing due to extreme heat. Now, the building remains abandoned and according to one local Armenian resident, is only visited by stray dogs.

CHURCH OF THE RED GOSPEL

The final church on this list is the Church of the Red Gospel, a mysterious church with contradictory accounts as to what befell it. Walking towards the old town from the Avlabari district, you may come across a half-collapsed church with Armenian inscriptions on it, with the courtyard being used as a car park.

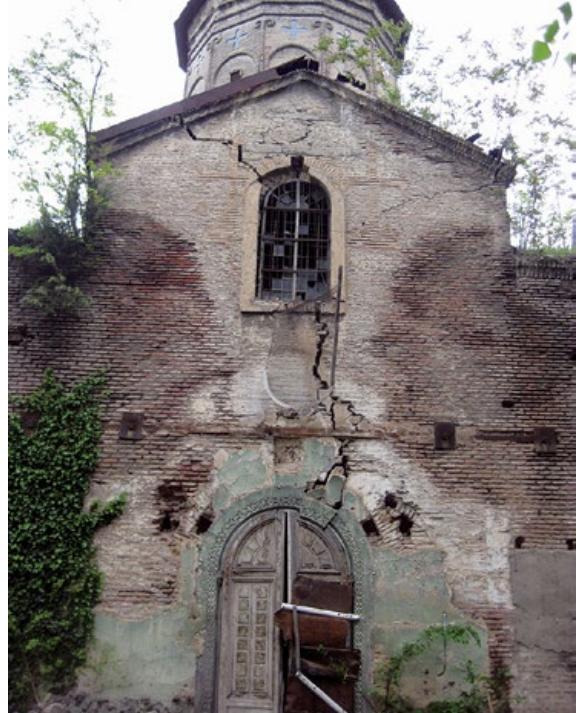
The Church of the Red Gospel's destruction is debated to this day. Armenian locals state that it was a controlled demolition, whilst other Georgian locals state that an earthquake caused the structure to collapse.

Regardless, the church, which once stood at 40 meters, would have dominated the historical skyline of Tbilisi.

While today, with its structure destroyed and the interior closed off to the public, it has become a regular dumping ground for garbage.

These churches are all integral parts of not only Armenian culture and history, but Georgian culture and history as well. Although there are those in Tbilisi and elsewhere that are tirelessly working to preserve or restore the history of these churches, the lack of awareness about their stories remains a major obstacle to any progress.

We applied to the Tbilisi Municipality for a comment with regards to concerns about the issues around Armenian churches in Tbilisi, as well as the slow progress of returning churches like Norashen to Armenian church jurisdiction, but received no reply.



SAINT GEORGE OF MUGHNI CHURCH

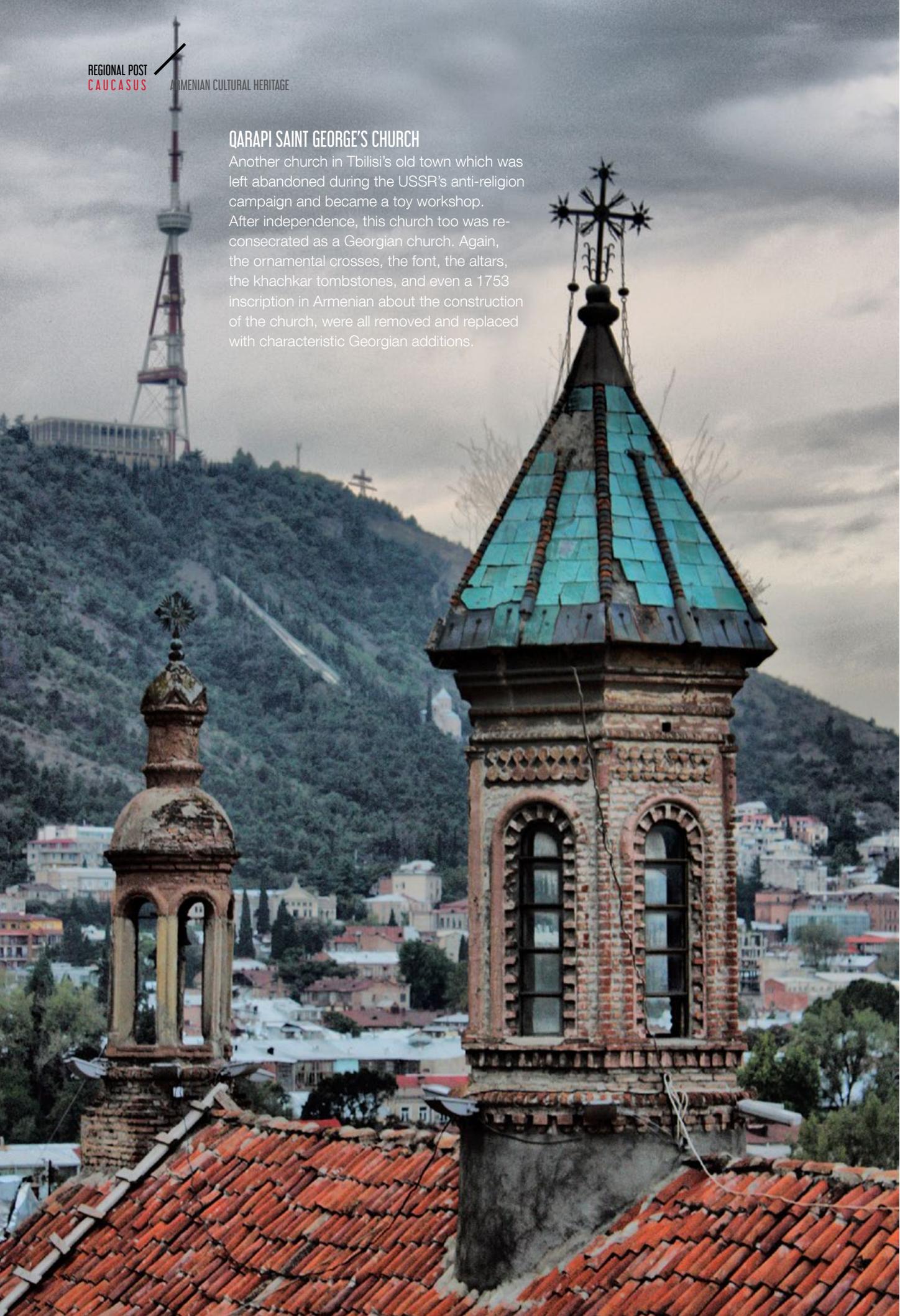
Saint George of Mughni in Tbilisi's Kala district has been sought after by the Georgian Orthodox church, but instead has fallen into disrepair and remains derelict to this day.

After the USSR's anti-religion campaign the church became a museum of art, but soon became disused after the Collapse of Communism. Parts of the church were destroyed in the early 1990s, and cracks started to appear across the walls which were used as an excuse by Georgian authorities who argued that demolishing the unsafe structure was a better course of action than repairing it.

In 2009, the dome collapsed leaving the church laid bare before the elements. Since then multiple sources have committed to renovating the ruined church, but till now nothing notable has happened, and the church built in 1756, remains neglected. ➤

QARAPI SAINT GEORGE'S CHURCH

Another church in Tbilisi's old town which was left abandoned during the USSR's anti-religion campaign and became a toy workshop. After independence, this church too was re-consecrated as a Georgian church. Again, the ornamental crosses, the font, the altars, the khachkar tombstones, and even a 1753 inscription in Armenian about the construction of the church, were all removed and replaced with characteristic Georgian additions.





UPPER BETHLEHEM CHURCH

Located at the foot of the Narikala fortress, this 18th-century Armenian church, in the Kldis-Ubani district, was also reconsecrated as a Georgian Orthodox church in 1994.

Much like some other Armenian churches in Tbilisi, the hallmarks that would identify this as an Armenian church were removed throughout the 90s. In 1991, the frescoes in the interior of the dome were removed. The altar, which was originally constructed in 1898, had inscriptions about the construction of the church in Armenian which was erased by 1990. Furthermore, the font, and a 17th-century Armenian khachkar tombstone also disappeared.

SAINt STEPANOS CHURCH

Saint Stepanos is located very near to the Upper Bethlehem Church, at the foot of the infamous Narikala fortress.

Some estimate the original construction of the church to be as far back as the 14th century, but it was rebuilt in the late 1860s.

Saint Stepanos was again subjugated to the same tactics as the previously mentioned churches.

The altars, fonts, inscriptions, windows, iron gratings, drum, frescoes were all destroyed. In fact, according to some, this was one of the most extensive examples of the lengths Georgian Orthodox Church authorities went through to eradicate any remnants of Armenian culture and history. Throughout the early 90s, apart from the structure nearly the whole church was changed, with some claiming that even explosives were used to destroy the western pediment of the church.



SAINt KARAPET

During Soviet rule, Saint Karapet was turned into a dormitory for Russian Old Believers, then into a painting workshop, but by the 80s, work began to Georgianize the church.

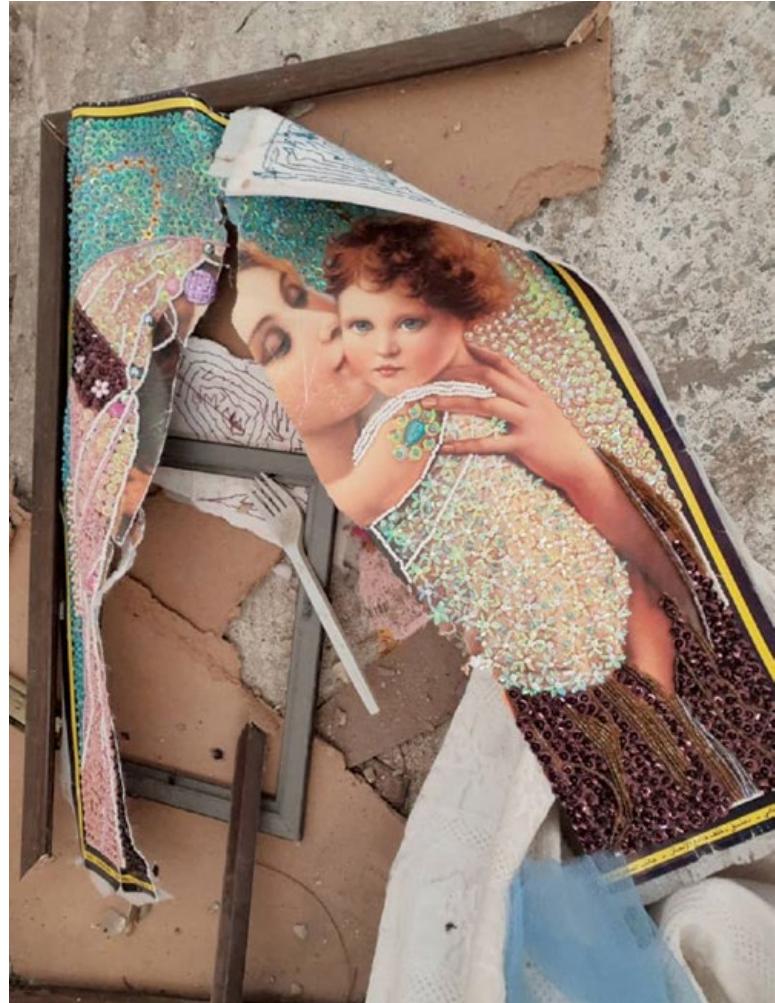
Saint Karapet was reconsecrated as a Georgian Orthodox church in the early 90s. On top of this, not only was the jurisdiction of the church building changed, but the Armenian characteristics were also erased; the font, the Armenian-style belltower, the altar (which was placed outside and used as a bench), the tombstones, and even the graves of the deceased, were removed. The interior frescoes were also painted over and the church was renamed. Soon after independence, it became a church mainly attended by Georgians who fled Abkhazia. ♦



THE RESTORATION OF ARMENIAN CHURCHES IN SYRIA

What happened to the Armenian heritage in Syria after the war? Some are destroyed, some – like the Church of the Holy Mother of God – are saved and restored.

TEXT : EMILIO LUCIANO CRICCHIO



War has been raging in Syria since 2011, and although much of the fighting has abated, the conflict still hasn't ended. The Armenian community in Syria, which some have estimated to be 100,000 strong, has felt the impact of this conflict, with many fleeing to Lebanon or other Arab nations, Europe and Armenia. Moreover, Turkey's intervention in Idlib province and its widely condemned attack on Kurdish-led forces in Northeastern Syria have reignited worries amongst the Armenian community that threats remain to their longtime existence in Syria. Once again Armenians found themselves in the midst of another Middle Eastern conflict, with many cities and towns inhabited by Armenians being embroiled in fighting, with some even overrun by fighters of the Islamic State. As war dragged on, much of Syria's cultural sites and places of worship were damaged, looted or even destroyed during the war, including many which are Armenian. Regional Post got in touch with Bishop Armash Nalbandian of the Armenian Apostolic Church Diocese in Syria's capital of Damascus to understand the situation regarding many of the Armenian cultural sites and churches in Syria, and whether any work is underway to restore these beacons of Armenian culture in Syria.



Armenian Genocide Martyrs' Memorial in Deir Zor

Bishop Armash started by telling us that nearly 200 Armenian fatalities have been confirmed throughout the war. Moreover, 450 people suffered injuries as a direct result of military conflict. 1,200 houses were bombed or partly destroyed, 200 were totally destroyed, 900 sustained damage, 15 Armenian community centres were damaged, 19 schools were attacked, and 3,300 businesses and workshops were either damaged or looted.

Bearing in mind these grim figures, it's easy to understand why the fate of many of the Armenian churches in Syria would be spotlighted, especially as many Islamist fundamentalist groups have and are operating on the ground, including the infamous Islamic State which is known for its persecution of Christians and other minorities.

Probably the most iconic example is the Armenian Catholic Church of the Holy Martyrs which is located right in the centre, in what was the capital of the Islamic State. When IS took over the city, the church was converted into a headquarters of the religious morality police, known as the Hisba; later it became a military HQ. During the 2017 Battle of Raqqa, when Kurdish-led SDF forces took the city, the structure was completely destroyed, rendering it almost beyond recognition. In late 2017, the Syrian Democratic Forces de-mined the church and its surroundings.

However, Raqqa's Civic Council announced in early 2020 that restoration work on the Armenian church would begin, with its reopening to the public being scheduled for early 2021. This church has been described by some as a metaphor for Raqqa itself, moving from the Islamic State to complete destruction, then to reconstruction.

Some other Armenian places of worship have met even less fortunate fates. In 2014, the Armenian Genocide Memorial Church in Deir Ez Zour was reportedly blown up by Islamic State fighters when they took over the majority of that region.

The memorial church was constructed to commemorate the victims of the Armenian Genocide, as Deir Ez Zour was once the site of a death camp where Armenians were marched to after Ottoman Empire officials ordered the mass-deportations of Armenians from Anatolia. Since then, the region of Deir Ez Zour has remained one of the most volatile parts of Syria and remains split between the SDF and pro-Assad forces. It is also known to have IS sleeper cells, Iran's IRGC and US troops operating on its territory.

Syrian President Bashar Al Assad has vowed however to reconstruct and restore the memorial church, but as of yet no concrete steps have been taken to do so.

Apart from these two examples which received widespread international attention, there are many less famous cases of Armenian churches that have been restored since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria.

The Forty Martyrs Cathedral is one of the oldest active churches in the northern city of Aleppo, which was the site of major battles between the Syrian Army and rebel forces. In 2015, as the Battle of Aleppo raged on, the church came under artillery fire. Later, in what many suspect was a targeted attack by Jabhat Al Nusra fighters, explosives were laid under the cathedral, which destroyed 70% of the structure. >

➤ Armenian Catholic Church of the Martyrs in Raqqa



➤ Forty Martyrs Armenian Cathedral of Aleppo

In 2019, the Armenian community of Syria funded a complete restoration of the cathedral, once the Syrian Army had gained full control of Aleppo. This was one of the most notable restoration efforts in the city of Aleppo.

In 2019, another major Armenian church in Aleppo, the Church of the Holy Mother of God, had its belfries and dome restored after gunfire and artillery shells had caused damage. The church did not sustain significant damage but has been fully restored and is now in good condition and open to worshippers.

Armenian Catholic Cathedral of Our Mother of Reliefs was bombed in 2015 in Aleppo. Fighters of the Islamic Front fired mortars at the cathedral in the early hours of the morning, creating a gaping hole in the dome. The bishop responsible for the diocese stated even that in case the attack took place two hours later, the cathedral would have been filled with churchgoers.

In 2019 however, the cathedral was fully restored, and the reopening was attended by interfaith leaders, including the Grand Mufti of Syria and the Papal Ambassador.

The Surp Khach Church is located in the town of Tel Abyad along the Syrian-Turkish border. In 2014, Tel Abyad fell into the hands of the Islamic State which set the church on fire.



Later, Kurdish-led forces retook the town and repaired the damage which was inflicted by IS.

In 2019, Turkey launched an invasion of Northeastern Syria. Turkish-backed rebels took control over Tel Abyad and vandalized the Armenian church there. Pictures of the damage were posted on social media by journalist Jenan Moussa.

Turkish media then reported from the church showing that the damage had been repaired and that religious services were once again taking place. Turkey's offensive into Syria, and the groups they back in Syria, have been questioned by many who hold concerns for minorities. This may well have been an apparent camera op to show that Turkey's invasion of Syria would not result in the persecution of minorities.

These are but some notable examples, even speaking to Bishop Nalbandian, it still proves difficult to conjure all the information needed to ascertain the situation of all the Armenian churches in Syria. We know other restoration works have taken place in places like Kessab, but the details remain murky.

Having said this, some analysts see the war as drawing to a close, so the Armenian churches of Syria can now look to restoring rather than worrying about projectiles, mortars and barrel bombs. ♦





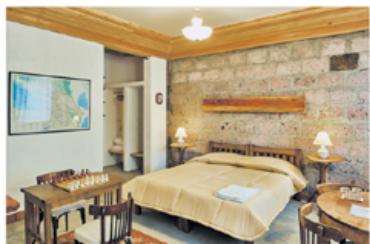
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GYUMRI



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HOUSEKEEPERS

The guides of Yerevan house-museums spend an essential part of their day at the homes of famous composers, poets, writers, and see and notice what is invisible to others.



SHUSHAN HYUSNUNTS, THE ALEXANDER SPENDIARYAN HOUSE MUSEUM

Alexander Spendiarayan's Museum is the first House Museum in the republic. The composer lived in this house from 1926 to 1928. The collection presented here includes the composer's personal belongings, documents, letters, and manuscripts. The museum also displays the handwritten score of the "Almast" opera and the only preserved poster of the first Yerevan show, with which on January 20, 1933, the Opera and Ballet Theater was opened.

I've been working here since May 2010. I've got music education and Spendiarayan was one of the greatest composers for me prior to being employed here. But as I began to associate endlessly with his personal belongings and read his letters, he became a remote relative, a grandfather, whom I'd never seen, but whom I know very well.

Spendiarayan's soul lives in his hall, in the whole museum and even in the nearby streets. Spendiarayan was an extremely modest person and even now he does not impose his presence on us, the museum staff. Spendiarayan has become a part of my life. When hearing, the sounds of his music I perceive with much more warmth than those of any other, more popular and favorite work. He has given an important lesson to me, and to the whole staff of the museum; to be utmost demanding and professional in everything. Whenever facing different household issues, I recall that Spendiarayan has resided here and I straighten up and become more vigilant.

My favorite exhibit is the Spendiaraphone, the musical instrument Spendiarayan created himself, made of his own leather belt and 12 bronze bells.

**EVERY TIME I COME HERE, I GET ENERGY AND CHARGE
MYSELF WITH THE AURA DWELLING HERE. I CAN FEEL THE
BLESSED LIGHT RADIATING FROM HIS CANVASES**

TEXT : LENA GEVORGIAN / PHOTO : MARIAM LORETSYAN, SUREN MANVELYAN,
FIRST PUBLISHED IN "YEREVAN" CITY MAGAZINE #10, 2012



**ANGELA VOLCHINSKAYA,
THE MARTIROSH SARYAN HOUSE MUSEUM**

The Martiros Saryan House Museum was opened on November 26, 1967, during the lifetime of the artist. The collection was based on 50 works donated by Saryan. I'm a professional guide-interpreter, I've worked in the "Institute" for 20 years. After working for 1 season, I continued the job. At first, I was afraid, as the program was very extensive, but I got used to it over time. It's already the sixth year I am giving tours in either English or Russian: they say, I have my heart in it.

Saryan is a great person for me. Along with being a genius, he is a good and decent personality. It is a privilege for me to represent him here to the guests from abroad. The House Museum is not just a workplace for me. Every time I come here, I get energy and charge myself with the aura dwelling

here. I can feel the blessed light radiating from his canvases. Bright colors create a mood and inspire. In short, I enjoy the hours spent in the museum. I was not personally acquainted with Saryan, but now I have the feeling that I have known him. The Saryan spirit lives here not only in the studio but everywhere. I can feel it. During the tour, when I stand next to a painting, I can feel his presence. It's an inexplicable feeling; I don't just tell about the artist, it's like having a soul's talk. I have many favorite exhibits here: "Walking Woman", "Night Landscape". However, my most beloved is "Ararat" canvas hanging on the second floor, which Saryan painted in 1925. It gives me extreme pleasure to leave my house knowing that I will come here and spend a few hours in Saryan's atmosphere. >

THAT'S TRUE, THE WORK IN A MUSEUM IS LIKE A BOG,
BUT A TRUE, A PLEASANT BOG. IT ABSORBS AND TAKES
YOU COMPLETELY. MY ONLY FOCUS IS THE MUSEUM



**JANNA MKRTCHYAN,
THE ARAM KHACHATURIAN HOUSE MUSEUM**

In 1978, the Armenian government issued a decree on setting up Aram Khachaturian's house museum. The composer personally got acquainted with the project and made his remarks. The house museum was opened on January 26, 1984, for the composer's 80th anniversary. Aram Khachaturian received this house in 1947, as a gift from Armenian people. The objects of the apartment are brought from his Moscow flat and near-Moscow summer residence and are arranged in the same way as they used to be during his lifetime. Aram Khachaturian's mother, Mrs. Ghumash, lived in this house with the family of his elder brother Vaghinak. I've been working at the House Museum since August 17, 1996. I enjoy interacting with interesting people and I constantly discover new things.

Aram Khachaturyan is already a friend to me, a very close and a dear friend. For about 16 years I've been speaking about him, sharing my love and appreciation for him. I've studied Khachaturyan's private letters, also the books and famous people's opinions about him. I try to imagine how he looked, how he moved, what he thought.

Khachaturyan has had so much influence on my life that I never got married. I thought there couldn't be a better place for me to go. That's true, the work in a museum is like a bog, but a true, a pleasant bog. It absorbs and takes you completely. My only focus is the museum.



**MARIAM SOKHIKYAN,
THE AVETIK ISAHAKYAN HOUSE MUSEUM**

Avetik Isahakyan House Museum has been operated since 1963. The poet lived in the mansion in the last ten years of his life. Everything is preserved here as it was during the poet's lifetime.

It's been 7 years since I've been working here. I wouldn't have worked if I didn't like it, but I was fond of Isahakyan before taking up the job.

I have closely studied Isahakyan's life and his works. At first, I was afraid that if I worked here for a long time, all of this would become commonplace. But every time I accompany the visitors to the rooms, I am experiencing the same excitement as if it were the first time. I work with the foreign language books of his personal library, and I get goosey every time, realizing that he himself has opened that

shelf and touched those books. The most important thing for me in the museum is those books, especially those where there are his personal notes. Isahakyan's breath lives in these walls, all visitors feel it.

Isahakyan is not only a great poet for me but a wise, intelligent person. I call him a master, too. I never get tired of the museum. Even in our house, I have a corner dedicated to Isahakyan, a small museum. At home I often quote Isahakyan, my relatives sometimes complain, but they've already got accustomed to it. When we go on a staff excursion, the onlookers can guess at once that we somehow relate to Isahakyan; we sing his songs and deliver toasts. We aren't some ordinary staff, we are Isahakian's staff. ➤

**KLARA KHOJUMYAN,
THE YEGHISHE CHARENTS HOUSE MUSEUM**

Charents has lived here for two years, 1935-1957. Almost four decades after his death, in 1975, by the decision of the Council of Ministers of Soviet Armenia, in that house was established the house-museum of the poet.

In 1987, due to the 90th anniversary of Charents' birth, the building was partially changed, the museum area expanded. I get very excited because I've lived in Charents' house more than his wife and daughters and Charents himself has. The funds were placed in the kitchen of his apartment, for 20 years I've worked in that very room as a chief funder, later I started working as a guide. Charents' home is very dear to me with its every detail. But the bamboo table in his office is unique to me. He worked at that table under the photographs of his father, Goethe, Pushkin, and Komitas.

In the corridor of Charents' flat, there was a memorial stone, above which there was Charent's Mask authored by Sargis Bagdasaryan. Every time I presented that part to the visitors and told them that Charents had no grave, I got emotional and my eyes teared. I feel the same now, but I know his grave is in the hearts of all Armenians. I grieve for Charents, he's like one of my family members.

Every second it seems to me Charents is listening behind my back to what I'm telling about him. When I first started working, sometimes I turned around, it seemed to me that he was following me. In hard times, when it was dark and cold, Charents helped me to survive and live. Because I remembered the days Charents lived, and my reality looked way lighter.

**EVERY MORNING WHEN I COME TO THE MUSEUM,
I LOOK AT TUMANIAN'S PORTRAIT ABOVE THE
MUSEUM'S ENTRANCE AND SAY, "HELLO, TUMO JAN!"**



**ANAHIT NALBANDYAN,
THE HOVHANNES TUMANIAN MUSEUM**

The Hovhannes Tumanyan Museum was opened in the April of 1953, in a building constructed by architect Grigor Aghababyan's project. In a separate hall on the second floor of the museum, Tumanyan's personal library is presented with about 8,000 volumes. The replica of the Tiflis "Vernatun" is very impressive.

The replica of Toumalyan's Tbilisi house has been constructed on the second floor of the museum and has been furnished with the articles brought from there. I am convinced that the articles have memories. The poet's breath, his aura, and energetic vibrations are felt everywhere, especially in his study room. When I was newly employed, I was intimidated to go into his study alone, as the atmosphere was chilling, and I constantly felt as though he would enter

in a minute. During the tour, I thought he was sitting at his table. His personal belongings, by the way, are my favorite: the pen, the chair, the coffee maker, the books.

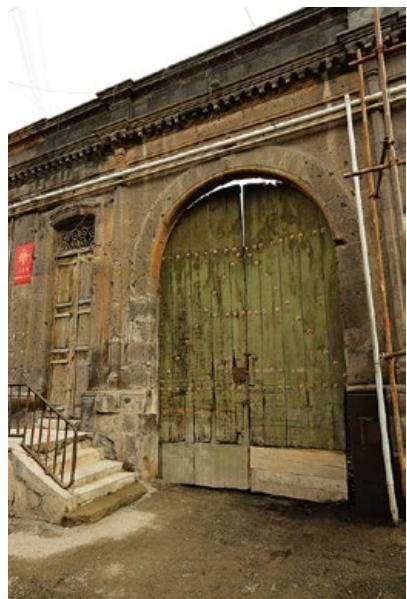
I started seeing the world through Tumanyan's eyes, from his point of view. For me, he is, first and foremost, a human being, and then a great writer. Every morning when I come to the museum, I look at Tumanyan's portrait above the museum's entrance and say, "Hello, Tumo Jan!" To look at that portrait, you have to lift your head, as if you are talking to God. Tumanyan is the mediator between me and God. ♦



A PERFECT DAY IN GYUMRI

What you should see, eat, drink, hear or do if you arrive in Gyumri in the morning and have some spare time until the sun goes down. Carine Aroyan, the coordinator of the “Open Gyumri” initiative and simply a great lover of the city, tells what one can or should do in former Leninakan.

TEXT : CARINE AROYAN / PHOTO : ARNOS MARTIROSYAN, MHER KARAPETYAN
FIRST PUBLISHED IN "YEREVAN" CITY MAGAZINE, #57, 2019



◀
“Villa Kars” hotel

When my American-Armenian colleague first arrived in Gyumri, it was a cold November day. He looked around guiltily and said, “Where’s the culture? Show me the culture”. What can you do if you know that it’s there, but you can’t show it? Everyone must find it for themselves. In this text I’m going to use a lot of expressions like “if you are lucky enough”, “if you succeed”, “if you manage” because this is Gyumri – at times temporarily unavailable and unnoticed. When going there for the first time, you admirably observe reliefs of old buildings, wooden doors, elegantly grown molds and lichens, you eagerly take the photos of the hairdressers in white robes who haven’t put their scissors down since the 70s, then you

saunter in the cool halls of “Dzitoghtsonts House” or stroll around the Vardanants square. Or, if you have a long day ahead, you may pass by or through the museums of Mher Mkrtchyan, Shiraz, or Isahakyan, look in through the gate of “Villa Kars” and crawl inside its wonderful yard disturbing the dreamy cats. Then, Mr. Montalto may appear in one of the doors and disappear instantly.

I have heard a lot that even after the second visit some complain, “There’s nothing to do, I get bored.” Yes, that’s exactly how it is, don’t do anything, get bored! Who said you have to do something all the time? Gyumri will do. You watch. In Gyumri, one sometimes needs to be quiet, get bored and just breathe and look at the horizon in inexhaustible enjoyment. ➤

WANDERING

If you arrive by train, or just find yourself near the train station, take your time. Walk in the echoing halls of the building, look up at the center of the ceiling, take a few shots, then look left and right where you'll find two old frescoes. Enter the slightly dripping underground passage from the backyard and recall the adolescent acnes and loneliness. Schoolchildren are very fond of this area, they wander here, ride their bicycles, talk endlessly, and take pictures.

Walk to the other side of the rails and make sure you go to see the old depot buildings. You can also cross the rails, but be careful; the number of trains has increased.



◀
The old train depot



▼
In "Arvestanots"
studio

In dusty and peaceful August, it is worthwhile going to all those places where you have never set foot before. Let's head towards these ruins, check that bush, and then get into that half-constructed "ghost" over there. If you reach "58", keep walking towards "Gyumri Chalet" – a lifetime work of a family, a guest house, everything. This is a place where you can find the spirit of the old city – a century-old piano, archival dailies, rare photographs of Alexandrapol, chairs with velvet seats, a workshop, Mastiff dogs (Gumprs), and cats of Van. For me, the center of Gyumri has shifted to Tigran Mets street over the last few years, so I'd like to linger here a little bit. Tigran Mets, the former International Street, connects the railway station with Independence Square,



where there's the building of the former "Chulochni" (hosiery factory), the Academy of Fine Arts, the theater at a distance of 3 minutes' walk to the left, and the regional administration at three minutes' walk to the right. One sidewalk of the street is a part of the Kumayri reserve, that is, the historical center, but the architecture here essentially differs from the rest of the streets in the city; the houses are two-storeyed with oriental arches of white and yellow, built in the 1930s. The wide intersection dividing the street into two parts is known as "Zuygaghbyur". The International street seems rather introvert, as there are not many people there, and even the dubious grandmothers at the small bakeries "don't sell lavash to individuals" but there are many doors here to be opened boldly. In the "Arvestanots" studio, for example, artists Mamikon and Karlen Varderesyan live and create together with their two dogs and about... 200 birds. Here you'll find the only hunting shop in the city, as well as the respected "Perazhkianots", where it is worth eating at least one hot pastry burning the fingers after having waited for your order for 10 minutes, under the strict gaze of the saleswoman. A few steps away, there's the recently opened "Gvug" gastro-house serving food and



➤
"Garage" club

beverages of Shirak, where you can not only enjoy tasty food but also buy delicacies like fresh honey or green cheese for your household. Next to "Gugunts" is the archaic "Vardzuyt" (Rent), where you'll find worn-out trestle benches, lop-sided Soviet plates, and glasses of vodka both for happy and sad occasions. Also, you are very likely to be treated to a glass of vodka here.

In the same district, if you make an appointment in advance, you will find the only Boeing plane simulator in Armenia and you'll soar in the virtual sky for one hour at only 5000 AMD. And, if you are fond of air flights, make sure you don't miss the annual "Fly-fest".

One of the car attractions in Gorky Park will be demolished in two years' time because of its being very old, so try not to miss it. You should also try the wheel for 15 minutes. It's the most euphoric moment regardless of the weather and the time of day. Gyumri is always beautiful from above, either in sun or in fog; there's the statue of Mother Armenia on the velvet green-and-yellow wavy hills, the TUMO construction, the half-ruined building of "Varem-Marem" (where the "Tango of Our Childhood" was filmed), the Gorky park, the domes of churches, the red and gray roofs, trees, mountains, and the peaceful buzzing of the city.



PEOPLE

You hear a lot about Gyumri being a city of master blacksmiths, but when you arrive here, just like that Armenian-American guy, you wonder where they are.

To really get acquainted with Gyumri, you should find one or rather a few of those who would tell you about Alekpol and Len-nagan (as locals call Aleksandrapol and Leninakan), who could take you beyond the nostalgic fog of the black and white photos, beyond the ordinary rails and show you the contemporary city and those Masters temporarily gone underground, whose clangs of hammers you can't hear with a naked ear. They can take you to houses and backyards, desolate places and ruins...

Everyone in Gyumri talks about phaetons, but you will not see any phaetons unless you are here on some holiday. You might think, "Where are the phaetons? Show me the phaetons", and one day, while wandering in the backyards of Rustaveli, you might find yourself in the yard of phaeton master Samvel, legendary phaeton master Grish's grandson. Gyumri is an endless puzzle and it is multi-layered; you first learn through the abstract myths and clichés heard before, then you pass to the people and through those people you start to know the city. People, and especially those who you walk with or go after, play an essential part in solving this puzzle as it's them who choose which pieces to offer you. For almost 5 years, both my life and work have been related to this city, but I often realize that I know next to nothing about it. Gyumri was revolutionized for me twice; first, when our teacher (Nazaret Karoyan) took us, the three curators – Lilit, Terez, and me, on a fabulous art trip around the studios, places, houses, and museums in Gyumri, and second – at the "Rock-Fest" 2016. I had





▲
Cathedral of
the Holy Mother
of God

▼
Surb Nshan church





a sensation that the sleeping dragons had woken up and were dancing happily. According to my internal clock the doors of Gyumri opened for me and did not close anymore while we were sitting at "Rob's" that very day and grabbing the fat, lucky red cat from each other's hands. We locked eyes with Manu for a second and realized that our "Hartak" festival was going to be held in Gyumri next year. You will hear some of the young say that during the earthquake Lennagan collapsed – Gyumri remained, but the old watchmaker in the square may shake his head in regret and reminisce the abundance of the "communists' time", and then go on fixing the broken watches.

Try to catch the present of today's city, its contrasts, contradictions, the burnt out and the burning, and "the darkest shadow caused by the brightest sun".

Follow people, be it in real life or on Facebook, see what they live on, who they get photographed with, whose jewelry they wear, and whose toys they buy for their children. There is diversity here without a dulling multitude, every lecture is an event here, every new cafe is long-awaited. Today's Gyumretsi is so real that at times I feel myself being in a dream. Those are people who heal the present while holding the past in their minds and don't believe that one day everything will turn for the better out of the blue.

They talk less and work ferociously. They interrupt you abruptly when they suspect dishonesty in the "sweet" words you say about Gyumri. In Yerevan, no matter how busy you are, there'll always be an hour or a half for a coffee – sometimes, several times a day. In Gyumri, even though you'll be asked "shall we have a coffee?" after every greeting, the thimble-sized coffee cup is a matter of one or two sips – there is no leisure in it.

▼
Qyalla



EATING/DRINKING

I must say, my recommendations are patchy like my character and are based on my experiences and mis-adventures full of coincidences.

And so, where to eat? In fact, there are a lot of places. Among the traditional ones are "Dzkan Dzor" and "Poloz Mukuch", which are the so-called experience places. For example, in "Mukuch" be ready to surrender to fate, because the menu here is conditional (English in Armenian letters) with no price list. There's the aunty who says, "I'll bring it right away" and returns with a platter of side dishes, which makes the rest of the order meaningless. And yes, drink draft beer here, it's part of the ritual. "Herbs & Honey" is that cozy must-go place, where the most irresistible cakes and fantastic Shirak honey and herbs are. The menu is very healthy and smart, there are detox cocktails, and they sell their own bread. It is the most convenient place for vegetarians in the city. Here you'll find "ghaifa", something like barley coffee. A little below that cool hairdresser's, at the beginning of Aboyan street, there is "Aregak", the first inclusive cafe in Armenia. When you look from outside, you want all the bread and croissants on the stand to be yours. It isn't in vain that Armen Sargsyan always comes to visit the people of "Aregak".

The recently opened "Florence" is one of the new fancy places which is also very "Instagrammable" both from the inside and the yard (but the architects complain that they have damaged the historical facade of the building). The people of Gyumri are fond of the "Hatsatun" tavern. "They make a good tail stew here", they say. If you are brave enough, come back in winter to eat "qylla" – an oven-cooked head of a cow.

If you want something pleasant and fast, visit "Ponchik-monchik", don't be afraid of the queue, it moves quite fast. The thin and crispy dough is hollow and with little cream in it; you won't gain weight. ➤



WATCH

Prior to coming here, check if there's a new exhibition in the gallery of the Aslamanzyan Sisters (the only gallery of woman artists in Armenia), in the exhibition hall of Hotel Berlin and in "Stil" museum; if there is – it's fantastic, if there isn't – go and see anyway.

Whenever I pass by "Berlin Art Hotel," I always drop in to get me a couple of postcards. The tranquility of the hotel and the art starting right from the threshold is one of these experiences when you walk down the corridor and you know the places of some works by heart, when you look at them like at an old acquaintance of yours and say "hello", then Gohar Martirosyan's big and blue ocean-space emerges in front of you, or – Hrach Vardanyan's canvas that looks like moist soil.

More? There we go; "The Youth House" (Hayordats Tun) and the Merkurov Art School, which is said to be the oldest art



▲ "Style" graphics museum



◀ "DeGar" tattoo studio



▲ "Amigo" pub

school in the South Caucasus. Here you can see pictures and sculptures by children which haven't perceived yet that they are art in themselves.

I tried to persuade them to sell me the picture of the soldier rabbit, but I failed.

"The space is small here, there isn't much to do, it's easy to concentrate and create," Artush Hayordatsi told me once. Then he added, "It's best to create in Gyumri and exhibit in Yerevan."

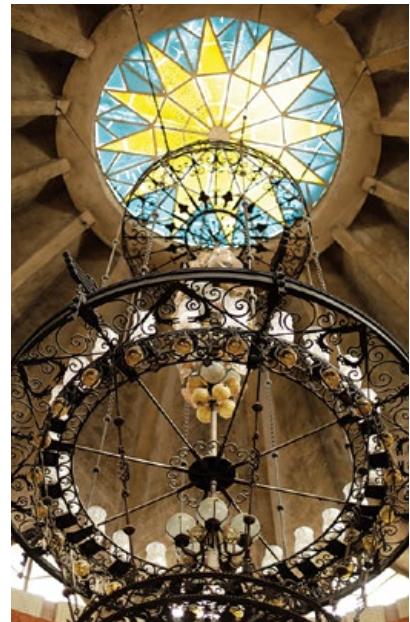
If you've already seen a lot and you're tired and you can't eat any more and it's too early to go for a drink, what can I say? go to "DeGar" tattoo studio, get a brutal tattoo and go to "Garage" club (If you are lucky, you'll listen to the Bambir or to other celestial bodies) or go to "Amigo" – the first and, I guess, the only pub in Gyumri.

SEE YOU SOON

The road from the square to the station is always windy and dusty in the evening hours. On my way to the bus station, out of the corner of my eye I catch the mannequins with crooked hands and legs, the dolls, the toy donkeys and toy horses, and the rows of rubber shoes, scythes, and construction materials. Meanwhile, I miss the last bus. One step away, every other half a minute, a taxi driver chants monotonously, "E-re-vaa-an... by taxi... Ere-vaa-an... by taxi". Then, you get into a taxi, say goodbye to the train lines, to the skeletons of factories and combines, and to the desolate suburbs... When you love Gyumri, it's never



Gyumri railway station



One of the abandoned factories

that sugary love. Too many times I've got furious in Gyumri, too many times I've seen the closed and the rejective next to the beautiful and the open-hearted. But every time, the moment I enter the city my breathing gets faster and I become impatient and longing. I know that I will probably not see anything new, and depending on the season of the year I'll get to the railway station either frozen or hot, I'll cross the International street, and if I am lucky – I'll greet Hamlet and Hrach, I'll feel the sand of the endlessly repaired street inside my shoes, I'll go to Kirov street and I'll look at the beautiful red building, where my [future] apartment is still "for sale", I'll take pictures of the blossoming trees, and I'll notice that my favorite cafe has become more perfect, while the hair of the young owner of the cafe has turned whiter. You can't help it, there are so many problems. But it doesn't matter, it is at those moments that I strongly want to be here, in Gyumri. ♦





THE INCREDIBLE LORI

Art curator Emma Harutyunyan tells about the beauties of Lori region one should visit as soon as possible.

TEXT / PHOTO : EMMA HARUTYUNYAN

Even though it is hard to write and think about anything other than the oppressive consequences of the war, it is impossible not to notice the beauties of the world around us. I've always been convinced that the best way to recognize and cherish one's own country is by exploring it, and now more than ever our wounded country needs to be loved. Thus, we should explore it even more whole-heartedly, more diligently and with boundless interest.

I invite you to follow my journey step by step. It happened months ago, when the total lockdown seemed to be the worst reality for us. I haven't edited the text on purpose so you could feel the lightness of my voyage and flee for a moment from the depressing reality.

Lori is the fragile and tender bride of Armenia. This region is very diverse, deeply spiritual, poetic, evidently and richly cultural, with freshest greens, saturated with oxygen, and inhabited with the quietest and unsophisticated people. ➤

SPIRITUAL CULTURE

As an art historian, for me the ecclesiastic culture of Lori is stunning. Besides the most popular and known Sanahin, Haghpat, Akhtala monasteries, here you will find dozens of cozy trails, which will lead you to the medieval dilapidated churches in the heart of dense forests and mountains. During the long walks, my imagination was drawing medieval priests who were following these trails to communicate between churches and, maybe, contemplate about the future of this land. Sometimes, approaching these churches I felt like catching the



◀
Aghtala frescoes

SHELTER IN A MOUNTAIN

Unlike other regions of Armenia, shepherding is very popular here. You might be fairly confused reading about shepherding in an article about a trip and say, "It doesn't relate to sightseeing." But wait; I'll explain. You'll discover soon that summer "binas" (temporary summer structures for shepherds in Lori dialect) are situated in places with the best views you can ever find; on top of mountains, in valleys and magical glades next to the forests.

Nothing can be compared with climbing the narrow mountain track, meeting a lonely shepherd there and talking with him about the stunning beauty of their homeland, and, maybe, having a cup of coffee prepared on fire. These are irreplaceable feelings, which can never be predicted.

▼
A medieval trail
between the
monasteries

last notes of some Sharakan (Armenian church psalm) and these notes created a vision like a liturgy was in process which was about to end. In Lori, there are many churches covered with frescos. The restoration of impressive mural paintings in Haghpat monastery has recently been completed. But it's not everywhere that frescos are so carefully and professionally protected; in Kobayr monastery – one of the most powerful monasteries in the region, the figures of Saints and Biblical illustrations are still waiting for the representation they deserve. But even in this condition, hardly protected from rain and sun, the frescoes on the background of dramatic rocks and glorious nature are unbelievably impressive.





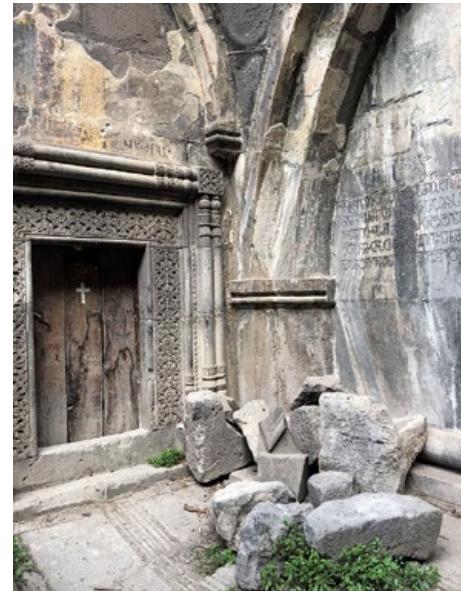
MULTICULTURAL AND CULTURAL LORI

Lori is a definitely diverse region, which makes it more attractive. The close border with Georgia and the region's being inhabited by Russians, Greeks and other nationalities in the northern villages have visibly influenced the cultural pattern of Lori. One of these villages is Privolnoe, which can easily win the prize of the most "Instagrammable" village in Armenia. Recently, it's been decided to change the name of this village with tiled roofs into Armenian, but the villagers, who are now mostly Armenians with "no 'for' but all 'against' votes", stood for the historical name of their village. "It's always been Privolnoe, and for us – it's beautiful," they said. The most curious tourists can hike or drive from here to Khuchapi monastery. For this, you need to receive permission from Armenian Border Guard, whose representative will accompany you to the monastery. This is because its status of territorial belonging is still unclear between Armenia and Georgia. However, I think this little obstacle makes this monastery even more mysterious.

One of the most fabulous villages in Lori is Ahnidzor. Probably, this name is familiar to many fans of Hrant Matevosyan's novels. This connoisseur of both the mountains and Armenian soul was born and raised in this village. Hrant Matevosyan's brother – uncle Hamo, kindly welcomed us in the family house of Matevosyans. Squeezed between forests and mountains, this tiny village embraces you with its warmth and is unforgettable. The road that leads to the village is bad, but as uncle Hamo says, "It's even to the better that the road is bad; this place is not for everyone. Who really needs, will come."

In this chapter I would like to also include Dendropark, not only because here you can find the huge collection of ornamental trees from different

▲ Sanahin monastery



BESIDES THE MOST POPULAR AND KNOWN MONASTERIES, HERE YOU WILL FIND DOZENS OF COZY TRAILS, WHICH WILL LEAD YOU TO THE MEDIEVAL DILAPIDATED CHURCHES IN THE HEART OF DENSE FORESTS AND MOUNTAINS

areas, even continents, but also because it was founded by Polish engineer-forester Edmund Leonowicz, in 1931. Coming to Armenia, he initiated an experiment on planting different types of trees in natural forests and during years, he reshaped it into the Forest Park with more than 500 introduced species. We owe to him personally for the most popular park in Armenia – Stephanavan Dendropark. Today, Edmund Leonowicz's mission continues his son Vitaliy Leonovic, who is 82 and lives in a small fairytale house in the territory of Dendropark.

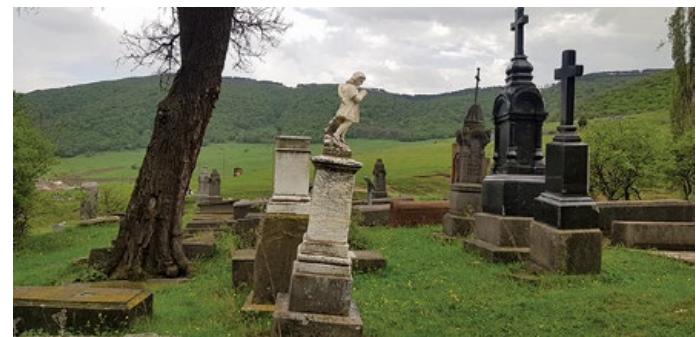
ON LEGENDS

"I've heard many times from locals about the general called de Gaulle, who passed his care-free childhood in the mountains of Lori while his parents were working in the mine," says the security guard Rubo. Of course, I didn't believe him, but, anyway, I checked. It turned out that in the archive materials there really is a family



►
Grandpa Ruslan

▼
The cemetery
of a church
established by
Hovhan of Odzun,
Ardvi village



◀
Russian church at
Amrakic village



►
The imperial build-
ing of Tumanyan
train station

with the name of de Gaulle having lived in Lori, but this family had nothing to do with the famous de Gaulle. The sameness of surname has inspired the locals so much that they didn't want to accept the possible existence of other de Gaulles. So, I decided not to disappoint them. There are so many legends here; one more won't matter.

The incident, however, happened in these same mountains and connected with the name of the famous Russian writer Alexander Pushkin, is more realistic. The villagers of Gar-gar proudly show the visitors the ruins of the

➤
Stepanavan
Dendropark



RIGHT NEXT TO THE PUSHKINO VILLAGE THE MISSILE REGIMENT WAS LOCATED DURING THE SOVIET TIME. REGULAR TOURISTS WILL BE SURPRISED TO FIND THE ENTRANCES OF REAL BUNKERS PROFESSIONALLY HIDDEN IN THE FOREST



house where the woman had offered milk and cheese to Alexandre Alexandrovich. The great writer with his brilliant descriptive language wrote about his trip from sunburned Georgia to breezy and flowerful Armenia, where he had come across the carriage taking Griboyedov's body to Tbilisi. These two incidents have motivated the names of the Pushkin mountain pass and the Pushkino village. Nowadays almost all drivers prefer the tunnel to get to Vanadzor, but if you decide to drive along serpentines up to the meeting spot of the two poets, you'll be inspired to contemplate about the harmonious beauty of the nature and, probably, you, too, will start writing memoirs.

MILITARY PAST

Right next to the Pushkino village the missile regiment was located during the Soviet time. Regular tourists will be surprised to find the entrances of real bunkers professionally hidden in the forest. I think there's no need to illustrate that the bunkers were made to be used as shelters during the war. It was even more surprising to find the huge 3D stone map of the mountain ranges of the territorial neighbors of the Soviet Union – Turkey and Iran. Now, only small fragments are left, but looking at this model, you can easily imagine the group of high-ranking militaries gathering around it and developing scenarios for possible operations.

Grandpa Ruslan, who has been serving in the military forces for his entire conscious life, told me many amusing stories about the dinners he organized, the military life, and many other things. By the way, he gave us a useful suggestion; if you want the Armenian khorovats (barbecue) to get prepared faster, you should cover it with a newspaper, preferably, "Pravda". ➤

SOVIET BOARDING HOUSES

During the Soviet time, among all regions of Armenia Lori was an undisputed champion with the number of its resting zones. I cannot insist, but locals are convinced that the elite of Soviet Armenia used to spend their regular leisure here.

One of the most impressive resting areas was "Artek" – Soviet Pioneer's camp near Vanadzor. Nowadays, only the most solid buildings partially stand. The huge territory of the camp is literally ruined. But even in this condition, you can catch the silhouette of the former extensive architecture. I would love to be one of the children who used to spend their summer here.

"Anahit", "Tsiternak" (Swallow), "Lori"... It can take quite a while to list all the of former resort oases in Lori. I am convinced that for most people who grew up in the Soviet times these names are dear and evoke sweet memories. But now the vast majority of resting houses are either destroyed both by time and the vandals or have become the victims of their owners' understanding of beauty.

Nevertheless, there are some samples which still stand and serve their direct purpose thanks to their new proprietors. Here I would love to mention about "Lori" holiday home next to Vahagnadzor village – designed as a small town for 400 people, which looks enveloped by the rich forests and has fallen out of time. Maybe this very fact protected the building from the brutal "euro renovation" and left some "Soviet wind" in the walls of the pension. The security guard of the hotel remembers the flourishing time of the boarding house very well. He says people used



▲
The dome of
Russian church at
Privilnoe village



▼
Three-dimensional
military map,
Pushkino village

to come and wait in their cars till morning to get a room there. Nowadays, the picture is incomparably worse, but the employees are convinced that after the restoration of the road which leads to the hotel, things will get better.

IMPERIAL TRAIN STATIONS

My small research about the train stations in the Lori region was very entertaining and full of discoveries. The construction of railways in Armenia started in 1886. They were to connect Tbilisi and Alexandrapol (modern day Gyumri) with Yerevan. This large-scale construction, which started during the reign of Tsar Nikolai II, was very innovative not only for Armenia but for the whole Russian Empire. I found some witnesses of that time among the former administrative buildings or the waiting rooms at the train stations. It seems that these solid buildings made of black basalt can never collapse. They've stayed for almost 120 years and can stay much longer. Even during the devastating earthquake of Spitak, when whole districts and the nearby villages





▲
Artek Children's
Camp, Vanadzor



▼
Ahnidzor, Hrant
Matevosyan's
house

**NOW THE VAST MAJORITY OF RESTING HOUSES ARE
NEITHER DESTROYED BOTH BY TIME AND THE VANDALS OR
HAVE BECOME THE VICTIMS OF THEIR OWNERS' UNDER-
STANDING OF BEAUTY**



were destroyed, these black beauties weren't even slightly disturbed. Just in one building there was a stone that had shattered. Even now, in the modern world with so many technological possibilities, this excellent quality of construction and taste arouses admiration. These imperial buildings can be found in the stations of Ayrum, Akhtala, Pambak, and Tumanyan, and they are mostly inhabited by the former or present workers of the railways, because due to the social difficulties or simply unwillingness to respect the "old" style, the owners have significantly distorted the noble appearance of the buildings. Many of them have lowered the high ceilings, covered the windows and the doors, built additional walls, and so on. Interestingly, the most common excuse for lowering ceilings is that with high ceilings it's more difficult to change the light bulbs.

EPILOGUE

During this trip I understood how underestimated our country is, how abandoned our culture is, how we've lost much time, and how many mistakes we have made. Not appreciating our culture has left us with hard processes of self-contemplation we can overcome only by obtaining education and knowledge. As to me, the way out is in traveling, recognizing and exploring, and finally, admiring our country.

Peace to all of us. ♦

BITTERSWEET RIVALRY: *Middle East Between the Czar and the Sultan*

As Russian-backed Assad forces and Turkish-backed opposition forces clash in the northwestern Idlib province of Syria, many question how far this proxy war can go. Some second-rate politicians started to recall a history of the past two and more centuries dotted with incessant Russian-Turkish wars. Yet many deliberate that with all the possibility of this clash escalating into a serious souring of relations, there is a lot which will keep those two partners together.

TEXT : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN



The famous quote spoken by a British Prime Minister Lord Palmerstone of 1848 “We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual” couldn’t be better suited for describing the current state of the complicated Russian-Turkish relations.

The recent escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean, which has entangled – apart from the usual suspects, Greece and Turkey – an unusual number of actors, showed how far the neo-Ottoman ambitions of Turkey have advanced. Erdogan was bold enough to confront nuclear power France, while another nuclear power Israel expressed support to Greece and Cyprus. Albeit the US involvement and a limited support to Greece and Cyprus forced Ankara to back down to a certain line, still it continues to rattle sabers pledging to defend “every swath of 462,000 square kilometers of Blue Homeland with great determination”.

This picture of an overly defiant Turkey who is acting as a bully in its neighborhood needs to be complemented by a reminder that as recently as in February-early March this year Ankara and Moscow were on the brink of an armed conflict, at least in Syria. Meanwhile it would be deeply erroneous to think that Turkey is hurling itself into reckless confrontations and conflicts on all fronts, without gaining allies and clients and that everything is done in foreign policy is simply the whim of Erdogan and his supporters.

The focus of our interest here is the relations between Moscow and Ankara and looking at the rich history of those relations, there is much to unearth and compare to the modern state of affairs.

OLD ENEMIES, NEW FRIENDS?

In the recent history of Russia’s wars over the last 3 centuries one traditional rival stands out prominently – the Ottoman Empire. While Russia’s strategic aim in those wars was to gain access to “warm waters” via the Straits, it inevitably antagonized the Ottoman Empire. The European Powers in their turn were poised to support the ailing empire – dubbed by Czar Nicolas I (1825-1856) as “the Sick Man of Europe” – to prevent Russia from achieving its goals.

Unearthing the history of the Russian-Turkish relations will also reveal that the recurrent hostilities between the two empires regularly culminating in



▲
Russian and Syrian
militaries in Idlib

BOTH BOLSHEVIK AND TURKISH NATIONALIST IDEOLOGIES, REGARDLESS OF THEIR SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES, BELIEVED THAT THE WEST WAS THE SOURCE OF THEIR PROBLEMS

a war fought once every several decades came to an end with the end of those very empires. The new, revolutionary governments of Russia and Turkey, which came into being in the aftermath of the World War I and both being isolated and fighting their desperate wars, forged unusually friendly ties. Yet a more detailed view would suggest that this was not that unusual. Both Bolshevik and Turkish nationalist ideologies, regardless of their significant differences, believed that the West was the source of their problems. Among their victims, *inter alia*, was the first Armenian Republic, which was considered by the both as an “agent of the Entente”. As soon as both regimes emerged victorious in their wars the relations cooled again and even became somewhat tense during the Cold War, but the Soviet Union never crossed the red line, while Turkey as a NATO member was performing its role as a bulwark against the Soviet expansion.

TWO NEO-EMPIRES IN ONE ENVIRONMENT EMPIRES RE-LAUNCHED

The breakup of the USSR and the ensuing deep economic and social crisis in Russia in 1990’s brought new opportunities for Ankara. ➤

Based on the fast growing Turkish economy Ankara started to lead a more ambitious policy, involving enhancing its presence in the former post-Soviet republic of Central Asia and South Caucasus.

The Turkish state entered the 21st century in as a growing regional power, which embraced under Prime Minister and later President Erdogan a ideological bizarre mix of Kemalist nationalism and pre-republican ideology of Islamic solidarity, coined under the term Neo-Ottomanism.

Meanwhile Russia under Vladimir Putin was able to overcome the internal turmoil and return to the traditional track of an assertive foreign policy, challenging the western dominance.

Both Turkey and Russia on the fringe of Europe have a lot in common. Both claim to have a "glorious past" which is projected into the future and both have a historical resentment towards Europe for whom they are too "wild", big and foreign to be absorbed and yet too important to be neglected. It is only normal that they pragmatically chose to cooperate in a number of spheres, including military and political.

FRIENDS IN ENERGY, FRIENDS IN ARMS

The Russian-Turkish cooperation agenda is rather long with energy and arms sector being leading in the list.

Russia since 2003 sells natural gas to Turkey via the Blue Stream pipeline added recently by a second one – TurkStream – which can transit the Russian natural gas to the Balkans and Central Europe.

Yet not everything is fine in this cooperation. Due to the lower prices for liquefied gas and the alternative of the Azerbaijani gas, Ankara has much more room for maneuvers and more solid ground to demand discounts on Russian gas. Reuters reported in July that the Blue Stream was staying idle for over a month and this is a tendency rather than an isolated case. In view of the recent Turkish ambitions in the Mediterranean, and more realistic plans of exploiting gas deposits in the western part of the Black Sea as well as buying oil and gas from Libya's Tripoli government, Russia will face increased problems in the Turkish gas market.

Meanwhile the bilateral cooperation is more productive in nuclear energy. The construction of a major nuclear power station at Akkuyu on the southern coast of Turkey financed by Rosatom is about to be finalized with the Russian state-owned company holding the controlling stake in the enterprise.



▲
Syria's Bashar Assad
and Vladimir Putin



Yet another important segment of the Russian-Turkish cooperation is in the arms trade. Turkey expressed interest in purchasing Russian S-400 air defense systems and despite US threats and pressure the deal was implemented in July 2019. Currently another agreement is signed between the two countries on delivering a second batch of the system elements. While it was previously known that Turkey aimed at technology transfer and establishing a joint production of the missile system, it is unclear whether the objective was reached.

This interaction definitely does and will create frictions with the NATO partners and the USA for Turkey, which were amply manifested in the recent spike in tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

►
Anti-Turkey protest
in Moscow, 2015



◀
"Battle of Sinop,"
a painting by a
prominent Russian-
Armenian painter
Ivan Alvazovsky,
1853



ERDOGAN'S PAN-ISLAMIC AND ANTI-WESTERN DISCOURSE SOUNDS APPEALING TO MILLIONS OF PEOPLE ACROSS THE REGION AND HERE TURKEY ENJOYS A CONSIDERABLE AMOUNT OF SOFT POWER

TURKEY AND THE WEST

French President Emmanuel Macron was among the first of global leaders who voiced concern at Turkey's increased role in the Mediterranean region noting that Ankara was "no more a partner" in the region.

In fact Turkey's expansionist projects does not give much opportunity for gaining new partners. Erdogan's Turkey with its nationalist and pan-Islamist mindset, which is quite in tune with the "Muslim Brotherhood" ideology, has a very limited pool of allies among the Middle East governments (the only examples being Qatar, otherwise isolated by its Arab neighbors, and Libya's Tripoli government, controlling only part of the country and effectively being a client state). On the other hand, Erdogan's pan-Islamic and anti-Western discourse sounds appealing to millions of people across the region and here Turkey enjoys a considerable amount of soft power. On the other hand Erdogan's ambition to turn Turkey into a leader of the Sunni world naturally puts it in bitter rivalry with Saudi Arabia and Egypt. ➤

On yet another direction Turkey seems actively involving into a new “Scramble for Africa” projecting its influence over the north of the continent where it would inevitably rub shoulders with US, France and China.

All this makes Russia a more valuable partner for Ankara, in dealing with which Turkey has to think twice before rattling sabers, while Moscow in its turn can profit from the anti-Western moves by Ankara.

It can hardly be coincidence that the second deal on S-400 was struck in August as tensions were quite high on the Eastern Mediterranean maritime borders and gas drilling. Turkey also expressed interest in buying Russian Su-35 modern fighters instead of the F-35, a deal which was scrapped by the US after the purchase of the Russian missile systems by Ankara.

In spite of all this the Russian-Turkish relations are far from being an alliance. Both Moscow and increasingly so Ankara view themselves as independent “poles” in a multipolar world, who have no constant allies to rely on, but only short-lived situational alliances on certain issues, which are both volatile and limited in their depth.

TODAY'S FOE YESTERDAY'S FRIEND AND TOMORROW'S PARTNER

With all of this cooperation curbing western influence in the Middle East and cooperation in energy and weapon trade, the national interest of those two assertive states clash rather often.

Downing of a Russian Su-24 jet in 2015 by Turkish air force caused a major souring of relations, entailing sanctions, freezing of energy projects and a dramatic drop in tourism and trade.

The relations were soon restored, yet there can hardly be found a steady course of Russian-Turkish rapprochement to speak of. A proof of this point was yet another Russian-Turkish crisis in late February this year when Russian air force based in Syria hit Turkish military targets in the northwestern Idlib province causing major human loss. Yet Erdogan unexpectedly refrained from retaliating, instead targeting heavily the Assad regime. In the diplomatic field he had to turn to EU leaders Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel for support in its tough negotiations with Russia. Although Russia foiled the EU involvement, still Putin and Erdogan reached an understanding on 5 March and agreed to a “safe corridor” through the Idlib de-escalation zone, which was to be patrolled jointly by Russian and Turkish forces. Although this deal is far from being thoroughly

➤
Turkish troops in Syria



implemented, still it performs its main function – keeping the western influence on the Syrian conflict at a lowest level.

Turkey came at odds with Russia in Libya as well, where Moscow and Ankara are supporting different factions and it seems that the latter's influence over Libya is similar to that exerted by Russia over Syria. Yet Turkey's interests in Libya are more fundamental, including energy resources, which combined with the prospects of gas extraction from the Black Sea and possibly from the Mediterranean (where an ultimate understanding on sharing the resources with Greece and Cyprus is not to be excluded) will make Ankara much less dependent from Russia in energy sector.

Another important instance of clashing interests between the two empires is the South Caucasus, particularly the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. Turkey traditionally and increasingly posed itself as a broker of Baku's interests, however Ankara's reaction to the conflagration in July on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border this year was somewhat



outstanding in harshness and hawkish language. The recent anti-Russian developments in Azerbaijan, including the dismissal of foreign minister Elmar Mammadyarov and other diplomats considered as “serving the interests of a foreign country” (i.e. Russia), was a boost of Ankara’s positions in that country as opposed to Moscow’s interests. This was not missed in Moscow who sent critical, yet not harsh remarks at Ankara and is trying its best to woo Baku.

WHAT YEREVAN SHOULD AND SHOULDN’T BE WARY OF

The surge of Turkish involvement in the South Caucasus, unquestionably, poses a threat to Armenia’s vital interests. Yet Armenia also can discourage Turkey from going too far in that direction through its proactive actions in diplomacy and beefing up its military potential.

Currently we witness Armenian proactivity in the Middle East; ties are being forged with not only the traditional allies Greece and Cyprus, but also with

BOTH MOSCOW AND INCREASINGLY SOANKARA VIEW THEMSELVES AS INDEPENDENT “POLES” IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD, WHO HAVE NO CONSTANT ALLIES TO RELY ON

Egypt and the Israel, until recently a problematic country for Yerevan. Interestingly enough some Arab countries, for whom Turkish plans in the Middle East are detrimental, show signs of benevolent attitude towards Armenia and among them is a most influential regional player Saudi Arabia. Albeit the monarchy in the past had stubbornly refused to establish diplomatic ties with Armenia on grounds of “occupation” of Nagorno-Karabakh, it congratulated Yerevan on Independence Day on 21 September this year while having done that in 2018 as well, which could lay a foundation of normalization of relations with that country. Of course, joining such broad and ad-hoc coalitions does not mean at all that Russia’s role in providing security will be neglected or compromised. However this would add more to Armenia’s security particularly in shielding it against Turkish threats.

Armenia has its strategic interests in the Middle East and it would be impossible to avoid entanglement in regional matters. Armenia’s involvement in the broader region is detrimental to Turkey and it is no coincidence that when Yerevan expressed its full support to Greece and Cyprus in their conflict with Turkey, Ankara’s reaction was very harsh and nervous.

Of course, unnecessary provocations are to be avoided, however in the meantime Ankara should be reminded that embracing unequivocally the Azerbaijani stance in the Karabakh conflict would come at a cost of added problems on its other fronts.

With all of this said, it is clear that Turkish advancements in the South Caucasus deepen Armenian-Russian interdependence. Yerevan needs to highlight this point and all other players regional or global actors should take this into consideration when dealing with Yerevan in particular.

Armenia internally would need a firmer consolidation against any foreign threats both by military and other means. Armenian army needs to be given further attention in order to create an even firmer bond between the society and the armed forces. ♦

BIDEN IN THE WHITE HOUSE: What Could Armenia Expect?

After an unprecedented tight race and contested vote counting the US has a new president Joe Biden. Without going into details on Biden's internal and external policies, it is interesting to concentrate instead on the prospects of changes in the new administration's policies towards Armenia and the region it is located in.

TEXT : TIGRAN ZAKARYAN



The political situation in and around Armenia has dramatically changed since the war that broke out on September 27 and it would be interesting to see what changes it might introduce in the initial plans. What Biden as a presidential candidate could have promised on issues like the Armenian Genocide, US-Armenian relations, promises to harness the increasingly aggressive Turkey – which has embarked on its ambitious project of rapid regional expansion – all this might be revised under the new reality which has been unfolding since the 9 November agreement on Nagorno-Karabakh.

The presidential candidate Biden twice reacted to the ongoing war in Nagorno-Karabakh, making two statements over the month of October, which could give an idea of his visions on the conflict. Not unexpectedly, the statements called for a cessation of hostilities and urged to curb chiefly Turkish, as well as Russian and occasionally Iranian involvement in the conflict, yet in the



THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE BIDEN TWICE REACTED TO THE ONGOING WAR IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH, MAKING TWO STATEMENTS OVER THE MONTH OF OCTOBER, WHICH COULD GIVE AN IDEA OF HIS VISIONS ON THE CONFLICT



meantime suggesting that Armenia could not “occupy indefinitely” the territories surrounding former Nagorno-Karabakh autonomy. From these statements it can be inferred that Washington’s attitude is unlikely to change dramatically while in the meantime it can undergo certain transformations, like a revision of the previous disengagement policies and also, considering new facts on the ground be more ready to resist its regional rivals in the greater Middle East (which Armenia increasingly seems to be a part of).

Another hint at a comeback to the Middle East under the Biden Administration can be found in a statement by Biden’s choice for the state secretary Antony Blinken who called the previous administration’s handling of the Syrian crisis as “failure”. What most analysts believe is that Joe Biden will follow a more value-driven policy, as usually is the case with the Democratic presidents, however this should not be overestimated and it should not be done so even more in the case of Armenia. What Yerevan and the Armenian community could count for is some expression of sympathy (including financially, morally on the level of

some statements) and perhaps some steps in the Genocide and Karabakh issues, which are nevertheless unlikely to tip the existing balance in those matters.

It is important and helpful to view the Biden Administration's expected policies towards Yerevan against the larger background of the policies towards Armenia's neighboring countries.

It can be expected to a reasonable degree that Washington would be set to play a more active role in the Greater Middle East (including the Caucasus, with a focus on Georgia) and reverse Trump administration's disengagement policies in the region.

A certain pressure on Turkey could be expected in order to keep it under control and this certainly is not lost in Ankara as well, as Erdogan, just like Putin did not rush – to put it mildly – to congratulate the US president elect. A key point of Washington's discontent is certainly over Ankara's choice of purchasing Russian S-400 air defense systems. Meanwhile any Armenia-related matter, such as the Armenian Genocide recognition by the administration or pressure on Ankara on Nagorno-Karabakh war, including its humanitarian aspects and the presence of the Jihadi fighters in the war scene could be used as leverages against Ankara. Apart from that, Yerevan could expect US pressure on Turkey to open its borders unconditionally which under the current circumstances is quite realistic.

On the other hand one should bear in mind that Washington's aim is not by any means to alienate and antagonize Turkey, but rather keep Ankara under control. Turkey has been and most probably will be an instrumental partner for Washington in other key areas of the world, including Central Asia where it can serve as a bulwark against both China and Russia. In this respect Washington is highly unlikely to resent Turkey's increased presence in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan in particular, from where it could project its influence further into Central Asia.

In the meantime Washington's task will be to make every effort to drive a wedge between Russia and Turkey, also using Ankara's certain dissatisfaction with the outcome of the Karabakh war, even if it greatly bolstered its own role in Azerbaijan as well as with Moscow's attitude in the problems in Syria.

In this context the Biden Administration might be expected to make efforts to challenge the de facto Moscow-Ankara format of the conflict resolution in Nagorno-Karabakh while sending low-key

pro-Armenian messages on one hand (just like the French Senate did recently) and on the other hand insisting on the primacy of the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs in mediating the talks, however – make no mistake about it – these could only be viewed as tools for pressure on its regional and global rivals rather than a serious attempt at fixing the situation and let alone reversing to the status quo of September 26 2020.

As to Armenia's two important regional partners, Russia and Iran, Washington can be expected to spare no effort on isolating Russia and Iran and

T CAN BE EXPECTED TO A REASONABLE DEGREE THAT WASHINGTON WOULD BE SET TO PLAY A MORE ACTIVE ROLE IN THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST AND REVERSE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S DISENGAGEMENT POLICIES IN THE REGION



this is where Turkey as well as Azerbaijan could become partners to Washington. Yet the promised US reinvigorated presence in the Middle East sounds better than it could be done, because of Trump's fluctuating and erratic policy in the region is unlikely to contribute to the solid image of the superpower. Meanwhile continued support to the Kurdish forces in Syria seems to be frustrate and anger first of all Ankara and it would be a hard task for the Biden administration to convince Turkey to support its own initiatives.

There is not much to say about the relations with Iran. Albeit there is a slight potential for improvement and a new nuclear deal, this time it will require much more efforts and sacrifices than it did back in 2015 when the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed under Obama administration. In any case Iran is moving closer towards a nuclear weapon, while expectedly US pressure from different directions and on many

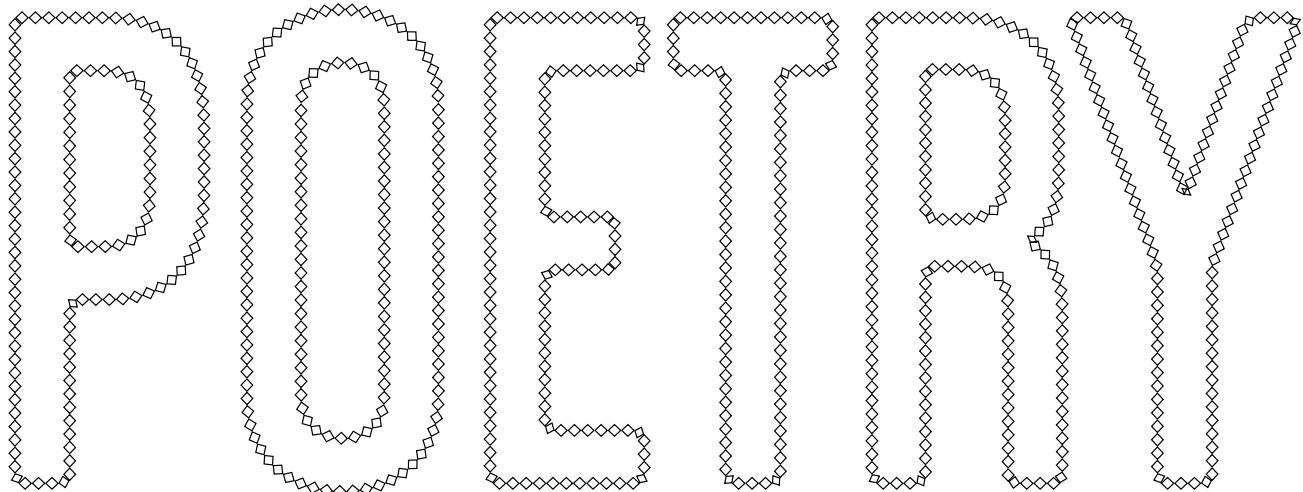


levels are only increasing and these are unlikely to stop any time soon. In this respect Yerevan could count on Washington's understanding of the vital importance of relations with Iran to Armenia. On the other hand Yerevan could press for alternatives to Iranian transit routes via Turkey and also ask for an effective US mediation for improving relations with its two key partners – Israel and Saudi Arabia – in order to avoid a regional isolation.

And the last, but not the least: the US would most likely seek to increase its influence and presence in neighboring Georgia with Tbilisi more than welcoming such a choice. This would also ensure Washington a more practical leverage on the Ankara-Moscow volatile relations, which at times of rapprochement bode ill to the US foreign policy makers.

With all the above-said in mind, it should be noted that against the background of a new round of US-Russian tensions globally, and the Karabakh war showing a clear retreat of the US and the West in this region, Armenia will firmly stay in the grip of Moscow for the following several years.

The nature and firmness of that grip will determine a lot in Washington's policy towards Yerevan. ♦



Armen Sargsyan

Instead of unread books

To Mariam With love

*Though I didn't write about you,
I wrote for you, instead...*

I wanted to forget you,
I rubbed the pencil painting of yours
I blew the paper,
Now, you are all over my room.

On page 11 of Maupassant
There were dried chambers,
On page 11 of Maupassant
You used to love me.

Like a happiness descending
 though the chimney
Unnoticed and expected
 so much, you came,
Woke me up,
And left.

On your high heels
you entered my heart,
then into my inkpot
and started to run
on my white papers...

And before tomorrow
a whole lightful night,
is not enough for me
to forget the day
that came
after you left.

I love you
like writing a poem
unplanned, short and beautiful,
like coloring white into yellow,
the sun above, the snow bellow,
and I am drawing my love with a rubber.

Like a half-eaten chocolate bar,
that is neither to be thrown away
nor can be wrapped up again,
I am leaving you
far and close from
the coast of coffee sediment.

I have chosen you
instead of all unread books
And unseen films.

My streets
didn't reach your sidewalks,
as you were
at the wrong stop,
and I
as in the wrong city...

You are so near,
that the city will fit between us,
where I can wait for days,
and not be afraid you will reach me,
in this city that is becoming
small and thin after rain,
you are so close,
that I cannot hold your hand
to forgive you.

You like the tea in the transparent cup,
In order to see your odditiest,
To keep them in your hands,
And leave them free,
To show that you rule,
So that you are watered and kept dry.

In all the films
There is something about you,
That makes me dial your number,
All the films are alike us.
They end.

A blue-drawn road,
Love,
that is shallow
The explanation remains far away
Truthes with remaining
Whimsical stupidity,
Dressed so slowly as if apologizing
Something differrent spread on

my memory

one in a hurry is lying on my skin
I feel, he is pulling my muscles
With the desire to seize my nerves,
And is tired we are together
We are adjusted
Now you will come out and
I will paint you blue
I will play with you
And will take care of you
So that you stay secure and healthy
And I will wait here
Impatiently

One day,
When you wake up from painful limbs
And the feeling of wetness that
 has nothing to do with the rain
Uncontrolled puppets inside
Let me start with this
There was a room of clarity in your life
Where I was living laughingly and
 was surprised at her beauty

when you dive
Sea freedom will touch my body
one day

We were watching football
We both at the same ball
Of different screens

My heart
is a sloppy typewriter
That makes bugs
My intelligence is not literally
The stories of my typewriter
Remained unproofread

The moon has been lost
In the street of lanterns
Nobody has noticed his absence
There are rains there now.

* * *

Winter is running in the sallow branches,
The holidays are over,
Those who lived happily these days
Go on walking without an umbrella.
The leaves of sallow are burning,
While the rain is having rest on
people's shoulders.

* * *

On holidays the city is full of,
The wishes of the previous winters
And the snow doesn't stop dropping
On higher mountains
Far from the small yards,
The city is full of
The wishes of the previous winters. ➤

What do the puppets dream about?
 Swinging on the mouth of the roof
 The girl who never says anything
 And who is sure of her life with her
 swinging bones
 Thanks to you, because you
 always leave.

From the opposite coffee shop
 My roof puppies are not seen
 So that we can be friends
 I just think that
 In one word, loving you is dangerous
 A self-administered puppet,
 Hand mile away
 No one knows anything about you
 Though everybody knows about
 everything

Night spreads her careless laundry
 Under my window
 My loneliness gathers them and iron
 Put them in the landlady's suitcases.

Night spreads her careless laundry
 Under my window
 My loneliness gathers them and iron
 Put them in the landlady's suitcases.

I have filled my pockets with spring,
 In order to give back the change of
 autumns lavished to me.

It is easy to write about love in
 the country
 There is fire, wood, fireplace,
 ash, wet wood,
 never used fireplace,
 It is easy in the country to walk
 barefooted on the ground
 Roll up naked in the mud.
 And come out clean.

And higher than the east,
 Cautious ways, without shade,
 Like a distant, colored moon.
 Peace...

The moon has fallen off
 The edge of bay,
 Ferries have tied the rays
 To the shovels
 In order not to pass the horizon.

Rainy night
 washes his tea cup on the city
 Yerevan mulberry trees
 Became wet and bent
 like an delapidated umbrella of my
 and your childhood.

Autumn collectors
 Took away my springs
 My frost has no gloves.

I had a country house
 That was a bit smaller than
 wthe one you had drown
 Where I had written a few remarks
 One or two poems
 Where there had not been any meetings
 Where I had looked though the
 curtains and had dreamt of
 becoming a poet and Paris
 To the post of my Paris house
 Hundreds of letters about my
 new book had arrived
 But my dream had remained in my
 old country house behind the curtain
 I had somewhere written about
 my old age
 It is sometimes impossible to
 forgive everyone.

When the skyscrapers
 Do not put any attention to you
 Because they have left the man
 By their height,
 When your footsteps escape from you,
 No matter how firmly you stumble
 on the ground,
 You are missing Yerevan.



Husik Ara And the Love Said

Translated by Liana Shiroyan

PSALM

Lord,
 I never learned one prayer yet in
 the life I lived
 And never read a psalm for you,
 I am, here I am, a delusion,
 the insurgent son,
 who is lost
 and has no return in the light.

A tired night
 And the darkness squeezes its
 heavy color into the rooms,
 filling the body, heart and pulse.
 In this gray sleep,
 that's hanging from the fear,
 fever and horror strings,
 the only dream is a warm girl
 with no jewelry on,
 that still has color and sound in the light.

I bend a knee
the purest on the stones
worn-out by hot kisses,
my prayer, Lord, I'm pleading you,
instead of celebrating you.
and my open heart is a reception
for this inconceivable,
unimagined prayer.

My prayer, Lord,
is that warm girl with no jewelry on,
who still has a color and
a voice in the light.

AND THE LOVE SAID

Everything is relative in the universe –
except for the love,
that I have to you.

And my love said: „Let the light be“,
and your eyes came to be:
saw, that your eyes are marvelous,
and called the white part – a day,
the black – a night,
for her to sleep and wake up
under your eyelids.

The love said: „Let the sky be“,
and your glance came to be,
said: „Let the earth be“,
and your hands came to be,
to embrace firmly,
not to let fall onto the waters.

Love wanted the sun to be,
and your kiss came to be,
wanted the moon to be,
and your charm came to be,
and wanted the stars –
the smile of yours,
not to stroll lost in separation.

And the love created you –
and you became real,
body and soul,
and you would multiply
the kisses,
the charm,
the smile
and you would rule over all and
over him.

Everything is relative in the universe –
only you are
the absolute I,
like the first word,
uttered in chaos
and came to be.

YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

What's the heaven's kingdom like,
I don't know,
but the only treasure on the earth is you.
And seeing you,
I gathered all my friends
And talked about love,
like this.

Let me be blessed to have a vacant
soul, for I shall be occupied by you.
Let me be blessed to have lost,
for I have found you;
Let me be blessed to have the
patience, for I shall inherit you.
Let me be blessed to have hunger
and thirst for your body,
for I shall be surfeited.

I'll be your gardener, your only
bodyguard –
I'll come to you in the morning and
enjoy you till the night,
I'll come to you in the afternoon,
and get full by you,
I'll come to you in the evening and
get the pleasure of the whole day,
I'll be the summer and your garden –
do not deprive me, pay me what
I am worth and say,
Do not be jealous for I am generous.
Let me be blessed for giving,

for I will get you –
Let me be blessed for the pure heart,
for I shall see you and glorify.
Let me be blessed for searching love,
for I possess your heart in full –
Let me be blessed for loving you,
for I will be called your love.

True I say,
I came to you tired and loaded,
I was blind and I see,
I was deaf and I hear,
I was dumb and I speak.

You are the salt of the earth,
if insufficient, I will be tasteless –
you are the light of the world, my city,
that have spread out on my wings,
and there is no way but to be mine.

Let me be blessed for they will
envy me for having you.
I rejoice and I am delighted,
for thanks to you I'm the best of all.

HEAVEN AND HELL

What should I say there, in the heavens?
that I took you for the God on
the earth –
should they judge me?

Instead of my friend I loved you,
like myself,
for you are my neighbour.
Like the heavens and the earth
and by the purity of those in the waters
I made you an idol.

For
not to misuse the name of God
our Father,
I called your name on every occasion.

I didn't observe Sabbath,
for on that very day I couldn't
take you out of me,
and having you I honored
my father and mother.

I stole the forbidden fruit from your tree
and handed in the weariness of people,
not to reduce the beauty of the world.

I killed myself,
for you to be on my behalf –
two you and not a single me.

Did I lie by saying,
you are the light and darkness,
you are the beginning and the end,
you are life and death

If loving you is to fornicate:
I will not change that hell to heaven.

P.S.
I took you for the God,
and you doomed me to devil. ♦

THE TREASURES OF KHNDZORESK

A short story of writer Artavazd Yeghiazaryan, from the "Stories from Armenia" project.

STORY : ARTAVAZD YEGHIAZARYAN

TRANSLATED : NAZARETH SEFERIAN

ILLUSTRATION : WILLIAM KARAPETYAN

In cooperation with the European Union Delegation to Armenia



After the unlikely accident that had occurred on the overpass at Barekamutyun Square, many people thought that the beloved 2004 Suzuki Zaven called the “yellow submarine” would end up in the pages of history and the garbage dump at Sovetashen – not many vehicles would survive a landing following a jump off the overpass onto a trolleybus on the street below. But Zaven demonstrated unparalleled stubbornness and demanded that his car should be revived. His father said, “Here, see if you can rebuild it yourself, and then you can keep it for yourself. As for me, I’ll take the insurance money and get myself a new car.” And so it was, four months later, that the “submarine” was once again racing along the roads of Armenia. Zaven’s cousin Lilith had asked to borrow the veteran vehicle for a new project. In Lilith’s own words, it was “both a fun job and a great way to get to know Armenia better.” The work consisted of the following – supported by a special European Union programme, specialists and volunteers were to study the road from Goris to Kapan and gather information of interest to tourists, mapping all the sights worth seeing and providing that wonderful part of the country with exposure to the world.

Lilith, naturally, could not be a part of this simply because it was “awesome” – she had found her first real job a few months ago, after she had taken a loan with her father to cover energy-efficient renovations on their house in Charbakh and this was part of that real job. The task was split

between two people – Lilith and Karen, a guide with twelve years of experience. Karen was a seasoned professional when it came to inbound tourism – he knew everyone and had been in every nook and cranny of Armenia. He simply adored his work because “could there really be anything better than showing people from outside your home, enjoying the whole experience with them, and making a living out of it?” as he said to Lilith on the first day that they had met. He also knew the owner of the small bed and breakfast in the village of Tatev where they had booked two rooms the previous evening.

“If we had more people like Mrs. Susan, nobody would beat Armenia in tourism,” Karen had said when they had just walked in.

There were four rooms in the house that had been converted into a bed and breakfast, and it had already been successfully hosting tourists from various countries for several years. Karen would also bring his customers here regularly if the programme required spending the night in the Syunik region. Naturally, this neat little bed and breakfast could not be left out of the guidebook they were preparing.

The previous days had been very full – Lilith and Karen had managed to go to Karahunj and hear the locals’ stories about the mysterious stones, they had naturally tried the mulberry vodka (and set aside a special column for it in the future guidebook), they had examined every centimetre of

Tatev Monastery with students from Goris University, spent some time at every privately-owned bed and breakfast in the area, and collected stories about the town of Goris. Lilith had taken photographs in all these cases, and Karen had used his map to mark all the sights in the area that needed electronic screens – even elements of augmented reality – instead of illegible and rusty display boards. “This is the 21st century, after all,” he kept saying, well versed in his profession and passionate about it.

And so, today, they had arrived in Khndzoresk. Or rather, in Old Khndzoresk – the mysterious cave town, the outline of which awaits its visitors in an impassable but simultaneously hospitable gorge. They needed to study this area as well, note everything down and then use the latest technology to get that information to the tourists.

In the morning, they had exchanged a few thoughts on that over a cup of coffee with Mrs. Susan, who had been excited to hear that Lilith and Karen would be leaving for Khndzoresk that day.

“I’m crazy about Old Khndzoresk,” she said and recalled her childhood, “When I was little, Old Khndzoresk had already been vacated, and we children would run down into the gorge almost every day. Some of the kids even said that there was gold hidden in those parts, but that was all a lie, of course. Ah but the natural beauty there is simply wonderful...”

“The tourists will like it, won’t they?” Lilith asked.

“Oh, of course, they will! Is there a place like that anywhere else in the world? Houses carved into a cliff, where people have lived for centuries? Ask Karen. The tourists wet themselves with joy when they get there, don’t they?”

Mrs. Susan was a grey-haired but bright woman past fifty, and she laughed heartily, probably at the image of a group of tourists wetting themselves with joy.

“Of course they do,” Karen confirmed, “But what we’re doing now is preparing a guidebook that anyone can use as they wish – irrespective of whether I’m guiding them or not – without missing any important sights. They’ll check the app on their phone, and they’ll see the such-and-such place, such-and-such legend, such-and-such hotel. It’s the 21st century, after all.”

A short while later, Karen was driving the car and telling Lilith about how he was managing to arrange activities for his tourists during the days of the Velvet Revolution. He had reached a point in his story when the excited tourists had asked their guide to find them several vuvuzelas so that they could join the protesters, preferably to help block the roads. As he told the story, a tall individual appeared in the distance, standing alone on the otherwise empty and quiet road. When the “yellow submarine” approached him, the man bent his head slightly and raised his hand. Karen braked a few meters past him, and soon the tall man with hair that grew past his shoulders and a long beard ran up to the car. Based on his walking shoes and backpack, one could assume that the hippy-like man was an avid hitchhiker.

Lilith even thought that he was a foreigner – hitchhikers were not a common sight in Armenia. But he wasn’t.

“Hi there, do you mind giving me a ride?” the traveller said with a smile and in fluent Armenian.

“With pleasure,” Karen responded, “But where are you going?” “I’m going to Khndzoresk actually, but my handy’s got no charge left and there are either no signs, or the ones that exist aren’t accurate, so I have no idea where I am right now. If you’re headed somewhere else, maybe you could point me in the right direction...”

Lilith analysed the way in which the strange bearded man spoke. He was speaking fluent Eastern Armenian, but there was a noticeable accent, as if he knew the language since childhood, but had not had much practice speaking it. And then there was that unusual word, ‘handy,’ as in handheld phone.

“It doesn’t matter where you are, what matters is that we’re going to Khndzoresk too!”

“Wow,” the new passenger exclaimed, opening the rear passenger door.

“I’m Karen and this wonderful girl here, hiding behind the camera lens, is Lilith,” Karen introduced himself, once the car had already started racing ahead. “We’re helping put together a new guidebook for tourists about this area.”

“Mkho. Pleased to meet you.”

“What has brought you to the Syunik region?” Lilith asked. “It’s difficult to say,” Mkho replied mysteriously, “I was sitting in my office in Hamburg one day, and I suddenly had this strong desire to leave that boring place and start walking down a road. And to finally lead a normal life. There’s nothing better than the road. So I came to Armenia and started learning more, talking to people. And I’m finally going to make it to Khndzoresk now.”

“What do you mean ‘finally’?”

“You could say I’m looking for treasure there,” Mkho said with a smile, then he sensed the surprise his travelling companions felt, so he added, “In reality, my grandmother would tell us about Armenia when we were little, and she would always say that there was a place like this in our country that was unlike any other. So I had decided to leave it for the final part of my trip.”

This explanation seemed closer to reality, but Lilith noticed later in the trip when she glanced in the rearview mirror that Mkho had taken out and unfolded a worn out and yellowed piece of paper, closely examined it, then quickly folded it and put it back in his pocket. The photographer could not shake the feeling that this was in fact what someone on a treasure hunt would do and that looked like a treasure map. She could not tell Karen at that moment, but thought that it would make great material for the guidebook if Mkho managed to find something valuable in Khndzoresk today using his old map...

Here they were, standing at the edge of the gorge – the yellow car, the experienced Karen, Lilith with her all-seeing camera, and the taciturn and mysterious Mkho. They were looked

with awe at the steep cliff that rose up from the emerald forest of the gorge. Karen opened his notebook and produced facts gathered from various sources for his companions.

"So these seemingly impassable territories had actually been inhabited for almost a millennium, all the way up to the 1960s," Lilith took a picture of Karen, his hand stretching out towards the gorge, "And 1800 families lived in Old Khndzoresk before it was vacated."

"I wonder why they suddenly decided to leave this place if they'd been living here so long?" asked Lilith and she noticed how Mkho had tensed and was watching Karen closely, as if his future depended on his response to the question.

"Well, if my understanding of the situation is correct," Karen once again gazed deeply into his notebook, "The gorge was a suitable place to live, safe from bandits and the enemy. Fortunately, there were also a large number of springs there. But, at some point, there was no longer a need to live here. People had started to live with modern facilities. So they left this place and moved to New Khndzoresk... Every time I see it, I feel the same sense of wonder."

They walked up to a symmetrically dug archway in the rock and ended up in an "apartment" with several rooms. A door, garret, smooth walls, long benches sculpted into the walls – the locals who lived here had everything they needed for several centuries. All three of them examined the space with great interest, even though Karen had already been here on several occasions. Lilith watched Mkho from the corner of her eye. She noticed that he was looking around him as if he was searching for something, and not simply exploring the area. "You've lost your mind, Lilith, what treasure could there be?" she scolded herself in her thoughts.

"If I could get online here, I would probably move away from the noise and craziness," Lilith confessed, basking in the amazing quiet. She had said this to distract herself from her own thoughts, not to start a new conversation.

"Oh, it's worth moving here even without the internet, Lilith jan," Karen sighed, sitting down on a bench, "Just the natural scenery here is worth everything."

They moved from cave apartment to cave apartment, and the group slowly descended to the lower part of the gorge, where they found themselves in a jungle of wild fruit-bearing trees and shrubs – wild pears, blackberries, anything the heart desired. The lunch that they had in their bags (Mrs. Susan's delicious sandwiches) remained where it was; the gorge fed the travellers.

A rustling was heard from behind the shrubs, and a little later, an old man on horseback appeared, looking like the ghost of Khndzoresk. He looked like he was past seventy – his face was wrinkled and sunburnt, his eyes had a serenity and depth about them.

"Welcome," his hoarse voice said.

"Hello, old sir," Karen responded.

"How are you, what can I do to help you?" he asked, stopped his horse. Lilith was capturing the moment with her camera.

"We're exploring the area – both for future guests here and for ourselves."

"Good for you," the man voiced his approval, "If that's what you're doing, let me show you Mkhitar Sparapet's grave. But only his body is buried here, not his head."

They walked up to a mossy but grand rectangular grave-stone. On one side, it depicted armed horsemen – the comrades-in-arms of that General, Mkhitar Sparapet. Under the rock, as the old man who had now dismounted insisted, lay the decapitated remains of the General.

"The Persians captured him and killed him. They had his head cut off so that the Armenians would not find out and rebel. And that was how they buried him."

"Stand next to the grave, Mkho, so I can take a picture of you with your namesake," Lilith suggested.

"Sure, I was named for him in particular. But I ended up not becoming a soldier."

"Well, a soldier isn't just someone who stands against the enemy with a gun, son. We're all soldiers, each in our own way," the wise old man said as consolation.

"What do you do in these parts?" Karen asked, "The village is on the upper side now, isn't it?"

"The village is in the upper parts, but my garden's in the lower parts. I'd come down here to water it and to relax in the peace of this area. I've lived in Old Khndzoresk. I was little when our village moved out, but I still remember it."

"Who were the last people who remained, do you remember?" Karen asked, sitting down on a rock as Lilith examined the gravestones next to the General's which, in contrast to the soldier's, depicted men who were feasting. "It was probably the old people who hadn't wanted to leave their homes, right?"

"No, it was the opposite."

"How come?"

"It's a very interesting story – remember it so you can tell your tourists. People were gradually moving out, and only twenty or thirty homes remained. They were waiting for a house to be allocated to them in the upper part. We were among those families. And when we were supposed to move out, it turned out that our neighbour Taguhi had fallen in love with Torgom Ghazarents. The two of them would meet in secret..."

"Right over here near this grave, right?" Mkho suddenly asked.

"Why, yes!" the old man said surprised, "How did you know?"

"My grandmother was from this village. I've heard this story."

"So he must know something about a treasure here!" Lilith's adventurous mind continued in the same direction.

"Well," the old man grew excited, "Your grandmother probably remembers then that both sets of parents were again the union. Those two families did not like each other, they had had some problems in the past and did not want their children to live together. Moreover, they'd already arranged for a girl from Tatev to marry Torgom. So the whole village moved out, but those two lovebirds eloped at night and came back here, living alone in the caves. The village was empty, but the two of them were happy. But when the girl got pregnant, the

parents finally got their acts together, and they said fine, come to live a normal life with us if you love each other so much. And that was how the final residents left this village."

"Could they perhaps have left gold or other valuable items here before they moved out?" Lilith asked with the gravity of someone investigating a case, "Have you heard a story like that?"

The old man laughed and replied with a smile,

"Ah, young lady, if you believe what the villagers say then there is a tonne of gold in each part of the valley. But there were stories like that about Khndzoresk as well. They said that Torgom had found gold in the ruins of the church and that was supposedly why he had stayed here for so long with his wife. When he left, he had taken part of it with him and left the other part in the caves. But if that were true, the villagers would have found it over the past fifty years for sure."

Karen asked everyone to stand still, and he held his phone high above his head, then began to rotate in place. The old man arched his eyebrows, probably assuming that this city-dwelling youngster had slightly lost his mind.

"I was taking a 360-degree photo," Karen said when he had completed one rotation, "I'm adding it to Google Maps – there are very few pictures of Armenia there. Technology should help us tell everyone about the wonders we have here."

The old man's eyes fell upon Mkho, who was sitting a slight distance away from them on a rock. Lilith spotted the suspected map in his hands once again. The bearded traveller was looking at the paper, then the dwellings carved into the caves, and then back at the paper. Lilith tried to walk up to Mkho from behind quietly, pretending to look for a good position to take a photograph.

"Do those young people," Karen walked up to the old man, "Still live in the new village? Did they lead a happy life? It would be fun to talk to them..."

That was when Lilith saw the map. The crumbling piece of paper had a sketch of the cliff – the scene that lay before them from the depths of the gorge. One of the archways on the paper had a cross on it. "Oh God, it's just like Treasure Island," Lilith said, barely suppressing a sigh, "But why didn't he enter that cave on our way down... Ah, because he first needed to get a view from down here to compare the scene with the map and find the right cave. That's why..."

"No, they left the village a long time ago," the old man said, "I don't even know where they went and what they did. Torgom got an official position of some kind back in Soviet times, and they went to Europe somewhere – Germany, I think – then they got divorced..."

"They had a child and got divorced. They never spoke to each other again and took turns seeing their only grandson to avoid seeing each other," Mkho suddenly continued, his eyes staring at a round box, "And then Torgom died, and for the rest of her life Taguhi would recall the happiest weeks she spent in Old Khndzoresk, when it was just the two of them and the old village. And she told the whole story to her grandson, who was born and brought up in Hamburg. She

would tell him, 'Go there one day and see what a wonderful place it was, and bury me there in the old graveyard, liebe.' Mkho had slowly taken out a round, plastic box from his backpack, around the size of a three-litre jar. He put it on his knees and then held it tightly to his chest. After being quiet for a while, the old man asked Mkho with suspicion, "What was the name of your grandmother who lived here?" Lilith was interested in something else.

"Mkho, are you really here to get treasure? Did your grandmother and grandfather leave gold here?" She asked, confused.

Mkho smirked and promised to tell them the whole story. The sun was setting. Before leaving, the old man warned them against staying in the gorge for too long, going back would be more difficult. So they went back up the same way they had come down. Before getting to the top, they stopped at one of the caves in the "upper floors" of the cliff. They had reached the cave that was marked with a cross. That was where Mkho told them that he had drawn the map when he was little, based on the what his grandmother narrated. And that was the cave in which his grandmother and grandfather had lived when they were young, escaping the wrath of their parents. "There really were treasures. At least, for a while. The happy days that Torgom and Taguhi lived here. They never lived as happily afterward, but the days they spent in this cave was their biggest treasure. Taguhi would always dream of coming here one more time at the end of her life. As it turned out, it happened after her life was over."

As Mkho was casting his grandmother's remains into the wind so that she would find eternal peace in this abandoned and mysterious cave village where she spent the happiest days of her life, Lilith and Karen whispered to each other about the day they had had.

"Do you think this will be an interesting story for the tourists?" Lilith asked.

"Of course it will! It's like a movie screenplay – how the last resident of Old Khndzoresk returns to her village after several decades and finds eternal peace there, reclaiming her invaluable treasure in the mountains... They can't relive the emotions that we experienced today, but it's stories like this one that makes traveling come to life. And, of course, smart use of new technology."

At the top, they stopped on a large signboard that had a declaration of friendship between the European Union and Armenia. Karen noticed that it would be quite symbolic if another board would soon be added next to it mentioning how the European Union helped people easily walk across these wonderful and treasure-rich paths.

"We still have a lot to do together," the tourism professional said with a sigh.

Karen took another 360-degree photograph and uploaded it to Google Maps right away. The beauty of Armenia must be well represented. And then the three of them reluctantly got back into the "yellow submarine." ♦

SOVIET ARMENIAN TOURISTIC POSTERS





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