

ARTSAKH KARABAGH – FIRST MEMORIES

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By **Raffi Bedrosyan**, Toronto, 28 July 2018

My first trip to Armenia was not really to Armenia, but to Artsakh, known internationally as Nagorno Karabagh, right after the war with the Azeris ended in 1993 with victory for the Armenians. The united goodwill, cooperation, sacrifice and courage of Armenian leaders, peoples of Armenia, Artsakh and Diaspora had made the miraculous victory possible in those early days, followed by enthusiastic rebuilding and reconstruction projects. Unfortunately the winning spirit was replaced over the years by selfish greed, power grab, corruption and bribery by the leaders, while bringing disillusionment, disappointment, frustration and poverty to the people. It is my hope that the leaders and people of independent Armenia and Artsakh as well as the Diaspora learn from the lessons and memories of the first quarter century, build on the good deeds and avoid the bad ones.



Jdrduz

I remember the Hayastan All Armenian Fund or 'Himnatram' was just formed then to provide desperately needed funds and know-how to construct civil infrastructure such as highways, water distribution networks, gas pipelines, schools and hospitals, either destroyed during the recent war or left in ruins during decades of neglect. As a civil engineer specializing in public works infrastructure in Toronto, I volunteered to go to Karabagh and help the Himnatram engineers in implementing these essential projects. I informed the Armenian Ambassador to Canada: 'The leader of Himnatram is Mrs. Manoushag Bedrosyan, the leader of Karabagh is Leonid Bedrosyan (assassinated along with other politicians in the Armenian Parliament in 1999), the leader of Armenia is Levon Der-Bedrosyan, and since my name is also Bedrosyan, I have no choice but to volunteer and go to Armenia and Karabagh'. Therefore, I boarded the Tupolev jet of Armenian Airlines in Paris and landed in Yerevan around 3 am one night. Himnatram engineers picked me up at the airport, and we travelled in pitch dark from the airport to a downtown hotel, with electricity and streetlights off. There were several gas tanker trucks parked along the road, selling gas by container, as gas stations didn't function. In the morning, I saw beautiful Mount Ararat and beautiful Yerevan for the first time, but also the makeshift pipe chimneys sticking out from all apartment windows and the thousands of chopped down trees all over the city for heating and cooking purposes.

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We started our long journey to Karabagh, six people including two young soldiers going to the front, all crammed into a small Niva. We stopped for breakfast by the Arpa River in Yegheknadzor, not with tea or coffee but with the obligatory mulberry vodka, 'tuti oghi' in Armenian. As we left Goris and entered Karabagh through the Lachin corridor, we could see the violence of the war all around us, the burnt houses as well as hundreds of destroyed Azeri tanks strewn on the side of the road. One of the Himnatram engineers who knew the heroic commander Monte Melkonyan explained how Monte changed the course of the war when he told the Armenian fighters: 'Why do you destroy the gift of the Turks (Azeris) to us?' After that, the Armenians changed tactics to preserve the captured Azeri tanks instead of destroying them, and won the war against the Azeris by using Azeri tanks. To understand the realities of the war and the enormity of the victory, one should visit two sites in Shushi, Karabagh. The beautiful white church in Shushi, Ghazantchetsots Church, was used as an arms depot by the Azeris on the assumption that Armenians would not fire on their own church. The Azeris controlled Shushi, which is situated on high cliffs literally on top of Stepanakert, enabling the Azeris to target and rain hundreds of rockets on any Stepanakert building that they wished to destroy. But Armenian commandos accomplished the impossible, climbed the almost vertical cliffs at Jdrduz near Shushi in one night, and gained control of Shushi, which paved the way to victory.



I worked for a while on the highway construction project joining Armenia to Karabagh, known as the Goris-Stepanakert Highway, which became a lifeline and replaced an almost unpassable mountain road reducing the trip from Yerevan to Stepanakert from 11 hours to 5 hours. During the war, even this road was blocked and the only connection between Armenia and Artsakh was via helicopters, bringing supplies, medicine, arms into Artsakh, and returning with wounded soldiers back into Armenia. I then moved on to the water supply and water distribution project for Stepanakert, capital of Karabagh. Before fleeing, Azeris had destroyed all the plans for existing infrastructure, making it even more difficult for our contractors. Without knowing the location of underground gas, electric or telephone ducts, it was slow and dangerous work to dig the streets for new water pipes. Almost everyone that I met in Karabagh had participated in the war or had lost a family member to the war. The main contractor, Felix, told me his story. He was sitting with his friend on the front steps of his contractor's office one day, to smoke cigarettes. He couldn't find matches and went inside to get some. Just then, an Azeri Grad missile landed at his friend's feet, blowing him to pieces. Seeing this, Felix just grabbed a Kalashnikov, stopped being a contractor and became a soldier. From the highest government official to the lowest construction labourer, every person regarded these construction projects as a patriotic mission. Donations poured in to Himnatram, from Diaspora as well as from within Armenia and Artsakh, large and small, even from a beggar on a Yerevan street.

I learnt a lot about land mines on this first Karabagh trip. They are one of the most cruel and sinister inventions. Years after the war ended, children playing in the countryside would blow up, or a farmer working in the field, or a grazing cow. Some mines are weight sensitive, which will not detonate when several cars pass over it, but will blow up if a heavier bus or truck rolls by. Some mines have counter mechanisms, designed to blow up after a certain number of passes over them. Other mines are designed to blow up even at the slightest touch. On a rural road, we had a close encounter. The road had a huge failure creating a pothole the size of a car, filled with water like a pond, virtually impossible to pass. We had no choice but leave the road and find a way through the forest nearby. As we started weaving a passage through the trees, we suddenly came by a car blown up by a mine in the forest... When planning the route of water supply or gas pipelines in the mountains or countryside, I learnt that we had to walk behind one another in a single line, with the most experienced engineer familiar with the area or the mine tracker in front. In the western world, a sign of respect is to give way to someone and tell him/her: 'Please, after you', whereas in Artsakh, a sign of respect or care is: 'Please, walk behind me'.... I doubt if any engineering contract in the western world has a tender item making the contractor responsible to detect and clear land mines along the project route.

We went to northern Artsakh near Sarsang Reservoir, to provide preliminary engineering and cost estimate for another water project. The flowers were budding in the beautiful spring weather, and we picked up some of them. The village leader and his three year old grandson greeted us. When the little boy, Armen, saw the flowers in our hands, he started calling 'Baba, baba', leading us and his

grandfather in a certain direction. Curiously, we followed him and his grandfather... until we reached a home-made cemetery with a tombstone covered by flowers. In tears, the grandfather explained that his son, Armen's father, was recently martyred in the war, and every day the grandfather and Armen would bring flowers to the grave. The grandfather had two sheep, and he offered to slaughter one of them for us so that we can have dinner together, basically offering half of his entire assets as a donation or present to us for bringing water to his village...

We also went into Aghdam with my Himnatram engineer buddies, Azerbaijan's third largest city before the war. In a calculated way to keep Karabagh Armenians isolated, Azeris had not built any roads within Karabagh and one had to go through Aghdam, in order to travel from north to south Karabagh. As we know, Armenians have now built an economically and militarily critical north-south highway within Artsakh joining most cities and villages to one another, as well as a second lifeline link between Armenia and Artsakh through Kelbashar. Aghdam was evacuated in panic by the Azeris due to the superior military tactics of the Armenians, even though Armenians were outnumbered both in men and equipment. There were even restaurant menus intact in Aghdam for the day of the rout. The city had become an open air building materials supply centre for the Karabagh Armenians, a virtual Home Depot... Armenians would come and pick up housing materials, furniture, even pots and pans from the abandoned city. With some of the army commanders and contractors, I helped transport pipes, electric poles, even hydro transmission towers to the Armenian side. But when one of the contractors proposed to use the precast concrete girders from a recently blown up bridge as the sides of a water reservoir, I had to object... Perhaps this was the first time in Armenians' history that instead of being plundered, Armenians had become plunderers.

In one of our travels, we brought a wealthy Armenian lady from California with us to Aghdam. She was in her eighties and in a wheelchair, but very feisty and determined to see Karabagh, as she had donated substantial sums to Himnatram. We stopped at the Aghdam mosque as some of the engineers wanted to climb the minaret to see the entire city from up above. This lady told us that she also wanted to go into the mosque. Our objections that it may be unsafe or difficult to take her in a wheelchair were to no avail, and she insisted that we carry her into the mosque. We had no choice but to comply. Once inside, she knelt, lifted her skirt, and urinated. And she said: 'Now I can die in peace'. She told us her story, that she was an orphan of the 1915 Armenian Genocide, and most of her family was put to the sword by the Turks who had then urinated on the dead Armenians...

Armenians of Armenia and Artsakh have paid and continue paying a high price for Karabagh/Artsakh but it is worth it, for many survival reasons - strategic, military, economic, and last but not least, historic.

