

HORSE LATITUDES IN YEREVAN

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Dikran Abrahamian, 14 July 2011

An Open Letter to My Friends

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At the outset let me state that I think I am a forward-looking person, otherwise I can't explain why I have made several leaps from one profession to another and gradually improved my lot over a span of 60-plus years. There is no explanation to why I joyfully fathered a half-a-dozen children, without fearing the financial burdens those decisions entailed. Was it luck or was I taking calculated risks? I think it's the latter which has propelled me. In today's jargon, I would probably be tagged as an individual with positive attitude.

Why do I start with this personal confession? Because what follows is far from being rosy and may be interpreted as the product of a disgruntled old man who in his sunset years is disposed to view life in dark tones. I tend to think of myself otherwise. On the other hand, there are "surprises" which pull you to the abyss, despite attempts to look at the brighter side of situations and events.

All the above words so as to tell you that I would like to write about my recent trip to Artsakh and Yerevan while my impressions are fresh and are not clouded by temptations to be politically correct or diplomatic.

I will not bother you with details on how friendly the people were; how wonderful the mountains and the forests felt; how the lakes and rivers made me hum here and there or recite a line or two from favorite poems. Likewise, I will not be a tour guide to the more attractive natural, historic or cultural sites. Google does a better job than I.

What was I looking for? Was it residents or how patriotic they are? Was it the land for which we have fought for millennia? By the latest count, some 6,000 people were killed, maimed and injured to liberate a slice of our motherland--*Artsakh*. What's mind-boggling is how this region is defended.

Are the mountains and the highlands our natural protectors? These were questions to which the people at large and officials could not provide credible answers.

Lebanon, home of the cedars, comparable in size to Artsakh, the sea as a natural defense on its west, a 20,000-strong army in peacetime (prior to the tragic civil war of the '70s) defended a little over 3-million citizens. Inflated numbers claim there are 160,000 people in *Artsakh*--a jurisdiction that has no significant economy and no tax-base to speak of. How can it defend itself? Who is providing this crucial function? The answer would simply be speculation.

Is it any wonder that two themes dominated my conversations with *Artsakh* citizens? There is talk of populating it with people from remote areas of the former Soviet Union, i.e. Hamshens (Muslim Armenians) families who have expressed a desire to move to *Artsakh*. However no one is willing to make a move for acutely uncomfortable reasons.

Who will provide the finances for such a migration? Are the millionaires in the inner Diaspora of Moscow or the ones in the West to foot the bill? Why invest in such a venture when there is talk of ceding portions of the land to Azerbaijan? Will the Hamshens be willing to fight in case of war? Will they integrate in their new environment? What if "transplanted" people have to be deported again to safer regions, in case hostilities resume? Couldn't such a project open Pandora's Box in already complex international negotiations and provide Azerbaijan with new ammunition for propaganda--i.e. populating *Artsakh* with non-*karabaghtsis*, while Azeri refugees, former residents are "languishing" in Azerbaijan? One might add, "Why don't the former Armenian *Karabaghtsis* come back to claim the land for good?"

The other recurrent theme of my conversations was the Republic of Armenia presidential election, scheduled within a year. It's not uncommon to hear, "What if a non-*karabaghtsi* becomes the commander-in-chief? What will become of *Artsakh*?" There are no answers. The questions betray a legitimate anxiety. Other less frequently heard topics are the *Himnatram* and what a wonderful job the Diaspora has done. One wonders whether such glowing words come up because the listeners are from the Diaspora.

Yerevan? This is my third visit since the creation of the Third Republic. In a couple of months there will be celebrations commemorating the 20th anniversary of "independence". Am I biased and is that the reason why I use a qualifying sign? You bet I am, and that's because of the perspective that living as a student almost eight consecutive years in Armenia during the '70s and early '80s has supplied. That period provides me with some point of reference to compare the present with the past.

The views I hold of the present have minimal relation with the Marxist ideology that I profess. In the early '60s I was in a very small minority, within the staunchly pro-Soviet segment of the community, that was critical of the Soviet totalitarian socio-economic system. A number of friends and I paid dearly for our stance: we were terrorized and I was obliged to carry a concealed weapon for personal protection. Furthermore, during my studies in Armenia, a friend from *Qamishli*, Syria, and I

we were denied our elected positions in various student and compatriotic councils. We were to be expelled from Armenia for criticizing, during a semi-public gathering with officials, the bribery and corruption in educational institutions. A fellow Diasporan student accused us of being involved in *hagabedagan* (anti-state) activities in a subsequent "trial-by-colleagues", i.e. by the student body of the institution where we were studying. That was reason enough for the Dean of Diaspora students to take action. To this day it's not clear whose magic wand played a role in "sparing" us from expulsion.

Why this long-winded sub-introduction following my statements about *Artsakh*? It's intended to demonstrate where my bias is rooted. Secondly, to put at ease acquaintances in *Artsakh* and Yerevan who confided in me and told some ugly stories.

On my previous two visits I had returned home depressed. This time, I was not--probably because I was "immunized" against what to expect. I feel re-energized ... to tell and retell what's happening in the Motherland, until somebody listens for the sake of our land(s), for the sake of our people(s) in *Artsakh*, in Armenia and in Diaspora.

It's a no-brainer to any social studies student that a country without a sound and independent economy of whatever type (capitalist, welfare state, managed economy) there can't be political independence, especially when the levers of production and distribution are owned and managed by foreign investors. The main sectors of Armenian economy are now owned by foreigners. There is no need to elaborate on the oligarchs collaborating with foreign interests and about whom people--the homemaker, taxi driver, server in the restaurant, reporter, editor, publisher, educator, doctor, professor and academician--have little positive to say. The country is in worse economic shape than many Third World countries I visited in the late '60s and the early '70s.

There is much talk about construction and beautification but it's limited to Yerevan and primarily to its centre. There is a semblance of clusters of residential mini-skyscrapers. Try to rent an apartment in this putative high-rises? No way! How can a family with a monthly income of \$150 to \$200 dollars afford the exorbitant rents? These buildings are in areas from where people were forcibly vacated and were offered peanuts in compensation. How did the price of older apartments, close to the centre, which were priced at \$15,000 to \$20,000 ten years ago now fetch \$100,000 to \$150,000?

Yes, the new buildings have provided a modern look to the city. Outwardly, they are comparable to downtown apartments in small cities in the West. But at what cost? In addition to cheating previous owners of the lands and in erecting new buildings on the same lands, the developers have compromised the eco-system. German experts have condemned the constructions as non-eco friendly. It appears that Alexander Tamanyan, the principal architect of the "old" city, knew a thing or two about the movements of air and pollution. The present architects, nearly a century later, display utter ignorance in favor of beauty.

Let's be fair. The highways converging to the city centre have made a difference in normalizing

traffic and providing much needed arteries to various outlying neighborhoods. Moreover, they have made it easier for the innumerable BMWs, SUVs and the sleek, new Mercedes look-alike Volgas to maneuver. Who owns them though? Most are bought through borrowed money at 10-12%, adding a further burden on a country drowned in debt.

What about culture? It was off-season and thus concerts, the opera and other cultural activities were not on. To compensate, I listened to street violin players, to piano, and to guitar-based groups at the café-restaurants around the Opera House and along the Teryan Boulevard. I thought it would be pleasurable during late evenings--following days of 41, 43, 45 degree Celsius. I wish I had not ventured. I heard more Russian songs than during the Soviet era. Mind you, I like all types of music and all kinds of songs, irrespective of language, but the dominance of one particular language irked me, to say the least. And to add insult to injury the melodies did not resemble the popular Russian music. They were fake-jazz. Who do the performers think they are kidding?

I can't refrain from commenting on the servers. They were eye-catching, sensuous beauties who lacked the basic skills of trained professionals. Having once been a server myself in the mountain resorts of Lebanon and a "flying-waiter" in the Middle East Airlines, I couldn't help noticing a lack of decency and common courtesy. Am I exaggerating? A relative told me that they were very low-paid, untrained employees, and I had been too demanding in my expectations. Some people made the remark that I should have attended the gala-dinner at *Harsnaqar* Restaurant, following the 3rd International Medical Congress of Armenia closing ceremonies, instead of *rabiz* places to observe a high quality service and not be disappointed. May be they were right, but there is a but... Having heard that the said restaurant allegedly belonged to an oligarch, and it would have cost 25,000 drams per person (around CDN\$65) to attend, I couldn't bring myself to the notion of further enriching a crook. For the same reason, I regret staying at Aviatrans Hotel. I should add though, the employees at that lodge were excellent.

Another point to ponder about: Doesn't *rabiz* music, behaviour, "culture" represent the average Joe in any society, and isn't the "common" citizen a part of the majority in any country? I was interested in that!

I repeat my initial expression of regret for another reason. The centre of evening enjoyment and unfortunately one of the best parts of Yerevan, is not for families. I write in no disrespect to people in the villages and towns surrounding the city. Poverty and lack of employment has driven the young to Yerevan. What better trade is there without monetary capital than exposing one's flesh? That's what I observed around me in the café-restaurants.

Incidentally, I noticed the monument dedicated to the victims of the Jewish Holocaust at the Teryan park. Though small in construction, it was very tastefully done and awe-inspiring. But I could not figure out why it was positioned in a location dedicated to the poet? Why the late human rights activist Sakharov had his own square with a bust, but just a corner was devoted to a whole people

subjected to holocaust?

I didn't visit *Dzidzernagapert* and other significant commemorative markers anew. Moreover, the majority, like the monuments at *Sardarabad* and *Musa Ler* were erected during the Soviet period and I had paid my respects, time and again, in the past.

Yerevan is floating in horse latitudes. There is a palpable stagnant atmosphere in politics. Nothing moves. While people in Karabagh are "concerned" in the identity of the next president, in Yerevan they complain about how long they have to "support" their brothers in the *Artsakh* highlands. Overall, it appears they are tired of unending protests that have led matters nowhere. A minority is hopeful that the proposed "dialogue" between the government and the opposition may lead to some "accommodation".

