

LINGERING NATIONAL DISGRACE IN ARMENIA

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By Berge Minasian, San Diego CA, 20 June 2010

✘ Ever since I was a little boy growing up in Highland Park, Michigan, (1930's) my dream was to someday see a free and independent Armenia so that our countrymen could live a proud and satisfying life. This dream stayed with me well into my adult life. But over the years I began to think that it just might never come true since Armenia was a captive nation of the Soviet Union. It was quite unlikely that the Soviets would ever grant us independence.

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During my childhood, I witnessed the traumatizing ideological clashes that erupted whenever our community had social gatherings. Armenia had become a captive nation of the Soviet Union in 1920. This came on the heels of the genocide in 1915 after which the first Republic was formed and survived from 1918 to 1920. These bitter clashes affected almost everyone as even family members took passionate positions against each other regarding the pros and cons of a Soviet Armenia. The ARF leaning folks took the position that free and independent was the only acceptable status for Armenia while the Ramgavars and Hunchaks took the position that being tied to the Soviets guaranteed our safety from the murderous Muslim Turks. This ideological split between Diaspora Armenians was painful and the backlash of that terrible era haunts us even today.

The ideological differences of that era even spilled over into our churches as communities built parishes and then affiliated with either the Dioceses or Prelacy. This split pitted families against each other as they would vehemently boycott any event held at the "other" church. I remember being so confused back then. How in the world could our uncles and aunties be persona non grata when we were all of the same blood?

Now, fast forward to the later part of the 20th century; Armenians suffered a horrific tragedy on December 7, 1988 when a massive earthquake struck the area around Gyumri, Spitak, and Vanadzor. Twenty five thousand lives were lost and the economy took a severe hit from which it is still struggling to recover. Then in 1991 Armenia declared independence and was free once again. My dream had finally come true, but it has been bitter sweet to say the least.

The earthquake and the collapse of the Soviets left Armenia in a horrible mess. The economy was destroyed and unemployment was rampant throughout the country. As if all of this wasn't enough, Nagorno Karabach fought a war for independence from Azerbaijan and Armenia found itself fighting a de-facto war in support of the Armenians of Karabach. The Turks and Azeri's immediately set up a

blockade to economically destroy Armenia.

Much to the spirit of the resilient Armenian people, Karabach is still free, and Armenia exists in spite of the criminal blockade imposed by their enemies. The economy is slowly recovering with the massive infusion of hundreds of millions of dollars loaned by the worlds leading banks. The country has shifted from that of a communist/socialist totalitarian country to a somewhat democratic albeit mildly corrupt nation.

I would imagine that we are all proud of our tiny country. With fewer than 3,000,000 inhabitants, the country has survived and is even a proud member of the United Nations world organization. Thousands visit the homeland each year from the Diaspora and visit the obligatory tourist sites and come home somewhat pleased that although there is some poverty, Armenia is free and gaining in stature.

But, unless one deviates from the well scripted tourist itinerary, it is quite unlikely that one would ever discover the national disgrace that has existed for the past twenty plus years. What I am referring to is the fact that there are hundreds of families in and around Gyumry, Spitak, and Vanadzor living in metal shipping containers which were set up as temporary shelters after the earthquake in 1988. My wife Terry and I have toured the ghetto in Vanadzor and have seen these conditions first hand.

These containers are now old and in many instances the metal floors have rotted out and the inhabitants live on dirt floors. In the summer the boxes (domigs) are unbearably hot and in the winter they are freezing cold. Most of these families have small children and the adults are mostly unemployed. All of them, young and old alike are suffering from respiratory conditions as well as an arthritic type of joint disease.

Now here's the tragic part. These families are the poorest of the poor in Armenia. They are mostly unemployed and survive on meager pensions from the government and the \$30.00 per family sent by HUMANITARIAN OUTREACH FOUNDATION sponsors. The foundation was created in 2005 by our family to provide a tax free vehicle for sponsors. We are pleased that over 150 families have been adopted by benevolent sponsors.

But the real disgrace is that there is no plan to relocate these pathetic families into regular apartments. For the most part, they are the forgotten families. Maybe it's because some of them are immigrants from the brutal massacres in Baku and others of them are escapees from the oppressive discrimination in Georgia. But nevertheless, THEY ARE ALL ARMENIANS!

How can the authorities in Armenia and the leadership of our churches as well as the powerful Diaspora organizations just look the other way and act as if these poor people don't exist. What was their big sin? Why must Armenian men, women and children live in such inhumane conditions in their own country? Something is wrong with this picture.

~~Let's just assume that the condition exists because most ordinary citizens in Armenia can barely care for themselves let alone worry about others. Or maybe the non-involvement is a hangover from the Communist mentality. But what excuse can we make for the Armenian Church in Armenia remaining distant and uninvolved?~~

I think it's time for every caring person among us to step up and raise our voices about eradicating these inhumane living conditions for this tiny segment of Armenia's population. I know for a fact that there are more than enough vacant apartments in the surrounding cities that each of the families living in "domigs" could be relocated very easily and quite economically.

If you belong to a church, speak to your pastor about creating a movement to save the poor families. If you have any influence with the AGBU, the ARS, the Knights of Vartan, the Triple X, or any other group, share this article and insist that they take action to eradicate the "domig" ghettos by January 1, 2011.

In the meantime if you would care to help one of these families survive until they get relocated call us to discuss how you can join the EACH ONE HELP ONE MOVEMENT thru the HUMANITARIAN OUTREACH FOUNDATION. We have created a one of a kind debit card system for the poor families which allows them to withdraw \$30.00 monthly from their local ATM machine. The foundation pays for the annual card fee and sponsors contribute \$1.00 per day (\$360.00 per year or \$30.00 per month) to their adopted families.

Every sponsor is provided with a photograph of their adopted family, a brief biography, and their mailing address. Every bit of a sponsor's donation goes directly to their adopted family. All organizational and operational costs are absorbed by the HUMANITARIAN OUTREACH FOUNDATION.

But if you can't help financially, please help us raise the level of awareness throughout our Diaspora. Together we can save these forgotten families before the New Year. Let's all get as passionate about this cause as our parents and grandparents were about their causes. Although we probably can't make a huge difference in the way Armenia is evolving, i.e. overall economic development, political transparency, etc, we can definitely make a huge difference in the lives of this tiny segment of our nation.

After reading this letter, doing nothing is no longer acceptable. If we have an ounce of Armenian blood in us we MUST get involved. And for our adopted non-Armenian spouses and families, we call upon your humaneness to also get involved so we can finally eradicate this lingering national disgrace in Armenia.

Get involved now and see how together we can make this happen. It is possible and we will get it done! Things get done one project at a time and the time has come for this one.

God bless Armenia!

If you want more information please contact us at tminasianatsbcglobal.net or call 858-481-8904 and we will be more than happy to discuss this crisis with you.

