

PHOTOGRAPHIC JOURNEY IN SEARCH OF ROOTS

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Stepan Norair Chahinian, "Armenia", São Paulo

Two years ago, in São Paulo, we promised Stepan N. Chahinian that Keghart would be honoured to introduce to its readers his book "Armenia", a superb collection of photographs shot in Armenia and in Artsakh. At the time, Mr. Chahinian had no extra copy to lend. Recently, we received the book from another source. Better late than never.-- **Editor**



To come to know Armenia was a journey that had begun much earlier than my arrival in Yerevan in 2004. It was as if I had chosen an opposite road. I was not looking for an obvious and predictable path, but an exit, a shortcut, where surprises would happen naturally in the form of facts, scenes or images, unusual answers for questions that have grown with me about the history of my ancestors and research that up to that moment had been somehow incompatible with my reality as a young Armenian from the diaspora.

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I had to see it with my own eyes. I knew that I would find the answers in simple gestures, unusual figures, smiles and silent tears, friendships that had happened one after the other just by the fact of being there, in the land of my roots, wandering in a free and independent country with more than 4000 years of history.

During my stay, I was involved with the country and got in touch very easily with things that were very well stored in my short past, giving life and sense to the old stories that I used to listen to with so much passion and curiosity, told by wise old men and women, some of them survivors of the 1915 genocide carried out by the Turks.

I always thought of discovering Armenia at my own pace, without the rush of typical tourist trips, events, sports and games or meetings; for me to come to know Armenia, should be something very personal, deep and reflective, without impositions or alternatives, only dictated by desire. Besides as

a photographer, I needed time, I knew that to penetrate in the essence and soul of this ancient country it would have to be a complete surrender and with no great ambitions; the answer would come in a natural and spontaneous way, present in the most subtle light, in an unexpected framing or when facing the most dreamed about mountain, feeling emotions and astonished at every dawn, wandering at the pace of my heart, and as only companions my camera and an old Lada.

Living at random between Armenia and Artsakh (if ever a distinction can exist between territories so obviously continuous and united), I was literally lost in a three road crossroads, between Karvadjar and Nor Kedashen (a small village settled by refugees from the village of Kedashen), when a man on horseback answered my question about which of the roads would take me to Yerevan. He told me that all three of them would somehow take me there, but only one would take me to his home, and I should go there with him. I went with him and stayed there for two days. Such events marked my passage in Armenia. Time had another measure, and above all, another meaning.

I chose photography, as a medium of representation, to make those moments I lived everlasting; it is an inheritance I received from my grandfather, Avedis Chahinian, a renowned professional photographer in Syria, during the first half of the 20th century. Photography was the key that opened the world wide to me.

Many people used to ask me, why did I travel by myself, but it just happened that I felt like all the people that I would love to be at my side, were already there waiting for me. I should go on with my meeting them, that is how each image of this book is a unique encounter.

By nature, a photographer is identified with solitude, and needs it to accomplish this kind of documentation. Photography is more than a register or illustration of real life. It is the materialization of sensations and longings, an endless search toward the discovery of the mysteries of the external universe, and simultaneously it is the search for self knowledge.

The present edition of the images that illustrate this view of Armenia, tries to contemplate in some way, the cultural and natural diversity of the country, the landscape, the daily life, the unique architecture, the mystical Armenian church and the characters, some of them anonymous, but who reflect the people of Armenia: those images somehow try to offer a small part of the reality and current context of the country. Have a nice trip.

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Along the journey, there was an invitation for an exhibition of pictures of Brazil, organized by

Armenpress, the news agency of Armenia, and the Armenian consulate in Sao Paolo; this exhibition was an opportunity not just to present the country where I was born, but also a chance to establish bonds of friendship with dear Armenians, and I take this opportunity to thank all of them.

I would also like to thank the families of Aurel Arsag Djanian, Carlos Tchalian, to the memory of Yeprem Bilezikjian and Hagop Balassanian, and to Jorge Vartparonian for their confidence and faith in the project from the very beginning, making this edition feasible, and understanding the real purpose and the importance of presenting Armenia to the world.



