SECOND GENOCIDE IN THE OFFING?

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Jirair Tutunjian, editor, Keghart.com

It's about 8 p.m. Wednesday, April 24.

I am in a battered taxi, on the road from Yerevan to Echmiadzin.

We are passing through the garish, obnoxious, preposterous Casino Row.

To make conversation, I ask the cabbie whether he had been to Dzidzernagapert earlier in the day.

He takes a deep breath and mutters: "I am waiting to pay respects to the second Dzidzernagapert."

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"We are going through a second genocide…The country is emptying every day… Nobody knows the true unemployment rate …People are borrowing money wherever they can just to stay alive…It's much worse in the marz (provinces)…In 1915 our women committed suicide rather than submit to the Turk; now our girls are selling their bodies to Iranian tourists… Soon there will be no Armenian left in Armenia… then we will build a second Dzidzernagapert outside Armenia for this second genocide…" the cabby's outburst continues. "I am an engineer and a professional musician, but I can't find a job. I am driving a taxi because there's nothing else I can do. Many men are doing the same."

The outrageous and painful rant pours cold water on my high spirits, having witnessed earlier in the day seemingly half of Armenia's population at the grand Genocide memorial.

The following morning, returning from Echmiadzin, I ask another cabby whether he is earning enough to support his family. "We are not living; we are surviving," says the man who still works at the age of 75 because his monthly pension is 30,000 Dram (about $52). He has four children: one is in Belgium; the second in Russia; the third will leave any day now for Russia. The fourth, is underpaid at a Yerevan retail store, says the grandfather, who like so many adult males, has a two-day stubble. He says his children have stopped sending remittances because "the economy is bad in Europe and in Russia."

When he drops me at Hrabarag Square ($5 for the half-hour drive from Echmiadzin), he pulls out a pamphlet from the glove compartment and gives it to me. It's a Jehovah's Witness pamphlet. "Read it. It's good for you," he says with a half smile.

Cabbies are traditionally and notoriously easy information source for visiting journalists everywhere. Sometimes they merely project their own circumstances, although they merrily assume the role of a credible source re the national psyche and condition. However, during my eight-day recent visit to Armenia, I heard dismal variations of what the two cabbies had told me. I heard it from young women in parks, from middle-aged family men, from painters at the Saryan Monument and from young men at the Cascades Park. I heard the same agonizing stories in Yerevan and in Echmiadzin. They all blamed President Serge Sarkissian and his affluent coterie for the dismal economic condition. And practically everyone claimed to have voted for Raffi Havanissian at the recent presidential elections.

A few days after the above encounter, I gave to a wealthy politician (a redundant descriptive) a summary of what I had heard. He said that Armenians are notorious for wanting work to be all ready and easy (wrapped in ribbon?) before they deem to take on the task. He said that he had vacant jobs at his company which paid $1,000 a month, but that there were no takers. When I mentioned the politician's statement to several men, their response was unanimous: they would take any job which paid $1,000 a month. Two Syrian immigrants I met told me they found it extremely difficult to import car accessories from Europe because of archaic and restrictive customs regulations.

Who is to blame for the economic basket case Armenia has become? Who is to blame for the unemployment, the emptying of Armenia, for the bureaucracy's corruption, for the deteriorating infrastructure, for the absence of rule of law? For the disillusionment, for the hopelessness?

Is it the corrupt, unwieldy, fossilized Soviet mentality which is "sucking the blood" of Armenia?

Is it the Turkish-Azeri economic blockade?

Is it the emergency condition (daily threats from Azerbaijan)?

Is it the alleged crib-to-tomb welfare tradition and mentality of the Soviets?

Is it because those who run the country belong to the same clique that runs Russia or in other words, does President Putin decide who runs Armenia?

Is it the oligarchs who control Sarkissian and whom Sarkissian may not be able to control even if he wants to?

In his inaugural address, on April 9, President Sarkissian said: "Let me highlight three main ones : emigration, unemployment, and poverty. The solutions to these problems are to be found in the same field. Efficient economy that is on the rise, this is the formula to our success. The second priority is in ensuring the rule of law. Equality of everyone before the law is a binding prerequisite

both for our economic and political advancement. The third priority, mostly directly linked to the one before, the rule of law, is the deepening of democracy."

Amen.

Why do we have a faint suspicion that he must have said something similar at his previous inaugural address?

The question remains: How do we stop the slow suicide of Armenia?

Do Sarkissian and his oligarch honchos, henchmen, and hangers-on care while they enrich their illegally acquired assets in foreign banks?

Will Armenians of Armenia soon import the defeatist Seattle slogan of the '80s: "Will the last person leaving Yerevan please put out the lights?"?