# STORIES FROM ARMENIA

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Vicken Gulvartian, Los Angeles, March 2012

# From Russia with Love

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Russia is Armenia's only foreign investor worth discussing. Russians rarely look at Armenia as a place to set up factories. Instead they buy out assets that can be dismantled for scrap and sold for a quick buck. Basically, nothing to write home about.

Less than one third of Armenia's economy (and GDP) is based on soft or service-oriented industries: banking (the topic begs for a separate article), food packing (wine, jams, cheese), wireless technology, tourism and, until three years ago, housing construction: tear down anything, build new apartment complexes, and sell to Iranians, Armenians from Russia, and a few people from Los Angeles.
Armenia's few undeveloped mines are up for contracts to any outside bidder, including Turks doing business with Iran. The Chinese are buying like crazy. Armenia now counts a community of Chinese workers in the thousand. Two Chinese restaurants in Yerevan (food's not bad), and a radio station in Mandarin cater to them.

But Russia remains Armenia's main business partner, and they are not to be outdone. I might as well get to the point, otherwise you may think this is a story of love from Russia. Hardly!

A Russian agency has arrived to Yerevan to open up shop. It has rented a huge space (or maybe bought it) and employs some 500 people to conduct business:

Great? You bet!

Wait, wait. Don't get overly excited.

The agency in question interviews, screens and prepares Armenians… for immigration… to Russia.

The agency provides visas, permanent residency, housing, travel expenses and jobs for Armenians to pack up, and go. Entire families at a time.

But go where?

Entire villages are being relocated, not to the lovely Caspian basin, not to marvelous Moscow or the fertile lands of southern Russia, or the prosperous oil fields of Tyumen. The destination is… hold on to your seat … south Siberia… on the border with China. Thousands of Armenians have been relocating to these remote, desolate, sub-freezing regions for menial work, physical labor… or anything resembling a living.

Russia is a capitalist country now, in case you missed the news. It too has resorted to importing people to replenish its diminishing population, and has found Armenia as a partner with a perfect "sense for business." The entire leadership crowd of present-day Armenia prides itself for being very business-friendly (patriotism? What's that?!) and a decision to allow such an agency to operate had to be approved by the highest office in the government, thus effectively making Armenia a net exporter of human beings (please, not to be confused with a real export industry).

There's no doubt that years of aimless economic voodooism has resulted in more and more Armenians leaving the homeland since independence. More than 70,000 have left in the year 2010, and as many have already left in the first half of this year alone. The very government officials who are in power to address the crisis are actually spectators to the exodus. Immigration is used to keep an unpopular government in power by dismissing from the country people who may join mass protest of a million on the streets, the kind we have been watching sweep the entire Middle East these days – by students with no hope for jobs, elders with no dignity, mothers unable to locate their husbands who left the country for work but were never heard from, women who are forced into white slavery in Dubai or Istanbul, hungry academicians, army veterans, and the list goes on.

Immigration out of Armenia is hidden policy of a government that prefers to "see them go, rather than stick around and make trouble." It serves yet another purpose for them: the government can grab the money sent by Armenians living and working abroad by artificially manipulating the currency exchange rate, or raising the price of basic food staples- which are monopolies of government ministers and members of parliament to begin with. That money (which accounts for another one third of Armenia's GDP) is spent entirely - by the people who receive it - on necessities. Nothing is saved or invested. It does not contribute towards the construction of a sustainable economy.

I do not see any foreign aid (the other one third of the GDP) being invested in any long-term plans to refurbish the infrastructure, reform the courts of law, or to create jobs. A fifteen minute drive from

Yerevan in any direction out of the city will reveal literally thousands of dilapidated residential buildings, abandoned shops, businesses, factories and schools, crumbling roads, emptying neighborhoods and villages.

It would be more fitting of the leadership in Armenia to undertake a plan to tear down all those eye-sores on the side of the roads, so visitors such as myself can be fooled that, maybe, things aren't as bad as everyone from the UN on down has been saying. Besides, the undertaking to beautify the landscape may do some good to very sad unemployed laborers who are, most likely, on a waiting list to immigrate to, where else… south Siberia.

Incidentally, the mighty Russian (immigration) agency has made requests to open similar centers in other countries as well. I didn't learn what the response was, and frankly, I really don't care. But I did find out that both Georgia and Azerbaijan turned them down.

There's something in the wind blowing from the steppes of Siberia, and it ain't love.

## In God We Trust

Khor Virap is the holiest site in Armenian Christendom. Then why is it in such a mess?
The location marks the site of a dungeon where Krikor Lusavorich was imprisoned for preaching Christianity. When he was released, thirteen years later, King Dertad III converted, and accepted Christianity as the official religion of Armenia. The year was 301 AD.

But why is Khor Virap in such a mess today?

A beautiful church compound, built around the pit where Sourp Krikor Lusavorich was imprisoned, sits on the side of a soft-sloped hillock facing Mount Ararat. The Turkish border is no more than 400 feet away. The platform at the edge of the compound provides an exceptional breath-taking view of Mount Ararat - so close, yet so far away.

I never miss the opportunity to visit Khor Virap every time I'm in Armenia. The vista point at the edge of the church yard is a place of contemplation and meditation about identity. When I'm there, I am reminded of Armenia and my place in this world as an Armenian. The mountain, Turkey across the border and a medieval church hurl me into a journey of exhilaration and sorrow.

But I didn't find Khor Virap in good condition this summer.

The lead to the monastery on top of the hill was a difficult experience. A group of young unemployed men from the surrounding villages gather in the parking lot, at the foot of the hill. But the most tortured soul in all of Armenia is a woman, a beggar, shriveled and turned purple by the sun, and she is seen agonizing on the side of the pathway leading to the top. She is barely able to

cling on to life, or to the dresses of women making the walk to the monastery ahead. My teenage daughter broke down into tears at the sight of the poor woman, opened her purse, and panicked at the thought that she may not have enough to alleviate suffering of this magnitude.

Once in the compound of the monastery, the rejection from the place becomes even more apparent. There's no information booth anywhere, no security guards, no signage, no guide books, no rest facilities, and for crying out loud - not even a priest in sight. Inappropriately-dressed bunch of loud Armenian tourists from the north were pushing for their turn to enter the pit twenty feet below. There were no trained people to help them maneuver the claustrophobic dive, and no guides to explain the historic significance of the place. I was shocked to find some of them rubbing pieces of gravel stones against the walls of the chapel (this is a 500 year old national landmark, mind you). I was told that wishes will come true, if they successfully stuck the stones into the hole of their making. How bizarre!

The revered platform I was eager to occupy for an unobstructed view of the mountain was heavily damaged at one end, and there were no workers repairing it. On her way down, a woman in her 40's fell off the stairs. There were no railings to support her. Half a dozen other women rushed to the scene to wash her face with bottled water. The only person who seemed to be in charge of anything was an overwight, unwashed and unshaven man inside a little room by the side, selling postcards. I checked, and they were the same postcards I saw there the first time I visited Khor Virap in 1973.

On our way back, I stopped at the dinky kiosk at the bottom of the hill to buy bottled cold water. Soon the brigade of the unemployed was around me with an eerie plea to use the money Armenians in America donate to the church, to repair and guard Khor Virap, and give them jobs that will help them feed their families. It turned out that in happier times, these men were carpenters, masons, metal workers, and stone carvers.

My driver abruptly pulled me out of the pack. I heard him whisper nrank (them) with a slight jolt of his chin toward his left shoulder. It was apparently a warning against unseen people who may give me a hard time, I suppose, for instigating dissent amongst the poor and the destitute. I did not bother to ask him if the authorities he suspected of watching and listening were from the church, or the government. We were not in the mood to discuss.

Two days later on Sunday, we visited that other gem of Armenian Christendom, Noravank. The two of us were the only people attending mass.

Manifestations of dejection are visible throughout Armenia today: Poverty-stricken villages with dilapidated schools and roads dot the entire country. But behold... of brand new churches, standing taller than the shacks around them, making their mark, in stone and steel... in a deserted land.

What is a hungry man to do?
Pray.
Armenians have no hope except for their trust in God. But what is God to do about the pain that men

inflict upon others?

In God we trust, but what's in it for a forsaken and desolate nation, and its poor and abandoned people.

## When the Saints Go Marching In

The Soviets were known for their mastery of very commanding, expressive and monumental statues of steel and bronze dedicated to workers, farmers and, of course, soldiers. Thousands dot the Russian landscape to this day. Some are small (a meter high, as in the Moscow metro stations) others very colossal, as "Motherland Calls" atop Mamayev Kurgan in Volgograd (former Stalingrad, the site of the bloodiest battle in world history). At 85 meters it is twice the height of the Statue of Liberty.
Many of these monuments are still standing in the former republics of the Soviet Union, including "Mayr Hayasdan" in Armenia. But my story is about an unlikely small statue, no more than 6 meters high, outside of Yerevan.
During a drive through the villages of the Araradian plains I noticed a statue of a soldier-in-arms at a distance. It had all the markings of a Soviet edifice - helmet, cape over the shoulder, an automatic rifle lifted into the air in a pose of conquest and victory. I was in the village of Masis, or was it Shahumian?

It was a matter of minutes before I reached the foot of a statue that turned out to be well preserved. Though not very impressive by Soviet standards, it was graphic enough to make its presence felt. Behind it were remnants of what was once a spacious park, now in shambles, surrounded by abandoned and dilapidated buildings.
Frankly, I was surprised that the local boss had not yet dismantled it to sell it off as scrap metal to any bidder. Why? I wondered! The answer was to be found on the panels on each side of the 2-meter pedestal on which the statue rested. There, I found engraved the names of 42 men of that village who were killed during the Great Patriotic War (WWII). The statue was a dedication to honor their untimely death, and preserved perhaps for its sentimental value to their descendants who live in the village to this day.

But what I actually couldn't see from the distance were the two small identical elements installed a few meters away on each side of the statue. As a matter of fact they looked like they were added at a later date, and I was curious to find out why. It turned out they were water fountains, one damaged but still running, and the other completely wrecked and abandoned.

Upon closer look, I could see a metal placard set over the running faucet with the following inscription on it: A gift by the Latter Day Saints. Armenia 2004.

Umm. I looked up, looked around, and tried to make sense:

Of all people, the Church of Latter Day Saints, the Mormons, have bothered to come here, to gift a dinky little water fountain to a run-down desolate village in Armenia, next to a monument dedicated to the memory of the beloved sons of the village who fought the Nazis under the red banner of the USSR on the diabolical Eastern Front, during World War II. Whew!

Does this make sense? It does if you note that in Armenia today, poverty and hopelessness are ready fodder for new religions. Some as distant to Armenian culture as the Mormon Church, which was founded in the 1820's by an American for Americans, based on the premise that Christ returned to America after his resurrection, guided by a trumpet-playing angel called Moroni (pronounced, moronai). Try to fit that into the narrative of a nation that has built its entire identity, over the last one thousand and eight hundred years, on Christian faith inspired by the Bible. Try to prioritize a new religion to a nation of Christians stuck in an everlasting existential struggle with the pseudo-secular Muslim Turkey on one side, and the theocratic-militant Muslim Iran on the other.

Neither the Mormons nor, for that matter, any other proselytizing religion that has landed in Armenia lately really care much for Armenia. They are on a mission to recruit converts from amongst the poor. Today, Salt Lake City is home to a nifty community of hayastantzis who have given up on their identity by the terms of their conversion, which was also their ticket to a job, food and a decent living.

In the new order of things in present-day Armenia, even national icons as the saints Sahag, Mesrob, and Nerses et al can gradually lose their place in the heart and soul of the people. And in their support, I'm tempted to end my story humming that catchy (ha-ha, American) spiritual song that goes like this:

*Oh, when the saints*
*Oh, when the saints*
*Oh, when the saints go marching in.*
*Oh Lord, how I want to be in that number.*
*When the saints go marching in.*