

# VISIT TO ARMENIA KINDERGARTEN

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By Hovsep Dagdigian, Harvard MA, USA, June 2014

*Because of Keghart.com summer vacation this and other articles are being published belatedly. However, the original dates are preserved.-Ed.*

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After a bumpy bus ride to Ararat (pop. 11,000 – 12,000) we stopped for coffee at a 'café'. One of the local grade schools was having a noisy celebration. The children having a great time. When I asked to pay for our two coffees, I was told it was "on the house". We then took a marshutka (minibus) to Ararat's Zod suburb. The district hosts an army base, including an armored contingent, which guards the border with Nakhichevan (Azerbaijan) and is situated to protect Yerevan. As we approached, we could hear distant cannon fire, and presumed it was a training exercise. Troops there have lately been under high alert. The border is close and Azeri snipers are active.

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We proceeded to the kindergarten. We had heard it was in bad shape and needed help. The

kindergarten is in a two-storey building designed to accommodate about 360 children. Currently there are about 75 children enrolled, with a staff of 21. Tuition is 3,500 dram/month (about \$8.50) per student. Not all parents can afford the fee so some children do not attend. Also given the poor condition of the building, it cannot accommodate many more children.

Since the building's construction 25 years ago there hasn't been one iota of renovation done. Less than 10 percent of the building is habitable. We met some of the staff. Most of them were busy with the children, many of whom were dressed in the same colorful T-shirts that our children in the US wear.

The building's roof leaked in many places. Moreover there was water only on the first floor, apart from the water leaking from the roof. The staff carried buckets of water up to the second floor where the classrooms are. There were one or two usable toilets – not enough for the children there. Moreover, there was no sewage connection. Waste water and sewage simply drained into the ground around the kindergarten, some of it seeping into the basement. In unused areas of the building parts of the ceiling were coming down; there were cracks in the wall, and the floors were a mess.

There was no gas for cooking lunch for the children in the antiquated kitchen. Cooking was done on an old electric stove, and there was an old refrigerator that, amazingly, worked. There was no heat in the building. There were radiators but the heating system was inoperable and there was no gas connection to the gas line in the street. The school couldn't heat with electricity because the electricity budget was insufficient, especially given the lack of insulation and weather-proof windows. At the bottom floor there were a couple of small woodstoves. In the winter the staff brings the stoves up stairs to a couple of the classrooms. Children come to school with scraps of wood, and any other trash that can burn such as cloth, paper, plastic bottles, etc. In one room downstairs are sacks of trash ... stuff to burn this winter. Anything that will burn is used.

Though our visit to the kindergarten was unannounced, the staff was very welcoming. They are sincerely dedicated to the school. When we suggested that we may be able to find help for renovation of the school, one woman had tears in her eyes. We stressed that we couldn't promise anything but that we'd see what we could do. The school needed to come up with a detailed renovation plan in coordination with the city. I don't know if some seed funding is needed to kick-start this process.

After a partial tour of the facilities, including rooms where the children were napping, we were treated to some ice cream, some pastry which the cook prepared in the old, antiquated kitchen, and coffee.

Then one of the women revealed some sobering news. Two young Armenian soldiers at the nearby border with Nakhichevan had just been killed, apparently by sniper fire. We continued to tour the facilities. Suddenly I could not take it anymore. I just needed to get away and think for a minute or

two. I strolled down a hallway to clear my head. When these beautiful children are 18 or so, they will be issued a weapon and told to defend their country! I felt like I needed to make a decision: sit town and cry, or strangle someone – but I don't know who. I haven't quite decided yet.

All during the visit I took photographs. As we left we were shown the small part of the school yard where the children area allowed to play. There was nothing but dry dirt and some tall weeds. The rest of the yard surrounding the school had high, uncut grass and is dangerous as the area may contain snakes. There were no swings, slides, or other playthings in the outside play area.

Back in Yerevan workers are planting flowers, watering trees.

Great legislative progress is being made. A recent law prohibits smoking while driving a car. The fine is 5,000 dram (\$12-13). Same with using a cell phone while driving. That's OK, but none of this will make a bit of difference in anything really important.

Meanwhile, huge and expensive SUVs drive around Yerevan and magnificent palatial homes are being built.

I don't know what to say. There are many positive things to report on. People here have done so much for me, I fear I can never adequately repay them back or show them my gratitude. But there are some things that are intolerable, and we should not tolerate them whether we live in Armenia or the Diaspora. We can't give up, there's no second chance. The kids at the school were wonderful. One just cannot imagine how wonderful. They probably accept the condition of their kindergarten as normal. This should never be normal for any child, anywhere, ever.

