

## *VOICES FROM THE FORMER USSR*

In 2003 I brought one of Armenia's finest chamber choirs 'Hover' on a tour of England (including Emmanuel) and Scotland; it culminated in an independence day service at which the choir performed, at St Yeghishe church in London, and sang the liturgy the next day. To many people this may not seem significant; however, to this choir of local Armenians, they were celebrating 13 years of Independence of the Republic of Armenia together with the Diasporan Armenian community of Great Britain. Furthermore, for at least half of the choir members, it was the first time they had travelled out of the country. Following their emergence from a tumultuous past, their performance was a wonderful sight to see.

In 2002 I was given the opportunity to work as a volunteer in Armenia for a year, with the Armenian Volunteer Corps, directly upon graduation. For many Diasporan Armenians, this programme offers an opportunity to explore their heritage. As a half Armenian, it was a chance for me to live and work in an amazing country. I wanted to understand this new Republic and how it evolved from the first nation to be pronounced Christian in 303AD to its present-day form.

Sitting now in a College room overlooking the paddock and watching a huge snowstorm, I now very much appreciate the warmth. The first winter I spent in Armenia was the coldest winter in 60 years, which meant wearing layers of thermal underwear, spending most days in the office sitting with my coat on, hoping that it would get slightly warmer, but being fortunate to be able to afford electric heating to heat one room of my flat (whilst the kitchen was nicknamed 'the freezer').

Having visited the Yerevan State University, the Polytechnic and other academic establishments during the year, I can only say that I was fortunate to have been an undergraduate at Cambridge. The Armenian students lack books, libraries, access to computers, labs which have any equipment in them and warm lecture theatres and, more worryingly, many academics have left for the US and Europe. Those who stay are rewarded by a wage of less than \$100 a month and learn to work the system: exams can be paid for. But for those academics who are left, they have to learn to use English instead of Russian.

Language is a problem within Armenia. Armenian and Russian are the native tongues; with Europe and the US both 'operating' within Armenia, the need for English speakers is increasing. The second major problem for Armenia in becoming globally operative is the people's facility for the English language, which is making language a barrier for economic

growth. Most English-speaking natives in Armenia, irrelevant of profession, will have corrected or written grant applications, edited articles, e-mails and such like on regular occasions. The shock and surprise of ex-pats at the lack of knowledge of English often brings a smile to my face. We can't presume that everyone in the world will be able to speak English.

Yerevan, capital of Armenia, is dominated by Mount Ararat, which astounds any newcomer to the city. Currently, Armenia's population is three million, of which two million live in Yerevan. Armenia is bordered by Georgia to the north, Azerbaijan to the east, by Iran to the south, and Turkey to the west. The former Soviet Union left Armenia with 70 years catching up to do. The so-called 'Diasporan' Armenians fled Eastern Turkey between 1895 and 1915, during which time the Turks carried out severe atrocities upon the Armenians, bringing about the first genocide of the twentieth century. Those Armenians who fled to countries such as the USA, France, Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and Iraq, are labelled 'Diasporans,' and now fourth generation Armenians can be found in these countries. Whilst the 'Diasporans' were busy creating their Armenian schools and churches in their respective countries, the Soviet Armenians were living within the former USSR. In the 1950s the USSR's government tried to lure Diasporans back to Soviet Armenia; many Egyptian Armenians re-patriated and regretted their move. Diasporans were permitted to visit Armenia care of 'Intourist' tours. In 1989 the opportunity to visit their homeland freely was created, with the creation of the Republic of Armenia. Since then, Diasporans have gradually started to acknowledge that their 'dream' of their country differs from the reality of Armenia . . . stern-faced Russian border guards at the airport, taxis which only just about run, paying bribes to get service, grey hastily-built apartment blocks, so called corruption (predominantly due to low pay). Seventy years of communism cannot be ignored and shouldn't be instantly dismissed.

The Diasporans generally believe that there is a huge gap between them and the local Armenians. On the contrary, having lived there for 16 months, I believe there is not such a great divide: underneath it all my father's ability to talk nonsense at any time of the day and with anyone is just the same as my neighbour in Armenia!! Yes, elucidating common sense to professionals, at least 10 years older than myself, gives one a great sense of humility and has taught me that western values aren't always better. Much work is involved in harnessing the talents of the Diasporans: the late Charles Aznavour set up a foundation after the 1988 earthquake, Kirk Krikorian of MGM has repaved all the roads and

pavements in Yerevan through his Lincy Foundation, Vartan Gregorian of the Carnegie Foundation is setting up links between universities and the west . . . but there's more to be done and providing people with stability and education is one of the first stepping stones.

Having described such poverty and disadvantage, I must ask where else can you go to a university department, expect to have a meeting with a professor, only to learn that it's a feast in the lab and you're expected to drink all of the many shots of vodka put in front of you? Where else can the craftsmanship of a carpenter cause your mother to be jealous because a handmade cherry wood kitchen in Armenia is less than 10% of the cost of a laminate kitchen? . . . Armenia is a country in which \$40 a month is the average wage, and yet the Armenians will still pay their neighbour's water bill if he cannot. And in Armenia, when a party starts, everyone displays their own talents: someone dances, someone sings, and someone plays. The monasteries take one's breath away: only three of them are on the UNESCO World Heritage list, and those aren't even the best. On an amusing note, the Hilliard Ensemble sang in the holy mother see of the Armenian Church Echmiadzin and it was fascinating to hear Armenian sung in such a manner it was unrecognisable. Those who heard the choir singing in the UK will be pleased to know that they heard the real thing!

I left Armenia having experienced more in one year than I would probably ever have learnt in 10 years in England: persistence, humility, anger (whether necessary or not), humour, and most importantly, an understanding of what an individual can do to improve anyone's situation irrelevant of where one is in the world. The choir is now rehearsing in Yerevan's newly-renovated opera house, having moved out from the stinking old rehearsal hall. Reflecting on their wonderful memories of Emmanuel College, as I left Armenia my choristers implored: 'You're going back to study there? Wow, what a fairytale! Bring us back there soon.'

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