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10-9-2009

Heavy Architecture on Frail Shoulders

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Panel: 1989-2009

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Recommended Citation

Grigoryan, Violet, "Heavy Architecture on Frail Shoulders" (2009). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 784.
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Violet Grigoryan

Heavy Architecture on Frail Shoulders

The German artist, Joseph Beuys, in one of his works of 1964, proposed to elevate the Berlin Wall by five centimeters to create a “better property”. What Beuys was proposing was, certainly, the reverse, even though it wasn’t similar to the Reverse that my colleague here, Min Htet Maung, writes about in his poetry. The sarcasm of Beuys’ reverse was in reality breaking down the wall far more fundamentally than its physical fall would, since that reverse first questioned and broke it down in our understanding. Whereas, when the physical wall was broken, its chips flew far and wide and multiplied the wall, erecting new, virtual “Great Walls of China” in and between various countries.

The Berlin Wall came to symbolize the thousands of kilometers of barbed wire that separated us, Soviet citizens, from the prohibited world. If I and my colleagues Marius and Vafo were invited by the IWP in those times, we wouldn’t have been allowed to come. Even if we were graciously granted visas, we would have been accompanied by a “writer” in a suit and tie, whose “literature” would comprise our activities step by step and word by word, and later be submitted to KGB.

In Soviet countries there is a famous Russian song – *moy adres ni dom i ni ulitsa, moy adres Savetski Sayuz*, which translates to - *my address is neither the home, nor the street I live on, my address is Soviet Union*. An inhabitant of Alcatraz could perhaps introduce his address in exactly the same way – *my address is neither a house, nor a street, my address is Alcatraz*.

One of my poems embraces a passage in prose, where an Iranian-Armenian lady complains that it was her husband’s choice to move to Soviet Armenia from Iran. She recalls what her Iranian neighbor has warned her – *keshmari ke...* I wrote this in Farsi with Armenian letters, but did not include a translated note, so that the reader (just as you now) can unexpectedly come into collision with a lingual “barbed wire”, the lingual “Berlin Wall” and feel the obstruction on an instinctive level too.

As Vahan Ishkhanyan, an Armenian writer and journalist, wrote in one of his essays, on the other side of Soviet barbed wire “was the unattainable wonderland, from where streamed the colorful chewing gums, high quality electric appliances, pornographic magazines, delicious chocolates, stylish clothes... and anti-soviet or other prohibited literature”.¹ The fall of the Berlin Wall was immediately followed by an avalanche of chewing gum and pornographic magazines, jazz, and, most importantly, sex, which was said not to exist in the Soviet Union. Then Marlboro cigarettes came out and only officials could have them, so by smoking them we also joined, as the advertisements claimed, the scent of the world. Then came Coca Cola and Burger King, the horror and threat of global warming and terrorism, bananas and break-dance, AIDS, the “Supermarket” of

¹ <http://www.armenianow.com/?action=viewArticle&AID=1833&CID=1913&lng=eng&IID=1106>

Ginsberg and the real supermarket, bird flu, advertisements, various religious sects, and homosexuality (the Article on the conviction of homosexuality was eliminated from the Criminal Code of Armenia in 2003.)

There is an Armenian joke: a person is chasing a Jew to kill him. When asked why, he replies that they crucified Jesus Christ. When he's told that it happened two thousand years ago, he answers – "I just found out about it". It's quite possible that many Armenians will learn about the fall of the Berlin Wall only two thousand years from now.

Armenians were, however, still among the first to find out about the fall of the Wall. As early as February 1988, the Karabakh Autonomous Region, which was within Azerbaijan, declared its independence from Azerbaijan and joined Armenia. When the Soviet Union did not recognize it, the Karabakh Movement gained momentum. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the residents of tiny Armenia, who often take pride in being the first to strike blows at the foundations of the gigantic Soviet Union in 1988 through the demonstrations of over one million people for Karabakh (while the act of demonstration in itself was a miracle for the Soviet Union), now found themselves within new, much more constricted walls.

Karabakh declared its independence right after the fall of the Soviet Union. In response, Azerbaijan launched a war against Karabakh. Armenia supported Karabakh, and established a security belt over seven Azerbaijani regions. Turkey then stepped in to support Azerbaijan, imposing a blockade on Armenia that is still in place today.

In the 1990s, due to the blockade and to gas-pipes exploding in Georgia every week, Armenia survived unheated winters with air temperatures dropping to -30°C (-22°F), in conditions of hunger and darkness, deprived of even electricity. And what in Europe qualified as a "new cold war" last year, when there was no gas for a short period of time, were already termed as "the cold and dark years" in Armenia 15 years ago. Due to its closed borders, many products in Armenia, which is not a rich country, have the same prices as in wealthier countries. In fact, sometimes they are more costly (the very first day I entered a grocery store here I saw grilled chicken that cost \$6.99. This is actually cheaper than in Armenia, so I bought two. Of course, I couldn't eat all of it and this, in fact, cost me as much as it would in Armenia).

It may seem strange to you to find out that, presently, when an agreement is pre-signified with Armenia on opening the Turkish border, many local and Diaspora Armenians organize demonstrations. How can people be against the opening of the border due to which life may become more comfortable, prices go down and grilled chicken become affordable to everyone?

For two reasons – the Genocide and the Turkish policy in the Karabakh conflict.

The subject of opening the borders has suspended the process of the international recognition of genocide as an excuse for not impeding the improvement of Armenian-Turkish relations.

The way Armenians treat the issue of genocide and opening of the Turkish border can be described as “Antigone syndrome”: she wishes to bury her brother, that is, to preserve the human order as opposed to political, public order. Moral need is referred to instead of the political needs that come to dictate the human imperative of burying one’s relative and performing the ceremony of mourning. Unless the genocide is recognized both internationally and by Turkey, for Armenians, the corpses of their grandfathers and grandmothers still remain unburied, their horrid death and torture and the mourning of their memory not yet legitimized. You cannot bury someone without his death certificate.

The second reason is that Turkey, as a condition for opening the borders, verbally asserts its position on the issue of Karabakh, which is subjective and defends the interests of its ally or its, as they say, brother Azerbaijan. It’s also true, that despite the fact that the agreements pre-signified in Geneva on August 31st, do not say a word about Karabakh, even so, Erdogan, the Prime Minister of Turkey, states, that unless the Karabakh issue is resolved and the Armenian army depart from its positions, the border will not open. He perceives the resolution of that issue to be the return of Karabakh to Azerbaijan, and getting rid of its population, which is now entirely Armenian.

If the collapse of the Soviet Union, apart from the interests and new positioning of superpowers, was not meant to contribute to the right of autonomy of colonized small countries, and Karabakh, which was independent before finding itself within Azerbaijan in accordance with the map drawn by Lenin and Stalin, was never to clarify its address, all these come to prove, that the Berlin Wall fell, but our address is orientated through the wall – slightly to the right of the wall, big, red, with hammer and sickle on it... Which means that our address is always the same - *moy adres ni dom i ni ulitsa, moy adres Savetski Sayuz* (*my address is neither the home, nor the street I live on, my address is Soviet Union*).