

## Mt. Aragatz and Mariam Hovhannisyan's Family—Oct. 16, 2005

Have you ever been so overwhelmed with what you're seen, felt, tasted or experienced that you can barely describe it in words? If so, then join me in my awesome Saturday afternoon trip to the Village of Bjrakan (boo-rah-kahn) located about an hour from Yerevan.

A few times, my student Mariam Hovhannisyan had said that I should come to her village. In public speaking class, she even talked about an English-speaking man she met on her daily bus ride from Yerevan back to her village. He was from Israeli and had come to walk up to Mt. Aragatz. First, however, he stopped in Mariam's village to see Armenia's observatories and its high-tech telescope. The village and observatories lie at the foot of Mt. Aragatz, the highest peak in Armenia since Mt. Ararat ended up in Turkey at the end of the Ottoman Empire. Mt. Aragatz is about 3,900 meters above sea level and about a week ago snow appeared on its tips.

My roommate and fellow volunteer Marcia Evans and I agreed to join Michael Halbert, UMCOR regional finance director, for a day trip. We weren't necessarily keen on one thing over another, so I suggested a trip to Mt. Aragatz. That way, I could also see Mariam and her village. Michael and Marcia could scale the mountain. Life would be good.



It was more than just good. It was unbelievable.

With only a hand-drawn map Mariam had given me on Friday and some directions from Armen Khnkoyan on how to get out of Yerevan, we set out Saturday morning to Bjrakan. We had to make a couple U-turns once we left the city, but we eventually found our way—and Mariam walking down the road to greet us (we actually sort of missed her father, who was sitting beside the road with a borrowed Niva to greet us.)

What struck me first was how old the village was, rich with history and people full of interesting stories to tell. Its trees were starting to turn yellows and oranges. Water trickled down the main street, crossing from one side ditch to the other side. There were few plastic bags or bottles littering the roadsides. The air was cool and clean.

Mariam and her father had arranged for us to get an insider's tour of the observatory from one of the scientists there. It's a very high-tech operation with scientists visiting there every year. Armenian astronomers have added to the world's body of knowledge about the heavens. And our guide was proud of both the facilities and the work accomplished there.



Then we were whisked off to Mariam's house. Along the way, we stopped at her school she attended from about age 7 to 17. It has 650 students, while a second school in the village has about 350. The

*Mariam with a cousin outside her former school and with her favorite teacher on the Bjrakan's main road.*



students were just taking a midday lunch break from their Saturday classes, so we visited with the principal. Shyly, Mariam also showed us a large, framed display the school had made in honor of her and her academic achievements. You could feel the optimism and pride this little village has riding on Mariam to succeed.



*In the garden behind the house.*

Also on the way, Mariam showed us her bus stop...and then we drove the very rough pavement and dirt road to one edge of the village to her home. It takes her 20 minutes to walk the route so she can catch either the 7:20 or 7:50 bus to get to the Agricultural Academy in time for classes. Her family had lived with her grandparents, now ages 91 and 87, but her father built them a new home. It's still under construction, but they live comfortably in four rooms and a hallway, of sorts. You enter the long, narrow hall from the front door. It was complete with two sofas and a small dresser on which the TV sits. There's a bedroom to the right for Mariam and sister, Anna, 13, while her parents have the room next to them. On the left is one large room with windows looking down the valley towards Yerevan. A small bed against one wall is for brother, Poghots, 16.

The family is big, as are the families of Mariam's mother and father. While nearly everyone else I know has two children, the Hovhannisyans have three. And the parents come from families of five and seven children. They all still live in Bjrakan. Mariam's father is a hydro-engineer, working on the extensive water canals that pass through the neighboring village of Ashtarak. Her mother stays at home to milk the cow, feed the chickens and rabbits, tend the extensive garden they raise, clean, wash, make preserves, tend to the children and other family members, and keep everything organized and working.

Through the back door of the hallway is the kitchen and beyond that the garden area, barn and lavash bread oven. On one wall of the kitchen was a large map, so I could finally show Mariam Wisconsin in relationship to Armenia. It works OK to use my right hand to show them where Baraboo is in Wisconsin, but it's hard for the kids to really relate to how far away I live or how our climates are similar since we're on the same latitude.

A large table loaded with food was the centerpiece of the kitchen. There was also an armoire, a stove and a small hotplate. The sun poured in from the garden windows.



*Michael, cousin Armen, Dad,  
sister Anna, Mom, Mariam & Marcia*





*Lavash oven in the backyard.*

apricot compote drink; a type of apple cider; apricot vodka; and a type of wine/brandy. All of it farm fresh and made by the loving hands of Mariam's mother. It was bountiful and beautiful, like our hosts.

Then we piled into Michael's Niva, Mariam riding with us, while her parents rode with her cousin, Armen, up the mountain. We stopped for a sip of cool spring water and slowing crawled up, around, back and forth, until we reached we physics compound (where they're conducting experiments on gamma rays, Mariam's father explained) next to a lake and a resort/restaurant under construction. We had arrived at the foot of the four peaks that make up Mt. Aragatz.



Michael, Marcia, Mariam and Armen walked up a rocky road to a cross high above the lake. I remained with the parents, who insisted on spreading out some blankets and pulling out some of the lunchtime delicacies for a little mountain picnic. Some passersby needed the nourishment and apricot vodka more than me, however, so I gratefully passed up more food in honor

of our newfound friends (one of whom turned out to be the editor of an Armenian magazine and knew a bit of English.)

Some fishermen came ashore with a half-dozen Seeg fish before Mariam came bounding down the rocky path with a snowball for me. The sky darkened and freezing rain (or was it small hail?) was cause to fold up the picnic and head back down the mountain.

At a Scout camp half-way down, Armen scaled the smooth cement wall and slide back the heavy metal door to reveal several buildings, trees in full autumn colors and some athletic-type courts or play areas. We climbed up onto the wide, roofed



*Note the cross (left photo) is barely visible on the hill across the lake from these fishermen.*



porch of one building. Mariam's father proudly explained that he was responsible for building the main structure. From its porch you could look farther down the valley, yellow and orange and even a few red trees or bushes bursting forth from the shades of dark green and brown ground cover. We explored, finding just outside a chain-link fence a deep gorge ablaze with colors and rock outcroppings. The grounds itself also featured nut trees, fruit trees and a few wild berries.

The picnic fare was pulled back out and we ate more fruit, dried fruits, lavash, nuts and the salty Lori cheese that is a favorite of every Armenian. We drank some of the apricot vodka and the cider, but we encouraged Michael to drink water. Apparently, the drive and the climb had made him a bit woozy.

While Mariam invited us to stay in Bjrakan for a wonderful barbecue that her father wanted to make, we decided it was best to head back to Yerevan for Michael's sake. But not before we



stopped at the family home for more fruit, cake, lavash, cheese, coffee and a little bit of the wine/brandy. They offered to let us stay the night, but we thought it best to go so Michael could sleep comfortably in his own bed since he just wasn't his spunky self.

We embraced our hosts long and hard. It was a day filled with so much beauty, love, friendship, food, fresh air, drink and laughter.

God is so good, and his bounty surrounds us every day in big and small ways. Sometimes, all we can do is experience it and then say, "Thanks God!" No other words or pictures can best describe the awesomeness of it all.

*Cousin Armen, sister Anna, Father, Mariam, Mother and brother Poghots.*

Peace!  
Pam

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