

## Adjusting to Life in Armenia – July 25, 2006

Sometimes, I can be so American! On the other hand, I am American. I cannot help being who I am and reflecting the society in which I lived. But I better “tone it down” while adjusting to life as a volunteer at the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) in Armenia.

After packing an obscene number of suitcases to haul some personal items as well as lots of donated clothing, mittens, hats and shoes for vulnerable families of Armenia, I landed in the capital of Yerevan June 29 in the middle of the night – without any luggage! Over the course of the next four nights, I was able to collect my bags and finally start the process of settling into a two-bedroom apartment. I also needed to settle into a new culture filled with too many people

who always seem to carry all the burdens of the world on their drooped shoulders and stooped backs, deeply creased and frowning faces, and a hot, dry climate that can sap all your energy – if caring about the troubled people around you doesn’t do it first.

As for adjusting to the weather, I’m not whining, given reports that Wisconsin’s heat and humidity set records. However, I will say that America seems more prepared for those days. It has air conditioning, while only some businesses have it here. Some places have fans and, in the UMCOR office, people have turned off the lights to keep the circulating air cooler and to conserve on energy.

This is quite a feat – getting Armenians to turn off lights even on sunny days! Several have explained to me that, ever since their first years of independence when none of the infrastructure worked reliably, Armenians have kept the lights on. They spent too many electricity-less days huddled around a wood- or kerosene-burning stove in their city apartments trying to keep children and elderly warm.

America has screened windows that stave off dust and insects. My apartment windows allow all that in, plus a stray mourning dove every so often. I find myself with new bites every morning, including this past Saturday when one on my lip made it swell to an unusual size. So I’ve been

stopping at each store in the two blocks between the subway and my house, trying to figure out who sells either material or screening so I can Duck Tape some into my windows.



Some of the 1.5 million people living in Yerevan escape the summer heat by loading up the family into a 12-person public transportation van called a marshootnee to spend at least the weekends in their ancestral dacha or summer home. A dacha was a grandparent's or great-grandparent's home before the family moved from villages to Yerevan to find work. The home stays in the family, passed down from son to grandson.

Dachas generally have few accommodations, though one I was fortunate to stay in with my landlady's family my first Sunday night here did have an indoor toilet used for late-night trips rather than traipsing through the backyard orchard to find the outdoor Turkish-style privy. A pot of water, gathered from the common spring in this particular village, sits beside the indoor toilet, I think. I forgot to ask exactly what to do before trying to fall asleep. Worried I would have to venture into the unknown and potentially wake the whole family, I laid awake all night to ensure I didn't have to make the

trip. By 6 the next morning, the sky was light enough to tiptoe out of the house, down the broken stone walk and into the outhouse. Afterwards, a bar of soap and another pot of water outside the dacha door allowed me to wash my hands as well as splash my face with cold water for a quick clean-up before a walk, a small cup of Turkish-style coffee and the trip back to UMCOR. It reminded me of family vacations camping across the United States, and weekends up north or out in the Prairie du Chien area with my grandmothers. I loved it!

Unfortunately for nearly half of all Armenians, summer dachas are their year-round homes. It's the people in these rural villages who have the least, subsisting on what they can grow, gather or make themselves.

Trying to speak the language, remembering which way the subway runs to go to my house, fighting bugs and listening for the water pressure to make the pipes rattle right about 7:30 in the morning and in the evening so I can run the heater for a shower seem difficult to me some days. Yet, they pale in comparison to what many Armenians cope. It makes me wonder why we, as Americans, ever feared the Soviet Union. I don't think

it would have taken much for people to break apart the whole place sooner than 1991. So as an American, I try to set aside what I think is difficult to muster all the positive attitude I can. I pull out my old Girl Scout smile and the hope God has put into my heart that I can try to put some of the same into people's lives.

*Peace!*

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