

March 20, 2007 – This is a portion of a letter sent today to two people from the East Ohio Volunteers in Mission team who gave me \$3,000 to use in my everyday ministry to people here in Armenia to meet outside the realm of programs and other official needs, as well as for incidental items I might need while serving here.

Dear Friends –

Today, I want to share two experiences I had while “hanging out” with Roman Asatryan, a student I’ve been working with since autumn to prepare for his Test of English as a Foreign Language.

First, we spent a week in his “village” called Alaverdi, home to 12,000 people and a smelly copper processing mine and plant just 25 minutes south of the Georgian border. His mother speaks Russian and a little bit of Armenian; his father speaks both languages and works in the mine as a dispatcher. They live in a one-bedroom apartment—it also has a living room, a tiny kitchen and an even smaller bathroom (as in, once you sit down on the toilet next to the tub filled with water—used for flushing—there’s no more room. Yet, it’s a house filled with love and laughter which can be seen in Roman and his sister, Svetlana, back here in Yerevan.

We feasted on pickled fish and mashed potatoes for breakfast, homemade breads and pickled vegetables for lunch and some kind of delicious meat and potatoes every night. Roman and his parents took me to several of the ancient churches in nearby villages, the museum that houses artifacts from the Armenian who invented the MIG fighter jet, Roman’s grandparent’s house where his father keeps his little ham radio and to the language center where local people can come to learn English. It was started several years ago by Peace Corps workers and Roman’s oldest sister, Nellie, works there (though she was on a long-anticipated vacation to visit her Peace Corps friends in America.)

While there, a “papik” (grandfather, old man) came in. He had a brown envelope from the Chrysler Corp. and wanted to make sure that the translation someone else had given him was correct. So he asked the women at the center to read it and translate it for him again. Luckily, Roman was also there because papik turned out to be an inventor and had some mechanical drawings of a few ideas. (Roman is studying engineering economics with an emphasis in air transportation and the ideas had to do with power parachute or ultralight types of things.)

The letter was basically a “thanks, but no thanks, but send us your idea via the internet to our ‘idea center’ and we’ll get back to you.” Of course, that would be out of the question for papik, who went on to tell us about a few of his inventions and how there is no avenue for people like him since the collapse of the Soviet Union. His son came back from his required military time with some psychological problems, no pension and doesn’t work (though even if he didn’t have the mental problems it would still be very difficult to find a job in a “village” like Alaverdi since economic development has really not spread too far outside of Yerevan yet.) He never really said what happened to his wife nor the rest of his family.

What little money papik can save from his \$30 a month retirement payment, which supports him and his son, goes into paying for the two-hour marshutka ride to Yerevan so he can register his

inventions. Papik was dirty, hadn't shaved, wore very old clothes and smelled a little. He was younger than he appeared, but years of worry shrouded him in oldness. We offered him some coffee and some candy, which the women had offered to us initially when we arrived just before papik at the language center. Yet papik was proud and didn't want to impose or take either since he was already asking for the translation and getting more than that.



I watched from outside the circle of papik, Roman and the two women. Then I realized that, tucked in my wallet, was a \$20 bill. I discreetly pulled it out and rolled it into my palm. When no one was looking, I handed it to Roman and asked him to give it to papik. I thought he'd do it on his own as papik was leaving. Man to man. Helping papik yet ensuring his pride remained intact.

But Roman asked me to step into the hall with him and there he handed the \$20 to papik. Roman explained I was an American volunteer from the church and that some other volunteers had given me a little money that I could share with people, and that we wanted papik to have this little bit of extra money.

At first, papik refused. But Roman insisted and I put my hands on papik's hands and closed it firmly around the \$20. I also gave him three kisses (the usual would be one or maybe even two) on his cheeks as well as a big hug. Then in my best Armenian (that I learned after someone sneezed once and I said, "Gezuteit" in German) I said, "Aruchuchiun" (God bless you).

Papik had tears. I had tears. I think papik just really needed someone to say, "You are a person. I care about you. God loves you." The three kisses and the hug told him that more than the money, I believe.

Later, Roman was a little surprised, though really not too much since he's been hanging out with me long enough. He knows that I've been blessed with so much and will always share my blessings with others. He reminded me that the \$20 was nearly as much as papik lived on in a month and that it was truly a very giving thing to do; that what it will allow papik to do is to go to Yerevan again and register more inventions. Whether any of them ever come to fruition isn't important to me. What we did together—you, your gift, Roman's translation and me—was give papik hope and renew his faith.

The second incident I want to tell you about happened about two weeks ago. I have always wanted to visit one particular second-hand store I see on one of the fashionable streets here in Yerevan. So I made Roman walk with me from Republic Square, through a park I'd never been

through and over to the store. Along the way, we decided to sit on a park bench so Roman could rest his feet and tell me about how he took his Red Cross certification test at different spots in this park during a mock disaster.

A man walking some ways away from us clutched his chest and rested his other hand on a small wall. For a few seconds, I just looked at the man and then told Roman, “You’re medically trained and can speak Armenian, you better ask him if he’s OK.”

Roman went over to the man just as two other well-dressed men were walking by. All three talked to the man and encouraged him to sit down, to rest. I offered Roman that we should walk him to the hospital just two blocks away if the man thought he was having a heart attack.

But it wasn’t a heart attack. It was hunger and, I believe, despair. The man was out of work and hadn’t taken anything home to his family—a wife and two children—in two days.

Part of the reason Roman and I had been on Republic Square was because I had to go to the HSBC Bank to cash a check. I was able to find a small editing job with an “economic policy and poverty” periodical that wanted a native English editor (I won’t take paying jobs that an Armenian could hold) and, after four months of work, they had given a check worth over \$500. I was going to go to the second-hand store and maybe splurge on a “new” pair of khaki colored pants, if they had some, in my size and at the right price.

The money was in my pocket. The man was sitting on the bench. Roman explained the situation. I reached in and pulled out 5,000 drams—now worth \$14.29. I told Roman to give it to the man without me since the other two men were also still there (I always try to be considerate of the cultural differences of how men deal with men and women stand behind; I may not agree with it or like it all the time, but I do try to be sensitive to it.) Roman did as I asked and gave him a small explanation.

We continued our walk to the second-hand store (which was disappointing, as it turned out. I could buy new for those prices!)

“What if it turns out not to be true?” Roman asked me.

“Well, then let the lie be on his conscience,” I replied quickly.

“It could be a lie, but how do we know?” I went on to explain. “I know the tatik (grandmother) who hangs out in front of the HSBC is always there and probably makes quite a bit of money, 10, 20 or 50 drams at a time. And I know some of the other usual beggars along a few of the streets. But how would this man know that we’d do that or that the other two men would give him 2,000 drams? He might have seen us in a distance, but this time of year, everyone keeps talking to me in Russian because they think I’m Russian—they don’t expect Americans to be here this time of year or in just a regular, everyday place. So why would he lie?”

“Janas (my dear),” Roman said, “you’re just too good.”

But I reminded Roman that some Ohio camavors (volunteers) had given me money to use where and when I saw a need. And I had just cashed a big check. What was 5,000 drams if the man needed it? And what was 5,000 drams if the man was lying? God had given me so much, including a friend like Roman and his sister (who let me sleep at their toasty one-room house several bitterly cold nights this winter as well as take a really hot shower a couple times), so I felt obligated to share my bounty with others. To pass on to others what had been given to me by others.

And I made Roman promise me that, from now on when I asked him to do something similar that he had to explain a couple things. First, that it was a small gift from some American church volunteers who don't the person but who care deeply about Armenians. (Giving to complete strangers is not the norm here.) Second, that God has given them so much and they want to share it (something Armenians do understand and will do, to a degree, with people they know.) Third, that I want them to do the same for someone else the next time they see someone in need.

"But what if they don't have any money, and you know that's not the nature of Armenians, to help strangers," Roman said.

"Well, it doesn't have to be money, tell them," I replied. "It could be helping a tatik carry her heavy bags—a tatik they don't know. Or, it could be some friendly, encouraging words to a neighbor. Or, it could be an extra kind word to a spouse. They just have to do something nice for the next person."

Then I explained the whole "pay it forward" concept. Roman understood and he promised to translate that idea for me to the next person we help.

I know I don't need to account for all your money—our money—I spend. Yet, as I've explained before, I like to share some of the more significant donations so you know how big a difference you are making for people—not the least of which is Roman.

There are a few other contributions I've made to people here or there who have not had enough money to pay their heating bills this winter, for example, despite the fact that they work and scrimp and save. There is a person who needed a particular over-the-counter medication sent from America (via another friend of mine) for an eye he lost. Two women being housed in UMCOR's anti-trafficking shelter each need a coat. I have tried to use our money in quiet, discreet ways to help where we can. Always in the name of American church friends who care about that particular person. (I'd explain "United Methodists" to them, but it would take a bit of doing, so I leave it as a simple explanation since they already know I volunteer at UMCOR.)

Hardly a week goes by when some reference isn't made about "the Ohio VIM team" by myself or others whose lives were touched by you. As always, thank you for your big hearts and caring spirits. And may your lives continue to be filled with the blessings of our Risen Lord!

Peace!

Pam Karg