

Heat is Highly Over-Rated.....January 12, 2007

By Pamela J. Karg

Since about mid-December, two daily functions have consumed my life—heat and water. They dictate my life patterns. In fact, if you know a Peace Corps worker who has ever served in Armenia (and probably any of the other 26 former Soviet countries) you already know that heat and water dictate the rhythm of all life.

As my father always said, “You can live three weeks eating a bushel of dirt, but you cannot survive three days without water.” I agree. So every workday morning between 7:30 and 8, I listen intently for a high-pitched buzzing sound that signals the water pressure is up in my 16-story apartment building. I scurry to the bathroom (not to be confused with the toilet room, which is a separate door), turn on the yellow handle of the three or four included in a strangely re-configured faucet, flip the switch on the small electric water heater, turn the dial all the way up to its maximum temperature and jump into the shower.

On non-workdays during the week, I’ve discovered that the water pressure remains on until about 9:30. Then there’s either not enough pressure to run the water heater or no water at all. For about an hour each weekday afternoon, the high-pitched buzzing returns, as well as at about 7 at night. Sometimes on Saturdays and often on Sundays, there doesn’t seem to be any water at all. That’s when I especially rely on the water I’ve stashed in bottles or vases or kettles.

Why does this happen? I’m not sure. Even my landlady asks me why. But how can I tell?

I don’t speak enough Armenian to ask the neighbors for their theories and, even if I did understand and speak better, I don’t know that they have any information other than theories and rumors. Or, as they call it here, “habarbizek.” It’s a word that doesn’t quite mean “gossip,” but neither does it mean “fact.” I tend to think of it as Armenian fairytales created from bits of gossip, innuendo, past experiences, suppositions, political leanings and a person’s own wandering mind.

Only once, while preparing my Christmas Eve dinner (*photo at left*), did I run out of water completely. I was on the verge of trekking outside to the small well in the park outside my building when I heard the pipes rumble and the high-pitched buzzing return. The meal was a big success!

However convoluted American readers may think this water situation is, the heating situation is different. In fact, it’s driven me to the conclusion that heat is highly over-rated!

Call me crazy—and it wouldn’t be the first time someone affectionately did—but I’ve found a way to really cut down on the world’s energy consumption. Turn off the heat! Or, just turn down the thermostat. Or, in my case, don’t worry about it because there’s no way anything is going to actually get heated. Slightly, warmed, OK. But heated—no way!





Layers of clothes are a way of life, whether selling herbs and onions at the outdoor food markets (photo at left), shopping as Svetlana Asatryan does each weekend (lower photo) or sitting in my apartment!

After watching friends live through summer, autumn and winter, I've developed a theory—or habarbizek—that Armenians have a low threshold for temperature variations. Even though the nation has always experienced all four seasons just as we do in Wisconsin, they've never acquired the DNA to thrive outside a 15- to 20-degree Fahrenheit window. In other words, anything over 70 is “shat shok e” (it is very hot) and anything under 50 is “shat sujrt e” (it is very cold). As a result, the first Armenians immigrating to America got as far as Boston, Detroit and Racine, Wisconsin. It wasn't until subsequent waves of immigrants did they discover that Los Angeles (affectionately dubbed “Los Armenios” here) was more conducive to their

lack of stamina for “cold” or “hot”! In hot summer, they escape to dachas or walk around complaining about the heat. In winter, they hunker down in front of a space heater in the house or telephone friends to complain about the cold (they'd walk, but that would require going outside into the cold!)

Because my apartment building is so tall, there is no gas coming into the high-rise yet. Why this relationship between tall buildings and the gas supply exists, I don't know. It just does. Or, at least that's the story everyone tells: “Oh, you live in a high rise. It doesn't have gas.” It's just a statement that rolls off everyone's lips as though saying, “Bari luys.” (Good morning.)

Yet, the promise of gas is on its way. Well, the words have been uttered. Whether it was a promise or another case of habarbizek, only time will tell. But now we're waiting for the gas line to be dug to the front entrance. Then, somehow, everyone in the building will start the process of getting gas from that point to each apartment.

(How this will happen, I'm not sure since no one seems to actually own the building itself—the hallways, elevators, stairwells, utility boxes, trash receptor and so on. I think the people on the 16th floor actually own their portion of the roof, though I'm not even sure about that and probably won't find out since it's a long way from 16 down to my 4th floor apartment.)

Once the gas gets to my floor and into my apartment, my landlady's son promises to buy me a gas space heater for the house. Well, I don't want to say it's a promise because he doesn't have a good track record at following through on much of what he tells me. (In the case of the recently broken-down refrigerator, it's not a problem since the kitchen is cold enough to keep my food on the counter and the enclosed balcony is frigid enough to freeze leftovers!)

Until the gas and the heater arrive, I'm left with two broken-down space heaters that I swear haven't seen good days since Lenin! To compensate for their lack of putting off adequate heat, I invested in capital assets to buy a blower. It's similar to a large hairdryer, though this one sets on a table and actually has a little gauge to automatically turn on or off when the room temperature reaches a certain level. I think the one I bought is broken, however. It never seems to



turn off! I also talked a visiting Diaspora friend from Denver into buying me some 3M window kits, which have really cut down on the air blowing through the apartment, so much so, in fact, that I now have to use the hairdryer rather than simply standing in front of a window. Along with some thicker cotton material I bought to hang as curtains to replace the old eyelet ones, the place is almost toasty!

Well, that is to say that the living room is almost toasty! Compared to the 40 degrees registered on my thermometer in other rooms—where I sometimes surprise myself because I can see my breath—I'm guessing it's about 55, which is really quite warm. I was expecting a friend this past week for a delicious spaghetti dinner, so I ran all three heaters for the 24 hours preceding the visit. The friend never showed, but the room was warm! Then I packed up the extra spaghetti and put it on the balcony to freeze for another day with other friends.

I've taken to sleeping in the living room often. Why? Because I'm just too lazy to dash from the toasty room through the frigid foyer and into the half-frigid room. Thanks to a few Armenian blankets as well as a down one given to me by a friend in Wisconsin, I can sleep comfortably after a few minutes with the blankets over my head to warm up.

The worst is actually in the morning, after showers. Sleeping in the living room the night before adds heat so I gladly make the mad dash back into the toasty room.

And did I mention that, just before the new year, we lost power for about 12 hours, so no one had heat in my building—unless they happened to have a small gas tank and two-burner stove top in their apartment?

Some people may be appalled by this story and pity me. Some people may be only mildly amused. Others may wonder why I don't complain to someone about all this. Still others will wonder why I don't just pack it up and return to America with its central heating and reliable power and water supplies.

First, don't be appalled or have pity for me. Living these experiences first-hand allows me to feel what life is like for the average person struggling through each day. In fact, it is just a small window into what Armenians went through during their "Dark Years," the first years following the collapse of the Soviet Union and an especially harsh winter when nothing was available. The millions of rubles socked away in the bank were worth only hundreds. The infrastructure to deliver gas, electricity and water to homes was defunct and some of the first humanitarian aid here was to deliver fuel oil to families with children and elderly. If the infrastructure did work, it was only for a few hours every few days and people patterned their lives to collect water or cook several meals at once because they didn't know when they might do so again. People went to jobs just for something to do, but no one had work nor wages. The lines at small shops just to buy bread were hours long. Families snuggled together fully dressed and with winter hats and mittens on under the covers in one bed in an effort to keep warm overnight. (I did the same one night after sister and brother, Sveta and Roman Asatryan and I saw off our Diaspora friend at the airport. We returned to my frigid house and all climbed into bed together, they now able to laugh that I was



Me and Sveta. She and brother, Roman, heat their living/dining/study/bedroom by gas as well as laughter with their great senses of humor, so we're always warm when I sleep or share a meal at their house. Photo by Roman Asatryan



An average of 40% of rural/village Armenians are unemployed or living on subsistence farming, heating old, energy inefficient homes with mostly dried manure or wood picked up in the country's sparse forests. Institutions such as orphanages and boarding schools do get some funding to keep gas heaters running for the children, but the big, old cement-and-brick buildings need renovations.

getting a full “Dark Years” experience by sleeping with them and all of us wearing everything except our boots!)

I believe my current experiences enable me to empathize better as well as write more accurately and insightfully. Writing about coping with everyday life from my daily exploits allows you to read and to imagine what it is like for the roughly 2.9 million people living in Armenia, many of whom face the same challenges I face. If you are appalled, please be appalled for all the other people in Armenia who have been living for years in the same state I now find myself.

Second, don't be mildly amused. Laugh with all your might. It creates energy and that creates heat. However, don't lose the imagery of people huddled over a small space heater or

dressed in layer upon layer of clothing. Even in the nicest, warmest homes I visit, layering is a fact of life. On the other hand, too many people especially in Yerevan walk around trying to be fashionable rather than sensible. Their fashionable coats are too thin—even if they are mink or fox or whatever fur and leather combination they can find and afford. They don't want a nice winter hat to mess up their straight, black hair or short, cropped hair—neither of which will get messed up. If it did, who cares? Isn't it like 80 percent of a person's body heat is lost through their head, so that a hat certainly keeps the body heat in and the ears from getting frostbite! And, too many people think having cold, red, chapped hands is better than wearing mittens or gloves.

Third, don't even think about complaining. There are not enough people empowered to actually do anything about the situation. If there were, I'm sure my landlady or maybe her son would call someone to do something. Yet, what can be done? Most of the infrastructure hasn't been updated for at least the 15 years since Armenia declared its independence from the Soviet Union. Millions of people are living like me or even worse. I really don't want to be perceived as some spoiled, rich American who stomps her feet and expects life to be suddenly something other than what it really is for so many others. Plus, I've told everyone that I love winter and I like it cold. In fact, back in Wisconsin, I keep the window open next to my bed. So I can't complain just because I can see my breath in my house.

Finally, I don't want to pack it up. There's work to do here and I'll stay as long as I can assist. Plus, it seems somewhat insincere to look around at how others live and suffer, say I want to help, but escape at the first sight of struggles or hardships. How do I explain that to the thousands of children living in big, drafty, ill-heated, poorly maintained orphanages and boarding schools because their parents cannot afford to work and keep them at home. As bad as the orphanages and boarding schools are, they're often structurally better than the family home. The children even get to eat each day, including cheese donated by UMCOR from funds donated by people like you as well as the U.S. Department of State. And the children receive hats and mittens knit by people such as the women at the Green Bay United Methodist Church; or school kits, bedding packs, hygiene kits, sewing kits and other used clothes or shoes donated by Americans to UMCOR's Sager Brown Depot near New Orleans. This past autumn at the Gavar Special Education School, a team of eight Ohioans came to Armenia through the United



Methodist Volunteers in Mission (UMVIM) program and renovated the common meeting room where kids hang out. The renovations included new, energy-efficient windows, curtains, better insulated flooring and some private donations to help keep the heat turned up in the room!

Now I need to close. The sun is shining and I have to open the curtains to collect some heat in the house. Plus, it's a great day to ice skate or to take a hardy walk in this winter wonderland, enjoying the heat—and even sweat—that comes from such exertion—and to think of my mom who's leaving on her own UMVIM team experience right about now—in Hawaii!!!!!!!!!!

*Story and Photos by
Pamela J. Karg, Individual Volunteer in Mission
At the United Methodist Committee on Relief NGO
In chilly Yerevan, Armenia!*

*It's a winter wonderland in Armenia
and the challenge for me is to keep my
apartment warmer than the
temperature outside!*