INVITATION TO RAIN

A STORY OF THE ROAD TAKEN
TOWARDS FREEDOM

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Introduction and Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this book to my mother, Sudaba Alesker gizi Ibrahimova, a wonderful woman and loving mother, and my father Jumshud Mukhtar ogli Ibrahimov, who both devoted their entire lives to their children. Let their souls rest in peace.

I also want to dedicate this book to my wife, Leila, who shared some of my life experiences over the years described in the book, and my wonderful "little princess," my daughter Nigar.

Special thanks to Lynn Greenky, who became a good friend of mine, for her advice and help in assisting in writing and editing *Invitation To Rain, The Story of a Road Taken Towards Freedom*. I hope our friendship will last for a long time.

I am grateful for all the support given to me over the years by my friends Herbert and Pat Romerstein, Nathan Slate and his wonderful family, Marty

McCullen, and many others who demonstrated a reliable and lasting friendship.

The conclusions which are drawn in the book come from real life situations and interactions with people, a combination of experiences which indeed bring a very important asset—a human wisdom and understanding of life. An ancient oriental proverb says: “Not the one who reads a lot knows a lot, but the one who sees a lot.” I honestly and truly agree with that statement, because my own life experiences make me feel happy that I have lived a difficult but a rewarding, interesting and meaningful life. I have never regretted any part of it.

I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God.

United States of America Oath of Citizenship

I am an American

My hands were outstretched before me, an uncontrolled reflex to protect my face. The soft inner center took the brunt of the blow bestowed by the frozen ground, but my arms buckled under the force and a sharp pain shot through my cheek, under my left eye. Something, probably a rock, had cut me. I felt it rip into my skin and then the warm blood as it rolled down my face. I didn't move for a moment, unsure of how I had tripped. My mind began a quick body check, registering first my head and down through my limbs, scanning the parts for injury. All clear— just my hands and face. A shadow appeared on the ground in front of me; I turned my head to see a steel-tipped boot forcing itself between two of my ribs. The pain didn't register until the foot withdrew. I looked up and saw a thin, dark circle of brown encasing a kaleidoscope of blue-green colors in an iris that, had there been some sense of humanity behind it, would have been stunning. The face, too, was pretty, surrounded by spikes of short dark hair. In the

space of seconds, before the second blow hit, I wondered if the others teased him, if it was difficult to be a pretty boy in command of an army unit.

"Up!"

I didn't move.

"Up!"

Maybe it was the cold or perhaps the pain; I still saw those eyes, but the face seemed transformed, tortured, even ugly.

A third blow, this time to my kidney. As I collapsed, my chest slammed hard into the ground. I gasped, searching for the air that had escaped from my lungs. My fingers clawed the rocks and pebbles surrounding me, expressing the agony I could not vocalize. My backpack fell to my side and kept me off balance. I had to shift the weight before I could roll onto my hands and knees and stand. In order to do that, I had to twist the parts of my torso that had just been battered. Each turn was greeted by paralyzing pain. The blood continued to run down the side of my face, and my eye was beginning to swell. As I

looked down, I could see dark wet drops on the snow-dusted surface. I pulled up my knees and got onto all fours, trying to reposition my backpack. I overcorrected, it shifted again, and I teetered over about to fall.

Then came another blow. A second officer decided to join the fun and struck me with the heel of his boot. It had the unintended effect of centering my backpack, and I scrambled to my feet. I took a wild swing in the air. It felt as if my cracked rib was tearing into my muscle. The pretty boy laughed, grabbed my arm, twisted it, and pushed me into the second officer, who shoved me back down. My arms failed me again and my face smacked back onto the ground. I heard a crack and yelped as rings of pain rippled between my eyes.

Some time passed; it might have only been seconds, maybe minutes, I don't know. My mind wandered to a place outside. Finally, I turned my head and saw indistinct brown shapes and shadows that slowly bent and swayed in and out of focus. Sounds

were garbled and the volume turned down low. My nostrils filled with fluid, so I gulped trying to force air into my lungs. Instead, my mouth filled with blood and I gagged. My tongue ballooned in size so that when I tried to spit, pushing my tongue forward from the back of my throat, I made sort of a puckering sound, like when a rubber stopper is pulled from a drain. An officer still standing near me kicked me in the thigh for good measure and walked off. I stayed there for a while. No other soldiers came to my aid. They watched without looking directly at me and moved away, creating a safety zone between them and me. I don't blame them. The average age in my unit was nineteen, everyone was scared, and no one wanted to become the next victim. I had to get up; the ground had about as much give as a slab of marble, so that lying chest down did not allow for much breathing space. I did and continued the exercise.

The whole "evil empire" tale concocted here in the U.S. at the time was a bit overdone, but it was a

dead-on description of the Soviet army. Life in the Soviet army was filled with arbitrary acts of brutality. More soldiers died during the basic training of the troops in the Soviet Union than in any of the western countries. Cause of death: barbarism, or more accurately *dedovshchina* — the violent use of power by officers and senior conscripts against new recruits. Today it is considered a crime; in 1974 it was an open secret masked by taboo not to mention formal military cover-ups.

All attempts at forcing military accountability for the *dedovshchina* were countered with accusations of drunkenness and cowardice on the part of the victim. Soldiers were viewed as expendable manpower; at one point there were estimates that one soldier per day died as a result of the *dedovshchina*; putting soldiers at greater risk of death during peacetime training than wartime combat. Headstones of the poor souls that died were inscribed: “Died heroically in the performance of his internationalist

duty." There were no avenues of redress; Soviet soldiers had fewer rights than Soviet prisoners.

The truth is, despite all efforts at homogenization, the Soviet Union was a deeply ethnic place. To my countrymen and to my comrades, I was defined by my heritage; but according to the government, I was a citizen of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and it was my sacred duty to provide "my country" with two years of army service. I was Azerbaijani, which made me a non-Russian, or more accurately a Caucasian— one who lived in the Caucasus, which include Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and various parts of Russia. There was an unofficial hierarchy between the Russians and non-Russians. The Russians were treated with greater respect. Non-Russians were subjected to the vitriol of the officers; we were the dregs, the untouchables. The Russians hailing from Siberia and the Far East were the most athletic and often times the cruelest. They created *zemliachestvo* or *gruppovshchina*, their own enclave within the unit that persecuted other ethnic

groups, causing more pain and injury in a situation that was already fraught with both. Although education may not be the measure of a man, it did seem to turn the light on civility. The more senior the soldier and the less educated he was, the more monstrous the behavior. I am not sure intelligence is a valued commodity in any rank and file soldier, but critical thinking and independence was not only discouraged in the Soviet Union, it was dangerous.

Azerbaijan was a reluctant member of the Soviet Union; the Red Army invasion of 1920 persuaded that small country to relinquish the dreams of democracy that had been birthed only two years earlier. And I was a reluctant soldier, having been conscripted into service only two months after I had won a hard-fought battle to enter the Baku Medical College technical dentistry program. Worse was the injustice of it, since mandatory army service was normally waived for all those attending school at the university level.

By law every able-bodied Soviet man between the ages of eighteen and twenty-seven was eligible for military duty and expected to serve at least two years. Only a fraction of them actually did. Favored methods of avoiding the draft included false medical certificates and bribes. Only the poor and the poorly connected actually had to serve.

Twice a year, once in the spring and once in the autumn, there was a call-up of new conscripts. I received my draft notice by letter in November 1974. During the call-ups the government engaged in a mass propaganda campaign. It was all pomp, circumstance, and breasts. Young men were leaving the bosoms of their mothers to be embraced by the bosom of the supreme mother of them all—the Soviet Union. All that talk of patriotism appealed to my blossoming manhood; I sucked it up like a dry sponge so that when I was offered a less strenuous job in a construction unit, because of my flat feet, I refused, insisting that I wanted a real army experience. They sent me to one of the most difficult units,

located in one of the harshest places in Russia, Volgograd, formerly Stalingrad.

Stalingrad holds the infamous distinction of hosting the costliest military battle in human history. It is credited with serving as a pivotal point in the Second World War for the allies. The cost of that victory: almost four million people killed or wounded. Despite the enormous death and destruction, the people of Volgograd wear the distinction as a badge of honor. The defining characteristic of the city is the statute of *Mamayev Kurgan, The Motherland Calls*. The statute memorializes the World War II battle and the inhabitants of the *hero city*, so designated by the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet. At the time of its completion in 1967, the *Mamayev Kurgan* was the largest statute in the world—a 280-foot tall, 8000-ton concrete and steel metaphor for war. She is a woman filled with terror and violence, draped in classical Greek garb, wielding a ninety-foot sword. Her mouth is open, screaming the cry to battle. Her arched eyebrows are etched in hatred, and her Medusa-like,

shoulder length hair is swept up and sideways in a wild frenzy of wind. Her enormous, thick-girthed arms are open, embracing death. Like the politicians that control the wars, her back is turned so that she does not face the city and the people that live there. The *Mamayev Kurgan* is a vertical victory parade, all glory and no gore; her stone eyes are open, but just like all of the celebrants at the parade, she's never really seen war. I have.

Ugly though she is, the *Mamayev Kurgan* is the single most memorable artifact of Volgograd. A modern-day internet travel guide describes Volgograd as "not very nice" but "with a few interesting spots." It goes on to recommend a walk along the promenade on the banks of the Volga River and a view of the local power plant. Volgograd is, however, presently featured in internet sites for those seeking Russian brides.

I was actually stationed in Volzhsky, a suburb of Volgograd. I left Baku with three other poor conscripted souls, after waiting for three days at the

station for the train to appear and transport us to our destination. Volzhsky has its own colorful history, having been built by convict labor, each of whom received a house or an apartment after completing his prison sentence. The train was dirty and cold and there was no food. When we finally stopped at the southern Russian town of Tikhoretsk, we were fed a meal of boneless meat cutlets, *poltav kotlets*, and fried potatoes that to this day I remember as the tastiest I have ever eaten. We arrived in Volzhsky several hours later, hungry again, dirty, and tired, and we stayed that way for the next six months.

Russian winters in general are fabled events, and many of those fables were written about winters in the Volgograd Oblast. The winter we were experiencing during my time there in 1974/1975 compared favorably to the winter that contributed to the defeat of the armies of the Third Reich. The cold was a separate life force with its own personality. I don't believe I regained any feeling in my toes until the spring thaw. Every day I had to unfold my fingers

separately. I would watch my hand as each finger made its own independent decision to uncurl and renew its association with the rest of my body. Breathing required thought; I could not do it voluntarily. I could only inhale with short staccato breaths, which made me dizzy, but long extended breathing was too painful. I couldn't decide if I was glad when the sun was shining or not. It offered some meager warmth, but the snow acted like a mirror and reflected the glare with such intensity it rendered me blind, like when a photoflash goes off. Walking was an exercise in faith and hope that the ground in front of me was solid and flat. When I looked up, my eyes watered. The tears instantly froze on my cheeks and my skin burned. The weather and the commanding officers shared the same sadistic sense of humor. My body temporarily warmed from the physical exertion of the military exercises, but as the exercises progressed, I would sweat so that my clothes stuck to my skin. It seemed that the commanding officers would watch and wait for those moments and then

inexplicably abort the exercises and require us to stand at attention for who knows how long. As we stood there, our clothing froze and stiffened. I am shivering now even as I write these words remembering those days.

The sadistic antics of the officers were the only thing that broke the monotony. Afternoons were filled with droning lectures regarding the technical aspects of warfare, and communist propaganda films were the evening's entertainment. Lectures and films were interspersed with tasteless meals of harsh grain and *kotleti*, meatballs. We lived like monks in a silent order. Conversations consisted of Morse code-like blinks and stares transmitting warnings that an officer was approaching. There was no sense of friendship among the recruits; everyone was too busy dodging the next diatribe.

Powerlessness does not become me, so one night, not long after my beating, feverish and restless, I snuck out of the barracks and into the town. The barracks was a bleak two-story building with the

sleeping area on the second floor. Lights had been out for about an hour. I was assigned a bed, a night table, and a small cupboard where I kept my toiletries, which were used only once a week when I was allowed to bathe. It had been another brutal day. Awakening at sunrise to a whooping alarm, we dressed quickly, packing our Kalashnikov rifles and ammunition, chemical masks and suits, and backpacks of additional fighting gear. The military base was located in a rural area near the Akhtuba, a tributary of the Volga, Europe's longest river, which forms the core of the largest river system in Europe. We ran several miles down the hill to the frozen waters, crossed them, turned around and ran back up hill to the base, where we were served a lukewarm breakfast of *mannaya*—similar to cream of wheat cereal or some other type of kasha or grain—hot tea in metal cups with two pieces of sugar, black bread and butter. I had stopped counting my bruises and ignored every new pain and blister; it was a worthless exercise, which only made me more unhappy.

I was nineteen, and I missed my home. The youngest of four children, I was accustomed to the camaraderie of my brother and sisters. I enjoyed their attention and the extra care I garnered from my parents as the *sonbeshik,* the baby or youngest member of the group.

I listened for the steady breathing of my comrades as they each, having collapsed, fell into a heavy sleep. They slept inert, the sleep of the weary. I winced as my bed creaked while I shifted my pillow and blankets and molded them into the shape of a body. The cut under my eye was healing, and the bruise that had begun around the orb dripped down onto my cheek, leaving a serpentine river of yellow and purple in its wake. We slept in our clothes, a saving grace in the morning allowing us an extra few precious minutes of sleep before we began the day. My boots were on the left side of my bed, buffed to a high shine, per regulation. I held my breath, bent down, and pulled them on. I stood up slowly. A knife-like pain plunged through my side into my

ribcage, a remnant of the kick I had received there. I closed my lips and bit down, touching my teeth to my tongue to keep from groaning. My cot was third from the door. Close. I walked towards it, careful to make no sound. Years of freezing winters and sultry summers had warped the door so that it scrapped slightly as I opened it. Surprisingly, the hinge did not squeal. For some reason as I moved the door towards me, a sort of suction effect occurred and wind blew in, making me shiver. A couple of men shifted in their beds; some pulled at the blankets wrapping them tighter around their bodies. As I watched them move, I was sure someone would awaken. I didn't wait to find out; I hurried down the stairs and stepped outside. I walked in the direction of the latrine, thinking if I were caught, I could easily explain my nighttime jaunt. No one stopped me, so I walked past it.

I am not sure what I hoped to find on my journey. I just followed my desire to disappear, at least for a while. I had been to the town before on

leave: once to see a movie and once to visit a museum dedicated to *the great victory*. It was an easy walk towards the town along the paved two-lane road. The night was clear, and the glare from the moon lit my way. There wasn't much snow, but whatever water was in the air had crystallized onto the pavement, leading me on what seemed like an enchanted pathway. My walk was meditative; the quiet of the night surrounded my thoughts and drew them inward. I welcomed the freedom of walking without combat gear, listening only to my own footsteps. The road was deserted, so my view was uninterrupted by artificial light and structures. Under other circumstances it might have been a lonely walk, but that night I welcomed the solitude. I looked up, and as many of us do, wondered who else was gazing at the sky. I longed for home and my parents. I conjured their faces in my mind and began a conversation with them. I listened to the soothing sounds of my own breathing and felt the tension leave my shoulders. Within fifteen minutes I entered the outskirts of

town. The dogs started to bark and my mind flashed to the World War II movies of the frenzied animals ripping limbs off their victims. I picked up a large stick and looked down the street to see if any were coming after me. The wind shifted the shadows of the trees, and my stomach twisted from the rush of adrenaline. For the first time, I was immobilized with fear. I almost turned back, but some invisible force pushed me forward and guided me to one of the houses at the end of the street. As I think back, it really wasn't any different than any of the other houses on the street. There were no inviting lights and although smoke billowed from the chimney, it billowed from every chimney in every home there. I could have spun myself around and randomly picked any house, but I picked that one. It was a lucky choice. It was a small two-story house, tiled roof, dormered upstairs windows, really nothing out of the ordinary or particularly inviting, except perhaps there did not appear to be a dog. I knocked on the door, and a small, stooped man with gray, uncombed hair

opened the door. His eyes were swollen with wrinkles, yet somehow emitted youth and energy.

"Come inside, son."

I hesitated, still unsure I had made a safe choice.

"It is cold outside."

His face had deep wrinkles. His hands were profoundly veined and his long fingernails thick and yellowed. I don't think he had gone to bed yet because he was wearing light work pants and a button-down flannel shirt. I looked at him, and then beyond him into the house, took a deep breath, thanked him, and stepped in. The house had a pungent smoky smell that triggered some forgotten memory from my childhood. A rush of warmth and familiarity filled my heart. The man took my hand and led me to the main room, guiding me to a chair near the pechka. A Russian pechka is unlike an American fireplace. In small Russian towns during the winter months, the pechka is the traditional center of family life. It is huge and not only serves to heat the house

and cook the food, but also with the proper materials, it is used as a bed. It reminded me of the pechka at my grandparents' home in Shusha. I stared into the fire for a while and did not speak. The silence was warm, and I retreated to the safety of my memories.

Shusha was my childhood summer play-ground. Both of my parents were teachers; my father taught biology and chemistry and my mother taught Azeri and literature. They were born in Shusha, and every summer all six of us, my parents, my two sisters, my brother and I, would travel eight hours by bus to Shusha along the long spiral mountain route and live in my grandfather's large hundred-year-old home. My memory has transformed the house into a castle. It was adorned with two large gated entrances leading to the main house down a stone road. There was a long wooden staircase in the center of the home that led to a balcony on the second floor. Three rooms issued from the balcony: the *zal* was designed to receive guests; a second room, the *shushaband*, or glass room, was a large windowed room designed specifically to

capture the afternoon sun; and the third was a bedroom. Mulberry, or *tut*, trees paid homage to an old stone we used as a bench in the middle of the yard. The web of twigs and branches made for perfect climbing. I spent hours cradled in the shade eating what I still believe to be the sweetest fruit on earth. On cold nights I would drink tea from a big *samovar*, a special tea set for making tea on coal. I loved the smell of the burning coal; it embraced me and rocked me into the peaceful sleep of a child.

My grandfather looms large in my memory. He was the king of the castle and of course seemed ancient to me, but I remember him as a man of great courage and character. He was a wealthy business-man, who went by the nickname *Gizil Mukhtar* or *Gold Mukhtar*. He was big and strong, and the family legend is that he insisted on carrying the water buckets into the house each day and would accept no offer of help. There was no running water in the house, and as head of his home, he maintained it was his responsibility alone to provide it. Then one day

after filling the buckets with water, he quietly lay down and died at the well.

Shusha was the soul of Azerbaijan. Artistry and inspiration grew out of its glacial lakes and lush green forests, planted by the hands of God. It was the home of dozens of poets, philosophers, musicians, authors, painters, and playwrights. Shusha means glass in Azeri, a reference to its crystal-like air. It served as a major resort destination within the former USSR from the 1960s through the 1980s. Its thousand-foot cliffs earned it the nickname of Soviet Switzerland. I remember it particularly for its stone streets and graceful mosques.

As a child I would climb the mountain with my father and bathe in the natural mineral springs there. There were several routes up to the top. The level of difficulty of the climb was reflected in the name of the route traveled: the *eshshak yolu* was the donkey road, which described the method of transportation used on that path; the *pishik yolu* was

the cat's road, which required astute climbing skills; and then there was the *girkh pilakan*, or forty stairs.

I watched the fire that night in that man's home in Volgograd and dreamed of Shusha. Then it was only the youthful heartache of a homesick boy, but today my dreams of Shusha are filled with the agony of knowing that the Shusha of my youth is in ruins, eviscerated by hatred and war. Memories are like fairytales. Behind the beauty of the story hides the ugliness of the truth. The flames of the fire that night illuminated only my dreams of Shusha. The nightmares remained imprisoned in the darkness.

Throughout its history Shusha experienced tensions between its ethnic Armenian residents, who practice the Christian faith, and its ethnic Azerbaijani residents, who are Muslims. Shusha is a militarily strategic town and the historical capital of the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region, which is claimed by both the republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Today the independent governments of both Armenia and Azerbaijan are stable and democratic,

but that hasn't seemed to stop the bloodletting. There were outbursts of ethnic strife throughout my childhood. I remember my parents helping clean up a neighbor beaten in an attack; and we were caught in the middle of a deadly skirmish on our way to *Isa bulaghi,* a beautiful park with natural springs. I even became embroiled in a fistfight after being teased about my heritage. As a little boy, I spent hours of everyday up in the *tut* tree dreaming of all the things little boys dream about and watching my neighbors go about their day. One neighbor, Bahram, a big kid, maybe a year or two older than me, blessed with a muscular frame and impressed by it too, called at me from below. He insisted I was a dirty Armenian eating fruit from trees that only ethnic Azerbaijanis should enjoy.

I hope I was not offended by the misidentification, but rather by the obvious intent to insult me; however, I was only a child and the truth is I probably understood even then that an Azerbaijani of any character would not tolerate being referred to

as Armenian. In contrast to Bahram, I was small and skinny, but I refused to acknowledge that disadvantage; I was insulted and intended to avenge my honor and the honor of my people. So I waited for an opportune moment, and one day as I was returning from the *torpag meydani*, having purchased a loaf of bread per my mother's instructions, I came upon Bahram. I sucker-punched him and gave him a bloody nose. As is true of many boys and of too many men, a show of force earns respect, and Bahram and I later became best friends.

The Soviet quarantine on all things ethnic and religious actually kept the conflicts between the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis in check, but once the stranglehold of communism was lifted and the former satellite countries claimed independence, the conflicts boiled to the surface. During the late 1980s in Baku, bands of Azerbaijanis formed a pogrom killing ethnic Armenians, evicting them from their homes, and desecrating their cemeteries. In May 1992, the Armenians returned the favor. As the politicians

pretended to talk peace, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict exploded and the Armenian army captured Shusha. It was their turn to murder, rape, and destroy. My sister, uncles, aunts, and cousins all lived in Shusha at the time. They were told if they did not leave, they would be murdered. Almost the entire ethnic Azerbaijani population fled, numbering in the tens of thousands. My sister told me they were shocked by the sudden onslaught of the Armenian forces. There was no real Azerbaijani resistance, which made her believe there was some sort of payoff to the Azerbaijani military. All of a sudden Shusha was surrounded from all directions. My sister, her family, and the rest of my extended family left with only the things they could carry. Even their refrigerators were still stocked with food. My grandfather's home was confiscated by Armenians, some of whom may have been refugees driven from their homes by Azerbaijanis. Many still live in the refugee camps created after the siege. They fester there with little electricity and no running water,

awaiting their professed right of return. And the Armenians remain in the rubble of collapsed roofs, broken walls, and windowless homes. There is no money to invest in rebuilding. The mosques are covered with graffiti, and the springs are surrounded by waste and weeds. There are no Azerbaijanis living in Shusha today, and you can only enter the region from Armenia. There is no compromise, positions over the last decades have hardened; both parties want the same piece of decimated land and refuse to share it with the other. In the meantime, Shusha no longer hosts concerts and dance recitals. It no longer inspires artists and poets. The residents subsist on government handouts and whatever else they can eke out on their land. And when there is nothing else, they fill their bellies with the satisfaction of revenge.

It seems to me there are just a finite number of stories in the world. Locations change and character traits are added or subtracted, but in the end it's all the same. I mean, how many stories are there really? Stories about love lost, infidelity, corrupting

power, altruism and sainthood, struggle and redemption. It seems to me as I sit here and remember that pechka and the pechka of my grandparents, the stories all seem to intertwine.

There had been no direct light when I was standing at the entrance of that man's home outside of Volzhsky. All he saw at that time was the featureless form of a shivering boy in combat fatigues, but the light from the fire illuminated my face. Recognition reflected in his eyes when he noticed my bruise, but he said nothing. I looked around, the room was small and comfortable: dark wood floors, white walls, simple curtains and cushioned chairs. At some point during those quiet moments, his wife entered the room. She looked at me and sympathy crossed her face. She glanced at her husband, and it seemed to me that they were silently conducting a conversation. The man pulled a chair up next to mine and took my hand into both of his. He gazed so earnestly into my eyes, I felt compelled to turn mine away.

"What is your name son?"

"Mahir," I answered and met his eyes again.

"Where are you from?"

"Baku…Azerbaijan." I added, unsure if he knew where Baku was.

"Ah, far from your home."

He continued to ask me simple questions, the kind you ask when you first meet someone and are trying to learn enough information to continue the conversation. I hadn't noticed that his wife had left the room.

"Are you in trouble?"

I said I was not, but that I was sick and I missed home. A young woman I later learned was the man's daughter, perhaps a little older than I and apparently awakened by our conversation, came into the room. She was wearing a faded nightgown and slippers and held a crocheted shawl tight around her shoulders. She stood behind her father for a minute. Our eyes met briefly, and then she turned and quietly walked out. She returned with her mother and handed

me a bowl filled with hot shee, a Russian soup made with beef broth and cabbage. The daughter brought a chair over, so that her mother could sit next to her father, and then took her place again behind him. I finished the soup quickly and the wife stood and took the bowl from me. She offered me a second helping that I refused, but I agreed to a cup of tea, which the daughter delivered from the kitchen. Finally warm and comfortable, I told them about the beating I had endured days earlier.

"You must be careful not to anger the officers. Just do as you are told, it will be over soon," the old man said.

Finally, the daughter, too, pulled up a chair, and we all talked about ourselves and our lives. I am afraid I did most of the talking, because I learned little about them except that the daughter had been married to an abusive man. She was very sweet and like many creatures of the north, sported an extra layer or two of heat retaining body insulation. She smiled often, patted my knee, and laughed at the

slightest provocation. The mother, identical to the daughter in stature and frankly not much older looking, reacted in much the same way as her daughter. In short, it was obvious the family saw me as a potential son-in-law. I was warm and full-bellied, and I am sure I wasn't as forthright as I should have been in discouraging them, but I was sincerely grateful for their kindness. I spent a long time talking to them, eating, and generally rebuilding my faith in the human race. I left several hours later laden with food and good wishes and changed somehow. I saw the man and his family only one other time: On May 9th, Victory Day, my unit, dressed in formal uniform, paraded down the central street as part of the festivities celebrating the defeat of the Germans in the Second World War. Although the locals clearly didn't need any encouragement, they used the holiday as an excuse to bring out the vodka and beer. Many of the unmarried young girls in the town were taking photographs with the soldiers, and the daughter sought me out to take a picture with her.

* * *

As I took my oath of citizenship pledging allegiance to the United States, I remembered my walk back to the base that night some thirty years earlier. I returned to camp early the next morning, was found out and punished, but I survived. Since my act of defiance did not kill me, I began to believe that I might have the power to control my own destiny.

Status Quo

As the train pulled out of the station away from Volgograd moving west, we did not seek comfort among one another; instead we clung to each other out of fear. Fear of each other and the West, that unknown behemoth that sought to destroy us: the jewel that was the great Soviet Union. Ignorance was the essential glutinous ingredient. Truth and education were the only antidotes, but they had to be delivered carefully or they would be manipulated and distorted and serve as further strengthening compounds. The friendship and shared purpose between young American soldiers was an anathema to the Soviet soldier and, now I think also, to the Iraqi soldier, although not to the Iraqi insurgent whose religious or ideological affiliation are seemingly impenetrable.

We gathered strength from the knowledge that we had survived basic training and were on our way to complete our required army service. For the

next eighteen months I was stationed in Kaliningrad, the most western point of the Russian Federation situated on the shores of the Baltic Sea and bordered by Poland and Lithuania. I spent quite a bit of time in or on the Baltic Sea pulling pontoon bridges from one piece of land to another or driving armored personnel carriers through the water. Fortunately, the weather in Kaliningrad was much more temperate than in my previous deployment, so although I hated standing in the water, the experience was not nearly as painful as basic training.

We arrived at Kaliningrad station to shouts of *molodiye prishli*, *molodiye prishli*, the literal translation *youngsters came*, the functional meaning *new blood*. The *dembels*, or graduates, were leaving; we would be the newest victims. Perhaps it was the *banyas*, or bathhouses, in the city that were guarded and maintained by the soldiers for the use and enjoyment of senior Soviet generals, for although the officers in Kaliningrad were not kind and caring men, they were not the brutes of Volgograd. Indeed, our field

commander, a Lithuanian, was a good man, who kept the troops organized and out of harm's way.

The Kaliningrad region served as a bridge between East and West and has a somewhat schizophrenic feel to it. Shopkeepers sell Nazi-era paraphernalia alongside soviet iconography. After World War II the Soviet Union annexed this former German territory and waged a campaign to erase all evidence of German culture. An ethnically German miller recounted a story to me of being forced to watch as Soviet soldiers raped his daughter. He was very old and his bodily decay mirrored the decay of the city. He whistled as he spoke through broken teeth wishing me good heath and a long and prosperous life. He had witnessed Nazi atrocities too. None are blameless. He remained in the town of his birth and raised his family. I fell in love with his granddaughter for an evening as we sorted the grain and worked the machines and I relaxed in the monotony of simple farm work. He was satisfied with his decision to remain in his ancestral home. Many

years later I would take the opposite road and leave mine. It is only now that I live in America that I understand his attachment to the place.

The outskirts of what is left of the town are filled with disintegrating farmhouses built by the Germans and poorly functioning Soviet collective farms. I heard a rumor that skeletons of Nazi soldiers remain unburied on a secluded beach, and another that a bridge that had been destroyed by the Nazi troops as they retreated remained in that condition, apparently immune to all attempts to repair it.

There is very little to do in Kaliningrad; alcoholism is the local hobby and sex is easy and plentiful. During the eighteen months I spent there, several dozen soldiers disappeared into the bowels of a local hospital. No official explanation was offered, but I later learned that the soldiers had contracted syphilis. Ever mindful of its image, the army ignored the epidemic, treated the symptoms, and sent the soldiers away, uneducated, to infect other parts of the population.

My commanding officer, Captain Butakov, was one of the very few good men I met in the army. It took him very little time after having learned about my deployment home to inform me of the good news. I yelped with joy; it had been two very long years since I had been home. There was no one to say goodbye to, no addresses to exchange, but I had been deeply affected by my experiences and my life was about to alter course.

* * *

The roles of mother and child had reversed. First it was a young boy peering out behind the curtains awaiting the return of the mother. Later it was his mother looking out onto the roads surrounding the *microrayon* waiting for her son. The microrayon was the architectural symbol of the Soviet system. Nicknamed *khrushchevka* to honor Nikita Khrushchev, they were prolific concrete-building complexes that mushroomed across the Soviet space after the Communist Revolution. The microrayons were massive prefabricated neighborhoods devoid of

imagination and creativity. There is no art or beauty in Soviet architecture, only function. Design and beauty had its place, but not in the ordinary working lives of the citizens. Natural obstacles were used as barriers between the neighborhoods, which were designed to perform as self-contained units including schools, stores, playgrounds, and maintenance units.

Every day during my last month of deployment, my mother would look out upon the ugly uniform landscape. It was the second such complex she had lived in during her married life. The first was located in a volatile sector of Baku: *Sovietski*, which was populated with thugs and thieves. The second complex was safer but no more visually appealing. She watched for my return, worried about her youngest son, remembering her eldest daughter, who had died during childhood. She knew she could not survive such a loss again. She recalled watching me play with my older siblings in the snow and eating sweets during *Noruz*, a March holiday celebrating the beginning of spring. She had waited the same way for

their father; however, she was forced to wait for him for six long years. He finally returned, but he had suffered a head injury. He was never the same after that. My father was a good man with great integrity, and I have fond memories of spending hours walking around the city of Baku with him. At the time Baku was a city that embraced many diverse religions and ethnicities. I would sit with him on the shores of the Caspian Sea, listen to the sirens of incoming and departing ships, and breathe in the wet, salty air, unaware of the future conflicts that awaited the city and the ethnic strife that would rip the fabric of its multicultural society. On Saturdays my father would take me to the *hamam*, traditional Azeri bathhouses. He would stay in for a half hour or more; I could not tolerate the heat for more than five minutes. In the outer room we would be served tea with sugar in traditional Azeri fashion: the tea was bitter, so you would bite the sugar and keep it in your mouth while you sipped the liquid. When we arrived home, my mother, who had been cooking all day, would serve a

feast of *khingal*, boiled wheat and meat topped with garlic-spiced yogurt, and *shirin ash*, rice mixed with meat, fruits, and vegetables. In public my father maintained his composure, even withstanding an assault by a drugged-out patron of the bathhouse. But my father was easily angered at home and would seek relief in the same medicine many Soviets relied on: vodka. When he did, he became aggressive. My brother and I would be forced to withstand his tirades, while my sister scuttled my mother to the safety of a room out of reach from my father's fists. It didn't happen often, but as do many children of alcoholics, my sisters, my brother, and I all learned how to protect ourselves very early in life.

* * *

I arrived back in Baku by train, having traveled through Rostov, one of the oldest towns in Russia. The train station in Rostov was filled with soldiers and drunken men and gypsies. I noticed a pair of gypsies, a mother with her young daughter, and asked the mother to read my palm. As she did her

face dropped and she refused to look up. She quickly told me something I no longer remember; I knew it was not what she had seen. I continue to wonder if whatever it was she saw still lies ahead of me.

No one knew about my return. I ran to my home and opened the door. My father was sitting at the kitchen table drinking tea. He looked up, expecting my brother, saw me, and began to sob. I cried too. He came to me and grabbed me into a bear hug. We stood for a while wrapped in each other's arms. I buried my head in his neck and inhaled the sweet smell of familiarity. My brother, still living at home, returned a short while later. He hugged me too, then pulled off my shirt and commented on my well-toned body, making me feel for the first time I was his equal and a man.

My brother took me to my mother, who was still teaching at a nearby elementary school. We entered the classroom and the children saw me first. She followed their eyes; it took her a moment to process her vision. Then she too burst into tears and

ran into my arms. The children were young and confused, and they all began to wail. So I began to laugh, my brother laughed, and my mother, not knowing what to do, broke into hiccups. For the next few minutes it was complete pandemonium with children and adults alternating between laughter and tears.

After a few days rest, I returned to the studies I had left, but it was not the same. When I think about how I got to where I am from where I was, I have come to believe I am programmed to reconfigure disappointments into challenges. As a young man with no political connections and even less money to bribe officials, I wasn't expected to pursue higher education. Expectations be damned, I wanted to be a doctor. Despite clear evidence that I was doomed to defeat, I applied for entry into the Baku State Medical Institute– ENTRY DENIED.

As a child I had scaled the walls of my summer camp because I did not like the boundaries they created between me and whatever place I wanted

to go. As a young adult I bristled at the boundaries of graft and nepotism that kept me from whatever future I chose to pursue. Entry into the medical school had been denied, but it was like a maze. There was another route available. I could enter and graduate from the technical dentistry program of the Baku Medical College and from there leap frog to the State Institute. Entry into the technical dentistry program was highly competitive and bribes greased the way for many students, but not all. So I hit the books. I studied through three months of a stultifying summer and aced the entrance exam. I am sure someone could have dreamed up some pretext to keep me from the program, but it must have been too much work, because I was granted admission. I began school in September 1974 and made two new best friends: Eldar, a tall handsome fellow who was hobbled by an amputated leg, but supported and loved by his childhood sweetheart, and Alesha, an ethnic Armenian of great character and integrity. Their approach to learning was very practical; they were in

school to learn how to make teeth so that they could then earn a lot of money. I was the most esoteric of the group and found myself drawn to all of the non-technical classes.

I renewed my friendship with Eldar and Alesha, but it was not the same. The building I had studied in two years before had been renovated. The new building was more modern now, but still built in the sterile communist style. I sat in a backless chair with a round seat (I think it was green plastic) with two pairs of aluminum legs that seemed to either grow or shorten overnight. The counter I worked on top of was white, and the lights under which I worked were florescent. Eldar, Alesha, and I often lunched in the cafeteria together. It was a big room, simply designed, consisting of wood tables and small plastic chairs. I remember two big windows with curtains, and in the summer time we had a lot of light coming in through those windows, which I liked very much. Sometimes we went to downtown Baku. Many years later ethnic issues would bring a lot of suffering and

death, but then we could go to the boulevard across the central "Neftchilar prospecti" (Oilmen Avenue), pass the maiden tower ("Gis galasi"), and see Russians, Armenians, Jews, and others walking along the Caspian Sea, enjoying the fresh air and beautiful view together. Everybody proudly referred to themselves as "Bakintsi" (Bakuvians from Russian), regardless of their ethnicity. I remember the oil smell of the boulevard and the sirens of incoming and departing ships. It was wonderful but temporary. Many years later the politicians would destroy everything for the sake of their ambitions and political games.

Despite my experiences with the army system, I remained a dedicated communist. I was voted *komsomol*, leader of the communist youth organization in the dentistry program, which required me to organize various community service activities consistent with the communist ideology of unity. In truth, the planned activities were more like slave labor. In the summer of 1976 we were sent to the

Barda area of Azerbaijan, an agricultural community located west of Baku, to help the farmers there. We lived in a dirty warehouse full of rats, which was bad enough, but more infuriating was the special treatment one of my colleagues was receiving. He was the son of a highly placed official in the communist party. He was not required to sleep in the warehouse and dined with the leaders of the program. At the time, I refused to believe these situations of unequal treatment were the results of deficiencies in the system, but believed they were singular, unrelated events. Later, when it was time to graduate, I would again be victimized by the inherent inequities of communism and the system of graft and corruption upon which its foundation lay. I was an A student. By every standard of measure, I deserved to graduate *summa cum laude*. The problem was, the institution was awarded only a set number of such diplomas, and they were for sale to the highest bidder. My family was not poor, but we did not have extra cash to pay for bribes. I learned I was not scheduled to receive

the honors diploma I deserved and I was livid. I met with several administrators of the school and pleaded my case. The administrators were forced to acknowledge their "mistake," and I was ultimately awarded the sought after diploma. Rather than awaken me to the knowledge that the system was corrupt, my success combined with my youth and naïveté served to reinforce my belief that the problem lay with various individuals and not with communism.

Of course, life was not all work and patriotic party duty. Although the building architecture of communism was ugly, the architecture of its women most certainly was not, and I did my fair share of investigating their structural details. My most memorable dalliance was with a very beautiful woman several years older than me who worked as an administrator of the dentistry program. Gamar was a very persistent young woman. Unfortunately, my mother did not like her and screened all calls from her, finally causing a confrontation between us where I was forced to tell Gamar our relationship could not

move forward. It wasn't only my mother's disapproval of Gamar that kept the relationship from growing; I was bored and the tedium of my life infected my desire to pursue a serious romance.

I graduated with my summa cum laude diploma and set out to find a job. Predictably, that too required connections or money to pay bribes, which I still did not possess. I do, however, possess a great deal of luck. It turned out the director of the local clinic was a man with the last name of Ibrahimov. We were not related, but he apparently liked his name and therefore liked me. The female comrade who happened to be the director of the medical clinic took a liking to me too—which I was happy to encourage—and she persuaded Mr. Ibrahimov to hire me. She also convinced him that I was only planning to work in the clinic for a short time, which was important, since it meant he would sooner be able to collect a bribe for the next man's employment. It later became clear to me that Mr. Ibrahimov's main occupation was collecting bribes

and sharing the profits with his superiors. In fact, at the time I think I was the only person who was hired at Central Clinic # 5 in Baku without having to pay a bribe. It was a good deal for Mr. Ibrahimov and his colleagues. I am a hard worker and production levels rose during my tenure, making him look good. I was also awarded the first communist party membership position ever offered to the clinic. It was a huge status boost for the clinic, earning it the right of representation, which could later lead to additional cash or the opportunity to be among the first to receive equipment or upgrades, or both. It was a small victory for all of us "ordinary," unconnected folks. All of the directors believed the membership would be awarded to one of the dentists, who held a higher status than the technicians. After a general meeting of all of the employees of the clinic and speeches made by all of the candidates, I won the vote. The corruption in the system still existed, but this time it was defeated.

The clinic was located in a gray, single-story

building with few windows. To the right from the entrance of the clinic there were several doctors' offices that served various dental professionals. The technician's laboratory was a big room with equipment that was quite primitive, taking into consideration that it was the 1970s and imports of the more sophisticated Western equipment were very limited. The room was usually hot and overcrowded with technicians, and the long corridor was always full of patients sitting and waiting. In an attempt to add some style to the space, somebody with a very poor artistic eye placed blue and white paintings on the walls.

I worked in the clinic for two long years. I was paid a good wage, but the comfort the money provided was not enough to make me happy. Some may call it artistry, but those would be people without talent or imagination. Creating teeth, even those made of gold, is about as exciting as watching paint dry. Every Monday I met my friends for lunch; every Saturday I played soccer. The clinic was located near

the Avrora metro station in a very polluted part of Baku called *Cherniy gorod*, Russian for black city, a reference to the poor air. I lived in my parents' home and traveled to the clinic by over-crowded bus.

As terrible as my time in the army was, it was the first time I had traveled outside of my country, and it was exciting. When I listened for the sounds of my life back in Baku, I heard nothing but white noise. One day, like the cartoon light bulb that bursts into view, a thought suddenly occurred to me: I didn't want to be a technical dentist, I wanted to be an international journalist. I didn't know any journalists at the time, national or international, so I am not sure how I developed the idea. True, I could speak Azeri and Russian, but that wouldn't get me very far. The title "international journalist" promised travel and even hinted at intrigue, and it clearly was a whole lot more interesting than making teeth. I began to write for small local publications and took several classes in English. I discovered I have a gift for languages, progressed quickly through my classes, and within

two years I was speaking English fluently. Single-mindedness is the pleasure of youth; I drove toward the vision of my future and accepted no lure or detour. But I have heard it said that while man plans, God laughs. Despite my ambition, my plans to find my destiny were almost derailed.

Sometime in the early morning hours of June 6, 1979 my mother entered the room I shared with my brother, she gently shook me out of my slumber, and then shocked me into consciousness with a whisper: “Your father is ill. He is dying.” My father was not an old man; he was the picture of health just hours before. I ran from my room and crossed the hall into my parents’ bedroom. Whatever had happened during the hours I was asleep convinced my mother that my father needed medical attention. I pushed through the strange bodies in white costumes floating around his bed. They were moving slowly, placing blankets on top of my father’s prone body. His eyes were closed, but his chest was moving. Then, unbelievably, the medical team stepped away from his

bedside and began to file out the door. I accosted one of them.

"Where are you going? Stay here!"

The nurse looked at me and then at my mother who was standing next to me. My mother took my elbow and guided me back to the bed where my father laid; his eyes were still closed, and his breathing was shallow. I stared at his face, which was unnaturally gray, the color of stone; his lips were thin and blue. It was only minutes later that I witnessed his death rattle. My father emitted a whooping rasp and then silence.

I had been scheduled to leave the next morning for the Moscow State Institute of International Relations to begin my studies. Career change in a communist state is no simple task. Unlike in the United States, I couldn't just leave my position and start anew. In order to begin my new studies, I had to apply first to the government for permission to take an aptitude exam. The Soviet educational system is completely alien to American custom and tradition.

As with everything else Soviet, continuing education in certain elite institutions required state approval. Without it, I would not be given the opportunity to continue my studies in one of those institutions. And if approved, I was considered a representative of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan and was expected to fulfill my international duty to my country—in other words, do well and stay out of trouble. I had completed my interview months before with each of the state officials and party bosses, and they gave me permission to travel to Moscow as a representative of Azerbaijan. I had done so and met with the Moscow officials of the Institute, who then approved my application to take the aptitude exam. I took the exam and I passed. I was scheduled to begin my studies, when my father died. I was grief stricken by my loss and began to lose faith in myself.

Death is so small; the person is here and then he is not. But the empty space in which I lived after my father died was cavernous. I found comfort in old religious customs that my family had ceased to

practice for generations. It gave me a tool to process my grief. Prior to 1920, when the Russian Army invaded, a majority of Azerbaijanis were practicing Shi'a Muslims. However, during the Soviet regime, religious practices were systematically repressed, and Azerbaijanis, like much of the Soviet population, simply stopped practicing them. I was then, and remain, a secular Muslim, but I am thankful for the sense of calm the funeral preparations required.

According to religious law, my father's body had to be cleansed and then quickly buried so that his soul could rest. The reality of my father's death came to me through the touch of my fingers on his skin as my brother and I washed his body with scented water. A body without life is cold; it moves as a single block with odd parts attached by heavy hinges. It is at the same time pliable and resistant, but its resistance is by weight instead of force. Moving him and holding was like molding a pliable piece of lead. Someone, I am not sure who, purchased the traditional white kafan in which my brother and I wrapped our father. He was

buried in Muslim tradition without a coffin in an area close to our home, a place I have not been to in a long time but still visit in my dreams. I relived my father's death countless times in Iraq. I hope it made me more sensitive to the needs of the men and families I served there.

I spent the next year in Baku healing my wounds and coming to terms with my father's passing. Finally, the next year, I gathered my courage and, in homage to my father, I once again embraced my dream. I was given permission to take exams at the Peoples' Friendship University to study international law. Upon arriving in Moscow, I was asked to interview and take proficiency exams for the newly created international journalism program. Again I passed and was offered a spot in the new program. It was my dream coming to reality. I was sure I was being given a gift from my father, who I felt was watching over me and guiding me through my new life.

The majority of the students in the program were from countries outside of the Soviet Union: Asia, Africa, and South America. I lived in the university dormitory, *obshejitie*. My first roommate was a very wealthy man from Kuwait and my second, Alexander, was from Byelorussia. Alex was tall, handsome, and shy. He was the perfect lure for young women. He often brought them into the dorm, but they spent the night with me. Needless to say, I have very fond memories of my escapades with my roommate and friend.

The course of study was rigorous. First year Soviet students were required to become fluent in two languages other than his or her native tongue. I was selected to study Arabic and English. Non-Soviets were required to study Russian. The rest of the curriculum included course work in history, literature, and domestic and international journalism. Also required was a steady dose of communist propaganda. We were each required to attend meetings of the *komsomol*, the Soviet youth organization, as well as

meetings of the communist party committee at the university. In 1986 I was awarded a Master of Arts in International Journalism and Linguistics, and thereafter a Ph.D. from the Academy of Social Sciences in Moscow. By the time I had completed my studies in 1991, I spoke five languages fluently: Azeri, Russian, English, Arabic, and Turkish. Given the chance, I could travel the world; getting the chance was another story entirely.

I am single-minded to a fault. I worked tirelessly on my studies almost to the exclusion of all else. My academic achievements were hard to ignore. Other than eventually being awarded my degree *Summa Cum Laude*, the recognition I received was in the form of jibes and insults from ethnic Russians, and the privileges I was granted were fewer than those granted to classmates with weaker grades but stronger connections to the party elite and more money to spend on administrators and teachers. The deeply held racist beliefs of the ethnic Russians were only barely concealed during the Soviet reign, and

upon its collapse all pretense was dropped. During my schooling I was frequently reminded of my ethnic heritage and in no uncertain terms told to keep my tongue and know my place. Even in gym class my teacher made it a point of telling me that all of the political and economic troubles of the time were the fault of my race—the Caucasians. I was a *churka*, from one of the Caucuses, and therefore a person of lesser status. The epithet hurled at me from the lips of the ugly granddaughter of a former Moscow Communist Party boss stung. She was a classmate of mine and given praise and privileges beyond her due. She was a mean-spirited girl who abused her position. What was most revealing was that her father was Armenian; however, she chose to deny that heritage in favor of her mother's pure Russian blood.

One of the few friendships I forged during my time at the university was with a professor by the name of Farid Shukurovich Alizadeh, who taught Farsi. He was an ethnic Azeri, but had never lived in Azerbaijan. It was his life-long dream to move back

to his homeland. He was a gentle, intelligent man and did his best to raise his family in accordance with Azeri culture and tradition. He had a daughter a few years younger than I, and I know he wished we would marry. No culture has a monopoly on good children; there will always be some who try to harm their parents, but in the Soviet system a child could use the government as a weapon against the family. Professor Alizadeh's daughter almost succeeded. She married a man who did not meet her family's approval and left Moscow. She later returned and attempted to convince the government that she should be awarded part of the property her father had worked decades to obtain. She was able to convince one of the party bosses to investigate her father's property. The boss was envious of the professor. Despite all the superior amenities he received as party boss, the apartment he had been awarded was only moderate in size. Professor Alizadeh's was larger. According to Soviet law, if the Professor's apartment was larger than the Party determined his needs were, his daughter could

claim part of it for herself. Fortunately, she lost her bid, but I was deeply disturbed and angered by the story. Later his son was brutally murdered, and the crime was never solved. The stress overwhelmed my dear professor, and he died of a heart attack shortly thereafter. Still I remained blinded by the communist rhetoric and believed with all my heart that my achievements would win me success; the problem was with individuals, not with the system.

The Winds of Change

My father's death was quick and painless (for him). The death of the Soviet Union was slow. It was marked by periods of deterioration, followed by short surges of power for the old communist leaders. Iraq, too, is suffering a long painful death. Former leaders and those who held privileged positions are fighting to retain their power. Of course, the details differ significantly, but the general story is the same. As the old regime dies, the coalition forces are playing midwife to the difficult birth of a new order. For me, it felt like déjà vu all over again.

In June 1986 I had begun working at the Executive Committee of the Red Cross for the USSR. I had a job typical of the communist era: I was assigned to the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and it was my responsibility to use my language skills to review open and public information published by Western agencies regarding Soviet-American

relations. I assessed the information and reported to the former USSR ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, and later to Valentin Falin, former Soviet ambassador to West Germany, as well as Dmitry Lisovolik, who headed up the U.S./Canada division of the Department.

* * *

In 1989, at age thirty-three, I decided it was time for me to marry. I had been spending many evenings after work walking along residential streets, looking into the apartments of men and women and their families and suddenly felt very lonely. I come from a culture where arranged marriages are still customary. I believed if I could meet a young woman whom I liked and liked me, I could convince her family to allow her to marry me. I did just that. I asked my supervisor at the Red Cross for a week off to return to Baku to find a bride. He looked at me like I was absolutely out of my mind, but he decided to take up the challenge and let me go. My family knew of my plan and had lined several dates up for me, but

it was too structured. It felt too traditional, too much like the arranged marriages of the past. I wanted a relationship that at least reflected in some way the times in which we were living, and I wanted the attraction between my bride and myself to be mutual and independent of our families. During one of my last days home riding bus # 65, I saw her. She was at the front of the bus holding onto some books. I moved up to where she was seated and asked her for the time, admittedly not the most creative introductory remark, but it worked. I was able to continue the conversation until she disembarked. By that time I had learned her name and obtained a phone number. Truth is, I was not as successful as I believed myself to be, because she had given me her aunt's phone number and not her own. But I was undeterred. I returned to Moscow without my bride, but I truly hoped and believed it would only be a matter of time. I was persistent. Leila's aunt and I had many telephone conversations over the next few months. She was indeed an excellent gatekeeper. She

delayed my meeting with Leila until such time as she was sure I was honest and sincere in my quest. Finally, a family meeting was arranged. I flew back to Baku and met with Leila and her family at the appointed time. My mother and older brother joined me. Her family was fifteen people strong including aunts, uncles, and grandparents. I have taken a lot of exams in my life, but I was the most nervous for this one. I took a deep breath and told them everything I thought they would want to know. I told them I was healthy, educated, had a good job, and would take good care of Leila. I told them my worst fault was my single mindedness in reaching a goal. They turned from me and conversed amongst one another, and then smiles broke out on all of their faces. I passed, I won, I got the deal! They approved. They brewed some sweet tea, which traditionally marked the family blessing, and on December 12, 1989 we were married. The next day we left for Moscow.

It was a beautiful introduction to the city. A light snow had fallen, and the city was silent and

glistening. My new bride had never been away from her family and had never traveled out of Azerbaijan. I believe in omens, and it was a good omen. Neither of us has ever regretted our decision.

During my time there, Moscow suffered from a severe housing shortage. The remedy was communal housing, or *kommunalka.* I had already been living in the *kommunalka* when I met my wife. It was actually an improvement from my living quarters previously, which included renting space from a temperamental alcoholic who threw me out the door with no forewarning. It was so bad that one night I was forced to sleep in the train station because I had nowhere else to go. The *kommunalka* is the quintessential communist incarnation. It is a living unit in which several families share a bathroom and a kitchen; privacy, such as it is, can only be achieved in the bedroom. It was more like living in a barracks or dormitory than in an apartment. Leila and I shared a three-room flat located near the *Medvedkovo* metro station that included the communal area and two

bedrooms. When I left for Baku the second time in hopes of bringing Leila back as my wife, the woman with whom I shared the apartment was quite ill. I never thought she liked me very much during our time together, but I later learned it was merely a reflection of the pain she endured daily. As I was about to leave for the airport, Olga Ivanovna called out to me. For the second time in my life, I entered a room where death hovered overhead. Her son and daughter were at her side. She said goodbye and wished me luck. She died the next day. Leila and I attended the funeral together. Olga's son told me it was his mother's wish that I take her bedroom, which was the bigger of the two. Unfortunately, before we were able to make the exchange, Olga's long-time friend arranged for a man to take over the space. Evgeniy was an alcoholic man prone to violent episodes. He was divorced but remained obsessed with his former wife and frequently forced his way into our bedroom looking for his ex-wife and accusing me of having sex with her.

My memories of romancing my new wife in that strange environment leave me with a sweet instead of a bitter taste. We were unknown to one another, and my wife was barely out of her teens and inexperienced. In the early days of our marriage, she would follow me around the apartment as if playing a child's game and mimic everything I did. Finally we would break into peals of laughter. We still do whenever we remember our lives there.

Before we celebrated our first anniversary, our daughter was born, and I decided it was time to get away from Evgeniy. Because of my employment, I was able to arrange for my family to move to a single, non-communal apartment. It was a sixth-floor walk-up, smaller than the *kommunalk*a and on a noisier street, but it was far more private and located near a shaded area where Leila could walk with our daughter in the new perambulator we purchased. The day we were to leave, Evgeniy came into our apartment very drunk and very belligerent. When asked, he refused to leave. Fearing for the safety of my wife and daughter,

I pushed him outside. My pent up anger with that lunatic reached deadly proportions. I forced him down and smashed his face repeatedly into the ground. Finally, I was pulled away by a concerned neighbor, who didn't want to see my wife and child abandoned while I served time in jail for murder. My small family moved the next day and stayed in the new apartment until we left Moscow two years later.

On March 11, 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the Communist Party and de facto ruler of the Soviet Union. The world changed. When he came to power the Soviet economy was failing, worsened by miners' strikes. Store shelves were empty; some of the Soviet republics continued to call for greater independence, and ethnic conflicts in Transcaucasia (which includes Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan) were accelerating. Gorbachev transformed the Soviet Union. His policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) gave the populous a sense of power and a taste of freedom that was the ultimate undoing

of the seventy-year union of republics. For the first time, representatives of foreign countries came to the Soviet Union to invest and exchange goods and ideas. The entire structure of Soviet society as I had known it began to shift. At the time I was unsure how I felt about it. Fortunes were being made, but it seemed as though the people that were making them were the same people who had been in power during the old system.

Independent newspapers, magazines, television and radio popped up. The Ploshad Nogina, where I worked, was situated across from a quiet park. Before Gorbachev's reforms an elderly woman used to sweep the square every morning. Every morning I would say hello to her and she would reply "Good morning, son." Then the character of the Ploshad Nogina changed; it became a gathering place for the new Russian businessman complete with cell phones, laptop computers, and prostitutes. Clothing styles changed, even the manner of talking to other people changed. Life became louder and more

frenetic. Restaurants popped up along the plaza like mushrooms. One afternoon I decided to try one. The obsequious waiter fawned all over me, insisting on seating me near a window that was unobstructed so that I could watch the activities outside, unfolding my napkin and pouring me a glass of water with just the correct number of ice cubes. Then he brought the menu. The prices were, to my mind, outrageous and to my pocket unreachable, and I left. So apparently did the elderly woman.

It was not a course of steady progress forward. Perestroika in theory should have led to greater debate and understanding among the different populations of the Soviet Union; instead it created an opportunity for many to express long held ethnic hatred with little fear of reprisal. People like myself were jeered at on the street, and one time I was threatened while waiting in line to purchase food.

It's all in the language, in the definitions, in the types of words you use: *comrade* instead of friend, *microrayon* instead of home or apartment, Azeri or

Armenian or Georgian instead of citizen. The heat and fire from the mixing of races and ethnicities in the United States created a melting pot. In the Soviet Union those same elements only served to create greater friction and separation among its peoples. During the period of *perestroika* things turned ugly and unpredictable. The children of communism had never been taught how to deal with freedom, and the State as parent had been too restrictive during their youth. The release of state control over all things created a vacuum. The population acted as a bunch of ill-behaved teenagers who no longer needed to heed common rules of civility. The disintegration and ultimate demise of communism as a system was a good thing, but its unexpected and unintended consequences have lead to a proliferation of ethnic conflicts, first among the peoples of the former Soviet republics and later in the Middle East, which was no longer controlled through the balance of power between the Soviet Union and the United States.

The changes initiated by *perestroika* and *glasnost* were beginning to have an effect on my career. In November of 1990, I left the Red Cross and began employment at the League of Scientific and Industrial Associations of the USSR. As Chief Expert Interpreter of the International Department, I was part of a team responsible for developing economic and trade relations between the Soviet Union, the United States, Canada, and Japan. It was one of the first organizations created specifically for the purpose of opening up Soviet markets to foreign interests, and it was my first opportunity to work with educators and businessmen from the West. The president of the Association was a former influential employee of the Central Committee, Arkady Volsky, who wisely used his contacts within the communist system to secure his position in the Association. It turned out to be a very successful move for him. Others who failed to adapt quickly found themselves in the unfamiliar position of ordinariness. They soon lost all the accoutrements of privilege, some with very dire

results. Dmitry Lisovolik, whom I reported to at the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, was one such individual. No longer invited to shop at the stores reserved for the Party elite, he was required to stand in line with the rest of the masses to purchase food. He was unable to tolerate his change in circumstance and committed suicide. It was a frightening omen of events to come. Western journalists showed up at Lisovolik's funeral. They were quietly convinced to leave, having been given the party line that all was well with Soviet society.

There was little discussion about the change in the political and economic climate at my place of employment, at least with me. I was outside the loop of the powerful and connected. Those with whom I did converse seemed, like me, cautious. We had grown up believing in the communist system, and it was hard to accept that the changes were permanent. We were convinced that despite the rhetoric, the KGB continued to have eyes and ears everywhere,

and it was only a matter of time until things would return to normal and those who were too vocal would be jailed or worse.

A month after I joined the team at the League of Scientific and Industrial Associations of the USSR, I was hired by Luna-Trading Inc. to help coordinate economic and trade activities between Japan and the USSR. In addition, I was working on my Ph.D., hoping that the new era of *glasnost* would provide me the occasion to travel. Still opportunities continued to pass me by. Control seemed to have shifted from the Kremlin to individual *Mafioso*, who were even more brutal in their grab for power. In spite of many promises, I was never asked to join any of my employers on their trips overseas. In truth, the policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, which were meant to open Soviet society, were proving an impediment to my opportunities for advancement. And I was not alone.

Government, Soviet culture, and the economy were crumbling. In an effort to save the system,

Gorbachev negotiated a New Union Treaty that would have converted the Soviet Union into a federation of independent republics. On August 19, 1991, the day before the treaty was to be signed, a group of hard line communists attempted a coup d'etat. The *putsch* of August 19 through 22 was a dizzying three days.

I awoke on the 19th to news reports that Gorbachev had suddenly taken ill and power was being transferred to Vice President Gennady Yanayev and the newly formed State Committee for a State of Emergency, or GKChP. A chill ran down my spine upon learning that the committee was composed of the leaders of the KGB (the notorious Soviet intelligence agency), the military, and the police. I was not frightened, but I am cautious by nature, and I arrived at work careful not to respond to comments and questions of my colleagues. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary except perhaps there appeared to be more policemen on the street than was typical. Later that morning I heard a low rumble and the floor

shook. The central boulevards in Moscow are unusually broad, designed for military control. Within hours most of them were filled with tanks and armored personnel carriers. I tried to maintain my routine during those three days, but entering and leaving the building sometimes proved difficult. On the first day of the *putsch*, hundreds of people filled the Ploschad Nogina, and some of the demonstrators tried to break into our building. Arkady Volsky, the president of Scientific and Industrial Associations, managed to convince the crowd that our organization had nothing to do with the Central Committee of the Communist party, even though we shared space on the Ploschad Nogina with them. Later that day troops surrounded the area and kept the crowds at bay during the remainder of the uprising. I kept my distance, as I did not want to anger any of the weapon-toting soldiers. I could still remember the steel-toed kick to my ribs. I also did not want to participate in the demonstrations. I am a quiet man, and as an interpreter, I am by nature an observer;

more importantly, I had a young wife and child, and I was responsible for their safety. Each day more people filled the streets. Many approached the tanks, some stood in their path, others stuck flowers in the guns. At one point I watched a mob of people storm Dzerzhinsky Square, the place where the KGB was headquartered. Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky was widely recognized as the father of the notorious intelligence agency, a ruthless murderer who was responsible for the death of millions in the early years of the Russian Revolution. A number of people tried in vain to topple the statute of Dzerzhinsky. What was odd was that the KGB brutes just stood on the roof of their building quietly watching. There was an unreal quality to the whole affair, almost as if it were completely orchestrated on both the part of the military and the crowds. In fact, I was unable to shake that feeling during the entire event, and I was unwilling to become a tool played by others for their own gain.

Later I went back to Dzerzhinsky Square, curious to see what was going on there. A crowd was still milling about, and there was a frightening energy in the air. The door to the KGB building had the word “fascists” spray-painted across it, and several of the doors and windows to the buildings had been smashed. The Dzerzhinsky statute lay prone on the ground. I asked a man standing near me what had happened, and he explained to me that a crane had come and brought the statue down, all under the noses of the KGB! Again, I couldn’t shake the feeling that this was someone’s dangerous game of chess. I saw no future in it, and instinctively I knew I would soon be starting over.

By August 20 all independent news agencies were officially shut down. A couple of them resorted to handing out flyers to keep everyone abreast of the developments. Curfews were imposed and mass gatherings were banned. Younger people still openly discussed events in public places, but older people were much more cautious, still uncertain how the

events would play out. At home I turned on the television to see if I could learn more about what was happening. Central Television was broadcasting the ballet Swan Lake of all things.

Police began checking passports and identification papers. And more than once I saw Russian officers abusing non-Russians. It was open season. I approached one such policeman and asked him why he was mistreating a young man. He responded to me by saying all Caucasians were criminals and should be treated as such. I was speechless. I felt I was safe, because I had a *propiska*, a document that proved I was a proper resident of Moscow, which was particularly difficult for non-professional Caucasians to obtain, but under those conditions I was afraid the situation could change at any moment.

Then, on August 22nd it was all over. Gorbachev was miraculously healed, but politically severely weakened.

It was time for me to go home.

A Communist Democracy

I left for Azerbaijan in the hopes I could exploit new opportunities that were arising there. It was clear to me that it was only a matter of time before Azerbaijan claimed independence from the Soviet Union. Whether the Soviet Union would quietly accept that declaration or once again invade my country was unclear. My instincts proved correct; four months later, the Soviet Union ceased to exist. As of December 1991, all of the Republics had declared independence.

Ethnic conflicts intensified. I have often compared the ethnic conflicts in Iraq to those that exploded after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and wondered how much they really differ from one another. Change the names, but the stories are essentially the same.

Given my background in international relations, it seemed my best opportunities lay in the diplomatic corps. Fortunately, when I went back to Baku to explore future opportunities, I was able to get

an audience with the foreign minister. We had a long fruitful conversation, and he promised me if I returned to Baku, he would offer me a job in the ministry. He presented me with a letter of invitation to that effect, and I took him at his word. It was a gamble I almost lost. My colleagues at the League were certain that the center of Central Asian power would return and remain in Moscow. They were concerned that the conflict that had recently erupted again in the Nagorno-Karabakh region would overflow into other parts of Azerbaijan, throwing the country into civil war, causing my new diplomatic prospects to evaporate. The conflict between the Armenians and the Azeris had reignited in 1988. Shusha, my childhood summer playground, was at the center of the conflict and served as a mountain stronghold from which the Azerbaijani forces shelled the Armenians. In May 1992, the Armenians launched a counter-offensive and captured Shusha. It was then that my extended family was forced to leave as the city was looted and burned by the invading forces.

Hedging my bet, I thanked my colleagues, who assured me I would always be welcomed back, and returned to Azerbaijan. Ultimately, my calculations proved correct, for many former Soviet republics including Azerbaijan took a pro-Western orientation, which opened a lot of opportunities to see the world and work in other countries. But there was a period of several months when I wondered whether my luck had run out.

It had been difficult to leave Moscow; after all I had lived and worked there for twelve years. My wife and I walked the streets, remembering our first days together, excited about the prospect of returning home, where our daughter would have more opportunity to spend time with her grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. So we left with light hearts, full of anticipation and hope of a newly independent country ripe with opportunity. But even as hopeful as I was about our future, my past experiences and disappointments kept me in check, and I decided not relinquish my Moscow apartment just yet. I, of

course, could not afford two apartments, one in Moscow and one in Baku, so my wife and I split up. She and my daughter lived with her parents, and I lived in my mother's home along with my brother and his family. Leila and I dared to believe the situation would be temporary, and we would be reunited once I was given the promised position.

My decision to hold onto my Moscow apartment was prophetic, because no sooner had we left Moscow than we encountered an unexpected problem and had our first experience with the new face of Azerbaijani corruption. No longer was the corruption masked by the face of the Soviets. This time the corruption was internal, due to the forces at work within the new Azerbaijani government and diplomatic corps. The Popular Front was running the government, and after seventy-plus years of communist rule, they were decidedly anti-Soviet. Many of the leaders of the Popular Front resembled the thugs of Soviet Russia—they just wore different uniforms. As a sign of independence, they insisted

that the populous speak only Azeri, notwithstanding the fact that for the last seventy years the citizens of the large cities in Azerbaijan spoke Russian as their primary tongue. To insist on immediate change was foolhardy and unnecessary.

So while my Moscow credentials were impressive, they actually worked to my disadvantage in the nascent days of the democracy. I found myself in the offices of the Foreign Ministry daily. I arrived with my letter of invitation in hand and left with the same letter—promises only, but no employment. I was losing patience and was beginning to think I would have to return to Moscow. I was angry and depressed and felt foolish in believing that once the Soviets left, things would instantly change, that education and work ethic would count for something instead of money and influence. I began to consider returning to Moscow, and I almost came to blows with my father-in-law, who threatened he would not allow Leila or my daughter to leave Baku for Moscow during this time of uncertainty.

Finally, the ice broke. I cornered Albert Aliyev, the deputy foreign minister. He had greeted me everyday as I arrived to see if my position had been finalized, and he nodded when I complained to him. It seemed to me at the time that at least he was sympathetic to my situation. I called his name as he approached and stood in front of him so that he was unable to pass. I barely controlled my temper and spoke to him through gritted teeth. I wasn't sure he was listening to me, but he was clearly watching me. I started to perspire as my emotions took over, and I saw him look at my upper lip. Self-conscious, I wiped it, and he nodded—perhaps an acknowledgment that my words were true and my situation required action. Then he took my papers from me and disappeared into the building. I stood there wondering whether my precious letter was being destroyed and calculating my next course of action if in fact it was. Fortunately, I never had to prepare a plan. Aliyev returned ten minutes later and announced to me I was now officially employed by the Foreign Ministry of

Azerbaijan. Finally, six months after I returned home, I received my diplomatic credentials and was asked to serve as second secretary to the Foreign Ministry of Azerbaijan. I was to work in the Information Department.

Our offices were in an old building in the center of the city not far from the boulevard at the Caspian Sea. It was a simple affair. The entire department was located in one room; even the head of the department, Fakhraddin Kurbanov, shared space with us. We each were assigned a table, which served as a desk. Our duties were simply to assess and categorize the incoming and outgoing information related to our diplomatic activities with other countries. Still, I was worried that my failure to ally myself with the ruling party would once again hurt my chances for advancement. Fortunately, that did not come to fruition; two months later I was promoted to first secretary. We moved offices and I was appointed acting head of the Press Service of the Foreign Ministry. The Popular Front government was strongly

pro-Western, so my ability to speak English and my research in Western politics became an advantage. I was placed in charge of U.S. and Canadian affairs in the International Department. Things were beginning to look up; my family's fortunes were improving.

We relinquished our Moscow apartment and moved into a spacious apartment formerly owned by the daughter of a Soviet general; my family was finally reunited under one roof. I returned briefly to Moscow to retrieve the few furnishings we had and moved them up into our second-floor "Stalinka" style apartment, so named after the former Soviet leader Stalin. It was a nicely designed three-room apartment with high ceilings, wide windows, and solid walls. It was located close to the center of the city, with two balconies, one facing an inner courtyard and the other facing a busy city street across from a statute of Azizbekov, one of the former Soviet Baku commissars. The statue had an outstretched hand that symbolized forward movement into the future. I loved the statute and often whispered to it, asking

which way it was directing me, where should I go? My daughter started nursery school; it was located right next door to our building, and I was able to walk to work. The first floor of our building housed a music school, and I have fond memories of readying for work and beginning my walk down the hill listening to the cacophony of sounds coming from the rooms below.

We spent time with our family and a small group of friends from the ministry. My closest friend was deputy Foreign Minister Albert Aliyev, after he forgave me for accosting him in the corridors of the ministry, and I thanked him for his efforts to help me win my appointment. He was elderly and gray-haired; he walked fast and talked the truth. He never hid his past as a former KGB colonel, even though that association was frowned upon by the ruling Popular Front. Indeed, he shared my concern that the leadership was creating an international image of incompetence and inexperience in foreign affairs.

Many ill-considered actions were taken with regard to Azerbaijan's relationship with Iran and Russia. Some people were concerned that the former Soviet government would once again invade our country and reassert its power. There were clear reasons to distrust the Iranian government as well. There are an estimated twenty million ethnic Azeris living in the northern provinces of Iran, concentrated in and around the city of Tebriz. The central Iranian government has always been suspicious of the ethnic Azeri population, and Iran was concerned that a strong, independent republic of Azerbaijan could become a powerful destabilizing factor within its borders. Nonetheless, as a small country, surrounded by big regional players, Azerbaijan could ill-afford to undertake any aggressive action at the time of our fragile independence. Those countries could cause a lot of troubles for us. And allegedly they did. After the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict broke out, reportedly both Russia and Iran unofficially sided with Armenia. As a result, Azerbaijan lost about 20%

of its territory: the Nagorno-Karabakh region plus seven additional surrounding regions. In my opinion, that was the price that the Popular Front government of Azerbaijan paid for its clear anti-Russian and anti-Iranian policies.

In addition, I was frustrated by the growing strength of the relationship between Azerbaijan and Turkey. The slogan among the diplomats working with Turkey was: "One nation, two countries." I thought Azerbaijan had had enough of foreign influences, and it was time to continue the history and development of our own separate, independent nation. Fortunately, the Turkish influence dissipated after the Popular Front lost power, and the members of the Foreign Service who had championed the Turkish cause, emigrated there.

As diplomats in the Ministry, Aliyev and I would voice our disagreement with the government privately to each other, but we didn't dare publicly voice our disagreement. In that case we would simply be fired. Most of the Ministry employees didn't really

care much about the policies conducted in this or that area; everybody was busy trying to get an assignment to one of the embassies abroad. The inter-department intrigues were mainly aimed at who was going to be the chief of this or that department. However, in general, I believe the Foreign Ministry played a positive role in developing Azerbaijan's independence, and I am proud that I shared the strategic direction of the Foreign Ministry in the development of Azerbaijan's independence.

The government was actively involved in applying for membership in strategic international organizations, including the U.N., OSCE, and NATO. Foreign policy priorities included development of peaceful diplomatic and economic relationships with neighboring countries, integration into the world economy, and promotion and exploitation of Azerbaijan's rich oil reserves. The first attempts by the Popular Front government to use the oil factor was, in my opinion, a very powerful economic and diplomatic tool. That factor was fully

utilized by the government of Heydar Aliyev, which came to power one year later. Eventually, it attracted the commercial interests and much needed investments of Western countries in Azerbaijan, and later it influenced the strategic relationships between Azerbaijan and the West, particularly the U.S. Today, the powerful oil consortium which consists of the international oil companies is fully operational in the capital Baku. Not only has it had a significant influence on Azerbaijani foreign policy, it has also contributed to the beginning of the creation of an Azerbaijani middle class by opening employment opportunities to young English-speaking Azeris. However, to date, in my opinion, not enough has been done to expand opportunities and encourage the growth of the middle class. That failure has led to increased economic difficulties and encouraged the continued growth of the black market and graft. It continues to be a corrupting force in Azerbaijan, and, I believe, in Iraq as well.

In 1992, special attention was being paid to relations with the West, and the U.S. in particular. As a person in charge of the U.S. and Canadian affairs, I was actively involved in different meetings and negotiations with U.S. embassy representatives. The first U.S. ambassador to Azerbaijan was Richard Miles, and I was in regular contact with his deputy Robert Finn. Mr. Finn was a former Turkic language scholar. He sometimes spoke in Azeri, but with a strong Turkish accent. Actually, the Azeri and Turkish languages share much of the same vocabulary, so he was able to converse with locals in their own tongue and still be understood. We had a very good working and personal relationship; he and I usually spoke to one another in English.

By the end of 1996, Azerbaijan had become a full-fledged member of the international community. The single blot on our international status was Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act. The Freedom Support Act was legislation enacted by the United States Government designed to help in the

rebuilding of the newly independent republics of the former Soviet Union. Passed on October 24, 1992, it is replete with provisions for financial, technical, and other forms of assistance "to support freedom and open markets in the independent states of the former Soviet Union." Amid these good works, however, is a little-known but important and mischievous clause that prohibits the provision of U.S. assistance "to the Government of Azerbaijan until the President determines that the Government of Azerbaijan is taking demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh."

In brief, although often seen as a religious war between Christians and Muslims, the Armenian-Azerbaijani war is really a territorial dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, a region located in the western part of Azerbaijan. The conflict compares in many ways to the Serbian-Muslim war in Bosnia and the Sunni, Shi'ite, and Kurd conflicts in Iraq. It is a dispute that began centuries ago and, consistent with

the cultural realities of Central Asia and the Middle East, has survived generations of death and destruction. The modern face of the conflict began in February 1988, when Armenians perceived a weakness in the Soviet central government and decided to take advantage of it. Ethnic Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh demanded secession from Azerbaijan to join Armenia, arguing that their low status in Azerbaijan made life there intolerable. The Armenian authorities in Yerevan then armed Armenian nationalists in Nagorno-Karabakh and sponsored the creation of a military force. From the beginning, Yerevan authorities claimed not to be involved in the fighting, insisting that the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh shouldered the entire military effort, an amazing contention, given that its tiny population of 150,000 was soundly beating an Azerbaijani population of 7,500,000. The hollowness of this claim became obvious over time. For example, *The New York Times* reported in August 1993 that the

Armenian army, not forces from Nagorno-Karabakh, controlled the Azerbaijani city of Zangelan.

The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan easily ranks as one of the bloodiest conflicts among the former Soviet republics. What had been mainly local warfare during the Soviet period (1988-91) has, since Azerbaijan claimed independence, developed into an open military conflict between two states. Fortunately, I did not lose any family members to the conflict, but it claimed the life of a former colleague of mine from my days in Moscow. Tofig Ismailov was a man dedicated to peace. He traveled between Azerbaijan and Moscow in a vain attempt to find a solution and halt the bloodshed. He died when his helicopter was shot down during a peace mission to the region.

The official Azerbaijani position calls for an end to fighting on the basis of existing borders, the assurance of minority (namely, Armenian) rights in Nagorno-Karabakh, and the safe return of refugees to their places of permanent residence. In contrast, the

Armenian side is holding out for keeping the occupied territories under its military control.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was to continue to play a significant role in my life. One September morning in 1992, I arrived at work and was greeted by the assistant to the foreign minister, who informed me that that day I was assigned to accompany a group of Western journalists to the war theater. It was actually one of my first assignments as acting head of the press service. There were five journalists in the group, representing the U.S., Germany, and Great Britain. I didn't particularly like them. They were interested in details, but not realities. They didn't seem to understand we were about to enter a war zone where people were suffering horrible injuries and dying. Their attitude toward the locals was characterized by arrogance, but I appreciated their openness and professionalism. They were dressed very casually; some of them were wearing typical multi-pocket jackets, which the journalists usually wore in the field. I was wearing a suit, which I

came to regret later in the day. They were quite young, between twenty-five and thirty-five years old. Of the group, one journalist was American and one was British. I never learned the nationalities of the other three.

We were transported to the airport by minibus and then boarded a Soviet-made helicopter to the city of Aghdam. As we approached the area, the chopper began to fly in a zigzag pattern so as to avoid hostile fire from below. Twelve years later, I was to take the same type of trip into Baghdad. As soon as we started to approach the conflict area, the fellow from Britain became very aggressive, trying to record everything he saw and thrusting his upper body over the window of the helicopter. He was hanging out so far that his entire upper body was outside of the chopper, and I was afraid that he would fall. I tried to warn him, but he ignored me. From up above we could see lakes, mountains, and forests that had become no-go zones. I was momentarily overcome with sadness and regret,

believing that this was probably the last time I would see these places. I closed my eyes and breathed in the air and tried to commit it to memory.

I tried to engage the pilot in conversation, a stocky young man sporting a large moustache. He spoke little, but I did learn he was originally from Aghdam, which was under siege by Armenian forces operating out of their positions in the village of Nakhichevanik. The pilot boasted to me that the people of the city were ready to defend it to the death, but he was worried about rumors that the Armenians were receiving support from Russians and other mercenary groups. I never learned if the rumors were true.

Once we landed, we were transported by jeep to the Azerbaijani command post. The trip took about an hour. Aghdam translates roughly as *white roof*, and I remembered as a child being told stories about the brave people of that city. I was shocked by the state of the city when we arrived. Aghdam had been a wealthy city, and its people took great pride in its

appearance, but there was no longer any dignity to the place. Few people walked the garbage filled streets. There were no rooftops on any of the houses in my field of vision. The structures resembled the jagged teeth of the monsters that populated my childhood nightmares. There was no greenery, just dust and holes and all manner of debris. Only weeks later, fearing recapture by Azerbaijan, the city was completely destroyed by Armenian troops. Today the city stands as a silent monument to the waste of war. It is a ghost town, its rich culture destroyed. It serves as a source of construction material and sullied income for the scavengers of war.

Upon arrival we were met by one of the commanders of the Aghdam military unit. I believe he was a colonel. He looked exhausted. I introduced the journalists to him, and he introduced himself to them. We followed him past a group of young soldiers between eighteen and twenty years old. They, too, looked exhausted in their dusty uniforms, smoking cigarettes and talking quietly, their Kalashnikovs by

their sides covered with green tape to keep the magazines tighter against the assault rifle. The journalists took notes as we followed the colonel toward the mobile field hospital. Before we reached the hospital, he stopped at a large, single-story building and bid us to enter. It was a warehouse. It stored the dead. This was the first such warehouse I would enter; the second one would be in Iraq.

Poets, reporters, and novelists have written much about the battlefield, but no one has ever written about the warehouses of the dead. When the dead are not buried in mass graves, they are stored in warehouses. The first thing that strikes you when you enter a "dead warehouse" is the silence. Actually, it is more like an absence of sound. It's as if the sound-space is dead too; there is no echo. There is not so much a chill as a lack of warmth because of a lack of body heat to warm the space. The air is heavy and damp, like breathing through a wet blanket, and there is an odor that is a mixture of mold and blood and summer's stagnant water due in part to decay and in

part to the natural release of body gases from the dead. There is no dignity or glory in such a place. I visited a warehouse in Iraq. It was clean and neat. But the bodies I saw in the warehouse in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan were not treated as well; most were not covered, some were sitting up, others leaning, still others lying down. They seemed animate even in death, their bloated bodies causing their clothes to stretch taut as if they ate too much at their last meal. At first I thought all the people in the room were crouched together hiding from the war. Then the smell hit me, and I realized they were dead and apparently had been stored there for quite a while. The colonel looked at the journalists, his face had grown deep lines in it just in the few minutes since we entered the warehouse. He looked at me and gestured towards the journalists, indicating he wanted me to interpret: "Look at what is happening to ordinary citizens, what was their fault?"

I still have dreams of that place, but they are mingled now with images of my time in Iraq. My

dream begins with a child standing on the roadside; he has no shoes. His dark brown hair has a gray caste of dirt, but it's his eyes that stir my soul. They are a deep brown, almost black. There is an emotion behind them, but I can't tell if it's fear or deceit. So I don't answer his pleas for help and return to the truck. I open the door and look in; it is not the interior of the convoy truck, black leather and army camouflage. It is the interior of a building. I slowly realize I have entered a mobile train hospital in Azerbaijan. I am cold; there is no desert heat to warm me. I step in and look around. I see gurneys lining the hallways in disarray; doctors and nurses walk past me with clear intensity of purpose. I look down. I am still wearing my combat boots. I look up again and see the boy. He is there with a woman. She is lying on the floor, limp. Her filthy clothing drapes a frail frame. Her breathing is fast and light; it reminds me of the sound of a fluttering bird. Her hair, matted against her face, has no color. She is silent, but her body screams in pain. She is his mother. The boy is sitting

on the floor, his mother's head in his lap. He takes a wet piece of hair and moves it back against his mother's scalp. Then he takes his finger and touches the curve of her eyebrow and follows the contour of her face to her chin. His mouth is slightly ajar, lips curled down. He looks at me. Now I understand. It is fear. He is crying, his mother is so small, shriveled really. The doctor shakes his head; he is speaking to me now in English, now in Russian, now in Arabic. "Nothing can be done. The boy's mother will die." I moan.

The woman of my dream is from the conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. I watched her as she died in the mobile hospital we were to enter later, but the son in my dream is not her son, he is the son of another woman in Iraq. I never saw the Iraqi boy's mother; I only listened to his plea for help. I was part of a convoy in Iraq, and as we passed the boy on the road, he flagged us down and begged for help. I was the only one who understood his words, but we all understood their meaning. Nonetheless, we were

under orders not to leave the road or the convoy, and under no circumstances were we to enter the homes of Iraqis that had not been previously cleared. It was too dangerous. The insurgents used any means available to mount an attack or kidnap a contractor. The kidnappers had different motives, some were political, others purely for criminal profit, using the names of known terrorist organizations as a cover. Women, children, the sick, the elderly were used as a guise or pretext to lure us into a trap. My internal conflict never changes. Fear and death bring all characters home to me. I am still haunted by the boy's look.

The journalists' response to the warehouse was clinical. They asked questions and continued to do their jobs. We left that place and entered a train that had been converted into a mobile hospital. It was a Soviet style train with *kupes*, separate cabin sections, and *plaskards*, open sections. If they could, the wounded sat in the seats; if they couldn't, they lay down, their legs blocking the aisle making it difficult

to move from one patient to the next. It was there we saw the woman of my dream. Actually, the boy had already died and she was dying. The journalists asked questions about the closeness of the hospital to the front lines and the logistics of evacuating the population. The woman sat there, her grandson in her arms, and died. That was it. It was over. Her life, his future, because of a piece of land that now serves as empty space. The journalists asked the colonel why the families had not been evacuated when the shelling started. He answered that the shelling was in fact sporadic and the families, reluctant to leave their homes and afraid of looting, believed they could wait out the latest onslaught. Some of them were obviously wrong.

The journalists had moved on. The hospital was too sedate; they wanted to see where the fighting was. Despite the colonel's objections, they insisted on going to the village of Nakhichevanik. Nakhichevanik is not far from Shusha, and I told them about my connection to the place. They asked me background

questions, and I gave them as much information as I could. I had no choice but to escort them there; my instructions were to take them wherever they wanted to go. We were not offered the protection of the soldiers. We were on our own, without weapons or protective gear. I was in my suit and tie. The closer we got, the louder the sounds of war: shells exploding nearby and bullets flying overhead. We had to crawl on our hands and knees in order to avoid having our heads blown off. We were almost at the outskirts of Nakhichevanik. I could see the houses and hear the dogs barking not far distant. I could smell something burning, but I was not sure what it was, and I imagined the worst. My mind actually began to wander, and I thought I should have brought a knife with me so I could kill myself if I were captured. I had the same bizarre thought when I was in Iraq and we traveled through unfriendly villages. As we approached Nakhichevanik, I could see some of the houses and a chain of beautiful mountains behind the village. It was as if nature was saying: no matter how

much ugliness you bring to the world, I will always bring something beautiful before it. My gaze met the gaze of the youngest of the group, and I could read fear in his eyes. Finally, the rest of the group realized the danger of the situation and agreed to turn back.

Five or six hours after we arrived in the war zone, we boarded helicopters back to Baku. On our return trip, we carried two wounded soldiers, one was young, perhaps nineteen or twenty, and the other was older, perhaps thirty. I watched their faces as we zigzagged our way back home. The older soldier looked healthier, the younger one was pale and his breathing was shallow. He was still breathing when we disembarked. I never learned his fate, and I never forgot his face.

An Immigrant's Dream

In March 1993, the newly appointed ambassador, Hafiz Pashayev, approached me in the Ministry. Reportedly, the foreign minister, and member of the Popular Front, Tofig Gasimov, recommended him to that position. Apparently, they were both physicists by profession, having met at the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences, where they had worked together. Later, they both served as top diplomatic representatives of Azerbaijan. Ambassador Pashayev talked to me several times, asked a lot of questions about my background, and knowing that my doctoral dissertation analyzed several aspects of U.S. foreign policy, requested a copy of it. It was clear that I was a potential candidate to go to the U.S. to work in the embassy, which did not exist yet. I would be part of the team that would open it. I had already participated in negotiations with the American ambassador and his staff on issues related to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Clearly, the death and destruction had to stop; in addition, a solution to the

problem was necessary in order to encourage much needed investment into Azerbaijani oil and gas industries.

Finally, it didn't seem to matter that I had no political connections and bribes. I was one of the few in the Foreign Ministry who could speak fluent English and understood American culture. Even so, on more than one occasion, Mr. Pashayev inquired about whom I knew in top political circles and whether or not perhaps my wife might have some relatives in a position of power. The truth is my wife's uncle was well politically placed, but despite frequent promises, he never offered any assistance. Nonetheless, I was offered, and I accepted, the position of First Secretary for Political Affairs in the soon-to-be established Azerbaijani Embassy in the United States.

The preparations began. Mr. Pashayev put together the diplomatic team that would open the first embassy in the United States to represent the new democratic republic of Azerbaijan. Mr.

Pashayev's driver and bodyguard, Mr. Mustafayev, was responsible for taking care of procedural and administrative issues relative to our departure, including securing travel and lodging. Mr. Mustafayev was also a long-time friend of Mr. Pashayev, having met at the Institute of Physics. At thirty-six (my age at the time), he reminded me of pictures I had seen of Abraham Lincoln. He was tall and had a long, thin face. He would be traveling to the States with his wife and two daughters. Our chief of administrative affairs was Mamed Veliyev; he was in charge of administrative issues in the future embassy. He also became "decorator-in-chief," arranging for shipment of office furniture and rugs as well as office equipment. Mamed was the oldest member of our group. He was married and had one adopted son. The next member of our group was Farhad Balashov, a quiet, soft-spoken man in his early thirties; he had one son at the time. He was our technology department at the embassy and had his job cut out for him, attempting to set up the computer network for our

future embassy. Mr. Fakhraddin Kurbanov, who was my chief in the Information Department, was appointed as the First Secretary and Counsel in charge of visa issues in the embassy. Mr. Kurbanov, a tall, bold, and pleasant man, was about a year older than me and had one two-year old daughter, the same age as my daughter at the time. The last member of our group was Galib Mammadov. Galib, at twenty-six years old, was not an employee of our Ministry; someone, I don't remember who, told me he was an active member of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan, and for that he landed the plump position of acting Second Secretary of the embassy. Such was the team that was put together to work in the Azerbaijani embassy in the U.S.

Leila and I began to pack and ready ourselves for our newest adventure. I moved between feeling as though I was living somebody else's life to feeling I was living my own, but I would soon awake from my dream and find myself in the dental lab of my youth, staring at unfinished gold teeth. Leila, who spoke no

English, was giddy with excitement and left me little time to think between the hundreds of questions she asked. I felt larger than life, full of love for my country and a sense of being part of something historic. I was so hopeful, and I believed completely in our mission and the possibilities that awaited my country.

The day prior to our departure, relatives and friends gathered in our apartment for a big party. We arranged a big table in our living room, and everyone brought something to either eat or drink. We cried and laughed and ate and joked, and when we were done, we cried and ate and laughed and joked some more. Glasses were raised and toasts were made to the health and good fortune of my family. We had a great time.

It was a typical warm April day when we awoke, ate breakfast, and took pictures of the apartment so that we "wouldn't forget." We had very little to pack, so when we gathered with our countrymen at the Foreign Ministry building ready to

depart, we had only five packed suitcases. Our families came by for a final farewell. My mother cried. She told me how much I reminded her of her beloved brother, who emigrated to the U.S. after World War II and stayed there. Finally, the time arrived, and we climbed into the bus and headed toward the airport. I realized how tired I was as I was finally able to relax after so many days and weeks of intense preparation. We arrived at the airport and checked in our luggage. It was a simple procedure, since we were proudly holding diplomatic passports, a status which saved us from tedious procedural formalities, and we boarded a flight towards Moscow. The plan was to spend a night there before we proceeded on to Washington, D.C. Azerbaijan was still a new country, and it was still relatively impossible to get anywhere directly from our country. All roads still lead to Moscow; it would take time before Azerbaijan was truly independent. We were going back to the place where I had spent twelve long years, and forward towards freedom.

Three hours and thirty minutes later we landed at Sheremetyevo airport. It was a strange feeling to come back to Moscow after being away for a while. It no longer felt familiar; it seemed to me that even the smell of the air was different. We were transported to the Hotel Russia not far from Red Square in the center of the city. My mind wandered back across time; it was the same hotel where I had spent many hours with different international delegations when I was a student working as an interpreter. It had been a luxury hotel, a place where diplomats and foreign businessmen were housed, because it reflected well on the city and the country. I was stunned at the transformation. Now, only a few years later, it was filthy and roach infested. It was a moment of transformation for me too. I began to believe in the permanence of a free and independent Azerbaijan, and a future that did not include the weight of communism.

We arrived in Moscow at about dinnertime, and we were all hungry. Only a few years before, it

would have been no trouble to find a decent place to eat. Now everything was shut down and closed. Finally, after walking around for a while, we found a small café and ate a simple dinner. No one slept well in the grime and filth, but we knew the accommodations were only temporary.

The next day, our IT man, Farhad Balashov, and I went to the open market to buy each a business suit. When I left Baku, I only had $10 in my pocket, which was money I had earned back in Moscow when I worked for the Japanese company. Our salaries in the Foreign Ministry were very minimal, and we were being paid in the local currency, Azerbaijani manats. I do not remember the exact salary or dollar-equivalent I was receiving at that time, but obviously it was not much. And, it cost approximately $200 a month to maintain a quality of life for my family of three in Baku; so when the time came to leave for the United States, I found myself without a proper suit of clothes and without the money to purchase it. Thankfully, I was able to

borrow $50 from a friend of mine, who was successfully engaged in business, to finance my trip to the United States. Several years later I repaid him ten times as much, with more gratitude than I can measure.

Leila stayed with our daughter while I shopped at the market. Farhad and I found two women who were selling suits there. It was unclear if they were related, but it was very clear they wanted to sell us something. Somehow they convinced us to follow them back to their apartment to show us additional wares. They showed us, and we purchased some suits, but they had other things they offered for sale as well. As diplomats and married men with children, we declined and quickly left.

We had expected to stay in Moscow only overnight, but we were delayed and spent two. Even so, there was not enough time to look up old acquaintances and friends, and I arrived and left Moscow without contacting any of them. I was on a new road. They were a wonderful part of my past, but

I was focused on my future. Finally, it was time to head west. Anxious to get on our way, we got to the airport early, and in the tumult Leila and I left our daughter's favorite Barbie doll in the hotel. Truthfully, we were more upset than our child; she was excited by the new sights and sounds around her, and obviously there was no difficulty in replacing the doll in the United States. I spoke to the ambassador on the day of our departure from Baku. He was already in the U.S. and looking forward to our arrival. He had a laundry list of things we needed to accomplish—quickly. Nonetheless, we were to have a few days to settle in and get acclimated.

The flight was long but comfortable. I watched as we glided over water. I had to keep reminding myself that the sparkling jewels formed by the white-capped waves below belonged to the Atlantic Ocean and not to the Caspian Sea. We stopped for refueling at Shannon Airport in Ireland. It was only an airport, and other than the language of the directional signs, not much different than the

airport in Moscow, but I couldn't help thinking: "This is the first time I am stepping on the soil of a European country." If I could have, I would have scooped up a piece of that lush green land and kept it as a keepsake. I am sure if there were a machine for measuring it, the electricity bouncing between my companions and me would have registered off the scale. I know our eyes sparkled. I saw it in my wife's eyes, and her smile told me she saw it in mine. We soon re-boarded and continued on our way. We slept fitfully and awoke to a nighttime view of the capital city of the United States of America.

I know as children we often look at the streetlights and imagine they are talking to us or leading us towards a new adventure, but the streetlights of Washington, D.C. that April night were truly talking to me, to all of us. They were leading us all onto a new adventure. We acted like children, leaning over one another to catch a glimpse of our future, foretold, we were sure, by the coded flickering of those lights.

We landed, and the voice overhead welcomed us in English to the United States of America. We deplaned and passed through Customs as part of the masses, not as elite diplomats, which was curiously comforting. We were all equal here; at that moment no one had any greater rank than anyone else. I took the lead directing our group towards baggage claim, because I was the most fluent in English. Someone approached Leila and without a word took hold of her suitcase. She yelled for me and I came running, only to find out it was one of our countrymen who had previously immigrated to the U.S. in 1979 from Iran after the Islamic revolution there. He decided to play a trick on Leila. (Obviously the new surroundings had increased his sense of freedom, but done nothing to remedy his poor sense of humor.)

We were driven to an apartment building in Rockville, Maryland, where the embassy had rented apartments for us. It was near a lake and had a beautiful green park surrounding it. We arrived en masse and stood together in the lobby of the building.

Our exhaustion was temporarily abated by adrenalin. Each family waited patiently for its turn as the rental agents cheerfully directed us and offered assistance as we made our way to our separate residences. My family was settled on the 11th floor, which we liked very much. There was a wonderful view of the lake and the park from the balcony, and we were to spend many mornings and early evenings looking out and marveling at our new lives. Conveniently, there was a market close to the apartment building, and the apartment complex was located close to the Grosvenor metro station. Many of the families had small children, and none of the women were licensed to drive a car. The apartments were completely equipped with furniture and bedding, and even the refrigerator was stocked with food awaiting our arrival. We had a good night's sleep, and the next morning the ambassador and his councilor came to see us. The ambassador gave $100 to each family to buy some food and other necessities. He suggested that we take several days to get adapted, which we

thought was a wonderful idea, and then handed me some materials to review. We spent the next week acclimating ourselves and purchasing additional materials we needed. Leila found a tree with the image of a snake. She insisted we had arrived at the Garden of Eden. Like Adam and Eve, our home would be temporary, just over two years, but we had no intention of leaving early; in fact, we would later ask the blessing of its creator to stay.

The next week our work started in earnest. Our first embassy was located on the 7th floor of an office building located next to the McPherson Square metro station, not far from the White House. Traveling to and from work was not difficult, and I did not yet need to purchase a car, which I could not yet afford. My office was in one of the middle rooms on the right hand side when you enter the office suite. Accommodations were simple: I had a desk with a phone on it. On the left hand side of the room were shelves for books and folders. The front part of the room was occupied by Mamed Veliyev, our chief of

administrative affairs. There were two more rooms further down the corridor. One was the ambassador's office, another one next to it was the councilor's office, and another room was occupied by Fakhraddin Kurbanov. He was responsible for issuing visas. Initially we did not have any secretary. Those functions were performed by Galib Mammadov, our acting second secretary. Later, we hired a lovely Filipino woman to serve in that post. The last room was located at the end of a long corridor. That housed Farhad Balashov, our IT department, such as it was.

The very first day the ambassador arranged a meeting in his office and assigned each of us a specific area of activities. I, along with the ambassador and the councilor, were assigned the task of working with Congress, the White House, and other U.S. government agencies and non-governmental organizations for the repeal of Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act.

The Armenian lobby had a long and successful history in the United States, and that lobby

was the sole reason for the adoption of the section 907 amendment. In almost all other circumstances, humanitarian and economic measurements determine the level of American foreign aid; with regard to Azerbaijan, the measurement was political. The politics was singularly defined, and we were determined to equalize the situation. Section 907 defined Azerbaijan as an aggressor and Armenia as a victim. It was a stunning achievement by the Armenian lobby. They were able to label Azerbaijan as the aggressor, even though almost one quarter of the territory claimed by Azerbaijan was then occupied by Armenia. The occupation by Armenian forces led to the worst humanitarian crisis in Azerbaijani history. It resulted in the displacement of more than one million Azeris, including my own extended family. These refugees received no direct American assistance because of the amendment, creating a humanitarian disaster for my country. Several senators had already indicated sensitivity to our position. Indeed, during the debate leading to the adoption of the amendment,

the Republican senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky was quoted as saying:

> By imposing sanctions against a specific country in the former Soviet Union, this amendment would establish a potentially dangerous precedent of choosing sides in conflicts which have deep historical roots. Indeed, we fear that this amendment would be an invitation to consider other such provisions in which the United States is asked to side with one state, nationality group, or religious entity against another state, nationality or religious body within the former U.S.S.R. That would be most unfortunate. We simply do not believe that the provision will have any positive effect on resolving the conflict.

In fact, the problem had been manipulated by the Soviet communist regime. My countrymen and my family were paying the price for their political games. Russia had a long history of drawing borders between its outlying territories that were arbitrary, thereby keeping the local nationalities divided and unable to unite against Moscow. Soviet interests dictated that it create a geographic region settled by Christians (Armenia) to establish a counterbalance to historically Muslim lands (Azerbaijan).

Senator McConnell's prediction was correct. The amendment did not move the parties towards peace. Instead, it exacerbated the problem. Armenia regarded the issue as a "zero-sum game": the more difficult the situation in Azerbaijan, the better it was for Armenia. The practical impact of the amendment was to limit the U.S. influence in the region.

In 1992, when Congress approved Section 907, Azerbaijan did not have any official representation in the U.S. In fact, when I began the process of contacting congressmen, some did not even know where Azerbaijan was located on the world map. Some were surprised, not having realized that the Armenian lobby supplied all the information they had been given. Others plainly didn't care, even when we explained it was our considered belief that Russia was supplying the Armenian forces. One congressman quietly listened to us as we described our country and its resources, nodding his head and replying "good" at measured intervals. It was when he nodded and replied "good" to our description of the

one million refugees who were presently suffering, living under deplorable conditions in camps with poor housing, little food, and no education, that we realized we were wasting our time.

Although Section 907 declared Azerbaijan must take "demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh," the facts on the ground indicated that a blockade by Azerbaijan against Armenia was a physical impossibility. Armenia shared only one border with Azerbaijan, and that border represents significantly less than 50% on the Armenian perimeter. Further, supplies could not be transported between the countries, not because of a blockade, but rather because of the destruction of the war. Since the start of the conflict in 1988, all railroads and highways which connected Azerbaijan with Armenia had been destroyed.

We began immediately by imitating the successful Armenian lobby: writing letters, distributing leaflets, and making phone calls to

influential congressmen and women. We also initiated contact with several oil companies in the hopes of interesting them in the growing opportunities in my country. As part of the public relations campaign, I published several articles that appeared in numerous journals detailing the situation and the Azerbaijani position. I became a member of MESA, Middle East Studies Association, a group which describes itself on its website as a "non-political association that fosters the study of the Middle East, promotes high standards of scholarship and teaching, and encourages public understanding of the region and its peoples through programs, publications and services that enhance education, further intellectual exchange, recognize professional distinction, and defend academic freedom." Through MESA I participated in debates and seminars across the country. During my travels, my childhood summer home in Shusha, the hospital outside of Nakhichevanik, and the helicopter ride back to Baku played in my memory. I had to make the Americans understand the devastation of

the war and the responsibilities of both parties—not just Azerbaijanis, but Armenians too. I understood my efforts could affect millions of lives; and closer to home, it could affect my mother, my brother, and my sister. And finally, it could have a significant impact on my daughter's future.

I was determined to learn as much as I could about my new home. I studied the history of each state before I arrived there. One evening after a seminar in Durham, North Carolina, I was invited to a reception at a local restaurant. A country music band from a nearby farm was invited to play. I was sitting next to the dance area tapping my feet and enjoying watching everyone dance. I was not familiar with country music, but I liked it. The band had just started a new set, and everyone jumped up and grabbed a partner. Once again, I was a little out of place in my suit and tie, surrounded by jeans, cowboy boots and hats. I had no idea what they were doing, so I stayed in my seat just enjoying the show. Suddenly, the female lead singer in the band pulled

me onto the dance floor into the center of the circle. I laughed and shook my head and tried to work my way back to my seat, but she would not hear of it. She told me she was going to teach me the two-step, and that it was very simple to learn. The whole group was watching; I had no choice but to follow her. She was right; it was really easy to learn. At the end of the evening, one of band members placed his hat on my head and another took a Polaroid picture of me. I still have that picture; it is one of my favorites.

At one point, I was invited to participate in a debate with the deputy chief of the Armenian Embassy. At the time my title was First Secretary of the Azerbaijani Embassy. Paul Goble, former special assistant for Soviet nationalities in the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, moderated. The debate generated a tremendous amount of interest among diplomats from the Caucasus and Central Asia, congressmen, and Armenian expatriates. I prepared for weeks and welcomed the assistance of Bulut Mehmandarli, one

of the journalists from the Voice of America, Azerbaijani service. The room was full, and I broke into a sweat during the initial introductions. The Armenian representative had been in the U.S. longer than I had, his command of English was superior to mine, and the audience was decidedly in favor of the position he was advocating. But, this was a battle on my terms. My weapons were my words; my armor was the truth. Calmly, carefully, I explained the Azerbaijani point of view to the audience: Section 907 created obstacles to the development of U.S. economic and strategic relations with Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan held a strategic international geographic position located between Russia, Iran, and Turkey. I described the growing involvement of the U.S. and international oil companies in the development of Azerbaijani oil and natural gas reserves. Then the question and answer period began. Now my Armenian counterpart got very nervous. He became impatient with the questioners and angry at my responses, even trying to interrupt me from time to

time. He kept saying that I was not right; what I was saying was not true. He obviously was not in control, a unique experience for him. The more nervous and agitated he became, the calmer I became. It was a battle of wills now. I even smiled at him or the audience from time to time and delighted in his outrage and indignation. At the conclusion of the debate, Mr. Goble complimented me and called me a brave man for speaking to the largely ethnically Armenian audience. But some of the participants were not as generous and started to shout at me and call me a liar. I looked at them, smiled, and said, "Please, I am only one, and you are many. Who is going to defend me?" Somehow that diffused the tension, and if I hadn't managed to persuade them, at least they had begun to listen.

We needed to convince U.S. decision makers that the position it had taken with respect to Azerbaijan not only hurt that country but the interests of America as well. Azerbaijan was strongly pro-Western and was strategically located between Russia

and Iran. Additionally, Azerbaijan was rich with oil, and the government was taking steps to exploit that natural resource. U.S. companies had expressed strong interest in investing in Azerbaijan, but were hindered by the amendment. In that moment, in that debate, I had succeeded in my mission, and it was a sweet victory. Afterwards, Azerbaijani, Turkish, and American participants of the seminar surrounded me. Bulut Mehmandarli, the journalist from the Voice of America, suggested we go to a nearby restaurant to celebrate the victory of the Azerbaijani cause, and I was the subject of several victory toasts for having "defeated the powerful Armenians." I felt like a hero because I dared to stand up to the powerful Armenian lobby with dignity and composure. It was the beginning. Ultimately, enforcement of Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act was suspended, and the face of U.S.-Azerbaijani relations was forever changed.

Privately, life took on a sense of order. Leila stayed home with our daughter and developed a

strong friendship with the wife of our IT specialist. We became friendly with many of the staff members of the congressmen we were lobbying. I took the opportunity to develop professionally and enrolled in classes at the World Politics Institute. One of my professors was Herbert Romerstein, former head of the Office to Counter Soviet Disinformation and professional staff member for the United States House of Representatives, who became and has remained my closest friend. We joined our friends Patricia and Lloyd Keagan eating and dancing at various restaurants and clubs. Patricia was the editor-in-chief of the *Washington International Magazine*. Much of the material she published contained information about the activities of the foreign embassies in Washington and highlighted various cultures and customs. She frequently invited cultural attachés from the embassies of the several former Soviet republics, such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, to her home. At our gatherings mainly we exchanged information about the cultures and customs of our

countries, and brought samplings of native dishes. Patricia used the events as a social as well as informational source, and much of the material she published was garnered from these gatherings. We were all grateful to her, because all of the embassies represented newly independent states, and ordinary Americans still knew little about our countries and their cultures. I was not specifically a cultural attaché at the time, but because our staff was very limited in number, the ambassador asked me to take on those duties. I didn't mind; it didn't take much time and made life more interesting. Later, I became the de facto president of our group, and took on the responsibility for organizing the cultural activities. At the request of the Japanese Embassy, I organized a photo exhibit of the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict, and generally did anything I could to educate my colleagues and the general public about my country.

Several of the embassy staff were relieved of their positions once the Popular Front was ousted. I was relatively apolitical, so I was safe, but it was a sad

realization that so little had changed while so much was different. I began to wonder then if perhaps my future lay in the United States and not in Azerbaijan.

The Popular Front Party retained control of the Azerbaijani government for barely a year. In 1993, Heydar Aliyev, former leader of the Azerbaijani branch of the KGB and leader of the country during Soviet occupation, replaced the leader of the Popular Front Party and regained his leadership position in Azerbaijan. Much criticism can be leveled at Mr. Aliyev, particularly with regard to his relationship with the Soviet Central government, but in my opinion he was the right leader for the time. Even today a truly democratic Azerbaijan does not exist, but in 1993 the level of graft and corruption was stifling. There could be no movement forward, no economic development if something was not done to curb it. Aliyev had a successful history of fighting corruption as First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijani Communist Party under Leonid Brezhnev, and he continued that success as president of the newly

independent country. He deserves the majority of credit for developing the oil and gas industries in Azerbaijan and stimulating the growth of the economy there. But even so Azerbaijan suffocated under the yoke of nepotism and political payola.

In 1994, trying to further develop my professional skills, I attended the Paul Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at the Johns Hopkins University in Washington DC. It was a mid-career program which gave me the opportunity to work during the day and attend classes in the evening. After my Moscow education, it was another great educational opportunity. The educational systems in the Soviet Union and the United States are actually difficult to compare. In the U.S., after high school, students can choose to continue their education in college and, after taking the required amount of credits, receive their undergraduate degrees. They can then continue their education thereafter and obtain graduate or professional degrees. The system was quite different in Moscow. In the former Soviet

Union, a student first had to finish primary school, which continued until the 10th grade. If the student decided to continue his or her education, s/ he would move up to a university or institute for the purpose of pursuing a specific specialty. There was no concept of obtaining credits toward a degree. You simply received a grade ranging from two to five, five being the highest and two being the lowest passing grade. There was also a system called *zachet* in Russian, which translates as non-grade courses. After that, if you wanted to continue your education, you went to *aspirantura*, probably equivalent to a graduate degree program in the U.S. While writing your dissertation, you worked with a scientific consultant, or *rukovoditel*, meaning leader or guide in Russian. After defending your dissertation on that topic, you were awarded a degree called *candidat nauk*, or candidate of sciences. Finally, if you wanted to receive a higher degree, you had to write another dissertation expanding upon your previous topic and defend that dissertation as well. Upon completion of the process, you would

receive a *Doctor Nauk*, degree of Doctor of Sciences. In Moscow you were required to take a lot of ideologically driven humanitarian and social sciences, and subjects such as the history of Marxism and Leninism, which were not very helpful. However, some disciplines, such as foreign languages, were very well taught. At Johns Hopkins I learned to study more independently and be more flexible in my course choices. At the University in Moscow there was more control exercised by the administrators and a study program that left little room for exploration of topics outside your major. I took classes in the politics of foreign aid and micro and macro economics. I would later find that experience extremely useful.

The simple fact that the students were older was a complete change from my previous educational experiences. I liked the way the classes were designed; our professors were not only academics but practitioners as well. They worked in the State Department, Pentagon, CIA, and other government

and non-governmental agencies, which gave them an opportunity to share with us their rich academic and practical experiences. One thing I simply could not get used to was that people actually brought food and drink to class. We never could do that in Moscow; we would be punished by the teacher and expelled from the class. I remember one rather large woman who sat in the first row next to the professor's podium. Every class she would pull out a big sandwich from her backpack and eat it. I would look at her with horror. She was very loud, and frankly I found it quite disturbing. At first, I expected the professor to either ask her to leave or put away the food, but he paid her no attention at all. Ironically, I learned that the woman did not pass the exams, perhaps because she was concentrating on her meal rather than the class material.

As the end of my two-year commitment to the embassy approached, I asked the ambassador for an extension of time so that I could finish my coursework. His response: a firm "No." To allow me

to stay would be to admit to a loss of control over my destiny. It was yet another moment of my awakening. Many things had changed, but not enough. I talked to Leila, and we decided to try and stay in the U.S.

I went to the World Bank and other places, trying to get a sense about a possible job situation. I talked to my contacts in the oil companies. We even looked around for an apartment to rent. We would be leaving within weeks, and I couldn't secure anything. Would I be required to become a U.S. citizen? It was a pleasant thought, but until that moment, I had never really considered the possibility. I wasn't sure how much it would cost, and without an assured job, I could not afford the necessary fees. I had a family to consider, and I was not willing to take a gamble. So, we returned home, back to Azerbaijan. Reluctantly, we began to pack our things. In 1995, after working in the embassy in Washington, DC for two and half years, we returned to Baku, Azerbaijan. I resumed my work in the Ministry and maintained my title as First Secretary. For the first time since independence, I

found myself without hope. The barely concealed system of bribery and graft still infected the government, and the bureaucracy still held the citizens in a stranglehold. The corruption inherent in the communist system would take decades to dissipate, if it were even possible. I was always in a bad mood; from the very beginning, I tried to do my best for my country. I had very sincere motives and intentions; so when I realized that nobody really cared, it left only emptiness in my heart. My energy was spent, and my hope had vanished. I became certain I wanted to leave and pursue my future in the United States, but I wasn't sure how to accomplish that. I needed a plan…actually, I needed a job.

I began to look around for opportunities. I approached the head of the U.N. mission in Azerbaijan. He met and talked to me several times, and expressed a very strong interest in my skills. He verbally offered me the position of program officer or something to that effect. I would be involved with humanitarian issues in Azerbaijan on behalf of the

U.N. At that time Azerbaijan had a lot of pressing humanitarian problems because of the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict. There were about one million refugees and internally displaced people. As a part of my job, I would keep in touch with Azerbaijani government officials and representatives of non-governmental organizations; generally to act as a liaison between the Azerbaijani representatives and the U.N. officials. The proposed salary was about $600/ month, which was good money for Azerbaijan at the time. He even said that I could skip a few ranks and begin above an entry level position. The problem was, the position required I stay in Azerbaijan; taking that job meant I was choosing to stay. I felt as I had many years before in Baku working in the dental clinic; I did not have enough air to breath. I was no longer single; I couldn't take the chances I took so many years ago. I was paralyzed. I simply didn't know what to do. What's more, Leila was in the hospital. Although it was minor surgery, I was concerned

about her and entered my apartment in a fog of depression.

I am a very lucky person. I have always believed that. I understand I have put myself in positions to take advantage of opportunities, but nonetheless, when all hope seems lost, opportunities seem to miraculously present themselves. One day I was coming back from a meeting with the head of the U.N. mission, which was located on the hill not far from the office of the President of Azerbaijan, passing a building I had passed hundreds of times before, and I noticed in a very remote fenced area a sign which read: "The American University in Baku." It drew my attention, and I decided to go inside and ask about it. I entered the yard and walked toward the building, which I now noticed housed several international organizations, including the Red Cross. I opened the door with the sign "American University in Baku," and found myself at the beginning of a long corridor. I followed the corridor and entered the first door. I opened the door and was greeted by Margarita

Ashrafovna, secretary to the president of the university. I told her I was interested in learning more about the university. She replied that the president was not in the office, but that I should return the following day for an appointment, which she then scheduled. The next day I came back and met Mr. Nadir Ali Nasibov, president of the university. That day promised to be an interesting turn in my life.

Mr. Nasibov's office was large and very comfortable. Although he was graying at the temples, he was younger than I was. We had a long and interesting conversation. I learned that the American University in Baku was the most recent of fifty-one such universities to be established around the globe. This university was created only months before as a collaborative effort of the Azerbaijan-America Society and the Texas International Education Consortium (TIEC). TIEC was a private, nonprofit association of thirty-two public universities in Texas which worked to develop international programs on behalf of its member universities. Specifically, the consortium was

developing a comprehensive private education system in Azerbaijan based upon American educational theory and tradition. I also learned that President Aliyev personally supported the initiative. He apparently agreed with the founders that this enterprise would strengthen the developing relationship between Azerbaijan and the United States. In fact, Mr. Nasibov held a government title under the office of President Aliyev and served as the editor-in-chief of one of the government supported magazines. Clearly, the university needed someone with my abilities, someone who could speak Azeri and English fluently and understand the nuances of both cultures. Fortunately for me, I was among the very few in Azerbaijan who possessed those skills at that time.

It was apparent during the course of our conversation that the president was interested in attracting me to the initiative. He told me they needed people like me to develop the initiative and make it successful. They had already signed a contract with

one of the educational associations in Texas for academic exchanges and development of curriculums. Still, he questioned me about my family and political connections. He later indicated to me he was considering me for one of two positions: dean or vice president. Although he could offer me the position of dean without approval from the government, if I were to choose vice president, he would need such approval. Clearly, it would be easier to gain the approval if he could make some strategic phone calls. Of course, I could offer him no help. Once again, I did not have a relationship with anyone in power. He did not expressly offer me either position that day, but he sent me home to think about which one I might be interested in.

I left the building and went straight to the hospital to see Leila. I told her about the two options that appeared to be before us: A UN position in Azerbaijan or a university position. She was very pale and weak; she took my hand but did not offer her opinion. Still it seemed clear from our conversation

that she was more sympathetic to the option of the university and the position of the vice president. Those were exactly my thoughts.

The next day I called Mr. Nasibov and told him my choice. He was clearly pleased with my decision and said that he would arrange a meeting with representatives of President Aliyev's office. Several days later, Mr. Nasibov and I had a meeting with Ramiz Mehdiyev, President Aliyev's chief of staff. Mr. Mehdiyev was a small man, but I was not deceived by his height. His stature in the government was large; he had been in politics all of his life, including during the Soviet regime. He was someone who demanded deference and respect. He was believed to be the second most powerful person in the country after the president himself. Many people thought that he was effectively running the country, especially after the death of President Heydar Aliyev, when his son Ilham Aliyev became the president. Mr. Mehdiyev was very friendly. He told me he had heard good things about me. I knew he had spoken with

Mr. Nasibov, but I wondered what other sources of information he had tapped. His questions were insightful, if not a bit personal; he was clearly trying to size me up. He asked about my background and my work in the Azerbaijani embassy in the U.S. as well as my previous experience in Moscow in Soviet times. I realized he was pleased with my accomplishments and relaxed a bit.

Obviously the meeting went well, because two days later I was offered a job as vice president of the university. It would be my responsibility to encourage and develop relations between the university and its U.S. partners, and to further expand those relationships to include other universities, research centers, and educational institutions. I accepted the job, and during my tenure, in addition to the original thirty-two universities that were members of the consortium, we established contacts with the American University in Washington, DC, the University of Maryland, and George Washington University, among others. Our American partners

were tasked with designing educational techniques and programs; the Azeris were tasked with administrative duties. The curriculum was designed to mimic the American educational system in every way, even down to the furniture in the classrooms and administrative offices.

I informed the UN mission about my decision, and then it was time to resign from the Foreign Ministry. I arranged a meeting with the then foreign minister, Hasan Hasanov. He did not express surprise, but perhaps confusion. My job at the Foreign Ministry was quite a coveted position, particularly as the country continued to open embassies across the globe. He shook my hand and told me everybody needed to go where they felt it was better to be, and he wished me the best. I finished my final assignment, which was to write a brochure for the Ministry about the university, cleaned out my office, and embarked once again on a new career.

Finally, several months into my employment at the university, the president called me and said that

the time had come to travel to the U.S. It was to be a short trip without my family for the purpose of meeting with our U.S. partners in Texas to inform them about the university and its goals, and if necessary to talk more specifically about the future directions of the university. I was very excited. The president's wife and her brother were traveling with me. In the U.S. our partner, Texas International Education Consortium, arranged a number of meetings with its member universities. We traveled to Austin, Houston, Nacogdoches, and other cities and towns to meet our U.S. colleagues. We discussed the specifics regarding what was needed for our existing programs, and what we needed to do to expand them and introduce new programs. We were already planning to expand the program to include K through 12. It was a very ambitious plan, and we were exploring those opportunities with the consortium.

It was an exciting time for me. I believed in what I was doing and again felt I was part of a program that would provide great benefits to the

people of Azerbaijan. My presentations reflected my interest, and I developed a rapport with my audience; some even asked me to return to discuss the issues I addressed in my doctoral dissertation. One Texan asked me if I was married. When I answered "yes," he expressed regret, saying I already had the energy and down-home style, all I needed was a Texas bride.

After a long day of meetings during another visit to Texas, the president of the consortium, Dr. Franklin, invited us to join him at his country club for dinner. It was located about fifteen miles outside downtown Austin. We drove up a long driveway to a large, single-story building and filed out of the car. I was in cowboy country. Everyone was once again wearing jeans and cowboy hats. Even Dr. Franklin was dressed in cowboy boots, hat, and shirt. His wife Sonya also wore a jean skirt and a hat. And of course, once again, I was in my suit and tie. No matter, this time I knew how to dance the two-step. We all sat at table next to the dance floor. Dr. Franklin was dancing with his wife. I was thinking it would be fun

to dance with Leila, but I was sure she wouldn't mind if I asked one of the young girls in attendance to join me. I walked up to one of the women who had greeted me when we entered and asked her to dance with me. My accent is not strong, but I clearly didn't sound like, or frankly look like, a local. She turned to her boyfriend and asked him if it was okay with him; he nodded and we started to dance. She turned out to be a very good dancer, and we became the center of attention. The look on my new friends' faces was priceless. I think it is safe to say they had never seen an Azerbaijani dance an American iconic cowboy dance. It was a great evening, and we laughed all the way to the hotel.

When the fun was over, I sat at my desk, wrote a detailed report for Mr. Nasibov about our experience, and set forth my recommendations regarding the further development of the university. There was agreement initially. The educational programs should focus on business administration and computer sciences, but we recognized the need to

expand beyond a university education to primary school in order to properly convert the system from a Soviet model to an American model. It was our goal to prepare a new generation of young Azerbaijanis, who could easily adapt to the new capitalist, independent Azerbaijan and profitably function in the world market economy.

Some months later I returned to the U.S. My task was to set up appropriate representation of the university in the States. If all went well, I would return to the U.S. with my family permanently. All seemed to be going along according to plan. I arrived in Washington, DC in August, 1996, and stayed for about a month. During that time, I stayed at my friend's home, who was away on vacation with his family. I met with representatives of academic and political circles. I had regular meetings with members of Congress and their staffs, educating them about the university. I also arranged meetings with representatives of various foundations, seeking potential donors and sponsors of the university. I

managed to arrange to have a number of articles published about the project in a wide range of magazines and newspapers, including *The Chronide of Higher Education*, *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Times*, and *Washington International*, among others. Finally, every evening I drafted long reports about my activities during the day to Mr. Nasibov. When I returned to Baku at the end of August, I was met enthusiastically by the leadership of the university and in the office of the president of the country. Everybody considered the trip a success, and my family was soon going to be on its way back to the United States of America.

Homeland

In October 1996, about a year after we had left, Leila and I returned to the United States—to stay. It was actually a very difficult move. Moving to and from the United States the last time had been arranged by the embassy. This time, we were on our own.

We rented a beautiful apartment overlooking a wooded area near the Vann Ness metro station in Maryland. We did not have a car at the time, so living near a metro station was essential, and we were able to travel to the grocery store, my daughter's school, etc. very easily. Our apartment was on the second floor. It had only one bedroom, and that room did double duty as my office. Still, we considered ourselves lucky. We were able to firmly stand on our own feet, live comfortably, and enjoy our lives.

Upon arrival, once again our luggage was taken by a stranger, but this time it was for real. A woman approached my wife, who was busy watching our now six-year-old daughter, who was energetically

running around the baggage claim after a long time being confined in an airplane. Apparently, the woman's purpose was to distract my wife so that her accomplice could steal our suitcase. It contained documents (which were not replaceable) and money (which was). It was an ugly new beginning, but it didn't dampen our joy at our once again new future.

I began work again in the hopes of securing a bright future for Azerbaijan. Essentially, I was a lobbyist on behalf of the American University in Baku and the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan. It was my responsibility to meet with U.S. congressmen from appropriate committees to raise awareness about the university and hopefully garner some governmental funding similar to that which was being given to the American University in Beirut. But the American University in Beirut was the oldest American university abroad, with a long presence and experienced lobbying. The American University in Baku had just been created and needed a lot of networking, which was exactly what I was actively

doing at the time. It was a very difficult and challenging job. My greatest achievements were in bringing together different people and creating favorable conditions for cooperative projects benefiting the academy and the university. We achieved measurable success. Most members of Congress now knew where Azerbaijan was located on the world map, knew about its pro-Western orientation, and knew about its desire to upgrade its educational system using the American system as its model. The public was being informed about our presence as well; articles about the university and its goals were published in *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Times*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Washington International*, and others. Of course, the dispute with the Armenians even reared its head in this forum. When an article appeared in *The Washington Post* about the American University in Baku, the Armenians sent out a press release and purchased an ad comparing the American University in Armenia to our university.

Later in the year, I returned to Azerbaijan with a group of congressmen. Among them were former congressmen Bill Brewster, Greg Laughlin, and Jim Japman, U.S. businessmen, representatives of academia, including the former president of one of the Texas universities, members of the Texas Education Consortium, and former politicians. They were met by the President of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, Prime Minister Arthur Rasizadeh, Foreign Minister Hasan Hasanov, and other high-ranking Azerbaijani officials and Azerbaijani business leaders. The U.S. ambassador to Azerbaijan also participated. I moderated the conference in three languages: Azerbaijani, Russian, and English. We were able to raise funds for the university, and perhaps even more important, gave our mission exposure, which we believed would ultimately benefit all citizens of the country. The role of the university as an effective tool to help Azerbaijan integrate into the world market economy was emphasized. The participating congressmen promised to renew efforts to repeal

Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act. It appeared my diplomatic credentials were not going to waste. At the close of the conference, we went to the beautiful mountainous area called Kuba, located not far from the capital Baku. Again the conferees were met by high-ranking officials of the region, another indication of government support for the venture, and each of the members of the delegation was presented a small handmade carpet with an image of the region.

In February 1997, we founded the Azerbaijani-American Educational, Cultural, and Economic Center in Washington, DC. It was a non-profit organization incorporated under the laws of the United States. I was elected as the president of the center, which was created for the purpose of assisting the American University in Baku with development and funding. The center's board members consisted of distinguished former senators, congressmen, academics, and politicians, the president of the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan, and prominent U.S. businessmen. Our partners in Azerbaijan were

the American University in Baku and the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan. We needed a permanent physical presence to assist the educational projects of the American University in Baku and the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan. Additionally, the existence of a U.S. corporation with distinguished board members raised the prestige of the educational, cultural and business projects, which we were trying to develop with the university in particular and with Azerbaijan as a whole. The contacts and experiences of the board members were invaluable. For example, Duncan Gray, partner at Baker & McKenzie, a prestigious international law firm, served as coordinator of business programs and assisted the university in its different legal issues and agreements. My former professor and friend, Herbert Romerstein, was also on the board. Professor Don Wallace, the chairman of the International Law Institute, donated space for the Azerbaijani-American Educational, Cultural, and Economic Center in his institute in a prestigious part of Washington, DC. We met there regularly to

coordinate the activities of the center. I often took minutes of the meetings. The center served as a convenient tool to coordinate our activities with our U.S. partners, especially for educational projects. The center also gave us an opportunity to expand beyond the Texas universities and cooperate with other U.S. universities, such as the American University in Washington, DC and Maryland University. As part of those efforts, we sponsored two Azerbaijani students to come to the U.S and study at the American University in Washington, DC.

We began hiring U.S. faculty and sending them to teach at the American University in Baku at all grade levels, from K through 12, as well as university professors. By that time, the university had moved to a wonderful new building in Baku, which was equipped in accordance with the U.S. educational system. We placed ads in various newspapers throughout the United States seeking qualified teachers to fill positions in all grades at the University. After receiving resumes of the applicants, we began

the process of selection. It began with phone interviews, then personal meetings when necessary. We sought educated applicants who possessed cultural awareness and sensitivity. We arranged for air transportation to Baku and provided the educators with apartments, which we rented from the local residents. For the most part, the program was successful, except for one or two incidents when the teachers for different reasons could not adapt to the new conditions in Baku.

Other high profile meetings followed in Baku. The discussions always included debates regarding strategies to overcome the barriers erected by Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act. The amendment was creating insurmountable difficulties, was severely hampering the development of the university, and more importantly hampered the ability of Azerbaijan to operate as an effective member of the world community. Of personal importance to me, Mr. Duncan Gray, Jr., senior partner at Baker and McKenzie Law Firm and board member of our

center, approached me and asked me to serve as a consultant to his law firm and the business interests of its clients in Azerbaijan.

Everything was going well at the American University in Baku until the relationship between the chief of staff of the President's Office and the president of the university deteriorated, which ultimately led to the closure of the university. Unfortunately, the university was incorporated as an Azerbaijani legal entity, and as such, was subject to the political intrigue that plagued the government. All those who knew better believed the university should have been incorporated in the U.S. and not Azerbaijan. The former U.S. representative made it clear he felt even the use of the word "American" in the title was improper, because it was not an American entity; it was an Azerbaijani entity. In contrast, the Azerbaijani-American Educational, Cultural, and Economic Center that was founded to support the university was incorporated in the United States. Although it too disbanded after the university

closed, it was never subject to any of the political shenanigans that occurred in Azerbaijan. Once again, the problem seemed to stem from the corruption and greed inherent in a society that operates pursuant to unwritten rules of family relationship, political ties, and bribery. Once one of the university's government benefactors fell out of favor, so did its government support and protection. It ultimately led to the destruction and dismantling of the university. Our success at the university was measured by the few students who benefited from the education we had provided them. They had survived a rigorous curriculum, which required proficiency in English. In fact, when it closed, only six of the original fifty students had satisfied all of the graduation requirements. Overseas study was costly and bureaucratically challenging. Our students received all the benefits of an American diploma without ever leaving the country. They were fluent in English, were independent thinkers, and had developed a wider vision of life and of the world.

It was a very sad time for me, and the last straw. Fortunately, I saw the end before it arrived and was able to secure employment. My relationship with Mr. Gray took on added importance for me. I had already begun employment with his firm as a consultant, and with the closure of the university, my responsibilities to his firm increased.

As an international consultant to Baker and McKenzie and later King and Spalding when Mr. Gray became associated with that firm, I made regular trips to Azerbaijan, approximately once every two months, back and forth through Frankfurt, Germany, Mr. Gray's preferred route of travel. Our goal was to pave the way for a legal basis for privatization of the Azerbaijani economy, and we were successful in drafting a master agreement that outlined responsibilities and set goals for that process. I participated in all the negotiations and preparations of the contracts and agreements. My role once again was to serve as a bridge between the two cultures. I helped solve different cultural and linguistic issues

when they arose in the course of our meetings, and sometimes I simply translated or interpreted if it was necessary or the meeting was important enough.

Duncan Gray Jr. was a good businessman and a good friend. We can attest to many successful ventures; however, the lack of transparency in the government and business and the still pervading cancer of graft, bribes, and corruption frustrated us both. The corruption was at every level of society; it seemed no one was above reproach. Everybody paid bribes to everybody else: patients paid bribes to doctors and nurses; nurses and doctors paid bribes to the chief doctors at the hospitals; applicants paid bribes to institutes and universities for admittance; students paid bribes to professors for better grades. It was never-ending. This time, I knew it wasn't only a problem of individuals, but of the entire social network. It resulted from the ugly heritage of the former USSR as well as Azerbaijan's own old national problems. I now clearly understood the difference between the two cultures: in the U.S. everybody was a

part of a fully diversified economy. In contrast, the Azerbaijani economy relied singularly on the development of the oil and gas reserves of the country. The revenues from foreign investments in those promising areas were not reaching the ordinary people. There was a huge gap between the incredibly wealthy and the incredibly poor. The small middle class, comprised mainly of young English speaking Azeris who were employed by the foreign companies operating in Azerbaijan, lived hand to mouth, able to afford basic necessities of life, but little else. The increasing refugee problem caused by the still unresolved conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region only exacerbated the problem. The problems of graft and corruption were internal affairs of the country, and foreign investors took little interest in it, but in my opinion, the problems were ultimately going to hamper normal development of the Azerbaijani economy as well as the activities of the foreign companies and investors.

I am not naïve. I know graft and corruption exist in all societies, but in the West and in the United States, it is not the glue that holds the economy together. The middle class in the United States can live comfortably on their salaries. In Azerbaijan, middle class salaries frequently are not high enough to cover regular living expenses, so people are compelled to look for other indirect means to earn money. I was even asked to pay to secure a job for my brother, an accomplished physicist. During one of my trips back to Azerbaijan, I was introduced to someone who worked in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. He had a high level position there, and my impression was that he was a very intelligent person. When I told the ministry employee about my brother, he expressed his anger that such talented national cadres could not get good jobs. He was full of patriotism in his rhetoric, but once he had made his speech, it was clear his interest was in me, not my brother, and the wealth he believed I could share with him, since I lived and worked in the U.S.

The average citizen of Azerbaijan still had very limited knowledge about the West, Western culture, and Western economic values. Many still believed that to be an American meant to be a millionaire, or at least to have great wealth. As a result, particularly among the youth, there was tremendous desire to leave Azerbaijan and head west. But ordinary middle and lower class Azeris were frustrated by their lack of funds to support a move and by the increasing difficulties in obtaining a visa. Only the well educated and wealthy could leave, and they did. It was a terrible drain on the society and the economy. I was embarrassed for my country, and saddened by the fact that it was failing to make good use of opportunity.

During my last visit to Azerbaijan, I experienced a final insult. I left my country and closed the door, knowing the next time I would return would be as an American. One evening after Mr. Gray and I left a restaurant with a group of our American business partners in the center of Baku, a

young girl approached me and offered herself for money. She was probably fifteen or sixteen years old; I saw my young daughter in her eyes. I was so angry at the whole situation with my country that my hands were shaking. I asked her some questions, and she told me that she was a refugee from the occupied Kalbajar region of Azerbaijan. She told me her father died two years ago, and her mother was very sick. She needed money to feed her mother and herself. It was probably a lie, but I chose to believe it. I took her to a McDonalds restaurant, bought some food for her and her mother, and gave her some extra money. I asked her not to offer herself to anybody anymore. Of course, I had little hope for it; I had little hope for Azerbaijan. My efforts to help Azerbaijan were premature. The country and its people needed time to grow into democracy and a free market economy. I had outgrown my home. I needed to move.

* * *

My contract with King and Spalding expired. We had completed our work. I needed a more stable

job situation if I was going to seek U.S. citizenship. Because of my scholarly activities, I received quick approval for my green card. It would be five more years until I could become a U.S. citizen, and I was looking forward to it. I had begun to work at PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP as a full-time employee. The next logical step in the continuation of my plan was to teach language. I taught for some time at the Berlitz Language Center in Washington, DC as an instructor in Russian, Modern Standard Arabic, Turkish, and Azeri language and culture. I was gradually distancing myself from Azerbaijani issues and becoming more American. My family was too. It took me decades of searching, living, and working in different countries and cultures to finally find my place; where I was comfortable living with my family and raising my daughter. But I also realized that the very hardships and difficulties of my life had given me an opportunity to appreciate where I lived now. My daughter would never have that opportunity. And maybe that is for the better. My wife and I appreciate

the positive features of American society, with its democracy and freedom; I think we have managed to get those positives across to our daughter while also protecting her from the negative features which the so called neo-liberalism brings with it: pornography, drugs, etc. I think we have managed to preserve and balance the positives of the American culture and the positives of the Azerbaijani culture, and our daughter's behavior and values reflect that.

Sometimes I thought about the fact that I had not become an international journalist; but even though I had not become one professionally, I had written and published in dozens of journals so I could deliver my positions and views. And my life was very interesting; I was happy. I did not regret any choices I had made.

We still lived in the Vann Ness area, and although we loved the apartment and its convenience, it was a noisy place. Every morning the trash truck awakened us. We had become used to the comforts of America, and now it was time to realize one part of

the American dream and buy a house. It was love at first sight. After looking for several months in both Maryland and Virginia, we walked into a house in Rockville, Maryland and knew we had found our home. It has a lot of natural light inside, three levels, and a basement with an extra bedroom and family room. The neighborhood is quiet, with a park and soccer field across the street. The Montgomery County school system was reportedly one of the best in the entire nation. We made our offer and moved in one month later.

* * *

The unseen hand that seems to have guided my life provided me the opportunity to learn Arabic, Turkish, and English in addition to my native tongues of Russian and Azeri. Fate, luck, and sheer providence brought me to Washington, DC, where I was working on the day Flight 77 slammed into the Pentagon. I was working at PricewaterhouseCoopers on September 11, 2001. It was certainly a turning

point for this country. And it was yet another turning point for me.

Shortly after the attacks, I realized that interest in Arabic language and culture was increasing. At the language centers where I taught, I saw an increase in the number of students from the FBI, CIA, the World Bank, and other agencies and organizations. One day I was told that the American University in Washington, DC was looking for Arabic teachers for its newly created program. I sent my application and was invited for an interview. I passed the interview and a language test. Interestingly, the director of the resource center was ethnically Armenian and originally from the Middle East. We became good friends. In the U.S. it seemed our ethnicities were not a barrier to friendship. I was offered a job as an adjunct professor of Modern Standard Arabic and culture. My students were young people and very eager to learn Arabic. I had a wonderful experience working with them. Their enthusiasm gave me even more energy to teach them.

In a short period of time they were able to write a simple essay in Arabic and maintain simple conversations. Then one day I was invited to the Foreign Service Institute to substitute for a teacher of Azerbaijani language. I have never been one to pass up an opportunity. I was constantly networking and sending out my resumes at that time, trying to improve my job situation. Of course, I accepted the offer and after class introduced myself to the supervisor of the Azerbaijani section, Judith Tomas. My circle of acquaintances and friends was beginning to rival the diversity of the United Nations. Judith is originally from Israel. From time to time I was invited to teach Azeri at the institute. I networked some more, and not much time passed before I was invited by my newest friend, Emily Urevich, to teach in the Russian section. Emily, who is of Jewish origin from the former USSR, and Judith became, and have remained, close friends of mine.

Not long after I started to teach at the Foreign Service Institute's Russian section, Emily

suggested to me that I become full-time instructor there. She correctly pointed out it was really a much more rewarding financial situation than working part-time at both the Foreign Language Institute and the American University. I enjoyed my work at the American University and enjoyed my colleagues, so I was reluctant to leave. I went out of my way to find a replacement, so that my students' education would be uninterrupted, and I changed employment once again.

Soldier of Languages

My wife, my daughter, and I finalized our applications for citizenship in 2004. The Pentagon had been repaired; plans were being made to rebuild the World Trade Center and to construct a memorial in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Although President Bush had declared "mission accomplished" in Iraq, and it appeared that the initial mission of dethroning Saddam Hussein had been accomplished, the remainder of the mission of creating a secure and stable Iraq was morphing into a much more difficult assignment. There was talk of a growing need for near native speakers of Arabic, but I wasn't looking to change jobs again. The last thing I was expecting was a call from a job recruiter. Nonetheless, I answered the phone, and when asked if I might be interested in working in the Iraqi theater as a linguist-interpreter for Titan National Security Solutions Corp., I inexplicably said yes. The call only lasted ten to fifteen minutes. The recruiter was honest; it would be my responsibility to assist in providing continuous 24/ 7

support to the coalition forces. As such, I would often be required to work in excess of sixty hours per week, which included twelve-hour shifts under war-time conditions. She explained to me that I was of particular interest to Titan because of my experience and knowledge of the culture. They had already learned that my Ph.D. dissertation was on U.S. Policy in the Middle East. They expected I would be able to conduct myself in accordance with local customs and deal unobtrusively with the local population.

Titan had for many years maintained a small translating division, but the events of September 11, 2001 convinced management to increase that division. By 2003 Titan's linguist division accounted for approximately 7% of its total revenue, in excess of $112 million.

I admit to being easily bored, but I am not by any means a thrill seeker. I had been to a war zone before. It is ugly. It is loud. It is frightening. I didn't wish to return. If you would have presented me with the hypothetical, I would have told you that I would

have politely said “no thank you” and continued on with my nice, safe, interesting enough teaching job. My wife certainly wished I had done that, but I didn’t, and the interview process began.

It did cross my mind that working as a U.S. Defense contractor would put my application for citizenship on the fast track, and I saw nothing wrong with that. Still, I wanted to enjoy it while I was alive. Posthumous citizenship might help my family, but it would do me little personal good. The interview process took about three months, and of the members of my recruitment class only 10-15% ultimately passed through all the stages and were offered the job.

The medical checkup was extensive. In addition to the usual blood and heart tests, I had to submit to very sensitive hearing tests. I guess the thought was, if I was going to translate, I needed to hear what the parties were saying. In any event, I passed. The tests were conducted at an ordinary looking two-story facility in Maryland or Virginia

somewhere. I was transported there by bus with a number of other applicants. All of the others were also seeking positions as interpreters. There was one woman, whom I am sure was hired for a Russian-interpreter position, or if she wasn't, she should have been. She was American, blonde, blue-eyed, very pretty, and very much in demand by the younger men in the room. They were flirting with her mercilessly. During a discussion with one of her suitors, I heard her mention that she spoke fluent Russian. I decided to test her myself and said a few words to her in my second tongue. I have never in my life met anyone who was not a native speaker of a language speak so well. She was indeed fluent and had no trace of any kind of accent other than native Russian. Much to the chagrin of the younger, unattached men in the room, we spent the entire waiting period deep in conversation.

The first medical checkup was followed by a second check and a series of immunizations. This was the first time I started to have second thoughts. I felt

like a pincushion. As to the security check, well I like spy novels as much as the next guy, so when it came time for the interview, I had visions of men in gray suits with skinny lapels and the narrow black silk neckties popular in the 60s, wearing dark sunglasses. Indeed, the interview was conducted by three men, but they weren't dressed in suits. They weren't even dressed in gray, and none of them wore a tie. Once again, I was the only one in the group dressed in formal business attire. Only one fellow wore glasses; they were suspiciously tinted though. The men were dressed in casual button down shirts and well ironed khaki or brown slacks. There was a large wooden desk in the room, and they sat behind it. I sat in front of the desk, but there was no single light swinging from the ceiling. The room was comfortable, not airless. It was, in a word, non-threatening. The men rose from their chairs as I entered, and they each shook my hand. The interview lasted about an hour, and they asked me what you would expect to be asked if you were applying for a job that required a security

clearance. But it wasn't a tense situation; it was actually quite friendly. They asked me if I had ever used drugs, about my past, knowing the dangers, why I was considering this position, and about any outstanding debts I might have. The truth is I have never even had a traffic ticket.

The only reservations I had were for my wife and daughter. My daughter was only thirteen at the time, entering into a time of great tumult in her own life, and I wanted to be part of it and share the obvious oncoming rollercoaster with her. She is an American teen with all the images that brings to mind, and I wanted to be part of the story she would be writing. Leila was frightened and had visions of military personnel knocking on our door bringing her news of my death. In an effort to keep our daughter unaware, I found her one afternoon sobbing in our closet. We talked, and I explained to her my depth of feeling for the place we now called home, how I felt a deep sense of gratitude for the opportunities the United States gave to its citizens. I recalled with her

the 1990 invasion of Baku by Soviet forces to put down a rebellion based only on people's desire to choose their own destiny, to speak their mind, to travel as they wish within and outside of the country. We talked about Shahidlar Hiyabani, the cemetery in Baku where the martyrs of that rebellion were buried. There are no such cemeteries in the United States. There are cemeteries of heroes not martyrs.

It happened in January 1990. I was working in Moscow for the USSR Red Cross. After weeks of demonstrations, Azerbaijanis peacefully gathered in Baku to demand sovereignty and an end to the Communist regime. In response the Kremlin declared a state of emergency and sent tanks into the city. The attacks were ruthless; anyone caught between the crosshairs of the Soviet military machine was murdered. Official estimates are that 130 people died, and more than 700 were injured. Unofficial estimates are much higher. Gorbachev has since acknowledged that his actions then were a mistake, but the incident remains burned into the collective memories of

Azerbaijanis. Even today the invasion is commemorated every year on January 20, when millions of people gather at the Alley of Martyrs in Baku, a hilltop park where the victims of Black January are buried. Although my wife and I were in Moscow, we watched televised reports of the invasion; however, the state-run news organizations presented an antiseptic version of the truth. The purpose of the broadcast was to parade the strength of the military; they failed to reveal the carnage. We later learned from our families of the death and destruction.

America has certainly wrestled with issues of civil rights and racism, but they were a result of internal disputes and the definition of freedom that had been written into the Constitution. The openness with which Americans reprimand themselves is sometimes ridiculed outside its borders, but for those of us who grew up in societies where you dared not, it is nothing short of stunning. Given the opportunity, how could I not choose to do what I could to defend

this part of the American dream against those who sought to destroy it. Perhaps I could even have a hand in winning the hearts and minds of Iraqis. After all, I understood the repression under which they had lived and the possibilities that lay before them. I could speak to them in their tongue. This time I wanted to take a more active role. My efforts to support freedom and democracy are singular and personal, and I truly believe I have done so in my own way, person by person. I know it sounds puerile, and I knew I would not be able to turn the tide and effect major change. But you never know whom you might meet and what you can do unless you actually make the attempt. I could not miss this opportunity. Leila reluctantly agreed.

* * *

The events in Fallujah seem to have foreshadowed the story of the entire Iraqi conflict. While the residents of Fallujah did not necessarily welcome the invasion in March 2003, they were not initially unfriendly to coalition forces, which was of

course a good omen. It didn't last long. Although Fallujah was sporadically targeted by air, it had been spared the ground war in March of 2003. In what I believe was a misguided effort to maintain the peace, approximately 850 members of the armed forces entered the city on April 23, 2003, and approximately 150 of them commandeered the al-Qa'id primary school. Fallujah, called by many "the city of mosques," is a religious city populated by a majority of Sunnis. It is extremely conservative and has a reverence for the Islamic code of honor. The decline of the U.S. relationship with the residents of Fallujah was almost inevitable. The clash of cultures and misunderstandings were predictable. Our soldiers may have been briefed regarding proper behavior and the nature of Iraqi culture, but if they were, they didn't remember much of what they had been taught. Sex and family honor are intimately linked in Iraq, as they are in most Muslim countries. Relations between men and women are severely constricted. Women hold a unique place in Islamic culture; they are revered and

protected while at the same time shunned and dismissed. Even suspicion of lack of propriety can endanger a woman. For all the repression women face, their sensibilities must be protected and men must not parade in front of them inappropriately dressed. Muslims are quick to find insult from the treatment of their women. It is unacceptable to take pictures of women, and they are not to be spoken to without a male escort.

Stories regarding rude behavior swept through the city and surrounding villages. Salman, my Iraqi counterpart and the man who was to become my best friend during my time there, repeated the stories to me of the alleged improprieties by the soldiers to the Iraqi women: soldiers sunning themselves on rooftops without shirts in full view of the women, women touched by men, homes searched while women were still in their nightgowns. The inhabitants were further offended by the use of night goggles when rumors spread that the soldiers used them to spy on women. The rumors took a sinister turn, and

many Iraqis came to believe the night goggles enabled the soldiers to see through clothing, that children were being detained at their schools and given bubblegum wrapped in paper that contained pornographic pictures. These incidents, some of which I am sure were accurate and others obviously fabricated, were repeated throughout Iraq, even by local imams in their sermons, so that ultimately the stories were treated as unassailable fact by the citizenry. Resentment grew. I think what sometimes gets lost in all of the rhetoric is the fact that our troops are populated with individuals who are barely out of their teens. They are more boys and girls, than men and women. They receive excellent combat training, but nothing can replace life's experiences. It is my belief that the youth of the soldiers played a large role in the Fallujah debacle.

The residents resented the soldiers and wanted them out of the school. The commanders agreed, and they were packed and planning to vacate the school on April 29. On the evening of April 28, a

group of approximately 200 protestors approached the school. At this point reports diverge. Although the protestors insist they were unarmed, the soldiers at the scene were equally insistent that the protesters were armed. Where the truth lies I will leave to those who are much more expert than I, but I too was in the army at the age of nineteen and twenty. I have spent time with these young Americans, and I am convinced that the initial violence in Fallujah could have been diffused with greater sensitivity to cultural considerations. It is undisputed that these young soldiers heard shots. It remains disputed whether or not the shots were fired at them or in celebration some distance away.

It is the nature of war that young men are faced with impossible choices. They must either choose to face death by the hand of the enemy or face the enemy with death by their own hand and risk the possibility of shooting civilians. The damage created by the choice is not collateral, it is devastating. In short, the soldiers reacted as scared young people

would. They fired their weapons: seventeen civilians died and more than seventy were wounded. Americans lost one of the first and most important fights for the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people. Whatever initial euphoria there may have been was lost one month into the battle.

Violence steadily increased in the city. In March 2004 American troops, citing safety concerns, completely withdrew from Fallujah. As a result, the city fell under the control of Sunni insurgents led by former members of the Iraqi Army. Finally, on March 31, 2004 the insurgents overplayed their hand when they ambushed a convoy containing four American military contractors from Blackwater USA, a private security firm. The contractors: Scott Helvenston, Jerko Zovko, Wesley Batalona, and Michael Teague, were killed when grenades were thrown through the window of their car. One of the men was decapitated. Two of the charred corpses were dragged through the streets and were hung over a bridge that crossed the Euphrates River.

I was in Fort Benning, Georgia at the time, preparing for my own deployment to the region. We all knew beforehand that we would be entering a war zone, but the pictures and the description of the increasing violence were sobering. Several people decided the situation was too dangerous and opted to leave the training. I watched the television; the men swinging from ropes on the bridge were men like me. They were non-military men who had gone to support the rebuilding of Iraq. There was no sense of humanity in the pictures of the dead men or in the pictures of the celebrating crowds. The crowd was a mass of contorted faces. Mouths were open and twisted; they reminded me of Halloween jack-o-lanterns: haunting, but flat, the flickering light behind them providing no illumination or warmth. There were flashes of fire in some eyes, but like the flame of the jack-o-lantern, the flashes had no meaning, they were only a reaction to something external. Is it madness that overtakes such a crowd? Are we all capable of such madness? Worse, am I?

Three weeks later I arrived on Iraqi soil. I was frightened, but I never considered quitting. I had a sense of being part of an important mission. Those of us who elected to stay did so for varying reasons. One of my colleagues decided dying in Iraq was better than dying from cancer at home, another saw glory and honor in supporting the fight for freedom. Certainly none of us would have agreed to take on such a dangerous mission if the economic remuneration was not substantial. Money was one of the reasons I agreed to take the job, but no amount of money is worth dying for, so of course there had to be something else in it for me. I was a husband and a father and had responsibilities to my family, not to mention my desire to grow old with my wife and experience the joys of raising our child and grandchildren. I am not a doctor and was not going to heal bodies. What did I hope to do? What did I expect to give and to gain? I searched my soul and I found the answer. God is being used in this place where civilization began as a destructive force. But I

believe if there is a God, he is a good God, and he gave me a gift, a talent. I can speak many languages. Just as musical artists and painters feel a need to express their gifts and share them, I too felt a need to share my gift. I have taught and continue to teach language and culture, which is very gratifying, but I felt in Iraq I could use my talents to affect the quality of peoples' lives. Death and killing will only lead to more death and killing. Communicating between languages is more than translating words, it is also interpreting emotion and thoughts. It is the art of interpreting in which I excel. I knew I could use my talent to interpret between people of different cultures and help build bridges between them. I could not change the world alone, but I could help.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

The military, the UN investigators, spy planes, they all missed it. There is a weapon of mass destruction in Iraq. God. I do not mean to speak blasphemy or to impugn any religious belief, but God has been used as a weapon of mass destruction ever since the human mind was able to grasp the concept of His existence. The insurgents and the warring tribes in Iraq are only the most recent abusers. Individual Americans are guilty as well. During one of my visits to a bunker during a mortar attack, I met a soldier who insisted the only thing that would save the Iraqis was Jesus. Words are my business, but I looked at him and was speechless. Jesus may indeed be the savior of mankind, and his return may indeed herald peace for the world, but what Iraq does not need right now is someone else's definition of God as a solution to the bloodshed. The truth is, wars really aren't about God. God, in fact, is a symbol of love and peace. Wars are about power.

I arrived in Iraq from the Rhein Main air force base in Germany on April 21, 2004. The flight to the air base in Balad took about four-and-a-half hours. I shared the aircraft with three Kurdish Americans, originally from the northern part of the country. They were returning home. They had each left Iraq to escape the horrors of the Hussein regime, and were now returning to help rebuild their country. I relived my own life's journey that had finally led me here to Iraq.

As we were approaching Balad, the pilot announced that our landing would be delayed due to a sandstorm. One of my traveling companions, a Kurdish Sunni, became visibly upset, certain there was a more sinister reason for the delay. As I was trying to calm her fears, the captain again spoke to us encouraging us to recall the necessary procedures for a parachute evacuation of the aircraft. At that point, my colleague took her copy of the Koran out of her backpack and began to pray.

In fact, the airplane's landing in Balad was uneventful, but that was not true of the helicopter ride to Baghdad, where I was taken to complete my registration. The chopper would bank to the left or right and quickly descend. Then just as quickly, it would rise in altitude to avoid ground fire. I watched as a haze concrete buildings and sand-colored highways whirled by. Soldiers stood on each side of the helicopter, focused on the terrain below, weapons at the ready.

I disembarked at the former Saddam Hussein Zoo and spent several days there. I thought that place was the perfect model for America's goal in Iraq. The zoo, once the pride of Baghdad, had at one time been the largest zoo in the Middle East, boasting more than 600 animals and over one million visitors a year. The sanctions that followed the first Gulf War inflicted a particularly heavy toll on the zoo, and in 2002 it was closed and converted into a military base. It became part of the battleground during the 2003 invasion, and reports of the shocking condition of the

animals were soon broadcast around the world. The looting that followed the invasion further damaged the structures, and many of the animals were stolen for either food or profit. Americans, with the help of various international volunteer organizations, rebuilt and reopened the zoo three months after the invasion. Having gone from ruins to rejuvenation, it is a beautiful, serene place located on the Tigris River. I thought it was a fitting place to begin my journey.

I was assigned to the Civil Affairs Unit back at the Balad base. This time I was transported by jeep with two other linguists. We were asked to don civilian clothing and cover our military duffle bags with black plastic in an effort to avoid insurgents, who had been attacking traffic along the road between Baghdad and Balad since the war began. There were black spots at various points along the road, scars from the ubiquitous improvised explosive devices. Logistic Support Area Anaconda, also called Balad Air Base (although it is actually located within the municipality of Yethrib) or Camp Anaconda, is

huge and handles some of the world's largest military aircraft. It takes about half an hour to drive around its twelve-mile perimeter. At the time, it had five cafeteria-style dining facilities, a post office, a PBX or market where residents can purchase snacks and sundries, a health clinic, two swimming pools, a gym, and a movie theater, which showed three free movies a day.

It is a truism now that, in the end, the war in Iraq is a battle for people's minds. The Civil Affairs Unit is at the forefront of that battle. My job there was to facilitate communication so that the battle could be won.

The second battle of Fallujah, dubbed Phantom Fury by the Department of Defense and later renamed Operation al-Fajr (Arabic for Dawn) by the Iraqi Defense Minister, took place a little more than six months into my tour. Operation Phantom Fury was designed to re-take the city in advance of the upcoming January elections. Once again the story turns upon the struggle for power. Between Iraqis the

struggle is about who has power over land and oil. It's about how relationships are defined and regulated between men and women. It's about who gets to write the history books and who has the right to dictate societal mores and religion. No one has ever seriously argued that the United States is engaging in a religious war in Iraq, but the issue of whether or not the United States is seeking power remains unresolved. The United States government acknowledges one of the initial justifications for the invasion was regime change. Once that was accomplished, there is also little dispute that the United States had a responsibility to ensure a transition into a functioning civil and economic entity.

The insurgents, often using God, religious imagery, and even religious artifacts as their shield, claimed a holy right to rid the coalition forces from Iraq. The United States asserted its right to remain in Iraq until a stable democratic government was in place. The United States claimed to be fighting for the liberation of the people of Iraq first from the tyranny

of the Saddam Hussein regime and then from the tyranny of the insurgents. The stated motives were pure, but there is little logic in the concept that you can liberate a people by destroying their lives.

Operation Phantom Fury was largest combat mission since May 2003, when President Bush declared "Mission Accomplished." The battle also marked a turning point in the perception of the on-going conflict. It had become clear that it was no longer only Hussein loyalists who were opposing the coalition occupation, but there were now new and growing groups of insurgents with differing agendas that sought the removal of all foreign military forces.

The situation on the base in the weeks building up to the operation was tense. Not one of the local Iraqis I spoke to believed military action in Fallujah would solve any problems at all. Almost immediately, as the assault began, we experienced increased mortar attacks on the base—already a common occurrence. In fact, the base was affectionately called by some "Mortaritasville"

because of the number of mortar attacks it received. The whole tenor of the camp changed. We all listened and watched for military medical helicopters, which had also increased dramatically. One soldier with whom I shared space in one of the hardened bunkers during an attack looked at me and simply said, “Why did we have to make it worse?”

Conversations among friends became more intimate. One time when we were stuck in a bunker for a particularly long period of time, talk turned to what was the most important thing for us in our lives. I participated, but mostly I listened— and interpreted. I listened to the tone of my friends’ voices, to whispers and short choked sounds. It is in between words that you find meaning. Strange friendships grew strong during those attacks, the loquacious became quiet, and others bore the pressure as if it were all in a typical day. During those times in the bunker, it was hard not to visit death, or to at least make its acquaintance, and although conversations

rarely ever mentioned its presence, it was there in between the words.

After Operation Phantom Fury, it seemed to me the tenor of the entire base was less hopeful. Among those with whom I worked, it was the generally accepted opinion that the battle served as a justification to the insurgents to recruit new members. When Colin Powell resigned as Secretary of State, the talk in the bunkers was that there was no longer an impediment to the hardliners in the government and that battles like Fallujah would become the rule rather than the exception.

Terror became a business enterprise. Not only did new Iraqi entrepreneurs traffic in stolen weapons and contraband, kidnapping became very profitable. Many of the kidnappings were not statements of anger or religious partisanship, they were simple commercial transactions: I take your loved one, throw a little torture in to make it look real, and you pay for his return; we are all satisfied. U.S. contractors were particularly profitable products. Firas, another

interpreter, a Shi'ite and frequent co-worker of mine, was caught up in the trade. He went missing from work for a couple of days, then returned having had $10,000 removed from his savings. Salman was a Sunni. He was afraid he would not be as lucky as Firas and often prayed he would have the strength and opportunity to kill himself if he were ever abducted.

Criminals and those seeking political power used the fear of American culture as a recruitment tool and their ranks swelled. Better to die the death of a martyr and find paradise than watch as your women walk uncovered, talk to men without the protection of a chaperone, and lose their virginity by choice rather than through the sacred rite of marriage.

Suspicion and distrust shadowed the terror. I witnessed one occasion when Americans distanced themselves from local contractors, citing safety concerns. Arabic signs erupted across part of the base warning Muslims not to enter the dining facility. It was an ill-conceived plan created by an ignorant KBR

employee. The offered explanation: it was Ramadan, a time of fasting for Muslims. Clearly, it was a poorly concealed ruse. Like Christians and Jews, there are Muslims who actively practice the faith and those that don't. The contractors were working for the coalition. If they wanted to eat during Ramadan, it was no one's business but their own. True, violence increased during the holy month, but segregation failed as a social policy in the States, and it was equally destructive in Iraq. It sometimes seemed like the United States was exporting its entire history as a democratic experiment to Iraq, complete with racism and bureaucratic inertia. The Iraqis also carried with them the baggage of history. Baathist propaganda and years of repression and international isolation left many Iraqis poorly educated and suspicious of foreign influences. I had conversations with many Iraqis who fervently believed the September 11 attacks had been masterminded by Washington and Israel. There was no debate or discussion. This was a truth for them.

Their minds were locked; no amount of evidence could dissuade them.

I remain convinced that given a chance, it is activities like those of the Civil Affairs Unit that will finally diffuse the weapon of mass destruction that is the grab for power; and that, like Azerbaijan, once Iraq's economy is stable and its infrastructure secure, so that the government can supply its population with basic needs, there will be peace. To that end, I spent some of my time with the military on missions whose purpose was to train Iraqis to operate and maintain facilities built by the coalition.

In mid-September, 2004, I worked with two American officers, who spent the better part of a day explaining a fuel distribution system to an Iraqi colonel and major, members of the Iraqi National Guard. The system built by the Americans was quite complicated and differed greatly from the former Iraqi system. It was also important that the Iraqi Army understood the vulnerabilities of the system, so that they could protect stockpiled fuel deposits, which

were often the target of mortar attacks. The process of educating the Iraqi military was an interesting illustration of the difficulties facing the culture. The Iraqi men were clearly interested in learning all of the intricacies of the system, but it was never clear to me where their loyalties really lay. Although they appeared at the time to be loyal to the new Iraqi Army, I was sure they were just as loyal to the army under the leadership of Saddam Hussein. The colonel was a Shi'ite and the major a Sunni, and the two of them seemed to compete for the Americans' attention, each trying to prove his intelligence and bravery.

I was unique among the interpreters in Iraq. My ability to speak fluently in Arabic, English, and Turkish often made me indispensable to the Transportation Unit, which directed convoys of materials throughout Iraq. I was frequently asked to assist in the security screenings of independent transportation contractors. It was a job I was proud to undertake, but one in which I felt an especially

heavy responsibility. Few of the local and third country nationals spoke English, and those that did, did not speak fluently. I was required to translate and verify their personal information in Arabic and Turkish, and convey it to the relevant U.S. service members. There were unending horror stories of security breaches which resulted in the deaths of our military men and contractors. I made every effort to ensure that the men I interviewed were, from my point of view, honest applicants. There were many times I alerted the military personnel of my suspicions, and to my knowledge, I was able to prevent these men from being hired.

The military was acutely aware of the constant danger under which the transportation contractors worked. They were obvious and all-too-easy targets. I spent many hours at the military convoy staging areas talking to them and filing reports and complaints regarding their situation. Some, unfortunately, succumbed to the lure of drugs to numb the fear. Several times I was called to translate for a contractor

who was obviously under the influence of a controlled substance and arrange for his transportation off of the base and to the appropriate authorities.

Suspicion and distrust between members of different ethnic groups were not resolved merely because coalition forces employed them. At the convoy staging area, a Saudi Arabian contractor, a tall man wearing a dishdaasha (the white loose and flowing garb of his country) and red and white shumaagh (headscarf) with a squared pattern on the fabric held in place with an ‘iqaal or ra’as (a thick black cord), began to yell obscenities, itself an odd event. He tore at his clothes and kicked at the dirt. He watched as an Iraqi contractor walked past him, creating space and avoiding the Saudi’s eyes. The Saudi ran in front of the Iraqi and faced him, nose to nose, and continued to swear. A second Iraqi entered the mix and pushed the Saudi, wrestled him to the ground, and began to choke him. Finally, one of the military police arrived and tried to pull the men apart.

My job: translate between the American and the combatants without further inflaming passions. The hatred between the two men, who knew little of one another, was palpable. Without intervention, it indeed might have been a fight to the death over nothing.

Those otherwise healthy contractors who survived insurgent attacks sought compensation from the various companies for which they worked. In addition to Iraqi companies, there were Turkish, Pakistani, and Saudi Arabian companies supporting the war effort. There was a great deal of paperwork that was necessary to complete between and among the countries and the relevant units of the coalition forces, so that much of my time was spent assisting men in writing and filing reports in multiple languages, and arranging for the return of any material that survived the attack. Some of the stories were heartbreaking. A father whose son lost his legs to an IED (improvised explosive device) came at the behest of the Turkish company his son was working for seeking to recover the truck. The evolution of the

IED as a killing device, I think, will ultimately become the symbol of this war. They inspire terror by reason of their unpredictability and easy disguise. The attack on this man's son occurred on a bridge near the city of Samara; there are a lot of insurgent activities there. Even in the unlikely event the truck was still there, it was too dangerous for our troops to risk recovery. Another time an elderly man, or perhaps just a prematurely aged man, came into my office; his hands were shaking and he had trouble meeting my gaze. His was the only truck of four that was able to make it to the base following an insurgent attack two months before. Two of his companions were stabbed and killed during the attack. He too sought recovery of the remaining truck so that he could bring it back to Turkey, a trip he looked too feeble and frightened to make. Still another man needed to complete paperwork confirming that his truck was attacked, leaving his partner dead. It was important that his paperwork was completed properly; without it he

would not receive compensation from the Turkish company for his work or his injuries.

Independent, non-military commercial contractors have long been part of the landscape of military operations by the United States and others. But the conflict in Iraq represents a sort of paradigm shift given the voluntary nature of the armed forces and the level of reliance upon commercial contractors. According to Peter W. Singer, author of *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Cornell University Press, 2003), at the end of the Gulf War there was about one contractor to every 100 soldiers; by 2003 the ratio increased to one contractor to every 10 soldiers, and to my knowledge there has been no significant decrease in that ratio. As noted in various books and newspaper reports, there has been a consequent increase in deaths and injuries of non-military personnel. The non-military transportation contractors were generally from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Turkey. Difficulty communicating among and between them was only

part of the challenge. Culturally and ethnically, they were different. My studies in Middle Eastern politics and culture were invaluable to me when trying to interpret and resolve confusion and disputes between the men. There was one instance where a Kurdish contractor's truck had broken down somewhere near the base in Balad; he needed a ride on another convoy headed to Turkey, where the company he worked for was located. My job was to explain the situation in English to the commander, relay it back to the Kurd in Arabic, and then arrange for the transport in Turkish. At other times, I was required to serve not only as an interpreter but also as a referee. There were countless "international skirmishes" among the Iraqis and third country nationals. Tempers would flair, and objects would start flying. One time an Iraqi contractor stole the driver's manifest from a Turkish contractor and demanded a ransom for its return. Calming these gentlemen down was an on-site lesson in international diplomacy.

The healthcare many of the non-coalition contractors received in their country of origin was not up to the standard of American care, and many became horribly ill. One time, during the second Fallujah offensive, when the danger to the convoys was especially acute, a Turkish contractor entered the base. He was pale and disheveled. His clothes were filthy and his walk unsteady. I was called immediately to assist in interpretation. The man's speech was slurred, and it was very difficult to understand him. Finally, I was able to learn that he had been sitting in the cabin of his truck without moving for three days, afraid to leave because of the fighting. At one point, he quickly turned from me and ran toward a medic. He ripped his shirt open and revealed a wet, red rash. He became quite agitated and began to run towards several people, attempting to touch them. One soldier aimed his weapon at the man as I yelled at both men to calm down, first in English, then in Turkish, and finally in Arabic. Upon seeing the weapon, the contractor stopped in his tracks. A medic was able to

put on gloves and examine the man. Unfortunately, because it was not a life-threatening injury, there was little the medic could do. He thought it was probably an allergic reaction to an insect bite. We "quarantined" the man at an outdoor station, while I arranged with some other Turkish contractors to transport the poor man back home.

The situation regarding life-threatening or combat-related injuries was quite different. Americans, true to the values of their culture and faith, treated the injuries of all that were wounded. I spent enumerable hours in the military hospitals on base assisting medical personnel. Often Americans, Iraqi military, and insurgents would be recovering in the same room. It was not always a comfortable situation. Salman, always in awe of the American ethic, once turned to me and remarked, "Life is so precious to Americans. Iraqis would let an enemy die, but Americans work to save them." It is true. It is one more reason, when asked, I desperately wanted to answer, "I am an American."

One evening I was called to the military hospital to help in communicating with one of the Turkish contractors wounded on his way to Anaconda Base. He was wounded as the result of the explosion of an IED, suffering injuries to his right arm and side. The hospital at that time was no more than a tent. As I entered, I saw only one U.S. soldier; most of the wounded were Iraqis and Turkish contractors. Some of them were slightly wounded, others more severely. The nurse explained to me that some of the men were Iraqi National Guardsmen, policemen. In the same room were insurgents; they were receiving medical treatment for various degrees of injuries they suffered while fighting coalition forces. I noticed one of the insurgents was sleeping. Both of his legs were bandaged above the knees. The nurse explained that he lost his legs because the device he was setting up on the road exploded prematurely. I turned around in order to assist one of the medics with one of the Turkish contractors. Later I noticed that the insurgent was awake and looking at

me. His eyes were large, his stare unblinking. I wasn't sure if it was hatred or fear. I questioned the nurse, and she told me that he had been quiet since entering their care, and he had refused talk to anyone. According to the nurse, once he was strong enough, he would be interrogated and subsequently jailed. I looked at him. Even if he survived, he would never again be strong. In his world he was ruined and probably better off dead.

Participants in the war theater have always invented characters, and in this war the character has been named hajji. For Muslims, hajji is used to describe a person who has made the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. The soldiers use the word hajji to refer to insurgents. It is a derogatory phrase, the same way the word gook was during the Vietnam War. It is a way of demystifying and dehumanizing the enemy and perhaps diminishing some of the terror. The MP, a young handsome man, who was guarding the quiet insurgent, turned to me and said, "Those hajjis are all cowards. An IED is a coward's

weapon. I don’t see why we don’t just let them all die.” I don’t blame him. I already knew many soldiers who had lost friends; I assumed he had too. I don't know how I would feel in his place.

Invitation to Rain

I stood there looking at the moon. I don't remember what I was thinking, probably nothing. It had been a long day. Salman walked up to me quietly. "When the moon is full and it is surrounded by three colored rings, it is a sign…an invitation to rain." There was poetry and mystery in his voice, and I will forever think of Salman when the moon invites the clouds to rain.

Salman was with me in the bunker many times. He and Sergeant Rodionov and I had become good friends. We were any unlikely group. Salman was an Iraqi. He is, by Iraqi standards, an educated man, a practicing Sunni Muslim in his mid-thirties, medium height and athletically built. Sergeant Pavel Rodionov was a kid. He was about twenty, not much older than my daughter, Russian Orthodox, and had only a high school diploma. Pavel had immigrated to the United States from Russia when he was eight years old, and he spoke fluent Russian, the language

in which we conversed most of the time. He was a big kid, over six feet tall with light hair and blue eyes. I was forty-eight and, at the time, still a citizen of Azerbaijan, although my paperwork to become an American citizen was complete, and I was merely awaiting the privilege to take my oath of citizenship. In contrast to Pavel, I am smaller in stature. Some might describe me as stocky, and due to strong Iraqi sun, darker in complexion. Unlike the other men, I am well educated and do not practice any organized faith, although my family is historically Shi'ite Muslim. Pavel often provided security support on our missions, and Salman assisted in translations. I was the elder statesman of the group. In Azerbaijan we refer to the head of the family as Agh Sakkal, literally white beard. The Agh Sakkal is the individual to whom the family turns for approval of all major decisions. My life's experiences and education made it a natural place for me within our friendship. I enjoyed my role, and felt especially content when I was able to provide my friends with direction and advice

regarding significant aspects of their lives. Indeed, since returning home, Pavel has begun college studies, and Salman is seeking to immigrate to the United States.

Salman took to calling me Genius along with many others on the base. It was a term of affection and respect that I had earned by reason of my ability to interpret in multiple languages. In fact, Newsreel Anaconda even produced a video about my work. The newsreel was one of several media that chose to shine the spotlight on me. Salman would often point to my bedroom door, on which my name was printed in rather large letters, and say, "Here is the big genius. I am the little genius." And he was. Salman was very adept at translating between English and Arabic, even though he was not formally trained in the art of translation and interpretation.

Salman, Pavel, and I shared many meals together and would greet each other with the phrase "wakh, wakh, wakh." It's a derivation of a phrase I created that is used by people in the Republic of

Georgia, another former Soviet satellite state. It does not translate well, but it can be interpreted as an emotional greeting of welcome. Salman and I worked well together, often finishing each other's phrases. I am sure Pavel and I owe him our lives. Salman lived in Taji, about an hour's drive from the base, so he was very familiar with the surrounding area. He knew which villages were predisposed to be welcoming and friendly and those that were not, so that he was able to guide and direct our travels and provide additional direction regarding our safety and security.

Salman had a clear understanding of the goals of the occupation, but recognized the frequent failure of implementation. It was a truth for him that in some ways life was easier and safer under Saddam Hussein, yet Salman believed in the stated mission of the United States. He did not appear to have suffered under the Hussein regime; he nonetheless clearly hoped for a more open and democratic culture. His hopes seemed to diminish, however, with each

reported death of a coalition fighter or his countrymen.

Salman was very sensitive to the delicate balance that he had to maintain. Local translators were paid well according to Iraqi standards. For most it was the highest salary they had ever earned, but at times it seemed as though there was no way to adequately protect them, particularly as they commuted back and forth between their villages and the base. Salman was fiercely protective of his family, but his job with the coalition forces put them and him in daily danger. He frequently said to me, "I don't talk about my job at home. It is not safe for my neighbors to know my job. If I don't talk, no one is going to know."

Death's cousins are terror and fear. They were diseases that spread through Iraq, leaving human remains in their path. We made attempts at humanity. Friendships were born, and they flourished for a while, but the disease eventually found them. Salman was my best friend for a year. We shared meals and

missions, we spoke about our families, played soccer together; yet I don't know anything about his past or his present. The future is too frightening and the past too dangerous. It may reveal an element of character or choice that one would rather keep hidden. Friendships are difficult for the Iraqis. During the Hussein regime, the Party and the security forces watched the creation and destruction of relationships. Now it is old friends and neighbors that watch. So although he was my best friend, I never asked Salman about his life during the regime, and he never offered any information about it. The disease withered any future possibilities of friendship too. Our friendship could only be in the moment and only when we were together working. He invited me to his home. I could not go. It was too dangerous for me and for him. My last day in Iraq was the last day of our friendship. We did not exchange addresses or phone numbers. That simple exchange could be used as evidence to support a contract of death for Salman. As for me, I have great affection for Salman, and I think of him often.

But I too am afraid. I am an American now; I value my citizenship and I love my country. I am not a practicing Muslim, but I am a Muslim. I speak Arabic, and I spent time in Iraq. Contact between myself and an Iraqi is dangerous for me. To survive, to protect myself, to keep Salman safe, I can only remember him and our friendship, and look forward to the day when we meet on the soil of freedom.

Casualties of War

The Iraqis often felt Americans were not only killing their bodies but also their souls, and the death of the soul is far more dangerous. Iraqis often turned to traditional values and fundamentalist precepts as a protection against perceived American incursions.

The Arab version of the ugly American arrived with the troops. Even simple interpersonal details have been overlooked. Iraqis require less interpersonal space between themselves and others; they touch a great deal when they talk. It is insulting to them when Americans step back. These are simple details that create trust and help build friendships, yet they were often ignored. Iraqi culture requires very rigid rules of social interaction. The need to maintain honor governs all relationships. In Muslim cultures death is preferable to a loss of honor. Such cultural restraints are anathema to Americans. One friend of mine positively broke out in a sweat every time he was required to accept a gift or join an Iraqi at a meal. He found it nearly impossible to remember to use

only his right hand at the meal table, because the left hand is considered indecent as it is supposed to be used for personal hygiene. He would tie a string around his wrist as a reminder.

Of course there were rules regarding interaction with women to which the Iraqi men were particularly sensitive. Although women's roles are expanding in Iraq, they are still treated, according to Western standards, as second-class citizens, and they are expected to remain secluded and out-of-sight to all but members of their family. I frequently advised the younger men to avoid talking to an unaccompanied woman. Americans also had to be reminded that photography was often viewed with suspicion by fundamentalist Muslims; some Muslims believe that photographs imitate the creative act of Allah and are therefore forbidden. So before taking a picture of an Iraqi, it is required for the photographer to obtain the permission of the subject.

The directness with which Americans conduct business is insulting to Iraqis, who require some

exchange of pleasantries before they begin. If an Iraqi senses you are impatient and wish to "get down to business" before the appropriate conversational starters have ended, the likelihood of a pleasant and productive exchange will be severely handicapped.

Perhaps most important is a cultural reluctance to accept criticism. Translating criticism without seeming critical is dicey. The complexities of renovating and rebuilding Iraq with an eye towards eventual Iraqi autonomy necessarily involved the cooperation of many parties. It is to be expected that there would be some errors and misunderstandings, but when there is a reluctance on the part of one party to take responsibility for any errors, you have a problem. Add to that an almost non-existent legal system, a weak economy, and a strong black market economy that rewards graft and corruption, and you have a bigger problem. I clearly remember one village where the Civil Affairs Unit managed the construction of a water purification plant. A local translator and my friend Salman estimated the actual

cost of the project was probably $30,000 - $35,000. However, at that stage the plant had already cost the United States $120,000. In another village, the contractors who were building the water purification plant complained they had not been paid. The city council was responsible for payment, and U.S. invoices indicated $80,000 had been forwarded to the council. I do not know how that particular dispute was concluded, but having witnessed countless meetings of finger pointing, I can imagine it wasn't pretty.

Although I was primarily assigned to the Civil Affairs Unit, as time went on, I found myself also working for the Transportation Unit, Special Forces, Intelligence, and the Medical Unit. LSA Anaconda provides logistics support to the entire Iraqi theater. Military and contractor convoys criss-cross the country transporting weapons, soldiers, and supplies. Civilian Iraqis and third country nationals from Turkey and neighboring Arab countries supported many of the supply convoys, and most of the drivers

did not speak English. As a result there was often a great deal of confusion and heated exchanges. Shortly after I arrived on base, I spoke to Major Blue, then the commander of the Transportation Unit, and we decided there ought to be signs around the base to provide the contractors with essential information and create an atmosphere of cooperation and friendship. I designed signs in Arabic and Turkish so that upon entering the base the contractors were welcomed and thanked for their assistance in rebuilding Iraq. Other signs served as directional indicators and warnings not to enter certain areas and to refrain from smoking or taking pictures. But all of our efforts at creating positive relationships seemed to be lost in the battles around us.

It was always hard to get a clear read on the motives of many of the local and third country nationals working for the coalition forces. The contractors seemed to belong to one of two mutually exclusive groups: those that harbored dual loyalties and those that didn't. Those that had a single loyalty

were spies and conspirators. And loyalties changed. Friends became enemies at the drop of a bomb.

It seems the lessons of Vietnam were not learned, or at least not learned well. The bombs may be smarter than they were thirty or forty years ago, but even smart bombs kill innocent people. Revenge killings are part of the culture in Iraq and many other countries of the Middle East. Forgiveness is not part of the equation. Enmity is inherited by future generations as is dark hair and black eyes. On the other hand, the contractors were gainfully employed. They were making money and able to take care of their families. That was the good news. The bad news: many of them expressed the belief that America was an invading power not really interested in nation building. And despite all the work we did in Civil Affairs, that was the perception of many of the native Iraqis. At one point, I was translating between a Kuwaiti, an Egyptian, a Palestinian, and an Iraqi. Each of them was employed either directly by the American government or by an American corpor-

ation. There was no support among them for a return of the Saddam Hussein regime, yet in their opinion the danger and the suffering of the general population had increased since the American invasion. The contactors were all preparing to join the military convoy in a project of rebuilding. Nonetheless, they each expressed the belief that America was in it for the oil profits. Translated: it wasn't about nation building or democracy or peace; as far as these contractors were concerned, it was about power. How could they be part of a process and yet deny its existence? Clearly the locals and the third party nationals were having a hard time hearing the American message over the din of the fighter planes and tanks.

Out of Ashes

I was sleeping the deep dreamless sleep of absolute exhaustion. I never heard the explosion or the warning siren, never had the chance to ignore it. I just slept. I didn't hear the second explosion either. Another soldier did. She had been making a phone call across the street. She saw the sergeant, shrapnel slicing across his throat almost severing his head. She ran to him, swallowed her vomit and her fear, and pretended to be a nurse so he could die in a woman's arms, listening to soft whispers of hope.

Death strikes with utter randomness in Iraq. I had intended to purchase some toothpaste at the PBX, the site of the explosion, when the attack occurred. I wasn't there because I had fallen asleep. I didn't know the other four soldiers that died that day or any of the twenty-five that were wounded. I don't know where they are now or what happened to them. The one thing I know for sure is that the only reason I wasn't there when the explosion went off was

because my fairy godmother sprinkled fairy dust in my eyes and put me to bed.

My father's death came to me in whispers, but the language of the dead in Iraq is deafening. Their demands are exacting: Find them. Identify them. Return them to their homes. I heard their commands and followed their orders. Early in my tour, I was asked to help identify three men who had been beheaded. Whatever their crime, they did not deserve such punishment. Even when the heads are discovered with the bodies, they cannot be used as a means of identification; the loss of blood distorts the features, there is nothing human left. Tattoos, however, remain unchanged. They were in Arabic, so someone had to interpret them, and I was chosen. They were not Turks, as had been supposed by one of the commanders on the base, they were Kurds. Their tattoos were in Arabic, not Turkish. They were verses from the Koran; they no longer served as statements of political and ethnic affiliation but insignias of defiance or hope, depending on your point of view.

What made me different from those who would commit such atrocities against another person? How could I distinguish myself from them? I don't know; I keep trying.

In Iraq, death is ordinary, and death as commonplace is like a cancer: it invades all spaces of time and mind. It haunts dreams. Typical, even rational, fears go into hyper-drive. The few times my friend Salman was late, I was sure he had perished. My wife worried that a game of soccer on the base would leave me dead. Even my own severe stomach illness was, I was certain, my own ticket to death.

There is an office in a removed corner of the base devoted exclusively to the paperwork of death. Bodies are kept in one location for no longer than twelve hours. The paperwork for the Americans is in English; the paperwork for Iraqis and Turks is not; someone needs to translate them. These men too demand identification and some dignity. They too need to be sent home.

The paperwork of business continued despite the death of the courier. A Turkish contractor killed by a roadside bomb left his unfinished business bloodied. The transport papers needed translation. They were covered in blood. Unthinking, I picked them up, forgetting to put gloves on, searching the paper for anything identifiable to make him human. There was nothing.

* * *

Fear did not acknowledge rank or experience. Men who had served the military in multiple theaters were alarmed by the disintegrating situation in Iraq. At various times, when the security situation appeared particularly shaky, large group gatherings were discouraged. People were told to eat in shifts, or take their food outside of the dining hall and eat in their rooms. Cell phones became contraband. At one point, I was asked to assist in interrogating a man who had entered onto the base with a compass hidden in his wallet. He claimed innocence, but in a previous incident at another base an insurgent had

used just such a means to draft detailed maps, which were then used to launch an incursion.

Security was measured in relative terms. One village near the Balad base received assistance from the Civil Affairs Unit of the army to rebuild a school. When the villagers complained of having received threatening letters from the insurgents, the police chief responded by saying the area was safe compared to other regions of Iraq. My job was to translate comfort into those words. I failed.

On September 11, 2001, Americans had their only experience with the sense that their homeland was in danger. The Iraqis live with that danger everyday. Many of them do not know what face that danger has or how it speaks, what faith it follows, or what country it originates from, but it is palpable, and it is with them every hour of every day. Each trip off the base became an exercise in faith and hope. Despite that, my favorite experiences were in the villages; their layout, even their smell, reminded me of the rural areas of Azerbaijan in my youth.

Our trips always began with a briefing led by the Commander of the Civil Affairs Unit and included a general discussion of the villages we would be visiting, the length of the trip, and the status of the projects we were inspecting. Always there was a discussion of the necessary security measures that we would need to take. Some villages were known to be hostile and others friendly, but nowhere was truly secure, and merely taking the trip off the base was dangerous.

Our comings and goings from the base were often re-routed at the last minute, due to the discovery of an IED or security breach. I actually felt safer at those times, knowing the danger had been identified and we were taking steps to avoid it. I was never quite sure how that assessment had been made, perhaps by air reconnaissance or observations of material that had suddenly appeared in the daylight. IEDs might be assumed to be hidden under a freshly dug mound of dirt, a carelessly thrown can of soda, a box, an abandoned car, or a spent artillery shell. IEDs

were placed in the path of the convoys under the cover of night. The safer days followed the colder nights; it seems even insurgents preferred not to work in the cold. For some reason, although I was cautious and alert, I was never really frightened. However, on one trip I was especially sensitive to the danger ahead. Our mission that day was to visit two schools in the Diyala Province that were being renovated under the guidance of the Civil Affairs Unit. The Diyala Province, located northeast of Baghdad, was then, and remains today, one of the most volatile provinces in Iraq. The province, approximately the size of Connecticut, is home to a half-dozen or so jihadist and Sunni nationalist groups. It is resource-rich with fertile farmland landscaped with orange and date groves and irrigation canals supported by the Tigris River. The Tigris River and the general climate provide Diyala with abundant water. Untapped oil reserves make the province economically viable as well. Unfortunately, Diyala also supports strategic roads that connect it to Baghdad to the south and

Iran to the east, providing easy access to the strongholds of all of the insurgent groups that use the province as a staging ground for their political and religious battles.

Another interpreter, Eva, was originally scheduled for the mission, but she was a Christian Arab from the province. Working for the coalition was an act of defiance for Eva. She chafed at the restraints imposed upon women by the conservative Muslim sects, but she was not foolhardy, and working in an area where she was recognizable not only endangered her safety, but the safety of her family. She had already been shot and wounded by unknown assailants, and she did not wish to repeat the experience. I liked Eva. She had a desire to grow, to experience life outside of her small town, and to travel the world. She was passionate in her support of the invasion, and was not looking forward to the time when the Americans would leave. She was afraid that the few strides women had made during the occupation would be lost when no Americans

remained. Her dream of Iraq included her as a full and participating member; her nightmare was a theocratic government where she would be forced to become an anonymous ghost hiding behind a chador.

We had an extra cadre of security for this trip including one American, one Brit, one Aussie, and two athletic looking security contractors from South Africa, who had been employed in special police forces in their country of origin. Before going outside the base, the men locked and loaded their weapons. I sat quietly in the humvee and listened to the ammo click into place. I felt a slight shudder; a quick slide show of my life passed before my eyes. I took a deep breath and settled in for the ride. We were all on hyper alert, looking out the windows for odd shadows or objects. Adrenaline, however, is a short-term drug, and after a period of time you are forced to relax. We did, and began to talk. Our discussions turned to the mindset of the villagers and the goals of the insurgents. Clearly the insurgents could not operate without some measure of support from the villagers.

Whether that support was voluntary or coerced was unclear and often changed. Coalition supporters one day would become insurgents the next, either because they were bribed into joining the insurgency or because they suffered a real or perceived injury from the occupying forces.

Our first destination was the Al-Qa'im elementary school, which was located in a remote area of Diyala Province. In order to reach the school, we had to drive across the Tigris River. It was a first for me, and despite the obvious danger, I was excited. The trip lasted over an hour, a long time to be out on the road and an easy target to anyone who was interested in making a point. I was unable to sit by the window due to security constraints, but sat forward in my seat so that I could see. I watched the landscape and was struck by the tragedy that has become Iraq—a place where there were once so many beautiful architectural sites that could have provided the country with millions of tourist dollars that are now reduced to nothing more than ancient rubble. We

entered a village of single-storey houses, huts really, made out of mud bricks and plaster that seemed to crumble in the sunlight. The convoy stopped, and I got out of the vehicle, stretching my legs that had cramped during the long ride. The dust stirred up by the convoy coated my mouth. There was no beauty in this place. The living conditions were primitive. There was no vegetation, only sand and bricks. The school was in disrepair. It was a flat building the color of the desert around it, surrounded by piles of dirt. The village leaders who had come to meet us engaged first in the usual introductory chat, but quickly moved to the crux of the matter, which was in itself unusual and led me to believe there was a high level of frustration there. The men were animated in their complaints. People of the Middle East speak with their hands, similar to the people of the Mediterranean and very unlike Americans. The more emphatic the speech, the more wild the gesticulations. These men were flailing their arms around, investing their words with anger, almost threatening. From my point of view, the

translating was easy. There was no need to use any interpretive phraseology; the leaders were making themselves abundantly clear. They insisted there were not enough classrooms to provide instruction to all of the school-aged children, and in any event, there was no electricity or running water, making the classrooms almost unusable. The leaders accused U.S. army personnel and representatives from the Iraqi Ministry of Education with doing little help to the school, which of course was not true. At least with regard to the Americans, we were doing a great deal, but our Iraqi partners often undercut the process. As I listened to the words and repeated them in English, I wondered how we would accomplish our mission of winning hearts and minds. Clearly the Iraqis had grown impatient with the progress of reconstruction. Whether the fault lay with the insurgents or with bureaucratic inertia did not seem to concern them. The facts of their lives required immediate assistance. It was imperative that we impress upon the villagers that notwithstanding the pace of the reconstruction,

the coalition had done more to improve their lives than the insurgents had. It was a tough sell.

The struggle for power was apparent in almost every visit I made to the villages. More than once village leaders complained of bureaucratic roadblocks or corruption. There were constant complaints that the United States was not doing enough. There was not enough electricity, or the water purification plants were not servicing a large enough area. To his credit, my first commander possessed a reserve of calm I have yet to witness in any other human. He listened carefully and never made any promises. His favorite phrase was "I will look into it," and to my knowledge, he always did. The 13th Corps Support Command Assistant Chief of Staff for Civil Affairs, and the soldiers under his command, represented to me the antithesis of the struggle for power in Iraq. Under his command, in 2004, 13th COSCOM Civil Affairs sponsored over $4,000,000 worth of infrastructure improvements, including school reconstruction, medical-clinic

construction, and water-treatment projects in the villages surrounding LSA Anaconda. Unfortunately, it sometimes seemed that the Civil Affairs units were working at odds with other parts of the armed forces. The men and women with whom I worked were dedicated to building bridges, both figuratively and literally. We worked to help build and rebuild schools, water purification plants, and oil and fuel plants. It was gratifying much of the time, but the level of frustration and the sense of futility grew the longer I stayed.

Later we met with the teachers of the school and some of the children, and gave them some school supplies and promises of future assistance. It is always the children that fueled the anger, the frustration, and the desire to help. The children are the great equalizers. Each side cites their future as the justification for all they do. The problem is that all sides define success differently, and until we can all agree on what is best for the children, it seems we will be forever caught up in this tempest. We did not stay

long, and we did little other than observe and make promises that the Iraqis did not believe.

The trip to the second school on our itinerary should have been short, but the roads are circuitous and not well marked, so we got lost along the way. Our security detail was getting jumpy. We have all heard of the disasters that have struck those unlucky enough to make a wrong turn, including the now infamous story of the capture and recovery of Private Jessica Lynch. None of us was interested in becoming the next day's headlines. While our driver and navigator were reviewing maps and GPS coordinates, I noticed a group of Iraqis working in the field next to the road. Even in the stress of the moment, I was drawn to the picture of the difficulties facing these people. In a country that could afford to build a billion dollar oil industry and government palaces, these people were eking out a living digging the land with hand-held hoes. Much to the surprise of my companions, I decided to approach the farmers and ask for directions. I stepped out of the humvee,

careful to keep my hands at my sides, and walked over slowly. I introduced myself in Arabic, and before asking for help, keeping in mind the cultural necessities of introduction, I asked them about their families and their children. Having obviously shown them respect, they willingly guided us in the right direction, adding a caution to be careful because there had been an explosion in the area not too many days before. I thanked them, and we moved on, much to the relief of all of my traveling companions.

We finally arrived at the Muhammed Abdo School, which was essentially uninhabitable. According to the school guards and representatives of the village, classes were being held outside. The villagers complained that the contractor responsible for re-building basically took the money and ran; he did little or no work, and there had been no adequate repairs made in months. In addition, we heard complaints that the village did not have enough electricity to maintain satisfactory living conditions. Once again we listened, took notes, and made

promises. The problems seemed overwhelming; there did not seem to be enough money, time, or sense of loyalty among the citizens to make the transition into a healthy, working society.

On our way back to the base, we got lost again, but this time the GPS device was sufficient to guide the way. As we were driving, we passed the Al-Ashraf camp. I was fascinated. The camp had been used by the Iranian Mujahedin al-Khalq. It is a group with a long, sordid past. To some they are considered allies of the West, and to others they are the basest kind of killers and charlatans. According to Michael Rubin in his detailed and well-researched article, "Monsters of the Left," the Mujahedin al-Khalq, or the MKO, has done an excellent public relations job of presenting themselves as supporters of democracy in general and U.S. Policy in Iran in particular. Rubin insists that the MKO is a terrorist organization that sought to replace Khomeini's dictatorship with a dictatorship of its own. According to him, the MKO opposed the Islamic revolution in Iran only after the

Ayatollah Khomeini purged them from power. Nonetheless, the group supported the Kurds in their uprising against Saddam Hussein, and in August 2003 exposed Iran's covert nuclear enrichment program, thereby earning the gratitude and respect of some members of the United States government.

Iraqi society is filled with monuments to war, heroes, and martyrs. Their stories are rich with imagery and inspire feuds that last across millennia. Shi'ite homes are draped with flags of green, black, and red. Green symbolizes Islam; black is the color of mourning for their Imams, all who died during the seventh century; and red signifies revenge against those who killed the Imams. The Al-Ashraf camp was another symbol of struggle in Iraq, perhaps more recent, but still inspiring deeply held feelings of patriotism or betrayal, depending on which side you belonged.

Not all of my visits were fraught with danger or full of political history, but they were all exceptional with respect to the window they provided

me into the soul of the Iraqi people. On my first visit to Albu Hassan Village to check the progress of a water purification project, I was struck by the simple sadness of the people. Sadness in Iraq is made of mud and waste and trash and rubble. Sadness is the festering puddles and the untreated sewage. It infects the children, whose eyes followed the convoy as we drove through the town; and the children in turn infected their mothers, who turned their faces away from us in disgust. As the convoy progressed down the narrow streets, I came to understand the metaphor of sweet-smelling air because of the contrast to it there. Even in my memory, I am nauseated by the stink of that village. There is a desperate need for clean, fresh, potable water in Iraq. Economic sanctions, war damage, and looting of Iraq's water facilities have lead to a crisis in public health. The villagers use untreated water straight from the canals or the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, leading to epidemics of typhoid and dysentery. Among the primary missions of USAID is to construct and

rebuild water supply facilities. Although some of the projects reached their goals and were successful, for many others the same graft and corruption that plagued the school rebuilding projects plagued the water purification projects, leaving illness and disappointment in their wakes.

As if to emphasize the anger expressed by the villagers, we learned upon our return to the base that shortly after we had left, they discovered an unexploded rocket. It had since been diffused, and we were able to re-enter.

Two months later, I returned to Albu Hassan. The stink was gone, and along with it the sadness that had permeated the place We visited the school, and I heard children laughing inside the classroom. The school was clean and filled with supplies; the only request was that, at some time in the future, the facility be expanded. As we left, the children ran fearlessly alongside the humvees calling out, playing, and seeking the candy and toys that often accompanied visits from the Americans. The Sheik,

too, was happy to see us, and invited us into his home. Although the security detail hoped we would decline the invitation, according to Iraqi custom to do so would have been considered an insult. The Sheik's home was located next to the now functioning water purification plant. Remembering my first visit, my stomach lurched into my throat just thinking about eating surrounded by the smell of raw sewage. But there was no odor any longer. I was able to enjoy the beauty of the place. The hills and narrow streets reminded me of my childhood. The tree trunks were thick and offered welcome shade from the ever-growing heat of the sun. I was reminded of my childhood in Shusha. As we drove to the Sheikh's residence, I was transported to the hills and lakes of Shusha, to the stone streets and old mosques. As we entered the Sheik's home, we were greeted by his young daughter. Females are often excused from contact with strange men, but she was still considered a child, although not for long. The Sheik explained it would soon be time for her to put the headscarf on,

indicating she was nearing the pre-marriage age. We were led into a large room that obviously served as a living room. Consistent with Shi'ite custom, the room was decorated with religious writings that included the names of all twelve Shi'ite Imams. The Sheik was cordial but commanding in his presence and concern about his tribesmen. He was obviously pleased with the progress of the past two months, but insisted more needed to be done. Our commander, for his part, was consistent in his insistence that Iraqis needed to work within the governmental system they had created and rely less on the United States. The Sheik had obviously intended to invite us to the feast, and had elaborate dishes prepared in advance for our enjoyment. Food had been transported from Balad especially for the occasion. We were served kubba, which is a delicious mixture of minced meat with nuts, raisins, and spices, including, I think, saffron and mint. We were served traditional dishes of chicken, beef, and lamb, as pork is prohibited. The meal ended with baklava and Iraqi tea that was served

in small glasses without milk and sweetened with sugar. As we left the Sheik thanked us for all that had been done to help his village, and my commander promised as much support as possible for future projects.

* * *

Successes are hard fought for in Iraq, but the effects of endless war are slowly eroding them. As I read the newspapers today, I am afraid the stink will return to Albu Hassan and with it the sadness and anger; and then I wonder if all the work and the sacrifice will have been a terrible waste. I thought I understood the Iraqis in a way that maybe most Americans did not. I thought I understood why they bristled under coalition control. It is hard for an American to understand what it is like to live under the thumb of an invading power. Instead of pride and patriotism, there is an overwhelming sense of loss. There is a sense of powerlessness that your destiny does not belong to you. It is not really a sense of dread, but rather a sense of surrender or resignation.

But still, living can only be obtained from life-giving activities: from safety, health, and economic stability. Perhaps when there has been enough death to satisfy the hunger for revenge of the warring, they will stop and the building will begin.

* * *

After I received my U.S. citizenship in 2006, Senator Inhofe from Oklahoma, who is the ranking member of the Arms Services Committee, invited me to his office and thanked me for my service in Iraq. We took a picture together, and the senator signed it: "Mahir-Great American." The picture is now on the wall of my house and is one of my favorites. (A copy of this picture is reproduced below.) I was very impressed with the senator and his dedication and patriotism, and I hope he and others will always consider me a "great American."

Epilogue

I am home now. I have realized my dream, and my wife, my daughter, and I are citizens of the United States of America. I visited Azerbaijan shortly after my time in Iraq. My mother was quite old, and her health was impaired. It was important that I see her, and I am glad I did. Three years later my mother died.

My mother and I had a very special relationship. I was the youngest, and so held a special place in her heart that my brother and sister recognized and encouraged. When it was clear her time was close, my brother called me and told me to come soon. I made plans to leave the following week. As my mother's conditioned worsened, my siblings were able to calm her just by telling her I was on my way. I am comforted by that knowledge, and know that my mother felt my presence even though I did not make it to her bedside before she died.

Little has changed since my last visit. The country is still mired in the waste of political

corruption and graft. The Nagorno-Karabakh dispute remains unresolved, and presumably my grandfather's wonderful, majestic house lies in ruins.

The situation in Iraq also remains unresolved. They are as different as they are the same. I know I have in some small part helped the world come to terms with itself, but in the end, with one very great exception, there is precious little to celebrate. My daughter is an American; she will never know the yoke of communism; she will always be free to pursue her dreams and determine her own fate. If that is the measure of the success in my life, I am satisfied with it.

Picture of the author with Senator Inhofe.

About the Author

by COL (R) Nathan Slate, Former U.S. Army Brigade Commander who served in Iraq

Over the 4th of July weekend I could not help but think of Dr. Mahir Ibrahimov. I first met Mahir when I was working on the Joint Staff, at the Pentagon, in Washington, D.C. Mahir had just returned from a year long tour in Iraq, where he served as a cultural and regional awareness expert and an interpreter for Arabic and Turkish. At that time, Mahir was not yet an American citizen. Becoming an American citizen was the most important thing in the world to him. He had been waiting for two years for his citizenship to be approved and had volunteered to help out in Iraq as a heart felt obligation of patriotic duty.

Mahir served in Iraq at Balad Airbase, just north of Baghdad. As fate would have it, he served with my former cultural adviser al-Dulaimi. They had become fast friends and shared many trials and tribulations together. Mahir looked me up when he

returned to present me with a gift from al-Dulaimi – a dishdaasha (customary man dress) with a Sunni head dress.

Dr. Ibrahimov is from Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan is a rather small country in the Caucuses in the Persian Platto. In many ways, it is the ideal place to be born to become a cultural awareness expert. South of Russia, East of Turkey, West of Iran, and North of Iraq, Azerbaijan has been a cultural crossroads for centuries. The Azeri language that Mahir grew up with is Turkic. He was raised a secular Shi'ite (yes, there are secular Shi'ites). Having been drafted into the Soviet (in those days) Army at a very young age, he learned about the abuses of communism first hand. Moreover, as an Azeri in the Soviet Army, he learned a great deal about the prejudices that exist in the region.

Determined to make a better life, Mahir became an avid student – taking every course available to him. He even became a dentist at one point. Not satisfied that this field of study would

enable him to change his life, he went back to school, eventually obtaining a Ph.D. from the Academy of Social Sciences of Moscow in International Relations, specializing in Middle Eastern studies. Mahir, like so many young people, wanted to change the world for the better. In particular, he wanted to see his native Azerbaijan become a democracy.

The oppression of the Russians, after the fall of the Soviet Union, and an ugly enduring war with Armenia, left Azerbaijan vitiated. Without hope of reaching his dream of freedom and opportunity, Mahir left Azerbaijan in 1993 and came to America. In the beginning, he served at his country's newly opened embassy in Washington. In time, he realized that he could not live in Azerbaijan anymore. His dream of democracy was in America.

Mahir became an instructor of cultural awareness and languages at our State Department. For four years he helped prepare diplomats to serve in foreign countries. Mahir enjoyed this work, but did not feel that he was reaching his potential. He wanted

to give more. The year in Iraq made him feel more satisfied. With the assistance of Senator Inhofe, who met Mahir in Washington, he finally received his U.S. citizenship. Although this was the greatest day in Mahir's life, he still had not found his home in America. The D.C. area is rich with opportunity, but its fast paced indifference lacked the hospitality Mahir looked for in his new home.

When Northrop Grumman invited Mahir to come out to Lawton, Oklahoma, to interview for a position as a cultural and language instructor, Mahir did not know what he would find. He had never traveled to the Midwest. To his surprise, this was the America he had been looking for. Mahir says, "I immediately loved the big sky, the open farmlands, and the friendly people." He was impressed that although most people he met did not know where Azerbaijan sits on the map, they were no less happy to meet him. "The people are good and kind and very patriotic," Mahir says. "I immediately felt at home here."

Mahir's personal philosophy has always been about results. Following the traditional Middle Eastern approach, Mahir says, "Talk is talk; what matters is what happens." "The result is the most important thing," he always says. A colorful personality, Mahir loves music and dance. He greatly enjoys the region's music and has a "fascination" with the Texas Two-Step. According to Mahir, everything is better in Middle America.

Mahir's work as a cultural, regional, and language instructor is more satisfying as well. Mahir knows that he is making a positive difference for our American soldiers. He wants to make them feel more comfortable about their deployment. Most of all, he wants to ensure that they are prepared to interact in a safe way with the Iraqi and Afghan people.

Inside the Lawton community, Mahir has already begun to reach out to organizations – always volunteering to come and speak at clubs and churches when asked. Mahir believes that it is the responsibility of moderate Islam to help stop violence in the world.

Mahir says, “Working with all our brothers and sisters who are Christians, the followers of Islam can play a major role in curtailing violence around the world.” Mahir sees himself as an agent of peace. Although there is so much violence in the world, he says, “World peace is so much easier to imagine, when you live in the friendly setting of Lawton, OK.”

Mahir’s book is a wonderful tribute to strength of spirit. Although challenged with a multitude of obstacles throughout his life, Mahir enthusiastically engaged them all. Armed with faith in the one kind and loving God of all humanity, he fearlessly embarked upon a journey that would take him through some of the world’s most fascinating history. His resulting life is a testament to change and adaptation. His book captures his warm personality, unfaltering determination, noble humility, and contagious optimism. I hope that everyone will enjoy Mahir’s journey and learn, as I did, that wisdom is a never ending pursuit.