

KHOJALY

by Thomas Goltz

February 26th, 1992 seemed like a regular working day. Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati was back in town to finally bestow diplomatic recognition on Azerbaijan, as well as to respond to American Secretary of State James Baker III's recent comments about the growing threat of Iranian influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

It was not the Islamic Republic of Iran that posed any threat to the region, intoned the wiry Iranian emissary, but the United States America. In addition to being the country responsible for the continued bloodshed throughout the world, it was America that was actively fomenting conflict in Karabakh. The Islamic Republic, in contrast, was a country interested in peace between nations and peoples. To that end, Dr. Velayati had brought a peace plan for the increasingly bloody and senseless conflict in Karabakh-and one both Armenia and Azerbaijan had agreed to sign. He himself planned to visit Karabakh the next day.

This was newsworthy, and I was getting ready to file a story on the subject to the Washington Post when Hicran came rushing into my work room. She had been on the telephone with the information section of the Popular Front, and had some very distressing news: sources in Agdam were reporting a stream of Azeri refugees from Karabakh filling the streets of the city, fleeing a massive attack. There had been many exaggerated reports about the conflict germinated from both sides, and perhaps this was just another, but I thought it best to start working the phone. Strangely, no one in government answered. Perhaps they were all at the Gulistan complex, having dinner with the Iranian delegation. So I waited for a while, and then started calling people at home. Around midnight, I got through to Vafa Gulizade.

"Sorry for calling so late," I apologized. "But what about this rumor?" "I can't talk about it," said Vafa, cutting me off and hanging up.

A sense of unease filled my gut. Vafa was usually polite to a fault. Perhaps he was sleeping? I decided to call again anyway, but the number stayed busy for the next half hour. Maybe he left it off the hook, I thought, and made one last effort and the call rang through.

"Vafa," I said, apologizing again. "What is going on?"

"Something very terrible has happened," he groaned.

"What?" I demanded.

"There has been a massacre," he said.

"Where?"

"In Karabakh, a town called Xodjali," he said, and then he hung up the phone again.

Xodjali.

I had been there before. Twice, in fact. The first time was in September, when we had staked out the airport waiting for Boris Yeltsin to come through. The last time had been a month before, in January, 1992. By then the only way to get to Xodjali was by helicopter because the Armenians had severed the road link to Agdam. I remembered that little adventure all too well. Doubting the many reports from the Armenian side that the Azeris were massively armed and that their helicopters were 'buzzing' Armenian villages in the territory for fun and terror, I had traveled out to Agdam with Hugh Pope of the (London) Independent to chat with refugees about their situation.

Refugees were easy to find at Agdam. They were all over the place. The heaviest concentration was at the local airfield for the simple reason that many of the refugees didn't want to be refugees anymore: they were going back to their homes in Xodjali. Their pride had silenced their better sense. One was a 35-year old mother of four by the name of Zumrut Ezova. When I asked why she was returning, she said it was better 'to die in Karabakh' than beg in the streets of Agdam.

"Why can't the government open the road?" shouted Zumrut in my ear over the roar of the nearby chopper's engines, "Why are they making us fly in like ducks, ready to get shot?"

I didn't have an answer.

Then someone was lurching toward me from across the airfield. It was Alef Khadjiev, the commander of airport security at Xodjali and the gentleman who had saved us from the Agdam drunks during the Yeltsin visit three months before. He had been pretty chipper then, but despite his broad smile for me, he was no longer fun and games. I asked him what the situation was in his hometown.

"Come on," said Khadjiev. "Let's go to Xodjali--then you can see for yourself, and write the truth if you dare."

Behind him stood a MI-8 helicopter, its blades slowly turning. A mass of refugees were clawing their way aboard. The chopper was already dangerously overloaded with humanity and food-stuff, and waiting on the tarmac was even more luggage, including a rusted, 70mm cannon and diverse boxes of ammunition.

"I'm not going," said Pope, "I've got a wife and kids."

The rotor began to twirl faster, and I had to decide quickly.

"See you later," I said, wondering if I ever would.

I got aboard, one of more than 50 people on a craft designed for 24, in addition to the various munitions and provisions. I thought to myself: this is insane; there is still time to get off. Then it was too late. With a lurch, we lifted off the ground and my stomach smashed through my ears.

I could see Pope waving at me while walking away from the field, and wished I was with him on terra firma. The MI-8 cork-screwed up to its flight altitude of 3500 feet-high enough to sail over the Askeron Gap to Xodjali and avoid Armenian ground fire. Two dozen helicopters had been hit over the past two months, including the crash/kill not only the one filled with officials in November, but another 'bird' a week before. The machine we were flying in had picked up a round through the fuel tank the week before, the flight engineer told me. It was lucky that fuel was low and the bullet came in high. This was all very reassuring to learn as we plugged on through the Askeron Gap, bucking into head-winds and sleet.

Through breaks in the cloud cover I could see trucks and automobiles driving the roads below-Armenian machines, fuelled by gas and diesel brought in via their own air-bridge from Armenia (or purchased from Azeri war profiteers).

Finally and mercifully, after a trip that seemed to take hours but really only lasted maybe 20 minutes, we began our corkscrew descent to the Xodjali airfield. No-one who has not been aboard such a flight can appreciate what I felt when the wheels touched ground.

I am alive! I wanted to shout, but thought it most appropriate to stay cool and act like I did such things twice a day.

"How do you feel?" Alef Khadjiev asked me.

"Normalno," I lied in Russian, cool as cake.

Meanwhile, the chopper was mobbed by residents-some coming to greet loved ones who had returned; others trying to be the first aboard the helicopter when it went back up and out. All were there to get the most recent news from the rest of Azerbaijan: newspapers, gossip, rumors.

The reason for the excitement was pretty obvious: there were no working phones in Xodjali, no working anything: no electricity, no heating oil and no running water. The only link with the outside world was the helicopter-and those were under threat with each run. The isolation of the place became all too apparent as night fell. I joined Khadjiev and some of his men in the make-shift mess hall of the tiny garrison, and while we dined on Soviet army SPAM with raw onions and stale bread to flickering candle light, he gave me what might be called a front-line briefing.

The situation was bad and getting worse, a depressed Khadjiev told me. The Armenians had taken all the outlying villages, one by one, over the past three months. Only two towns remained in Azeri hands: Xodjali and Shusha, and the road between them was cut. While I knew the situation was deteriorating, I had no idea it was so bad.

"It is because you believe what they say in Baku," Alef chortled. "We are being sold-out, utterly."

Baku could open the road to Agdam in a day if the government wanted to, he said. He now believed the government actually wanted the Karabakh business to simmer on to distract public attention while the elite continued to plunder the country.

"If you write that and attribute it to me, I'll deny it," he said. "But it's true."

The 60 odd men under his command lacked both the weapons and training to defend the straggling perimeter. The only Azeri soldiers worth their salt were four veterans from the Soviet war in Afghanistan who had volunteered to try and bring some discipline into the ranks of the defenders. The rest were green-horns-if the Armenians shot off one round, they would answer with a barrage of fire and waste half their precious ammunition. So it was that night: around two AM, I was awoken from my sleep by a distant burst of fire coming from the direction of a neighboring Armenian town called Laraguk, about 500 yards away from a part of Xodjali called, ironically enough, 'Helsinki Houses.' The Armenian sniper fire was returned with at least 100 rounds from the Azeri side, including bursts of cannon fire from an old BTR, newly acquired from some Russian deserter. It was the only mechanized weaponry I saw in the hands of the Azeris. The fire-fight continued sporadically until dawn, making it impossible to sleep. No-one knew when the Armenians would make their final push to take the town; everyone knew that some night they would. Xodjali controlled the Stepanakert airport and was clearly a major objective for the Armenians. They had to take it. I thought to myself: I would, if I were them. With that thought came another that filled me with unease: what would the residents do when they did?

In the morning, people were just standing around-literally. There was not a single tea shop or restaurant to idle away the time, so people just stood in small knots in the mud and gravel streets, waiting. The only person I saw actually do something was a very fat girl who worked as a sales clerk in the fabric shop where there was nothing to sell. I first saw her rapidly waddling to work at nine in the morning; the intensity of purpose was unique, so I followed her into her shop. I next saw in a video, lying dead on the ground with a pile of others-but that was later. The rest just waited around, waiting for the ax to fall. I just prayed that it wouldn't be while I was there.

We wasted the morning away around the airport; a photographer from an Azeri news agency happened to be around, so the military boys put on a good show, rolling out of their bunkers and running behind the old BTR, guns blazing. 'Let's do it again, but this time, let me take pictures from the front,' the cameraman asked.

I felt sick and refused to have anything to do with the theatrics. 'These guys are going to die,' I said to myself. 'And I do not want to die with them just because they are so stupid to be shooting at shadows that shoot back.' Alef Khadjiev seemed to agree. We sat together in silence, watching his men pose for the camera, running hither and yon with brave looks carved on their physiognomies.

'Let's try that one again!' crowed the photographer.

There was not much else to say.

Finally, around noon, I heard the tell-tale whine of a chopper moving high over the Gap. Thank God! crowed, but tried to look indifferent. Then I made my way toward the airfield, and just in time to see the overloaded bird disgorge its cargo of food, weapons and returning refugees. One

kid got off with a canary in a cage, or maybe he was getting on. I think it was the former, but honestly, I cannot say for sure. There were a lot of people at the airport, trying to get on and off that lone bird, and I was merely one of them.

When those getting on seemed to be more than those getting off, I tried to get on myself. I didn't care that the chopper was carrying twice or three times its weight limit, nor did I mind that part of that weight was a corpse-one of Khadjiev's boys picked off by a sniper the night before. I wondered if we had had Soviet-style SPAM dinner together, but thought it impolite to pull back the death-sheet and stare. The engines gunned and whined, and we lifted with a lurch-but this time I was not afraid of the flight. I just wanted out. We climbed and climbed, cork-screwing high into the sky and blowing over the Askeron Gap at 3500 feet with tail-winds. Maybe we took ground fire; I do not know. But this I did: I would never go back to Xodjali again.

There were no need for vows.

The last helicopter flight into the surrounded town was on February 13th.

The last food, save for locally grown potatoes, ran out on the 21st.

The clock was ticking quickly toward doom.

It struck on the night of February 26--the anniversary of the massacre of Armenians at Sumgait in 1988. Only this time, vengeance would demand not an eye for an eye, but whole human heads.

We were in the car at seven and drove as quickly as we could across the monotonous flats of central Azerbaijan. Brown cotton fields belonging to collective farms stretched to the horizon in all directions, and men stood along the roadside waving dead ducks at us as we roared by. We stopped for gas at a town named Terter and asked the local mayor what was happening in Agdam. He said he didn't know anything. We stopped again in another town called Barda, and again took a moment to inquire about events and rumors. Clueless looks greeted us. We were starting to think that the whole thing was an exaggerated bum-steer when we arrived in Agdam and drove into the middle of town, looking for a bite to eat. It was there that we ran into the refugees. There were ten, then twenty then hundreds of screaming, wailing residents of Xodjali. Many recognized me because of my previous visits to the town. They clutched at my clothes, babbling out the names of their dead relatives and friends and dragged me to the morgue attached to the main mosque in town to show me bodies of their relatives.

At first we found it hard to believe what the survivors were saying: the Armenians had surrounded Xodjali and delivered an ultimatum: get out or die. Then came a babble of details of the last days, many concerning Commander Alef Khadjiev.

Sensing doom, Alef had begged the government to bring in choppers to save at least some of the non-combatants, but Baku had done nothing. Then, on the night of February 25th, Armenian fedayeen hit the town from three sides. The fourth had been left open, creating a funnel through which refugees might flee. Alef gave the order to evacuate: the fighting men would run

interference along the hillside of the Gorgor River valley, while the women and children and gray-beards escaped below. Groping their way through the night under fire, by the morning of February 26th, the refugees made it to the outskirts of a village called Nakhjivanli, on the cusp of Karabakh. They crossed a road and began working their way downhill toward the forward Azeri lines and the city Agdam, now only some six miles away via the Azeri outpost at Shelli.

It was there, in the hillocks and within sight of safety, that something horrible awaited them: a gauntlet of lead and fire. "They just shot and shot and shot," wailed a woman named Raisha Aslanova. She said her husband and a son-in-law were killed in front of her and that her daughter was missing.

Scores, hundreds, possibly a thousand were slaughtered in a turkey-shoot of civilians and their handful of defenders. Aside from counting every body there was no way to tell-and most of the bodies remained out of reach, in the no-man's land between the lines that had become a killing zone and a picnic site for crows.

One thousand dead in one night? It seemed impossible. But when we began cross-referencing, the wild claims about the extent of the killing began to look all too true. The local religious leader in Agdam, Imam Sadik Sadikov, broke down in tears as he tallied the names of the registered dead on an abacus. There were 477 that day, a number that did not include those missing and presumed dead, nor those victims whose entire families had been wiped out and thus had no one to register them as dead before God. The number 477 represented only the number of confirmed dead by survivors who had made it to Agdam and were physically able to fulfill, however imperfectly, the Muslim practice of burying the dead within 24 hours.

Elif Kaban of Reuters was stunned into silliness. My wife Hicran was paralyzed. Photographer Oleg Litvin fell into a catatonic state and would only shoot pictures when I threw him at the subject: corpses, graves, and wailing women who were gouging their cheeks with their nails. Yes, it required stomach-but it was time to work, to report: a massacre had occurred, and the world had to know. We scoured the town, making repeated stops at the hospital, morgue and growing graveyards, out to the ends of the defensive perimeter to make horrible spot-interviews with straggling survivors as they stumbled in, and then went back to the hospital to check on new wounded and then back to the morgue to watch truck-loads of bodies be brought in for identification and ritual washing before burial. I looked for familiar faces, and thought I saw some but could not be sure: one corpse was identified as that belonging to a young veterinarian, who had been shot through the eye at point-blank range; I tried to remember if I had known or been introduced to such a man in Xodjali, but could not be sure. Other bodies, stiffened by rigor mortis, seemed to speak of execution: arms were thrown up as if in permanent surrender. A number of heads lacked hair, as if the corpses had been scalped. It was not a pretty day.

Toward late afternoon, someone mentioned that a military helicopter on loan from the Russian garrison at Ganje would be making a flight over the killing fields, and so we traveled out to the airport. There was no flight, but there I found old friends.

"Tomas," a man in military uniform gasped, and grabbed me in an embrace, and wept. "Nash Nachalnik..."

I recognized him as one of Alef Khadjiev's boys, a pimply-faced boy from Baku who had described himself as a banker before he had volunteered for duty in Karabakh. He was speaking in Russian, babbling-but one word got through the tears: the commander...

A few other survivors from the Xodjali garrison stumbled over and seized me. Of the forty odd men under Alef Khadjiev's command, only ten were left alive. Dirty, exhausted and exuding what can only be described as survivor's guilt, they pieced together the awful night and next day-and the death of their commander, Alef Khadjiev. He was killed by a bullet to the brain while defending the women and children; most of the women and children died anyway.

Toward evening, we returned to the government guest house in the middle of town to look for a telephone, and there we met a drained and exhausted Tamerlan Garayev. A native of Agdam, the deputy speaker of parliament was one of the few government officials of any sort I saw there. He was interrogating two Turkmen deserters from the Stepanakert-based 366th Motorized Infantry Brigade of the Russian Interior Ministry forces. They had taken refuge in Xodjali a week before. The last element of the tragedy suddenly clicked into place: it was not only the Armenians who had assaulted the doomed town, but the Russians.

"Talk, talk!" said Tamerlan, as the two men stared at us.

"We ran away because the Armenian and Russian officers beat us because we were Muslims," one of the pair, a man named Agamuhammad Mutif related. "We just wanted to go home to Turkmenistan."

"Then what happened?" Tamerlan demanded.

"Then they attacked the town," said the other. "We recognized vehicles from our unit."

I thought of Commander Sergei Shukrin, and wondered if he had been involved. The two fled along with everyone else in the town, and were helping a group of women and children escape through the mountains when they were discovered by the Armenians and 366th.

"They opened fire and at least twelve were killed in our group alone," Mutif related. "After that, we just ran and ran."

A Russian-backed assault by Armenians on an Azeri town, resulting in up to one thousand dead?

This was news. But it was at this point that things started becoming very strange. No-one seemed very interested in the story we had stumbled on. Apparently, the idea that the roles of the good-guys and bad guys had been reversed was too much: Armenians slaughtering Azeris?

"You are suggesting that more people have died in one attack in Karabakh than the total number we have reported killed over the past four years?" said the BBC's Moscow correspondent when I tipped him on the slaughter.

"That's impossible."

"Take a look at Reuters!"

"There's nothing on the wire."

Indeed. While Elif Kaban was churning out copy on her portable telex, nothing was appearing on the wires. Either someone was spiking copy, or was rolling it into larger, anodyne regional reports of 'conflicting allegations'. To be fair, the government and press in Baku didn't exactly assist in supporting our reporting. While we were off in Agdam trying to get out the news, the presidential spokesman was claiming that Xodjali's scrappy defenders had beaten back an Armenian attack and suffered only two dead. Just a regular night in Mountainous Karabakh. We knew differently, but it was the three of us against the Azerbaijani state lie machine. Finally, I got a line through to the Moscow bureau of the Washington Post and said I wanted to file a story. The staffers there were too busy to take a dictation, but reluctantly patched me through to the foreign desk in Washington when I insisted. I used 477 as the number of dead, as religiously reported to Imam Sadikov, and was dragged over the coals by editors: where did I get this number from when Baku was still reporting that only two had died? Had I seen all the bodies? What about a little balance? The Armenian press was reporting a 'massive Azeri offensive.' Why wasn't that in my report?

I was about to answer that this bit of information was not in my report for the very good reason that it had not happened when the first Kristal missile crashed into Agdam, about a mile away from the government guest house I was calling from. Then came others and when one crashed into the building next door and blew out all the windows in our downtown dacha we thought it best to get off the phone and into the basement before we were blown to smithereens. After about an hour of huddling under mattresses we came up for air and decided it was probably a good idea to leave Agdam. So did about 50,000 other people, and we discovered ourselves in the middle of a mass exodus of trucks, cars, horses and people on bicycles, all trying to flee East.

I broke the story about the Xodjali massacre with a February 27, world exclusive on an inside page in the Washington Post. This was followed with a 'European' front page of the London Sunday Times. By then, the international hack-pack had started parachuting in to count the bodies and confirm that something very awful had happened. The first western reporter to actually get out into the killing fields and perform the grisly task of checking documents on the dead was Anatol Lieven of the London Times. His companion in the task was the late Rory Peck of Frontline News, another cool professional and dear friend. Others performed less well. One best nameless reporter from Ajans France Press arrived in Agdam the night we left and found the city 'quiet,' apparently having confused the silence that followed the missile-induced exodus of 50,000 people with peacefulness. Still another, while a guest at my house, abused the

confidence of Vafa Gulizade by grossly misquoting him. At the height of the crisis, Douglas Kennedy, son of Robert, showed up with a KGB-minder/translator from St. Petersburg, and thought he might do a little poking around the Front for amusement. After convincing him that his translator would probably get killed by a mob, Kennedy took my advice and hired two local lads, and then refused to pay them.

The government of Azerbaijan, meanwhile, had performed a complete about-face on the issue. The same people who had remained unavailable during the early days of the crisis were suddenly asking me to provide numbers of foreign correspondents in Moscow whom they could invite down, at government expense, to report on the massacre.

I did not react very well. I almost physically assaulted the presidential press secretary, Rasim Agaev, and publicly accused him of lying. The spokesman was not pleased and began a rumor that I was an Armenian spy sent to Xodjali to ferret out 'military secrets' during my January visit to the doomed town. I was temporally detained thanks to that charge, and started to slid into a very bad mood. When I was released I went downtown and found myself sitting around a commercial shop with a bunch of black marketeers, vaguely waiting for rubles to arrive in exchange for my dollars, when the whole thing hit me and hit me hard. The evening streets were still filled with smiling shoppers, apparently oblivious or even indifferent to the fate of the citizens of Xodjali. It was the same men in leather jackets and the same women with far too much rouge on their cheeks and they were all smiling and laughing and parading and I have to say I hated them all. Maybe they didn't know what I did. Maybe they knew but didn't care lest it drive them insane. It was not clear and neither was my brain.

I canceled the dollar deal, walked out of the shop and wandered the streets. I think it rained, but I cannot be sure. I wandered and wandered, unable to stop anywhere or see or talk to anyone for hours and hours.

"Ha ha," someone cackled, as they leaned toward their gal, or turned on the key to their car.

"Ho ho," someone else chortled as they lurched out of a Komisyon shop, bottle of Finnish vodka under the arm.

I wanted to slash their tires, smash their noses, burn their houses-do something, and violently. I did nothing but wander the streets and avoid humanity. It was better like that. Then I got home I sat down and poured myself a long drink and drank it and Hicran asked me where I'd been.

"Xodjali," someone said in a voice I didn't know.

I was there with the ghosts in a dumpy town with no food to speak of or water to wash and all the people I knew or had known there were dead dead dead and I just started to cry and cry and cry.

There weren't too many bodies. Most were still in the hills, waiting for the higher temperatures of spring for rot to set. Some, the few, were being spaded into the shallow ground of the growing Martyrs' Cemetery across from the parliament building in Baku. One of those was Alef Khadjiev. I liked to think of him as a friend because we had consumed a few drinks together. A jocular cop with a big swagger and smile, Alef had managed to galvanize the Xodjali community around him in the belief that despite the odds and an almost total lack of support from Baku they could hang on and survive. But now Alef Khadjiev was dead. He had bought a bullet through the brain and after rotting for a week in the mountains of the Black Garden his body was bought for 100 liters of gasoline and then brought back to Baku to be buried with military honors.

Despite the proximity of the parliament across the street no-one from the government came to the funeral and maybe that was out of good taste because had they been there, whispering eulogies about courage and fortitude, Alef, the hero and then martyr of Xodjali, might have broken free of the bonds of death and climbed out of his grave and strangled the hypocrites with his own cold hands. He was that sort of guy.

But they weren't there and the funeral procession was small because Alef was a native of Xodjali and all or at least most of the would-be mourners were either dead or had become refugees, and had to be brought to Baku by truck or bus or train for the last rites.

The exception was Alef's widow, Gala, a chubby Russian girl with a hint of a mustache who lived in Baku. We had met in Agdam in the aftermath of the massacre and she refused to believe that her husband was dead. Aside from an overwhelming sense of grief she was frightened out of her wits, wondering how she could live without him.

"I'm just a Russian, a Russian!" she cried. "And now everyone looks at me with hatred in their eyes!" That was in Agdam when anyone who wasn't speaking Azeri was indeed being looked at through the evil eye.

I gave her my telephone number in Baku and told her to call if there was anything I could do. She called a few days later, babbling into the phone.

"Tomas," she wailed. "Alef is here."

At first I thought a miracle of mistaken identity had occurred and that Alef was still alive. But Gala was only calling to tell me that Alef's remains had been recovered in an exchange with the Armenians for several dozen gallons of gasoline, and then been shipped to Baku for burial. It was tough for me to understand her Russian on the telephone and probably a lot tougher for her to have to pick up the phone at all. But she stayed coherent long enough to give me her address and the time of the funeral procession. I went, not knowing what to expect: A week old cadaver in the living room? Mutilated like others? Scalped like some? I got in a taxi and traveled through a wasteland of hissing, blue and pink stuff-belching pipes of the oil refining area of Baku, driving over streets that had seemingly never seen repair. We drove and drove and it was a drive though an utterly depressing landscape, the sort that no-one ever sees, or admits to having seen: broken, diseased and bad. It was as much a symbol of the rapacity and ugliness of the regime in Baku as the corpses in Agdam had been. How can you allow people to live and die like this?

Complicating my dark mood was the fact that the Azeri taxi driver only wanted to make jokes, and in Russian. I told him what I thought. I told him I was going to find the funeral of my friend, Alef Khadjiev, Martyr of Karabakh, and that all the people of Baku were greedy cowards and that only the good men died and the filth remained behind. He agreed, refusing to take any money for the ride. It was his contribution to national defense, or something.

I got out of the taxi in front of a series of high-rise Soviet-style buildings-the ones designed so that the toilet is in a separate room from the sink. Degrading, like everything else around what was the USSR. Walking through the mourners I saw people I knew or at least recognized and embraced them. Then I saw Gala. She was standing in back of a truck carrying the flag-draped coffin and holding the hand of her smiling child who was still oblivious to what had happened to her father. I said something stupid like 'be strong.' I tried to plant a hand-extended kiss on the coffin perched on the back of the truck but I couldn't reach it and decided against climbing up on the truck and just waited for the procession to proceed.

There were plenty of people crying. Everyone but me. My eyes were dry; I don't know why. Then someone somewhere responsible for formalities gave the word and the column started out toward the Martyrs' Cemetery in the heights above Baku. The funeral train in was the same as my journey out, although the route was different: another broken road leading through another industrial wasteland. It was Alef's route to anywhere, nowhere, death.

We arrived at the Shehidler Xiyabani, or Martyrs' Lane cemetery, the place where victims of the Soviet army crack-down on January 20th, 1990 were buried in a long line along a granite wall shaded by dwarf Cyprus trees and pine. I had visited the cemetery before and I have visited it since but it was different this time. I wasn't there as a journalist covering the event or even a political/cultural tourist. I was there as a mourner, mourning Alef Khadjiev, the most recent addition to the second tier of graves, where the dates of death are different than in the first row. There was no third row, then. a place that would and will continue to grow.

Alef's was the 127th grave then, a hole in the ground surrounded by freshly dug earth. His casket was lifted down from the truck and I joined the pall-bearers as they hoisted it on their shoulders and brought Alef's remains down the line as a local man of religion recited the 'Fatihah', or Muslim creed of faith. This was odd because I was not sure whether Alef was a Muslim except in the formal sense of the word. He never expressed anything approaching piety to me. When he was alive he was a drinking man, although he didn't smoke. This was really odd, because Azeris usually smoke all the time, even at funerals. And the strangest thing about Alef was that he certainly didn't like Turks. He once told me that he had found too many 'Made In Turkey' labels in the trash cans of Stepanakert to believe in any pan-Turkic ideal.

I was thinking thought like this because I was remembering, which is what you are supposed to do when you punch bodies in the ground. Alef Khadjiev was about to become the first of a whole string of people I knew who died violently over the next few years, so he got more thought than most.

Alef's wife Gala and her Russian relatives were confused by the ritual placement of the body, the pious incantations and the fact that the week-old corpse had to be lifted out of the casket to be put in the hole dug in the muddy ground. They put the body in. An honor guard clicked their heels, slapped dummy slugs in their Kaleshnikovs, and let off three volleys. The empty shells fell clattering on the granite walkway. I picked up one and put it in my pocket. Then the family and intimate friends began covering the body with dirt and the wailing really began. Women ripped their cheeks with their nails and men sobbed last regards. I was invited to say something into the grave but declined. I had quite a bit to say but I didn't want to say it, even in a language no one would understand. Cultural differences and all. I would do it differently today.

Then another, larger funeral procession started moving down Martyrs' Row. They were heading for the shallow grave next to Alef's. It was the corner spot and the next corpse would start a new row, even then being dug among the dwarf Cyprus trees in anticipation for the next to die in the Black Garden, that horrible place called Karabakh. More young men would soon lie here and their numbers would soon exceed all those killed at Xodjali and the events of February 25th and 26th, 1992 would soon become just a detail, just another grim statistic in the on-going litany of death and destruction in Karabakh, the Black Garden.

I swore I would remember Alef and all the others, whose names I never knew but whose faces were etched on my memory forever.

Yes, I would remember Xodjali.

It was a dump. But now it was dead.

Thomas GOLTZ
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