

March 14, 2007

TRAVEL TO ARMENIA

Day 5 Diary from Lila Tocci

“Crossed the border” sounds simple but entails driving to the border between Georgia and Armenia, obtaining an exit visa from Georgia at the first kiosk, having your visa for Armenia approved at the next kiosk, and at the final kiosk, registering as you enter Armenia. We said goodbye to our faithful Georgian chauffeurs, then shifted luggage to the three small Russian 4-wheel drives called Nivas for the drive into Tavush.

The World Vision literature describes the region best: “A war-torn, poverty-stricken area in the north east of Armenia, where the remote location, poor roads, lack of communication systems and insecurity with neighboring Azerbaijan hinder economic development and contribute to wide-spread poverty and high unemployment.”



Armenian village that World Vision is working in

Our trip into Armenia took us over winding mountain roads in the “No Stop Zone” (never, for any reason) where the byway is the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Azeri fortifications and Armenian trenches are tucked into the hillside where hostilities are expected to resume in the spring.

There was an impalpable sadness. We saw the tumbled rock remains of an Azeri village, Armenians forced them out. So many men were hanging out on the street corners in small groups, talking, waiting, bent over the hood of a stubborn car. Occasionally we passed a man with three or four cows. The villages on the main road are not so bad off, the traffic creates opportunities that mountain villages don't have.



Scores of guys waiting to work, this was only about 10%!

I asked the World Vision Program Manager, Curt von Boguslawski, about the young people. “The ones who can, get out, usually to Russia. If we're lucky, they return. Once they return, they never leave. They come back to Tavush with a bit of money and buy property.”



Curt von Boguslawski, World Vision Program Manager

So what is World Vision doing here, in this remote and seemingly forgotten enclave? They have set up a local office with programs on health and nutrition and introduced a child sponsorship program. Most importantly, they have helped establish forty Civic Action Groups where the citizens assess their own needs and receive help with development planning, proposal writing and fundraising.

We saw the results of one such project at a farm cooperative. The farmers pooled their pastureland, own cattle and an additional 25 cows, in various stages of pregnancy, given to them by World Vision. Part of the World Vision support required that the farmers donate a certain number of gallons of milk to the local kindergarten each week. The cooperative decided it could improve its economic viability by having its own milk pasteurization and slaughterhouse. They have also realized the need to find markets other than the local population and are hoping to raise more beef cattle.



Cooperative farm project! Former farm girl, Lila Tocci, is at home with the cows

One big gain from World Vision involvement and instruction has been disease prevention and early intervention. Farmers see the importance of ventilation in the barns to improve air circulation and reduce heat and dampness.

Next we went to an older school building, again unheated except for one room where a sewing cooperative worked. Using donated commercial sewing machines women with no other means of support were making sheets and other linens. Part of their deal was that a certain number of sheets had to be made for the local kindergarten.



Sewing Cooperative - they are making sheets for local Kindergartens

Kindergartens in Armenia seem to include pre-school. Naps are mandatory. They aren't the "rest on a little carpet square with a head cushion type" but are full hour long taken in a youth size bed with mattress,



sheets and comforter. When not in use the beds are stacked against the walls, three high in trundle-bed fashion. Fresh new sheets are very helpful indeed!

Our visit ended with Armenian coffee made on the ubiquitous wood stove right there in the workshop. The youngest woman prepared and poured, using the customary demitasse, accompanied with chocolates. We were shown gracious hospitality throughout both countries. It is humbling when people with so little share so freely.



Everywhere we went we were shown such gracious hospitality