

UC Focus

Published for the faculty and staff of the University of California by the Office of the President

Vol. 6, No. 1 September/October 1991

Postcard from Armenia

Academic venture brings UC to Yerevan

On Dec. 7, 1988, an earthquake, measuring 6.9 on the Richter scale, destroyed the Polytechnic Institute in Leninakan, Armenia, killing 300 faculty, staff and students.

From that rubble emerged the idea for a new American University of Armenia (AUA), a private university of technology and business. To help launch the new institution, Armenian Americans recruited technical assistance from UC and its faculty.

This fall, the new university opened its doors at a temporary site in Yerevan, the Armenian capital.

For three weeks in August, UC's Theory Condos was in Armenia to screen 102 applicants for graduate programs in earthquake engineering, industrial engineering and business management. Condos is special assistant to William R. Frazer, senior vice president for academic affairs.

The following is an account of her experiences, including the historic coup attempt in Moscow.

By Theory Condos

August is hot in Armenia. The heat is mesmerizing and every day seems to be a

copy of the one before. By 8 a.m., the temperature is at least 80 degrees. By early afternoon, it is hovering around 105.

Yerevan is located on a 4,000 foot plateau in the Caucasus Mountains. On a clear day, Mount Ararat is visible to the south-east. Unfortunately, there were no clear days during my stay. The heat, combined with automobile exhaust - auto emission controls are unknown here - and fumes from various industrial installations, gave the air a brownish, hazy cast.

Each day began with breakfast at the hotel: tea, tomatoes, cucumbers, yogurt,

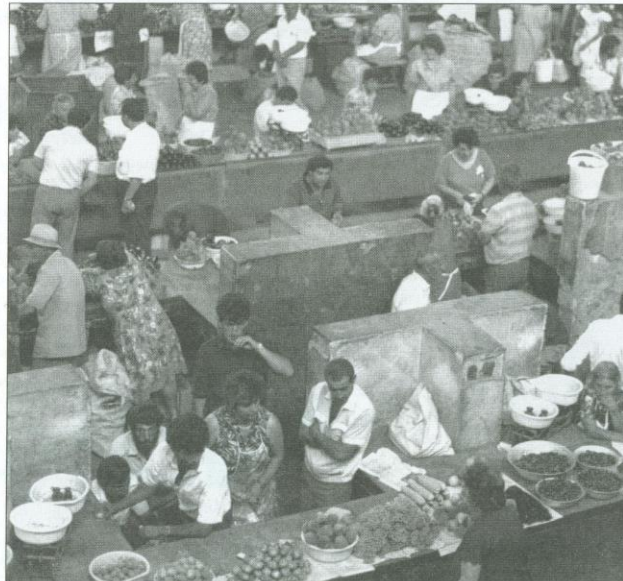


Photo by Theory Condos

In Yerevan, the home of the new American University of Armenia, the public market offers an abundance of fresh produce that is less varied than in California, but unequalled in taste.

cheese, and brown bread. The rest of the day was totally unpredictable.

The first task was to get to the university offices, located about one mile away - all uphill.

There are a few taxis in Yerevan, but since there are no identifiable taxi stands or telephone directories, calling a cab is not an option. One stands on the street in the hope that an empty taxi will come by. If it does not, then perhaps a passing motorist will stop. I met an interesting assortment of local inhabitants in this way.

Once at the office, we would go about

our various tasks in the certainty that whatever the program for the day, it would have to be adjusted. My first day in the office was typical. Three members of the local staff had not been paid for over six weeks because the bank which held the AUA account kept running out of cash.

In this corner of the Soviet Union, at least, there are no checking accounts. You can go into a bank at almost any time to deposit funds in an account. You cannot, however, withdraw any amount unless you give the bank 24-hours notice. Even so, you

Continued on page 8, col. 1

Day's events unpredictable in Armenia

Continued from page 1

must arrive at the bank before it runs out of cash for the day. It took another three days before the AUA staff finally received their salaries.

We normally skipped lunch, opting for a more leisurely evening meal. Food is plentiful in Yerevan. The public market is open daily and features the best produce in season, along with meat, fish, and live chickens.

In August, the stalls offer tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplant, peppers, figs, pears, peaches, melons, and grapes in abundance. Fresh fruits and vegetables in Armenia are less varied than in California, but unequalled for taste.

Meat is typically lamb, sometimes pork or chicken, skewered and barbecued. Whatever is placed on the table will be accompanied by a dish of fresh herbs – basil, dill, cilantro, and flat-leaf parsley. Armenians drink wine, but more often vodka or the local brandy, interrupting the meal repeatedly to offer toasts.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Armenia for me was the landscape. Armenia is an ancient land, and its antiquity is palpable. For example, the citadel of Erebuni, which still stands on a hill overlooking Yerevan, was established in the 8th century B.C.

Latin and Greek coins and inscriptions in the National Museum and a Roman temple 25 kilometers east of Yerevan are a reminder that the armies of Alexander the Great and of Rome marched through these mountains.

I am convinced that many of the cultural differences that struck me were conditioned by the antiquity of the land: the ritual sacrifice of animals, for example, which can be observed on any Sunday, and the attitude toward women, who, even though they are given access to higher education, are, in general, not taken very seriously.

Emblematic of Armenian determination in the face of obstacles was the reaction to



Theony Condos

Photo by Paul West

a traffic backup we encountered one Sunday afternoon. An accident involving two cars and an ambulance blocked one of the two lanes on our side of the highway. Two lanes of cars immediately crossed the 15 foot-wide median strip and drove down the other side of the highway, forcing oncoming traffic onto the shoulder.

Part of my assignment in Armenia was to evaluate the English proficiency of the AUA applicants since English is the language of instruction. This I did by interviewing candidates individually, after reviewing their academic records. An impressive 85 percent of the applicants communicated fairly well in English.

The academic plan called for accepting 25 students into the two engineering programs and the business program offered, but this turned out to be impossible, as 80 percent of the applications were for the business program. I tried to get at the reasons for this during the interviews and learned that setting up a joint venture with a foreign company is viewed by many young Armenians as the best way to help their country enter the Western economic system.

By Monday, Aug. 19, my interviews were completed. I had only a few miscellaneous items to deal with before my departure on Thursday.

The day began as usual. We arrived at the office around 9 a.m. and were met by a rattled staff member. Radio Moscow had just announced that Gorbachev was no

longer president.

Following the announcement, there was nothing but classical music on Soviet radio and television. In the absence of fact, rumor became the news of the day: Gorbachev and his bodyguard had been shot; Yeltsin was fleeing for his life; the parliaments of the six independence-minded republics, which includes Armenia, were dissolved; two Red Army divisions were marching on Armenia; the borders were closed; all joint ventures with the U.S. were canceled – this, if true, would have affected AUA.

Early Monday evening, two of us were able to communicate by telephone with our families in California, who had slightly more information than we did. My anxiety subsided somewhat, but there were still doubts.

When the Red Army did not materialize on Tuesday morning, as rumored, I felt much relief.

Over the next few days, life seemed to return to normal. My flight left on time, with a scheduled a hour stop for refueling in the Crimea. The one hour stretched to two and a half hours, provoking some anxiety, but at last we were on our way.

The American University of Armenia is seeking visiting faculty to teach during the spring-summer session, May 25 to July 31. The university offers graduate programs leading to master's degrees in earthquake engineering, industrial engineering and business management.

Information concerning teaching positions in engineering can be obtained from Armen Der Kiureghian, professor of civil engineering at UC Berkeley, who is AUA dean of engineering, (510) 642-2469 and in business from Stepan Karamardian, former dean of the Graduate School of Management at UC Riverside, who is AUA dean of business and management, (415) 723-5576.