

Sumgait : 1988-2011

by Pietro Kuciukian

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In 1998, close to Lake Sevan in Armenia, I met an Armenian woman, working as a waitress in a restaurant, who told me her story: “I was born and lived in Sumgait, an Azeri city of 250,000 inhabitants. I studied industrial engineering in Moscow. In Sumgait I held a managerial position in a petrol-chemical complex. I lived in a flat in the centre with my mother, in a building inhabited by Turks and Armenians. For months it had been impossible to find vodka in the shops; Gorbachev had banned sales of alcohol. Three days before the massacre, vodka reappeared. That day, 27 February 1988, we all flocked to the main square where trucks were distributing free alcohol. A party leader kept yelling at the crowd with news of two Azeris being thrown out of the window of a house in Askeran, in Karabakh. People started to scream and I raced home. That afternoon a group of troublemakers attacked my apartment block; they were ordinary citizens, young people I didn’t know, workers and students of the Sumgait schools who were behaving worse than animals. My mother and I left our flat and took shelter in the house of our Turkish neighbours. These Turkish friends told me what was happening in town. The homes of the Armenians had all been marked with crosses so the hooligans would know exactly where to strike. They were smashing everything to pieces. They flung Armenians out the windows, wrapped them in truck tyres and set light to them alive. They raped women and girls. They had a list of the Armenian women giving birth in the hospitals and forced their way in, killing both the women and their babies. They broke down the doors of the houses, rolled the Armenians up in rugs and then hacked them to death with axes. For three days the police did nothing. In the end, the Red Army entered the city and the pogrom came to an end. We stayed in hiding for a year, sheltered by our Turkish neighbours.”

“Then what happened”, I asked, “did they arrest the perpetrators?”

“They held a trial and only one person was sentenced”.

“After a year”, continued the engineer waitress, “our Turkish friends advised us to leave; by then everyone suspected that we were guests in their house. I left my money, jewellery and gold with these friends, who drove us to the border with Georgia. From there we reached Armenia, as refugees. I have always felt terribly homesick, every year I have wanted to go back to Sumgait again, but my mother wouldn’t let me. Finally, last year, I made up my mind: for a month I pretended to be ill, then I told my mother that I was going to Moscow to find a cure. From Moscow I called my Turkish friends and I got on a flight for Baku. My friends came to fetch me at the airport. When the customs official saw my passport, he refused to let me through so I had to give him a hundred dollars. My friends took me to their house after covering my head with a scarf. My flat had had all the doors and windows broken, the furniture had been smashed. They told me that it had been assigned to some Azeri refugees from Karabakh. They gave me back all my possessions and I gave them the ring with the biggest diamond. Then they drove me back to the airport. There are still good people around”.

Twenty-three years after the tragic events in Sumgait, which sparked the war between Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan, the problem is once again in the news following the on-going tension in the sub-Caucasus. The problem of Nagorno Karabakh – still unresolved despite the truce signed between the opposing factions in 1994 – dates back to 20 February 1988, when the Armenians living in the autonomous province administered by the Azeris staged a series of peaceful demonstrations to demand the right to decide on their own future.

The Soviet of Nagorno Karabakh, with a majority Armenian population and assigned to Azerbaijan in 1923, voted a resolution calling for unification with Armenia. The Azerbaijan government’s reaction was violent: in February 1988, for 3 long days, Sumgait, a city far from Karabakh, was the scene of outrages and massacres against the Armenians, all of whom had been living in that area of Azerbaijan for centuries.

These events were followed by an armed conflict, which came to an end in 1994 when a fragile truce was signed, unlikely to guarantee lasting coexistence between the two peoples, especially in the border areas.

It is now hoped that the Minsk group, represented by the United States, Russia and France, can achieve concrete results in the peace negotiations, bringing tension on the borders between Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan to an end; this tension could easily lead to new clashes, which would be unbearable for people on both sides.

A peace accord is the only hope for future coexistence between the populations involved. But this result can only be achieved when people realize that they can effectively oppose the nationalistic policies that their own governments enforce in order to hold on to power.

In her preface to Samuel Chahamouradian's book *Le tragédie de Soumgait*, Elena Bonner Sakharova, writes: "Since I am half Jewish and half Armenian, I may not be the best person to write this preface, but rather that Azeri woman who rescued an Armenian family and said: "My son can see what I am doing, tomorrow he will do the same". "It is a warning for all of us, if we fail to ensure that every state is at the service of its people and not the people at the service of the state, however large or small, our children and our grandchildren will turn into herds of wild animals, like in Sumgait".

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