

# Talk to Me

BY KRISTI RENDAHL

There are people more qualified than I to write on the momentous occasion of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Armenian printing. Nonetheless, I've been given the honor of adding my two *dram* to the conversation. (As you know, they don't even make one *dram* coins, so take it for what it's worth.)



## WHAT HAVE I GOTTEN MYSELF INTO?

Let's start by establishing one thing: I talk a lot. And I talk to a lot of people. So, it won't surprise you that when I moved to Armenia three weeks after college graduation in 1997, I was beyond concerned about my ability to communicate.

Until a month or two before I left for Armenia, I had been slated for Albania. The Albanian language uses the Latin alphabet, which makes it more accessible than, say, Armenian. At least for the ignorant lass that I was at the time, and quite possibly still am. As

such, I'd learned useful words like *mirupafshim* (goodbye) in Albanian, which, incidentally, is the only word I can recall from my self-study.

The Peace Corps called one day, though, to say that I would not be going to Albania after all, due to instability in

the country. So much for the chest thumping I'd done in front of my father: "I will go until they tell me I cannot!" Well, they told me I cannot.

I'd lost my verve for advance preparation, having done so in vain once already. Also, I was terrified of the Armenian language. The Armenian-English/English-Armenian dictionary I special-ordered through a bookstore in Fargo, N.D. did nothing to ease my mind. The words appeared to be constructed entirely from letters that resembled m, n, and u. How in God's name would I learn this?

My dad advised me to first learn the phrase "I'm much funnier in my own language." Instead, I learned the word for bathroom. I'm still not sure if I made the right choice.

In high school, I'd taken two years of Spanish. In college, I took another semester of Spanish, and a semester of, you guessed it, Norwegian. Neither one spoke to me in a meaningful way at the time. There was no urgency for me to learn either, though I certainly could have created some of my own.

My entrée to Armenian was something altogether different. My host family spoke nary a word of English, save for a lullaby that is useful only in very specific, and obvious, settings. And, I lived in a village. Classes were four hours a day and four days a week, and that was a good start. The real work came when I got back home, where my host family had infinite patience to talk with and at me.

If it weren't for my young host brothers, I'd still be differentiating consonants in the Armenian alphabet. If it weren't for a Peace Corps colleague, I'd still be learning the alphabet. This is the colleague who taught me the beauty of mnemonic devices. Thanks to him, I saw the letter "m" (մ) as a "mud" shovel and the letter "n" (ն) as capable of holding a "nut" to the left.

This wasn't high level linguistics; this was survival.

## REWIND 15 YEARS

**F**ive hundred years is a lot to celebrate. I'm just celebrating what 15 years of progress can provide.

When I arrived, e-mail was still in its infancy stage. I had an e-mail address in college, and my second was with the American University of Armenia. At that time, there were no cell phones, let alone Skype, which even my taxi driver from today uses on a regular basis.

In fact, when I lived in the Lori province in the north of the country, I walked down the mountain village road about a mile to make \$1 per minute calls to the U.S. from a call center, where everyone listened (or tried to listen) to every word spoken. More often than not, once I'd reach the building, I'd be told, "*Gits chka*" (There are no lines).

Today, I don't need to tell you—you who are quite likely to be reading this online—that the world is a different place. I send PDF documents in Armenian to my Kindle, which holds hundreds upon hundreds of books without changing in weight. I learned recently that a new Armenian font was created for official documents. I read Facebook status messages and comments in Armenian to keep up with people's views on the latest topics of conversation. And, when in a pinch, I use Google translate to decipher a complicated sentence.

Mashdots would not believe his eyes.

## MODERN-DAY WORD ADVICE

**P**eople ask me how I learned Armenian, and occasionally they ask for advice. My stock advice is: 1) make a decision to learn it, 2) get a tutor, and 3) forget about shame. These three things, if sincerely attempted, will get you where you want to go. In the meantime, tuck these bits of unsolicited advice in your back pocket.

*Amot* and *absos*—the words for "shame" and "it's a pity"—will take you a long ways in this country. As with most things, timing is important, but usage is more important. Both, as it happens, can be used in serious

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present-day boundaries of Armenia. It's as if to say, "C'mon, man!" or "Alright already!" If someone is piling food on your plate, you might try this. If they are talking your ear off and you want them to stop, shout it out and walk away. If someone budes in front of you in line, mutter it with intention.

The word *esa* is tricky to translate. When you're waiting for something to happen or someone to arrive, you will often hear "*Esa klini*" or "*Esa kga*." The implication is that "it will happen soon" or "s/he will come soon," but the reality is that it is not time-bound in any way. If someone says this to you, treat it with a healthy dose of suspicion before you find yourself waiting for a bus under the direct sun for two hours. Sure, it might come soon, but you also might be better off catching a cab.

It's useful to have a line of poetry on the tip of your tongue. One such useful line comes from the great Armenian poet Paruyr Sevak: "*Menk kich enk, bayts mez hay en asum*" (We are few, but we are Armenians). Not sure what to say in a toast? Unsure of the direction the conversation is taking? Try this line. You won't be sorry.

## LANGUAGE IN ITS ENTIRETY

**I**began by stating the fact that there are others who can speak to the noble aspects of the printing that has given us the Bible, the works of Sevak and Naregatsi, and the books that provide witness to the Armenian Genocide.

What is within my scope of knowledge and ability, though, is something more modest. My abilities lie in words, written and spoken, that help a person understand and enjoy exactly where they are. And, if you should find yourself here, Armenia is a wonderful place to be.

*Lav eli, yegek!* □

situations, or as jokes. I'll leave it to you to find the appropriate tone for each.

*Lav eli* is a phrase unique to Armenians who live in the