

EXPOSURES

A QUEST FOR IDENTITY

BY EDGAR ALLEN BEEM

Ara Oshagan first picked up a camera in 1993 in an effort to illustrate some of the stories he had written about the Armenian community in Los Angeles. Over the next decade, he forsook writing in favor of photography and, for the past three years, has been taking his camera to the breakaway state of Karabagh in the former Soviet Union in search of his Armenian roots.

The result is a portfolio of strong black-and-white photographs that Oshagan plans to publish as a book with text by his late father, the Armenian poet and critic Vahe Oshagan. At the time of his death in 2000, Vahe Oshagan had just completed a 30-page manuscript entitled *The Spirit of Karabagh*. "My father and I worked on this together. We were extremely close, and I admired the work he did in his life," says Ara Oshagan. "This was the last work he did before he passed away, and it will be the only work I will be able to collaborate on with him."

The Spirit of Karabagh, which has found a French publisher but not yet an American one, is a work of personal, professional and ethnic pride for Oshagan. Not only does it chronicle the attempt of Armenians to reclaim an ancestral homeland, it also represents a homecoming of sorts for the photographer, who has maintained his Armenian identity despite a lifetime of dislocation.

Ara Oshagan was born in Bulgaria in 1964 but moved as a baby to Beirut, Lebanon, where his father taught literature, philosophy and psychology. In 1975, when the Lebanese civil war broke out, the Oshagans immigrated to America, settling first in Philadelphia, then Wisconsin, then Memphis. After graduating from high school in 1982, Oshagan headed for California, where he earned degrees in physics and literature at UCLA and a master's degree in geophysics at the University of California in Berkeley. He now lives in Glendale, California, and works for a digital mapping and surveillance firm in Los Angeles.

Oshagan's first photo projects were portraits of elderly survivors of the Armenian genocide perpetrated by the Turks during World War I and documentation of the Armenian community in Los Angeles. Then came Karabagh.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Armenians of the Karabagh region declared their independence from surrounding Azerbaijan in 1991



Top: Edik Aghajanian, former soldier in Stepanakert. Bottom: Holy Communion in Ghazanchetsots Church in Shushi.



A Quest For Identity continued from page 121

and established the Republic of Nagorno-Karabagh (or Mountainous Karabagh), a state the size of Delaware with a population of 200,000. No other nation recognizes the existence of Karabagh, yet it is a source of extreme pride to Armenians.

"It is a major event in Armenian history," says Oshagan. "Since the Ottoman Empire was created 600 years ago, Armenians have been losing land and being killed. This regaining of ancestral land is the first time that has happened in over 600 years. It is a very big event for us."

Oshagan made his first trip to Karabagh in January 1999 and was immediately overwhelmed by the reception and acceptance he received there as an Armenian of the diaspora. He describes his first experience of Karabagh as a homecoming to a place he had never been. "In Karabagh I have found my an-

cestors—my grandparents and my children," writes Oshagan in an afterward to his Karabagh portfolio. "Extending far beyond mere photo-documentation, this project has become an exploration for me of my roots as an Armenian."

Oshagan returned to Karabagh in the fall of 1999 with his father and then again in February of this year. The photographs he made on these three trips are all dark, inky black-and-white images that capture Oshagan's sense of excitement as he enters into the flow of family and street life in an ancient land that is in the process of reinventing itself.

Using an old handheld Olympus OM-1 (because it is small, light and unobtrusive), Oshagan makes pictures with a deep sense of humanity and a complex sense of pictorial space—a man's spontaneous New Year's dance at a family gathering, an old woman staring at the pot lid while her grandson plays and a chicken looks on, two dogs in a sun-filled market courtyard, a fleeting moment at a bus stop, newlyweds seen through a frame

Top: The Aghajanian backyard in Stepanakert. Bottom: Wedding reception in Stepanakert.



of food and flowers. "A lot of images I take I don't remember taking them," says Oshagan. "I get so intensely involved I don't really know what I have taken."

Oshagan credits his mentor Nubar Alexanian, the well-known Gloucester, Massachusetts-based photographer, with helping him understand the intuitive nature of his best work. Oshagan subscribes to Alexanian's philosophy that the process is more important than the product, that putting yourself in situations where images will occur is preferable to making images happen. "I'm really proud of him," says Alexanian of Oshagan. "Every time he sends me work, it is amazing. Ara is an excellent example of someone young who is really willing to do the work. Man, this kid just really went after it. He feels very passionate about what it is he's doing."

And, refreshingly, that passion is not for photography as an art form or for professional success for himself, but for his subject—the quest for Armenian identity that inspired him to pick up a camera in the first place. Oshagan seems to be finding what he was looking for in the Republic of Mountainous Karabagh.

"Since a 1994 tentative cease-fire, the Armenians of Karabagh have rushed headlong into creating all the trappings of statehood and calling themselves a republic—though no one else does," he writes. "Still technically in a state of war and under a severe economic blockade, they have also been struggling to rebuild their land, to restore dignity to their lives and to create a future for themselves out of thin air." □