

Personal stories

These personal stories from Armenia and Azerbaijan are drawn from the South Caucasus radio diaries project, which grew out of a two-year pilot project run by Conciliation Resources with Georgian and Abkhaz journalists. Over 20 radio stations in the South Caucasus now participate, broadcasting stories recorded by ordinary people and edited by local journalists.

Divided family

My name is Asmik Akopyan and I live in the village of Karabulak. I am 68 years old and a pensioner. I went to medical school as a young woman and in 1954 was sent to work in Shusha as a nurse. It was there that I met a handsome young Azeri among my neighbours. Despite the fact that both his and my parents didn't approve of our meetings, we paid no heed and eventually married. We were blessed with a large family – I gave birth to two boys and two girls. They were clever, good-looking children, all of them went on to higher education. I was very happy. But then in 1988 the conflict began. I fell ill, and had to convalesce in Ashkhabad in Turkmenistan. I couldn't be treated in Stepanakert because my husband was an Azeri and I

couldn't go to Baku because I was Armenian. So my son-in-law took me to Ashkhabad, where he had relatives. It was there that I learned from the television that Shusha was now under Armenian control and no Azeris remained in the town. I lost contact with my family, knowing only that my children had left for Baku. Then I learnt that my mother was ill, and I thought I should go and look after her and wait for this war to end. Thus I came to Karabulak in 1992, but I never expected this situation to go on for so long. I miss my children terribly, and live only for the hope that we will see each other again. There is nothing I want more.

Basra

In the 1980s I worked as a contract translator at an electricity plant in Nasiriya, Iraq. This was at the height of the Iran-Iraq war and there were frequent bombardments from Iran. Soviet specialists were not permitted to move about freely, but it fell to me to go once a week from Nasiriya to Basra because the authorities dealing with foreigners and visas were located there. There were a number of Soviet specialists working in Nasiriya, among them Azeris. I became friends with one of them, Abil Askerov. He had been in Iraq longer than me, and as his contract was about to expire he asked me to take him to Basra one time as goods were cheaper there, and he wanted to buy some presents before he left. This was not allowed, but nonetheless I agreed and off we went. We were walking around Basra when an artillery bombardment from Iran

suddenly started. Shells were exploding around us as we rushed to the car to get out of the danger zone. Suddenly a shell landed right near us. I had no time to realize what was happening as Abil pressed me up against a wall and covered my body with his own. Seeing the shrapnel scars on the wall around us, we thanked God we had survived. On the way back I asked him why he had protected me instead of running for cover. I will never forget his words. He said "in that moment I thought let fate have its way with me, but let nothing happen to you, as it would be my fault if it did. And then how would I live with myself?" Later, after everything had begun, he called me in Yerevan asking me if there was anything he could do to help, knowing the situation we were in. After that we lost contact, though I would dearly love to know where he is, how he is.

The nightingale of Shusha

I will never forget an encounter I once had in Karabakh. It was the Bulbul [nightingale] Festival in Shusha, and we decided to take a break from the programme. We had guests from Moscow and quickly organized an impromptu picnic by the Isa Bulagu spring, with everything except alcohol as this was the time of Gorbachev's anti-drink drive. Everything was fine except for this lack of wine or spirits, and because of that the picnic ended quite soon. I was in the process of leaving when I heard a mysterious, surprising voice. I took out my dictaphone and walked up the hill, to the point where the voice was coming from. There I found a typical Azerbaijani ensemble with traditional instruments - a *tar* and a *kyamancha*, both similar to a lute. Next to them stood a tall woman holding a *daf* tambourine. She didn't seem to notice me and carried on singing an Azeri folksong from the popular epic

'Gachag Nyabi'. When she had finished she turned to me and asked me to stop recording. It was only then that I realized that she was totally blind. She then told me about her singing career, how she had sung for the great Khanom Shushinsky to get into his academy in Baku. "He accepted me and proposed to take me to Baku. But then my brother Suren forbade me from going," she told me. Hearing the name Suren, I understood that this woman was Armenian, although she sang Azeri folksongs in flawless Azeri. Some time later, after everything had happened in Karabakh, I tried to find out what had happened to this woman. I found out that she had never left Shusha and that she still sang Azeri folksongs on the hill above Isa Bulagu. They had asked her to stop singing those songs, but she didn't listen and carried on as before.

My path

I'll tell my story. I was called up in 1992, at the beginning of the year. It was very difficult – physically, morally. There were a lot of casualties. That was hard, when you'd sit and get talking with someone before the battle, you'd find out about his problems, try to help out in some way and all that, then a few hours later after an artillery bombardment you'd find out this person had been killed. Our division went on the offensive. I knew that even if we took these positions, these heights, we'd never be able to hold them. It was 3,000 against 117 of us – that's just overwhelming force. Yet we fulfilled our orders. And at the last minute, when we'd nearly finished everything, they wiped the floor with us. A very powerful artillery barrage began, and I was injured in the head. I came to in a field hospital. It later became clear that I had lain there for two weeks. I was sent to Baku and installed in a hospital. One and a

half months I had to lie there. In February my wife and two children came to visit me. She didn't have money to come on the bus, she came by foot – seven kilometres there and seven kilometres back, every day. Her boots were all ripped, her feet cold and wet. She'd have one child in a pushchair, one in her arms and a string bag with food in it hanging off one of the pushchair handles. That's how she looked after me, and that's why I got better so quickly. After leaving hospital I got myself discharged. Now I have a small workshop, where I make furniture. It's worked out well, people know of me and I make ends meet. I get a lot out of life and I've raised my two children. But if I had to do things over again, I wouldn't change anything. Because when I was in military training college, day and night they instilled in us three basic psychological concepts for men and citizens – Honour, Courage and the Motherland.