

From: the air en route from Yerevam to Berlin

[illegible]

Armenia in the Sky

I will share an experience with you, and I will do it in a form of a story. It will be about one particular part of a strange journey that I took some years ago. It will be an example of the most exotic kind. It is, indeed, an unique incident, which, however, can be articulated so that it is available for others, not to understand, but to relate to.

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This story is exotic because it takes place in a site and situation that is simply very different than most of us are used to. It is a setting of a city and a nation-state that has been in turmoil since the break up of the entity called the Soviet Union. The city is called Yerevan, and the country, Armenia. A place amidst violent and dramatic transitions; transitions that have not yet reached their final stage.

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I went to Yerevan to talk with artists with whom I curated a show within the structure of the IFA galleries in Germany in the summer of 2003. I traveled to Yerevan in a typically hot mid-September week in 2002. The exhibition—called Getting Closer—was in Berlin and in Bonn. It included four artists, all of them originally from Armenia; two of them still living there, one in Paris, and one, my close friend since early 1990s, in Berlin.

I landed in a site and setting that had lost almost two-thirds of its population to immigration since the war began with Azerbaijan during the early 1990s. A bloody conflict that was at stand-still, but not yet resolved. A country where just a year before my visit a gunman entered the parliament and shot eight members dead before being gunned down by the security forces. A country

where you can fly in daily from three directions, either from Paris, Vienna, or Berlin. Some of the flights are direct, some of them stop in Moscow.

The peculiar, and again unique I believe, thing about flying in and out of Yerevan, at least then, is that it only took place during the night. In fact, the airport, a shabby and dirty concrete block, was open from midnight to 8 AM. Planes arrived after midnight, and they took off from 4 AM onwards. The official reason for this was the supposed reconstruction of the landing patch—even if nobody has seen any action there at all. The real reason was a perfect example of the logic of post-Soviet market economy. The airport was fully privatized, owned by Armenian businessman living in Buenos Aires, and operating at night time enabled him to make the most money with the least effort and cost.

After spending six days in Yerevan, meeting with artists and the family of the friend of mine, drinking and laughing with them, I left to go back home. My flight was scheduled at 5 AM, via Moscow to Berlin. I did not sleep at all, and we arrived early at the check-in. There were three lines to the counter. One normal, one where you bribed yourself through faster, and one for special VIP people.

The airport terminal was rather full of people, containing the common noises of people leaving and saying good-bye. Not so long after settling into my slower than slow queue, I heard a very loud rumble from behind. Turning to look at it, in unison with all others in the terminal, we saw a group of five very large men with shaven heads and black leather jackets roaming towards the desk.

It was a funky scene. Four of the “men in black” were holding up and guiding the fifth one, who was drunk as a skunk. The drunk was in a bad mood. He was screaming this and that, breaking loose from his buddies, and desperately trying to pick up a fight with anyone. He stormed, aggressively and loudly sidestepping and stumbling towards the Moscow desk and its VIP line. He got cleared effectively and suavely from the desk, and via VIP doors, guided into the plane. An act that one could call good service.

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In the meantime, things got back to normal. The rumor spread around and it was even translated to me that the angry drunk shouting and hitting hot air with his fists was a personal body guard of the Armenian president. Well, that was interesting enough while we waited and waited. In the end, all passengers were checked in, driven in with a bus to the plane and off we went. It was an almost brand new aircraft with two seats on both aisles and four in the middle. I had an aisle seat, and fell into a magnificent sleep without an effort.

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A couple of hours later we landed safe and sound in Moscow. During the process of clearing out of the plane, I noticed that for some reason, the left side of the aisle functioned much faster. There was some kind of a problem on the right side going through the business class. I was on the right side line, moving very slowly towards the entrance. Once entering into the business-class zone, I soon realized why it took the other passengers such time to proceed.

It was a known figure to all of us. What we saw was the seriously big body guard of the president. He was lying down in the aisle, forming a distinguished letter X with his unguarded body, snoring away like there was no tomorrow. His leather coat was all open. It provided us with a view into his shoulder pockets. What we recognized was the end part of a gun that looked huge,

bulging out of its holster. It was truly a comical view. Passengers stepped very, very carefully over him, putting one leg on the lower side of the human X, and then another tentative step to the upper slot in the X—sincerely hoping that the monster didn't wake up. It was an unique experience. I have never ever before walked over a sleeping giant, the real body guard of a president —and I have a strong feeling that I will never have the need or possibility to do it again.

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