

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

TCG-19

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KARABAKH: IN THE BLACK GARDEN

Dear Peter,

It has been a pretty rough time around here lately.
Lots of blood and guts, a lot of dead and dying.

I thought and I think you thought I was some kind of hardy,
savvy guy, able to deal with whatever came down the pike.

'Sufficiently ferocious,' was the term you once used in
reference to me, if I recall correctly.

Maybe that has been true and maybe it will be so again.

But for the past couple of weeks I have been in a state of
shock, stunned by my own prescience, stunned by my own naivete
and stunned by things I never expected to be stunned by
before, but should have been prepared for.

I was part of a massacre.

You know the place.

It was called Hodjali.

Alternative spellings are Khodjali or Khodzhali or even
sometimes Khodzhaly, depending what newspapers you read.

The essence, though, is the same: Hodjali was a dumpy
little Azeri enclave within the Armenian enclave of Nagorno
Karabakh and it was wiped out of existence on the night of
February 25th and 26th, 1992.

This has been documented by the international press, which
has descended on Azerbaijan by the plane-load to write and
interview and film and sound-bite and body-count the tragedy.

I know the exercise is necessary but it fills me with
disgust.

Because I am one of the few foreign persons ever to have
visited Hodjali when it was still a living community and the
body counters are counting the bodies of my friends and
acquaintances.

They are also vicariously yours: the people of Hodjali
appeared in a couple of ICWA newsletters, and it was to
Hodjali that you banned me from going after reading about my
last trip there via helicopter.

Thomas Goltz is an ICWA fellow researching the Turkic nations
of the former Soviet Union with emphasis on Azerbaijan.

That was in January of this year, and I can say that I was the last outsider to visit the besieged town.

There weren't too many foreign visitors before.

Because Hodjali wasn't one of those places that normal folks or even half-mad hacks went to.

It was a dumpy little Azeri town in Nagorno Karabakh. Getting there was dangerous and staying there was unpleasant and getting out was as dangerous as getting in.

Not too many people went to Hodjali who didn't have to.

But I was one.

I was it.

And if my fellowship has no other value (and I rationally know it has far more) it is in the fact that I was the only 'western' person to ever visit Hodjali before it wasn't.

You might even call me the world's only expert on the town.

I also have the dubious distinction of being the first to report to the world that the place had been destroyed and its population slaughtered by Armenian militiamen, apparently assisted by units of the 366th brigade of the army of the former Soviet Ministry of the Interior.

The whole thing was intensely personal for me.

My friends, or if you will, my acquaintances, were reportedly slaughtered. It meant something to me.

And this personal interest about the fate of my friends turned into a baffled rage when no-one would believe that dumpy little Hodjali, my Hodjali, was gone and most of its inhabitants dead.

Breaking a major story is never easy, especially when the roles of the good-guys and bad guys are reversed:

Armenians slaughtering Turks?

You must have it all wrong, Thomas, either that or you are over-reacting.

You may also be exaggerating and slanting the story because you happen to live in Azerbaijan, speak the language and are thus susceptible to perfidious local influence.

There was local input.

Acting on a tip from the Popular Front that something big and bad was happening in Hodjali I traveled out to the city of Agdam on February 27th. There I met hundreds of screaming, distraught survivors of what they described as a slaughter of civilians in the rolling hills separating Agdam from the Armenian town of Askeron on the eastern lip of the Karabakh range.

Many recognized me because of my previous visits to the town. They clutched at my clothes, babbling out the names of their dead relatives and friends and dragged me to the morgue attached to the main mosque in town to show me bodies. There Sadik Sadikov, the mosque administrator, broke down in tears as he tallied the names of the registered dead on an abacus.

There were 477 that day, a number that did not include

those missing and presumed dead, nor those victims whose entire families had been wiped out and thus had no one to register them as dead before God. It represented only the number of confirmed dead by survivors who had made it to Agdam and were physically able to fulfill, however imperfectly, the Muslim practice of burying the dead within 24 hours.

The real number, it was clear, was far, far higher. 1,000, maybe 2,000.

Aside from counting every body there was no way to tell.

But 477 was far too big a number for the Washington Post to believe. It was also too big for the BBC.

How many bodies did you actually see, Thomas? How many did you actually touch?

Don't tell us the names of people you knew, whose bodies, you say, are rotting in the hills.

Give us the number of bodies you saw, bodies you touched.

The editorial discussion in those first few days was intense and insulting and only got worse.

'What do you mean, quoting a high government source who says his government is lying but declines to be identified? We are on two different wave lengths...' said my friend David Ignatius, the Post foreign editor during a marathon, one hour edit/critique of my basic report, "What do you mean by 'mosque morgue numbers'. This is incredibly vague.

He told me that he had solicited opinion about previous Goltz files from others and that they had been found wanting.

The desk was doubting.

I needed to study the basics of the journalist trade.

The only reason I didn't hang up the phone was because of my devotion to the story.

I suspect the only reason he didn't hang up on me was because he knew, or felt, in his heart of hearts that his paper had to do something.

I have heard that they at least covered their institutional ass by running enough material qualified by 'allegedly' and 'reportedly' to have it both ways,

The BBC, meanwhile, declined to use my tip-offs and suggested I was a crank.

'You are suggesting that more people have died in one attack in Karabakh than the total number who have been reported killed over the past four years?' said the BBC's Tim Huill in Moscow.

'Yes.'

'That's impossible.'

'You're calling me a liar?'

'No, just that we don't believe you.'

I can never listen to the BEEB with the same ears again.

To be fair, the government and press in Baku didn't exactly assist in supporting my allegation--that upwards of 500 people had been pitilessly slaughtered as the population of Hodjali ran for their lives after their town had been attacked.

The presidential spokesman and the ministry of the interior's information bureau initially claimed that Hodjali's scrappy defenders had beaten back an Armenian attack and suffered only two dead. Just a regular night in Nagorno Karabakh.

But it was more than a little irritating that my value as a news source on the ground was being put on the same level with the Azeri state lie machine.

It was infuriating and humiliating.

Between 500 and 2,000 people slaughtered and no-one cared?

I thought I was losing my mind.

Then one newspaper I occasionally contribute to, the London Sunday Times, decided to pick up the story.

They had a lot of serious questions. But after hours of give and take on the phone they had the courage to run the story on the front page.

It was four days after I had first reported the business, but I still had a world 'scoop'.

Then the hack-pack started parachuting in from around the world to go and count bodies and confirm that something very awful had happened.

And the government liars who had remained so unavailable during the early days of the crisis were suddenly calling me and asking me to provide numbers of even more foreign correspondents they could invite down, at government expense, to report on the massacre.

I did not react very well.

I exploded.

I almost physically assaulted the presidential press secretary, Rasim Agaiev, and publicly accused him of lying.

He was not pleased, and, true to the nature of dinosaur of his ilk, he then took the only recourse available: he began maligning me, and started a rumor that I was an Armenian spy, sent to Hodjali to ferret out 'military secrets' during my January visit to the doomed town.

In an awful, ghastly way, this was true.

Doubting the many reports from the Armenian side of the Karabakh dispute that the Azeris were massively armed and that their helicopters were 'buzzing' Armenian villages in the territory for fun and terror, I got aboard a shot-up civilian helicopter designed for maybe 20 people but packed with more than 50 terrified men, women and children, cork-screwed up to 4,500 feet above the Azeri city of Agdam and ran the gauntlet of Armenian fire to Hodjali.

Once there, I reported on the state of siege on the town and the military preparedness of its defenders, which was virtually nil. Did my report find its way into Armenian hands and, suggesting that victory would be easier than they presumed or believe, somehow influence their decision to attack?

I cannot know and am reluctant to speculate.

In a bizarre and pathetic sense, though, the allegation that I was assisting the Armenians neutralized, at least in my own mind, the 'pro-Turkish' allegations suggested by my editors at the Washington Post and my contacts at the BBC:

Damned if you do, damned if you don't.
Maybe, maybe, I was doing something right.

It was around this time that the whole thing finally hit me and it hit me hard.

I was back in Baku after having been shelled by missiles in Agdam, when the things had come raining down around the government guest house where we were staying and blown out all the windows. We hid down in the sauna/basement until the attack was over and then left, joining tens of thousands of others on the road away.

It wasn't fun.

But the next day I was sitting in a commercial shop with a bunch of black marketeers in Baku, in a different world.

There I was, waiting for roubles to arrive in exchange for my dollars when I started collecting moisture in my eyes.

'Oh look,' said the sympathetic dollar dealer, noting my slide into mourning, 'He cares for us, he is holding the Yas.'

His mates wanted to go on counting money but he tried to clear them out.

But I could no longer stand it.

I cancelled the dollar deal and walked out of the shop.

The evening streets were still filled with smiling shoppers, apparently oblivious or even indifferent to the fate of the citizens of Hodjali. Maybe they knew but didn't dare think about it lest it drive them insane.

It was the same men in leather jackets and the same women with far too much rouge on their cheeks and they were all smiling and laughing and parading and I have to say I hated them all.

And when I got home I sat down and poured myself a long drink and drank it. My wife asked me where I'd been.

"To Hodjali," someone I knew was me said in a voice I didn't know.

I was there with the ghosts in dumpy dumpy Hodjali with no food to speak of or water to wash and all the people I knew or had known there were dead dead dead and I just started to cry and cry and cry.

It was sometime around then that I threw open my house and telephone and brains for any visiting journalist from any visiting newspaper even if I personally disliked the newspapers or reporters, which is increasingly common for me.

It was open house at Tommy's, and still is as I write this.

There are an average of two house guests a night sleeping over and an average of four dinner guests and then just lots of people from everywhere who show up for a drink or to chat or argue. The numbers are truly a low-end estimate.

There were ministers and diplomats and press from around the world, and even a senior advisor to the President of Azerbaijan, coming round to confess his boss's crimes and to hint at the momentous changes now underway in Azerbaijan.

There was the regular hack-pack from Moscow, irritated that press conferences were held in Azeri and not Russian and still spelling Azeri names incorrectly because they were using Russian as their basic, lingual tool.

There were Englishmen and Americans and Canadians and French and a lot of Turks and even a Turkish/Farsi/Gypsy-speaking Greek/American photographer who helped the traffic flow.

There were stringers and staffers and freelancers, writers from competitive wire agencies, sitting side by side for the most recent Goltz-briefing.

There was even a group from Life Magazine, re-doing some journey made by Robert Kennedy in the 1950s as seen through the eyes of his son Douglas, who had accidentally stumbled on to a big news story and wanted to write about it but didn't have the first idea where to start. Hard-nosed yours truly succumbed to the Kennedy mystique and gave them a precious ink-jet cartridge which they repaid with two packs of Marlboro cigarettes in the sense and style that they were dealing with a carot salesman or a taxi driver. Adding insult to injury, they then screwed two young Azeri translator lads I set them up with to bring them to the front, acting surprised when the kids asked for payment for getting-shot-at-services.

But perhaps my attitude was hard to comprehend.

It was ICWA on the front: inform inform and inform some more. Brief 'em one, brief 'em all. Feed 'em, drink 'em, sleep 'em and then get ready for the next batch.

I even allowed the Moscow reporter for the BBC over as part of a group gathering, less due to any sense of magnanimousness on my part than as an opportunity to demand an apology for his having called me a liar.

"All you have to say is 'I Am Sorry' and your are welcome in my house," I said.

"I am sorry if there were any misunderstandings," said Huill in his overweening public school manner.

I should have thrown him out but I allowed him to stay. He abused my hospitality the more by huddling in a corner, passing the telephone numbers of people in the Azeri national lie machine to his replacement and generally acting like an instant expert on Azerbaijan.

The one man I did throw out was my 'replacement' from the Sunday Times. Due to a misunderstanding, he assumed that I had opened up my house as a sort of service bureau and intended to charge the paper for all the briefings, feedings and telephone filings that I was providing.

Perhaps he had never run into an informational altruist, and thus mistakenly thought he had the run of my place.

We later made up.

But I have to say that whatever lingering sense of faith I have in journalists as purveyors of basic information has been fundamentally shaken.

Few were really interested in 'information'.

Most were interested only in 'the story.'

I hated the story.

I was an informational altruist.

I was scooping the remains of my dead friends off the bloody ground of Karabakh, the 'Black Garden', and burying them the only way I knew.

There weren't too many bodies.

Most were still in the hills, waiting for the higher temperatures of spring for rot to set.

Some, the few, were being spaded into the shallow ground of the growing Martyrs' Cemetery across from the parliament building in Baku.

My body was that of Major Alef Hadjiev, the de-facto commander of the Hodjali garrison who was a friend of mine. A sort of jocular Chief Joseph with a big swagger and smile, he had managed to galvanize the community around him in the belief that despite the odds against them and the almost total lack of support from Baku that they could hang on and survive. Some say the Armenians had put a price on his head of a million roubles. Others say it was a million dollars. All say he died defending women and children as they ran the gauntlet of Armenian fire. Most of the women and children died anyway.

I knew Alef and considered him a friend because we had drunk together three or four times, the last time in a muddy, darkened room that served as the soup kitchen of the garrison although there was no soup or bread. We ate Russian army Spam with onions and stale biscuits and washed it down with over-sweet Azeri cognac and talked about the perilous situation of Alef's hometown.

"The government could raise the siege in a day by forcing open the road through Askeron and could impose its authority on all of Karabakh in five days if it wanted to," Alef said with a smile, "But the old communist mafia just wants the crisis to go on and on while they continue to loot the country. If you write that and attribute it to me, I will deny it. But its true."

Now that Hadjiev is dead, I don't think he'll mind my quoting him post-humously.

And I think there were a lot of people in Baku who breathed a sigh of relief when they learned that Hadjiev was among the Hodjali dead because if he had lived he would have made problems.

Like a revolution.

That is happening in a slow, subtle way, even as I write this because there are other Alefs out there. You might even say that he didn't die in vain. You might say that only in death did he, symbolically, have the resonance to start the people to root out the filth and corruption that has so afflicted their lives.

But that is another story for another day.

Major Alef Hadjiev bought a bullet through the heart and after rotting for a week in the mountains of the Black Garden his body was brought back to Baku to be buried with military honors at the Martyrs' Cemetery.

Despite the proximity of the parliament across the street no-one from the government came to the funeral and maybe that was out of good taste because had they been there, whispering eulogies about courage and fortitude, Alef, the hero and then martyr of Hodjali, might have broken free of the bonds of death and climbed out of his grave and killed them.

But they weren't there and the funeral procession was pretty small because Alef was a native of Hodjali and all or at least most of the mourners, now refugees, had been obliged to truck or bus or train the distance from Agdam to attend the last rites. The exception was Alef's widow, Gala, a chubby Russian girl with a hint of a moustache who lived in Baku.

We had met in Agdam in the aftermath of the massacre and she refused to believe that her husband was dead. She was frightened out of her wits, wondering how she could live in Azerbaijan without him.

"I'm just a Russian, a Russian!" she cried, "And now everyone looks at me with hatred in their eyes!"

Then she called a few days later when Alef's remains were recovered in an exchange with the Armenians for gasoline--100 liters a corpse.

"Tomas, Tomas," Gala babbled, "Alef is here."

It was tough for me to understand her Russian on the telephone and probably a lot tougher for her to have to pick up the phone at all, but she stayed coherent long enough to give me her address and the time of the funeral procession.

I went, not knowing what to expect:

A week old cadaver in the living room?

Mutilated like the others?

Scalped like some?

I got in a taxi and traveled through a wasteland of hissing, blue and pink stuff-belching pipes of the oil refining area of Baku, driving over streets that had, seemingly, never been repaired.

We drove and drove and it was a drive though an utterly depressing landscape, the sort that no-one ever sees, or admits to having seen: broken, diseased and bad.

It was as much a symbol of the rapacity and ugliness of the regime or successive regimes in Baku as the corpses in Agdam had been: How can you allow people to live and die like this?

Complicating, or maybe complementing my dark mood was the fact that the Azeri taxi driver only wanted to make jokes, and in Russian.

I told him what I thought.

I told him I was going to find the funeral of my friend, Alef, a Martyr of Karabakh, and that all the people of Baku were sold along with most of the people of Azerbaijan and that only the good men died and the filth remained behind.

He agreed.

He also refused to take any money for the ride.

It was his contribution to national defence, or something.

I got out of the taxi in front of a series of horrible high-rise Soviet-style buildings slapped up for reasons I understand but still cannot comprehend. The ones designed so that the toilet is in a separate room from the sink.

Degrading, like everything around what was the USSR.

Walking through the mourners *I* saw people I knew or at least recognized and embraced them.

Then I saw Gala.

She was standing in back of a truck carrying the flag-draped coffin and holding the hand of her smiling child who was still oblivious to what had happened to her father.

Gala embraced me.

I said something stupid like 'be strong.'

Then I tried to plant a hand-extended kiss on Alef's coffin on the back of the truck but I couldn't reach it. I decided against climbing up on the truck and just waited for the procession to start.

There were plenty of people crying, everyone but me.

My eyes were dry.

Then someone somewhere responsible for formalities gave the word and the the column started out toward the Martyrs' Cemetery in the heights above Baku.

The funeral train in was the same as my journey out although the route was different: another broken road leading through another industrial wasteland.

It was Alef's route to anywhere, nowhere, death.

It was Azerbaijan.

Then we arrived at the cemetery, carved out of what was the finest recreational spot in Baku--the former Marshall Kirov Park. It is here that the scores of victims of the Soviet army crack-down on January 20th, 1990, are buried in a long line along a granite wall shaded by dwarf Cyprus trees. The faces of the dead are photo-etched in stone. This is not unusual in Azerbaijani cemeteries but the difference here is that the faces and names and dates of birth were different but the date of death was is the same. Now that is changing.

I had visited the cemetery before but it was different this time.

I wasn't there as a journalist covering the event or even a political/cultural tourist.

I was there as a mourner, mourning my friend, Major Alef Hadjiev, the most recent addition to the second tier of graves running among the dwarf Cyprus trees where the dates of death are different.

It was the tier of graves given over to the growing number of military men killed in action in Karabakh.

Alef's was the 127th this year, if I counted the graves correctly.

Martyrs' Row.

Kids, mainly.

Cannon fodder.

Anyway, Alef's casket was lifted down from the truck and I joined the pall-bearers as they hoisted it on their shoulders and brought Alef's remains down the line as a local man of religion recited the Fatiha, or Muslim creed of faith.

I am not sure if Alef was a Muslim except in the formal sense of the word. He never expressed anything approaching piety. He was a drinking man, although he didn't smoke, which is odd for an Azeri. And he certainly didn't like Turks, which was also odd for an Azeri. Alef once told me that he had found to many 'Made In Turkey' labels in the trash cans of Stepanakert to believe in any pan-Turkic ideal.

I was remembering a lot of things, the first time we met, the second, the third, what he said, how we joked, how we spoke. I don't want to exaggerate and say we were best friends because we weren't but we were friends and I was remembering.

But that is history.

Gala and her Russian relatives were confused by the ritual placement of the body, the pious incantations and the fact that the week old corpse had to be lifted out of the casket to be put in the hole dug in the muddy ground.

They put the body in.

An honor guard clicked their heels, slapped dummy slugs in their Kaleshnikovs, and let off three volleys. The empty shells fell clattering on the granite walkway.

I picked up one and put it in my pocket.

Then the family and intimate friends began covering the body with dirt and the wailing really began. Women ripped their cheeks with their nails and men sobbed last regards.

I was invited to say something into the grave but declined.

I had nothing to say.

Then another, larger funeral procession started moving down Martyrs' Row, heading for the shallow grave next to Alef's.

It was the corner spot and the next corpse would start a new row, even then being dug among the dwarf Cyprus trees in anticipation for the next to die in the Black Garden, that horrible place called Karabakh.

I had nothing to say but I had something to write so I went home and wrote the following story, filed it to the Washington Post and told them it was my swan-song, that I quit.

I knew it was way too long but I am told the Outlook section of the paper ran it at considerable length and that it was reprinted in the International Herald Tribune.

I thank them for doing so.

I thought about naming it 'An Epitaph for Alef,' but ended up calling it 'An Anatomy of a Massacre'

I don't know what title they used.

Regards
Z. L. B.



Epitaph for Alef or An Anatomy of a Massacre

I remember Hodjali.

It was a dump.

There are plenty of other dumpy towns in the world and most hardly merit even that description, but Hodjali is different in one important respect.

It was a dumpy, Azeri Turkish town in Nagorno Karabakh. And last week it was wiped off the map.

'Town' is almost an odd way to describe Hodjali because it really didn't have any center to speak of or many other features one usually associates with an incorporated, urban entity. Set in the plain between the eastern lip of the Karabakh mountains and the capital city of Stepanakert to service that city's airport, Hodjali was more like a series of connected villages, defined by mud or gravel roads cutting between two storied houses with toilets set in little gardens out back. A miasmic river and several other seasonally-dry canals also crept through the place.

I remember knots of waddling white geese, but no trees.

Hodjali's downtown, as such, consisted of several unstocked shops and four, strangely naked and unattractive local government buildings with outdoor wells. Construction work was in progress in September, 1991, when I first went to the town, but that had all stopped by early 1992. There was no electricity or fuel for machines, and no bricks or mortar or faith in the future to build.

Nor was there a single tea shop or restaurant to idle away the time. By day, people just stood in small knots in the mud and gravel streets, waiting. By night, they huddled in their houses, un-lit but for candles, listening to the sound of gunfire as the garrison of 63 security men tried to hold the sprawling periphery as Armenian militiamen crept ever closer.

The residents and security men knew they were doomed, and spoke openly of it. There were a lot of people in Hodjali who could accurately predict their own fate.

"The Armenians have taken all the outlying villages, one by one, and the government does nothing," Balakisi Sadikov, 55 said at the time. He was my host.

"And next they will drive us out or kill us all," said his wife, Dilbar.

The Sadikovs are both dead, as are their three sons and two of their daughters.

The list also includes the fat girl who worked as a sales clerk in the fabric shop where there was nothing to sell. I don't know her name but I first saw her waddling to work at nine in the morning and last saw her dead on the ground, lying with a pile of others, in a video clip last night.

There were others, many others--mothers and fathers and sons and daughters, babies and grand parents. All very dead.

The ultimate death toll will probably never be known, but at the very least I can help establish some parameters.

Established as sort of an airport service town with a minor interest in collective farming, Hodjali had a normal, pre-conflict population of around 3,000.

But at the time of my first visit in September, 1991, the town had swollen to twice that size. The new residents

included several thousand Azeri refugees from all over Karabakh. Others had been settled in after being evicted from Armenia. The Azeri population was supplemented by the arrival, in 1989, of 75 families of Meschectian Turks.

These poor souls had thus become refugees for the third time in as many generations: after their deportation from their native Georgia in 1944 for allegedly collusion with the Nazi army, they had been force-settled on collective farms in the Fergana Valley, but evicted once again in June, 1989, when ethnic violence flared up in Uzbekistan.

Undoubtedly the most pathetic group in Hodjali were some twenty families of mixed Armenian-Azeri heritage, driven away from their homes in Stepanakert on January 12th, 1989, along with all "pure" Azeris by dint of their Azeri blood.

One man I met in September, Murat Shukerov, whose mother was an Armenian, maintained that even those individuals who were only a quarter Azeri and who are not even Muslims were driven away in order to "purify" Karabakh of all traces of non-Armenianness.

Shukerov is also reported dead.

In any case, there were 6,000 people living in Hodjali in September, when the town was still connected to the Azeri city of Agdam by road.

This was cut on October 30th, when Armenia militiamen blockaded the road, only allowing passage for MVD vehicles.

In mid-December, even this tenuous ground link was severed when the MVD packed their bags in Agdam and Hodjali and withdrew to Stepanakert--presumably to prepare for their total withdrawal from the area to a staging base in the Azeri city of Gandja, and after that, to Russia.

(The MVD might have pulled back to Stepanakert, but they never pulled out of Karabakh. And it was these forces, eye witnesses and deserters say, that assisted in the attack on the town on February 25th. Those accompanying the Armenian attackers say that the preliminary artillery barrage and subsequent use of armored vehicles provided by the MVD forces, while welcome, was 'unexpected'.)

Thus, from mid-December, Hodjali could be accessed only by the limited fleet of civilian, model ME-8 helicopters from the Agdam airfield. And it was aboard one of these flying mini-buses, designed for 20 people, that I made my last journey to Hodjali on January 8th.

"Come on," said my old friend Major Alef Hadjiev, spotting me at the airport, "You're coming to Hodjali. Then you can write the truth."

Insane as the idea was--22 helicopters had been hit from ground fire over the past two months, although, miraculously, only one had actually been shot down--I could not resist, and got aboard for the short, dangerous ride over the Askeron Gap. We had to corkscrew up to 1500 meters before running the gauntlet, and then corkscrew back down to the Hodjali field.

"There is no government in Azerbaijan," charged Zumurut Ezova, 35, a mother of four aboard the helicopter, "why can't Mrs Ayaz President open the road? Why are they making us fly in like ducks, ready to get shot?"

Zumurut and all her family are also now believed dead.

The chopper was packed with around 50 men, women and children, one carrying a canary in a cage.

There were also food supplies as well as several boxes of munitions and a rusted 70 mm canon, purchased from some anonymous MVD garrison in Azerbaijan. The limited hardware was aimed to supply the 33 soldiers and 30 airport security guards ('Amon') who made up the town's trained fighting force.

Most of the passengers said they were returning to Hodjali because the government in Baku had afforded them no support after they had arrived in Agdam as refugees. Better to return home 'to die in Karabakh' than beg in the streets, they said.

Most, apparently, did just that.

"It was a mistake to keep the women and children in the town," admitted Hodjali Mayor, Elman Mahmedov, a survivor of the massacre, "But if I had forced them to leave and stay out, I would have been accused of selling out the town. Their faces will haunt me forever."

The point is this: the majority of the residents of Hodjali were there at the time when the Armenians attacked. The Armenian claim that there were only 1,000 in Hodjali on February 25th is an outrageous lie. It is a number manufactured for damage control purposes on the assumption that no outsider could dispute it. Who had ever been to Hodjali to know how many people lived there?

Me.

I took no head-count in January but I will hazard a guess and say that there were at least 4,000 in town at the time--a one third reduction from the September census of 6,000, made for the sake of conservative argument.

The mathematics are important.

Because even if one were to assume that an average of one helicopter each day after my departure (and there was not), and that each chopper arrived empty and took out an overfull load, the total number of possible evacuees since I was there would range at 2,000.

But the choppers that arrived continued to bring in more people than they took out.

The last flight into Hodjali was on February 13th.

The food ran out on the 21st.

The clock was ticking quickly toward doom.

Yet Baku did nothing.

"We had several Armenian prisoners, and we learned from them that the Fedayeen were planning a major attack," Mayor Mahmedov recalled, "We begged Baku to open up the air corridor and at least get the women and children out. The government did nothing. We were utterly sold out."

The mayor described how the anticipated attack began on the evening of the 25th--apparently in commemoration of the anniversary of the Sumgait massacre of Armenians in Azerbaijan in 1989, when Azeri Turks who had been expelled from Armenia descended on the Azeri city. 54 people were killed in mob violence then. Azeri sources insist, perhaps a little conveniently, that the violence was inspired by the KGB.

"They opened their barrage at around 8:30 pm, and then attacked from three sides about two hours later," Mahmedov said, "They wanted us to flee toward Askeron and through their gauntlet. We had no other choice."

A photo reporter accompanying the Armenian fedayeen confirms the details of the assault, saying that the group of fighters, he was traveling with attacked the airport, while the

NVD armored vehicles hit an adjacent area of Hodjali known, ironically, as the Helsinki Houses where most of the Meschetian Turks lived.

According to survivors who made it to Agdam, of the 75 Ahiska families in Hodjali, less than 33 individuals remain alive, although unconfirmed reports from the Armenian side of the lines suggest that a number of surviving Meschetian Turks are in Armenian hands as 'captives'.

Azer Usubov, one of the few Azeri militiamen to survive the maelstrom described how Major Hadjiev organized the effort to break through the Armenian lines.

While part of his force took refuge in a building to hold off the Armenian advance, the rest of the outgunned and out-numbered fighting men ran interference while the rest of the men, women and children worked their way east along the Gor Gor River toward Askeron, before fording the stream and working their way up-hill toward the town of Nakhichivanik.

The photographer traveling with the Armenian fedayeen says that the battle for the building raged for 16 hours, and that only two Azeri militiamen survived.

Their sacrifice may have held off one group of Armenian fighters from pursuing the column, but it also served to keep the photographer from witnessing the critical event in the foot-hills between Nakhichivanik and Agdam.

"We left Hodjali around two in the morning, and by dawn, we had managed to work our way through a wooded area and had entered an area filled with brush," said Mayor Mahmedov, "It was close to the Armenian lines we knew we would have to cross. Then there was a road, and the first units of the column ran across. Then all the fury of hell broke loose, and bullets and fire were raining down on us from all sides. We had just entered their trap."

Whatever order existed in the column of refugees broke down when Hadjiev was shot by a high caliber machine gun mounted on a BTR--the standard Soviet Armored Personal Carrier.

What happened next is the subject of bitter contention.

Survivors say that the Armenian forces closed on the panicked refugees and, literally standing above them from the tops of small hillocks, pitilessly slaughtered anything that moved in the gullies below.

Eye witnesses who flew to the disaster site via military helicopter speak of scores of bodies, many mutilated, lying in the open in the area where their helicopter touched down.

"There were around 30 on the hillock we touched down on," said freelance photographer Costa Sakellariou, "Many of those we found, including women and children, had their hands raised above their heads as if shot after having surrendered. Many were mutilated, with fingers cut off and eyes gouged out by knives. Three were scalped."

When the helicopter was back in the air after having recovered several bodies, Sakellariou says he saw 'many more,' on small declivities between hillocks.

A video of the disaster zone filmed by an Azeri cameraman, wailing and crying as he recorded body after body, shows a literal wake of dead leading from the foothills back up to the mountain range where many Azeris retreated back into the low brush and forested areas, hiding in trees as Armenian militiamen looked for more potential victims or captives.

But it is in the foothills, the no-man's land between the Azeri lines defending Agdam and the dug-in Armenian positions in the Askeron heights, that the real slaughter occurred.

The Armenians say that those in the zone were cut down in 'a cross fire'.

There are serious problems with this explanation--not the least is why fleeing civilians could get caught between the Azeri defensive positions and Armenian fire unless the Armenian side was advancing on the backs of the refugees, and using them as a human shield.

And there are even those who say that the Armenian forces were not even in the killing zone where the massacre occurred.

No Armenians, no cross-fire.

The implication of this is that it was Azeri soldiers who were mowing down row upon row of their kith and kin.

And more: Given the nature of the fatal wounds in at least one pile of corpses in the foothills, where a high proportion of the victims died from gun-shot wounds to the head, the Armenian assertion means that the Azeris executed their own people and then carved them up for good measure in order, presumably, to sully the name of Armenians before the world.

The charge boggles the imagination--not the least because it is in total contradiction with the testimony of hundreds of survivors who made it, wounded, frozen and in shock, back to Agdam late last week.

Their story is now known. Survivors spared no details of the slaughter and who they held accountable: Armenian militiamen and Russian soldiers from the 366th brigade of the army of the Ministry of the Interior. They also blamed the highest echelons of the government of Azerbaijan, whose incompetence and cupidity was only matched by its bald-face lying about the massacre in order to cover up its own criminal negligence in allowing up to a 1,000 of its citizens to be slaughtered. They called the president a traitor.

But not one voice suggested the ultimate cynical ploy:

That the government had ordered Azeri soldiers to massacre their own, and that the soldiers, so ordered, complied.

That is the Armenian lie.

It is an infamy to be condemned as fully as the Armenians and their supporters condemn the massacres perpetrated by the Turks against Armenians more than 70 years ago.

The Turks deny they did it.

The Armenians deny they did it.

And people continue to die maybe because everyone only wants to deny.

Now, the two sides are gearing up for the next round of blood-shed and more young men, and others, will be killed.

And their numbers will soon exceed all those killed at Hodjali and the events of February 25th and 26th, 1992 will soon become a detail, just another grim statistic in the on-going litany of death and destruction in the Black Garden of Nagorno Karabakh.

But I will remember Alef, Zumrut, the Sadikovs and all the others, whose names I never knew but whose faces are painted on my memory.

I will remember Hodjali.

It was a dump, and now it is dead.

