

# Azerbaijan 1998

## Monday, 11 May 1998

You can get to Baku, Azerbaijan, from anywhere in Europe. Baku represents the eastern boundary for our Middle East & Eastern Europe region. Three time zones from Central Europe and as many hours flying—if you can get a direct flight—which you usually can't from Vienna.

To get there from Vienna on a Monday, I flew west to Amsterdam, changed planes, and flew back. After six hours of travel and waiting, I saw Vienna again off the right wing. Three hours and a whole day later, I was in Baku.

By now, it was dark. The KLM flight was not too full, and the queues at Immigration were not too long. A young, uniformed soldier acted as a gate at the four lines. He stood inches from the front person and gazed into the middle distance with feigned intent. With his back to the immigration booth, he could not see when the previous entrant was finished. So, each person in line let him know when it was their turn. It was a tedious and unnecessary job that carried implications of the recent Communist past in which jobs were more important than reasons for them.

The immigration official was welcoming and pleasant and told me he would keep my passport and that I could pick it up from the foreign affairs department the next day. This revelation would usually have rattled me, but I had been forewarned that it was standard procedure in Baku. I had never been asked to surrender my passport in more than twenty years of world travel. During the next two days, a World Vision colleague did the necessary genuflection and retrieved the document with its Azerbaijan visa inserted.

A man attached himself to me immediately. I stood by the baggage carousel.

“You need a taxi?”

“No, thanks. Someone is meeting me.”

“I will wait with you in case he does not come.”

“I'm sure that is not necessary. Thank you just the same.”

“No. I will wait,” he insisted. “Just in case.” Perhaps he knew something about our country director's reliability that I didn't. I thanked him for his generous concern for my transport and ruminated about the lack of business for taxi drivers that caused such speculative marketing.

We queued for our luggage to be x-rayed through customs—a rare but not unknown procedure in other places. Most X-ray on the way into the terminal. Here, they also do it on the way out. My taxi-driving friend helped and pushed me past the hassled official, and I saw Stu, our country director, in the small crowd. I shook his hand of welcome and turned to thank my hopeful friend, who was already gone.

Stu had a four-wheel drive waiting in the car park and drove it himself. It was called a “Gallop,” and I had never seen one before. It appeared to carry no other name, although it looked like the old Mitsubishi Pajero—which, Stu informed me, is what it was, but made by Hyundai in South Korea.

By now, it was past eleven p.m. Stu's cell phone rang, and it was Carolyn calling from Washington, D.C. He spoke to her for a minute and then handed the phone over to me.

“Welcome to Baku!” Carolyn gushed. “The view along the road is pretty depressing, right?” She was referring to the thousands of abandoned oil derricks and oil pools that make up the landscape between the airport and Baku.

“Well, the view is pretty depressing because it’s nighttime!” I replied. The sun was up in D.C., though.

The guest apartment was a pleasant two-bedroom flat that looked like the same interior decorator had decked it out as a similar apartment in Gomel, Belarus. Entry was via a depressing courtyard and stairwell, commonplace for many cities in the old Communist world. I was soon asleep.

## **Tuesday, 12 May 1998**

The Galloper arrived at 0830, and Stu drove me to the office. Downtown was a combination of wide tree-lined avenues and very narrow lanes. The latter had been regimented into a grid of one-way streets, and we seemed to turn a few too many times before arriving outside a door with a “World Vision” sign. Along the lane, a sturdy grapevine curled up the wall and across a mesh of electricity cables.

Steve, who was to be my host this morning, led devotions for a small group in Stu’s office. Then, we were joined by his colleague, Gulnara, and Roman, our driver, to visit the town of Sumgayit. Here, World Vision was in the construction business. Refugees from the Nagorny Karabakh conflict ended up here in run-down dormitories designed for single factory workers. And not well designed even for them. Huge five-storey blocks with a central corridor, communal washrooms and no cooking facilities. There were over a hundred such buildings, each containing hundreds of families. Bad to begin with, the buildings had deteriorated even further. Chilling winds howled constantly through open brickwork. The plumbing had stopped working. Basements were flooded and rat-infested. Mould grew everywhere from water leaking through broken rooves and from broken pipes.

With American government money, and despite an act of Congress restricting aid to Azerbaijan, World Vision was making these places habitable. Steve and Gulnara were running the project. Steve’s job as an engineer was to decide what needed to be fixed and to get it done. Gulnara’s job was to organise the people to take control of their environment.

It’s easy to fix a building. It’s hard to keep it fixed. In our business, we have often seen situations in which a well is provided in a village, and when it breaks down, the villagers expect World Vision to come back and fix it.

“It’s your pump,” they say, “you come and fix it.”

It’s the same with buildings. If World Vision fixes the plumbing, we are responsible for maintaining it.

Even in relief and rehabilitation work, thinking developmentally from Day One is essential. This is not a building we are putting back together—it is a community. That’s Gulnara’s job. She meets with people in each building a few times and explains that World Vision plans to work on their building. Then, an open meeting is announced. Many people come. They elect a committee. Four tradesmen are appointed as handymen to keep the repairs up to standard. Only then, when local responsibility for the building is established, does World Vision’s engineer move in.

People in our business often talk about the difference between relief and development. Such talk is nonsense. It shows lazy thinking. The tendency to compartmentalise and divide the real world into boxes of black and white is undisciplined thinking. It may look disciplined because it is neat. But so is juggling with one ball. It’s neat because it is simplistic. And pointless.

Too often, undisciplined thinking leads to rules and regulations that put straitjackets around people. The people of the old Communist world know this only too well. However, laws and rules do not equal discipline; they equal control. One doesn't need discipline to remain in handcuffs.

Discipline is only needed when we have freedom. Remaining still when one's hands are free requires discipline, as does juggling three balls.

It is the same with thinking. When we divide things into boxes, we are lazy and undisciplined thinkers. When we operate in the real world of open and complementary categories, we need disciplined minds to keep all those balls in the air.

That's why World Vision's work in Azerbaijan should not be categorised as "relief," "rehabilitation," or "development." It was some of all these things. We were rehabilitating buildings, bringing relief to people from the suffering of improper shelter, and doing it all in a way that developed community and sustainable change.

Steve, from Liverpool, UK, contained more enthusiasm than his Englishness could release quickly. After visiting a wrecked building, he said, "An engineer's delight! There's so much we can do!"

He also cautioned me against standing too close to one of the electricity substations.

"You might get arc-ed," he said as I stood near the evil ganglia of thick wires exuding through the small brick building's doors and windows. I stepped back.

## Some history.

As the Soviet system crumbled after 1988, Azerbaijan and its neighbour, Armenia, fought a territorial war. History, which didn't care much about nationhood or national borders until recently, had permitted an enclave of Armenians to live in an area surrounded by Azeris. To cut a long and bloody story short, Armenia won. Armenia occupied the area known as Nagorny-Karabakh and the bit of Azerbaijan in between. 853,000 people were displaced and now live in other parts of the country, unable to return home. Many of them lived in Sumgayit—a long way from home.

Back at the office, the cook provided lunch, an Azeri dish of chicken and herb rice. To my surprise, the staff welcomed me with a gift, a small carpet in the colours of the Azerbaijan flag and the pattern of the Azerbaijan map.

Next, we drove through the city to meet with the deputy Prime Minister, Mr Rustamov. He is a former philosophy professor who is now responsible, among other things, for humanitarian affairs and reportedly accommodating to aid agencies. I thanked him sincerely for this support and enjoyed a briefing on the country's situation, which he gave with well-rehearsed and practised ease.

At five, we were due for an office-warming party to which many in the NGO community had been invited. Since it was not yet four, Stu asked if I would like to walk in the old city. Of course, I did. We walked by an ancient stone wall adorned with sharpshooters's slots and small towers. New and old buildings pressed around it along narrow lanes. The architecture is an exciting mixture of East and West. A doorway here resembling the front of an Austrian apartment block. Around it was a stone building that would not look out of place in Jerusalem. In architecture and many other respects, Azerbaijan is a place between cultures.

After some leisurely meanderings, we came by the Maiden's Tower, which was once by the shore of the Caspian Sea. Now, the sea is a few hundred metres away and below, but I was told it was on the rise again.

“Why is it called the Maiden’s Tower?” I asked, looking up at this massive tower shaped in an unbalanced ellipse and seven storeys tall.

“I don’t think anyone knows,” Stu replied. “Some say her father built it to protect her from unwelcome suitors. Others that she built it to protect herself from an abusive father.”

Around the tower's base, carpet sellers show the products for which Azerbaijan continues to have a good reputation. However, I heard it was moderately complicated to get them out of the country.

Downtown was a large fountain square, although the fountain was dry. Here, one saw the modern side of Baku, with well-dressed people hurrying about business and shopping. We stopped for a coffee and enjoyed the company of Baku's rich, young people. Some people had money in this town. All the latest European fashions were on show: blue jeans and jackets, leather, and red hair. Girls wore platform shoes that made their miniskirts appear teasingly shorter, and boys wore designer-tattered trousers and Men-In-Black sunglasses.

Back at the World Vision office, things began to hop. Vanessa-Mae was playing on a CD player, and all the staff were smiling and welcoming, offering soft drinks and nibbles. The NGO community was all present and knew one another well.

Sometimes, people think we compete with one another. This is rarely true. Cooperation and support are the more common experiences. Unfortunately, there is always more than enough work to go around without us getting in each other’s way!

After a few hours of meeting new people, my attempt to remember names turned my brain into mush. When I began to forget my name, even though I was drinking Coke, I sat quietly in a corner.

Around eight, Stu took me off to his apartment where my morning companion, Steve, was to be joined by Scott and Carrie, young married American colleagues, for dinner. Carrie had agreed to prepare a meal and had gone hunting for chickens. Contrary to the plan, Carrie had the keys to Stu’s flat and had not arrived before we did. I wandered through the street vegetable market outside Stu’s apartment block. Garlic, tomatoes, onions of various kinds, cucumbers and other things were in plentiful supply. A few years ago, under Communism, such markets were unheard of.

Stu had been lucky to find a lovely apartment, especially since he’d had no time to look for himself. Dinner was delicious—barbecue chicken, vegetables and potatoes. Carrie had an open, honest face that suggested a short distance between heart and sleeve. Her husband, Scott, had chiselled All-American boy looks and a ready smile. Around the dinner table, we talked about our experiences in this World Vision business. Since Stu and I had been in it for about twenty years longer than the others, they were mostly our stories.

### **Wednesday, 13 May 1998**

Around eight, we left for the road south. Our destination was Imishili, which is southwest of the city. On the drive out of Baku, I started to understand Carolyn’s ironic description of depressive beauty. The outskirts of town were littered (it’s the right word) with abandoned oil pumps. Thousands of rusty skeletons in a jumble of dead iron and oil sludge. A Mad Max landscape. In one place, an immense oil rig was dismembered in sections on its side. It towered four times above the height of three-storey buildings. All abandoned and useless.

There is oil in Azerbaijan, but interest has moved to the Caspian Sea. Working oil rigs could be seen offshore. In one place, a new oil rig was being built in a dry dock.

Once out of town, our driver, Roman, picked up speed to 100 kays. As it turned out, the roads in Azerbaijan are generally of good quality. Many are four lanes wide or broader and, at least

outside the towns, free from potholes. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the quality of the foundations because, at speed in a four-wheel drive, it's a bit like riding Space Mountain at Disneyland. Bumpy is too polite a word for it. After two days of these roads, I said ironically to Stu, "I think we should go and find some really bumpy roads now. I don't think I have been shaken up quite enough yet!"

Roman proved to be a good driver when not too tired. His anticipation seemed good, and I commented to Stu that I thought there was a relationship between driving and strategic thinking.

"You can tell a good strategic thinker by how they drive," I said. "Good drivers look ahead and anticipate possible events. Many drivers don't do this. They have to have good reactions and be good at avoidance. It's the same in business. Good leaders look ahead and anticipate possible events. When problems occur, they have long ago taken corrective action. It all looks like plain sailing for good strategic thinkers and drivers."

Once we left Baku, we were immediately in the desert. The Caspian Sea was light blue and calm to our left, and to the right were sand and low hills. After about an hour, we turned west and crossed a river near Gazi-Mammad, and immediately, the landscape turned green. Although relatively dry, only the strip of land by the Caspian is a true desert. The rest appears fertile and productive.

Scattered here and there along the coast were small communities of limestone block houses, sometimes their existence and location merely at the whim of some distant central planner. Such communities had been built around factories, which were now defunct. What life was left for people in this terrain?

The traffic was mostly Ladas; those Fiat 124 copies still produced over thirty years after the original. Somewhere along the way, we stopped for morning tea, very salty goat cheese and flatbread. It was nourishing, and we enjoyed a pleasant break from the bouncing Galloper in the open-air shade of a small teahouse.



By lunchtime, we arrived in Imishili, near Iran's border. World Vision had taken over a World Food Program food distribution project from another agency a few months before. Running the team was an Ethiopian, Debebe, who gave me the best briefing on food distribution that I had heard in all my World Vision time!

Recently awarded a PhD from the University of Baku, Debebe had a mind like accounting software. Arrayed along one wall were all the forms used to check, crosscheck, and double-check that the food distribution was going without hitch or loss. He guided me through this maze with stunning logic and bewildering clarity. I say "bewildering" because I have always found these complicated accountability systems bemusing. I was confused to find that I wasn't bewildered!

No one in World Vision underestimates the importance of accountability in food distribution. It is perhaps the Achilles' Heel of the aid business. It is so easy to lose or waste food through sloppy procedures. Over the years, World Vision has built a foolproof system ensuring accuracy and security. Our internal systems have completely documented the system, and faithful application of the procedures ensures outstanding performance. In Imishili, a loss rate of 0.004% and an excess rate of 0.04% were caused by slight shortages when measuring flour and other commodities out of the sacks. As impressively small as these numbers were, it was even more impressive that they had been measured with such accuracy.

Consistent with our disciplined thinking about our business, food distributions were being done soundly. Local people are responsible for much of the organisation and even participate in the control and checking procedures, in addition to being full-time monitors attached to every distribution.

After this tour de force, I was ready for lunch, which we enjoyed with Debebe's staff in their office. We had yoghurt and greens, delicious, sugared strawberries, bread, rice and chicken, followed by a question-and-answer time.

The first question was revealing. It came from someone employed by the previous agency and suddenly lost his job when the agency stopped working without warning. He wanted to know if World Vision was committed to staying. I assured him that we were, but I reminded him that our ability to stay rested on quality work that impressed donors enough to continue to support us. So, he also played a hand in World Vision's long-term prospects.

One young woman asked if people in Europe knew about Azerbaijan. I replied that I did not think so. That, even in Europe, people do not know history well. Many think Azerbaijan (which has thousands of years of history astride the Silk Road) only came into being in 1991!

We looked at the warehouses containing the flour, oil, and other things for distribution. Debebe said the previous agency had received these warehouses for free, but the owner insisted that all his relatives be employed. Perhaps this led to corruption. Our policy is to avoid such coziness. Not that we have anything against families working together, but we know from experience that even the most honest person can come under enormous pressure from family obligations. It's best avoided.

On the drive north, with the no-go mountains of Nagorny-Karabakh rising to snow-tipped heights to our left, we bounced by Ladas stuffed to the roof with various vegetables.

"Oh, look," I said with surprise when I spotted the first one, "a cabbage car!" The Lada had hundreds of cabbages in the back seat, pressed against the windows up to the roof line. Roman showed no real surprise, and I soon discovered what was new to me was commonplace here. Soon, we passed another cabbage car, a tomato car, and a few onion cars. Imagine a car full of onions on a warm day!

As we moved further north, we saw more houses with elaborate tin rooves, and now and then, we had to slow for herds of sheep and cattle grazing by the roads.

Our destination was Ganja, the second biggest town in Azerbaijan and once the capital. In Soviet times, it was a military town closed to visitors. From there, the first crack troops invaded Afghanistan. We were to see, the next day, how their barracks were being used in a new way today.

The World Vision office in Ganja was the base for a microenterprise loans scheme and a nutrition research unit. A local man, Mustagil, managed the microenterprise loans scheme, and an American, Tammie, managed the nutrition research. Tammie occupied one room in the local guesthouse, and we dropped our bags there before joining some local staff for dinner in the open air high on a hill overlooking the town.

For the first time since arrival, I was offered alcohol. Azerbaijan is a Muslim country, but it was clear from the many bottles and cans of Vodka available alongside Coke and Fanta at roadside stalls that there was little strictness about alcohol use. The alcohol offered in this case was Vodka. This proved to have a uniquely medicinal aroma and flavour. Trying to balance cross-cultural clumsiness with humour, I quietly labelled it “E.R brand” after the American TV show of the same name, suggesting it would go well on swabs. Sipping only enough to follow the toasting around the table and swamping it with ample supplies of Coke, we enjoyed a meal of cooked meat and greens.

Back at the World Vision guesthouse, I found my bedroom was downstairs through a door made for the vertically challenged. The room was of adequate height and comfortable, but it seemed no one had worked out how to get into this part of the house until it was already built. Stu slept on top of the garage, which had been converted into a patio. This seemed sensible since the night air was merely cool, but the mosquitoes arrived to annoy him. After we shared a digestive and some conversation, we retired, and I drifted off to the muted sounds of a dog’s yapping and a distant conversation.

#### **Thursday, 14 May 1998**

The toilet wouldn’t flush, but we found a bucket. The water in the shower was hot, but the drain water ran out from under the bath, across the tiled floor and down a drain hole in the middle of the room. I wasn’t complaining. Yesterday, after looking in the warehouse, we wandered across some railway tracks and saw where hundreds of refugees were now living.

I say “refugees”, although the official title is “internally displaced people”, usually abbreviated to IDPs. I think this kind of categorical language is just another form of abuse. Technically, you cannot be a refugee until you cross a border. But since most borders are, to say the least, contentious, what right does anyone have to categorise people like this? These IDPs can look across a new border, an unofficial border caused by an unresolved conflict that separates them from their homes. They are seeking refuge, no matter what label we put on them.

These refugees in Imishili were living in old railway carriages. In winter, they are cruelly cold, and in summer, they are stinking hot. Many had built a ramshackle lean-to against their part of the railway carriage to make life more bearable. Some had been there for more than five years.

So, the odd plumbing of the World Vision guesthouse in Ganja would have blessed them. And I counted my blessings as I prepared for another day.

“Why did you join the Peace Corps?” I asked Tammie while sipping coffee. She came to World Vision after a stint in Sri Lanka in the Peace Corps and worked in public health in Senegal.

“It was something I always wanted to do,” she replied. “My parents encouraged me. I think they wished they had done something like this when they were younger.”

Mustagil and his colleagues took me on a tour of some loan clients. First, we visited a busy factory in the middle of a former military barracks pressing sugar into cubes. A thriving concern, the owner had borrowed money to buy machines and had quickly repaid the loans.

In one of the dormitory-style buildings, once occupied by the Russian Blue Berets and still adorned with official Russian Air Force graffiti, we visited a family that had developed a dressmaking and tailoring business.

We dodged around the “hub cap holes” on the way out of town. Manholes were everywhere, and some of them even had covers. Most did not, so avoiding dropping a wheel into one of them was important. It would indeed rip off your wheel, stub axle and all.

On the hills near the town was a new community of stone and mud houses, delineated by wandering stone walls and accompanied by chickens, sheep and goats. This was the farming

and business community of refugees who had transferred their lifestyle to near-town rather than in-town. It was a thoroughly more satisfactory arrangement. A better quality of life, like the farming lives they had abandoned a few years before.

Here, World Vision was helping a family of brothers with a boot-making business. They had bought boot lasts with loans and had little trouble selling their shoes in the markets.

As we left, one of the loan officers said to me, “They like to work. If you like to work, you have a future.” True.

For lunch, we drove to nearby Mingechevir, a small and attractive town with wide tree-lined streets beside the huge Mingechevir reservoir. Myles, a young Englishman who had acted with distinction as country director for a few months during the hiatus in leadership before Stu arrived, was now firmly in place running the combined food distribution and microenterprise development project.

Food was being distributed that day at Mingechevir so that we could see this side of the program. It was running like a well-oiled machine. Many of the Azeris working for World Vision spoke good English, which I appreciated since I had only learned my first word of Azeri yesterday—how to say, “Thank You.” Tomorrow, I will try for “Goodbye.”

It turned out that many of these people were former teachers. After meeting the tenth or eleventh schoolteacher, I asked, “If you are all working here, who is teaching in the schools?”

“There are too many teachers for the jobs available,” came back the reply, which I discovered was diplomatically only half the truth. The full story had to do with what a local schoolteacher gets paid: less than USD 30 a month, whereas a controller at a food distribution gets USD 100 a month. Pure economics at work. Hopefully, the government will do something about teachers’ salaries soon.

Again, we enjoyed lunch with the staff, with the pleasant addition of rich onion soup. The Mingechevir office was in a building that looked like an office block, whereas other offices were in converted houses or flats. Part of the office was a small theatre that would have held an audience of about 30 people. A small stage had been walled off and converted into the record-keeping room for the food distribution documents.

We had time to visit one of the microenterprise project's clients. It was a family living in former boat sheds by the river. In their living room were three incubators full of eggs. Outside was a small chicken run from the last batch. Those incubators were working OK. Around the corner of the house, sheep skins were being tanned into leather for jackets.

The project manager, Durdana, a small woman who could command authority in inverse proportion to her height, showed us this with evident pride and not a little dismay that we could not see her other eight clients.

We needed to leave for the three hours back to Baku, and my flight at three. The drive took us up into the mountains, with spectacular views across the plain and then across rolling hills. Unfortunately, the roads were as bumpy as ever.

A few boys were selling something in small plastic packets at one spot. When I asked what it was, we stopped and bought a packet of mint-flavoured tea leaves.

“Good medicine,” Roman explained. Stu offered to let me have them, but I said I didn’t want to explain them to narcotics-sensitive customs officials in London or Vienna.

About an hour out of Baku, the terrain suddenly switched back to desert sands, and by seven, we were at the airport again. There was only one flight out that night, mine to London. It was scheduled for 9.15 P.M., and already a half dozen people had arrived, but the entry to the check-in counters remained closed. I dispatched Stu and Roman with thanks and waited.



Soon, I saw a queue begin to form, so I joined it in about fifth place. Beside us was a door labelled “Business Class,” and soon, people arrived and went in. Those of us in economy class, or what British Airways dresses up as “World Traveller Class,” were made to wait until the business class line was empty before permitting us to continue to the single X-ray machine.

In addition, a gaggle of flash-looking people arrived with metal cases individually labelled “Case 1,” “Case 2,” and so on, up to 30. These cases were deposited at the front of the line, and Azeri fixers soon appeared to try to persuade the military doorman to give their clients priority. Clearly, I would be standing in this queue for a little while.

After about 40 minutes, the four world travellers before me had been admitted to the inner sanctum. I stood an inch from the young soldier’s face while he looked around my left ear at something extremely important in the middle distance.

The younger American behind me expressed his impatience as another dribble of Business Class passengers arrived and gazumped our place on the X-ray machine.

“Who are these people?” he asked the younger soldier, who looked at him as if he had spoken a foreign language, which he had.

The American added something in Russian that seemed to register with the soldier, who merely shrugged. It was obviously out of his control. I didn’t hold a grudge.

“How I think about it is this,” I said gently to my queue companion. “We all must get on the same plane. We can either wait out here or wait in there. The only advantage is that you can sit. But you must pay a lot more for Business Class for the privilege of a seat inside.”

This seemed to mollify him, but this was when the Azeri fixers for the many-cased party found their cousins on the other side, and admission was created for them. This delayed us another fifteen minutes and caused the younger American behind me to explode with a four-letter word.

A man in a suit was helping to pass the metal cases through. Overhearing this supportive word from my companion, he turned to me as he heaved another heavy case and said, “I’ll bet you’ll never complain about overweight again after seeing this.”

I smiled. “I’ve travelled with a film crew once or twice myself,” I assured him. “I don’t mind.” Then I added, “Who are you with?”

“CBS Sixty Minutes,” he replied, “if that means anything to you.”

I assured him it did.

The cases progressed gradually, and about five of the CBS team members were admitted through the Business Class door while another fifteen or twenty waited in our line.

“You see that man with the grey hair next to the guy you spoke to?” asked my American companion.

“Yup.”

“He’s the CBS News Correspondent for this region.” He said his name, but it didn’t mean anything to me. “He’s a big-time newsman. Maybe I’ll ask for his autograph. At least I’ll get something out of this waiting.”

I considered this. It would be no thrill to me to get the autograph of “a big-time newsman.” I did not value fame like my companion.

“I tell you what,” I said. “I’ll give you my autograph. Then you can tell people you got it from a complete nobody who endured an hour in a queue with you in Baku. No one else can claim that little piece of fame except us!” He looked at me like I was a bit looney, which was probably accurate.

“Forgive me for saying so,” I persevered foolishly, “but I’m cynical about the big-time news media.” He looked interested, so I kept going. “Look at this guy. He is surrounded and protected by at least twenty people here. He gets special treatment in airports. What do you think happens when he goes into a village? Does he even go to villages? How can he know what is happening in the real world? He doesn’t touch the real world.”

Of course, part of my own dilemma was expressed in this. I had seen people living in railroad cars, but I didn’t have to live in them. I had seen people receiving food supplements, but I didn’t have to live on them. I had wandered the dark corridors of dilapidated buildings, but now I was standing in a queue for an aeroplane that would fly me to London and on which they would ply me with food and drinks.

Did I have any idea what was going on in the real world? In World Vision’s business, one needs to soberly assess what one has seen and experienced and let it enter your heart till it hurts enough to be real.

“Do you have any carpets?” the customs official asked me when I finally got my bag from the X-ray machine from the hands of a man who had offered to help me for ten dollars. I couldn’t stop him from helping me, but I knew I could bargain about the price later.

“Yes, I have one.” The official’s eyes brightened, and I wondered if I was in trouble. “But it’s a small one.”

“It’s in your case?” he asked. A-hah, an unbeliever. “May I see it?”

I opened my case and showed him the one-foot square carpet the staff had given me as a souvenir. He looked disappointed.

“Isn’t it nice?” I asked. “Map and flag together. Nice souvenir.”

“Show me your currency declarations.” He was moving on. I produced the forms.

“You have a problem,” he said.

“No,” I said carefully. “I don’t think I have a problem.”

“Yes,” he explained, “you must get this one stamped when you enter the country.”

“I didn’t know that”, I said with honest amazement. How could one know what to get stamped? “I showed it when I came in, but he didn’t stamp it. I’m sorry about that.”

“Next time, you should get it stamped, then there will be no trouble.” Trouble? I doubted there was going to be trouble. He must see hundreds of unstamped currency declarations if my experience was a guide.

“Thank you very much for your advice,” I replied with hardly evident sarcasm. “I’ll certainly know what to do next time.” He waved me on so he could look for bigger carpets.

“Ten dollars,” my porter said. I gave him one.

“No, ten,” he said, presuming I was deaf. He had not helped speed me through customs one bit, and the American behind me in the line was ahead of me in the check-in queue.

“No,” I said gently. “One dollar is good. Thank you very much.”

“Five,” he tried.

“No,” I laughed. “Thanks.”

“You have Azeri money?” He was a trier, this one.

“No. Thank you, and God bless you.” Now that was uncalled for, I thought, dismissing a pesky porter with a blessing. But he left with a tip as big as a schoolteacher’s daily wage.

*Be still, be still, my soul; it is but for a season:*

*Let us endure an hour and see injustice done.*

—A.E. Housman (taken out of context)