

Soccer Number Eight in Armenia

Little eight-year-old Krikor Antramian wore the number eight on his jersey. His grandmother picked that number. It is a sacred number for Armenians. Churches are adorned with the eight-pointed star. It is the connection of eternity, somewhere out there, to life here. Krikor, at that early age, was a soccer phenomenon. His feet skills were noticed by the older coaches, and he played on teams two years older. By the age of ten, his number-eight jersey was followed by the Armenian national team as a future star. Even though he retired, his father was already one.

Krikor's family was from Artsakh, an ancient Armenian land that contained many churches and even the foundations of an ancient castle built around 70 BC by the famous Armenian king Tigrane "Medz" The Great. Around 1923, Joseph Stalin gave this mountainous enclave to a newly created country, Azerbaijan. When the Soviet Union broke up, this tiny enclave declared its independence. A war was fought from 1991-94 between these far-outnumbered mountainous Armenians and the massive oil-funded Azeri army. Throughout its history, Armenians have never started a war. They have always been invaded, and most of the time, they lost the battles. For some heavenly reason, all over the world, they survive as a people to this day. This time, they defeated a superior army and lived peacefully in their ancient Artsakh homeland, separated by mountains, from Greater Armenia.

Peace is but a fleeting moment prior to the next war. The next war came to Artsakh, and the families were again called to fight. Krikor's 152

father, Ara, became a platoon leader not far from the village they lived in. Krikor, Ara, and Krikor's grandmother Catherine all lived in a small stone home on the sides of the mountain village. Krikor never knew his mother. She did not survive his birth.

Ara Antramian, an Armenian national soccer team star, would meet a similar fate to the 5,000 other soldiers from Artsakh when he was killed by an Azeri drone attack while he was defending his village. Unless a soldier is known personally, it is hard to grasp the violent death of this cancer called war. This death had a side story that could not be pushed aside. The morning of the drone attack, Krikor was running food to his father and his fellow soldiers when the missile that took his father's life tore into his tender left leg. He was immediately sent to the main hospital in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. There, talented surgeons repaired what they could. He would then spend his next six months living in the Artsakh orphanage to rehab his damaged leg. His ability to run and cut quickly was gone. So was this gentle giant's soccer career. It made the news. Not just any news, but the national news. Unbeknownst to Krikor, he had become a symbol of survival. Number eight.

Grandma Catherine was a short, stocky Armenian grandmother. Her head was full of white hair. Her face could not conceal the many tragedies she had experienced in her life. She had also learned how to rise above and conquer. She would say, in a quote from the famous Armenian author William Saroyan, "I don't need happiness to be happy!"

Krikor needed a lift. This twelve-year-old had grown up much too fast and had seen too much. Krikor needed a dog, she thought. After talking to the orphanage, it was decided that all the kids there could use a mascot.

Grandma Catherine bought a dog. Not just any dog, but a Gampr puppy named Oscar. The Gampr is the national dog of Armenia. With a coat made up of any color, it always has a soft undercoat with short or long hair. They grow to be very large, achieving 130 pounds—the size of a large bull mastiff. Some of the small orphans would hug and ride Oscar. 153

The leaves fell early as the brilliant summer sun began to calm down and the shadows became gentler. It was time for the city soccer championship for fourteen-year-olds. This was a major event in the city of Yerevan. Families would so look forward to seeing their relatives, neighbors, and friends at the stadium.

This Saturday, there was a massive crowd of over 6,000 people in this park-like stadium called Yerevan Orbita. Twenty teams have battled down to two. The Yerevan team called "Urartu" battled against the Artsakh team known as the "Nagorno-Artsakh."

“Hurry up, Krikor.” Grandma Catherine had a plan. She knew with the damaged leg, each step was painstakingly slow, but his big smile said it all. “Wear your soccer shorts and shoes to show your support. I have Oscar on the leash.”

Krikor, though puzzled by her request, followed her instructions.

“You can’t bring the dog into this taxi,” the driver admonished Grandma Catherine.

“My dear son, have you not heard of Krikor and Ara Antramian, the soccer stars of Armenia? Are you going to deny his dog a chance to see this game? Here, take some of these zilook bread sticks for your wife; she will be very thankful.” Grandma Catherine opened her purse and grabbed a bag of zilooks as she forcefully pushed Oscar into the taxi.

“Well, I am not married,” announced the taxi driver.

“We can take care of that another time; I have a niece in Artsakh,” Grandma Catherine responded as Oscar licked the side of the driver’s head.

Taking the long taxi ride, Grandma Catherine went into the stadium but took a shortcut to the field. Krikor followed behind her.

There before them was the gleaming green grass on a perfect sunlit Saturday. What a wonderful arena.

Running ahead of Krikor, who held Oscar. “Who is the coach here,” Grandma Catherine bellowed.

“I am,” A short, bald named Levon came forth.

Grandma Catherine took his hand and kissed it. Then she pulled something special out of her purse: the number-eight jersey. It was her 154

son-in-law’s number, and now it belonged to her wounded grandson. She told the story of soon-to-arrive Krikor, about his love of the game and how, while assisting his father’s platoon, his leg was damaged so severely, he was unable to play. She spoke of the loss of his parents and finally asked, “Could this boy play in this game with his fellow teammates?”

“Medz Mideek, great-grandmother Catherine, this whole stadium knows the story of Krikor, his father, and the tragedy. This is the city championship game!” The coach exclaimed. “I know of what he could do in the past; I am truly sorry for all the bad things that have happened. There are many families here whose sons have worked for years to get to this tournament.”

Then, pausing after looking at the crowd, he said, “Take him to the bench; I will not promise he will play.”

Grandma shouted, “Hurry, Krikor; go to the bench. You are on the team,” turning her head so Krikor could not see her tears. Oscar whined and shuffled his fist-sized feet. He was ready too.

“But Grandma. I don’t have my uniform,” Krikor protested.

Slowly opening her purse, she pulled out the famous jersey, the complete number, the Number eight. Removing his shirt, he put on the jersey for the first time in over eight months. Unknowingly, he was putting on a prophet’s mantle.

Soon Krikor was greeted by his old teammates. Having him in uniform caused astonishment for some parents. They knew the story of Krikor, his sacrifice, and that of his family. For those who did not, word began to spread through the crowd. “The number eight, that is Ara Antramian’s son.” Even the opposing team was told about Krikor’s presence on the bench.

In the final period, the game was tied 4-4. There were only forty-five seconds left. Some felt a good defense should be in place to wind down the clock and go into a game-ending shootout. The Urartu team had gotten to this championship game by winning two shootout games. They had tremendous fourteen-year-old forwards. Suddenly, a Nagorno-Arsakh player was tripped, and he was not getting up. The other players helped him off. 155

Coach Levon looked at the parents in the stands, then at his team. Finally, deep in thought, he looked at the ground, looked up, and nodded. The injured boy on the Nagorno-Artsakh team limped off the field.

The coach came up to Krikor and got on one knee. “This is for you, this is for your father, this is for all those who hold the dream of freedom in their heart. Krikor, you go in as a forward and score.”

Turning his head away, Coach Levon ran his open hands over his closed eyes and through his hair. His assistant coaches watched in disbelief as the disabled Krikor was assisted onto the field by his former teammates.

Like a lit fuse, the people in the stands suddenly noticed the number eight on the jersey.

Their coach on the other team recognized the number. He had played with Krikor's father. He knew the story. During this timeout, the Urartu team huddled. His hands went up and down as he advised his young players what to do.

The parents in the stands began to stand up, some confused, some understanding. Krikor himself was the most surprised. His old teammates and the large crowd began to say his name slowly and quietly, "Krikor, Krikor, Krikor!!"

Oscar began to pull on the leash. Grandma Katherine struggled with all her frail strength to hold him back.

With the biggest grin his contorted face had ever shown, Krikor swayed one leg after another until the ball was passed to him. By this time, the forwards on the other team came up, and Krikor passed to a teammate. The ball could have been easily intercepted by the defensive fielders. But for some reason, they let the ball pass. Krikor's teammate passed the ball back to Krikor, who continued to use his damaged legs to move the ball forward. Finally, two midfielders who could have easily stripped the ball from him—well, they stood in place, almost at attention as an honor guard would. Krikor passed them and looked to pass to his old teammate, Hratch. He caught Krikor's eye and shook his head "no." The defenders spread like the Red Sea before Moses. 156

The people in the stands suddenly grew silent. A strong breeze began to come from the east. Family, friends, and neighbors watched in anticipation of something special.

Instinct took over, and the scar tissues of his young mind and heart were torn asunder. Krikor took the shot and, with his good leg, he kicked the ball toward the goal with all of his being. The force of that twist of his wounded leg caused him to fall directly onto his face. What happened next, he never saw. The ball bounced off the goalie's hand and into the net. The people already on their feet did something few do: they began clapping and cheering despite their team losing. Pandemonium of relief broke out. Even the losing team rushed around Krikor and lifted him up. Many people were weeping. This was a release of emotion beyond a fourteen-year-old's Regional Soccer Championship game. This was a people's release of a war lost—of 5,000 families without fathers, sons, and brothers. This was a healing that the nation needed.

Tugging on the leash held by Grandma Catherine, Oscar finally got free and chased after the ball.

"Krikor, Krikor, Krikor!" the fans began to shout, all now standing, many with tears in their eyes.

The team and their fans found a new hero that day. Even hunched over, white-haired Grandma Catherine rushed and kissed all the boys, saving her tears and a big hug for Krikor. Oscar whined and jumped until she petted his big head. Despite threats from Grandma Catherine and bribing of treats, Oscar would not release the ball.

There are two pictures on the wall at the Artsakh orphanage. One proudly displays a picture of Grandma, Krikor, and his Nagorno- Artsakh teammates next to the actual regional soccer trophy. In the other photo sits a very large Gampr named Oscar, holding the ball.