

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 9
Issue 1 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 35

August 2005

Unsung Heroes: German Avagyan

CISR JMU
Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)

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Recommended Citation

JMU, CISR (2005) "Unsung Heroes: German Avagyan," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 35.
Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol9/iss1/35>

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GERMAN AVAGYAN

Freelance documentary photographer German Avagyan has dedicated his time, effort and art to the landmine situation in Armenia and Karabakh. Through his photography, he has helped to educate people on the seriousness of the landmine problem in Armenia. Over the past five years, Avagyan documented over 50 cases of landmine injury and became closely acquainted with the families he photographed, hearing their stories of tragedy and sometimes death. "The more I have learned from them, the stronger my determination has grown to tell their stories," Avagyan states.

Avagyan became interested in landmine and UXO victims in 1999 when he was working on a photo documentary project at the Yerevan Boarding School for Children with Vision Impairment. He explains, "There I met several boys who had lost their vision as the result of mine or UXO explosions. One of them lost most of his left arm, and two boys lost siblings in the explosions. As I heard their stories and learned more about the circumstances that led to these accidents, I understood that there is a serious problem in Armenia and Karabakh, about which little was being done and even less was spoken." Avagyan then felt that he must do something to help spread the word and to possibly prevent accidents like these. "I decided to investigate further and traveled many times to distant regions to meet with boys, girls and families whose lives have been turned upside-down by such accidents."

Avagyan hopes to use his photography to create an educational book for children, teachers and parents to demonstrate the harsh realities of the landmine problem in Armenia and Karabakh. "I want my photographs and book to spur people to action," he states. "I want children, parents and teachers to understand the dangers of landmines and UXO. I want them to learn how to recognize mines and UXO, and I want to teach them caution and care. I want all of this, so that not one more Armenian child will be injured or killed by what I call 'lethal toys,'" says Avagyan.

He feels that an educational book for children would be one of the most effective strategies for decreasing landmine casualties. "Clearing landmines, training sappers and dogs are also very important, but this is extremely time-consuming and expensive," Avagyan explains, "An educational book could be published and some training sessions conducted for teachers and parents at a fraction of the cost, and there would be immediate results." He uses the example of a young boy who was recently wounded by an explosion because he was not aware of the

dangers of landmines. "No one warned him of the lethal toys lying out there in the fields," Avagyan states. "Until we get educational materials distributed through the schools, there will be more explosions, more deaths, more severed limbs, more blindness [and] more children made disabled in a blinding flash."

Seeing the day-to-day effects of landmine injuries on children and families, Avagyan has found working on this project to be both difficult and inspiring. "It is very frustrating to watch as those who have survived continue to struggle with their disabilities in a culture that considers them 'invalids,' in a society that looks upon 'invalids' with pity and in horror," he admits. "I feel so helpless and often think that my work is just not enough. ... There is so much that needs to be done." Yet this need motivates him to continue to "tell the stories through my photography of children and adults who are overlooked, forgotten, marginalized—who need our attention and action."

In 2004, a documentary film called *Continuing War* was made in Armenia that was inspired by the work and photography of Avagyan. The film, directed by Ara Shirinyan, features Avagyan's work and focuses on the children involved in the project. The film begins with Artak, who lost his eyesight at the young age of 7 due to a mine explosion. Avagyan is interviewed in the film, stating, "A 6-year-old child loses eyesight, his arm and leg after the war, remaining an invalid for the rest of his life. I suddenly realized that the war that ended a long time ago was still continuing as long as there were mined territories and uncontrolled ammunition."¹ The film then moves on to the story of Sevak, who lives near Stepanakert, the capital of Karabakh. Sevak attempted to disassemble a mine he found with his brother and sister, which resulted in the death of his brother, and the injury of his sister and himself. "I don't remember what happened next; probably it exploded at the very same moment. I woke up and saw that I was in hospital,"¹ says Sevak. The film premiered on Shoghakat TV in Armenia, showing the community the harsh reality of landmine victims and how landmines can instantaneously change a child's life forever. Shirinyan hopes that the film will reach a wider audience and plans to enter it into an international film festival focused on topics of disability. ♦

See "References and Endnotes" on page 105

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Photographer
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PHOTOS COURTESY OF GERMAN AVAGYAN

Amine Yeghiazaryan lost her arm in an anti-personnel mine explosion on the bridge near Saghateashen village.