



Construction! Destruction?! by Betty Blair

Well, here we are—the end of 2005, the long-awaited date that Azerbaijanis have been anticipating for a long time. Eleven years have passed since September 1994 when the “Contract of the Century” was signed for the development of Azeri, Chirag and Gunashli oil fields.

Finally, the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Pipeline is finished. The long-awaited date has been pushed back on a number of occasions. That black liquid from the bowels of the earth is now being pumped into the pipeline and has nearly completed its 1,100 mile journey across three countries—Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. Soon tankers will slip into the dock at the Turkish seaport on the Mediterranean, and fill up with its prized cargo en route to Western markets. The event is a significant milestone in the history of Azerbaijan. It should be a moment of celebration—brimming with joy, immense pride and the satisfaction of accomplishment for a brighter future.

But here we are at the magazine, like Chicken Little of the well-known children’s tale, raising our voices in alarm: “The sky is falling! The sky is falling!”

And how did Chicken Little know to sound the alarm? “I saw it with my eyes, I heard it with my ears, and a bit of it fell on my head,” said Chicken Little, after getting hit on the head with an acorn while walking through the forest.

And so, as the story goes, she gathered her barnyard friends—the hen, the cock, goose, gander, and duck—all together headed off to find the King and warn him of the approaching danger.

Sometimes this tale has come to symbolize media-driven scare tactics created artificially. But in terms of Baku, disaster truly is imminent if nothing is done to rectify serious trends that have been ushered in with this construction boom in downtown Baku.

During the past five years, Baku has grown at a phenomenal rate. More than 500 high-rise buildings—many of which tower 15-25 stories—have totally altered the character of Baku as a city.

In this issue, two authors plead with Azerbaijanis and officials to heed the ominous situation and move strategically to avoid two major irreversible situations: (1) the destruction of beautiful, century-old buildings dating from the Oil Boom—the likes of which will never be built again on such a wide scale in Baku, and (2) the critical need to address safety issues related to the potentially fatal building practices so common to the city, given that it is situated in a very active seismic zone.

Both authors—Pirouz Khanlou and Thomas Goltz—write out of a deep concern that these catastrophes are inevitable unless major steps are taken. Both are long-time friends of Azerbaijan. They write—not for the sake of pointing fingers or making accusations—but primarily to generate community discussion that can lead to correcting the situation.

Both writers developed extremely close emotional ties to Azerbaijan nearly 15 years ago, having set foot in the country even before the Soviet Union had collapsed (late 1991). Both are among a mere handful of foreigners who have sustained relationships with the country, unlike the majority of foreigners, who come and go. On average, international companies and embassies have changed their management at least five times during that same period.

Thomas Goltz knows the territory well. He risked his life on more than one occasion to document the ethnic wars of the Caucasus. He has authored three books about Azerbaijan (1998), Chechnya (2003) and Georgia



Limestone sculpture, characteristic of the oil boom architectural era (1880-1920). Today, so many buildings of this period are at risk of being demolished because of Baku’s new construction boom.

(forthcoming in 2006). He is highly respected among Azerbaijanis for his passionate stand against the massacre that took place in the Azerbaijani town of Khojali (part) in 1992, which set off the “ethnic cleansing” process by Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh. (Obviously, this term has Orwellian implications as it has nothing to do with cleansing, and everything to do with the absolute annihilation of any Azerbaijanis who dared to remain in Karabakh, their home.)

Pirouz Khanlou, a Los Angeles based architect, has carried out several very successful construction projects in Baku. His experience working in earthquake-prone California makes him extremely conscious of the Building Codes and Regulations that must be scrupulously followed to ensure safety under such precarious conditions.

Khanlou fears that Baku is woefully unprepared should an earthquake strike again as it did in November 2000 which brought quite extensive damage. This was before the recently constructed towers, so poorly built had sprung up all over town. Khanlou is concerned that, sooner or later, the inevitable will happen. Nature will take its own course and Baku will be suffer devastating loss. Baku’s difficulties, he insists, stem from a serious lack of

Urban Planning. The capital has been allowed to develop haphazardly without a clear plan or strategy. The future looks even less promising, insists unless serious steps are taken to rebuild the infrastructure at a deep level.

Most people throw up their hands in total frustration when they understand the complexity of these issues. Khanlou, an eternal optimist, attempts to offer a concrete approach so that the City can begin to tackle these problems, both on a short-term, as well as long-term, basis.

That’s why we’ve made such an enormous effort to translate his article, “Construction! Destruction?” [see page 32] into Azeri [page 48] as well. Usually our articles are written to target international readers. This time we wanted to make sure the Azerbaijani community was conscious of our concerns.

On a happier note, with this issue—Autumn 2005 [AI 13.3]—Azerbaijan International magazine celebrates its 50th issue. Published quarterly since 1993, the magazine now boasts nearly 5,000 pages and is subscribed to by some of the world’s most prestigious universities including Oxford, Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, Cornell, Stanford, Georgetown, Texas A & M, Fletcher School of Business at Tufts, and state universities such as UCLA, Berkeley, Penn, North Carolina, Indiana, Texas, and numerous other public libraries, including New York City and Los Angeles.

Our Website—AZER.com—archives the entire contents of these 50 issues. We were one of the earliest (May 1996) to launch a Web site about Azerbaijan and now can claim far beyond dispute to be “The World’s Largest Web Site about Azerbaijan” with approximately 1,840 articles and 5,300 photos.

And that brings us to mention how the tale of Chicken Little ends. As is true of all fairy tales as they get told and retold across time and space—across history and geography, there are various endings depending upon who tells the story. One concludes with Chicken Little and her friends being tricked by Foxy Woxy who makes a scrumptious dinner of them all.

Another version ends “happily ever after” by announcing the arrival of the King’s hunters and their dogs, just in the nick of time, to chase away the wicked fox and rescue the barnyard crew. “After that day, Chicken Little always carried an umbrella with her when she walked in the woods. The umbrella was a present from the King. And if—KERPLUNK—an acorn fell, Chicken Little didn’t mind a bit. In fact, she didn’t notice it at all.”

How much we hope that our efforts to publish on this topic will help to raise community consciousness which, in turn, will facilitate the opening of a huge protective symbolic umbrella over those who love Baku, including foreigners, and all those who call it “Home”. ■