

GYUMRI

Friends of Gyumri

French-Armenian entrepreneur and philanthropist Manoug Pamokdjian and Italian doctor, the founder of Family Care Foundation Antonio Montalto met in 2009. Since then they have launched several large-scale and ambitious projects together, aimed at shedding new light and giving hope to the second largest city of Armenia, Gyumri. We talked to Mr. Pamokdjian and Mr. Montalto about the projects that have already been implemented and about the upcoming plans.

Text : Artavazd Yeghiazaryan / Photos : Friends of Gyumri Foundation



An entrepreneur of French-Armenian origin Manoug Pamokdjian, has been active in Armenia

since 1990. During these years he has managed to implement a number of projects in different fields and in various parts of Armenia. He says that while working in Armenia one should remember that it is, of course, more challenging here compared to Europe. A lot of time is necessary to establish a full democratic system in Armenia. "I realize all of these difficulties. I just do everything possible for my country, for the youth's future", Pamokdjian states.

In 2009, Paomokdjian's efforts turned into a new and exciting continuation, due to a very significant and unexpected encounter. "I heard about an Italian doctor, who visited Armenia after the earthquake and stayed here. He managed to build schools, hospitals and also this wonderful hotel 'Villa Delenda' in Yerevan". Manoug was holding all of the important meetings and was discussing the projects with partners in 'Villa Delenda'. One fine day, the owner of the hotel Antonio Montalto approached him. Antonio told Manoug that he had heard about his projects and would like to discuss a possible cooperation. "Life always takes us to unknown places. Such a thing happened to me, when I arrived in Armenia in 1989", the Italian doctor remembers. Currently Montalto is the Honorary Consul of Italy in Gyumri. He states that although he got acquainted with the country during a tragic time, it stimulated the further strengthening of relations between Armenia and Italy. Montalto had initiated a number of humanitarian projects with his companions in the first years after the earthquake, for instance in the field of motherhood and childcare. But even at that time, it was clear to him that the idea was not only about building hospitals. It was necessary to organize training for the specialists and to invite professionals from abroad. The most important thing was the goal to alter the soviet mentality concerning life issues, people etc. "I stayed here after completing the first project and many people were surprised by that", Montalto says, "Gyumri attracted me. There were two main reasons: Shirak and Lori, the most devastated regions of Armenia, needed me. And in 2001, I was appointed Honorary Consul of Italy in Gyumri. It is such a great responsibility for me and my presence in Gyumri has become more important". The Italian doctor wanted to talk to Pamokdjian about Gyumri. "It is a unique place, and it seems to me it has a symbolic significance for Armenia", he says, "Gyumri is a frontier city and that is the reason for the unique cultural infiltration. The city has got huge potential for prosperous development. But people have to do their best for the further development of this huge potential".

"We had been talking and discussing things for about three hours", Pamokdjian recalls. "Soon we approved the first project. We intended to restore one of the buildings in Gyumri, which had a historical significance, to establish the European Cultural Center there. Currently this building is called 'Villa Alexandropol' and it serves as the Consulate of Italy". Montalto had already implemented similar projects in Yerevan: the aforementioned 'Villa Delenda' and 'Villa Aygedzor'. And this fact played a significant role for Manoug to cooperate with him. "I have been implementing a number of projects in Armenia and I do not deal with the government within their framework. I don't think I would have been involved or had ever been in contact with them if it wasn't for Antonio who took full responsibility. I am happy for our cooperation".



The most important fact is that the buildings are not just restored within the framework of these projects. As a result, they begin to function. This is the right way to make a change in Gyumri. The situation in Gyumri is poorer in comparison to other cities. Twenty-eight years after the earthquake, the consequences are still unsolved. The number of unemployed people is high and emigration increases. So the companions have to struggle for the further development of the city.

Antonio Montalto recalls that he started to work in the field of medicine both in Gyumri and Shirak. But later he switched fields and dealt with social business. “Currently it is high time for the creation of employment. We have to give people long-term opportunities to do what they love. Employment creation in Gyumri is equal to giving hope to people, to let them build a better future for their families in their native city instead of emigrating”. ‘Villa Kars’ was one of the first projects to be implemented. It is a hotel and a cultural center with a conference hall. On the one hand, it had already become an actively functioning spot in the city, on the other hand, being a hotel it brings short-term income to support the implementation of future

projects. Experienced Italian architects helped to restore the building. By the way, it is called Kars as it is the biggest city situated next to the border of Gyumri, and its architectural style and spirit has always been similar to that of Gyumri of 19th century.



Currently Pamokdjian and Montalto are intending to restore buildings gradually, to create a restoring momentum preserving the glorious history of this city. In a few years they plan to present a project to UNESCO to be declared a World Heritage Site. One of the abandoned factories in Gyumri has become the next project. They intend to make it a new center for ceramics. An English tourist discovered and visited a ceramics center while in Spitak and consequently ended up supporting the project. He was so impressed with the place that he

provided all the necessary equipment. Soon, the center was ready to open its doors to Gyumri. Currently, wonderful ceramics are made there, resembling the famous Kutahya style and techniques.

It should be noted here that the ceramics center has been operational for many years, but it was moved to Gyumri at that time. It first opened in Spitak on the initiative of Antonio Montalto. At that time, the main goal was to establish and open a warm and welcoming place, where the children of Spitak would be able to spend at least a few hours to learn art. The center was relocated to Gyumri and it has around two dozen employees. “They produce high quality work. Eventually, Armenians got the skill of handmade art in their veins”, Montalto assures. “There is no need to create something new, we just need to bring back and revive this tradition. We study the traditions of Armenian ceramics of Kutahya and Iznik”. The Honorary Consul of Italy in Gyumri thinks that true patriotism means being useful to the world, while using the skills which are considered to be the best for Armenians.

To make this a reality Pamokdjian and Montalto have already established contact with the Balyan family based in Jerusalem. The family has continued these traditions for decades. The next step is to commercialise the ceramics in France and in Europe. The first exhibition in Lyon was quite successful.

The artworks produced in the workshop were exposed in Lyon for two months. The exhibition had over 400 visitors and €25,000 was collected from the sale. Paris, Geneva, Milan, Verona and many other cities are waiting for their turn to host the exhibition. There is high demand and the raised funds will be sent back to Gyumri. About 16 employees currently work in the workshop and it means that at least sixteen families are given the opportunity to stay put in Gyumri.

The ‘Friends of Gyumri’ foundation was founded to coordinate the great number of projects. At that time the co-founders managed to cooperate with the Gyumri Municipality and another building of historical significance was given to the foundation for further restoration. A small ‘City History Museum’ and the ‘George Gurdjieff’ center will be situated in the building after restoration. Currently the International Gyurdjieff Center is situated in Malta, it is time for this legendary person to also be remembered in his home town too. Pamokdjian states that the implementation of all the aforementioned projects is quite a significant factor that has had great success and has produced a noticeable result concerning the creation of employment. “This is a very good example for Armenians in the Diaspora to follow and to unite, support and promote our activity, which is the future of Gyumri”.



Manoug Pamokdjian
Board member and co-founder of Friends of Gyumri

Manoug Pamokdjian was born in Lyon in 1946. He is an engineer-meteorologist, entrepreneur and scientific adviser. He has been present in Armenia since 1990, where he began as part of an effort to promote a major technology transfer. Creator and director of a startup incubator within the Universite Lumiere Lyon (Lyon II Enterprise), he was also the co-founder of a nursery for innovative companies from 1982 to 1989 – MIFI (House of Innovation, Training and Industry). Founder of the company Finesco Eurofinancement in France and co-founder of Fineco Innovazione Italy. Co-founder of Pamexial Expertise. With his wife Aghavni, he initiated several economic missions between France and Armenia in 1996-1998. His various companies and family are actively involved in cultural and humanitarian patronage. He is a member of the International Association ‘Terre et Culture’ which renovated the hospital of Shushi, Karabakh, between 2008-2010. Since 2009, he has been a partner of the Istanbul based NGOs ‘Anadolu Kultur’ and the ‘Hrant Dink Foundation’. Several cultural projects are co-organized by himself between France, Armenia and Turkey. Since 2009, Pamokdjian and his family combined their efforts with Antonio Montalto and created the Friends of Gyumri foundation.



Antonio Montalto
President and co-founder of Friends of Gyumri

Antonio Montalto was born in Palermo in 1953. He first came to Armenia in 1988, where he led medical aid projects after the earthquake until 1991 and again from 1993 to 2004. The projects involved mainly motherhood and childcare and they have been implemented in Armenia and then Karabakh. In 2004, the NGO was transformed into a Foundation. As the president of the Family Care Foundation, Antonio implemented projects in tourism, with the focus on promotion and recognition of Armenia in Europe. He is also actively involved in the restoration of buildings of historic and cultural significance both in Yerevan and in Gyumri, as well as in activities focusing on the preservation of Armenian cultural heritage in Armenia and Turkey. He has been the Honorary Consul of Italy in Gyumri since 2001.

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