**Matt Garnett**

**Personal Story of Karabakh Victory**

***A Lifelong Dream of Liberation Becomes Victory***

 I was only eleven years old when I began to take an interest in Azerbaijan. This interest took me to the history of Karabakh and to the First Karabakh War. The more I learned about it, the more I became instilled with a deep love for Azerbaijan. This was something that would change the course of my life. I am 23 years old now, and to this day, I love Azerbaijan as if it were my own homeland.

 For half of my life, I desired to see the liberation of Karabakh from Armenian occupation. During the years of occupation, I remember thinking about it was emotionally draining for me. I felt helpless from my home country because even though I could write letters to my congressman or post on Facebook about Azerbaijan, nothing would ultimately change the situation unless Karabakh was saved. However, even though times were dark, I never once lost hope that the the liberation of Karabakh would become a reality. After the July 2020 attacks on Tovuz, I had a strong feeling for the next few weeks that liberation was going to happen soon.

 On September 27, 2020, it was 6 AM and I was sleeping. I just woke up intending to go back to sleep, but I checked my phone like I did any other morning. The first thing I saw on my lock screen was a news alert from Anadolu Agency that read, “Azerbaijani Army liberated 5 villages from Armenian occupation”. I became so excited and immediately got up and contacted my friends in Azerbaijan and checked Facebook. Then, I heard that the number of liberated villages jumped to eight. I immediately knew that this was the beginning of the end of the occupation.

 Most Americans during this time were concentrating on the upcoming presidential elections in November. I, however, focused all my attention on the war where a historical injustice was about to come to an end. I used my Facebook and Instagram to take part in the information war. I had for a long time used both platforms to talk about Azerbaijan and Karabakh, but this time was different. I put my posts into overdrive. I felt in my heart that I had a moral and patriotic duty to support the Azerbaijani people in their cause by spreading awareness to those at home. This was not an easy task because in the US where a huge Armenian diaspora resides, it was easier for the Armenians to control the narrative in the media which spread continuous misinformation on their behalf.

 The war also made my emotions swing like a pendulum. On one hand, the incredible bravery of the Azerbaijani soldiers was bringing good news to us. The more villages and cities that were liberated, I became filled with excitement and joy. However, I would also feel angry over terrorist attacks on Ganja and sad that many Azerbaijani soldiers were becoming martyrs. I was certain about one thing though: Karabakh must be liberated at every possible cost. Azerbaijan cannot surrender. If there is no Karabakh, there is no Azerbaijan.

 On November 8, 2020, I woke up in the middle of the night in America when the news alert that came at 4:20 AM confirmed the liberation of Shusha. I was so overjoyed and turned on the TV to listen to President Ilham Aliyev’s speech. As I was watching him speak with the flag of Azerbaijan behind him, I realized that the lifelong dream of millions like me had just come true. Karabakh was free! As I listened to the national anthem of Azerbaijan afterwards, I cried tears of joy. I knew in my heart that the occupation would soon be over. On November 10, it was announced that the victory of Azerbaijan had been won.

 Almost two years after the 44 – Day Patriotic War, I had the opportunity to visit Karabakh after its liberation. I first went to Aghdam and Füzuli where I saw destroyed cities, but cities that will be rebuilt. After this, I went to Shusha. I finally fulfilled a great wish of mine to take the flag of Azerbaijan to Shusha and take a picture with it in the mountains. As I stood on those mountains, I was reminded of the enormous sacrifices that the martyrs of Azerbaijan made to save the homeland. Their memory must never be forgotten. I am proud to have witnessed the fact that much of what was destroyed is being rebuilt. Life is returning to Karabakh as I write this.

 Karabakh is Azerbaijan. Nothing will ever change this. I see a bright future for Karabakh now that it is free. We must always be grateful our heroes who made our victory happen and restored Azerbaijan’s full independence. Whether you are Azerbaijani or a foreigner who stands with Azerbaijan, it is our duty to protect the independence, traditions, and cultural values of the motherland. The Karabakh victory gives us the opportunity to do this. I will always stand with my Azerbaijani brothers and sisters. With all of this said, our victory is eternal, and the independence of Azerbaijan is forever!

QARABAĞ BİZİMDİR! QARABAĞ AZƏRBAYCANDIR! EŞQ OLSUN AZƏRBAYCAN ORDUSUNA! YAŞASIN AZƏRBAYCAN!