

Asylum Granted Armenian Activist

An immigration court judge granted Armenian political activist Shoghik Karapetyan asylum last week, successfully bringing to a close a struggle that began over two years ago. Hughes Hubbard represented Karapetyan pro bono.

The case can be traced to the assassination in October 1999 of Karen Demirchyan, then leader of the opposition Peoples Party of Armenia and one of several victims of a massacre on the parliament floor. Karapetyan, a college instructor of economics and math in the capital Yerevan, had been a top aid to Demirchyan. After Demirchyan's death, Karapetyan became an even more vocal critic of President Robert Kocharyan's government, which she accused of plotting the murders of Demirchyan and the other slain opposition parliament members.

Karapetyan was interrogated, threatened, and both verbally and physically abused by the officials from the military prosecutor's office. The most violent incident occurred on April 7, 2001 when three men attacked her at a bus station, beating her until she was unconscious. The attack, which continues to haunt her in the form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression and headaches, is believed to be typical of the kind of tactics employed by the Kocharyan administration to suppress dissenters and human rights activists.

Knowing it was no longer safe for her in Armenia, Karapetyan fled to America – making the difficult decision to leave behind her husband and four children, now in their teens and 20s, in the hope of finding political asylum. (Family members bribed airport officials so she could bypass customs.) But when the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services denied her first request for asylum – citing what an official deemed a lack of credibility – her case went to immigration court.

After hundreds of pages of evidentiary submissions – including an affidavit by an expert on the repressive conditions in Armenia under the Kocharyan administration – and nearly 20 hours of testimony, Judge Noël Ann Ferris entered a final order granting Karapetyan asylum on Dec. 16. The INS waived its right to appeal.

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Judge Ferris noted for the record that the post-trial brief prepared by Hughes Hubbard was particularly helpful in her decision, adding later that the firm had truly “made a difference in the case.”

Now that she has been granted political asylum, Karapetyan is able to bring her family here and will soon be eligible for a green card and eventually citizenship.

Marina Drapey has worked on the case since the advocacy organization Human Rights First referred Karapetyan to Hughes Hubbard over two years ago. (A native of Ukraine, Drapey’s Russian-language skills made her a good match for Karapetyan, who also speaks Russian.)

In addition to Drapey, Vilia Hayes, Sarah Cave, Catherine Meale, Andrew Lupin and Leslie Ballantyne also represented Karapetyan.