

Brain Cells: "Lifer" enters Masters program from behind bars

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ArmeniaNow reporters

Arsen Artsruni is scheduled to graduate the Masters Program at Urartu University of Practical Psychology and Sociology three years from now, when he will be 48.

He is not the typically aged student. Nor the typical student, generally.

{ai183201.jpg|left} Artsruni is an inmate at Nubarashen prison, serving a life sentence for crimes related to terrorism, including premeditated murder.

Artsruni was one of 11 convicted and sentenced to death in the notorious Dro trial on December 10, 1996. (His sentence was changed to life in prison, when Armenia adopted Council of Europe policies, in 2003.)

Artsruni was born in Lebanon, where he received a bachelor's degree in psychology at Haykazian College. He moved to Armenia in 1989 to organize computer classes in Armenia and Karabakh.

Artsruni was arrested in 1994 and spent time until January 2000 at the jail of the National Security Service. Thereafter he was taken to Nubarashen – to the cell of death-row prisoners and till today is serving out his punishment there.

Sidetracked by the law from his initial purpose (computer training), Artsruni taught computer and foreign languages to his "lot-sharing companions".

Now, he plans to become the prison's first resident student.

"There was no such precedent in Armenia. The prison administration has a positive attitude to this phenomenon, if he is a literate man, then why not to meet his request half way," deputy head of Nubarashen prison in social and psychological issue Edik Hovhannisyan said. "Arsen is a strict-regime convict. I, myself, went and submitted an application for him, met the rector of the university, presented the situation, reached agreements. He even sent me back a letter of thanks for organizing all that."

The university in advance sent a list of examinations and corresponding literature so that he could prepare for examinations.

At the fixed time three members of the admission commission visited the prison where in a room prepared in advance there was a computer and literature, an MA entrance exam was held. On November 3, Artsruni passed the exams with excellence.

"I must say that any higher school would be happy to have such a student. My personal impression was excellent," Urartu University Rector, commission member Sedrak Sedrakyan told ArmeniaNow. "He had deep knowledge about psychology and it could be felt that he had expanded that knowledge during the years of imprisonment as he knew well foreign psychologists and about trends in psychology."

According to the examination commission members, when they informed Artsruni that he had been admitted to the MA course, he said that his dream of eight years had been fulfilled. For eight years on end the condemned prisoner had been applying to different higher schools and only this year he managed to get the consent of the Ministry of Education and Science.

"Studying and receiving education is everyone's constitutional right, no matter where a person is, only good will was needed to meet the man's request," Sedrakyan thinks. "Law does not prohibit a lifer to have a chance to continue his or her education."

Sedrakyan says that during three years of studies the student will submit tests in written form and during the time of end-semester exams university teachers will visit Nubarashen arranging the visit with the prison administration beforehand.

"We haven't got any applications after the precedent of Artsruni, but I know that people like him also have a very positive attitude to this phenomenon," Hovhannisyan says. "Arsen is convinced that knowledge in psychology is essential to him to remain stable, to preserve his mental integrity. I think that in those tense social-psychological conditions in that micro-environment Arsen will be able to play a positive role."

Three years from now Arsen Artsruni, surely having already "studied" psychology, will have an MA degree in the science.