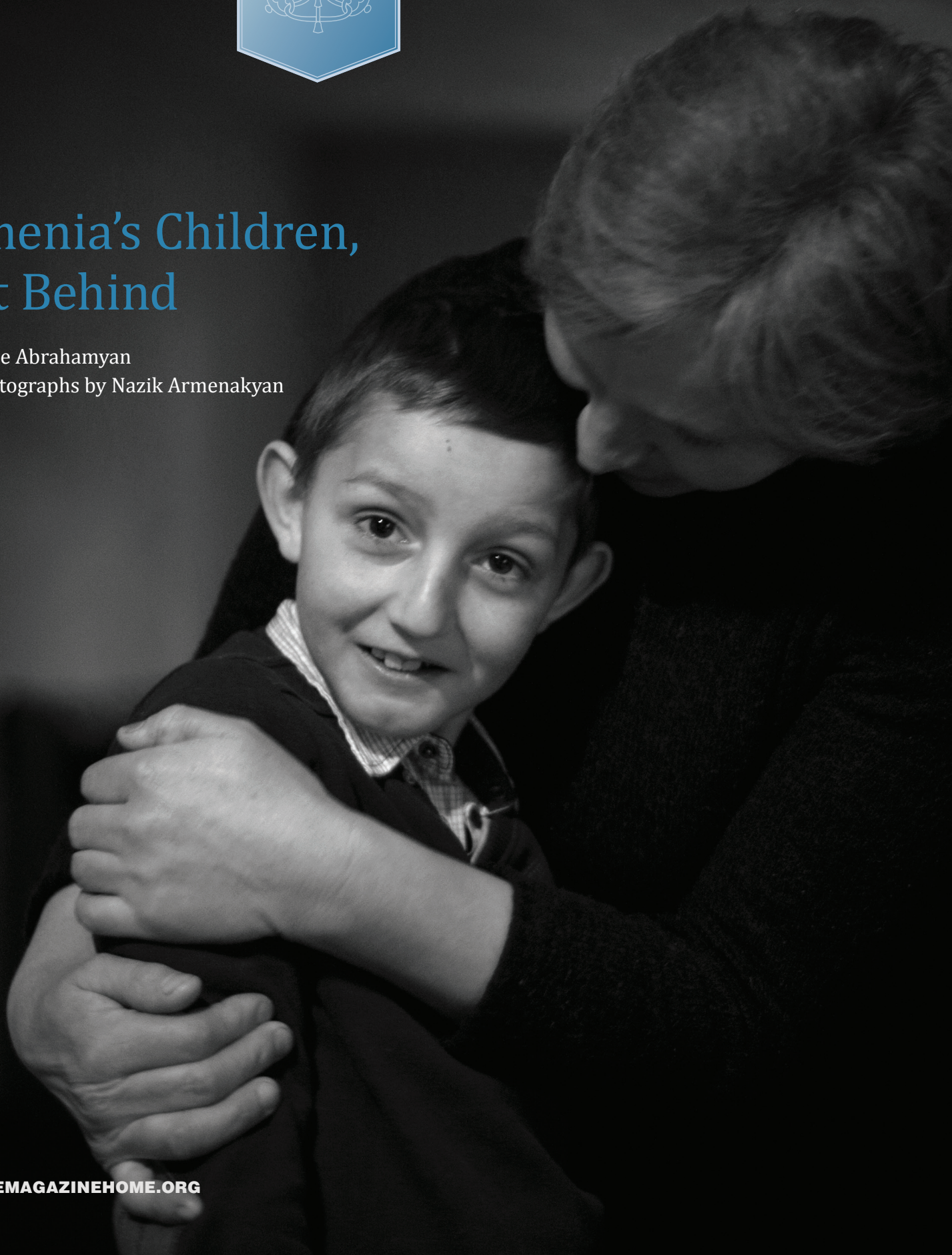




Armenia's Children, Left Behind

by Gayane Abrahamyan
with photographs by Nazik Armenakyan



In a chilly and damp room, 12-year-old David does his homework near a pile of books. “Do you know what I want to become,” the fair-haired boy asks, looking up from his assignment. “An archaeologist, in order to study animals that are extinct.”

“But there are also other things I want,” he adds, “but won’t have.”

The dreams of David, and those of his 9-year-old brother and 26-year-old sister, are varied and often changing, but they all hold one element in common — the return of their father.

David last saw his father seven years ago; he had given David a kiss goodbye at the door as he left for Russia in search of work. He has not returned since.

“He makes telephone calls, but I don’t speak to him. I think he doesn’t even remember me,” the boy says, trying to hide his tears.

Many men in the northern Armenian town of Tashir leave the country to work abroad; unemployment tops 50 percent in the region. Many who work in Russia provide the minimum means of subsistence for their families back home, but some never return. As a result, women are left behind to shoulder the burden of running households and rearing children on their own.

David’s 49-year-old mother, Tatyana Dilbaryan, wears a smile, but the lines on her brow mask the difficulties she endures. The question lingers: Why has it come to this?

“I don’t know the answer. Perhaps he saw that I managed to do everything myself,” she says of her husband. “I raised livestock, worked in the fields, did everything for my children,” says Tatyana, still smiling despite a welling of tears in her kind eyes.

“We are good. We’ll get through this, my children will grow up and everything will be alright.”

Optimism such as hers, however, is in short supply in Tashir and



elsewhere in northern Armenia, where many children grow up fatherless.

Although the small town nestled high in the mountains has an official population of about 9,000, in fact the community currently consists of fewer than 5,000 people. Once home to the Molokans — a Russian sect exiled to the region by the tsars in the late 18th century — the area today is populated largely by Armenian Catholics, who share the rites and traditions of the larger Armenian Apostolic Church but remain in full communion with the bishop of Rome.

The town, with its surrounding Alpine-like meadows and fields, was once an important center of cheese production when Armenia was a part of the Soviet Union. Today, the only evidence of this legacy remains a half-ruined, dilapidated cheese factory. Traditional cheesemaking in Tashir is preserved in the form of several small creameries owned and operated by families. Such enterprises provide few jobs, however.

▲ Immaculate Conception sisters greet children at Our Lady of Armenia Education Center in Tashir.

◀ Tatyana Dilbaryan rears her three children alone.

“This town has become a town of elderly people and women — poor, alone, struggling to make ends meet,” says Lida Gasparyan, who works as a teacher at one of the town’s three schools.

“My husband also goes abroad for work. Every time I close the door behind him, I feel as if the walls of the house are collapsing on me. The entire burden falls on my shoulders, and the worst thing is that you never know whether your husband will return or not,” says Mrs. Gasparyan, adding: “It is twice as difficult for the children.”

The underlying conditions causing these trends are structural and deep. Nevertheless, in this difficult environment, some do as much as they can to ease the burden of those left behind.

