

# Psychiatrist lent expertise in Armenia

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Six months after news of the devastating earthquake in Soviet Armenia rocked the world, most people in America have tucked away the tragedy as an event of the past.

But not Dr. Edmund Gergerian. Just returned from a mission of mercy to the city of Kirovakan in Armenia, Soviet Union, he knows the suffering that the earthquake survivors still are facing.

A psychiatrist for the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office in Willowbrook, Dr. Gergerian is of Armenian descent. He has been looking for ways to help since news of the Dec. 7, 1988 earthquake which killed an estimated 50,000 people and destroyed cities.

"I'm a troubleshooter," said Dr. Gergerian, a Queens resident. "I like challenges."

He took a leave of absence from work and flew to Armenia March 13 for two weeks as part of a six-person mental health team sponsored by the Earthquake Relief Fund to Armenia. The group has been sending small teams in two-week shifts, and has found a great need for services.

"People in an earthquake are devastated, traumatized. The best way to deal with that is to stay there and deal with the fears," Gergerian said. "Exactly the reverse happened: mass evacuation. Working through their fears and other symptoms has become very difficult."

The population of Kirovakan, 170,00 before the earthquake, fell

to 70,000 as many fled the destruction in the city. It has climbed back to about 100,000 as some have returned.

The 3.5 million people of Armenia, a Soviet state the size of Belgium, have some very real causes for fear, Gergerian noted. Eighty percent of the buildings in Kirovakan are unsafe, with half-inch cracks a common sight.

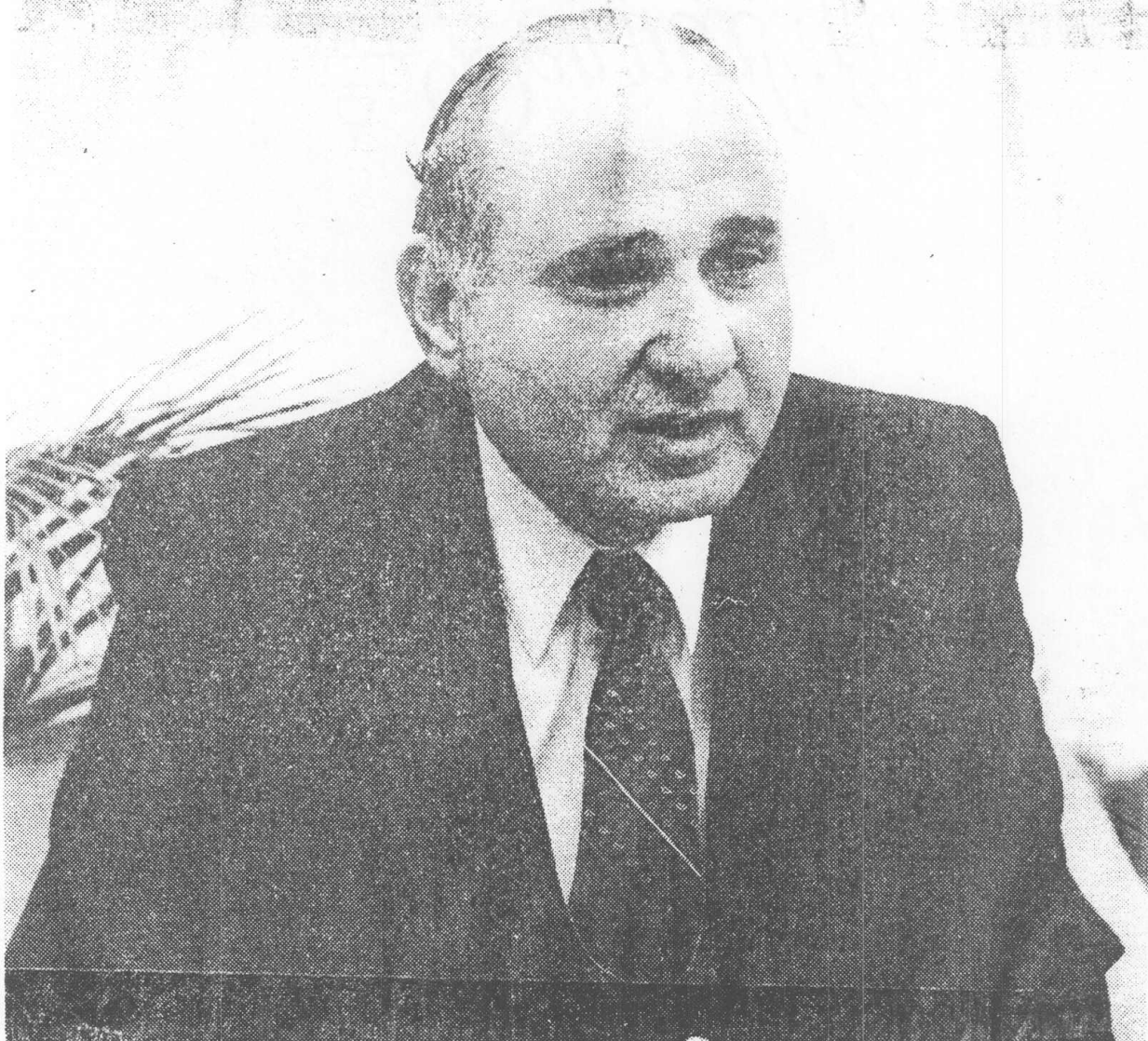
Almost everything has moved to tents: housing, hospitals, offices. He saw patients with three local psychiatrists in a huge tent equipped with heat and electricity, as many of them are. Rebuilding the city will take years.

Irrational fears and lingering trauma are widespread, however, and depression is a major problem, as those who have lost several family members are not uncommon. About 80 percent of the people will develop post-traumatic stress syndrome, Gergerian estimates.

Survivors may deal with guilt for having survived. Schoolchildren are afraid to go out of the house alone or sleep alone. Sudden noises can cause panic, and the feeling of an impending earthquake is very real months after the event.

The day before he arrived in Kirovakan, he was told, a brush fire in the surrounding mountains caused mass hysteria.

"The people were up in the streets, in panic, running right and left. They didn't know what to do. They thought it was a volcano," he said, although there are no volcanoes in the area. "You see where the irrational part comes in."



ADVANCE PHOTO/FRANK J. JOHNS

Dr. Edmund Gergerian talks about his mission of mercy to the city of Kirovakan in Soviet Armenia.

In between transitional days in Moscow, Dr. Gergerian saw 95 patients in Kirovakan, and treated them through supportive counseling, play therapy, medication and behavior modification.

"My adrenalin was very high. I really was there to work," he said. "I'm exhausted, honestly."

The Soviet chief psychiatrist in Kirovakan serves almost 500,000 in the area with a small staff. Medications are in short supply, and techniques well known in the West, such as group therapy, have been introduced to Armenians by the U.S. teams.

"To encourage (people) to express and cry has been one of the

main tasks of the team," said Gergerian. "There is a strong sense of denial. Crying is discouraged" in the culture.

The teams have also focused on helping the helpers: treating medical personnel, mental health workers, teachers and politicians so that they are able to help others.

The Armenian government paid for his accommodations, and the Soviet government has processed visas quickly, eager to assist visitors who come to help.

"Within 24 hours, the entire population knew about my arrival" in Kirovakan, said Gergerian. "I was greeted like a god. I mean it. Anybody from the outside is greeted with full honors. Since Gorbachev has opened the doors to the Soviet Union, the outpouring of help has stunned them."

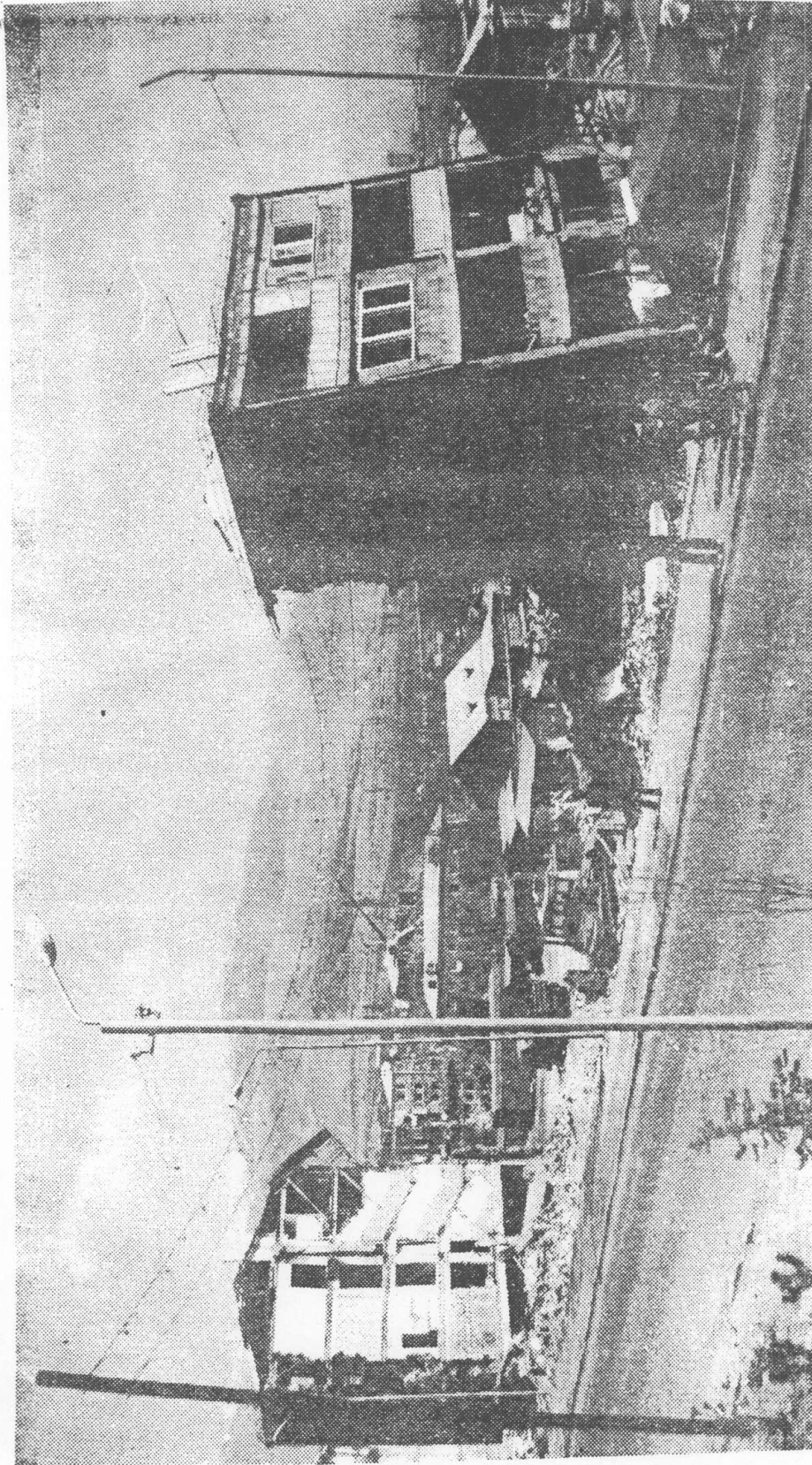
Most of the international help

has been geared toward food, medicine and reconstruction. Mental health efforts, still considered a luxury, have been slow in coming. But Gergerian hopes he and his fellow volunteers have helped establish a base for continuing Soviet, as well as international, services.

"This is an issue that has to be dealt with on a long-term basis," he noted.

He would like to return to Armenia later this year for another intensive round of treatments. But Gergerian is satisfied that his short time there was helpful.

"Besides the practical work I did there, morally, the support of someone coming from the U.S.A. to help them out, or just talk . . . it raises their spirits. Even if you're not a physician, your presence shows them the world has not forgotten them."



ADVANCE PHOTO/CARLO MARANO

The cleanup continues in Soviet Armenia six months after the devastating earthquake.

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