The Last Armenian

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Dhaka, our beloved city, once the melting pot of hundreds of ethnic communities, faiths, creeds, languages and professions over the centuries. This year Dhaka has completed 400 years. A walk in old Dhaka still reminds us of the lively presence of different communities like the Dhakaiyyas (old Dhaka residents), *shankharis* (manufacturers of different ornaments and artifacts from conch shells), Shias and of course, the famous Armenians who have lived for a prolonged period and contributed to our culture and heritage.

After you pass the Dhaka University Campus and its adjacent Nilkhet area, you come in close contact with hundreds of legendary lanes and by-lanes of the old Dhaka. Then just cross the gate of Dhaka Central Prison and move forward to Armanitola. You would see that historical Church of Armanitola which was established in 1781.

There he lives. The last Armenian of Dhaka. His name is Mikhail Martirosen. Of the nine children of the Armenian couple Hofsef Martirosen and Elena Martirosen, only Mikhail is now guarding this centuries old Church and around 150 graveyards of the Armenians who once lived and passed away in this city.

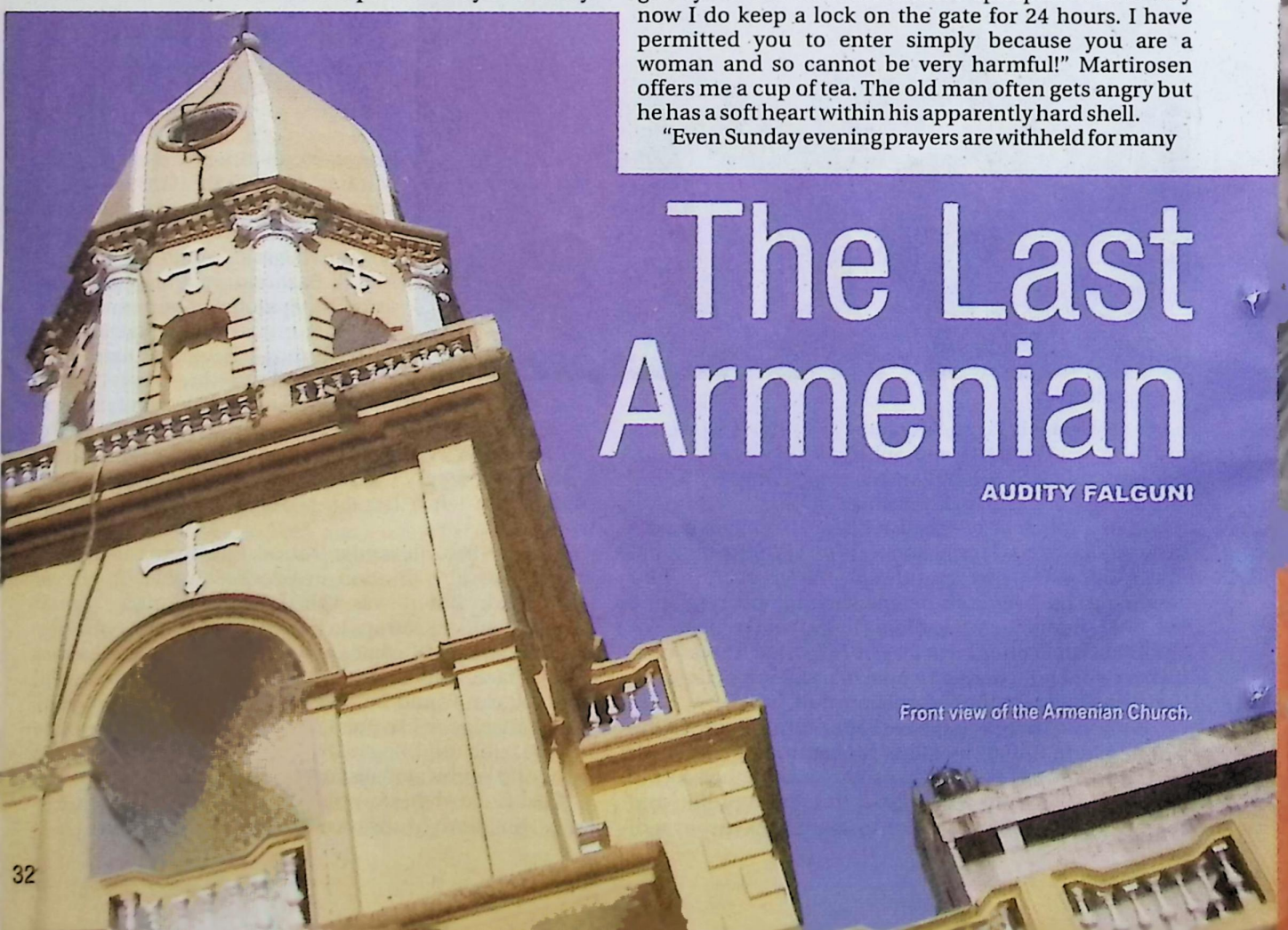
"The Armenians came in the Indian sub-continent particularly in Bengal in the last decades of the Mughal empire and within a few years of emergence of sovereign Bangladesh in 1971, the Armenians left this country for ever," says the eighty year old Mikhail Martirose.

"My four sons and daughters now live in Canada. Other brothers and sisters are scattered over India, Myanmer and London...different countries and cities of the world. I talk with them over the phone. So, I am not alone. Because, my wife sleeps here! My parents sleep here. So, I would stay here till I die!" Martirosen says all this in his broken Bengali with lots of English and Hindi words.

The 228-years' old Church is 750 feet high and comprises of four doors and 27 windows. The Church now looks old and a bit pale with little renovation and decoration. Even Sunday prayers are withheld over many years. A number of epitaphs over around 150 graveyards are no longer readable. Most of the epitaphs were written in both English and Armenian alphabets. The Armenian alphabets have some resemblance with the Russian alphabets.

"Some local hooligans used to trespass within this graveyard and steal the marble epitaphs. This is why now I do keep a lock on the gate for 24 hours. I have permitted you to enter simply because you are a woman and so cannot be very harmful!" Martirosen offers me a cup of tea. The old man often gets angry but he has a soft heart within his apparently hard shell.

"Even Sunday evening prayers are withheld for many



Front view of the Armenian Church.