

A DATE WITH DESTINY --- 55 YEARS LATER

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Tom Vartabedian, Haverhill MA, 26 January 2016

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I was the first American student to evade their premises for any duration of time -- a baptism under fire that would hopefully open doors for subsequent students of my generation.

My mission was a worthy one. Study the Armenian language, learn more about your culture and heritage, and above all, make a firm impression.

It was a tall order. I was a 19-year-old journalism major at Boston University, born to genocide immigrants, and deeply involved with my church and community. On the social side, you could call me a whirling dervish, attending dances and carousing until the wee hours of morning.

I didn't just fit the typical college mold. I broke it.

For one year, I minded my manners and applied myself to their rules of decorum. I spoke their language, ate their food, observed their tenets, and played their role. I grew my own beard and often donned a robe, particularly when it came to serving Mass for the Archbishop and Abbot General of this monastery.

I found myself inside a coterie of 15 priests and three older seminarians about to be ordained. Each priest was an entity unto its own. I often wondered how a group of men, personalities diverse, could bond the way they did.

And how, despite their advanced ages, could they maintain such a diligent literary pace. I was grounded once for not meeting curfew and disciplined another time for not having my lessons prepared. Obedience, chastity and poverty were permanent vows with no exception.

I came out a new man, resolved toward maturity, and about to embrace the university with a new and serious frame of mind. No. The idea of being ordained into priesthood never entered my mind. My parents thought otherwise, fearful of any last-minute decisions. They wanted marriage, grandchildren, a son with a career other than the church.

It wasn't easy severing my Boston ties for a life in Vienna, located right in the city's metropolis, with weekend visits along the Danube, the Vienna Boys' Choir often heard, music and days spent by Mozart's gravesite meeting classical aficionados. You kidding? I was in Shangri-la.

After a year, I vowed to return. The year was 1960. Elvis was singing the blues. "Ben Hur" was rocking the big screen. John F. Kennedy was on his way to becoming our 35th President. And I had just smashed up my father's Buick.

Things weren't going particularly well on the home front. I had broken up with a girlfriend and could tolerate the family's luncheonette business no longer after being weaned into it.

To put it bluntly, I needed a change in life. It came one Sunday after church when my pastor proposed the idea of a pilot program.

The decades trickled by. Each Christmas for 25 years, my wife and I made it a point to send the seminarians gifts at Christmas, mailed well before Thanksgiving. Six years ago, I met a man in Armenia who remembered the "Santa Claus from America" who brightened the day with presents.

I did not recognize him in his adulthood. He remembered me like a true brother. And suddenly, just like that, sentiment sent me soaring to the skies. At 70, time was running out on my promise to revisit.

This past September, a trip to Turkey was postponed, due to the unrest taking place in that country. Istanbul was under siege and other points of interest on our itinerary were being compromised.

In order to preserve our airlines tickets, we had a year to recalculate. After some serious thought, we decided upon Munich, Salzburg, and --- Vienna. It was now or never. Our sojourn would take

place March 8-16. Just the two of us, my wife and me.

The mere thought puts a tear in my eye. The city of Strauss and a coterie of priests awaiting my arrival. The church where I enjoyed my altar duties. The distillery where I helped to prepare the greatest cordials and cognacs throughout Europe during work-study. The chess games at sidewalk cafes. I learned my backgammon here and seldom prevailed.

Ironic, isn't it, the way serendipity has chosen to play its idyllic course. We'll soon meet again at the crossroads of destiny and I will have fulfilled a vow of my own.

Maestro Petrossian Defies Health to Conduct Chorale

Tom Vartabedian, 4 January 2016

Cambridge, MA --- Days before conducting the Erevan Choral Society in its annual Christmas extravaganza, Konstantin Petrossian was confined to a hospital bed --- his fate in balance.

The popular maestro didn't let a heart disorder prevent him tending to business as usual, least of all a procedure which required two stents in his arteries.



Erevan Chorale & Orchestra

One would never have suspected that the veteran music director had a health issue. With baton in hand, he led his 42-member ensemble with undeniable panache while joined by full orchestration.

The free concert took place Dec. 13 at Holy Trinity Church with another full complement of fans who had no idea of the rigmarole their esteemed conductor had faced earlier.

"The man is unbelievable," lauded Martin Hatzadourian, a veteran tenor. "Such a disorder would have hindered a lesser man. Not the maestro. The show went on as scheduled. He was determined to carry out the mission. He has our respect and our blessings."

Others in the chorale shared the same sentiments and were not about to be deterred in a Boston tradition that celebrates its golden anniversary this year. Many felt the maestro was at his very best despite any discomfort he may have felt.

At least one physician warned him about making an outside appearance. A week before, he suffered a second seizure within the month which required an electronic shock treatment. Another doctor told him more encouraging news.



"You can try, but just take it easy."

The 59-year-old maestro was already convinced. "How can any conductor take it easy? he told

himself. "I decided to go ahead with the concert."

Like he always had done in the past, the maestro paid a visit to the cemetery and asked for a blessing from his late predecessor Very Rev. Fr. Oshagan Minassian, who passed away in 2008. Hayr Oshagan had been an icon in the music world for more than 40 years, directing the Erevan Choral Society from the confines of a wheelchair.

He was an indefatigable promoter of Armenian music, shaping a small group of dedicated amateur singers into one of the cultural pillars of the Greater Boston Armenian community. His legacy became the inspiration which has motivated Maestro Petrossian over the past six years.

Last April, the chorale dedicated a concert to the genocide victims during the centennial. Like all complimentary concerts, a reception follows where musicians and guests get to mingle. Even there, few if any outside the group knew of Petrossian's condition.

"I asked Father Oshagan to give me the strength to do this concert," Petrossian admitted. "I was on medication and thought I was going to slip away. Hayr Oshagan was my best friend. He guided me."

The maestro admitted being fatigued but exhilarated following the 2-hour ritual. His vast resume also includes the Armenian Chorale of Rhode Island, a number of sound tracks, theater music and the Armenian Union of Composers. He also co-founded the Armenian Chorale of Worcester.

"If I didn't show up, many people would have been discouraged," he confessed. "I told the orchestra and chorale before the concert that if I couldn't finish to please go ahead without me. Every year, our music has been a gift to the community. This year, the gift was even greater --- my survival!"

