A REBEL WITH A CAUSE

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Vahe H. Apelian, 28 August 2011

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In the '50s and the '60s Pharmacie de la Paix (**Խաղաղութեան Դեղարան**) was one of the most prominent pharmacies in the commercial hub of downtown Beirut. It was on Rue Weygand, not far from the Lebanese Parliament, in an area known for its cluster of the big banks. Much like the rest of the Armenian businesses in downtown Beirut then, the owner of Pharmacie de la Paix was also socially referred to by his store's name. It is thus that I came to know of Bedros Alahaidoyan as Pharmacie de la Paix's son who was uninterested in his father's business and pursued "music" in Europe.

Bedros's interest did not make much sense or sit well with the members of the downtown's Armenian business community who knew and related to each other much like the members of a clan would, even though they competed ferociously in business. They were a business force to reckon with, if not the predominant businessmen of the area. Their opinion mattered. My father worked at and later ran Hotel Lux on Allenby Street, a walking distance from Pharmacie de la Paix where I had been many times with my father. He would never fail to point out to me how good the lot of a pharmacist could be in Beirut.
The '60s was the era of the Woodstock, "do not trust anyone over thirty" and of the "flower power" generation. Music to the young and the restless of the '60s was an instrument of the counterculture, if you will. It was the era of rebels without much of a cause. I thought of Bedros as the son of the well-to-do family pursuing his "thing" in Europe. Little did I know of what I found over the last decade or two about Bedros' real vocation during those years. I realize now how wrong my perceptions of him were then.

Bedros did study pharmacy in Belgium, but rather than engage in the profession, he continued his studies in music. He graduated as a musicologist from the State University in Brussels and worked at the state-run radio. However, his mission was to salvage Armenian folk songs from their inevitable loss, due to the passing away of the displaced survivors of the Genocide of Armenians.

In early '70s he embarked on his mission to collect Armenian folk songs. Initially, he collected the folk songs of Kurdified Armenians who had settled in Belgium and in Holland. He then expanded his search by visiting other European, American and Middle Eastern cities and their Armenian seniors' homes. His decades-long endeavors culminated in the publication of "An Ethno-Musicological Collection of Palou and its Neighboring Areas" in 2009.

The book is in hard cover with a dust jacket depicting an actual Armenian inscription in Palou. It is in Western Armenian and is printed in Yerevan with easily readable fonts over good quality white paper. One does not need to be a musicologist to be impressed by the depth and breath of the book. With this book Bedros Alahaidoyan salvaged, for posterity, a vast collection of the folk songs of Palou that were passed down to singer Maro Nalbandian.

The 448-page book consists of three parts. The first part is a collection of six articles dealing with the history of Palou and its traditions. Black and white and color pictures depict Palou then and now. This section also contains a fairly large compilation of folk songs that Bedros Alahaidoyan has collected through the years. The text of folk songs from more than 30 villages starting from Akn and ending in Qghi are listed. The second part is a textual and musicological presentation of the seventy-two Palou folk songs in the collection. The notes and the lyrics of each of these songs are laid out. An explanatory note accompanies each. The third part contains various lists and catalogues such as dictionary of rural dialects, bibliography, locations from which the songs have been collected and the list of the songs in the two compact discs that accompany the book.

The two CDs are voiced by Maro Nalbandian and are attached to the inner cover of the book. There is no instrument accompanying the songs to preserve the authenticity of the folk songs.

The book along with the two CDs retail for $75.00 and can be purchased from Abril or Sardarabad bookstores in Glendale, CA or may requested from the author.
Treading along the pioneering path of Gomidas Vartabed has led Bedros to another discovery... in the person of his wife Violet, the daughter of Nartouhie Khosrofian from the Sgham village of Palou. Bedros has dedicated his book to her and attributes its realisation to her encouragement and support.
Alahaidoyans live in Glendale, California where Bedros pursues his calling with a youthful passion and the continued support of Violet. Their email address is bedovio@earthlink.net.