A SELFLESS ARMENIAN HERO PASSES

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Karen Mkrtchyan, Yerevan, 22 April 2020

"Patrick Devedjian was an exemplary Armenian, a great personality with a big heart. He was someone you could trust blindly. His passing is a big loss for all of us." These were the words of Vazgen Sislyan of the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA).

Sislyan, along with Aram Basmajian, Hagob Dzhulfayan, and Kevork Guzelian participated in the capture of the Turkish Consulate in Paris on Sept. 24, 1981, which is remembered today as "Operation Van". He was the leader of the group. Patrick Devedjian, the French-Armenian politician who passed away on March 29 after contracting Covid-19 defended Sislyan and his comrades in court, risking his political career.

Devedjian was born in Fontainebleau on August 26 1944. His father, Roland Devedjian, an engineer, was born in Sebastia, Western Armenia (Sivas in present Turkey). He migrated to France in 1919, having survived the Armenian Genocide. His family was able to escape with the help of a Turkish neighbor. His mother, Monique Wallois was French. She died when Patrick was 6-years-old.

The perils his family had suffered had made the Armenian Genocide an issue close to his heart and would remain so throughout his life.

Patrick's father was keen to ensure his son remained connected to his Armenian roots. After attending the municipal school of La Frette-sur-Seine, his father enrolled him at the Mekhitarist Fathers'-managed Samuel Moorat Armenian College in Sevres when he was 11-years-old. The decision ensured Patrick would receive an Armenian education.

After graduation, he continued his education at Université Paris II Panthéon-Assas, graduating from the Faculty of Law, as well as at the Paris Institute of Political Studies. He shone at both schools.

From very young age, Devedjian was interested in politics, joining the far-right group Occident when he was 17-years-old, a decision he would come to regret. In 1970, he co-founded *Contrepoint* with philosopher Raymond Aron and after being admitted to the Paris bar, he became an activist in the Gaullist movement, joining the *Rassemblement pour la République* ("Rally for the Republic") upon its founding (1976) under the leadership of Jacques Chirac. After the founding of *Union pour un mouvement populaire ("Union for a Popular Movement-UNP"),* a combination of centre-right political parties, Devedjian continued his political activities and became secretary-general of the UNP from 2007 to 2008. When the post of the UNP president became vacant, Devedjian acted as head of the party during his tenure as secretary-general.

During his long and successful political career, Devedjian held many influential positions. He was elected Mayor of Antony in 1983 and served in the position until 2002, having won re-elections in 1989, 1995 and 2001. While mayor, he was elected Deputy in the National Assembly of the 13th district of Hauts-de-Seine in 1986, winning re-elections six times in 1988, 1993, 1997, 2002, 2007 and 2012. From 2007 to 2015, Devedjian served as President of the General Council of Hauts de Seine. On

March 22, 2015, he was elected Departmental Councillor of Antony and less than a month later was elected Chairman of the Hauts-de-Seine Department. He also served as Chairman of the Board of Directors of Paris La Défense.

Devedjian had a diverse political career. He was held in high esteem by Presidents Chirac and President Sarkozy. He successfully defended Chirac in French courts on a number of occasions as well as served as the personal advisor to Sarkozy for many years. In 2002, when Chirac became president, Devedjian was appointed Minister for Local Liberties becoming minister of industry in 2004. After the global financial crisis of 2008, President Sarkozy, who had replaced Chirac in 2007, created a special portfolio and appointed Devedjian Minister of Economic Recovery Plan in a bid to revive the French economy. He held the position until 2010. Upon hearing of Devedjian's death, Nicholas Sarkozy said: "Devedjian was an honest, dedicated and goal-oriented person. He dealt with politics the way I like to deal with it, that is, with feelings and emotions…I am proud that he was by my side."

Devedjian was one of the most successful individuals in the Armenian Diaspora, a strong advocate of the Armenian Cause, a tireless campaigner for the recognition of the Armenian Genocide and one of the architects of the strong French-Armenian bilateral ties. While his achievements in the political arena are worthy of mention, Devedjian's work as a young lawyer is rarely remembered.

Vazgen Sislyan recalls the first time he met Devedjian. Sislyan had just opened his eyes in the hospital in Paris due to the injuries he had sustained during the capture of the Turkish Consulate. "He was sitting next to my bed, a stranger, waiting for me to come out of coma. He introduced himself and said that he was going to defend me in court. Of course, I wouldn't have trusted him, but on seeing my watch in his hand, which had been sent to me from Lebanon, I knew he wasn't bluffing," remembers Sislyan. Devedjian considered defending the four young Armenians as his duty and a matter of personal honor. "I remember asking him how much we would eventually have to pay him for his services," Sislyan said. "Devedjian looked at me and asked, 'Am I going to expect money for defending myself? I do not charge any money for defending myself and my nation." For Devedjian, the trial was a persona one. "I am defending my people. I am defending the Armenian Cause and I am defending myself," he had said. For him, Armenia was on trial that day. This was almost a repeat of Soghomon Tehlirian's judicial proceedings and required an equally rigorous defense. He ensured that the four ASALA members were not termed terrorists in the court of law. Armenian honor was at stake.

"In everything that Patrick Devedjian did, his Armenian identity always reigned supreme. Although he was born in France and led an active life as a French politician, he was a devout Armenian above all else. Looking back now, I feel honored and humbled that such a great patriot had defended us during our trial," said Sislyan.

Devedjian visited Armenia to attend the 17th Francophonie Summit in Yerevan in 2018, during which

he also met Sislyan after thirty-two years. "When a friend told me he was visiting and asked if I would like to meet him, I wasn't sure if he would agree to meet me, given his political career. By the time I went to meet him in the Marriott Hotel in Yerevan, his entire group of 25 to 30 people already knew who I was. He had told everyone about us and our actions. He welcomed me with a warm embrace," Sislyan remembers fondly.

It's no surprise to Sislyan that many people in Armenia did not know about Devedjian until the French-Armenian politician's death, "He did not like to talk about himself or what he had done. He maintained a low profile and was a very humble person. He wasn't looking for recognition or applause and carried out his work in France with dignity," said Sislyan.

Devedjian's death is a huge loss not only for Sislyan but for the entire Armenian nation. In Sislyan's words, "We have lost a true Armenian."

There are no comments yet.