

# "AN INSIGHTFUL GIFT TO ARMENIA THIS CHRISTMAS"

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**Tom Vartabedian**, Haverhill MA, 5 January 2016

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Two missions to the homeland was all it took for Dr. Fantazian to see the need. Both trips resulted in corrected vision for hundreds of patients he encountered. Much of the inspiration came from his mother, an activist among her peers at genocide commemorations throughout the valley.

"I'm happy to see that my equipment will help many, especially at a hospital in Shengavit," said Dr. Fantazian. "We've served patients there over the years."

Shengavit is the oldest district in Yerevan. A previous visit provided eye care to 934 patients at five locations: Tchambarak, Maralyk, Yeghnadzor, Lernanist amd Ooshie. All were within two hours of the capital city where his group was based for 10 days.

Dr. Fantazian was part of collaboration between Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity (VOSH), Amaras Arts Alliance and Yerevan-Cambridge Sister City Association. The team was registered with the Ministry of Health and Humanitarian Commission of the Republic of Armenia.

In retrospect, 794 pairs of eyeglasses were dispensed, along with 46 medical approvals and 83 cases of nearsightedness addressed with over-the-counter reading lenses.

A previous trip resulted in new eye-glasses for 2,500 men, women and children in six other regions. Free eye care, examinations and surgical referrals were provided where necessary.

It's safe to conclude that Dr. Fantazian sees "eye-to-eye" with the visual difficulties surrounding the

"We were overwhelmed to witness such a dire need for eye care," he said. "Our goal was to address every patient, no matter how difficult their situation. Another major concern was the high blood pressure diagnosed."

The equipment he donated was in behalf of the Knights of Vartan. Included were: an optical chair and stand, slit lamp with tonometer, illuminated refractor, ophthalmometer and stand, chart projector and slides, retinoscope, 224 eyeglass frames for men and women, 152 eyeglass frames for children, 25 eyeglass cases for women, 40 eyeglass cases for men, a lensometer, projection screen, slit lamp and empty pallet.

Total value of the goods is \$15,080.

Dr. Fantasian has practiced optometry in Billerica for 48 years and prior to that in the military. He is a graduate of the New England College of Optometry and closely connected to the Armenian community of Greater Boston and Merrimack Valley.

Nobody's been closer to him during these missionary trips than Jack Medzorian, a tennis partner and Sunday School teacher over the years.

"Jim informed me that he was retiring and wished to donate his entire equipment to Armenia," said Medzorian. "I approached my sources to find a suitable home, especially one that does charitable work and has a trained specialist."

Medzorian got immediate feedback from a friend in Yerevan named Haik Minasyan, director of the Shen NGO, Armenia's oldest non-profit charitable agency, which does tremendous work in Armenia.

Last September, a visit was paid to the Shengavit hospital where Medzorian met with Dr. Varazat Seyranian, a Karabagh war veteran and ophthalmologist.

"They had a plan, a need and capability," said Medzorian. "It all sounded like a perfect fit for Jim's equipment."

The thousand-pound shipment was made out of A & A Industries in Peabody where owner Aurelian Mardiros assisted in sorting and packing. The United Armenian Fund (UAF) office in California arranged for delivery.

Since this was another Knights of Vartan Ararat Lodge project, freight costs to Armenia were partially covered. The K of V Lodge is responsible for nearly \$4 million in supplies to needy hospitals and medical clinics in Armenia and Karabagh.

Efforts are being made for Dr. Fantazian to visit Armenia a third time and pass on to folks there his vast knowledge on eye care accumulated over the past half century.

"In all our visits and medical shipments, we're doing our utmost to improve eyesight in Armenia," Dr.

Fantazian added. "And we're inviting other specialists to follow the same example. Only then will this country continue to improve."


## "One man's survival journey reflects grit"

**Tom Vartabedian**, Haverhill MA, 23 December 2015

Lexington, MA --- "Hrant's Story: A Journey to Survive" is a true eyewitness account of one man's life and survival through the Armenian Genocide in Turkey during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Traveling from Kharpet to freedom, his journey symbolizes the courage and perseverance Armenians exhibited during that period.

Hrant Russian recorded his story in Armenian on tapes during the last years of his life. Having defied death three times, he felt compelled to chronicle the events in vivid detail. For years, it remained dormant until family members decided to share the story in time for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary --- 30 years after his death.

"I remember as a little girl standing many times behind my father as he sat at his desk doing his  bookkeeping and tracing the slit in the back of his bald head," recalled daughter Sandra (Russian) Aghababian of Lexington, who handled the translation and editing.

"He never told me what it was from until he started to tape his story and I found out this was a scar from a bullet."

While the impetus to finish this book was certainly the centennial, Aghababian said the real reason was the realization of her own age and mortality.

"I had made a promise to my father to finish this project and it was not yet fulfilled," she added. "Armenians who went through the Genocide generally fell into two categories: those like my mother who would not talk about it and those who had a passion to preserve their story."

Russian recorded his life on many tapes and wanted it published. After some unsuccessful attempts, it was left unfinished.

"Finally, after many years, it was time," Aghababian brought out. "Not being a writer, I hesitated wanting to do him justice and finally realized that his words and story were most important."

Aghababian recruited the help of her brother Hrant, an attorney on Cape Cod, and together, they were able to document their father's legacy. While Sandy initiated the writing and translating, her brother provided many of the old photos circumventing their father's life.

Aghababian's daughter Pamela, a librarian by trade, found the publishing site and walked her mother through the Internet process. The book is available from Lulu.com.

The story warms any reader's heart --- well written, documented and told in a provocative way. After immigrating here in 1923, Hrant realized that having an Americanized name was easier, so he adopted "Henry."

He eventually wound up with his own grocery store --- Henry's Market --- in Cambridge and was very successful both in real estate and other investments.

He wed Pegrouhi "Peggy" Tashjian in 1934 through an arranged marriage. Their love and commitment toward one another only grew stronger over the next 50 years. The family ultimately settled in Belmont.

"For a man who toiled the earth in his youth, he never lost his passion for gardening," said Aghababian. "Every summer we would go to the Catskills where he would gaze over the mountains, lost in her own reverie for the homeland."

Although he worked very long hours, Hrant took pride in being one of the instrumental people in forming St. Stephen's Church in Watertown. He was also a devoted ARF member.

"My father's only regret was seeing his education cut short," Aghababian noted. "Through hard work, he still achieved the life of his dreams. For a man who defied death three times, he was never bitter and counted his many blessings right up until his death in 1985."

As a mother of three and grandmother of three, Aghababian knows the value of family inculcated by her own dad. One of the most poignant parts of the book is when Hrant realized the very hat he had worn during a Turkish siege actually save his life upon being shot in the head.

"He taught me to be strong and deal with adversity," Aghababian maintained. "He could be tough and smart in business but never raised his voice to me --- very loving."

After graduating from Boston University, Aghababian secured a masters degree from Boston College and carved out a career in education. Her brother secured his degree from Boston University School of Law and has practiced over 50 years. He also admits to learning perseverance from his dad.

Because of the Genocide, he went to law school to learn how a civil society should function. In the book, he was surprised that the Germans used Sursuri as a landing strip for their airplanes and that his father met an Armenian airman flying for the Germans.

"All our stories are important because they give voice to history," said Aghababian. "Although there are many similarities in the stories of Genocide survivors, each is unique and should become documented. Only by hearing the eyewitness accounts will the world recognize the injustice done to the Armenians."

