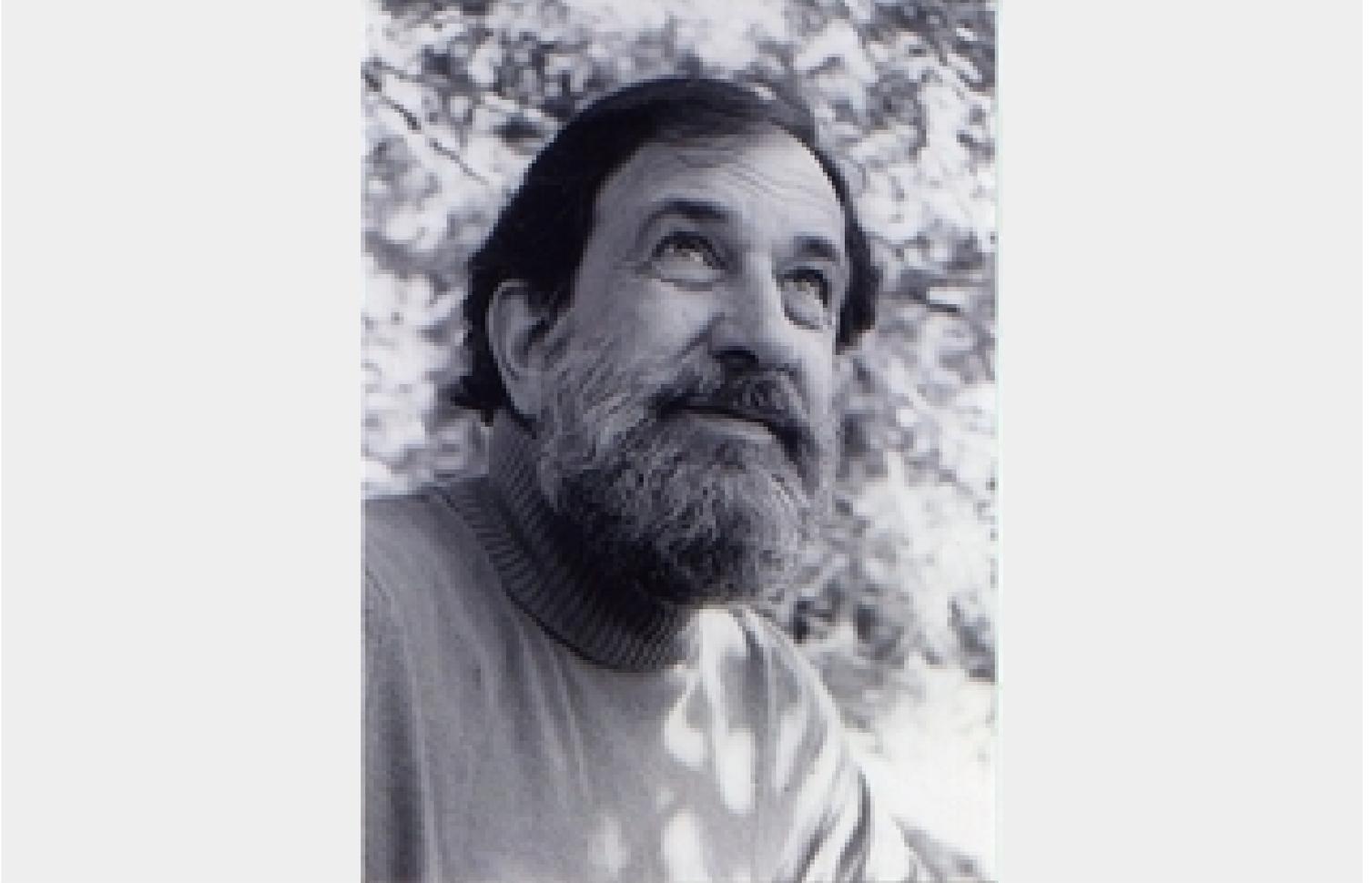


ARMENIAN POET WITH UNIVERSAL APPEAL

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At the best of times, maintaining a career as a poet is a challenge. For an "ethnic" American poet it is even more so. David Kherdian has not only flourished as an Armenian-American poet but has done so with brilliance for more than half-a- century.

An award-winning and prolific poet, writer, editor, anthologist, publisher, and memoirist, Kherdian was born in Racine, Wisconsin (1931). A first-generation Armenian-American, he is best known for "The Road from Home" which has been translated to many European languages and also Japanese and Chinese with pirated editions in the Middle East. The book is based on his mother's childhood and survival of the Genocide.

Early in his literary career Kherdian was poised to become William Saroyan's secretary, but recognizing Kherdian's literary talents, Saroyan urged him instead to write "for and about himself."

Kherdian has done so with grace. When Kherdian began to publish his work, Saroyan remarked that Kherdian is "a poet with authentic voice and style, with universal appeal."

The author of scores of books, Kherdian has devoted a large body of his work to grow up Armenian-American in the '30s and the '40s. As a result as a poet, novelist and anthropologist, he has been recognized for placing ethnic-American writing within the canon of American literature. Reviewing Kherdian's "Root River Return", critic Bonnie Bekken wrote: "No one speaks more poetically of his heritage. Pure gold."

Despite his age, Kherdian is as busy as ever, averaging a book a year. "David of Sassoun" is his latest project. In the [letter](#) below to Keghart Editor Jirair Tutunjian, Kherdian reports that publishing the book has come to a dead end due to financial problems. Through Keghart, Kherdian is seeking support for the epic's publication.

Following Kherdian's call for support is [an interview](#) by novelist Aris Janigian. In the interview, Kherdian talks about his love of the "David of Sassoun" epic and its importance to the world today, as an allegory of a world facing destruction and dissolution. Although written in the 9th century, "David of Sassoun" speaks for the world today. That this message could come from Armenia may astonish the world, it should not astonish us.

Readers interested in supporting the publication of the book may contact Kherdian through Keghart.com

November 19, 2017

Hi Jirair,

Once again publication of my epic has fallen through. It astonishes me that there is no Armenian press or institution that would like to see this book published, both for ourselves and for the world.

We seem to want to show the world our suffering and misery but not our triumphs and our innate goodness, which is being smothered instead by self-pity and other unfortunate characteristics in our nature. We are just people, but the wisest among us has used our suffering, and not just to build monuments, but to enlarge and perfect our own character, to grow in Being.

Would it be possible to interest a group, or institution, or just a body of like-minded Armenians to take on the challenge of producing my retelling of David of Sassoun? I believe that if we could make it known to all the Armenian communities around the world, in particular English speaking nations, like England and the the British Isles, New Zealand, and Canada, and of course the U.S., we would have a propaganda tool that would change how the world sees us. David is a world class epic from the 9th century that is highly pertinent for our time because it is about the death of civilizations.

I'm pretty sure you've read my book, but probably not this interview (below), which could be useful in raising money for the book, and/or finding a publisher for it, possibly in your own backyard.

Somehow I think Canada has a greater interest in world literature than does America, as we are becoming more and more isolated from the rest of the world. What about starting an Armenian press in Canada?

What are your thoughts?

All best,

David

Novelist Aris Janigian's interview with David Kerdian

In Fresno, where I grew up just a couple of blocks down from William Saroyan's childhood home, there was a sculptor named Varaz. His studio was near my house and once in a while I'd pass by and see him pounding and chiseling away at one of his many wild and wonderful large-scale pieces. During the summer he'd work in his shorts and shoes, his bare chest and legs glistening with sweat. Then one day, my parents said that Varaz had sculpted something important and that they had given it a prominent place near Fresno City Hall, and that we should go see it.

The bronze sculpture was huge and powerful: David of Sassoun is rearing back on a horse that is readying for a charge. His sword is drawn and his huge eyes are full of fire and resolve. I asked my parents, who is David of Sassoun and they said, "our greatest folk hero." Tell me more! They looked at each other and laughed uneasily. Something like, "he lived a long time ago and defeated our enemies," was about all that my father could give me.

As I grew older, I was surprised to discover that though nearly every Armenian knew of David of Sassoun hardly any Armenian could say much more than what my father told me about him. Sometime during my twenties, I stumbled upon The Daredevils of Sassoun by Leon Surmelian. As I turned the pages, my delight at having finally discovered the story quickly petered out. The words were there but the thrill of the story seemed to have leached away in translation. I had a very similar

reaction to Mischa Kudian's *Saga of Sassoun*, and though I enjoyed Tolegian's version of the tale, especially his attempt to capture the rhyming patterns of the original, the story stumbled until it ultimately fell apart. I might have turned to the Shalian's definitive translation, except the length and the scholarly nature of the production daunted me. I wanted to enjoy the tale not use it in a dissertation.

Though I'd admired David Kherdian for many years, I was frankly doubtful that his version could do much more than any of the others. I had concluded the reason the writer/translators hadn't been able to make David into a compelling story was because it was actually a kind of mosaic of stories with many missing pieces and that to artfully arrange those stories together into a unified picture, even for a writer accomplished as Kherdian, was nearly impossible. But as I began reading his book, I felt the sense of adventure and playfulness and wonder that I'd always hoped to find in this tale. For the first time, David came to life for me, and, as it turned out, in a way that DID NOT really match Varaz' sculpture. Kherdian's David was powerful and courageous, yes, but he also possessed the all too human flaws that the gods and demigods usually possess. Varaz' statue embodied the fantasy hero inside of every Armenian, the Savior that might've repelled the savagery that befell them during the genocide, but this David had a sense of humor, was a victim of temptation, suffered from poor judgment; this David actually embodied the realities of Armenians through their long and tumultuous history at the crossroads of civilizations, a reality that they continue to face to this day. What makes epics great is that they seem to be borne outside of time altogether, personifying the essence of a people if not the essence of humanity---and Kherdian's David of Sassoun did just that. This interview was conducted via e-mail exchanges over a period of a week.

Janigian: What inspired you to do this book?

Kherdian: I don't know that there was a moment of inspiration as such, as there was the *knowing* that a retelling was possible. This happened while I was reading Shalian's word for word translation. I had already tried the Surmelian and Kudian translations which I found not only worthless as writing, but after reading Shalian, I saw that they were totally false as translations of the original. But it was only after I got into the Shalian that it occurred to me—like a shot—that I could bring this tale to life, and do it brilliantly, even better than my retelling of the Asian classic, *Monkey: A Journey to the West*, because it was Armenian and I had it all in me, the sensibility, the psychology, the humor, the pathos and bathos, the sentiment and sorrow, and the need, even if tragic, of delivering it to a higher truth.

Janigian: How long did it take? What was the process like?

Kherdian: I began the writing in early 2012, and I'm guessing it took from six to eight months to complete the first draft. I spent the next two years re-writing, revising, reshaping and polishing the manuscript. My original intention was to drop the concluding tale, "Mher's Door" for the same reason, I realize now, as the writers in Armenia, because the harshness of the last tale, which denotes the end of a civilization, was something almost no one was willing to face, and so idealized versions

were presented, at the expense of facing its actual truth, that ends and beginnings cannot be separated. This misunderstanding then accounts for my own struggles with David, as well as the reasons for its obscurity. I seem to be the first, or possibly only the second writer who wanted to decipher what it was the originator of this tale was saying to the world. As I explained in my previous answer, its meaning can only be found in the epic's *purpose*, which purpose might not necessarily be in its direct service of the people, but as an explanation as to the evolution of the planet, of which we are a part, which in turn places us correctly in scale and value: that the planet is not here for us, but that we are here for the planet, in ways that as yet we do not understand. If I am right, then David of Sassoun is an objective work of art, as I believe the other existing epics are. It is through our deciphering of these works that our own consciousness can grow.

Janigian: The cover of the book reads: "David of Sassoun: Retold by David Kherdian." Can you tell us what you mean by "re-telling?"

Kherdian: When you change languages you are automatically doing a retelling because everything has to move at once: syntax, metaphors, similies, expressions, figures of speech, and so the dialogue is altogether new as are the descriptions of sights, scenes, people, etc., and not only new but different, because all of it must become natural in the language you are working in. There are times when you can make an almost literal translation of a figure of speech for example, and make it as poignant as the original, where it feels literally translated, yet is just as strong as the original, e.g., "horruh eengav" (fell into the hole, meaning "completely failed") to "don't fall in the hole," as the *maireeg* says to the two travelers, where the reader knows it is a translation, because of the quirkiness of the English, and so the figure of speech is retained along with the humor of the original.

There are many times in the straight narrative of the original where the psychological underpinnings, as well as the philosophy were simply absent, so these had to be applied. The moral of the story can't be provided alone by the actions, the tale teller must inject these in order to keep himself connected to the reader. This has to be done with great delicacy, and this is the art of story telling. When and how to do what. In the end it must not read like a translation, which means that the teller must become its author, not its translator. For example, I had to rewrite the first genealogical tale of Sanasar and Baghdasar three or four times before it became my story. Nonny, my wife, would read the early versions and pronounce, loudly, "it's not you! it's not you!" Until one day (because I couldn't always tell myself) she announced, "You've got it, *now* it's yours."

Janigian: The story occurs in four parts, each building on the last. In some ways, it could be the story of the birth and decline of any civilization, but there is definitely something "Armenian" about it, a particular cultural sensibility that you capture in your re-telling.

Kherdian: With Armenians there is always this feeling, axiomatic in their makeup, that they have been wronged, that they are too good for this world, and should be exempt from its worst nightmares, simply because they are who they are and therefore stand above the fray—and yet

again and again they find themselves caught up in it, and being small are overrun time after time. The superhuman giants of Sassoun have their own laws and codes and badge of honor, and never get mixed into the politics that nevertheless engage them, and although they win battle after battle, they do not collect the grapes of wrath because they stand above the world that they find themselves living in. They remain psychologically detached in their ideal world, but must enter and even invade the world of their enemies, that they disdain and repeatedly destroy, each time they are challenged by them. In short they are beautiful dreamers, whose ideals can only be preserved by extraordinary means, by being sterling undefeatable giants. But in the end they succumb to the earthly, human seductions from which they are finally not exempt. Thus they pay for their sins in isolation, because they have no place in the ordinary world. Armenians have always sustained themselves with humor and disdain for the absurdities of life, which only humor can leaven, finding comfort in ideals, while preserving their sorrows in music that strains to find peace in beauty, however agonizing, that yearns for understanding from a world within reach but out of touch.

✘ Janigian: There is also a sense in this masterpiece that civilization itself is a burden. The giants would always rather be hunting and scouting through the forests. Outside of their total devotion to their mothers, even women don't seem to interest them much, and when they finally get around to them they treat them badly or get treated by them badly.

Kherdian: What kind of explanation would be needed: would a giant not carry an extra burden of discomfort, along with the expectation that being bigger they should know or do more than a normal human being? Most men would prefer hunting and scouting as boys to shooting and killing other human beings. The transference is put on them, hunting and scouting they chose for themselves. I suppose women were included in that transference they were dragged into; most men remain boys into young manhood, so in that sense I do not find them unusual, and Armenians have always kicked at civilization.

Janigian: This is a fascinating observation. In the book, time and again, all the Armenians want is to build a society where they can live peacefully and honorably. And just because of that, it sometimes seems, foreign kings are keen to cause them trouble. Does this dynamic describe the inner life of the Armenian people even today?

Kherdian: In the sense of being dispossessed I would say it is true. Any people without a country, or one that has been lost to them for so long, as well as lost to itself, I think does something to the psyche. I remember as a little boy arguing with other little boys in the neighborhood about God's nationality with their concluding that God did not have a nationality, but I decided in silence that if God was my father he must then be Armenian. In time I gave up this idea, but the estrangement I felt that night has never left me, and I have never had a sense that I could call any nation mine. I believe most Armenians outside of the Homeland feel this way. The scorn that was directed at me as a child by the established order only deepened this feeling. Hence, I have worked to become invincible.

Janigian: There are so many attributes possessed by David and his forefathers that characterize Armenians even to this day. I'm particularly struck by his oversized generosity, which seems to me is an Armenian trait. On more than one occasion, he announces his presence to his adversaries, so that they will not later claim that he "came like a thief in the night." One wonders whether these traits are part of our so-called "genetic code." Is there a lesson we can learn from this reality if it is in fact so?

Kherdian: To be an underdog aligns one with others who have suffered, which accounts for the compassion many Armenians feel in the face of injustice, the sufferings of others. By offering a hand up we assuage some of our own pain, while also placing ourselves on the right side of the equation. This natural sympathy comes not only from our own experience but from racial memory. Most Armenians have this to one degree or another. We can also become obsessed with the idea of fairness, addressing past hurts with a countering action that says, "This is how it should be," which can lift us out of a posture of inferiority into one of superiority, but this can also lead to acts of hubris, as we have seen time and again in this epic. However, when this action is right and comes from a clean heart, we move from selfishness and self-serving, to one of simple honor—then the very order of life moves onto a different scale. The giants codify this change by announcing to the adversary that they are going to attack, to make themselves ready. By leveling the playing field, they are affectively rewriting their own history, not only with righteous victories, but by offering instant pardons to the vanquished, freeing them of guilt and humiliation. There are variations on these actions throughout the epic.

Janigian: This makes me think how different David is from the heroes in the ancient epics, including the Greek epics whose heroes were "raised" so to speak in the pre-Christian era. David possesses a kind of chivalry consistent with early middle-age norms of conduct for heroes and warriors. He is innocent at heart and yet a consummate killer. He does not pick fights, but is courageous to a fault when demanded. He conducts himself with honor at home and yet struggles with temptation abroad.

Kherdian: How can it be that as old as we are we have remained naive? Because we are innocent at heart, uncomplicated, like children who refuse to grow beyond their games into harsh reality, with its humorless edicts, presumptive conduct, and learned behavior—but remain, partially hidden in a corner, making faces at the adults with their fancy dress and ideas, their rules and regulations. Gurdjieff, the spiritual teacher, said the entire cause of our misery, of our fall from grace, was our "educations"—the way we were taught to lie, to pose, to pretend, to envy, to betray, and hide behind authority figures, ad infinitum—which is the "civilization," so called, that controls us. Is there no way out of this, excepting perhaps on the back of a magical horse, transcendent of the beliefs of man with a power that is outside of theirs, a power that does not fear the extraterrestrial, and is able to enter the domain of the supernatural, that children trust, the way they cannot trust the laws of man—that Way, which tests bravery over fears, challenges us in our faith, our hope, our love—that which is truly sacred in us, that we can only enter as a child . . . the myth now enters the Christian era.

Janigian: I asked you a question that I hoped would take us into the historical aspects of the tale, particularly the chivalric medieval world view that I suspect shaped the sensibility of the narrator(s) and construction of the characters, but you chose to answer it with a poetic philosophy. This poetic worldview, I think, is your unique contribution to this tale and allows you to re-tell *David of Sassoun* with such artistry. In the past when this story has been told into English the "translator" either treated it as an historical text, which made it uninteresting to all but a handful of academics, or hadn't the poetic power or prowess to unlock its magic, which made the tale unwieldy and uninspired.

Kherdian: I have to confess that history never interested me, but it wasn't until I wrote *The Road From Home* that I realized why: history was telling the story of everything everywhere, or all of it outside of time, with the larger lens turned on themselves, that is the historian at his dais—instead of on the storyteller, going down onto the ravished field, hoisting one casualty onto a stretcher, taking that person to the sidelines and asking to hear their story: What happened and how and, if you know, what was the reason, and what are you thinking right now, and where can you/we go from here? That's the person I want to meet, not what the general did that the politicians arranged under instructions from the power- possessors, that evil cadre that will always be with us—with the academics following after to professionalize. They are still producing books from talks and lectures and conferences on *David of Sassoun*; I got a new one in the mail just yesterday, and they are still at that old occupation of five against one. Leafing through this tome I was shocked to learn that all these people seem to know or are interested in is how things got assembled, disassembled, re-assembled, and forgotten, to be re-remembered, ad infinitum. I was shocked to learn that the genealogical tales that make up this epic were published in different combinations, some singly, and then in various combinations, but only in *one* instance were the four tales collected into a single volume, which is the unadulterated epic itself. This worked out beautifully for these academics, who would never have to answer the question: What does this epic mean? Fortunately, Artin Shalian, also an academician, performed a word for word translation, of the complete epic. Just think what might have happened if they came to an actual realization—that this epic was about the rise and fall of a civilization. When I asked the editor of this latest volume if there was a consensus by them of the epics actual meaning and value to humanity, to the Earth, and finally the planet, he had nothing to say.

