ATKEN ARMENIAN: A MAN WHO MADE NOT JUST A DIFFERENCE – BUT SO MANY DIFFERENCES

Posted on January 1, 2009 by Keghart

Category: Opinions

By Armenag Topalian 30 December 2008

Atken enjoyed a rich education, starting in Cairo at the English School, on to King's School, Ely in England for Advanced levels. He read Oil Technology at the prestigious Imperial College, London and then continued further studies in the United States.

By Armenag Topalian 30 December 2008

Atken enjoyed a rich education, starting in Cairo at the English School, on to King's School, Ely in England for Advanced levels. He read Oil Technology at the prestigious Imperial College, London and then continued further studies in the United States.

He started work as an oil engineer in Edmonton, Alberta. It is at this time that he met and married Hasmig, and had two children Ani and Van. His family was most dear to him, and he cultivated strong bonds with his ancestry and immediate family. He moved on to a Doctorate in Education at the University of Alberta, permitting him to launch a teaching career which profoundly influenced many young people to build their future. It also awoke in Atken this deep care for the less fortunate. From the roots of his family came his love and devotion to music and culture. All this prepared him for his ultimate mission in life, to help build his "home" as he called it, Armenia, for which he put heart and soul.

When assessing the impact of Atken's life, one thing is absolutely guaranteed. Attempts to list all his achievements is bound to be incomplete, and any analysis an underestimate of how he touched the lives of others. He committed a significant proportion of his own income on diverse community activities, and then devoted even greater effort and time to helping those in need.

From his school days, he discovered his love for his people, their culture, language, and subsequently the republic that was born from the collapse of the USSR, pursuing this relentlessly with passion, dedication, complete commitment and huge energy. Just as he flew over potholes in Armenian provincial roads driving at breakneck speeds, he skimmed over the many practical problems in his projects that would have deterred so many others. There were no 'ifs' or 'buts' with him. He would not be fazed by received wisdom that said it could not be done; he did not tolerate pretension or pomposity. If he met resistance, he found an alternative way which, often, meant rolling up his sleeves and taking on the task himself. Even then, he had a knack of finding the right person to carry on the job, to deliver support to some of the most distressed at a most difficult time in the birth of the Republic of Armenia. His only conditions to take on a challenge were that it had good purpose, made sense and would be directly beneficial.

His main area of activity was in education. As Dean of Extension Studies at the American University of Armenia (AUA), he gave the department a much wider brief than the management would have envisaged (visit the AUA website as a

very small example for 'This day in Armenian History' feature). He repeated this again at the French University there. As University Registrar, he paid out of his pocket the tuition fees of countless students who could not afford them. While working full-time for these institutions, he travelled to Gyumri each weekend over many years to teach English to the young people there. He set up on behalf of an UK Armenian trust a system of scholarships in Gyumri and Vanadzor so that today 400 young persons in each city receive education they would not afford otherwise.

Education was a broad palette for him. He devised with others the first set of new children's books that broke the mould of the Soviet system of teaching. This extended to a book on standards and etiquette as society struggled with the transition from a planned totalitarian regime to the confusion of a market economy. His interests were wide: one of his last projects was to undertake the costs of publishing Ghevont Alishan's book on pre-Christian religions and faiths in Armenia.

His focus on young people was constant. Thanks to his publicity, the AGBU in London provided support to the Arts Academy in Gyumri and directed its funds to replace the central heating in the Lord Byron School with a more modern gas unit. He directed funds towards replacing the roof and furniture of an Orphanage in a village near Vanadzor. He gathered money to purchase brass instruments for a band, as well as traditional musical instruments (such as the *duduk* and *shvi*) for talented young musicians to pursue their interest in folk music, paying all the fees of their teacher after raising external donations. He settled the expenses for young musicians to travel to auditions, to purchase scores and even contributed for the talented Van Quartet to participate in a summer school in Canada. He was on the committee of the Friends of the Armenia Philharmonic Orchestra, and sponsored the *Speghani Orphans Choir* to travel to Italy where they won second prize in a competition.

Even more importantly, he was keenly aware of the plight of the rural and small town poor. He often had to travel through various areas such as Lori province, and many witnessed him disbursing clothes and money to needy families that he had only just met, and to various orphanages. There were women who specifically knitted for him, including his aunt Hilda. He was instrumental in getting piped water supplies to three villages, Khatchig near the Nakhichevan border (and thereby retaining the precious water within Armenia), Goghtanig village in Vayots Dzor province (which then commenced goat cheese local production) and Aygut village in Gegharkounik province. He ensured the long-term income of many needy families by providing them with cows and paying for all the rearing expenses for one year. He translated a layman's medical reference manual so that those with no ready access to doctors could look after their health.

Because he was so effective in this philanthropy, individual and collective donors willingly sought him out and gave him money absolutely safe in the knowledge that it would always be put to good use. They knew he instinctively would go direct to find the source of greatest need and give the support needed without the unnecessary involvement of intermediaries or avoidable expenses. He had drive, common sense, strength in character and conviction. Yes, he was a character who could hold strong views, particularly with those who had an unrealistic vision of their importance, yet for many he was inspirational. He delivered reliably and delivered good outcomes. He had no desire to make a name for himself yet made a reputation of conviction, integrity, and for bounteous caring for his fellow men by

willingly giving so much of himself.

What an extraordinary man! What shining light of a life! What a legacy that literally hundreds of people have had their lives improved, even transformed, by Atken! What an example for us all! And what a loss to all others who but for cruel fate would have benefited from his work!

Atken, we salute you.