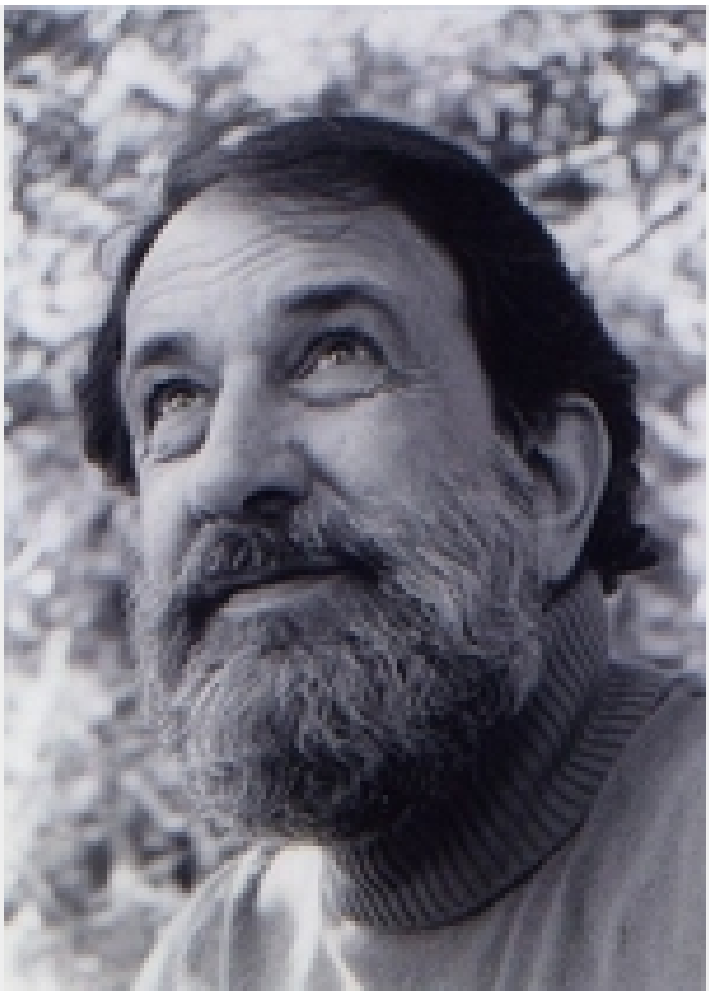
AUTHOR DAVID KHERDIAN COMING HOME TO RACINE

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Lee Roberts, TheJournalTimes.com, 2 May 2015

Internationally acclaimed author and poet David Kherdian is coming home for a visit this month.

The Racine native — whose large volume of work often draws inspiration from his time growing up here in the late 1930s and 1940s — recently released his memoir titled "Root River Return". And he'd like to celebrate its release — along with the donation of his collected works to the Racine Heritage Museum last year — with his hometown community.

Kherdian — who currently lives in New York state with his wife, award-winning writer/illustrator Nonny Hogrogian — will do so through a series of free public events being held in Racine May 19 through 24. His appearances have been coordinated by the Racine Heritage Museum, working in conjunction with other local organizations and individuals including the Racine Literacy Council, Racine Public Library, Racine Interfaith Coalition, Racine Arts Council, City of Racine, Root River Council and Racine's poet laureate, Nick Ramsey (see accompanying story for event details).

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"David's got such a huge body of work and so much of it is so locally significant," said Chris Paulson, executive director of the RHM. "Each event will provide different glimpses into his life and his work."

In addition to being great opportunities for both people who are familiar with Kherdian's work, and those who want to know more about it, the programs will also provide insight to anyone interested in local history, Paulson said.

"We will be rediscovering the community through his work," he said.

Kherdian said he is looking forward to once again exploring the city's river, lake and park areas, as well as Downtown. It will be his first time back in Racine since 2008.

In preparation for his trip here, the award-winning writer answered the following questions for Journal Times readers. More about Kherdian is also available at *www.facebook.com/davidkherdian.author* and *www.beechhillpublishingcompany.com/2015—featured-author.html*.

Your time growing up along Racine's Root River has played such an important role in your writing career. Is there something about Racine during that time that sets it apart from other, similar cities — or do you feel your experiences here were much like those of other children across America growing up then?

It was the confluence of the river's force resounding with something deep inside me that first awakened my consciousness. Then, as my understanding grew, I made symbolic use of it, tracing its powerful influence over me, because what it meant was time, truth, movement, growth, and the passage of life. The river would come to have a transformative effect on my life, and later my work.

In addition to the river we had our parks and bridges, the great lake, our differing neighborhoods and our very special downtown, where the city and its people met and conjoined.

We were poor then, but also lucky, because growing up in our ghetto-like neighborhoods we were compelled to draw upon our own resources, putting our imaginations and energies to work to embody our dreams. And, thus, we persevered, and all of this together prepared me and invisibly supported me in my struggle to become an artist.

We were once a community, and the nostalgia that many feel who left Racine, as well as those who have remained, is that the bonding that was done then cannot be broken, because the treasures we put up in ourselves have not been forgotten.

How do you feel your artistic expression has changed or evolved through the years?

I became a poet quite by accident (or was it divine providence?), because poetry was the last kind of writing I wanted to do. But the few stories I wrote in my last years in Racine were poor, and I knew I had to leave Racine if I was to evolve as a writer.

I left for San Francisco on the day following my final college exam at UWM, and landed in North Beach (in San Francisco) where I very soon met and formed a friendship with William Saroyan. But, more important than that, although he was my hero at the time, I spent time in the company of Allen Ginsberg, Richard Brautigan, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen and other poets. My book about these poets, written when the San Francisco poetry renaissance was in full swing, established me as a writer. And then one day I wrote a poem, which impelled me to leave San Francisco at once, because I didn't want to be identified as a Beat (poet), or a writer embodied within any scene, movement or literary fashion.

It was after I published my second book of poems that my mother asked me to write the story of her life during the genocide. There was no way I could get out of it — not only because no one before

me had done it, but because it was my mother's wish and there wasn't anything I wouldn't have done for her that was within my powers, or even outside my powers, because without her love, understanding and support during my troubled childhood and youth I never would have found my way in the world.

When I read my book to my mother in manuscript she looked up and said, "Now Davy, you can write anything." I saw instantly the truth of this, and all at once my earliest wish for myself was about to come true. I would be able to make my living as a writer. I had found myself, and through writing I would become myself — that is through the acquisition of self-knowledge, for which writing was my key.

In addition to poetry I began writing novels, biographies, memoirs, short stories, creative non-fiction, retellings, translations and essays. I also became the editor of three journals, as well as three small presses, and I have written thousands of letters, the best of which I am confident will one day be published.

Hence, the evolution of my talent cannot be separated from the many expressions that have bounded it. The only downside to this is that while I have had my share of readers, they have been separated out over all the genres I have worked in, and few of my readers know me for more than two or three of these. Artists build their reputations by becoming specialists, and readers insist on this. We want to go to different writers for different things, and so specialists are valued, while Men of Letters are not; in fact, there are none now that carry this appellation. Civilization is the loser.