

BERDJ GARABEDIAN – A PILLAR AMONG MANY

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Tom Vartabedian, Haverhill MA, 19 April 2016

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On hand were members of the artist's family, including three daughters, all of whom embraced the moment. Archbishop Oshagan Choloyan was more than generous in his praise of Garabedian, calling him an icon among his peers.

"Berdj was a simple man whose work spoke volumes," the Prelate described. "He left behind his seal of greatness in the arts, donating time and money to formulate this collection. His love for art portrays his nationhood."

He remains one of the fortunate ones in our midst by having his talent perpetuated and appreciated. Think for a moment how many artists never gained that opportunity, mired in obscurity, victims of a genocide whose efforts never took root.

Not only did we lose 1.5 million sainted martyrs, but we also suffered irreplaceable cultural losses. Just look at the ruins of Ani and you'll see our tragedy. Look at any church in Historic Armenia and you will feel the pain and torment. Look at any religious edifice or icon and see the heartache.

Garabedian was not satisfied to merely collect and save Armenian coins and antiquities. He was also inspired by those national treasures he studied. He enthusiastically shared that knowledge with

those who were interested in the ancient and medieval cultural heritage of Armenia.

We are writers and photographers, poets and artists. More than anything, we wish to make an impact with our talents, inspire an oncoming generation, and getting our own children involved.

What we do for ourselves unfortunately dies with us. But what we do for others, lives on. It is the stuff of which legacies are made.

I respect people like Dr. Levon Saryan and Gary Setian for how they have taken Armenian coins to another level. Levon's research of historic coinage has become a vanguard of respect and perpetuity.

Setian, on the other hand, shared his vast collection with Armenian School students throughout our Prelacy schools. I can only tell you what my daughter did with her coin one year.

She took it to a jewelry store and had a pendant made which she treasures to this very day. She took a weathered coin and turned it into a personal jewel, drawing curious eyes to the piece.

"This is a coin from the country of my ancestors," she reminded everyone.

An inventory of Garabedian's collection reveals that over a lifetime, he assembled a legendary holding of 7,634 ancient and medieval coins, bank notes and antiquities. His collection consisted of gold, silver and copper coins, coin boards, seals and metalware which carry very important information about our heritage.

Much too often, we often pass before our time, only to see our art grow obscure. It seldom works the other way. As long as the artist lives, so does the skill and genius.

Over the years, I've amassed a huge inventory of photojournalism. Any picture worth its salt was secured and preserved. I can say the same for my visits to Armenia. I do not consider myself prominent by any stretch.

In an attempt to keep my work solvent, I began displaying at libraries and schools and keeping the interest secured. Others were benefiting by the wisdom. Like Garabedian, we cannot grow to appreciate what we don't cultivate.

Art becomes a paradox of sorts. If you want to master it, you must become a slave to it. Garabedian was obsessed by it, no doubt. He understood that preserving art and culture is the sacred and ultimate duty of every responsible Armenian.

Like so many other artists that come before us, perusing Berdj Garabedian's exhibit at AMA only confirms the obvious. Our artistry is a testament to the ingenuity and general refinement of our precious civilization.

For that, we remain grateful.

“Nubar Alexander --- From Land to Sea”

Tom Vartabedian, 11 April 2016

Gloucester, MA --- Nubar Alexanian is like a whirling dervish when it comes to making a point. If it's not a genocide film that has occupied his time the past decade or so, then it's books on photography.

✘ If it's not getting involved in community affairs, then it's family, friends and fraternity. To say he's mired in momentum is putting it mildly. He lives the moment.

His latest book --- a just-released coffee table gem --- is called “Gloucester --- When the Fish Came First.” It's a compilation of black and white photographs from the city where he resides. If anything, it's a tribute to the unsung heroes of the sea which brought us “The Perfect Storm.”

Alexanian has opted to donate part of the proceeds from the sale to the Northeast Seafood Coalition. The book was no easy task.

The author returned for decades to the same location, capturing a historical document that describes Gloucester's way of life. He's been shooting here since 1971 and hasn't stopped, calling it his life's work.

“The sea gives and takes away,” it's noted. “Fishermen and their families look mortality in the face every working day. We cannot say what gives the people of Gloucester their determination and perseverance but photographs capture the spirit when words cannot --- and they make time and tide stand still.”

The book contains 66 striking images over 113 pages. For more information, see: www.whenthefishcamefirst.com or walkercreekmedia.com/gloucester.

You might consider the work a pleasant diversion from another project at hand. Over the past 10 years, Alexanian and daughter Abby have dedicated themselves to producing a film titled “Scars of Silence --- Three Generations from Genocide.”

It's been a work in progress that encountered several trips to Historic Armenia in pursuit of their family's history following the Genocide. As expected, the funding continues to remain sporadic but it hasn't deterred from the challenge.

The Alexanians are resolute in their quest to share this film with the outside world, no matter what the consequences. They represent an Armenian-American father-daughter duo which has set out to understand the powerful legacy of genocide and the ways “a century of silence” has shaped their

families and themselves.

What does it mean to be a second-generation Armenian-American?

"I was raised speaking Armenian as my first language, surrounded by the haunting sounds of the oud," he explains. "Yet, no one ever spoke of the persecution that brought my grandparents to America. Not my grandmother who lost three young daughters on a death march, or my grandfather who fled everything he knew, never to return. When your family's violent past is denied, how do you make sense of the present?"

Alexanian said he felt suffocated by the unspoken suffering and fled as far from his Armenian identity as he could. He rarely talked about his heritage until his daughter asked a simple question.

"Dad, will you come with me to Armenia?"

Thus became the inspiration for the film that sent both of them on an inexplicable journey to understand their shared history.

Alexanian has spent the past 38 years working as a photojournalist and film-maker. He has traveled to more than 40 countries shooting for magazines such as Life, Newsweek, Time and National Geographic. He has published five books and rubbed elbows with some of the most influential people throughout the musical world.

He has grown involved as a recent board member with Project SAVE Armenian Photograph Archives while producing an eclectic video on the organization's 40-year anniversary last October.

Daughter Abby is a graduate of Vassar College. Over the past decade, she has spent considerable time working on her dad's still photography and film sets.

For Abby, the understanding of this past is a generation removed, yet intensely personal.

"It's heart-breaking to see what really happened to them and to us," she says. "But now, I feel like I'm beginning to understand my family and myself."

In a nutshell, the film is a feature-length documentary of how a young woman's curiosity propels her reluctant father to join her in finally confronting their family's dark past and discovering how the denial of the 1915 genocide affects them today.

According to the Alexanians, the project is on firm ground at the moment. Last year they were finalists for a MacArthur Foundation Grant as well as a LEF Foundation Production Grant. They hope to complete production by the end of September.

"Editing will begin in November and proceed as funds are raised to cover final production and post-production expenses," says Alexanian. "We expect to have a complete version of the film by June 2017."

“One man’s survival journey reflects grit”

Tom Vartabedian, 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 20th 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 100th 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 saved 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."

