

# CLOSE ENCOUNTER AT ARMENIA'S HAGHPAT

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By Tom Vartabedian, 31 January 2012

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We met 50 years ago while I was a student at the Mekhitarist Monastery in Vienna. Stepan happened to be a young seminarian at the time and I enjoyed watching him kick a soccer ball during recreation time.

He was a spunky kid with all the right moves. There was another reason for our close relationship. His brother --- Father Vahan --- was one of my Armenian instructors at the vank and perhaps the youngster could put in a good word from time to time.

Like all the seminarians, you grew attached to them. Some would go the distance and take their vows. Others would decide upon an alternate career but at least got a decent education from the priests, many of whom were old enough to be their grandfather.

Looking back upon it, the experience was as much a pleasure for me as it was them. After spending the year at the monastery, our relationship continued. Each Christmas, like clockwork, I would send supplies to the young seminarians as a way of playing "Santa Claus."

A letter of thanks would follow with Stepan's note always full of tenderness. "We miss you," he used to write. "My studies are going well and perhaps someday, I shall follow in my brother's steps."

I later learned that Stepan attended the University of Vienna but never quite made it to the ordination steps. His love for the Armenian Church and heritage remained uncompromised, however.

Like anything else, distance and changing times kept us apart and ultimately forgotten. I lost complete track of the individual as I did the other priests and seminarians at the vank. The gifts went on for 25 years through half my married life before petering out.

It wasn't until 2006 --- some 45 years later --- when our paths would cross again. Call it serendipity, but there we were at opposite ends of Haghpat Monastery in Armenia. Both of us were members of a different tour group.

Quite frankly, I probably would not have recognized Stepan had the two of us tripped upon one another. But he remembered me.

Off I went with my camera, bent on getting some unique shots of this 10th Century church overlooking the Debed River in northern Armenia's Lori region. The itinerary also called for a visit that day to Sanahin Monastery --- another religious jewel built around the same time.

Both places were a photographer's paradise and though I had shot my load at Sanahin, the opportunities at Haghpat seemed just as intensified.

There I was, crawling under crevices and climbing foothills to secure a good vantage point. A woman was selling vegetables by a stand and agreed to a photo, provided I handed her a coin for her wares.

I was munching on an apple when a member of our tour group came running after me in haste. Had the Catholicos arrived unexpectedly? Was the President of Armenia visiting?

"Tom, come quickly. There's a man from another tour group who claims he knows you. Says you were in Vienna with him when he was a seminarian 45 years ago."

I quickly rejoined the group and this man approached me, both arms extended. We embraced but still his identity eluded me. When a boy becomes a man, you lose all concept of individuality.

It wasn't until he introduced himself when I realized who was hugging me. Stepan Hovagimian.

"You used to bring us candy and gum at the seminary," he recalled. "My brother was your Armenian schoolteacher and you served Mass at his ordination."

A tear rolled from his cheek. Here we were, 9,000 miles away, in an obscure place called Haghpat with two Armenians rekindling their past while others looked on in admiration. It was not an isolated case as others in our tour group were reunited with people they knew in Haleb and other places.

I later learned that Stepan grew into an Armenian activist much like I had hoped to be, remained tight with his spiritual life, and became a true leader inside his Los Angeles community. I was happy to learn that he knew both classical and modern Armenian --- Western and Eastern dialects --- along with several other languages.

Nor was I stunned to learn that he chaired the Armenian Independence Festival Committee and was active in the Nor Serount Cultural Association. Life had been good for both of us.

Fate has a habit of performing tiny miracles in Armenia. It is where distance often leads to the same road --- and enchantment.



