

HATS OFF TO PROJECT SAVE

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By **Tom Vartabedian**, Haverhill MA, 30 July 2011

*Tom Vartabedian is a veteran journalist for 45 years with **The Haverhill Gazette**. He corresponds on community activities for the Armenian-American press throughout America and very busy giving genocide programs to the local community. He taught at the Armenian School for 30 years at his local church. He is married with three children and six grandchildren, and chairs the Lowell (MA) "Aharonian" Gomideh. He also served as a board member for Project SAVE, an archival photo distribution directed by Ruth Thomasian.*

Welcome to Tom Vartabedian. Ed.

**The photo is a formal portrait of the Deradoorian family
Morenig, Kharpert, Historic Armenia, Ottoman Empire - 1890**

**From the collection of Project SAVE Armenian Photograph Archives
(Courtesy of Grace Deradoorian - Waltham, MA)**

My grandfather wore a fedora.

I can see him now strolling down the lane, cane in hand, tipping that hat to all the fine ladies who crossed his path. Good thing he wore a head covering. I remember him as bald as a cue ball but quite distinguished all the same.

My dad wore a similar fedora. Where he inherited the hat remains to be seen. Unlike me, my father had a good head of hair. As for my mother, many pictures of her shown as a comely young lady exposed a wide-brimmed Gainsborough, much like Audrey Hepburn or Sophia Loren might have worn in their day.

Over the past 26 years, Project SAVE guru Ruth Thomasian has concocted a number of themes for her calendars, be they rugs, dancing, flags and weddings. Now, she's added a new twist.

"Hye Hats, hair and hands." And she appears to have it working on all cylinders.

Some might think it a bit premature to be plugging calendars in August but the deluge has already started from different agencies. Already I've been sent four calendars from different agencies and several more will be arriving before year's end.

"It's that time of year again and we hope you'll lend a hand, let down your hair and throw your hat into the ring," says Thomasian, who is actively seeking sponsors.

Depicted will be Armenians in the homeland and throughout the Diaspora. Included will be images showing people of all ages sporting hats and hairstyles of the times and places in which they made their homes.

"From the fez to the fedora, page boys to pigtailed, pudgy baby hands to hard working hands, this

promises to be a kaleidoscope of Armenian life," Thomasian continued. "It'll spark memories and conversations with others."

Sponsorships are divided into different hat categories, including a pompadour, lichaki and yasma.

Thomasian is a "calendar girl" of her own these days after being chosen to receive a coveted Vahan Cardashian Award from the Armenian National Committee of America for her efforts toward the ANC and Armenian community-at-large since 1975.

She will share that tribute with Merrimack Valley activist Stephen Dulgarian at a dinner taking place in Boston Oct. 15. It's an honor richly deserved on both accounts.

Over the past 3 ½ decades, nobody has brought greater focus to historic photography than Project SAVE and Thomasian. As historian, preservationist and executive director, she, too, has worn many hats in her society --- all of them snug.

Her historic calendars are just one iota. Although they are a major source of income, it's also a way of sharing a photographic treasure trove. If pictures could talk, they could fill a library with stories and anecdotes.

And to come up with 26 different calendar themes is surprisingly another coup de grace for her organization. It isn't a job that gets done in a fortnight. And one that will not make Thomasian rich, except in spirit.

All three idioms --- hats, hair and hands --- are features we have come to accept as ordinary qualities of life. Combining the three elements into a chronicle of Armenian art is pure ingenuity.

The hats and hairstyles of yesteryear were provocative to say the least and defined the very soul and character of our heritage. Nobody portrayed hands better than photographer Yousuf Karsh. He was a genius at it.

I remember the story of when a haggard woman entered his studio in Canada and wanted a portrait taken for her family. As Karsh was about to click the shutter, the woman timidly placed her hands behind her back with obvious chagrin.

Karsh stopped in his tracks, went to re-position the woman's hands, and noticed they were severely chaffed. She did not want her hands shown in the photograph and Karsh wasn't about to accept "no" for an answer.

"These hands represent a working woman's hands," he said to her. "They've cooked meals, did housework, changed diapers and were the tools of life. To take a portrait without showing them would be unacceptable."

The subject relented and what followed was a provocative sitting with the hands neatly exposed, giving the Armenian woman a perfect image. Her hands were more striking in the photo than the

To amass such a collection at Project SAVE (over 35,000 images), Thomasian spends hours interviewing photo donors with stories about their lives, ancestors and cultural data. Emphasis is also paid to the lives and works of Armenian photographers.

A loved one in a certain hairstyle? Wearing a special hat? The touch of their hands? It's the stuff of which memories are cherished and preserved.

For further information, call (617) 923-4542 or e-mail: archives@projectsave.org.

