CENSORIOUS NEWSPAPER SHAMES TOWN

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Category: Opinions

"Journal Times" of Racine, Wisconsin, which for decades hailed award-winning writer David Kherdian as the "man who put Racine on the map" has refused to review or even mention the author's recent "A Place in Time: A 20th Century Memoir". Racine-born Kherdian has accused the newspaper of racism. The newspaper apparently objects to Kherdian's depiction of Racine's bad old days when young Kherdian and other non-Anglo-Saxons suffered from discrimination.

By David Kherdian, 8 September 2021
DEAR WORLD, DEAR JOURNAL TIMES, DEAR ME

To measure this time I am in now I must go back to the time when I was a lone boy of immigrant parents who had survived the genocide, and in particular the memory of my mother who had lost everyone, a survivor who would hold helplessly to the ashes left behind. I was a difficult child, unruly, spoiled, searching, vibrant with energy—as were so many of the Armenian lads—who could not be contained by the imposed rules of that society, and often arrogant and disdainful toward those in command, that caused many of the boys (but never the obedient Armenian girls) to be flunked in grade school—in my case three times, once even in summer school, which had a profoundly harmful effect on the rest of my life, until at age 60, that resulted in my wife compelling me to write a biography of that period. Which I did, with my novella *Asking that River* (later collected in my memoir *Root River Return)* and in the process I at last crossed that river to stand on firm ground, earned by my forgiveness of those who had tormented me with their hatred, which I now understood for what it was—small minds reverting to racism, when their own self worth was brought into question by those who were innocently clamoring for a freedom they could sense but were feeling deprived of.

The classroom now is this tormented world that seeks the only possible cure, which is love, but where can that love come from if it is not understood, just now terribly absent this is in so their many of their lives, who must helplessly seek some balance they cannot find, when it turns its face away to the antipode of hate, accompanied by blame, in seeking revenge in any form that can be found.

This is my prelude to the theme of oppression that once again has come down on my head, but what a long arc it has been from childhood to this—flunked, once, dismissed, then admired, and now, once again unwanted because out of sync with the prevailing power possessors who are determined to run this country into the ground.

It has come to this, My new book, *A Place In Time: A 20th Century Memoir*, that The Journal Times, my hometown newspaper has refused to review or even mention in its newspaper, with the great irony that this very paper once proudly proclaimed that I had put Racine on the map. Over the years I have published over twenty books on my youth in Racine: poetry, verse, memoirs, novels, short stories, receiving altogether countless awards, with my work translated into seventeen languages. My many awards and honors from Wisconsin include the prized Banta Award, and from my hometown The

Emily Lee Award for lifetime achievement.

America has over time become more inclusive and accepting of its changing make-up; I was in my thirties when I first began to think of myself, at last, as an American, and although I had worked hard to honor and understand my racial heritage, and for a time I was overtly proud of my ancestry, perhaps in part at least from a sense of isolation. But that began to change when I spent time with Allen Ginsberg, who seemed free of of his Jewish roots, working instead for the common good of humanity. This was in the 60s, when I was coming into my own, as was the case for so many who alive to their own individualities, to judge their previous devotions or identifications and causes, to seek a new freedom and not just for themselves, which began for me when I started writing poetry, while coming into my own as an artist, not wishing to be typed or caught up in any cause, even freedom for all, for how could I know that if I hadn't freed myself from my own humiliating past. Thus I became a loner, recognizing that I had always been that, first from my conditioning, that I had to overcome. But I realized that I could not come to this without first honoring my roots, by measuring and evaluating the contents of my own being, what I was born with, what I came out of, and what contained me, that is how my soul's body was holding its spirit in place.

I began by studying and even translating some Armenian poets, with a growing interest in other Eastern poets, like Cavafy and Hikmet, slowly to realize in time that I was becoming a mystic poet, a label first put on me that I never would have assumed, as being too lofty, but it was a fact that my favorite poets then as now were Whitman, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats and Yeats, but I read everyone, and in time I came to study the ideas of G. I. Gurdjieff, who was the first master to bring Eastern spirituality to the West. Here, too I was almost instantly out of place, while writing an important book on my understanding of and experiences in a Fourth Way school, that my wife and I were in for nine years, being founded on Gurdjieff's system, and all the while I was writing poetry, published by the press my wife and I had founded there within our school.

I feel it is incumbent on me to analyze why my hometown paper has rejected my book, and I think the clues are most likely to be found in my book. First of all, I wanted to honor Racine for the democratic principles that held it in place, by inviting workers from all parts of the world in its various ethnic alignments: Jews, Italians, Armenians, Greeks, Czechs, and also from central Europe, beginning with the Danes, and followed by the Irish, the Welsh, and still others. The native black population, although not treated equals where absorbed into the body politic and belonged, if not properly appreciated as equally, as they certainly were for me, and treated thusly, and not only because of my classmate, friend and neighbor, Ulysses Doss, but also Mr. Miller, who was the radio repairman in our neighborhood, who impressed me by his dignity and upright character. Also, just outside our neighborhood, I came to know an elderly, if not old, black couple, who befriended the children around them, sometimes feeding and nurturing them in their special way, who had a dignity and sweetness of character that I also found in other blacks, which I happily noted in my book. One of the very first poems I wrote was a reverential tribute to this couple. This poem and my

regard for the blacks I encountered in our town as a boy, and then as adult, are described in this book. And I believe that both this and my regard for the democratic principles that existed there then has put me out of favor with the rascists that now run that newspaper, and I'm sure they represent other leaders in Racine, like the museum, and various clubs, yet I have never ceased to honor my hometown's importance and place in my life, all the years I lived there as a boy and young man.

There is one other thing in my book that I feel must also mark it as something to avoid if not condemned by racists and fascists and bigots, and that is the books dedication, that subtly points out that the blacks from the south, that were brought into its labor force rather late, and soon abandoned, and then vilified after the factories shut down and moved away, leaving them stranded in a hostile world, that would not accommodate them, but that they had to accommodate themselves into its racist strictures. Here is my dedication in full, in which this is sadly denoted, along with all that I found praiseworthy and worthy of honoring.

DEDICATION

For Gilbert Knapp who found and then founded it

For the Natives who first knew, loved and lived for it

For William Horlick who helped to grow it

For Jens Jensen who designed the lasting parts of it

For Mr. Vance who brought along the children within it

For the businessmen and town fathers who once cherished it

For the factories that consumed and then abandoned it

For the black workers, that last source of willing labor who

were sacrificed and then abandoned for the good of it

when there was no longer any good to be had in it

And for those who never lost their love for it

but who are now mostly not living there inside it.

So why should I not be shameless for showing both the glory and the underside of Racine, when anything else would favor sentimentality, a falseness that would spoil the book and my memory of life there, which I believe most anyone of intelligence and sensitivity must feel for their homeplace. To be worthy of our humanity we must see ourselves as we are, flawed and aspiring, and the city the same, a work in progress or regress, which is how I have gone through my life here, on this sacred soil.

Because of the Journal Times unique censorship of me, hundreds if not thousands of people in Racine, not to mention those who are far gone, will likely never know of my book, with its benefits I had had in mind for them.

Sincerely,
David

There are no comments yet.