NEW, DAZZLING RENDITION OF THE ARMENIAN ALPHABET

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Arthur Hagopian, NSW Australia, 4 June 2016

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He asked his father Arakel, whom he knew to be endowed with wisdom and charity, for the father long ago had been briefly enrolled as a seminarian at the Armenian Patriarchate.

Arakel, a strong family man had expected such a loaded question, but did not want to make his explanation too complicated.

Baghsarian, who moved to the United States in 1955, will never forget what his father told him: "We think that religion is a source of communication with God and we will eventually go there," he said, pointing to the sky. "But the means to arrive there will be different: some will take the bus, others might take the train. It is not the means of transportation that counts but rather the final destination we are all aiming for," his father had added.

Arakel had concluded with a Shakespearean dictum: "Do not judge a person from his religious beliefs but rather evaluate a person from his actions."

That, and a keen pride in his precious Armenian heritage, have guided Baghsarian through his prolific artistic endeavors, the most recent, a graphic rendition of the Armenian alphabet, a vivid expression of his desire to inspire and encourage young Armenians to keep the faith.

"I am worried that if we do not raise awareness of our children about our language, and alphabet, our poetry and literature, we will lose our culture and our millennia year-old history," he says.

The avenue he has chosen, with the intention of "empowering our children through education and enriching their life", is one that leads to the innermost core of the Armenian soul.

Armenians are rightly proud of their unique alphabet invented 1,700 years ago by Saints Sahag and Mesrob. It originally consisted of 36 letters, including more than half-a-dozen almost duplicate sounds and a double ("yev"), that have created major headaches for children trying to distinguish between "tah" and a "toh". Two more letters were added in the 12th Century.

Is it any wonder then that Armenians will opt for the more easily manageable English alphabet with its 26 letters when communicating via social media, SMS or Facebook?

In a world where unending "text messaging with short symbolic tags" are taking over the means of communication, it is easy to visualize the abandonment of proper language and alphabet, the retired artist avers.

For decades involved in AGBU, Armenian Fund of America, and other Armenian organizations, Baghsarian's concern is tangible: future generations of Armenians, mainly those in the Diaspora, run a very real risk of losing their ethnic identity through assimilation and acclimatization if they neglect to inculcate in their children the delights, and travails, of their mother language and its alphabet.

The modest, but bold and innovative step he has taken towards helping redress the anomaly is embodied in a slim volume, "Armenian Alphabet " (a companion volume, "Calligraphy in Motion," rhapsodizes the English alphabet), where he has created his rarefied version of the invention of Saints Sahag and Serop, remaining punctiliously faithful to the original, while embellishing each of the 38 letters of our alphabet with ethereal curves and lines that seem to be climbing ever higher, towards a distant Ararat.

The silver sheen and the underlying undulations, underlined by the eddying whorls, dazzle the eye.

He has no plans yet to convert the graphic fonts into a computer software program, but is attracted by the prospect. There already are several Armenian fonts available for word processing, adding one

more would be a breeze, IT experts confirm. The fact that like Latin characters, Armenian is written from left to write, unlike Hebrew and Arabic for instance, which move in the opposite direction, right to left, makes the job easier.

"Armenian Alphabet" is Baghsarian's fifth book. In addition to the alphabet book and "Calligraphy in Motion", he has written "Arsho's Love Affair With Shoes", "Reflections" and "In Bloom". The softcover of "Armenian Alhabet" is priced at $30.99 while the hardcover is $39.79.