THE YOUNG VISIONARIES OF 1959

Posted on December 9, 2018 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

In Memory of the Late Yeghish Hajakian of New Jersey

Dikran Abrahamian MD, Ontario, 5 December 2018

Coastal Lebanon is always the same in the summer: hot and humid. Sixty years ago, those who could afford would flee to the mountain resorts, especially on weekends. Today they go through the same ritual. The summer of 1959 was no different in Antelias, a town north of Beirut. Despite the sweltering heat, a dozen girls and boys, 15- to 18-years old, gathered one weekend at a house which had a high ceiling and many windows. It provided a welcome breeze.

The teenagers were not there to dance, drink, exchange pleasantries and socialize. They were on a mission. They were representatives of the Union of Lebanese Armenian Students, which went by the nickname "Ousanoghats". It was a left-leaning group of pupils from the Armenian secondary schools, except for the Neshan Palandjian Djemaran. Its members and sympathizers, about forty to fifty at its peak, operated in near-underground fashion for fear of expulsion from school. None of the Armenian educational institutions would tolerate active leftist students except New High School of Armen Gharib. The children of Hunchak families were subjected to the same fate by AGBU administered Hovaguimian-Manougian Secondary School for boys.

Members of "Ousanoghats" attended such varied schools as AGBU's Hovaguimian-Manougian and Tarouhy Hagopian, Melkonian of Cyprus, Mekhitarist School in the Hazmieh suburb of Beirut, High School of Marash, the Armenian Evangelical College, Central High School and New High School in Beirut.

Following a review of the activities carried in the preceding academic year (1958-1959), the bulk of the day's schedule revolved around the fratricide which had intensified in 1958 in Beirut. Each member had a tragic story to tell. Despite the end of overt hostilities, many a student were subjected to bullying, ridicule, name-calling, and threats of the "opposing" camp's students while passing through "unfriendly" areas. Such was the case, for example, of a few students from Hovagimian-Manougian when they had to pass by Djemaran which was located nearby. The St. Nishan Cathedral and School were on a high ground, perched on a hill next to the Grand Sérail building. On a lower ground, across the street, was Hovagimian-Manougian. Some mornings, when the students prayed in the school yard, loud "boos" from St. Nishan side would overwhelm the solemn process.

Meeting attendees deliberated on ways to ameliorate the situation and eventually put an end to the hostilities among students belonging to "opposite" ideological camps. Most active in making proposals were Maro Bedrossian (née Kojaoghlanian), Mari Tarpinian, Meliné Sepetjian (née Madourian), Vartan Ouzounian, Jirair Tanielian, and Yeghish Hajakian. After a long discussion, occasionally punctuated by expressions of hopelessness, they agreed that it was possible to launch a project that would bring students of all the schools under the same roof in amicable atmosphere.

I don't recall who first proposed the idea of Քիչ մը ամէն բան (Kitch me amen pan), a variety show in which students of all secondary schools would take part. The concept would be presented to Mr. Ara Topjian, the principal of Hovaguimian-Manougian Secondary School. Who would approach him and get him on board was examined in detail.



Hov-Man Band (1960-61) performing "Danse du feu" of Manuel de Falla

Invitations were extended to the management of all the Armenian secondary schools. The first show took place at the Gulbenkian auditorium in the spring of 1960 with the participation of Hovaguimian-Manougian, Tarouhy Hagopian, Neshan Palandjian Djemaran and the Armenian Evangelical College students. The schools delegated student-representatives who formed the committee that organized and supervised the activities. The show was received with overwhelming joy and gratification by the student body and the public at large. As if a fresh breath had engulfed the Armenian community. An additional performance was scheduled later. Քիչ մը ամէն բան (Kitch me amen pan) went on for four years with repeats and a new program every year. Unbeknownst to the school authorities the chair of the organizing committee was a member of "Ousanoghats" throughout the years. Each session of the show was a celebration. The programs included solo

singers, choirs, bands, recitations, drama, and a rich variety of performances by the students. In the years to come some of the performers became national celebrities and a few shined on international stages.

Friendships were forged among yesterday's "enemies". Dikran Shirvanian, Zareh Sourouzian, and Asdghig from Djemaran befriended a number of students from AGBU schools; Bedig Kahvedjian of Armenian Evangelical College with his pop-band became a household name and others followed his footsteps; in subsequent years Loutfi Tabakian and Hovsep Melkonian of Mekhitarist School launched their public debut in the Քիչ մը ամէն բան environment. Loutfi excelled in stage performances and Hovsep as an organizer. They established friendships with students of other schools. The list goes on, and I believe representatives of that generation could cite hundreds of other names.

The variety shows and the friendships they gave birth to were the result of the vision of the 1959 adolescents. To some extent, the confidence the group gained through shared experiences had also an impact on other areas. By 1963, yesteryear's "Ousanoghats" members were university students. Some criticized the outmoded methods of the leftist establishment, its subservience to Moscow in policies pertaining to local and national matters, and with the left-oriented intellectuals jolted the community thus paving the way to the re-evaluation of the past and planning future actions.

Two years ahead of the upcoming commemoration of 50th anniversary of "Medz Yeghern", they advocated for its recognition across Lebanon, **transcending the confines of the Armenian community**. They reached out to **non-Armenian** comrades, friends and students. Through concerted effort many leftist leaders were sensitized to the importance of this matter to Armenians. Dr. Georges Hanna, Architect Antoine Tabet, George Hawi were some of them. The latter had vast contacts through the Lebanese Student League. He aligned with the establishment but called for more independence from the policies of the Soviet Union in 1967. Hawi promoted Armenian concerns then and in subsequent years when he became a prominent national Lebanese leader. He was assassinated in 2005.

In 1969, a number of the old "Ousanoghats" boys became founding members of the "Yeridasart Hye" magazine.

These reminiscences were prompted by the recent passing of one of the long-ago young visionaries – Yeghish Hajakian. His memory will live in the hearts of his friends and all who knew him.