GUIDING ROGER

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Category: Opinions

By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 22 June 2023

The two boys, both thirteen, are looking at the camera. Their expression is hard to pin down. Although it's summer, the boy on the left is wearing a coat. He is Kevork Hintlian. Someday he will become a historian and a leading authority on Armenian Jerusalem. The boy on the right is me. We are standing on the roof of the Sts. James Armenian Cathedral. On our left there is a lonesome pine. Behind us is Goveroun Bardez ("Cows' Garden") and Jerusalem's city walls built 500 years earlier by Sinan, the great Armenian architect. Behind the wall is the no man's land separating Jordan from Israel. In the blurry distance are the massive YMCA and King David Hotel buildings, both in Israel. It's the summer of 1959 and the occupation of the Old City of Jerusalem by Israel is eight years away.

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Before Internet and electronic communication, everyday magazine editors received piles of news releases from all over North America and beyond. One day, in late 2002, I received a news release from an Irwindale, California produce-related company. Since my Canadian magazine was about travel and leisure, I was about to toss the news release when I noticed the sender's name: Dennis Gertmenian: a rare Armenian last name. He was the CEO. The name took me back forty years to the Jerusalem of the late '50s when the above photo was taken.

Back then, Jerusalem summer days were slow like the luscious snails we caught in the crevices of the Armenian cemetery wall. Summer meant endless hot days. We waited the whole year for summer vacation but when it arrived we had nothing to do. In the absence of organized sports or social programs we created our own entertainment. It often meant playing the games which our genocide-surviving parents had brought from Turkish-occupied Armenia. Games called "Chain", "Top Daynag", and "Ploor". The Monopoly board at the social club was often monopolized by the older boys who seemed to drag the game all day. A handful of lucky boys found "jobs" as gofers. The shopkeepers who hired them were relatives or their father's friends. Their weekly "salary" of a dollar or so was often covertly paid by their fathers to keep their sons off the streets. When the Old Country games became boring, we raided the Muslim and Assyrian quarters to start fights with the boys there.

That summer my friend Kevork and I decided to find a job: with supreme confidence, we decided to become tourist guides. What was there to know? We knew where Christ was arrested, chained, whipped, and carried the cross along Via Dolorosa to Golgotha and His empty tomb in the Holy Sepulcher cathedral.

We would look for independent and lone travelers—no more than two at a time. We didn't target Americans: they were almost always escorted by professional guides. The Americans also stayed at well-known hotels which were not accessible to us. We decided to ambush European tourists. Unlike the Americans, the Europeans traveled on strict budget. Most stayed at cheap hostels owned

by the various religious sects.

On our first morning of operations we walked to the Casa Nova hostel which was owned by the Roman Catholic patriarchate. Because Kevork's English was better than mine, he would act as the main guide. My job was to locate the "target" and persuade him or her to take a chance on us. My opening pitch had two parts: We didn't want money; we just wanted to practice our English. I had to smile a lot. My other job was to make sure no one would "steal" our catch.

We got lucky that first morning of business. I 'accosted' two French women whose English was as bad as mine. They were well dressed and one of them was a *soigne* beauty in a tight blue dress. Her every move was alluring.

We took the pair all over town. They didn't ask us questions but studiously followed Kevork's narration. After three hours of cris-crossing the Old City, we were forced to return to the hostel because of an unseasonable rain. At the entrance to Casa Nova we bid them farewell. But just like a guy expecting a goodnight kiss upon returning his date home, we were waiting for a tip. A shilling, about 25 cents—would do. They were about to disappear down the hostel's dark innards when one of them—not the looker—opened her hand bag and dug a brown purse from it. My eyes zoomed on the purse. When her hand came out from her handbag, she was holding something which looked like a turquoise gem: she gave each of us a "gem": Vicks candy.

Walking back to our neighborhood, we cursed the pair as we sucked the triangular Vicks. We swore we would never pick "cheap" French tourists again.

The following day, in front of Hotel Petra at the Bab el-Khalil neighborhood, I eyed a lone tourist. He was a stocky man in his early twenties. He had thick curly hair and a dark, bushy beard. He had big, friendly eyes. It didn't take me long to persuade him to let us show him the town. We were amazed to learn his name was Roger Gertmenian. An Armenian last name we had not heard before. He said he was Los Angeles-born and was traveling around the world with a friend.

We were disappointed to learn Gertmenian couldn't speak Armenian. He was the first Armenian we had met who couldn't speak our language. He was also unaware of the significant Armenian community in Jerusalem and that the Armenian Church owned almost one-sixth of the walled city.

After showing him the holy sites, we took him to the Armenian Quarter. When we entered the quarter Kevork and I were very proud of our prize: we had landed not just a tourist but an AMERICAN tourist who was ARMENIAN. America meant big payday.

We took Roger around the Armenian Quarter and for a panoramic view climbed to the roof of the St. James Cathedral, the most beautiful church in the city.

At the end of the day, when we took him to his hotel, Roger insisted that he pay for our "trouble." But the proud patriots that we were we wouldn't accept money from a fellow Armenian. We wished Roger a safe journey as he continued his around-the-world trip.

More than forty years later the name Gertmenian had popped up again. Again from California. I faxed Dennis Gertmenian's administrative assistant and asked for the CEO's email address. She said she couldn't give me the address but I could fax my query. I asked Gertmenian whether he knew a Roger Gertmenian. I mentioned that I had met Roger long ago. He replied Roger was his first cousin and lived in Pasadena. He sent Roger's address.

I wrote to Roger. He remembered us. I asked him whether he had written about his round-the-world trip. I told him Kevork still lived in Jerusalem and was a world authority on Armenian Jerusalem. I told him I edited a Canadian magazine.

After a career as a grocer, teacher and politician, he had retired a few months earlier. Soon after, he sent me the Jerusalem photo. I had forgotten that he had photographed us. We didn't look like a pair of junior hustlers. Maybe it was our disguise.

Roger and I began to correspond. In his first letter he wrote about Sylvie, his Armenian wife who was born in Zahle, Lebanon, and about his daughter Greta and son Daniel. He began the letter with "I am Roger, age 65 and still talking about our wonderful adventures in Europe, Asia and Africa in 1959-60. Yes, we met in the Convent and spent a great day together. I still have a picture of you two. Everything about Jerusalem was memorable. The Armenians are the world's most wonderful and baffling people!" In another letter he wrote: "I am enjoying the fact that Armenia is independent and free. I never expected to live and see this miracle."

I sent him a book I had written about my father's experiences during the Genocide and how he had survived. He wrote that he had enjoyed reading the book.

He said he had kept a log of his 1959-'60 around the world trip but had lost it. He said the log had included a detailed account of being guided by two Armenian boys through the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem.

We continued our correspondence off and on. His every letter made reference to Armenia and Armenians. Roger couldn't speak Armenian but was passionate about his Armenian identity.

After several years, our correspondence began to dribble and eventually came to a halt. In my last letter, I told him I was thinking of visiting Los Angeles and that I would make a point of meeting him.

For a variety of reasons, including lethargy and COVID, I didn't make the trip.

A few weeks ago, I finally decided to fly to L.A.: to see relatives and friends. Meeting Roger was at the top of my itinerary.

A few days ago, I telephoned his number. A woman answered. It was Sylvie, Roger's wife. I told her how I had met Roger years ago and had corresponded with him. I said I was planning to visit Los Angeles and get together with Roger.

Sylvie said: "I am sorry to tell you that Roger passed away last Thanksgiving Day." I froze. I didn't

know what to say. Sylvie said Roger had suffered from several serious maladies in his last years.

In Roger's obituary, his son Dan said his father had been a "passionate and colorful teacher over the decades-long career." He had served on the council of the Armenian Cilicia Church and had been a lifelong member of the Knights of Vartan. People who knew Roger were not surprised when they learned he had made an anatomical gift of his body to the Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California (USC). A renowned trauma surgeon at the USC will write a textbook about Roger.

A recent published obituary said Roger had led "an active and multifaceted life..." and had pursued several careers (foodservice, politics, and teaching.) As a teenager, he worked after school and on weekends at his father's Gertmenian's Maket. That opened the door to a career in restaurant operations and produce distribution.

He got the bug for politics early on. Sylvie says: "He was always interested in politics and worked on many campaigns and when he had the opportunity to work in Sacramento for a state senator he jumped at it." He scored his first victory when he was elected to the Pasadena City College Board of Trustees, a position he held for three consecutive terms.

When George Deukmejian campaigned to become governor, Roger provided staunch support which earned him a position on the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. He later served on the Los Angeles County Business License Commission as well on the Los Angeles County Commission on Alcohol and Other Drugs.

He had a yet another career as a veteran teacher. After receiving his teaching credentials at USC, he taught history, western civilization, government, English, and Spanish. He was a passionate and colorful teacher who dazzled his students with his enthusiasm and knowledge.

Roger had died at the age of 85 but I will remember him as the easy-going, 22-year-old, stocky, bushy-haired and bearded Armenian whom Kevork and I guided through Armenian Jerusalem on a sweltering day when we were adolescents.

The Goveroun Bardez, which stretched behind us in the long-ago photograph, is in the news these days. Patriarch Nourhan Manougian has leased or sold the tract of land which covers one-fourth of the Armenian Quarter's area, to Israeli interests. I pray patriotic Roger hadn't heard about the treachery.

Comments

Cindy Kaloostian – 2023-07-17 19:53:41
It doesn't surprise me that my older brother, Roger, saved the photograph. Memories of that trip stayed with him his whole life, and he often used his photos and stories to teach history and social studies. Thanks so much for writing of your experience with him.

kathleen harvey – 2023-07-12 10:50:33
What a truly heartwarming story. Roger was indeed an amazing man.

Jirair Tutunjian – 2023-07-09 20:48:12
Thank you all for your generous words. Perhaps because the story had been churning on my mind for a while, I wrote it at one sitting. I wish I could have written a story with a happy ending. I would like to thank Mrs. Gertmenian for telling me about Roger's impressive career, his popularity, and his commitment to our people. Over the years, I have written a number of articles about remarkable Armenians, unsung Armenian heroes, and famous people whose Armenian identity is not widely known. I am planning to publish a book which will feature the lives of thirty-five to forty of them. "Guiding Roger" will certainly be in the book. Jirair Tutunjian Toronto

Adom – 2023-07-09 18:39:21
Jirair is a very skillful and talented raconteur, who uses carefully selected words to tell his stories with integrity, eloquence and panache. 'Guiding Roger' is a beautiful true story written in the former editor's style and perspective. Adom

Patti O – 2023-07-09 14:20:13
What a great story and article. It warmed my heart and reminded of some of the reasons we thought so highly of Roger. He was one of a kind. Thanks so much for sharing this.

Van – 2023-07-08 17:49:42
Perhaps not a coincidence that Roger would become a passionate university professor and nn active politician.

Douglas B. – 2023-07-07 23:59:21
Thanks so much for this story. Roger must have made a deep impression on young Kevork and the author that after spending only one day with him, the boys remembered Roger for so many years after. Before reading this account, I hadn't known of the substantial Armenian community in Jerusalem. My wife and I are neighbors of the Gertmenians and we enjoyed the description of twenty-two-year-old Roger with a dark, bushy beard. Plus we learned that the Gertmenian is a rare name. It is a shame that Jirair and Roger were unable to reunite after so many decades.

Dana T – 2023-07-07 12:01:11
Thank you for writing and sharing this article. It's beautiful. It shows the best of humanity - strangers meeting, being kind, caring and thoughtful to each other and building a life-long bond. Precious. Roger is greatly missed by all who knew him around the globe.

Arlene Aaronian – 2023-07-07 11:13:23
What a truly wonderful story about our Roger Gertmenian. I have had the pleasure of knowing Roger the majority of my life. Amazingly, Roger had never shared this story with me and I was pleased to read this interesting event in your publication. Thank you very much. Roger must be smiling from above!

Allan S. – 2023-07-05 19:53:45
A beautiful biographical look back at Roger and his visit to Jerusalem.

Sylvie Gertmenian – 2023-07-05 09:44:24
Hi Jerry, Thank you for the wonderful and heartwarming story on Roger. He would have loved to read it. You really captured his essence. He was a very patriotic Armenian-American through and through. Sincerely, Sylvie [Mrs. Roger] Gertmenian



H – 2023-07-04 15:40:22
The story of two Jerusalem charming Armenian kids and their summer escapades. While experiencing and exposing themselves to few or many arrogant and flaky tourists, who totally ignorant of the layers history of the Old City, often took advantage of the goodwill of young and old Jerusalemites. Armenian or other. Roger Gertmenian ending up being as one of the happy exceptions. As first generation of the survivors of the Turkish Genocide of the Armenians who had made Jerusalem their adopted location, Jirair's young innocent ambitions and expectations fulfilled as a known journalist, and Kevork Hintilian's, now renowned Historian of the Holy Land and Armenians, charm the reader. To say the least. The memoir and photos are for keeps. Thank you Jirair Tutunjian.



Vahe – 2023-07-03 22:55:48
What an interesting story. It was a pleasure to read it. Thank you Jirair for sharing it with us. Both of you as teenagers must have impressed Roger to have kept the photo he took of you both at that historical junction of Jerusalem Armenian quarter. Indeed, hopefully Roger Gertmenian had not heard about it. It seems that we too will not hear from the Patriarch.



Tavit – 2023-07-03 16:28:52
This is a great personal story, one of many I have had the pleasure of reading by Tutunjian.



Migirdic – 2023-07-03 14:24:19
This is a very heart-warming story as well as a typical one for the Armenian world; between the old and the new one. As for the travesty of selling a big chunk of the centuries old Armenian Quarter in Jerusalem, indeed hopefully Mr. Roger Gertmenian had not heard about it before passing...