

# LOOKING BACK...GENTLY

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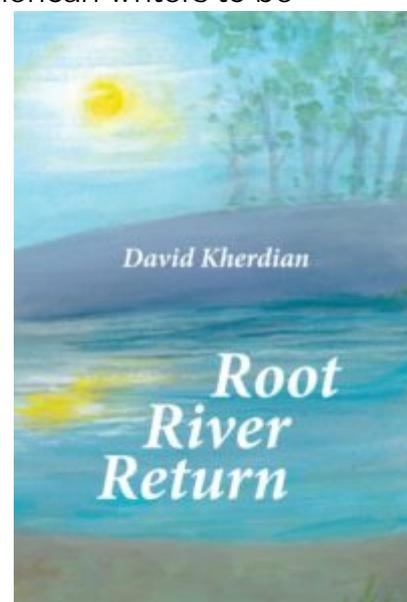


**By Jirair Tutunjian**, Toronto, 27 July 2015

When Aram Khachaturian became famous some music critics jibed that his music echoed that of Tchaikovsky, Rimski-Korsakoff and Ippolitov-Ivanov. The Armenian composer silenced his critics by pointing out there might be some truth to what they said because the Russian composers had been inspired by the traditional music of Khachaturian's native Caucasus.

Something similar happened when Armenian-American writer David Kherdian made the scene six decades ago. Certain literary critics pointed out the similarities between his work and that of William Saroyan. "At one time most of us, if not all, were compared to Saroyan, because he was the first...in the sense that we are taking something from him that was his, whereas in truth, we all sounded alike because of this Armenian sensibility we share," says Kherdian.

Born in Racine, Wisconsin (1931), Kherdian was a friend of Saroyan and idolized the Fresno-born author. Saroyan "gave permission" to the first generation of Armenian-American writers to be themselves. A poet, fiction writer, memoirist, translator, editor... Kherdian has written 70 books and won his share of awards. He has been translated into 13 languages.



In a wonderful symmetry, Kherdian's main themes are often about memory, roots, identity while his hometown is Racine-- roots in French. Kherdian's recent "Root River Return" is a collection of memoirs in prose and poetry.

Growing up Armenian-American in a small and wintry northern town is the theme of the book, with an overdue focus on the author's father--a genocide survivor like most of the Armenian adults in the Racine Armenian community of the '30s.

The 210-page book (Beech Hill Publishing Company) is a mix of elegiac prose and poetry which explore the bittersweet childhood and adolescence of the 84-year-old author: a time when the second generation of Armenian-Americans experienced not only the Depression and the war years,

but also the anguish of dual identity, deracination, and discrimination. It was a stressful and confusing era, especially for children and adolescents who had little guidance and no social scientist to verbalize their plight. Meanwhile their impoverished parents, mostly peasants from the old country, were going through the trauma of genocide memories and survival in a strange land.

Kherdian portrays the various layers of these stresses in pain and in joy, compassion and understanding. Kherdian has succeeded at a very difficult job: he has "forgiven" his childhood. His old friends are all here and remembered with tenderness. Eggs Krikorian, Dominic Galati, Chuck (Horse) Kamakian, Nancy Jacobsen, Gob Kaiserlian, fishing ace Joe Perch, Dafje Vartan, Ray Rodriguez, Lotch Oglanian... The vibrant mosaic of Racine is also here: the rag man calling from his horse-drawn wagon, bridges, trains, Lake Michigan, Garfield School, the Boranian Grocery Store on State Street, driving to a picnic in his uncle's Model- A Ford, the Root River which separated and joined the various communities, St. Mesrob Armenian Church, downtown's Monument Square, Rex, Rialto, and Venetian theatres, and the Armenian sourjarran (coffee house). They all come alive as Kherdian rolls back the years gently into his sometimes gray, sometimes luminescent boyhood.

In the past Kherdian has written extensively about his indomitable mother. The biography of his mother "The Road from Home", which he wrote in 1979, has been continuously in print since. In his latest book Kherdian's father gets an overdue attention. At least 15 pieces are about Kherdian Sr. as the author tries to understand his father and make peace posthumously with him. Thus some of the most evocative, poetic, and touching lines in the book are about his father. Kherdian describes his father going to work:

"...trudging down dark street  
of icy wind-swept snow  
in your heavy gray coat  
waiting at the corner for the bus  
that would take you  
to the factory gate alone."

And

"...And sometimes on the porch  
waiting to be greeted  
as he had waited to greet  
me, pressing a nickel or  
dime into my palm, still warm from his hand,  
money he had saved from  
the fare, that I was to use  
for ice cream..."

The moment is almost universal.

In "The Coffee House", where the poet talks about the Armenian sourjarran, he is also referring to his father and their sometime strained relationship. Peering into the sourjarran from outside, Kherdian remembers:

"...Our curiosity sated by  
the stolen glances, the  
furtive look into that large  
smoke-filled room  
The inhabitants dressed  
in grays and browns,  
somber, silent, belonging  
to a world outside of ours

That somehow also ours  
for these were our fathers,  
the other half  
of the split-off world  
We know only Armenia,  
a name and a tragedy  
they could revisit, but that we  
dared not enter with our lives."

Kherdian ends his "To My Father" poem with:

"...the transition from  
old country to new too unbearable for you  
and much too confusing for me,  
because I needed what was old as much  
as what was new, even if I didn't  
fully understand this at the time."

Don't miss the penetrating and poignant "Baseball & Father" where Kherdian's father momentarily joins his son in a baseball game. The poet makes you nostalgic for a time and place you haven't experienced.

Kherdian is 84. "Root River Return" doesn't sound like the last hurrah of a writer who has run out of words.

