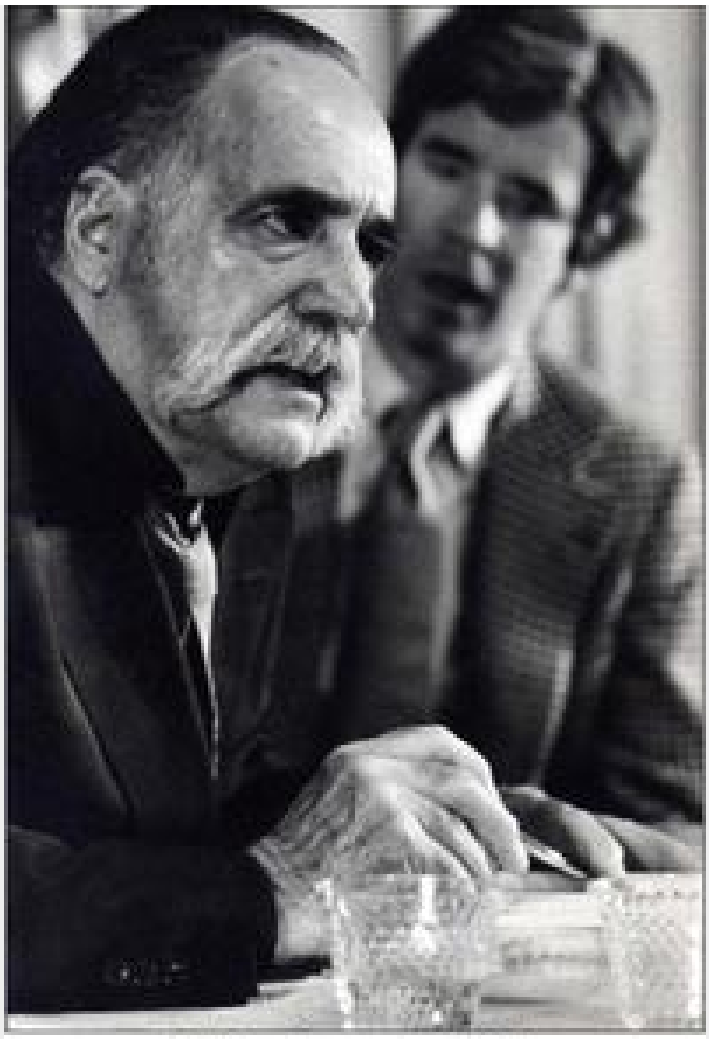
WILLIAM SAROYAN --- A 30-YEAR RETROSPECT

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William Saroyan 1981*

Category: Opinions



By Tom Vartabedian, 3 October 2011
The question remains: If you could have dinner with any prominent Armenian, dead or alive, who might it be?

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Would it be Mashtots, Komidas or Khachaturian? Perhaps Mamigonian, Karsh, Cher, Aznavour or Kardashian?

No doubt, all of them would be perfect subjects with which to converse and get to know on a personal basis. Mine would be William Saroyan.
Hard to believe that 30 years have passed since this prominent novelist, playwright and short story writer left the planet. His absence created a void in the international literary world that has not and cannot be filled by any other.

Gone but not forgotten.

I would venture to say that Saroyan's popularity has not waned one iota. He's as renown today as the primal years when he crafted his stories that entertained one generation after another. From his early days as a Hairenik Weekly scribe to his Pulitizer Prize ("The Time of Your Life"), 28 books, 25 plays, and a plethora of short stories. And, oh yes, a song (Come-on-a-My House) which was immortalized by Rosemary Clooney.

I would ask him where he got his inspiration. Was he an impulse writer? What would he regard as his most satisfying work? And which one made the biggest impact?

I would ask him what he thought of Armenian writers today and if there were any worthy of perpetuating his fame.

I have in my hand an inaugural issue of The Armenian Review, dated 1948, which contains Saroyan's "The Theological Student." In a word, "impeccable."

- Saroyan starts out by telling us about this theologian he had met a quarter century ago in the plays of certain Russian writers like Tolstoy, Chekhov and Gorki.

What struck me as unusual about the piece was nothing else pertaining to Saroyan. No introduction. No short bio. Nothing that might elucidate a reader on who the author was or anything about his story.

His words were well crafted, poignant and mesmerizing, like you were the one conversing with his subjects. He later adopted the pen name Sirak Garoyan. Why? I don't know. Why would anyone dilute their given name?

I was only 8 when that issue was launched but Saroyan became a role model ever since, reading his stories throughout high school with a voracious appetite. My favorite? "The Human Comedy."

We met three times. The first encounter came in 1960 while studying at the Mekhitarist Monastery in Vienna. A mere 19 then, I had taken my sophomore year off from Boston University to study at the vank.

One day while poking about the library, I stumbled upon this gangling figure with a handlebar moustache, huddled over a pile of books. His eyes were like dancing marbles as he studied the pages.

He introduced himself as Saroyan as if his identity didn't precede him. I told him I wanted to become a writer like himself and what words of wisdom could he impart.

He looked up at me and snickered, "Write what you see and what you feel," he said that day with encouragement. "Just be yourself. Draw upon your own experiences."

I remember him pointing toward an old bearded scholar cowering in the corner of that library, documenting a copy of Hantes Amsora," a Mekhitarist publication.

"See that priest over there," Saroyan said. "He's written 50 books. I have a long way to go to catch him. There's nothing like the first one."

Saroyan made his breakthrough in Story magazine with "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze" (1934), the protagonist being a young, starving writer who tries to survive in a Depression-ridden society. I recall giving a report on it to my high school English class.

Five years following the Mekhitarist experience, I made my way up three flights of stairs inside the old Hairenik Building at 212 Stuart Street in Boston, prepared to submit a story to editor Jimmy Tashjian.

In his seat was Saroyan. With no pants. Perhaps I mentioned this before but good stories bear repeating from time to time. Seems Saroyan was in Boston for a speaking engagement at the Ritz and ran into an embarrassing problem. He couldn't close the zipper to his fly and asked Tashjian to find a tailor nearby.

So there he sat, bony-legged and all, somewhat embarrassed by his appearance, never suspecting an outsider. I happened to remind him that we met five years prior in Vienna and he didn't seem to recall the incident, only to say his visits to the monastery were regular and it was a pity how so many books in that library were being ignored.

Our last encounter followed a year or so before his demise. Saroyan had come to Belmont High School for a talk and book-signing. A new work was just released titled "Obituaries," an original and candid meditation about death and our only possible answer to it.

It some ways, I considered the work a memorial tribute to himself --- the manner in which mortality overtakes us and the way we might prepare for it.

The line was 50 deep with guests when I made my way to Saroyan's table. I didn't bother with re-introductions that evening but did beg for his indulgence in another way by asking him to pose for a photograph.

He looked up with a stoic expression as I clicked the shutter. I don't think Karsh would have done much better given the situation.

Some months later, I read his obituary and dug out the photograph. Turned out to be the perfect illustration for a Jimmy Tashjian anthology on the author and wound up being donated with some others to his Fresno museum.

Thirty years later and time marches on. Like he once said, "Death is not the end of a good Armenian. But the beginning. For when two of us meet …"

* **William Saroyan, in one of his last photos taken by this writer during a book-signing at Belmont High School, shortly before his death in 1981 at age 72.**