

To the Memory of Father Nerses Baboorian.

by James Russell

His biographer will have to sift through masses of papers: poems, reminiscences, photographs- his life approached the three score and ten to which reasonable men aspire, and it was richly spent in the Armenian churches of many countries. He knew many languages, and the Armenian proverb that tells us a man is multiplied by the tongues he knows would have Father Nerses a multitude of men, each radiant with the same humor, grace and gentle friendliness that touched me and many others every day at St. Vartan Cathedral. When they told me he had died, these memories of that beloved man came back. Those who knew him have many more to add, but here are a few.

It was the great New York transit strike of 1980. Many of the Diocesan staff live in the borough of Queens, and were waiting for their car pool, weary, their endurance wearing thin. Yours truly, a native of Manhattan, is passing by on his way to do something or other, having had more sleep and less trouble than they. But Father Nerses, sprightly and smiling, bars my way and intones a proverb, in Persian: Mai khor, mambar be-sus, sāqi-ye maikhāne be-sho, mardom āzār ma-kon 'Drink wine, kindle light, visit the cupbearer at the tavern, and do no wickedness to men.' These words, deeply understanding of human frailty and diversity, yet carrying a clear moral message, are what got me through the days of the strike. I wrote them on a piece of paper and posted them in my office, and perhaps in some future crisis God will grant me to remember them and the wonderful man who said them.

In the little coffee room of the Diocese, a locus rather like the Stoa of ancient Athens for great minds to graze and consider the weighty questions of being and not being, I found myself one day

transported suddenly and without warning to the early dawn in an ancient Arab city. From the high, wavering cry of Ashhādu 'I confess' to the deep roar and receding power of the final Allah!, Father Nerses was the equal of any muezzin in Baghdad (a city where he had lived for many years). To listen to him chanting the Islamic call to prayer was to be standing below the dizzying minaret and watching the Sun wash with the first colors of day a vast and cloudless dome of sky above the palms, driven as it were by the chant of Father Nerses.

A few days before the western Christmas: we are all in the Council Hall of the Diocese with Archbishop Torkom Manoogian, laughing, exchanging presents, talking, eating Armenian goodies. Srpazan Hayr sits at the center, gathering and radiating the joy we feel in his presence, which unifies us to each other. As if stilled by the command of some angel deputized for the purpose, the telephones are silent, and Syraun Palvetzian is there, too, having a rest for a change. Everyone is smiling.

There is one man in the room who is trying to smile, but he looks baffled, awkward: an Armenian merchant from the remote town of Siirt in eastern Anatolia. Very few Armenians live there now, and most speak only Kurdish. Of course, Father Nerses is speaking with him in fluent Kurdish, making him feel at home. There is a photograph of Father Nerses taken many years ago, in Iraq. It shows a slender, comely boy in the flowing robes and headdress of a Kurdish mountaineer. It is perhaps not often that such mysterious, delicate beauty is transmuted in later life into the subtler, finer charity of spirit that Father Nerses had. But on occasion, when Father Nerses smiled and recited some

choice bit of Eastern wisdom, the ghost of the beautiful youth seemed to touch his face again. Perhaps we only dream these things, never granting age the unbridled dominion to pull us away from those floating white jellabas, those Turkish and Persian ghazals, that chant echoing through the Church of Khorhurd khorin anhas anskizbn 'Profound mystery! Unapproachable, without beginning...' into the dark.

Father Nerses used to pad about the Diocese in embroidered slippers, tap-tap over the polished stone floors, soundless on the rugs. 'Why is the Turkish word for a rug hali?' he asked me once. I didn't know. 'Because without it, the floor would be khalil (Arabic: 'empty') he explained triumphantly.

Some people might be perplexed at what I have written, for after all I seem to have said little of Father Nerses as an Armenian. In fact, it was his Armenian heritage that placed him at the center of the entire Middle East, and Armenia is the filter through which he extracted the wisdom, humor and color of the peoples of the East: Arabs, Kurds, Jews, Greeks and Turks. It was the Armenian and the Christian in Father Nerses that made the wickedness, suffering and mutual mistrust of those peoples vanish like smoke, leaving only a treasure of millennial wisdom. There were other journeys on which I could not follow Fr. Nerses: he seemed to be interested in China, in Poland, in the strange ways of our own United States, indeed in all the world. I can imagine him as an Armenian spaceman with clergyman's collar and bubble-like helmet, conversing in fluent Martian.

He once wrote a short essay about how any visitor to the Diocese ought to stop for a few minutes of spiritual nourishment in the Cathedral instead of merely attending to business and running

for the crosstown bus. The essay was called in Armenian utogh urratsogh which might be translated as 'someone who eats and disappears.' He thought God had a right to our company a few minutes a day, and was disappointed and even lonely if He didn't have it. Now Father Nerses is in Heaven, perhaps at this very moment meeting St. Nerses the Great, ~~or that other St. Nerses who lived at Hrenia~~ and was called Shnorhali, the Graceful. A grace and joy has gone out of our lives with Father Nerses, and I suppose that is why holding the tears back was hard when they called this morning and told me he was gone, when after twenty numb minutes I sat down and remembered all of these things. We needed him so much in this world! And he left so soon, leaving us to hold onto what we remember about him with both hands. Like a cupful of water in the burning desert, not a single drop must fall.

He died on Sunday, they tell me. I was in the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine that hot afternoon, listening to a concert of cantatas by Bach. One was about death, and one was about birth. When I remember Father Nerses and what he gave to us, I remember this line of the second cantata: 'Let our mouth be full of laughter, and our tongue full of praise. For the Lord hath done great things for us.' (Psalm 76, 2). I thank God that my life and that of Father Nerses met, albeit for all too short a time. Farewell, Der Hayr! One of the joys of Heaven will be meeting you again.