

# The World of Hirair Hovnanian

Remarkable Men

by Gillisann Haroian

*Note: continuing a concept introduced in the Spring 1985 issue of Ararat ("Remarkable Men"), the following interview is part of an on-going series devoted to the lives of Armenian men and women who have brought distinction to themselves by their achievement in their particular field of endeavor, whatever it may be. Similar pieces will appear in subsequent issues.*

Many times attention is focused on the glamorous — the movie stars, the moguls, the popular musicians — though their glitter is transient. Those who have truly golden stories but are in lower-key professions create no calculated nor gaudy spectacles. One such story belongs to Hirair Hovnanian, a man who immigrated to the United States from Baghdad in 1951 and proceeded to build himself a real estate empire.

Now a multi-millionaire, Hovnanian is President, Chairman of the Board, and Sole Stockholder of his company, Hovsons, Inc., which has major branches throughout New Jersey, Florida and California. The company develops community housing, medical and light care facilities, nursing homes, and physiotherapy centers. Hovsons, Inc. has expanded into commercial, office and industrial building, and includes a lumber subsidiary providing prefabricated components for construction.

In 1976, Hovnanian was chosen for an award of excellence by the Bicentennial Celebration Committee in Philadelphia as one of the fifteen outstanding Armenians in the United States. Hovnanian is also serving as a member of the Statue of Liberty Centennial Commission. He was awarded an honorary Ph.D. from Villanova University, where he received his business degree in 1956. He has been a Fellow Associate Trustee of Villanova since 1984.

A philanthropist, Hovnanian has been the benefactor of many organizations, from hospitals to cultural and educational entities. In 1970 the National Court of Honor of the Boys Scouts of America conferred the Silver Beaver Award on him for distinguished service to youth.

Hovnanian is actively involved in the Armenian community also. He was a co-founding trustee of the Armenian Assembly in Washington, D.C., and he recently

donated \$1,000,000 to the Assembly. For his work in the Church, Hovnanian was awarded the St. Gregory Illuminator Decoration and the Prince of Cilicia Decoration by the Catholicosate.

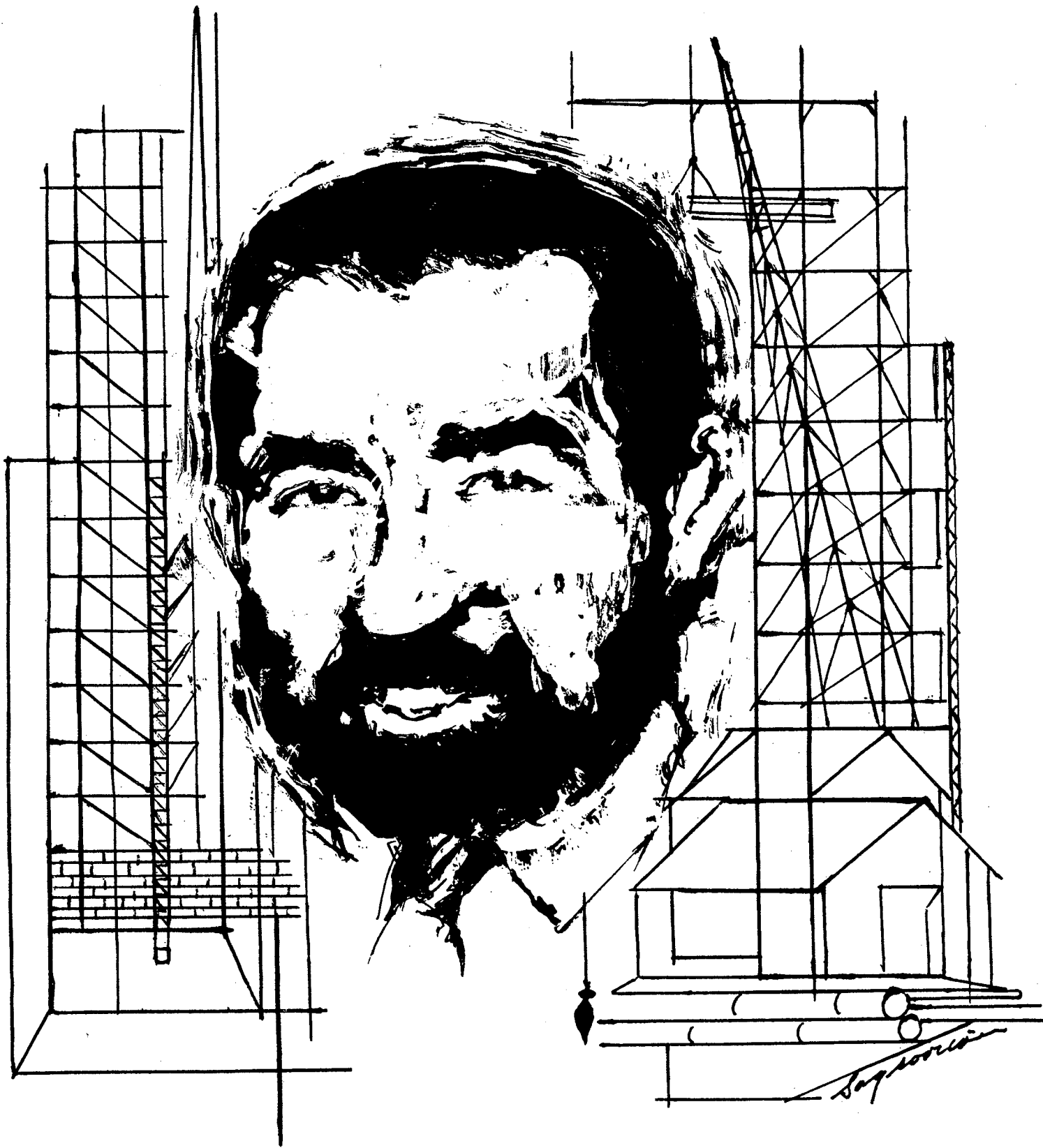
Hovnanian now has three homes: one in Deal, New Jersey; a second in Boca Raton, Florida, and the last a townhouse in Manhattan, New York, on the upper east side and nearby the residence of Vice-President Bush. The interview was conducted in New Jersey, where Hovnanian's brick mansion fronts the ocean. Outside flies an American flag. The driveway can hold Hovnanian's Cadillac Limousine (which has three Oriental rugs on the floor), two Rolls-Royces, a Mercedes-Benz, and an Alfa Romeo. Inside barks a Pekinese name *Aboush*, or Stupid, by Hovnanian. Also inside are family pictures and a collection of paintings by Armenian artists such as Jansem and Carzou. Hanging on some walls are gifts: ceramic tiles from Jerusalem or carpets depicting Mesrob's alphabet, the map of the Armenian Republic, and a picture of that homeland. Armenian music flows continually throughout the rooms.

The owner of all this is a short but robust man, bearded, sometimes grinning, sometimes frowning in thought. On his left wrist is a small blue tattoo, a sign of the pilgrimage he made to Jerusalem in 1969. His most outstanding traits are his vivaciousness and personableness. Hovnanian's chauffeur says that his wife sends him off to work at the Hovnanians each morning with the words, "There you go to spend the day with your other family." He greets a visitor with a strong handshake, a welcome word, and an urging to sit down and relax while the business is being done.

**Q: Start from the beginning. Tell me about Iraq: your family in Iraq, the Armenians in Iraq. . .**

A: I was born in Kirkuk, Iraq in 1930, the third youngest of four brothers. We also have two sisters. We had a family Bible, and everybody's birth was written in there. My father migrated from Malatia to Der-el-Zor during the massacres. He was fifteen at the time. He ended up in Iraq, where all of us were born, and passed away in 1976.

For the Armenians, we had a church, we had a club. Being Christian, of course, we congregated together. I



went to Armenian school. I also learned the Turkish and Kurdish languages fluently because we were surrounded by these Islamic peoples.

In 1945, we migrated to Baghdad. They had a pretty vibrant Armenian community there. I belonged to the church choir group and sang in church almost every Sunday, so I know the Mass from beginning to end, including the priest's part, which is very interesting. The melodies are beautiful, and the chants take me in completely. It's very emotional to me.

Another organization I belonged to was the Armenian Educational Foundation for young men. So, we had a lot of friends. We were a close-knit community at the time. As a minority we needed that protectionism, even though the Iraqi people were nice to the Armenian people. They are even up to today. It's just that we are two different people.

**Q: How about your mother?**

A: I think I remember my mother almost every day of my life. She was the most dynamic and one of the most intelligent women I've ever known. An extremely balanced individual. She died at a very young age, in 1947 or '48. She was 46 years old when she passed away. Basically, my life exemplifies my mother's teachings.

**Q: Can you describe her?**

A: She had hazel eyes and semi-blonde hair. A very light complexion. She was Kharpertz. She married at a very young age, when she was 13 or 14 years old. Every couple of years, a baby was born. She didn't have the opportunity to go to a college or university. But she had a wisdom, a feminine wisdom, a motherly wisdom. She knew when to stop, she knew when to put the pressure on. My mother was calm, cool and very affectionate.

For instance, I was a very, very hard individual and still am. Everybody looks at me and . . . I am intimidating. My mother always tried to totally understand me. As bad — as *char* — as I was as a youngster, she always understood. I used to pick fights, I always wanted my way. Anytime a person stood in my way, I would rebel against them. When I came home from giving someone a bloody nose, she would say, "Lovely. You did well. I'd rather see you give somebody a bloody nose than get one. I'd rather his family comes and complains to me than I go to them to say, 'Well, you beat my son.' She was a tough lady. She pulled our whole family together all the time.

In fact, I'll never forgive myself because I was the one who drove her to the hospital for her operation and she never made it. She never came out of it. And I feel partially guilty, even though she was sick. I was a very young fellow at the time, about sixteen.

**Q: What kind of business was your family in?**

A: My father was a dynamic individual. He was without any education, but highly motivated. I was too

young a boy to remember, but my father took a large risk. Just imagine an immigrant boy who had crossed the desert. . . I made sure his memoirs were printed. I'll give you a copy. . . He reached Kirkuk and established himself, got involved in the Iraqi Petroleum Company at a very young age. Before you know it, he was one of the larger construction contractors in Baghdad.

I'll never forget as a youngster seeing four or five hundred laborers lined up in the streets. In those days they used picks and shovels. My father would employ them, and he used to bring home money in sacks to give cash to these native people.

He also gave to others. He was the first one of the immigrants to build an Armenian school in Kirkuk. He was very much involved in the church, too. My father had a large influence on us that way.

**Q: Why did you leave all that?**

A: He did not think that a Christian or Armenian individual could succeed further in an Islamic country. He thought the opportunities would be greater in a Christian, democratic country like the United States than anywhere else. One of my older brothers came to the U.S. and went to the University of Pennsylvania. Then I came. After that, the others started coming.

Another reason is that after 9th grade, my brothers and I went to a Jesuit high school known as Baghdad College. We came to know some of the Jesuits and a lot about America. We were getting to know about the freedom, democracy, opportunities, and we had learned to speak some English.

**Q: When I mentioned this interview to some people, they all wanted to know where your inspiration to achieve so much comes from?**

A: I don't know — I just wanted it so bad. I wanted it so *bad*. To me, even brushing my teeth meant a waste of time. I just wanted to go to work. I wanted to accomplish something. Even sleeping, I don't even remember when, unless I was totally knocked out — never from work but maybe from a drink — I never slept more than five hours. As a rule, I go to bed around 11 o'clock. Three-thirty or four o'clock I'm up. I just read the periodicals and Armenian papers. Everything that interests me I read.

My motivation was from within. Some of it was from my hard-working father, but most of it was within. I could see *it* out there, and I wanted to reach out and grab everything that I possibly could. Even up to now, everyday that I don't go to work I feel very, very guilty though I have enough personnel to handle all my operations.

I remember in Iraq, during the summer vacations, I used to go with my father to build residences for the workers and the pipelines. As I started growing up, I was out there in the trenches, in the ditches. I always wanted to make sure that everything fit perfectly together.

I checked the time. Every minute of the day was valuable. I couldn't see wasting it. I was not a good student, either, because I couldn't wait to run out of school and get into the world of business.

When I used to see people playing *tavloo* and card games, I wanted so much to do the same things, but I just never had the time. I don't know whether I would have been successful in business if I had spent every evening or several times a week doing that. Business really takes your full concentration, I mean critical concentration, to be successful. To start from almost ground zero and to run a business like mine takes a lot of time. It wasn't left to me from my father. I had to do it all alone.

Now, since I had a problem with my heart, one of my pastimes to get away from the whole world is a friendly game of *tavloo*. But I still hate to lose. The reason I don't play *tavloo* with my brothers is that if they beat me I get very upset, and I just can't stand to lose.

**Q: And when you came here?**

A: The nice thing about when I first came to this country was the fact that I knew I was a free man. I had taken a slow Greek freighter boat from Beirut — I don't know how many days it took me to reach here — and as soon as I landed, I realized I could do anything that I wanted provided that it was within the law. I felt free. I think coming to the United States was one of the greatest things that ever happened to me.

The other beautiful aspect of it was that, from my father's side, we had some relatives in Philadelphia. They took me in. Their mother was a second cousin to me. My brother married one of their daughters. I never really felt that I was a stranger in this land. Suddenly, my cousins were like brothers to me. From day one, I never felt alone.

First thing, I went to St. Joseph's School as an accounting major. I detested it. I thought I needed something more challenging, so I went to engineering school at Villanova. Immediately after, I went to work with a consulting firm on Connecticut Turnpike as an assistant project engineer. After working there a couple of years, I decided it wasn't in me to work for somebody else. I felt it was wasting my time and energy.

I have this philosophy: I am an optimist. A person should never believe that anybody is bigger than he is. He should never belittle himself. He can be anything and surpass the best — if he wants it bad enough. I wanted it that bad.

Then — well, every Memorial Day I recall the beginning of my success story. On Memorial Day, 1958, my cousins in Toms River, New Jersey had called us up for a picnic. They had a very lovely home, spacious backyard. All the relatives were there. Alex, who was the builder, said, "Hirair, now that you're a graduate civil

engineer, I would like to show you how to build houses."

So he took me to some of the houses he was building. I didn't know how to build an American home as I had never been involved in it, but I said, "Alex, you know something? I think I could build thousands of these a year."

He came out with a word I can't really mention. He said, "You know, you're really boasting."

It was a matter of a challenge at that point. And the challenge I faced that day brought me where I am. I said, "I'll tell you what I will do, Alex. I don't have that much money, but if you find me a piece of property in Toms River, I'll be willing to move to Toms River and start building houses."

The day after I returned home to Fairfield, Connecticut, my phone rang. Alex said, "I found 23 acres." He went into the acreage and so on.

I just couldn't wait until the following week. I hopped in my car. That car! I always saved any money because I wanted to go into my own business. I used to go to the junkyard and pick up different colored fenders just so I wouldn't spend the money on new parts. I wouldn't even buy a clotheswasher and dryer. I went to the laundromat. Not that I was cheap, but I wanted to save money for my own capitalization.

When I drove up and saw the property, I said, "Alex, I'd like to buy it. What do I do now?"

He said, "We have to put a deposit down."

That's how green I was in business. We put the deposit down. I said, "What's the next thing I'm supposed to do?" He said, "You have to get yourself a lawyer." I said, "Let me use your lawyer!"

So he took me to his lawyer who happened to be a judge and the chairman of the planning board at that time. He asked for a retainer of \$500. My head nearly blew wide open. I only had about \$3,500 in my bank account. I gave him the money. I said to Alex, "What do I do now?"

He said, "You have to get yourself an engineer."

I said, "I'm an engineer!"

"But you're not registered professionally in the state of New Jersey!"

"So, let's go to your engineer."

We went, and that engineer wanted \$500 as a retainer. By this time, I thought, "Hirair, maybe you're getting yourself into trouble."

But I gave him the \$500 deposit. After that, a couple of months subsequent to Memorial Day, I closed the deal. I paid part of the money and the rest of it was a mortgage.

I think the most exciting part then was that I could not wait for weekends to come to Toms River. My adrenalin rose so high. I felt that for the first time, I owned a piece of real estate in the United States.

I had an old jeep, and I had a chainsaw. I used to go



and cut the trees, burn the trees, open the roads up and everything else. It was great.

I realized the trips back and forth had to stop, so I

quit my firm in November. I moved to Toms River into a very small flat with my wife and first baby, Sirán.

I had two or three jobs. I had a regular-paying, full-

time job, and at the same time, I would work at A & P and then on my own project. I was short of cash and had to put the whole thing together myself. Finally, I finished the building plans and started the models.

At that point, my three brothers joined me. The four of us began working together. Between then and 1963, we were fairly successful. Then, we came to a mutual decision it would be healthier for us to work in a separate direction. The final break came in 1969.

From that point on it's history.

**Q: You keep saying that you wanted to achieve, you wanted to achieve. Did you have clear ideas exactly what you wanted before all that happened so suddenly?**

A: Yes, I remember a clear day back in 1961. My wife Anna has a cousin in Toronto. He, Terry Wilson, was at one time to become the chairman of the board of Union Carbide. We were having a discussion and he said, "Hirair, what is really your goal? What do you want to be?"

I said, "I want to be bigger than Levitt — ten times over." Levitt was one of the largest developers after W.W.II. He built thousands of homes for all the G.I.s returning. I said, "I'm going to be Levittown ten times over!" That was my ambition, even being into the business about a year or two years or three. I really had the dream of being one of the largest builders.

**Q: Why a builder?**

A: Not only a builder — a success. I felt that there was a great opportunity for any young man in real estate, provided he had the drive and the dream and the ambition and was not afraid of work. Today it's a bit more difficult, but I think it's still a very lucrative business. By now, of course, I have diversified a lot.

**Q: When you earn this lucre, I notice, you're very free in giving some back. You gave a million to the Armenian Assembly, for example.**

A: I give a lot. The lavishness has to stop somewhere. A person has to care, to give, to share.

At this point, I presume it's over five or six million dollars in all that I've given. Not only to the Armenian community, but to this country which has given me the wealth and graciousness. I like to give some back to the land. I revere this country. I have a great love and respect for it, and so do my children.

There's so much you can spend and so much you can give to your children. I feel what I should leave for my children is a comfortable margin, without making them lazy. I'd like to see that they have within themselves that drive, that creativeness like I did, maybe more so. I just don't want to sit calmly and kill that spirit by leaving my children everything. I don't want them to depend on me. I want every one of them to be like their Dad — not only creative in making money, but in community work, charity work, or scholarly work. . . whatever it

may be. I'm not going to spoil them and have them say, "Hey, I have all this money. I don't have to rise up in the morning."

**Q: One of your daughters, Edele, has an M.B.A. Is she taking after you and your work?**

A: Yes. Edele happens to be very like me. She's dynamic and brilliant. Immediately she came after graduation from the University of Pennsylvania to me. She had majored in two subjects: finance and civil engineering. I said if she cared to work for me, she could. She worked for six or seven months.

Unbeknown to me, she had applied to go to Armenia. Previous to that, her sisters had travelled to Armenia two or three times as they were growing up. We used to let them alone to explore, and they would also rent a car and go throughout Europe. My children developed a very close relationship to the land of *Haiastan*.

Edele was very frustrated because her sisters spoke fluent Armenian, but she had never picked it up even though every morning when I used to get up, I would play Armenian music for them to listen to as they brushed their teeth and combed their hair to get ready for school. Every time they heard this music, they started tapping their feet. They had heard it throughout their whole childhood days.

So, my daughter came to my office one day and said, "Dad, sorry but I have to quit."

She had applied for a scholarship to Yerevan University, and she had just been accepted. I understand only a handful of American-Armenians are accepted, and she was one of them.

I said, "If that's what you want, that's fine."

Within three or four weeks, she was on a plane to Yerevan. She stayed there eleven months and learned the Armenian language perfectly. Edele speaks the Eastern dialect, and we speak the Western dialect, so now we enjoy both.

We went down to see her in *Haiastan*. It was quite emotional for me to see my children have such a close affection for Armenia. They always loved visiting Armenia.

**Q: You've been to Armenia separately?**

A: We've been there twice, and we have been the guests of His Holiness Vazken Catholicos. We have relatives there, if you want to call them that, for I think all Armenians are my relatives. All you have to do is give them a couple of vodkas or a couple of scotches, and we all speak the same language. My wife and I would stop at a house for dinner. The next thing, some neighbor would drop by, bringing a violin. Someone else would join us with a *doodook*, then someone with a clarinet. We would have a big barbecue. . . . That happened wherever we visited.

Another wonderful thing is that wherever you go, the people don't speak Russian, they speak Armenian. All

their songs are in Armenian. We understand every word that they say. We *feel* every word that they say.

I love their culture. . . I don't know. . . I was in a dream about Armenia, and I was never disappointed. The villages were exactly as I pictured them as a child. As I had been growing up in Armenian school, the teachers used to describe the picturesque mountains and the hills and the green trees and flowers—that's exactly what it was.

The first time I stepped off that plane, I put my foot on the ground and I started crying. I just. . . [He cries] . . . That was a very, very emotional moment.

**Q: When you referred to the culture, did you mean anything specifically?**

A: The arts, the science, the education. . . the scholarly individuals. They were all very invigorating. I met the entire cultural group: the professors, the Cabinet ministers, and so on. In fact, we invited them all over. They came to the United States and I think had a good time, despite our superficial differences.

Even though I was born in the Antelias segment of the community, and we used to go to Beirut almost every year before the civil war, the so-called 'separation' between our communities to me is a shame. I'm very hopeful that the day is going to come that, forgetting the different political mentalities that everybody is entitled to, we as a *spirit* are going to join together. I hope I'll be very much part of that.

A second reason I had gone to Armenia was that I was close to His Holiness Karekin, from Antelias. He was like a brother to me. When he was in the United States for six years, he was at my home almost every weekend. We spent many hours together.

When he became *Vehapar*, I wanted very much for him to meet His Holiness Vazken. So I went to Etchmiadzin to talk to H.H. Vazken so we could create the environment and atmosphere for two of the Holinesses to meet. That happened in Paris last year.

I'm very optimistic that something is going to come through from that meeting. I want to stop this madness of my church, your church! We really only have one religion underneath the guise of two churches. I really don't mind having two churches, but we have to accept the fact of a Mother See, and Etchmiadzin is the one in *Haiastan*. However, others such as the Giligia See go back centuries, and we shouldn't abandon them. They ought to stay there, but we need one head, like in business there is a chairman who has his vice-chairman that he respects. Somebody somewhere somehow ought to be able to stop this separation. That's my goal. I would like to work with the Church to see that come to fruition. I'd like to unify my people.

**Q: So what do you see as the future course for Armenians?**

A: Examining the different regions of the world, I

think the Armenians in the Middle East have a better chance to preserve their culture and survive, especially in Iraq and Syria. Lebanon, of course, is shattered right now. We also have a vibrant community in Iran, Teheran, and Tabriz. We have many churches and schools. Times and politics change there, but I don't think the Middle East represents a threat toward assimilation.

But if you take countries in Europe, like Greece and Belgium, where we have a sparsity of Armenians, I'm afraid to say that the assimilation has already taken root.

We have nobody else to blame but our parties for not doing *enough*. Throughout all these years, they had the power in their hands and didn't allow other people to be involved in it.

I blame others just as well. The reasons are known to everybody. Our leadership didn't have the dynamism to keep the Armenian spirit more alive against that strong current which is always pushing us toward assimilation.

**Q: And here?**

A: In the United States, I think we do have a chance, but we need institutions, large and non-partisan, that will bring under an umbrella all the scattered groups, whether political or religious, regardless of their affiliation with one side or the other.

We ought to bring new leadership. We can't afford to lose people. I tell others, "I'm Armenian. Don't worry about my leaving. You already have me in your pocket. Worry about the other guy. You might lose him."

We have to concern ourselves with our youth. We need to encourage individuals with dynamics so they can go throughout the community and create that vibrance. Most people anywhere, believe it or not, are followers. If you have a good, dynamic leader, you can attract enough. We will have a certain amount of pilferage as time goes on, and who can predict fifty years down the road, but I am optimistic that if we have organizations like the Armenian Assembly nationally and regionally, and hopefully one day internationally, we should at least be able to save some from the White Genocide.

The Armenian Assembly is very limited now, but it just takes one, two, or three individuals to do what I'm about to say. I'm speaking as an individual, not as a Chairman of the Board. During the past eight or nine years, we have brought in approximately 150 to 200 interns, all university students, to Washington to be involved in the democratic process of this country. We're growing, and we have growing pains, but it's working. The interns learn American politics and get to know a lot of our senators. They know how the state agencies and media work, and they are invited to a lot of special functions, Armenian and otherwise.

One long weekend, about forty-five of them came together. They were all anxious to know about their heritage and their ancestry and what they could do to

be helpful. The letters they wrote to me were surprising in their eagerness. I can not admire them enough. I want to see in the years to come that these young adults will be the future leaders of the American-Armenian community.

That's what we must work toward until history presents us with an opportunity. When such a time comes, 1918 will not repeat itself. When the Republic was formed, we didn't have the cohesiveness and power, enough people in the proper places. Even during the President Wilson era, when Wilson was drawing the new boundaries of Armenia, we didn't have enough political clout, enough representatives, enough *power* in important areas. That situation should not occur again. We need to collect all the vital documentation on our history because history to me is just like a wheel, it's turning all the time. I think the Armenian people have come of age. That in a very short time, we're going to cooperate and work together. I'm an all-the-time optimist, there's not one ounce of pessimism in my system. So, I feel, and I hope, that this time we will be ready. One day we will have a motherland, and justice will be served — not through a third or fourth party, but through the efforts of Armenians themselves. We can seek the help of the civilized world, and they'll give us some crumbs, but I'm not satisfied with crumbs anymore. . . I want the *whole pie*.

**Q: You refer to Armenian history a lot. Who was your favorite figure?**

A: King Dikran was the greatest.

**Q: He was a builder, too. He built Dikranagerd. How did you go about building the Armenian Assembly initially?**

A: I can't take credit for founding it on my own. Before the Assembly, if you asked me was I involved in the Armenian community, I would have given you an emphatic, "No!" Because the kind of work I could have done, there were a lot of people who could do the same work. I believed that before I got involved, I had to be successful — moneyed, known, and respected — in my own life. I knew that to get the programs I wanted going, I needed capital.

After I became so-called successful, I started to know people, and saw how the machinery really works, how the jigsaw puzzle fits together. I said, "There is a simple solution for us to get involved and receive recognition. We ought to start an entity with a group of scholars, business people, clergy, Armenian politicians." I got together with Hagopian, an industrialist from New York, and a priest, and I indicated to them that the time had come. During the course of this discussion, John Ohanessian really germinated the specific idea, along with Haikaz Gregorian. They were both attending Georgetown University at the time. Simultaneously they were talking about the same possibility, and Haikaz

Gregorian had heard about my interest in such an entity.

He called me up and said, "Hirair, we are trying to form an Armenian Assembly in the same vein that you are talking about. Would you be interested in attending and contributing?"

Approximately 150 concerned Armenians were invited to attend a meeting, and a mandate was given to a small group to start the formation of the assembly to write up a constitution and by-laws. They drew up sort of a laundry list of all the magnificent things this assembly was supposed to do, as if it were a multi-million dollar endowment! Anyway, the entity was born. I worked along with Stephen Mugar, known as the godfather of the Armenian Assembly. I wanted it to be a big, big assembly. I didn't want to start from zero ground, but to launch it at least a quarter or half of the way.

We formulated a new policy of paying the people who worked for the Assembly according to the scale of pay in Washington or New York. We were able to attract professional individuals who were concerned and ingenious from day one. If you look at our Board, we have something like nine Ph.D.s out of twenty-four members.

**Q: As you were talking, you referred to your "so-called" success story? What do you mean by "so-called?"**

A: How do you measure success? I was very successful in marrying the most beautiful woman in the whole world, Anna Hamparian Hovnanian. That's a success story in itself — my wife. A success story is also to have lovely children. They are my pride and joy.

After I was very comfortable with my wife, very comfortable with my children, and my business was going very well, then I thought I had the bases all covered — that's where my success began. The material success came so that I could help my community.

**Q: A little more about your wife.**

A: Fifty percent I owe to my wife. She's a very strong individual and has a great input into a lot of my thoughts, whether she's agrees or she doesn't agree. If I were to have two backbones, she would be the other one.

We hit it off very well when we met in Asbury Park one day. A lot of Armenians used to go there. That was 1954, and I was in school. We married in 1956, during my last term. She is very tolerant and sophisticated, like my mother. She interprets the words people say carefully, what they really mean or don't mean, and she reads well people that we know or I work with. And [pointing to some sketches on the wall] she went to the New York Art Institute briefly, and she is a good artist.

She is also an excellent mother. She's in contact with the children all hours of the day. Children have to know that you love them and you care for them. You have to be interested in them, listen to them and hug and kiss them. You can't just bring children into the world and ignore them. We made sure to give them a very warm



Armenian home and an American home at the same time. We gave them the proper education, and have taken care of their future monetarily-wise.

I always listened to my children. Sometimes my wife would have to explain to them, "You have to forgive your dad because he hasn't slept more than five hours. He's been working for nineteen. So, if he's falls asleep when you're talking to him, you have to forgive him for that."

Whenever I had a chance, I talked to them. And my wife transferred my thoughts and ideas to them, to make sure they knew how I felt about them. And they knew it. If a person really likes himself and is a selfish individual, I think the children can read right through that. We have come to trust our children and can now leave them to live their lives freely. I think they have their own wings right now, and they can fly as high as they want. I'll never stop them.

Look [pointing to a 550-pound, 147-inch Blue Marlin mounted on the wall]. My son really made me pick up an interest in fishing. He was twelve or thirteen years old when we first moved here. He had me rent a little boat. Then we rented a little larger boat, then larger and larger, until we became good friends and went fishing almost every day.

All my children are involved in the Armenian community, too. They can carry on a discussion about the issues spontaneously. I like them to challenge me in any discussion. Not that I like to win, but I would rather my children convince me now because I'll be prouder. They are no longer rough diamonds, but polished diamonds.

I won't just say that about my children. Every single young Armenian child I have met is impressive. It's not really fair to speak about the children who have not had the opportunities to go to college and such. But they all have it.

**Q: I notice you give much to the boy scouts. With four daughters, how about the girl scouts?**

A: I give to them, too, though not quite as much. But I just founded the Hovnanian Exploratory Foundation with a quarter of a million dollars for youth. I'm not just Armenian oriented, but American, and I believe that unless we take care of the American kids today, I don't know if the Armenian-Americans will exist twenty-five years down the road. I believe in taking care of the youth. That's where my drive and contribution has been. My ethnicity has brought me closer to the Armenian segment, but I have also been involved with the boy scouts, girl scouts, or even Columbia and Harvard University. I hope I have done my share.

**Q: In addition to being youth-oriented, I saw in your vitae that you were one of the pioneers of adult community housing? Where did that concept come from?**

A: As I drive in my car, nothing escapes my eye. I

was in California and I saw this retirement community, a different kind from the one I created, but it looked promising. My concept really came from my father.

He had a home in Toms River. After I had come from Baghdad, my father had joined me. That California community concept featured high rises, either multiple horizontal or vertical attached units, rather than single-family homes. My father, though, had always wanted to know where his property was — from this corner to that corner to that corner. He wanted to know what really belonged to him. He didn't want to know that this wall, half of it belongs to me, half of it belongs to the other fellow, and the yard belongs to an association.

So, my father made me realize that as a person grows older, he likes to know what really he can call his own. That gave me the idea I should come up with an adult community with single-family homes where the house belonged to the individual buyer, and the property surrounding it, whether it was 20 feet or 50 feet, belonged to him, too.

With a very meagre start, I built a 1500-home community with clubhouses, busses, shopping, and so forth. From day one, that concept was so successful that I just couldn't possibly build fast enough. It was just one success story after another. After that, I began branching out into many other concepts of communities, commercial offices, prefabrication, and on.

**Q: What are your plans for the future? Do you want to pioneer any other concepts? Or do you want to keep with what you're doing?**

A: I'm hoping that some of my children, one or two or three, might be interested in continuing. That remains to be seen. I cannot predict the future, and I won't push them.

What I would like to do, if they're not really interested in it, would be to devote more and more time toward Armenian community and non-Armenian community activities, whether it's universities, colleges, boy scouts, the Assembly or the Church, whatever have you.

I think my next job is to figure how to attract the 36,000 Armenian students in the U.S. to be the next leaders of our community. The Assembly will help by providing contacts to establish them in well-placed positions.

**Q: I was asking also for your business.**

A: At this stage of the game, I don't feel I would like to expand into something different, such as the stock market or imports-exports, unless I know that something well. I don't know too much about them, so I don't want to get involved at my age.

On the other hand, I'd love to build a Disney World. I think this area needs one. More and more people are going towards recreation. I have a great ambition to do that. Something similar to Disney World, not that itself. Maybe Hovnanian World.