Interview with Vartan Gregorian

(12/18/79)

(in Provost Gregorian's office)

Your first question is, how did it happen that you left Iran and traveled to Lebanon at such an early age? What was it in your background that influenced you to become a scholar?

When I was thirteen and a half or fourteen, I met a French diplomat in Tabriz, Iran, who was ill at the time and was staying in the home of a friend of mine, because at that time, Tabriz had only one or two hotels...so-called hotels, I should say...and anybody who was somebody, who knew somebody therefore, stayed at somebody's home. France did not have a consulate in Tabriz, so the gentleman in question, whose name was Edgar Maloyan, was lying ill in the family room of my friend, taught me how to play chess. And in a jest, he told me that you should be in "Petite Paris", Beirut, Lebanon, and not remain in Tabriz. I told him I had no money. He said you did not need money to go to Lebanon. How about for food? He said Lebanon has bananas...and you can eat bananas and live forever.

(WMP: You mean you could get them right off the tree?)

No, you can buy them and so forth, but you did not need much to eat. Well, he said this in jest, but the idea was implanted in me that I should go to Lebanon. I had a step-mother and that was a contributing element for my departure.

So after hard work and securing my own passport, which is another tale, I traveled to Lebanon with $11 and an air ticket which was contributed by friends and relatives, and two letters from Edgar Maloyan; one to Armenian College, which said I was a potential scholar to come there, and second, to the Secret Police chief in Lebanon, with whom he had worked during the war when the French had mandate over Lebanon. Armed with these two letters, I went to Lebanon.

I almost decided to return because I did not know French, and I did not know English...I still don't...and I spoke Turkish and Persian and Armenian, and read a little bit in Arabic, but that was no help to me. The thing prevented me returning was the idea that my step-mother would say, "I told you so!" So that's what took me, and kept me in Lebanon.
I had a very rough first year. I had to learn French because I was going to a French school. And I lost one year as a result. But having arrived in Lebanon, I made a couple of friends there...families...Armenian families...one of those families is now here in the United States...who protected me in Lebanon.

Then after the first year of difficulties in Lebanon, I became assistant director to the boarding school of the Armenian College which allowed me room and board. And that was the beginning therefore, of institutionalization of my stay in Lebanon.

At that time...this relates to your second question, how was it that you became secretary to the president of the Armenian College...at that time the Armenian College had a new president whose eyesight was not good. This new president by the name of Simon Vratzian, was a scholar and the last prime minister of the independent Republic of Armenia in 1920. He was writing his memoirs and he needed somebody to work for him. That's the way I became secretary to the president of Armenian College who was the former prime minister of Armenia. I edited a couple of his books; I conducted all his private correspondence.

(WMP: In which language was this?)

In Armenian...all of it in Armenian.

In the Armenian College...this answers to what was it in your background that influenced you to become a scholar...in the Armenian College, my initial interest was to be a physicist. But that love was killed in Persian elementary and secondary schools, and not much was done to revive that interest in French high school, where memorizing was paramount, and understanding only secondary. A professor of history there by the name of Guzellian, who used to be a professor in Russia...professor of a university, but now he was professor of a junior college or high school...Armenian College......he influenced me to study history. And he was instrumental in a sense...he gave me the impetus to go towards scholarly endeavors.

I had in my background one other thing which influenced me and set me apart, as a matter of fact, from my high school friends...some of whom are famous now in Tabriz and Teheran and so forth, and some of them wonderful people...but it was that I worked as an attendant in the library, Tabriz library. And at a very early age, from ten to fourteen, perhaps I read a couple of hundred books, including Alexander Dumas and Victor Hugo and Greek tragedies, Shakespeare and so forth...all in Armenian or Persian. So that background also, had already predisposed me to go into arts or in history and so forth. Collège Armenian just re-inforced that.
To come to your third question, what induced you to come to the United States, and particularly, to Stanford University? In 1955, as I finished Armenian College, and two years of Oriental Studies, I was studying Portuguese in Beirut in order to become a high school principal in Sao Paulo, Brazil. At the same time I received a fellowship from Armenian College...they had one major fellowship which paid travel expenses, living expenses and tuition. I had a choice to go to London or to United States. Since I did not know English, I thought I could not go to London. And also, I did not know anyone in London. Since I knew two friends of mine in the Bay area, California, near San Francisco, who were going to school there, and since I was interested in World War I, and since Stanford had the Hoover Institution, full of documents on war, peace and revolution, primarily in World War I, my teacher applied for me, because I could not fill out the forms, to two universities. One was Berkeley and one was Stanford. I did not even know where they were located. The letters were added, "P.S. Please send correspondence by air".

Berkeley wrote that they had no funds to correspond with me by air; Stanford accepted me, so I went to Stanford...simply that. Now, of course, knowing how difficult it is, I would not have dared to apply, either to Berkeley or to Stanford.

I went to Stanford to study English literature, but I entered as a sophomore, and switched to history. I did jointly, history and humanities. I finished it in two years...'56 to '58.

'58 to '60, I was a Ph.D. candidate. I finished all my course work in 1960, got married, and then left the United States for England, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, where I worked on the politics of modernization.

That brings me to your fourth question: was it Martin Meyerson who brought you to the University of Pennsylvania? Had you known Sarkes Tarzian before coming here?

I had known of Martin Meyerson when he was acting chancellor in Berkeley. I did not know him; I knew about him because my friends had worked for him. My friends were members of the Berkeley faculty. I came to the University of Pennsylvania in 1971 to interview Robert Lumyanski who was chairman of the English department here, for presidency of the University of Texas at Austin. I was heading a delegation here, and that delegation met with Lumyanski at the Barclay Hotel. Lumyanski is a distinguished Chaucer scholar, highly decorated World War II hero, was a Tulane University provost, was unanimous choice of Tulane's search committee to be president, but he was not appointed to the presidency of Tulane. And I was here to investigate why. The rumor was that because he was Jewish, he was not appointed president of Tulane at the time.
Since I did not know anybody on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania closely, except one, who has died, John Shover of the history department, I visited John Shover, who put me in contact with Al Rieber, chairman of the history department, with whom I had won, in the same year, 1968, the Danforth Teaching Award. But I had never met with him because he was the only one who did not come to receive his award directly. So I discussed here, explored with people in the history department, asked certain questions about Lumanski. This led the history department to introduce me to Meyerson, and to tell me that there was Sarkes Tarzian, one of our trustees, who wanted to do something in history and so forth, Armenian history. My discussion was that they wanted me to convince Sarkes Tarzian to endow this in history rather than any other field.

I met with Mr. Tarzian. I convinced him to establish something, but I did not have the idea that I would be the occupier of the chair...because in '72 I received an offer from the University of Pennsylvania to come to occupy that chair.

So, to answer your question, I did not know Sarkes Tarzian. As to who brought me to the University of Pennsylvania, naturally, Al Rieber of the history department, President Meyerson were very instrumental.

That brings us to the fifth question: would you describe your work at Penn, particularly your re-organization of the structure of various departments and programs to form one cohesive Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

I came to Penn as professor of history...Tarzian Professor of Armenian and Caucasian History. I had been teaching at Penn European intellectual history, history of the Caucasus, and history of Armenia. In 1973, I became faculty assistant to President Meyerson and provost Eliot Stellar. My first position at Penn was as a member of the provost search committee, which introduced me to the University of Pennsylvania faculty both politics and the structure of the University, and an inside understanding of the problems at that time.

In 1973, as I mentioned, I became faculty assistant to President Meyerson and Eliot Stellar, and in 1974, I was chosen by a faculty and student committee, chaired by Bob Schrieffer, our Nobel Laureate, to be an inside candidate for the Arts and Sciences deanship. I became the first dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. This faculty was formed by bringing four component units together; College for Women, College of Arts and Sciences, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, and four social science departments of Wharton. Altogether it brought together five hundred twenty faculty, eight thousand students, twenty-eight departments, thirty-three hundred graduate majors, forty-four graduate majors.
It was very hard to bring this faculty into creation because they had four different traditions. But I'm happy to tell you that because of the behind-the-scenes work and so forth, and faculty co-operation, this is the smoothest possible cohesive unit that has been found anywhere, without a single conflict. So now we have a Faculty of Arts and Sciences which brings 50% of the University together; five hundred from the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and some two hundred fifty from Bio-Medical groups.

This brings us to your sixth question, Walter. Within your various roles at the University, have you had much contact with the officials of the city government? Have the officials sought any help from the University or have members of the faculty or administration been involved in programs for the benefit of the city? What would you say has been the relationship between City Hall and the University during your years at Penn.

To put it mildly, I have had no contacts with the city. President Meyerson has, but I have not had, as dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. My only contact with the city has been through Rafsky, as you well know, Walter, through the Bicentennial effort...which, in my opinion, was not well done... because I found that the whole Bicentennial effort here could have been much more dramatic, much more imaginative, and would have had much more far reaching impact on the city.

I cannot remember a single instance when the city administration or administrators have called upon me to give them advice or assistance or co-operation during five years as the dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

What civic aspects of Philadelphia have you been associated with? (Question seven)

I've been associated with World Affairs Council as program committee member, as board member. I've been associated with the Fellowship Commission. I've been associated with International Visitors, CIV. I have associated with various organizations, including, by the way, many speeches to Colonial Society, to the Numismatics Society, Atheneum Society, Cricket Club, and the Racquet Club, and all of these places where I have given speeches and lectures on behalf of the University and town relationship, and how to utilize the resources of Philadelphia.

That brings me to question number eight. As an historian and scholar of the Middle East, would you be willing to comment on the situation in Iran at the present time?

Yes. Iran, in my opinion, both the American government and
the Iranian government in the past have made many mistakes. Number one, by allowing the shah to ban all the political parties, I think we created a major problem, both for Iran and for the United States, because all opposition went underground, and all the political parties that were founded in Iran were sham, because initially they were supposed to be two parties. Then it collapsed into one-party system, without allowing the fact that Iranian elite, educated in Europe, in United States and so forth, familiar with the laws of constitutionality in France and Germany and England and the United States, would not be willing to accept a one-party dictatorship.

Second mistake, I think, that we have made, is that we did not see Iran's ethnic diversity.

And the third mistake that we made, I think, was to allow religion in Iran to be considered inconsequential. This was especially manifested in the twenty-fifth hundred anniversary of the Iranian monarchy, during which the monarch crowned himself, and by-passed the entire Islamic tradition.

Two years ago when I was giving a lecture on Afghanistan at the National War College, somebody asked me "What is the most unstable region in the Middle East?". I told him, "Iran". They all laughed; they thought it was the most stable region in the Middle East.

(WMP: How did you know otherwise?)

Well, because I was born there; since I left home I had visited there five times; I was reading their literature, attuned to students and other types of people here, and I had colleagues who were commenting. I think the United States cut off itself from all sources of opposition in Iran...Iranian politics...fearful that Iranian monarchy may be angry at the United States. And I think that was a major mistake too.

AS to what will happen currently in Iran, I think in Iran it's not the religion that is dominating now, alone, but along with it, also highly organized left-wing forces in Iran. So therefore, I think religious elements try to use the left-wing politics; left-wing politics is trying to use religion.

Number nine: has the U.S. Department of State called upon you for your special knowledge of problems, or have you offered your services to the government in connection with the present crises?

The answer is no. United States government has not asked me; I think they should have...I could have been much more helpful, especially on Afghanistan. Especially since I was born in Tabriz, I could have given at least impressionistic or inside information. Second, it would be presumptuous to offer my ser-
vices to the United States government... it would be self-serving. I do gather that a distinguished member of the Philadelphia Bar has called State Department, and said that they should be in touch with me.

Number ten: were you at all involved in the co-operative efforts between the erstwhile Pahlavi University and the University of Pennsylvania? Is there any communication remaining between Shiraz University and Penn?

Well, I was not involved in the relation of Pahlavi and the University of Pennsylvania. I did go there, in the last phase of it, renewed the relation for one year in order to collect the dues that they owed to us...which they have not paid... and also, according to our agreement, last year, before all these things happened, our agreement with Pahlavi University ended, because it had come to only an occasional exchange of professors, primarily in medicine.

Number eleven: in 1969 you were one of the outstanding professors to receive the Danforth award. Obviously you are extremely popular with the students as a classroom teacher. Which role do you find most fulfilling... that of professor, dean, or provost?

In the following order, I still teach... so therefore I enjoy the role of professor. I enjoyed the role of dean more than the role of provost, for one simple reason. As dean, I dealt with faculty; as provost I deal with deans and with budget people. I have taught always, in the seven years I have been here. Now I am teaching a course on varieties of anti-Semitism, a freshman seminar here. And I have always corrected my own exams. And I have had more contact with students, both as professor, dean, and provost, than many of my colleagues, as few have anticipated I would have.

So to answer your question, Walter, I'm primarily a teacher, secondarily an administrator, because administrators come and go. What is important is the role of the teacher, which I hope is permanent.

This answers all your questions, Walter.

(HMcM: Do you have anything else that you'd care to add to the record?)

Well, I'm hoping with the Green administration, that we will go back to Dilworth days in one sense... to mobilize the city. Within fifty mile radius we have one hundred twenty institutions of higher learning. We have to mobilize that effort in order to put the city of Philadelphia in the forefront of major cities of the United States. I think that we can do it, and I hope that the Green administration will mobilize the city's artistic, educational, scientific and industrial and
and financial talent.

(WMP: What do you think needs to be done at the state government level, from the standpoint of the city?)

Well, I think that the state government, until now, at least, has been much more worried about balancing regional interests, rather than trying to mobilize the talents of various segments. Mainly, I think state government should do the same kind of dramatic task force for the entire state as I'm talking about for cities. The state has not capitalized also, the great talent that Pennsylvania has.

And it's my hope that the Thornburgh administration, again, instead of being pre-occupied merely with balancing the budget and taxes and so forth, they should have a creative way of analyzing the prospects of the entire Pennsylvania. We have one of the richest states in the union; we have rich talent...from business schools to industrial, commercial, scientific areas...all with talent, but we have not capitalized on it.

I think the amount of expenditures of the state on scientific matters...and educational matters...is one of the lowest in the union. We rank, I think, in terms of support of higher education, forty-sixth or forty-eighth. I'm not sure about the statistics.

(WMP: Well, thank you very much, Greg. It's nice to see you.)