

One Cause: Armenia

**Interviewed by Shant Petrossian
For a college course requirement
“A Person who inspires you”**

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"Living for Armenia is when you have the spirit, the aspiration, the feeling of being Armenian, it is a deep sense of belonging to a locus, to a nation, it is your Armenian identity." For Dr. Rubina Peroomian, it is "natural" for her to commit to one cause, that of Armenia and the Armenian People. To live a life for something or someone else can become an extremely eventful and onerous crusade. Dr. Peroomian has chosen to dedicate her life to one purpose and one struggle. She has the inner-strength required to endure and overcome brutal adversity. And even more so, the determination, devotion, and loyalty to a dream that may never be actualized.

Rubina Peroomian, however, had a double-dose of this spirit which she describes with great passion. Other than her innate quality to stand by her nation and her homeland she had not yet seen, she credits her father for her consistent desire and recognizes her mother for her success. Born in Tabriz, Iran, "My first childhood memory is the abduction of my father by the Soviets in 1944 for his role as leader of the anti-Communist Armenian Revolutionary Federation. The Red Army had seized North Western Iran, and Tabriz was under Soviet control. And the trauma escalated, I was told that my father (Dr. Baghdik Minassian) was sentenced to serve ten years in the treacherous labor camps of infamous Siberia." Her mother began to sell their family possessions, such as a treasured Persian rug, which "I was very sad to see that go." She then resorted to selling her handicraft for income. She recalls her mother telling her and her sister that, "'Since we have suffered and since we are not a complete family, since our father sacrificed his life for his nation, we have to be achievers'...so I worked hard at school, I always tried to be first in my class which was a burden and a challenge."

After Stalin's death, a general amnesty was granted to the Prisoners of war. With a lump in her throat, she remembers the emotions of being reunited with her father. "At the age of sixteen it was a struggle adjusting to a father-figure after so long," she added. Fortunately her mother kept his memory alive during the decade they spent apart. Regardless of their separation, Peroomian maintains that her father is her role model

and his sacrifice for his nation is her life's underlying inspiration. Dr. Minassian had received a Bachelors in Education and a Ph.D. in Biology and Chemistry from the European center of higher education of the time, Prague University. This too was to have a significant influence on the life of Rubina Peroomian. During her adolescence, she excelled in mathematics, yet her true love, or as she puts it, her "hobby" was Armenian Literature. She had no formal-education in this area, but she considers it as a form of "self-training." Reading one book after another in Armenian literature intensified her appetite for the literary arts and expanded her knowledge.

Throughout her life, Peroomian was often *first* and *only*. At the University of Tehran she was one of three Armenians and the only female among a class of 110 within the civil engineering department. Rubina was the first female to receive a degree as a civil engineer. She exclaims, "I was very proud of that." During her university years, she immediately became active in both Armenian athletic and cultural clubs. Having been born and raised outside of her homeland, Armenia, in no way inhibited her personal growth as an Armenian. "Armenian is my first language," and her family continued to practice the traditions of a historic people. Once again, in 1957 she was the only female to be elected to an executive committee of a literary group of Armenian youth. There she met her life-long love, her husband, Neshan Peroomian.

In June of 1963 she made her way towards the United States for the first time to meet up with Neshan who was completing his studies in civil engineering at UC Berkeley. With a charming smile she says, "I was immediately drawn to that warm and cozy Armenian community." Remaining consistent, she and her husband were active in the Armenian Revolutionary Federation and the Armenian Youth Federation. Returning to Iran for 13 years, she begins to work and continues her ties to Armenian community. 1970 became the year that ignited the ever-lasting fire within Rubina Peroomian. This flame constantly burns for education. She served as the only female

on the Central Educational Council and took over as director of extra-curricular activities and programs within the Armenian schools in Iran.

In 1978, the Peroomians returned to the United States to a permanent life in California. Within a year, she began to satisfy a life-long aspiration of higher education in Armenian Studies with her acceptance into the University of California, Los Angeles. She had no previous education in the humanities, yet she would not allow any obstacles to hinder the fulfillment of her dream. Upon completing a variety of courses in Language, Literature and History, she received her Masters in Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures. She emphasizes the importance of broader knowledge, "If you want to become a true connoisseur in literature you must learn the history; you must know about the political, social, and economic changes to understand the environment in which the literary piece was created." And by 1989 she was the first and once again, only Ph.D. in Armenian Studies at UCLA. Her dissertation was on the comparison of the Armenian Genocide and the Jewish Holocaust literatures. She chose an alternate path, by not documenting nor describing the genocide of 1.5 million Armenians in 1915. Dr. Peroomian explained the commonalties and differences of the two major 20th century massacres from the perspective of ordinary people who withstood the trauma and their responses to a catastrophe of this magnitude. Peroomian also discussed the key ingredients for survival within the contrasting traditions and religions.

After returning to the US she visited her homeland, Armenia, for the first time in 1981. Her first impression: "I was going to a country that was mine. I was going for the land. I felt a sense of enthusiasm to see MY ARMENIA. Yet with the presence of Communism and the Soviet regime whose pressure I felt in every step I took on the soil of my ancestors, my emotions were of frustration, joy, sadness, and tears." She returned to Armenia after the 1988 earthquake and continued to travel back for another nine times.

"In order to serve my nation, I have to achieve, I have to go as far as I can in my education, because as a non-professional, there is a limit for what you can do." If barriers did exist, Dr. Peroomian broke through each and every one to make sure that she too could contribute a part of herself to the cause that took her father away from her for a decade. She has always been considered as a "child of the Party (ARF)" and with this role, she continues to educate the world about the Armenian strife. The writer in her speaks, "It is my way of struggle for my nation, in academia, by way of writing, teaching, lecturing. These are my weapons and I am a soldier fighting for a cause."

Like her parents, she began at home. She raised two children in Southern California where they spoke Armenian at home and attended Armenian school. As if that was not enough, they were members of the Armenian Youth Federation and Homenetmen, a scouting chapter, where they learned both athletic and leadership skills, as well as about their heritage. Later, they continued with their contributions as leaders of these youth organizations. Following their parents' example, the Peroomian boys have also visited their homeland on many occasions. Both entered UCLA from high school and continued to study there in Physics and Aerospace Engineering. Dr. Peroomian continuously encouraged her boys to assimilate, but assures herself that she raised two proud Armenians, "I am sure that they can express themselves better in English, but it is that your first language is the language in which you quarrel with and make love, and I am sure that they are doing their quarreling and love-making in Armenian." At the risk of sounding cliché, "The apple does not fall far from the tree." Dr. Rubina Peroomian did not and neither did her two sons, Dr. Vahe Peroomian and Dr. Oshin Peroomian. What a family!

Outside of the home, and into the community, Dr. Peroomian taught in an Armenian Private High School. She educated the youth about recent Armenian history, current events and the CAUSE which she hopes the next generation will continue to fight for. She served as the president of the AYF Executive Council, where she headed

the educational department. She was also the first female elected to the Prelacy Executive Council, the highest body governing the Armenian community via the church. As for the non-Armenian community, Peroomian Taught Armenian literature at UCLA, The University of Laverne and Glendale Community College. She also "joined the crusade for the inclusion of the study of human right violations and especially the Armenian Genocide in the public school social science and history curricula."

Peroomian says "That the Armenian in a Diaspora situation who can live a double-identity and reconcile their Armenian culture and heritage with the culture of the mainstream is a true achiever and a great example." Withstanding such a busy schedule of wife, mother, teacher, student, and author, she has participated in over 70 lectures, presentations, and speaking engagements world-wide. She has been appointed to 8 professional boards and committees. She has over sixty research articles in literary journals, newspapers and periodicals on the history and criticism of Armenian literature or the Armenian Question and has been interviewed by both national and international papers, ranging from Los Angeles to Boston and from Buenos Aires to Athens.

Dr. Peroomian is definitely a woman on a mission.

She teaches the Armenian community of the national struggle, in the Diaspora and she educates the intellectual community especially non-Armenians about the truth of the 1915 Genocide. Her literary books emphasize the importance of recognition by the international community of the inhumane massacre of 1.5 million Armenians by the Ottoman Turks. She could not forget nor accept the suffering of her nation especially with the continual Turkish denial of the crime. "It has been my mission to let the world know about a crime, an injustice that has been committed not only against my people, but against the entire human race, because it has not been redressed. And I fulfill my mission any way I can."

Perfectionist? Maybe. She is her own critic, "I am extremely tough and demanding when it comes to my own work. I always feel that it could be better, so I aim for the better." She does not produce her literary work in an expectation of becoming a national best selling author. However, she continues to accomplish and achieve. Aside from her two children, when asked what is her greatest achievement, she paused and answered pensively: "it is yet to come."

Dr. Peroomian has written, spoken, and presented the true story of the Armenian struggle and with much pride, I tell her story. Her honor and pride is an inspiration to the next generation, "I can enumerate people, events, cultural achievement that make me proud to be an Armenian." She has acquired a lot from her ethnic heritage, and she owes it to her people to give something back. She not only teaches, but lives by the three R's: "*Recognition* of the Armenian Genocide, *Retribution* of the losses, and most important, *Restoration* and unification of the lands of historic Armenia." As a mother, as a true erudite, as a fighter and most importantly, as a daughter of the Armenian people Rubina Peroomian, has managed to keep both eyes on the target every step of the way. "These are the goals of my life and there is no compromise!" and there is no stopping Dr. Peroomian until--mission accomplished.

SIDE-BAR:

Before concluding the interview, we played a word association game, where I threw out the word to the left and she told me her immediate thought.

ARARAT -- "A DREAM"

(a mountain that is held sacred by Armenians and is currently on Turkish soil)

CHRISTIANITY -- "A TOOL OF SURVIVAL"

ARMENIA -- "A GOAL"