

Paris, May 23, 1981

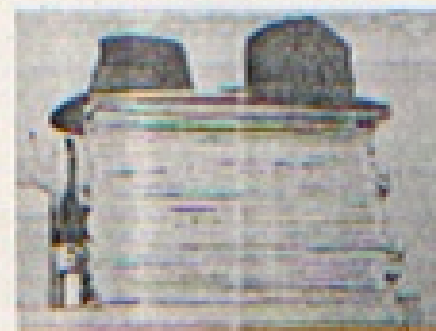
A Letter To Saroyan

1960 from a maker friend after you decided to write in Paris. Like your brother Henry in the "Broken Wheel," your earliest published story I seem to recall, justifying his first extravagance — an enormous cake — by saying he thought it looked just right, you, seeing all that sky and light on the top floor, said to the bewildered agent, "I'll take it" over his protesting. "But Mr. Saroyan, I have many other apartments to show you."

Here it is nearly 21 years later to the day. Aram didn't tell me that, you did, indirectly. For among the letters, manuscripts and clippings in the locked file cabinet that, with your paintings and some books, you wanted me to ship to Fresno (I am for what will be the William Saroyan Archive, part of an Armenian National Museum, I found an old book: "The Cornucopia Chronicles" by Kathleen Knox, New York, 1935.

Inside the front cover was the short inscription that explained why, unlike the thousands of other books piled everywhere in these four rooms, it was under lock and key: "My first day here was May 23, 1960. William Saroyan." It occurred to me that 21 years at this address is the longest you have been in any of the places you've "done time," as you once put it, even longer than your early interrupted years in Fresno or the later ones there or in San Francisco and New York. During those past decades I guess Paris was more your home than anywhere in the world, though you will always be associated with Fresno, or rather Fresno with you.

Your friends Kevorkian and Atamian have met, and in true Armenian fashion found out quickly that they are nearly related. Once in 1963 or 1964, Aram remembers going with you to what he thinks must have been Atamian's tailor shop, not the new one on the Rue La Fayette but the original one around the corner from Fairboat on Chateaudun, to get a suit made. He repeated in French what you had already told Krikor, in the Paris dialect of Armenian you were famous for, not to make the jacket too short. Of course, each time you emphasized that point, you were assured that it would not be too short.



The hats and stacked newspapers.

When you finally got the suit, the jacket was probably too short and you were in a state. After learning that you could never wear it, Aram apparently said to simply return it and be refunded, but you replied, "I can't do that to Krikor. Don't worry, I'll write a story and get more than my money back." And curiously enough, Bill, almost directly underneath Ms. Knox's book of 1935 was a carbon copy of "One of the 804 Armenian Tailors of Paris," which you wrote a decade later.

The most important news of this letter is that yesterday, Krikor, Aram and Angèle and I were together with hundreds of your other Paris friends at the Armenian church on Rue Jean Goyon for a requiem service in your memory performed by none other than His Holiness the Catholicos of all Armenians, Vazken I, here on a pastoral visit from Holy Eucharistia.

Though I know you wanted no religious service in Fresno, Paris is not Fresno and I recall how warmly you used to speak about your meetings with Vazken in Armenia. On this first Sunday after your material departure from earth, he wanted personally to enlighten you in your adopted hometown.

There was already to be a service in honor of those who died at Sardarabad in May, 1918, during the heroic struggle that stopped the Turkish Army from taking the Ararat valley and completing the genocide started in 1915, as you remembered hearing about at age 10 back in Fresno. Everyone seemed moved when the Catholicos turned from Sardarabad to Saroyan, beginning with the metaphor used in the obituary in Le Monde, signed by your old friend John Hess (he also did the one in the Trib, if you were wondering), comparing you to a prayer, "exploding," said His Holiness, "all the time with stories, and everywhere he went, bursting with laughter."

He also called you the prodigy of the nation, the vehicle through which three millennia of the Armenian experience was perhaps most perfectly expressed, you, the emphasized writer of an explained nation. The Catholicos concluded, "William Saroyan's writing, his humanism, speaks not just about or to the Armenian but to all people about all people."

Oh, I almost forget, your mint is coming up once again all over the balcony, a bit late because it has been so cold, but robust and dark green. I still don't understand why you planted it in plain, gravelly sand, but the crazy Saroyan must love it. The water level in the two plastic buckets you left out last September to measure the accumulated rainfall during your annual winter migration is exactly 16.1 centimeters in the yellow one and 16.1 in the blue. I know you will appreciate that detail.

Your friend, Dickran Koussjian

1981, Dickran Koussjian

Dickran Koussjian, a close friend of William Saroyan in the writer's last years, is professor of Armenian studies on leave from California State University at Fresno. He lives in Paris and, as did Saroyan, commutes to Fresno.

Dear Bill,

If commentators might have their "heavenly tide," as you speculated here in Paris in "Days of Life and Death and Escape to the Moon" while describing the death of such a bird you witnessed once on the beach at Malibu, so too there is probably a special "heavenly public library" for writers, especially for book-crazy Armenian-American ones from Fresno, Calif. Surely such a heavenly library renews the Herald Tribune or you would not have considered going there for such a long time as eternity.

I know you will be pleased to read a letter sent from your own 15th-floor walk-up, 74 Rue Fairboat. In the apartment everything is fine — all the hats, the Tribunes neatly stacked though yellowing, your collected stories and pebbles, those under water in jars, those wrapped in napkins in jars, the rest on the mantels and the balcony — everything systematically disorganized as you left it. The hallway is dustier than usual because of a renovation on the second floor, but the climb up the five flights of unvarnished wooden steps distracts the mind differently from floor to floor and at the top it's catching one's breath, as you used to say, that is the immediate preoccupation, not the dust.

May has been rainy and cold, milder than any May I can remember in Paris, heavy rains like those water downpours in Fresno. But on the 18th, the day you left Fresno and the "whole voyal" forever, it was wildly sunny and the flat was particularly luminous.

Your Paris agent, Michelle Lapauze, took care of the bills you were concerned about, and announced that Flammarion expects to release the French translation of the "Adventures of Wesley Jackson" in October. Arpak called from Haratch to say that the "Arts and Letters" supplement for July would be devoted to William Saroyan. (I am not sure if she knows that you immortalized her and the only Armenian daily in Europe in that yet-to-be-performed and unpublished play you wrote in 30 days a couple of years ago in Paris and quite exceptionally let my students at Fresno State read last fall. I am sure she will be pleased when she discovers that the action takes place in her editorial offices on Rue d'Hauteville.)

I finally met your lawyer friend of 20 years, Aram Kevorkian, after his return from seeing you in Fresno in mid-April. His news was good and bad, sad but sometimes laughing news too, the fusion or confusion of a proper Philadelphian's first impression of Fresno and what he discovered would be the last of you. (I understand even better now why you insisted on giving me your own keys to the apartment over my protest that I could use the set that Krikor Atamian had; you knew the actor was more than just an actor.)

Aram said that, at your request, he played Bach, some of your old favorites, while visiting you on West Griffith Way — just as he did on your pianola ("remarkably in tune") when we came up here to No. 74 a fortnight ago. He remembered you had bought that player piano a block down the street; he recalled the purchase of the apartment itself in