



Kay Mouradian

The engaged and engaging world of David Barsamian

by Kay Mouradian

Through his weekly radio program, *Alternative Radio*, an independent weekly series based in Boulder, Colorado, David Barsamian's fiery brand of politics is heard worldwide. He is a radio producer, journalist, author, and lecturer and has been working in radio since 1978. In 1986 his program went national and plays also in Canada and Australia. He is currently on an extended book tour talking about his latest book, *Targeting Iran*, co-authored with Noam Chomsky, Ervand Abrahamian, and Nahid Mozaffari.

I heard his talk at the Luna Playhouse in Glendale a few weeks ago. Having listened to his radio program, *Alternative Radio*, and viewed his website, my perception of him was that of a gentle dissident, but his intense passion for social justice overshadows that gentleness. He is a powerful speaker and captures the attention of an audience, especially those of like mind. He doesn't care whose toes he steps on, and he pulls no punches about our politicians in Washington. His credo is "information is the oxygen of democracy."

Barsamian started his talk with a heated monologue. "A breaking news announcement," he blared out. "The Glendale Liberation Front just arrested George W Bush for crimes against humanity." His absurdity and humor in this three minute political satire was worthy of any *Saturday Night Live* appearance where absurdity invariably contains a nugget of truth.

If there is anyone left of the left,



David Barsamian (r.) with Aramazd Stepanian, co-founder of Luna playhouse. Photo: Levon Parian.

that is David Barsamian; a first-generation Armenian born in New York during the era of the baby boomers. He is driven by a morality of social justice and refuses to quietly let our democratic way of life be tainted by politicians who use corrupt propaganda to promote their addiction to power and line their pockets as well as those of their friends. I wanted to learn more about where and when he began to understand the horrors of injustice and how that affected him. I was also curious if the Armenian Genocide played a role. We met over coffee in Westwood and I asked him about his trip to Turkey.

"Which one?" he replied.

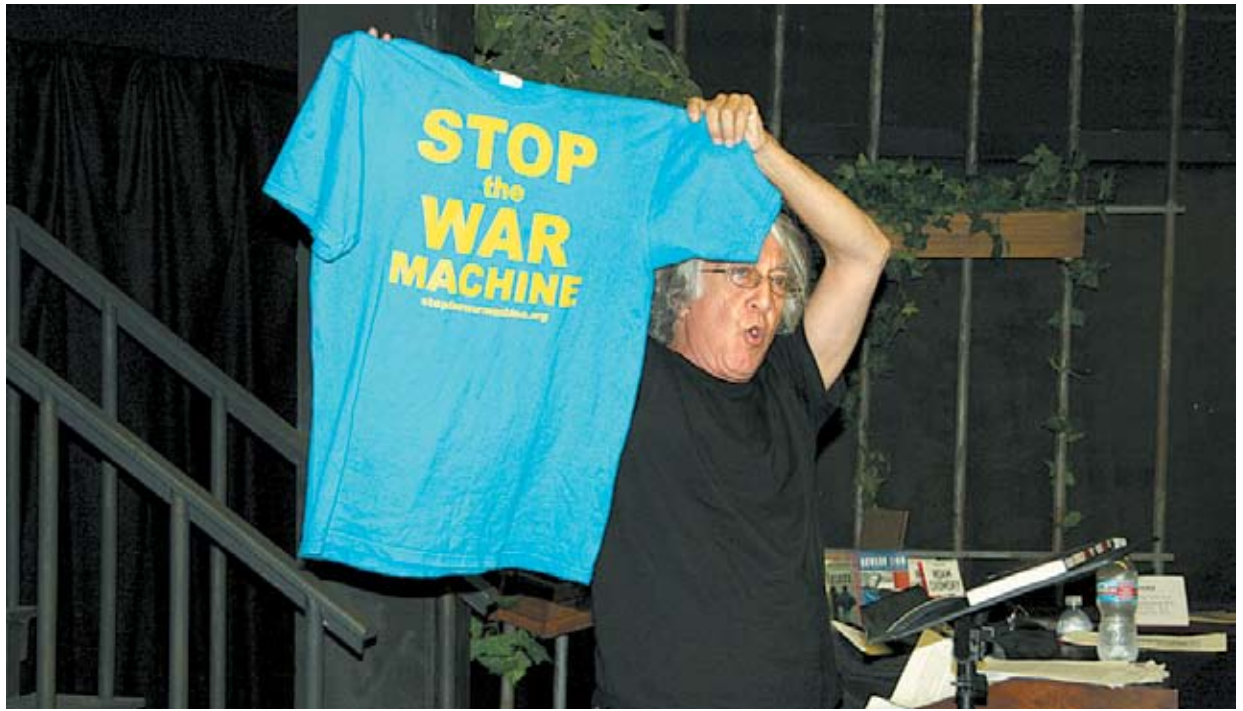
He had just returned from a trip to Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon, but when he told me he had gone to Turkey in 2005 to visit his moth-

er's village, my Armenian antenna rose. I became curious about his reaction to that visit.

Kay Mouradian: Tell me about that trip.

David Barsamian: My mother came from Dubne, about an hour north of Diyarbakir. Diyarbakir is populated by Kurds. It is their cultural center and the city where they hold political power. There I met the mayor who put me in touch with the mayor of Dijali, the area where my mother's village is located. The Dijali mayor offered to take me to my mother's village. At different times and in different words, both mayors told me they held great shame and remorse in their hearts for what their Kurdish grandparents had done to the Armenians during the Genocide, even as neither tried to justify the actions of their ances-

books



Barsamian at an appearance at the Luna Playhouse in Glendale. Photos: Levon Parian.

try. As we drove along the Tigris River, I remembered my mother's descriptions of the river and the surrounding semi-arid mountains. "Your mountains are just like ours in Dubne," she would say when she visited me at my home in Boulder. My imagination was coursing through my mind. How will I react? Will I be emotional, nostalgic, angry? When we arrived in Dubne, the villagers recognized the mayor's car and rushed tell him about all the things that needed to be fixed in the village. When they learned that my mother once lived in Dubne, many of them took me

on a tour of the village ... to the stream and the apricot trees my mother talked about so often. The man who owned the apricot orchard is an Armenian whose family converted to Islam and he is now called Mustafa. They gave me a basket filled with apricots, so sweet to the taste, and I later shared them with those on the bus when I left Diyarbakir. From the orchard they took me to the old Armenian cemetery whose gravestones were barely readable. My grandfather was probably buried there. He was killed before the deportations. We went to look

at the remnants of an Armenian Church. The villagers told me they used the church stones to build their homes. Like recycling. They treated me like a rock star, touching me and following me everywhere.

KM: Knowing his mother had survived the genocide, I asked about his emotional reaction to being in Dubne.

Barsamian: They were so excited having me, a foreigner, in their village, they never left me alone for a moment. I left Dubne not knowing.

KM: Listening to the rhythm of his words, I suspected that music played a role in David's life. He told me that he spent the years 1966-70 in India studying Urdu, one of India's 23 official languages, and the sitar, an Indian lute, under the guidance of a world-famous sitar master, Debu Chaudhuri. He traveled and performed with his teacher, sometimes for groups as large as 20,000. On one occasion they performed for Indira Gandhi, who at the time was Prime Minister of India. David gained a rudimentary grasp of both Arabic and Farsi, because both languages are rooted in Urdu. "I'm totally fear-

less and unashamed in my travels if I make grammatical errors, knowing how much people appreciate foreigners trying to speak their language.”

KM: Tell me about your love of language and how it influenced you.

Barsamian: I was the youngest of four children; grew up speaking Armenian, learned English in school in New York, and as I watched my parents struggling to write a sentence, I decided early on that I wanted to have a command of English and the power of a large vocabulary. My parents came from illiterate villages and didn’t have books in the home. I saw what happened to them and maybe unconsciously there was this drive for knowledge, maybe thinking if you are clued in then maybe you won’t get massacred.

KM: What about your early education?

Barsamian: I barely got through high school and was a drop-out. I hated school, but I am a voracious reader. At ages 7, 8, and 9 I was subscribing to *Esquire*, *Newsweek*, *US News and World Report* magazines, writing letters and getting them published. When the magazines came every month with my name on the label, I felt like I was something, somebody. My parents couldn’t imagine writing a letter or expressing an opinion and getting it published. I spent most of my free time in the Webster public library on 78th street in New York. I read everything and anything. The library was an oasis where I could feed my mind and get away from the roaches in my house. I lived in a section of New York populated primarily by Germans, Italians, and Irish immigrants, and I had to constantly explain about being Armenian, because no one knew anything about Armenians.

KM: Where did your interest in politics begin?

Barsamian: My uncle, Sarkis Hagopian, visited every Sunday

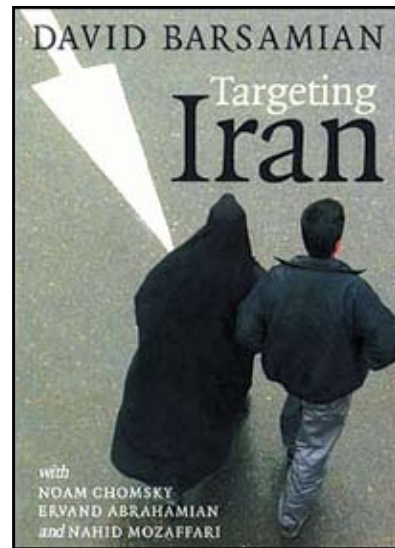
afternoon. He wasn’t a blood relation, but he was from my mother’s village, and he was very political. I was learning from him even at seven years old. I loved being with someone who had clearly defined political ideas, so different from my parents. Uncle Sarkis was a strong Armenian ARF nationalist and a radical who hated Nixon and Joseph McCarthy. At nine I was educating myself watching the McCarthy hearings and Edward R. Murrow’s famous broadcast on CBS which eventually became the film *Goodnight and Goodluck*.

KM: Tell me more about your early interest in social justice.

Barsamian: There were two major things. I was strongly influenced by my parent’s displacement and disposition and the ensuing Turkish denial, and the other, believe it or not, was a baseball team, the Brooklyn Dodgers. One of my brothers was a Yankee fan, the other a Giants fan and for me to individuate myself, I had to be a Dodgers fan. When rumors hinted the Dodgers would leave New York, I believed owner Walter O’Malley when he said the Dodgers would never leave New York....until Los Angeles made him a deal, gave him Chavez Ravine worth 80 million dollars and uprooted the Mexican-American community who lived there. That taught me all I needed to know about greed, economics, lying, and manipulation.

KM: I find it interesting that many in the Armenian community don’t know of you.

Barsamian: That’s because my politics are so radical. Most American-Armenians are Republicans, flag wavers, primarily interested in making money and don’t want to upset the status quo. I don’t feel American citizens should serve in the military in wars of imperialism or wars of aggression, but if it is about being attacked that is a very different thing. I attract those who are concerned primarily with social justice, and I’m seeing hope in the younger Ar-



David Barsamian's *Targeting Iran*, co-authored with Noam Chomsky, Ervand Abrahamian, and Nahid Mozaafari.

menian generation. I’m proud to say that my birthday is on Flag Day, June 14, the same birthday as Che Gueverra, and I identify more with Che Gueverra.

KM: Barsamian recently returned from Turkey, Syria and Lebanon. In Turkey he interviewed Hrant Dink’s son and Ron Margalies, a prominent Turkish Jewish commentator and poet. In Beirut he interviewed Rami Khouri, an independent Arab journalist who at one time interviewed Osama Bin Laden, and Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, a leading authority on Hezbollah. And in Damascus he talked with Yassin al Haj Saleh – one of Syria’s leading dissidents and political activists who spent more than 15 years in the jails of Hafez al-Assad. Barsamian said Yassin is a brilliant guy, was a medical student when arrested, and taught himself English while in jail. Those interviews will be scheduled on his radio program. Barsamian’s web site, alternativeradio.org, is a treasure trove of programs with many of today’s well-known personalities who are unafraid to challenge the ideas of those in power. His radio program on NPR is funded entirely by listeners who hear a program and order a CD.

connect:

alternativeradio.org

Kay Mouradian is author of *A Gift in the Sunlight: An Armenian Story*