

Stephen Philibosian Foundation

By **Joyce Philibosian Stein**, *Stephen Philibosian Foundation Trustee*

The inner motivation in the depths of a person leads to success. Stephen Philibosian's success was a consequence of the motivation that parents and circumstances implanted in his heart. Born in hilly and remote Hadjin, where opportunities for a financial success were limited, Stephen had a burning desire to go to the United States. "Why my son," asked his mother pleadingly one day, "are you so anxious to go to America." His honest answer did not surprise her: "I want to go to America to make a lot of money, return to Hadjin and start an industry so I might pay big wages to the workers."

This was the height of his ambition which went as far back as he could remember and of which his mother approved with these words: "My son, God bless you. Go with that dream in your heart. God will be with you, and you will fulfill your dream." This commenced his dream to become wealthy, with ambition to be helpful to his beloved race which had suffered so much.

Stephen was born to dedicated Christian parents in a town 100 miles north of Adana, and, at 10 years of age, moved to the biblical town of Tarsus. His dream became reality when he arrived in the United States at the age of 17, on May 1, 1909, just before the Adana Massacres. His dream was realized: albeit his ambition to return to his motherland was dashed with news of massacres. His parents were saved, thanks to the protection given by missionaries at Saint Paul's College in Tarsus. So, while working and living with an uncle in Syracuse, NY, he learned the intricacies of the oriental rug business as an apprentice. He also resolved to bring his family to America. But this was not easy since money was needed as he was earning only \$10 a week. It was also difficult, because after the long day of work, there was night school to attend; enabling him to communicate in his new language.

Stephen was given the added responsibility of waiting on customers and selling his uncle's rugs. He learned so quickly, his uncle dispatched him soon to a nearby town to conduct a sale of rugs all by himself! This was about the time he was able to send money to bring his family to America: within six months he greeted them at Ellis Island. (Stephen Philibosian's name is inscribed on the immigrants' Ellis Island Wall). Speaking of his parent's influence, "Whatever success I have, I owe my parents. They were my inspiration; my love for them stirred my imagination and enabled me to learn well to make them comfortable." With the responsibility of caring for his parents and other members of the family upon him, he decided he must seek a better position.

In spite of his uncle's disappointment, he took the position of salesman in Wade's Department Store in Auburn, NY. He became the rug buyer and operator of the Oriental rug concession in his first solo business venture. It was such a success that one day Mr. Wade confided, Stephen was making more money than the store's president! Success came his way!

Then off to Atlanta, GA, Stephen built a beautiful store of his own on Peachtree Street. The store was considered one of the most magnificent in all the country: Georgia's Governor personally wished Stephen success at the occasion of the grand opening.

Success was enjoyed, but only for a short time because of the Great Depression. However, this turn of events proved to be only a temporary hurdle. In time, Stephen owned and operated over 10 oriental carpet concessions throughout America. His ingenuity in this field earned him the title, "Dean of Oriental Rug Retailing."

In 1932, Stephen made his initial trip abroad since emigration. While visiting the Middle East, he was profoundly impressed by the severe poverty. With the consent of the government of Lebanon, his first project was to help his unfortunate countrymen by constructing a Beirut community known today as "Nor Hadjin." Aided by his Uncle Harry, Stephen completed a community center based in Philibosian Hall. He then embarked on providing food and shelter for the impoverished widows, the blind, and orphaned children. Throughout the years, he personally and through his foundation fostered many thousands of children.

Another of his charitable endeavors was serving on the Board of the Sanitarium at Azounieh, Lebanon which was known for its high caliber of medicine, specializing in the treatment of tuberculosis. In Beirut, 1963, a reception was given in his honor by people who had served with him on the Board of Azounieh Sanitarium. Founders Reverend Yenovk Hadidian and Henry Gertmenian said, "Over 40 years ago when we established the hospital, we solicited funds from our friends in the United States. Mr. Philibosian was the first to respond with a substantial donation." Thus, it was with Stephen, ever watchful for opportunities to serve his people on a grand scale, especially those who had not been fortunate enough to come to this blessed country of plenty.

The opportunity for more intense service came in 1948 when, during a Sunday service in the former Masis church of Los Angeles, Reverend Puzant Kalfayan described the deplorable condition of schools in the Middle East. Deeply moved and seizing the moment, Stephen invited Reverend Kalfayan to his home where the Child Education Sponsor Program was born. Together they organized a banquet, where speeches and tears, coupled with excitement, touched the hearts of so many, that in one evening, 300 students were sponsored for six years of elementary school.

This program has greatly expanded and continues today, implemented by the Armenian Missionary Association of America. Soon after the establishment of the Child Education Sponsor Program, Stephen and his family moved to Philadelphia where he joined the Armenian Missionary Association of America's Board of Directors. He worked steadfastly to make the organization a star in the American-Armenian community. Stephen became Treasurer of his beloved organization and began to dream about putting the Association on a strong financial footing. Becoming deeply involved in the work of the AMAA, he established a sustaining endowment fund with an initial contribution of \$100,000. With his business acumen, he invested this amount, with additional contributions; and his AMAA endowment fund today is the resource for humanitarian efforts: education, and the physical and spiritual welfare of Armenian's worldwide. It is noteworthy, that during his tenure as Treasurer, he effectively launched AMAA's investment portfolio, currently valued at about \$140 million.

The year 1967, saw the AMAA, jointly with Stephen as a financial catalyst, build or restore 12 impoverished schools in Lebanon. Thousands of youngsters basked in the fresh new and shiny schools! In addition, the team embarked on a completed and desperately needed slum clearance program in Beirut. In 1965, Stephen was decorated by the Lebanese President with the Order of the Cedar, the Republic of Lebanon's highest order.

Without doubt, Haigazian University became Stephen's passionate vision, and it deserves special mention. While it was conceived in Phoenix, Arizona, in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Mehagian, it was born in Radnor, Pennsylvania on a snowy March evening in 1955 at Stephen Philibosian's hilltop home. With the initial gift of \$25,000 from the Mehagians, Stephen worked diligently to implement the challenging details: locate a building in Beirut to house the college, find the ideal president and secure critical operating funds. He was responsible for the purchase of

the initial structure from the American Congregational Board of Foreign Missions, at a remarkably low price of \$25,000.

The search for an exemplary leader resulted in the fortuitous choice of Dr. John Markarian, a professor from Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, who served with distinction for over 25 years. Operational funds were assured by a generous Board of Trustees. It is interesting to note AMAA's Board of Directors requested that Stephen select his own Board of Trustees. With generous and faithful cooperation from the Trustees, Haigazian was given enormous funds for an additional building on campus.

Steven Mugar, a philanthropist from Boston, donated the Mugar Building with additional support from Alex Manoogian. This magnificent structure is considered a rare, historic landmark in Lebanon. Having been damaged during the Civil War, the landmark has been restored to its prior glorious state and is one of the most beautiful buildings in all of Lebanon. It became the home of former President, Rev. Dr. John Khanjian and is currently home to Rev. Dr. Paul Haidostian and his family.

The University, which celebrates its 65th anniversary this year, has enjoyed the largesse of the Stephen Philibosian Foundation's annual scholarships and even more. This Christian institution was founded with the express purpose of training Armenian youths for work in all professional fields. Today, the University continues to provide a full complement of superior academics for a diverse student body. Of the thousands of Haigazian graduates, many or singularly have accomplished impressive success in their specific fields. This indeed has been the fulfillment of the founder's dream and vision.

In spite of the rapid growth and immense proportions of all the projects, the Philibosian Foundation has never displayed the least resentment, inconvenience, or lack of generosity, while it meant assisting his people, regardless of political or religious affiliation. The thought his mother planted in his mind many years ago was always his guide: "Be helpful to your people as that is the way God wants you to be." This has been and always was the hallmark of the life of Stephen Philibosian and his foundation continues that magnificent tradition today.