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Vartan Gregorian, Charisma, and New Technology Combine to Revitalize the New York Public Library

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As a child I spent many hours in the Highbridge branch of the New York Public Library (NYPL). Later on in high school and college I would spend entire days in the Central Research Library housed in the great beaux-arts building on 42d and Fifth Avenue. This neoclassical palace has special significance to most New Yorkers. Designed by John M. Carrère and Thomas Hastings in 1897, it is one of the most impressive repositories of literature in the world, with over 5 million volumes, 20,000 periodicals, 11 million manuscripts, and 90 miles of shelves.¹

While the Central Research Library is impressive, it is only 1 of 85 facilities constituting the NYPL system. With 4 research libraries and 81 branch libraries located throughout Manhattan, the Bronx, and Staten Island, the NYPL is considered 1 of the world's top 5 libraries. Its peers are such prestigious institutions as the British Museum in London, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the Lenin State Library in Moscow, and the US Library of Congress in Washington, DC.² Yet the NYPL is the only one of these five research libraries that offers unrestricted access to the public.

NYPL History

Augustine Birrell, a former British chief secretary for Ireland and founder of the National University of Ireland, once wrote, "Libraries are not made; they grow."³ Such was the case for the NYPL, which was created in 1895 when two privately funded

reference collections, the Astor Library (founded in 1848) and the Lenox Library (founded in 1870), joined with the Tilden Trust to form a new corporate entity, the New York Public Library.

In 1901 the free circulating libraries that had developed in New York between 1870 and 1890 merged with the NYPL to create a coordinated, tax-supported circulating library system. Industrialist Andrew Carnegie offered to construct branch buildings for the library system, provided the city took responsibility for the permanent maintenance of the buildings.⁴ The consolidation of the research libraries and the absorption of the circulating libraries make the NYPL a unique institution in that the research libraries are mainly privately supported, while the branches are primarily publicly financed, all within one private corporation.

Since its doors first opened in 1911, the Central Research Library has played a role in many exceptional achievements. For example, Edwin Land used the library's collection for research prior to his development of synthetic polarized light, the basis for the Polaroid camera. Chester Carlson researched photoconductivity and electrostatics, leading to his invention of the Xerox photocopier.⁵

The library has also played a crucial role in the early lives of many prominent people. For example, Nobel laureate Joshua Lederberg worked there as a page, and he recalls that the NYPL "was as important to my education as were schools and college."⁶ Lederberg believes that the NYPL opened otherwise locked doors for under-

privileged youth. He writes, "The New York Public Library was another important element of an efficient and calculated system of Americanization, and of social mobility for first generation immigrant youth."⁷

Budget restraints during the 1970s caused a period of decline in library services and building maintenance. At one point, the Central Research Library reduced business hours from 87 to 43 hours a week. Patronage fell from a high of 3 million users in 1960 to 1 million by 1980. In addition, reduced financial resources forced the curators to cut back on acquiring significant collections.⁸ The Central Research Library building itself, a National Historic Landmark,⁹ suffered severe maintenance problems owing to neglect. A leaking roof damaged books that were already deteriorating because the building lacked an air-conditioning system. The grand interior of the building had been diminished by poorly executed alterations.⁸

A decade of budgetary limitations linked to the New York fiscal crisis finally ended with the arrival of Vartan Gregorian in 1981 as NYPL president. Gregorian is considered the force behind the library's recent rejuvenation. Vartan's charismatic personality has brought a new vitality to the library that has caught the public's attention. Countless articles have been written about him, including a two-part profile in *New Yorker*¹⁰ attesting to his stature.

Born in Tabriz, Iran, he came to the US in 1956 to attend Stanford University where he earned a BA and PhD in history and humanities.¹⁰ His book on *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization 1880-1946* was published by Stanford University Press in 1969.¹¹

In 1972 he became a professor of history and South Asian history at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, and held the Tarzian Chair for Armenian and Caucasian History. While at Penn, Gregorian served as the first dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences from 1972 to 1978. In 1978 he became provost of the university, a position he held until 1980.¹⁰

Recently I had the opportunity to chat with Vartan about his role as head of the NYPL. He said, "I have always felt it was my life's

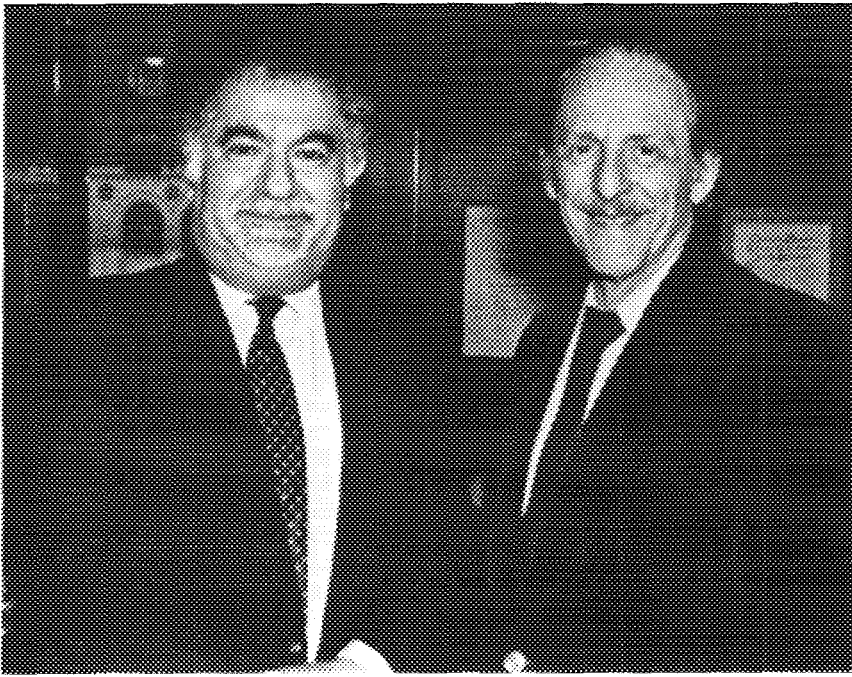
mission to promote and sustain respect for learning and respect for knowledge. [The NYPL] is not merely a repository but a living institution, which plays a dynamic role in the spectrum of the city's educational opportunities."¹²

He added, "There is such a great reservoir of good feeling about this place in New York. There is no cynicism about this institution, and New Yorkers can be very cynical. But not about the NYPL; they take great pride in it.... I have tried to rekindle that pride. The issue is no longer whether the NYPL will survive or not—the issue is the quality of its survival."¹²

Since Gregorian came to NYPL, funding for the library has greatly increased. The Vincent Astor Foundation has bestowed a \$10 million grant to the library and David Rockefeller provided a \$2.5 million gift.¹³ In 1985 the library received one of the largest grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities ever awarded to a single institution—\$6 million on a matching basis over a three-year period.¹⁴ In addition, since 1983 the operating budget has grown from \$71 million to over \$100 million.¹³

Meanwhile, some sorely needed physical renovations have begun. The building's facade has been cleaned, advanced temperature and humidity controls for the stacks have been installed, and the Public Catalog Room has undergone extensive renovation.¹⁵

Vartan's revitalization program has been more than cosmetic, however. He has directed the implementation of an online catalog system that makes access to the library's vast collection simpler. More recently, following the recommendation of a committee of experts, he has appointed Richard De Gennaro as director of the NYPL. Formerly director of the University of Pennsylvania Libraries, Dick is an internationally recognized leader in library automation and management. His most-cited paper discusses the necessity and strategy of developing effective means of library resource sharing.¹⁶ Vartan was provost at Penn when Dick was librarian. Now he compares Dick's position at NYPL to that of a university provost.¹² Dick's responsibilities at NYPL include planning the policies, programs, and budgets of the research libraries and the branch li-



Vartan Gregorian and Eugene Garfield

braries. He will oversee automation, staff development, exhibitions, and public education programs.¹⁷

The Public Catalog Room

On January 18, 1985, the Public Catalog Room was closed for the first time since the Central Research Library opened in 1911. During a year of renovation, the walls of the room were hand-scrubbed, the tile floor repaired, the long oak tables refinished, and the ceiling mural restored. In addition, the 10 million cards that were stored in over 9,000 catalog drawers were replaced with an 800-volume *Dictionary Catalog of the Research Libraries of the New York Public Library, 1911-1971*. This book catalog contains photoreproductions of the cards cataloged prior to 1972. Not surprisingly, it has been purchased by such libraries as the Bib-

liothèque Nationale and the British Museum.¹⁸ No doubt we will one day see a CD-ROM version of this catalog.

To search for materials acquired since 1972, 50 computer terminals were installed for users to access the online catalog of the New York Public Library, nicknamed CATNYP. Vartan notes that "this leap in twenty-first-century technology affords improved access to our collections within the grandeur of nineteenth-century-style surroundings."¹⁹ It was fun for me to try out the new system and to think back on the rows and rows of catalog trays that used to occupy that huge room.

The library is also a member of the Research Libraries Group, Inc., a consortium of about 30 major universities and other research institutions dedicated to improving the management of information resources. This consortium enables scholars to have the benefit of shared access to research materials from a variety of sources.

Science and Technology Center

On the first floor of the Central Research Library is the Science and Technology Center, which is regarded as one of the world's greatest research collections in the pure and applied sciences and related technologies. This collection contains 1.2 million volumes, 100,000 volumes of bound patents, and 4,800 current periodical subscriptions.²⁰ About 56 percent of the periodicals are in English, with the rest in over 20 languages.²¹ Such an extensive collection has long since outgrown the boundaries of the Central Research Library. According to John Ganly, acting chief, and Elizabeth Bentley, acting manager of the center, 70 percent of the collection is now housed at the Annex at 521 West 43d Street, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues. Plans are under way to renovate this warehouse into a state-of-the-art science and technology branch library by 1989.²⁰

The center is particularly strong in astronomy, engineering, military and naval science, patents, and physics. Included in the collections are the first editions of Euclid's *Elementa Geometriae* (1482) and Newton's *Principia* (1687).²¹ In addition, the center houses the Parsons Collection, which contains materials on engineering dating back to the seventeenth century, as well as documents concerning railroads, canals, and the construction of the New York City subway system.²²

While the sciences are well represented in the collection, the Science and Technology Center also has one of the most important collections in the US of material relating to food and wine. The culinary collection contains 80,000 items including 15,000 cookbooks, 25,000 menus, periodicals, prints, rare books, and manuscripts dealing with the technological, social, and anthropological aspects of food and wine.²³ In the near future we will be discussing enology, the study of wine.

For over 70 years, the center has received new books in the fields of science and technology intended for inclusion in the monthly publication *New Technical Books*. These works are reviewed by the library's profes-

sional librarians and are then added to the collections. Over 1,400 institutions and individuals worldwide use this bulletin to develop their own collections.²²

In our conversation I reminded Vartan of the librarian-educator Henry E. Bliss, who had served at the College of the City of New York for over 40 years. He created the Bliss Classification of Science.²⁴ Bliss made me realize that the solution to information overload is classification. As Vartan put it, "The library provides the link of connectivity, and I perceive my role as not simply the guardian of the repository but rather the educator who helps the present generation find its links with the past and the future."¹² He addresses other librarians as fellow educators, which astonishes those who mistakenly view their role as auxiliary to educators rather than an intrinsic part of the process. Vartan would have shared a natural kinship with Bliss.

Space does not permit me to report all of the intriguing topics covered in this interview. But just as I was about to leave, I mentioned to Vartan an upcoming essay about the Bicentennial of the Constitution.²⁵ He handed me a copy of a new book *Are We to Be a Nation? The Making of the Constitution* by Richard B. Bernstein, Research Curator of the NYPL's US Constitution Bicentennial Project.²⁶ This is yet another "connection" provided by the NYPL under its new leadership.

Conclusion

The collections of the Science and Technology Center are only a fraction of the extensive works owned by the NYPL. The value of these collections cannot be quantified, however. Instead, they must be measured qualitatively. As Vartan told me, "The New York Public Library is a center for the immortality of man. It provides an outlet for man's insatiable appetite to preserve some type of identity.... We are the record, we are the mirror of society, we are the collective memory of mankind. We are the unity and continuity of humanity."¹²

Postscript

When I left Johns Hopkins University in June 1953, I attended the Columbia University School of Library Service. To help finance my studies I applied for a job at the New York Public Library. The head of the cataloging division courteously interviewed me. After reading my references from several eminent librarians he informed me that he might find a position for me as a stack boy. Since the pay was as unexciting as the offered position, I chose to work instead at the Old Hickory Bookshop. Over the next

several months I cataloged over 4,000 old and rare medical and scientific books. I often wonder what might have transpired had I taken the advice of Seymour Taine, then editor of the *Index Medicus*, to accept the NYPL position as part of the dues I would need to pay for the privilege of entering my newly chosen profession.

* * * * *

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