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Father's Memoir a Labor of Love for Professor

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – It was a 12-year labor of love for retired Illinois Wesleyan University Professor George A. Churukian to bring his father's memoirs to the printed page.

"At times I thought it would never get done," laughed Churukian, who self-published the book *Never Settle for Second Best* earlier this year, "but it was a journey I'm glad I undertook."

Churukian's father, Giragos Missak Chururkian, died in 1994 at the age of 97. A physician who immigrated to America from the small Arermenian village of Kessab in present-day Syria in 1931, the elder Churukian left behind a brief account of his life. "Parts of it were good, and parts were very sketchy," said Churukian of the handwritten manuscript. "But my father left a lot of papers and a 1927 diary that helped put things into place. I was able to flesh out a lot of information."

Shortly after his father's death, Churukian and his family began to wade through the manuscript and a treasure trove of papers. "It was incredible how much we found. He had his passenger lists from the boat trips to America. He had an original contract when he worked as a doctor for the government of Sudan in the mid-1920s," said Churukian, who also pulled from personal experiences when he and his brother Peter journeyed to his hometown in present-day Syria with his father on separate trips.

Compiling the information became a family affair. "My sister encouraged dad to write his story, my brother and I poured over photos, and my daughter tackled the handwritten manuscript my father started when he was 94," said Churukian.

As a first-generation American, Professor Churukian felt compelled to tell his father's story, and that dedication led him to self-publish the book with Adams Press. "I thought it was important for my children to know their history. And it helps to answer the question we all ask—why we are who we are," said Churukian, who retired from Illinois Wesleyan in 1993, the University's chair of the department of education and the director of teacher education.

Churukian slowly filled in the details of his father's life. To gather information over the years, he spoke with many relatives and traveled to Pennsylvania where his mother and

grandparents once lived, and to Ohio where both of his parents resided before settling down in Paris, Ill., in 1940.

Perhaps the most difficult part of the research came with one of the saddest chapters of his father's life. Churukian writes of how both of his parents and their families survived the genocide of Armenians in 1909. Six years later, his father and his father's family survived another genocide of Armenians that killed more than two million people in 1915, according to Churukian's research. The elder Churukian wrote vividly of his family's struggle to survive as they were driven into the Syrian Desert without food or water when he was only 19 years old. Yet Churukian found living relatives stayed away from the subject. "When I would ask about 1915, you never saw the subject change so fast," said Churukian. "None of my relatives who survived that time wanted to talk about it, but I knew it was part of the story that needed to be told. Of the 6,000 people in my father's village in 1915, only 2,000 returned."

Though at times his life was hard, Churukian infused the book with his father's humor and wisdom. "The title of the book came from one of my father's pieces of advice," said Churukian. "He always told us, never settle for second best. I think he would be proud of the book."

Professor George A. Churukian taught at Illinois Wesleyan from 1976 to 1993, and was the chair of the department of education from 1979-1990. Known for assisting other countries develop teaching tools, Churukian was Illinois Wesleyan's first Fulbright Scholar, traveling to Kuwait shortly after the Persian Gulf War in the 1992. His work has also taken him to more than 30 countries, including England, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Brazil, Kuwait, Germany, Egypt, The Netherlands and the present-day Czech Republic. Those interested in the book Never Settle for Second Best can contact Churukian at gchurk@iwu.edu.

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cutlines for photos:

- George A. Churukian, author of his father's memoirs, *Never Settle for Second Best*
- Dr. Giragos Missak Chururkian poses with pharmacy workers in the Sudan in 1926.