

**United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights**

1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2019

Sir Vartan Melkonian,

Keynote Speaker / 2<sup>nd</sup> October

Speaker's notes along the following lines:

Thank you all for making time to be here today.

You've heard a great deal about me, that I am conductor of classical music, patron of the Consortium for Street Children, an Ambassador... that I am decorated with various honours... yes, indeed, I have. But you didn't hear about my academic achievements, did you? Do I have a PhD degree? NO! Do I have any kind of university degree, or a college degree? NO! Well, I must have some school diploma at least. NO!

For your information, I have no formal education, whatsoever. And that's an agony I have suffered all my life.

I say these things to bring to your attention that Street Children and young people do have just as much potential to succeed if they are given a fair chance. And that's why we are here, at the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

I was borne in an Armenian refugee camp in Lebanon. The camp was nothing more than a heap of tin shacks and hovels next to the city's principle rubbish dump. There were hills upon hills of rubbish all around the camp, steaming in the heat of the Lebanese sun, and there were a network of sewage channels meandering in the camp's muddy alleyways, carrying in them human waste, and rotting animal intestines where I used to play as a child. That was my home, my sweet home.

Then my blessed mother passed away – I was four or five at the time. I have no birth certificate.

I was then sent to the Birds' Nest Orphanage north of Beirut.

When I arrived there, an old Armenian woman, Mrs Ossanna, took me into a room, took off all my clothes, gathered them into a tight bundle and with a stick pushed them into the flames of an iron stove, presumably not to bring in diseases from the refugee camp.

When I saw my clothes catch fire, burning with crackling blue and yellow flames in the black stove, I felt a pain in my heart like no other, because these were the very clothes that my mother had mended

many times, sitting on a very low stool by the oil lamp in our tin hut. That was the first time I felt a deep sense of separation from her although I didn't quite understand it at the time. I wanted to cry but couldn't, because the pain was much greater than my age. So, the pain sank deeper like a well camouflaged snake never to surface, but would strike me only at my most vulnerable moments.

Mrs Ossanna measured my weight and height and declared something that would stick to me for the rest of my life. She said; "you are now five years old." And here I am, condemned never to know my true age.

Then - I met her, Maria Jacobson, the Danish missionary, the founder of the orphanage; this glorious and brave woman. Brave, yes, because she left her comfortable home in Denmark, her sheltered life in a beautiful town by the river in Denmark and travelled alone to the wilderness and dangerous parts of the Middle East to look after orphans, at a time when women didn't travel alone.

Here she was, standing right in front of me and looking at me. I looked up at her, and I could immediately see that she was not Lebanese.

The skin of her hand and arms was not scratched and sunburned like the women scavenging the rubbish dump at the refugee camp. Her skin was white, and her hair was pearl silver and, and – unlike the native women – none of the buttons in front of her long dress were missing.

She squatted down to my eye level in front of me, very close, and began to whisper to me in a language I didn't understand, in an alien language. Yes, I had heard stories of angels whispering to children, but I didn't know that they were real, and alive, because Maria Jacobson was real, and to my young mind, she was an angel in human form, whispering to me in, what I thought, angelic language – of course, little did I know that she was in fact praying for me in Danish, which I didn't understand. Then, to my surprise, she spoke in Armenian with a strong Danish accent – she had actually learned to speak Armenian, my language.

She reassured me that I was not alone, she said: you are here for a purpose. You will grow strong like a tree by the side of a fresh stream. You will grow up to become an ambassador, sit in righteous assemblies and report what is like to be an orphan.

Then she gave me something, something that would shape my sense of determination for the rest of my life, something so natural, so simple and yet so extraordinary, something that we often take for granted.

She gave me a – generous hug, that honest hug, that feminine hug, that bosomy hug that made me feel I was not alone, that I was loved, even by a stranger, as she was to me at the time.

Then when I was eight or nine years old, influx of new orphans came and there was no room for them. All the boys between the age of eight and eleven had to leave the orphanage to make room for the new comers and go and work in all sorts of vocations, for the Lebanese army for example. But I knew that was not for me. So, the next best thing I could do was to run away, which I did. So, I jumped on a cattle train in the town of Byblos and ended up in the heart of Beirut city, with only my shorts and shirt, in bare foot.

And that's where the second phase of my life began, in the slums of the city, in the dark alleyways, in the urine saturated alleyways of Beirut's red-light district. But Maria Jacobson was there with me, hugging me with her folded arms, like the protective wings of an angel, lifting me off the ground so that my feet with not get hurt on the stony grounds.

I lived in a broken boat by the city sewage where it was dark, but I used to borrow candles from the catholic church in the city. I also used to borrow oranges from Mrs Samira's orchids, at night.

You can only imagine how I survived the slums of the city, when I was constantly being chased away by shopkeepers and the police alike by sticks and stones, warning us, the street children, never to be seen there again. I worked as a shoeshine boy, a runner in the red-light district.

I gathered five Arab street boys together, thought them the Christmas hymns that I had learned back at the orphanage. Can you imagine, amides the noise of belly dance music, jingling fruit machines, hundreds of radios blaring out different Arabic songs all at once, we, five Arab street boys and me, standing in the night lights of Beirut's red light district and quietly singing, Silent Night. Holy Night. Drunken foreign sailors were bemused by us. So, we earned, mucho dollars. Thank you very plenty Mr Joe Americano. That was my life.

Then one day, one day – I became a conductor of classical music conducting the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in London and many other orchestras of that calibre around the world.

I believe we all have a certain gift unique to us, which helps us to create fresh ideas, improve our lives, and, and – in particular, improve the lives of others.

If I were to ask you, each one of you here, what would be the single most important thing you would wish for if you were able to turn the clock back and start your life all over again? It's a testing question isn't it? What would you really wish for?

I know exactly what I would wish for the most – with all my heart, if only I could turn the clock back: I wish I could have gone to school – yes to school.

I must tell you this: when I used to drive to pick my children up from school in England where I live, I used to try and get there a bit early, before home time, just to see them through their classroom windows sitting at their little desks and studying.

You can-not imagine the joy I used to get from just seeing them being educated – it was like experiencing something I've always wished for with all my heart because I have never, ever, sat at a small desk in a classroom like that with other children. So I just watch them, not because they are my children, but because I knew then, as I know now, that there are thousands of children out there, without education, that will one day grow up with the painful wish what I'm wishing for today and every day.

These children too deserve the education we expect for our own children.

They too deserve people like us, in this forum, to speak up for them.

They too deserve to have the UNs High Commissioner for Human rights, and the Consortium for Street Children, to advocate in their favour.

And it's not too late to invest in them. It's never, ever, late to do the right thing with love and consideration like Maria Jacobsen's wholehearted determination.

Let us put aside our political views, our religious beliefs, our cultural differences and think with our neutral minds:

These illiterate children on our streets should not be seen as problems but as agents of future prosperity. Invest in them and see if these little stones on our streets, these little dirty pebbles on our streets will not one day grow up to become precious jewels, the diamonds of our future generations.

They too have the universal rights to be granted the honoured virtues of education like everybody else.

[1,700 words long / 12 minutes]