

# The Collectors

**Almost every Mini owner has a few models and brochures tucked away for posterity, but these memorabilia hounds can fill rooms with their collections – and do!**

**W**hen it was first decided to do this story, everyone we came across said, “You should talk with Hrach Chekijian. He has a huge collection of everything Mini.”

Well, even though I didn't know Hrach, I had heard of him and knew where to contact him: I called him at MINI of Peabody where he worked as a MINI Motoring Advisor and initial arrangements were made to do a story on his memorabilia collection. Unfortunately, before our story could come to fruition, Hrach was felled by a stroke at work, passing away last October 31st. Consequently, our memorabilia story was put on hold until such time as we could find another collection to write about. In fact, I almost forgot about it entirely when a friend asked me when the story on Hrach would appear. I explained that Hrach had passed away in October and that I was looking for a new collection(s) to write about.

My friend expressed shock at this news and told me that he had met Hrach a couple of times, and that he was a load of fun and very passionate about Minis. He suggested I get in contact

with Cesar Chekijian, Hrach's brother, who might have some photos.

Cesar graciously sent me some photos of Hrach that included bits of his collection. He also included a link to a BBC feature on his brother, plus he included a number of pages of condolences from well-wishers at Hrach's funeral. The funeral, memorial and wake for the fallen Mini enthusiast had almost 800 people in attendance, many of whom had driven hundreds of miles in their Minis to say their final farewells. (How many of us, I wonder, will garner that level of respect when we pass away?)

In this article, MC2 focuses on three collectors of Mini/MINI memorabilia who have set the standard very high, indeed, for budding Mini Memorabilia collectors. The late Hrach Chekijian was probably the premier collector of Mini Memorabilia in the world, but our own Chuck Heleker and Mini Enthusiast, Andy Vanko are pretty serious collectors in their own right. Out of respect, Hrach's story will come first and because of his untimely passing, it will be more about the man than the collection – not that you could ever separate the two!

by Peter D. DuPre

photos courtesy  
Cesar Chekijian,  
Andy Vanko, Jay  
Elliott and the  
author



## Hrach Chekijian

“Nobody is more passionate about Minis than me,” Hrach used to say and truer words were never spoken.

Born in Beirut, Lebanon in 1949 from Armenian parents, Hrach moved to Baghdad with his family at age seven, where his family was in the jewelry business. It was here, at the age of about 14 that the young teen noticed an Austin Mini driving down the street and being intrigued with the unusual machine, he set off after it on his bicycle to have a closer look. As his brother, Cesar says. “It was love at first sight and the beginning of a lifelong affair pursuing

Minis around the world that lasted almost half a century.”

Being too young to actually own a Mini, the young Hrach contented himself with collecting Mini publications, brochures, posters, models and other memorabilia related to ground breaking little car. He finished high school in Iraq and then apprenticed in Lebanon as a gemologist before coming back to Iraq to join the family business. During this time, even though he was busy at work, Hrach always found time to write to Cesar, who was attending college in London, asking him to send anything Mini related.

When he turned 21, the family emigrated from Iraq to



Model cars, toys, puzzles became so numerous that the roofs of his real Minis became display surfaces for Hrach's memorabilia collection.



Hrach modified his first Mini with Mercedes headlamps. the car was sent to him from England by his brother Cesar.



800 people showed up for the funeral and memorial. A long line of Minis was part of the funeral procession.



Every square inch of wall and floor space in the basement garage was used to house Hrach's models, toys, posters, photos, signs, T-shirts, hats, books, DVDs, and a collection of real Minis.



Mr. Mini - Hrach Chekijian  
September 21, 1949 - October 31, 2010

the US, settling in Watertown, Massachusetts and set up a jewelry business in Boston where Hrach worked. Around the same time, Cesar sent Hrach a real Mini from London. This really excited the young Mini enthusiast, who could now arrive at Mini events in proper style. One Mini became many Minis and in the family jewelry business display cases Hrach was busy placing Mini models and even displaying Mini jewelry that he made.

After Hrach's father passed away in 1990, Hrach continued on with the family business, but more and more of his time was taken up with traveling across the country and to Europe to attend Mini gatherings. The passion grew to the point where the young Armenian became known world wide as "Mr. Mini," and when the new MINI was announced, the factory sought his advice on setting specifications for the new car. Once the new MINI debuted in the US, it wasn't

long before Hrach sold the family business and went to work at MINI of Peabody as a Motoring Advisor. He had made his hobby into his calling.

Of course, his collecting of memorabilia continued the entire time. Hrach's house was filled with everything from his own design Mini jewelry and books, to posters, framed photos, models, toys, videos, parts, and of course, full size Minis. In his bedroom he even had the front clip from classic Mini made into a bed, but it such a tight fit that Hrach said he had to lay in it with his feet sideways, so they would clear the bonnet! On the walls in the bedroom were literally dozens and dozens of Mini T-shirts - with plenty more just out side the door on the walls of the basement garage. As time went on Hrach's collection of everything Mini grew until the dozen or so Minis in his garage were packed full of memorabilia and toy cars were displayed on the roofs. It is a collection for the ages - one that it is hoped will end up in a museum.

However, as much stuff as Hrach collected, the biggest part of his collection wouldn't fit in a hundred basements, let alone one. Hrach was passionate about Minis; everyone knows that. More importantly, he was passionate about life. No matter what was going on, when he walked into a room a party just naturally started. He was known, lovingly, as a crazy character that warmed the hearts of everyone he met, and he seemed at little crazy when you first saw him at a Mini meet. Dressed in his trademark yellow jumpsuit, wearing a hard hat and waving his arms as he greeted people, he looked somewhat like a loveable Benny Hill character. But real he was, and he made immediate and lasting friends of virtually everyone that he met, often by taking them on a hair-raising ride in his Moke or one of his other Minis. At the end of the day, what Hrach really collected was people and Minis and Mini memorabilia was just the excuse he used to add them to his collection.>>