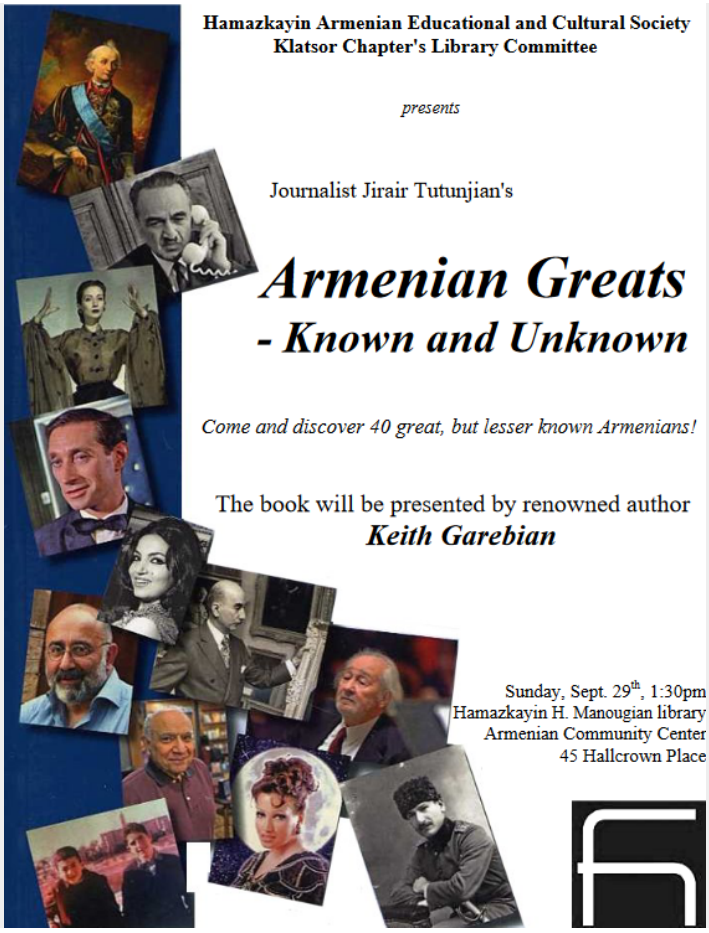
PRESENTING OUR OWN ARMENIAN GREAT—JIRAIR TUTUNJIAN

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Category: Opinions

By Keith Garebian, Torontohye, October 2024

We are delighted to present renowned author Keith Garebian's open remarks-introduction to Toronto-Armenian author Jirayr Tutunjian, delivered during the recent launch of Tutunjian's latest book Armenian Greats—Known and Unknown. The event, which took place on Sunday, Sept. 29, 2024, at the Hamazkayin H. Manougian library, was organized by the Hamazkayin Armenian Educational and Cultural Society Klatsor chapter's Library committee. Garebian introduced Tutunjian's work, which shines a light on 40 influential yet lesser-known Armenians, whose remarkable contributions have often gone unnoticed.

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Of course, I could begin with a list of his outstanding distinctions, especially his having been the youngest magazine editor in Canada and one of the most honoured and successful ones. Or with his deep involvement with Diaspora work. Or with his amateur but useful etymological investigations. Or with his own extensive tours of multiple countries around the globe. But I want to offer a different set of perspectives of the man, beginning with the beginning—in Jerusalem (his birthplace), circa the early or mid-1950s, where he and boyhood chum Kevork Hintlian proved themselves to be streetwise hustlers who "ambushed" foreign tourists, especially Europeans who mostly stayed at cheap hostels and travelled on strict budgets, unlike Americans who, flush with money, stayed at well-known hotels which were inaccessible to the boys. Because Kevork's English was better than Jirair's at the time, he was to be the main guide, while Jirair's job was to locate the "target" and persuade him or her to recruit the boys as local guides.

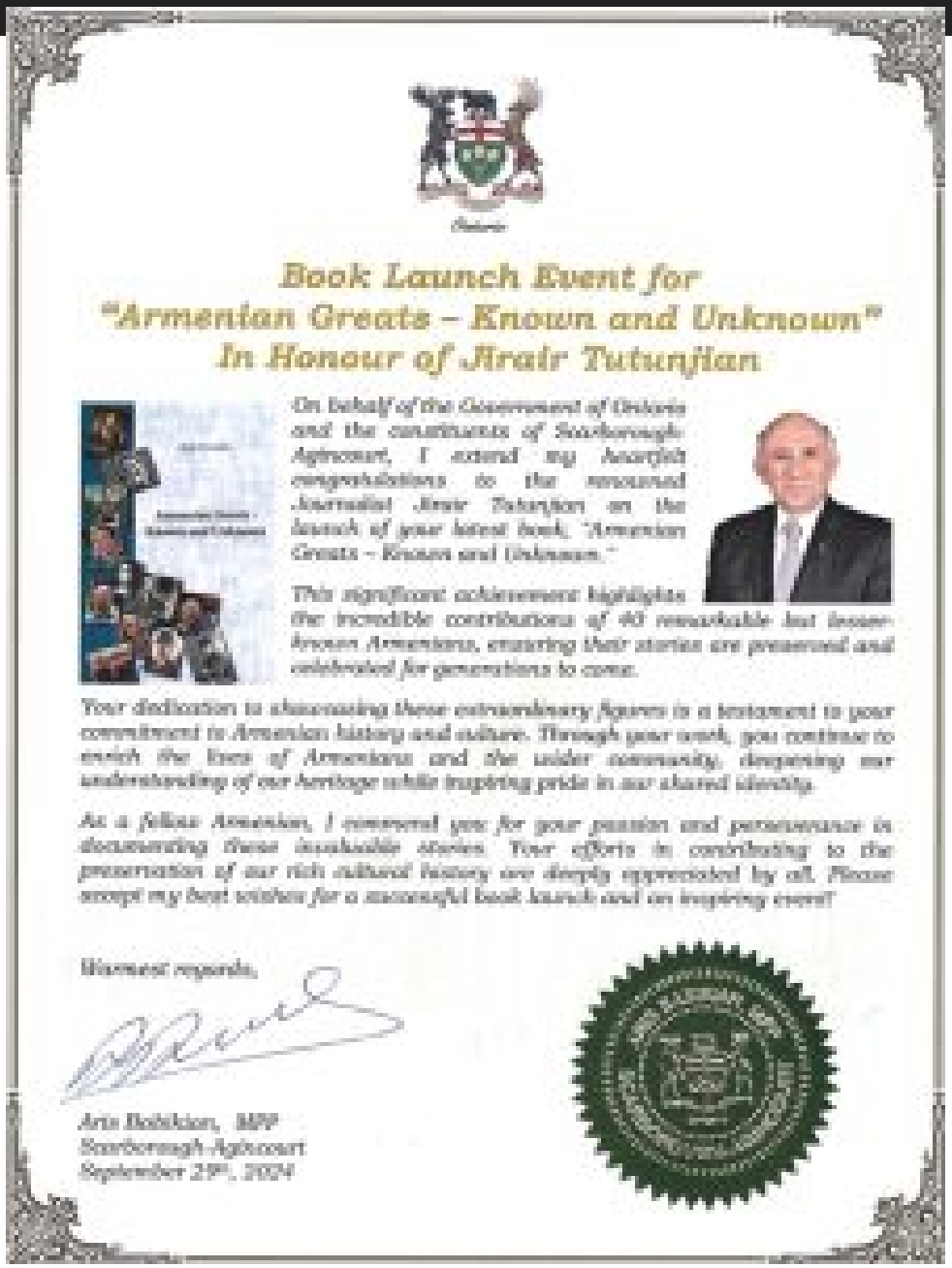
The course of their amateur business changed only after a pair of well-dressed French ladies, alluring in dress and behaviour, rewarded the boys not with a kiss or a monetary tip but the turquoise gem of a Vicks cough-drop! The next day, Lady Luck came to the rescue when the boys found a stocky man in his early twenties, with friendly eyes, thick curly hair and a dark beard, a Los Angeles-born Armenian who couldn't speak Armenian. After showing him the holy sites on a sweltering day, the boys took him to the Armenian Quarter, very proud of their prize: they had landed not just a tourist but an American who was Armenian. "America meant a big payday." But that was not the end of the story. More than forty years later, Jirair (by now well and prosperously settled in Toronto) re-discovered Roger Gertmenian (now 65 and retired from his careers as grocer, teacher, and politician in California) and began a correspondence, from which Jirair quotes this salient remark from Gertmenian: "The Armenians are the world's most wonderful and baffling people!" An exclamation outmatched only by the great English novelist Aldous Huxley's declaration in another article from this book we are officially launching: "The Armenians are the only people in Palestine who seem to enjoy themselves. They have a genius for life."

I begin this way to reveal key qualities in Jirair Tutunjian: instinct for survival, ingenuity, vivid memory, and a warm appreciation for his tribe, no matter where they wander or settle—an appreciation that is

fuelled by his staunch refusal to submit to the toxins of history (particularly the toxins of obscene persecution, subjugation, and epical denial by criminal perpetrators). which brings me to something we both share—as possibly with most Armenians who have never forgotten their painful history as a tribe. I refer, of course, to the historical "wound" that he describes in a later profile and one caused by an "often tortured history (battlefield for empires, occupation by nearby Persia and distant Rome, countless exiled by Byzantium to Cyprus, Thrace, and Sicily for heresy; invasions and centuries of persecution and finally genocide by the Ottomans." But Jirair goes a step farther than I have ever done in lamenting what he calls Jermag Chart (White Massacre), by which he means a huge loss of native Armenians over the past two thousand years to massive assimilation in disparate countries, often for the lure of financial betterment. Their exilic life as diasporans often resulted in many Armenians losing track of their fellow tribesmen. But an even greater wound than this is the failure of ultra-nationalistic Armenians to realize that many diasporan Armenians are what Sarkis Guiragossian called "faithful and dedicated ambassadors of their Armenian blood and spirit in non-Armenian surroundings."

It is not for nothing that Jirair describes himself as "a card-carrying member of the Venerable Order of Armenian Hunters (VOAH) organization." These hunters don't carry guns or hunt victims (animal or

around the globe), "mild-mannered scholars, patriotic bookworms, assorted milquetoasts, and ethnocentric busybodies who get a frisson upon unearthing the hidden Armenian identity of famous people."



Book Launch Event for
"Armenian Greats – Known and Unknown"
In Honour of Jirair Tutunjian

On behalf of the Government of Ontario and the constituents of Scarborough-Agincourt, I extend my heartfelt congratulations to the renowned Journalist Jirair Tutunjian on the launch of your latest book, "Armenian Greats – Known and Unknown."

This significant achievement highlights the incredible contributions of 40 remarkable but lesser-known Armenians, ensuring their stories are preserved and celebrated for generations to come.

Your dedication to showcasing these extraordinary figures is a testament to your commitment to Armenian history and culture. Through your work, you continue to enrich the lives of Armenians and the wider community, deepening our understanding of our heritage while inspiring pride in our shared identity.

As a fellow Armenian, I commend you for your passion and perseverance in documenting these invaluable stories. Your efforts in contributing to the preservation of our rich cultural history are deeply appreciated by all. Please accept my best wishes for a successful book launch and an inspiring event!

Warmest regards,

Aris Babikian, MPP
Scarborough-Agincourt
September 29th, 2024

Although of hybrid ethnicity, I am part of his tribe, and as he reveals in the first of two articles on me in his book, he was the one who discovered me after he had come across a book review I published in the Globe and Mail. I don't remember the year, the review, or the book, but I do recall being invited to coffee and pastries at an Armenian restaurant near Hallcrown Place. I am guessing that the meeting was close to the time of the release of my memoir *Pain: Journeys Around My Parents* in 2000. It was certainly not later than 2000, which means that he and I have been friends for at least 24 years. I found Jirair to be a man of warm cordiality, generous with his time and information, and sincere about exploring my Armenian connection and promoting my work within the Armenian

community. Because of Arsho Zakarian and the ladies of the Hamazkayin committee, I was welcomed as a diasporan writer at the library, but it was he, Aris Babikian, Khoren Mardoyan, David Karapetyan, and the Armenian National Committee who were instrumental in securing me partial funding and guaranteeing warm hospitality for my first and only trip to my father's homeland in 2013. And it was Jirair who promised I would see Ararat everywhere, and I am certain he didn't mean just the mountain. As it unfortunately transpired, I never did get to see the mountain, but its historical shadow could be felt in many places and in several ways.

Some self-styled experts are renowned for their fountains of useless information: not Jirair. He never poses as an expert on anything, but he is one who keeps his mind alert. Along with his empathy. And he hasn't changed in terms of personality and character from the first time I met him, which means that his consistency is an expression of his security in himself.

But you don't need to believe just me. Read his new book carefully, and it is prudent to read it in installments rather than straight through because of its range. Comprised of thirty-nine articles (running from a page to four pages in length) and a final list of "possible" Armenian greats, it is (as he himself puts it) "overwhelmingly about remarkable but often unsung Armenians whose Armenian identity is not known even to Armenians." Perhaps this is why you won't find profiles of Atom Egoyan, Arsinee Khanjian, Isabel Bayrakdarian, Peter Balakian, Lorne Shirinian, Lucine Kasbarian, Alan Whitehorn, Peter Oundjian, and many other luminaries in this book. They are well-known, and some are, in fact, international celebrities. Jirair elects the unsung, the lesser known. His first subject is photographer Arto Cavoukian, whose process on colour film baffled Kodak, Gaevert, and Agfa manufacturers. This piece has the distinction of being his first journalistic class assignment in 1967. The true value of this article is the insight it provides into informal technique: how the photographer used coffee and conversation to put his subjects at ease in order to induce the right expression that could reveal the inner personality of famous people such as Earl Mountbatten, Vladimir Ashkenazy, David Ben Gurion, John Diefenbaker, Pierre Berton, the Shah and Empress of Iran, and the Queen Mother who was so pleased with her portrait that she ordered it for her personal Christmas cards. Cavoukian's ancestry has Egyptian links, but the book as a whole is linked by its various subjects and historical periods to such other countries as Kenya, America, England, Russia, Turkey, Brazil, Poland, Ukraine, India, Canada, Italy, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Spain, Germany, Belgium, and, of course, Armenia.

Overlooking flaws in writing and editing, there's an impressive range of professions and vocations covered in the columns, and leave it to Jirair to express the contents succinctly: "Canada's top newsreel photographer Haig Tashjian, who during his long career was known as Roy Tash; Generalissimo Alexander Suvorov—the greatest ever 'Russian' military leader; Commander Philaretus Varazhnuni who made possible the establishment of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia; a prominent Armenian family in Texas who changed their name from Donigian who were leading citizens of Corpus Christi; an entrepreneur who put a remote Brazilian town on the map; an inventor

who helped Oklahoma become a player in the international petroleum industry; one of the deadliest villains in James Bond movies; a tragic singer who was recognized by critics as having the best voice in the Arab world; an engineering-mathematics teacher who, along with his students, launched the first rocket in the Middle East; the Armenian queens of Jerusalem; the six Armenian viziers of Fatimid Egypt. Also profiled are inventors, industrialists, a star Nazi propagandist, an etymologist, an ethnographer, a clergyman, tourist guides, community leaders, a seamstress who was the right-hand woman of fashion designer Schiaparelli, diplomats, a poet, a major conductor, several professors, etc. No one is too high or too low for Jirair's inquiry. An important feature of this collection is that nine of the thirty-nine profiles are of Jerusalemites, and Jirair explains why: "I was born in Jerusalem and thus am familiar with the city's Armenian community; the small but patriotic community has contributed a great deal to the Diaspora although receiving scant recognition."

Recognition in a subtle psychological sense, I would suggest, because it implies that due or befitting attention has been paid.

What sort of attention and recognition? The article on Philaretus, a distinguished but controversial Byzantine general in the mid-11th century is informative on this issue, for Jirair presents both sides of this "renegade hero," asserting that though he was dedicated to his people, Philaretus had many Armenian enemies. Worshipped for his bravery, sagacity, and patriotism, he rescued Armenians fleeing the Seljuks (Turco-Persian Sunnis) but cared little for Armenian religious orthodoxy. Another exceptional piece is the one "Finding the Elusive Roy Tash," in which we discover the extent and acuity of Jirair's sleuthing. Tash was recognized as the Canadian dean of newsreel photographers, and acting on a suspicion that this man might be Armenian, Jirair conducts assiduous research, using as his investigative sources Google, Library and Archives Canada, Findyourpast.com, Familyrecords.org, Jewish Canadian database, Canadian cinema photographs, magazines, and books, the Toronto Reference Library, Toronto City Hall, Canadian National Archives, the National Film Board, the Canadian Society of Cinematography, Ancestry.com, the National Association of Armenian Studies and Research, and the Armenian community at large. All these many sources for a four-page profile. This means that Jirair doesn't begrudge the immense expenditure of time if the exploration of myriad resources leads to a discovery of a diasporic Armenian of significant interest.

While such uncompromising investigation is admirable, my own favourite pieces for personal exploration are about Karekin Dikran (1945-2012) and Hovhanness Pilikian (1940-2018), two men of my generation: the first being a Beirut-born polymath, amateur etymologist, Armenologist, semiotician, lover of mythology, pictographs, art, and ancient languages; while the second was a virtual Renaissance man in England: scholar, social scientist, author, film producer/theatre director, classical music composer, etymologist, and avid puzzle solver who, among many distinctions, published a stunning interpretation of the word "Hai," as well as a paper on Shakespeare's Black Mistress in the Sonnets. Jirair's recognition is exceeded only by my appetite to know more about these remarkable Armenians. I look forward to seeing more of Jirair's correspondence with Dikran

and to Jirair's help locating some of the books of Pilikian and his stunning paper on Shakespeare's Black Mistress. If I had only known of Hovhanness before I met his son Vaughan (an anarchic genius) during my only trip to Armenia in 2013, I could have made inquiries then, but that has been another of life's lost opportunities. So, Jirair, let us both undertake a new cultural adventure, if time permits.

Meanwhile, ladies and gentlemen, please join me in applauding another great Armenian, one of my leading teachers in many things Armenian: Jirair Tutunjian!

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The above presentation is reprinted from Torontohye magazine (October 2024)

Comments



Keith Garebian – 2024-10-17 18:06:02
Thank you, Antoine Stepan Terjanian for your approving comments and kind offer of hospitality at your home. If I could ever manage another trip to Armenia, I would certainly try to visit you.

Antoine Stepan Terjanian – 2024-10-11 23:35:29
Thank you Mr. Garebian for introducing Jirair's great new book so deliciously. It opened my appetite to read it. Jirair came to stay with us on the top of our mountain in Yeghegnadzor. I hope you do too, next time you visit Armenia.