

# THE GREAT WRITER, THE GUIDE, AND THE PIANISTS

*Posted on September 3, 2023 by Keghart*



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**By Jirair Tutunjian**, Toronto, 26 August 2023

The prolific English writer Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) was considered the finest essayist since Montaigne. His range of knowledge was astounding. He could write with authority about art, architecture, politics, psychology, poetry, history, biology, music...Huxley wrote more than fifty books. One critic said: "Mr. Huxley is not only a literary giant, but one of the greatest thinkers of our time." Huxley visited Jerusalem in early 1955 when the city was part of Jordan.

Although Huxley's guide was fluent in English, he suffered from a verbal tic: he arbitrarily inserted "usually destroyed" whenever he talked about historic or religious sites. Thus, when Huxley wrote his essay about Jerusalem he titled it 'Usually Destroyed'.

The essay appeared in the June 1955 issues of *Encounter* and *Esquire* magazines and was published shortly after in a collection of his essays titled "Adonis and the Alphabet."

Huxley's guide was Armenian. We know he was because when they left the Armenian Quarter, he told Huxley: "In the year of Our Lord 1916, the Turkish Government usually massacred approximately 750,000 Armenians." Local Arabs had little knowledge of the Armenian Genocide.

The celebrated English author wrote these words about his guide: "He was a sad, embittered young man—and well he might be. His prospects had been blighted, his family reduced from comparative wealth to the most abject penury, their house and land taken away from them...the surprising thing was not his bitterness, but the melancholy resignation with which it was tempered." Huxley added: "He was a good guide—almost too good... spoke English well and fluently."



***Vahe and Arshalouys Kalaydjian's (centre) piano students prior to their annual concert in the Armenian Quarter, Jerusalem (circa late '50s)***

Huxley thought Jerusalem was one of the world's most depressing cities. He wrote the only exception to the downcast mood of the Holy City was the Sts. James Cathedral. This is how Huxley described the Armenian cathedral: "Here, finally, was St. James's, of the Armenians, gay with innumerable rather bad but charming paintings and a wealth of gaudily colored tiles. The great church glowed like a dim, religious merry-go-round. In all of Jerusalem, it was the only oasis of cheerfulness." Elsewhere he wrote: "The Armenians are the only people in Palestine who seem to enjoy themselves. They have a genius for life."

There was more. "As we came out into the courtyard through which the visitor must approach the church's main entrance, we heard a strange and wonderful sound. High up, in one of the houses surrounding the court, somebody was playing the opening Fantasia of Bach's Partita in A Minor—playing it, what was more, remarkably well. From the open window, up there on the third floor, the ordered torrent of bright pure notes went streaming out over the city's immemorial squalor."

Half-blind, Huxley was led by his guide up the dark and steep stairs to the third-floor apartment

where the piano music was drifting from. Huxley wrote he found himself "in a large room where a young Armenian girl was sitting at the instrument. She was playing to an audience of half a dozen people who listened with rapt attention." It was the living room of Vahe and Arshalouys Kalaydjian, the siblings who gave piano lessons in their home to Armenian students. The talented piano player was one of Kalaydjians' students.

"The room was full of books and pictures, and had an air of culture and refinement. It was like a glimpse of another world, a world of art and beauty, far removed from the sordid realities of Jerusalem," wrote Huxley.

Jerusalemites didn't know they had played host to one of 20<sup>th</sup> century's greatest writers. Huxley's unpublicized visit was not unusual. Years later, we would learn so-and-so celebrity had been in Jerusalem in the '50s and the '60s. Over the years, such luminaries as Mickey Rooney, Katherine Hepburn, Peter O'Toole, Cole Porter and many more celebrities visited the city without the local media's knowledge.

Throughout the Fifties and the Sixties, the Kalaydjians gave piano lessons to hundreds of students—Armenian and Arab. Vahe later taught music at the German Schmidt Girls' School and the Armenian seminary among other schools. In addition to organizing concerts where his students could showcase their talent to the community, Vahe and Arshalouys brightened Armenian social and cultural gatherings by playing newly-released Armenian songs in addition to classical music. At the end of his performances, Vahe often played Khachaturian's rousing "Sabre Dance".



***Arshalouys and Vahe Kalaydjian's (centre) piano students prior to their annual concert in the Armenian Quarter, Jerusalem (circa late '50s)***

In a community of 2,500 to 3,000, practically everyone had a nickname. Because their father owned a flour mill in the Armenian Quarter, the Kalaydjians were known as Bulghurji. Bulghur means 'wheat' in Arabic. Thus, the pianists were known as "Bulghurji Vahe" and "Bulghurji Arshalouys." Although they were superb piano players and teachers, they were unknown outside Jerusalem. The Armenian diaspora's media took little interest in the small Armenian community of Jerusalem.

Vahe died in 2016. He was in his nineties.

Arshalouys died a few months ago. She was in her nineties.

Aldous Huxley died on Nov. 22, 1963. Despite his international fame, his death went unnoticed for a long time because media were focused on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy that same day.

Who was the young Armenian guide who impressed much-traveled Huxley? Seventy years have elapsed since he guided the celebrated English writer. In those seven decades the Jerusalem

Armenian community has been reduced to a shadow of its former self. The guide's contemporaries have either immigrated or passed away. We probably will never know the identity of the guide but are grateful to him for having introduced Huxley to Armenian Jerusalem.

## Comments



**Jirair Tutunjian** – 2023-09-04 06:54:55

Ani, two questions: As a Kalaydjian piano student in the Fifties, would you know the name of the guide who took Aldous Huxley to the Kalaydian house and the name of the piano student who was playing the Bach Partita Huxley mentioned?



**H** – 2023-09-03 20:49:39

Jirayr, Fascinating history of the Armenians of Jerusalem seen through the eyes of non other than the world renowned artist, scientist, novelist Aldous Huxley. Thank you also for sharing the mention of the Kalayjjan family, and their talented Arshalouys and Vahe. And through their Piano recitals, the importance of the culture of Armenians of the land. I too am thankful to the mystery Armenian guide. His name, if found, deserves to go down in the history of the Armenians of Jerusalem.



**Keith Garebian** – 2023-09-03 20:46:57

One of the most significant sentences in Jirair Tutunjian's interesting articles is this from Huxley: "They have a genius for life." How else to explain Armenian endurance and hope, despite immense tribulation, affliction, and inhumane indifference by major international powers to Armenia's continuing chronicle of suffering?



**Ani Stambouljian** – 2023-09-03 04:51:55

Interesting story Jirair. I'm a student of Vahe. I'm in both pictures. I'm currently teaching piano also. I was touched with the great memories of the Kalaydjians. Both very inspiring piano teachers.