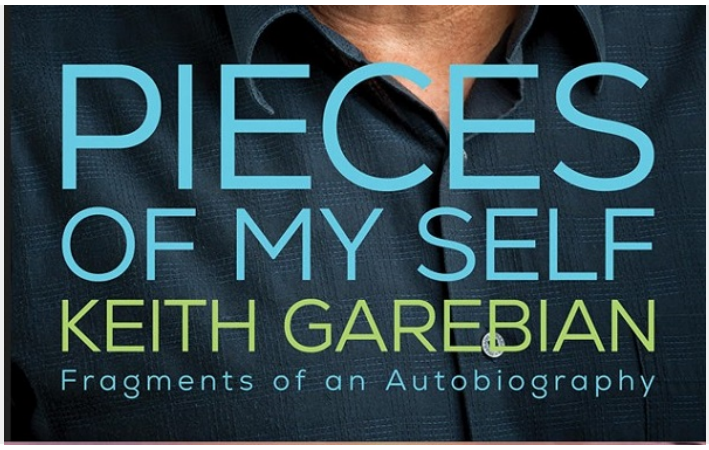
LITERATURE THE "HOMELAND" OF A PROLIFIC WRITER

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Category: Opinions

By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 23 March 2023

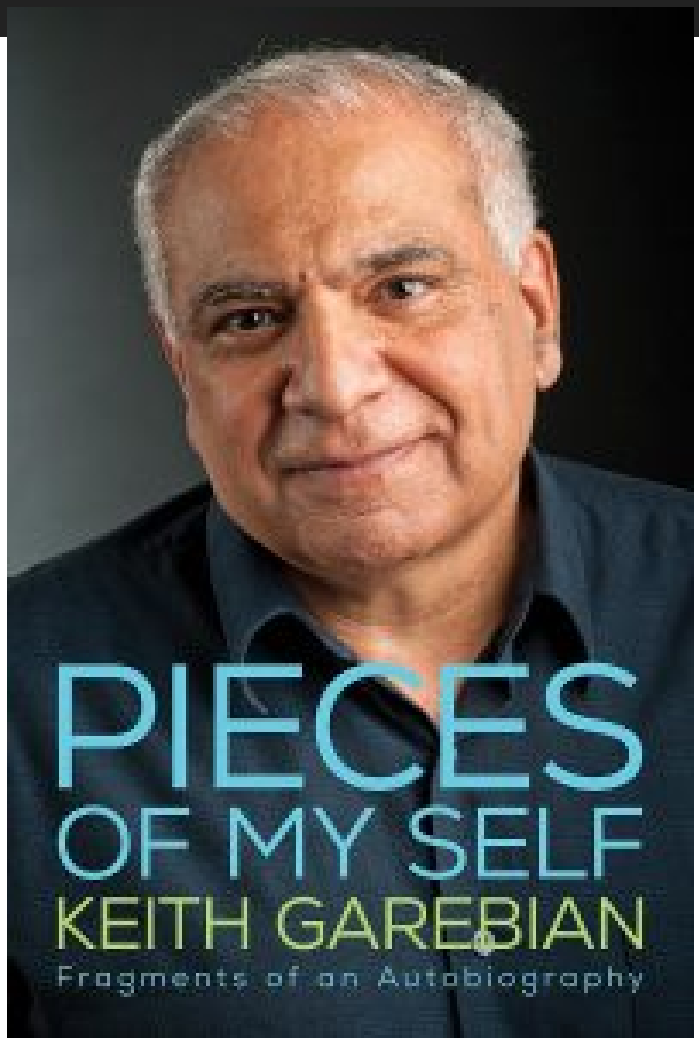
The biographical arc of the immigrant's tribulations trying to settle in a new country is a well-trodden trail. In his autobiographical *Pieces of My Self* (Guernica Editions, $25 CDN, $21.95 U.S), Armenian-Anglo Indian-Canadian poet-author-book and theatre critic Keith Garebian adds new wrinkles to the genre and does so with elan, candor, original perceptions, amazing recall, and an enviable facility of language.

A multiple award-winning author of ten books of poetry and numerous books on theatre (especially famous Broadway musicals), Garebian was born in 1943 in the multi-racial and congested cauldron known as Bombay (Mumbai). His father, Atam/Adam (born in 1909 or 1911) in Dikranagerd, was one of two members of a large family who miraculously survived the Genocide. While a child, Atam's flight out of Armenia with his older sister continued on foot to Iraq, and after a spell in that country Atam moved to India where he married Garebian's Anglo-Indian mother.

While life was comfortable in the rousing megalopolis, the Garebians could sense (following the withdrawal of the British) that their Anglo-Indian community was becoming a shadow of its former self. "Most of the Anglo-Indians I knew seemed adrift, either biding their time for some fervently imagined expatriation or resigned to being rejected by Hindus and the British." He also recalls "there was no reflection of this tribe in Indo-Anglian writing…Anglo-Indians of my generation were a dying

breed,dyingnotonlyinternsofnumbersbutinculturalsignificance."

Another dark cloud over Garebian was his intractable relationship with his apparently cantankerous and mercurial father. It took many years before father and son could make peace.



Considering the sea change in the life of their community, it was no surprise that the Garebians (three children and parents) immigrated to Canada in 1961. Keith felt significant culture shock although he shared a commonality of language, custom, the Bible (as mythology), Shakespeare, and the Commonwealth. It was far more difficult for his parents to adjust. His father's "period of adjustment" was particularly painful. A senior executive at a car manufacturing plant in India, he had to revert to being a car mechanic in Montreal.

While studying at St. Joseph Teachers College, Keith dabbled in acting and directing. He graduated magna cum laude and won the Lieutenant Governor's Medal, in addition to being selected valedictorian. Eventually, he obtained B.A. from Thomas More Institute, a M.A. from Sir George Williams University (before it morphed into Concordia University), and a Ph.D. from Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. In the early '80s, he moved to Mississauga, a suburb of Toronto, where he continued his freelance career as literary and theatre critic.

Although reviewing books and plays did not make for a lucrative freelance career, Garebian made

life-long friends in Canadian theatre. Among his new friends was William Hutt, one of Canada's premier actors. He later wrote the authoritative biography of the actor (*William Hutt: Soldier Actor*). Along the way, he met international stars such as Sir Laurence Olivier, Vanessa Redgrave, and Tammy Grimes. In fact, Garebian's eloquent letters to Olivier, Redgrave, and Nobel Prize-winning novelist V.S. Naipaul are worth the price of the book.

The first chapter of his book, "My Passage to Ararat," is about his partial return to the Armenian fold. He not only explored his Armenian identity and read extensively about Armenian history and culture, he wrote *Pain: Journeys Around My Parents* and a poetry collection about the Armenian Genocide titled *Children of Ararat*. He became acquainted with a number prominent Armenians in Canada (Atom Egoyan) and the United States (Peter Balakian). He launched several books at the Toronto Armenian Community Centre. In July 2013 he was invited to Armenia for the Fifth Conference of Writers of Armenian Origin Composing in Foreign Languages. At the end of the conference, he was surprised when he was awarded the Saroyan Medal for his "work and books on behalf of the Diaspora." He was the first Canadian-Armenian to have received the medal.

Reminiscing about his Armenia trip, Garebian writes: "...I felt a kinship with the rocks, the soil, the scrub, the apricot trees, the exquisite illuminated manuscripts, the massive stone architecture, the Paradjanov memorabilia (particularly the drawings he made in prison), the dancing fountains, even the biting wind whipping around the lake...I felt a new sense of Time..."

"Believing that I had prepared myself against an overwhelming welter of feelings, I resolved to be silent because of the 'remoteness' of the genocide, silent because I felt that my father and I had forgiven each other, silent because I had already written about feeling a nomadic kinship with him, silent because I had already given voice in poetry to empty work-sheds, ruined orchards, shrivelled shoes, abandoned flutes, and blue shadows. I had delivered elegies in print for my father and his murdered tribe..."

Pieces of My Self is a "dense" book: its 234 pages are packed with interesting facts about India, Armenia, Canada, the theatre and the publishing world. Canadians should also be interested in reading the book since Garebian says "Unsurprisingly, my theatre books are more highly and widely regarded abroad (especially in the U.S.) than they are in Canada."

Dislocated son of a dislocated father and with triple racial identities (Anglo-Indian-Armenian-Canadian), Garebian's true homeland is literature, even though (as his autobiography shows), he has not had a lucrative life as a freelancer, and has often felt like an exile or "resident alien" within his adopted country. The book is a must read to Armenians because it gives a chance to get learn about Garebian and his writing better.

Comments

H – 2023-04-10 18:49:32
Mr Tutunjian, Thank you for introducing Keith Garibian to your readers. While he may be known to some Armenians, chances are Armenians in general may not be familiar with this great talent. Worth reading his book.

Lucine – 2023-04-10 17:48:32
This book will surely be a fascinating read since its author is a fascinating individual himself. Keghart readers would do well to acquaint themselves with Keith Garebian. This gifted writer -- who indeed, as Mr. Tutunjian states, writes with elan, candor, original perceptions, amazing recall, and an enviable facility of language -- is uniquely suited for the role. Fortunately for his readers, Garebian has cleaved to his profession in spite of the fact that it's an economically unprofitable one.