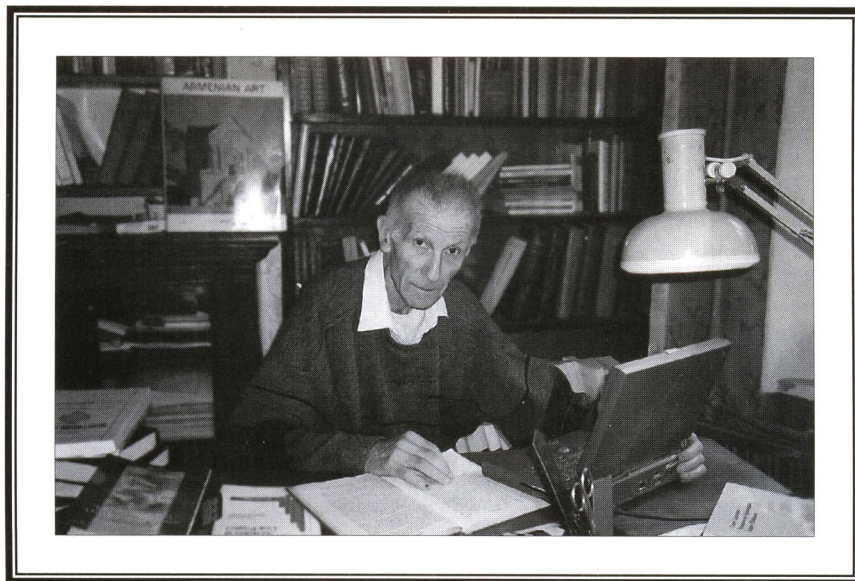

IN MEMORIAM

KAREN NIKITICH YUZBASHIAN 1927—2009



In the Fall of 1982, in the golden Armenian autumn when the air is sweet and cool and all is touched with rose and sun and tastes of the ripe fruit of the harvest on the plain of Ararat, a charming scholar whose Russian sounded like a good 19th century classic and whose Armenian was Isahakyan's and Tumayan's, this scholar with a smile like the golden autumn, gave a lecture in the halls of the Matenadaran, the temple of manuscripts facing the snow masses of Ararat floating in the air above Erevan, and after his enchanting text, on the merchants' secret argot called Rshtuni lezu, we began to talk as though we had always known each other. Those were days of repression but also of ease and wealth. Armenian scholarly books were printed in fine editions, there was food and coffee, you could have a long late breakfast and walk to the Matenadaran and spend the day in good conversation with your friends. The butcher's bill for the militarized economy and the static social mess in the Soviet Union had not come in just yet; and the doddering dictator passed inane laws. I had just bought an armload of books when one of these laws cackled over the radio: no books to leave the USSR. (I got them out anyway: Soviet law was mostly a joke except when breaking an enemy.) Karen Nikitich Yuzbashian, the scholar, and I, the younger guest, stood outside the Matenadaran and I said, *Ia èto prosto ne poĩmu*, "I just don't understand it". About the law. And he, with a sweeping gesture taking in the Land of the Soviets, *A ostal'noe vy ponimaete?* "And the rest of it you DO understand?"

Thus was born our friendship, and when this native of the Caucasian cosmopolis of the fabulous and scary 1930's Tiflis and son of the Karabagh Armenians before that became a member of the Karabagh Committee to liberate the Armenians in the Azeri enclave, and was elected to the fledgling Armenian parliament, and as the crazy winds of freedom, chaos, resurrected history, swept the country and blew down statues and drowned out propaganda, in those epic times Karen came to New York and Nina Garsoian declared me his guide while she assembled the *karasun tel*, the forty-layer fish pie, and the roast lamb, and the army of red wine bottles for her massive Easter party that night, and we tramped happily around Manhattan and got back a little late to be scolded like two mischievous boys, and we traded smiles, because Nina was the grande dame of the Russian, French, and American Armenologists and by late that night when the pompous official guests were gone and the core of our lot were crammed into her small study with its books and antiques and heavy old wooden furniture, "les artistes chez eux" as she called us, and we basked in that, there would be tiny glasses of very cold vodka.

Columbia University's Middle East department expelled its dirty Jew. A petition from many Soviet scholars was to no avail. My life in New York, the city of my birth, ended. I went to work in a colder and unfriendlier place; and as the