OBITUARY

Karen Yuzbashian

(January 6, 1927 – March 5, 2009)

The current issue of Iran and the Caucasus was at the stage of preparation, when we learned of the sorrowful news of Professor Karen Mkrtchi Yuzbashian’s demise.

Karen Yuzbashian, one of the most prominent Armenologists of our times, the last student of academician Iosif (Hovsep’) Orbeli, embodied the best of the St. Petersburg school of Oriental Studies and the Soviet and Russian traditions of the Humanities in general.

On the 5th of March, this year, Professor Karen Yuzbashian died at the age of 82 years, in St. Petersburg. Karen, whom his younger colleagues and students called in the Russian manner Karen Nikitich, was, indeed, a paragon of kindness, open-mindedness, always ready to help any student or colleague, anytime and in any condition. For me, person-
ally, Karen Nikitich will always remain the one who introduced me, then a fledging PhD student, in the far summer of 1977, to the fascinating world of the Leningrad Orientalistics. For us, his friends, colleagues and disciples, he became an inseparable part of our biographies.

Those who enjoyed the company and hospitality of Karen Nikitich in the small kitchen of his apartment in a xruščëvka building on the Orbeli Brothers’ street in Leningrad, or in his summer house, will never forget the intellectual discussions, captivating stories and eloquent reasonings of this indefatigable and omniscient person. Armenians, Avars, Dargins, Laks, Uzbeks, Tajiks... We were sitting next to one another and enjoying the company of the many masters of our Institute, the famous LO IVAN: Vladimir Livshits, Muhammed Dandamaev, Yurij Borshchevskij, Saurmag Kakabadze, Isaak Tsukerman, and others. We used to prepare national dishes, more often Dagestani xinkal or Central Asian oş (pilav)—the latter a subject of great quarrels between our Tajik and Uzbek friends for calling it either tadžikskij, or uzbekskij, plov.

In the company of Armenians, Karen Nikitich preferred to speak Armenian; he was a staunch purist of his mother tongue, carefully avoiding foreign words and calques, and becoming upset if someone spoke non-normative language or used, inter alia, Russian terms or expressions.

Karen Yuzbashian was born in 1927 in Yerevan, to a family of hereditary intellectuals, expatriates from Shushi in Karabagh, one of the main Armenian cultural centres in Transcaucasia. After graduating from school in Yerevan, he became a student of the Faculty of History at Yerevan State University. Soon after, in 1947, he left and continued his study at Leningrad University. Upon graduation, he was engaged by Orbeli as a researcher at the Leningrad Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, where he worked until his death.

No doubt, Prof. Yuzbashian’s scholarly work will be analysed and duly evaluated by his disciples, the experts of the field. These lines are just a tribute to the memory of my senior friend, whom I sincerely loved, though often disagreeing with him on most national and political issues.

Karen Yuzbashian represented a specific era of the Soviet history, initially marked with fresh and principally new for the country atmosphere of the political thaw (the so-called Xruščëvskaya ottepel’). Despite the fact that this period was very soon changed by trends of a long-term

1 A well-known abbreviation for the Leningrad Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR (Leningradskoe Otdelenie Instituta vostokovedeniya AN SSSR).