

This article has been published in English and Armenian languages in the following newspapers.

The Armenian Reporter Intl. NY, USA. Armenian Mirror Spectator MA, USA. Armenian Weekly MA, USA. Armenian Life CA, USA. Nor Serount CA, USA. Asbarez CA, USA. Nor Or CA, USA. Massis CA, USA. Nor Hayastan CA, USA. Nor Gyank CA, USA. Arev Cairo, Egypt. H.E.M. Jerusalem, Israel. Jamanak Istanbul, Turkey. Oct.- Dec. 1997

EUROPEAN VIEWERS DEEPLY INSPIRED BY SAROYAN DOCUMENTARY

By Siran Sarian



Paul Kalinian addressing the audience

Recently, the documentary film entitled "William Saroyan: The Man, The Writer," written, directed and produced by Paul Kalinian, was proudly presented by chapters of the Armenian General Benevolent Union in six European countries: Switzerland, Italy, Austria, England, Belgium, and France. Despite the fact that the language of the film was in English, it was very well received by both Armenian and non-Armenian viewers. Readers may recall that this film has won six international film festivals awards, with five going to its creator and one to the composer of its music score. In addition the Armenian and non-Armenian press, throughout the world, has given considerable coverage on several occasions, to Kalinian's works of photography--particularly his photograph of Saroyan which was selected by the USA and the Soviet Union for their commemorative postal stamps, jointly issued in 1991.

Under the patronage of the A.G.B.U. headquarters in New York, the film began its A.G.B.U. sponsored premiers in December 1995; screenings of which are still in progress. To date, Mr. and Mrs. Paul and Araxie Kalinian have visited 22 cities in 9 countries. More than 10,000 viewers have attended the film's screenings. The Kalinians have unselfishly and eagerly offered their services to Armenians and non-Armenians alike, displaying a singular patriotic devotion that is most praiseworthy.

The recent European tour, which lasted seven weeks, began in May 1997. This time, the Kalinians were accompanied by the co-producer of the film, their daughter Susie Kalinian. They visited more than 20 historic cities, had fellowship with various Armenian communities, and returned to the US with unforgettable memories of the centuries of history that unveiled before them. On this occasion, I met with the Kalinians to discuss the premiers and the family's impressions of their tour. My primary focus was on the reactions displayed by the various Armenian communities of Europe, toward the unique phenomenon that is William Saroyan. Presented below are few excerpts from our conversation.

S.S. Welcome to the three of you. I sincerely congratulate you for your unique devotion toward the edification of our nation. My first question is directed to you, Susie. What made you accompany your parents to Europe, and what were your impressions of the young generation and the countries you visited?

S.K. Since we finished making the film in 1991, I have traveled with my parents to all premiers in California, and as my schedule would allow, to various out of state presentations as well. On this occasion, I had the opportunity to travel to Europe and the desire to see the places of history, and how far Saroyan's fame had spread. We saw much more than we expected, and were impressed from the very first screening. One thing that is characteristic of the European people is their respect for, and interest in, Saroyan, which was especially demonstrated by their presence at the film's screenings.

Wherever we went, I had the opportunity to get to know both Armenian and non-Armenian youths, and asked them what they knew about William Saroyan. Some simply said, "He's an American writer." Others said, "We've just heard his name..." A few individuals had no idea who he was, or seemed indifferent. However after the film was shown, those same persons approached me and enthusiastically exclaimed, "Now we know who William Saroyan is. We hadn't known him this well before. We are proud of him and of our being Armenian." I was very moved by their remarks.

My second desire was to see Europe, which made a deep impression on my family and I. Europe, as a whole, is one huge museum. Ancient architectural monuments are present everywhere. It's impossible to adequately describe everything. We visited more than 20 historic cities. We toured palaces, castles, fortresses and museums. We saw the masterpieces of past kings, queens, emperors, empresses, architects and artists, and experienced their legacies. We also visited Armenian churches, schools, and centers, as well as the Mekhitarist School of Venice (where writers Daniel Varoujan, Zaven Surmelian, Megerdich Beshigtashlian, composer Kurken Alemshah and other famous greats studied). We visited the Mekhitarist Monastery on St. Lazar Island (where Saroyan visited twice with his children) and saw its historically valuable museum filled with ancient Armenian treasures, which left an indelible impression upon us. It was exciting to walk the streets where Saroyan once walked and see his apartment in Paris. The huge cemetery of Pere-Lachaise was indeed an adventure. The day my father and I visited the Parisian cemetery, there was a terrific downpour. At times, we even had to take cover under the individual, alter-like, grave monuments (caveau) during our two-hour search for General Antranig's famous grave! All in all, we were greatly impressed by our tour and returned to Fresno with a huge bundle of precious memories.

S.S. I'm familiar with your numerous talents. Can you briefly tell us how you met Saroyan, and how you became collaborator on the Saroyan film?

S.K. I was 9 years old when I met Saroyan and shook his hand in my father's studio. I remember that day very well. He looked straight into my eyes and asked me my name, smiled, then twirled his mustache. Although my father always spoke about him, it wasn't until much later that I realized who William Saroyan was. After his death, when my father decided to make a film about Saroyan's life, I wanted to be part of that project. As the co-producer, I was involved with script research, costume design, make-up, casting, and public relations. After much difficulty and through my father's efforts, along with my brother Harold, the film's technical engineer, and my mother Araxie, we devoted ourselves to the completion of this film; succeeding in 1991, after working on it for 8 long years.

S.S. Araxie, I highly appreciate the tremendous work you've done with your husband, which brings honor to our nation. As the popular saying goes, "Behind every successful man is a successful woman." Araxie, for the past 6 years, you have accompanied your husband to every film screening and have made the acquaintance of numerous individuals. During this period you have toured the world, visiting 32 cities, and you're still on the move. It's been my experience that traveling to this many places is very tiresome, what with all the screenings, sightseeing, invitations, etc. All the more so, considering you suffer from arthritis. How did you manage all this? What are your impressions of these travels?

A.K. Thank you for your words of appreciation. Yes, what you say is quite accurate. This last two-month trip required packing, unpacking and repacking 10 suitcase, 20 times, boarding and deplaning 34 times, etc. All this effort would have been tiresome and simply too much, if it hadn't been for the assistance of the sponsoring organizations. Wherever we visited, we were warmly received by the local organizing committee. In many places, we didn't even have to bother with our luggage. I had such a pleasant time with the women that I met, it felt like we were old friends. The three of us didn't feel our tiredness, thanks to the exceptional way we were treated and the receptions we were provided; an intangible service that money can't buy. The only discomfort that bothered me was the pain in my knees, which was alleviated through medicine.

The people and the atmosphere of each city we visited, made a unique impression on us, particularly those people whom we had the opportunity and pleasure to meet. On this occasion we would like to express our thanks and appreciation to all the societies and organizations who invited us, the special respect and hospitality they afforded us, and for taking us to and from the airport.



From left, Paul, his wife Araxie and thier daughter Susie Kanlinian

S.S. Mr. Kalinian, what were your impressions of the screenings? Did the audience have difficulty understanding the film on account of it being in English? What influence did Saroyan have on people? Could you explain how the film was received?

P.K. The A.G.B.U. chapters did their best to ensure the success of the screenings. However, success notwithstanding, the programs in a few cities could have been more efficient, if the people had arrived at the starting time, especially since there were non-Armenian guests present. Among invited guests were consuls, bishops, other clergymen, artists and government officials. At the start of each program, the contents of the film were explained in English, Armenian, and/or the language of the country. After the film was shown, there were bilingual interviews, and ample refreshments were served at the program's conclusion.

The fact that the film was in English did not present a problem, except in Paris where a few individuals regretted not having understood the film on account of the language. The necessity of the film being translated into French became a topic of conversation during the reception. Some were in agreement but commented on the huge expense involved. Others were against the idea, objecting that the viewer's attention would be distracted by the subtitles and the film would lose its impact. A young lady, speaking in French, said, "When Michael Jackson comes to France, he sings in English, or when Charles Aznavour goes to America, he sings in French, so why should we change Saroyan's voice. The important thing is his presence on the screen, which is more powerful than any translation. Saroyan is the symbol of our nation."

I infer from the excitement expressed by the people that Saroyan has made a profound impact on Armenians and non-Armenians alike. Particularly at a point in the film when he speaks in Armenian about his people and stresses, "I am an Armenian writer, but my language is English." Many were quite surprised to hear Saroyan speaking in Armenian.

In order to give a general idea of the viewers' impressions of the film, let me briefly share a few of their reactions and comments from each screening.

Geneva: A French woman, whose husband is Armenian, said, "I'm going to send my two children to Armenia to learn Armenian." A black woman was interested to know if it was possible to show the film in her homeland of Ethiopia. The Armenian consul, who had been invited to the program, expressed an absolute desire for the film to be shown in Armenia; particularly in light of the fact that half of Saroyan's ashes are buried there.

Milan: An Italian-Armenian woman proudly exclaimed, "Although I don't understand any English, or much Armenian, I understood the film from beginning to end." A young male Italian student said, "I was very moved by Saroyan's life. The Armenians are very attached to their roots, and they don't forget their identity." An elderly woman expressed her gratitude, "I've seen very few programs like this, will you visit again?"

Vienna: A young Greek-Armenian opera singer, inspired by Saroyan, wished for the film to be shown in her hometown of Salonika and Athens, because she said, "Saroyan is much loved in Greece." A film director recommended, "Armenian organizations must support the medium of film so that similar biographies of our famous personalities can be made."

London: An Armenian woman proudly stated, "I named my son Aram, inspired by Saroyan's book (My Name is Aram)." An Armenian teacher frankly and openly expressed her regret and disappointment for not bringing her children, saying "I left them at home this time because in the past, we have seen Armenian films of inferior quality." A young artist, deeply moved, was roundly applauded by the audience when she praised the film and Saroyan. An Armenian singer teacher and playwright expressed his appreciation of the film and emphasized, "If our own people can't appreciate our merits, then how can we expect such programs as this,"

Brussels: The Armenian consul, who was an invited guest, expressed his appreciation adding, "This film must be shown without fail in Armenia, because Saroyan loved Armenia and its people." A few senior citizens, who knew Saroyan closely, disapprovingly remarked, "Why is our nation indifferent toward this great Armenian of world renown? Especially when no other single Armenian has dared to speak and write so proudly about his people to the world at large, as Saroyan has, particularly during that bitter period when the Armenians were persecuted."

Paris: In the city where Saroyan spent latter years of his life, the Armenian pupils presented an Armenian play in our honor. An older gentleman pronounced, "You've awakened my personal memories of Saroyan. The film is an authentic interpretation of his life." A group of youths commented, "The A.G.B.U. should present other programs similar to this, and films of this quality and caliber must be shown in larger theaters, with all the artists of Paris being invited."

Marseille: The mayor, government officials and many other non-Armenians, reacted favorably to the film. Impressed by the documentary, a musician said, "The perfectly matched film's score is a separate story all to itself." After the program, my daughter Susie and I had a two-hour radio interview devoted to Saroyan and the film. With appropriate translations, we responded to numerous phone calls made in Armenian, English and French. The following day, we heard from the producer of the French show that people were frantically seeking copies of Saroyan's books and wished to see the film.

S.S. I would like to express my profound thanks and appreciation of the invaluable humanistic dedication displayed by you and your family through your work, which shall be remembered through the years. I wish you continuing success in your mission and bid you bon voyage. My last question is, where will your next tour take you?

P.K. An artist's spiritual reward is appreciation and understanding; I thank you for both. On behalf of myself and my family, I would like to extend my thanks for your time and the sincere interest you have shown in Saroyan. We also wish to thank A.G.B.U. President Mrs. Louise Manoogian Simone, Chapter Activity Director Mrs. Anita Anserian, and all the presidents and members of the branches, who sponsor and meticulously organize these beneficial programs. I believe that film is the best medium by which to acquaint non-Armenians with the Armenian people and culture. This is the only tested and proven means which other peoples use to familiarize the world about themselves. Why shouldn't we do the same?

God willing, before the end of this year we are scheduled to visit Western Canada and cities on the East Coast of the United States. Next year will take us to the Middle East, South America, and Armenia.

As we have done in the past, likewise we take this opportunity to inform those organizations wishing to sponsor a screening of the documentary film, "William Saroyan: The Man, The Writer" to reserve their future selected date(s) prior to the end of 1998. Proceeds from the screening of the film will be donated to the sponsoring organization.