

HAROLD M. KESHISHIAN, 81

The expert's expert on oriental rugs, carpets

By **MATT SCHUDEL**
Washington Post Staff Writer

For years, on the first Saturday of each month, Harold M. Keshishian would hold court at Washington's Textile Museum. The sessions became known as Mr. Keshishian's "rug mornings," when he would describe the vibrant patterns and hues of oriental rugs and the equally colorful stories behind them.

He illustrated his lectures with items from his own collection or from the vast stores of his family's business, Mark Keshishian and Sons. Mr. Keshishian, who died July 23 of leukemia at his home in the District at 81, grew up in the rug trade. His family has been furnishing the carpets that cover Washington's most distinguished floors since 1931, and he brought a lifetime of knowledge to his rug mornings at the Textile Museum.

With just a glance or the educated touch of his forefinger and thumb, he could weave stories about carpets and the people and places that produced them.

"It's not enough to look at a rug," Grace Moe, who attended many of those Saturday sessions, recalled last week. "You really need to handle it. Harold had handled tens of thousands of rugs."

A 1978 *Washington Post* article described Mr. Keshishian as having "the manner of a . . . potentate" as he examined the rugs brought before him.

"Take that home and soak it in the bathtub overnight," he told one owner. "It is filthy."

He could point out treasures worth thousands of dollars or break the hearts of people who had been bamboozled in a foreign bazaar. Once, when someone presented a carpet he believed was handmade, Mr. Keshishian declared it virtually worthless: "It was made in Belgium or Italy on a machine."

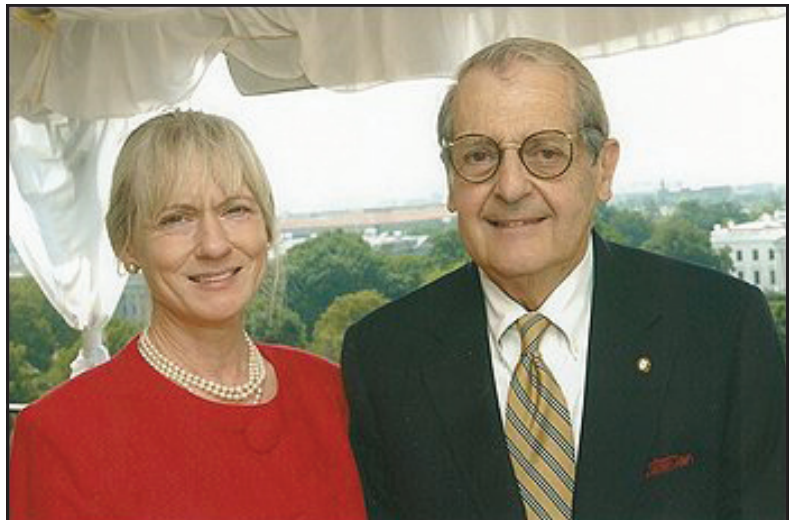
"You think so?" the man asked.

"I know so," Mr. Keshishian answered.

By studying a carpet's knots, coloring and calligraphy, he could instantly assess its provenance, naming the country, village and sometimes the exact year in which it was made.

One of his most dazzling discoveries came when he noticed something unusual about an antique Star Oushak carpet from Turkey that had spent years in a dusty attic in Georgetown. Somehow, the rug seemed familiar.

Finally, Mr. Keshishian remembered where he had seen it before: It was the same rug—or a close copy—that appeared in a celebrated 16th-century portrait of England's King Henry VIII by



Mr. Keshishian with wife Melissa McGee Keshishian at the Hay-Adams Hotel. (The White House is in the background.)

Hans Holbein.

"That was the genius of Harold," Moe said. "He was able to bring it all together because of vast knowledge of history and an almost photographic memory."

Harold Mark Keshishian was born March 20, 1929, in London, during the third step of his family's long journey into exile. His family was Armenian and had lived in the Turkish region of Anatolia for years. In 1915, a prolonged period of ethnic cleansing began, during which Armenians were forced from their homes in Turkey and often killed.

Mr. Keshishian's father, Mark Keshishian—all male members of the family have Mark as a middle name in his honor—moved his family to the Greek island of Corfu in the 1920s, then to Belgium and London. Each of his three sons was born in a different country.

The family came to New York in 1931 and settled in Washington later that year. Mark Keshishian, who first became a rug merchant in Constantinople, opened a shop in the District and, by 1935, was cleaning, repairing and selling rugs at the White House.

"Mrs. Roosevelt used to go to my father's shop at least once a month to look at carpets," John Keshishian, the eldest of the three sons, recalled last week.

Harold Keshishian, the youngest son, graduated from Woodrow Wilson High School in 1948, served in the Army and attend-



Harold Keshishian last year at Kennedy Farm in Washington County.

ed the Colorado School of Mines. In 1956, he joined his father and middle brother, James, in business.

On any given day at Keshishian and Sons, a visitor could hear seemingly half the languages of Europe and the Near East. At home, the family spoke Armenian and a patois all its own.

“My father would say something in Greek,” John Keshishian recalled, “and my mother would answer in French.”

Mark Keshishian, the family patriarch, died in 1985; James Keshishian died in 2003. The company, based in Chevy Chase, is now operated by Mr. Keshishian’s widow and nephew.

Mr. Keshishian’s first marriage, to Nancy Cornett, ended in divorce.

In addition to his brother John of McLean, survivors include his wife of 27 years, Melissa McGee Keshishian, and their three children, Kirk M. Keshishian, Christopher M. Keshishian and Jocelyn B. Keshishian, all of Washington; and a daughter from his first marriage, Elizabeth A. Keshishian-Tyler of Los Angeles.

Mr. Keshishian wrote two books on rugs and quietly did work at the White House for presidents of both parties. In the 1970s, he had a prominent role in redecorating the diplomatic reception rooms at the State Department.

He was a trustee of the Textile Museum and a consultant to embassies, the Blair House and the historic Tudor Place, Decatur House and Hillwood Estate in the District. He received a presidential appointment to the State Department’s Cultural Property

Advisory Committee in 1992 and was sometimes called on by the U.S. Customs Service to examine rugs seized from smugglers.

Proud of his Armenian heritage, Mr. Keshishian was a member of Soorp Khatch Armenian Apostolic Church in Bethesda. He had a farm in Poolesville, where he raised cattle, sheep, horses, chickens and goats and was part of a group that bought and restored the Kennedy Farmhouse in Washington County, Md., where abolitionist John Brown planned his 1859 raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, W.Va. It is now a national historic landmark.

But the strongest thread running through Mr. Keshishian’s life was his devotion to the elaborately dyed and knotted rugs that have enchanted the world for centuries.

“Harold was recognized as the expert’s expert,” said Grace Moe. “He could unravel the mystery of a rug—its history and background. Every rug was a puzzle to figure out.”



Mr. Keshishian, in an undated photo, at a reception at the State Department, where he supplied many of the rugs.