

# TOM REISS: THE ORIENTALIST

## Chamanzaminli's Son Orkhan Vazirov Counters Reiss's Tale

Introduction by  
Betty Blair

The beautiful  
watercolors of  
Baku's Old City  
have all been  
painted by Asif  
Jabrayilov.

Mobile  
(994-50) 346-6836

Lev Nussimbaum (1905-1942), who wrote under the pen name of Essad Bey, was an extremely versatile, prolific and talented storyteller. And so is Tom Reiss (USA), who wrote Lev's "biography" which was published in 2005 under the title *The Orientalist*.<sup>1</sup> On Reiss's Website (TOMREISS.info), *The Orientalist* is described as "part history, part cultural biography, and part literary mystery."<sup>2</sup> We would suggest one more term: "part truth!"

Unfortunately, in the process of "Solving the Mystery of a Strange and Dangerous Life," as the subtitle of the first American edition suggests,<sup>3</sup> Reiss seems to have slipped into a writing style which patterns itself on Essad Bey's tendency towards sensationalism. For uninitiated readers—and most people fall into this category when it comes to distant places and earlier periods of history—it was impossible to distinguish which parts of Essad Bey's books were true, which were embellished and exaggerated, and which were total figments of his imagination, created to dramatize his storyline. This was precisely the reason why *The New York Times* deemed Essad Bey's "biography" of Stalin as a "dangerous book" in 1931. [See this issue: "What Essad Bey's Critics Said"].

As of September 2010, the official Web site for *The Orientalist* at TOMREISS.info boasts 16 editions—British, Czech, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, Serbian, Portuguese (Brazilian and Continental), Spanish and U.S. (regular and large print). There is also an e-Book English edition. Turkish is said to be in the works. Publishers are being sought for Arabic and Russian, and word is circulating in Baku that there will soon be an Azerbaijani translation.

And a quick glance at World Catalog—WORLDcat.org—which identifies the vast holdings available in libraries (primarily in the United States and Europe which have joined into World Catalog), indicates that the English edition alone of *The Orientalist* is on the shelves in more than 1,000 libraries. This does not include many foreign editions and many of the foreign libraries.

Tom Reiss is quick to point out how fortunate he was to have stumbled upon some colorful characters while researching his Lev's life. He's right. Many of them were elderly and eager to tell their story. Today, most of them are gone, including: (1) Gerald Höpp (1942–2003), a German Orientalist, who should be credited with having done superb academic research about the life and works of Essad Bey; (2) Baroness Mireille von Ehrenfels (1923–2007), who managed to secure the copyright of the works of Kurban Said (pen name of the author of *Ali and Nino*) for her daughter Leela;

(3) Heinz Barazon (1914–2002), an advocate friend of the Ehrenfels' family; (4) Jenia Graman, the woman who translated *Ali and Nino* from German into English, and whose translation has become the basis for many translations; (5-6) two daughters of Baku Oil Barons, Sara Ashurbeyli (1906–2001) and Zuleykha Asadullayeva Weber (1907–2002), who as children growing up in Baku both remembered Lev Nussimbaum, and (7) Walter Loewendahl, Jr., (1920-2007), a filmmaker and brother of Essad Bey's wife Erika, and who admitted doing his best to make life miserable for Essad Bey.<sup>4</sup>

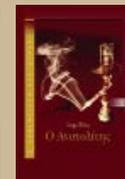
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The Orientalist by Tom Reiss  
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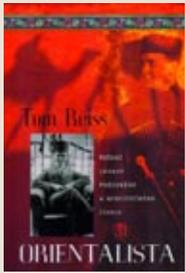
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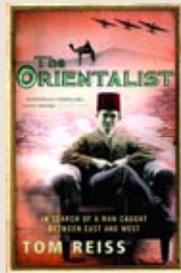
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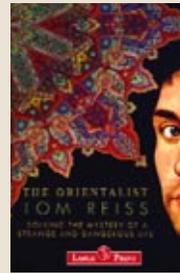
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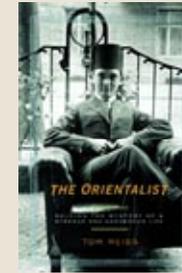
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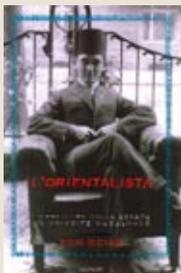
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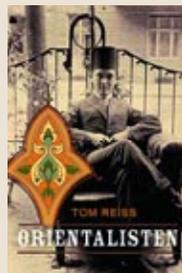
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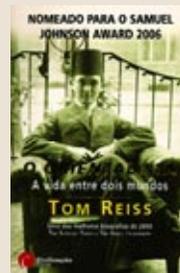
Hebrew



Italian



Norwegian



Portuguese - Europe



Serbian



Spanish

However, two individuals featured in Reiss' book were still alive when we began our research and they had serious quarrels with him, precisely because he distorted their stories to support his own sensationalist agenda. In fact, their complaints have so much legitimacy that one wonders what those who have passed away might say if only they had the chance. We interviewed Orkhan Vazirov (1928-2010) on many occasions from 2005. At

Leela Ehrenfels, who inherited the copyright for Kurban Said's books *Ali and Nino* and *Girl from the Golden Horn*, also found Reiss' portrait of her family to be irresponsibly written (Reiss paints her family as pro-Nazi, when exactly the opposite is true. Email to author, April 25, 2005). As background to Orkhan Vazirov's reaction to Reiss, it is important to understand that Tom Reiss visited Baku twice—in 1998 and 2000. Before his second visit,

In *The Orientalist*, Reiss continues to denigrate and dismiss the Vazirov connection. He does not even bother to name the two brothers as interviewees. He merely lists them "Veziroff brothers, 2000" [page 391].

Nor are either of them listed in the index. Reiss is equally dismissive about their father, the author Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli (1887–1943). There is no entry for "Vazirov" (or alternative spelling "Vezirov") or "Chaman-

**"Tom Reiss came to Baku, and when he couldn't support the article he had already written in The New Yorker, he left and made up lies."**

**Orkhan Vazirov (1928-2010), son of Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli, speaking about the interview he had with Tom Reiss in 2000.**

that time, he was the only living son of Yusif Vazir (Chamanzaminli) and he had written two books about his father's life.<sup>5</sup>

In the course of our meetings with him, he mentioned that Tom Reiss, too, had visited his home. This puzzled us because *The Orientalist* describes their meeting having taken place in the Interpol office in Baku. That prompted us to check if there were other discrepancies as well. Sadly, there were.

Reiss' account is full of inaccuracies and even distortions to the point of absurdity. With Orkhan's consent, we publish his reaction to Reiss' book here. Orkhan passed away in February 2010. But we had prepared this article in 2007 and translated his comments back to him to be absolute sure they were accurate and that he approved. He did.

Tom Reiss had published an article in *The New Yorker*,<sup>6</sup> one of America's most prestigious literary magazines, where he identified Lev Nussimbaum as Kurban Said, the author of *Ali and Nino*. Without the association with this famous book, Essad Bey essentially is a minor writer despite how prolific he was.

But it was after Reiss had published his article and was exploring the possibility of expanding it into a book format that he returned to Baku and interviewed the two sons of Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli—Fikrat (1929-2004) and Orkhan. In other words, Tom Reiss had already built his reputation as the biographer of Essad Bey before he thoroughly examined the authorship issue of *Ali and Nino*. Lev Nussimbaum is only a minor literary figure if he is not the core writer of this novel because his other books have been dismissed by critics as having little regard for truth.

zaminli" (alternative spelling "Chemenzeminli") in the index, although he is briefly discussed in the text. Instead, he is listed in a sub-entry under the strange heading: "Said Kurban (Lev Nussimbaum)." There he is listed: "Josef Vezir as" and pages xv and 217 are referenced [Index, NY: 2005, p. 430]. But Yusif Vazir was never—"as" Lev Nussimbaum—so the listing is totally misleading.

Chamanzaminli, whom we are convinced is the core author of *Ali and Nino* deserves far more attention and certainly more honest scholarship than Reiss's sweeping dismissal. Here is Reiss's recollection of his conversation with Orkhan Vazirov, who describes the encounter quite differently and concludes that Reiss lied about the meeting that took place between them.

Tom Reiss

Author,  
The Orientalist



*The Orientalist*, preface xiv

Another day, I visited the National Literary Society, a Stalin-era building.

where the chairman...

filled me in on the simmering dispute in Azeri academic and government circles over the novel's authorship. Kurban Said's identity had long been a subject of speculation, he explained, but fortunately, the issue had now been resolved.

Orkhan Vazirov

Son of  
Yusif Vazir  
Chamanzaminli



If he means the Writers' Union building, then it was built long before the Stalin era."

In 1994, a discussion was held in the Nizami Literature Institute. Most of the participants supported the opinion that Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli (YVC) was the author of *Ali and Nino*. A decision was made to grant permission to publish the novel under his name.

Then in April 1996, the Azerbaijan Writers' Union decided to discuss the authorship question. Distinguished figures in the literary world participated: Anar, Husein Abbaszade, Gabil, Gilman Ilkin, Famil Mehdi, Sabir Ahmadli, Nariman Hasanzade, Panah Khalilov, Kamil Valiyev, Academician Kamal Talibzade, A. Sarajli, Magsud Hajiyev, researcher Ramiz Abutalibov, and Orkhan and Fikrat Vazirov, sons of Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli. Again, at this session, they confirmed Chamanzaminli as author.<sup>8</sup>

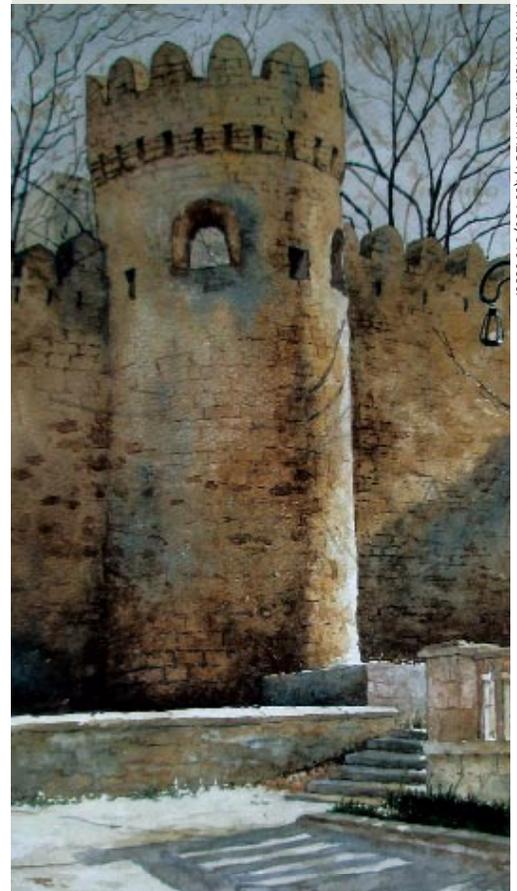
Betty Blair

Editor,  
Azerbaijan International



The Writers' Union building (Khagani Street opposite the park which used to be named after 26 Commissars until 2009) is quite ornate, which generally signals that it was built prior to the Soviet period.<sup>7</sup> Here Reiss interweaves trappings from the Cold War by referencing the Stalin era, but it simply isn't true.

The Chairman of the Writers' Union, whom Reiss does not bother to name—either in the text, index, or in his list of people he interviewed—happens to be one of Azerbaijan's most distinguished and reputable authors—"Anar." By not naming him, Reiss diminishes Anar's authority, enabling him more easily to dismiss comments that follow about the endorsement of Chamanzaminli's authorship.



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“Kurban Said was the pseudonym for Josef Vezir, an Azeri author whose sons, the Veziroffs had been very active in making sure his memory was preserved and that he receive credit for Azerbaijan’s national novel.

“But when I got a copy of some short stories and novellas by Vezir...

“Veziroff?” We have never spelled our family name via “-off,” nor did our father Yusif Vazir. No, it’s Vazirov (“-ov” ending). But abroad, they sometimes use “-off.”

I showed Reiss some documents that linked my father directly to *Ali and Nino*; for example, his short story entitled “Gurban” [“Kurban” via Russian,] as in the pseudonym for the author of *Ali and Nino*.

I also showed part him a copy of the 1904 student newspaper *Fokusnik* in Shusha with the article about Griboyedov [the Russian diplomat who was murdered in Tehran and whose young wife named Nino is featured in *Ali and Nino* when they visit Tbilisi]. My father had drawn the portrait of Griboyedov.

And I showed him the part about Sheikh Shamil (1797-1871) because my father had been in St. Petersburg in 1909 for the 50th Jubilee of Shamil’s surrender and had written an article about this North Caucasus resistance leader against the Russians.

I also showed him a poem that my grandfather had written for my grandmother using the pseudonym “Seyid” or “Said.” “Seyid” designates someone who is descended from the Prophet Mohammad, which is considered to be sacred lineage. My father was “seyid.” The pseudonym “Kurban Said” for *Ali and Nino* could mean “Happy Sacrifice.” But the word “Seyid” [Kurban Seyid] makes even more sense. YVC always referred to himself as a “sacrifice.”

Reiss has spelled all the dozen or so Azerbaijani names in his text the standardized way via “-ov” except for “Veziroff.” The “-off” ending would generally be viewed as obsolete, and somehow a bit pompous and pretentious, especially now that Azerbaijan has gained its independence.

The use of the suffix “-off” affixed to family names dates back to the Russian Empire (early 1800s) when Russian or Russianized names were transliterated into Western languages. The practice generally died out around the mid-1900s.

Novellas? Chamanzaminli (YVC) did not write any novellas according to Dr. Tofiq Huseinoglu, a professor at Baku State University in the Literature Department, who has been researching the life and works of YVC since the 1970s. In 2005, Tofiq edited three volumes of YVC’s works, totaling nearly 1500 pages.

YVC has no novellas—only novels, short stories, diaries, plays, essays and a few short poems. YVC wrote full-length novels.

Tom Reiss



Author,  
The Orientalist

"I was surprised that anyone could give this theory credence, Vezir was clearly an ardent Azeri nationalist....

Vazirov



Son of  
Yusif Vazir  
Chamanzaminli

But *Ali and Nino* is a patriotic book. Only a patriot could have written it.

Betty Blair



Editor,  
Azerbaijan International

Yes, Chamanzaminli was a nationalist, but not in the narrow pejorative sense of the word that Reiss implies here—not as a chauvinist or fascist.

Consider the setting for the novel *Ali and Nino*. In 1918, Azerbaijan had just declared its independence from the Russian Empire and was attempting to crawl out from under the enormous yoke of imperialism and occupation from which they had suffered for more than a century.

Chamanzaminli was trying to challenge fellow citizens. He wanted them to rise up, become educated and make wise decisions so they could protect their hard-earned independence. He trumpeted education, especially for women.

He created his own Latin-based alphabet (while still in high school) because he felt the Arabic script was a deterrent to progress. He pushed for the creation of a national library and started a campaign to collect books for it.

He advocated for the use of the Mother tongue, and urged the intelligentsia to speak in a language that could be easily understood by the masses.

He even proposed a competition to create a national anthem. If this is the definition of "nationalism," then certainly YVC deserves to be at the top of the list.



SCENES FROM OLD CITY, BAKU (ICHARI SHAHAR), ARTIST: ASIF JABRAYILOV.

"whose novellas openly stated that ethnic and cultural mixing was a bad idea and a betrayal of the Motherland.

In *Ali and Nino*, Kurban Said offers nothing less than a passionate endorsement of ethnic, cultural and religious mixing...

"The warmest passages in the novel describe the cosmopolitan Caucasus on the eve of the revolution—when a hundred races and all the major religious groups fought together only in battles of poetry in the marketplace, and the message seems to be that the separation of peoples is hideous and genocidal...

My father's works have only been published in Russian or Azeri languages which Reiss doesn't know. He would have had to consult someone to understand them.

Yes, there were such arguments in the marketplaces, but mostly they would have taken place in the "chaykhanas" (tea houses).

Chamanzaminli never wrote that ethnic and cultural mixing was a bad idea or a betrayal of the Motherland. YVC continuously wrote in his diaries that he hated the prejudice and discrimination that emanated from stereotypes of nationality and religion.

This is true, but so do Chamanzaminli's diaries (1905-1909), which are extremely close in tone and substance to *Ali and Nino*.<sup>9</sup>

Baku was a cosmopolitan city at the beginning of the 20th century, but certainly there could hardly have been 100 races. The truth is that YVC championed diversity. He never wrote about it as being hideous or genocidal.

A few nights later, while I was supposed to be in a disco hanging out with young oil boomers from London and Moscow, I convinced Fuad [Akhundov] to let me use the Interpol offices to interview one of the Veziroff brothers.

The brother had gone so far as to appear before the Azeri Parliament to insist that his father had written *Ali and Nino*...

and that the scenes about inter-ethnic love had been slipped in by a malicious translator...

What is he talking about? I don't even know where the Interpol office is. I don't know what building he's talking about. Interpol? Where? What is the address?

No, Tom Reiss came to my house with Fuad Akhundov and met me right here in my own living room. We had tea together and talked. My wife even baked a cake.

Reiss came to Baku on two occasions (1998 and 2000), but my brother Fikrat and I met with him only once on his second trip. He met with my brother Fikrat [1929-2004] separately at his home because Fikrat had a lot of archival material there.

What a ridiculous comment! Could we do such a thing? Address Parliament ourselves? Is it possible for us to do that? We couldn't even imagine doing such a thing. Besides, the Writers' Union had already confirmed Chamanzaminli's authorship. It would have been their responsibility to address Parliament if they had felt the need."

We never said that. We could never have said that. It's impossible. In my father's novel *Students*, you can find students falling in love with girls from Russia and various other nationalities. Reiss doesn't know *Students*.



Chamanzaminli's diaries reveal a continuous fascination for "foreign" women, whether they were Russian or Jewish. One was even Ossetian. He even plays with combining his name, "Yusif," with theirs; as in Berta (Yubert), Olga (Olyus) and Leyla (Leyus). The prototype for Nino can be found in Chamanzaminli's diaries. She was a Jewish girl that he met in 1907 in Ashgabad. See article in this issue.

It wasn't that YVC didn't like Azerbaijani girls. But they were very hard to meet since they were kept isolated, veiled, forbidden to circulate alone, and usually uneducated, unlike the girls of other nationalities. That's one of the reasons why YVC advocated for women's education for Azerbaijanis.

Chamanzaminli's novels also support his interests in intercultural relationships, especially in "Students" (written 1931-1934) and *Between Two Fires* (written 1936-1937).

The word "interrogation" is especially painful to Orkhan. In 1940 when he was about 12 years old, his father had been interrogated and tortured for six months by the NKVD (forerunners of KGB). In the end, they sentenced him to eight years of forced labor. The tragic result was that YVC died under extremely harsh conditions—hungry, ill, separated from family, and broken-hearted—in January 1943 in a prison camp near Moscow. Orkhan, his brother and sister were left fatherless, and his mother became a young widow. And it had all started with "interrogations."



had the vague hope that the atmosphere of the interrogation room might help get at the truth...

Who is Tom Reiss to interrogate me? Who does he think he is? Who is he to think that I have to explain anything to him?

Tom Reiss



Author,  
*The Orientalist*

However, my meeting with the bald, serious fellow in a sagging gray Soviet-style suit produced only an endless stream of documentation that proved nothing, but that most everyone in Baku wanted to claim the novel for his or her own reasons.”

Vazirov



Son of  
Yusif Vazir  
Chamanzaminli

Is there such chaos in this city [Baku], that anybody and everybody could dare make such claims of being the author of *Ali and Nino*?

Tom didn't refute my arguments. He said that he would go the next day to the Manuscripts Institute where there is a substantial collection of YVC's works, but he never showed up.

Simply, Reiss came here to Azerbaijan to try to find proof for what he had already written in *The New Yorker*, and when he couldn't find it, he left and made up these lies.

Betty Blair



Editor,  
Azerbaijan International

In Baku, there are basically only two contenders for the authorship of the novel *Ali and Nino*. Either Yusif Vazir (Chamanzaminli) or Lev Nussimbaum (Essad Bey). There are no other Azerbaijani writers under serious consideration: Grigol Robakidze was Georgian, and Baroness Elfriede Ehrenfels, Austrian. But their work seems to be peripheral to the core of the novel.

Simply Reiss dismisses Chamanzaminli without seriously examining his work or life. But without the authorship of *Ali and Nino*, Essad Bey has no serious claims to fame, as his works have nearly all been discredited and most have passed into deserved oblivion. ■



MAIDENS TOWER, BAKU, ARTIST: ASIF JABRAYILOV (994-50) 346-6836.



ASIF JABRAYILOV



ASIF JABRAYILOV

**Endnotes**

- 1 Tom Reiss, *The Orientalist: Solving the Mystery of a Strange and Dangerous Life* (New York: Random House, 2005), 433 pages.
- 2 "Part history, part cultural biography, and part literary mystery" is the introductory statement directly from the Website: TOMREISS.info under category, "The Book."
- 3 The subtitles of the foreign editions of *The Orientalist* vary in degrees of sensationalism, for example, British: *In Search of a Man Caught Between East and West*; Portuguese: *A Vida Entre Dois Mundos (A Life Between Two Worlds)*; German: *Auf den Spuren von Essad Bey (On the Trail of Essad Bey)*; Italian: *L'Ebreo che Volle Essere un Principe Musulmano (The Jew Who Wanted to Be a Muslim Prince)*; Dutch: *Een Reiziger uit de Oriënt: Over het verborgen leven van de schrijver van Ali en Nino (A Traveler from the Orient: The Hidden Life of the Writer of Ali and Nino)*.
- 4 Reiss, p. 281.
- 5 "Orkhan Vazirov, *Atam Yusif Vəzir Çəmənəmənli haqqında (About My Father Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli)*

- Baku: Azerneshr, 1997, 120 pages; and *Azərbaycan Respublikasının Ukrayna və Türkiyədəki ilk səfiri (Azerbaijan's First Ambassador to Ukraine and Turkey)*. Baku: Nargiz Publishers, 2007, 311 pages.
- 6 Tom Reiss, "The Man From the East" in *The New Yorker* (October 4, 1999), Vol. 75, No. 29, pp. 68-83.
- 7 "Architecture of the Oil Baron Period, Introduction by Blair: Distinguishing Features of the Oil Baron Period," in *Azerbaijan International*, Vol. 6:4 (Winter 1998), p. 29.
- 8 Orkhan Vazirov, *Azərbaycan Respublikasının Ukrayna və Türkiyədəki ilk səfiri (Azerbaijan's First Ambassador to Ukraine and Turkey)*(Baku: Nargiz, 2007), 197 pages.
- 9 Leyla Majidgizi Imamaliyeva, *Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli: Diarilər, Minutes for Myself, from Fokusnik (Eastern Tale), Altunsach (Girl from the Golden Horn)*. Editor: Tofiq Huseinoghlu (Baku: Azemashr, 2001).  
*Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli, "Diary of a Youth," in Works (in Azeri)*. Ed: Tofiq Huseinoghlu, Vol. 3 (Baku: Avrasiya Press, 2005). ■



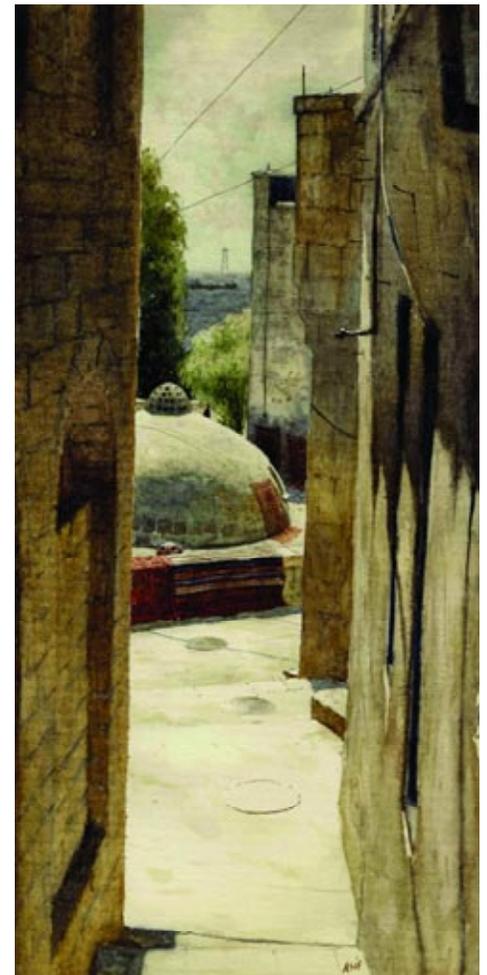
SCENES FROM OLD CITY, BAKU - ICHARI SHAHAR. ARTIST: ASIF JABRAYILOV



MOSQUE AT THE SHIRVANSHAH'S PALACE, OLD CITY, BAKU. ARTIST: ASIF JABRAYILOV



ASIF JABRAYILOV



ARTIST: ASIF JABRAYILOV