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SANS FRONTIÈRES

On ferme !



There are a number of valuable Armenian properties around the world which have played a historic role in preserving Armenian heritage. But with the change in the demographic profile in the countries where those properties are located, the institutions have outlived their usefulness.

The educational mission of the Mekhitarist Order has disintegrated because of the paucity of young clergy recruits. On the other hand, the once-burgeoning Armenian community in India has all but disappeared, leaving behind an island in the form of the Calcutta Philanthropic Academy.

But there are institutions whose viability and relevance to their respective communities continued to justify their existence and their mission and they, also, have been abandoned prematurely.

One such property is the Melkonian Educational Institute in Nicosia, Cyprus. That institute has been “abandoned” in the sense that its mission is no longer contributing to the preservation of the Armenian heritage.

Melkonian’s creation was a response to a catastrophic crisis and it continued to provide solutions throughout its history, every time a crisis erupted in various Armenian communities.

Following the 1915 Genocide, hundreds of thousands of Armenian orphans were left destitute in the desert or at the mercy of foreign charitable organizations. Patriarch Zaven Der Yeghiayan of Istanbul gathered 300 such orphans to house them at the Melkonian Institute; the school originally acted as an orphanage before changing its mission to that of a boarding school. In later years, it housed and educated students escaping the Iranian revolution or the Lebanese civil war.

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The institute was ideally located on the island of Cyprus to continue in its role as a safe harbor as other crises plagued Armenian communities in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere.

In time, the institute became a center for academic learning and the names of many noted scholars, writers, philosophers were connected with it, such as poet Vahan Tekeyan, Hagop Oshagan, Vahe Vahian, Kersam Aharonian, Hagop Topjian, Krikor Guiragossian, Moushegh Ishkhan and many others.

Melkonian graduates eventually took over the intellectual life of much of the diaspora, shaping the lives and minds of their fellow Armenians.

The institute was founded by benefactors Garabed and Krikor Melkonian, brothers from Egypt. They liquidated their large tobacco business to create an endowment which initially was entrusted to the Istanbul Patriarchate. However, through the efforts of some prominent Armenian leaders, including Archbishop Mushegh Seropian, the endowment was diverted away from Turkey and entrusted to the Armenian General Benevolent Union, which carried out the school's educational mission eminently, until its demise in 2005.

The closure of the Melkonian touched off a public uproar; in particular, the alumni mobilized and organized to keep the doors open, but to no avail.

The Melkonian had not suffered a drop in enrollment nor experienced difficulty in recruiting educators and it maintained reputable academic standards. However, AGBU officials said that the school was unable to keep up its standards and deserved to be shuttered.

Topics: AGBU, Armenian Diaspora, Armenian Properties, Literature, Melkonian Educational Institute

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‘Abandoned’ Armenian Properties around the World

In addition, the school had an endowment fund and had the responsibility of abiding by the terms of the Melkonian brothers’ wills.

Besides, thanks to the visionary leadership of Haigashen Ouzounian, an intellectual leader of the AGBU, income-bearing office buildings were constructed on the school’s campus. Public records indicate that in recent years, the Melkonian Commercial Center produced an annual income of $650,000.

The Cypriot government was also supporting the school and there was potential for further subsidies. If there is a discrepancy in the math, where then is the responsibility of the leadership to raise funds?

Melkonian's closure in 2005 almost coincided with Cyprus joining the European Union which took place in 2004 and resulted in two particularly damaging missteps. The European Union had designated Western Armenian as an endangered language; therefore funds would be forthcoming for its preservation, as Melkonian was a major educational center in Europe, besides some failing schools in Greece. In preparation to join the Union, the Cypriot government was highlighting its focus on minority rights, in compliance with Europe's standards. The status of the Armenian community and other minorities was to serve as credentials for the government's minority policy but the closure of Melkonian at that delicate moment served as a stab in the back. So much for the political prudence of the AGBU leadership.

The retaliation was not delayed as the government took part of the Melkonian campus by eminent domain to handicap the sale of the entire property, which at that time, was quoted to be worth $80 million, thanks to the urban sprawl of Nicosia's suburbs.

Melkonian's demise still remains a hotly-debated controversy. Many reasons and speculations are being thrown back and forth. The leadership of the AGBU has not come up with a plausible explanation and in its absence, many people are left to draw their own conclusions.

The main argument seems to be the lucrative potential of the sale of the property.

When the late Patriarch Mesrob Mutafyan decided to sue the AGBU on the grounds that the original intent of the Melkonians' will was to entrust it to the Istanbul Patriarchate, we were all alarmed at the potential transfer of the property to the jurisdiction of an entity in Turkey.

If today the Patriarch were alive, it would be within his right to question the AGBU leadership about the whereabouts of the endowment fund and the use of its income.

In 1974, Turkey's President Bulent Ecevit launched an act of aggression against Cyprus, and in his determination to intimidate the Greek people, he also targeted the Armenians.

During that act of aggression, the Melkonian school was purposely bombed by the Turkish

Air Force because it had been a shining star of Armenian education throughout its history and Turks have always abhorred Armenian educational institutes.

There is an anecdote about Sultan Abdul Hamid who has said that “I am more afraid of the Mekhitarist printing press [churning out scholarly books] than the bombs of Armenian ‘terrorists.’”

Thus, Ecevit had to outdo the destructive task of his predecessors.

Unfortunately, those who turned off the lights at Melkonian became inadvertent accomplices.

The Melkonian property has not been sold yet, therefore it is safe to assume that greed is not one of the reasons for its demise.

But even worse, there is apparently a reversal of the educational mission and philosophy among the AGBU leadership, particularly in the mindset of its current president, my respected friend, Berge Setrakian.

The late Alex Manoogian, throughout his presidency of the AGBU (1953-1989), allocated his own resources and inspired other benefactors to contribute to the development of the educational mission of the organization; benefactors like Hussisian, Nazarian, Kouyoumjian, Zaroukian, Hanessian and Bazarian joined his drive to expand the network of the schools in the Diaspora.

With the current leadership of the AGBU, the trend has been reversed. Therefore, Melkonian was just the tip of the iceberg as other schools have met the same fate. The AGBU closed the Bazarian School in Sao Paolo, Brazil and the Zaroukian School in Toronto, Canada. The axe was over the Manoogian school in Detroit before it became a charter school funded by the state.

The Kalpakian School in Athens and the Sydney School in Australia are slated to be closed.

As well, the AGBU School in Watertown had closed in the 1990s.

The fact that all the schools started by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) camp in the same communities are burgeoning is proof that there is no dearth of students nor funding in the respective communities. That leaves the AGBU leadership open to be accused

of lack of vision, lack of commitment to our heritage and lack of know-how to run educational institutions.

The current educational philosophy of the AGBU leadership is — and that is enunciated proudly — that preserving the Armenian heritage is tantamount to containing those communities in ghettos and that closing schools is a form of emancipation in the present globalized world.

Should we hesitate to call this campaign to close down schools a betrayal of our heritage?

The Melkonian Educational Institute is not yet an “abandoned” property but it looks like it’s on its way.

This destructive drive is being conducted with impunity, under the belief that the diaspora is disintegrating and will reach a point where there will no longer be an authority seeking accountability and no public to be incensed.

(Part III of this subject will appear next week.)

source : The mirrorspectator