

## BREACH OF ETHICS AND BETRAYAL OF TRUST

The AGBU Central Board "discontinues" the Melkonian Educational Institute

### CONTEXT

The announcement to close down the Melkonian Educational Institute should have come as no surprise. After all, hadn't the Central Board of the AGBU duly prepared us for the news by its repeated affirmations that all such "rumors" were false and unfounded? Haven't we all mastered the art of looking for the truth precisely in the *denials* that official sources make? And yet the announcement, when it came in the form of a short press release accompanied by a lengthy position paper outlining the Central Board's stand on the issue, not only surprised people, but sent shock waves of revolt and disgust through every concerned and responsible Armenian. The death warrant had been signed of an institution of immeasurable educational and *symbolic* value. A cultural icon was being deemed irrelevant. The importance of all that we value and cherish as Diaspora Armenians was being called into question. The letter and spirit of a will entrusted to the AGBU violated. A national legacy written off.

And so apathy, which had characterized reaction to previous unwise decisions concerning the MEI by the Central Board, gave way to revulsion and condemnation across the board. The line had been crossed. This was something beyond the reach of our imaginations and the cold calculations of pragmatism. No amount of dollars pumped into the coffers of the Central Board from the proposed sale of the school can now save it from the public disgrace into which it has fallen.

But first things first. A careful reading of the two press releases from the Central Board on the issue, the first dated November 14 2003, and the second March 16 2004, reveals a subtle, dishonest play on words. The first denies as "*unfounded*" rumors concerning the sale of the property of the school. "*Land, facilities and financial conditions of MEI are not the primary concerns of the Central Board at this time, and will not be determinants in setting future directions for the school*". The second press release announces that the school is being "*discontinued*", and that the decision is not driven by financial considerations (primarily), but rather a conviction on the part of the Board that the school "*no longer meets the challenges of its mission in the present context of the Armenian world*."

Let us for a moment naively assume that the two issues are indeed not related, as the Central Board would have us believe, and examine how the MEI fails to meet the challenges of its mission in the present context. For that we have to examine the position paper entitled "*MELKONIAN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTE -*

*AGBU's Commitment to Education: Placing MEI in Context*", which was released simultaneously with the announcement of the discontinuation of the school. Let us indeed put matters "in context".

## **SOME CONGRATULATIONS, BUT MOSTLY REPRIMANDS, THREATS AND WARNINGS**

The section in the position paper entitled **AGBU Educational Mission Today** sets the tone of the Central Board's position, and that *tone* is perhaps more indicative of Central Board intentions than the actual information that one finds in the document. The attitude is that of a disinterested bank loan manager, and not even a concerned and charitable NGO. Clear prerequisites are outlined for AGBU support, and there is absolutely no sense of ownership by the Central Board regarding its own schools. Rather, a "Big Brother is watching you" approach. If you keep up local academic standards, if your enrollment levels are sufficient, if you are financially self-supportive, then we will lend you a helping hand. (One has to wonder why an institution that is fiscally independent would need AGBU's support, but let's move on). The Los Angeles and Aleppo schools are lauded for their high number of student enrollment, and support from local communities. Some schools are handed warnings, others, clear threats of closure. And AGBU's *mission* in education cited in the title? It escaped me even after several readings.

In one passing comment we read the following, "*Opportunities to merge Armenian schools in some communities should also be explored, our priority being the survival of Armenian education rather than the short-sighted promotion of any given school.*"

No harm in unifying resources in different segments of an Armenian community to promote the survival of Armenian education. Granted. But this is the only reference to any relationship AGBU schools may have with *Armenian* education.

Beyond enrollment levels, beyond financial self-sufficiency, beyond meeting local standards of education, what does the Central Board see as a *distinguishing factor* of AGBU schools? What purpose are they supposed to serve? Should there be an emphasis on Armenian language, history and literature, beyond a general imbuing of a sense of identity and heritage? This paper affords no clarifications on these issues. Even the contribution of day schools to that effect is called into question. "*...whereas the promotion and preservation of the Armenian identity may, at certain times, be appropriately served through the establishment of schools, at other times such goals may require the implementation of alternative programs.*"

So only at certain times does a day school serve the purpose of promoting and preserving Armenian identity. And how does the Central Board *define* what that identity entails? No clue.

How we define, how we negotiate our individual and collective identities and what it means to be Armenian, cannot be the exclusive prerogative of a few individuals with decision-making powers. Does our Armenian identity necessitate preserving the Western Armenian language? Or just imbuing children with a sense of pride in being Armenian? The spectrum has endless possibilities. This is a policy issue of utmost importance, yet the position paper has little to say on the matter.

Perhaps the following sentence gives a hint of intentions. "*...it has become paramount for the organization to reexamine the extent to which the schools today fulfill AGBU's education mission.*" Today the Melkonian, tomorrow....

### **NO IDEOLOGICAL TRANSPARENCY**

The paper posits as one of the strengths of the AGBU its ability to adapt to the changing needs of generations of Armenians throughout the last century, and focusing its areas of operation accordingly. The organization, reflecting the needs of Armenians, has evolved from an orphanage-building charity to one that provides scholarship and internship programs and supports "Young Professional" groups. By this reasoning, the paper argues that the AGBU should "*...establish programs driven by evolving concerns and requirements.*" The current youth has different needs from that of a generation ago. Only ten percent of Armenian children in the Diaspora (statistics cited in the paper) attend Armenian schools. And so, the AGBU Central Board should look into alternative programs, and views education "*... in the broadest of terms, beyond academia, and as an activity for all age groups.*"

How seriously has the Central Board assessed the needs and priorities of youth in North America and beyond? Yes there is a pattern of integration and assimilation this side of the Atlantic, but is that a model to be followed? Conditions are hugely different even when we compare the US to the situation in Canada, where the government strongly supports multiculturalism, let alone with circumstances in the Middle East, South America or Europe. Should we not leave room for different approaches within different Diaspora communities and geopolitical settings?

Furthermore, from a leadership perspective, doesn't the AGBU Central Board also carry the obligation and responsibility to direct and guide "*evolving concerns and requirements?*" If an organization of the magnitude of the AGBU absolves itself of such duty and wishes to float simply by following changing trends, it is condemnable. The AGBU Central Board manages the Diaspora's largest

humanitarian organization; it can not simply be a follower and adapt itself in order to survive. It has to lead by example; it has to guide; and it has to *set* trends.

The AGBU is not a democratically governed organization \_ as few Diaspora organizations are \_ and hardly needs to create a general consensus among its members for the decisions and policies it espouses. It is certainly governed by a top-down style of management and has always been. However, the visionary leadership, dedication and commitment of past presidents and Boards did not call into question intentions and hidden agendas – and hardly left a need for such authentication. The current leadership lacks vision and far-sightedness. It has adopted an extremely high-handed approach, and is out of touch with the aspirations and priorities of its member base. The ideological directives and guiding principles of the Central Board have become moot and murky.

### **THE CASE AGAINST MELKONIAN**

The reasons to discontinue the MEI are driven by pragmatism, if we disregard the financial implications of the sale of the school. Yet pragmatism should always be practiced against a backdrop of clear ethical guidelines, at least when dealing with national issues and funds and properties bequeathed “in trust”.

The position paper acknowledges the invaluable contribution the MEI has had in providing Armenian communities with cadres of writers, editors, community leaders and teachers. However, *“In the mid-1970’s”*, the argument continues, *“MEI experienced increasing difficulty in attracting students and in balancing constant deficits.”* This is one piece of flawed logic among many. The argument assumes, and this continues in the analyses of the 80’s and 90’s, that there is a direct correlation between enrollment numbers and balancing budgets at MEI. We are told that *“In 2002, only 18 percent of the MEI student body covered their costs in full, while more than 40 percent did not pay for any of their costs and another 40 percent paid only a limited portion.”*

What the paper does not elucidate is how this compares with previous years. The student body at Melkonian has never been one that could cover the astronomical cost of studying at a boarding school. Perhaps the 18 percent is a significant improvement on previous statistics. The Melkonian was *not* established to be a paid boarding school for the children of the elite and well-to-do, but precisely for needy young Armenians who would then serve their communities. This was the legacy of the Melkonian Brothers. The day that most students at Melkonian can cover the full tuition of boarding there, the school will have stopped serving the purpose for which it was established.

Changing migration trends and unstable political situations in the Middle East are cited as having had a tremendous impact on enrollment levels at the school. In the 1980's, many students enrolled at Melkonian from Lebanon and Iran due to the civil wars in those countries. The school for them was in fact more than just a school, it was a haven. Precisely for which purpose it was established in the first place.

The geopolitical situation in the Middle East remains extremely volatile, and is precarious in some Eastern European and pre Soviet-Bloc countries where there are considerable Armenian communities. The MEI can yet serve as a refuge in future upheavals, if they come to pass. Provided of course, that the school has not been developed into a commercial center in the meantime. At the present time, shouldn't the administration look into enrollment options from Iraq, for example?

Another challenge that purportedly the MEI faces today is the extreme divergence of its student body, and the difficulties this presents in providing a homogenous education to all. The student body at the MEI has always been diverse. It has shifted and changed reflecting geopolitical realities, but it has never been uniform. Just as it is a challenge to have students from Albania, Armenia, Bulgaria, Rumania and Russia, it was not less of a challenge having students from Ethiopia, Greece, Iran, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Turkey twenty years ago. The school has always been able to adapt and change (just like the AGBU), accordingly.

*"For illustration purposes"* only, a general overview of operating expenses and projected income for the academic year 2003-2004 is presented. The income from the rent revenue of the Melkonian Center is curiously absent from the picture. The land of the MEI was carved up and sold for commercial development with the reasoning of making the school financially independent and less of a burden on the Central Board. That revenue should, as was the initial promise, go directly towards covering the operational expenses of the school and yet does not even get a mention in this illustrative budget.

Around ten years ago, the MEI was in need of a principal, and ads were posted in Diaspora papers for the position, stating that knowledge of Armenian was desirable, but was not a precondition for prospective candidates. In the end a principal was appointed who knew the language, but the bug of indifference towards what the Melkonian had traditionally stood for was planted. New and modern buildings were erected to attract students of affluent parents from the West. What gave the school its unique Armenian character was overlooked and relegated to secondary status. Efforts to keep academic standards were perhaps made, but now we are informed by the Central Board, the body ultimately responsible for maintaining such standards or setting guidelines and making

resources available for their upkeep, that the school doesn't stand to scrutiny on its academic performance. Who is doing the finger-pointing here?

### **EMPTY PROMISES**

Although the AGBU Central Board still denies any intent of sale of the Melkonian estate, and insists that the current decision only refers to "discontinuing" the school as a residential facility, the position paper outlines how best to perpetuate the legacy of the Melkonian Brothers. If this does not entail the sale of the school, one has to wonder where the money for the ambitious list of alternative initiatives is going to come from.

And the proposed alternative programs? The intended sugar coating on this bitter pill? The establishment of a *"large and prominent facility"* in Armenia, to be known as the Melkonian Educational Center, which, *"....can offer programs for learning, enrichment and cultural identity to a large number of young Armenians from around the world. Such a center would house modern facilities to accommodate hundreds of individuals at any given time, thereby attracting our young generation in multitudes throughout the year"*.

Hundreds of Armenian youth will flock to this center for cultural enrichment, *"throughout the year."* These young Armenians apparently have no obligations to education or employment. It is otherwise hard to fathom this center having any visitors other than during the summer months. The ultra modern facility equipped with computers and language labs will help Diaspora Armenians get immersed in their language, culture and heritage. Will any of these extensive language courses offer Western Armenian? Or is that no longer relevant?

There are a few other tentative references to establishing a Melkonian Center for Armenian Research and Studies, the establishment of a Center for European and Ethnic Studies at the University of Cyprus, etc. These initiatives would magically meet the challenges of their missions, in a way that the Melkonian Educational Institute has not been able to do, and the funds allocated to these programs will apparently not be mismanaged, as those for the MEI were.

### **THE FELLOWSHIP OF MELKONIAN**

Melkonian marks. Boarding and studying at Melkonian is a unique kind of initiation that only a Melkoniantsi knows the meaning of, but all who have known Melkoniantsi's can appreciate. A young person first walks through those gates and is welcomed by the watchful, vigilant eyes of the Melkonian brothers, takes in the majesty of the buildings, and is transformed into another individual. Living, laughing, loving, studying, simply walking the grounds where the likes of Hagop Oshagan, Vahan Tekeyan, Vahe Vahian, Kersam Aharonian, and Moushegh

Ishkhan have walked and learnt and taught anchors every young Melkoniantsi to his past, his history, his sense of continuity; his identity and responsibility as an Armenian. The soil has absorbed their wisdom and their visions of who we can aspire to be as a nation. Anyone who has been a Melkoniantsi has soaked up that energy and has enough to last a lifetime. Our memories, our identity and belonging are strongly bonded to the physical space that is the Melkonian. No millions, no centers in Yerevan, no summer camps can replace that. And we want for new generations of Armenians, few though they may be in numbers, to forge their sense of who they are on the same grounds. To bond with the buildings, to bond with the spirit of the Melkonian brothers and then spread across the globe.

Have you witnessed the meeting of two Melkoniantsi's who have studied at the school ten, twenty, thirty years apart? Have you seen how they instantly bond? They have drunk from the same waters of inspiration.

A Melkoniantsi stands apart from the crowd. The Melkonian Educational Institute stands apart from all other Armenian institutions of secondary education in the Diaspora. It is unique and irreplaceable. And it will prevail.

Hermig Yogurtian  
Class of '81  
Montreal

- The two press releases as well as the position paper cited above are available at the AGBU official website; <http://www.agbu.org/>

