

Lord-Setrakians come and go,  
but

## **the fruits of enlightenment remain**

*On his recent visit to historic homeland the head of Armenian General Benevolent Union mister Berge Setrakian confirmed the hitherto known and most unpleasant news: in January 2005 the famous Melkonian school in Cyprus will be closed – an institution that has been one of the main centres of national enlightenment for Armenian Diaspora for nearly a century. From some of the school’s graduates of various generations, who have arrived in Yerevan for the occasion, a fact even more unpleasant became known: they will not just re-profile the school into a cultural centre – something that various optimists believed to be the case. But – the buildings will be sold.*

In 1925 brothers Karapet and Grigor Melkonian transferred under the management of AGBUnion a sum of 1.5 billion US dollars (in today’s value) – an immense amount – and formed their deed of assignment, which states that the money should be used for the purposes of educating Armenian children in Diaspora from poor families. There was also an emphasis – in their mother tongue. The school’s birth owes to the desires of the benevolent brothers. But its fame and glory it has earned over the decades without any external help. Over the past century hundreds of architects and engineers, lawyers and doctors, writers and musicians received their preliminary education here, and kept the Armenian standard high around the world.

During the meeting with Mr Setrakian at the Union of Writers of Armenia “the lords of national thinking” showed a rare unity in the attempt to avert the administration of the AGBUnion from a fatal blunder. The writers spoke about the necessity of keeping that school not only as a temple of enlightenment and as an integral part of our history, but also in the context of contemporary reality (in particular, of joining the EU), of unitising existing opportunities and even the “geographical location” of the school. In reply, Mister Setrakian demonstrated the perfected skills in demagoguery – uttering an endless sequence of conjugated words: “Hayrena...”, “Hayrenanpast”, “Hayrenacer”, “Hayrenanver” and so forth. At the end of it all, How a closure of the most famous Armenian school is equated to these “Hayrena...”, is something that is still unclear. Despite the obvious indignation, the writers kept themselves restrained, while the guest, perhaps out of a respect for status of the hosts, tried to evade the sharp edges.

Mister Setrakian’s press conference with the journalists was a lot tenser. To start with, the president of the AGBUnion was late by a good half-an-hour. But, there is no evil without good. Such a drawback presented the representatives of SMI with a splendid opportunity to consult the uninvited guests – the graduates of the Melkonian school who too came to the press conference in order to find out a coherent answer to the question “what is the real basis for the decision to close their alma mater?”. It turned out that desperate Melkoniantsis established an internet website, where among multiple accusations toward the governors of AGBUnion, is also the matter of a major financial breach. It is precisely that, according to Melkoniantsis, which is the primary reason for the closure of the school.

Mister Setrakian, naturally, did not share the same point of view. He began with a greeting speech dedicated to the development of journalism in Armenia. Then he

turned to the theme of unbelievably “Hayrenanpast-ic” activities of his Union. He was extremely surprised to find out that the Melkonian issue interests the Armenian journalists: as if, how come such a trifle can be placed at the head of the questions when the Union has an enormous mass of plans? Again, like a gentleman he composed a mere verbiage of “Hayrena...” type-set words. “Can you believe that: he arranged us and thought he could take us for fools” – some of our colleagues had the fuses blown. When mister Setrakian embarked on his argumentation, it became a lot more amusing. We were amazed by the “globalistic” frame of mind.

At the outset, it appeared that the one to blame for the closure of Melkonian is the independent Republic of Armenia, since today the epicentre of Armenian education must become Mair-Hayrenik, and not some school in Cyprus... However, there was no answer to the question whether the money of Melkonian brothers would be used for opening and support of new schools in Armenia for Diaspora children as well as for travelling and accommodation expenses of those who would desire to study in motherland. Nobody heard a reply to these questions.

The second argument was “world processes” – from changes within the system, which the Melkonian school is for some unknown reason unable to catch up with; on to changes in migration processes. “Before the school was attended by children from Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Greece since the diaspora in those countries was strong and numerous” – so was the reasoning of the president of the benevolent union – “but now since many are migrating from these countries to America, everything changed. Before our events were attended by 2000 people, and now not more than 800. Today the school has 206 students”. Why 206 students is not a good enough reason to upkeep the school, especially when it is a matter of Diaspora, of money and of the last will of mega-rich multimillionaire brothers – nothing was said about that. And yet, wouldn’t mister journalists think that they are a lot more “hayrenaver”, “hayrenaser”, “hayrenanpast”, “hayrenapasht” and so forth then the administration of the AGBU of which he is the head?

In short, it is decided: in January 2005 the school will be closed! All this would be too amusing if it was not so sad. I don’t know how many hours they spend in the next-door Turkey about patriotism, but that with the state-support they are opening Turkish schools so as to spread around the world what is Turkish “reasonable, good, eternal” – that’s already a fact.

For us, of course, these things are more difficult. We can’t find so much money as to accustom aliens to our language and culture. But should we deprive our own people of that opportunity? We have deleted the “nationality” column from the documents not for the reason of deleting it from our souls. To keep it in our souls, high slogans are not enough. Who would benefit when suddenly there will not be the famous school that has not only the enlightening, but also a historical significance? And if interfering into the private matters of the Armenian General Benevolent Union by the Armenian State is not in order, is it then not more reasonable and worth that the latter takes the school under its own guardianship? At least to such extent as the Cypriot government has done in the past. Mister Setrakians come and go, but the fruits of enlightenment remain.

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(translated by Garen Karapetyan)