



**Brick Walls around a Glass House:  
AGBU and the Melkonian**

[November 24, 2004]

**The AGBU is a house made of glass**  
*Boghos Noubar Pasha, founder and first president  
of AGBU*

**The Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) will celebrate its centennial in two years; Almost a hundred years of humanitarian and charitable work in Armenia as well as the Diaspora remarkably unscathed by scandal. No other Armenian non-profit organization has the financial means as well as the breadth and scope of the AGBU. No other Diaspora institution commands as much trust and respect. It undoubtedly has a glorious past, and may yet have an outstanding future, but its current credibility is perhaps at an all-time low.**

**To criticize the modus operandi of the present administration and to disapprove of the present direction adopted is not to discredit the immeasurable good that this organization has done and continues to do. But a brick wall is slowly rising around the glass house that Boghos Noubar Pasha built. We have to speak out before the wall gets too high and we lose sight of the organization.**

**I am a Diaspora Armenian who went to an AGBU school in Beirut (now closed), then attended the Melkonian Educational Institute (soon to be closed). My children attended the AGBU School here in Montreal , whose continued operation is also hanging from a very thin thread. The educational policies espoused by the AGBU interest me, as they interest every Armenian concerned with the preservation of the Armenian identity, language and heritage in the Diaspora.**

**Last March, after repeated denials about its sale, the AGBU Central Board announced the closure of Melkonian in June 2005. The Melkonian is important as a cultural, historical and architectural icon and not only as an educational institution. The Cypriot Government has put a preservation order on the estate and this will perhaps complicate the sale of the property. Articles are still being published in the Cypriot press and the Yerevan newspapers and television continue to discuss the matter, but the AGBU declares it a closed case. It was not on the agenda during the organization's 83 rd Annual Assembly in Yerevan last October, and privately Board members have confirmed that the Melkonian was not discussed.**

**For the past year, Melkonian alumni around the world have mobilized and are waging an ardent struggle against the AGBU in an effort to reverse the closure of the school. They argue the original will of the Melkonian Brothers confers upon the AGBU the role of trustee (not owner) and by closing the school the AGBU is contravening the terms of the will. Alumni say they are taking up the matter in court and will fight to the end. Jack Melkonian, grand nephew of the benefactor brothers, has joined the cause.**

**One has to wonder what it is about the closure of the Melkonian that has galvanized Armenians in the homeland as well as in the Diaspora to such an**

extent, and why it is that the Central Board adamantly refuses to discuss the issue any further.

The whole underhanded approach with which the Central Board has conducted the matter is perhaps one of the reasons why Melkonian alumni have been enraged so much. None of the transparency of the glass walls that Boghos Noubar Pasha cherished so much. That the AGBU is governed top-down is not new. What is new is the total disregard for public opinion and the absence of honest public discourse about the Melkonian that has marked a clear change in AGBU methods.

The justification given by the AGBU for going against the will and the wishes of the Melkonian Brothers is that Diasporan realities have changed and Armenia is an independent state. There is loose talk about opening a Melkonian Center in Armenia where Diasporan youth will spend time to be immersed in language and culture and connect to the land and people. No more details are known since nothing has been published. This is a very laudable project, but shouldn't be done at the expense of Diaspora educational institutions.

The AGBU has 24 schools around the globe yet doesn't seem to have a clear pedagogical policy, or even a central educational committee. The current thinking, if we boil it down from the elaborate explanations given in the position paper published in conjunction with the announcement to close the Melkonian seems to be the following: The Central Board supports schools that are working well, (that is, enrollment is satisfactory, academic levels are high, and the books are in the black), and questions the logic of keeping open the schools which do not meet the above criteria.

If such reasoning and a simplistic approach drive policy, closing down the Melkonian and countless other Diaspora schools becomes a foregone conclusion. Firstly, schools whose books are in the black hardly need AGBU support. While overall student numbers may be decreasing, in some communities where the AGBU schools have a dismal enrollment and the Central Board is considering discontinuing the school, other Armenian day schools are extending primary schools to secondary levels. ( Toronto is a case in point). Another important consideration, academic excellence, does not occur in a vacuum. Obviously some AGBU schools have such enviable standards and others don't. The Central Board should provide the resources necessary and charge a committee of educators with the task of discerning patterns and analyzing case studies if the success of some is to be replicated by others. If, of course, the ultimate aim is to re-haul the schools, invigorate them with fresh thinking and keep them open.

And most importantly, parents send their children to private AGBU schools in the hope of some value-added education their children cannot get elsewhere. If the present attitudes of indolence and indifference regarding Armenian curricular subjects, teacher training, and textbook preparation persist, it is inevitable that parents will not commit themselves to the extra financial burden that sending their children to an Armenian school entails.

This is where the Melkonian has enormous untapped potential. It can become that hub of higher learning in Armenian studies, and ensure the proper survival of instruction in Armenian for all other AGBU schools.

While the Central Board seems to have conducted a statistical study of how many Armenian youth in the Diaspora attend Armenian schools (a small percentage), no

**investigation has been carried out as to why some schools seem to work and others don't, and consequently adopting a model of what does work.**

**This is too ambitious a proposal perhaps since AGBU schools operate in so many different countries and what works in one situation may not work in another. But having a centralized policy for the instruction of Armenian language, literature and history is not a preposterous proposition. That is the precise *raison-d'etre* of AGBU schools.**

**Armenian day schools in the Diaspora are facing a crisis situation. With universal education available in most countries, enrollment is dwindling. The pool of Armenian teachers is not being renewed, and textbooks are in a prehistoric state compared to what is available for other subjects. (Photocopied sheets and handwritten forms are most often the norm)**

**Instead of choosing silence over public debate, the AGBU should open the forum of discussion to avert turning the Melkonian case into a missed opportunity for all. Its hasty closure is certainly a mistake; its sale, if it does eventually become reality, will leave Diaspora and homeland Armenians alike agape with horror. This is the perfect time, and the Melkonian is the perfect impetus, to bring together teachers, educators and school administrators together and *plan properly* for the future of AGBU schools.**

**The last decade has indisputably shown how the support of the Diaspora is important for the homeland. The Armenian Diaspora is in a truly unique position of having laid down community infrastructures throughout the last century of which schools are a major element. Questioning their relevance is unacceptable. Leaving them to rot and then closing them down is not an option. Hopefully, this is what the AGBU Central Board will reconsider for its centennial celebrations.**

**Hermig Yogurtian**