

Communique

The Meeting of Armenia's Diaspora Minister With Melkonian Alumni & Friends

On November 25, 2008, Armenia's Minister of the Diaspora, Dr Hranush Hakobian, met with the representatives of the Association of Melkonian Alumni and Friends in the offices of Dr Harout Mesrobian in Glendale. The meeting lasted approximately one hour. The minister was accompanied by Mr Armen Liloyan, Consul General of Armenia in Los Angeles. Representing the Association of Melkonian Alumni and Friends at the meeting were Chairman Raffi Zinzalian and members of the Administrative Board Harout Mesrobian, Zohrab Shammaasian, Vahakn Gharibian, and Garo Kasabian. The Melkonian alumni brought to the minister's attention a number of issues related to the closure of the Melkonian Educational Institute (MEI) in Cyprus.

The closure of MEI by a decision of the Central Board of the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) in June 2005 is no doubt one of the most pressing issues of the Diaspora by virtue of its broader adverse consequences. Consequently, it would be appropriate for Armenia's Ministry of the Diaspora to take up this issue with high priority.

Legal and other actions undertaken in Los Angeles and Cyprus in the last few years with the leadership of the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul and the joint efforts of Melkonian alumni organizations across the world to halt the closure of MEI have not produced any positive results. All legal rulings in these actions have favored the AGBU.

In late 2006, the Supreme Court of Cyprus ruled and affirmed that the AGBU has full ownership rights over the MEI properties and that it can dispose of them as it wishes. This ruling cleared the way for the immediate sale of the Melkonian properties, which would have happened had it not been for the intervention of the alumni in Cyprus.

In response to an appeal by the Cyprus alumni, the National Assembly of Cyprus declared the original MEI buildings and 60 percent of its campus of approximately 40 acres as a historic and architectural heritage site and the adjoining grove of trees a "green zone." Although this regulation reduces the monetary value of the Melkonian properties, it makes the sale of the properties more difficult because it imposes tough restrictions on any modifications on existing structures and construction of new buildings in green areas.

Although the MEI has served as one of the most important centers of preservation and advancement for Armenian existence and culture in the Diaspora and provided high-quality education to thousands of Armenian men and women over 80 years of its existence, it must not be viewed solely as an educational institution. Indeed, it is an institution established, above all, for the purpose of “avengement.” The following remarks by the benefactor Garabed Melkonian are so apropos and memorable: “I am building this school to take avenge my nation. The Turk decimated us. He first killed our leaders and then our entire helpless nation. These young orphans must rebuild their patriarchal homeland, and we must make leaders out of them. It is my wish that the existence of these Melkonian educational institutions be perpetuated for centuries to come and that they serve as hearths of enlightenment that train productive and honest men and women for the Armenian nation, the Armenian homeland, and all of humanity.” This was the vision of the founders of MEI. To that end, Krikor and Garabed, the two Melkonian brothers gifted the vast sum of 600,000 British gold pounds to the Armenian nation. That endowment is equivalent to hundreds of millions of dollars in today’s prices. The interest on that gift was sufficient to perpetuate the MEI “for centuries to come.” The MEI opened as an orphanage in 1924 to serve the needs of more than 300 helpless and destitute orphans who had survived the genocide of 1915-1923. Subsequently, hundreds of other orphans found shelter, food, and education in Melkonian. Stretching in front of the twin MEI buildings is a grove with hundreds of Roman pines. Those trees were planted by those same orphans in memory of their lost kin and the uncountable victims of the genocide. That grove is essentially the first “monument” that eternalizes the memory of the victims of the Armenian holocaust. Consequently, the MEI is closely associated with and an integral part of the history of the genocide perpetrated against the Armenian people at the beginning of the 20th century. As such, it is unthinkable to sell it no matter how high the value of its physical assets.

Why was Melkonian closed? This question continues to torment our minds. We believe that specious excuses to the effect that “the existence of Melkonian is no longer justified” or that “Melkonian’s mission has come to an end” are without grounds.

A comprehensive report dated November 23, 2003, and drafted by Mr Sarkis Bchakjian, then Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the MEI, cited reliable statistical data to present an optimistic picture of the situation that existed at the time and the future potential of the school. At that point, the number of students in the institute had risen to 251 over the previous eight years and the potential existed to increase that number to as high as 350. However, the AGBU Central Board sent instructions that this number should not exceed 250 to avoid any budgetary strains. At the time of the report, the educational standards of the school had reached unprecedented heights. Specifically, 90 percent of MEI graduates were easily admitted to European and North American universities to pursue their higher education. Thanks to the generosity of the government of Cyprus and rent income from the MEI’s commercial

properties, the school's revenues and investment returns were on the rise. The institution was on its way to self-sufficiency.

Armenian schools in the Diaspora play a huge role in the preservation of the Western Armenian language and culture, which remain in peril and face extinction if we cannot keep these schools open. In some countries, the use of local languages has become so prevalent among Armenians that the few surviving Armenian schools are virtually incapable of teaching our mother tongue. The MEI is the only Armenian co-educational boarding school in the Diaspora. As such, it must be reopened so that it can carry on its mission as a stronghold of Armenian education and culture. The value of an educational institution lies in its output. Can the "Melkonian Educational Center," a youth complex the AGBU plans to create in Armenia, replace the MEI of Cyprus and assume the role it played? In any event, the piecemeal information that has been provided about planned Melkonian complex in Armenia does not inspire much confidence or hope, given that the plan has not yet taken concrete form and appears to be stumbling. We have been told that the complex will bring together around 200 Armenian students from various corners of the world and offer them instruction in the Armenian language, literature, and history. We are told that such activities will contribute to the preservation of Armenian existence, culture, and education. We are told that all these can be achieved over a period of at most six months.

Situated in a hospitable and generous country like Cyprus, a member state of the EU with a superb geographical location, the MEI can be gateway to Europe for Armenia. The matriculation of a certain number of students from Armenia at the MEI would provide these students with high-quality secondary education and prepare them for admission to European and North American universities. After specializing in various professions, these students can return to Armenia and contribute to the advancement and prosperity of their homeland. Their interaction with students from other countries would also help the further strengthening of ties between Armenia and the Diaspora.

Minister Hakobian and Consul General Liloyan carefully listened to the information presented to them and expressed compassionate understanding for the work of the Melkonian alumni across the world to have the MEI reopened.

Dr Hakobian took notes throughout the meeting and assured the participants that she will present the MEI case to the serious consideration of Armenia's President Serzh Sargsyan and Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan. She said: "As your representative, I am prepared to present the Melkonian case to the president and prime minister of the Republic. I will also personally meet with Louise Simone and Berj Setrakian of the AGBU Central Board to discuss the reopening of Melkonian. I will also meet with relevant government authorities in Cyprus to discuss the status of Melkonian. I believe that the preservation of the Armenian language is an essential prerequisite of perpetuating the Armenian nation. I am aware of the contributions of the MEI to the

building of the Armenian nation.” The Diaspora Minister also expressed her opposition to the closure of any school in the Diaspora.

We thank Dr Hakobian for making room in her busy schedule for this meeting and for listening to the concerns and problems of Melkonian alumni. We are especially gratified by her commitment to work on the Melkonian case and to find a positive solution to this problem. We also thank Consul General Liloyan for his interest and patience in listening to concerns about Melkonian.

Association of Melkonian Alumni and Friends

Los Angeles, California

www.melkonianforever.org