

## "There's No Turning Back"



BY HAYGACHEN OUZOUNIAN

Yes, these were the words spoken by an American-Armenian woman, the totalitarian chairman of the educational committee of the AGBU, who doesn't know Armenian and is unfamiliar with the situation of the Armenian communities in Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

The Jewish prophet Moses, having climbed to the top of the mountain and surrendered to the voice of God, wrote the obligatory Ten Commandments for the Jewish people on a stone tablet with letters of fire. Now, like the prophet Moses, the prophetic educational committee chairwoman indignantly shouts, "There's No Turning Back."

We see now in whose hands the future of the AGBU has been left and the unscrupulous individuals, who, showing contempt for the Armenian people as a whole, from Armenia to Ireland, and ignoring the voice, the protest and the efforts at national self-preservation of all classes, shout, "There's No Turning Back." Why did Mr. Alex Manoogian have the modesty, yet personally elevating nobility, to revoke a decision that was made, listening to the voice of his people, the suggestion of concerned Armenian individuals? Not only did he continue to keep the doors of Melkonian Educational Institute open for Armenian pupils but also agreed with his fellow Central Board members to totally reorganize the institute's living conditions, making them competitive with those of modern boarding schools. Apparently, the members of the current Central Board don't have the slightest individuality, in order to get up and say "No!" to the inappropriate and harmful desecration of a sacred will, as ordered. It is so amazing that not even one member out of the sixteen hasn't had the courage to express his inner compunction, and all of them have tacitly and involuntarily put their signatures on a piece of paper put before them.

How should the members of this body called the AGBU Central Board be characterized? I personally said, "You stepped into mud in front of the people, since you deceived the people by stating that you are opposed to the decision reached and will fight it." But you didn't have the decency and courage to stick to your real decision, because I believe that you were sincere in your statement. But, when the time came, you weren't able to say "No!" to the order given, by obeying your inner voice. Then, a few others yet, who had represented themselves to the people for years with slogans espousing national self-preservation, were reduced to a sorry state, for they didn't have the courage to remain firm in their decades-long faith.

Today, if Boghos Nubar Pasha, Arshag Karageozian and Alex Manoogian were alive, they would be aghast and shout from their chairs of retirement, "Quo Vadis, AGBU? In accordance with your whim or in order to make your friends happy, you cannot, you do not have the right to destroy the national fortresses built during our decades of leadership, to convert them to dollars and cent, to reduce them

to [gold] dust and allocate them to projects that suit your pleasure. The will was made for Diasporan Armenian children; you don't have the right to move it to Armenia."

Today, where are the AGBU circles? Are they sitting on their seats of authority for glory's sake? Where are the leaders of the Armenian Democratic Liberal (Ramgavar) Party, who for years gave such great workers to keep the AGBU, to help it progress, to popularize it and to increase its assets, and who made their entire press available for the defense of the AGBU? Today, have they too have been bought for thirty pieces of silver? Finally, where are our religious and Armenian governmental authorities, who are constantly talking about national self-preservation? It is their wish to see just the Diasporan institutions of national self-preservation become destroyed, put up for auction so their proceeds can then be transported to Armenia.

When the Diaspora weakens, how will it be helpful to the Homeland? The church in Armenia and the governmental authorities of all ranks are trying to merely benefit from the diasporan resources, often at the price of damaging the very roots of the Diaspora's existence.

Moreover, the "president" of the AGBU speaks here and there about the educational plans of the organization. Either he doesn't understand what he's saying or he is repeating what is dictated to him like a parrot. When the Central Board closed the Watertown school a few years ago, when it decided to close the Melkonian Educational Institute on June 5, 2005, when it tries to close the AGBU Kalpakian School of Athens, when there's still talk of closing the Daniel Dzarogian School of Toronto, when the AGBU School of Sydney is in danger of being closed for financial reasons, while the Armenian Catholic and Dashnak schools in the same city are overflowing with pupils, when the Central Board impedes the purchase of a center in Vienna despite the availability of a donation (the sum having been transferred to New York), when an attempt was made at the time to prevent the revitalization of the Melbourne chapter of AGBU and its attempts to establish a center, again when it was attempted to prevent the revitalization of the organization's chapters in Bulgaria, when the buildings of the Tarouhie-Hagopian and Hovagimian-Manoogian schools in Beirut were sold and there is refusal to allocate a portion of the proceeds for the building of a new school in Beirut, for which there is such great demand by the AGBU circle there, when the AGBU

News ceased publication, when the UGAB magazine of Paris is no longer being published, when the monthly Hoosharar-Miutun was converted to a quarterly publication, what is the point of going around here and there and shouting about the educational plan being developed by the AGBU? Who is the AGBU "president" trying to convince with regard to the ravages being committed? Meanwhile, Hamazkayin, to its credit, is opening schools and putting up school buildings in Europe and the Middle East. What explanation can be given for the preparation of the AGBU's plans? I wonder, is the AGBU Central Board mocking its membership?

The question must be asked here, what does Carol Aslanian, member of the Central Board and chairwoman of the Central Education Committee, do? At one time, she was paid to monitor and coordinate the level of the schools. At present I don't know if she is being paid, but, as chairwoman of the Central Education Committee, she merely issued the dictum "there's no turning back" in the face of the AGBU's decision to close MEI, when she should have been the one waging the most ardent fight against that decision.

In the past, it was the AGBU's policy that the Central Board members be drawn from all classes of the people, so that the entire Armenian population would be represented therein and the Central Board would be able to consider all aspirations and demands. Thus, the Central Board would contain a clergyman, an intellectual, an individual from the teaching profession, a successful businessman, a representative from the professions, even a humble rank-and-file member; it was like this on a continual basis. And the Central Board would be aware of the viewpoints of all classes of the people. The AGBU assumed a popular profile.

This has all gone by the wayside, and the Central Board has transformed itself into a fund, become fractionalized. It is made up of persons who are partly unaware of the concerns that led to the birth of the AGBU and who are out of touch with the AGBU's prime motivations down through the decades and the organization's spirit. Moreover, these persons are always read to complaisantly agree with the decisions of the leaders. The reason is that their pulse hasn't beaten with the breathless pursuits of resolutions to national crises one decade after the next.

At this point, it's also worth becoming cognizant of who "Mr. President" is. He's an attorney in private practice. In the 1980's, the AGBU had the will of Hagop Diran Topalian, which amounted to over 13 million dollars. As an intelligent and astute man, Hagop Topalian had divided up and placed his wealth in four different countries: South Africa, Switzerland, the United States, and the Seychelles (England). And, in each country, he had drawn up and left wills. The AGBU, in turn, hired lawyers in each country to ensure the execution of the wills. At that time, "Mr. President,"

who was just a member of the Central Board, officially contacted the AGBU lawyers by phone from his New York office to consult with them and find out the progress of the execution of the wills. During the course of his personal business trips, as well, he would meet our lawyers, again to consult with them. There were Hagop Topalian's heirs, with whom "Mr. President" had meetings for the purpose of arranging matters of the inheritance. There was also the woman named Saade, who had been Topalian's girlfriend and was aware of all his activity and the details of his wills. At that time, "Mr. President" had meetings with Mrs. Saade, in order to cull information pertaining to the wills.

It was officially anticipated that "Mr. President," as a member of the Central Board and as one of the leaders of the AGBU, would not expect financial remuneration for work done in the AGBU's interests. However, he charged the AGBU the sum of **\$140,162.61** as his fee for the aforementioned work, which was paid to the legal firm of Whitman & Ransom, of which he was a partner. Of course, this sum was credited to him at Whitman & Ransom, in order for the corresponding profit to be transferred to him by the firm.

On November **15, 1994**, I wrote a letter expressing my dissatisfaction regarding this and other business to President Louise Manoogian Simone. Even at that time, I foresaw the current state of the AGBU. In that letter of mine, I had analyzed and given an evaluation of the causes leading to the AGBU's stagnation.

In the past, the Central Board had some very prominent attorneys as members, such as Richard Gregory, Hagop Derderian, Dickran

Simsarian, and A. Fenner. These attorneys did very important work for the AGBU, yet none of them received any payment, either personally or through their firms. They considered that work as their obligation towards the AGBU.

Today, there's one thing for the AGBU Central Board to do: to humbly realize that a wrong decision was made to close Melkonian down and to have the courage to reopen the reorganized Melkonian Educational Institute to hundreds of Armenian youths, by creating financial means which won't prevent the flow of those students toward Melkonian. The AGBU presidents have always repeated that no Armenian student must be deprived of the opportunity to attend an Armenian school for financial reasons. The policy determined by the AGBU presidents wjth regard to Armenian students must not be betrayed.

It is not possible for the Armenian people, as a whole, from the Armenian homeland to far-off Ireland, to be wrong, and a few individuals sitting in New York, cut off from Armenian life, be right when it comes to making decisions regarding the scholastic preparation of Armenian youths.

The Central Board is attempting in vain to convince the people regarding its decision to close the Melkonian Educational Institute, in terms of budgetary considerations, dwindling number of students, and incorrect data pertaining to its standard of education, when it had planned and prepared all that years ago. The Central Board is spending huge sums furnished by benefactors and general population in vain, insider to justify its wrong deleterious decision through the press, lawyers and various other

means.

I shall again repeat the following, just to give an example. The Central Board considers its allocation to the MEI of the incomes received from the commercial building constructed on the Melkonian property by Melkonian alumni and the Education Committee, which must be approximately **300,000** Cypriot pounds according to the current Cypriot leasing policy, as making up the MEI's budget deficit, and it presents the school's budget deficit with the addition of that sum. What a ridiculous and illogical assertion! How can such a ridiculous approach be explained?

Now there's talk of Melkonian alumni associations resorting to legal proceedings against the AGBU's decision to close down the Melkonian Educational Institute. How useful and honorable will it be for the AGBU to be in such a state? What will be the reaction of past and future benefactors in the face of such a situation?

This much intolerance, this much contempt for the popular revulsion, the clash between the people and the AGBU will cause the latter to end up in court. The Central Board can very easily avoid this disagreeable, injurious and dishonorable state by revoking its decision to close the MEI down, by taking the praiseworthy course of following the voice of the people. That is what the still faithful adherents of the AGBU are waiting for. For once at least, we expect the sixteen members of the Central Board to know enough to listen to the popular voice and regain the people's trust. Otherwise^ their subsequent days shall be a continuation of poisonous regrets.

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Larnaca, Cyprus