

THE MELKONIAN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTE  
FROM ONE AGBU ASSEMBLY TO THE NEXT

---

On the occasion of Dr. Arshavir Gunjian's interview with Azg daily of Yerevan (reprinted from the October 12, 2004 issue of Zartonk).

On the occasion of the 83<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly of the Armenian General Benevolent Union, the scientist Dr. Arshavir Gunjian, vice president of the AGBU Central Board and former chairman of the ADL Central Executive Committee, gave an interview to Azg daily, in which various topics were discussed. When he was asked about the Melkonian Educational Institute, specifically whether or not the AGBU was in tight financial straits, whereby it wished to transfer the profit from the sale of the Melkonian property to the United States, Dr. Gunjian replied that the financial condition of the AGBU was better today than at any other time. During the last year alone, the AGBU's income increased by a minimum of \$15 million dollars, on the strength of hefty donations given by benefactors considering that this organization continues to enjoy absolute trust. The real reason for Melkonian's closure, therefore, is that, in the course of time, it has lost the natural flow of pupils as a consequence of regional political developments and the migration of Diasporan Armenians to the West; moreover, it has continued to maintain its existence for quite some time now solely on the strength of its long-established tradition. The school has also not been able to maintain its erstwhile identity. No educational institution can survive in the absence of both quantity and quality. This problem has existed for decades but it has always avoided solution. Now the school is being replaced by another school in Armenia and other suitable educational projects in various Armenian communities.

Leaving issues of the AGBU's economic crisis to an experienced economist to investigate and analyze, I shall reflect on the second part of Dr. Gunjian's answer, namely that the Melkonian Educational Institute has suffered for a long time from the lack of quantity and quality. I wish to remind here that, at the beginning of October 2003, the chairman of the board of trustees of MEI informed all the members of the AGBU Central Board concerning Melkonian's financial condition, educational level and the improved state of Armenian instruction, while stressing its importance as a vital educational center on the hospitable soil of Cyprus, which had newly become a member of the European Union, and as a citadel in the struggle for Armenian survival. Apparently, Dr. Gunjian hasn't read the written report sent to him, or he has forgotten what he read.

In the following lines I wish to show that Melkonian has not had the falling off in quality and quantity, as stated by Dr. Gunjian; on the contrary, during the past three years, it experienced one of its best periods, in terms of its educational level and number of pupils. Let the tables presented below speak for themselves.

1. Increase in enrollment in the past eight years

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number of Students</u>
1996-1997	163
1997-1998	174

---

1998-1999	197
1999-2000	196
2000-2001	244
2001-2002	251
2002-2003	241
2003-2004	208

## 2. Student participation in international examinations and percentage of success

### Advanced Level

<u>Year</u>	<u>Success</u>	<u>Number of Examinations</u>	<u>Percentage of Success</u>
1997	30	45	67%
1998	21	30	70%
1999	48	68	71%
2000	39	46	85%
2001	65	83	78%
2002	44	52	85%
2003	89	100	89%
2004	160	194	83%

### Ordinary Level

<u>Year</u>	<u>Success</u>	<u>Number of Examinations</u>	<u>Percentage of Success</u>
1997	186	208	89%
1998	130	159	82%
1999	117	136	86%
2000	144	166	87%
2001	244	275	91%
2002	397	421	94%
2003	219	228	96%
2004	326	366	89%

## 3. Makeup of student body in the school year 2001-2002, by region

Middle East, Cyprus and Iran	133
Europe	53
Former Soviet republics	14
Armenia and Karabagh	45
North & South America	6
Total	251

During the past 7 years, the majority of the awards for poetry writing, sponsored by the Cultural Committee of the AGBU-AYS Alex Manoogian Center of Beirut, have gone to Melkonian students.

Tamar Jourian (Cyprus), Lala Demirdjian (Lebanon), Nazine Gureghian (Bulgaria), Soteri Semerjian (Greece), Nayiri Varteresian (USA), Karp Oktavian (Romania), Hovik Atabekian (Armenia), Vruyr Gabrielian (Karabagh). These students are the torchbearers from the crop of recent graduates from Melkonian that is part of the past tradition; considering their Armenological knowledge and the success they have achieved in international exams, they cede nothing to the first generations of Melkonian students. Citing one of them as an example, Hovik Atabekian registered A-Level success in five subjects on the 2004 GCE examinations. This year, only ten students throughout the world were able to achieve this success. For the past three years, Hovik has won the award for poetry writing in the aforementioned competitions.

The successes mentioned do not signify that everything was rosy at Melkonian but every year witnessed improvement there in all aspects.

The events pertaining to Melkonian in the period between the 82<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly (2002 - New York) and 83<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly (2004 - Yerevan) show that the closing of the Melkonian Educational Institute was decided much earlier than the infamous date of March 16, 2004. Here is a list of the events in succession.

The [senior] editor of the Armenian Reporter [Edward K. Boghosian] was sent to Melkonian in September 2002 to prepare a report about the school's condition. The prominent editor returned to New York after spending a week at Melkonian. His article-report, which was published on the eve of the 82<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly, presented Melkonian Educational Institute as those having sent him there wished to see it, and not as the institute actually was at that time. When the MEI board of trustees took issue with the paper's one-sided article, making corrections and demanding that their letter of protest be printed in the paper, word of this reached the AGBU headquarters, which immediately ordered the board of trustees to rescind its letter of protest. The board of trustees acquiesced, in order to avoid a confrontation with headquarters.

The 82<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly took place in New York, at the end of October 2002, with its behind-the-scenes activities, general membership meetings and dinner-dances. There, in front of everybody, it was announced that the MEI was showing an annual deficit of \$1 million USD and that, with its enrollment at 200-250, the AGBU could not carry such a heavy financial burden any longer. The majority of the assembly participants, unaware of this situation, were shocked and greatly disturbed over this "dissipation." Subsequently, the public was to learn that the announcement of the aforementioned "deficit" was baseless. It was true that the sum of money received from Melkonian pupils was only one third of the income that was part of the budget (\$1,500,000 dollars for the school year 2001-2002) but the Melkonian brothers had secured the MEI's existence with the Melkonian Fund. The MEI also had income-producing rental buildings, incomes from other benevolent sources, and the support of the Cypriot government, such that the deficit for that year amounted to only \$50,000-\$100,000. When the public was apprised of the truth, the AGBU headquarters then changed its position, saying,

“MEI’s existence is not in jeopardy for financial reasons; rather, it is not fulfilling its role and its enrollment doesn’t justify its continuation, its educational standard is sub par, Melkonian graduates are of no benefit to their local communities and the Armenian people . . . .” The Central Board began to clamp down, and new instructions were issued: “Full scholarships shall be terminated; in the best-case scenario, give only half scholarships.” Despite the increase in tuition, the school was on the ascent and was not greatly affected by this restriction; enrollment suffered a slight drop-off, falling from 250 to 240, to the headquarters’ surprise. It was necessary to tighten the clamps even further so tuition was charged to 70% of the students for the 2003-2004 school year. Moreover, pupils from Lebanon, Iran and Armenia were accepted only on the condition that they pay full tuition. As a result of these restrictions, enrollment dropped to 206. However, the roots of this oak tree were deep and strong, such that it was always able to sprout new branches. Thus, it was not possible to fell this huge tree; it was necessary to axe it directly at its roots, pour a little gasoline on it too, so this time it wouldn’t dare revive.

For this purpose, an American “economist” by the name of Gordon Anderson was sent to Cyprus in 2003, to spend a year improving Melkonian’s “troubled” financial situation. This base individual soon showed his true face, measuring the area of Melkonian’s properties and cultivating relations with real-estate agents, all the while forgetting his mission of improving MEI’s economic situation. The principal’s authorities gradually began to become limited. Although the AGBU headquarters often made announcements about the school not being closed down, Melkonian’s death verdict, which had been planned and prepared for a long time, was not long in coming. On March 16, 2004, the Central Board of the AGBU, with the signatures of its 16 members, announced that the Melkonian Educational Institute would permanently close its doors in June 2005. Following this announcement, Mr. Anderson began to work in an unbridled manner, together with mercenary Armenian and non-Armenian agents. It was announced that Melkonian would not accept new students for the 2004-2005 school year. The parents of all the pupils were told not to send their children to Melkonian the following year, and tangible sums of money were promised to them if they went along with this suggestion. It was planned to decrease enrollment as much as possible, in order to justify the decision to close down the school to the government: “No pupils, no school . . . no Armenians, no Armenia . . . .” However, to the credit of the pupils’ parents, the absolute majority of the pupils returned at the start of the school year.

The ruse of the AGBU Central Board to subject the MEI to liquidation at the hands of non-Armenians was obvious. Which Armenian, in good conscience, would ruthlessly destroy such a rich and vital national center of learning as Melkonian? What did Mr. Anderson know about 1915, about the will and goal of the Melkonian brothers? He was told to destroy this institution, in which case he would be amply rewarded, and he carried out the mission charged to him with utmost calm, loyalty and vivacity.

Turning to Dr. Arshavir Gunjian’s second supposition, that the Middle East is becoming emptied out of its Armenians, who are settling in the West; i.e., the “Promised Land” America, that three million Armenians exist on this side of the Atlantic, outside of Armenia, and that

MEI has great significance and a major role to play in terms of national self-preservation and the building of Armenian identity.

It must be said that, in the past 15 years, the profile of Melkonian's student body has fundamentally changed and that, most recently, students from more than twenty countries, half of which are located in the Middle East, began to come to Melkonian.

Today, when the above tables and the account books show that the MEI did not have a decrease in either enrollment or quality, nor did it experience a financial crisis, the question is being asked the scientists, lawyers and economists of the AGBU Central Board, why make this sudden and exclusive decision to close the MEI down, since, as Dr. A. Gunjian points out, the AGBU is not in tight financial straits.

The MEI has enjoyed the AGBU's guardianship and support for 78 years; in exchange, the MEI has given and continues to give the AGBU and the Armenian people its finest young people.

It is not possible to replace the role currently played by the Melkonian Educational Institute with the construction of a cultural center in Armenia for Diasporan university students, or with a secondary day school in Cyprus for Armenian pupils, as well as by founding a scientific research center. All these projects face huge question marks. Furthermore, the establishment of an ethnic ethnographic museum within the confines of the Melkonian property will resemble the Armenian Genocide memorial monuments located in the four corners of the world, without the ebullient Melkonian pupils and their vivacious spirits.

Today, the Armenian General Benevolent Union is experiencing the greatest crisis in its 100-year history, due to the shortsighted decision of its Central Board to close down the Melkonian Educational Institute.

ZAVEN GHARIBIAN

*This article was first published in the November 26, 2004 issue of the Beirut-based Armenian-language newspaper Ararat. The English translation is by TAR Int'l managing editor Aris G. Sevag.*

Sponsored and paid for by:  
Melkonian Alumni of Canada

---