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Fall Event of AGBU Hye Geen

Sona Yacoubian Founder and chairperson of AGBU Hye Geen

I believe that we are at the crossroads of making a serious commitment to preserve our “ARMENIANnes.” With this important issue in mind, on November 2, 2013, AGBU “Hye Geen” organized its fall luncheon at the AGBU Vatche and Tamar Center in Pasadena California, titled **“The U.S Armenia Diaspora Should Replicate Success of the Middle East”**

Of course we are referring to the herculean accomplishments of the Armenian Communities in the Middle East who for almost one hundred years kept alive the Armenian spirit and its rich heritage. Yet today, our cultural centers in the Middle East are in dire straits. Cairo has lost its luster, Aleppo is devastated by war and Beirut is in decline. Cities which had once been the hub of leadership in politics, arts and literature are now fighting to survive.

Two prominent speakers shared their thoughts about the subject.

Ms. Baydzig Arabian Kalaydjian is presently the executive secretary of the Tekeyan Cultural Association in Boston. She has extensive experience in teaching in Beirut and Cyprus, and for a time worked as the editor of the “Zartonk” newspaper in Beirut. Ms. Kalaydjian shared her outlook of the situation based on the dispersion of Armenians around the world. She explained that there are 7 million Armenians in the world. 2.5 million Armenians live in Armenia and Karapagh and the rest are dispersed in 60 different countries around the world. Emigration from Armenia is an endless exodus for greener pastures, and as Ms. Kalaydjian put it, ninety percent of the next generation of Diaspora Armenians will see themselves as descendants of Armenians and not as Armenians.

There is no doubt that personal survival and well-being is a priority. The stark realities of the daily struggle often tamper one’s ability to live as a member of a community. The struggle is even greater for many young

people who study and work in close proximity with different minorities. The demand to find a common denominator is almost overwhelming as is the need to belong to the dominating culture. The mainstream majority rules and eventually absorbs all the rest.

Ms. Kalaydjian also stressed on the sad news that Western Armenian has been listed as an endangered language since 1999. She explained that a language cannot be preserved and remain active if the language is not used for daily responsibilities of business, school, social activities, creativity, and pleasure. Ms. Kalaydjian pointed out that in 1970 there were 250 Armenian schools in the Diaspora while currently there are only 170 schools with around 30,000 students. What is more, the numbers are shrinking year after year. Parents, as well as students reason that learning our ethnic language is a waste of time as later in life it would hardly be useful in the business world. An additional complication is that there is a shortage of Armenian language teachers because the demand is not there and communities do not have Armenian Language Institutes in the Diaspora to prepare young teachers. This decline is truly a shame, because Ms. Kalaydjian firmly believes that not only do Armenian schools provide an excellent education but they also mold students into strong and exemplary individuals.

The good news is that all is not lost this is the time to engage in serious dialogue and explore different options for keeping the Armenian heritage alive.

Mrs. Sona Zeitlian a long time AGBU “Hye Geen” board member, a respected and well known writer and lecturer also took the podium to share her analysis of the day’s dilemma.

She pointed out that Armenians in the Diaspora usually settle in large and culturally active cities, as they have in Los Angeles. They benefit from the excellent education offered in those centers where work opportunities are more available. While there are multiple societies and associations in the community, unfortunately their agendas are not planned to pursue the ultimate and important goal of guarding the Armenian spirit and heritage. These entities need to initiate programs to enhance the longevity of the communities through their activities.

It is surveyed that after ten years, the majority of the youth, those 18 and under, in the United States will come from ethnic minorities. Ms. Zeitlian stressed that in this maze, the success of retaining our youth within our community and preventing total assimilation will be dependent on a well thought out and coordinated strategy.

She recalled how Armenian women had the courage and wisdom to gather the entire family and gradually build the foundation of new communities in the Middle Eastern cities right after the Genocide, as in Aleppo, Beirut, Alexandria or Cairo, where at the time, Armenian men were few and scarce. She added that women have played an important role in supporting the Armenian Church, Schools, and cultural and sports activities. History has shown that Armenian women adapt well and fast to their surroundings wherever that might be. Moreover, Mrs. Zetlian stressed that “Women are the mortar between the bricks that holds the community together.” They are capable of bringing people together to blend the different generations with each other as they have done for so long within the family circle. Through the centuries they have developed an innate and keen sense of direction towards the betterment of the self as well as family and community. Necessity of course is the mother of innovations.

My personal thoughts about the workshop:

It was only recently that I was reading about the lost Armenian communities in the Italian Principalities, in Austria, in India. We are all familiar with the assimilation of almost one million Armenians who had immigrated to Poland, and yet we take the liberty of doing almost nothing. The world is a different arena nowadays specially that globalization is such a challenge to our survival. By no means should we allow the mistakes of those bygone centuries to be repeated. We have to pledge our determination to keep our ethnic identity that is so essential to our existence.

First of all, wherever Armenians live they struggle to improve their economic situation. But most of the time that endangers our ethnic survival. The ego trips become so intense for ownership and wealth and self-promoting becomes so very important that the common well being

of all gets lost in the heat of extreme competition. It becomes a must to sit in the front row wherever they are. They have to be courted, praised and written about. Our Armenian Christian church has a lot to teach its followers about the merits of humility. I believe that individuals should be honored for their humility and nothing else!

It was a successful event, it was well attended and the presenters had come well prepared.

Here are a few suggestions to follow the Day's Workshop:

Ms. Kalaydjian raised the issue of the fading Western Armenian, the language of St. Mesrop Mashdots with its unique spelling. It has existed for more than 17 Centuries and it should not be allowed to die on our watch. There have been several distressing calls for this and I am sure many suggestions have been offered but no ACTION has been initiated to date.

1. We need to organize a coalition of all Armenian teachers and listen to what they have to say. I am sure that they will be able to guide us towards practical solutions because of their experience.
2. I believe that The Melkonian Educational Institute in Cyprus with its two historical buildings should be converted into an "Academy of Research for Western Armenian" with a tremendously rich Library where linguists who want to research and students who want to pursue a teaching careers can intern under the guidance of experts. It was there that, the Western Armenian was further developed into perfection by Literary Giants who taught there for so long. Graduates in the Western Armenian language from Armenia usually have a hybrid style of structuring and forming Western Armenian sentences, which does not fully resonate as true Western Armenian.

Lately a significant aspect has emerged in our community, the increased frequency of holding "Scientific Conferences" about Armenian historical, political periods with endless and repetitiously redundant programs. These conferences should be exchanged with "Plenary Sessions" for the whole community to set forth reachable goals for the near future. The goal should be to find a way to coexist in this country with its 150

different minorities, without surrendering our identity, our language and our religion. I am sure that we have educated young and older experts who can help to find solutions to these problems. How long do we have to live in the past? How long can we revise the stories of the past-- of Dikran the Great, of our Cilicia settlements, of our heroes and the Genocide?

AGBU Hye Geen will take the initiative and following the footsteps of the women who did so after the Genocide, who gathered their families to rebuild our communities. Hye Geen wants to start with a Coalition of Armenian Women to pledge our support to strengthen our community by trying to resolve our common community problems.

The most significant aspect of the day for me was to see the attendees. It was amazing that for the first time ever in the past 20 years of our yearly events, many elderly women were present. Why? Perhaps to witness and assure themselves that the young generation will carry the torch as they have done themselves for so long, for hope and for a glimpse of a future where not all is lost, to lend support and express approval.

Father Arzoumanian ended the day's program with his final thoughts which remain imprinted in my memory. We have such a difficult task in the Diaspora of keeping the communities alive as well as assisting our people in Armenia. We are battling on two fronts, what is Armenia doing to help Diaspora?