

A New University as Symbol of Statehood in Karabagh

By Mihran Agbabian

On May 10, 1993, the State University of Mountainous Karabagh (SUM) opened its doors receiving the congratulations and good wishes of educators in Armenia and the population of Karabagh. The government of Armenia, in a declaration dated 12 October 1992, had given its support for the founding of the university.

At the invitation of Arpat Avanesian, the Rector of SUMK, Vartkes Barsam, Michael Kouchakdjian and I, accompanied by the Deputy Minister of Higher Education of Armenia, Zovak Avakian, traveled to Stepanakert as an official delegation of the American University of Armenia. We met the faculty and the students, as well as the Minister of Education and Culture, Nellie Oskanian, and had discussions on mutual cooperation.

An agreement for cooperation between our two universities received enthusiastic response by faculty and students during a convocation where I had the privilege of addressing the faculty and more than 500 students of the upper classes. I have entitled this article, "a new university in Karabagh", but history tells us that it is not the first. Mesrob Mashdotz traveled to Artsakh and founded a school in the monastery of Amaras. It continued during difficult years. This was in the fifth century.

In the 13th century, Mekhitar Koch founded a religious school in Khachen. At the beginning of the 19th century, a school was founded in Gantsazar, and in Shushi, a cultural center of the Armenians, schools were founded by local educators as well as missionaries from Basel, Switzerland in or about 1827. A decree issued in 1836 by the Tsar allowed the Karabagh Armenians to open schools in many villages.

Around the year 1860, the first school for girls was founded in Shushi. In fact, there were two schools for girls in Shushi during that period. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, there were a total of more than 60 schools in Karabagh.

I have compiled this information from an article by Grisha Harutunian, the dean of pedagogy at the new university in Karabagh. He further states that after Karabagh came under the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan the educational program continued in spite of discriminatory policies. Higher education institutes were founded in Medicine, Agriculture and Pedagogy in Stepanakert.

The Pedagogical Institute was dissolved by Azerbaijan, but a branch of the Kirovakan

Pedagogical Institute soon replaced it and a branch of the Yerevan Polytechnic was opened. The merger of these two institutes and the addition of five more faculties resulted in the founding of the new university, the State University of Mountainous Karabagh.

The university now has 2100 registered students in a five year undergraduate program. 300 of these students are from outside Karabagh, from other Republics and Armenia. It is, of course, co-educational, but unfortunately most of the boys are at the battlefield. During rotation when they return home, they attend classes.

The seven faculties consist of medicine, physical sciences, pedagogy, economics, law, agriculture, and engineering. There is a special curriculum in military science.

The present faculty consist of 136 persons but they need a total of 220 to staff the 38 departments within the seven faculties. Six of the seven deans had received their education in Yerevan. The seventh member of the dean's council had studied in Moscow. They returned to Karabagh to assume their posts. The Rector also returned from Yerevan after having served there as a professor for many years.

There were no work opportunities in Karabagh for persons educated in Armenia during the Azerbaijani controlled government. This was the Azerbaijani method of forcing the Karabagh intelligentsia to leave their land. They are now returning. Many of them are teaching in village schools. The Deputy Minister of Higher Education of Armenia, Zovak Avakian, read a letter by Minister Vartkes Gnouni at the convocation, stating that the Armenian government had appointed an Academic Council, chaired by the President of the Armenian Academy of Sciences, Fadei Sarkisyan, and with membership that includes most of the rectors of the institutes in Armenia, for the purpose of providing academic guidance and assistance to the new born university.

It is an exhilarating experience to see a new university in Stepanakert founded under the most adverse conditions. The answer to our question as to why such a bold action was taken in time of war and deprivation was the unanimous and emphatic statement that without education Karabagh will perish even if it wins on the battlefield.

It was, however, a sad experience for me to see very few boys among the student audience, because the "boys are defending their land and families", as it was stated by the Minister of



AUA officials discuss issues with SUMK officials

Education.

More than 50 students were killed at the battle front since the founding of the university. One of these heroes was Hagop Avanesian, the 20 year old son of the Rector. He explained that his son was one of seven in the unit, when five of them were wounded. He was dragging his wounded friends to safety when

he stood up to catch his breath and was hit in the back and killed instantly. We visited his grave with his bereaving father. We also visited the cemetery where all the other boys were buried. The Rector has another son in the Karabagh army. He could have stayed in Yerevan with his family, but he decided to return. For him there was only one goal and

that was, in his words, "let God give us peace, to the suffering but undaunted people of Artsakh, so that we may build our university. It was necessary to found the university in order to preserve our country and our people and to rediscover our will and soul. The university is the symbol of our Statehood."