

GHOSTS OF THE PAST

By MIHRAN S. AGBABIAN

Just when some negative vibrations against the American University of Armenia were being amplified here in the Diaspora, creating feelings in the community that we should not have started a new university in Armenia, I ran across an article in the *Science Journal* of the American Association for the Advancement of Science which bears the title "Science Held Back by Ghosts of the Past." The author analyzes the issues of higher education and science in the Czech Republic, Poland, and East Germany, three countries that were molded by the Moscow dominated Soviet System. He arrives at the conclusion that the ghosts of the past will hold back science (and higher education) until new opportunities are seized and developed.

First let us take a look at the ghosts of the past. For more than seventy years, some of the most oppressed persons in the Soviet system were the scientists and educators. Their relatively prosperous financial condition notwithstanding, they were surrounded by obstacles to free thought. Those who kept active as scientists and educators were able to do so because of their acquiescence to the system's control of their lives.

After the Second World War, Moscow initiated a policy in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe of shifting the best scientists from universities to institutes that were run by powerful Academies of Sciences. Peer review and scientific criticism were abolished by giving researchers guaranteed funding provided they complied with what the system dictated. The internal grant system and the budgets of the Academies were assured by Moscow as long as the administration complied with the Moscow policies. This policy of bringing into the Academy the best scientists deprived the universities from the best talent, leaving for university teaching "mediocre nothings who got their posts more for ideological reasons than scientific ones." This criticism may be too severe for Armenia, but we know that ideology was more important than scientific merit in all the republics of the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe.

It is now extremely difficult for the scientists of Armenia, or of any country dominated for so many decades by the Soviet System, to make the transition to a free and open society where the merit system and the evaluation of their peers should determine the advancements of science and higher education. The article in the *Science Journal* brought into focus the fact that the crisis in Armenia will not disappear in a short time. This is most discouraging when we consider the importance of science and technology for the opening of new markets throughout the world for Armenia.

East Germany has confronted a similar crisis recently by carrying out "a thorough and often painful evaluation, with international participation when possible, to identify the best groups wherever they are — in the academy institutes or in universities — and preserve them." To this should be added the urgent need to encourage young scientists to assume responsible positions based on merit rather than ideology or nepotism.

In 1990, I was given the distinguished honor of being elected to the Armenian Academy of Sciences. I belong to the old generation of scientists in the Armenian Diaspora. The honor was for

past accomplishments, and that is the way also in the United States when distinguished scientists are elected to our National Academies. At the inauguration ceremonies I looked around, and I did not see young scientists in the audience. My acceptance speech was brief, and I made only one point: If Armenia will advance in science and technology, the older scientists in positions of power should encourage young scientists by letting them have important responsibilities, even if this means the relinquishing of some of their own power bases in favor of the younger scientists. I am sure that it was not a popular speech.

The year 1991 brought many new developments in Armenia. With independence came into power some of the youngest members of a political system anywhere in the world. The political and economic systems of the country were in the hands of a very young group, who interestingly, were mostly from the scientific community of Armenia. One would have thought that the same would have happened in the fields of science and education. But the resistance to change was very great, and several attempts by the government to introduce changes were unsuccessful.

It was during this period that the American University of Armenia was founded by the sponsorship of the Armenian General Benevolent Union. The government of Armenia, including the President, the Prime Minister, the Chairman of the Parliament, and the Minister of Higher Education, advised us to start this new university so that it may serve as a model for other institutions. They said that internal changes cannot be made if there is no model to emulate. They said that we would fail if we tried to introduce reform into the existing systems. Some people in the Armenian Diaspora were opposed to the founding of the university, using the argument that the millions of dollars spent for the new university, if spent in the existing universities and institutes, would solve all the problems and remedy the deteriorating situation in higher education and science. To prove their point, some educators and scientists of the Diaspora tried to introduce the reforms that they thought possible, and they ran against intransigent administrations and an indifferent scientific and educational constituency. The current situation remains untenable. It goes without saying that millions of dollars spent for any purpose in Armenia will be fruitless unless the leaders unselfishly use them for the benefit of the country and its population.

I now feel reassured that the American University of Armenia will provide new opportunities in higher education and science, and that no critic, whether in Armenia or in the Diaspora, can legitimately downgrade this venture of goodwill. It is a constructive alternative to the existing institutions. It is my firm conviction that the ghosts of the past will disappear in time, and the American University of Armenia will become an integral part of the higher education and science of the Republic of Armenia, by helping create an environment that encourages the free and open principles of higher education and rewards scientific endeavor based on merit.

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