

A University Emerges From Under the Rubble

by **Mihran S. Agbabian**

President, American University of Armenia

My interest in Armenia had been more than casual before the December 7, 1988 Spitak earthquake. Although my parents traced their ancestry to Cilicia, and my Armenian activities had taken place mostly in the Armenian Evangelical communities of the Middle East and the United States, with very little time for nationalistic feelings toward Armenia, I was hit by an emotion that I could not comprehend when I set foot on Armenian soil for the first time in 1978.

I was there with an American group of scientists, escorted by our Russian counterparts from Moscow. The Russian leader had changed our itinerary to include Yerevan, because, he said, there is an Armenian among these Americans and he should see Armenia. We stayed two days in Armenia, and the rest of the trip took us to different Republics. I kept thinking of Armenia as my Homeland during the entire trip, and I knew there was going to be a change in my life.

As an earthquake engineer I kept in touch with colleagues in Armenia, mostly on a scientific basis, but my concern for the earthquake risks in Armenia was more personal than when I worked in other seismic regions of the world.

I returned to Armenia twelve days after the 1988 earthquake with another group of American scientists, and this time, I knew that the tragedy in Northern Armenia had made its permanent impact on me. I started working on reconstruction and earthquake safety programs. I still do. But a conversation with my colleague from the University of California at Berkeley, Professor Armen Der Kiureghian, made a dramatic change in my outlook. He asked me if I would work with him to establish a university to replace the Polytechnic Institution in Leninakan (Gumayri) that was totally destroyed,

During our visit to Gumayri, we had seen the building where hundreds of students and faculty had died. I picked up a torn book in Russian from under the rubble. Its title read, "Strength of Materials" — a book on the principles

structural engineering. I found this ironic because the devastation showed a lack of utilization of those principles. The system in the Soviet Union had corrupted just about everyone that was associated with the construction of the buildings that had collapsed.

Armen's question led me to the conviction that a University should be established in Armenia, but it should be on a different model. Armen and I agreed that it should be based on the American model. He told me that the Rector of the Polytechnic Institute of Yerevan, Yuri Sarkisyan, agreed that it should be an American University.

We wrote and talked to many people upon our return to the United States. The response from two persons made us realize that the dream of establishing an American University in Armenia would become a reality. Louise Simone, President of the Armenian General Benevolent Union, responded with the promise of financial support. Dr. William Frazer, Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs of the University of California, agreed to explore the possibility of providing administrative and academic guidance.

Many people have told me: "All this is well, but why do you have such a commitment to this distant land from which your ancestors were separated for more than six hundred years?" I remember vividly a sermon that my father, Rev. Suren Siragan Agbabian, gave in Aleppo that I had heard as a teenager. There was a strong accusation at that time by some segments of the Armenian community that there was no nationalistic feeling among Armenian Evangelicals, that their missionary spirit was global and not directed toward their own people.

My father had left his comfortable place in Cyprus and had gone to Aleppo to serve his people who were just begin-



Mr. Papken Ararktsian, President of the Armenian Parliament, and Dr. Mihran Agbabian during a reception at the American University of Armenia.

ning to recover from the effects of the genocide. He felt that the accusers were misdirected, and he chose the topic of his sermon as "Nationalism or fanaticism." He made the point that the Christian spirit does not place any boundaries for service, but nationalism coupled with Christian spirit is the best motivation for service. He had said during his sermon that the rhetoric of the fanatic has no place in the spirit of nationalism and it is no substitute for service.

My father's sermon had found its mark in my life, and my visit to Armenia revived it with an irresistible calling. The challenge to serve was presented to me after the disastrous earthquake of Armenia, and I accepted it.

Plans for establishing the American University of Armenia have evolved with successive steps in the United States and Armenia. Professor Stepan Karmardian, the dean of the Business Management School at UC Riverside, joined us to expand the program, and together with Dr. Frazer and his colleagues at UC, we formulated a long term goal of establishing a University with all the disciplines that are needed in Armenia and its surrounding region. Our effort culminated, first, in a Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Armenia to authorize and support establishment of the University,

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and then, by the unanimous approval of the Board of Regents of UC, to have the American University of Armenia as an affiliate of this great University of California.

Classes began on September 23, 1991, the day that the Parliament declared the independence of Armenia. We started with 101 graduate students in Earthquake Engineering, Industrial Engineering and Business Management. Plans are now underway for disciplines in Environmental Engineering, Political Science and International Relations, Public Administration, Agricultural Sciences, and Health Sciences. As funds become available, these disciplines will start in successive years. The University's program will also include seminars and short courses for the larger community in Armenia, as well as research centers in which American faculty will work jointly with Armenian scientists and engineers.

I have heard from many government officials, educators, and persons from all walks of life in Armenia and in the United States that this University means to Armenia as much now, and even more in later years, than the humanitarian aid that they received from many nations. Armenia has turned away from the Communist way of life, and an American educational institution at this critical time will give them a constructive alternative.

While immediate humanitarian assistance is essential for Armenia, a long term educational and technical assistance program is equally important for building an independent republic that has economic, social, and political stability, so that it may find its legitimate place in the community of the nations of the world. F