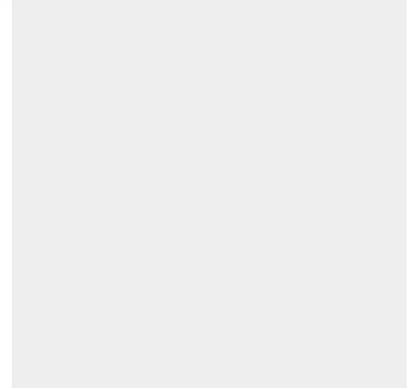
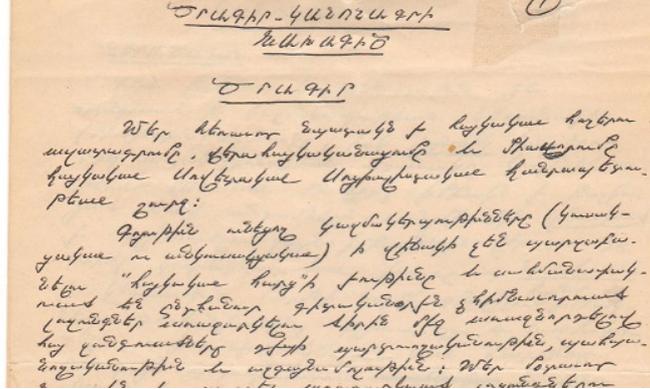
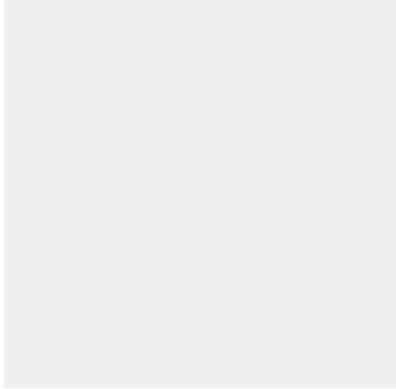


# DIASPORA STUDENTS' DARING, SECRET VENTURE IN YEREVAN

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**Dr. Dikran Abrahamian**, Ontario, 14 April 2020

It was an evening in October of 1973. Three Diasporan students, away from prying eyes, had gathered in a secluded room at Nork students' dormitory in a suburb of Yerevan. They were engaged in a heated discussion.

The youngest, a new graduate from an Armenian high school in Syria, was calm and inquisitive. The slightly older student from Jordan, a supporter of the Palestinian liberation movement, was assertive and action-oriented. The third, a Lebanese citizen who was older than the others by at least a decade found himself in an awkward situation; he frequently questioned the validity of statements that were being made by the two.

The conversation was reminiscent of the endless discussions that characterized the '60s particularly in Lebanon. A decade earlier, during the years immediately pre- and post- commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Genocide, existential questions had been raised by young intellectuals, students, individuals of all backgrounds and social standing, members and non-members of the traditional parties.

They were frustrated by the promises and inaction of the establishment, had started questioning the ineffective direction of their community leaders. They questioned the leaders of their political parties and associated organizations the methods that were adopted in pursuing justice regarding the Genocide, in running community affairs and their mistrust of the youth. Some went further and doubted the allegiances of certain community leaders accusing them of demagoguery, deceit, and subservience to either local and/or foreign interests. Whether these allegations were true or not is beyond the scope of this article, but it provides a synopsis of the prevailing mood.

The youth in the '60s, especially those who were fortunate to attain higher education, were no more bound by the norms of the ghetto mentality inculcated in the Armenian youth for the decades following the Genocide. They were no more restrained by long-held taboos and were highly critical of the parties that had triggered the fratricide which had torn apart the community. The youth had been exposed to local non-Armenian, regional and international developments that were shaping their socio-political and cultural environment. Of these, probably the most significant was the emergence of the Palestinian liberation movement. Parallels were drawn between the not-so-distant history of the Palestinian and the Armenian people and their fate. It was as if through a natural evolution some young Armenians adhered to the Palestinian cause, fought alongside Palestinians, and years later many Armenian freedom fighters were trained in Palestinian camps.

In laying out a new course in public discourse, initially most vocal were leftist intellectuals, students and their friends. They had resigned *en masse* from the Communist Party of Lebanon because it was ossified, the rules of democratic centralism were not being adhered to and the party was insensitive to local and national aspirations. Although they maintained the basic tenets of Marxism, some in

private were critical of the Soviet Union. A few went so far as to declare the Soviet system was state capitalism and not socialism and that sooner or later it would collapse and be transformed. In 1965 they had started publishing the "Haratch" (Forward, **Յարաչ**) weekly which had lasted four years. This was followed by the independent magazine "Yeridasart Hay" (Young Armenian, **Երիտասարդ Հայ**). The first issue was distributed in December 1969 and was halted in 1975 due to the start of the civil war in Lebanon. Both publications elaborated on contemporary socio-political issues beyond colloquial matters. They had significant circulation particularly among the youth and reached neighboring countries. Along with "Nayiri" (**Նայիրի**) and "Spyurk" (Diaspora, **Սփիւրք**), they provided an intellectual stimulus to the youth, notwithstanding the role of other publications which by and large were mouthpieces of the political parties and their affiliated organizations. A constant theme in all was the Genocide and how to recover the ancestral lands occupied by Turkey.

Since the late '50s, students from the Diaspora were admitted to study in Armenia. By the mid-'70s there were close to 350 students in various fields of higher learning. The majority were from the Middle East, some were from Europe and the Americas. The students in the '70s, unlike their predecessors, had no illusions of what they would encounter in Armenia and were relatively better prepared to adapt to its social, economic and political realities. They were as if immunized against official propaganda. They were also mindful of the changes in awareness of national aspirations that had taken place since 1965 when thousands of people had poured to the streets of Yerevan chanting "The lands...lands" referring to Western Armenia. The Diaspora students were appreciative and encouraged by the appearance of various monuments such as *Tsitsernakaberd*, *Sardarapat* and *Musa Ler* complexes which conveyed patriotic feelings and determination. The emergence of Genocide historiography trials, the resurgence of patriotism in all genres of literature, the abundance of sanctioned or unsanctioned folklore exalting Armenia, the Armenian nation and its heroes were all elements that made socially conscious students proud and motivated them to be participants in realizing the cherished aspirations of the nation.

It was against this backdrop that the above-mentioned trio gathered. Following a few sessions, others were involved. By the end of October 1973, a verbal pact had been drawn which was finalized in Beirut in January 1975. The expanded gathering could not be held earlier in Yerevan, because of the nature of this venture; the state laws in Armenia would not tolerate it. The association called itself "Khempag" (Group, «**ԽԵՄՔԱԿ**»). The founders were cognizant of the role of the Armenian capital as an exceptional location where Diasporan students from various countries would meet and together could possibly launch a new path. Given the political-juridical environment (Soviet Armenia) in which it functioned, it was extremely secret and operated like a non-sanctioned entity. Its remote ultimate goal was the liberation of Western Armenia.

At the time of the association's inception, it would have been audacious/overly positive to have imagined it would continue to operate for eight years without being exposed by the omnipresent state authorities. Today, some members question whether the state was aware of the association's

existence. Archives would answer that question.

**(To be continued)**

**There are no comments yet.**