ANATOMY OF THE UNITY SYMPOSIUM

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It took a single meeting, in late December 2010, and subsequent e-mail discussions to organize the Unity Symposium of March 19, 2011 in Montreal. Many had predicted that it couldn't be done and such an undertaking would require the "expertise" and finances of an established organization.

A few dedicated people proved those predictions wrong. What motivated them was the urgency of getting organized for the day after 24 April, when commemorations have yet again re-asserted the obvious without addressing the issues of reparations, retribution and land claims. What do Armenians have to claim from Turkey, what are the Armenian nation's short- and long-term objectives particularly in the Diaspora were paramount on the minds of the organizers. Mere four years part us from the centennial of the Genocide of the Armenians, and yet we are in disarray.

Without unity of purpose, without agreement on at least "the lowest denominator", nothing can be achieved and all the talk about patriotism, our just grievances, and cherished national dreams will vanish in thin air. More than ever, this assertion is irrefutable considering the two main calamities that we face today--the unprecedented emigration of people from Armenia, and the rapid pace of assimilation in the Diaspora.

Much has been said about unity. Yes, in the face of imminent crisis Armenians have historically shown that they can get together and overcome challenges. That's history, though. Rapidly changing geopolitical developments and the reshaping of national interests of major powers could now deny us one last opportunity to reassemble and exert our will.

Prof. Andrew Demirdjian's compelling arguments based on natural and social sciences, and his emotional appeal for unity set the tone for most of the day's discussion. California Courier publisher Harut Sassounian's proposal for a popularly elected structure to represent Diaspora Armenians was presented in a video clip, since he could not attend the symposium for personal reasons. It was followed by former UN deputy secretary and Deputy Director of the International Organizing Committee for Western Armenian National Congress Dr. Souren Seraydarian's speech, outlining three unity proposals that are in circulation. He highlighted the merits and drawbacks of each and stressed the notion that we don't have the luxury of time to get organized for the pursuit of our "inalienable rights".

Prof. Levon Marashlian's common sense approach to unity and organizing a national congress was attentively received by the audience. While underlining the necessity of such a congress, he enumerated the difficulties that lie ahead. Fr. Mesrop Aramian, a scientist, theologian and educator from Armenia and producer of "From Ararat to Zion" documentary film, brought a new dimension to the discourse of unity, stressing the role of education.

For the first time in Canada, probably in North America, a Hamshen Armenian was invited to participate in such a public gathering. The presence of Aliye Alice Alt from Germany, author of

"Hamshens in the Mirror of History", was received with reverence by the audience. Although she did not specifically address the subject of unity, her presentation in Turkish, translated live by Ared Misirliyan, was a reminder that in the process of achieving unity many aspects have been overlooked in our national discourse.

Following the above mentioned main speakers, local participation to the Symposium was provided by Prof. Arpi Hamalian, Antranig Bedrossian and Viken L. Attarian, in the form of commentaries to speeches of the guests from Armenia, France, Germany and USA. Keghart.com will publish video clips of their talks in a future update.

This unique gathering devoted to the subject of unity was concluded with a session of a lively Q&A which could have gone on for more than an hour, the time allotted by the organizers. Various topics ranging from the National Constitution of the Ottoman Armenians to the present were brought up during this session.

The symposium organized at University of Southern California in November 2010 and the recent gathering in Montreal are wake-up calls to examine ourselves and our choices, and take appropriate action individually and collectively.

The organizers of the Montreal Symposium should be commended for a job well done. It is worth noting that the sponsors were small, grass-roots organizations without political affiliations. For a community of 30,000 people scattered in and around Greater Montreal, the presence of 110 attendees for a demanding, day-long discussion was encouraging. More so because the average age of a significant portion of the audience was below 50, and the participation of young people and women was palpable throughout the day. It's only fair to mention some of the active young people--Vrouyr Makalian, Nayiri Abrahamian, Chahe Tanachian, Rahel Ourfalian and Azad Chichmanian. They were instrumental in running the program smoothly and in abiding by the announced schedule.