FR. HOVAGIMIAN OF VIENNA MEKHITARISTS INTERVIEWED

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Category: Opinions

Reporter, Vienna, Fall 2014

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The monastery includes a church, museum, library, and school. The library has the largest and the oldest collection of Armenian newspapers: some 170,000 volumes. The museum has one of the most significant Armenian coin collections, the oldest dating from the 4th century B.C. It also has ancient tapestries, ceramics, maps, a huge globe of the world, old Armenian silver works, Bibles, paintings by Naghash Hovnatan and Aivazovsky, and cartoons by Saroukhan. Its 2,600-illuminated manuscript collection is the third-largest after that of Armenia and Jerusalem. The library also has an estimated 500,000 books. The street where the monastery is located is called Mechitaristengasse.

It's in the 7th district of Vienna.

The congregation was founded by Mekhitar Sebastatsi in Constantinople in 1701. After being forced out of the country and a brief stay in the Peloponnesian islands, the monks established themselves in the San Lazzaro island of Venice.

Keghart.com interviewed Father Vahan Hovagimian, the head of the Vienna monastery, in late fall.

Keghart: *Tell us about yourself, Father Hovagimian.*

Father Hovagimian: I was born in Qamishli, Syria in 1958. I lived in Lebanon and came to Vienna in 1972 to continue my schooling and to study at the university. I was ordained priest in 1984. I am in charge of the parish, the library and the museum. My title is "*Hiurungal Vartabed*"-- guest priest,

custodian.

Keghart: *How many priests are there in the monastery?*

FH: We have six priests here and 18 in other countries.

Keghart: *What's the focus of the Mekhitarist mission?*

FH: Our motto is "*Ora e labors*" (prayers and work). Praying in community and working together. In addition to spiritual work, we are—as always—occupied with education/schools, parish work, research, and publishing.

Keghart: *How many students do you have here?*

FH: In 2000 we had 380 students. We now have almost 30. Our student numbers shrank because of the availability of many schools around us. The glory days of our school were from the post-WWII years until the '60s.

Keghart: *How are your relations with the local municipality?*

FH: We have good relations with the municipality and with the state. They support us when we ask for their financial help. When we ask for help, say, for renovations, they help us, but only when the cost is too high. They pay one-third of the cost. The monastery also has private buildings and receives monthly rents from these buildings.

Keghart: *I understand you have another source of revenues…liqueur production.*

FH: We produce six types of very popular *Mechitharine* liqueurs. They are generally speaking stomach-friendly beverages which are based on ancient recipes our Founder Mekhitar Sebastatsi brought with him to Europe. One of them is good for the heart. Others are for diabetics or for people with stomach problems. We also have an appetizing bitter. They come in .70L (22 Euros) and .35L (13 Euros).

Keghart: *There are about 4,000 Armenians in Vienna, many of them recent immigrants from Armenia. Can you talk about the community?*

FH: For years our community had about 3,500 people, almost all from Bulgaria, Hungary, Turkey, Lebanon, and Iran. In the past ten years immigrants—mostly from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Syria—have joined the community. I don't have exact population figures, but it's safe to say that the number of the newcomers is 4,000.

Keghart: *Can you tell us about Mekhitarian's great tradition of research and publishing?*

FH: We publish four to five books a year. Recent publications include "Symposion, 200 Jahre Mechitharisten in Wien" and of course "*Hantes Amsoria 2014*" and the "National Library Series" which started in 1889 and so far contain 227 volumes. We also continue with the "Studies of the Armenian

History" series. We sell "*Hantes Amsoria*" around the world, including in Armenia. "*Hantes Amsoria*" and other journals can be obtained through subscription.

Keghart: *Considering your vast library of books and publications, do Armenian and non-Armenian scholars utilize them for their research?*

FH: The library is open to all—to "odars" and particularly to Armenians.

Keghart: *How many visitors/tourists stop by the monastery every year?*

FH: We get more than 3,000 visitors a year; almost 1,000 are Armenian.

Keghart: *Is it true that the Nazis occupied the monastery as their offices during WWII? If yes, what did the monks do?*

FH: I know that our monastery was used in the WWII as headquarters for Marines. The monks went to the Middle East. The monastery treasures and books were hidden in the basement of the monastery.

Keghart: *Is the Mekhitarian Brotherhood growing?*

FH: For three weeks recently I was in Venice, in our main mother monastery at St. Lazzaro. We had the ordination of two young deacons. We hope that in 2015 they can become priests. Two days after the ordination of the deacons, four youngsters made their vows, to devote their lives to God and to the Armenian Nation.