

STS. JAMES PATRIARCHATE LAND LEASE

Posted on October 25, 2021 by Keghart



Category: [Opinions](#)



By Arousyag Harutunian, 16 October 2021

The name "Կովերու պարտեզ" (Garden of cows) was coined to describe the Patriarchate-owned farm which once provided milk, pork, eggs, and chicken to the Sts. James Brotherhood. There was also a small pond for the animals. Once a year, housewives, per Armenian tradition, washed the lamb wool of their mattresses at the pond and spread them to dry.

This was before Israel was established (1948). The "Bulgurji" Kalajjian family continued its operation at the northern tip of Goveroun Bardez until recent times, boiling wheat, spreading it to air dry, and crushing it into bulgur for use by the monastery and for sale to the community.

After the Israeli Occupation of East Jerusalem in 1967, Patriarch Yeghishe Derderian and Archbishop Shahe Ajemian got involved in various shady business dealings unrelated to the monastery. It was during this period that an Armenian lawyer in New York learned about the 99-year lease to Israel of the Armenian Patriarchate's prime property (church and convent) at the Mediterranean city of Jaffa. There was public uproar. It was later announced that the lease had been nullified.

In spite of international law protecting Church properties in and around the Holy City, the real estate saga continued with the sale to Israel by Patriarch Derderian and Archbishop Ajemian of land that had belonged to milkman (Կաթնապահառ) Մկրտիչ Family for generations.

Since the occupation of East Jerusalem by Israel, several similar acts have caused major concern in the Sts. James Brotherhood, within the community, and Armenians at large.

1) Unlike prior to 1967, when Jerusalem and the West Bank were under Jordanian rule, Israel does not allow the Patriarchate to enroll Armenian orphans or young men from Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and other Arab countries to study at the Armenian seminary in Jerusalem. Traditionally, many of the graduates of the seminary became priests serving Armenian parishes worldwide. The Israeli ban caused severe manpower shortages to the Armenian Patriarchate. It also isolated the community from the Armenian communities of the Middle East.

2) The illegal Israeli Occupation of Jerusalem also resulted in occasional violence and vandalism of the Sts. James Brotherhood and the small Armenian community. The tires of vehicles parked in front of the Sts. James Convent are frequently vandalized by religious and political extremists on their way to the Wailing Wall. Posters depicting the routes of the Armenian Genocide are regularly ripped.

3) On the streets of Jerusalem, Orthodox Jews, who believe they are the rightful owners of Jerusalem, often spit at Armenian priests to provoke fights. There are no official repercussions to these outrages.

4) The majority of the tightly-knit Armenian community are the descendants of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide. They were protected by the Armenian Patriarchate, and until 1967 by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

As the Genocide survivor generation passes on, Armenians oppressed by Israeli high taxation, lack of employment opportunities for non-Israelis, subtle discrimination of non-Israelis, and the difficulty of obtaining travel permits, are forced to leave their hometown, their community and their friends. As a result of the above limitations and restrictions, the once-vibrant community continues to shrink.

As a result of the Israeli ban on Armenian youth from the Middle East to enroll as seminarians in Jerusalem, the Patriarchate has been unable to educate a sufficient number of priests to responsibly govern the Patriarchate and prepare seminarians and spiritual leaders for diaspora churches. As well, with the residents getting old while young people look for opportunities abroad, the community keeps shrinking to the present 1,000 or so in Jerusalem.

5) The hopes and aspirations of the community are as follow: That at "Goveroun Bardez" the Patriarchate build rental apartments for young Armenians, especially for newlyweds, in addition to a hotel to encourage Armenian pilgrimage to the Holy Land, to create employment for Armenians, and to generate revenue. These hopes and visions were shattered by the Israeli Government, the Jerusalem Municipality, and the Jewish development company by the distressing and scandalous announcement that the Patriarch and Fr. Baret, without securing the necessary votes and approval of the St. James Patriarchate Synod, have gone ahead and leased the "Goveroun Bardez", to the Israeli Authorities for 99 years! Violating church doctrines and ignoring community needs, the two have instead facilitated the building of a hotel on the said property, by and for a Jewish businessman.

6) Several years ago, the street leading to the Armenian Convent went through a major overhaul of its the sewer system. This possibly coincided with the current plans for a hotel by a Jewish businessman at the adjacent "Goveroun Bardez".

To shed further light on the importance of Goveroun Bardez and the other Armenian Church properties in the Holy Land: several centuries ago, the Armenian Church was saved from bankruptcy by the "Krikor, Chain-bearing Patriarch, շղթալսակիր" who traveled abroad under difficult circumstances, collected funds to settle the Patriarchate's debts. His legacy assured that the Armenian Church properties remained untouched. Gratefully, we also remember Armenian pilgrims who over the centuries made the arduous pilgrimage to the Holy Land and often donated their life's savings to help build and maintain the Convent.

Under the current Patriarch, however, an unqualified priest (Fr. Baret Yeretsian) has been given "guardianship" of the Armenian Church properties all over the Holy Land. A tragedy indeed.

Land and housing prices outside the convent being out of the reach of most of the residents of the convent, most Armenians continue to live in Patriarchate-owned housing within the Armenian Quarter. Therefore, fearing reprisals from the Patriarchate, they avoid criticizing the wrongdoings and unbecoming behavior of Fr. Baret, and the Patriarch.

What the Armenians worldwide must do now is to protest at Israeli consulates and embassies and

demand that the recent illegal 99-year lease of Armenian Church land be declared null and void.

Comments



Hayorti – 2021-11-03 14:37:33

Garabed, You seem to believe the Jerusalem Patriarch signed the long lease because it needs the money. That view is contradicted by the Patriarch and Fr. Yeretsian (the director of real estate). In a recently published statement, Fr. Yeretsian said the Patriarchate has never been in better financial health. He elaborated that the critics of the long lease are unhappy because they are jealous of the Patriarchate's financial success. Meanwhile, Patriarch Manougian has said the rents the Patriarchate collects from its real estate properties have made the Patriarchate financially self-sufficient. By the way, the million or so dollars the Patriarch received from the Australian businessman is too little to make a difference to the health of the Patriarchate. Finally, the profit-sharing potential from the hotel's sales revenue is in the distant future. It will take years to build the hotel and more years for it to become profitable.



Garabed – 2021-11-01 20:47:36

As a matter of principle, I am not opposed to the Patriarchate to have leased that property which I understand has remained unused, to raise funds. After all the Patriarchate needs income to get by. Gone are the days when Armenians would go to pilgrimage to Jerusalem in large numbers and was a source of income to the Patriarchate. How does the Patriarchate raise money to remain afloat subsidizing the education of those who attend Jarankavorats school and become monks? The issues for me are two folds. First is the lack of transparency of the deal. The second is the kind of the commercial enterprise that will be operating next to the Patriarchate. I imagine that the hotel will have halls that will be used for parties whether social, business, or ceremonial such as weddings. It may have bars for the attendants and for others to frequent for socializing and passing time. To have such a business enterprise next to the Patriarchate is concerning for obvious reasons.



NURHAN ADARIAN – 2021-11-01 09:24:50

I read the article. I have visited Jerusalem and Patriarchate in 2017. I was impressed whole Patriarchate surroundings. We have to keep alive all those amazing structures. After all Jerusalem is very important for Armenians. Jerusalem has produced too many great clergies . If Hayr Baret Yeretsian is not qualified (He served disgracefully several Churches in USA also in Montreal, Canada) he should be terminated from this extremely important post. I know as a fact we are short of students and priests in Jerusalem but still no excuse, because Hayr Baret's long term effect is detrimental. Long live Jerusalem and our Patriarchate and Armenian community.



H – 2021-10-25 15:22:54

Thank you Arousyag Harutunian for your article. The lease by Yeretsian and Noorhan not only should be reversed and declared null, the two clergymen should not have the privilege to live among the pious community in the monastery.