PARLOUS STATE OF DIASPORA ARMENIAN SCHOOLS

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By Lalai Manjikian, Montréal, The Armenian Weekly, 16 September 2010

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These lessons weren't exactly my favorite way to spend time over the weekend because it interfered with my play. However, as much as I dreaded temporarily leaving my amusement behind as a 7-year-old, I recall my mother's enthusiasm as she taught me how to read and spell in Armenian. With excitement in her voice, she would tell me that soon, "When we move to Canada, you can go to Armenian school there." I now understand that she wasn't one to take Armenian schools anywhere in the world for granted.

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Like many Armenian families, we emigrated, again. Fast-forward to Montreal, where a full-time Armenian school became part of my new daily routine. Like any transition, it was challenging at first. The second-grade class that I joined was already quite advanced in the language. With the help of a dedicated Armenian teacher, I gradually caught up. In the process, I soon realized that my mother's Armenian tutoring, which I had once dreaded, had been invaluable.
Although the Armenian curriculum was demanding, I came to yet another realization after I graduated: Armenian school had exposed me to literary gems, genres, and analytical thinking, historical facts, cultural relics, and intricacies of an obscure Indo-European language—which I could not have unearthed on my own. In retrospect, my most interesting exposure to Armenian knowledge was at the high school level.

When I visited Armenia, our homeland, for the first time, I felt as though my appreciation of the country's cultural and historical wealth was accentuated by the knowledge that was transmitted to me over the years at Armenian school.

It wasn't perfect, and some days, especially towards the end, it felt suffocating. Nevertheless, I have

many fond memories of attending an Armenian elementary and high school, where a "home"-like atmosphere permeated. And to this day, some of my closest friends are from Armenian school.

Unfortunately, a sense of widespread apathy has taken over the alumni, materialized in our inability to mobilize and create an active alumni association.

Will this indifference eventually lead to the closure of schools? Potentially, but it won't be the only factor. In August 2010, it was reported that what remains of the Kaloustian School in Cairo is being merged with another Armenian academic institution, the Noubarian School. The Kaloustian School was established in 1854 and has had as many as 800 students. The current student population of 45 cannot sustain the school.

The reasons boil down to decreasing numbers of Armenians living in Egypt, as a result of recent emigration waves, families opting for non-Armenian schools, an Armenian community that is now predominantly Arabic-speaking, and an increase in mixed marriages. In a sense, these realities are linked to being scattered in a diaspora, but as I have argued in previous columns, they do not always have detrimental effects. They are part of the dynamism and regeneration of a diaspora.

The merger of the schools in Cairo may be a way of salvaging both institutions, though it is undeniable that an academic institution that once thrived is essentially defunct today. The Melkonian Educational Institute in Cyprus suffered a similar fate, closing its doors in 2005. On the other hand, the Armenian College and Philanthropic Academy in Calcutta, India, established in 1821, experienced the reverse: After experiencing a difficult period, it was revived in 1999 when the administration of the school was transferred to the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin.

A friend of mine recently expressed regret over the fate of the Kaloustian School in Egypt. She insisted that we should focus on repopulating Armenia and improving the country, namely the schools there, as the future of the diaspora looks grim. The numbers in Egypt are telling. This once bustling diasporic hub in Africa used to count around 50,000-60,000 Armenians. Today, the community counts all but 3,000.

Indifference and assimilation may be some of the causes behind school closures throughout the diaspora, but migratory patterns are also an important factor. The population may be moving out of Egypt, but Armenian populations are moving into other cities, namely in North America. Repopulating and "returning" to Armenia is a passionate ideal with complexities, which I do not delve into here. In reality, however, emigration from Armenia is at a high rate, while the number of diasporans repatriating to Armenia remains low.

Our fate is in our hands. We have obligations to fulfill both towards Armenia *and* the diaspora. We cannot neglect one for the sake of the other, because they do co-exist. Furthermore, we must respect the effort, time, and faith that have gone into establishing Armenian schools throughout the diaspora, in cities such as Syndey, Boston, Los Angeles, Beirut, Marseilles, and in the Armenian-Syrian enclave of Kessab, to name but a few.

Nevertheless, it is essential that these institutions adapt with current demands and curriculums depending on where they are located in order to allow upcoming generations to keep the schools in Armenia and in the diaspora. The closure of Kaloustian is not merely Cairo's community's loss, but Armenia's and the diaspora's loss as a whole. After all, this long-standing institution has prepared cohorts of students, who not only became central figures, intellectuals, and leaders throughout the diaspora, but who are also contributing to Armenia's development today.

Many realizations later—since being homeschooled in Armenian, graduating from an Armenian school, visiting Armenia for the first time, and visiting other Armenian schools around the world—I am still a proud product of my Armenian school in Montreal.

Armenian schools nurture and develop our ties and allegiances to Armenia, though more and more dialogue with the world around us should also be prioritized. We cannot afford to take these academic institutions for granted.