

A Boost to Western Armenian Language and Culture

By Edmond Y. Azadian

The Genocide was not only directed at the indigenous people of Historic Armenia, but also against its intellectuals – its creators of culture and preservers of its language – to make sure that Armenians would never rise again as a civilized group deserving a homeland.

To counter that nation-destroying policy, Diaspora Armenians built their schools, cultural centers, churches and institutions around the world to preserve their identity by perpetuating the Western Armenian language and heritage.

The rise of Soviet Armenia and the undeniable development of language, literature and culture in the homeland impacted the diaspora only tangentially, as there was no distinct policy to contribute to the development of Western Armenian language nor any concern about the loss of its valuable heritage. The diaspora was left mostly to its own devices to shape its destiny.

But globalization, along with its many benefits, basically undercut all the efforts in the diaspora to contain the momentum for the preservation of the Western Armenian language and culture. We witnessed the gradual demise of the schools, the bastions of the preservation and development of language and heritage.

Armenia's independence did not produce a dramatic change to help the diaspora. There is no state plan to salvage the Western Armenian language and literature. There are only half-hearted efforts – sometimes self-serving – to extend help to the Western Armenian heritage. Even the Armenian constitution does not have a specific provision to save the endangered Western Armenian language, although the recognition of Genocide has an important place in the constitution, which claims that the official state language is the literary Armenian language, without any distinction in the two branches of the language.

Under the influence of European Culture, Western Armenian has enjoyed full development, with a vast treasure of distinct vocabulary, style and tradition, which are destined, at this point, to be ossified, because of a lack of use.

Ironically, Armenia's news media, literature and the political discourse liberally borrow from Russian and other foreign sources, ignoring completely the wealth of Western Armenian.

Only a few institutions and intellectuals are engaged seriously in evaluating, preserving and developing the Western Armenian language and literature. One is the Sarkis Khachentz Publishing House, mostly through the efforts of erudite literary historian Yervant Ter Khachatryan. Another is the Spurk Center at the State Pedagogical University, headed by Surén Danielian, and third, there are some programs at Yerevan State University, which amount to little more than lip service to Western Armenian intellectual heritage.

Defeatism reigns in the diaspora; since the language and literature are in quick decline, it is easier to ride with the tide and accept the demise of a heritage as an unavoidable consequence of modern trends. But no general is in his place who believes that a necessary war is not winnable, therefore we have to let destiny take its course.

But some valiant institutions and individuals have taken the challenge and are fighting that necessary war. One such institution is the Catholicosate of Antelias under the leadership of the learned Pontiff Aram I. Antelias has assumed the role of the monas-

teries of Venice, Vienna and Jerusalem, where a tremendous amount of research was conducted, educational programs were developed and a network of schools was developed around the world. Old and new literature is published, textbooks are developed, seminars are organized and in general there is an intellectual movement fueled by the determination to preserve and disseminate the Western Armenian language and heritage.

The Dikran Tchouhadjian Research Institute in Paris also dedicated to preserving and breathing life into the treasures of Western Armenian culture, with an additional dimension of introducing that heritage on the world stage. The AGBU's virtual college is a global approach using modern technology for the instruction of the Armenian language.

Enter the Gulbenkian Foundation's Armenian Communities Plan, introducing a new approach and a new optimistic view to the entire endeavor vis-à-vis the Western Armenian language and heritage. Since its inception the Foundation has supported many worthy projects around the globe, but its new five-year plan, published on December 11, 2013, brings an entirely new approach to charity with its focus on the orphaned Western Armenian language and culture.

The vision, the detailed plan and the reliance on modern technologies to implement the plan, are the brainchild of its new leader, Dr. Razmik Panossian. The published plan states its mission as: "to create a viable future for the Armenian people in which its culture and language are preserved and valued." And then under six segments the implementation of the plans are detailed.

The five-year plan is motivated by a deep concern over the danger hanging over the Western Armenian language and education as well as the recognition of the historic timing to react. Indeed, it is stated that, "Western Armenian is an endangered language," according to UNESCO, under the threat of disappearing if serious initiatives are not undertaken to reinforce it. This generation is probably the last generation that can help or possibly reverse this process of not-so-gradual loss of a language that was a vibrant source of Armenian culture only half a century ago."

As we go through the plan we realize that it is proactive and interactive. It does not have a confrontational approach nor does it try to underestimate other efforts towards the realization of the same goals. On the contrary, it paves the way for broader cooperation with other projects and institutions striving along with the same concerns.

The plan also addresses a very sensitive issue of Armenian-Turkish relations in its third part, with the following careful statement: "Improve Armenian-Turkish relations by sponsoring projects that encourage a common understanding of their shared history."

The prudent approach indicates here that Armenians, through their meager resources are not in a position to force the Turkish state to recognize the Genocide nor consider any compensation; that leaves the only alternative of cooperating with honest and progressive Turkish historians and human rights activists to bring about quantitative and qualitative changes in public awareness in the Turkish population, which eventually can influence the political direction of the state.

This is a welcome plan by a major institution which combines its funding resources with strategic vision for maximum impact. It is more realistic than optimistic and it brings with it not only a distinct course of action but also a source of thinking in diasporan guiding principles.

(Readers can look at the Gulbenkian plan on page 6)