

The Place and Meaning of Armenian Studies in the Life of Armenians in America

An address by the Rev. A. A. Bedikian at the Banquet of the National Association of Armenian Studies and Research at Hotel Commander, Cambridge, Mass., June 11, 1955

The very first remark I would like to make with the thought of the great project in which we are all so deeply interested, is the obvious fact that we, Armenians in this country, have come of age in more than one sense.

What we have set before us to accomplish is a clear proof of our maturity socially, intellectually, and spiritually. It is also a proof of our emancipation from a complexity of conditions, with which we have been encompassed, and the state of mind shaped by these conditions.

The evolution of our sense of values during the past fifty years is an interesting subject to study. We came to this country towards the beginning of the century as refugees from political oppression, cruelty, and persecution. Our first thought was then establishing a foothold in this country primarily economically and secondarily, socially and spiritually. The first generation of Armenians came to these shores in search of a livelihood under political and economic conditions conducive to security and prosperity.

Speaking in general terms, Armenians could not be classed among the prosperous class in this country till the end of the first World War. And when their prosperity began, as did the prosperity of the entire country, their main preoccupation was, by necessity, helping Armenians who had somehow survived the genocidal atrocities of 1915 perpetrated upon them in Turkey, with some of whom practically every single Armenian family in the U.S.A. was directly related in blood ties. So that whatever resources Armenians had had to be directed to the relief of their suffering brothers and sisters overseas to save as many of them from death and starvation as they could.

Then we advanced to another stage in our progress towards achievements of perhaps more lasting value. We must note that in this stage we prospered as we had never done before throughout our history; and then also the urgency of aid to fellow Armenians in the Diaspora diminished to a great extent.

But it is also important to note that what prosperity usually does to people did also for Armenians; that is, it roused their interest in intellectual and spiritual enlightenment. They now had time, money for, and interest in the promotion of their national cultural heritage. Therefore we can say that at the end of fifty years Armenians are well adjusted in this country in every way. They have found themselves socially, intellectually, spiritually, as they had not done some twenty years ago.

My guess is — for, in the absence of statistics it cannot be more than a reasonable guess — that in proportion to their numbers, there are more educated Armenians in this country than in any other national group. The sons of merchants are now turning to intellectual and professional pursuits. This single fact alone is enough to explain the remarkable change in the national outlook of Armenians. They seem to have drastically revised their sense of priorities in values.

And here is one clear evidence of that: this movement, this project, this great dream—call it by whatever name you want—that has brought us together here. I assure you that twenty years ago this would be impossible. Then they were not as yet conditioned to such ideas as this organization is sponsoring. They had to come of age; they had to mature to launch the sort of thing that has become a reality today.

The dream some of you have dreamed is not new; but you had the wisdom and fortune to dream it at a time when the day was dawning, whereas some of us of the older generation dreamed the same dream in the middle of the night.

I have seen, and have been a part of good many campaigns for funds in this country for diverse projects, but this is the first one for purely a cultural or academic object.

You will be amazed if you figured the amount of money that is being solicited at the present time for essentially cultural objects. Funds for churches, cultural centers, schools, publications, and the like, will amount in the aggregate to a few million dollars. And we want three hundred thousand dollars for our objective. Our people seem to be earning not to accumulate but to spend for immaterial values. We are prepared to invest money in projects from which there is no material return except academic and cultural. We have fortunately reached the stage of maturity in which we realize that the life and destiny of a nation is insured through its investments in cultural and spiritual endeavors.

My second remark is this in brief: As far as I know this is the first time in a century or more that Armenians themselves are taking the initiative in making the study of Armenian on a high level of scholarship possible and available. Up to the present time this initiative was taken by foreign scholars or higher institutions of learning in various European countries.

It is common knowledge, certainly to this group here, that some of the great universities of Europe sponsored the study of Armenian and in connection with them were associated names of famous scholars. Just to mention a few universities: Paris, Marburg, Gottingen, Berlin, Strasbourg, Christiania, St. Petersburg, Oxford, etc. Even leaving out the names of pioneers in this field of study, who labored and produced as early as the second half of the 17th century, we meet such distinguished scholars, from the beginning of the 18th century as La Croze, Guillaume Villefrois, whose students faithfully and successfully maintained the heritage of high standards of scholarship from one generation to another. At the close of 1798 courses of lectures in Armenian were initiated at the School of Oriental Languages of the University of Paris, then and perhaps through the years till now, the strongest for the study of languages. The first instructor appointed by the State was one called Jacques Shahan Cirbied, an Armenian whose Armenian Grammar is an interesting antiquity today still good to consult more with historic interest than for its linguistic value. Then a line of great scholars succeeded each other, to name a few: Saint Martin, Florival, Edouard Dulaurier, Carriere, Brosset, Victor Langlois, until Feydit, the present incumbent of the chair, and previously Frederick Macler and Adolphe Meillet.

France's contribution has been tremendous in the study of Armenian. But Germans have not done less. Just a few well known names will bear evidence of the contribution of Germans to this field of study: Muller, Hubschmann, Delagard, Petermann, Gutschmid, etc., have set standards of scholarship that we can only follow with gratitude and humility. I cannot even touch upon this rich subject of the work done by European universities in the field of Armenian studies. It has been extensive and valuable historically and critically.

What I am trying to say is the fact that so far others have done for us that which we are now prepared to do for ourselves. This truly marks a most significant landmark in national progress. We are changing positions. We are deciding not to be receivers but

givers. We are now helping ourselves instead of letting others help us. We are thus gaining self-respect in the intellectual domain as we already have done in the economic domain. We are not asking for courses for someone to provide to us; we are providing them ourselves. Civilization has also this meaning: it means resignation from begging.

And my third and last remark now: I am very happy that the study of Armenian will be under the stringent standards of a university like Harvard. What has been to this day—and it is continued to be done in some quarters—has been equivalent to glorifying the Grammar School with the dignity of a university. Announcement of courses in the catalogue of studies of a well-known university does not dignify the courses if their instruction is entrusted to mediocre or incompetent men. In this field an intellectual vacuum cannot be tolerated. We cannot tolerate High School standards in a university whatever the subject of instruction may be. When we speak of a chair at Harvard for Armenian studies we mean creating and maintaining the highest standards of scholarship. Here and there courses are being offered in Armenian but they are not up to university standards. In all these years we have not seen even a pamphlet of scholarly value produced in any of these universities where Armenian courses have been offered. Harvard must show the way for scholarly instruction in graduate studies and in publication.

This country is taking over the leadership in the world in many areas. Also, in intellectual pursuits. And we Armenians of this country are trying to lead our own people intellectually. We are shedding our dependence upon the traditional sources of inspiration. And I am sure the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research with its wonderful program of action is a convincing evidence of it. Somebody must congratulate them and I want to be the one to do it at this time.