

THE PROTESTANT SCHOOLS IN MUSA DAGH DURING THE 1920s-1930s

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The first Protestant school in Armenian Musa Dagh was established in the village of Bitias in 1856. Yoghun Oluk village followed suit fifteen years later, in 1871. Short-lived schools also existed in nearby communities. Despite rampant poverty and political instability in the region at large, the total number of students increased from 81 in the 1880s to 102 in the 1890s to 117 in the 1900s. Importantly, the Protestant community was the first to establish coeducational schools in pre-World War I Musa Dagh with girls constituting about one-third of the student body. Similarly, 69% of the faculty was female, some of whom native.¹ At the Armenian refugee camp of Port Said, Egypt, where about two-thirds of the Musa Dagh population had been transported by the French Mediterranean Navy in mid-September 1915 after resisting the Genocide for six weeks, the Protestants did not have their own school. Instead, all children, regardless of their confessional affiliation, from 1915 to 1919 attended a single school named Sisvan administered by the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU).²

In the early 1920s, that is, right after the repatriation of survivors from Port Said and Hama (where the remaining one-third of Musa Dagh's inhabitants had been deported), education among the Protestants of Musa Dagh—indeed the entire population—assumed paramountcy. In Bitias and Yoghun Oluk kindergartens and elementary schools began to operate albeit in very poor conditions. As an American Protestant missionary in January 1920 reported, “From a third to a half of the people from the Antioch villages have returned,

¹ Vahram L. Shemmassian, *The Armenians of Musa Dagh: From Obscurity to Genocide Resistance and Fame, 1840-1915*, Armenian Series, No. 11, Fresno, California: The Press, California State University, Fresno, 2020, pp. 174-82.

² For the Sisvan school at Port Said, see AGBU, *Hashvegshir yev Deghegagir 11rt, 12rt, 13rt yev 14rt Shrchanneru 1916-1919* (Balance Sheet and Report of the 11th, 12th, 13th and 14th Periods 1916-1919), AGBU Printing, Cairo 1920, pp.107-110; M. Salpi (Dr. Aram Sahagian), ed. *Aliagner yev Khliagner. Hay Vranakaghakin Darekirke* (Little Waves and Hovels: The Yearbook of the Tent City), A. Kasabian Printing, Alexandria, Egypt, 1919/1920, pp. 181-93; Khacher Madurian, “Por Sayidi Hay Kaghtaganats Vranakaghake” (The Armenian Refugee Camp of Port Said), in Mardiros Kushakjian and Boghos Madurian, eds., *Hushamadian Musa Leran* (Memorial Book of Musa Dagh), Atlas Printing, Beirut, 1970, pp. 411-15; Ardashes H. Kardashian, *Niuter Yekibdosi Hayots Badmutian Hamar* (Materials for the History of the Armenians of Egypt), vol. 3, S. Lazarus Printing, Venice, Italy, 1987, pp. 263-300.

and they are trying to start schools. They seem bound to have schools whether they have anything or not. They have no books and get along with a little paper [and] some pencils. As soon as they get started, they write to Aintab for books, and the pastor finds what he can, a meagre [sic] supply and sends them off.”³

According to George Kelejian (nicknamed “Dkhruni”), a student at Bitias, a room at notable Moses Chaparian’s house served as school. In the absence of desks boys and girls sat on straw mats while native Miss Gaydar Chaparian taught Armenian grammar, history, geography, arithmetic, and dictation-spelling. In 1921-22, the classes took place at the Magzarian residence because Moses Chaparian needed his for sericulture purposes. An anecdote describes a strange disciplinary action taken. As a new teacher hailing from Marash by the name of Yevnigé Baghdasarian took a two-week maternity leave, substitute Mihran Renjilian, an educated *cheté* (armed brigand), placed his gun on the desk to scare disruptive children off. Those known for excessive misbehavior turned into “angels.” A new subject was also introduced at this time: English. The school in 1922-23 was transferred yet again, to the Protestant church, while Apostolic children relocated to a neighborhood called Vire Gule (Upper Threshing Floor) to be taught by a certain Hrant Chakerian from Zeytun.⁴ This division shows that the Protestants may have acquired their separate school circa 1923, whereas before they were part of a school network called Sisvan operated in the six villages of Musa Dagħ from 1921 to 1925 by the AGBU.⁵

STUDENT POPULATION AND FACULTY

Generally speaking, the student population in Musa Dagħ remained modest. Enrollment at the two Protestant schools was not different. During the 1926-27 scholastic year 60 boys and girls attended the Bitias school under two female instructors, and the church and school budgets combined amounted to 11 (Ottoman) liras to which the locals could contribute only 2.5 liras (22.7%). On the other hand, only one female teacher ran the coeducational school in Yoghun Oluk, with no reference made to the number of students and the budget.⁶ In

³ American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) Archives, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, ABC: 16.9.6, Lucile Foreman report, January 13, 1920.

⁴ Interview with George Kelejian, August 3, 1977, Anjar, Lebanon.

⁵ For the Musa Dagħ episode of the Sisvan schools network, see, for example, *Husharar* (Monitor) (Cairo), no. 59 (January 15, 1922), pp. 432-33; *Arev* (Sun) (Alexandria), June 2, 1924; *Husaper* (Hope-Bearer) (Cairo), November 20, 1924.

⁶ Garabed Harutiunian, “Surio Tashde—Avedaranchagan Bduyd Me” (The Syria Field: A Missionary Trip), *Yeramsia Lradu Hay Avedaranchagan Engeragtsutian Amerigayi* (Quarterly Bulletin of the Armenian Missionary Association of America), vol. 5, no. 4 (May 1927), p. 9.

1927, Yoghun Oluk had 30-35 pupils, half boys and half girls. Despite the small number, the presence of girls showed progress given their education was largely neglected in the village.⁷ In 1928, Bitias and Yoghun Oluk had 50 and 20 pupils, respectively.⁸ Referring to the situation in Bitias, Movses Sarkis Renjilian, a prominent figure within the Protestant community, claimed that 90% of people there were now literate, whereas only 20% knew how to read and write beforehand. This substantial increase prompted him to consider the establishment of a high school in Musa Dagħ “essential.”⁹ In 1929, the Bitias school consisted of 60 students, 2 teachers, a kindergarten with 2 classes, and an elementary school with 5 classes, averaging 8.6 students per class.¹⁰ In 1930, some 65 children attended the Yoghun Oluk school (the highest number recorded in its annals), of whom 41 girls (63%) and 24 boys (37%). Arusiag Darakjian, a graduate of the American missionary school for girls at Marash, taught the elementary classes, while her daughter, Satenig, dealt with the kindergarten section (mother and daughter had originally served at Bitias). Tuitions covered only ⅓ of the teacher’s salary (apparently only Arusiag was compensated).¹¹ Pastor Garabed Tilkian (b. 1906 in Bitias) was similarly a member of the teaching staff at Yoghun Oluk. He wrote in his memoirs: “I was the head teacher.... The main emphasis was on reading, writing and arithmetic. I taught French and English to fifth and sixth graders. I must say from this experience that under primitive conditions teaching would become often frustrating.”¹²

Recruiting qualified teachers locally proved difficult, which compelled the Protestant community to look elsewhere. A list of educators assigned from Aleppo to serve in Bitias during the period under study is telling. An anonymous woman originally from Aintab or Marash worked in Bitias. She was replaced by Arusiag Darakjian and her daughter (mentioned above) sometime in the late 1920s. An active educator, Arusiag organized cultural programs such as one presented to the public on May 4, 1929 at the Protestant church. It included recitations of poetry, singing, and the staging of satirist Hagop Baronian’s *Shoghokorte* (The Flatterer). The reporter covering the event observed that

⁷ *News Bulletin of the American Board Mission in Syria*, no. 3 (February 1927), p. 4.

⁸ Hovh[annes] Shnorhokian, “Musa Dagħi Ermeni Kariyeleri” (The Armenian Villages of Musa Dagħ), *Nor Avedaper* (New Herald), vol. 1, no. 12 (May 12, 1928), pp. 94-95.

⁹ M[ovses] S[arkis] Renjilian, “Bitiasda Mektebler (The Schools in Bitias), *Nor Avedaper*, vol. 1, no. 17 (July 21, 1928), p. 135.

¹⁰ *Nor Avedaper*, vol. 2, no. 8 (April 21, 1929), p. 334.

¹¹ Garabed Tilkian, “Yoghun-Oluk,” *Nor Avedaper* (February 21, 1930), p. 63.

¹² Garabed S. Tilkian, *Musa Dagħ Boy: Story of Survival and Service*, ABRIL Printing, Los Angeles, CA, 1992, pp. 78-79.

people were aware of their educational needs so the future augured well. Poverty, however, hindered progress.¹³

In 1931, the Armenian Protestant Station Committee in Aleppo (hereafter Station Committee) dispatched a certain A. Chekijian to Bitias to fill the vacant teaching position.¹⁴ It was perhaps during this time that native Sara Melidonian served as aide. Nevart Dedeyan, born in Kilis and who in August 1934 married Pastor Tilkian, assisted by native Sima Taminosian, taught for several years as head teacher after Chekijian left. Lucine Baylozian from Aleppo replaced Mrs. Tilkian when she relocated to Yoghun Oluk to be with her husband.¹⁵

In mid-September 1936, Bitias asked the Station Committee to contact a certain Toros Shanlian, then in Beirut, offering him a teaching position at their school with a 2 Ottoman liras monthly salary for nine months.¹⁶ Given Shanlian had already been hired by a private school in Lebanon, interest in him automatically dropped.¹⁷ Bitias then invited S. Manishagian, pledging “the highest annual salary” that teachers serving in Armenian Protestant schools received at the time. He declined, because he too had a job.¹⁸

When Rev. Hadidian in October 1936 visited Aleppo in search of an instructor, the Station Committee checked its pool and found two possibilities (besides Shanlian). Bitias native Movses Renjilian had expressed interest in a teaching position to which the Station Committee did not object and left the decision to Bitias. The second prospect, Levon Babigian, had taught in Kesab the previous year, but now he had found employment in a pharmacy. However, he was willing to move to Bitias if, according to the Station Committee, the locals would pay him an annual salary of 24 Ottoman liras.¹⁹ Although the Station Committee refrained from expressing its preference, based on the tone of its assessment it can be surmised that Babigian was presented as a better fit. And indeed, he served in Bitias as the main pedagogue for two years, from 1936 to 1938. During this time Bitias considered hiring a certain Eliza

¹³ M[ihran]. M. Keoroghluian, “Bitiasdan Khaberler” (News from Bitias), *Nor Avedaper*, vol. 2, no. 10 (May 26, 1929), pp. 366-67.

¹⁴ *Nor Avedaper*, no. 20 (November 5, 1931), p. 476.

¹⁵ Alberta Magzanian, letter to the author, April 8, 2009.

¹⁶ Armenian Evangelical Church (AEC) Archives, Anjar, Lebanon, Armenian Evangelical Church, Bitias, Musa Dagħ: *Incoming Correspondence 1927-1938*, Chairman S.G. Aghbabian and Vice-Secretary Yeghia S. Kasuni of the Aleppo Station Committee to the Bitias Protestant Church, September 16, 1936.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Chairman S.G. Aghbabian and Secretary H.A. Chakmakjian of the Aleppo Station Committee to the Bitias Protestant Church Board, October 9, 1936.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Aram Hadidian to S. Manishagian, October 8, 1936.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Chairman S.G. Aghbabian and Secretary H.A. Chakmakjian of the Aleppo Station Committee to the Bitias Protestant Church Board, October 9, 1936.

Geokgeozian from Kirik Khan as the female teacher for the lower grades. The outcome of this quest remains unknown.²⁰

Kegham Mississian, also from Aleppo, replaced Babigian after his departure. Student Alberta Magzanian described Mississian's important role during his one-year tenure:

In a sense, Baron Kegham Mississian was the last and the only teacher running the Protestant school of Bitias for the academic year 1938-39. Since 1936, the school always had two teachers, a male teacher for grades 4-6 and a female counterpart for the lower classes. The school committee members had planned to hire a second teacher for the year, especially when they had already received ten [British] pounds from AGBU to cover the salary. Unfortunately, it never happened. Instead, Mrs. Gaida Hadidian, the minister's wife, stopped at the school for less than an hour to teach French to several students. On Friday afternoons, she also taught music. A young local girl who had graduated from the sixth grade the previous spring took care of a small group of kindergartners. Baron Kegham assumed the remaining tasks of running the entire school. Besides that, through his self-assumed responsibilities, he became the educator and advisor for the entire village.

During the months of September through May, Bitias, like all other Musa Dagh villages, was isolated with hardly any access to news about the outside world. Once Baron realized the situation, he scheduled monthly information gatherings open to the entire community which became very popular with the younger generation. I also understand the young members of the Protestant church community sought his advice on church issues fairly regularly.

...

Baron Kegham Mississian, according to his students and the parents of those students, was an exceptional teacher and a very caring person. He comes across as a serious, stern, compassionate teacher with a great sense of humor. He had high standards for his students and for himself.²¹

For the 1939-40 academic year the joint meeting of the Aleppo and Beirut Station Committees, held on May 26, 1939, stated that "Good teachers are needed in Bitias, Yoghunolouk [sic], and Kaladouran [in Kesab district]. This matter was left to the Aleppo Station Committee with the suggestion that Emmanuel Darakjian be placed in Yoghunolouk for the summer and for the

²⁰ Ibid. Secretary Misag G. Mamalian of the Kirik Khan Armenian Protestant church to the Bitias Protestant church and school board leadership, December 26, 1937.

²¹ Alberta Magzanian, letter to the author, no date.

coming year either there or in Bitias.”²² The exodus of the Musa Dagh population in summer 1939 rendered the acquisition of a teacher irrelevant. A final note: The teaching staff of the Musa Dagh Protestant schools, usually hired from outside, frequently changed hands perhaps because of insufficient income and/or the inability to cope with the tough living conditions in the mountainous milieu. This instability must have impacted education negatively to some degree.

SCHOOL FACILITIES AND CURRICULUM

In the case of Yoghun Oluk, the church was also used as a school. Unfortunately, no characterization of the structure’s exterior and/or interior has been recorded. Bitias was a different story. Mihran Keoroghlian (Koeroghlian), who was assigned in 1928 by his mentors to gain some teaching experience in that village before attending the School of Religion in Athens, Greece to become a minister, provided some details about the Protestants’ facilities:

The schoolhouse and the church building were set side by side in the yard. They both were old and almost crude buildings but good enough to serve as a place of worship or instruction. It was the middle of September when pupils and teachers gathered in the schoolhouse. It was a long and narrow building divided into two sections: one set aside for the kindergarten, the other for the elementary grades.²³

Different details exist pertaining to the 1930s because by then the school structure had undergone some renovations. Magzarian described it as follows:

Our school building comprised four large L-shaped classrooms. Besides, it had a large, two-level yard with a huge plane tree on the lower level planted in mid-19th century. Because of its enormous size and age, the plane tree was a curiosity to all visitors and visible from many sections of the village. I don’t remember when I started school. Whenever it was, only two of the four rooms were used for classes; of the remaining two, one was for storage and the other was in disrepair, missing a front wall. The latter space was a convenient area for congregating early in the mornings or during recess when the rain interfered with our games. During the summer of 1936, the three rooms were renovated. The dividing walls were removed, the floors

²² Armenian Evangelical Union of the Near East (AEUNE) Archives, Beirut, File *Mertsavor Arevelki Yegeghetsineru Miutian Zhe Ta Hamazhoghov 1939-40* (14th General Meeting of the Union of Near East Armenian Evangelical Churches 1939-40), Minutes of the Joint Meeting of the Aleppo and Beirut Station committees, May 26, 1939, Aleppo.

²³ Mihran Moses Koeroghlian, *A Latter-Day Odyssey: The Autobiography of the Man Who Would Not Give Up*, Dorrance & Company, Inc., Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, 1986, pp. 177-78.

and windows restored and a new auditorium replaced the old rooms. The new auditorium then, divided with a curtain, replaced the old classrooms. The new space, besides serving as a school, was used for lectures on weekends and replaced the church as the new facility for plays, performances, etc. Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* was the only play performed in the new auditorium before the Musa Dagh evacuation in 1939. I understand our last city teacher, Baron Kegham Mississian ... used the auditorium regularly for *lsaran* [lecture series] on weekends, a much appreciated and informative gathering by the young men and women of the community.

...

Once we arrived at school, we waited for the arrival of one of the two teachers. Of course, the classroom doors were locked. If we were early, and most of us were, we played in the yard, and during bad weather, we congregated in the empty room with the missing front wall. Once one of the two teachers arrived, he or she rang the hand bell, students then lined up according to class, girls and boys separately, and marched to our assigned rooms and seats.²⁴

Alberta also described the interior of the classrooms after reaching fourth grade and the changing room:

How different was RNT [Room No. Two]? It was the same size as our first classroom, but everything else was new and exciting. Instead of our individual mats sitting on the floor, now we had to share a long desk with three or four students. As we entered the room, a large blackboard hung on the right wall, and next to it a map of the world greeted us. The teacher's chair and table were to the left of the door. The students were segregated, the older boys' desks were to the left of the teacher's table followed by the older girls. Facing the teacher were the long desks for the new group, the girls occupied the back row and the boys the front. Like our first room, two L-shaped benches, were placed in front of the teacher's table.... [Room No.] Two was exciting and memorable. Of course, it was not just the novelty of the environment, but the subjects covered, especially geography for me. Here was also the additional opportunity for teasing older students. I must confess, we did not wait very long.²⁵

Speaking of the daily schedule and class length, school started at 8:30 a.m. and ended at 4:30 p.m. However, "class periods were flexible and bells did not disrupt the activities going on in each room. When three separate grades with

²⁴ Magzanian, letter to the author, March (no day), 2009.

²⁵ Ibid.

about two dozen students share a room and when the number of students in each grade varies from three to nine students, specific time periods were totally impractical. Therefore, a bell did not mark the beginning and end of a particular class session. The teacher marked the length of a period by calling a particular grade to the front benches and dismissing the group when he determined the assignment covered. The head teacher used a hand bell to announce the beginning and ending of the daily schedule—morning classes, recess, lunch break, afternoon classes and short recess and dismissal.”²⁶

Needless to say, recess constituted part of the school day. As Alberta reminisced,

[R]ecess was noisy and exciting. The entire school played together and shared the multi-level yard. Some of the most popular games were catch and especially “double catch.” “Double catch” was a partnership game.... Other popular games, especially for girls, were hopscotch and jumping rope. The boys played competitive marble games and during the wet season *labeud* [a game played with a wooden stick]. Sometimes during the afternoon recess, we had a supervised gym class. We lined up in columns, marched and did different stretching exercises. In 1936-37, Baron Levon [Babigian] introduced volleyball to the older boys. Our recess period was about half an hour long. Besides our games, we had enough time to run to the neighbor's yard for a drink of fresh, cold water from a little spring. Once in a while some adventurous students took a chance and ran to Frangen Aghpayre [a central water spring] because of their thirst and on the way visited a garden for some fresh fruit, especially fava beans.²⁷

Alberta also provides us with specifics regarding the curriculum, textbooks, and things learned. The long quote below is warranted because of its substantive content:

In RNO [Room No. One], we had a couple of primers which did not change from year to year, a situation which was not any different from RNT [Room No. Two]. Every September we got new copies of the same books, which became pretty tattered by June. The first Armenian primer I received was called *Keragan* [grammar-language book], and to this day I remember some of the subjects covered and the pictures. How can one forget when one lives with the same booklets for several years? On the very last page of our *Keragan*, there was a picture of a young girl in Japanese attire holding a small umbrella over her head and introducing herself, “Yes Japontzi aghchig mun em” (I am a Japanese girl). We also had an English primer a few pages thick that my mother remembered from her school days before World War

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

I. Even before I entered school, I could recite “Run mouse run. If you do not run, the cat will catch you.” Besides primers, our slate with a double string holding a small wet cloth and a piece of chalk was our most important learning tool. We learned to write on it, solve math problems, take tests and even draw pictures on it. I don't remember using paper and pencil until we graduated to RNT.

What skills did we bring with us to RNT? We could speak, read and even managed to write in standard Armenian. We had mastered the English alphabet, could write all the verses in our primer and even spell correctly a few dozen words in the little booklet. We knew math—add, subtract, multiply and divide. We knew a lot of Bible stories, hymns, could recite many psalms and verses, could sing patriotic songs with gusto. We knew some of our early history, had shed some tears over our hero [Armenian commander-in-chief of the mid-5th century] Vartan [Mamigonian] and the *tavajan* [betrayor] Vasag. Some of us had even mastered the Arabic alphabet and could write and decipher some words. Yes, in every way we were ready! The study of geography entailed memorizing most of the information on the map hanging from the wall — continents, oceans, major countries and their capital cities, rivers, mountains, etc. Definitely, a lot of memory work. The teacher followed the same procedure as in Room No. One. He called on each class to come to the front and occupy the benches facing him. Once the students settled down, he called on one of the students to stand up and answer some questions. For geography class, the questions could be naming all the continents, oceans, rivers, etc. Once the student answered the questions correctly, the teacher would then hand him a ruler and ask the student to point to the places on the map. While the class was going on at the front of the room, the rest of the students had to occupy themselves with homework. This was a difficult task to enforce. Finding it difficult to concentrate on homework, some of us found ways to participate during class time. If a student stumbled during geography and if we liked him or her, we would help by whispering the correct answer. We often got in trouble for our misbehavior, but the punishment did not deter us from mischief. We even continued the teasing during recess.

Geography of course was memory work and all based on the information on the world map. However, we did have a math book with new terms, new symbols, new exercises, metric system and the beginnings of algebra for sixth grade students. Our English primer was thicker and bigger. I don't remember the title, but later I learned that it was identical to the booklet used in city schools in Aleppo.

Our favorite textbook in RNT was the thick Armenian volume called *Oshagan*. Much later, we discovered this was the author [writer and literary

critic Hagop Oshagan] and not the title of the book. Since I don't remember the title I continue calling that book *Oshagan*. *Oshagan* officially introduced us to our national literature for the first time in fourth grade. We first read a biographical sketch about an author followed by a sample of his/her work—an essay or a poem. We memorized many poems and segments of essays. We enjoyed the new vocabulary and compared the words to our spoken dialect. Some of us were so carried away with our newly discovered literature, we voluntarily memorized as much as we could. We also decided to converse with each other in standard Armenian outside the school. Probably we hoped to compete with the older students and impress our parents. Some of the popular authors whose works we loved were Arshag Chobanian, Vahan Tekeian, Zabel Yesaian, Daniel Varujan, and on top of the list, Bedros Turian. I remember some of us cried when we learned about him and tried to memorize his poetry.²⁸

Music also constituted part of the curriculum. It flourished during teacher Babigian's tenure especially. It is true that students used to sing patriotic and spiritual songs on special occasions. However, Babigian taught them how to read notes and perform *karatzayn* (in four voices), that is, soprano, alto, tenor and bass, with the accompaniment of an organ installed in the church. The whole process was a novelty that caused excitement among the students.²⁹

At the end of the school year in June 1937 a formal, historic ceremony took place: it was the first time that the graduates, five boys and three girls, received an actual diploma. They were Norman Movses Balabanian, Nubar Igarian, Barkev Phillian, Levon Shemmassian, Movses Sherpetjian, Mari Keledjian, Mari Magzanian, and Vergen Melidonian.³⁰ Alberta explained what graduation meant from her perspective:

We never had a graduation before. People just stopped attending school once they were classified “old.” As a matter of fact, dropping out and

²⁸ Ibid. Magzanian is confused about the Armenian textbook. Hagop Oshagan wrote a single Armenian literature book titled *Hay Kraganutiun*, published in Jerusalem in 1947, which could not have been the one used in Bitias during the 1930s. Instead, they must have adopted an illustrated textbook, titled *Oshagan Nor Entertsaran* (Oshagan New Reader), published in Constantinople by T. Hovhannesian in 1930. Oshagan is the name of the village in present-day Armenia where Mesrob Mashdots, the creator of the Armenian Alphabet, is buried. I thank Dr. Antranig Dakessian for bringing this matter to my attention. See also his article, “Hagop Oshagani *Hay Kraganutiun* Hadorin Dznunti Badmutenen” (On the History of the Birth of Hagop Oshagan's *Armenian Literature Tome*), *Haigazian Armenological Review*, 14:1994, pp. 299-328.

²⁹ Magzanian, letter to the author, March (no day), 2009.

³⁰ Ibid.

sometimes “dropping in” seemed to be an on-going activity of the school. We had some students who started the school year after the harvest season in the fall and sometimes left early in the spring, attending school just a few months. Some others helped their families with the silk industry and missed almost two months during that season. Now, some students labeled sixth graders were officially going to be sent off—graduate! And, to make sure these students did not “drop in” again, they were awarded a piece of paper called a “diploma.”

In the community, the word itself seemed to carry a lot of prestige with a touch of sarcasm. The younger folks began to realize that a diploma was a symbol of accomplishment. The sarcasm or grin came out when a *diplomalan* [diploma holder] made an innocent mistake or showed poor judgment in a situation. Then the derision would start and people would question the value of such a piece of paper....³¹

FINANCES AND THE AGBU CONNECTION

The Armenian Protestant churches and schools in Musa Dagħ from the outset could not stand on their own feet financially. Initially American Protestant missionaries operating in the region then the Armenian Protestant Station Committee in Aleppo came to their aid. In 1924, the missionaries spent 304 Turkish liras (\$1,337.60) for Armenian schools in Syria. Of this amount 63 liras (20.7%) was given to Musa Dagħ, more specifically, 36 liras to Bitias and 27 liras to Yoghun Oluk.³² A year later it was reported that “There is a great desire for education both here [in Aleppo] and in the villages. From W[oman’s] B[oard of] M[issions] funds we are aiding two schools in Aleppo, and paying the salaries of teachers in Kessab, Yohounolook, Bitias, and Kuruk Khan.”³³ The budgeted estimate for 1925-26 for Syria totaled 245.50 Turkish liras (\$1,080.20), of which 31.50 liras and 27 liras for the Bitias and Yoghun Oluk schools, respectively (58.5 liras aggregate). Although the allocations decreased for Syria in general and Bitias in particular, Musa Dagħ’s overall share increased by 3 percentage points, to 23.7%.³⁴

Despite the contributions made from outside, insolvency remained the norm during the interwar period, which fact reflected the chronic economic malaise that prevailed across the district at large. As indicated, the Protestants of Musa Dagħ could not sustain their institutions on their own, and often failed to

³¹ Ibid.

³² ABCFM, ABC: 16.9.2., vol. 1, Lucille Foreman to Kate G. Lamson, May 19, 1924.

³³ Ibid., Foreman to (Mabel E.) Emerson, April 18, 1925.

³⁴ Ibid., August 25, 1925, Station estimates for village schools for the current year—1925-1926.

compensate their pastors and teachers in full. Accordingly, debts persisted for years, thereby becoming a matter of concern for the Armenian Evangelical Union in the Near East (AEUNE). Despite reminders of their financial obligations, the village Protestant communities struggled to come up with the necessary funds. For example, as a way of pressuring Bitias to pay its debt to Rev. Dikran Antreasian even after he had left that church in 1925 to serve in Kesab, not only did the Aleppo and Beirut Station Committees warn they would terminate their appropriations for Bitias beginning in late 1927, but also decided to deduct a portion of the 20 Ottoman liras (200 Syrian liras) of its previously budgeted share on a monthly basis to close the books.³⁵ Pastor Hagop Gurlekian, who had succeeded Rev. Antreasian in Bitias after a year, faced the same issue. When he left the church in 1927, missionary John Merrill on behalf of the Aleppo Station Committee wrote to the Bitias Church Committee the following: "It is necessary to speak of the payments due from the church to Mr. Gurlekian and to previous pastors. These, of course, should be met without delay, as outstanding debts of this kind reflect on the good name of the church."³⁶ But the problem persisted for another decade, when Rev. Antreasian had already left Bitias after reassuming its pulpit from 1929 to 1935.³⁷ This time around, the Aleppo Station Committee decided to cut from its allocation for the Bitias school a certain amount each month until the \$70 Bitias owed to Rev. Antreasian could be paid.³⁸ The situation in Yoghun Oluk was not any different. The Aleppo Station Committee Meeting, held on March 3, 1939, discussed a letter submitted by Pastor Tilkian, "in which he was asking them to consider a mode of payment by the Yoghun Olouk [sic] church which is due to him. It was voted to write to [deacon] Mr. Kuyumjian so that the Yoghun Olouk church may find a way to pay the debt to Mr. Tilkian."³⁹ In the same vein, what is significant is the fact that by early January 1938 the Aleppo Station Committee had found itself unable to compensate pastors and teachers

³⁵ AEC Archives, File *Incoming Correspondence 1927-1938*, Chairman S.G. Aghababian and Secretary H.A. Chakmakjian of the Aleppo Station Committee to Bitias Protestant Church Board, October 5, 1927.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, John Merrill to the Church Committee of the Evangelical Church, Beytias, August 26, 1927.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Aghababian and Chakmakjian to the Bitias Protestant Church and School boards, April 19, 1937.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Aghababian and Chakmakjian to the Bitias Protestant Church Board, November 7, 1937.

³⁹ AEUNE Archives, File *Mertsavor Arevelki*, Aleppo Station Committee Meeting minutes of March 3, 1939, signed by Secretary H. Apkarian.

functioning in its field unless all Protestant churches sent their membership dues, which had stopped coming except from churches in Aleppo.⁴⁰

Unable to cope with their financial predicament, the Musa Dagh Protestants turned their attention to a new resource: the AGBU. As a genuine manifestation of admiration for and belief in the mission of the AGBU, Yoghun Oluk on January 1, 1937 formed an AGBU chapter with thirty members and a temporary executive including Dikran Kuyumjian, Chairman; Movses Khayoyian, Secretary; Hagop A. Atamian, Treasurer; and Mihran Kazanjian and Bedros Aprahamian, advisors. The general membership hailed from the Apostolic community with two notable exceptions, both Protestant: Chairman Kuyumjian and Garabed Tilkian, pastor of the Protestant church, who for a while also served as Secretary of the executive.⁴¹ Membership grew to forty-six within two years.⁴² Besides its various activities, this chapter played a significant role in seeking funds specifically for the local Protestant school. The Apostolic elementary school remained outside the AGBU purview, because it was subsidized by the mandatory French administration of Syria and Lebanon.

On January 25, 1938 an AGBU chapter emerged in Bitias with twenty-seven members and an executive committee of five, all Protestants. This was the result of “an honest sympathy and feeling of love” that they had entertained towards the AGBU for a while.⁴³ The AGBU regional headquarters in Cairo expressed satisfaction and asked for the amounts of the obligatory entrance fee and the membership dues of each and every member.⁴⁴ Twelve new members, some of whom from the Apostolic denomination, joined the Bitias chapter the following year.⁴⁵ A women’s auxiliary was also organized.⁴⁶ A critical observation is in

⁴⁰ AEC Archives, File *Incoming Correspondence 1927-1938*, Aghbabian and Chakmakjian (now Secretary-Treasurer) to Aleppo Station churches, January 20, 1938.

⁴¹ AGBU Archives, Cairo (now Heliopolis), Egypt, File 167, Chairman D. Kuyumjian and Secretary M. Khayoyian of the AGBU Yoghun Oluk Chapter to the Chairman of the AGBU Cairo Regional Committee, January 25, 1937.

⁴² *Ibid.*, accountancy and balance sheet/questionnaire-report card of the AGBU Yoghun Oluk Chapter for 1938-39, signed by Chairman D. Kuyumjian, Secretary M. Yarialian, Treasurer H.A. Atamian, and B. Aprahamian.

⁴³ AGBU Archives, File 167, Chairman Movses Janbazian, Secretary Sarkis B. Tilkian, and Treasurer H. K. Kelejian of the AGBU Bitias chapter to members of the AGBU Cairo Regional Committee, January 25, 1938.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, typed copy of a letter bearing two illegible signatures from AGBU Cairo to Movses Janbazian, February 1, 1938, March 16, 1938.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Janbazian and Tilkian to Chairman and members of the AGBU Cairo Regional Committee, April 14, 1939.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, typed copy of a letter bearing a single illegible signature from AGBU Cairo to Chairman of the Bitias AGBU Chapter, May 3, 1939, June 9, 1939.

order. When the Aleppo Station Committee in 1938 learned of the formation by Protestants of an AGBU chapter in Bitias, it commissioned two of its members, Rev. S.G. Aghbabian and Rev. S.S. Manugian, to assess this development on location. The question apparently was whether Protestants could join organizations other than ones affiliated with the church. The two envoys concluded that, so long as the AGBU was a philanthropic society and not a political party, Bitias was free to determine for itself.⁴⁷ There is no reference to a similar concern respecting Yoghun Oluk. As a final note, the AGBU Musa Dagħ chapters did not carry on their associational life only in pleading mode. They raised money during the annual Culture Sunday and through the sale of wall calendars, and transferred these proceeds, meager as they were, to the general AGBU account in Cairo.⁴⁸

The Bitias chapter did not waste much time in soliciting financial assistance for the Protestant school. Already in summer 1937 the school board had approached Mikael Natanian, AGBU Education Inspector in Syria and Lebanon, for help, which was ostensibly promised. Based on it, the board formed its budget.⁴⁹ Cairo refuted the claim of a promise by Natanian. Besides, Cairo's resources would not allow for an increase in the number of schools receiving AGBU financial aid.⁵⁰

Natanian on July 22, 1937 had included in a "temporary list" the Yoghun Oluk Protestant school as a possible recipient of AGBU assistance, adding the Bitias school in September.⁵¹ Cairo "did not find suitable" their inclusion before studying the situation on the spot.⁵² Natanian asked Cairo to support them with £15 each to keep sympathizers in "that conservative circle" under control.⁵³ Cairo disagreed: "We have the impression that with those contributions it is wanted to strengthen the AGBU party in that place. If it is so, we cannot make a contribution to win sympathy and multiply the number of sympathizers.

⁴⁷ AEC Archives, File *Incoming Correspondence 1927-1938*, Rev. S.G. Aghbabian and Rev. S.S. Manugian, untitled report, April 4, 1938, Bitias.

⁴⁸ AGBU Archives, File 167, typed copy of a letter bearing a single illegible signature from AGBU Cairo to Chairman of the Bitias AGBU Chapter, April 19, 1939.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Janbazian and Tilkian to AGBU Cairo Regional Committee members, May 3, 1938.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, typed copy of a letter bearing two illegible signatures from AGBU Cairo to Chairman of Bitias AGBU Chapter, May 11, 1938.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, File 181, Natanian to Chairman of AGBU Cairo Regional Committee, September 11, 1937.

⁵² *Ibid.*, typed copy of a letter bearing two illegible signatures from AGBU Cairo to Natanian, September 15, 1937.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, Natanian to Chairman of AGBU Cairo Regional Committee, September 19, 1937. See also *idem*, September 25, 1937.

Where we find sympathy and a need [for it], we work, and do not carry out labor to create sympathy. This is our direction, especially for Syria.”⁵⁴

Taking advantage of their presence in Beirut while participating in the fall 1937 general convention of the AEUNE, ministers Hadidian and Tilkian met with Natanian and assured him that they would never harm the AGBU and that their “conservative” congregations were “the best means” for the spread of the AGBU. Therefore, they wanted to gauge the AGBU’s “mood” before their respective school budgets could be finalized. They further explained that on-the-spot inquiries would not make any difference in terms of determining the needs.⁵⁵ Regardless, Cairo insisted that Natanian visit Bitias and Yoghun Oluk personally to know the facts first-hand, saying, “There is no need to refer to this matter any further.”⁵⁶

Because Natanian had not yet visited Musa Dagh by mid-December 1937, Cairo asked for detailed information regarding the Protestant schools’ budgets and the way they were balanced previously.⁵⁷ Bitias, it was reported, had about 150 pupils (the largest figure ever), 4 teachers, and a 466 Syrian-lira budget. Head teacher Levon Babibgian’s salary of 250 Syrian liras was determined based on “hopes” that the AGBU would cover it, and 300 liras would be acquired locally and from the Protestant headquarters in Aleppo. The discrepancy between Natanian’s figures of 466 liras and 550 liras (250 plus 300) could not be explained. As for Yoghun Oluk, detailed information was lacking, but £10 could suffice to sustain their school.⁵⁸ Cairo remained undeterred and demanded a clear answer regarding the way they managed their finances. It further added: “Asking for this information does not mean that contributions will be made to them. This point must be explained to whom-it-may-concern.”⁵⁹ Natanian then furnished new details. The Bitias budget was 543 liras, of which about 100 liras from tuitions and 145 liras (\$111) from American missionaries or the AEUNE. Thus, there was a deficit of 298 liras. Expenditure contained the following items: a teacher (Babigian), 250 liras; two other instructors, 90 liras each; a fourth one, 36 liras; a custodian, 25 liras;

⁵⁴ Ibid., typed copy of a letter bearing two illegible signatures from AGBU Cairo to Natanian, September 23, 1937.

⁵⁵ Ibid., Natanian to Chairman of AGBU Cairo Regional Committee, October 3, 1937.

⁵⁶ Ibid., unsigned typewritten copy of a letter sent from AGBU Cairo to Natanian, October 7, 1937.

⁵⁷ Ibid., copy of a letter bearing two illegible signatures from AGBU Cairo to Natanian, December 17, 1937.

⁵⁸ Ibid., Natanian to Chairman of AGBU Cairo Regional Committee, December 28 (?), 1937.

⁵⁹ Ibid., Janig Chaker and an illegible signature on behalf of the AGBU Cairo Regional Committee to Natanian, January 3, 1938.

sundries, 52 liras. The Yoghun Oluk budget was £20, of which \$15 [sic] promised by the AEUNE, and 1 or 2 liras [sic] from tuitions. While the two places requested a “final” answer, Natanian did not make any promises, but in communicating with Cairo spoke favorably.⁶⁰ Cairo wanted to know whether the budgets were inflated based on expectations from the AGBU or the increase in the student population, because, “as you very well know, the Schools [sic] always magnify their budgets with expectations of more funds.”⁶¹

Yoghun Oluk continued to beseech the AGBU for financial support. From a letter, dated January 4, 1938, it was revealed that during the first semester of the 1937-38 academic year the Protestant school comprised a kindergarten, two preparatory grades, and three elementary grades. A total of 45 learners attended the school, of whom 27 boys (60%) and 18 girls (40%). A full-time female teacher, Nuritza Harmandaian from Kirik Khan, and Pastor Tilkian in half-day capacity, constituted the faculty. A total of £20 was budgeted as follows: £14 for the female instructor, £4 for the pastor, and £2 for miscellaneous expenses. It must be noted that Tilkian had taught voluntarily the previous five years, that is, without pay. The new budget income would be acquired from the following sources: the AGBU, £15 (75%); the AEUNE in Aleppo, £3 (15%); tuition, £2 (10%).⁶²

Bitias similarly persisted in asking for money. According to a letter soliciting funds, dated January 10, 1938, sent by Rev. Hadidian to Natanian, the school had 80 students, of whom 43 boys (54%) and 37 girls (46%). They included “a good number of poor Apostolic kids.” Babigian, a graduate of Aleppo College, taught French, English, and Arabic. He would receive 250 Syrian liras, of which 110 liras from the local budget and the rest directly from the Protestant headquarters in Aleppo. Armenuhi Kitabjian, an alumna of the American Girls’ School in Aleppo, was the female teacher, who would be paid 99 liras. A local aide was also needed for the preparatory section with a monthly salary of 5 Syrian liras for six months, totaling 30 liras. With a 14-lira deficit carried over from the previous year, the total budget—excluding 140 liras to be sent from Aleppo directly to Babigian—would be 253 liras, of which only 100 liras could be obtained from tuitions. Therefore, the AGBU was asked to cover the balance of 153 liras, that is, 60% of the budget.⁶³

Despite the above pleas, Cairo on January 31, 1938, instructed Natanian to let the two schools know that it would not be possible to support them for the

⁶⁰ Ibid., Natanian to Chairman of AGBU Cairo Regional Committee, January 9, 1938.

⁶¹ Ibid., Chaker and an illegible signature on behalf of the AGBU Cairo Regional Committee to Natanian, January 14, 1938.

⁶² Ibid., Dikran Kuyumjian to Mikael Natanian, January 4, 1938.

⁶³ Ibid., Aram Hadidian to Mikael Natanian, January 10, 1938.

time being and that “They have to tighten their budgets like the previous years.”⁶⁴ That rejection was conveyed to AGBU Yoghun Oluk on February 2 causing great dismay and dimming hopes.⁶⁵ Dikran Kuyumjian, AGBU Yoghun Oluk chapter chairman and an influential leader of the local Protestant community, hastened to Beirut with a letter in hand to discuss with Natanian its content and Cairo’s declining of their request. Kuyumjian insisted that Natanian had “promised” them, and separately Pastor Tilkian, that assistance was on the way, even mentioning the specific amount (£15), with an instruction: ““Go and hire your female teacher’.” For a long time Yoghun Oluk “had wished that the AGBU would extend its strong hand to us, however, we did not want to enter into negotiations with it; the formation of our chapter has not been conditional and we have not approached the AGBU for reciprocity,” that is, in expectation of mutual benefits. There were only 10-15 pupils last year, but now their number had increased to 50, of whom 6 Protestant, 3 Catholic, and 41 Apostolic Armenians. Their parents were AGBU affiliates unable to afford tuition. This substantial growth of the student population could definitely be attributed to AGBU’s good reputation. But the unexpected rejection of support would subject the AGBU to mockery by those who wanted to bury it.⁶⁶ The Protestants were now compelled to close the school depriving the fifty boys and girls of education. The community was unable to pay the teacher’s salary on its own, Kuyumjian explained; that is why they were making a last-ditch effort for the AGBU to reconsider its decision. Feeling the emotional heat and cognizant that the matter was out of his hands, Natanian resorted to Cairo one more time, seeking a positive outcome.⁶⁷ Cairo turned down the request saying that a large village with a population of 1,450 souls ought to be able to support its school.⁶⁸ Cairo forgot that the school belonged to the tiny Protestant community, not the majority Apostolic population, whose elementary school was subsidized by the French mandatory administration.

Sometime in May 1938 four prominent Protestant reverends—Siragan Aghbabian, Hagop Chakmakjian, Hovhannes Apkarian, and Yenovk Hadidian—had an audience with Natanian in Aleppo seeking clarifications regarding their Musa Dagħ constituencies. They revealed that they had made a written

⁶⁴ Ibid., Chaker and an illegible signature on behalf of the AGBU Cairo Regional Committee to Natanian, January 31, 1938.

⁶⁵ Ibid., File 167, Chairman D. Kuyumjian and Secretary M. Khayoian of AGBU Yoghun Oluk to Chairman of the AGBU Cairo Regional Committee, February 25, 1938.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., File 181, Natanian to Chairman of the AGBU Cairo Regional Committee, February 19, 1938.

⁶⁸ Ibid, copy of a typewritten letter bearing two illegible signatures from AGBU Cairo to Natanian, February 28, 1938.

demarche with the AGBU Paris headquarters, something Natanian was not privy to. According to the latter, the interlocutors were trying to inject an accusation of confessional discrimination in AGBU's decision-making process, which had not been the case. He also explained to the visitors that the allocation of funds for educational purposes in the Middle East rested with Cairo, not Paris.⁶⁹ Another situation that upset Natanian was when some notable members of the AGBU in Beirut interceded on behalf of Musa Dagb by asking that the 40 liras of the 120-lira proceeds from a tea party given in honor of Janig Chaker, the Vice-Chairman of AGBU Cairo regional center then visiting Lebanon, be given to Yoghun Oluk.⁷⁰ Cairo considered this move, "besides being strange," as "absolutely illegal."⁷¹

Yoghun Oluk's pressure on Cairo continued unabated. They insisted, as before, that Natanian had given them an "ardent promise" with attendant "reassurances," and despite their own intercession, the school closed its doors because it did not receive the allocated money. "The cause of all this still remains for us an enigma and discreet like a 'sphinx'." Because Cairo supported almost all schools in Syria and Lebanon, Yoghun Oluk deserved the same treatment, especially when the school benefited the entire village community without confessional and political discrimination. Besides, the school's "spirit and direction were analogous to AGBU's spirit and orientation."⁷²

Cairo did not budge. It explained that financial aid was disbursed based on need and within the limits of available funds. The monetary crunch that the Union felt would even force it to make cuts for the following year let alone new contributions. In any case, the aid given was never meant to be of a "permanent nature"; rather, it allowed poor schools some time "to gradually increase their incomes to become self-sufficient." Under the circumstances Yoghun Oluk had to appeal to Natanian in case "OPPORTUNITIES" arose for consideration. This should not be taken as a promise or an obligation in order to avoid last year's "misunderstanding."⁷³ That "unfortunate experience" had caused some

⁶⁹ Ibid., Natanian to Chairman of AGBU Cairo Regional Committee, June 2, 1938.

⁷⁰ Ibid., June 11, 1938.

⁷¹ Ibid, copy of a typewritten letter bearing two illegible signatures from AGBU Cairo to Natanian, June 25, 1938.

⁷² Ibid., File 167, Chairman D. Kuyumjian and Secretary G.S. Tilkian of the Board of Trustees of the Yoghun Oluk Protestant Church to Chairman of the AGBU Cairo Regional Committee, August 10, 1938.

⁷³ Ibid., typed copy of a typewritten letter bearing B. Giragosian's signature and another illegible signature to Yoghun Oluk Armenian Protestant School Board, August 19, 1938.

“hopelessness” among the Yoghun Oluk AGBU membership, making it difficult to collect their (monthly) fees.⁷⁴

In turn, Bitias continued to petition Cairo for aid. In September 1938, they reported that “a serious economic crisis” had hit them hard (due to the worsening of the Sanjak of Iskenderun question) with even a bleaker forecast. The Aleppo Station Committee, like in previous years, would provide them with a teacher, but they expected Cairo to cover the estimated £15 salary of a second instructor. As for a third one, he/she would be compensated by the tuitions collected locally. In addition, a £10 debt existed from the past; therefore, Cairo was asked to contribute a total of £25.⁷⁵ Cairo deferred the matter to Natanian with no guarantees given, at the same time letting it be known that “this year the Union’s educational credit has noticeably dwindled as a consequence of reduced income.” Therefore, they did not have the means “to meet all needs.”⁷⁶

In the final analysis, despite back-and-forth correspondence, arguments, frustrations, and rejections, the AGBU advanced Bitias and Yoghun Oluk £10 each for the 1938-39 scholastic year, paid in three installments.⁷⁷ Cairo made it clear that this was a one-time contribution with no commitment to future payments.⁷⁸ In any case, political developments in the Sanjak of Iskenderun rendered any such considerations irrelevant as the vast majority of Musa Dagh’s population exited the area before July 23, 1939 and relocated mostly to Anjar, Lebanon.

PURSUIT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Despite the fact that no middle schools and secondary schools existed in Musa Dagh, some students fulfilled their aspirations for higher education by

⁷⁴ Ibid., Chairman D. Kuyumjian and Secretary M. Khayoian of AGBU Yoghun Oluk to Chairman of the AGBU Cairo Regional Committee, September 2, 1938.

⁷⁵ Ibid., Chairman Hovhannes Kelejian and Secretary H.A.M. Tilkian of the Bitias Protestant School Board to AGBU Cairo Central Committee members, September 12, 1938.

⁷⁶ Ibid., copy of a typewritten letter bearing two illegible signatures from AGBU Cairo to Bitias Protestant School Board, September 19, 1938.

⁷⁷ Ibid., copy of a typewritten letter bearing two illegible signatures from AGBU Cairo to Chairman of Bitias AGBU Chapter, April 5, 1939, June 20, 1939; idem, to Chairman of AGBU Yoghun Oluk Chapter, April 4, 1939; idem, Chairman D. Kuyumjian and Treasurer Kh. Hajian of the Yoghun Oluk AGBU Chapter to Chairman of the AGBU Cairo Regional Committee, April 16, 1939; *Amsoria Deghegaker Haygagan Parekordzagan Enthanur Miutian Yekibdosi Srchanagin* (Monthly Report of the Armenian General Benevolent Union Egypt Region) (February, 1940), p. 4.

⁷⁸ Ibid., copy of a typewritten letter bearing two illegible signatures from AGBU Cairo to Chairman of the AGBU Yoghun Oluk Chapter, June 20, 1939.

enrolling in institutions outside their native soil. A major destination was the Melkonian Educational Institute (MEI) in Nicosia, Cyprus, functioning under the aegis of the AGBU. Built in late 1925 due to the munificence of Egyptian Armenian tobacco industrialists, the brothers Krikor and Garabed Melkonian, the MEI, in addition to being a boarding school for boys and girls, included a teacher-training department as well as an apprenticeship department teaching mechanics, woodwork, tailoring, etc.⁷⁹ Students from Musa Dagħ enrolled in the 1930s.

The applicants from Bitias were all from the Protestant school. One was Barkev Filian/Philian. A letter from Cairo asked him to provide an affidavit, a certificate of need, and a certificate of good conduct; all three were submitted.⁸⁰ Like all other candidates, he had to take an entrance exam.⁸¹ After he passed it, the acceptance letter asked him to be in Nicosia by September 10-12, 1938. In the meantime, he had to possess a round-trip passport, MEI would send a permission paper for the issuance of a Cyprus visa, and he was asked to pay for his travel expenses.⁸² The AGBU Bitias chapter received £2 (presumably from the Filian family) for Barkev's return ticket, which amount they had to transmit to the AGBU Beirut chapter to be deposited in the Cairo account.⁸³

In March 1939, the AGBU Bitias chapter proposed the names of seven youngsters, three from the Protestant school's graduating sixth grade and four from the fifth grade. Their applications and accompanying documents were attached to the letter. Among the three students from sixth grade, Boghos A. Stambulian had "merits from all perspectives" and was a promising teenager. The only factor that worked against him was his age: he was almost seventeen, which exceeded the age limit of fifteen for admission. However, unable to resist his "ardent plea," the village AGBU gave his name for special consideration. Mari Sherbetjian's (m. Zanoian) case was similarly problematic. According to MEI rules, no two siblings from the same family could be accepted. Given her brother, Movses, had already been studying at MEI for the past two years, her

⁷⁹ Central Board of Directors, *The Armenian General Benevolent Union: One Hundred Years of History, vol. I, 1906-1940*, Raymond H. Kévorkian and Vahé Tachjian, eds., G.M. Goshgarian, translator from the French, Imprimerie Chirat, Cairo, Paris, New York, 2006, pp. 159-62.

⁸⁰ AGBU Archives, File 167, Barkev H. Filian to Chairman and members of AGBU Cairo Regional Committee, June 12, 1938.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, copy of a typewritten letter bearing two illegible signatures from AGBU Cairo to Chairman of AGBU Bitias Chapter, June 18, 1938.

⁸² *Ibid.*, August 28, 1938.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, copy of a typewritten letter bearing two illegible signatures from AGBU Cairo to Chairman of AGBU Bitias Chapter, October 26, 1938.

candidature would accordingly be dismissed. But the supplicants “thought that more opportunity will be afforded to female students if they are endowed with exceptional ability. One can find very few students who are this bright and praiseworthy conduct wise.” Besides, Mari was “much more advanced [or smarter] than her brother” and would bring pride to the institution. The third candidate, Nubar Makhulian, was “recommended strongly” for having “a good mind” and being “a promising teenager.”⁸⁴

Although the four students from the fifth grade could still attend the local Protestant school for one more year, their names were mentioned ahead of time. Distant relatives Marta and Robert Igarian as well as Hovhannes Frankian “did not have bread to eat nor clothes to wear,” but were considered advanced students of equal ability. Hovhannes Kelejian, on the other hand, did not possess the same intellectual capacity. However, he was endowed with skills in handicrafts/arts and particularly drafting, and could be placed in the apprenticeship department of the MEI.⁸⁵

Stambulian and Sherbetjian were rejected for the reasons mentioned, as was Makhulian for exceeding the eligibility age limit. Similarly, Kelejian did not make it because even for the apprenticeship department the candidates had “to have a certain amount of educational knowledge.” As for the two Igarian cousins and Frankian, their papers were transferred to MEI for registration. Their sponsors had to submit affidavits guaranteeing their return and other expenses.⁸⁶

To be sure, a number of scholars from the other villages of Musa Dagħ also applied to attend the MEI. As hinted above, they had to take an entrance exam to be admitted. This requirement hit a roadblock with the escalation of the Sanjak crisis in summer 1938 as travel to and from the province posed a problem alongside other restrictions.⁸⁷ Curtailment of movement thus affected students from Musa Dagħ and Kesab. Would they be able to take the exam as a group (presumably at a different location following the standard mode)?⁸⁸ What transpired in 1938 remains moot, but Cairo instructed Natanian in May 1939 that students from Musa Dagħ ought to be in the coastal town of Iskenderun on the designated exam day (an arrangement for Kesab was not

⁸⁴ Ibid., Chairman Movses Janbazian and Secretary Sarkis Tilkian of the Bitias AGBU Chapter to Chairman of AGBU Cairo Regional Committee, March 20, 1939.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., copy of typewritten letter bearing an illegible signature to Chairman of the AGBU Bitias Chapter, April 4, 1939.

⁸⁷ Vahram L. Shemmassian, *The Musa Dagħ Armenians: A Socioeconomic and Cultural History, 1919-1939*, Haigazian University Press, Beirut, 2015, p. 277.

⁸⁸ AGBU Archives, File 181, Natanian to Chairman of the AGBU Cairo Regional Committee, June 12, 1938, June 18, 1938.

mentioned).⁸⁹ The plan changed, however, as Cairo dispatched a certain Apraham Seraydarian to Bitias in summer 1939 as proctor. The AGBU chapter there borrowed money to cover his travel expenses (535 Syrian piasters) with the understanding that Cairo would reimburse them.⁹⁰

A small number of students from the Protestant school of Bitias also matriculated at Aleppo College, formerly an American missionary institution of higher learning known as Central Turkey College (aka Aintab College) in Aintab, the Ottoman Empire. In their report to the AEUNE annual conference, held on April 15, 1936, Bitias church delegates Rev. Aram Hadidian and Movses H. Janbazian brought up the issue of making their school a feeder to Aleppo College, meaning, sending graduates there to further their education. That practice having existed in the pre-World War I period as Musa Dagh fell within the parameters of Central Turkey College, a similar arrangement now would bring light and render a salutary service to Musa Dagh in general. “Do whatever you want to do, cut from whatever [funds] you want to cut, think of whatever means you want to think of,” the two delegates told the Aleppo College administration, they would not rest until their wish was granted. But in order to strengthen the Bitias school, they asked for capable teachers, either male or female, whose livelihood they were prepared to provide to the full extent of their ability.⁹¹

Connections definitely played a role in the successful outcome of the above push. Bitias, as a summer resort, each year hosted numerous vacationers from Aleppo and elsewhere. Among them was Taniel Voskian, a professor at Aleppo College, who had developed a special relationship with Rev. Hadidian. This bond proved “instrumental in starting a secondary boarding facility for Aleppo College.” Mayroom Igarian from Bitias, as the *mayrig* (caretaker), was put in charge of some 8-10 boys and 1-2 girls from Kesab and Bitias, Nubar Igarian, Soghomon Filian, and Norman Movses Balabanian being from the latter place.⁹²

Born in the United States, Norman Balabanian had relocated to Bitias with his parents, both natives of that village. At Aleppo College, he started at the 9th grade, but was moved to the 10th grade within six weeks. “That was quite a feat after completing 6th grade at the school in Bitias—he wrote in his

⁸⁹ Ibid., File 167, copy of a typewritten letter bearing an illegible signature to Chairman of the AGBU Yoghun Oluk Chapter, May 20, 1939.

⁹⁰ Ibid., Chairman Movses H. Janbazian, Secretary Sarkis Tilkian, and Treasurer Kevork M. Janbazian of the AGBU Bitias Chapter to Chairman of the AGBU Cairo Regional Committee, no date (but stamped September 22, 1939 by AGBU Cairo without specifying the occasion).

⁹¹ AEC Archives, File *Incoming Correspondence 1927-1938*, Rev. Aram Hadidian to the Aleppo College Administration, May 18, 1936.

⁹² Magzanian, letter to the author, received April 4, 2009.

autobiography—which shows that the village school was quite advanced.”⁹³ He graduated in June 1942, taught 9th grade English and 8th grade French the following academic year, returned to the United States, joined the Army Air Corps and participated in World War II in various parts of the world. After the war, he pursued higher education at Syracuse University, New York, where he obtained a Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering in 1954. He then served as professor at his alma mater for most of his professional life. As such, he authored and coauthored some 12 books and 40 articles.⁹⁴

Another transfer from Bitias, Alberta Magzanian, similarly did well in certain subjects, but initially struggled in others. She wrote:

In 1938, my parents decided to send me to the American High School for Girls in Aleppo, Syria. I arrived at my new school at age twelve, having skipped a grade in my village school in Bitias. I soon realized that I was well prepared in certain fields but not ready to follow the seventh-grade curriculum in English. My English was limited and my French non-existent. I was placed with half a dozen students in a special class of English immersion that year, which turned out to be the best place for my classmates and me. However, I felt I could easily compete with any seventh grader in Bible studies, Armenian literature, math and especially geography. Besides memorizing many names and places, I had learned about degrees, latitudes and longitudes. I could locate any place on a map without previously knowing its exact location, a skill that came in handy when I started driving. This latter skill, very much like reading, I absorbed from an upper-class man in Bitias who was a math genius. I am also indebted to him for showing me how to enlarge a map without distorting it.⁹⁵

While in tenth grade, Alberta concurrently served as Sunday school teacher at the Emmanuel Armenian Evangelical Church of Aleppo until she left for college in Beirut. She described the local conservative mentality as follows:

I considered myself pious enough for such a role and took my duties very seriously. However, I never “dressed” the role. Probably some members of the church community considered me a poor role model for my young and impressionable students. After all, during those hot Aleppo [summer] days, I always arrived at church with no hat, in short sleeves and no silk stockings. They never fired me ... [but] tried to advise father not to send me to college in Beirut, a truly “sin city” they explained to him. They had no idea that my parents had already sent me away to school from a village at age twelve to

⁹³ Norman Balabanian, *Life Story*, N.p., Gainesville, Florida, 2008, p. 25.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-45, and an unnumbered page at the end of the book.

⁹⁵ Magzanian, letter to the author, no date.

their very own city, where a hat supposedly classified whether a person is pious or not.⁹⁶

The transition from a mountainous village to a large urban and alien center proved difficult for Alberta. She expressed her inner torment in vivid terms:

No one had any idea of my pain at the time. Here I was in Aleppo, home sick, feeling sorry for myself for living in such a filthy town where people openly urinated in the street, where water was a precious commodity, where people bathed infrequently and mostly in hammams [public baths], once a month if they were lucky. Nauseous smells seemed to be coming at me from every direction and I felt paralyzed... [My uncle's] advice "to follow the footsteps of my grandmother" [Anna Sherbetjian Magzanian to pursue higher education and become a teacher] placed an extra burden on my shoulders. In all my misery, I decided I will never forgive him. I was twelve years old.

Fortunately within a few days, my mother and younger sister visited and spent a couple of weeks with me in Aleppo. Mother bought me some clothes, shoes and a wrist watch. The merchant recommended that she buy a cheaper watch for such a young girl but mother refused. I enjoyed that watch for many years until I graduated from American Senior College in Beirut, Lebanon.⁹⁷

Hagop/Jack Magzanian, another student from Bitias, was encouraged and financially supported by his uncle, an expatriate who had returned from the United States, to attend Aleppo College. However, "his parents decided that he didn't need to be in school at age 20 and pulled him out his senior year and put him to work in the family orchard. Jack, later, used his education effectively by becoming a group leader for the young men in Bitias and teaching in several countries."⁹⁸

THE LAST YEAR: TURKISH INSTRUCTION AND INSPECTIONS

The last year of Armenian Musa Dagh, from summer 1938 to summer 1939, proved a worrisome and fateful episode. Farcical elections in the Sanjak of Iskenderun installed a Turkish majority (22 out of 40 representatives) in the legislature, Turkish troops entered the region, and military-police posts were set up in and around the Armenian villages of Musa Dagh. At the same time attempts were made to establish Turkish *halkevleri* (nationalistic peoples' houses, i.e., clubs) with the help of local Armenian collaborators, who sent

⁹⁶ Ibid., April 21, 2009.

⁹⁷ Ibid., September 26, 2009.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

agents to Aleppo, Damascus, and Beirut to propagandize about the new regime among compatriots. The noose also tightened around the economic arteries of Musa Dagh as heavy import-export customs fees were imposed. As a result, unemployment and food prices surged drastically, and poverty hit virtually every household.⁹⁹ The Turkish tentacles extended to the educational domain as well.

A degree of Turkish indoctrination in schools had become manifest by winter 1938. Alberta Magzanian, who returned from Aleppo to spend the Christmas vacation with her family in Bitias, “heard about Turkish language primers, Turkish verse recitations and other tidbits about the school.” Her younger sister, Anna, uttered the word “Anadolu” (Anatolia) frequently. Furthermore, Alberta wrote, “during my vacation, I sorted out the details and even learned some Turkish verses.”¹⁰⁰ She realized that her “hometown had changed” within the three short months she was absent. She provided additional details:

The story of the Turkish primers was probably the major cause of hilarity of my first night home. It seems some weeks before the Christmas holiday, word had arrived in the village that a Turkish educator was going to visit the school to check the level of Turkish language instruction. As soon as Baron Kegham [Mississian] received the message, he began to check the physical condition of the primers that he had distributed to each student. Without any exception, all the books were uniformly mutilated. The imposing picture of Atatürk on the cover of the books had lost its eyes. Baron Kegham immediately tried to replace the books, which was not an easy task. The only store in the village had several copies, and the rest had to be ordered from Antioch. He hurriedly collected enough copies, but instead of distributing them, he locked the primers in the cabinet, waiting for the arrival of the Turkish inspector.¹⁰¹

The Protestant school was not the only one subjected to Turkish surveillance; the same scenario prevailed throughout Bitias and Musa Dagh in general. According to a boy named Boghos Snabian, a future writer and editor, one Saturday Vakef native Tateos Babigian, the new, Turkish-appointed governor of Musa Dagh, appeared in Bitias with two gendarmes and, through a town crier, announced the reopening of the national (Apostolic) school with a new assigned teacher, Taniel Chaparian. “Always” in opposition to every general concern of the village, he had voted in favor of the Turks instead of Arab nationalists in the Sanjak elections. As Turkish textbooks gained in

⁹⁹ Shemmassian, *The Musa Dagh Armenians: A Socioeconomic*, pp. 277-78.

¹⁰⁰ Magzanian, letter to the author, no date.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

importance, he behaved strictly with a stick in hand to ensure the correct pronunciation of words. Students read and repeated verses like “cumhuriyet bayramına gidiyoruz, güle-güle, Türk yavrularız, güle-güle” (we are going to [celebrate] the [Turkish] republic holiday; happily, we are Turkish children, happily) and “Sarı elma, tatlı elma/Bir tenesi on para” (Yellow apple, sweet apple/Each worth ten coins).¹⁰²

In late March 1939, a Turkish Inspector of Schools and a companion arrived in Kheder Beg to assess the status of Turkish instruction on the spot. After exchanging pleasantries with Fr. Benôit, the head of the Capuchin Mission and an Armenian by origin, they wanted to visit the Catholic school. Although Fr. Benôit explained that it was a French institution sponsored by the French government, it did not matter to the visitors. They asked three students to read from a Turkish textbook, probed the extent of their understanding of the language, and tested their knowledge regarding the local geography. They then visited another class, but did not make any demands. As they were leaving, Fr. Benôit inquired whether they had also passed by the Capuchin school in Antioch, to which they answered positively (although it was another inspector who had performed that task). In reporting the encounter to a confrere, Fr. Benôit expressed regret for his compliant attitude vis-à-vis the Inspector, but, he explained, he “was forced by certain considerations.” Because France had ceded the Sanjak of Iskenderun—then called Hatay Republic—to Turkey, the latter had assumed “absolute” control of the area. Therefore, “like all States of the world,” it had “the right ... to interfere in all public Administrations, including the schools,” aiming “to do what was best for the State as well as the inhabitants.” It would be “futile” for him to be “odious and prejudicial if [he] showed opposition to the reasonable exigencies of the Inspector, especially ... when the Armenians are considered revolutionary people and having mortal hatred against the Turks.” Fr. Benôit also expressed concern for his personal safety, because he still carried Turkish citizenship, having been born in Kharpert/Mamuret ul-Aziz, and would have no protection from France should conditions deteriorate.¹⁰³ Such were matters when the overwhelming majority of Musa Dagh inhabitants exited the area on the cusp of the Sanjak’s final handover to Turkey in the summer of 1939. Taniel Chaparian, together with a small fraction of his countrymen, did not join the exodus and stayed put.

¹⁰² Boghos Snabian, *Aghkadnerun Avantutiune* (The Tradition of the Poor), Hamazkayin Vahe Setian Press, Beirut, 1983, pp. 17-23.

¹⁰³ Capuchin Mission, Maison Saint François Archives, Mtayleb, Lebanon, File *Khoderbey: Lettres concernant le poste de Khoderbey, du 13 Jan[vier] au 27 avril 1939*, Fr. Benôit to My Good Father, March 28, 1939.

IN ANJAR

When the refugees from Musa Dagħ arrived in Anjar on the eastern peripheries of the Bekaa Valley bordering Syria, they found themselves surrounded by inhospitable terrain. Life under tents in harsh weather conditions and contagious diseases caused great damage. But the collective trauma did not prevent the religious denominations from reviving their respective churches and schools. The Protestants held their first Sunday worship service in a tent on September 17, 1939, that is, just two weeks after arrival in Anjar. They inaugurated an actual sanctuary a year later, on September 22, 1940. Sunday school, a Christian youth association, and a women's auxiliary resumed their activity as well. A day school opened its doors in 1942. In 1943-44, it consisted of a kindergarten, an elementary section with six grades, and a special class for slow learners and those who could not attend lessons regularly. Enrollment increased to 240 boys and girls. Parental involvement was encouraged. The school suffered numerically as a result of more than half of Anjar's population relocating to Soviet Armenia in 1947. That year, the German-Swiss Christian Hilfsbund (Helping Bond) in the Orient missionary organization sent Sister Hedwig Aenishanslin and a few colleagues to Anjar to establish a boarding department for Armenian children at risk coming from Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and other countries. By 1955-56 the school had become a high school, something never realized in Musa Dagħ. At present the school functions regularly yielding successful crops of graduates, many of whom further their education in institutions of higher learning such as Haigazian University, the American University of Beirut and others.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ For the establishment of Anjar and the revival of the Protestant community including its school, consult Vahram L. Shemmassian, "The Armenian Religious Communities in Anjar (1939-1944)," in Christine Babikian Assaf, Carla Eddé, Lévon Nordiguan, and Vahé Tachjian, eds., *Les Arméniens du Liban. Cent ans de présence*, Presses de L'Université Saint-Joseph, Beirut, 2017, pp. 125-43; Vahram L. Shemmassian, "The Settlement of Musa Dagħ Armenians in Anjar, Lebanon (1939-1941)," in Antranik Dakessian, ed., *Armenians of Lebanon (II): Proceedings of the Conference (14-16 May 2014)*, Haigazian University Press, Beirut, 2017, pp. 129-53; Hratch Tchilingirian, "The Armenian Evangelical School in Anjar," *Armenian International Magazine AIM*, vol. 11, no. 1 (January 2000), pp. 52-53 (online); "SOAR [Society for Orphaned Armenian Relief] – Ainjar Chapter" (online); "Armenian Evangelical Secondary School of Anjar" (online); "Armenian Evangelical School of Anjar," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia* (online). The online sources were retrieved on August 21, 2024.

ՄՈՒՍԱ ՏԱՂԻ ԱԻԵՏԱՐԱՆԱԿԱՆ ԴՊՐՈՑՆԵՐԸ
1920-30ԱԿԱՆՆԵՐՈՒՆ
(ԱՄՓՈՓՈՒՄ)

ՎԱՀՐԱՄ ՇԷՄՄԱՍԵԱՆ
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Հայ աւետարանականները առաջինն էին որ դպրոցներ բացին Մուսա Տաղի մէջ, 19րդ դարու կէսէն ետք: Ընդհանրապէս երկսեռ այս հաստատութիւններու աշակերտութեան մէկ երրորդը կը կազմէր իգական սեռը: Ա. համաշխարհային պատերազմին, շուրջ 4200 մուստաւոյիներ Ցեղասպանութեան դիմադրելէ ետք փրկուեցան ֆրանսական ռազմականերու միջոցով եւ փոխադրուեցան Եգիպտոս, ուր չորս տարի (1915-19) բնակեցան Փոր Սայիտի գաղթականին մէջ:

Այնտեղ կատարուած կարգադրութիւններէն էր Սիսուան վարժարանին հաստատումը՝ փոքրերուն համար, առանց յարանուանական խտրութեան:

1919ին գաղթականները վերադարձան ծննդավայր, ուր ապրեցան քսան տարի՝ մինչեւ 1939: Աւետարանականները, միւս վերադարձողներուն նման, վերականգնեցին իրենց կրօնական եւ կրթական կեանքը՝ Պիթիասի եւ Եոդուն Օլուքի մէջ: Վարժարանները, որոնք հիմնականին մէջ մանկապարտէզ-նախակրթարան էին, մնացին փոքր եւ համեստ միջոցներով: Ուսուցիչները կը պաշտօնակոչուէին դուրսէն, գլխաւորաբար Հալէպէն: Նկատի առնելով Մուսա Տաղի տնտեսական խեղճութիւնը, դպրոցի հոգաբարձութիւնները չէին կրնար հաւասարակշռել ամսվարկը եւ մեծապէս կը յենէին Հալէպէն եւ Հայկական Բարեգործական Ընդհանուր Միութեան Գահիրէի կեդրոնատեղիէն գալիք նիւթական օժանդակութեան:

Հակառակ դժուարութիւններուն եւ թերացումներուն, ձգտում ունեցող շարք մը շրջանաւարտներ, մասնաւորաբար Պիթիասէն, շարունակեցին իրենց ուսումը Նիկոսիոյ Մեղգոնեան կրթական հաստատութեան եւ Ալեքիփօ քոլէճի մէջ, հասնելով ասպարէզային բարձր դիրքերու:

Մուսա Տաղի վերջին տարին ճակատագրական եղաւ, երբ տնտեսական եւ քաղաքական վիճակը վատթարացաւ: Թուրք քննիչներ այցելեցին դպրոցները, քննելու թրքերէնի դասաւանդման վիճակը: Մինչ թրքական իշխանութիւնը հաստատուն փաստ մը դարձաւ, Մուսա Տաղի հայերը ձգեցին տարածքը եւ հաստատուեցան Այնճարի մէջ, Լիբանան, ուր վերականգնեցին իրենց փշրուած կեանքերը, նաեւ՝ կրթականը:

Ուսումնասիրութիւնը հիմնուած է արխիւային նիւթերու եւ առաջնային աղբիւրներու (նամակներ եւ յուշեր) վրայ: