

# The Miracle of Haigazian University

## History

*The Armenian Evangelical Community has deep historical roots in the Middle East. One of those is called Haigazian University and I had the privilege of serving as its Founding President. Rev. Dr. John Markarian*

By Rev. John Khanjian, Ph.D., Former President of Haigazian University

Haigazian University is an expression of the creative response and resilience of the Armenian spirit which refused to accept the Genocide, the destruction of its Homeland, and cultural institutions to be the final word. The dream to reestablish a remnant of its eight colleges continued to pursue the Armenian Evangelical leaders in the United States and in Lebanon.

Sixty-five years ago, that dream was realized by the establishment of Haigazian College. The year 1955 was propitious in that it coincided with the cultural renaissance of the Lebanese Armenian community wherein education, literature, theater, athletics and journalism blossomed. For example, there were 25 journalistic publications!

Dr. John Markarian who was the Founding President speaks of "magical convergences of thinking about a college to be established in the Arab world."<sup>1</sup> One of these convergences is the fact that Dr. Markarian's father was a student and later became a faculty member at the Jenanian Apostolic Institute in Konya, Turkey where Dr. Armenag Haigazian, after whom the College is named, was the Headmaster. Key founding donors of Haigazian University were Avak Stephen Mehagian and his wife Mary Mehagian, Dr. Armenag Haigazian's oldest daughter.

A second magical convergence or providential coincidence was the meeting between two Hadjentsis, A. Mehagian and Stephen Philibosian, coming to the AMAA Headquarters from different parts of the United States for different reasons and at the same time in 1954! When the two met, Mr. Mehagian presented his idea of a college which was embraced by Mr. Philibosian wholeheartedly. These two were also joined by Rev. Antranig A. Bedigian, the first Chair of the Board of Trustees, and thus began the hard work of planning, fundraising and looking for a location in Beirut. A third providential coincidence was the discovery of Rev. Dr. John Markarian who was a faculty member at Lafayette College for nine years before he found out from his friend Harry Balukjian that there was an Armenian Evangelical community in Philadelphia, PA. Being also an ordained Presbyterian minister, he was invited to deliver a sermon at Havertown Armenian Martyrs' Congregational Church where Mr. Philibosian was a member. When the two met, Mr. Philibosian noticed the charisma and leadership ability of the young professor, who had the potential to be the president of the dreamed of Junior College. After some deliberation he was offered the position.

At first, Dr. Markarian wondered about the need for such an institution which is "unashamedly Christian and willing to maintain a Christian atmosphere in all phases of its life and curriculum as well?"<sup>2</sup> After landing in Beirut with his young family and studying the situation, he realized that the answer was an affirmative yes. In his first letter to Mary Mehagian, he writes, "I am depending entirely on the Lord in this work and that in His strength I will do my best."<sup>3</sup> With faith, enthusiasm and the support of the local Board of Managers whose first Chairman was Rev. Hovhannes Aharonian, he did his best and the College

flourished: the first class which consisted of only 43 students, 40% of whom were non-Armenians, in time became a well-respected University with more than 850 students, before the recent economic and political crisis in Lebanon. During Dr. Markarian's tenure on March 25, 1966, the College was accredited by the Lebanese Ministry of Education as a four-year institution of higher learning. In retrospect, it is but right to name this development "the Haigazian University Miracle" where one can see the hand of God or synchrony working despite human and geopolitical limitations. Dr. Markarian served Haigazian College for two terms: August 1955-June 1966 and from May 1971-June 1982.

Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian served as President of Haigazian College from 1967-1971. Although he led the College for only three years, he had a significant impact by improving the administrative structure, creating the position of Dean, expanding the scholarship program, upgrading the faculty, and introducing a new major in Business Administration which became popular and dominant. Because of this major, the institution became well known and helped to support the arts and sciences departments. I recall seeing ads from the Gulf countries for business majors requesting applicants from AUB, Haigazian University, and LAU. Due to his children's special needs, Dr. Bilezikian resigned in May 1971 and resumed his position of New Testament Professor at Wheaton College.

Dr. Markarian's second term at Haigazian coincided with the beginning and intensification of the Civil War in Lebanon. Despite the constant danger, he remained in Beirut and kept the College going until 1982. The details of his life in the war zone are presented in his memoir, *The Thirsty Enemy*. With the departure of Dr. Markarian, the College entered a crisis mode while the country was being devastated by the Civil War. Fortunately, Dr. Verne Fletcher, who was Professor at the Near East School of Theology, accepted the challenge and became the third President and served during a very dangerous period. He retired in February 1985.

This was a period of great turmoil and the survival of the fittest. God provided a tough fighter in the person of Wilma Cholakian who became the Administrative Dean and courageously led the University through the remaining years of war from February 1985 to August 1995. Although she was a cultured educator, when needed she could act with the spirit of a *zeitountsi chete!* She became the wall of sanity against the chaos of war. In this effort, we must acknowledge that, she was assisted by some faculty members like Dr. Yervant Kassouni and others. During her tenure, the College was damaged and was forced to move to the Christian Medical Center in Ashrefieh and the science labs moved to Petanya School in Mar Mekhael. It was her initiative to apply to change the status of the institution to University; she was responsible for all its operations and fought the good fight to keep the College going through thick and thin.

As peace returned to the country, the Board of Trustees began the search for a president. On August 1, 1995, Dr. John Khanjian was selected and sent to Beirut. The city was still divided, and darkness ruled the ruined city center. There was no regular supply of water or electricity. There were around 300 students crammed into a four-story small hospital building; the thirsty had to go down two or three floors to the kitchen to have a drink from a jug of water. But the mood was positive and empowering which I call the Haigazian spirit or is it the Markarian spirit?

When the Board began to consider the school's future; the issue of the location came forward. After much deliberation, it was decided to renovate and move back to the old campus in West Beirut. There was resistance to this decision and some faculty and staff resigned for safety reasons. On February 16, 1997, the renovation began and through the diligent work of the architect and contractor, Mr. Jean Santourian, it was completed on

October 6, 1997; the hard work of packing and moving the two libraries, the labs and offices took place with great joy and to the delight of students, staff and faculty. The renovation process included the refurbishing and beautification of all buildings, the addition of water fountains for drinking, and the construction of a three-story building on the Mugar property which housed a small but state of the art auditorium, Boardroom, and faculty offices.

Finally, on December 28, 1996 the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education of Lebanon, which had been sitting on the application for several years, and with the last minute intervention by Hagop Demirjian, Minister of Economics and Commerce, approved our request, and the name and status changed to Haigazian University.

A university had to have four schools with each one having several departments. This entailed restructuring the institution, creating a new catalog, courses were updated, policies and procedures established, faculty and staff handbooks written, and quality assurance manuals produced with the approval of the faculty, staff and the Board. This was not an easy task as educators tend to be more theoretical and less practical. Because of these changes, the number of students and majors increased. The institution reestablished its existence on the educational map of Lebanon and was ready for further growth and development. Dr. Khanjian's tenure ended on August 31, 2002 with the prestigious Medal of Knighthood granted from the President of the Republic of Lebanon, a Medal of Service from the Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East, and a Tribute from the AMAA. All goes well that ends well!

As of September 1, 2002, Rev. Dr. Paul Haidostian, a well-known leader in the Armenian community and highly respected theologian hailed from the Near East School of Theology, became Haigazian's fifth President. The University continued its successful march forward, as the enrollment and programs grew the need for the purchase of property became urgent. There was a building adjacent to the campus for sale on May Ziadeh Street. It was purchased in 2004. Being a historical building, the façade could not change; therefore, the challenge was to develop the interior into a modern usable space. Through great effort and expense, it was refurbished and the building was inaugurated in 2011, with a cozy garden created in its courtyard. Thus, to the list of the University's buildings, which include Philibosian (1955), Mehagian (1958), Mugar (1971) and Aharonian (2001), was added the six-floor building, the Heritage (2011). While the refurbishing was in progress, classrooms were leased from the Armenian Evangelical College in 2004 and the adjacent hotel was leased to house 55 boarding students. All this entailed fundraising and hard work from the Board and the Administration.

An institution like Haigazian University carries multiple identities which are reflected in its agreements with universities in Armenia, Artsakh, Hungary, Cyprus, the U.S. and Argentina. These relationships led to multiple international conferences organized on campus which included various subjects such as education, religion, peace, Armenian studies, and intercultural studies. To serve its Armenian constituency, training programs were established for Armenia's and Artsakh's government officials in Beirut starting in 2012. The University joined the US Consortium for Global Education (CGE) as an Affiliate Member in 2016. This University, which is well-known for its benevolence as a non-profit which accommodates needy students added on its scholarship list two new programs: The Future Armenian Leadership Fund and The Christian Leadership Fund. The Administration succeeded in attracting projects with USAID, including in 2012 a four-year scholarship program for 65 qualified Lebanese students. This partnership, which began in 2007, secured a grant for almost \$7 million (US).

Universities which are the vanguard of human progress are also affected by the wave of artificial intelligence which seems to engulf the world. Hence the Administration had to find resources and lead the way to the automation of the Armenian and English libraries, including cataloguing and online services, starting in 2007. Over the recent ten years, the institution moved to an enhanced Student Information System (SIS), and a complete automated Information System including the GL accounts, the Payroll, the Fixed Assets, the Purchasing and Inventory functions, in addition to a Student-Instructor online learning platform.

In 2011, under the President's leadership, and the assistance of Dr. Antranig Dakessian, the University established the Armenian Diaspora Research Center which has been prolific in organizing international conferences and publishing books at the Haigazian University Press which was also established in 2011. The Press has published 40 annuals of the Haigazian Armenological Review, for example Volume 35 consists of 944 pages!

The character and spirit of an institution is defined and influenced not only by the quality of its Presidents but also by its Board of Managers and the Board of Trustees, students, staff, chaplains, faculty and Deans. This University has been blessed by two outstanding and resilient Deans who have been providing leadership since 1997: Dr. Arda Ekmekji, Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, and Dr. Fadi Asrawi, Dean of Business Administration and Economics. Together these fantastic Deans and their predecessors have granted more than 4,500 degrees, including 200 masters, and sent their students into the world to seek truth, promote freedom, and serve mankind with justice for all.

Over time, the University has justified its existence by offering quality education to many underprivileged Armenian and non-Armenian students, prepared educators for all Armenian schools, helped in the formation of Church educators and pastors, and brought together people of different faiths, ethnic and cultural backgrounds to work together for the common good whereby practicing the greatest commandment of "love your neighbor as yourself."

As I am writing these lines, the country is undergoing its greatest crisis to date in the economic, geo-political, international and moral spheres. The August 4, 2020 explosion in the port of Beirut had the force of an atomic bomb; it caused extensive damage to the doors, windows, walls, labs, libraries, classrooms and the morale of our people. What the future holds is unknown, but today's communication from President Haidostian says it all, "Dreadful days here, on many fronts, but we are trying to do our best, and signs of grace are all over, including at Haigazian."<sup>4</sup>

In conclusion, dear reader, you are invited to become an instrument of grace for Haigazian University.

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1. John J. Markarian, The Thirsty Enemy, A Memoir, Published by AMAA, 15

2. Ibid., 26

3. Ibid., 27

4. Personal communication with current Haigazian President, Paul Haidostian, September 23, 2020.