

NEAR EAST RELIEF AND AGBU COOPERATION IN RELIEVING ARMENIAN REFUGEES AND ORPHANS

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During the very first years after the Armenian Genocide collaboration between Near East Relief and the Armenian General Benevolent Union were fruitful, concerning support for Armenian refugees, as well as orphans. These successful steps provided a chance for the two sides to experience collaboration and conclude that both had ‘so many matters in common’ “are one in motive” and are in “perfect accord in spirit”. Capitalizing on this the two sides decided to build upon and go further in mutually supporting their common objectives. Besides, “bringing the orphans to maturity” was a ten-year project, which enabled the two sides to communicate extensively to discuss, highlight, assess and address immediate refugee challenges and plan for forthcoming difficulties.

In mid-May 1922 cooperation between the two organizations necessitated a face-to-face meeting to conclude and institutionalize certain business practices regarding the refugees and to discuss urgent matters. Furthermore, the successful cooperation between NER and the AGBU concerning the Jerusalem orphanage had given new impetus and thrust to this cooperation and opened up new paths for collaboration of a similar nature for other locations. Accordingly, the Cairo-based AGBU sent a delegate, Mr. Leone Assadour, to Lebanon to negotiate with the NER Beirut Office on pending issues, new suggestions and develop this collaboration. The meeting was important in clarifying the fact that likely conflicts between the two sides were to be perceived as “misunderstandings” rather than a deterioration in relations.

The document published below is the essence of the discussions that took place and the conclusions drawn from it during the May 1922 meeting.

The document highlights the fate of the Aleppo Armenian Orphanage, popularly known as the [Reverend Aharon] Sheradjian orphanage. The NER planned to relocate the orphanage, home for some 1150 orphans, from Aleppo to Beirut. An equally important issue regarding the orphanage was its funding. The British military government had supported it financially, followed by the French authorities, who had lately given notice that they would stop subsidizing its deficits. Though the NER had covered the deficits for 1921, it could not do so anymore. Thus, Mr. Assadour and the NER Beirut office negotiated how to address the issue and discussed details, as the NER wanted full administrative control of the orphanage, at the same time as the name of the AGBU would be “intimately connected” with it, enabling AGBU to conduct “their campaign to solicit funds...”.

Another very important item on the agenda of the meeting was the basis of cooperation for the use of the Duplication Fund. It was agreed that the NER would match any amount raised by the AGBU for the Fund, and the NER allocated funds

for the purpose. This would enable the AGBU to have extra accounts and extend its refugee support.

The document is a six-page typed paper, well preserved in the AGBU archives of Cairo.¹

XXX

Beirut, May 22, 1922

Armenian General Benevolent Union:
Cairo, Egypt.

Dear Sirs,

As our managing Director, Mr. Howard McAfee, is away in the interior of Turkey, I am writing this letter on behalf of our Committee at Beirut. We have been very much pleased by the visit of your delegate, M. Leon Assadour. We have so many matters in common that it is always a great help to be able to talk them over with one of your members, rather than be obliged to carry on all of our business by correspondence.

We are writing this letter to you, in order to state the chief points which have arisen in our very satisfactory conference with Mr. Assadour. First of all, there are several general statements to be made.

1. On the 5th May Mr. McAfee wrote two letters to you. One of these was to clear up any doubts as to the use of funds which are now on hand. The letter showed the complete accord between our two committees concerning the use of our balance of duplication funds. Perhaps the one point left unsettled by that letter was our two committees concerning the use of our balance of duplication funds. Perhaps the one point left unsettled by that letter was our policy towards aiding the work of Urfa. We believe that Mr. McAfee will visit Urfa during his trip so that he will be able to report upon that matter in full when he returns to Syria. In other words, the first letter of the 5th May settled the matter of using balances now on hand in a way which is satisfactory to us all. The second letter of May 5th opened up new suggestions for the use of our money in the future, after the present balance of duplication funds has been spent. In reading the remainder of this letter, please bear in mind that the references to be made are in no way concerned with such moneys as we now have in hand, but in regard to duplication funds which may be contributed in the future, over and above our present balance.

2. There are two motives which lead us to make the suggestions which follow. The first one is to attain a simple and businesslike basis for cooperation between our two societies; and the second one is to find some way of meeting a most urgent need. As the first matter is the simplest to deal with, I shall mention it immediately.

(A.) Need for a Basis of Cooperation between the
Armenian Union and the Near East Relief.

Our very pleasant conversation with members of your society, and our conference with Mr. Assadour yesterday, makes us certain of the fact that our two

organizations are in perfect accord in spirit. Both societies have the same aim in view, namely:- to bring orphans to maturity. Any matters which have arisen in the past, or which may arise in the future, to perplex and puzzle us, may be regarded as misunderstandings of language and terminology, rather than disagreements of policy. Therefore, when we speak about a more business-like "basis of cooperation" we refer to a simpler means of conducting our office work together, rather than to the need of a better understanding of motive, for I am sure that we all agree that we are one in motive already.

This one thing which has made it difficult to conduct our business together is the fact that our two committees are many hundreds of miles apart, and also that both are somewhat dependent upon procedure in New York thousands of miles away. Accordingly when we attempt to spend the duplication funds together, with mutual conference, we find it difficult to carry on that conference through the mails. It would be better to us to agree upon a definite basis of cooperation which would make all conferring together unnecessary for the appropriation, of funds, although we should always embrace every opportunity to talk matters over together, when time and space allow.

At the present time we have arranged for a basis of this sort in connection with the eight hundred Armenian orphans at Jerusalem. Although we shall always wish to advise together upon the conduct of the work, the accounting of the funds is an automatic affair, with a definite business agreement to determine it.

What we should like to do is to arrange for a similar agreement in connection with such funds as the New York office of the Near East Relief may wish to duplicate for work here. At least a few members of our local Beirut Committee have expressed themselves as feeling that it would be less trouble to give up the whole system of duplicating funds, unless some very workable system of this sort could be agreed upon. Accordingly, after long conference with Mr. Assadour, we wish to suggest in the paragraphs which a[re] basis for expenditure of funds duplicated by our New York Office, the basis being devised to facilitate our office work and to meet a very urgent need.

(B.) To Reorganize the Aleppo Armenian Orphanage²³ as an Urgent need.

Of course, you know that during the war the Armenians in Aleppo organized the large orphanage, which is known as the Aleppo Armenian Orphanage, or more familiarly as the Sheradjian orphanage. You also know that after the war the British military government and then the French authorities subsidized the orphanage, so as to meet its deficits. Last summer the French notified the Aleppo Committee that they could not continue their aid. The Near East Relief happened to have certain surplus fund on hand last summer, and so they offered to support the orphanage throughout the winter and until August 31st of this year, 1922. Please observe the fact that the Near East Relief has been giving this aid from surplus funds (not from their regular appropriations) and that we have not offered any promise of aid after that time.

It is now evident that no more aid can be expected from the Government. The committee in charge of the Orphanage at Aleppo seems to feel that by industrial work and the aid of friends, they should be able to care for about three hundred of the children. It is also true that perhaps fifty or a hundred of the children might be sent out to work, or placed with relatives. As there are some 1150 children in the orphanage at the present time, this will leave about 700 and 800 children as an extra burden, which the local committee at Aleppo cannot possibly support. The great need facing all who love the Armenian children is to find some way of supporting this group.

Our suggestion is that we should try to find some source of income outside of our regular appropriations from New York, in order to be able to reorganize the Aleppo Orphanage and to care for the seven or eight hundred children, whom the Committee can no longer support. Unfortunately we cannot undertake to care for these children from our regular monthly appropriations as they have been already reduced by 25% due to difficulty in collecting funds these days.

On the other hand we should almost be willing to undertake the reorganization of the Aleppo Orphanage and the housing of the seven or eight hundred children in better quarters, provided we could have complete control of them, and also provided we could feel reasonably sure of some aid from funds additional to our regular appropriations.

Although it might cost a little more to move the seven or eight hundred children whom the Aleppo Committee cannot continue to support, to some other place, we feel that the small extra expense ought to be undertaken rather than to allow the children to remain at Aleppo. The reasons for this are easily explained:-

1. It would be far healthier to have the children in some place away from the city, out of their present overcrowded quarters, and near to an adequate water supply. The present Aleppo Orphanage is very overcrowded, near to a most undesirable section of Aleppo, and far removed from an adequate supply of water.

2. If we are to bear the chief burden of caring for these children, it would be far easier for us to place them conveniently near to our Beirut Office.

3. If the children are to be supported entirely apart from Aleppo Committee, and Pastor Sheradjian, it would be an advantage to have them removed to another place, so as to avoid all complications of management. Moreover, if we are to raise funds to support these children, it would be an advantage to have them apart, for the sake of publicity work.

I have said that the Near East Relief would almost certainly plan to transfer these seven or eight hundred of Aleppo Orphanage children to a place near Beirut, and that we would wish to have entire control of the Orphanage. This desire is not because of any feeling of mistrust in your agents, but simply because it is impossible to manage any large institution with dual control. We should seek out your council and advise and expect to have almost all of the teachers of the new plant Armenians, but on the other hand, we should feel it necessary to have someone director in charge, and we should wish to have the right to appoint and control that director, for the sake of business efficiency.

Although we have given much aid to refugees in the past, we have come to feel that our first duty is to help the orphans. There are several reasons for this:

- (a) An orphanage is a regular business organization, with buildings to be rented, teachers to be contracted for, large orders to be purchased months ahead, etc., whereas refugee work is always of a rather elastic and emergency type.
- (b) Although even the poorest adults can care for themselves a little, children are helpless unless we care for them.
- (c) The hope of the future is in the children, not in the refugees.
- (d) The work for the children must be carried on for eight or ten years, whereas we all hope that the refugee work can come to an end in the course of a year or two, at least in Syria. It is extraordinary how many refugees have already found work in Syria.
- (e) The work for the children is very constructive in character, whereas refugee work must be carried on with wonderful wisdom, in order to avoid pauperising the people and creating a body of people who become a public charge.

Greatly as we sympathize with the refugees, and earnestly as we hope that enough money can be collected to aid both the children and the adults, nevertheless, we feel that our first duty must be to save the children at least.

It has seemed necessary to run the risk of fatiguing you by this long introduction, in order to make all of these points clear, before stating the suggested basis of cooperation for the use of such funds as our New York Office may give by way of duplicating the contributions of the Armenians.

3. Basis of cooperation for the use of Duplication Funds.

Recommended:

A. That after September 1st 1922, all new funds appropriated by the New York Office of the Near East Relief to duplicate the constructions of Armenians to the Armenian Benevolent Union, should be paid directly to the Near East Relief in Beirut, with the understanding that they be used to aid in supporting such children of the Aleppo Armenian Orphanage as cannot be cared for by the local Armenian committee in Aleppo, and furthermore, with following conditions attached:

B. That in case of appropriate of duplication funds for any one year should exceed the expenses of the said orphanage for that same fiscal year; the surplus balance should be paid to the Armenian Benevolent Union to be expended by them.

C. In case the Armenian Benevolent Union is able to carry on a successful campaign to solicit "protectors" or other contributions to aid the said children from the Aleppo Armenian Orphanage, any sum of money accruing directly from this source will be given to the support of the children, and an exactly similar sum will be taken from the duplication funds and paid to the Armenian Benevolent Union to be expended by them for their own work.

D. The administration of the children to be thus cared for will be entirely under the control of Near East Relief.

E. The name of the orphanage in which the surplus children from the Aleppo Armenian Orphanage are to be placed, and also the general organization of the plant, will be so arranged as to aid the Armenian Benevolent Union in conducting their campaign to solicit funds and to make their givers feel that they are contributing to a work which will enhance the good name of the Armenian Benevolent Union.

F. This agreement is to be in operation until some material change in the number of orphans renders a new basis of cooperation necessary.

4. There are just a few points by way of conclusion. If children are brought from Aleppo and placed in a new plant, which is to be thus intimately connected with the name of the Armenian Benevolent Union, we can't be sure that all of the children in the plant will be those actually taken from the Aleppo Orphanage. Needless to say boys and girls must be sifted out. It is difficult to find buildings for orphans, and the actual numbers of any new institution must fit the building in which they are to be placed. The important point is that a number of children at least commensurate with the surplus seven or eight hundred to be taken from the Aleppo Orphanage would be established in a new institution, which would have this new connection with the Armenian Benevolent Union.

Another point to be mentioned is that the element of the time enters into this transaction. We cannot commit the Near East Relief to this basis of agreement without the sanction of the New York Office. One reason why we wish to draw up our proposals as we have is that we feel quite certain that the New York Office will approve of them thus making it unnecessary to carry on a long set of negotiations across the Atlantic. The water supply in Aleppo is very inadequate, so that although the actual problem of supporting these children in the Aleppo Armenian Orphanage will not come to a head until September first, we should very much like to have the matter settled before that time, so as to begin reorganizing affairs before the hot season sets in at Aleppo.

Another matter is this. If the Near East Relief has control of these children, they will be responsible for moving them from Aleppo and establishing them in the new site. Any aid from the duplication fund would be regarded as being for the actual running expenses and upkeep of the Orphanage. Moreover, the Near East Relief would not hold the Armenian Benevolent Union financially or legally responsible for the support of the children. We realize that it may be hard for you to collect funds, and that the duplication funds may be far less than last year. However, we know that you are just as much interested in these Aleppo children as we are so that we should count upon your doing everything that you could to help us in supporting them, as our own finances are inadequate also.

We shall appreciate it very much if you will answer this letter at your earliest convenience. We hope that you will wish to join with us in this scheme for caring for these homeless children; and that you will also see the convenience of having a very definite plan for cooperation such as the one suggested. The plan will offer

our societies in America a splendid new basis of appeal to the public, and may be a means of increasing gifts to the work.

Thanking you once more for making it possible to confer in such a satisfactory way with your representative, Mr. Assadour, and with heartiest good wishes for the prospering of the splendid work which you are doing,

Yours very truly,

Sgd.

For Secretary,

Administrative Committee.

Copy to: M. Assadour
New York Office
Files

ENDNOTES

¹ We thank the AGBU Cairo Chapter Committee, for permitting the publication of this document.

² For further details on this orphanage see *Deghegaker Halebi Haygagan Vorpanotsi* (Report on the Aleppo Armenian Orphanage), Aleppo, Vosgedar Press, reprinted in 2012.

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ԵՂԻԿ ԹԱՇԱԾԵԱՆ, ԱՆԴՐԱՆԻԿ ՏԱԳԷՍԵԱՆ
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Ա. Աշխարհամարտի աւարտի յաջորդ տարին իսկ Մերձատր Արեւելքի Նպաստամատոյցի (ՄԱՆ) եւ ՀԲԸՄի գործակցութեան արդիւնաւորութիւնը մղեց կողմերը խորացնելու եւ ընդարձակելու իրենց յարաբերութիւնը՝ հայ գաղթականութեան օգնութեան եւ որբախնամի ոլորտներուն մէջ:

Որբախնամի աշխատանքը – ի տարբերութիւն գաղթականութեան հոգածութեան – կ'ենթադրէր տասնամեակի մը վրայ երկարող հոգածութիւն, ինչ որ անհրաժեշտ կը դարձնէր մեջ-հեռահար ծրագրաւորումը: Եւ քանի որ ՄԱՆը եւ ՀԲԸՄը «բազմաթիւ հասարակաց կէտեր ունէին, նոյն մղումն ունէին եւ ոգեղէն կատարեալ ներդաշնակութեան մէջ էին» նպատակայարմար կը դառնայ դէմ յանդիման հանդիպումի կայացումը՝ քննարկելու համար առկայ եւ առկախ հարցեր:

Այս նպատակով ՀԲԸՄի ղեկավարութիւնը 1922 Մայիսի սկիզբին իր պատուիրակը՝ Լեւոն Ասատուր, կ'առաքէ Պէյրութ՝ ՄԱՆի գործադիր տնօրէն Հաւրըրտ Մըթիֆիի հետ գործնական բանակցութիւններու:

Հրատարակուող նիւթը ամփոփումն է այդ հաղիպում-քննարկումին:

Ուշագրաւ է որ այս "փոխըմբռնման յուշագիր"ը մանաւանդ կ'արծարծէ Հալէպի մէջ Վեր. Ահարոն Շիրաճեանի կողմէ տնօրինուող որբանոցին Պէյրութ փոխադրութիւնն ու անոր մատակարարումը, ՀԲԸՄի կողմէ հանգանակուած գումարներու զուգահեռումը ՄԱՆի կողմէ եւ երկու կողմերու միջեւ յառաջանալիք որբւէ 'հարց'ի մեկնաբանումը իբրեւ "թիրխմացութիւն":