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Schools of the Armenian Catholic Community in Istanbul

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Besides the schools belonging to the Armenian Apostolic and Evangelical communities, great contribution to the education of the Armenians has been made by the Mkhitarian schools of the Armenian Catholic community, which still continue to carry out this mission. Before the Armenian Genocide dozens of Mkhitarian schools were working in the Western Armenia and different cities of the Ottoman Empire. In the years of the Genocide (1915-1923) Mkhitarian schools not only in the Western Armenia but also in Izmir and western provinces of the empire were fully destroyed and demolished. Meanwhile, the Mkhitarian schools in Istanbul escaped such a fate.

After the declaration of the Republican Turkey (1923) firstly the foreigners were prohibited to receive education at Mkhitarian schools; the schools were considered as the lyucees for the minority, thus, only pupils of the Armenian descent were allowed to enter these schools and only laic people, instead of clergy (due to the laicism provisions) could be appointed as the directors.

Further on, in 1942-1943 the Turkish Ministry of Education appointed Turks as the deputy directors of the schools of the minorities, which was not welcomed either by the community or the Mkhitarian Armenians¹. From the structural point of view the Armenian community schools had constantly been a subject to changes and as a result Mkhitarian schools also suffered losses, especially in the form of shrinkage of the number of pupils. It is important to mention that the government judicially controls both the subjects taught and appointments of school direction and teachers², and this refers to all the educational facilities belonging to the national minorities.

Today there are 4 schools belonging to the Armenian Catholic community in Istanbul, which are subordinated to the Ministry of Education. These schools are:

- Pangalti School of the Vienna Mkhitarian Congregation, which has a kindergarten, preschool and secondary departments³;
- Bomonti Mkhitarian School⁴;
- Samatia Immaculate Conception School;
- Bankalti Immaculate Conception School.

Table 1 presents information about the Armenian Catholic community schools for 2010⁵, but it does not include information about Bankalti Immaculate Conception School.

Table 1

School	Nursery school			Pre-school			Lycee			Total		
	Girls	Boys	Total	Girls	Boys	Total	Girls	Boys	Total	Girls	Boys	Total
Pankalti Mkhitarian school (Private)	21	20	41	95	80	175	36	29	65	152	129	281
Samatia Immaculate Conception School	6	7	13	20	27	47	-	-	-	26	34	60
Bomonti Mkhitarian School	1	-	1	5	18	23	-	-	-	6	18	24

In recently period not only the Catholic Armenians but also the members of the Apostolic community and children from mixed marriages have also been attending the Mkhitarian Schools in Istanbul. Interesting explanation to this was given by the Headmaster of Mkhitarian School in Istanbul Karekin Barsamian: *“The number of mixed marriages is growing day by day. They have children. And though some of these children are mentioned as Muslims in their passports but in our schools they receive the Armenian Christian education. When they grow up it is up to them to decide their identity”*⁶. In accordance with the procedures laid down in the past only children whose both parents were Armenians could attend Armenian schools. Now children whose only one parent is the Armenian can also attend these schools.

The pupils of Bankalti Armenian School excelled by a number of daring initiatives connected with the anti-Armenian expression in the Turkish textbooks. At the meeting with the Minister of National Education of Turkey the pupils of the school expressed their anxiety about the anti-Armenian expressions in the Turkish textbooks and emphasized that it would be better if those expression were removed. The minister told the pupils to send him those expressions. The pupils accomplished that mission, registered all those anti-Armenian expressions and sent it to the minister⁷.

Unlike Pankalti, Bomonti Mkhitarian School appeared on the verge of closing in the previous years. The point is that the building of the school became a “victim” of “1936 Declaration” (1936 *Beyannamesi*). In 1936 the Armenian, Greek and Jewish communities were demanded to submit the lists of their community estate property, which was attached to the Estate Property Law passed in 1935 as a supplementary and called “1936 Declaration”. In 1936-1971 due to different reasons some buildings, grounds and other estates were passed to different community councils by means of testaments, donations or sale, but since 1974 Turkish government has stated that the estate property, which was not mentioned in the “1936 Declaration”, cannot be considered community property. After that the authorities brought suits, and by means of Directorate of the Estate Property and Treasury these estates were nationalized⁸.

By the decision of the court based on the “1936 Declaration”, the building was passed to the Ayasi city council. The direction of the estate (vakif) which was obliged to pay rent for the building it bought, applied to the court within the framework of the decision taken in the provision to the law which came into force in 2011, which provides returning of the estate registered as a public facilities to the community vakifs. The head of Bomonti Mkhitarian School vakif Rita Nurnur expressed satisfaction by this fact, saying that due to this decision of the court the issue of vague future of the school was removed⁹.

The Bomonti Mkhitarian School was drawn into a scandal when poster with famous words of Kemal Ataturk “I am proud that I am a Turk” was hung in front of the school. The directorate of the school obliged the local government bodies to remove this poster which caused a row in both society and in mass media. There are no Turks studying in the schools of the national minorities and it is remarkable that these schools appear in such situations.

In this regard remarkable comments are made by the representative of the Armenian community Sasoun Esdugian: *“This was a message to the Armenians and Armenian children studying at school. Moreover, the contests on singing Turkish hymn are firstly held in the schools of the national minorities”*.

Sahakian-Nunian Armenian school in Samatia which belongs to the Armenian Apostolic community appeared in the same situation. The trustee of the school Filor Uluk gives grounded clarifications: *“Now can a nation which refuses from its ethnic identity be educated in their mother tongue? Our children demand respect from us. One day my child called me a liar. When I asked why, he answered that we were Armenians but in the school they were told that they were Turks”*.

This is another evidence proving that in the state policy carried out in regard to the national minorities, despite the methods and leverages used, confessional differences play no essential role; the national factor is primary; not only the members of the aforementioned communities but also their community institutions face these problems.

According to the Turkish sources the Mkhitarian schools provide rather high-quality education. Due to the good progress in study of pupils in 2012 Pankalti School was among top-ten of 917 schools in Istanbul¹⁰. All the graduates of the school easily take the examinations to the entry even to the best universities in the world.

Thus, though the Armenian Catholic community in Istanbul is not big and in their routine activity face many objective and subjective problems, in the aspect of schools the situation is comparatively normal. The community has modern and progressing educational facilities.

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