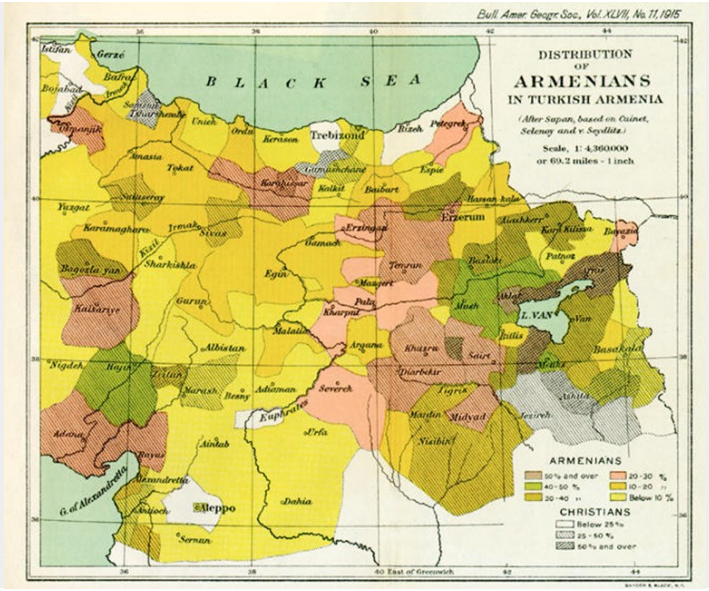
WESTERN ARMENIAN LANGUAGE FUND FORESTALLING EXTINCTION

Posted on June 19, 2020 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

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"**Language is the road map of a culture.**
It tells you where its people come from
and where they are going".
Rita Mae Brown

Even during the ancient times, human migration has been an important part of the study of geography, especially by the Greek multidisciplinary scholars. Since the dawn of humankind, people have been on the move. As people move, they both shape and are shaped by their environments. No matter where they go, the culture they take with them melds with the cultures of the place in which they have settled to work and live.

Contemporary geographers describe a people's choice to migrate in terms of "push" factors and "pull" factors. The push factors are propelled by people's lives that push them to leave, such as famine, political unrest, genocide, among other things. While the "pull" factors consist of the attractions in another country that pull people to move there. These factors include mainly better living conditions and aspirations for better jobs.

About ninety percent (90 %) of between 11 and 12 million Armenians living in the various diasporas have been strewn around the globe on account of the Armenian Genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Turkey in 1915-1923. Their move to leave their Western Armenian homeland including the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia was forced exile in order to avoid massacres. Therefore, the crucial "push" factor was the inhumane treatment of the Ottoman Turkish government.

The exiled survivors brought with them in foreign lands, such as Lebanon, Syria, France, USA, Argentina, to cite a few, their own culture. Paramount among the Armenian culture was the Western Armenian language. After having been over 100 years in exile, the vital concern is its survival in the dominant culture of their host countries that had welcomed them to save themselves from the swords of their tormentors either to accept Islam or die on the spot.

In this article, a practical method of forestalling this millennia-old language from extinction is explored and then a recommendation is made to kill two birds with one stone. Granted, it is not a sexy subject, but a very serious one, nonetheless.

Those Diaspora Armenians who live under the rock should know that UNESCO has already included the Western Armenian language in their list of endangered world languages. So, there is no need to prove here the danger the Western Armenian language will be faced in the future.

Suffice it to say that always the dominant culture win in absorbing any of the minorities' cultural heritage be they traditional customs or native spoken language. To the demise of many diaspora-cultures, the melting pot concept is operational on both sides of the world hemispheres.

According to rough estimates, there are between 6,500 and 7,000 languages in the world. However, nearly two-thirds of the world's population speaks a mere 12 common languages as a native language. Western Armenian language is not among them; this language is spoken only by the majority of the Diaspora Armenians coming from all over except from the present-day Republic of Armenia. This makes the vast majority of world's languages obscure and most likely on the path to extinction.

It is worth noting that the language of the Armenian Diaspora members who have come from the Republic of Armenia is not of concern here and it is not on the UNESCO's list of endangered languages for the official language of this state is Eastern Armenian language.

Compared to Eastern Armenian language, the Western Armenian language does not have a free and independent country wherein people speak their language to perpetuate its life unfettered by the forces of assimilation. A lion's share of the Armenian Highlands and the whole of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia are still occupied by Turkey.

For example, a written text translated into another language would seldom keep the effectiveness of its original language version; the spice of the original text would be lost. We owe it to our future generations to read their Armenian literary heritage in Western Armenian language and enjoy the richness of their ancestral language.

Armenians all over the world are busy building schools, churches, clubs, etc. to ensure the continuation of the Armenian culture, to safeguard against the contention that when a language of a people dies, so does the ethnicity of the group.

Building more schools is fine to borrow time. However, in the long run, they would provide us with diminishing returns due to the nullifying force of the dominant culture on the heritage of minorities. The whole effort would be to gain time so that the Diaspora would be of help to Armenia and Artsakh.

Years ago, I met an Armenian in Bulgaria. He came from a small, but vibrant, "Armenian town" not far from Sophia. (Sorry, but I cannot remember its name). When I asked him about the people there, he said: "What people, I am the only one living there". The town's Armenians were mostly assimilated and some of them had moved out to live elsewhere. As a result, the Armenian schools and churches were closed. Sad, but a true story which has happened many places inhabited by the Armenian Diaspora around the world, had eventually lost their Armenian identity due to the active assimilation forces of the dominant culture.

We have a sad story close to home in California, too. The only city in the USA built by Armenians is Yetem (i.e., paradise in Armenian). It was characterized by beehive activities and the Armenian traditions, culture, and heritage practiced on a daily basis. It boasted several Armenian schools and three churches (Armenian Apostolic, Protestant, and Catholic denominations). When I visited this town in the early 1970s after having read an Article in the National Geographic Magazine, I asked the

hotel manager to lead to the Armenian community members. To my astonishment, there was only one Armenian left in town and he was a teacher of English. The town's Armenian population had mainly moved to other parts of California and a good number of them had assimilated and, therefore, there was no need to schools or churches any more. From the Armenian perspective, the town was victimized, but from the dominant USA culture, it had triumphed by absorbing the foreign culture into the fold. The point is that the present is misleading of what the future would hold for the Armenian community who wants to keep their cultural heritage alive.

On a positive note, linguists have come up with a few ways to save a language from extinction. Technology-based methods such as on the Internet, languages can be saved. However, Armenians have a unique situation which requires a natural, human-based approach to perpetuating the continuation of the language as opposed to archiving the language on a tape or on the computer's hard drive and storing it in one corner of the server computer.



Percentage of Distribution of Armenians in so-called Turkish Armenia (i.e, Western Armenia and the Kingdom of Cilicia), 1915. In most of these Ottoman areas, Armenians spoke Western Armenian and now they speak this language in the vast Diaspora of 12 millions around the world. We should not forget that we have still hidden Armenians in these places who want to speak their native tongue. It is incumbent upon the Armenian Diaspora to help those interested in returning to their roots and native language.

As you would agree, ideas have changed the world. So, let us entertain this idea to see if we can kill two birds with one stone in our attempt at forestalling the eventual death of Western Armenian language.

Estimates run the gamut of anywhere from 50,000 to 5 million hidden Armenians (AKA cripto-Armenians, Islamized-Armenians) in Western Armenia live in so-called Eastern Anatolia in the present-day Turkey. Some of them still speak Western Armenian language as their native tongue.

While we should continue maintaining our schools in the Diaspora, we should also invest in the survival of the Western Armenian language in Turkey by helping hidden Armenians open more schools and churches using the Western Armenian language.

Hypothetically, the idea may sound great, but we need money to kill two birds at the same time: 1. To revitalize the Hidden Armenian community to begin exercising their Armenian cultural heritage and identity and 2. To return to the use of the Western Armenian language. At the same time, the Diaspora will be assured of the survival of its own language in its adopted countries.

To accomplish the goals and the objectives of the idea of rejuvenating the Western Armenian language in Turkish-occupied Western Armenia and averting its eventual extinction, the Diaspora needs to establish a Western Armenian Language fund. Details of this fund is akin to any fund we have so far for helping Armenia and Artsakh and it is beyond the scope of this article.

We could also resort to many other ways to prevent the Western Armenian language from extinction. Linguists have designed a number of methods to save languages from dying. It has been estimated that almost forty percent (40%) of the world's 7,000 languages are at risk of disappearing.

Fortunately, the new movement of apps and online services are making a huge effort to keep endangered languages alive. Two success stories of saving languages from the brink of extinction are Hebrew and Hawaiian languages.

We should also have an Armenian language section of our Armenian museums to show case Eastern Armenian, Western Armenian, Persian Armenian, Hemshen Armenian, Armeno-Tat Armenian, etc.

The future belongs to those who plan ahead to avoid mistakes. One of Diaspora's mistakes is to take for granted the survival of the Western Armenian language in the face of surreptitious assimilation force taking place outside the Republic of Armenia. Additionally, there are two other culprits in causing world languages to die: globalization which is favoring the use of one language everywhere (i.e., English) and not speaking the native language at home.

Those who are future oriented would consider the idea as a vital proposal. Diaspora will eventually be assimilated but the hidden Armenians will not easily mix with the Turks. There are a few Armenian schools in Istanbul which are suffering from lack of funds and students. At the present, Armenian schools are not even few and far between in the Western Armenia.

To encourage the hidden Armenians to come out of the shadows to send their kids to school to learn Armenian in addition to Turkish, many more such institutions must be opened to accommodate the adults as well as the children to learn and speak Western Armenian.

As for language teachers, there will be some volunteers from the Diaspora and from Armenia to go to Turkey to teach Armenian to the children of the native Armenians living in their ancestral highlands. To ingratiate themselves to the European Union as members of a modern democracy, Turkish officials would be amenable to allow hidden Armenians to teach their children Armenian in schools, especially in the Dersim area.

To those pessimist Armenians who say Western Armenia is gone and has become ancient history and, therefore, we should not waste our perfume on the desert wind --we should remind them that our "Homeland" is not historical, lost in the annals of time. While it is ancient, it does not belong to an era gone by. To most Diaspora Armenian, Western Armenia is very current and alive; next to the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia, it is the only ancestral land we have; and need to return to the Armenian Highlands when the opportunity presents itself. And one of these days, it will!

We need to bite the bullet and face reality staring us in the face. In 100 years or so from now, the Diaspora may very well be gone with the wind -- no matter how many schools, churches, and clubs we build. The destiny of the Diaspora is doomed, but the hidden Armenians, if revitalized, will continue using their native language. The feeling that they are not forgotten would boost their moral to revert to their former cultural roots.

For many of us, the first generation of Genocide survivors, the thought of Western Armenian language extinction would sound to our parents --like a death warrant or rather a second genocide of the Armenian people. Let us cooperate and collaborate with one another to put this idea into practice as a respect to all those who had rather perish than become Turkified at the hands of the butcher Ottoman leaders.

Our hidden Armenians are also truly brave patriots to stay behind in their native land and endure all the hardship presented by the government that refuses to recognize diversity in reality. Patriotism is love of country and language is its passport to its cultural heritage.

In fact, language is a nation's oxygen for the preservation of its traditions, culture, and heritage to be transmitted from generation to generation, as a reflection of the richness of its pedigree on the scale of civilization. When a people's language becomes extinct, so does the status of its ethnicity. Therefore, let us hit the ground running to save Western Armenian language for our future generations from dying by the merciless curse of oblivion.

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There are no comments yet.