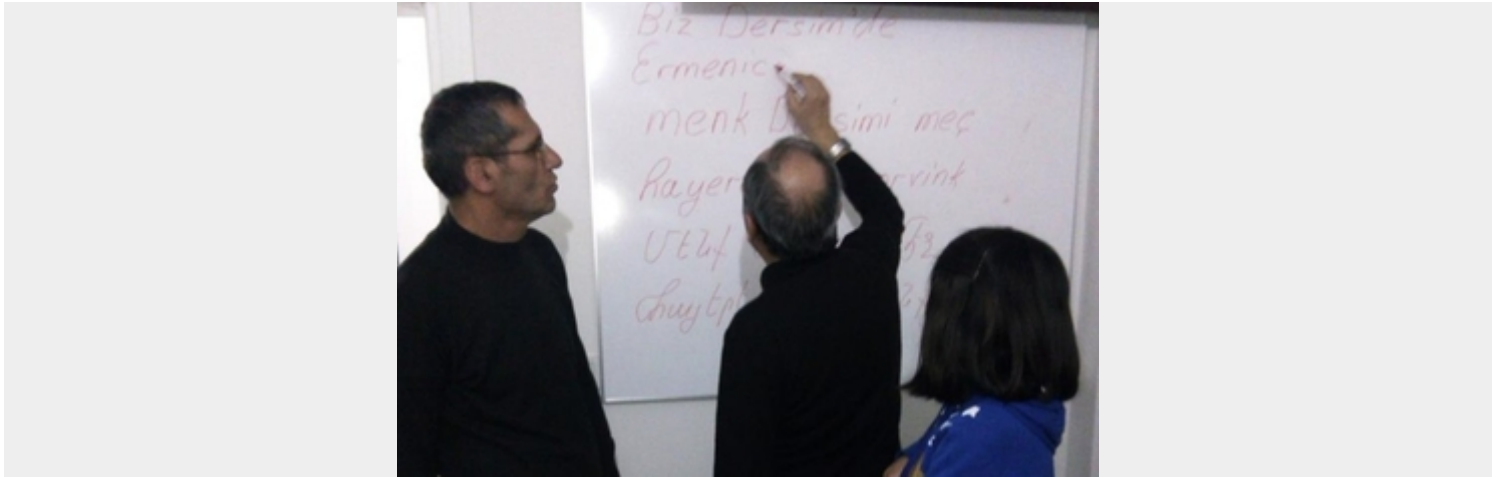


# DERSIM ARMENIANS RETURN TO THEIR ROOTS

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Raffi Bedrosyan, Toronto, 3 March 2015

Keghart readers would remember the historic first journey of hidden Armenians from Diyarbakir to Armenia last August, 2014. These brave people were the grandchildren of forcefully islamicized/Turkified/Kurdified Armenians from 1915, who had the determination and guts to return to their roots after the reconstruction of Surp Giragos Church, the first Armenian church to be resurrected in Turkey since 1915. As a reward for participating in Armenian language course organized by the local Diyarbakir Sur municipality and the Church Foundation, they were taken on an unforgettable journey to Armenia, to better understand their forgotten history, culture and heritage.



I am happy to report that the 'coming out' of the hidden Armenians is not restricted to Diyarbakir. Now, it is the turn of hidden Armenians of Dersim, officially called Tunceli province in Turkey. Dersim is a vast mountainous region with beautiful valleys, dotted with hundreds of picturesque villages in between Erzurum (known as Garin by the Armenians) and Erzinjan (known as Yerzinga by the Armenians), in Eastern Turkey. Prior to 1915, Alevi Kurds and Armenians populated the region.

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The Alevi Kurds, who have traditionally been sympathetic to the Armenians, did not participate in the 1915 massacre and plunder of the Armenians; in fact, they saved tens of thousands of Armenians, either by protecting them against the Ottoman Turkish army within their own villages, or providing safe passage to them toward Russian Armenia. As a 'reward' for protecting the Armenians and for

'rebellling' against the new regime, the Alevi Kurds paid dearly twenty years later in the 1930s, when the Republican Turkish army indiscriminately killed most of them, including thousands of assimilated Kurdified Armenians. The killing methods varied from assembling the civilian population - men, women and children -, into caves filled with poisonous gases, to straight machine-gunning them.

Now, fast forward to today, when hidden Armenians are emerging from among the Alevi Kurd population of the region, reclaiming the Armenian identity, changing their Turkish/Kurdish names with Armenian ones, and starting to learn Armenian. After overcoming many obstacles, logistical and organizational challenges, an Armenian language course started on February 1, 2015, with dozens of young and old people registering for the three times weekly classes. An Armenian and Alevi cultural association is formed, named Deradost, which can be translated as Dersim Armenians and Alevis Friendship Society. There is also another Armenian organization called Dersiyad, to promote cooperation and support among Armenians in Dersim, as well as Dersim Armenians in Istanbul and abroad, mostly in Germany.



Similar to the initiative which took Diyarbakir hidden Armenians to Armenia, now a trip is planned for some of the Dersim hidden Armenians to visit Armenia in late March 2015. But there is an added significance and historic first in this trip. All of the participants are ELECTED VILLAGE OFFICIALS of hidden Armenian villages. Twelve of these hidden Armenian leaders from the scattered villages of Dersim will visit Armenia for the first time. During this trip, they will learn about Armenian history and culture, but through TV and media, they will also show to the Armenians of Armenia and Diaspora the historic Armenian churches and monuments from their own villages, prior to 1915 and now. The trip is sponsored by an individual from Canada, as well as by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, following several emails and phone calls between Lisbon, Dersim, Istanbul, Yerevan and Toronto.

Details about this historic trip and the reflections of the Dersim village officials visiting Armenia will follow in future articles.

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