DIYARBAKIR STUDENTS TOUR ARMENIA

Posted on August 5, 2014 by Keghart

Category: Opinions

By **Raffi Bedrosyan**, Toronto, 5 August 2014

One sunny August morning a bus left Diyarbakir, Turkey, with 50 passengers, and traveled to Yerevan, Armenia via Georgia. At the same time, a man flew from Canada to Yerevan to meet the busload of passengers and lead them on a two- week tour of Armenia.

Diyarbakir Students in Armenia. Photo reproduced from Armenian Weekly

Organizations such as the Gulbenkian Foundation, Hrant Dink Foundation, AGBU, and a few individual Armenians from the U.S. and Canada helped finance the tour. The Armenian Minister of Diaspora and several senior government officials are scheduled to greet the group.

By **Raffi Bedrosyan**, Toronto, 5 August 2014

One sunny August morning a bus left Diyarbakir, Turkey, with 50 passengers, and traveled to Yerevan, Armenia via Georgia. At the same time, a man flew from Canada to Yerevan to meet the busload of passengers and lead them on a two- week tour of Armenia.

Diyarbakir Students in Armenia. Photo reproduced from Armenian Weekly

Organizations such as the Gulbenkian Foundation, Hrant Dink Foundation, AGBU, and a few individual Armenians from the U.S. and Canada helped finance the tour. The Armenian Minister of Diaspora and several senior government officials are scheduled to greet the group.

But what is so special about this group? Why all this attention? They are residents of Diyarbakir, range in age from 18-83, chat in Kurdish or Turkish… Wait, no, they all speak Armenian. But there are no Armenians left in Diyarbakir, except for an old couple (and Bayzar yaya, the female half of the couple, just passed away two months ago).

So, who ARE these people?

Three years ago, when the biggest Armenian church in the Middle East, Surp Giragos Church, was resurrected from its ruins, it served as solid and indisputable evidence of an Armenian presence in historic Armenia before 1915. Some Turks and Kurds, kept in the dark about the facts of 1915, started to question the state version of history, and some initiated the search for the truth. The church also became a living Genocide memorial for thousands of Armenians from Armenia and the Diaspora visiting the historic homeland. But, more significantly, it became a beacon or a magnet that attracted "hidden Armenians" from various regions near and far. They gathered and met at Surp Giragos. Islamicized, Kurdified, or Turkified, they started exchanging family stories and attending cultural events and concerts in growing numbers.

Seeing all this activity come to life, two years ago the church board and the local Diyarbakir Sur municipality decided to offer Armenian-language classes. And now, as a reward for completing the Armenian-language course, the 54 graduates are headed on a tour to Armenia so that they can practice their newly acquired language skills, and develop their understanding of Armenian history and culture.

Almost all of them have some level of "Armenianness" in their family. Some of their families were forcibly converted to Islam in 1915; others have an Armenian grandmother in the family, who was taken in by their Kurdish/Turkish ancestors as a maid, daughter, wife, or worse…

But we don't need to go into the past; rather, we need to focus on the present, on the grandchildren who have now courageously decided to "come out." Some have decided to identify themselves as Christian Armenian, others as Muslim Armenian. Some have changed their Turkish names to Armenian ones, others have still hung on to their names. The one common denominator is their desire to learn the Armenian language, history, and culture.

Yet, to truly understand the depth of their courage in "coming out," we must be reminded of the realities in Turkey. Until recently, speaking the Kurdish language was forbidden. Kurds were told they don't exist as a people, that they are mountain Turks who make sounds like "kart kurt" when walking in the snow… The official state policy denied the living existence of Kurds, just like it denied the extermination of the Armenians. These hidden Armenians of Diyarbakir saw their relatives and neighbors lose their jobs, homes, and lives, they saw them arrested, tortured, and "disappeared" by Turkish security forces for speaking Kurdish. And yet, here they are, willing to learn the Armenian language and come out with an identity much more hazardous to their health than the previous Kurdish identity.

In previous articles, I've outlined certain facts about the hidden Armenians of Turkey. In 1915, there were tens of thousands of Armenian orphan boys and girls forcibly Islamicized and Turkified, many more captured from the convoys along the deportation routes to the Syrian Desert. There were tens of thousands of Armenians who were given protection by a few friendly Kurdish and Alevi tribes, and who eventually got assimilated. There were also quite a few Armenians who converted to Islam to avoid the deportations and massacres in various provinces, at least for a few months in 1915. These people all became the "living victims" of the Genocide. Independent studies projecting the Islamicized Armenian population numbers, from 1915 to the present, have concluded that the "potential" number of people with Armenian roots in Turkey is in the millions—and more than the present population of Armenia. Of course, it is impossible to predict what percentage of them would be willing or able to "come out" and reclaim their Armenian heritage. But, there is a "back to roots" movement in historic Armenia, even among the Hamshen Armenians in northeast Turkey, who converted to Islam centuries ago.

A century ago, a 4,000-year-old tree was chopped down, burned, and uprooted in historic Armenia.

Spores and seeds from the toppled tree were scattered to all corners of the world, creating the Armenian Diaspora. But some of the roots survived, and after staying dormant for a hundred years, tiny seedlings are sprouting again. This trip is a historic first in nurturing those seedlings, a first step perhaps in re-creating an Armenian presence in historic Armenia. It will introduce Armenia to the hidden Armenians, but it will also introduce the hidden Armenians to Armenia.

In addition to the triple realities of Armenians in Armenia, Artsakh, and the Diaspora, we now have a fourth reality of emerging hidden Armenians. In the next few days, we will observe many emotional highs and lows while touring Armenia, visiting Echmiadzin, the Genocide Museum, and many historic and cultural sites. We will record their reactions to Armenia, and the reactions of the local Armenians to them.