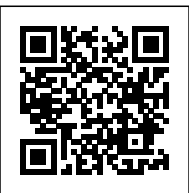


# HOMECOMING TO ARMENIA

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Category: [Opinions](#)



Raffi Bedrosyan, Toronto, 28 August 2014

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At the end of the first week, we organized a Dikranagerd Night at a beautiful HyeLandz Eco Village in the village of Keghatir. We invited government officials, academicians and researchers following our group, as well as some of the new-found relatives of the Diyarbakir hidden Armenians whose ancestors had managed to move to Armenia after 1915.

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The reunion of the Christian Armenian relatives with the Islamized Armenians of Diyarbakir was another special moment. Needless to say, the dancing and singing kept the whole village awake until the early hours of the morning. In the last few days the group visited Lake Sevan. Muslim or Christian, they all reinforced their 'Armenianness' by dipping into the holy waters of Sevan, some their toes, some their entire bodies... Then they were off to a government camping facility in Dzaghgatsor for a few days, where they had a chance to rest after a whirlwind tour of Armenia, as well as learn more Armenian lessons, songs and dances. They enjoyed the camp, except for the

morning gym classes and the 'beds from Stalin era'...

As they drive back home to Diyarbakir to resume their lives, perhaps a bit apprehensive about their emerging new identities, I would like to share some of the stories of these no more hidden Armenians. There is enough material for a book or a movie for each of the 50 members of the group. Through interviews by media or Ministry of Diaspora officials, Armenians of Armenia have started finding out about them.

The most interesting responses were to the question of when they realized they had Armenian roots. Some of them found out they were Armenian when they were already adults, at the deathbed of their parents or grandparents. Some discovered when they were in compulsory military service in the Turkish Army, when their commanders told them they can't be trusted because of their 'background'. Some were told as little kids, when other kids shouted at them 'Armenian' in the street or at school as a swear word, without knowing the meaning of the word. As they rushed home crying that other kids swore at them, their parents had to explain that Armenian is not a swear word, but their own identity. Some hidden Armenians tried hard to appear as devout Muslims; one even became an imam, a Muslim religious leader, while holding on to his hidden identity.

However, most hidden Armenians tried to ensure that their children married into other hidden Armenian families, even the imam giving his daughter to another Islamized Armenian boy, raising questions among his Muslim followers. No matter how much these people tried to hide their Armenian roots, it seems that the neighbors or the government officials knew about their origins. During disagreements between business people, shopkeepers, neighboring women or kids at school, the insults of 'gavur/infidel' or 'devil-rooted Armenian' easily came out, no matter how devout Muslims they appeared to be.

One tragicomic incident was the story of three Muslim Kurdish boys, 8- to 9-years old, one of them from a hidden Armenian family but unaware of his roots at the time. They stole some of those famous Diyarbakir watermelons from the orchard of an Islamized hidden Armenian. The man caught the three little thieves, but let go the two real Muslim Kurdish boys and gave a good beating to the hidden Armenian boy. I leave it to the psychologists to analyze the reasons for the man's actions. Years later, the hidden Armenian boy found out his identity. He still thinks about the incident.

Another interesting fact that came out during the interviews was the special place of Yerevan Radio in all Kurdish families' lives, including our hidden Armenians' group. As Kurdish language was banned and even possessing a Kurdish music tape was a punishable crime in Turkey for several decades, Kurds tuned in to Yerevan Radio which broadcast Kurdish news and music a couple of hours each day. The group members all remembered how, when they were growing up, everyone would stop work at home or at shops to gather around the radio to hear Yerevan Radio Kurdish news.

I am confident the groundbreaking nature of this historic first trip will open the road for other hidden

Armenians to follow, but I would like to report on three additional successful outcomes resulting from this trip.

Firstly, two university graduates in our group who wanted to further their graduate studies in Armenia will be able to fulfill their dreams. In discussion with Armenian government officials, we reached agreement that they will be able to attend Armenian universities with free tuition, master the Armenian language for a year and then continue into their desired field of study.

Secondly, some of the group members inquired about obtaining Armenian citizenship, perhaps retirement plans in Armenia. As per the existing citizenship requirements, Armenian government demands documents and proof of Armenian ethnic origin but of course no such documents exist among our hidden Armenians, except for the memories of their parents and grandparents. In discussion with the government officials, I proposed the possibility of a baptism document as proof of Armenian origin. I suggested that if a hidden Armenian comes out and is baptized in Armenia, similar to our two members who got baptized in Echmiadzin (see previous article), then this should be sufficient proof to apply for Armenian citizenship. The proposal was received favorably and will now be discussed in cabinet, hopefully leading to approval by the government.

Thirdly, learning the Armenian language, history and culture is essential to rediscovering Armenian roots. The Virtual University run by AGBU in Yerevan is offering online courses in these subjects. The administrators have now agreed to offer these courses free to all applicants from Turkey. This will have a huge impact on the hidden Armenians of Turkey wherever they are... in Dersim, Van, Mush or Diyarbakir, as they can start learning on their own, in their own homes, even in the absence of organized language courses.

Although the trip is the start of a new reality within the Armenian world and received with great enthusiasm by Armenian government officials and the public, I must admit that not everyone is on board. There are still a few Armenians who disapprove of the time and effort invested in bringing out the hidden Armenians. Perhaps it is untimely to air our dirty laundry, but I believe the arguments put forth by these disapproving Armenians must be discussed, as some of them hold important posts within the Armenian Church and political organizations in Diaspora and in Istanbul.

These rejectionists argue that Muslim Armenians should not be considered Armenian, until they convert to Christianity by getting baptized. But then they argue that the hidden Armenians cannot be baptized unless they show proof and documents of Armenian origins, until they speak fluent Armenian and 'pass tests of being a good Armenian'. I believe it is shortsighted and unrealistic to have such requirements for hidden Armenians living in Van or Dersim, surrounded by Muslim Turks/Kurds, working in government jobs.

The other argument I find incomprehensible is that the emergence of hidden Armenians in large numbers lessens the claims of the 1915 Genocide, and that it is tantamount to strengthening the Turkish denial. I have even received comments that Turks will now use the hidden Armenians as

proof that the Genocide never happened, and therefore, I should stick to engineering or music, instead of getting involved in these issues...These comments can be dismissed, were it not for the fact that they come from some individuals in undeservedly responsible positions in Diaspora, including in Istanbul.

Regardless, we will keep on expanding our efforts in Diyarbakir and other regions of Turkey, continuously pushing the envelope on rules and regulations to facilitate the 'coming out' of our hidden Armenian brothers and sisters, the grandchildren of the 'living' victims of the Genocide. There is a Turkish term for these hapless survivors: 'kilic artigi' meaning 'remnants of the sword'. The attempted murder of a nation and the confiscation of its wealth took place within Turkey, but as we approach the centennial of these problems, we must realize that the resolution of these problems will also take place within Turkey.

No matter how many events we organize in the Diaspora or Armenia, no matter how many third-country parliaments and politicians appear to sympathize with our cause, at the end of the day, the only change will come from within Turkey when the peoples of Turkey realize the truth about 1915 and force their government to stop the denial and deal with the consequences. One of the key components toward this goal will be the recreation of an Armenian presence within Turkey. The continuing dialogue of Armenian and Turkish civil societies and opinion makers, combined with the emergence of hidden Armenians within Turkey are essential toward eliminating the past and present barriers.

I will conclude this series of articles with a tribute to the courage and determination of our hidden Armenians, and a few questions for readers to ponder. How will the hidden Armenians be received back in Turkey? How will their families, neighbors, employers, employees react to their new identity? Just consider Stepan's case, the newly baptized man who is a teacher at a government school. All his students are Muslim. He told me he knows there are several kids in his class who come from hidden Armenian Islamized families, but he doesn't know if the kids know about their roots. How will the Muslim kids (or their parents) react to him coming out? How will the hidden Armenian kids (or their parents) react? How will his own kids react? We are in uncharted waters, but sooner or later, truth and justice will prevail.

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## Homecoming--the Baptisms

By Raffi Bedrosyan, Toronto, 11 August 2014

The homecoming trip of the (no more) hidden Armenians from Diyarbakir to Armenia finally began this week, after months and months of planning, preparation, resolving issues, emerging new issues, seemingly endless three-way long distance discussions from Diyarbakir to Yerevan through Toronto.

And now, the 'new' Armenians of Diyarbakir are strolling in the streets and museums of Yerevan, tiptoeing into the various churches scattered all over Armenia. Emotions are very near the surface... One moment they burst into dancing in the streets as soon as they hear a playful tune, next moment crying uncontrollably at a scene which may mean nothing to passersby but has reminded them something, someone – all the way back to 1915.

Yerevan is full of Armenian kids from all over the world as part of the 'Ari Dun' program at the invitation of the Ministry of Diaspora, which has also helped organize our itinerary. The government officials arranged to meet the Diyarbakir group on our first day along with hundreds of the Diaspora kids. The Diyarbakir group was extremely anxious about how they would be greeted. The Armenian officials were equally curious about these Turkish/Kurdish speaking individuals, ranging in age from 18 to 83 but mostly middle-aged people from all socio-economic and education levels, including teachers, students, doctors, housewives, retired people...

Some of them are sophisticated urban dwellers, others going abroad for the first time...I am acting as the translator from Armenian to Turkish and back, but my task needs to be more than just to relay statements and messages. I have to be able to convey, from Turkish to Armenian, the incredible desire and courage of these people in becoming new Armenians, and also to be able to convey, from Armenian to Turkish, the honest sincerity of welcome of the government officials. But I am happy to report that by the end of the meeting, the previously anxious Diyarbakir Armenians and the previously serious-looking government officials were dancing the Diyarbakir 'halay' together to Armenian music, while the kids from Diaspora, Russia, US, France, Iran, etc. watched these grown-up kids in amazement.

A government official says his parents are from Mush, another one says from Sasun, then one of the Diyarbakir people screams 'My father is from Sasun, too', and then there are common stories from Sasun. They don't need my translation any more, they have already started comparing Sasun village names and hugging each other...

I was a bit apprehensive when the Diaspora Ministry people had told me they had planned two hours of Armenian language lessons each day as part of the itinerary, thinking that our group would be more interested in seeing places. To my surprise, they all burst into enthusiastic applause and were deeply grateful for the lessons.

When we visited the Madenataran manuscript treasures and Oshagan where Mesrob Mashdots, the creator of the Armenian alphabet, is buried, they understood better the mystery of the strange letters that they saw for the first time in their lives just two years ago.

As I reported in previous articles, almost all of the group members have some degree of 'Armenianness' in their family, some from one parent, some from both. They have mostly decided to come out as Armenians, but not as Christians - YET. Two of them have already been baptized in

Diyarbakir Surp Giragos Church, changing names, identity and religion. Gafur Turkay has become Ohannes Ohanian, his wife Nurcan has become Knar, proudly wearing not one but all three cross necklaces given to her as presents after her christening.

One of the teachers in the group is determined to be baptized at Echmiadzin. The risks he is taking are enormous. He is a primary school teacher in a government school. He may lose his job, friends' circle, or worse; but his mind is made up. In addition, if he is baptized in Echmiadzin instead of back home at Surp Giragos, he will gain bragging rights over Gafur/Ohannes as being a more complete Christian Armenian... I have arranged for the ceremony beforehand with Bishop Pakrad Galstianian of Echmiadzin, formerly the Canadian Diocese Primate.

We also have a lady who has spent many sleepless nights trying to decide whether she should also get baptized. Her dilemma is even more dangerous. She feels she has an obligation to her long-suffering late father, a hidden Armenian, who had encouraged her to become a Christian Armenian before he passed away. But her devoutly Moslem Kurdish husband has forbidden her from taking this step. The night before our trip to Echmiadzin, she tells me she will not be able to go ahead with the baptism.

In the morning we are off to Sardarabad, visiting the Victory Museum, understanding the significance and consequences of the 1918 events. As we approach Echmiadzin, the lady with the dilemma walks from the back of the bus to where I am sitting, and tells me her final decision: 'My father suffered a lot, I know he is still suffering even though he is dead, I need to do this to end his suffering. If I will suffer as a result of this, I am prepared for it.'

So we end up having a double christening ceremony at Surp Asdvadzadzin Church in Echmiadzin for the 'new' Stepan who took his Armenian grandfather's name, and for the new 'Anjel' who took her Armenian grandmother's name. I am certain this was the first time in Echmiadzin, or all of Armenia, where the Armenian christening ceremony was carried out in both Armenian and Turkish translation word for word. At the end, Pakrad Srpazan concluded with the statement: 'To become a Christian, one needs to be brave, to become both an Armenian and a Christian, one needs to be doubly brave'. Everyone had tears in their eyes, including Pakrad Srpazan.

Isn't it ironic that these people chose to become Armenian on the same day when Turkish Prime Minister and presidential candidate Erdogan stated on national TV: "They (opposition) said I was of Georgian origin. Even uglier, they accused me of being an Armenian, sorry to say." ?  
And isn't it doubly ironic that as president, Erdogan will reside in the presidential mansion that was once owned by an Armenian family known as the Kasapyan family?

Our reporting of the journey through Armenia toward a new life for the (no more) hidden Armenians will continue.





