

ISLAMIZED ARMENIANS DISCOVER THEIR ROOTS

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*Telephone interview conducted by **Hamo Moskofian** with **Alice Aliye Alt**, 'Mother' of Hamshen Armenians in Germany, Beirut – Frankfurt-Canada, 28 May 2010*



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Hamo Moskofian: *Since your book “Hamshen Armenians in the Mirror of History” was published by the Goethe University of Frankfurt, you have become a spokesperson for the movement of Hamshen Armenian self-recognition in that country and their return to their roots. As we know, hundreds of thousands of Hamshen Armenians, who had lived on their ancestral lands in Western Armenia for millennia, were forced to convert to Islam and now live mostly in north-eastern Turkey. How did the movement of Hamshen Armenians to return to their roots start?*

Alice Aliye Alt: We knew since our childhood that once we had been 'gyavour-Armenians.' My father, the owner of a restaurant in Rize, was a Hamshen Armenian who had married a Laz woman, whose family were his neighbors on the coast of the Black Sea. As a young and educated girl, I came to study and work in West Germany, which 'imported', in the '60s, thousands of cheap-labour workers from Turkey.

I married a German citizen, from whom I 'inherited' his family name. My real Hamshen family name is Gosdan. After the death of my husband, I studied psychology at the University of Frankfurt, graduating as a specialist in working with minorities--mainly Turks, Kurds, convert Armenians. It's then that I realized that most of them were Hamshen Armenians who continued to live as 'disguised' or 'secret' citizens of Turkey, later of Germany. They were slowly discovering their real identity.

My contacts with the Union of Armenians in Frankfurt, and my personal research led me to my real identity. We were also 'secret' Armenians! I educated my children Deniz and Yasmine that they are Armenian and that they are survivors of a horrible genocide. Deniz, one of the most respected of New Generation painters in Germany, participated and even organized his personal exhibitions, devoted to the Genocide of Armenians. After taking a close look at my son's paintings, his professor at the Frankfurt Fine Arts Academy, said, “I think you are not a Turk; you are Armenian!”

Many of my dearest friends, members of the enlightenend Turkish intelligentsia, helped in our struggle to discover and establish our identity, and in the recognition of the known and unknown chapters of the Genocide of Armenians. Also our German and Greek humanist friends in Germany

and elsewhere, were always at our side. I cannot tell the same about most of the huge Armenian community here, who until recently, were suspicious of us.

HM: *How do the converts you have met feel about being Armenian, decades after living as Turks, Kurds, Zaza, Kizilbash or simply as followers of Islam?*

AAA: As a psychologist and a convert Armenian who was baptized with the help of Archbishop Karekin Bekjian of Koln, the primate of the Armenian Church of Germany, I observe that decades of fear inherited from generation to generation, horrors of massacres and genocide, living a double identity and suddenly discovering their Armenian origins, has sometimes tragic impact on some individuals who subsequently experience serious mental disorders.

I think, based mostly on my experience working with my patients of Turkish nationality, nearly all Armenians, survivors of genocides, sometimes need serious psychological intervention. Recently, my Hamshen grandmother, in horror, asked me, "Aliye, are we once more going to become Armenian?"

HM: *What's the reaction of your Turkish neighbors when they learn that you are Armenian?*

AAA: Most of them respect and trust me because life in a Turkish family, often divided between Turkey and Germany--sometimes with several wives--is horrible. Recently, when I met near my house the imam of the Turkish mosque of Hottersheim and his wife, she asked me, "They say that you are Armenian. How is it that your name is Aliye?" The imam told his wife, with a smile, "Didn't you know that there were always Moslem Armenians?"

So, it seems that, after centuries of persecution and insults, convert Armenians are considered by many Diasporan Turks as "one of them", specially Turks who were born and educated in Germany.

Thank you, Hamo, for opening to our family and to relatives the window to Armenia and Armenians.

