

LOST-AND-FOUND ARMENIANS NEED OUR HELP

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✘ **Keghart.com team** editorial, 7 June 2010

In the early to late '70s some Diaspora Armenian students studying in Yerevan, having established a patriotic and private group called *Khempag*, engaged in the study of various aspects of life in Armenia and Armenians in Diaspora. They were particularly dissatisfied with the accepted interpretations of historical events and policies that had contributed to shaping Soviet and Diaspora Armenian societies. Their efforts culminated in the establishment, for Diaspora students, of a historical society named after *Movses Khorenatsi*. Members of the group included Marxists, *Ramgavars*, *Hunchaks*, ARF and ASALA sympathizers, and *Chezoks*. At its peak the group boasted a membership representing close to 10% of the Diasporan student body.

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The task of the group was not limited to research but included an action plan that primarily was gauged to disseminate the notion of *demands versus recognition* with respect to the Genocide of Armenians. Furthermore, through a variety of student activities it strived to cultivate an atmosphere of political and intellectual tolerance and provide a contextual experience of co-operation that could be transported to *Spyurk*.

There were anecdotal reports at the time that many orphans of the Genocide and their descendants had converted to Islam to avoid Turkish or Kurdish persecution. These forced converts would occasionally confide their roots to strangers, it was rumoured. A sizeable portion of these individuals apparently lived in Kurdish areas and some had joined the recently formed militant Kurdistan Workers' Party. Others had left Turkey for Europe, taking advantage of the demand for cheap labour in Germany and in other European countries.

The members of *Khempag* were interested to know more about these crypto-Armenians, and possibly establish some contacts. One of the members was entrusted to travel to Turkey, particularly to the Kurdish areas and file a report. Listening to detailed descriptions that were brought back it became evident that earlier reports were not fiction. In village after village many old and young people had come forward to tell their stories, that they or their parents were of Armenian

origin, that they had "adopted" Islam, had changed their way of life, their language, and married Turks or Kurds to survive.

Over the past forty years some *Hamshen* Armenians and crypto-Armenians from Kurdish areas and elsewhere in Turkey have migrated to Europe, establishing communities, particularly in Germany. For a variety of complex reasons, which are beyond the scope of this editorial, they, by and large, have remained isolated from mainstream Armenian life. One wonders whether an important contributory element to this isolation has been the unwelcoming attitude of mainstream Armenians themselves. Is it without cause that [Alice Aliye Alt](#), a resident of Germany, who has converted to Christianity and has tried to raise her children as Armenians, and whose artist son has presented an art exposition about the Genocide, recently made unflattering remarks about the absence of a welcoming embrace by Armenian communities?

She stated, "Many of my dearest friends, members of the enlightened 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."

Having witnessed the uncaring attitude of native Armenians of Armenia towards their compatriots after the repatriation in the '40s, the disrespect of Indian-Armenians towards their own relatives who had migrated from Persia to India later in history, the critical approach of established Armenian communities towards newcomers in a variety of countries, it is not unreasonable to think that what Mrs. Alt says corresponds to reality. Armenians like to speak of unity; they write articles; compose songs, and shout at the top of their lungs about unity. Yet, when the opportunity is presented to help re-integrate lost Armenians who yearn to rejoin the Armenian 'family', we fail miserably. That's what the past forty years tell us about the odyssey of the *Hamshenites* and other crypto-Armenians who have settled in Europe.

Will Armenian organizations, cultural and otherwise, come to their senses and help our brethren who are caught in the vise of an identity crisis? Armenians look at secret Armenians as Turks while Turks treat them as *gavoor* Armenians. Their dignity should be respected with utmost care. Their desire to become Armenian again should be welcomed. They are in need of a variety of services, foremost all specialties that deal with rehabilitation. They should not be looked at as "potentials" who can "populate" and inflate the number of membership of this or that organization. The approach should not be utilitarian but humanitarian.

As observed by a Keghart.com reader, "Armenians, particularly in Europe, should provide all kinds of assistance to encourage these "lost" Armenians regain their identity. Armenians in Europe should hold informational meetings for these Islamized Armenians, provide them with books, brochures, speakers. If these Armenians are left to their own devices, their children will become Europeanized

and we would lose them forever. They are specially precious to the Armenian nation because of the lost-and-found aspect and because of their command of European languages, skills and citizenship they can be of great help to the Armenian nation."

