OUR LAST NAME IS GAVOOR

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By **Mark Gavoor**, Glenview IL, 10 September 2009

Our family name is Gavoor. People are always asking me about our name and its origins. These questions come in two forms.

First and foremost, we are Armenian. People that are not Armenian always try to guess what our ethnic heritage is. Most often I am asked, "Is that a Hungarian name?" I know that is coming from the three Gabor sisters, Zsa Zsa, Eva, and the third sister whose name always escapes me though Google informs is Magda. When you say Gabor and Gavoor, they sound the same. Others think the name is Dutch. I have no idea why they think this. Maybe it is the double o's? I am not sure. Then, if the non-Armenian inquirers knew anything at all about Armenians, they add a follow-up question, "I thought most Armenian names ended in 'ian'?"

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Second, inquiries come from Armenians. While I feel I have an Armenian name, the name is not Armenian, technically. It is a Turkish word. But, it is not just any Turkish word. It is indeed the Turkish derogatory word giavur or gâvur in modern Turkish, which means infidel. It used to be Karagiavurian, which is even worse. A karagiavur is a black infidel. It is akin to a Black American having Nigger as a surname. Actually, in Kharpert from where our family is from, the name is pronounced, Kharagiavurian. The "Kh" is a country or rural pronunciation of "K." So, Armenians question why I have such a shocking surname.
I am writing this short piece because of a recent question posed by a new friend Dikran Abrahamian. He was not so much shocked but wondering more so if the name meant what he thought it meant. I gave him my standard answer and he thought it was a story well worth documenting. I already thought I had documented this recently for my cousin David Gavoor, but upon scouring my gmail and hard drive, there was nothing. So, for family, friends, and Dikran, I am writing about it now.

Less so now than when I was younger, the Armenians of my grandparents' generation, that generation that somehow survived the 1915 Genocide, would ask me my name. They wanted to know whose son or grandson I was. I would tell them and see their faces contort from smile to disbelief. In Armenian, they would say, "Giavur, what kind of name is that. Do you know what it means?" When I told them that I knew what it meant, they would then say, "Why do you have such a name? You have to change that." I never really gave a good answer. Usually, I say that if it was good enough for my grandfather, it was good enough for me and I would never change it.

Later, probably from my failed attempts at being a defiant hippie, I actually liked the fact of having non-believer as a last name: Non-believer, not buying in, doubter. I applied it more to the organizational rhetoric created by man than to anything religious. The bottom line was, however, that I was not going to change the name. I am a Gavoor. I am proud of that. If I ever were to change it, I would only consider Gavoorian and even more likely, Kharagiavurian. Of course, that might limit my ability to visit Turkey.

Many Armenians have Turkish surnames. Often these names have to do with the family profession back when last names were being adopted. It must be noted that in that part of the world, the adoption of family names was a relatively recent event. I am guessing with the past 200 years. I know Palandjians (Saddle Makers), Zildjians (Cymbal Makers), Odabashians (Inn Keepers), Kouyumjians (Jewelers), and more. Some Armenians would like to rid our nation of these Turkish rooted surnames. My last name makes these same folks even more agitated.

How did we get this name? How did we become Black Infidels? I asked my Great Uncle Rouben this once. He told me the following. The family was originally from Sepastia (modern day Sivas). The name was originally Eflian (I have no clue as to the meaning of this surname). One day, during the harvest season, the family was working in the fields into the night by the light of bonfires. As it happened, the Sultan and his entourage were either encamped nearby or passing through. The Sultan noticed these bonfires in the distance and was curious about what was going on. He sent an emissary or scout to check out the situation. The scout came back and said, "Armenians are harvesting in the light of these fires." The Sultan then ordered that the leader or eldest of the Armenians be brought to him. Upon being brought to the Sultan, my presumable ancestor was asked, "What are you Armenians up to?" My ancestor responded, "We are working our harvest. We didn't finish in the daylight and as our family motto is 'do not leave today's work for tomorrow,' we are working under the firelight to finish." The Sultan thought a moment and said, "Ah, you giavurs are something else." He reflected another moment and added, "In fact, that shall be your family name, Kharagiavur, from now on." Voila, upon decree of the Sultan we became the Kharagiavur clan or in Armenian Kharagiavuriantz of the Kharagiavurs or sons of the Kharagiavurs. In time, it simply became Kharagiavurian.

Uncle Rouben went on to say that other branches of the family go by Gavoorian and Karian which got mistranslated to Stone thinking that 'Kar' was of the Armenian for stone and not Turkish word for

the color black. Uncle Rouben's brother Sisak had the surname Gavoorian. The Karian branches of the family were in Los Angeles, Fresno, and Paris. I have no idea where I might find the Stones but my guess is that they were more interested in being part of the American melting pot than maintaining and sustaining their Armenian heritage.

Uncle Rouben was the youngest of the children of Mardin and Mariam Kharagiavurian of Keserig, a village of Kharpert. There were three daughters: Markarid, Arshalouys, and Yeghsa. There were also three sons: Aram, Sisak, and Rouben. I knew all of them with the exception of Markarid. I know or knew all of their children born in the US. Arshalouys had been married in Keserig but her husband was killed in the massacres and her daughter was left behind never to have been heard from. Aram and Arshalouys seemed to be the most knowledgeable according to family lore but had passed before I was old enough to seriously discuss any of these kinds of issues with them.

In the early 1990s, I was talking with Arsha's daughters Florence and Grace. We were talking about family history and they were relating stories their mother had told them. I brought up the story of the Sultan and how we came to be Gavoors. Grace, the oldest, said, "That is a story Uncle Rouben used to tell and my mother said that it wasn't true." I was a little disappointed. There are very few stories like this that survived the Genocide. The vast majority of Armenians do not know very much of their family history before the generation of the survivors. So, I let the story go.

Shortly after that, I was at our church, The Armenian Church of the Holy Ascension in Trumbull, CT. During the coffee hour, I was talking with Varoujan Kochian. I always liked Varoujan. He reminded me of that first survivor generation. He was from Yozgat and a sturdy man of the land. He embodied hard work with a humble though proud attitude. Varoujan was about my parents' age. He asked about my last name. I was about to give the standard speech, explain what I have explained here when he offered a story that he had heard. He basically told the same story Uncle Rouben told. Varoujan did not mention the Eflian name, but other than that the story was the same. I was a bit stunned and impressed especially since Yozgat was not near Kharpert and closer to Sebastia. So, maybe Uncle Rouben wasn't so far off. The mathematician in me could ignore one data point, but with two I can establish trend, I can draw a line through two points. I think that this story is definitely legend, but a legend rooted in some truth. I would love to know the name of the Sultan to at least get a time frame on this story.

There are other Kharagavoorians. I corresponded for a short time with a gentleman in Aleppo, Syria. He is a friend of the choirmaster at our church in Glenview, IL. Given our families were rooted in different regions, we concluded we were not related. I asked about the uniqueness of the name to our cousin and noted historian Richard Hovannisian whose mother was a Kharagavoorian and whose family took the Karian name in the US. He said it was more common than I had thought and attributed the Sultan story to lore.

I wonder why my grandfather Aram shortend the name Gavoor? I never got to ask him as he died in

1959 when I was only six and not yet aware of all this. Yet, I know some of his contemporaries from the same village or region took names like Kamar and Karentz. My guess is that as a group they decided to not use the typical 'ian.' I like to think they wanted to be different and, in their own way independent. I like that and think it adds to my own desire to maintain the Gavoor name. My grandfather was pretty well educated having gone to school and even college in Kharpert. He most certainly knew the meaning of the word giavur and selected this one part of the family name as his. I like to believe he did it in defiant pride.

Uncle Rouben is the only Gavoor that I know has visited the Republic of Turkey. I asked him if he had any trouble with the name there. He said the spelling Gavoor versus the modern word gâvur was different enough that no one even suspected.

My sister Nancy's middle name is Carrie, an anglicized version of Kara. My sister Ani went a step further and named her daughter Kara.

As I said, I wear this name proudly and a bit defiantly. After all, it may have been bestowed upon us by a Sultan.

You may wish to visit Mark's Blog at ***http://thissideoffifty.blogspot.com***