RIGHTEOUS TURKS FROM ERAYLI

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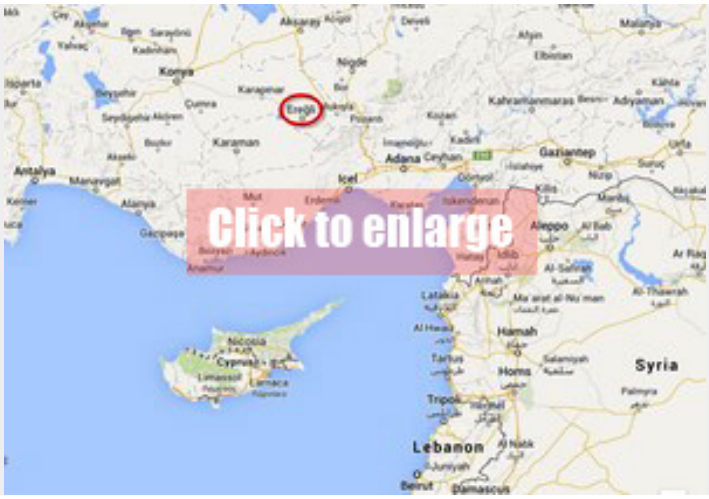

Category: Opinions

Vahe H. Apelian, Ohio, December 2013

Erayli is a name of a town in the province of Konya my late father-in-law would often mention. He was born there in 1915. Thanks to their Turkish friends and business partners, the family continued to live there until his father's untimely death sometime in the early 1920s.

Whenever he would reminisce about his childhood and tell us about Erayli, I would wander if such a humane townspeople existed in Turkey in 1915, let alone in such a town. However, even when I worded the sound of the name in western characters, I still couldn't find any reference to any town in Turkey which remotely sounded similar. For a while I thought of writing to a Turkish consulate to help me locate the town. I don't remember in what context it was that I appealed in a comment to readers of Keghart.com if they knew of such a town. Lo and behold, I got a response. The name turned out to be Ereğli in the province of Konya, as my father-in-law would say. According to Wikipedia Ereğli (formerly Erekli) is a Turkish toponym derived from Ancient Greek Ἡράκλεια (Herakleia), in Latin Heraclea or Heraclia.

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I do not read, write or speak Turkish. It may be that Ereğli is pronounced Erayli, but lingering doubt remained in me that my father-in-law may have forgotten the pronunciation of the town he was born in. However, my doubts dissipated when recently I read Israel Vahan Pilikian's memoir where he mentions the name of a town in Armenian character that sounded exactly the way my father-in-law pronounced Erayli in the province of Konya in Turkey much like my late father-in-law who would almost always refer the two jointly. I have not heard the sound of that name in Armenian from anyone else, nor read about the town in Armenian literature anywhere else.

Israel Vahan recounts that the Pilikian family found their father safe and sound in Erayli and reunited

with him after the family was forcefully separated on their way to their 1915 'golgotha'.

It was a discovery that not only affirmed to me that my father-in-law correctly pronounced the name, it also affirmed to me all the good things he would say about his father's Turkish business partners in that town.

I do not use the words discovery lightly because those few lines in Mr. Pilikian's memoirs were indeed a eureka moment for me. It happened on a plane on our way to celebrate this past Thanksgiving with our son and his family. To kill time, I was reading the memoir I had downloaded in my computer from the PDF file that I had received through Dr. Dikran Abrahamian of Keghart.com. I immediately pointed out the few lines to my wife. After reading those few lines, she said: "Lals yegav" (I almost cried in Armenian).

My father-in-law passed away two decades ago and yet his experiences have left an indelible impression upon us. I think our instinctive reaction to having heard of his birthplace from another Armenian survivor is common occurrence for the descendents of the survivors of the Genocide of the Armenians.

We know the following about my father-in-law. His father's name was Hovsep; his mother's name was Hripsime'. They had named their children Boghos, Mehran--my father-in-law--and their daughter Takouhie. I cannot help it, my eyes got teary as I wrote these names much like they did when I read my father-in-law's obituary in Clifton, New Jersey where he passed away and where he is buried, far from Erayli. Such authentic Armenian names for what must have been a traditional Armenian family living on their ancestral lands for generations and carving a life for themselves by minding their business, attending to their needs, striving to attain the niceties of life, if possible; and securing an honorable standing for themselves in the society they lived.

Upon the death his father and after continuing to live in the town for some time, his mother--seeing that her children were growing up isolated from the rest of the Armenians and speaking only Turkish--moved to Lattakia, Syria in the early or mid-'20s. Her sister was married to an Armenian pharmacist there whose name was Margosian. Their business partners helped the young mother and her three children by escorting the family to Istanbul and boarding them a ship to their destination.

Their family name was Altebarmakian. In Syria they registered as Hovsepian after their father. The registering officer, apparently finding Altebarmakian difficult to write, decided to register them under their father's name severing official ties with their past. In Lattakia my father-in-law had a few years of schooling in the Armenian school. Apparently, the eminent Armenian writer Armen Anoush had taken a liking to the handsome kid with hazel eyes and who only spoke Turkish. Mr. Anoush took upon himself to teach the boy Armenian with the correct pronunciation, my father-in-law would recall.

Years later, my father-in-law would continue telling us, that they received unexpected guests in the

persons of his father's Turkish business partners and friends. It turned out that their Turkish family friends, having lost contact with them had embarked on a journey in search of the family. They had undertaken the search for a reunion of the families for old times sake. That is why I have carved a place of affection in my heart to a town named Erayli in the province of Konya in Turkey.