

THE ARMENIAN ISLAMIC TRIBE – PART I

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Kevork George Apelian, 5 May 2011

Translated and abridged by Vahe H. Apelian

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Once in a while, along the road, we see young girls who are walking in the barren vast expanse. -'Don't they go to school, asks Annie?' Annie is my niece. We are travelling in her husband's- Tom's – car. My wife also is accompanying me.

-'Of course they go. However, after school they work in the fields to pull the plants and collect the lentil and the beans', replies the doctor.

The comfort in the car contrasts sharply with the scorching desert of this inhospitable terrain. Through these vast expanses almost a century ago my compatriots walked. Hungry, thirsty, bare-footed and emaciated, how did they manage to walk? Those who were massacred in Ras al Ein were done for, the survivors were herded to out far to Der Zor for their final reckoning. How fortunate are the girls we see outside every now and then gathering lentil or bean. They at least have shoes and are not starving and are not emaciated.

We pass through large and small villages.

-'Here in this village there are also Kurdified Armenians', notes Dr. Garo.

What is there to say or do? What Armenian in these places, isolated from the rest of the world, almost forgotten? I wonder. Their forbearers were forced to abandon their beautiful country and settle here. Of course the Armenian settlers here were fortunate. Others had not the opportunity to remain alive.

-'This is the Amouda village or city like settlement. There are a number of Armenians here as well', says Garo.

After driving for a considerable period of time we arrive Ras al Ein. We have been told that there is a noted restaurant here, Restaurant Serop. I had been in touch with the man and I was told that he has interesting stories to tell about his father. The man had not volunteered to tell us. We also had neither the heart nor the time to dine. We headed Dr. Garo's nephew, Mohammad (Mehran) Mahmoud's house.

The tall statured Mahmoud invited us in. The foreign car had aroused the interest not only of the neighbors and the lads on the streets, but also of the surrounding at large. The host had assured everyone that we were not harmful people. We stepped in, into a long and large hall with twin divisions. The "eastern" side was furnished with pillows and cushions and the "western" side was furnished with armchairs. Hardly had we stepped in we noted, to our great surprise, a wooden bust of King Trdat, an Armenian tricolor scarf, and few other Armenian pictures. What are these artifacts doing in Kurdified Hovhannes Hekimian's son - Mahmood's - guest room, I wonder.

There is a bit of a dismissive smile on Mahmood's face, at the site of our puzzlement.

- 'Our blood is Armenian blood', he emphasizes.

He wants to know the purpose of our visit. His nephew, Dr. Garo, had already explained to him. However, he wanted to hear from us. I explain. He shakes his head.

- 'I am glad you came, for no one is interested in us. Not the government of Armenia or the Armenian Church. We are people who live on social margin. The Armenians do not accept us, nor do the Kurds. We applied to the Government of Armenia, but nothing happened. You have come out of interest in us, we are thankful.'

I gift him a copy of my book's, titled "Martyrdom for Life", Arabic translation.

- 'This is our Salman Derbo!' – exclaims Mohammd Mahmood.

- 'Do you know him?' I ask.

- 'Of course. His son lives here' clarifies Mohammad.

He arranges to call a neighbor's wife who enters the room and sees the book's cover and is totally amazed.

- 'This', she says pointing to the picture on the book's cover, 'is my grandfather, Salman Drbo. Each and every home of our extended family has this picture hanging on a wall.'

Her father, Khalaf is away. He is the son of Hadjentsi born Aram Keklikian, turned Bedouin Chief named Salman Drbo who is a cousin of the famed Armenian American orthopedic doctor who treated a young soldier named Robert Dole. I autograph and gift a copy of the book to give to Aram's, that is to say Salman Drbo's son, Khalaf, and hand the book to his daughter. She is very happy. She stays with us throughout our visit. It is evident that she is pretty liberal minded. She

-‘Ya Mahmood’ I say, ‘we have come to gather information about people like you. What do you have to tell us about your father?’

-‘Whatever I know, I will tell you, says Mohammad Mahmood. My father, Hovhannes Hekimian, was from Geghetsi village of Moush. He was born in 1908. We were told that he had two brothers, named Anto and Avedis. He had two sisters, Srpouhie and Azniv. My father was forced out of Moush and was brought here where he remained. He was a kid in those days. He was named Ebrahem and settled in Meyrkez where he married a Kurdish woman named Khamsa. They have four daughters and four sons. I am the eldest of them. My brothers live in this area. I will take you to our village Meyrkez. I came and settled in Ras al Ein to educate my sons. There is no school in Meyrkez.

-‘Mahmood, how many children do you have? I ask

-‘I have 5 sons’, replies Mahmood. ‘Thank Allah. The eldest is Ebrahem or Apraham. He left the area and went to Europe and settled in Holland. He converted to Christianity there. The whole family was baptized. The names of his sons, my grandsons, are Sevag and Daron. Hence he cannot come to these areas any more. You know, he became a Christian.’

‘My other son is Emir. He has four beautiful daughters. The third is Akram. We call the fourth Ayden. However, he is Vrej. My last son is Arman, that is to say Armen. He serves the Syrian army for his compulsory military service.’



Part of Mahmood's extended family

The daughters of his son Emir enter. Indeed, the grandfather has every reason to boast of their beauty. They are well-dressed attractive girls.

-‘Ya brother George, says Mahmood, you do not ask their names. I will tell you. The elder is Nanor, the second is Nairi, the third Armine’, and the fourth if Menar. Beautiful, aren't they? I mean to say the names.

My companions and I remain speechless at the sight of such beauty and such authentic Armenian names in this part of the world and in such a family. These girls are the granddaughters of Mshetsi Hovhannes Hekimian. They are born and raised in Ras al Ein. They bear the brunt of the consequences of the Genocide perpetrated against their race 94 years ago. In spite of their beautiful names, what will eventually become of them? I wonder.

-‘My daughter is also named Menar’, explains Dr. Garo. ‘It is a name used in Armenia. My Armenia born and raised wife named her.’

-‘I congratulate you Emir’, I say, and add ‘May God guard your daughters. You have given them such

-‘We are also Armenians’, says Emir. ‘I wanted to learn our Armenian language. I had textbooks brought from Beirut. However, without help I could not learn the language.’

Emir then shows me his cell phone as if to certify that being an Armenian is not an abstract thing for him. There are such Armenian pictures that only a zealous Armenian would carry. They include pictures of the Tricolor, Lisbon 5 and of Armenian emblems.

-‘Akh George, you did not ask me about my wife’, reminds me Mahmood. ‘She is also an Armenian daughter.’

To be continued

