

TURKEY'S INVISIBLE ARMENIAN HEROES

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✘ Keghart.com Editorial Board, 30 March 2012

These days there are scores of Turkish cultural festivals across North America, from Montreal to Monterey, from Seattle to Santa Fe, to New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Miami, Houston and Dallas. These folk festivals, culinary events, architectural, film, music and literary events are not restricted to major cities: Jacksonville in Florida, Charlotte in North Carolina, fourth-tier cities of South Dakota and Maine are also hosting the costly gatherings.

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The campaigns are an exercise in cultural diplomacy. Often presented by North American Turkish communities, they are in fact mostly initiated, organized, sponsored and funded by Ankara and Turkish government-owned or allied corporations. Their main intention is to project a positive image of Turkey and Turks. This soft diplomacy is hoped to balance the negative image of the country where minorities are persecuted (even killed in the case of Kurds), the media is chained (Turkey has more journalists in jail than any country), the genocide of Armenians is denied and so is the genocide of Assyrians and Pontic Greeks.

There's no way to measure the effectiveness of these clever marketing, advertising, public relations campaigns. However, we are certain of one thing: they would have erased from their programs Armenian contributions to the Ottoman Empire and to the Republic of Turkey. Armenians are non-existent in the culture and heritage of the country, according to the Ankara-sanctioned narrative. And when in the unlikely instance a prominent Armenian is mentioned, say, Sinan, he will be identified as a Turk or the son of a Christian, but never as an Armenian.

These cultural events will not mention that Turkey's first woman pilot, Sabiha Geokje, was a genocide survivor whose real name was Khatoon Sebiljian. And certainly they will not mention that the Turkish writer who revealed Khatoon's ancestry was unanimously vilified in Turkey. Perhaps the writer has committed the crime of insulting Turkishness.

They will not mention that Hagop Martayan organized Turkey's European-based alphabet and consolidated its grammar.

They will not mention that the first Turkish operetta—"Arif"—was composed by Dikran Tchoukhadjian

and that the operetta was first performed at Theatre Ottoman (founded by Gullu Agop) in December 1872. Tchoukhadjian wrote three more Turkish operettas in 1873, '75, and '90.

They will not mention the architectural dynasty of Balian and that for generations the family was responsible for the building of palaces, mosques and major government buildings. Dolma Bahce Palace is one of the many palaces the Balian built.

They will not mention that the first Turkish language novel—"Akabi Hikayesi"—was written by an Armenian called Vartan. Although in Turkish, it was written in Armenian alphabet.

They will not mention that the first Western-style Ottoman theatre was opened by Arousiak Papazian, who also organized the first Eastern musical. The orchestra was that of Grigor Sinanian.

They will not mention that Haroutune Sinanian wrote the Young Turks anthem and Edgar Manos arranged the "Hymn of Independence" for the Republic of Turkey. Manos was also the founder of the first all-female choir in the empire.

They will not mention that that the founder of the feminist movement in Turkey was Haiganoush Mark.

They will not mention that the first Turkish etymological dictionary was written by Petros Kerestejian. He also translated Karl Marx's "Communist Manifesto".

They will not mention that the first satirical monthly in the Ottoman Empire was established by Hovsep Vartanian (1852).

They will not mention that the Duzian family managed the mint during the mid-1890s.

They will not mention that the Dadyans were the only manufacturers of gunpowder for the empire.

They will not mention that the first printing house (1759) was established by Armen Markos in Izmir. Another Armenian, educated in Venice, established the first Armenian press in the country in 1567 at the St. Nicholas Church in Yenikapi, Constantinople.

They will not mention that Berj Kerstechyan, the vice-president of Turkish Red Crescent, saved Ataturk's life and provided him with funds to battle his enemies from 1919-22.

When talking about music, they will not mention Komidas Vartabed whom the Turks tortured and drove into insanity. Neither will they mention legal giant Krikor Zohrab whom they killed during the genocide.

They will not mention that actress Irma Felekyan (Cem Karacash's mother), actors Nubar Terziyan, Sami Hazines, Kirkor Cezveciyan, musicians Onno Tunc Bayaciayan (died in a plane crash in 1996) and Garo Mafyan, and novelist Migirdich Margosyan and film critic Alin Tasciyan are Armenian.

The above list of prominent Armenians in Turkey is by no means inclusive. There are countless other

~~Armenians who contributed to the empire and to the republic.~~

Turkey, which has centuries of experience in kidnapping Christian children and in the forced Turkification of Christians, doesn't consider identity theft and identity falsification a challenge. Erasing gavor Armenians from the history of Anatolia is a breeze for these expert censors, deleters and falsifiers. After all, it's still an insult to be called Armenian in Turkey. Typically, when a Turkish politician wants to hurt his rival, one of his first choice of ammunition is to brand the opponent an Armenian. Bearing the above mindset no Turk or Turkish organization in North America would dare provide inkling about the huge Armenian contribution to the Ottoman Empire and to the Republic of Turkey. We are also not including prominent Turkish citizens who hide their Armenian ancestry out of fear of harassment in the democratic, liberated, tolerant, modern Turkey which boasts Western values and is a "bridge between enlightened Europe and backward Middle East." As the North American slang goes: "Tell me another one."

