

THE AWAKENING OF THE CONVERTED ARMENIANS:
Notes of an Investigative Journalist
1980-2011

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In September 1980, when a military coup d'état took place in Turkey led by Kenan Evren, head of a fascist junta, thousands of progressive and left-wing activists fled to Syria and Lebanon to escape mass arrests and hanging. Some of them, being skillful revolutionaries and professional combatants, joined the ranks of the Palestinian revolutionary organizations. As a reporter, I built close relations with *Devrimci Sol* (Revolutionary Left), *Devrimci Yol* (Revolutionary Path), *Partizan Yol* (Guerilla Path), *Türkiye Komünist Partisi Lenincileri* (Communist Party of Turkey – Leninists), *THKP Acilciler* and *TİKKO-Türkiye İşçi Köylü Komünist Partisi* (Popular Party of Turkey and Workers and Peasants Communist Party of Turkey), *P.K.K.* (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and some other organizations, many members of which were converted, Kurdified and Turkified Armenians. Also their ranks later included people that struggled for recognition of the Armenian Genocide, such as Tamer Akçam, Hrant Dink, Mihraç Ural, Abdullah Ocalan (“Apo”), Erkin Erkiner, Aram Tigran and many others.

Since the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 our most significant meetings took place in 1999 in Frankfurt and Wiesbaden, Germany with Hamsheni Armenians and Kurdified Alevi Armenians. Aliye Alice Alt, her brother Sadet Bostan – Tigran Kostanyan and her son Deniz Alt, Turkish-

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speaking and Islamized Armenians who were later baptized as Christians, were the relatives of Mesut Yılmaz, the former Prime Minister of Turkey. Alice Alt's diploma thesis-book "Hamsheni Armenians in the Mirror of History" has been translated from German to Greek by Yorgo Andreadis and to Turkish language by Ragip Zarakolu. Nureddin Gürman, one of the Hamsheni Armenians of Germany, has been quite active in undertaking various endeavors. All these meetings resulted in number of article series that familiarized the readership in both Diaspora and Mother Homeland with some of the true leaders of the lost Armenians who were able to spark off a sudden awakening among hundreds of their kinfolks after years of silence.

There were also quite noteworthy meetings, interviews and filming with the eastern, Armenian-speaking segment of Hamsheni Armenians in Federtsovka village, 1250 km south-east of Moscow. The children and grandchildren of Akboyukov (Jermakian), Karaibrahimov, Shabanoglu and other families that were previously deported to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan by Stalin and Beria, lived in hardship in this area of Russia and despite being fluent in the Hamsheni Armenian dialect often did not know that they are not only Hamshenis, but also Armenians. Some of them, like Ruslan Karabajakov, leader of Hamsheni Armenians in Kyrgyzstan, visited Armenia and Artsakh and expressed a wish to resettle in the lands of the liberated homeland after so many years of exile. Our continued joint efforts in this direction together with young people from Moscow's Hamsheni Union, such as Gevork Mkhitaryan, Garik Garanyan, Ashot Dudukjyan are kindly supported.

In Germany, invaluable information and material for photographs and films about Alevi and Sunni converted Armenians were provided by Simon (Sedat) Goenden from Mush-Gundemira region of Western Armenia along with his brother Arman and relative Orhan, as well as by gray-haired but always brave Daniel and his son Hagop who went through great suffering on their way from Varto to Hassakeh to Wiesbaden. They all were re-baptized

into Christianity and maintained close relations with thousands of Armenians in the Turkish-conquered part of Armenia. Simon's father, Hussein Goenden, visited Yerevan in 2007 and brought a handful of sacred soil of Taron from Knar village of Sassoun to the grave of late Armenian Prime Minister Andranik Margaryan, whose family was originally from Mush and Sassoun. Meanwhile, Armen (Martirosian) from Mush has been guiding numerous visiting Diaspora Armenians through Western Armenia. It has to be mentioned that Samuel Felekian (Ali Ihsan), a former PKK freedom fighter has returned to liberated Armenia after spending decades in Turkish jails as a political prisoner. He now serves a linking bridge between the converted Armenians of Turkey and Germany and the Mother Homeland.

Recently, in Wiesbaden I attended the wedding of Alan Goenden, an Alevi from Varto and an woman of Armenian descent who was a great-granddaughter of Seyid Riza, a hero martyred during the Dersim Rebellion of Zazas in 1938. The groomsman at the wedding with 1500 guests was Dikran (Shahin Menderes) Chatinkaya, a Sunni Kurdified Armenian who was re-baptized into Christianity and in 2000 successfully sued the Turkish government to return his Armenian Christian identity in his passport.

Our meeting and strengthening friendship with the great Zaza singer and musician Mikail Aslan and Cemil Koçgiri that was made possible through Zafer Küçük, a Kizilbash of Armenian descent, helped uncover previously unknown and concealed tragedies, which occurred during the 1915 Armenian Genocide. The martyred Zaza hero Seyid Riza had then saved thousands of Armenian orphans, which was one of the main reasons why he was hanged as a rebel in 1938 by the Kemal Atatürk - Ismet İnönü tyrant regime. According to Munzur Chem, a Zaza historian whose consanguine sister is Armenian, a great number of millennia-old Armenian manuscripts and bibles were confiscated and destroyed in Seyid Riza's house. The existence of ample Armenian vocabulary, traditions, festivities in the culture of Zazas in Dersim (named

after Der Simon, an Armenian priest) has been attested in the works of Mesut Keskin (Goethe University of Frankfurt), Nadire Göktaş (Ankara University), Annika Törne (Bochum, Germany) and especially in Mikail Aslan's famous album "Petag", which presents centuries-old Armenian songs of Dersim sung also in Zazaki and Turkish languages (using the archives of Mihran Tumajyan who was a student of great Komitas, as well as with the help of Akunq Ensemble).

With all this information in mind, in summary the converted Armenians can be categorized in the following groups:

1. Muslim and Christian Hamsheni Armenians. Those converted to Islam live in Turkey (Western Armenia) in the areas around the historical fortress-town Hamamashen built by Prince Hamam Amatuni, Trebizond, Khotorjur, Kajkar, Rize, as well as in Voronezh, Rostov, Federtsovka, Osh, Chirkino and other settlements in Georgia, Russia, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The Christian Hamsheni Armenians live mainly in Moscow, Sochi, Krasnodar, Gagra and settlements in Abkhazia; they are the descendants of the Hamsheni Armenians who fled from Western Armenia to escape Turkish persecution. Currently there are many Hamsheni Armenians in Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Canada and the USA, who maintain contacts with their compatriots. There are many Internet websites and *Facebook* groups for everyday communication that help awaken the Hamsheni Armenians. In this regard it is worth mentioning the academic research implemented in this field by Hamsheni studies scholars S. Vardanyan and H. Alvrtsyan, poet Y. Vayıç, R. Safrastyan and R. Melkonyan. Great work has been accomplished, particularly through the "Hamshen" illustrated magazine, by the members of Christian Hamsheni Armenian Union and its youth organization in Moscow, such as Sergey Galinjyan and Ashot Dudukjyan.

2. *Alevi and Sunni Armenians, currently Zaza and Kizilbash, Kurdified and of Zoroastrian stock.* They live mostly in Sassoun, Mush, Varto, Gundemira, Dersim, Batman, Erzerum regions. A few thousand of them reside in cities and towns of Germany, Netherlands, Belgium and Sweden. Their actual number increases daily thanks to the Internet websites, *Facebook* connections, conferences and new studies. Aram Ateshian, Vicar of the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople, and Archbishop Karekin Bekjian, Primate of the Diocese of Germany, have made statements many times in mass media about the existence of thousands of crypto-Armenians. After the identity of these people was confirmed, many of them received Christian baptism in Constantinople, Cologne, Hanau, Wiesbaden, Frankfurt, etc.

There is a significant number of Zaza and Kizilbash Zoroastrian Armenians in Dersim and Western Europe. They represent a new and powerful force with well-developed leadership and have joined efforts with their Zaza and Kurdish brethren for recognition of the Dersim genocide and struggle for independence. They have established unions and created websites, they organize cultural events and music concerts in Dersim and elsewhere in Western Armenia, attended by many Armenian and foreign dignitaries and leaders.

3. *Both Islamized and Christian Armenians who had become Arabs and Assyrians,* and long before the Armenian Genocide, in the age of the Cilicia Kingdom played important roles in the Assassins religious/revolutionary movement, and even as supreme rulers of the Mamluk Empire, such as Malik al-Afdal, Shajarat al-Durr, Lulu and others.

However, focusing on the days of the Armenian Genocide, thousands of orphans were saved by Arab tribes and most of them were handed over to Armenian or Armenophile collectors of orphans. Raised in the orphanages of Lebanon, Syria and newly independent Armenia, they later became the cream of the crop of the new Armenian generation. Yet many remained and

were Arabized, some others were Assyrianized, although maintaining their Armenian identity. There are many articles, photographs and films about them. Several years ago chief sheikhs of some Syrian Arab tribes visited Yerevan and told about many Armenians, who converted to Islam but maintained their identity. Sometimes they met with their re-found relatives coming from countries far away, causing very emotional moments.

The struggle for return to Armeniency carries on. The dawn of overall awakening movement approaches.

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