

Hamshen week will help understand who we are, how many we are, and what kind of people we are



The most exciting event of the cultural week dedicated to Hamshen Armenians that started on July 21 in Yerevan was the concerts of the Vova Hamshen ensemble invited from Turkey.

The first concert of the Vova (this name is translated as "Who is?") Hamshen ethnographic ensemble took place in the Naregatsi Art Institute. Everything seemed unusual at first. They were singing in Armenian, but in an unknown dialect. Then suddenly the sound of bagpipe was heard. The hall was filled with applaud. A new kind of Armenian song was discovered in Yerevan.

A happy mood was felt among those gathered, many were excited. Sergey Vardanian, a well-known specialist of Hamshen studies in Armenia, highly evaluated the idea of such an event. In his opinion, today Armenians do not know themselves, and the Hamshen Week will help understand better "who we are, how many we are, and what kind of people we are."

Film director Tigran Khzmalian confessed that he is too excited. "I think it is an historic event," he said. "I was astonished to learn that the Hamshen ensemble has arrived in Armenia. In my opinion, now we are entering an era, when we start uniting on the basis of national solidarity."

A historic review. Hamshen or Hemshin Armenians are those who settled at the southeastern coast of the Black Sea. According to the accepted opinion, escaping Arab violence, lords Hamam and Shapuh Amatuni transmigrated there from Vaspurakan with thousands of migrants in the 8th century.

Later an Armenian semi-independent power was established there, which by the name of its founder lord Hamam was named Hamamshen. The name changed in some time and became Hamshen. In 1489 Hamamshen was occupied by Turks and went to ruin.

Today Hamshen Armenians can be conditionally divide into two large groups. The first group includes Christian Hamshen Armenians who settled at the Black Sea's Abkhazian and Russian



coast. And the representatives of the second group mainly live at the Pontian coast of Turkey and profess Islam. The latter, in difference to Christian Hamshen Armenians, have never kept in touch with Armenia. Moreover, many of them are convinced up to the present that they are not Armenians.

In modern Turkey Hamshen Armenians were first spoken about after the 1990s. Before that even Hamshen Armenians themselves preferred to keep silence about their origin. The Armenians of Hamshen arriving in Armenia within the framework of the Yerevan cultural week confessed that they learnt about their origin already at a very mature age.

For instance, Istanbul-based Hamshen Armenian Mahir Ozkan told in his talk with us that he first read about his Armenian roots in a book. And Hikmed Akcicek, the founder and the soloist of the Vova ensemble, confessed that he was already 15 years old when he was told who indeed Hamshen Armenians are.

However, it did not hinder him in the future to collect Hamshen songs, to found an ethnographic ensemble, and to present the unique melodies of Hamshen to the world.

Nevertheless, not all members of the Vova ensemble are Hamshen Armenians. There are also Laz, and the drummer is Hogr Gyoregen Kurdish by nationality. In response to the question of what made the Kurdish drummer become a member of the Armenian ethnographic ensemble, Gyoregen said: "We help each other. Today singing in Kurdish in Turkey is, to put it mildly, a difficult matter. And Hamshen Armenians have no such problem, their language, for some reason, is considered a Turkish dialect. Therefore, if I cannot sing my national song, I can even help other national minorities keep their culture."

Hikmed Akcicek was very much inspired with the Yerevan success of his ensemble. However, it was more noteworthy what he said about his impressions from Armenia's capital: "When we entered the city, it seemed to me that I had never left it. I am at home."

