

## **A Different Tradition: Hamshen Armenians struggle for identity and recognition**

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They seem like a lost branch of the family, dispersed throughout the world long before the Genocide of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey that created today's Diaspora of seven million.

The Hamshen Armenians (Hamshentsi) are descendants of Armenians from the region of Hamshen, now in Turkey.



JULIA HAKOBYAN/ARMENIANOW.COM

Sergey Vardanyan says: “Armenia should encourage a national gathering and bring together Armenians around the world to preserve it as a nation”.

Founded in the 8th Century by the Armenian princes Hamam and Shapuh Amatuni, Hamshen (first called Tambur then Hamamashen) was captured by the Ottoman Empire in 1489. By the 18th Century part of the Hamshen Armenians had been forcibly converted to Islam, while the majority escaped to maintain the survival of their Christian faith.

Some historians call the Hamshentsi a unique Armenian group since it contains both Christians and Muslims. While some Christian Hamshens do not know Armenian, some among the Islamized Hamshentsi speak a dialect of Armenian as their native language.

Both Muslim and Christian Hamshentsi live in Russia, Georgia, Turkey, Armenia and Central Asia. Some historians estimate that there are several hundred thousand Hamshen Armenians in the world, while others speak of several thousands.

Sergei Vardanyan, a historian and journalist who is vice-chairman of the “Hamshen” charitable-compatriotic organization in Yerevan, says there is no way to know exactly how many Hamshen Armenians there are.

“The study of Hamshen Armenians should not proceed from the desire to create a

sensation by publishing some fabulous data about a million new Armenians. My research shows that in some Hamshen families people themselves did not know whether they are Hamshentsi or not. ”

Vardanyan’s research over many years shows that at least some 20-30,000 Hamshentsi Muslims who speak Armenian live in Turkey as well as some 100-200,000 Hamshentsi Turkish speakers. In Armenia, several years ago were some 10,000 Christian Hamshentsi.

“Both Christian and Islamized Hamshentsi now have a common problem - preserving their national identity, since they know their history only at the level of folklore. While Hamshentsi in the former Soviet republics states know something of the history of Armenia, in Turkey they have no access to this.”

Hamshentsi Armenians form the majority of the Armenian population in the Krasnodar territory of Russia. Many settled also in Abkhazia. By the middle of the 20th century Armenians had founded some 140 Armenian schools in Krasnodar and 128 Armenian schools in Abkhazia. However, the national schools declined during the Brezhnev era and they were many fewer by early 1980s.

In 1944, on the orders of Josef Stalin, Islamized Hamshen Armenians who had settled in six villages in southern Adjara near the border with Turkey were expelled to Central Asia. Forty years later when Vardanyan was searching for Hamshen Armenians in Central Asia, he met some of the survivors.

Most of the 3,000 Islamized Hamshen Armenians he saw were blue-eyed and blond. Some said that they did not know their nationality – their passports stated “Hemshil” or “Turkish”.

Vardanyan recalls that when a group of Hamshentsi decided to introduce him to their mullah Khemdi, they told him that the visitor claimed that they were Armenian. The mullah replied: “That’s true.”



SERGEY VARDANYAN

“My language says that I am an Armenian,” said mullah Khemdi.

“How do you know?” the residents asked.

“My language tells me,” replied the mullah, explaining that they all spoke the Hamshen dialect of Armenian. Khemdi also said that he had a copy of the Koran in which someone had written by hand that the Armenian Christians had become Muslims.

Vardanyan says that there are dozens of stories like that, demonstrating that each generation of Islamized Armenians knows less and less about their origins. In 1984, Vardanyan made an effort to resettle one of the derelict villages in Lori with 150 families of Christian Hamshentsi from Krasnodar and Abkhazia and Islamized Hamshentsi from Central Asia.

However, the program was not realized, partly because of official apprehension of conflicts between Armenians. Vardanyan says he is very disappointed at the indifference of the authorities towards issues of settlement and migration.

“Some say that Armenian society is not ready to accept Islamized Armenians, but I am not sure this is the only point. Armenia’s citizens were not happy to accept the refugees from Azerbaijan, Christian Armenians, either. Instead of creating opportunities to attract as many Armenians as possible, it seems that the authorities do the opposite and create conditions that make people leave the country.”

Vardanyan is the author of several books on Armenian history and Editor in Chief of “Hamshen Voice” newspaper. It is published in Yerevan once a month with support from private donations and the 1,000 free copies are circulated in Abkhazia, Krasnodar, Beirut, the United States and Turkey.

Vardanyan says the newspaper is an attempt to create a tie between Hamshen Armenians and their roots. It is popular not just among Hamshen Armenians, since the articles refer to the history, culture and traditions of Armenians generally.

Vardanyan says people often wonder why he spends so much effort on this one group of Armenians and ask whether he himself is Hamshentsi. He says he does it from a sense of national duty, since he does not believe that the Hamshen Armenians will succeed in keeping their identity without help.

“I feel responsibility towards the Hamshentsi simply because I am Armenian. With the help of the law on dual citizenship or any other law, Armenia should encourage a national gathering and bring together Armenians around the world to preserve it as a nation with good prospects for the future.”

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