

"ARMENIAN ORIGIN OF HAMSHENS SEEMS MORE PROBABLE TO ME"

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In July of the current year, within the framework of "Hamshen week" in Yerevan took place the concert of "Vova" concert group. The group has been set up with the effort of a number of Hamshens. Since 1996 they have been gathering Hamshen national songs and tunes, which in most of the cases have no names. As one of the group leaders Hikmek Akchicheq mentions, they are very much worried that in the quickly changing world a serious danger can be exposed both to the Hamshen dialect and the songs in this dialect, and they have an objective to gather, arrange and hand on the generations to come Hamshen unique tunes and songs.

If we take into consideration Turkey's scrupulous approach to ethnic problems, than the visit of this company to Armenia may be considered quite a brave step. In Yerevan after the concert and conference devoted to Hamshen Armenians we conversed with Hikmet Akchicheq about some problems concerning to Hamshen Armenians inhabited in Turkey. I'll mention that music is Hikmet's hobby: he comes from Hopa, however, he lives and works in Istanbul. Besides, Hikmet is the member of socialistic party "Freedom and Solidarity," he is also engaged in politics. His cagy and diplomatic replies in the interview may be reasoned by the above mentioned circumstances.

R.M.

Question: It is known that there are different standpoint on the origin of Hamshen Armenians: many people think that Hamshens have Armenian origin, and the others ascribe to them Turkish origin. I'd like to know your opinion on the matter.

Reply: I'm not a historian and I learn about historical facts from different sources. However, should one ratiocinate, than Armenian origin of Hamshens seems more creditable to me. It goes without saying that following my political convictions I'm not proud of my national belonging and I'm not ashamed of it. There is no difference for me what is my origin - Armenian, Turkish or Arabic. I'll also mention that that there are young Hamshens, in particular, carriers of socialistic ideas, who don't conceal their Armenian origin, and among them there are even some who are pleased with it. There are young Hamshens with opposition views who consider their Armenian origin to be the manifestation of their opposition origin.

However, I don't think so and I don't consider that my being Hamshen must make me oppositionist.

Question: Does it mean that there are people among the Hamshen youth that openly confess of their being Hamshen?

Reply: I rather want to say that the ones who find out their Armenian origin are not warred as they don't look at the world from the standpoint of national belonging. Besides, there are people who consider the Armenian origin of Hamshens to be true.

Question: As a specialist of Turkish philology I know that in Turkey it has always been carried out persecution policy to national minorities and concealment of ethnic belonging may be connected with this circumstance.

Reply: Just like in many states in Turkey as well there is not a policy encouraging research conducting in connection with ethnic belonging of people, developing any activity on this ground.

Question: Do you speak among yourselves in your families about your Armenian origin?

Reply: Yes we do, as Hamshens and Lazes in Hopa and Georgians in Borchka live together, people and nations have common memories and stereotypes connected with one another and the past. For example, for the Hamshens of these districts it is very common the expression "stubborn Armenian." I remember that in my childhood when we were quarreling or fighting with our neighborhood children they were calling us "Armenians" and running away. Perhaps, they heard the conversations about Hamshens' Armenian origin from their parents. As Armenians were perceived under the category of rival nations, the Hamshen-child taking offence of the word "Armenian," ran away with tears in his eyes and asked his parents if he was really Armenian. Later on, I suppose when I was a student (in the beginning of 1980s), I had quite a lot of information about the probability of our Armenian origin so I asked my uncle about it. He answered, "My son, they say that our ancestors had been apostate Armenians."

Question: I've earlier heard from the very Hamshens that religion doesn't have such influence on you, that's to say, you don't follow all the principles of Islam. As an example it is mentioned using of alcoholic drinks, seldom attendance of mosques etc. They say that it is possibly connected with leftist ideas adhered by most of the Hamshens.

Reply: No, it has nothing connected with leftist ideas. I supposed in spite of the fact that Hamshens are not very much educated, they have taken the way of reasonable Islam, and most of them don't have fanatic inclination to religion. For example, Hamshens may drink by day and pray in the evening or vice versa. In the period of Ramadan they fast, go to pray, however, two days later they may eat and have a good drink.

Question: How do you appreciate the condition of the "Hamshen" language, or more exactly the Hamshen dialect of the Armenian language?

Reply: The Hamshen language is at the edge of extermination, and it is more connected with globalization, growth in the number of urban population than with Turkey's policy. The usage of the language becomes more and rarer especially among the city inhabitants. The young women first of all teach their children Turkish and not the Hamshen language for their children not to undergo any language discrimination and not to have any problems. For example, at present I live in Istanbul, my wife is not Hamshen, and it is hardly possible for the two of my daughters to learn the Hamshen language.

In reality it is very difficult, and besides, there is not the natural surrounding making people learn this language, and this and not the other things is the real danger. That's to say such preconditions play more important role in the matter of losing the language than state policy.

Besides, such a state policy is not new, it was also carried out in the Ottoman epoch. I want to say, I ascribe such a policy not only to Turkey: It is adherent to all the nation states.

Question: From different sources it is known that, for example, the apostate Armenians of Turkey and their generations have preserved the tradition of inter-community marriages. Is this tradition preserved among Hamshens or is it also lost?

Reply: Let's say so: It is hardly possible for a Hamshen inhabited in Hopa to marry a non-Hamshen. There, Hamshens mainly marry Hamshens, Lazese marry Lazese, Georgians - with Georgians. However, as it has already been told, city inhabitants and the ones living in big settlements in other surroundings don't always follow this tradition.

Question: Have there been preserved Christian customs and ceremonies among the Hamshens in Turkey?

Reply: To tell the truth I can't say which of the traditions or holidays has Christian grounding, but I'll say that we, the Hamshens

of Hopa, have been brought up on the basis of Islamic culture and we follow it.

However, there is such a peculiarity: the Hamshens of Hopa have preserved the language but they don't hold to traditions, which is very strange.

But in comparison with them in Rez and in the district of Chamlhenshin (where the language is not preserved - P.M.) are particularly very common nation games, a number of traditions, for example, Vardavar and others.

Question: Much interest has been shown in both Hamshens and other Islamized citizens of Turkey - Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians recently, and besides some political speculations have begun. What do you think of it?

Reply: It goes without saying that revelation of various historic events and human tragedies is very interesting and exerts certain influence on people.

For example, in Anatolia one can find hundreds and thousands of stories which are alike the book by Fethiye Cetin. And it is necessary to make a ground for us to be able to speak about it. I think that an important step towards it is Turkey's democratization. However, it is also true that in any other country such historians and their revelations worry the carriers of narrow national ideas. I think that such subjects are to be far from political speculation; they can not do anybody good.

Question: If we take cultural, language and other commonalities between Armenians and Hamshens as a starting point how you think the future relations between the Armenians in Armenia and Hamshens should be?

Reply: We live in the same geographical zone. I can't treat you like strangers such as Englishmen and Germans. Our feelings and standpoints are quite common. More than the relations between Armenians and Hamshens I want a dialogue and multilateral good neighborly relations to be established between Armenia and Turkey.

The interview was conducted by Ruben Melkonyan