

CONVERTED HAMSHENI ARMENIANS: MUTUAL ACQUAINTANCE

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Today, at the end of 2011, when just several months are left before celebrations start for the 500th anniversary of the Armenian book printing, when hundreds of newspapers and magazines are published in Armenia and all over the world in Armenian language, it is hard to believe that we, Armenians, a nation with 1600 years old writing and literature do not fully know ourselves. Even 130 years ago the *Meghu Hayastani* newspaper published in Tiflis staged a discussion whether Protestant or Catholic Armenians could be considered Armenians or not. In 1880 the celebrated writer Raffi wrote in “Mshak” (# 121): “Neither Catholicism, nor Protestantism, nor even Islam cause the Armenian to cease being an Armenian”. However, the words of the great writer did not become an accepted view; such disputes and controversies in Armenia and Diaspora have ruined many lives and even resulted in bloodshed. Today, perhaps many will answer with a smile that both Catholic and Protestant Armenians are certainly Armenians as well, but there are also those in the words or attitudes of whom some sort of reservation is felt. Having worked for 11 years as vice-chairman of the State Council on Religious Affairs under the Government of Armenia, I have observed various manifestations of such reservation by clergy, state officials and ordinary citizens. If even today there

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is such an attitude towards our Christian brothers, one can only imagine what the public opinion used to be in the past about the forcibly Islamized Armenians. Back in 1887 Grigor Artsruni wrote in “Mshak” (# 13): “When many years ago we said that in Kars province and to some extent in Batumi there were many Muslim Armenians who had been forcibly converted to Islam under the Turkish rule, nobody wanted to believe”. Indeed, the Armenians of Caucasus had no idea about the Muslim Armenians living around Kars and Batumi and did not comprehend the reality that for centuries many Armenian villages and even provinces had been forcibly converted to Islam and that there had been Armenians living side by side with them who heroically managed to preserve their language. It should be mentioned that there were many cases of conversion in Syunik, Nakhijevan and Artsakh as well. It is natural that the readership of “Mshak” was small and the ideas of Raffi and Artsruni could not illuminate the inhabitants of the dark village shacks. However, in 1984, in about a century after those articles were written, when I visited some converted Armenians who were exiled in 1944 to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan from the villages near Batumi mentioned by Artsruni, after my return to Yerevan I again met astonished gazes and sometimes even hostility – how could one be a Muslim and Armenian? Of course, there were also many open-minded people. At that time about 3000 converted Hamsheni Armenians lived in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and many of them told me that while serving in the army or being at the Black Sea, in different resorts and big cities, even in the places where they lived (Osh district in Kyrgyzstan, Kizil-Kiya city, Bishkek, Tashkent) the Armenians they met always told that if they were Muslim then they could not be Armenian, even though everybody was surprised that they spoke Armenian. They asked me to send them books about their history in Russian language. I told them that there were no such books. Twenty-seven years have passed, and a part of the converted Hamshenis has moved to Russia – Krasnodar Krai, Rostov and Vo-

ronezh. Recently I received an email from the converted Hamsheni Armenians living in Russia. They again asked send them books about their history in Russian language, which would also cover the comparison of their dialect with the literary Armenian. I answered that about two decades after visiting them, at last my book “The Dialect, Folklore and Songs of the Converted Hamsheni Armenians” was published in 2009; it included the material I obtained from them, but there was no book in Russian. It is obvious that for publishing this book in Russian some funds are needed. So, the converted Hamshenis want to learn their and our history, but we do not give them such an opportunity. Why? I don’t know.

In this regard I would like to pose a question: if we don’t know converted Hamshenis well, do we know Christian Hamshenis well enough? In 1944, during the World War II, the renowned Armenologist Hrachia Acharian visited Gagra, Abkhazia. He stayed there for 25 days, studied the Hamsheni dialect and in three years, in 1947 published the book “A Study of the Hamsheni Dialect”. More than six decades since then no newer book is available on Hamsheni dialect, although many Hamsheni Armenians studied philology in the higher educational institutions of Yerevan and being the speakers of the dialect and living among other people who speak the dialect they should have published many new valuable works. Of course, not only they could have done it, but they should have done it in the first place. It has to be stated that over this period the vocabulary of the Hamsheni dialect has underwent considerable changes; the Trabzon (non-urban) sub-dialect has been displaced by Janik sub-dialect. Till now no academic work has been published on the folklore of the Christian Hamshenis. Books by Barunak Torlakyan and Hakob Gurunyan, which are a result of a diligent work, cover only some part of the Hamsheni Armenians’ rich folklore. No study of the heroic resistance of the Hamsheni Armenians during the Armenian Genocide has been published either. The memories of many of those who survived the

Genocide have either been already lost or are kept at somebody's place in some village or town, and who knows what will happen to these faded notebooks. Why do I tell all of this? I do it simply to state again that we, Armenians, no matter how strange it may seem, still face the issue of self-knowledge and moreover, we still do not know at all one of the segments of the Armenianness – Christian Hamsheni Armenians.

It should be added that Christian and Muslim Hamshenis do not know well each other either. As travelling has become easier over the last 20 years, they have heard about existence of each other and nothing more. They do not know why the children of the same family have had such different fates. In 1980s when I told the Hamshenis from Abkhazia, Krasnodar Krai and Armenia about their Muslim brothers, they were surprised, and now, when I tell the Muslims about their Christian brothers, they are equally surprised, especially when they learn that among the Christian Hamshenis there were many renowned people of art and science, Heroes of the Soviet Union, etc. And these are the Hamshenis from the Turkish Hopa and Borçka districts, which border Georgia. The converted Hamshenis in Rize province are even less informed. Over the recent years I had an opportunity to visit three times the Muslim Hamsheni villages in Rize and Artvin provinces, together with a small group including Turkologist Lusine Sahakyan, and it should be stated that the 70 years of closed borders and Turkish propaganda have had a devastating effect. They no longer speak Armenian in Rize province, though still continue using many Armenian words and toponyms, whereas more than 20,000 converted Hamshenis in Hopa and Borçka districts of Artvin province still speak the Hopa sub-dialect of the Hamsheni dialect, but their children do not understand it. Incidentally, the video clips and CDs produced in Istanbul in the recent years by Kazim Koyuncu (a Laz), Züleyha Ortak (a Zaza), Ayşenur Kolivar, Gökhan Birben, Hikmet Akçiçek, Aydoğan Topal, Nurcan Nurcanim, Altan Civelek, Erbal Aydın have greatly contributed to populariz-

ing the Hamsheni culture of Hopa and Borçka districts; they include some songs in Hopa sub-dialect of Hamsheni dialect. The works by prosaic Mahir Özkan and poet Yusuf Vayiç written in their native dialect, as well as three films by well-known film director Özcan Alper have played a great role in raising awareness about our compatriots. Though in both Rize and Artvin provinces there are Hamshenis who say with confidence that they are Armenians (some of them being truck drivers who have visited Armenia and communicated with the Armenians), most of them say that their ethnic background is Hamsheni. There are also those who consider themselves Turks. People repeat what such Turkish scholars as Sakaoglu, Kirzioğlu, Arici have foisted on them in their books. It is remarkable that some of the Hamshenis from Rize province have conducted studies and managed to publish books and articles about their native villages – Can Uğur Biryol about Çamlıhemşin, Adnan Genç about Zuğa, Ibrahim Karaca about Khachapit, Kemal Nabi Ünal about Senoz. Unfortunately, they are not familiar with the Armenian sources, as they do not know Armenian. In order to fill this gap to some extent, a very valuable article *Pages from the Hamsheni Armenian History* by Levon Khachikyan previously published in “*Banber Yerevani Hamalsarani*” journal in 1969, was printed as a brochure in 1996 in Istanbul. However, this study published 42 years ago was intended for the academic circles of Armenia and not for the converted Hamsheni Armenians living in Turkey who are not aware even of the well-known episodes of the Armenian history, so by reading this brochure they cannot find answers to the questions that are of interest for them. A collection of articles in 306 pages presented at the “Hamshen and Hamsheni Armenians” international scientific conference (2005, Sochi) that was translated in Turkish language and published in Yerevan (2007) significantly improved the familiarity with the Armenian sources. It included about 20 articles by well-known scholars. It was sent to all the Hamsheni intellectuals and scientists we knew. However, such academic articles are not accessible

to the peasants, drivers, craftsmen, in other words common people who have been asking me about their origins and requesting to send popular science brochures in Turkish language about the Armenian history and history of the Hamsheni Armenians. Unfortunately there are no such brochures. They asked me “Why?” What could I tell them? I didn’t know either. Maybe our nation has changed its system of values, attaching more importance to the comfortable, sometimes avaricious life rather than to nationwide issues? I am surprised by the behavior of the Hamsheni Armenians, too. It is no secret that there are many rather wealthy Hamshenis, including those from Russia – Moscow and Krasnodar Krai, especially Sochi, but these people wallowing in money do not want to fund publication of books about the history of their ancestors, grandfathers and fathers. Why? Again, I do not know.

I often think why we, Armenians, have created such psychological, public, political and economic conditions in our country, causing a situation which is probably quite unique in the world history, when in peacetime 1/3 of the population has emigrated and many are still preparing to do so: not to evacuate as in wartime, but much worse, simply leave the country. Whom are we running away from, ourselves? Unfortunately, yes. Numerous times I have witnessed how the children of many immigrants in Krasnodar Krai do not attend facultative Armenian language lessons or Sunday schools. They argue that they do not need the Armenian language, as they are not going to return to Armenia. The situation is similar in many communities of Diaspora. There is only one conclusion – today we, Armenians, have a paramount goal of self-knowledge and mutual awareness of various religious and confessional, ethnographic and dialectal segments of the Armeniacy, and all of this is interconnected.

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