



*Armenian
Voices
of Istanbul*



Armenian Voices of Istanbul

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Studies "Hassrahben"



Adult Education and Oral History
Contributing to the
Armenian-Turkish Reconciliation

Armenian Voices of Istanbul

The essays compiled in the brochure are based on oral history research among the Armenians of Istanbul. The narratives are summarized in six essays that reflect on different aspects of Istanbul Armenians' life. We hope that the publication will increase awareness about Istanbul Armenians both in Armenian and Turkish societies and will encourage further dialogue between the two countries.

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Preface

Since August 1 2009 *dvv international* (Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association) together with its Yerevan National Office is implementing a project aimed at Armenian-Turkish reconciliation. The project is financed by the German Federal Foreign Office. The principle project partner in Turkey is the non-governmental organization Anadolu Kültür, which is mostly focused on cultural and art activities, while in Armenia it is the “Hazarashen” Armenian Center for Ethnological Studies and the “Armenian Actors Union” (AAU) a non-profit non-governmental organization. The key project objective is to contribute to the regional reconciliation processes through adult education, intercultural exchanges and oral history research.

To date two student camps were organized under the project: one in Dilijan (October 2009, Armenia) and one in Antakya (August 2010, Turkey). During the first gathering ten students from Armenia and ten from Turkey had a chance to get to learn about the methodology of oral history. In October-November 2009 the students, mentored by their research advisors, conducted “oral history” interviews with respondents that represented different generations, had different past backgrounds and lived in different regions. The collected material was summarized into a book under the title “Speaking to one Another: Personal Memories of the Past in Armenia and Turkey”,

which was published in 2010 in three languages - Armenian, Turkish and English. At the Antakya camp students had training in project management, photo and video filming and in writing skills. They should use these skills in three student projects that were to be developed and implemented without the direct interventions of research advisors. The participants were divided into three groups to match the number of projects and they proposed projects around those issues of Armenian-Turkish reconciliation that were of keen interest to them. This is how three projects were identified and are now being implemented-an Armenian National project, a Turkish National project and a joint Armenian-Turkish project. Six of us who make up the team of the Armenian National Project are the initiators and authors of this brochure.

The essays included in the brochure are based on our interviews and observations during a ten day stay in Istanbul in September 2010. Having visited village Vakıflı (the last Armenian populated village in Turkey) and having passed through the territories of Historic Armenia, we realized how little we knew about the Armenians living in Turkey until now and how important the opinion of these people is for our joint undertaking, i.e. the Armenian-Turkish reconciliation. It is important so as to frame the process correctly, to assess it correctly and to discover the means to achieving that goal. Both the

Armenian and the Turkish societies know very little about current problems, worries and concerns of the people who lived through the genocide but did not leave their country. This is a huge gap especially in case of Istanbul Armenians who are the ones to experience firsthand all the factors that either add to the reconciliation or hold it back. The past experiences and the knowledge of this community can be of significant contribution to reaching mutual acceptance between the two people and their further dialogue.

So, we, the project implementation team strived to increase the awareness of Armenian and Turkish societies about Istanbul Armenians and their interaction with the Turks. The team also thought that the project will help overcome stereotypes, increase the interest toward these people among the Armenian and Turkish societies, create an informed environment for further cooperation and interaction.

Initially it was planned that we would conduct oral history interviews among the Istanbul Armenians. We also thought that we would live in Istanbul Armenian families to allow for possibly profound observations. However, during the project implementation a number of unforeseen issues occurred that made the initial arrangements impossible and even threatened the project implementation itself. Consequently, we were able to conduct a total of 13 interviews with respondents representing different age groups and gender. We understand well enough that the limited number of the interviews coupled with our inexperience do not allow us to consider this project as a serious research. Still, we want to note that the interviews were conducted diligently despite all the problems that occurred during the project. One of the big challenges that we faced was gaining the trust of our respondents, especially since the use of recorder heightened the tensions during the interviews. In many cases, be-

fore starting the conversation, we had to explain the goal of the project at length detailing how, by whom and with what purpose the information received during the interviews will be used. We had to reiterate several times that the respondent quotes will be presented anonymously in our brochure and no one will get to know their identities, that we simply needed the recordings to remember the details of the material, and many other nuances like this. Nevertheless, it was too difficult to convince the people. Even in case they agreed to talk we were very cautious during the interviews trying to choose such questions that will gain respondent trust and only then moving to more serious issues. Probably this is why issues related to culture, holidays and traditions prevailed in the interviews, while the subtle political questions are few and far between. People did not feel comfortable to answer such questions and had an inner tension that was present in almost all cases. This could be one of the reasons we had fewer interviews than planned, while the issues and the questions touched upon during the interviews did not match our initial expectations and plans. Still, we think that even such development of things has its interesting aspect. It allows us making the subjective assumption that while the Istanbul Armenian community lives inside the Turkish society and has everyday interaction with various members of the Turkish society, the Armenians of Istanbul still live in fear and without freedom of speech. They prefer not to speak up about their problems and concerns, but only present the brighter side of things so as to prevent further issues that could affect their lives in the same community, to ensure their own safety and security and that of their children.

A total of six (6) essays are included in the brochure:

1. Roots; Genocide; Istanbul



2. Armenia-Turkey; Armenians-Turks; Istanbul Armenians-Armenia Armenians
3. Mixed Marriages
4. Schooling and Language
5. Traditions, Holidays
6. The Wind of Change has the name “Hrant Dink.”

The sequence of the essays is merely random, they have different authors and consequently their style and language is also different. The last essay on Hrant Dink stands out in its style and language as it was originally written in English and, besides, the author decided to depict Dink not only based on the interviews but within a larger public context. In addition, as all the authors made use of the same 13 interviews, oftentimes the quotations in the essays are repeated, with different interpretation though. It should also be noted that the word “Polis” that appears in the essays refers to Istanbul and is a proper name frequently used by Armenians, while “America” refers to the U.S. Finally, some interviews were conducted in English and quotes from those interviews have undergone only minor editing to be as close to the original as possible.

The extracts and citations quoted from the interviews reflect the individual perceptions and positions of the people we talked to on certain issues. Being cautious and trying to follow ethics rules we kept our respondents' names anonymous and avoided portraying them in photos. Instead, we used thematic photos that are typical generalizations associated with the ideas presented in the essays. Most of the photos used in the book are provided by Nane Khachatryan, some are taken by the authors during the field trip, others are taken from different internet websites. Our group tried to use the

oral histories of Istanbul Armenians to convey ideas about their lifestyle, their concerns, their involvement in the Turkish society and their interactions with the Turks.

And finally, we should say that the project implementation team consisted of the following members, who are the authors of the essays:

1. Victoria Asatryan, Yerevan State Linguistic University after V. Brusov, Department of International Relations,
2. Mariam Grigoryan, Russian-Armenian (Slavonic) University, Department of Foreign Languages,
3. Avetis Keshishyan, Yerevan State Linguistic University after V. Brusov, Department of Area Studies,
4. Gayane Manvelyan, Yerevan State Linguistic University after V. Brusov, Department of European Studies,
5. Anna Poghosyan, European Regional Academy, Department of International Relations,
6. Hasmik Sahakyan, Yerevan State University, Department of International Relations.

Roots; Genocide; Istanbul

Hasmik Sahakyan

Many of the Istanbul Armenians that we met were born in this city, but as they told us their parents or grandparents moved to Istanbul from different Turkish provinces back in the period between 1915-1923. *“My grandfather was born in Sebastia (Sivas), but during the war he moved away. As to my mother’s family, I do not know much other than they were originally from Sinop”* – this is what one of our Istanbul Armenian respondents told us. This is what another one had to say- *“Well yes, I was born in Istanbul, but my Dad is from Sebastia (Sivas) and my mother comes from Qzi. Qzi is the village that is located right across from Khor Virap. My father comes from village Prknik (Perkenik) in Sebastia. They settled down in Istanbul in late 1915.”* And one more really unique story from an Istanbul Armenian whose grandparents on both sides were forced to migrate and settle in Istanbul. *“My mother and father are from Polis, but neither of my grandparents on both sides was born here. They came from Western Armenia, but all the four were from different places and all the four lost their families during the massacres. After 1915, when the violence receded, they married. So, my Dad’s father is from Verin Azguder village of Sebastia’s Sushihq province, while my Mom’s father is from Shapin-Garahisar (ebinkarahisar), the place where commander Andranik comes from. As to my Dad’s mother – she is from Tokat, a small settlement there called Erbaa.”* And yet another



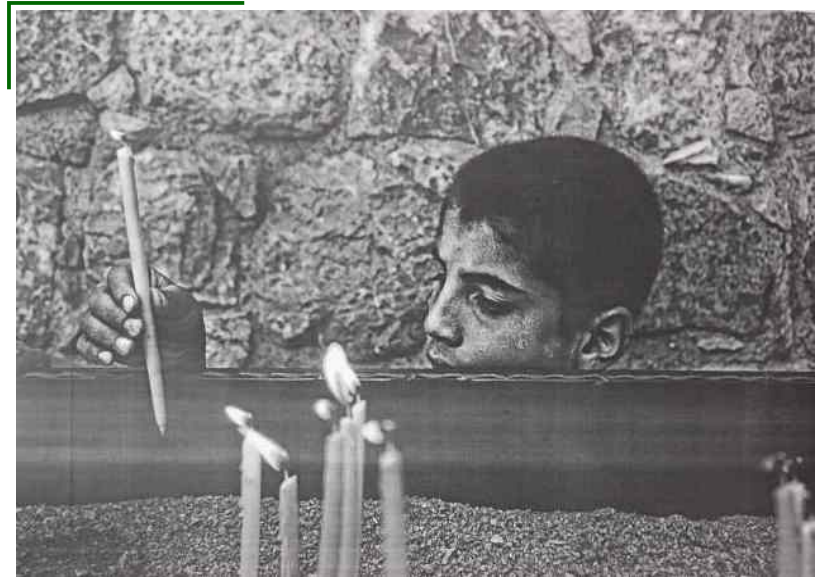


one has this to report, "*While my grandfather comes from Ankara, my mother was born in Istanbul... several generations have passed... their roots are in Kayseri*" A young Armenian tells us this, "My mother's family is from one place, my father's family - from an entirely different place. My father's family comes from the city of Adapazarı (Sakarya) in Genen province, my grandmother is from Kartal, a village very close to Istanbul. Kadıköy is part of Istanbul, it is located on the opposite bank, it was a resort place that Armenians used, there was even an Armenian church there."

Massacres; Episodes of 1915; Known Events...

The Istanbul Armenians that we interviewed avoided talking about the Genocide. If they did talk, then many of them used the term "massacre", others said "the episodes of 1915" and the thirds made reference to the "known events". Still, each of them had their own story to tell related to those events. "Before declaring about the deportation of 1915, before the exile, all the male Armenians of the city were taken away, among them my grandmother's father, her two brothers, uncles... and others. She was twelve at the time as she was born in 1903. She used to tell us how all men were taken to a place fenced by wires, which was not far from where they lived. The men were kept there for a long time, but in the end it became known that all were taken out of the city and killed, shot to death." This is what one of our respondents tells. Another one also recounts her grandmother's story, "My grandmother was a woman with no appetite, who did not like eating. Her family was a very patriarchal one-everyone living together- her grandparents, her uncles. Once

my grandmother was leaving the breakfast table thinking how to escape when her father noticed her and called her to come to the table to eat. My grandmother told him it was so crowded there was no room for her at the table. It was then that her grandfather stood up and let her sit in his place. The very next day the soldiers appeared and took away her grandfather, her father, and her uncles. Only women were left back. That breakfast story was my grandmother's last memory of her family together and she always cried when she told the story. All those people were taken away, I do not know where to. My grandmother's three young brothers were turned to Turkish families."



There are also stories of how the Muslims helped Armenians escape the massacres. *“The next day they came and told my grandmother and the other women of the family to leave, to prepare for exile. They were told to take only the most needed things, leave the rest behind and start walking on the road which was supposed to take them to Der Zor. But it turned out to be a very short road. They walked to the neighboring town, in a day or two they reached Niksar. Suddenly the band of Topal Osman marched into Niksar. Topal Osman was a bloodthirsty criminal who led a gang and was acting under the government patronage. So, this person comes and orders to kill everyone. He said that everyone should be slaughtered, that they should all be taken to the public bath and the bath should be put to fire. All women were packed in the bath, my twelve year old grandmother among them. At that very instance all Muslim women of Niksar raided the bath... they entered by force and started fighting the soldiers to snatch the kids. My grandmother was one of those kids. They took her into a Turkish family, gave her a Turkish name, cared for her like for one of their own.”* Another respondent tells us how a high ranking Turkish official warned her grandmother’s family about the danger. *“He said –either you become a Turk or run, go before the Turk hordes reach here.”*

I thought you would develop complexes, would not have Turkish friends...

As noted, the Istanbul Armenians we met avoided the Genocide topic. Our interviews and observations indicate that there are two reasons for this. First, Genocide is a forbidden topic in the families;



moreover, it is a taboo. Most people avoided talking about it in the past and continue doing it now, so awareness of these realities is low. Perhaps the roots of such behavior go back to the beginning of the last century and have been carried on into our days. A man in his mid fifties, an Istanbul Armenian we talked to had this to tell, *“Before I was sixteen-seventeen I did not know anything about the massacre; it was not discussed at home. My grandmother told some stories, but I could not connect those to such an enormous issue. I thought this was my family’s story, things that happened to my grandmother. I was sixteen-seventeen and had a friend who*



was eighteen. He was once talking to me about another person and said it was unbelievable but that guy did not know what April 24 was about. I did not know what it was about either. When I came home I asked my Dad what April 24 meant. My Dad told me a very cursory story. But then I started asking more questions, I suddenly linked it with my grandmother's story. I asked my father why he never told me about those things. He said the story was not for my age and my position. He said, if he had told me, then I would have developed complexes, would not have Turkish friends. Now I understand my father, he was right not to tell the story. If I had a choice I would not tell the story to my kids, I would want them not to know. Just look at my daughter, see how tense she is and she is simply listening." The younger people we talked to had similar stories to tell. One of them, a student of an Armenian private school, still found it difficult to speak Armenian. "Actually when I studied in Turkey, I wasn't involved in politics, and know what my mother, my father told, people told, but they didn't know much. My mother knew some history but she didn't want to tell because they thought it would harm me, I would be more afraid. That is a common understanding in Armenian community of Turkey, which I don't support."

The second factor is the state politics. Our own experience shows that people are afraid to speak openly, they avoid discussing this topic. It is because of the state politics that only a few lines are written about the Armenian Genocide and even those few records distort the history. As one of our respondents said, "Well, if I am unhappy about a number of things, at times I complain about them, but at other times I try to restrain myself. When you live in your own country things are different. If I lived in Armenia I would come for-

ward and easily speak about what upsets me. I may do the same in the U.S. It should be the same here. We should be like that here too, should not have concerns, but I doubt whether it is possible..." We met an Armenian from Armenia in the churchyard and attempted to talk to him about our project. This person got confused and told us this, "Look here, I will tell you what the nuances are. If there were no school, no church here, we could easily talk about the Genocide. But the church is here; next to it is the school - so no one will speak about that. The Armenian textbooks in Armenian schools do not mention the massacres, they just refer to the war between the Turks and the Russians, no mention of the Armenian factor. So, I repeat what I said - if there were no school here, one could speak, could argue and condemn, but since the church is here - no one will speak, no one will mention the Armenian history, the massacres, anything else, nor need to have the right, the authorization - where you come from and where you go to. We have the patriarchate here - Aram Ateshyan, he is replacing Mutafyan now. He needs to give authorization for going to this Armenian church or that Armenian school, to speak on this or that issue. He should authorize, endorse by his signature, then if I see his permission, I can speak about the Armenian history and anything else."

Why Istanbul?

Each of our respondents offers their own position on why their great grandparents moved to Istanbul or why they settled in Istanbul to avoid deportation. Two major causes prevail in their stories. First, Istanbul was safer as the wave of the mass killings did not reach here.



Or, as one of our respondents says, *“Because of the Genocide in Western Armenia my ancestors spread around. Instead of going to Marseilles or Boston they came here, to Istanbul. They could have gone to these other cities too, but preferred to move to Polis. And that was because of their thinking that Polis is different from those places where they were slaughtered, killed, deported. The same was true about Trabzon and even Izmir... Smyrna after 1915. But in 1922 Trabzon was also cleared of Armenians... of Armenians and Greeks. People in those cities rebelled and my family moved to Istanbul. The other reason for why people moved here is because Istanbul was the cultural capital of Western Armenians, very much*

like Tiflis¹ was for Eastern Armenians.” And secondly, it was possible to leave for different countries of the world from Istanbul. Istanbul, being a more developed city, provided many more opportunities.

We have relatives all around the world – in Australia, in France, in Germany, Canada, America... everywhere...

It is not by accident that many of the people we talked to have families in different places around the world. As they say, after the events of 1915, fleeing the massacres, their relatives settled down in different countries. Many of our respondents have either very few or no relatives in Istanbul. Instead, their families are scattered all around the world. *“I have three uncles and all the three emigrated, all the three are in different places- one in America, the other in Canada, and my Dad is here (meaning Istanbul). My mother’s family is the same-all relatives, family members are dispersed-in Australia, in France, Germany... Canada, America, and we have relatives everywhere”.* Another one notes, *“You know what- our family was a very big one in Istanbul, but around forty years ago my Mom’s family moved to America and my Dad’s family to France.”* A middle aged woman we talked to was very emotional when she spoke, *“My grandmother had two brothers. Theirs was a very big family, but they all left Turkey. Her youngest brother’s whole family moved to Australia. My grandmother’s brother, his wife-they passed away. The other brother’s daughter and grandchild are in Germany. My Mom’s brother is in Holland.”*

¹ (Placename) transliteration of the Russian name for Tbilisi, the capital and the largest city of Georgia



You are not Armenians.

Otherwise you would not live in Turkey...

Most of the Istanbul Armenians we met avoided being interviewed. It was difficult to convince them to talk and if they did talk, they talked about cultural topics more easily and avoided talking about the current Armenian-Turkish relations or the 1915 Genocide. Some of them, to avoid direct questions, said they were used to their lives in Istanbul and had nothing to complain about -thus stopping any further conversation. Others confessed that they did not imagine their lives in any other country; that they were used to their way of life, to the attitude toward them. As a middle aged women admitted, *"There are two big controversies in my life: the Turkish-Armenian relations and my patriotism. These two things are the opposing forces in my life, there is nothing else. I prefer living with Americans, in a more cosmopolitan environment, in better conditions, a more dignified life. But I prefer living in Turkey with Turks to living a better life. I lived in the U.S. for some time, but I prefer it here. Because I know that this is my land, even if Istanbul is not, then I know there is Anatolia somewhere there, which is my land. And there is a third reality too, which may not be true about everyone, but I speak for myself. I am an outsider everywhere, no matter where I go. I am an outsider in America, in France; in Armenia too I am an outsider. Perhaps I do not have a country/a homeland"- the lady sighed as she ended.*" We heard such views from several younger people of our own generation: *"I am not used to consider any country as my homeland. I won't say that Turkey is my homeland, but I cannot say that Armenia is my homeland as well, because I have never been there."*

Few of them say that they are not Diaspora; they feel offended when they are perceived as one of Armenian Diaspora communities both in Armenia and other Armenian communities around the world. Many of them consider Turkey their historical homeland. To be considered Diaspora one should live in another country, while they live in their own country. They feel even unhappy when they are considered Turkish subjects. *“What is written here? A Turkish subject? What is the second one? An Armenian? And is the third one a Christian and the fourth a Catholic? You cannot wipe it out /hitting his forehead/. I visited many places. You know what they told me? They said if you were Armenians, you would not live in Turkey. I heard this many times in many places. In Iraq I heard the same thing, in France, in the U.S. American Armenians said to my face and my aunt’s face, “You are not Armenians; otherwise you would not live in Turkey.” A forty year old woman who attended a conference in Armenia recalled with pain the words of her Lebanese Armenian peer, “Especially the Lebanese and the others asked us how we could live there. I cannot remember the exact way they formulated, but it was like a sting. And they thought we were dogs to live there...”*





Armenia - Turkey; Armenians - Turks; Istanbul Armenians - Armenia Armenians

Anna Poghosyan

Alas, we are people without homeland...

Which country is the homeland of Polis Armenians? Is that Armenia where many of them had never been to or is that Turkey, where they are like outsiders. Our interviews, our observations and contacts indicate that different people have different perception of the homeland.

Some doubt they can say Armenia is their homeland as they have never seen Armenia and were born and raised in Turkey. Others say if they are Armenians, then their homeland is in Armenia, while yet the thirds say they do not want to answer that question. We tried to discuss this question with Istanbul Armenians to understand their perception of the homeland. It may seem that this is a simple question, at least in Armenia it is. If you ask this question to most of the people there, they



will not think long before they answer, oftentimes mentioning the village or the region where their ancestors come from. But the seemingly easy question becomes complicated and multi-layer for the Istanbul Armenians. Diverse identities emerge, dual and triple identities, at times even opposing identities. *"Homeland... Alas, we are probably people without homeland. This is a hard one. Look, I am watching a match now, Turkey is playing. And I am so jealous of the flag that they are holding."* - tells one of our respondents and to depict his emotions more vividly he illustrates by a concrete situation, *"I had a very bad experience once when I went to watch the match between Turkey and Armenia. The match was in my country, in Turkey and I could not go around with a flag, that wouldn't be nice. Which one is our homeland? Do not ask us. That question offends us as we really cannot answer it and that is tough. What is homeland? Who knows? No one knows? The kids learn Armenian, but they cannot use it and there is no way kids can be forced into learning Armenian. Their friends are Turks; they speak Armenian only at home. Armenians here know the Turkish anthems better than all and if you think, it is not bad. If you live in the country, you should know the country's anthem. The issue, though, is not that the Armenian knows the Turkish anthem well, the issue is that we do not know the Armenian anthem. There is a contradiction here."*

Another common trend that is apparent in our interviews is viewing Istanbul as the homeland. This is so even in case of people whose parents or grandparents moved to Istanbul relatively late. Such perception of homeland is generally common to residents of multiethnic cities, but in case of Istanbul it is probably sharper because of the realities of the historical past. One of our interviewees, a middle aged man who moved to Istanbul in 1960s, tells us about his Istanbul identity, *“There are people who have no feelings for Armenia, no sentiments. We are different than that. We have turned toward the east.”*

A woman in her mid forties, whose ancestors moved to Istanbul in 1915-1920, has this to say about her perception of homeland, *“And now I never say my homeland is this or that. I found a way out for myself-I say I am from Istanbul. I do not live in Turkey, I live in Istanbul. This is a good solution for me. I rationalize that I am not a Turk, I am not from Turkey. I have to live in Istanbul and I love Istanbul a lot. There are places in Istanbul I have a need to visit once in a week or two weeks, very much like a tourist or else I will be restless. There are two big controversies in my life: the Turkish-Armenian relations and my patriotism. These two things are the opposing forces in my life, there is nothing else. I prefer living with Americans, in a more cosmopolitan environment. I am an outsider everywhere, no matter where I go. I am an outsider in America, in France; in Armenia too I am an outsider. Wherever we go, we are outsiders. This is our land; we are born in Istanbul, this is where we belong to. The second place where I would live other than Istanbul is Yerevan. I cannot go anywhere else. In Armenia I am cheering for Armenia, here I am cheering for Istanbul. I lived in other places for a few years, but I could not get used. I feel here is my home... I was*

born and raised here ... like a few days ago I went to the house where I was born. If I lived in some different place I could not do that. This means our memories, all we have is here. I was in Armenia seven-eight times and I miss Armenia...”

Since I was a small kid I knew that the Armenians in Armenia and Istanbul Armenians are not the same

Visiting Armenia is life-long dream for many of our respondents. But like any dream, this one too loses its allure as soon as it materializes and clashes with reality. And then the endless parallels and comparisons start- we and them, here and there. In this case the “we” of the Istanbul Armenians, or even more broadly the Armenians living in Turkey becomes compared and contrasted with the local Armenians. *“We have more traditions here than in Yerevan, especially in observing religious holidays, christening, Easter, Saint Mary's other days. Our funerals are also different. Our grandparents, our parents used to attach more importance to such things, to traditions. We are not like that. Soon our children may forget all of that. Things that should be maintained...”*

Another respondent, a young man of 24-28, who visited Armenia several times, responded this way to our question about the differences between the Armenians in Turkey and in Armenia: *“certainly there are differences because of the Soviet time. It took a long time for Armenia to change, but I feel there is a difference each year, the Soviet spirit is gone. What can I say - the museums are good there, the churches are good, other things are not good, but there are*



also many places to have fun at night. But buildings do not matter to me, what matters is the hospitality of Armenian families and that is very important."

They seem to draw parallels and to compete about who is more of an "Armenian". One of our respondents tells us, *"When I was a small kid I knew that the Armenians there and the Armenians here are not the same. I had a friend there who was very different. Sure, if we go to Armenia now, the people we contact with are absolutely different. When I was small I knew that Armenians from Armenia speak a different language, we could not understand them. Here we cannot speak like you. And it is known why - here we deal with everything in Turkish – in stores, in streets, at home - everywhere."*



Developing the topic they compare the living conditions. *"The Armenians there do not live in houses like ours. Their houses are small. That is the difference. Some years ago my mother had more friends among Armenians from Armenia, they came to our place and we went to see them."*

Sometimes they remember how they were treated in Armenia. *"When I was a small girl, I often visited Armenia. My playmates called me the "Turkish girl"; the girls would fight with each other and when I intervened to solve the conflict they would tell me to shut up, they would not let the "Turkish girl" speak. But I did not mind."*

Many of Istanbul Armenians had dealings with Armenians from Armenia in Istanbul and their views were formed based on such contacts. One of our respondents, a middle-aged woman says this about the Armenians working in Istanbul, *"I feel so sorry about many of them as they do not have adequate jobs that fit their skills. They are educated, but probably they earn more money here than in Armenia and they send the money home. But in winter there was a TV program during which the Prime Minister said they were not legal. Erdoğan said they should go back..."*

A young guy, while speaking about Armenians from Armenia working in Istanbul, says: *"Armenian people of Turkey usually think that they are different. In my personal opinion I do not see a difference between Armenian people from here and Armenia..."*

Another one thinks that the differences between Armenians from Turkey and from Armenia are natural. *"If you live in Turkey, you live in the Turkish culture; in France you adapt to western culture... How I can explain it? You have different values. Young people have more*

problems; in a western country they do not have the same problems, but in the east that becomes a problem. Still an Armenian is an Armenian everywhere."

And yet another young man says, "People say there are consequences and there are social differences. Armenians who work here are coming from villages, they aren't from Yerevan. They are poor people and they have less education than Armenian people in Sweden doing their master and doctoral studies. People are different. That's why Armenians from Turkey have prejudices about people from Armenia. But it isn't an ethnic problem, it is a cultural problem. It may also be cultural based on social and economic factors. Usually these people do the worst jobs in Turkey. The worst jobs, cleaning, as far as I know- cleaning jobs, babysitting. Maybe some of them are working in the factories, but usually babysitting and cleaning jobs... nursing also, taking care of old people. I know some Armenian families who prefer to call Armenian women for cleaning, helping them or taking care of the baby and teaching them. Getting permission is a long process and if you pay to an Armenian woman which is a low salary, she can clean the house, take care of the old people of the family, she can teach Armenian to the child. It is a sort of exploitation, because Armenians from Armenia living in Turkey are illegal, they aren't legal, they aren't on the paper so they can have issues, they are working illegally, that's why they are more exploited, they are paid less money than Turkish people. They have issues if they are sick. Maybe they will have no chance to go to the doctor, to use insurance... And the kids of the Armenian families who came from Armenia they are still illegal, they are also illegal, so they don't have access to education. As far as I know they go to the church and get the education there."

People are different - good and bad

What do the Turks know about Armenians? This is not just a rhetorical question. Simply, talking to Armenians from Istanbul and visiting Turkey several times we hear stories about how the Turks do not have any knowledge of the people living next to them. They do not know who their neighbors are - these people that speak a different language at home.

We talked to a middle aged woman who was born and raised in Istanbul, but her parents moved to another city in Turkey. She mostly mixes with Armenians and this is what she notes, *"There are people among Turks who have no clue at all that there are Armenians, Greeks living here. They do not even know these words. It is really funny. If someone says among the Turks that she is Armenian, they*





would ask whether traveling back and forth to Armenia every day is not tiring. They will ask where I come from and when I tell them I am from here, then they would ask where my parents come from. I tell them we are all from here and they get confused. Some say yes, they are from here, others say this could not be true."

Other than general statements like this Istanbul Armenians remember anecdotes that happened to them or people they know. Perhaps it is not accidental that many of such cases they remember occurred in the army where people with diverse life backgrounds and origin appear in a similar setting and have to mix with such people with whom they never had any dealings in the past.

One of our middle aged women respondents says, *"People do not know. There are some people though who learn since childhood that being an Armenian is a bad thing. My teacher told me a story about the time when he was a soldier. One of his fellow soldiers came crying to him and told him a very bad thing had happened. When he pushed the guy to let him know what happened, the soldier said others were saying that the teacher was an Armenian and that is why he was crying, because being an Armenian was a bad thing."*

Similar to army the educational institutions that follow schools are another setting where the direct contacts of Istanbul Armenians expand and they start hearing things never heard of before or receive different types of treatment. A lady we talked to, an interpreter by profession told us this. *"An interesting thing happened when I entered university exams. I was admitted to the Art Department and was required to take classes in social sciences or in English. As I was*

strong in English I chose the English class. The lady who was the professor asked me something and I answered. Then she asked which school I went to, she thought I went to a college. I told her I did not go to the college; I went to Esayan Gymnasium. The lady had a pen in her hand and she did something I had never seen before. She could not contain herself and she threw away the pen angrily. "They are always better" she said unable to restrain herself."

Another lady born and raised in Istanbul says sadly that while being Turkish subjects they are always outsiders. *"There is a story about my teacher. She did not like Armenians... but she changed so much toward us if you compare how she was at first and how she changed in the end. It was because we talked a lot together and that is why she changed. I also had many friends in the classes we took. There was a class I took, which only women wearing hijab/head scarves attended. When I was in class none of them talked to me, because I was wearing a cross. They never allow you having this sense that you are part of the Turkish state. You are always an outsider despite the fact that we pay the taxes, we serve in military*



dutifully; we take on all the responsibilities of a citizen. Still we are viewed as Turkish subjects of a foreign origin. That is what we are, where we come from unfortunately."

They live next to each other, they live together. Some of them know the others, some do not know who the Armenians are, since when they live in Istanbul, in what ways they are similar and in what ways they are different. Our few interviews with Istanbul Armenians provide evidence that Turkey is as dear for the Armenians living there as it is for the Turks. Moreover, the Istanbul Armenians feel unhappy about the failures of their native city. A middle aged woman who talked to us was unable to contain her feelings, *"They do not have a sense of the past, a commitment to keep the past. There was a cinema theatre in Taksim and my mother took me there often, it was one of the best cinemas. When I learnt they are going to tear it down and build a shopping center I started crying. I was eighteen years old and did not understand much, but I thought they did it because it is not theirs. It is built either by Greeks or by Armenians. Like all the other buildings. They are not the creators of the city and they should clear away the past. They think in the right direction, they should wipe away the history so as they are able to make the city fully Turkish."*

In our discussions and dealings with Istanbul Armenians we found a surprising tendency. That was the distrust of Turks despite a long-lasting and continuous history of living next to each other, which was because of bitter personal or group experiences. It is true that people avoided generalizations, but all the same, they were unable to hide this distrust. A man of 60-65, a second generation Istanbul

Armenian who works with the Turks and mostly mixes with the Turks says, *"Well, people are different; you cannot say the same things about everyone. When I speak like this I do really feel bad."*

In addition to these words, a socially active lady that we talked to, said, *"It is difficult to generalize about people, but we know that Turks are insincere, it is hard to find a really open person. They say one thing to your face, but think something entirely different. They do the same with the European Union. They say they have changed all the laws, made reforms and improvements, and in reality it is so. They did change the laws, they did adapt to European standards, but there is no enforcement, no application. It is as simple as dealing with a fruit seller, who tells you he is giving you the best apples. But then you come home and try it and it turns out the apples were rotten."*

Some think that lifestyle differences make contacts more difficult. *"No, it is not that. The thing is the difference in lifestyle, they always perceive us as wealthy and that makes them envious and aggressive. For years we try explaining to them that Armenians are hard working and because of that wealthy, that Armenians were forced to work, to trade... Armenians were forced to become doctors, lawyers, to take profitable jobs. Why? Because the Turks forced them by not allowing Armenians into government jobs. It is prohibited for Armenians to become soldiers, to be elected into such simple position as a city mayor. Armenians could not even collect garbage. So what should Armenians do? They should become doctors, lawyers; that is the way out."* This was the explanation the lady talking to us provided.



Others believe the reason is the ignorance about each other and this ignorance results in stereotypes that make relations thorny. Some Istanbul Armenians have their own stereotypes about the Turks. These stereotypes are rooted in their history; they make generalizations based on them and extend the historical precedent over the contemporary Turks.

They live next to each other... Some say Turks are very good and ethnicity does not matter, they are good, we are friends, we have good relations... others say they envy us, even our dishes seem different to them. Our modest inquiry does not allow us to make broad generalizations because of the few interviews and the limited time we had. Probably the best way to summarize this topic is by quoting one of our interviewees. *"How to say it right... Turkey is a big and powerful country. Its Armenian population is fifty thousand. Can you imagine what it means-fifty thousand among seventy millions? It is like a drop of water in glass. What can this drop do? People are different, both good and bad... It is true that we fight hard to keep our culture, not to lose the language."*



Mixed Marriages

Mariam Grigoryan

But he is a great guy... He is like an Armenian, he is not an Armenian, but he is like one...

In any Diaspora or minority community, be that an Armenian or another one, the issue of marriage is one of the most important. Ethnic, cultural, religious communities and minorities that have a relatively close life with a purpose to maintain values, traditions, identity and language, sooner or later face the challenge of mixed marriages. It is notable that in such cases when speaking about already existing mixed marriages people usually compare the in-law who is an “outsider” with their own ones. They use such attributes as “she is very good, she is like an Armenian” or “he is better than an Armenian” and similar characteristics. One of our Istanbul Armenian respondents, an elderly lady, told us this while speaking about her granddaughter, “*The son in-law is a Turk, he is not Armenian, he is not a Christian. We did not interfere. They fell in love and she said she should marry him. But he is a great guy. He is like an Armenian though he is not one. It was not our doing; it was my granddaughter’s doing.*”

Another respondent, a middle aged man tells us this, “*The young people think differently now. They say the different mentality is because of globalization, and because of that mixed marriages*

also increase. These are painful developments... The young ones follow each other’s examples... They say - Mariam married, she is happy, nothing is wrong, so what if I marry too.”





With the decreasing number of Istanbul Armenians the chances to marry one of their own become few and far between, while the dealings with other ethnic groups living in Turkey become more active as people go to school together, work together. Consequently, mixed marriages become more popular and the community faces a serious problem. They need to have a clear-cut position about this development, either they are for it or against it.

The younger generation thinks that mixed marriages are not a problem anymore as they used to be in the past. *“If I want to get married with a Turkish girl probably my parents wouldn’t be very happy but they won’t stop me. But I know some cases when the son or the daughter is excluded from the family, just because of their partner. I see, now mixed marriages are more popular. It used to be a trouble for Armenian Community and all the minority communities, such as ours. Now there are more mixed marriages, but still it is a hard issue to discuss because many parents are against mixed marriages, but when their son or daughter come with a Muslim partner, Turkish partner - they sometimes say yes.”*

Interestingly, mixed marriages with other ethnicities or religious groups living in Turkey are considered more acceptable when they happen outside Turkey. One of our young respondents says, *“For example when I was in Sweden my mother asked to find a Turkish girl and marry there. They are beautiful and so on.”* Probably this is because of the perception that outside the borders of Turkey any Turkish subject is considered more of their own and a friend.

Our interviews with the Istanbul Armenians and the observations in their midst provide evidence about the gradual increase of mixed



marriages. With time they become a common thing, more acceptable. One of our middle aged respondents says, *"In the past, when I was a kid, if someone heard about an Armenian girl marrying a Turk, or someone's son marrying a Turkish girl, that would be like putting the house where the family lived to fire. The father of the family could not face others, would not leave the house because of the shame he felt. Now it is different. People will simply prepare the wedding invitations and send them around."* He then continues, *"Let people be free, let them marry whomever they want. But still this degree of indifference worries me. I am concerned about the outcomes of these mixed marriages... For me there are no unacceptable things... We watch films about mixed marriages and it is easy watching them. But when it comes to real life, when it comes to our daughters, to our brothers, then the reactions are different. I should have the same reactions that I had when watching a film, but I have to confess it is tough to do that. I still find it tough... there is a big increase in mixed marriages... it is a problem."*

This shows that despite the increase in mixed marriages and people taking it more or less as a given, this is mostly so when it is on the level of theoretical generalizations, when speaking about others. However, when it comes to their own son or daughter, they become concerned and start worrying.

The few interviews that we had indicate that Istanbul Armenians are also concerned about the children of mixed marriages - their religion, language and other issues. What religion will they adopt, what names will they be given, what language will they speak? One of our respondents notes, *"The problem with the name and the religion*

are settled by an internal consent. The names are a different thing because the parents decide what name to give. The religion is something different as the godfather and the godmother are the ones who decide. But there is a new fad in the Armenian community lately; they give the kids European or Turkish names so as they are easy to say-. Both Turks and Armenians have the name Artak, so it is a common one. If we use Artak, Burak, there is no problem. But you will not find old names like Haikanush or Perjuhi among the sixteen year old.... Saint Hakob, Saint Sargis, Saint Karapet- certainly these names will be lost to the new generation. We use more of foreign names that are not authentically Armenian. This is because people do not want their being an Armenian becoming immediately obvious wherever they go. If someone's name is Harutiun, it is clear the person is an Armenian. But if the name is Albert, Murad, Burak or Ardah? If they say Ardah, then people may think the person is Turkish as the Turks also have this name. Recently the names become more and more Turkish sounding, names that are familiar to Turks or are easier to remember for Turks. These are by no means Muslim names like Muhammet, Ahmet, Mehmet, Hüseyin, but names like Bjurak, Ardah... Some use Turkish names too, but those are the ones who are from Anatolia, who don't even know Armenian. They mostly use Turkish names."

The topic of the names opens a window into another dimension, into questions about how Istanbul Armenians try to adapt to the ever changing realities of Turkey, what integration tactics they use, whether they really want to integrate and other similar issues. Another aspect of this is the role the school and education play in all these processes.



Schooling and Language

Avetis Keshishyan

It is a known standpoint that preserving the Armenian identity is one of the most important internal challenges of Diaspora Armenians. In almost every Diaspora community a struggle is on for raising an Armenian speaking younger generation, keeping them close to their roots and their church, which is the safeguard of the centuries-long history. These are key issues for the Istanbul Armenians too. However, our interviews indicate that it is almost impossible and even unfair to compare the Istanbul community with other Armenian communities in Diaspora, though that happens quite often. *"Firstly, being Turkish Armenians we are under some real pressure here. Not pressure coming from common people, but state imposed pressure. Well, we may not feel it in some cases, but when it comes to the Genocide, to the Turkish question and related things, some of the ministers start saying unpleasant things about Armenia and Armenians... This is why we feel bad about that, we feel pressure and we want to keep to ourselves in a close community. Though we can speak Armenian around here, but still we watch out, we are cautious not to speak Armenian everywhere, we do not dare. We can speak openly in this district, but if we go to another district, another city in Turkey, we cannot speak Armenian. This is how things are. Though we never have problems with common people, with the people in the streets. We have no problems with them. But*

there are such people who are real nationalists. These people exist, but we do not mix with them."

Taking this person's words as a starting point and as some response to the many questions posed below, we should continue discussing the issue of schools and education.

Like in many Diaspora communities in Istanbul's Armenian community too (mind that some Istanbul Armenians consider themselves Diaspora, while others do not) schools are one of the key structures that unite the community. Consequently, the schools thoroughly reproduce all the problems that exist in the community. The problem of maintaining the Armenian identity and language are directly interrelated with this institute. As our respondents report currently the Istanbul community has sixteen gymnasiums/lyceums of which twelve are apostolic and the other four are Armenian Catholic. These are all private schools and are funded by the community. The state pays only the salaries of those teachers that are of Turkish origin and that of the vice-principle, who, without any exception, should be a Turk in every school. The Armenian teachers are paid from the charity donations of the community members. Those schools where the number of students is diminishing are shut down. The seminary of Skyutar (Üsküdar), the Dpravang, which was the only school preparing church servants/clergymen, does not operate either.

Our interviews indicate that the lack of books and textbooks in Armenian is one of the most critical issues: the available books are outdated and cannot be the foundation of a sound education. *“We do have a lot of old textbooks, but nothing really up to date, new... We buy any new books that are published outside Turkey and use them as auxiliary textbooks... Such as Hakob Cholakyan’s² books. Have you heard of him?”*

Both elementary/middle school (grades 1-8) and high school/lyceum (grades 8-12) teachers prepare additional materials, oftentimes they translate from Turkish textbooks or use textbooks published outside Turkey. They make summaries and distribute them to students trying to fill in the gap. It should be also added that the Armenian authorities need to do a serious job in this regard, as any support from Armenia will not only help out with the textbook issue but also inspire the Armenian schooling in Turkey in general. There are no Armenian universities in Turkey or at least a Department where the studies would be in Armenian.³ Many parents send their children to public schools or better private schools after middle school so as they are prepared for university entrance exams. As one of the teachers says, *“Those students who are not accepted by public high schools come to our schools, come to Armenian schools. It is not because of their desire to learn Armenian, that has almost no role...*

² An Armenian educator and author based in Aleppo, Syria. Author of Western Armenian textbooks and several research monographs on Armenians in Syria and historical Cilicia.

³ The essay is based on the narratives of our respondents and none of them have mentioned about existence of an Armenian Department in Turkey. However, we have learnt later that the University of Kayseri has opened a Department of Armenian Language and Literature. More information could be found under the following link: <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-223973-turkeys-first-armenian-language-departmenttwo-students-one-teacher-and-a-bright-future.html>





they do not even require that the classes be in Armenian, they want the classes to be in Turkish, as they should then go to a university and Armenian is not used in universities... Every year around half a million students apply for universities. Of these only twenty out of hundred applicants are accepted, that is three thousand in total. If you are among the first thousand you enter the medical university, if you are among the first two thousand-then you are admitted to Bozaziçi University and so on. For them the most important thing is the university. The reason for sending to an Armenian school is not its being Armenian. There are some, no doubt, whose reason is that, but they are very few... no one complains about the level of Armenian teaching at school... On the contrary, they complain that science is taught in Armenian."

A middle aged woman, who is an art expert, says, "No one cares about what will happen. On the contrary, this plays into their hands. They do not speak Armenian, they think a college, a private school provides better education. They teach English there, they make it possible to prepare better of the college/high school, education in Turkish is more advantageous because of this. This is a good excuse-being better prepared for the high school exams. So they stop taking the kids to Armenian schools, business goes down at these schools and there is no money. The schools need the money to survive, the money that is paid by the students. This is why to please the parents often the schools introduce a system that is more acceptable to them; they turn to teaching in Turkish."

One of the teachers that we talked to said this about the Armenian language and speaking Armenian at home, "I know that kids can learn two-three even four languages at the same time, their mind

is fit for that. But the parents prefer speaking one language and as Turkish is easier even the parents that are graduates of Armenian high schools, parents that know Armenian, even they do not choose speaking Armenian. This makes things very difficult for us. If the parents thought the way I do, my job would be much easier. My problem is mostly with the parents. It is easier to convince their children. I feel more confident that I can do that. I know they like me, they want to be around me and I can make efforts in that direction, but the parents need to understand this and support. It is not important that the language is not used in the universities. They can send their children to America for education, but still they remain Armenians wherever they go." Interestingly, when we visited the Skyutar's (Üsküdar) Saint Cross church, there was a celebration of the Translator's day and there was a recital by students from different schools. The central topic of their recitals, without any exception, was the Armenian language and our alphabet. However, the adults sitting around us, the parents of these children spoke Turkish to each other and only when they realized we were among them they shifted to Armenian, just because of courtesy. We told one of our respondent teachers about this and in response she gave quite a different view of the issue. "Do you think they understood what was being recited? These are outdated methods... I, for one thing, would never want the kids to recite things they do not understand. This is not right... But still, people come together, they talk, they are in an Armenian environment. What does it give them? We need something else, this is not the most brilliant way, there should be practical steps... You cannot just say "speak Armenian, speak Armenian, speak Armenian". This is not pedagogical; there is something objectionable in it." In this context it is interes-

ting to hear what a young man under thirty has to say, a person who was born in Istanbul and studied at the Armenian school, who has more everyday contacts with Turks than with Armenians and who speaks Turkish even at home or among his Armenian friends. *"I do not know how to say this, but it is about the teenage period in a young person's life when guys start having beards and the girls bodies change... It is at that time that problems start with the older*



generation. For us the problem was at school, when we were under the pressure to speak Armenian, to always speak Armenian. Here in Turkey, the more they put pressure on us, the more we do the opposite. When we came to Armenia, we spoke Turkish among a few friends and we were told we should speak Armenian, but we didn't. When we came back we spoke Armenian, though we were told to speak Turkish we continued speaking Armenian. Doing exactly the opposite. I remember when I did not speak Armenian, but with time you understand the importance of the culture, of the language, but not because you link it to you ethnicity, no. Not because I am Armenian and I should speak Armenian. I am a humanist and I understand that the Western Armenian will be lost with time and it is with that understanding I speak Armenian to maintain the language."

One of our other young respondents with whom we spoke half in Armenian and half in English had a different interpretation of the choice of non-Armenian schools. *"My first school was an Armenian school, but then I changed and went to a school where all the classes were in English. My Mom and Dad decided to change the school as the Armenian school was not of good quality. If I continued at the Armenian school I would not be admitted to a good university. The teachers were not educated and my parents preferred to send me to private school where teachers were highly qualified, and using as the first language Canadian and British..."* The same position is supported by the art expert we quoted above. *"The Kedronakan one is the only good one, Ferikoy is OK, Esayan is OK, and it has some teaching in Armenian. But the situation is outrageous, really, really outrageous."*



At a broader view the causes of not learning Armenian or being unable to learn Armenian are historical and social and also contain an important loss of cultural and identity values or their simple devaluation. To understand these causes well and to fairly assess the current situation one should probably look back to the past. One of our respondents, a man in his sixties says, *“How to say this. Turkey is a big, powerful country. Its Armenian population is fifty thousand. Can you imagine what it means-fifty thousand among seventy millions? It is like a drop of water in glass. What can this drop do? Well, we do fight here not to lose our culture, to keep our language as much as possible. As an example, I know enough to speak to you, but unfortunately the majority does not speak this much. Why? What is the reason? The reason is that many of the Istanbul Armenians came here from Sebastia (Sivas), from Kayseri, Mu , Bitlis, Adana, Musa Da ı and other places. What I am saying is that the Istanbul Armenians who were born here, they all know Armenian, they all went to Armenian schools, but the Armenians from the provinces do not know Armenian... You know what the reason is? After 1915, as everyone knows, all young people, all Armenians know what happened here. Since then there were no schools, no churches, no parents, no families, nothing was left here. I will tell you the reason. Some people like you who come from Armenia say, “Why don't you know Armenian?” The reason is that these people are raised in these conditions. It is a great achievement that they did not change their religion. Imagine that back in 1950s-60s there was only one Armenian family left living among them. My wife's family was one of those. Did you get it? Well, these people did not change their religion. They moved to Istanbul so as their daughters, their sons could marry Armenians,*

live within the Armenian culture, keep the Armenian language. Thousands of families like this came from Anatolia. Besides, there were no jobs in the villages, there was an employment problem. There was also education problem... Istanbul is more developed... To make it clear, it is like Yerevan as compared to the villages in Armenia.” A journalist we interviewed had this assessment of the current situation in Istanbul, *“We have around 3000 students in sixteen schools. The French community is almost 50,000 and they have 5000 students. Compare to the 3000 out of the 60,000 large communities here. If we assume that around 10,000 of this 60-*



70,000 are of school age, then it means that only one out of three students goes to an Armenian school, while the other two go to a non-Armenian school. The aspiration to go to non-Armenian schools is because English is taught there, their system is more of a college type and the parents are confident that their children will then have easier access to universities than if they went to Armenian schools. These are the concerns and the issues we face, we have retreated from our position, we have a serious regress. For instance, one of the indicators of this regress is the diminishing level of Armenian speakers. This means backing away from national identity and this is already a reality. The nationalists have a different interpretation of these realities. For instance, if an American comes here - I mean an American Armenian or a French Armenian, an Egyptian Armenian-when they see how the folks speak Turkish here in the streets, they feel very much upset... But they do not feel the same anxiety when the Armenians speak French in France or when they speak English in America. They come to accuse us of becoming Turkish, but for me it is the same thing as becoming French or American-it is moving away from your Armenian roots. There is no difference in the two. If one moves away from the Armenian identity, then all such cases are unacceptable for me. One cannot be acceptable while the other is unacceptable. However, the general thinking is not like this."

The families that moved to Istanbul from Anatolia or other areas where once Armenians lived (the chronology of these movements does not end in the years following the Genocide. People continued coming to Istanbul until the 70s of the last century) were mostly Turkish speaking. They could not afford good education for their

children, because of which not only the language but many different cultural characteristics were lost. This is one of the reasons that the students of the Armenian schools have such different level of general knowledge and of language. If the teacher works in two different schools, she is supposed to prepare different materials as the students find it difficult to study in Armenian and often complain about Armenian education. This is especially true about those students that come from socially vulnerable families and from Turkish districts. Another reason, which is no less important, is the emigration of Istanbul Armenians to America and Europe. All the people we talked to regretted this fact and thought that this was another reason for diminishing use of the Armenian language, which is certainly true.



Traditions, Holidays

Victoria Asatryan

We have no right to be idle...

Unique in their nature the traditions and habits are diverse; they contain distinctive national, cultural, religious elements and are one of the essential means of maintaining the national identity. At the same time these traditions and habits are affected by diverse impacts of other cultures and thus may become transformed. Our interviews with the Istanbul Armenians indicate that while the community with its institutions (schools, the church, clubs) has an important role to play in maintaining and transferring the traditions and habits, the central role still belongs to the family. When speaking about traditions and culture our respondents often stated that they fight a continuous battle for not losing their cultural attributes. This is probably typical for the groups that live in an environment differing from their culture and make efforts to maintain their kind through preserving the traditions and habits. Thus, one of our respondents, says, *"Turkey is a big, powerful country. Its Armenian population is fifty thousand. Can you imagine what it means-fifty thousand among seventy millions? It is like a drop of water in glass. What can this drop do? Well, we do fight here not to lose our culture, to keep our language as much as possible. As an example, I know enough to speak to you, but unfortunately the majority does not speak this much..."*

Some others, though, tell us that the previous generations were more active in their efforts to preserve the cultural differences. The same respondent says, *"But for our grandfathers, our mothers, our fathers these things were more important, we are not like them. Soon our children will give up all of that... This is how things stand. Our determination to keep these customs is part of our culture, we should preserve those. We have no right to remain idle."*

The means and ways of ensuring cultural continuity are different. For one thing the Istanbul Armenians have an ethnic song and dance group; they organize concerts and evening gatherings quite often. The purpose is to consolidate Istanbul Armenian families, to keep up the commitment to national values-something that is fading away with time and due to circumstances. When speaking about their traditions the Istanbul Armenians try to



draw parallels with Armenia as if emphasizing that they are more of Armenians than Armenians in Armenia, for whom the preservation of the national identity is not that an important challenge. *"We have more traditions here than in Yerevan, especially the religious observations, christenings, Easter and other religious holidays"* - one of our young respondents says. As noted, as much as the community and its institutions play an important role in the preservation and transfer of the national culture and traditions, the family remains the most important link in this process. Our interviews show that alongside with the changes in the contemporary world the Istanbul Armenians also gradually move away from the traditional model of the family. One of our young respondents says this as an evidence, *"... in traditional Armenian families people come together and they sing, but in traditional... because mainly I am not from traditional, because they recognize that the woman must be a house wife; they are keeping the culture, and father was working, there is Armenian home which is constructed by woman, but now it is changing, culture is changing, people don't keep traditional, so my mother, my father they aren't traditional people, my uncle, especially my uncle's wife, she is traditional woman, she speaks Armenian, she knows Greek, she knows every detail of Armenian culture, she is practicing... There are traditional families, they gathered every Sunday, eat together..."* This is probably typical not only to Istanbul Armenian, but to many modern families.

We spend the New Year Eve with the family ...

It is a known fact that the holidays are one of the most important elements of preserving and transferring group identities. They play an

important role in the lives of Istanbul Armenians as well. Our interviews provide evidence that Istanbul Armenians observe such universal or Christian holidays as the New Year, the Christmas, the Easter.

Universal holidays that are observed by the entire Christian world are celebrated in the families, in the community, together with friends and relatives. *"Holidays such as Christmas, Easter... Armenian people always celebrate it, all the family gathers together, makes presents and Papa Noya comes."* (a young male interviewee)

Another of our respondents, a middle aged teacher says, *"A few families get together at the New Year, relatives, friends, whoever are close to each other. We offer treats, prepare the table together, we eat and drink, we have fun. We also wish each other Happy New Year and visit each other. I think it is the same, all the family gathers and they all celebrate together, make some presents."* Probably this description is no different from the general way this holiday is celebrated in other countries of the world. One of our woman respondents, a middle aged art expert tells this, *"On the New Year Eve we are with the family and that is a must. Old or young cannot say they want to be with friends that night. Nothing like that. Being with the family is a must."* It is notable that unlike many Armenians in Armenia the Istanbul Armenians have preserved to this day the sacrament of the Christmas/New Year Lent. As one of our women respondents says, *"New Year is about the Lent. To be honest, I am not religiously devout, I do not consider myself a good Christian, but I think all of this very important. I do not even go to the church at night, but observe the Lent on the New Year Eve eating mostly Lent dishes, with olive oil. The Istanbul Armenian cuisine is mostly like that, dishes with olive oil. There remain very*



few Istanbul Armenians, most of the people here are from Anatolia whose cuisine is somewhat different. They also use olive oil, but it is much different from ours. Ours is a little affected by the Greek cuisine. We use grape leaves but put olive oil, not meat."

I am an old man, should I celebrate my birthday and blow the candles on the cake?

Unlike the celebration of the New Year, which is described as similar to our own New Year, the Istanbul Armenians do not often celebrate their birthdays. As they explain it *"In that regard our traditions are lacking compared to yours. You have beautiful traditions, while we, because we lived among the Muslim people, are more reserved and do not have that many occasions to have fun as you do. In that regard we are rater ignorant. First of all, we think birthdays are only for kids and the young ones. Celebrating an adult's birthday is sometimes considered excessive. I am an old guy, should I celebrate my birthday and blow the candles on the cake? This is an exception for us. We do not celebrate birthdays in any way. For adults we do not celebrate. But you have very nice traditions of anniversaries-like fiftieth birthday or fortieth birthday for the women. You celebrate these anniversaries beautifully. We do not have that tradition. Birthdays are only for babies, kids and the young ones."* As our respondent notes this is probably conditioned by the local culture.

Instead, the Istanbul Armenians celebrate another occasion, which is no less meaningful and beautiful, i.e. the Name Days. *"Usually I forget my birthday. I do not know whether this is because as a guy I am tough and hard-hearted or that is lack of culture. We do not have*



that culture, but we do have something else that is a beautiful celebration as well-the Name Days... Saint Hakob, Saint Sargis, Saint Karapet. Though we gradually stop using these names for the new generation. We, like you, choose more of foreign names that have no national connotation. Recently Turkish names are used more often, names that are familiar or easier to remember in Turkish. Certainly, these are not Muslim names like Mehmet, Ahmet, Hüseyin but names like Burak or Serdar, what else? Like Ardah. Burak is a Turkish name but some Armenians think this an Armenian word which means a small forest. But that is not why the name their kids Burak. It is mostly because the name sounds easier in Turkish and is understood easier by the Turks.

Funerals are very important for us, very important. Even more important than weddings and christenings...

The Istanbul Armenians observe several traditional holidays and rites. The most important among them are weddings and funerals.

These two opposing ceremonies were mentioned more often by the respondents, one as a joyous occasion, the other one as mourning. One of the people we talked to was a 35 year old man from Armenia, who compared wedding traditions in Istanbul with those in Armenia. *"Generally they do not have dhol (davul)⁴ and zurna⁵ to dance to it, or they do not give money to the musicians or dancers. They go to*



⁴ A drum musical instrument

⁵ A pipe musical instrument

the registrar's office, marry formally and then come to the church. It is not the same say, they appoint a special day to come to an Armenian church and have the ceremony there. During the ceremony they make speeches, they pray and then stand in a line to give gifts to the bride..." If one can judge from the interviews we had the mourning ceremonies have a somewhat bigger importance for the Istanbul Armenians. One of our interviewees, a fifty year old man, speaks directly about that, *"...the relatives, the bigger family, the friends and acquaintances all go to the funeral. It is very important, the funeral is very important for us. I could even say that it is more important than the weddings and christenings. Why is it so? Because it is a duty, it is people's sympathy... People are softer, more empathetic. So, it is a duty and people go. When the funeral is over they gather at home. On the Saturday of the week they go to the church for the spirit of the deceased or they prepare dinner or halva. All the close ones get together and have dinner together and eat halva... They make condolences to the mourning family."*





*Many different dishes, possibly fancy... Why fancy?
Because then the year will be bountiful ...*

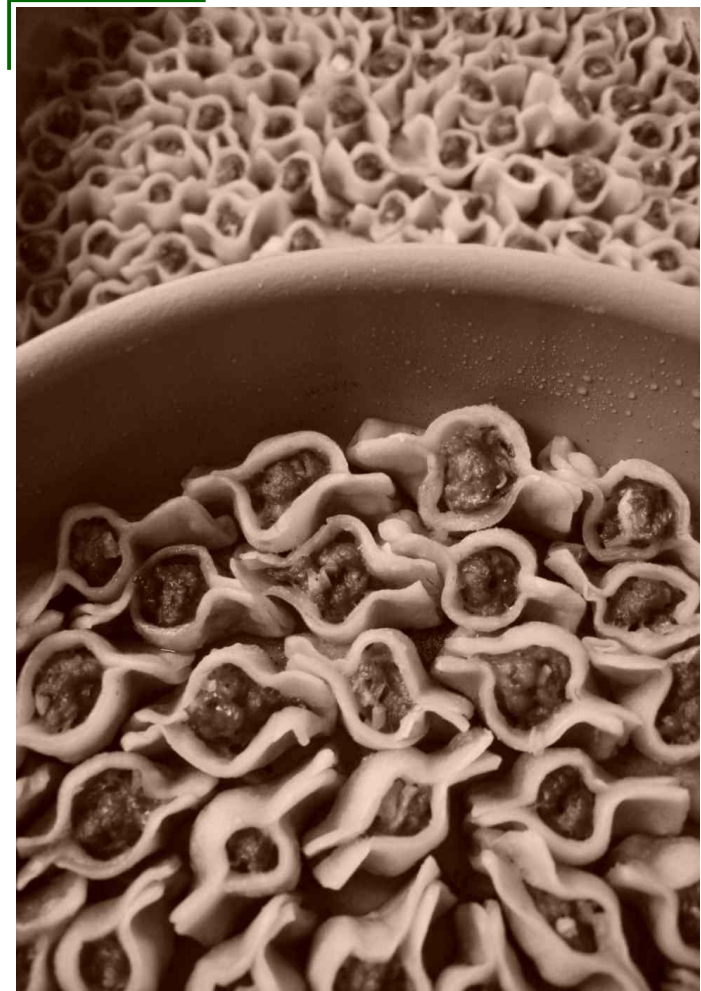
Our interviews provide evidence that the Istanbul Armenians have a rich, unique and interesting cuisine, which was formed throughout the centuries and subjected to many different cultural influences. Like in any culture the festive dishes that Istanbul Armenians prepare are different from the everyday dishes. Each of the holidays and rituals has a typical dish with a special meaning.

One of our women interviewees tells us about the everyday dishes: *"Many different dishes, possibly fancy... Why fancy? Because then the year will be bountiful... For instance, we prepare a dish called a sweet scent. It is prepared from a special wheat sort and different fruits are mixed in. Another dish is the soup that the Turks call ashule - it is filled in with boiled wheat, apricots, almonds, nuts, raisins - it is delicious and is served at New Year. It is white, with rice, with some fruits, with milk... it is a special dish. Etli ekme  is like a boat, we place it on a tray and fry with butter. Then we prepare clear meat soup and pour it over this dish and cook it. There are many ways of cooking this dish; this one is how my grandma prepared it. I never change it as this was my grandma's way.  i b rek⁶ dough is like manti,⁷ we put meat in it, it is a little bigger though, like lahmacun⁸. We make squares because my grandma used to make them in squares. The more butter in it the better. That is how grandma taught me."*

⁶ Type of food, thin layers of dough filled with meat.

⁷ Type of food, meat wrapped in dough and cooked on steam.

⁸ Type of food, muttons pieces on thin dough layer with spices that is oven cooked.



Based on the interviews the following holidays with their specific dishes can be named:

- *On the Khouttm night⁹ we eat fish. All Armenians eat fish. We color the eggs but do not hand them out. On the Easer Sunday there should be communion, confession ...*
- *Good Friday-on the Eve lentil is served, we dine here every Good Friday Ever, we eat a lentil dish ...*
- *We eat grapes on Astvatsatsin day,*
- *We pour water on each other on Vardavar day¹⁰*
- *We light candles and take home on the day of Tiarn ynd araj¹¹*
- *Christmas - spinach, yes, green spinach with fried onions, also eggs. What I learnt is that on holidays we should have fried fish, all kinds of dolma,¹² especially the mussels - is famous during Christmas. Then, you can also cook chicken in the oven and pilaf, that would also do. What else? The same things are cooked for Christmas, but spinach and fish should be there by all means.*

The cuisine and dishes have also changed with times and continue changing due to the influence of time, of geographical, climate and cultural factors. During the interviews we asked the respondents to share with us the differences and similarities in the cuisines of Armenians, Istanbul Armenians and Istanbul Turks, to tell us the secrets

⁹ Khtum- the eve of big religious holidays.

¹⁰ A joyous holiday that is celebrated 98 days following Easter, between June 28 and August 1.

¹¹ A religious and folk holiday celebrated on February 13-14.

¹² Type of food, spicy meat stuffed in grape leaves or in cabbage.

and recipes. One of the people we talked to, a 65 year old intellectual came up with very illustrative descriptions and explanations thus exposing to us the tasty secrets and nuances of Istanbul Armenian kitchens. Here are some of them:

The Armenian cuisine is perceived differently than that of Armenia. The Istanbul cuisine is also different. Istanbul is the capital of a great empire. It has always been a multiethnic city and the different nationalities living there had left their marks on each other. Consequently the Istanbul Armenian cuisine is unique and differs both from the western Armenian and Eastern Armenian cuisines.





For instance, we do not eat as much fish as the Istanbul people. We like to eat more of bread, baked things and prefer the meat. The Istanbul people, no doubt, eat both bread and meat, but they prefer fish. In the assortment of dishes prepared with olive oil Istanbul also differs from our cuisine. We use more of butter while Istanbul Armenians prefer the dishes with olive oil. And many other differences like that. The colorful dishes are part of our cuisine, like mussels which is seafood in a shell. We do not generally have mussels in the Armenian cuisine, but it is a favorite with the Istanbul Armenians, especially dolma made of it. Well yes, they prepare a filling with onions, raisins, rice, stuff the mussels and cook in olive oil and eat the stuffing together with the mussel meat. This is a favorite dish, a dish served at festive occasions.

We serve the dolmas prepared with olive oil as festive dishes. For the Armenians from Armenia it does not matter that there is no meat in it. For them meat dolma in itself is a dish to treat guests to. For us this same dish is an everyday one, not for special occasions. For special occasions we use olive oil in dolma. We also like the meat dolma a lot, especially when we put yogurt on it, some pepper. These are very dear to us but not a special treat for guests, not for special occasions, just as an everyday dish.

We will summarize by quoting another respondent, a 60 year old man, who spoke emotionally and with great meaning and each word, each thought contains so much truth and is so symbolic...

I do not go to church often because I am not a believer, I am a skeptic. I like the church because of its traditions, I love going to the church on holidays, though I am a psalm-reader. I sing in the church choir, but I do not have any faith, not one for Christianity, not for



the God and or the messiah. But I like this tradition deeply, I love our religious music, I love our church. These are things independent of the religion and faith. I love the national character of our church; I love the sacraments that our church represents. And I like the tradition of meeting relatives in the churchyard and wishing happy holidays-be it Easter, Christmas, all of these are very dear sentiments to me. Or the tradition of sitting down around the holiday table with the family or visiting the family elders to congratulate them. All of this is so dear to my heart.

The wind of change has the name “Hrant Dink”

Gayane Manvelyan

*Ten years ago we could not speak about the Genocide,
five years ago we were speaking and we were prosecuted;
now there is no punishment for that any more...*

Every time we asked our Armenian respondents in Istanbul about the recent changes in the sociopolitical life of Turkey and their repercussions in the Armenian community in Istanbul we always heard the name of a person who as if became the embodiment of those changes - Hrant Dink. The perceptions and opinions about Dink's activity and the changes he evoked differ from person to person; sometimes they coincide, sometimes they clash but when we listen to them it seems that now the life of Armenians in Istanbul can be divided into two big periods – before Dink's death and after it.

Being the editor-in-chief of Turkish-Armenian newspaper Agos, Hrant Dink became the voice of the Armenian community in Turkey. His main concern was to challenge the accepted views on history; not to write about things in black and white-the way people are accustomed to perceive them.¹³ That was the reason why he spoke about the painful question of Genocide not in a reproaching and accusing tone but rather conciliatorily. Meanwhile, he was a harsh critic of the democratic malaise of Turkey. He was constantly attracting attention to the state of minorities and their problems in the fa-



ce of the Armenian community thus instigating a debate in the Turkish society. The democratization of Turkey was a central issue in the activities of Hrant Dink. He considered it pivotal in the solution of the problems of national minorities, Genocide issue, and Armenian-Turkish rapprochement. The uniqueness of his phenomenon was the fact that he never estranged himself from the Turkish society. He viewed himself in complete solidarity with it while continuing spea-



king about the issues of the Armenian community, which touched deeply the national feelings of Turks, very much like the Genocide does. Hrant Dink tried to send his conciliatory message to the Turkish Armenians, to the citizens of Turkey, Armenian Diaspora and the Republic of Armenia. As he says he tried to change the historical conflict into peace to release the Armenian-Turkish relations of the burden of historical memory.¹³ He fought against the enemy image of the minorities in Turkey trying at the same time to show to the Turkish Armenians that the Turks are not enemies either thus promoting the dialogue between the two communities. With a full understanding of his ethnicity Hrant Dink viewed himself as a citizen of Turkey. He



¹³ www.cpj.org/regions_07/mideast_07/dink2.pdf

held an active stance of a citizen feeling responsible for the positive change in his country. Nevertheless, this did not save him from being prosecuted thrice under Article 301 for denigrating Turkishness. Hrant Dink wrote that those prosecutions were acts of discrimination against him, "They want to teach me a lesson because I am an Armenian."¹⁴ Fighting for democracy and justice, as well as against discrimination Hrant Dink fell victim to nationalism. On January 19, 2007 he was assassinated by a 17 year old militant Oğun Samast, who said, "I shot the Armenian because he had insulted Turkishness."¹⁵

Some of our respondents say that the assassination of Hrant Dink was linked with his ethnicity. A man in his sixties, "For years there was a simmering hatred for Armenians in this country and when people witnessed this assassination all of them said that he was killed because he was an Armenian."

The others see the reason in his activity and ideas. A man of 50, "He wrote openly about the Genocide in Agos, the nationalists did not like this and killed him."

A woman of 45, "The problem was not his being an Armenian, his ideas were the problem."

"He was a democrat, he was an ardent democrat", says one of the respondents, a man in his mid 40s, "And he was shot dead for his criticism and for his ideas, not because of his nationality. They did not like his ideas, the nationality has nothing to do here."

¹⁴ www.aaainc.org/.../pdf.../FACT_SHEET_-_Hrant_Dink_2009.pdf

¹⁵ <http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/2007/01/the-hrant-dink-murder-and-its->

Our respondents believe that the assassination of Hrant Dink made a deep impact not only on the Armenian community but also on the Turkish society as a whole. It is widely accepted that his murder caused backlash in the society and a common protest. The society that was mainly silent about the problems of its minorities being unaware of them or rejecting their existence at all suddenly was made to face the existence of the Armenian community by the murder of Hrant Dink.

One of our respondents, a man of 60 states, " *After Dink's assassination everything changed with surprising speed. And an important factor in this was the resistance, the reaction. It was surprising how within few hours after the assassination of Hrant Dink thousands of people got together in front of Agos. A person told me that after he heard that Hrant Dink is dead his feet led him to the ticket agency to buy a ticket to Istanbul and to stand there with thousands of other people. His death was like an earthquake that changed the perceptions of people. Now, after his murder it became impossible to reject the Genocide. There is still the law, it is not cancelled but it does not function any more.* "

Another respondent, a young man of 25 says, " *So many things changed after the death of Hrant Dink. Before it being an Armenian was considered a bad thing but when 200.000 Turks stood up and said that they are Armenians, they are Dink that gave us the hope that in this country both the majority and the minority may be equal. Ten years ago we could not speak about the Genocide, five years ago we were speaking and we were prosecuted; now there is no punishment for that any more. We were the generation which had not seen a massacre, for us the first victim was Hrant Dink.* "

Respondent, a man in his mid 50s, " *There, in Armenia everything is different. You learn the history of the Genocide from the very beginning, you understand more about it while here we learn all that through our effort, you see? Through our effort and this was the case before the assassination of Hrant Dink as before that it was prohibited, you could not say much as an Armenian, speaking openly was not easy. Hrant Dink was very brave to write about the Genocide in Agos. The Turks here have been thinking that only Turks are living here, they had no idea that Armenians have been living on this land for centuries and when Hrant wrote about this they suddenly realized it and questions arose about this.* "

Respondent, " *Yes, thanks to Hrant Dink Turks got to know the existence of Armenians in Turkey.* "

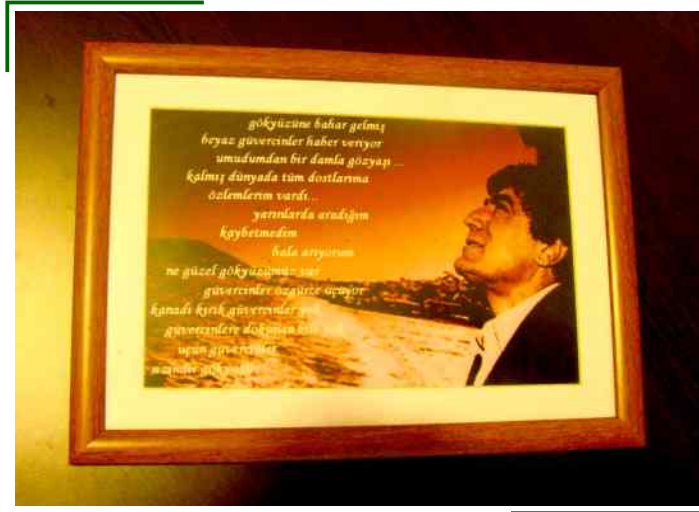




While viewing the phenomenon of Hrant Dink in the wider context of the Turkish sociopolitical reality a respondent, a woman of 45 says, *“Why that happened especially now? To me that’s because of the fact that Turkey is now pressed in a dead end. There is no exit for it, on the one side the Kurds, on the other one The Armenians, also there is the Greek question. Hrant Dink changed something and his death as well because now Turkey has no other way. The time came; the Turkish government wants to prepare its society for the changes.”*

Some of the respondents are speaking about the reflux after the assassination of Hrant Dink, a woman in her mid 40s says, *“Now I think that after that people became more reserved, I think that not much have really changed. To stand and say that the thing that happened to Dink would never happen again is a delusion. A thing like that can always happen, always.”*

Respondent, a man in his mid 50s, *“And now people think that if they killed the editor of a newspaper who was an Armenian, tomorrow they can also kill a Turk, an Assyrian...”*



Dink changed the perceptions while living and acting, he changed them by his death too. And it is painful to think that the reality is still such that the shock of the death may be more crucial in achieving the goals Hrant Dink was fighting for.

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