

A lone 'Hemşinli' in Yerevan

Thursday 20 May 2010, by [Mesut Cevikalp](#)

Sergey Vartanyan's roots are in Hemşin, near Rize, and he is looking forward to the opening of the Turkey-Armenia border. His family was forced to migrate to Armenia in 1915.

They first lived in the Çavuştepe (Haykaşen) village in Van's Gürpınar district. Vartanyan's great-grandfather, Vardan, was a village elder. Vardan immigrated to Yerevan with his family 95 years ago. He took choreography lessons in Yerevan and became the head of the Armenian State Ethnographic Dance Group in 1930.

Vartanyan was born in Yerevan in 1952. He has never visited Van but he has heard that his family's home in Van is still standing. It's isn't his past that makes Vartanyan the subject of this piece; rather it is the newspaper "Dzayn Hamshenakan" (The Voice of Hemşin), which he has been publishing for six years. This is why Vartanyan, whose family is originally from Van, is called Hemşinli (one who is from Hemşin). His interest in his family's Turkish roots in general and particularly the people of Hemşin, who live in small towns located in Turkey's Eastern Black Sea province of Rize, began years ago and culminated in The Voice of Hemşin newspaper, which was founded in 2004.

The story of Armenian Sergey Vartanyan, editor-in-chief of "The Voice of Hemşin" extends from Van to Yerevan and from Sochi to Hemşin. It began 30 years ago out of his curiosity to follow the traces of Armenians who speak dialects of Armenian ever since he came across them in Sochi

Initially it was printed every month, with 12 pages monthly, but due to financial constraints it is currently printed every two months on eight pages. Its circulation has declined from 1,500 to 1,000 over the course of the last six years. One of the reasons for the decline is the availability of the newspaper online. All pages of the newspaper can be accessed in PDF format on the website www.dzaynhamshenakan.org. The website also features music videos by Black Sea artists such as Altan Civelek, Harun Topaloğlu and the Vova group, which is known for playing traditional Hemşin melodies. It also contains information about the Hemşin culture and photographs from Hemşin. The Voice of Hemşin is printed in black and white. It may not have a high circulation, but I found that it reaches many countries including Syria, Russia, the US, Lebanon and certainly Turkey.

Noting that it is mainly read in Abkhazia where there is a large population of Christian Hemşinli, Vartanyan says: "The Voice of Hemşin is currently published in both Russian and Armenian. If we had an English version we would have more readers. But I do not have the financial means."

I asked Vartanyan about his interest in Hemşin. He explained that for 30 years he has been following the traces of Armenians who speak dialects of Armenian ever since he came across them in Sochi as a young boy. His work on the Hemşin culture, which started out of curiosity, has evolved into a profession. Of course he's done a lot of studying over the years as well. "We were going to Sochi [a coastal city in the south of Russia] with my father's car in 1950. It was the first time I saw Armenians who didn't speak like us. It was very fascinating to me. During our vacation in 1969, we visited the Armenian Moldovka village near the Sochi Airport. There were over 2,000 Armenians who were trying to open a school in this village. I began researching why and how these Armenians came to Sochi. I tried to understand why they were speaking in different dialects. I was not able to find any serious source on them because of the Soviet Union's censorship policies. When I began my journalism career in 1981, this curiosity turned into a job. I would go to Abkhazia, Krasnodar and Sochi and write about the stories of Armenians living in these areas. According to a census in 1979, there were close to 74,000 Armenians in Abkhazia and 121 Armenians in Krasnodar. There were reports that the actual population was higher. Scientific studies indicated that the majority of these people spoke the 'Hemşin dialect'. I traveled around those areas for many years and I

relayed the stories of Armenians I met to Yerevan.”

Sergey Vartanyan (R) is pictured here with Turcologist Lusine Sahakyan (L) and journalist Adnan Genç

Vartanyan’s writings on Hemşin culture were first printed in various magazines and newspapers. He intensified his research after he founded his own newspaper in 2004. It was easier to investigate and write because there was no problem finding a publication outlet.

Vartanyan (58), who studied philology, is not only the newspaper’s editor in chief but is also involved with everything from the content of the news to its composition and even its distribution. The newspaper does not have an office. Vartanyan has turned a section of his home into an office and he prepares the newspaper from there. He currently does not have a team. His only helper is his Turcologist friend Lusine Sahakyan. Sahakyan, from Yerevan State University’s Turcology department, takes care of the newspaper’s Turkish and English translations. The biggest supporter of the Voice of Hemşin newspaper is the “Hemşin Fellow Citizenship and Philanthropy Foundation,” which was set up in 1992. Vartanyan notes that Hemşinlis living in Russian territories tried to set up similar newspapers in the past but were shut down due to restrictions imposed by the Soviet administration and adds that The Voice of Hemşin newspaper has filled a major gap. “Similar activities by Armenians living in Russian lands were banned by the Soviet administration. In the Krasnodar region [located in southern Russia] and in the Caucasus the more-than-half-a-million Armenians had newspapers and magazines in Russian but did not have any publications in Armenian. With this in mind I set up the newspaper to give Armenians the opportunity to be able to read in their own language. We distributed our newspaper for free, especially in Krasnodar and Abkhazia where there are many Hemşinli Armenians. The demand for the newspaper has increased. We are sending it to more places now.”

Old photos show how the traditions and way of life have remained the same.

I ask Vartanyan about the newspaper’s publication policy. His immediate response is, “We don’t get involved in politics.” Indicating that the newspaper does not include any political articles, he says: “I am not interested in politics. I don’t really like it and I have never signed up as a member for any party. The Voice of Hemşin mainly prints letters and articles from Armenians living in Krasnodar and Abkhazia. I have a section with stories about teachers and students in Krasnodar and Abkhazia. There are many painful memories. Additionally, I allocate space to books, activities and new articles about Hemşin culture. In short, the newspaper is in general oriented towards learning. The newspaper contains articles on the history, philology, folklore, dances, music and dialects of Christian and Muslim Hemşinli people.

He found Muslim Hemşinlis as well

Vartanyan says he does not have any trouble finding contributors. Noting that he receives articles on the Hemşin culture from people in other countries, he says “Since I used to work at the Armenian Science Academy’s Archeology and Ethnography Institute’s Folklore Department, most of the writers are friends from my academic circle. Even though I don’t pay copyright fees, I receive articles from foreign academics about Hemşin culture. It’s appealing for them to write for this kind of a publication.”

The newspaper is not the only means by which Vartanyan provides information about Hemşin culture. He’s also organized conferences about the Hemşinlis. He has compiled stories, legends and songs he learned in Hemşin villages in Russia and the Caucasus that he has been visiting since 1981 into a few books. “While working for a children’s newspaper with a circulation of 220,000 in 1978, I had collected public stories, legends and conversations that students studying at Armenian schools in various Soviet republics shared with me in their own dialects. I published two books of the best ones. The books were later translated into Turkish, English and German.”

Vartanyan recalls that in addition to Hemşinli Armenians he also focuses on Hemşinli Muslims. He notes that he has published several articles on Hemşinli Muslims and has added these articles to his archives. Due to his efforts Vartanyan has been recognized with the Armenian Writers Union Award. “I compile materials on Hemşinlis in Turkish as well. According to my calculations, there are up to 30,000 Hemşinli

Muslims in Turkey today. Even if most of them can not read and write in Armenian, they can speak the Hemşinli dialect. In recent years, Dr. Sahakyan examined 16th century Ottoman tax registers and published an article on the demographics and names of regions in Bayburt and Malatya. Nowadays he is focusing on Trabzon. He also has articles on Hemşinli Muslims that have been translated into different languages.”

Dzayn Hamshenakan (The Voice of Hemşin) has been published by of Sergey Vartanyan for the past six years.

Vartanyan, who worked for different newspapers in the 1980s, also found evidence of Hemşinli Muslims in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. He notes that most Hemşinli Muslims moved from the Black Sea region to Soviet lands (mainly Adjara and Abkhazia) either during the forced migration period (1915) or before it. Then the Soviets forced them and other minorities to migrate to Central Asia (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan). “In 1944, 1,385 Hemşinli Muslims living in Adjara [Georgia] were expelled to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan on the orders of Stalin. People from Trabzon’s Sürmene and Hemşin also came to these areas. In 1984 I found Hemşinli Muslims in Kyrgyzstan’s Osh and Kyzyl-Kiya regions. Then I found more in Kazakhstan. There were up to 3,000 Hemşinli Muslims living in Central Asia. I took their photographs and wrote down their stories, legends and songs. I published a portion of these in a book in 2009. I have thousands of archives.”

In addition to journalism, Vartanyan is also busy with publishing. Publishing letters and articles from Hemşinli people has become his second job. He wants to do even more. He wants to set up a new building for the newspaper, a publishing house so he can publish more on Hemşin and set up a museum on Hemşin culture. This is his dream. He also wants to see Rize and Hemşin. While he doesn’t travel to Hemşin, his newspaper does. And that is enough for him for now.

Andan Genç: ‘He is working to preserve the Hemşin culture’

“I’ve known my journalist friend Sergey Vartanyan for a very long time. I personally saw the trouble he goes through to publish the Voice of Hemşin newspaper last year when I went to Yerevan. He came across Hemşinli Armenians in Russia for the first time in Sochi in 1969. He then intensely researched Hemşinli people and the Hemşin culture in the central parts of Russia and in the Central Asian republics. He publishes his research and the papers of researchers who study this culture in the Voice of Hemşin. For the last five years he has been publishing the newspaper monthly. But sometimes it takes up to three months. He mails his new editions to his supporters in Russia, Abkhazia, Syria, the US, Lebanon and Turkey through his own means. My friend Vartanyan has also been compiling Hemşin stories, songs and legends since 1969. He also has some books that have been translated into Turkish. He prepares his newspaper in an environment that is reminiscent of the local press in Turkey. There are serious financial difficulties involved. But despite all the challenges and hardships he is working very hard to preserve the Hemşin culture and language. He does not have private funds and he finds asking for money inappropriate. He does everything on his own. He welcomes all kinds of support.”

Sources

Source : 05 May 2010, Wednesday