

Visiting Yaghdan: The last Greek village in Armenia

Yaghdan, Lori Province, Armenia -

Frontik Nikolayid was born in the village of Yaghdan in the Lori province. He later moved to Yerevan and today heads up the Greek "Pontic" NGO. Mr. Nikolayid knows the exact number of Greek-Armenians living in the capital city - 615 families, 1253 people. He also stresses, however, that there are very few pure Greek families, where the husband and wife are both Greek. "My wife is Armenian, therefore she is not part of that 1,253," Frontik says jokingly.

Armenia is one of the most monoethnic states in the world, where only 2.5-3 percent of the population isn't ethnic Armenian. Of the ethnic minorities that do exist in Armenia, the Greek community is unique because it has existed here for 350 years. During the second half of the 18th century, close to 800 Greek families moved from the Ottoman Empire's Gyumushan region and established themselves in the present-day city of Akhtala in the province of Lori and the surrounding regions. The Greeks were considered specialists in mining and for that reason they moved to these areas. In later years, some of them moved to the mining regions of Hankavan and Kapan, thereby spreading their knowledge of mining throughout Armenia.

"Our forebears came from the shores of the Black Sea, from historic Pontos and then Gyumashan. Our language is closer to old Greek and is different from modern Greek. Apart from language, our organization has arranged for Greek history classes twice a week at Number 132 School in Yerevan," Mr. Nikolayid said.

The number of Greeks in Armenia severely dropped after the 1988 earthquake. The Greek government invited over 300 Greek children, whose homes were damaged during the earthquake, to Greece. After staying in Greece for six months, when the children returned to Armenia in May 1989, they, along with their families and other Greeks from the village of Yaghdan and other areas affected by the earthquake, returned back to Greece for good.

The allure of leaving for Greece was justifiable. Aside from returning to their historic homeland, the Greeks were escaping a country that was becoming poorer and poorer and



Valentina Kerkhanacheva of Yaghdan.

collapsing daily into darkness. In those days, even Armenians were escaping en masse.

Thereby, the 6,000-strong Greek community by 1994 had diminished as a result of migration to Greece. The same phenomena occurred to the Greek community of Georgia as well. Here, once again, Armenians and Greeks lived side by side, primarily in the region of Tsalka. The Armenians and the Georgians referred to the Pontic Greeks as Bertsons.

At one time in Armenia, there were purely Greek or majority-Greek villages such as Yaghdan, Madan, Koghos, Hankavan, Shamlugh, and Akhtala. In 1922, the entire population of Koghos moved to Greece. Today, outside of Yerevan, it is possible to come across some Greeks in Gyumri, Stepanavan, Noyemberian, Vanadzor, Alaverdi, Hrazdan, Akhtala, and Shamlugh. But the only village that is considered Greek is the village of Yaghdan, found not far from Stepanavan. However, even there the Greeks are a minority.

Valentina Kerkhanacheva is the village head of Yaghdan. Today, there are 209 homes in Yaghdan, 89 of which are inhabited, while the others are empty and are already slowly decaying. Of those 89 homes, only 36 families are natives of Yaghdan; the rest have come from the surrounding areas, even from Yerevan, Vanadzor, and Alaverdi. In the 1990s, during the cold and dark years, people were moving from the cities to the villages.

The village head told us that during the Soviet years, there were only four ethnic Armenian families here; the rest were all Greek. "Today we have 238 inhabitants, of which only 60-70 are Greek and the rest Armenian who came from different regions and took up residence in the abandoned homes. Until 1936, the school in the village was a Greek school; then it became Russ-

ian; and after independence, it is now an Armenian school," said Mrs. Kerkhanacheva.

The residents of Yaghdan are primarily occupied with dairy farming and agriculture, cultivating potatoes.

A Greek village has also been preserved in Nagorno-Karabakh: the village of Mehmana in the region of Martakert, where there continue to live several Greek families.

The Greek government, through its embassy in Yerevan, provides different kinds of assistance to the Greeks of Yaghdan and other regions. "In 2005, through the funds supplied by the Greek government, a 1.5 km water pipe was built. Officials from the Greek Embassy visit Yaghdan from time to time," said the village head.

The Pontic Greeks, after living in Armenia for centuries, continue to retain their language, customs, and traditions, and after independence have managed to maintain close ties with their homeland, Greece.

The director of the Pontic NGO, Mr. Nikolayid, says that the Greeks in Armenia observe all Greek holidays, the most important of which is March 25, Greece's National Day.

"May 19 is the day Pontic Greeks commemorate the massacre perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire. Every year on that day, we go to Tzitzernakaberd. On October 28 we celebrate Okhi day; that is the day that Greece was able to throw out the Italian fascists from Greece. In terms of religious observances, we celebrate Greek Easter and Greek Christmas," he said.

For those Greeks living in Armenia, their ancient history and culture, their gods and mythology are a source of great pride. They are also proud of friendly Armenian-Greek relations, which has survived for centuries.

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