

# Hidden Armenians Coming out of the Shadows

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On a recent road-trip to eastern Turkey, where once the land belonged to Armenians, we visited Diyarbakir, one of the largest cities in the region with a population of close to one million.

History tells us that Armenians lived there close to 4,000 years ago up until 1915. Diyarbakir's old name was Տիգրանակերտ /Tigranagert or City of Tigran, named after the greatest Armenian king of all time who established his capital there—(first century BC).

In Diyarbakir, unknown to me, there was a very old citadel, built around 500 AD, standing strong right in the middle of the city. Our tour guide explained that the length of the fortress, which runs through the city was about 7 km. They are the widest and longest defensive walls in the world after only the Great Wall of China. It was constructed by emperor Constantinus II. I was stunned to see such a well-preserved construction still standing in the middle of a modern city. The walls were made of black stone and were about ten meters high. It has 12 towers representing the 12 apostles of Jesus. In almost every other city we visited during our trip, we saw old fortresses, but nothing to that extent and so well kept.

The city now also has a beautiful monument, installed in 2013, in memory of Armenians and Assyrians who were massacred and deported. The monument, made of white marble, was about 7ft high, shaped in the form of a burning book. On one page there was a weeping eye.

It was a meaningful structure. To me, the burning book represented our history, which was burning and disappearing and the weeping eye was an analogy for our sorrow.

After we snapped some pictures of the fortress from different angles and a group picture in front of the monument, the tour-bus proceeded to the old market place and dropped us there. We then walked to an old Roman church that was built around 600 A.D.

In Turkey, there are numerous churches that have been turned into mosques and that church was one of them. It had a courtyard with numerous columns of white stone and stunning Byzantine architecture.

We left the church and strolled along the storefronts of the market place. The picturesque display of the dried fruit was something to write home about. The use of dried pepper is very popular in Turkish cuisine and those were offered on strings hung in front of shops.

Peddlers were selling a special juice and attracted customers by ringing their metal cups. Baklava shops displayed their wares in huge trays. Vibrant colors and designs unfolded in front of our eyes in a kaleidoscope of colors.

We had lunch at one of the typical restaurants in the middle of the bazaar. The weather was balmy, but water sprinklers made the heat bearable. Instead of regular chairs, the restaurant offered “takhts,” or “divans”— traditional Middle Eastern wooden beds that are covered in carpet, with pillows to lean against.



**The Genocide monument**

The most important and anticipated visit in Diyarbakir would have been the St. Giragos Armenian Church, which was renovated in 2012 for 2.5 million dollars. However, the church

suffered extensive damage in the course of Kurdish and Turkish clashes last year. According to some historians, the church is the largest in Turkey and the Middle East.

Our tour organizer had tried very hard to arrange a visit to the damaged church, but he was unable to because the church has completely shut down. Not only is the entire area closed off with a police blockade, but the church itself has been heartbreakingly damaged during the ongoing Kurdish-Turkish conflict.

Instead, the heads of the Armenian community put together a reception for us to meet the diminishing Armenians of Diyarbakir.

After lunch, we boarded our bus and headed to a county club for the meeting. We sat around the long tables that were set up under the shade of mature trees. We could see, on the other side of the club, families enjoying the swimming pool and having a break from the heat.

We were as eager to meet the Armenians of Diyarbakir as they were to see us. About 20 had managed to join us. They were the descendants of the Armenians who were left behind during the Armenian Genocide. Most of them had assimilated within two or three generations.

Only some of them could speak Armenian, but we could understand each other by mixing some English and some Armenian. A few had kept their Armenian identity and the language.

All of them seemed excited to discuss their Armenian heritage. They were our compatriots, whom historians call “Hidden or Islamized Armenians.” As I spoke to a few of them, they had many stories to tell us.

I met Udi Yervant, who is a musician and plays the Ud. He spoke perfect Armenian, and told me that he often travels outside of Turkey and gives concerts.

A second hidden Armenian I met was Armen Demirdjian. Armen had no idea of his Armenian heritage until he was 25. But after his father died, elders from his village told him the truth. Demirdjian’s father had survived because at the age of four, he was adopted by a Kurdish family. He had taken his grandfather’s last name and had changed his name from Abdul Rahim Zorarslan to Armen Demirdjian.

In his 50s, Demirdjian seemed so enthusiastic about discovering his heritage and embracing it. He had learned to speak enough Armenian to carry on a conversation. His wife and six children still cling to their Kurdish background.

Then I had a chance to talk to Fatimah (not her real name) and her son. She was a government employee and didn’t want to jeopardize her status by giving her real name. She didn’t know how to speak Armenian, but her 16-year old son spoke English with a perfect accent. He said that he had learned English from video games. He was the second teenager I met in my travels who had learned English by playing video games.

Fatimah said that both of her parents were in the second generation of hidden Armenians, but didn't speak the language. However, they had passed the Armenian spirit to her. She belongs to an Armenian choir in Diyarbakir. She sang for us a beautiful Armenian song that she had learned in the choir.

My little research told me that there is no exact number for Armenians in Diyarbakir; however, thousands of Armenian either hidden or not may be living throughout Diyarbakir and the surrounding villages.



**Church at Çüngüş village**

The interesting news is that the generation that grew up as Muslims, after their grandparents had converted to Islam to escape persecution, are revealing themselves and coming out of the shadows.

After the gathering, we left for the village of Çüngüş, where 10,000 Armenians used to live until 1915. We stopped a few miles before the village at a ravine. Our tour guide said that was the spot where Armenians of the village were herded and thrown into the raging river beneath. Mathew Karanian, in his book "Historic Armenia After 100 Years," describes a scene about this horrible carnage.

One young Armenian girl, not more than ten years of age, stood at the edge of death. She was part of a group that had been marched to the ravine on one of the killing days—the day on which her Çüngüş neighborhood had been selected for this "deportation."

This girl was pretty, and she must have captured the attention of one of the Turkish soldiers who were herding the Armenians to their deaths. Her life was spared. At the age of ten, she became the soldier's bride.

Five years later, in 1920, a baby was born from their union. This baby, named Asiya, was raised in Çüngüş by her mother, a genocide survivor who had been able to remain in the home of her husband as one of the village's hidden Armenians.

Karanian had met Asiya during his pilgrimage in 2014 to Western Armenia. At the time she was 95 years old, and the last surviving hidden Armenian in Çüngüş. Asiya is one of the many who suffered in silence, never daring to disclose their past. But now things have changed.

Karanian says when I asked Asiya how she feels when she meets Armenian visitors from Diaspora. She responded, "I get happy as much as a mountain." That speaks volumes.

We arrived at Çüngüş at sunset, leaving us little time to visit the ruins of the Armenian church before dark. Besides the historical value that Çüngüş carries, we wanted to see the village, because the grandmother of Liza, one of our tour members, was born there.