

Meskhethian Turks in Fourth Land: Identity and Socio-economic Integration into American Society

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Abstract: This study examines the socio-cultural life in the new land and integration processes into the host community of the 75 Meskhethian Turkish households resettled in Denver, Colorado. The traditional homeland of the Meskhethian Turks, as one of the dozens, if not hundreds, immigrant communities living the U.S.A., is Akhaltsikhe, a district in the region Samtskhe-Javakheti within the borders of the modern-day Georgia. In 1944, the Meskhethian Turks were forcibly removed from their homeland and exiled en masse to various countries in Central Asia by the Soviet Union. A significant part of those resettled in Uzbekistan were transferred to the city of Krasnodar in Russia, after the Ferghana Events of 1989. In 2004, due to the conditions of resettlement, 12,500 Meskhethian Turks immigrated to the U.S, under a refugee program, and dispersed throughout 26 states. Using the methods such as surveys, in-depth interviews and participant observation with an integrated approach, this study examined the family and community social structure of the Meskhethian Turks currently living intensively in Denver, Colorado. The study illustrated their cultural aspects, and tried to identify the present day of the process of integration into the U.S. society, as well as to envisage the probable future of this integration.

Keywords: *Meskhethian Turks, Colorado, Socio-cultural Integration, Identity, Exile, Refugee, Diaspora.*

Introduction

Meskhethian Turks witnessed two exiles, four countries, three cultures, languages, politic and economic regimes, two religions, and two societal forms in only two generations. All of these transformations have also brought about rapid and painful social changes. This essay aims to examine socio-economic, cultural, religious and identical problems and happiness of Meskhethian Turkish community living in USA.

The Meskhethian Turks are a Turkish population that lived in the Akhaltsikhe (Ahiska) district until the mass deportation in 1944. The Akhaltsikhe district had

been one of the Anatolian provinces located in the east such as Erzurum, Artvin, Kars, and Ardahan, continuously for centuries at least until 1828. The said province is not today in the political integrity of the Republic of Turkey, and the people of this province don't live there anymore.

The Akhaltsikhe district is located across the Georgian side of the present-day borders of Turkey, and the Akhaltsikhe city is 30 km away from the Turkish border. The space's being so important is associated with the transformation of the world. Even short distances have gained importance in transition from empires ruling huge lands to nation states. Differences far beyond the geographical distance of 20-30 km have emerged between staying beyond the border and within the border. Many political, social, economic, religious, denominational, ethnic, and ultimately identity-related differences have appeared. Despite the unity in all other categories, even basic human rights could lose their basis with the border difference. In transitions from empires to nation states, many such situations sprang up in the world. Many communities from the same nation were divided into different nation categories and had to reorganize their lives within a very different political, social and cultural framework. Although this could lead to lucky results for some few communities, it resulted in involuntary mass migrations and eventually deportations for the majority (Karpas 2003: 11-20; Conquest 1970; Denisenko and others 2003; Mukomel 2005; Pohl 1999; Khazanov 1995; Martin 1998).

The Meskhetian Turks have become one of the many Turkish communities adversely affected by the aforementioned transformation of the world. This community became the Turkish population, but could not be included in the scope of the Turkish Nation. In simile, they may be described as orphans of the Ottoman Empire and Anatolia's stepchildren. Details inconsequential for post-Ottoman countries and other cities in Anatolia have led to great political and social adversities that are still not over for the Meskhetian Turks and probably will not end in the near future.

The Origin of the Meskhetian Turks and Exile

The Meskhetian Turks are the remainder of the two separate ancient Turkish communities that settled in Akhaltsikhe district before. The first is the Turkish community which stood in front of the Macedonian King Alexander the Great in his Caucasus expedition and was recorded as Bun-Turks in the sources, as



confirmed by the European and Georgian historians. Historians state that this expression means autochthonous-native Turks. The second Turkish community refers to the 45 thousand Kipchak families the Georgian King David II invited to fight against the Seljuk Turks and had brought from the north, in another expression dominant then from the *Dasht-i Kipchak*, between the years of 1118-1120 A.D. The Kipchak-Turkish population in the region increased with those who migrated under the leadership of Kipchak Khan Sevinc 70 years later. Further unrecorded mass migrations of Kipchaks to the region may have occurred. This concentration of population resulted in the establishment of the Kipchak Turkish Principality in Akhaltsikhe, Ardahan and Artvin in 1262 by the first Kipchak King Sargis with the support of the Ilkhanid ruler Abaqa Khan. This principality became the longest-lived Turkish principality of Anatolia that lived until 1578 when Akhaltsikhe became part of the Ottoman territories and the Kipchak Beys became governors and bureaucrats of the Ottoman Empire in the region (Zeyrek 2001: 6-40, 2006: 9-35).

From 1578 until 1828 when Akhaltsikhe was for the first time no more under Ottoman rule, it was an “Ottoman territory” and the Akhaltsikhe Kipchaks were the “Ottoman Turks” continuously for 250 years. They integrated with the Ottoman and Anatolian in all respects. The 93-year period between that date and 1921 when Akhaltsikhe broke away from the Ottoman Empire was the process of disengagement. During this century-old process of disengagement, Akhaltsikhe hovered between Russia and the Ottoman Empire. However, including marriages, Akhaltsikhe just like Ardahan, Artvin and Kars continued to be culturally a part of Anatolia until the forcibly deportation of the people in the villages of Akhaltsikhe in 1944 after the evacuation of the city center in 1828. Since the last Turkish soldier was removed from Akhaltsikhe by order of Stalin, the other meaning of referring to the Meskhetian Turks had become referring to the Meskhetian Diasporas living in distant lands outside Akhaltsikhe. Various regions of Russia, especially Krasnodar were brought to agenda first for the Meskhetian Turks in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan), and then for the ones in Uzbekistan, and finally the United States of America was raised for some living in Krasnodar (Wimbush and Wixman 1975; Swertlov 2006; Gunay 2012; Aydingün 2002; Laczko 1998).

Scope

The total population of the Meskhetian Turks living in the world today is estimated at 600 thousand. This population is known to disperse in 8 different countries. The states with the highest population of the Meskhetian Turks are respectively Turkey (190 thousand), Kazakhstan (170 thousand), and the Russian Federation (85 thousand). Other countries where the Meskhetian Turks live in smaller communities are Azerbaijan (50 thousand), Kyrgyzstan (45 thousand), Uzbekistan (25 thousand), Ukraine (15 thousand), and the U.S.A. (12 thousand) (Riyazantsev 2009; Seferov & Akış 2008: 401-406; Trier and Khajin 2007; Pentikainen and Trier 2004; Oh 2012). Thus, it is clearly impossible to study the whole of such a large and dispersed population even by any sociological method. However, some studies, albeit insufficient, on the Meskhetian Turks in Turkey, Central Asia, and Russia were and have been carried out. Nevertheless, there are very few academic studies conducted on the Meskhetian Turks who started to go to the United States under a refugee program in 2004 and whose population in the U.S. reaches 12 thousand today (Kolukırık 2011: 167-190; Aktaş & Buntürk 2007:129-142). Hence, this study is about the Meskhetian Turks living in Denver, Colorado in order to both limit the study to one of the regions where the Meskhetian Turks inhabit and to choose this limited area from the U.S.A.

Research Methodology

The universe of this research is limited to the Meskhetian Turkish community of 75 households who lives in Denver. In 2011, during the stay in Denver, Colorado for seven and a half months, the author had the chance to meet the Meskhetian Turks at least two or three days each week and to establish closer relations for six months. The Meskhetian Turks preserve their traditional culture as a result of being a rural community on the one hand and an exiled community on the other hand. As a requirement of this culture, the majority of the Meskhetian Turks in Denver go to mosque every Friday and assemble there for weekly public worship. Thus, for the author, this enabled collective meetings, talks and interviews as well as the creation of mutual trust. These times spent together both developed the acquaintance between the author and the Meskhetian Turks in Denver, and provided a unique opportunity to obtain quite detailed information. Moreover, the author attended their three weddings as well as having a picnic together once.



These occasions had a different significance, as being the most collective gathering of the Meskhetians in Denver.

The other time of gatherings was the holy month of Ramadan. Almost every day during Ramadan, one of the Meskhetian Turks hosted an iftar dinner. Extremely friendly environments were created, and thus the author had the opportunity to make detailed observations. Lastly, the author could meet and talk with the Meskhetian Turks through family and workplace visits several times.

In order to embody all of these observations and interviews, in-depth interviews were conducted with five Meskhetian Turks, one of whom was B.T from Samtskhe-Javakheti Region, Adigeni District, Bolajuri Village, and suffered the exile in 1944. Apart from this, a 55-item survey was applied to 22 Meskhetian families.

Thus, this study based on ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews as well as surveys used both qualitative and quantitative research methods in an integrated manner. Surveys alone could be misleading although concrete numerical data is provided by surveys. Therefore, it was deemed proper to appropriately include the ethnographic information gathered in seven months in the findings of the study. In order to avoid being uninformed about the research topic, the author was intertwined with the Meskhetian community in Denver. However, maximum attention was paid to the danger of *the self-identification with the research topic* which M. Weber raised under the method of *Verstehen* (interpretive understanding) during the ethnographic observations and interviews (Bozkurt 2006: 80).

Conceptual Framework: Migration, Exile, Asylum, Diaspora

From superficial point of view, the fact that the Meskhetian Turks left their places and started to live in other places and countries seems to be explainable with the concepts of migration, exile, diaspora, and asylum. How accurate this image is basically may be seen after the separate examination of these concepts.

Oxford English Dictionary defines "migration" (2000: 743) as "the movement of large numbers of people, birds or animals from one place to another". Karpat (2003: 3) refers to "migration" as "the movement from the original place to the desired one". These definitions include taking initiative, desire and willing. In that case, migration is the movement of a person, a group or a community of their own free will from the original place to another.

Oxford English Dictionary defines "exile" (2000: 404) as "the state of being

sent to live in another country that is not your own, especially for political reasons or as a punishment”. Thus, exile means that a person, a group or a community is displaced from their homeland, and not only that, forced to live at least for a certain period of time in the place where they are forced to migrate.

The same dictionary defines “asylum” (2000: 984) as “protection that a government gives to people who have left their own country, usually because they were in danger for political reasons” while “refugee” is correspondingly referred to as “a person who has been forced to leave their country or home, because there is a war or for political, religious or social reasons”. In this definition, there is a state of having to migrate due to various political, social and economic conditions for a refugee community. However, time and place of migration is largely determined of a community’s free will.

Oxford English Dictionary defines “diaspora” (2000: 321) as “the movement of people from any nation or group away from their own country”. Karpat (2003: 5) states that the term “diaspora” means “dispersion” in ancient Greek, and the main feature of this term is the idea of returning back to homeland which a community driven out of their homeland has. A considerable part of diaspora communities in the world today pursues a case for taking their rights left behind rather than returning. Given this situation, it is possible to describe “diaspora” in a more complete way as a community that struggles to return to homeland and take their rights left behind in the immigration country upon being displaced from their homeland.

Thus, under which concept or concepts the Meskhetian Turks who immigrated to the United States should be evaluated needs a brief explanation. Within the framework of the concepts whose meanings are given above, it is clear that the movement of the Meskhetian Turks from Akhaltsikhe to Central Asia in 1944 cannot be assessed under “migration”, and is an “exile”, since it involve involuntary displacement, the use of force and violence, and finally deciding where to go and as well as the period of time staying there determined by third parties. The movement of the Meskhetian Turks from Uzbekistan to Krasnodar in 1989 should also be considered in this context. Nevertheless, it is not possible to explain the third displacement from Krasnodar to the U.S.A. in 2005 under either exile or migration. This event is clearly asylum with its political, social and legal aspects, and the relevant Meskhetians are refugees. Last but not least, the Meskhetian Turks in the United States represent a potential diaspora community, like all other



communities displaced from their homeland. Although they do not want to return to Akhaltsikhe, they demand restitution of their rights from Georgia. When this actual demand becomes a political demand as a result of association and is brought to legal dimension, it will mean the establishment of Meskhethian Turkish diaspora. As far as observed, the process is in this direction. Thus, not immigration, but exile, diaspora, and asylum are explanatory concepts for the Meskhethians in the United States. Exile explains the recent past, asylum expresses the present, and diaspora indicate the possible future (Sarfran 1991).

Reasons of the Migration to the United States

The first three thousand of the Meskhethian Turks transported from Uzbekistan to Krasnodar were entitled to official occupancy right and identity, while the greater part of the rest was not (Zeyrek 2006: 161). For this reason, during the 15 years in Krasnodar, the vast majority of the Meskhethian Turks could not offer their children regular training opportunities, purchase properties, vote, and become the real owner of any goods they earned. Eventually, they lived almost an "illegal and unlawful" life (Koriouchkina 2009; Osipov and Cherepova 1996; Burke 1998; Lubarskaya 2004; Nikitin 2005). It would be appreciated how intolerable this made their life. For a long time, a solution was expected from Turkey, and a legal arrangement was made in 1992. However, this arrangement was not implemented to the desired extent. As a last resort, the Meskhethian Turks conveyed their status to the American authorities in Russia, and the U.S.A declared that it would accept up to 25 thousand Meskhethian Turks from Krasnodar as refugees. Only 12 thousand 500 Meskhethian Turks participated in this refugee program commencing in 2005, since the rest is known not to be able to submit necessary passport fees. In addition, between them, there was an opposition against the movement to the United States. Thus, those who had relatively sufficient financial means and those who wanted to go to the United States applied to the program (Prytula and Pohorila 2012).

During the research, the Meskhethians in Denver, Colorado were asked about the primary reasons that make the United States attractive. The majority (36%) of the participants ticked only the choice "It grants citizenship or occupancy rights to immigrants". This reveals how big a problem the "illegal and unlawful" situation in Krasnodar is in their eyes. Other participants deemed it suitable to sort

the choices. Meaning of all these responses was that the Meskhetian Turks went from Krasnodar to the United States in order to regain freedom and human dignity, but not to escape from destitution. In that sense, the immigration of the Meskhetian Turks to the United States looks similar to, for example, the migration of Armenians and Jews as the remainder communities of empires rather than the Irish migration. Finally, the United States of America has become the "Land of Freedom" for the Meskhetian Turks.

Demographic and Economic Structure

Roughly 12.500 Meskhetian Turks who migrated to the United States were settled in up to 60 cities in 20 states in groups of 100 to 200 households. The Meskhetian population in the U.S. is highly mobile since they have been randomly dispersed under a refugee program, and are still in the process of resettlement. After the first two years, every family migrated to cities which house their relatives and offer lower house prices and a favorable labor market. Particularly those working in interstate transportation have mainly this tendency. This group spends their life travelling in vehicles. They are not registered in the state economy. What matters to them are low real estate prices. To take an example, more than half of the 130 Meskhetian families settled in Colorado remigrated to other states and cities. Today, the Meskhetian population in Colorado has been fixed to 75 households with the comers from other cities. Another example is the State of Utah. While the first group settled in Utah consisted of 80 households, today that figure has dropped to 35. On the contrary, a Meskhetian group of 150 to 200 households were settled in the State of Ohio, but today that figure has exceeded 300. There are other two major states attracting Meskhetian population. One is Arizona, the other is Pennsylvania.

Many of the Meskhetian Turks living in the capital city of Colorado, Denver, and the remaining small group lives in the edge cities of Colorado. The origin of many Meskhetians in the United States is the northwestern district of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, Adigeni. While a part of the Meskhetian Turks in Colorado has been living in the United States for seven years, the majority have been there for six years, and the minority for five years. As can be seen from this information, the process of the migration to the United States was spread out over three years.



The Meskhetian Turkish families in Denver are combined and large families of 5.16 persons on average. The largest of the participant families consisted of 7 persons, and the smallest was a 3-person family. In almost every family, at least one married son lives and shares the same house with his parents, depending on the continuation of traditional large family structure. There are indeed economic reasons for living in a stem family which appears to be traditional protectionism. Especially for a refugee family who has just migrated to the United States, living in a stem family may reduce life costs two or three times and be an extremely attractive way. The research indicated that 58% of the Meskhetian Turks lived in their home, and that they made it possible to buy a home through this way. The fact that a family living in the U.S.A. just for 5-6 years owns a home indicates a highly successful economic development. For the Meskhetians, this success is the result of rural solidarity and large-family-type lifestyle brought to cities in the U.S.A. as well as other factors. All of the Meskhetian Turks living in Denver have at least one relative in the state of Colorado. Frankly, after exiled in 1944, the Meskhetian Turks adopted a closed society approach and entered into and endogamous marriage. Thus, almost all of them were found to be a relative of the other, albeit through affinity. Exiles and migrations turned the Meskhetian Turks from members of a wider society in Akhaltsikhe into *the Meskhetian Turk community*. In a way, the identity was horizontal and the geography was partial before the exile, while the geography became horizontal and the identity become partial after the exile.

The surveys have indicated that none of the Meskhetians in Denver, many of whom originated from Bolajuri and Chechla villages of Adigeni, have any relatives in homeland Samtskhe-Javakheti. Thus, the 1944 deportation clearly functioned as quite an *ethnic cleansing*. This geography was so cleansed from the Meskhetian Turks that there was no one behind. On the other hand, the Meskhetians in Denver have relatives in Turkey, Uzbekistan and Russia. The research shows that 12 families engaged in the surveys have relatives of 52 households in Turkey, 218 households in Russia, and 170 households in Uzbekistan. Having regard to the Meskhetian Turkish community of 75 households in Denver, it is possible to think that hundreds of relative families live in these three countries. The Meskhetian Turks in the U.S.A. can see their relatives largely by telephoning and travelling to these countries. Due to the remote distance, relatives outside the United States have not been able to visit them in Denver so far. Thus, the continuity of the ties of kinship is left to the discretion of the ones in the U.S.A. In

this sense, reciprocity has ended, which signals that kinship relations will get reflected in future generations less and less.

It would be beneficial to provide general numerical information on the income status of the Meskhetian Turks in Denver. Although the Meskhetians are a small community, income level may vary beyond existing social differentiation and social respectability. Since the Meskhetian Turks consider income status as a private matter, relevant information was received not through survey questions, but through in-depth interviews confirmed many times. Income groups may be roughly divided into five categories in terms of occupation and line of work. Those in the lowest income bracket receive monthly disability benefit of \$ 600. Their family does not have many members, so household expenses can be met through the additional income of a working member.

The Meskhetian Turks age 65 and older who receives monthly social security old-age benefit of \$ 600 may be included in this first category. The second category involves those who make 10 to 12 dollars an hour, work 40 hours a week, and receive an average monthly wage of \$ 1600. For families of this category, two persons working can meet household expenses. The third category includes those who drive a truck owned by someone else and make an average of \$ 4000 a month. The fourth category consists of those who work as a car mechanic and make 7 to 9 thousand dollars a month. In the fifth category, there are those who transport goods on their own trucks and are at the top of the pyramid in terms of income. They can make 8 to 10 thousand dollars a month on average. In addition, there are families who own their own business such as a pizza parlor which does not form an income group and is a single instance at least for now. Their average monthly income may exceed 8 to 10 thousand dollar after the first few years of survival.

Considering the Meskhetian families' monthly income ranging from \$ 75 to \$ 300 in Russia, the figures above are extremely high. As the Meskhetian Turks brought their rural working culture to cities in the U.S.A., generally all family members work and make money. As before, income is collected by the head of the house and spent frugally and in a controlled manner. As such, the economic recovery gains speed. For example, in case of two persons working in a family in the lowest income, the average monthly income would be \$ 3200, and the half could be spared. In other words, these families can save up to pay cash for a house within two or three years. In case of a third person working or a higher monthly income, it could be even sooner to buy a house. As a matter of fact, the research



indicated that 50% of the respondents had their own houses, and a large part of those who do not own a home raised the required amount and were searching for a suitable home (Borjas 2006).

Lastly, it would be beneficial to touch on the intra-community social organization of the Meskhetian Turks. Meskhetian Turkish social solidarity and organization is based on mechanical solidarity as conceptualized by E. Durkheim and *Gemeinschaft* as coined by F. Tönnies. It is the solidarity by similarities where primary relationships are at the forefront. Accordingly, the Meskhetian Turkish community in each state has two informal leaders, one of whom is religious and the other political. Religious leaders are more influential and called “eke” following the leader’s name. ‘Eke’ is an Old Turkish word which means elder brother or mature man. The Meskhetian Turks in Colorado have also two leaders who have been adopted by the majority of the community. A religious leader is the person who blesses people and is asked about religious matters, and whose words are listened to. *Political leaders* organize the community about more secular matters.

Culture and Everyday Life

It was determined that the Meskhetian Turks in the United States preferred to communicate only in Turkish at home at the rate of 92%. Here is a choice since the Meskhetian Turks speak the Uzbek language and Russian as well as Turkish. 8% ranked these languages from most to least frequently preferred for communication at home as Turkish, Russia, and English, respectively. Ethnic studies in the United States highly regard what language is spoken at home. A criterion for assimilation in the United States is speaking English at home (Thernstrom 2004: 52-53). Thus, it should be highlighted that the Meskhetian Turks are away from assimilation as of today and maintain their own culture codes. However, the first-generation immigrants called “foreign born¹” often continue to speak their own language. In this sense, there is not an extra situation specific to the Meskhetians. The second and third generations are the determinant.

In the light of research and observations, It is believed that the first

¹In the Literature on the Sociology of Immigration in the U.S., immigrants and expatriates are called “foreign born”, but not first generation. First generation is used for their children born in the U.S. Although this usage is also basically preferred in this study, the phrase “first generation” is sometimes used for those born outside of the U.S. in terms of the Meskhetian Turks themselves.

generation (foreign born) will achieve only economic integration, the second generation will achieve social integration, and the third generation will fully achieve sociocultural integration by retaining only the Turkish and Muslim identity (Costoiu 2008). Thus, the first immigrants will remain to be the Meskhetian Muslim Turks seeking asylum in the United States. As an identity, Turkishness is more dominant than Muslimism in this generation since they believe that Russia sent them into exile not because they are Muslim, but because they are Turkish. Although the continuity of a Turkish identity without Turkish language seems possible in the second generation, religious identity will come to the fore in the third generation and there will be American Muslims whose origins are based on Meskhetian Turks. In this generation, Turkish identity will have significance only between other groups of American Muslims.

Freedoms and Integration into the Socio-Political System

Social integration is achieved through socialization. Socialization is ideally possible in a certain age range (Manojlovic 2009; Costoiu 2008). To deal with this matter, it should be first accepted that socialization will never ideally come true for most of the foreign born Meskhetians. Thus, this should be considered as a matter of socialization of immigrants. The condition for the socialization of immigrants is that they can get in and join, if necessary, clubs and organizations. This is closely related to the perspective of society on the religious beliefs and culture of people trying to socialize. Therefore, the Meskhetian Turks in Denver were asked whether they had any difficulty in living their religious beliefs and cultures. 42% of the respondents stated they “had no difficulty” and the remaining 58% stated they “had certainly no difficulty”. This is an extremely high pleasure. In such cases, it is predictable that social integration will be rapidly achieved. The related research conducted in the United States revealed that social and even cultural integration accelerated in the absence of discrimination (Hing 1997: 167). In light of this information, it may be considered that the Meskhetian Turks in the United States will become rapidly integrated into the host society. The participants were also asked “Do you have a fear of exposure to discrimination because of your identity?”. 83% answered no and the remaining 17% said “certainly no”. This question was also asked about real life situations as “Have you ever been exposed to discrimination because of your identity?”. 8% stated that “they had been exposed to discrimination several times” while 59% answered “never”. The



remaining 33% said “certainly no”. Thus, the vast majority stated no discrimination was faced and they also felt contentment. In another question, the Meskhetians answered whether the liberal environment in the United States worried them about the identity of their children (Berry et al 2006). The majority of 58% answered “yes, it worries” while 25% answered “no”. The answer of the remaining 17% was “certainly yes”. Although it seems like there is a contradiction here, this is due to the disadvantages inherent in the survey method. As the Meskhetian Turks are a traditionally agrarian society consisting of persons who value faithfulness and gratitude, they make positive statements unless negative situations are clearly asked. They do not want to show an attitude or behavior that may be considered as a kind of “ingratitude”. It is extremely understandable. However, it was observed there were concerns about the identity and culture of their children in the future. In the last question in this context, the participants were asked to make a situation assessment whether they had ever observed any tendencies in their children toward American culture in everyday life after resettled in the U.S. 34% answered “yes” and 16% said “certainly yes” while 50% answered “no”. Half of the Meskhetian Turks observed serious changes in their children in relation to getting used and adopting the American way of life within 5 to 6 years. It was determined these observations worried the Meskhetian Turks who had a heartfelt desire to integrate into American society by being themselves in terms of identity.

Tendency to Maintain Religious and National Identity

The Meskhetians were asked how important is to protect the Turkish identity. 19% answered “important” and the remaining 81% said “very important”. In interviews and conversations, parallel statements and attitudes were repeated several times. As if they all agreed, the Meskhetians repeatedly say “What happened to us just happened because we are Turks” and emphasize that their national identity is the most important value. They were then asked in what way it would be possible to protect their Turkish identity. They all gave an assertive and inclusive answer as “Being Turkish in language, religion, culture and emotion”. With this answer, the Meskhetian Turks stressed that they did not intend to ignore any of their values. The Meskhetian Turks care each component of their identity and try to honor the month of Ramadan and the holy days and nights (Mirkhanova 2006). During these times, hosting dinners and reciting Surah Yaseen, the thirty-sixth

chapter in the Qur'an, are important religious rituals for them. The Meskhetians highly care to be all together in funerals, do what is necessary and then organize a meal program where Surah Yaseen is read. The Turkish Association in Denver may provide a venue free of charge for most of such activities. The author observed that several programs were organized almost every month in the Association. In this regard, Turkish Turks in Denver try to help their Meskhetian kin. For example, during the summer months, on the weekends, 15 to 20 Meskhetian children gather in the Turkish Association in order to take free courses of Turkish, folk dance and Qur'an. These events are just some of the images of cooperation, unity and solidarity. However, the author witnessed the Meskhetian children spoke English among themselves even in these places and noticed that some could understand Turkish but not speak sufficiently. The Meskhetians are proud that their children speak Turkish while their children speak English among themselves. This is a paradox indicating that the cultural difference between generations will be higher than expected (Aydingün 2002; Khazanov 1992).

The referred acculturation process works roughly in the same way for all immigrants. Foreign-born immigrants continue to speak their own language but also try to learn English, and then children of the first generation become bilingual, but their children, namely the second generation, speak only English (Hamberger 2009:8 ; Thernstorm 2004: 58). From the third generation, the young, with a rate of more than 50%, marry someone from different religions and ethnic groups. Afterward children from these marriages mostly feel themselves to be Americans as secular Protestant Christians. Thus, it is safe to say that the said process of transformation of culture and identity respectively happens as *linguistic*, *biological* and finally *psychologically*. This process is completed in three generations, roughly in 90 years. Except for extremely communitarian groups living in villages of the U.S. such as the *Amish*, there is almost no community that has been able to stay out of this general trend. In this regard, even in the Jews with the strongest intra-community ties, marriages with people of different religions and backgrounds have reached 50% in many parts of the U.S. (Dinnerstein & Reimmers 1999: 186-187). The Molokans who emigrated from Russia to the United States constitute a very remarkable example of it. These people who emigrated to America about a hundred years ago observed that the *liberal city environment* of the U.S. in the 1960s estranged their children from their traditional identity and collectively emigrated to New Zealand where they hope to better protect their identities (Türkdoğan 2006: 269). These examples may give extremely important ideas to the Meskhetian Turks in the U.S.



Is the Meskhethian Turkish Diaspora Possible in the U.S.A.?

Meskhethian Turks are one of the few 'exile' communities whose all members live away from their homeland in the world today. Thus, all the Meskhethian Turks are at the moment in the 'diaspora'. However, even in an undertone, any voice of the Meskhethian Turks about Akhaltsikhe has not been heard in the international arena so far. The Jews and Armenians in the United States and the Armenians in France are involved in diaspora activities to the extent that is an example for many ethnic groups living away from their native place. It is possible to say that the Meskhethian Turks also need similar international activities. Therefore, in this study, the Meskhethians living in Denver were firstly asked "Do you know what the Meskhethian Turkish Diaspora means?". While 70% did not know, only 30% stated they knew. It is clear that this rate is extremely low. Thus, it is out of question to expect an actual political activity from a community with an insufficient level of awareness. The author observed that the Meskhethians did not engage in any activity to establish an association or to be considered under the concept of diaspora. They need governmental or civil support to lead them. Although perhaps it is early yet, their rapidly improving economic situation may reach the potential to generate a considerable diaspora activity, in company with an awareness to be developed after a few years. Today the Meskhethian Turks have their own associations in only three of the 26 states which are Ohio, Arizona and Pennsylvania. On the other hand, there are two associations in the city of Dayton, Ohio, home to the largest Meskhethian population in the United States. These associations may be evaluated as a negative situation by primary approaches as they have been established as a result of the division of Meskhethian Turkish community. However, it may have positive results with the effect of increasing competition.

The Meskhethian Turks were also asked whether they deemed it necessary to make any endeavor, as a diaspora activity in cooperation with the Meskhethians in other parts of the world, in order to return to the home Akhaltsikhe or to claim compensation for their property left behind from Georgia. 10% of the respondents deemed it necessary and 60% deemed certainly necessary while 10% did not express an opinion and 20% stated it was not deemed necessary. Despite the positive responses of 70%, negative and neutral approaches constituting the remaining 30% indicate that the Meskhethians feel quite nostalgic for their native place Akhaltsikhe but do not deem it helpful to rake up the past. Thus, it was

clearly expressed in the in-depth interviews. Finally, the Meskhetian Turks were asked what their most important problems were then. A 75% majority of the Meskhetians checked the choice "To gain citizenship in the current country of residence and to be economically strong". The Meskhetians today are green card holders. Only children born in the United States and those who have completed the period of 5 years and passed the test could obtain U.S. citizenship. Thus, their primary objective is that all the Meskhetians may become U.S. citizens as soon as possible. Incidentally, only 17% of the respondents checked the choice "To gather in Turkey" and 8% "To return to Akhaltsikhe."

It is understood that the Meskhetians never think to return to Akhaltsikhe, although they want to receive compensation for their lands in Georgia. The same attitude was also expressed in the interviews and collective conversations, sometimes even more sharply. In a conversation around the table, someone said that "Georgia has been giving the Meskhetian Turks the opportunity to return back" and this caused their faces to change. A witty elderly member of the Meskhetians responded with a soft style that "Yes, it has been, but how? As becoming a Muslim Georgian not Turkish". On the other hand, another said much more sharply "We do not need anything" and did not allow the conversation to continue. When such issues were raised, they struck 'sensitive' attitudes literally conveying the message "What's the good of talking this?". As can be understood from the experiences gained, the Meskhetians wish to feel the dignity of the human being and to have 'the right to live' as a human being. When considering these basic and unignorable rights, the degree of importance of the concern for the homeland from which they were forced into exile 70 years ago is seen to be too vague. The Meskhetian Turks look utterly exhausted due to the disproportionate force which has been imposed on them so far and now aspire to build a brand new future on the basis of freedom (Ray 2000; Baratashvili 1998).

Conclusion and Future Projections

Today, approximately 12,500 Meskhetian Turks live in the United States. In this study involving the 75 Meskhetian households in Denver, Colorado, the processes which the Meskhetian Turks have been in from the exile in 1944 until now was treated under the concepts of exile and refugee, respectively. It was understood that these processes which appeared to be a migration in general



terms were in the nature of exile and refugee when examined in detail.

The Meskhetian Turkish refugees in the United States are potential diasporas as the Meskhetian Turkish community rapidly improving their economic and social situation. The study, however, concluded that such an actual situation was a long way down the road. Only for the continuation of traditional ties, the preservation of kinship, and the maintenance of the communitarian structure, the Meskhetian Turks in the United States keep in touch with the others in Turkey, Central Asia and Russia and aid their relatives especially in Central Asia and Russia financially and in kind.

The study carried out in Denver indicates that although the Meskhetians in the United States are physically distant from each other, they strive to be socially close. That is largely achieved. The fact that the social distance is short beyond compare is considered to be useful for the Meskhetian Turks to remain as a community. However, many of the Meskhetians in the United States are foreign born. Thus, it is doubtful that the social distance will be still short for those who were born in the United States in the last five to six years and are U.S. citizens.

In light of the data derived from this study, it is reasonable to assume that the first-generation American Meskhetian Turks will undergo a rapid transformation from community to society and largely lose their solidarity, and there will social distances between individuals and families. Thus, the Meskhetians in the United States will neither lead a secluded life as the Amish nor have community motivation as Jews. The resettlement form of the Meskhetian Turks, as a refugee group, in the United States eliminates the possibility of realization these two situations. For the Meskhetians, as from the first generation, being able to maintain their identity and culture and not to melt into the host country may be based on two stipulations. In present-day conditions, the first stipulation seems to create a diaspora community in the United States and to tighten the traditional identity with the mission of the political and legal struggle against Russia and Georgia. The second is to be socially integrated with the U.S. society but culturally to maintain community life.

The Meskhetian Turks who immigrated to the United States had to move through a variety of different transformations in one generation. Firstly, there was the local, national, and international migration. The migration from the homeland Akhaltsikhe in Georgia to Uzbekistan is local as it was to another Turkish and Muslim region, the one from Uzbekistan to Krasnodar is national, and the migration

to the United States is an international social mobility. Secondly, the Meskhetian Turks, in one generation, had to live under three different political regimes: the communist regime of the Soviet Union, Russia's transitional regime, and the United States' democratic-liberal open society. Thirdly, they had to undergo a transition from the agrarian society in Akhaltsikhe to the period of agriculture and trade in exile and then the industrial society in the United States. Fourthly and finally, they had to pass from the rural, closed and mechanical type of society to an urban, open, and organic society. All of these transformations have also brought about rapid and painful social changes.

The research result revealed that the Meskhetians were extremely pleased to have been accepted by the U.S. government under a refugee program. They are filled with gratitude to the United States. It may be an indicator of a quicker integration with the host society. First of all, motivated by this feeling, the Meskhetian Turks respect utterly the U.S. laws. It is safe to say that they will not have any problem in terms of legal compliance. The Meskhetians enthusiastically want to be involved in economic life. They will certainly have no problem to achieve that. The most important institutional barrier to social participation is language. It is seen that most of the first generation will never remove this barrier; however, language will be not be a problem anymore as from the second generation. It is safe to assume that the Meskhetian Turks will represent a pleasant aroma and nice richness in this diversity, should the U.S. society be likened to the Ashura dessert cooked in the American melting pot. The migration of the Meskhetian Turks to the U.S.A. will be advantageous to both themselves and the host society. Perhaps the United States' social dynamics and political power lie here.

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