

Living Azerbaijan in America

2004-03-15 11:00:50

History books refer to Azerbaijan as the first Turkish and Muslim republic ever founded. First Azerbaijan Republic, founded in May 1918, five years before the Republic of Turkey, was short-lived. It lasted for 18 months only. As the Red Army invaded the country in 1920, Azerbaijan had to join the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. From that year on, Azeri people had to wait until 1991 before they regained their independence.

Naki Keykurun was the National Security Chief around 1917, when the Bolshevik Revolution toppled the Tsarist regime in Russia. He joined the liberation forces during the chaotic environment after the revolution. Mr. Keykurun compiled his memories between 1905 and 1920 in a book titled "Memories from Azerbaijani Struggle for Liberation";

He is now a national hero. The house in Gence where he was born is a museum. Naki Keykurun came to Istanbul during World War I and met with Talat and Enver Pashas, both influential names of the time, to discuss organize the Caucasian region army under Nuri Pasha's command. He then went back to the Caucasus with the Turkish army and fought for the First Azerbaijan Republic. He also took office in the new republic.

After the Red Army invasion of the Caucasus region, Naki Keykurun relocated to Istanbul and passed away there in 1967. His deepest wish was to see his book published in English. His wish finally came true, thanks to his granddaughter Tomris Azeri, who lives in New Jersey.

Tomris Azeri is also the president of the Azerbaijan Society of America, the oldest association that was founded in Newark, New Jersey in 1958. The association has five branches in different states. The number of Azerbaijanis living in the US is estimated to be around 250 thousand. Most of this population lives around California and New York.

AZERBAIJAN IN AMERICA

In New York, most of the Azerbaijanis live in Brooklyn. They meet frequently for various activities. For example, commemoration of Haydar Aliyev, the Azerbaijani President who passed away recently and the March 21 Nevruz Festivities were the last two activities that that association organized. Located on Emmons Avenue, Baku Palace is the favorite meeting place of Azerbaijanis.

Tomris Azeri dedicated her life to the Azerbaijani community. This is her third term of presidency in the association. She says that she would like young people to take over the management of the association, but she chose to continue her tenure when the Azerbaijani Ambassador Hafiz Pasayev insisted. There are two more ladies in the Association. The board members are Sevinc Azimova, Zumrut Koskar, Enver Dincer and Feridun Bahar.

Ms. Azeri, continues her grandfather's mission. Once can come across her name in almost all contexts related to Azerbaijanis. She worked and succeeded- Newark and Gence to be declared sister cities. She sent the agreement drafted by the Newark Municipality to the Gence Municipality in April. In addition, she is also organizing a campaign to build a school in Gence. Ms. Azeri remarks that Azerbaijan was the first country in Central Asia to perform ballet and opera. She is planning to bring Azerbaijan ballet in order to perform in Newark.

WITNESSING HISTORY

During our conversation, Adile Hanim, Tomris Azeri's mother, says that she works as her daughter's secretary for the association. During her childhood and youth, Adile Azeri witnessed her father's struggle for the freedom of Azerbaijan. She is now 71. She remembers how they escaped from the Red Army and settled in Trabzon.

Her father left Azerbaijan before the rest of the family. Her mother was secretly taken from Batum by Topal Osman, one of the security guards of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. She vividly remembers the Trabzon days. "Everybody thought themselves as Ottomans. It was strange to say that we were 'Turks'. My mother grew up in a liberal environment in Baku, without wearing head scarves. People of Trabzon found this hard to accept but they learned a lot from my parents", says Adile Hanim.

The three of us continue chatting. At that moment, we happen to see a member of the family's third generation on the MTV's Room Raiders show on TV. Tomris Azeri's nephew Baycan is going inside two rooms of three young girls that she doesn't know. This is a show about young people inspecting other people's rooms in order to select the best candidate for them. When her grandson appears on the screen, Adile Hanim says "he could have learned better Turkish. I sent him to stay with his family." Eyes on the screen, we continue talking. We too are curious about Baycan's choice! Unfortunately after inspecting the three rooms, Baycan chose the ugliest of the three girls.

"WE MUST SAY NO TO JOHN KERRY";

Tomris Azeri says that the voters should be informed about the upcoming elections in the US. She emphasizes that Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, Democrat Party's presidential candidate, has voted against Turks on several occasions. Her most important observation about Senator Kerry is on 1992.

When the US Senate affirmed sending American aid to all post-Soviet republics, (resolution 907) Azerbaijan was excluded. "One million of our people became refugees as a result of the Armenian invasion of Karabagh. The US Senate penalized Azerbaijani people who had no homes, no school, no food. John Kerry was one of the leading Senators who voted against helping Azerbaijan. I think that those who care about Turkey and Azerbaijan should vote for someone other than John Kerry", says Ms. Azeri.

She reminds the voters that "we are living in the US. It is our choice. Should we care about our well-being in the US or should we think about the well-being of people where our roots are. I am ready to be hungry here, as long as Turkey and Azerbaijan are not

(April 2004, 12th Issue)