

**Meskhetian (Ahiska) Turks: Their History, Culture and Adaptation into
American Society: Baltimore Sample**

By

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my gorgeous, unique and embracing-hearted parents. My Mother Nilüfer who taught me unconditional love, patient and empathy. My Father Hüseyin who inspires me about working without getting tired, without grumbling, and diligently.



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Abstract

Meskhetian (Ahiska) Turks who are ethnic group have lived much of the last century in exile. As a result suffering is central to their current identity as Meskhetian Turks. First exiled from Georgia to Central Asia by Stalin in 1944, Meskhetian Turks are Turkish speaking Sunni Muslims. Currently there are an estimated 600,000 Meskhetian Turks dispersed over nine different countries including their homeland, Georgia. Originally exiled from Georgia to Kazakhstan, the Meskhetian Turks have been forcibly removed from Kirghizstan, and Uzbekistan, only to relocate to Azerbaijan, Russia, Ukraine, Turkey and America. In 2004, after America declared that they would accept Meskhetian Turks as refugees, 12,500 immigrated to America. By the end of 2007, almost 17,000 had settled in 66 cities across 30 states (including the District of Columbia). They continue to preserve their culture despite its difference from American culture. In the past they were exiled many times but Turkish culture has persisted despite challenges. Identifying as both Turkish and Muslims constitutes a big part of their sense of culture and collective identity. This paper was written to evaluate the adaptation period of Meskhetian Turks who came from a culture valuing collectivism to an individualist community found in the USA and is based on observations of and the interviews with Meskhetian Turks in Baltimore.

Key words: Meskhetian (Ahiska) Turks, Integration, Exile

Introduction

In 1944, Meskhetian Turks were exiled to central Asia from their homeland, Georgia, forced onto wagon trains by Joseph Stalin, leader of Soviet Russia. Even though it was not the first time they were banished, it was by far the largest and cruelest instance of deportation. What exile would be easy and less painful? One night in 1944, Russian officials came to the homes of Meskhetian Turks and told them to be ready in two hours to leave for safety reasons because Germans were expected to occupy in the area soon and Meskhetian Turks left their homeland, taking little with them. This German occupation never occurred. But Russia did annex them. Within two hours, they were traveling to obscurity and had little understanding where to go and did not know what will happen. The expulsion occurred with subhuman conditions in animal wagons. On a winter night, thousands of people living in more than 200 villages were forced to leave their homes and start what would become a deadly journey. They were only to take three days worth of food. They were exposed to intimidation and violence by soldiers and others. Pregnant women and elders were among those who died because of the cold. Russian sources indicate that 457 people died during deportation, but real numbers estimate that number to be higher. In some sources such as Zeyrek (quoting Sheedy and Bohr 1973, 1989) suggests approximately 30,000-50,000 people died during deportation and in the places of they exiled because of the harsh conditions such as cold and hunger, to which they were exposed. J.Otto Pohl (2000) claims that Stalin's exile was an act of genocide committed against 13 different ethnic groups.

Meskhetian (Ahiska) Turks are generally Sunni Muslims who speak Turkish,

and were previously located in Southern Georgia, along the Turkish border. Currently, Georgia is an independent country, but in its not-so-distant past, it used to be a part of Russia, and before that, the Ottoman Empire (Cicek and Karagoz 2014). Meskhetian was not an ethnic identity before the deportation in 1944. Meskhetia was the name of a place people lived following the deportation (Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Serdlow 2006). Only after deportation did this displaced community come to define their ethnicity as “Meskhetian (Ahiska) Turks” (Aydingun 2002). They have faced intense discrimination imbued with suffering during deportation and in exile. It is estimated upwards of 400,00 spread throughout the world after dissolution of Soviet Union. Currently 600,000 are estimated (Alptekin 2014:50) to live across eight different countries: Turkey (40,000), Kazakhstan (150,000) and Russian Federation (70,000-90,000), Azerbaijan (90,000), Kirghizstan (50,000), Uzbekistan (15,000), Ukrain (10,000) and USA (12,500) (Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Serdlow 2006; Alptekin 2014). There has been little research on the Meskhetian Turks who immigrated to USA as part of a refugee program in 2004 (Alptekin 2014; Kolukirik 2011).

This paper focuses on Meskhetian Turks in United States exploring in particular in three facets: 1) background and demographic information of Meskhetian Turks; 2) discussion about the differences in life experiences when considering social, cultural, religion, language, and ethnic factors 3) concluding remarks on the experiences and integration process of Meskhetian Turks who came from a culture valuing collectivism to an individualist community found in the USA In addition this paper will try to understand how Meskhetian Turks have

come to understand America in terms of welfare, daily life, culture and religious perspective. How have they integrated in a multicultural society? How does the protection of their culture affect the process of the integration in American society? I base my discussion on ethnographic observations on Meskhetian Turks community and its members who predominantly reside in Baltimore. I spent more than a year attending various events, including many participant observations I made at commemorative ceremony of 72nd anniversary of the exile in front of the White House, in the events that took place in the mosque and the cultural center in Maryland, in the head office of the Meskhetian Turks in DC and during the visits I made to the Meskhetian Turks' homes in Baltimore.

When I was having my undergraduate education at sociology department in Turkey, I heard about Meskhetian Turks from my professors without knowing their stories. Then I learned that one of my professors was studying on Meskhetian Turks while I was listening to his trip experiences to Uzbekistan and Kirghizia. They had not migrated to the USA yet in my first years in the university when I heard their stories from my professor first. My professor was carrying out a research about their life and adaptation process in Kirghizia and Uzbekistan at that time. However, next year his research was left unfinished because they had to migrate over. Later, after a while I had started my master degree in the USA, I heard about the mosque and cultural center construction in Maryland. Turkish people were in service in a small building before it was officially opened. I met the president of Meskhetian Turks Association in one of my visits there. The story, which I listened from my professor and caused his story, to be left unfinished found me here because Meskhetian Turks in Uzbekistan migrated to the USA at that time. I started to read the studies about them

after I learned their existence in the USA. I decided to carry out such research after personal observations I made during the events of Meskhetian Turks joined. I supplemented my observations with in-depth interview with five people: two men and three women, between the ages of 25-65. It is almost impossible to just be an observer in every event I join with Meskhetian Turks. The conversations I had with Meskhetian Turks who recognize and welcome the different faces around them and show great hospitality. It often felt like an interview as they started to tell me their stories without being asked. As a person who has listened to stories from different people many times over, the point I wondered most about was their life in the USA. I found that while they gave details about their stories of past exile, they did not tell about their life in the U.S, unless asked.

Meskhetian Turks let me inside their group very quickly because I am Turkish. Besides, they were very helpful to me because they thought that it might make people hear their voice. However, this well-intentioned help sometimes crossed the limits. It was not easy to listen three or four people at the same time. Although I really understood that they wanted to raise awareness about their suffering, it was a little bit hard for me to take notes on my indebt observations, because I was more like a participant. And my observations before I started this research were freer. Because when I joined the events of small groups, the process became more unnatural if they were aware of the fact that I was observing them. My observations got little interrupted because they caught me whenever they saw me to tell their stories one more time out of their sensitivity about not leaving any missing part. Furthermore, some of them could behave as if they were watching their actions during interactions. For instance, when a child spoke English, they told me that he had never done that

before instead of warning that child. But I had a chance to make observations without being interrupted in the big events such as commemorative ceremony in front of the White House, holidays, iftars in Ramadan. The ease their interfering attitudes brought to my research is that they told me everything without I asked them to and their patience and eager to tell was the most important factor that made my research easier.

Meskhetian Turks whose mother tongue is Turkish have a unique accent. The language they speak is an eastern Anatolian dialectic of Turkish due to the region of their homeland. I had hard times in understanding some of the words they said because of their own dialect and the accent resulting from learning the languages of the places they migrated. But the hardest side of their language was not to know the meaning of the idioms they used. I tried to ask the points I did not get as much as possible but I understood that it is not possible to be the active talker if you are talking to a Meskhetian Turk about the exile after a little while. So, I had a chance to ask the questions I had in my mind by getting in touch with the president of Meskhetian Turks Association via e-mail and phone calls. And the most challenging part in my interviews was that they never changed the flow of the story no matter what I asked to them. The people I had interview with told the stories according to their order. Even though they answered my question in the first two or three sentences in their speech, the body and conclusion part ended up with the pain and the sufferings they had.

Another difficulty was translating the interviews I made in Turkish to English without changing the real meaning. In addition, I had so little contact with the new generation, who was born here or came here at the age of 1-10-, another point I dwelled on during the interviews with Meskhetian Turks was what they do to teach their history to their children and protect.

Before I move to discussion of my findings, in the first portion of the paper, I discuss the existing literature and what we learned from other interview projects. In the second portion of the paper I draw from my research, which is based on interviews, observations focusing on how Meskhetian Turks maintain cultural identity. The paper will start a short summary of challenges Meskhetian Turks faced in the past. Then, I will try to explain and understand how these group having experienced multiple exiles in the past, have kept their identity in USA In addition, I analyze how they adapt or have been adapting in American society.

Map 1: Countries with Meskhetian (Ahiska) Turk Population

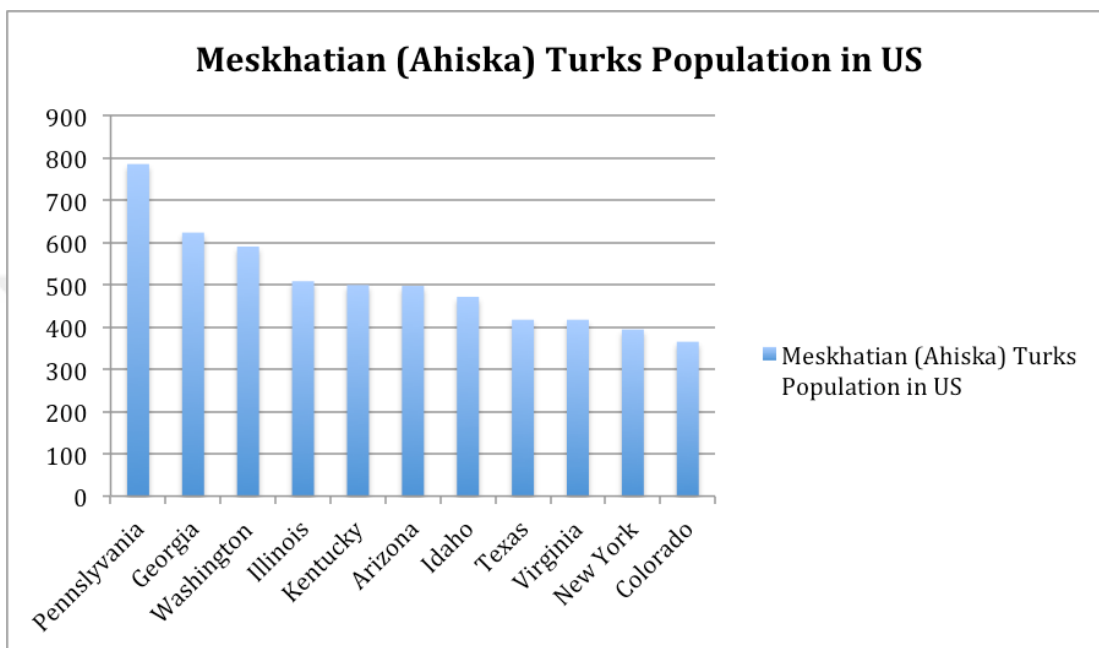


Source: Aydingun, A., C. B. Harding, M. Hoover, I. Kuznetsov, and S.Swerdlow, 2006. The Meskhetian Turks: An introduction to their history, culture, and resettlement experiences. Culture Profile 20:1-44

In 2004, the United States officially accepted 12,500 Meskhetian Turks from Krasnodar as refugees, almost 17,000 settling them in 66 cities in more than 30 states (including the District of Columbia) in the end of 2007 (Alptekin 2014; Cetinkaya and Kodan 2012). Officially, 25,000 Meskhetian Turks were able to participate in the refugee program but half were unable to pay the required passport fee (Alptekin 2014). Set this quote up more full The Meskhetian Turk have been in the USA for a decade

but are still in the process of settlement. Alptekin explains “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.” (Alptekin 2014: 54).

Chart 1: Meskhetian (Ahiska) Turks Population in U.S.



Source: Aydingun, A., C. B. Harding, M. Hoover, I. Kuznetsov, and S.Swerdlow, 2006. The Meskhetian Turks: An introduction to their history, culture, and resettlement experiences. Culture Profile 20:1-44

Although they have a background that is very different from the USA, they have been making an effort to adapt to American society (Cetinkaya and Kodan 2012). The challenge of adapting to a capitalist economic system is given their communist background (Alptekin 2014). This is further exacerbated by their forced migration. The Meskhetian Turks are not alone in their suffering. Many people and ethnic groups have been forced from their homes to other countries because of some political decisions like clashes of arms and ethnic cleansing (Oh 2006).

I. Background

While historically many groups have been exiled the situation of Caucasians is somehow different. Stalin's sending people into exile in 1944 was concealed from the public (Koriouchkine 2005). According to the 1989 Soviet census, 207,502 Turks were living in the Soviet Union at that time. This figure, however, does not reflect the real population of Meskhetian Turks, because "Soviet authorities recorded many of them as belonging to other nationalities such as Azeri, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Uzbek" (Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Swerdlow 2006:1). "There were 92,307 residents of five administrative districts of southern Georgia deported from the Caucasus to Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan), where they lived for approximately 45 years" (Pirtskhalava and Surmanidze 2015:100).

The deportation of Meskhetian Turks was kept hidden for years. The exact reasons for Stalin's removal of Meskhetian Turks last unclarified (Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Swerdlow 2006). It is mostly believed that Stalin regarded Meskhetian Turk's exile was to clean that strategically important region from Turks in condition of an invade by Soviet Union (Zeyrek 2001). "Some have also argued that Meskhetian Turks would have been a potential fifth column in Stalin's alleged plans to invade Turkey" (Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Swerdlow 2006:7). Apart from Meskhetian Turks, other groups including Crimean Tatars, The Malkarians, Chechens, Ingushetians and Calmucks were exiled for the purpose of an ethnic cleansing of the region from non-Russian groups (Mirkanova 2006). Today, they fight to preserve their identity. It became more difficult for people to continue living the Meskheta life after the Georgia territory was annexed to Russia a decision made by the Ottoman Empire and Russia, not the

Meskhathian Turks (Zeyrek 2001). This created much ethnic, cultural and religious pressure, as well as political strain by the Russian government (Pirtskhalava and Surmanidze 2015).

Despite facing all these difficulties, the Meskhetian Turks tried not to make cultural concessions, but the post WWII era proved to be a cruel and difficult climate for them. With the deportation of 1944, a total of 91,095 people were forcibly moved to Central Asia, areas known today as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and (until 1989) Uzbekistan (Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Swerdlow 2006; Zeyrek 2001). They were accused of betrayal in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and upon return to their homeland; they were restrained by the totalitarian regime. Unfortunately, they understood later that Central Asia was not the last destination to exile for them. Rather than having different challenging conditions in Central Asia, they also faced with a fear of assimilation (Oh 2006). Even though they struggled over time to keep their culture alive in Central Asia cultures, even a little, they integrated with central Asia cultures inevitably (Reisman 2012).

In the 1950s, on account of an extremely harsh dictator regime ending, all people who were punished by exile were allowed to go back to home, except the Meskhetian Turks (Mirkhanova 2006). They could migrate anywhere except some specific land that determined by the government, so some of them moved to Azerbaijan from Uzbekistan (Zeyrek 2001). People who stayed in Uzbekistan suffered an unfortunate fate. After some exiled Meskhetian Turks were settled in Fergana, Uzbekistan, in 1989 Ferghana pogrom, occurred in Ferghana Valley, which ushered in a new era and a second exile process because Meskhetian Turks

were not wanted there (Mirkhanova 2006). Many people were savagely killed and the survivors suffered from depression and deprivations of various sorts (Koriouchkine 2005). Thus, they were forced to move to Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Azarbijan and Russia (Yuzbey 2008). It is not easy for any society to be dismissed, constantly moving, and acquiescing others decisions many times over. Through all the injustices, the Meskhetian Turks never lost hope of one day returning to their homeland but once again they were met with yet another difficulty, the “Khojaly Massacre” occurring in 1992 (Buchanan 2012). Many lives were lost. Just as they had been getting used to living in the new location, they had to set off on another journey, traveling through the North Caucasus, Russian Federation, Ukraine, and Krasnodar (Koriouchkina 2005). They were aware of the danger in living in these areas, but they felt they had no other choices.

In 1992, Meskhetian Turks who were placed in Russia allowed to move to Turkey. Their hope to return to the homeland was aroused, but things did not start well for the people who lived in Ukraine and Krasnodar (a city in Russia) (Cicek and Karagoz 2014). Because they did not ultimately get a permission to stay in Krasnodar, the United States was forced to step in.

United States declared their acceptance of the Meskhetian Turks as refugees in 2004-2005. It is estimated that 25,000 Meskhetian Turks were accepted in the refugee program, but only half were unable to pay the required passport fee, so under a refugee program, 12,500 Meskhetian Turks in 2004, and almost 17,000 settling them in 66 cities in more than 30 states (including the District of Columbia) in the end of 2007 (Alptekin 2014; Cetinkaya and Kodan 2012). Thus,

with this opportunity many families who were living in the region of Krasnodar migrated to United States.

This journey started from Georgia and eventually reached Central Asia, Caucasia, Russia, Turkey and United States. The main reason of exile in terms of geopolitics was cleansing the South parts of today's Georgia from Turks and Muslims and annihilating the probable union with Turkey (Aydingün 2002). As of today, the problems of Meskhetian Turks' going back to earlier land (the one before 1944) continue to exist and the requests of non Russian groups in Caucasus about a democratic setting have been left to upcoming years. Starting from 1990s, Soviet Union was solved. Today, even though Georgia, which is independent country, does not let Meskhetian Turks come back for trivial reasons (Zeyrek 2001).

II. Meskhetian Turks' Culture, Identity, Religion and Language

According to Stuart Hall's (1990) description, cultural identity is a shared culture, some kind of a common only real identity, common identity of people who have common ancestors and history. In the light of this description, cultural identity reflects common historical experiences and shared cultural norms, which makes us a society. This union is more important than any other differences. For Meskhetian Turks, their common history is an important factor in constituting their cultural identity. Language and religion are also important factors in constituting cultural identity along with the history. Among the many aspects of culture, one can include history, geography, religion, language, traditions, norms, values and many more ideal and practical components that intertwine to create a cultural identity.

Some people regard Meskhetian Turks as a group who converted to Islam and started to speak Turkish at times when Meskhetia was governed by Ottoman Empire (Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Swerdlow 2006). However, after the exile to separate themselves more easily from other ethnic groups, they started to introduce themselves as Meskhetian Turk (Ziyanak 2014). They also were called by some other names in history such as Meskhetian Muslims, Georgian Muslims and Soviet Turks (Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Swerdlow 2006; Hasanoglu 2016; Pirtskhalava and Surmanidze 2015). Lastly about the last term as “Meskhetian Turks” among academicians and officials (Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Swerdlow 2006). Originally, Meskhetian Turk name includes three different groups Turks, Kurds and Karapapakhs. Meskhetian Turks did not know that they share same ethnic identities before their exile and the identity came into existence as a result of the 1944 exile and the interactive relation with these three different groups in central Asia. Also, this new identity was consolidated by the discrimination a Soviet state (Aydingun 2002). These groups all went through the same problems and they were under the same conditions in soviet regime. The three groups were all regarded as Turks by Soviet state as they spoke Turkish (Aydingun 2002). Thus The Meskhetian Turks preserve their traditional culture as a consequence of being exiled as a community (Alptekin 2014; Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Swerdlow 2006). Originally, Meskhetian Turks have a rural enclosed society. Generally they did agricultural jobs both in their homeland and the some exile countries.

Even though both they have faced with discrimination and forced to

differentiate themselves from other groups in the society and they have dealt with dominant society not to be assimilated by using their language (Aydingun 2002). Meskhetian Turks who speak with an Anatolian accent of Turkish language is a community of people who identify themselves as “Ottoman Turks”. Turkish culture is a dominant influence in their social life (Yuzbey 2008). “Shared language may demonstrate shared cultural components between Turks and Meskhetian Turks, yet one cannot assume a cultural connection as a result” (Bilge, 2012: 66). Their cultural values such as household, kitchen, dressing, family, wedding ceremonies, festivals and laments are similar to those in Turkey’s eastern part (Zeyrek 2001). Certain commonalities and strong similarities do exist between Turkish and Meskhetian Turkish cultures, such as food, music, clothing, traditions, values, religion, and, perhaps most importantly, language (Alptekin 2014; Aydingun 2002; Zeyrek 2001). They are loyal to their mother tongue and they give lots of importance to keeping their mother tongue and Turkish identity alive (Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Swerdlow 2006).

Religion plays a big role to preserve their ethnic identity for Meskhetian Turks are predominantly Sunni Muslims and speaks an Eastern Anatolian dialect of Turkish (Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Swerdlow 2006), but 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 (Alptekin 2014). Meskhetian Turks give importance to every element of their culture so they do not miss Ramadan month and other holy days (Cetinkaya and Kodan 2012). Ramadan Fest and the feast of Sacrifices are important religious festivals

and they practice every ritual on those days. They place importance on being together at the funerals and then from time to time host for dinners (Aydar 2015). On occasions requiring solidarity like death ceremonies, the participation is high. After the funeral, on the 7th and 40th days people gather again and eat a death dinner, which is a rich menu (Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Swerdlow 2006). In their cuisine one may see the impacts of South Caucasians and Central Asia (Aydar 2015).

As it was forbidden to learn about religion in the times of USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), they tried to preserve their religion with the help of mollahs (Zeyrek 2001). Mesketian Turks had problems preserving their religion because of those laws. Now, younger generations are developing a more religious participation with the help of broader opportunities in America and Turkey (Durmaz 2008).

The institution of marriage is important for them. Marriages among the community are supported and marriages outside the community are not allowed (Sakalli and Ozcan 2016). Traditional marriages take place in this way. Lots of the marriages occur as a result of elder people's arrangements (Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Swerdlow 2006). The commitment of family members is a very important part of their culture. In their traditional families, two or three generations live together. Every family has usually two or three children. The family elders live with the youngest son of the family.

The marriage celebrations start with asking for the girl's hand in marriage and then they become engaged. In wedding ceremonies, firstly there is a henna night and

at the end the marrying ceremony takes place. Marrying ceremonies last one day in general but sometimes they can last two days (Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Swerdlow 2006; Sakalli and Ozcan 2016). As a result of their culture, women are generally responsible for household. Women need to take care of the house and children even if they work outside of the house (Alptekin 2014; Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Swerdlow 2006; Cetinkaya and Kodan 2012).

III. As Immigrants in the United States

After Uzbekistan exiled Meskhetian Turks to Krasnodor some were given identity cards and residential permits but it were limited, so not all were not given them. Thus, other Meskhetian Turks living in Krasnodor could not send their children to school; vote and they could not legally own a property for 15 years (Mirkhanova 2006). They lived an illegal and runaway life (Demiray 2012). For a long time they expected Turkey to solve this problem (Alptekin 2014). After U.S agreed to accept 25.000 Meskhetian Turks as refugees from Krasnodar, Meskhetian Turks started to migrate there. They do not expect to be classified by the USA as refugees. As the USA government made an unexpected offers using particular language, they became refugees (Ziyanak 2014).

In research conducted by Alptekin (2014) in Denver, Colorado USA Meskhetian Turks were asked the reasons the USA was attractive to them for settlement. For 36% of the respondents, citizenship and residential permit was identified as the most important reason.’ It is not surprising because of their illegal situation in Krasnodor. The second option was ‘They respect humans and human values.’ the third option was ‘They give different ethnic groups the right to live among themselves.’ the fourth one was ‘It’s a free environment.’ ‘Its economical

status,” was identified as the least important. The survey shows that Meskhetian Turks are in the pursuit of freedom and humanity rather than economical well-being. Thus, Meskhetians feel grateful for United States because the government accepted them as refugees and help to create opportunities for brighter futures, hope and better living conditions (Alptekin 2014; Swerdlow 2006).

IV. Integration into American Society

Meskhetian Turks who ultimately immigrated to America were subject to dramatic upheaval and change, immigrating at local, national and international levels. The first immigration was from Meskhetia Georgia, the home country, to Uzbekistan. That was called local immigration because Uzbekistan was a Turk region and a Muslim community. Then, the immigration from Uzbekistan to Krasnodar was national and the immigration to America was international. Meskhetian Turks had to live under different regimes in a generation (Alptekin 2014). Soviet Communist Regime, Russian transient regime before settling under the US’s liberal democracy. Cultural transition was difficult because they were not familiar with those new systems.

Meskhetian Turks come from a religious closed society that is primarily collectivist. As a collectivist society, Meskhetian Turks have had difficulty adapting to an individualist society in America, yet they have enjoyed the relative freedom to practice their way of life. They could not have religious freedom in Russia but in America, the power of their Turkish identity and their being Muslims helped them to come together with the Turks there (Bilge 2012). Additionally, Meskhetian Turks who come from agricultural society, switched to agriculture-trade period at times of exile and then they had to switch to industrial society in America. They had to switch

from rural, enclosed, mechanical society to urban, organic society. All those transitions brought together some rapid and painful social changes (Alptekin 2014).

From 2004 onwards, the Meskhetian Turks who settled in different states of USA have been trying to overcome the adaptation problems among relatives (Swerdlow 2006), but the deportations they experienced, while traumatic also helps to promote resilience in existing in new cultures and societies. Thus, in adapting to the USA their experiences of previous exile helped them a lot (Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Swerdlow 2006). Meskhetian Turks give importance to their ethnic identities because of the negative experiences they had.

Meskhetian Turks have been taking good care of preserving their culture and language. They regard Turkish as the core of their identity and they see language as a way to exist (Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Swerdlow 2006). As Kim's 1988 (cited in Bilge 2012) writes, "Cultural identity of a refugee group plays a key role on their adaptation process." Most know Russian along with Turkish but English proficiency has developed slowly, especially among the first generations to settle here (Aydar 2015). Language often presents significant obstacles for immigrant societies. Thus, in adapting to American culture, language is an important obstacle for Meskhetian Turks. Most of the Meskhetians in USA know little or no English but they enrolled to English courses as they came to USA (Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Swerdlow 2006; Alptekin 2014; Aydar 2015). Among the interviews Bilge (2012) conducted, English seems to be spoken fluently by children going to school and adolescents but the working population tries to meet their daily needs with their limited English. In general, they can speak more than one language.

Multigenerational households have helped to ease the difficulties of

settlement. After they settled in USA they preferred to live in the same houses as three generations and to save money. Many faced problems are their limited language and limited transportation (Aydingun 2002). As public transportation is limited in USA the majority must buy their own cars. Meskhetian Turks had problems with that at first because they do not have such a necessity in their own culture (Alptekin 2014; Aydingun 2002).

Meskhetian Turks immigrated to USA also faced some health problems, contributing to a difficult transition. Because most of them came to USA as they could not afford their health expenses in Russia, they had health problems. A research conducted by Aydingun, Harding, Hoover, Kuznetsov and Swerdlow (2006) in Philadelphia, has shown that although Meskhetian Turks have different health systems from USA citizens, they adapted to the new system.

State governors have covered a notable distance in solving employment and education problems through appointed guides (Alptekin 2014). Almost all adult family members have a job and contribute to family budget. Men mostly work as truck drivers, car mechanics, and auto salesman, and civil workers. Women generally work in food sectors (Alptekin 2014).

Their traditions of birth, marriage and death continue to exist as they are and their activities among themselves create an impression of a little community. Their wedding and circumcision ceremonies are joyous and their hospitality is remarkable (Ziyanak 2014).

In general, each hardship brought by the new settlement is overcome with

solidarity. This solidarity is facilitated Turkish Culture Centers in towns and they organize some events together. Among those events are conferences, educational programming, feast and other social activities. Also, Meskhetian Turks in USA are known to be organized throughout the country at corporate levels and their organization will have a significant role in the representation of Turkish population (Kolukırık 2011). Meskhetian Turks who live in America keep their relationships alive with the Meskhetian Turks in Turkey, Middle East and Russia so as to keep their traditional bonds.

I have gained much insight about the struggles to survive and adapt for a group who has experienced multiple displacements and have lived almost a century in exile. The observations and interviews I made also support the literature and studies on Meskhetian Turks in many aspects. Meskhetian Turks, based on my observations actively protect their community, and their way of life through various events throughout the year. They established cultural centers in the areas where their communities live and all these centers are affiliated with the head center in DC. Thanks to these centers, Meskhetian Turks living in the USA are able to maintain social ties with each other easily. Many Meskhetian Turks regularly attend the events organized, which help them to maintain their bonds and enable cooperation. Through these centers, bonds have endured since they first migrated to the USA. Besides, apart from the centers in many states of the USA, other centers in seven countries that have Meskhetian Turk population are in communication with each other. As a nation away from their homeland, they provide the social tie in different geographical regions by the organizations they established. Especially the organizations in the cultural centers,

which strengthen the connection between the new generations. When I asked my interviewee Mr. Mehmet if they have any concerns about their life in the USA he told me that they are worried about their children forgetting about their culture:

“I am always worried if my children forget our culture. But we are so connected here. We have centers everywhere. We try to bring them to the mosque at weekends, you may have seen it, too.”

As the most significant ultimate goal of the centers and the organizations are to strengthen the connections between the new generations and keeping the Meskhetian culture alive, so they place so much importance on participating the activities and events:

“These activities are so important. We have Koran courses and different activities, they are always together. We have a big neighborhood in Philadelphia, they are much more crowded than us. We visit them because it is so close. We always try to get together. Actually I cannot say that we try, it is actually what we are. We are coded to be together even if we do not want to. I mean our life started like this. We all have the feeling that we should be together, we should not be separated from each other, we should not be assimilated.”

The tied provided by the centers also plays a vital role in aiding and keeping each other informed about their community. Meskhetian Turks who communicate and cooperate often organize in such a way that calls for the help and support of these centers and strong cultural bonds. Otherwise, every Meskhetian Turks that I had interviewed and visited their first or second degree relatives at least once a year because they separated to different part of the world.

Meskhetian Turks living in Baltimore still have two or three generations living

together much like other Meskhetian Turks despite economic hardship. The reason why they still live together despite the economic difficulties is due to tradition and their desire to forget the past and their identity so that they may pass it to the next generation. When I asked one of my interviewees Mr. Ali if they lived together with multiple generations or not he replied:

“Of course. The other way is not possible. Because we are away from our lands and mother, father and grandparents mean our root, our land. For example I have never seen Meskheta. I was born and grew up in Uzbekistan but I always listened the stories from my parents and my grandfather who lived in that time. Longing for homeland, Meskheta is still painful without seeing it or living there. Why? Because our elders always told us and never let us forget. It sounds weird to miss somewhere you have never seen, isn't it? I was born and grew up in Uzbekistan but I do not miss Uzbekistan. Because I always knew that I was a guest and I was always made feel like that. Now, one of my children was born in Uzbekistan and two of them were born here. I hope our parents will always be with us because the children listen and learn our history from them and feel it deeply. And our children our future”

Another interviewee Ms. Zeliha agreed stating:

“We live next to the other Meskhetian families. We are always together with them but we have never thought of moving our parents to the houses next to us. This is our traditional culture and a way of protecting our language and identity.”

Living in the same neighborhood also holds great importance in terms of passing the cultural heritage to the new generation and solidarity spirit. One of my interviewees, Mr. Mehmet stated that neighbor children always spend time together:

“They stand by each other. They have other friends from different backgrounds but every Meskhetian Turk is like a brother and sister for them.”

Mr. Ahmet, whom I observed and had interviewed, shared:

“One of my children was born and grew up in Uzbekistan until he was 10. We had a more crowded community in Uzbekistan and our ties with our neighbors and our relatives were so strong. Now I have a child born here. And the new generation gets married has kids. If you ask my opinion, if you have a lifetime chance, will you live in a place where Meskhetian Turks do not live, I say never. Because we have no other choice if our elders kept this bond by being together all the time. Our formula is obvious. Being together and united. That is why we did not think of another way different than our life in the USA.”

Mr. Mehmet did not disagree stating:

“My eldest child was born in Uzbekistan and experienced the exile even though she is too little. But it is too soon to talk about my little children. But I can say that we have photographs and books that tell our history at our home. Our elders keep on saying Meskheti. As our neighbor ties are strong, young generation spends time with our elders. It is like this in Turkish culture. We always spend time with our elders and learn a lot from them.”

For family elders living together and having Meskhetian Turks neighbors are a way of protecting and preserving their culture for future generations. Furthermore, their material goods including their house, Turkish literature, furniture and their arrangement, eating and living habits significantly contribute to this culture transfer. Turkey is a second homeland for Meskhetian Turks. As they lived under the sway of the Ottoman Empire, their language and culture are a reflection of Turkish culture.

They created their unique identity by adding the name of the place they lived “Meskhetia” before Turks. During one of my observations with Meskhetian Turks someone asks Ms. Zuhre who tells the story of exile if they are Crimean Turks. And Ms. Zuhre replies by raising her voice: “No we are not Crimean, we are actual Ottoman Turks.” The reaction of interviewee Ms. Zuhre shows their commitment to their origin and the fact that they come from Turkish. The Ottoman history is an important part of Turkish identity. Their commitment to a Turkish identity above all else can be deduced in part from their membership and commitment attending to Turkish mosques in particular, rather than any other Muslim mosque in the area.

From my interviews I learned they often visit the mosque and cultural centers in the religious center, which is affiliated to Turkish government, which just opened in 2016 in Maryland. Meskhetian Turks from different cities join the events by riding together and staying at the guesthouse of the cultural center. They are especially grateful if the mosque is affiliated with the Turkish government due to the strong ties to their homeland. Denied the opportunity to worship and without a mosque to attend. This is well captured in Ms. Zuhre’s comments:

“My girl (to me), I saw the mosque when I was 62. We did not know what mosque is. Because there was not any in Russia and as you know there were not any Turkish mosques here. Thank God this mosque was built close to us so that we can come to the mosque on our religious holidays. I can not tell you how happy I am because we were looking for a place to worship in Russia”.

A Meskhetian Turk woman whom I talk to in commemoration ceremony of 72nd anniversary of the exile in front of the White House says;

“We got so happy when the mosque is opened, we feel like in Turkey. But I wish there was one in Baltimore, the distance can be hard to take.”

She reports being grateful for religious freedom they have in the USA compared to the difficulties they had practicing their religion in non-Muslims countries they lived. They experienced the most severe discrimination and were prevented from practicing their religion in Russia.

“We were looking for a place to worship in Russia (Especially on religious holidays they have big worships, it is our tradition to worship together). We told them that we could pay for our worship. Even if we offered money they did not rent us a place to worship because they hated us so bad. We could not see a mosque, we were longing for it. We told them that winter is so cold we can pay for it but no one gave us a place. There was a spacious flatland in our village on a hill and we were praying there under the snow and rain. The polices came and questioned us to learn that why we gathered there. Then we started to gather at homes. We gather at the one whose house is big for tarawih and Friday prayers. For instance my house was big and we gathered there.”

Despite the hardships they had maintaining their religious identity, most of them did not give up practicing their religion.

The existence of different cultures and the embrace of religious pluralism the USA is an important factor for them. From the perspective of Meskhetian Turks, who faced a great deal of harsh discrimination before coming to the USA, the discrimination here seems minor. What’s more, they loathe discriminating themselves. The interviewee Ms. Zeliha expressed her appreciation about being free to go to the mosque, and her respect for different cultures. Islam phobia expressed in the USA seems relatively tame in comparison to what she had previously

experienced:

“There is the freedom which is always used to say the country of the freedom. People respect each other. Of course, there are some incidents, too. We hear about and witness them, nowhere is perfect but we do not question them due to their sincerity; at least we can go to the mosque to perform prayer. We are not alienated because we are covered. Some people talk about Islam phobia but my dear, I do not know if it is because we have witnessed racism, alienation so many times; I have never seen something like that here. They can see the real Islam phobia in Russia. My sister is in Russia and she has such a hard life. Shortly, maybe some things do not take our attention because we suffered a lot but we have peace here.”

Another interviewee Ms. Ayse elaborated on the same theme:

“They say that there is discrimination in this country. I do not know whether it is true or not because I we see it in the news. But if you ask me if I have ever lived or witnessed such thing, thank God, I have not. I am covered (My Muslim identity is obvious outside), I do not have a work life but I deal with my children’s school, we have kermises, we get together as parents for various activities; but I have never exposed to any implication or discrimination. I do not know, I feel happy about it here. I mean, I think like that as a Muslim I suffered a lot in a Muslim country (I do not event mention the difficulties our families living in Russia have). I have not had any problem about my religion practices or my appearance in a country majority of which is not Muslim, so if I were not happy I would be ungrateful.”

In all likelihood the difficulties they and their families had in the past led them to see their experiences from a different perspective. So, we are faced with a community who are thankful and this tempers how they views current discrimination.

Meskhetian Turks who are happy with their religious life in the USA are also content with the education system. While it has been reported that first generation

immigrants have undergraduate degrees while there is a decrease in education level of the society with the exiles. Even though Meskhetian Turks place importance on education, the discriminations they were exposed to and harsh conditions of exile limited their chances of having a good education.

Interviewee Ms. Zeliha asserted:

“We had such hard times in Uzbekistan. I had no chance to study. For example my father was engineer, he had even his graduate degree. We, Meskhetian Turks, give importance to education so much but we were hindered in Uzbekistan and Russia, especially in Russia.”

Ms. Zuhre:

“Unfortunately they did not hire us in Russia. I could not send to school my children, we were discriminated because we are Turkish. Unfortunately Russians and Turks had separate classes in school. There was no class separation in terms of levels. Every level was in the same Turk class. That was why our children could not get a good education.”

Meskhetian Turks in the USA seem very happy with the education their children have after the discrimination they were exposed to. In one of my observations, I asked Mr. Ali “if Turkish government opens a school here, will you enroll your children to a Turkish school?” and he replied:

“If the school at least has the same standards with the American schools, of course I will. But I will not send them just because it is a Turkish school. To be honest, I would look for the same education quality my children now have and I want to say that I would be very picky about it. (He is smiling)”

Meskhetian Turks are free to worship, they can eat foods they want and practice the cultural traditions they hold dear. This was well supported by each of my interviews. Consider one my interviewee “Mr. Mehmet” who explained when I asked him “Are you pleased with your life in the USA?” :

“We are definitely happy. My children can get a good education. We are not afraid of getting expelled. Do you know the importance of the laws? I am sure you know it but you can not know it as much as we do. Because the laws protect you. I know that I have right to live here, I have the documents. Two of my children are the USA citizens, nobody can change it. This feeling makes us happy. We can go to the mosque. Our women are free. There is no discrimination, isolation because the majority is immigrant here. I have Spanish colleagues and they have accents like us. We are both immigrants. This feeling makes me happy.”

Another interviewee Ms. Zeliha:

“We are so happy. Thanks God. We have not forgotten our traditions. We have not forgotten, yes we have not forgotten them anywhere we went but the effort we made in the USA in order not to forget is not the same with the effort we made in Russia. There is the freedom, which is always used to say the country of the freedom. People respect each other. Of course, there are some incidents, too. We hear about and witness them, nowhere is perfect but we do not question them due to their sincerity; at least we can go to the mosque to perform prayer. We are not alienated because we are covered. Shortly, maybe some things do not take our attention because we suffered a lot but we have peace here. For instance, it is easy to find halal meat here, we have Turkish markets. There is respect here, my girl. Our daughters and daughter-in-law study here. They have every kind of opportunities to improve themselves.”

Even though they have so many concerns before coming to the USA as a

generation who were raised under a communist regime with slogans against the USA, life got easier for them after seeing the peaceful atmosphere here. However, they never stop working for Meskheta.

The most remarkable thing about Meskhetian Turks who I came to know and about whom I read is that sharing their stories of struggle and suffering is central to who they are as a people. It defines them and their experience. What I found in the observations and interviews is they usually start to tell their stories without being asked. They always relate the conversation to their stories and tell what happened to them in the past and immediately express that they are Meskhetian Turks.

George Simmel's concept of 'stranger', explains the impact on the collective and inner life of those who have been displaced from their home and resettled in a new one. He documents the longings for homeland, the sense of suffering but also those who are exiled resolve the inner struggles arising from displacement. Edward Said methodologically realizes his own 'alienization' from the beginning, rather than trying to escape it he struggles to embrace it fully. His depiction captures what it is like to be an "alien". He shows how he can never be whole with those with whom he shared the same religion.

The interviews I did with Meskhetian Turks illustrate Said's claim. Their attitude while they raise their children and maintain their culture is fairly strict. They adhere to their cultural traditions, but they also felt the "alien" feeling in every culture they have ever lived in. Their exile has strengthened their adherence to their cultural traditions. In this sense they remain inward facing. Yet this suffering and exile has attuned them to the suffering and marginalization of others. And in this sense they are outward turning, willing and open to welcome those not like them into their home, to

share their culture, tell their story of suffering, and hear and appreciate the suffering of others. Because they have the freedom to practice their culture, they feel compelled to educate others about it. They do so in school, in friendship, over dinner and through their tale of exile.

There were no women who worked among those I interviewed. In fact, I realized that it does not result from the patriarchal understanding of ‘women do not work, they stay at home’ thanks to Ms. Zuhre explained: “I worked for 18 years like this as a woman. Because there was no job for men, no one hired men. My hands were swallowed and I wrapped them with ice at nights.” They worked so hard and got tired in the past and after they came to the USA, most of them found job and they did not experience the same degree of economic difficulty.

Conclusion

First generation Meskhetian Turks, preserve their identity and culture and as a result, they have been slow to into American culture (Alptekin 2014). They preserve their language because they are afraid of the next generations to lose their mother tongue. In the USA Meskhetian Turks have physical distances between each other but they do not have social distances. They are bound together. Geographical factors are very important for a sense of community solidarity. While ties to home no matter, regular communication, shared rituals and strong tie between a people is what remains most important. People who start to live in an unfamiliar environment put a lot of effort in adapting to the new environment and creating a tradition. Keeping their traditions alive is an important way for Meskhetian Turks to preserve their identity.

The most salient elements of the interviews and observation with the Meskhetian Turks is their sharing of stories of suffering and displacement and their

efforts to ensure other generations remember their history and remain committed to their cultural identity as Meskhetian Turks, and keep their history. Their narrative of exile and suffering are powerful tools central to community cohesion and group identity. These stories are also central to the intergenerational transfer of cultural knowledge. They do not present a self apart from their stories in any conversation they have. In each observation I conducted and conversations I had they repeatedly mention that they are Meskhetian and they have lived a lifetime of exile. Their exile is central to who they are as a group, how they orient themselves to other groups, and the culture commitments they continue to make.

They have embedded the concept of exile in their history. One of the reasons for this situation might be the fact that they are still in exile. Even though they consider Turkey as their second homeland. Meskhetian Turks care about and highlight their Turkish identity. Despite the fact that the majority has never seen Meskheti, their patriotism endures.

It was not easy for Meskhetian Turks who have never forgotten their Muslim identity to perform their religious necessities. Especially they were exposed to discrimination while they were living in Russia, which is a non-Muslim country. Even though it is a Muslim country, when they were living in Uzbekistan especially women could not go to mosque. Their women first saw a mosque in the USA and had a chance to perform their religion. It is a priceless happiness for them to have mosques around and performing their religion freely. But particularly, opening of the Turkish mosque and cultural center in Maryland is so significant for the Meskhetian Turks living in this area. They always express their gratitude for the Turkish mosque and state. It is true that Meskhetian Turks who lived under many different nations for all

their lives feel comfortable most in the multicultural USA. Even though they had so many concerns about language, culture and religion difference, their concerns lessened radically after they came.

Meskhetian Turks have strong ties with each other through their centers they established even though they live in different states in the USA. Besides, the bond between the Meskhetian Turks not only in the USA but also from all other countries is so obvious. Solidarity and being union are so important for them. As they have not lost the spirit of union, they never give up going back to their homeland and missing their country even though they live in different countries and many years passed.

They state that they are grateful with their life here even though at first they were afraid to live in the USA after the sad adventure starting in Uzbekistan and then continuing in Russia. Longing for the homeland is an unrelieved pain for Meskhetian Turks who describe their life in the USA as peaceful and secure. Regaining their religious freedom in the USA after being unable to practice their religion in Russia is one of the biggest factors that make them thankful for. Meskhetian Turk who could not go to mosque in Russia state that even though they lived peacefully with the Uzbeks who share the same religion with them after settling in Uzbekistan, they still felt the pressure of being a foreigner. The laws and the pattern of the USA, which consists of immigrants from many different countries provides them a more comfortable and secure place.

Their consciousness of exile and their concerns about their future continue to exist. However, this situation seems to decrease in strength due to their achieving citizenship right and right of establishment. Another facilitating factor is the bonds

like neighborhood, religion, language and family. Those bonds make it easier to keep solidarity alive.

Their adaptation process still continues. New generations are supposed to have a better life in terms of economy and education. However, it is not certain how much effort the new generation puts. The first generation switches to society life from community life, which can create problems in their solidarity and connectedness. It is debated how much they apply this rule to the new generations who are born in their new countries. Said (2000), claims that he could neither be a neither Western nor Eastern Intellectual, talks about how he never could find a home for himself. This attitude of Said made Meskhetian Turks who live in America think about their children's future. To which extent can Meskhetian Turks prevent their children to be affected by the dominant culture they live in? To what extent those children can stay as Meskhetian or continue as Americans?

After spending months with this group I have found them to be warm, welcoming and proud, but they still mourn loss. Being in exile includes the hope of going back to their homeland one day. Edward Said (2000) always says that hope, to some extent, is harmful. If it weren't for that hope, accepting and moving on would be much easier. I deeply understand now that I have examined Meskhetian Turks' 73 years of exile. A community burns inside with a hope in a foreign land. The longing to go home, even within those who have never been to their home. That hope may never fade away; because exile is torture. Exile is neither becoming nor disappearing, exile is a longing and an enigma.

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