

aware that their origin is different from that of their neighbors. They are the descendants of a group of Armenians headed by princes Shabouh and his son Hamam Amatuni, who fled north to the Khachkar Mountains to avoid Arab persecutions in Vasburagan. Isolated and semi-independent along the Black Sea coast and in the Pontic Mountains since the eighth century, they developed their unique culture and vernacular which is a distant dialect of the Armenian language. They practiced Christianity and followed their own diocese, the Diocese of Khachkar. Their name is derived from that of the town Hamamshen ("the town of Hamam") which they originally settled. Hamshen or Hamshin is the distorted form of Hamamshen. The Armenian principedom thrived until the fourteenth century and the beginning of the Ottoman domination. Hamshen was destroyed in 1489 by the Ottoman army, and its last prince, Davit, was exiled. Beginning in the sixteenth century and especially during the eighteenth century, as a result of the Sublime Porte's policy of forcing conversion upon the populations of the vast Ottoman Empire, assaults and persecutions increased. Hamshen Armenians too were forced to convert to Islam. Those who did not, fled to the northern coast of the Black Sea to seek Russian protection in that Christian empire. From there, they spread further into Georgia, Armenia, and Central Asia. Those who fled only as far as the western parts of the Ottoman Empire, to Ordu, Samsun, and Trabzon, became victims of the 1915 Genocide.

There is, however, an interesting recent development in the state of the Hamshenlis (as the Turks call the Hamshen Armenians). After centuries of total adherence to Islam and a remote consciousness of their ancestry, they are becoming