

The Volga's Children - Turkey

by Alina Lehtinen- 27.08.2012

Mornings in Osmaniye, a tiny village in northwestern Turkey, are so calm that even a light whisper could disturb the silence. Turkeys (hindi, as in "Indian" in Turkish) are running on the dirt roads frightened of the newcomers. A few children ride their bikes up and down the main street, for there is little else to do.

Here, there is none of Istanbul's heavy traffic and none of the street vendors yelling their daily offerings of discounted vegetables and fruits. Instead, there are the roosters' occasional cries and the chirping of grasshoppers. The fresh and dry air is a medicine to any lungs filled with Istanbul's dust.

"It doesn't rain much. That is why we can only have sheep, turkeys, and chickens. There is not enough food for bigger animals," said Irfan Bitik, a retired economist who spends his summers in the village.

Osmaniye is approximately 233 kilometers from Turkey's capital in Ankara and 330 kilometers from Istanbul. It looks like any other village in Eskişehir province. Yet many of the residents express their unique identity.

Many of the villagers are Volga Tatars. The ancestors of the Osmaniye Tatars fled their homes in the Volga River Basin in what is now Russia due to lack of religious freedom and vicious discrimination. They founded the village that would become Osmaniye in 1893.

"My family came here in the late 1800's. They couldn't practice their religion freely back home," Ravza Melle said. Standing next to her house while surrounded by cherry and apple trees, flowers and few bee boxes. "Everything here is organic," she says.

Yet Osmaniye is already losing its unique identity as a Volga Tatar village, mostly due to mixed marriages and a lack of interest from the young generation to keep the culture alive. Most of the Tatar villagers have already migrated to the cities, and now the culture is in the minority in Osmaniye.

Osmaniye is one of the only Volga Tatar village left in Turkey. There are 30-35 families living in the village all year around. Temperatures in the winter are extreme and can sink to well below freezing. The population seems to drop with the temperature in the winter time, but fewer come back each spring with the blossoms. Most of the villagers are retired, and there only few children living in Osmaniye.

"Now at most there is only one child per house. If this continues the village will disappear," Ferhat Aktaş, a 65-year-old Tatar man who grew up in the village.

In the nineteenth century, many Volga Tatars first arrived to Istanbul by boats. However, they claim now that they considered the city's lifestyle too sinful, so they left to create their own villages to raise their children. Most of them good farmers and for many years they made their living of land. The area around Eskişehir reminded them of the Volga due to its steppe-like flatness. "Turkey welcomed us. We didn't have problems coming here," Melle's sister Seviyye said.

Yet, the Tatars' longing for their homeland is obvious from the songs written during that time. Even now, many of the older Tatars yearn to visit Tatarstan to see the place where their great grandparents came from. However, the young Tatars living in Turkey are less eager to visit their roots and most of them don't even speak the language. "You cannot learn Tatarça anywhere. There are no Tatar language courses in the country," said Aktaş.

"When you don't speak the languages, you can't sing the songs. You cannot explore the culture in the right way," said Ravza.

Sule Baykal, like many young Tatars in Turkey, doesn't speak Tatar but understands it well. She feels more Turkish than Tatar, but she realizes the importance of preserving her dying culture in Turkey. Baykal is thinking about joining the young Tatars annual meeting in Kazan, but she is worried she cannot connect with other young Tatars due to a lack of common language.

Aktaş has dedicated his retirement to strengthening Tatar culture in Turkey and is trying to get the younger generation more involved. He is a member of the Tatar board in Eskişehir. Around ten years ago the board began organizing a Tatar festival every summer in Osmaniye. The festival has brought more young Tatars to the village and helped them to get more connected to their roots. Still, much more work needs to be done to stop the culture from disappearing in Turkey.

"Young people are more interested in other things," Aktaş admits. However, he sees light in the end of the tunnel. His son has a young child and the family is dedicated to educate his granddaughter on Tatar culture. ★

