

D'Erzeroum à Erzindjan , de Kars à Van....

finally reached Erzerum where Seljuk culture was established after the battle of Manzikert in 1071 and the final entry and establishment of the Turkish tribes in Asia Minor. The atmosphere in Erzerum was very religious and conservative. I was able to locate Sanassarian Armenian College, confiscated by Kemal Ataturk, where he proclaimed the resolutions of the Erzerum Congress in 1919, long threatened by the desires of the subjugated Armenian and Greek nations for liberation and autonomy and the Great Powers using these desires to fulfill their imperialistic ambitions.

The host at Sanassarian College received me with enthusiasm and emotionally explained to me the significance of the Congress for Turkey. I told her I was Greek. She told me we were brothers and greeted me warmly. I then asked her where the Armenian church of Erzerum was. At first she looked at me with some suspicion, but then she showed me the way. She asked why I was looking for it, and I told her that I admire Armenian architecture and culture and wanted to photograph it. She subsequently gave me directions to a beautiful Armenian home in the center of Erzerum, now serving as a museum of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. She told me the building originally belonged to an Armenian family and was very beautiful. It was clear to me that the most beautiful Armenian buildings had been confiscated to serve the needs of the newly-formed Turkish government due to their aesthetic value and functional capacity.

I went from Erzerum to Erzincan after visiting Surp David Abrank with its magnificent khachkars still standing on the top of the mountain. These were magnificent stone sculptures with carved symbols that served as a medium between humankind and the divine. The use of stone to express such emotional and spiritual needs is reminiscent of the most ancient civilizations.

Further west to Erzincan and in the Kemah gorge, the natural topography is magnificent. The Euphrates river flows in a serpentine way among the mountains of various geological shapes and colors, probably a result of eroded compact lava formations.

I had entered upper Mesopotamia, which had given birth to the most ancient and important civilizations. It occurred to me that the Armenians are probably the descendants of the ancient Mesopotamian people, still surviving, who had learned after years of experience to carve the stone and precious metals.

I remembered the documentary "The River Ran Red" and was imagining how this beautiful place would have looked in those dark and notorious days of 1915 when one of the multiple crimes against the

Armenian inhabitants was committed or how it would have felt to live at that time.

From Erzincan I drove to Kars, one of the ancient Armenian capitals, after Artashat, Tigranakert, Vagharshapat and Dvin. I visited the magnificent Kars castle and the hill beneath it where the prosperous Armenian population was once settled. The beautiful Armenian cathedral with the stone-carved twelve apostles had narrowly escaped destruction. I climbed up the hill to an abandoned Armenian church. The settlement on the hill had been destroyed. In the city's museum I saw a picture of old Kars which reminded me of Harpert. It is typical to find Armenian settlements on the mountain slope under ancient Urartian castles - Kars, Harpert, Van, Palu, Yerevan, among others. It serves as proof of origin and historical continuity. I also found ancient Urartian pottery and the magnificent carvings of a wooden door from an Armenian church before its demolition. While there I met some Turkish visitors from Istanbul who informed me the door was Russian to which I responded that it was Armenian, not Russian.

Kars and Van testify to the activity of Russian expansionism which took advantage of the Armenian's aspirations for liberation. The Armenians, abandoned by the Russians after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, were left to the wrath of the retaliating Turks. Kars had a strong sense of the Armenian-Russian tradition with its classical architecture reminding me of Gyumri and the tuff (porous rock formed by consolidation of volcanic ash) architecture of Yerevan. The cities of Kars and Gyumri encircle Ani and bear its architectural and cultural tradition.

