

A small church service in Diyarbakır signals bigger reconciliation

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Surp Giragos' restoration was widely supported by Istanbul Armenians, although the Turkish Culture Ministry, Diyarbakır's Sur Municipality and diaspora Armenians also contributed to refurbishing the church.

Harkening back to Diyarbakır's cosmopolitan past, diaspora Armenians and clergy held a small service in a local church Saturday in what many hope is a harbinger for a more multicultural future in the southeastern city.

"The sounds of the call to prayer and church bells will mix here on this land from now on," Diyarbakır Mayor Osman Baydemir said following the service at the restored Surp Giragos Church. "There were major sorrows experienced in the past. We [condemn] the heartlessness of those days in our hearts and we want a new start."

"Diyarbakır was a multicultural city in the past but we lost a lot with the 'monist' policy with the [Turkish] Republic. To be able to resurrect social peace, lessons should be learned from the past and history needs to be encountered. Kurds want to live together with and embrace those populations that [hegemonic actors] set at loggerheads with each other," Diyarbakır Sur Mayor Abdullah Demirbaş told the Hürriyet Daily News, adding that he was very pleased to be able to host the guests.

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Noting that Sur Municipality had recently printed Armenian poet Hovhannes Tumanyan's "Gatil mi Meghr" [A drop of honey] in Armenian, Demirbaş said: "Tales for children, history for adults; we are giving back to what belongs to this land by looking after languages."

Baydemir greeted visitors with carnations in his office immediately following the service and said he was conscious that they had been rather late in doing something for Armenians.

Meanwhile, Archbishop and Deputy Patriarch Aram Ateşyan said, "It is a start that Diyarbakır Armenians come and visit the land they have been born. We hope it [this trend] continues."

Defined as the largest church in the Middle East by some experts, the historic Surp Giragos Church will host a more grandiose service in October. Along with the representatives of Armenian Apostolic Churches from all around the world, representatives of sister churches and leading names from the diaspora are expected to form part of the large congregation.

'Telling the world about Anatolia'

Among the diaspora Armenian group of about 20 professors, historians and businesspeople that attended Saturday's service was world-famous lute maestro, Armenian-American Udi Yervant, who is also known as Yervant Bostancı.

Born in Diyarbakır and visiting his hometown after a 19-year break, Bostancı said: "I have yearned for the

land I was born in for years. I am not a diaspora Armenian: Not for one moment has my country left my soul and my heart. I live in Los Angeles but my songs tell of Anatolia to the world.

“I was never able to become a [true resident of] Istanbul, and I am not able to become an American. I have always lived in Diyarbakır and still live there. I wish people were able to live and die in the land where they were born,” he said.

In a special evening event organized by Baydemir for the diaspora Armenians, Bostancı took the stage and performed several songs in Turkish, Armenian and Kurdish.

Coming from Toronto, former Istanbul resident Raffi Bedrosyan said some difficulties occurred while collecting donations from diaspora Armenians for the church’s restoration.

“They did not want to donate money for the restoration of this church because they thought it prioritized Turkish and Kurdish interests. The diaspora is still living the trauma of 1915,” he said.

Last Armenian in Diyarbakır

The last Armenian to have lived in Diyarbakır, 81-year old Sarkis Bedrosyan, said it was a special feeling to see Surp Giragos with his own eyes once more.

Expressing his happiness that the mayor was able to host them, he said: “The mayor talked about a truth that was forgotten in this city. The Armenian past was mentioned; that was extremely important.”

The Istanbul Armenian businessman who started the church’s restoration process, Diyarbakır-born Ergün Ayık said he was happy but added that he wished there had been more support for the church.

The total cost of the restoration is around \$2.5 million; once the church is open for services its annex buildings will host several culture and arts projects.

Sources

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