

Meskhetians Make a New Life in Georgia

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A small group of Meskhetian Turks have made their home in Georgia, barely noticed by their neighbours.

On the road to Samtredia in western Georgia there are huge fields behind rows of ferns. There are horses, sheep and cows grazing on pastures. Shepherds in shabby clothes and their dogs watch the cattle. Almost unnoticed, far away on the horizon stands a row of identical two-storey houses.

The 26 houses, known by the unglamorous title "Plot 9 in Ianeti," are home to a small community of Meskhetian Turks, whose plight - and desire to return to their Georgian homeland - has become a major international issue.

The poorly-maintained road ends right by the gate of the first house. Everyone leaves their door unlocked, since no one has ever stolen anything here. It's just after midday, and the village is silent - not a soul anywhere. At this time of day, women are trading at the market, men are working in the fields, and the children are at school.

There is only one building in good repair in the village, the secondary school, where 45 young Meskhetians study the Georgian language and other subjects. They only started learning Georgian recently, and they have been given Georgian names which they use at school. The school was built two years ago on the orders of President Eduard Shevardnadze, and was named after him.

In the daytime, since the village has no shops, the school is the only place buzzing with life. If you want to meet the people who live on Plot 9, you should head straight there.

The Meskhetian children are beginning to assimilate into Georgian society, in a way their parents are not. They say they love football, school, and their teachers. Thirteen-year-old Muzafa Ino - his Georgian name is Zura Jincharadze - is a big fan of the Tbilisi football team Dinamo. "My brothers and I tell each other secrets in Georgian, and our parents understand nothing," he laughed.

The young people also like watching soap operas dubbed into Georgian. The Venezuelan serial "Wife of Judas" is particularly popular. "Our parents don't understand Georgian; their kids translate it for them," said Georgian-language teacher Manana Ketiladze.

Plot 9 in Ianeti looks like a small island - the Meskhetians lead a quiet and isolated life behind their green wall, avoiding contact with the outside world. Many residents of nearby Samtredia have never even heard of the village.

To a large degree this is because the Meskhetians speak only a dialect of Turkish. Very few older people speak Georgian and Russian. At first, teachers and pupils communicated only by gestures. "Sometimes we had to stage entire shows," said 26-year-old teacher of Georgian Manana Ketiladze.

"Once I was explaining a phrase from a poem, 'the hawk carried away the chicken'. As the kids didn't understand the word 'hawk' in Georgian or Russian, I tried to act it out. I screamed so loudly that the kids were amazed. Then I 'stole' one of them and took him into the corner. I showed how I was going to gut him and eat him up. Then I chirped like a chicken. That must have been the last straw. The scared kids ran out of the room, and it took me a while to persuade them to come back."

"Despite their poor knowledge of Georgian, they jump at you if you call them Meskhetian Turks," said Vazha Kokhreidze, head of laneti village administration. "They tell you they're more Georgian than you are."

The Meskhetians have had a tragic history. They come from Meskhetia, now usually referred to as the Samtse-Javakheti region in south-western Georgia. "Meskhetian Turks", the most commonly used term for this community, actually describes a number of small ethnic groups which share the same religion and historical fate. They generally prefer to call themselves Ahiska Turks.

The group was deported en masse by Stalin to Central Asia in 1944. Tens of thousands of them left Uzbekistan, where many lived, after violent clashes in the Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan in 1989. They are now mostly scattered throughout the former Soviet Union, especially in Azerbaijan and southern Russia. Estimates of their numbers range from 60,000 to 200,000.

Only about a thousand have returned to Georgia, despite a promise the government made when it joined the Council of Europe in 1999 to allow all Meskhetians willing to return to the country to come back within 12 years.

The first Meskhetians came to Samtredia of their own accord in 1975. Gradually the small settlement grew. In Soviet times there was a small cattle farm on the territory of the present-day village. "People are private farmers now," said Vazha Kokhreidze. "Meskhetians live like Imeretians [east Georgians]. They have neither gas nor electricity. Like the locals, they don't pay their land rates or utility bills. But they do have fertile lands, a school, cattle, a policeman, and a doctor. Their birth rates are also high - out of 16 infants in laneti as a whole, 12 are from their community."

The community counts itself as Muslim. "Rather, we are half Muslims," said 57-year-old Telman Eristavi. "There is no polygamy here, and we drink wine-with pleasure, but in moderation. The women are the bosses in our families. This is because they bring money into the house, and they're the ones who manage it."

Eristavi noted that his community still faced a few insults, "Georgians call us Turks, the Turks call us Gurdjogly [son of a Georgian], which is very offensive. We are just like Georgians, no worse than them. Talk like that has to stop."

But the two parts of the same village, Meskhetian and non-Meskhetian, have been out of touch for years. Local people either know nothing about the return of the Meskhetians, or they look at them with suspicion.

As the Georgian parliament has not even passed legislation on repatriation - the first of its obligations to the Council of Europe - it does not look as though attitudes will improve any time soon.

Residents of Plot 9 did not want to comment on the problem, except 71-year-old Beglasha Mamedov - known to everyone as Grandpa Pavle - whose story encompasses the Meskhetian odyssey over the last 60 years.

He speaks pure Georgian with an Central Asian accent. "I was born and grew up in Borjomi. In 1944, Stalin deported us from Georgia to Russia [i.e. the Soviet Union]. What were we to do? We started to settle down. When I finished building a house, they resettled us again, first to Tashkent, then to Baku. From Baku we came back here to Georgia.

"We've lived in laneti for six years. We're building a house again, but we are afraid-what if they drive us out again? This is how we live, scattered all over the place. I've got five children, they all live in different places. Some of them I haven't seen for 15 years. Will I ever see them again? Allah only knows," said Grandpa Pavle.

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