



# The Kurdish Voice of Radio Yerevan

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# Outline

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# Introduction

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- Despite the fact that Kurdish is the largest minority language in Turkey, since the establishment of the Turkish Republic, governments have systematically issued policies to eliminate Kurdish language and deny the existence of a distinct Kurdish culture.
- Radio Yerevan, or as Kurdish people refer to it, *Radyoya Rewanê*, served as a bridge between Kurds and their culture throughout the second half of the 20th century when Kurdish language and cultural expression were banned by the Turkish government.
- What inspired me to start a journey into the history of Radio Yerevan's Kurdish broadcasts?
  - The stories of and travels with my Kurdish Alevi friend
  - *Leylo Xanê*, one of the songs frequently played on Radio Yerevan.



**STRANÊN ARŞÎVA  
RADYOYA ERÎVANÊ**



**LEYLO XANÊ  
HOVHANNES BADALYAN**

**DEUTSCH KURDISCHES  
KULTURINSTITUT**

Excerpt from the song *Leylo Xanê*

Source: *Deutsch Kurdisches Kultur Institut*

# Key Terms & Definitions

*Dengbêj*: Kurdish singer-poet

*Kilam*: Recital song in Kurdish

*Navenda Çanda Mesopotamia*: Mesopotamia Cultural Center, a chain of Kurdish cultural centers in Turkey existing since the 1990s. The centers organize a range of cultural activities.

**Radio Yerevan**: the Public Radio of Armenia (Kurdish: *Radyoya Erîvanê* or *Radyoya Rewanê*)

*Stran*: Rhythmic song in Kurdish.

# Literature Review

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“ *Invisibilization is the deliberate removal, or concealment, of the overt signs of the existence of particular culture, with the aim of rendering that culture invisible. It is part of the logic of invisibilization that the policy and its implementation remain covert, because overt formulation would mean increased visibility* (Haig, 2014, p. 3). ”

Geoffrey Haig (2014) provides a comprehensive analysis of the political mechanisms that were established to suppress the Kurdish language. He argues that these mechanisms were a process of invisibilization toward the Kurdish population, aiming to assimilate them by destroying one of the most crucial cultural components of Kurdish identity, the language.

# Literature Review

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- Wendelmoet Hamelink's (2016) doctoral dissertation, *The Sung Home: Narrative, Morality, and the Kurdish Nation*, analyzes the role of Kurdish dengbêjs as storytellers in the preservation and continuation of Kurdish language and culture. Here, Hamelink provides the socio-political context in which the dengbêj music evolved, and the cultural shifts that altered the role of the dengbejs throughout time.
- In the first episode of *The Kurdish Edition* podcast by Sardar Saadi (2018), he presents a historical overview of Kurdish radio programs. This overview presents facts along with short analysis about the very first Kurdish radio program that existed in Red Kurdistan, a Soviet administrative unit that existed from 1923 to 1929, moving on to Radio Baghdad, the Kurdish radio in Cairo and Radio Yerevan.

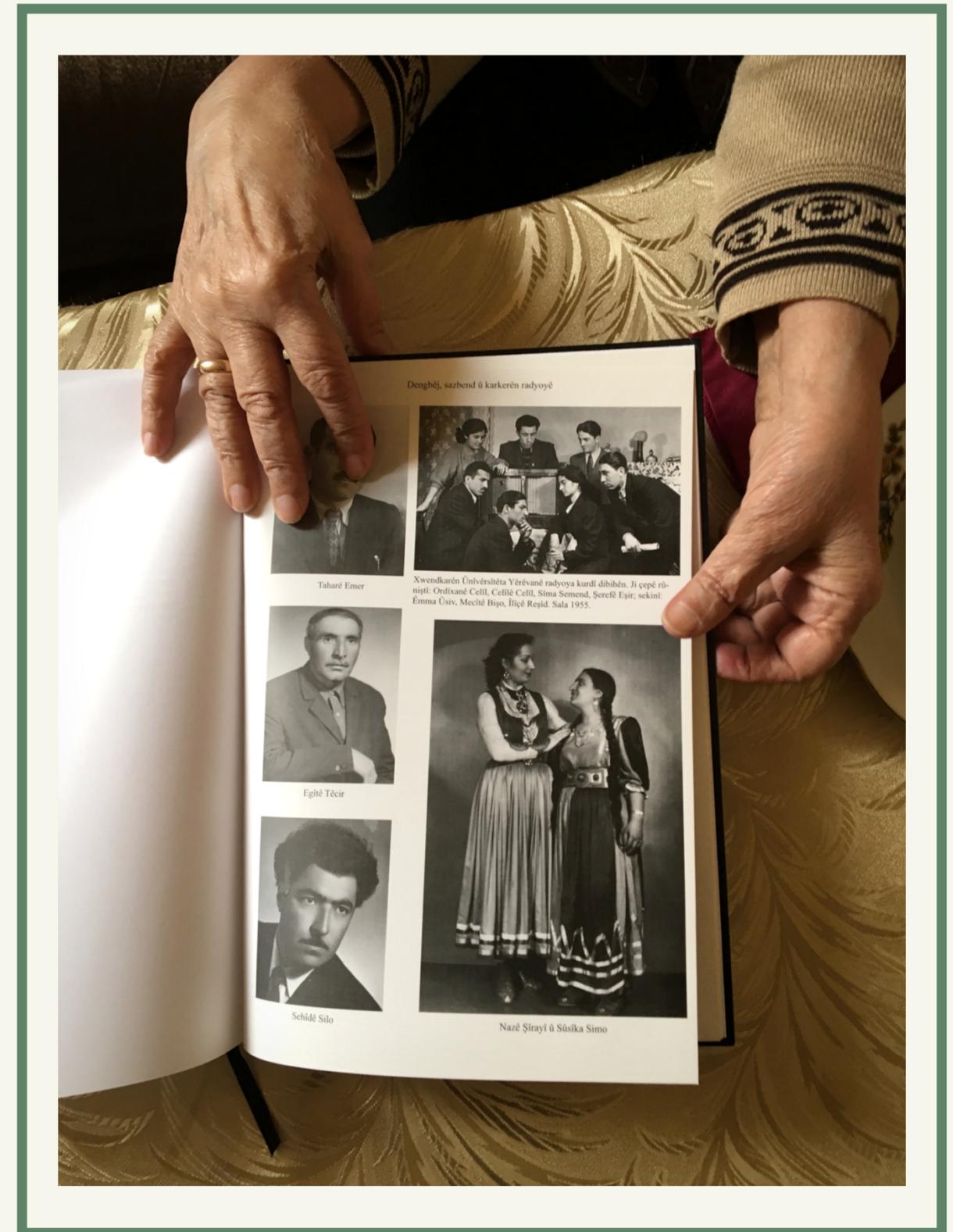
# Literature Review

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- *From shameful to public voice: Women dengbêjs, the work of pain, and Kurdish history (2016)* by Marlene Schäfers focuses on the role of female dengbêjs in the preservation of oral history and the social constraints that silenced them for decades. Contrary to the common belief that the dengbêj tradition has initially been a male one, she argues that "originally, it was women who mastered the art of singing *kilams*" (p. 1).
- Metin Yüksel's dissertation titled *Dengbej, Mullah, intelligentsia: The survival and revival of the Kurdish-Kurmanji language in the Middle East, 1925–1960* (2011) examines the transformations that Kurmanji, the northern dialect of Kurdish, went through between 1925 to the 1950s. He is particularly looking at how, in the absence of a Kurdish nation-state, Kurds were able to preserve their language. He also makes references to the Celîl family.

# Methodology

- My project is based on qualitative methodological approach close to oral history, where I attempted to reconstruct the past through my interviewees' memories and experiences.
- In-depth interviews with Cemîla Celîl, the daughter of Casimê Celîl; Titalê Kerem Choloyan, the editor of Radio Yerevan's Kurdish broadcasts today; Abdulgani (Kurdish: Xenu), a *dengbêj* from Erzurum and Ahmet Kaya, a doctor and musician who is one of the co-founders of the Kurdish folk-rock band *Koma Amed*.



Cemîla Celîl showing photos from their family archive printed in one of her books.

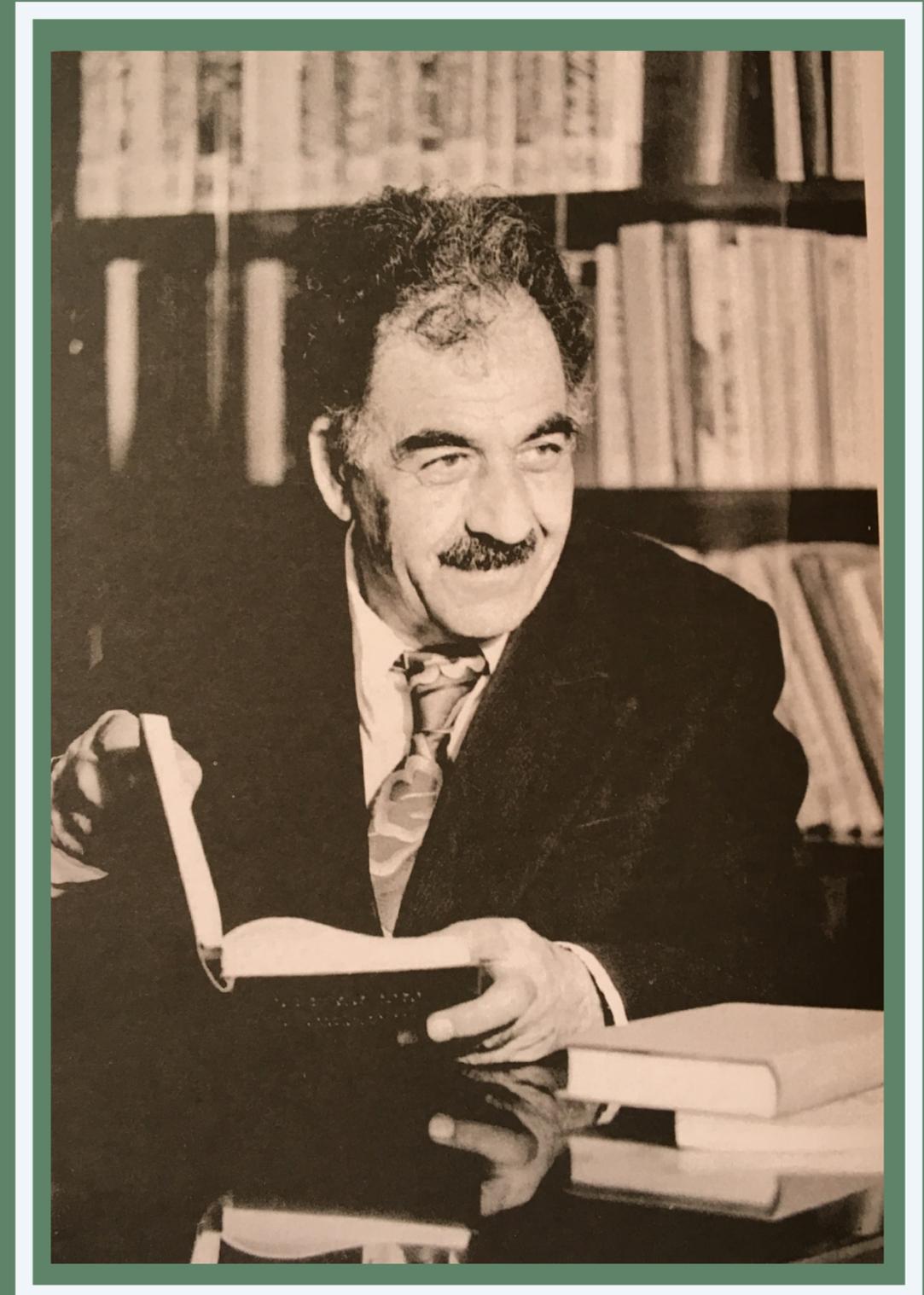
# Research Findings & Analysis

The Celîl family:

**Casimê Celîl**

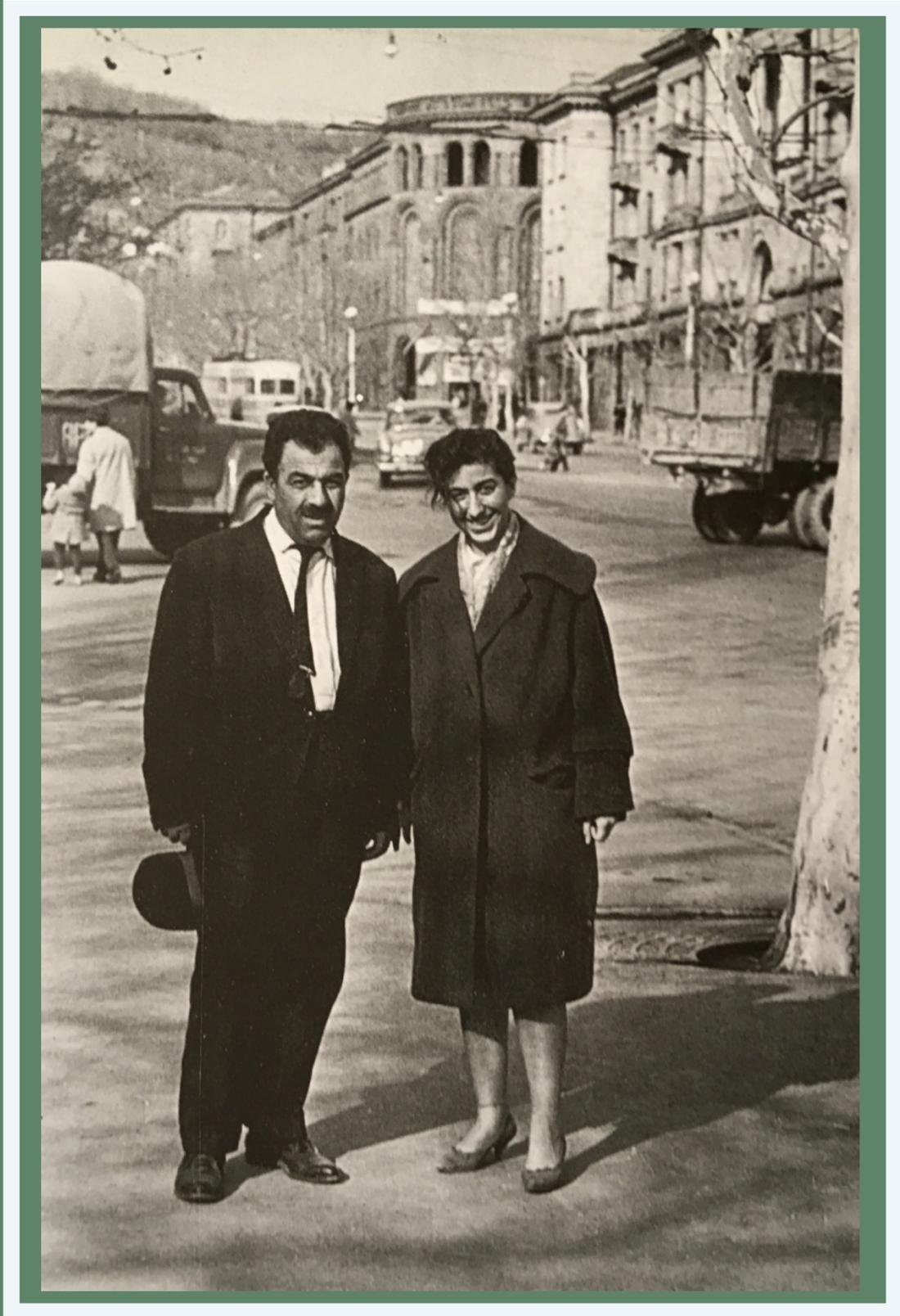
(1908–1998)

- Born in the village of Ghzl-Ghula (Kars region)
- Was a child of the “orphan generation,” and escaped Kars at the age of 10, growing up in the orphanage of Gyumri
- a poet, writer, translator, educator, the first director of Radio Yerevan's Kurdish broadcasts
- Thanks to him Radio Yerevan started "singing" in Kurdish, paving the way for a Kurdish archive



# The Celîl family: Cemîla Celîl (1940)

- Pianist and musicologist
- Continued her father's legacy officially joining Radio Yerevan in 1967
- Was in charge of the Kurdish section of Radio's musical archives from 1967–2002
- Has published dozens of books on Kurdish music and folklore



Cemîla Celîl with her father, Casimê Celîl

# Yêrêvan xeber dide! (Yerevan is speaking!)

- January 1, 1955 - the first official broadcast
- Şamilê Bako - the first person to perform on Radio Yerevan's Kurdish broadcasts
- Initially, the broadcasts were 15 minutes/ day , but gradually got extended and by 1967 they were 1,5 hours/ day
- Various programs: news, Kurdish language and literature
- Երաժշտական փոստարկղ/ The Music Mailbox - the most popular program
- Religious songs were banned. The content of all programs was monitored by the Soviet authorities

# Home: A Living Memory of The Past

“If my father taught us the value of national songs and music, my mother taught us how to treat people.”

- Cemîla Celîl

- The majority of musicians performing on Radio Yerevan were Ezidi and Muslim Kurds from the villages
- They stayed and rehearsed their music at Celîl's apartment in Yerevan



# Transcending Borders

- 1961 - Radio Yerevan's Kurdish programs went beyond the Armenian border, reaching to new audiences in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and other Soviet Republics
- The dialect spoken on Radio Yerevan was close to that of Serhat region in Turkey
- Radio Yerevan was the main source of Kurdish language and music for many Kurds throughout the second half of the 20th century
- Radio Yerevan introduced a number of instruments to the old songs: *def*, *zurna*, *duduk* and *cümbüş*. The instrumental accompaniment made the songs more accessible for the listeners.



*You will not be able to imagine how effective it [Radio Yerevan] was. I mean it was very very effective in our community for changing our mind or culture and to love our culture. It was so effective. And I think when they were publishing, they didn't know that it was so effective and it was listened by so many people and so effective, because you know, for villagers it's not easy to reach them with the ideas, you cannot reach them with ideology, but this way, radio, culture, and simple culture, roots, it's very easy. You can catch everyone.*

- Ahmet Kaya (2019)



## Limitations and avenues for future research

While exploring the history of Radio Yerevan's Kurdish broadcasts, I came across many themes and stories. I didn't have a chance to explore all of them because of time constraints and lack of resources. But in the future, I hope to have the opportunity to go deeper and research the lives and stories of those whose voices are now eternalized on the tapes kept in the Radio archives – the hosts, musicians, singers, and *dengbêjs* like Karapêtê Xaço, Aramê Tîgran, Meryem Xan, Memoê Silo, Sûsîka Simo and many more, both Armenians and Kurds.

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\*Photographs #1 and #4 by Gayane Ghazaryan. Photographs #2 and #3 are from the Celîl family archive.