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## HARPUT, TURKEY TO MASSACHUSETTS: IMMIGRATION OF JACOBITE CHRISTIANS

SHAMIRAN MAKO AND SARGON GEORGE DONABED<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

This essay falls into the category of rendering visible a community, the Jacobite Assyrians of Massachusetts, who have remained virtually unknown in the larger context of Middle Eastern Diaspora studies and American ethnic and cultural history. This brief study of the immigration of the Jacobite Christians originally from Harput, Turkey who settled in New England, shows a variety of distinct method(s) of identity preservation and transmission to subsequent generations, especially in regard to personal and group identity structures. These people, sometimes referred to as “Jacobite Syrians” by early Western travellers and missionaries, identified themselves as the “sons of Asshur” in 1842. (Southgate 1856:87) This paper is a narrative of the community’s tribulations in their country of origin during the first half of the twentieth century, internal religious politics espoused by the church, as well as their life and establishment in American society.

### Harput: The town and a brief history

The Armenians called it Kharpert/Kharberd or “rocky fortress.” It was known as Hisn Ziyad “fortress of Ziyad” in Arabic, called Hanzit by the Assyrians in their classical Syriac, in classical sources as Enzitene and in cuneiform sources

<sup>1</sup> Shamiran Mako is an independent researcher. Sargon George Donabed is an Assistant Professor of History at Roger Williams University in Rhode Island. The authors would like to thank Aryo Makko, George Donabed, and Elsie Odisho Donabed for taking the time to read through the draft and for their comments, corrections, and suggestions. Tomas Isik of the Modern Assyrian Research Archive (MARA) for his aid with particular dates. Also, to Afram Koumi for collecting and offering much of the unpublished works of David Barsum Perley J.S.D. The authors would like to thank Lisa Kashish, Brian Assadorian, and Aram Assadorian for providing the story and photographs of Corporal Barsom J. Kashish, to whose memory the authors would like to dedicate this article.

as En-zi-te.<sup>2</sup> It is also possible that Hanzit of the Syriac sources may be reproduced in the modern name Tilenzit, a site located to the east of Elazig. (Fiey 1993:207) The English traveller and writer Rev. Henry Fanshawe mentions that William of Tyre referred to Harput as Quartapiert, which may be Byzantine Χάρπυτε. He further mentions that the Syrians<sup>3</sup> knew it as Korthert (Tozer 1881:220-223). Many of these comments are inconclusive. The more modern and consistent Assyrian (Aramaic/Syriac) spelling is KRBWT, though even this appears to vary.

Harput sits approximately 4,757 ft. above sea level. (Cuinet 1891:355) The region had for centuries been a well-known mercantile town under the Ottomans. In 1910 the inhabitants of Harput numbered around 20,000 individuals, which had begun to slowly decrease (Hewsen, 2002:45). It was also the headquarters for all missionary activities of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in the region of Turkey. Established in 1855 the ABCFM had a theological seminary in Harput to educate clergymen for the Armenian Evangelical Church, along with a college and orphanage. However, after 10 years, the Ottoman authorities pushed to change the school's name from "Armenia College" to "Euphrates College" (Hewsen 2002:45). For the building of the college, \$140,000 was raised from the United States Government and \$40,000 from the local population in 1875; facilities at the college consisted of a hospital, orphanage, theological seminary and high schools for boys and girls. In 1915 several of the leading members of the faculty were arrested, tortured, and executed including the renowned Assyrian writer Professor Ashur S. Yousif.

## Genocidal massacres

The Ottoman province of Mahmurat Al Aziz (Harput), one of the major points of immigration for early Jacobite immigrants from Anatolia, met with as horrible a fate as did all other Assyrian-populated areas of Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and Persia. On November 10, 1895 3,800 people were killed in the province of Harput. In 1896, estimates number around 29,000 Christians murdered and thousands more men, women, and children burned. Almost 4,000 died from exposure, over 15,000 forcibly circumcised and Islamized; over 5,000 abuses were recorded of rape, and women stolen for marriage to Muslims. (Hopkins 1896:440-450)

This devastation followed continuous hardships and repression until 1919 during the new nationalization process. American consul Leslie Davis estimated 30,000 people living in the area of Harput between 1915 and 1918. (Davis 1989:38)

<sup>2</sup> See Russell (1984).

<sup>3</sup> Some early travelers and missionaries referred to the Jacobite Assyrians as "Syrians." This is the "Syrian Christian" of the Byzantine and Roman period rather than that of "Christians" in the modern nation-state of Syria.

Some estimates judge Assyrian losses from 1915 to 1919 at even larger figures; where Assyrians were killed (regardless of the actual numbers) they amounted to over 1/3 of their entire population.<sup>4</sup> More conservative numerical estimates begin at 250.000 persons and more<sup>5</sup>; though exact numbers are uncertain, the Assyrians approximate their losses much higher, in the order of 500.000 to 750.000 persons.

The Armenian troubles were well known and sympathized with in the West; however, the Assyrian plight was less so. Many Assyrians altered their names to appear Armenian, Keshish<sup>6</sup> to Keshishian, Barsam<sup>7</sup> to Barsamian, (there were also those whose names were indeed Armenian) in order to enter the United States. Thus Assyrians, along with Greeks — for other reasons — are often neglected in discussions on genocide, despite the reality that they [the Assyrians] both suffered alongside the Armenians, and in many cases, aided Armenian refugees retreating into the more defensible Tur Abdin region. (Shemmashian 2002:400) Though the Assyrians are overlooked by much “genocide” scholarship, they were not completely ignored by official United States documentation.

The present deportees are Armenians who are politically objectionable, and Assyrians. Both groups are unassimilable national minorities, and are therefore considered undesirable by the nationalists. (United States National Archives, Record Group 59, 867.4016/979, Parker W. Buhrman to Secretary of State, April 7, 1924).<sup>8</sup>

The Assyrians, along with Armenians and Greeks, suffered severe human casualties, land loss, and cultural destruction (i.e. homes, churches, monasteries, villages, and towns) during this period of upheaval and nation- and state building in Anatolia. Yet their cultural ties to their land remained strong and some Assyrians would return from the United States to visit their town in the decades to follow.

<sup>4</sup> Bloxham (2005:98) citing Yonan (1989:117, 213, 218-22) and Gaunt (2006) mention 250,000 of a pre-war Anatolian and Persian Assyro-Chaldean population of 619,000 people. Gabriele Yonan (1989) gives 500,000. Most of the dispute stems from two sources; Unreliable census information on the Christians of the Ottoman Empire, and the issue that many Assyrians were counted among the Armenian population since the Armenian patriarch was the sole representative of the Eastern Christians to the Sultanate.

<sup>5</sup> Gaunt (2006:300) cites preliminary numbers at around 250,000 persons. See also Travis (2006:350). Tashjian (1965:24) cites 424,000 Assyrians killed under the failing Ottoman state since 1895.

<sup>6</sup> Assyrian *qashisho* “priest.” Pertaining to being of the priest’s family and thus the Armenian “priest’s son.”

<sup>7</sup> Assyrian *barsawm(o)*, an Assyrian proper name, and thus the Armenian, “Barsum’s son.”

<sup>8</sup> See also the mention in Shemmashian (2002:391).

## To a New Land

Although promises were made for the Nestorian Assyrian resettlement in the province of Mosul (north Iraq), in Hakkari (Turkey), and the Khabur basin in Syria, British and French machinations prevented the successful relocation of the refugees in the Middle East. Duplicity was rampant, and they would eventually be left homeless.<sup>9</sup> Following the massacres of WWI, among those Assyrians who sought refuge in the West were many families of the Jacobite community of Harput.

The early Assyrians (and Armenians) who fled their native Harput immigrated to Worcester, Massachusetts.<sup>10</sup> Some later moved to the Boston area to find factory jobs such as at Hood Rubber. Factory towns were major immigration centres for new immigrants. The Assyrians of Harput in New England had close personal ties to the Protestant and Nestorian Assyrians (mostly from the Urmia region in Persia) who settled in New Britain, Connecticut because of the available work at the Stanley Tool Company as well as their coreligionist Jacobites of Mardin in Central Falls, Rhode Island. Their closest ties were however with their brethren from Diyarbekir, who fled during the massacres and settled in West New York/New Jersey. It was this Jacobite community in New Jersey that was instrumental in creating a variety of associations and organizations outside of the religious spectrum as early as 1897. These were the first meetings of what would come to be known as the Assyrian Orphanage and School Association of America, under the direction of Gabriel Boyaji, publisher of the Assyrian periodical *Intibah* [Awakening] from 1909 to 1915.

Assyrian families of Harput moved to the United States with most of them settling in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and California. Among the family names recorded were Alexander, Arakel, Arslan (Arslan, Aslan), Atlas, Barsam, Bedig, Boyaj, Chatalbash, Chavoor, Dasho, Deinha, Donabed, Eskander, Elby, Elias, Elbag (Illbeg), George, Hoyen (Quoyoon), Johnson (John), Kazar, Keshish (Kashish), Maljan, Manoog, Moomjy, Namen, Ohan, Perch, Sahag, Samuel, Shooshan, Stephens, Vakel, and Yoosuf (Yousif, Yousef).

## Religious institutions

As with many other Middle-Eastern Christian groups, the various churches played a major role in both aiding identity retention, and at the same time (the case of the Assyrian identity), almost destroying it. The church of the Virgin Mary in Harput (and that of Diyarbekir) was central to the lives of these Jacobite Assyrians. Thus, it is

<sup>9</sup> This issue is dealt with by a variety of authors including early on by Malek (1935) and later by Yonan (1978).

<sup>10</sup> Some families also moved to Fresno and Los Angeles, California.

easy to observe how the new church became a pivotal centre for the community in the United States as well. At the grand opening of Saint Mary's Assyrian Apostolic Church in Worcester in 1927, the Assyrian flag flew alongside the American. In the vicinity, three portraits were hung from the outside of the church, mementos to incite feelings of pride and remembrance. The first two were important and commonplace at such an event: images of church clergy. The central portrait held special significance: he who sat as peacemaker between the two clerics was the stoic visage of Captain Dr. Abraham K. Yoosuf (1866-1924), chief icon to a benighted community.

The Jacobite Church (officially known as the Assyrian Apostolic Church of Antioch) was established in various regions of the United States at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Firstly in West New York/New Jersey and soon after in Massachusetts, the Assyrian Apostolic Church of Antioch began with high hopes and ethical concerns for its peoples' spiritual and cultural heritage. Yet, soon after the massacres of Simele in 1933, the Jacobite Church in the Middle East, especially in Syria, began to demonstrate anti-Assyrian sentiment. Following continued persecution against the 'ethnic Assyrian people' after the Simele Massacre, the Jacobite Church in the Middle East adopted the term 'Syrian' in English (replacing 'Assyrian') in order not to incur the wrath of their non-Assyrian non-Christian neighbours in the midst of rising pan-Arabism in the region. Church officials began a campaign against all things Assyrian, and attempted to erase any trace of its culture from the church.<sup>11</sup> Some Jacobites, including the overwhelming majority of those from Harput, resisted this newer identity, but the affect was both potent and widespread. Much of the current identity crisis within today's Jacobite Church (now officially the Syrian Orthodox Church) stemmed from this pivotal period.

One of the most obvious changes was the slow transition in the 1950s under the leadership of the late Archbishop Athanasius Yeshue Samuel, from the Assyrian Apostolic Church of Antioch to the Assyrian Orthodox Church of Antioch and later to the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch. The final and observably most odd of these appellations began in a lawsuit with the previous Syrian Orthodox Church known today as simply the Antiochian Church.<sup>12</sup> This issue, which may have been clumsy enough to be termed a fiasco, forced some Assyrians to leave the Church of Antioch. Many went immediately to the late Patriarch Eshai Shimun of the 'Nestorian' or Church of

<sup>11</sup> See Mor Ignatius Ephrem I (1953).

<sup>12</sup> See the following for transition: Constitution and Bylaws of the St. Mary's Assyrian Apostolic Church, Inc. of Worcester, Mass, 1927, in Donabed & Donabed (2006:78); letter from Archbishop Samuel August 12, 1952 under letterhead "Assyrian Orthodox Archdiocese," (also in Donabed & Mako 2009:109); and letter from Archbishop Samuel to Thomas Newman September 22, 1973, under the letterhead "Archdiocese of the Syrian Orthodox Church" (also in Donabed & Mako 2009:111).

the East and requested permission to be subject to him in matters of religion, seemingly stating that ethnic identity was both separate from and perhaps more important than religious affiliation.<sup>13</sup> Indeed some went as far as to be re-baptized, so great was their disdain for what they deemed a complete and utter betrayal.

This incident was also sparked by the desire for identity retention. Put simply, the Harput Assyrians felt that the increase in the use of Arabic in church services, the slow elimination of cultural events, and later more flagrant church name changes, signalled that Middle-Eastern politics would eventually eliminate their identity through the medium of religion. Of course, the majority remained part of the 'Jacobite Church,' unwilling to abandon part of their historical heritage.<sup>14</sup>

### Assyrian intellectuals

As mentioned above, Dr. Abraham K. Yoosuf held a special place among Jacobites in Massachusetts as an archetypal hero, the last scion of a vanishing age. Yoosuf was born in Harput, Ottoman Empire, in 1866. He graduated from Central Turkey College in Aintab in 1886. By 1889 Yoosuf moved to the United States and in 1895 graduated from Baltimore Medical College. He was one of the founders of the Assyrian Benevolent Association of Worcester, Massachusetts in 1897. Yoosuf published *The Religion of Mohammed and Christian Sufferings* in 1905, which discussed religious intolerance in Anatolia.<sup>15</sup> He then conducted postgraduate work in both London and Vienna in 1912 before returning to Turkey at the onset of the Balkan Wars, where he volunteered as a battle medic for the Red Crescent Society. Dr. Yoosuf was decorated for his medical prowess by Sultan Abdel Hamid.<sup>16</sup> Yoosuf returned to the United States and soon offered his medical services again during World War I among the American forces, where he attained the rank of major. He eventually settled in Worcester, Massachusetts. Following the war, Yoosuf attended the Paris

<sup>13</sup> Interview, Sadie (Sidon) Behnam Samuel, Watertown, MA: Autumn, 1999; and Interview, Kasper 'Kay' Aaron Saffer and Phyllis Arslen Saffer, Worcester, MA: February 2000. The issue on ecclesiastical integration has a long history and the respect accorded to the "Nestorians" by the Jacobite Assyrians has a long tradition. See picture of a picnic to honor Lady Surma, the aunt of Nestorian or Church of the East Patriarch, Mar Eshai Shimun, held July 4, 1926 in Worcester, MA. (Donabed & Donabed 2006:72-73, see also p. 80 for a news article). It should be noted that a similar dinner was held for Lady Surma by Jacobite Assyrians from Diyarbekir as part of a Assyrian National School Association of America gala in New Jersey on April 11, 1926.

<sup>14</sup> Interview, Sadie (Sidon) Behnam Samuel, Watertown, MA: Autumn, 1999; and Interview, Kasper 'Kay' Aaron Saffer and Phyllis Arslen Saffer, Worcester, MA: February, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> See Yoosuf 1905.

<sup>16</sup> See *The Lowell Sun*, "Real Terrors of War," 10 September 1914



Peace Conference in 1919. He published various academic articles in the field of medicine and wrote prolifically for various Assyrian publications, including *The Assyrian Progress* and *The New Assyria*, both published in the United States, until his death in 1926.<sup>17</sup>

Ashur S. Yousif (Yousuf) was born in Harput in 1858 and received his formal education at Central Turkey College. He taught throughout the area between Harput, Amasia and Smyrna, and all the way to Antioch and was awarded a degree from the Turkish Bureau of Education. Not much is known of Ashur Yousif's early writings since much of it was destroyed during the massacres in 1915. Other works were translated and appeared in community-based periodicals such as *The Assyrian Star* magazine many years after his death. In Yousif's manuscript entitled "Reasons for the Backwardness of the Assyrians" he spoke candidly about the internal disputes, which led to the identity fragmentation of this people.

The second reason for this backwardness is the internal sectarian disputes in the church. The hindrance to the development of the Assyrians was not so much the attacks from without as it was from within — the doctrinal and sectarian disputes and struggles, like monophysitism and dyophysitism. These caused divisions, spiritually and nationally, among the people who quarrelled among themselves even to the point of shedding blood, thus creating a permanent schism. These dissensions sapped the physical and moral energy of the people and destroyed the sources of light, namely, the promising educational institutions. (Yousuf 1996:25)<sup>18</sup>

This work is remarkably direct in its eight reasons for the "backwardness" of the Assyrians and contains an intellectual outlook on the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Assyrian identity and its progress. Yousif was the editor of the Assyrian monthly magazine, *Murshid Athuriyun* (The Assyrian Guide) that was published in Harput from 1909 till 1915. Yousif's ideas triggered a line of nationalist poets, philosophers, and activists. His onetime student David Perley remains the most influential of those inheritors.

David Barsum Keshish Perley was born in Harput in 1900. In 1918, having escaped the devastation of the war and massacres during which his father had been killed, Perley arrived in San Francisco from Tbilisi by way of Japan. He then spent a few years in Massachusetts before leaving for New York. Perley was awarded his J.D. and worked as president of the Assyrian American Federation from June 1934 through October 1935 whereupon he took over as vice-president for a one-year term. The

<sup>17</sup> For a full history of Yousuf's accomplishments in New England see Nelson (1916:1189).

<sup>18</sup> See also the full translation of this article in the Appendix.



early Jacobite immigrants, like Perley, loathed to be identified ethnically by their ecclesiastical designation. Much modern Assyrianism is arguably based on — or perhaps in essence invented by — Perley's thought. His writings helped solidify many tenets and concepts in uniting an ecclesiastically and geographically divided people in the United States.

Jacobites are Jacobites only by virtue of their religious faith; they are Assyrians by virtue of their nationality. As such they resent any injustice that is directed against any part of their national composition, for – “No distance breaks the tie of blood; Brothers are brothers evermore.”

The soul of Assyria is spiritual through and through and not material. You can not destroy that which is spiritual; it is coexistent with eternity. (Malek 1935:115)

Despite this accomplishment, it appears clear that Perley's writings did not pervade the Assyrian community in the Middle East, perhaps due to the unknown medium, English. Furthermore, there would be an obvious disconnection with the Jacobites in the United States, and those who remained in the Middle East, especially those with strong ties to their church, which had begun a campaign of identity suppression and creation.<sup>19</sup> In 1944 he wrote *Whither Christian Missions*, which remains the best-documented account of the Assyrian despondency during the massacre of Simele and its immediate aftermath. Perley first wrote the book as a reaction to the comments against the Assyrian people by John Van Ess, a missionary of the Foreign Missions of the Reformed Church in America. John Van Ess had sided with the government of Iraq and showed camaraderie towards it in the wake of an act of ethnic cleansing.

David Perley and other Assyrian intellectuals in the United States became involved in campaigns to end atrocities committed against Assyrians in the Middle East. On June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1947 he participated in “The Middle East in the Post War World National and Religious Minorities” discussion at New York University's School of Education. There he gave an introductory speech on “The Assyrians”, their history, and present situation.

Perley was indeed as much a poet-philosopher as he was an activist. An unsuspecting file cabinet of a Jacobite family in Massachusetts returned this previously unknown essay by Perley.

<sup>19</sup> For more information on this issue, see Donabed & Mako (2009).

How often as a boy have I gazed at that peaceful flowing River, wondering from whence it came and whither it goes? The silvery ripples, shimmering and dancing in the sunlight fascinated me and their beckoning I could not resist. What sheer delight to join them in their happy, swaying melody, and to be cradled by the caressing water like the arms of a mother cradling her child! Thus, the Euphrates and I became one! Not that I was absorbed — or the Euphrates was absorbed by me. Each remained a separate entity, and yet the two were one, and no spoken word was needed to confirm this unity and harmony. It was a oneness of Spirit, the underlying principle of the Universe, and one sentient soul experienced the recognition and enfoldment of cosmic consciousness, an unforgettable experience which neither time nor distance can obliterate! And who can say with positive assurance that the Euphrates is not a sentient entity in its own realm? What age-old secrets are locked within the depths of this historic river, a monument of God's handiwork around which the earliest civilizations evolved, as it flows ceaselessly on to keep its never ending tryst with the Tigris!<sup>20</sup>

Through such students as David Perley, it is clear that Ashur Yousif's writings encouraged and influenced many other Assyrians, both individually and collectively. Such influence had developed a sense of inclusive identity, which bridged the gaps created by centuries of ecclesiastic identification under succeeding Islamic governments:

One's being an Assyrian is a synthesis of heritage, religion and culture, and emotional consciousness that transcends all diversities, theological, demographic, and otherwise. Those who honor truth for its own sake will have no difficulty in the comprehension of my meaning, and they will surely remember the lapsed Assyrians in a sunny Assyrian day. The Assyrians have but one nationhood, and the distinction is very clear. When a person is of Assyrian blood, he retains his birthright, self-esteem, and the heritage of his fathers. It is for this very reason that he may be called a Jacobite-Assyrian, Nestorian-Assyrian, Assyrian-Presbyterian, or Chaldean-Christian.<sup>21</sup> Calling someone a Jacobite-Assyrian should be no more amazing than calling someone else an Irish-Catholic. It is a mere matter of hyphenated description, not a hyphenation or division. A hyphen does not divide; it unites. The use of the term Nestorian-Assyrian is the simplest way of

<sup>20</sup> David Perley unpublished memoirs (Most will eventually be available through the Modern Assyrian Research Archive, MARA, online digitization project).

<sup>21</sup> Here we realize that Chaldean-Christian does not work well with the other groupings. It is probable that Perley simply overlooked this comment and had meant it as Chaldean-Assyrian, which follows succinctly with the previous appellations, rather than Chaldean-Christian which in form, does not.

designating a Nestorian, who comes from, or who has, an Assyrian background. The term Assyrian is ONE SINGLE UNITY. The approach of this oneness of all Assyrians regardless of their religious adherence is through the avenue of blood, and through the majesty of common memories. Religion is a faith acquired and is changeable. Nationality is one's flesh and blood; it is his total nature. Even death cannot undo it. (Perley 1967:10)

Initially, this ideology was embraced by an entire generation of American Assyrians from a variety of geographical, national, and ecclesiastical backgrounds. As writers, the use of vivid imagery and allusions to the 'homeland of Assyria' were common features of early Harput Assyrian-American writing. For example, Francis Emmanuel Hoyen Sr. wrote the following poem in response to what he felt were unrecognized and unmentioned atrocities of the First World War from 1914-1919:

*Assyrian song*

Oh! Sons of Asshur arise and do your share,  
The glorious hours are nigh, we must now be there;  
Worthy of such ties, we must now conquer and guide  
The enemies' leaders and ambitious pride.

*Chorus*

Joined in arms, boys, ahead we must go,  
And clean our world of such scandalous foes;  
By doing it now a good lesson we will give,  
Which they will never forget as long as they live.  
Let us break the chains, and break them today,  
And free our country and open the way  
To see our historical Nineveh as it was before,  
And all its beautiful surroundings that we so adore.  
Onward let us go until we get to Assyria, for joy and happiness will follow our Victory;  
We will have some tough fighting, but will not mind,  
To destroy our enemy for mankind.

By Son of Ashur,  
Francis E. Hoyen (Hoyen 1919:10)

Hoyen's militant tone was not lost on the Assyrians in the Diaspora as some also served in the ranks of the American military forces shortly after immigrating to the United States. This poem retains both elements of what might be termed 'patriotic Assyrianism' as well as a sense of hope for the future of their homeland.

### **Other methods of identity preservation and integration**

Due to the nature of the Ottoman millet system, much of Assyrian life (as with the Armenians, the Greeks, and others) centred on the church. In order to retain and promote their culture and heritage, the early settlers from Harput founded many social and cultural associations both within the confines of the new church and distinct from it. These societies were established with the intent of persistently reinvigorating Assyrianism among the immigrants from Harput in New England, and the Assyrian community within the United States as a whole. During these trial years of settlement in New England, they launched various organizations such as the Assyrian Young Men's Association of Boston in 1912, the Assyrian Mar Afram Benevolent Society of Lowell, the Harpoot Assyrian United Educational Fund, the Nineveh Association of Greater Boston, and the Assyrian St. Ephram Association of Central Falls, Rhode Island.

Since identity retention and propagation is a multi-faceted endeavour, people maintained a variety of customs to aid in the process. Of particular interest to this research was the manner in which these Assyrians promoted their language in the census information. It is well known that few Assyrians of Harput spoke more than a smattering of the modern Assyrian tongue, as they were educated in Turkish and Western Armenian. Similarly, 'Assyria' was obviously not a recognized country, and had not been so for over 2000 years. Yet, these Assyrians maintained that their land of birth still lay in the confines of their ancient homeland, which would apparently remain 'Assyria' in spite of the modern political borders. One such attempt is illustrated by the data from the 1930 Census Report from Worcester, Massachusetts where in this particular instance, the Hoyen family added 'Assyria' to country of birth, and 'Assyrian' under the language spoken at home sub-heading. (Donabed & Donabed 2006:53)

This is echoed further in the plethora of material extracted from primary documents concerning the massacre of Nestorian Assyrians in Simele, Iraq in 1933 by the Iraqi army in the first major military act of the newly formed Iraqi government. This ethnic cleansing event elicited outrage from Assyrians worldwide. Despite ecclesiastic differences, it was clear that the Assyrians saw this as an affront to their national character and those of the Massachusetts sector sent a telegram to U.S. senator David Walsh dated 22 August 1933:

Assyrian American citizens greatly aroused and urgently appeal to you to use your good offices in behalf of our kindred of Assyrian blood reported as being killed in massacres by Kurds and Iraq forces. (Donabed & Donabed 2006:68)

This event became the ultimate double-edged sword for the greater Assyrian community. For those of the Diaspora, who fifteen years earlier had recalled another horrific slaughter of their kin, it became a major unifying factor. Aiding their brethren who were struggling for survival in their homeland became another method of unification and sparked further cultural fervour.

Along with similar organizations, community publications further disseminated Assyrian news and culture within the United States. *Babylon*, a bimonthly handwritten periodical, edited by Naum S. G. Beshrov (most likely an Assyrian immigrant from Diyarbekir) in Boston was written in Armenian script but Assyrian language and published from 1919 till 1921. (Hopper & Naby 1999:40-41) Apparently, recent immigrants were the target audience for this periodical. On the Pacific coast, the Harput community in California published the *Assyrian Progress*, a monthly English-language publication of the Assyrian American Benevolent Association of California, Ltd. from 1932 to 1938 under editor Frank Chavoor and later Ezkiel Maljan in 1936. Among its contributors were members from the Diyarbekir and Mardin communities in the United States: Rose Dartley, Maljan Chavoor, Sargon Hoyen, David Perley, Francis Hoyen, Charles Dartley, and Albert Safer. The *Assyrian Progress* served as a tool for communication, news, and cultural diffusion among the entire Assyrian community of the United States. The following civic organizations (among others) were started by Harput Jacobites:

- *The Assyrian Young Men's Association of Boston, Massachusetts*, October 1, 1912 (Donabed & Donabed 2006:64)
- *The Assyrian National Union*, (Donabed & Donabed 2006:65) referenced 1934 perhaps earlier
- *The Assyrian Five Association*, May 5, 1917
- *The Assyrian Ladies Church Loving Association of Worcester, Massachusetts*, February 5, 1908
- *The United Assyrian Association of Massachusetts* (created out of smaller Massachusetts-based Assyrian organizations)
- *The Assyrian Benevolent/Benefit Association of Worcester*, August 1, 1897 (Donabed & Donabed 2006:64)
- *The Assyrian United Association of Worcester*, (Donabed & Donabed 2006:70) before 1928
- *The Nineveh Association of Greater Boston* (Donabed & Donabed 2006:66) referenced 1933 perhaps earlier
- *Camp Nineveh* (Shrewsbury, MA), 1960s perhaps earlier
- *Harpoote Assyrian United Association of America*, 1921 Worcester (Donabed & Donabed 2006:71-73)

- The *Assyrian Women's Progressive Club of Springfield*, Massachusetts (evidenced as early as July 1934 on a baptismal basin at St. Mary's Assyrian (now Syrian) Orthodox Church in Shrewsbury, MA).

Though the newly settled community established institutions that ensured the retention of their identity, they also found ways to become part of American society by creating civic institutions that promoted good citizenship and the adoption of American values, as well as serving in the United States armed forces, as evidenced by the list of ninety Assyrian Jacobites on the plaque currently residing at St. Mary's Assyrian, now Syrian church in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, as well as the Bronze Star Medal, the Good conduct Medal, the European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with 3 Bronze Service Stars, the WWII Victory Medal, the Combat Medical Badge First Award, and the WWII Honorable Service Lapel Button awarded to U.S. Army Corporal, Barsom J. Kashish for his service during the Battle of the Bulge in 1945.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

The Harput community in the Massachusetts area has significantly dwindled in numbers. Initially victims of war and massacres, these Assyrians found difficulty in making their plight known. Until recently, the town of Harput was only known for its Armenian heritage and the devastation. While it equally affected both communities, it did not acknowledge the Assyrians' sufferings.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, as most immigrant communities were replenished and reinvigorated by a constant flow of immigrants from the home country to the Diaspora, renewing cultural ties and allowing for easier retention of identity, was absent in the case of the Harput Assyrians. Since the town of Harput was destroyed following WWI, there are no new immigrants from Harput itself to revitalize the community.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, there has been some immigration to Massachusetts from other predominantly Jacobite areas in the Middle East since the 1960s. These have come from Midyat, in Turkey and from Qamishli and Al Hassakeh in Syria. Some of these new immigrants helped in the rebuilding of old organizations, the fashioning of newer

<sup>22</sup> See Appendices B and C.

<sup>23</sup> See Press Release by the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS), *Genocide Scholars Association Officially Recognizes Assyrian, Greek Genocides*, 16 December 2007. This is the first official international recognition of the Assyrian sufferings during the period of WWI.

<sup>24</sup> Some remained in the town of Elazig while the majority that remained in Turkey immigrated to Istanbul.

modern associations, and the revitalization of what could perhaps be termed a “cultural spirit”. Other Jacobites, indoctrinated in Syrian, Iraqi, or Turkish nationalism, have promoted these identities in the place of the previous Assyrian identity. And despite the massacres and deportations still a part of recent memory, and contrary to the poor and sometimes violent Armenian-Turkish relations, Assyrian-Turkish relations were both cordial and friendly<sup>25</sup> in the Massachusetts area.

In the case of intellectualism, identity retention, and cultural evolution, it is clear that both internal and external forces played prominent roles. Were it not for the conservation of the intellectual writings by David Perley, Abraham K. Yoosuf, Ashur S. Yousif and a number of others, much of their influence would have been as lost to the greater Assyrian community. This is the case among most current members of St. Mary’s Syrian Orthodox Church in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, the successor of St. Mary’s Assyrian Apostolic Church in Worcester, Massachusetts which was attended and built by some of the very same intellectuals and patriots. Though more can and should be said for the political motivations behind such policies, it must be conducted as part of a more thorough study. The fate of Harput Assyrians and cultural ‘Assyrianism’ has thus yet to be definitely decided.

June 2010

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<sup>25</sup> Interview, Sadie (Sidon) Behnam Samuel, (Watertown, MA: Autumn, 1999)



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## Appendix A

### *The Reason for the Backwardness of the Assyrians*<sup>26</sup>

By Ashur S. Yousif

In order to give a short answer to this question we could say in a word that the reason is ignorance, but the latter itself is result of a number of reasons that will be stated below.

The first and the main reason of the present backward situation of the Assyrians has an ancient historical origin. In order to understand it we should meditate upon it.

In the remote past the Assyrians not only were a developed and civilized nation but also gave their civilization to Palestine, Phoenicia, Egypt, Greece and Rome. And since the beginning of the Christian era they started to spread the Christian light in the East, from the coasts of the Mediterranean to India and China, from Syria to the Caspian Sea.

They gave the Arabians teachers, doctors and interpreters. Armenian, Greek and even Jewish students were educated in the Assyrian higher educational institutions of Antioch, Seleucia, Tizbon (Ctesiphon), Edessa, Nisibis.

The Assyrians were the first to preach Christianity to the Armenians. The Assyrian missionaries played an extremely important role in the formation and religious arrangement of the Armenian Church. They struggled hard against Greek Orthodoxy, saved the Armenian Church and contributed to it being a separate and independent church. As it is said, they even helped the creation of the Armenian alphabet.

And finally, long before Gregory the Illuminator, the Assyrians were the illuminators of the Armenians. With this brief historical reference, putting together the glorious past of the Assyrians and their backward and unenviable present we want to make understandable the plain truth that one of the chief reasons of backwardness is hidden in the past.

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<sup>26</sup> Translated from the Armenian original in the pamphlet entitled Assyrian Five Association of Boston, MA (Boston: Assyrian Star Press, 1919), p.9-12. Translation and reproduction provided by the Assyrian Academic Society. Also portions of the translation have been published by David Perley elsewhere, including piecemeal in a variety of Assyrian Star magazine issues.

The development and civilization, as well as the degradation and perversion of nations take place not within a day or a month, but within years and centuries. So, the civilized and advanced Assyrian lost his qualities because of remote reasons until he reached his present lamentable and backward situation. And this remote reason is mostly political. Since the day he lost his independence and ceased to be a ruling nation, he was subjected to violence and pressure of other nations that Jeremiah described in his oracular precepts with vivid but shocking language.

The second reason for this backwardness is the internal sectarian disputes in the church. The hindrance to the development of the Assyrians was not so much the attacks from without as it was from within – the doctrinal and sectarian disputes and struggles, like monophysitism and dyophysitism. These caused divisions, spiritually and nationally, among the people who quarrelled among themselves even to the point of shedding blood, thus creating a permanent schism. These dissensions sapped the physical and moral energy of the people and destroyed the sources of light, namely, the promising educational institutions. The church and the people were split up for centuries and still remain Nestorians, Melekites, Maronites, Atiqs ('atīq 'old') and Jedids ('new'). Today it is the same stupid phenomenon that is revealed in India as a result of the improvident attitude of the present Patriarch.

That was another reason for the backwardness of the Assyrians the beginning of which can be the starting point for calculating the years of backwardness of the nation.

The third reason was the loss of the language. When forcibly learning foreign languages under violence and pressure, the nation forgot its own, and the Assyrian language remained isolated among the few highlanders and useless and incomprehensible for the majority. Numerous volumes in this language became unintelligible and were sold by illiterate people as unnecessary material. Today thousands of volumes adorn the museums of antiquities of London, Paris, Rome and Berlin.

So the Assyrian was totally deprived of the wealth of his splendid literature. Devoid of the national literature, the clergymen and the people sank into unimaginable illiteracy and degraded in every direction.

The nation, which used to send missionaries to illuminate other nations, was now itself in need of a missionary. If only they had preserved their literature in the foreign language they learnt. They lost the old and did not gain anything new. As a separate nation and church, they did not even create literature in a new language. Thus, their progress and development was halted and degradation and regress came to take their place.

The forth reason was the ignorance of the clergymen. While the Nation was groping in the darkness of illiteracy, at least the clergymen were supposed to remain enlightened, to lead the nation with their preaching and high authority and to keep the light burning in the hearts and minds of the people. But this did not happen. On the contrary, the clericalism surpassed the people in ignorance. It governed the people ignorantly. It misled them and was misled itself. "Blind man leading blind people" and both of them sank into the abyss of ignorance. The enlightened and luminary nation faded into darkness.

Another reason was the helplessness of the church. This was a natural result of the previous reasons. The church, the cathedral of light, the consolation of the nation, the source of the religious light, the savior of the souls, and the center of the religious life, left its office. It was no more able to inspire hope and life, it had ceased to do its noble duty - to urge the people to be active, and to lead them to the noble ideal of the Christian life, as the clergymen no more had the sense of their high primary duty.

One more reason was the family and the schools. These two institutions, which play a most important role in the development of a nation, must support each other. But both of them were deprived of the sense of their noble duty: neither the family, nor the national school was able to yield people important and useful for the nation. If sometimes we meet here and there educated individuals who are an honor to the nation, they have got education not in the national school but in foreign ones.

Another reason is the environment and the atmosphere. The environment has a very important influence upon the life and characteristics of both individuals and nations. A person surrounded with educated and polite people will naturally be well influenced by them, and another one living in a bad environment will be ill influenced.

The residence and homeland of the Assyrians did not contribute to the progress of their development. The nations and tribes surrounding them were equally ignorant and backward. If the Assyrians or their homeland were in the civilized world or somewhere near it, no doubt they would be better influenced. We can understand the difference of the influence of the environments if we compare the Armenians of Constantinople to those living in the neighborhood of the Kurds in the inner provinces, and the Assyrians of India to those of Turkey. The prior is more developed advanced than the latter and this difference is the result of the influence of the environment. If the throne of the religious authorities governing the Assyrian nation were in a city like Beirut or London, instead of Martin surrounded by ignorant tribes, they would be influenced differently; they would think differently and would use different methods for the development of the nation under their care.

The last reason is the absence of a noble ideal. It is said, "A person is what he thinks". This is the undeniable truth. A person thinks before expressing his thoughts or acting; he acts the way he thinks, and he is whatever he thinks. The idea is the plan of the deed; the executed deed turns into capacities and skills, and those skills form the character of the person, outline the direction of his life and decide his fate. Then again it is said, "The fate of the individual or the nation depends on the ideas which control his mind or the collective mind of the people of the nation." Thus, in this life the backwardness of individuals or nations is the natural result of their being devoid of noble ideas.

In order to complete my answer let me give several measures for the progress of the Assyrians. As a separate nation, they must have a noble ideal and strive for it. For this aim the families must have Christian sons who will serve their nation, and the schools must educate leaders. The church or the clergymen must restore the destroyed altar and revive the spirit of the people with eloquent tongue and the commandments of the Bible. And the press must publish useful periodicals and books nourishing the mental and spiritual life of the people.

This way the family, the church, the school and the press must unite and cooperate with each other, and only then will the backward nation choose the road of development and reach the noble ideal it strives for.

October 20, 1914, Harput

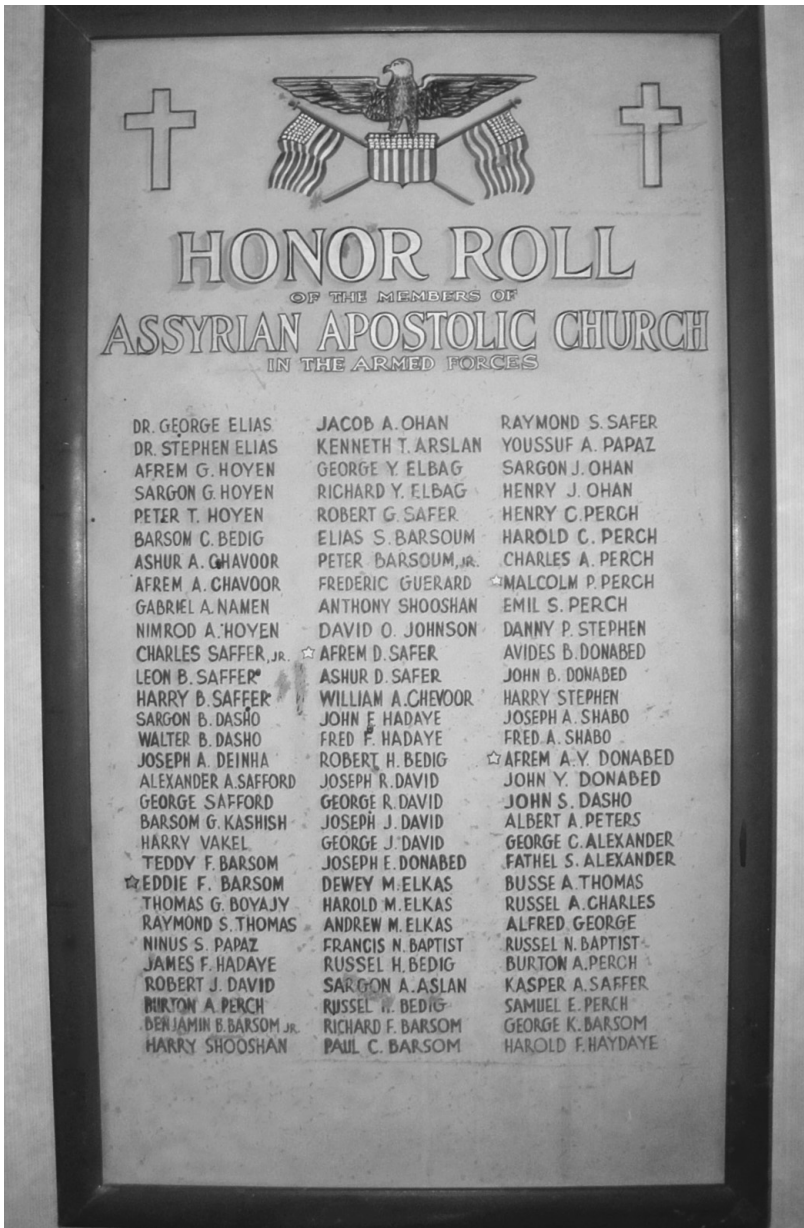
Ashur S. Yousif

Translated from the Armenian original.



## Appendix B

### List of ninety Assyrian Jacobite men who served in the United States Armed Forces



## Appendix C

### Young Corporal, Barsom J. Kashish on duty in Europe during WWII



## **Appendix D**

**The Bronze Star Medal awarded to the late Corporal Barsom J. Kashish  
for his service during the Battle of the Bulge**

