

Assyrians in Middle America

A Historical and Demographic Study of the Chicago Assyrian Community

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Introduction

This brief description has been prepared to introduce the Assyrian community of Chicago to those who want to know its people more intimately and more fully. It is not the first study ever written nor the most comprehensive one. Indeed, earlier attempts to tell the story of Assyrian life in Chicago have been highly informative.¹ The contribution of the present article resides in the fact that it presents new material unavailable to previous authors. The work briefly outlines the circumstances the Assyrian settlers faced in this important American metropolis from the day of their first arrival. It also attempts to explore how the new environment introduced fresh values and standards into their life.

The world's largest Assyrian diaspora community

The Chicago Assyrian *Shawtaputa* or community is one of a score of urban Assyrian communities in the United States. Obtaining accurate figures for the size of the community is difficult. The sources pertaining to its history are scanty, and available statistics are imprecise. However, in the opinion of most Assyrians in Chicago, today it numbers close to eighty thousand or close to one third of the present total Assyrian population in the United States, the country in which 10 percent of the world's Assyrian population lives today.² Besides

¹ On the early history of Assyrian community in Chicago see Edith M. Stein, *Some Near Eastern Groups in Chicago*, M.A. Thesis, University of Chicago (Chicago, 1922); Also Edward C. Collins, *What Remains of Nineveh*, M.A. Thesis, De Paul University (Chicago, 1978); also of value is Daniel Wolk, *History of the Chicago Assyrian Community*, a chapter from his incomplete Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago. This is an extensive and copiously documented study that gives a detailed picture of the Assyrian community of Chicago from the days of its establishment down into the 1990s. Similar in nature is his article "Assyrians", published in *A Guide to the Cultures and Traditions of Chicago's Communities*. Also of interest is the *Preface to the Studies of the Assyrians-Chaldeans in the United States*, a 56-page manuscript on the organizational structure of the community and the early immigration of Assyrians to the United States. This interesting study, from now on called *Monograph*, was written in June, 1920. It is based on the personal observations of an anonymous Assyrian immigrant of Chicago.

² There is probably no way to count the number of Assyrians in any given area, let alone the total Assyrian population in the world. It is not possible to give more than a rough estimate. The number of Chicago Assyrians has always been a perplexing statistical question. We must remember that the statistics used here are for the most part arbitrary and with a wide range of variation. Few studies have been made, but none can be made with any degree of validity. According to the State Census of 1990, the figure actually cited is around 12,500. Clearly, the official data on Assyrians in Chicago are too low.

having the largest concentration of Assyrians outside the city of Baghdad, Chicago also has the world's most cohesive Assyrian diaspora community. Perhaps the most important fact about this community is that it has been the most culturally active diaspora community for the greater part of its history.

Of the people who make up the population of this close-knit community, the vast majority, at least 75 percent, are Assyrians of Iraqi ancestry. The Assyrians of Urmian³ origin are about 15 percent of the populace, with the Syrian and Lebanese Assyrians making up the remainder of the community. Despite the absence of documentary evidence, we may assume that more than two-thirds of the present total inhabitants of this community are refugees and their children.⁴ According to some estimates, more than two-thirds of the community's population is foreign-born and speaks, besides the native language, one or two foreign languages. Of the Assyrian-Americans born here, very few speak the mother tongue.

The Chicago Assyrian community has grown from a no more than a handful of immigrants into a large, flourishing community in little more than a century, knit into a single society by the historical experience, language, customs, and sense of destiny of its members. Years of conflict with their oppressors in the native lands have strengthened their awareness of their common Assyrian identity. They are also united by the fact that they are confronted by the new customs and traditions of the mainstream society around them. As the years in the new environment turned into decades and the pace of migration quickened, the community grew up rapidly. It became the most important Assyrian settlement in the diaspora and the foremost living cultural center.

Assyrians discover America

Assyrian immigration to the United States has passed through three distinct stages, each having its own character. The immigrants and refugees came from different Assyrian communities in the Middle East, principally from Iraq and Iran, but also Syria, Turkey, and Lebanon, where conditions were intolerable. In fact the factors that forced these Assyrians out of their accustomed places and compelled them to emigrate were, overall, persecution and discrimination. Combined with these were the severe economic constraints

For probably more accurate estimates, see John Yonan (Assyrian Universal Alliance), *Census of Assyrians in the United States and the World*, (Chicago, 1995). The figure shown in this demographic study (p. 7) is given as 72,000. The United States contains far more Assyrians-306,500-than any country other than Iraq and Syria. Ibid., p. 6. The world Assyrian population totals 4,240,700. Ibid., p.6. However, we must accept all these data with reservations.

³ The plain of Urmia is in the north-western part of Iran. It is bounded on the east by the salt lake of that name, and on the west by the grassy slopes of the Zagros mountains.

⁴ Ibid., p.5.

within which the Assyrians were living. In their native lands, some were farmers, others were tradespeople and technicians, and not a few were engaged in professions of almost every description. From their former homelands, they brought their language, their customs, memory of their long history, and a mentality that differed greatly from that of the native born members of the new society.

Their relatives and friends who had preceded them helped some Assyrian immigrants to find their way to the United States. Others, mostly refugees who numbered more than 60 percent of the total settlers, had no Assyrian individuals on whom they could depend. Either American churches helped them, or various American and Assyrian philanthropic societies gave them a friendly hand.⁵

We know little about the Assyrian immigrants who came from their homelands before the immigrant tide of the early twentieth century.⁶ There had never been sufficient Assyrian immigrants in a group for them to maintain a separate identity. These immigrants were usually men from Urmia, who came by way of Russia, India, France, and England, happy to find fine opportunities in America. Their numbers were negligible, never more than a fraction of the stream of emigration that continued without interruption throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

Several individuals, primarily students from the communities of Urmia, arrived in the United States as early as the end of the nineteenth century. The Presbyterian missionaries who worked among the Assyrians of Urmia gave the Assyrians information about the opportunities for higher education in the United States. Each year the missionaries made scholarships available to several qualified students, primarily in the fields of medicine, humanities, and theology. After graduation, some of these students settled in American cities; others, however, returned to their villages in Urmia to teach or to carry on their work in the Presbyterian missionary.⁷

⁵ Working side by side with the Assyrian Universal Alliance, the World Council of Churches obtained an American visa for thousands of Assyrian refugees and found new homes for them in the United States. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁶ The first Assyrian to arrive in America was Bishop Mar Yohanna, who accompanied Dr. Justin Perkins, the Presbyterian missionary, to this country about 1840. Later, he returned to Urmia to preach. See Edith Stein, p. 91; also *Monograph*, p. 7.

⁷ In 1882, two other Assyrians came over from Urmia College to study theology in New York, later going as missionaries to Japan and Urmia respectively. About 1889, Mr. Nuworhaj entered the McCormick Seminary in Chicago, returning to Tabriz after completing his theological training. The first Assyrian to study medicine in this country was Dr. Yohannan Sayad who finished his professional training at the Bellevue [Bellevue] Hospital in New York after having studied at Urmia with Dr. Cochran, then famous medical missionary in that city (Edith Stein, pp. 91-2). From an interview with Jesse Yonan, Edith Stein learns that "Mr. Nuworhaj, who came to Chicago around 1889 was the first Assyrian to enter this city. His daughter, who is called the "Joan of Arc" of the Assyrians by some of them because of the part she played during the massacres of 1915 lives in the city at the present time

Chicago becomes a focal point

Upon arrival, the Assyrian immigrants at once scattered to various cities in the United States. Coming from a rural environment, most of them were without technical skills and a knowledge of the English language. They found it preferable to settle in metropolitan areas, especially in the flourishing cities of the northeast where unskilled workers could expect to find jobs. Slowly more Assyrians flocked to the industrial centers in Flint and Detroit, Michigan, and others found their way to Gary, Indiana. Still others who could not cope with the harsh climate of the eastern states put down roots in several enclaves in California. In time, Chicago, though not having the ideal climatic conditions, became a focal point for the vast majority of the Assyrian settlers.⁸ The Windy City was more heterogeneous; the lure of its employment opportunities provided the incentive that increasingly attracted the newcomers to make their homes there.

Early Assyrian settlement in Chicago

A substantial segment of the ancestors of the modern Chicago-Assyrian community, principally men from Urmia, arrived in the decade immediately preceding the outbreak of the First World War. For more than a decade, the Assyrian element in Chicago remained inconsequential. Up to the First World War, there were scarcely three thousand Assyrians in the whole country.⁹ Contemporaries in later years estimated that around one thousand lived in Chicago. The immigrants who settled in Chicago during this period were essentially adventurous young males who had lived mostly by farming and cattle-breeding. They came to America in a quest for economic gain. Some of them came with the intention of eventually sending for their families, left behind in the homeland. The first money earned by the young settlers was sent home to their families.

[1922], working for the Chicago branch of the Near Eastern Relief. In the early nineties two or three of these people followed Mr. Nuworhaj to Chicago, among them Dr. Jesse Yonan, who entered the Rush Medical College and received his medical degree in 1897. He became a citizen of the United States the following year but returned to Persia as a medical missionary. After the war he represented a group of his people at the Paris Peace Conference, and at the present time is practicing medicine in Chicago. His two sons fought in the American Army, and both of them are now married to American girls". Ibid. 97-8.

⁸ The author of the *Monograph* mentions that the Assyrians of Persia and Kurdistan had colonies in Gary and Knox, Indiana, and in Flint, Michigan, in Brooklyn, Manhattan, Elizabeth, and Yonkers, New York. Also, they had colonies in New Britain, Bridgeport, and Bristol, Connecticut; and in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. On the [P]acific [C]oast, the immigrants mainly centered in San Francisco and Turlock, California. The Assyrians of the Jacobite origin from Diarbekr and a few Chaldeans were found mainly in the East in New Jersey, New York, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. See *Monograph*, pp. 19-21; Edith Stein, p. 95.

⁹ Report of the United States Census, 1910, Population, Vol. I, shows that 2,591 Assyrians were in 1910 living in the United States. Quoted by Edith Stein, p. 94.

Isolated individuals, mostly impoverished peasants from the principal Assyrian enclaves in Tur Abdin and Hakiari, and some from Russia, too, also were drawn to Chicago from time to time during the first decade of this century.¹⁰ Poverty stimulated their desire to leave their native land. They were so impoverished that many of them had entered indentured servitude to pay for their passage to the United States. Their eagerness to find unique opportunities in the unknown country urged them on despite the hardships endured in reaching the shores of the United States.¹¹

Knowledge about the community during that period is scant. The settlers resided near one another in congested tenement dwellings in a neighborhood in the near-north part of Chicago, between Illinois and Chestnut Streets, Clark and Wells Streets.¹² Based on the estimates of informants and that of Edith Stein, it is unlikely that the number of Assyrian residents ever reached one thousand during that period.¹³

Upon their arrival the newcomers were, with few exceptions, very poor. Their most pressing concern was to obtain employment and support themselves financially. They spoke little English and lacked a formal education. Unequipped to meet the modern world, these new settlers faced hard and bitter experiences. They worked backbreaking jobs from sunup to sundown, and often on Sundays as well, to satisfy their basic needs. Their wages were inadequate to support a simple standard of living.

Usually these miserable breadwinners found employment and places to live with the help of other Assyrians, frequently friends and relatives from their former villages. They worked as waiters and dishwashers in restaurants, door attendants in hotels, cobblers and bootblacks, and in a score of other humble occupations. With the passage of time, however, they established themselves and improved their condition. After a period of economic and social adjustment,

¹⁰ Ibid., p.100. Of the Assyrians of Hakiari, Iskhaq (Isaac) Budagh Iskhaq, from Ashita, was one of the earliest immigrants. He came to Chicago in about 1901. His cousins, Gewarguis Enwiya Mikhail and Lazar Benyamin Warda, also from Ashita, reached Chicago a few years later. Information provided by Miriam Mikhail, the granddaughter of Mr. Iskhaq, and by her husband Aprim Mikhail, Mr. Gewarguis Mikhail's son.

¹¹ Very few of the immigrants left directly for the United States; most departed via Bombay, India, or Marseilles, France, or some other European port. Lacking money for passage, the immigrants sojourned in other countries and worked before finally coming to the United States. Gewarguis Mikhail of Ashita, for example, had worked for few months in Istanbul and then in London before he was able in 1911 to buy his passage ticket. In 1955, he returned to Baghdad. Information provided by his son, Aprim Mikhail, a Chicago resident.

¹² Ibid., 104.

¹³ Information provided by Sarah Paz, a resident of Chicago and daughter of David Sayad, an old settler. Also see Edith Stein, p. 98.

they moved into better jobs and improved housing.¹⁴ However, few could save enough money to start their own retail businesses.

The second migration wave

The next surge of immigration started after the outbreak of the First World War. It still increased around 1918-1925 and after 1933 when Iraq took repressive measures following the abortive uprising of Assyrians.¹⁵ The chief characteristic of this second wave of immigration was that it was larger than its predecessor and was essentially one of the families rather than of young males. Though the main group of immigrants was of Urmian origin, the influx included small numbers of Tekhuma, Tiyari, Gawar, Mar Bishu, and other Hakiari peoples, inspired this time by different considerations.¹⁶

At the outbreak of the world war in 1914, the Assyrians threw their lot in with the Allied governments, relying on them in their drive for civil and political rights. The sympathy of the Assyrian people with Russia and Great Britain brought merciless reprisals on the Assyrian communities in the Hakiari, Tur Abdin, and Urmia localities, rooted there for thousands of years. Turkish-Kurdish-Iranian forces pillaged and destroyed entire Assyrian communities, killing and mutilating young and old, women and children in the cruelest manner. The Assyrian legions fought back bravely to retain their freedom, but their vitality was gone. The series of Urmian massacres of 1915-1918 annihilated almost two-thirds of the Assyrian inhabitants. It was one of the great crimes of history.¹⁷ Those who survived this disaster had no recourse but to take refuge in Iraq, already occupied at the time by British forces. The masses of refugees were hemmed into a narrow tent camp in Baquba, Iraq, learning to

¹⁴ Only nine out of fifty-one men whose wages were known earned less than \$30.00 a week. Thirty were getting a weekly wage of \$35.00 or above, and thirteen were earning at least \$45.00 a week, with a few making as high as \$78.00, \$100.00 and more. This analysis was performed with regard to post World War I immigrants. Wages were less during the years preceding the war. Ibid., pp. 103-4.

¹⁵ For details concerning the Assyrian movement of 1933, see Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, *Iraq 1900-1950: A Political, Social and Economic History* (London, 1953), pp. 229-237.

¹⁶ This time, political considerations were the prime motivating forces. The prevailing insecurity in the wake of the atrocities perpetrated by the Turks and Kurds during World War I forced the Assyrian inhabitants of Urmia and Hakiari to leave their homes.

¹⁷ There is a large corpus of literature on the Assyrian question and the massacres during World War I. For first-hand accounts see William Walker Rockwell, *The Pitiful Plight of the Assyrian Christians in Persia and Kurdistan*, American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (New York, 1916), pp. 14-52. Also see Rev. William A. Wigram, *The Assyrians and Their Neighbors* (London, 1929); F.N. Heazell, *The Woes of a Distressed Nation* (London, 1920); also Abraham Yohannan, *The Death of a Nation* (New York, 1916), pp. 80-85; also John Joseph, *The Nestorian and Their Moslem Neighbors* (Princeton, N.J., 1961), pp. 48-66. Also Gabriele Yonan, *The Assyrian Holocaust in Turkey* (currently in translation from German to English). Also, Joseph Yacoub, *La Question Assyro-Chaldéenne, Les Puissances Européennes, et la Société des Nations (1908-1938)*, excerpts of which have appeared in English translation under the title "The Assyrian Question" (Chicago, 1986).

subsist under an ever increasing burden of bitterness and soul-destroying misery.¹⁸ Small wonder then that a small element of these refugees decided eventually to seek refuge in other lands. The main stream of this emigration flowed to the United States.

When the war was over, the Assyrians became aware that Great Britain had betrayed their political aspiration by renouncing her pledge to protect the civil and religious rights of Assyrians. They had good reason to believe that, during the critical days of the war and under the pressure of military necessity, the British had indeed given them the *Pledge*. The climax came at the Paris Peace Conference when the peace planners, including Great Britain, refused to acknowledge the idea of Assyrian nationhood.¹⁹ They also ignored the fate of the Assyrian people in Iraq, the very country of which the Assyrians had been the earliest inhabitants.²⁰

In 1925, the League of Nations granted Great Britain a mandate over Iraq. At this time the British authorities began resettling Assyrians in Iraq. But even here, their lot was not enviable. The high hopes of the Assyrians that they would obtain civic equality in Iraq did not appear. The uncertainty of their future and their status as a Christian community left to the mercies of a Moslem society and to passionate Iraqi nationalists threw the displaced Assyrians into greater despair and helplessness. A further complication that aggravated their intolerable condition was the severe economic crisis that plagued them at the time. These factors intensified the anxiety of a small core of the Assyrian refugees, this time numbering a few thousand, to seek a new haven. They felt that they would be most secure in the West. The rest of the population stayed in Iraq, established permanent home there, and lived on the margin of its public life.

¹⁸ See H.H. Austin, *The Baquba Refugee Camp: An Account of Work on Behalf of the Persecuted Assyrian Christians* (London, 1920).

¹⁹ See R.S.H. Stafford, *The Tragedy of the Assyrians* (London, 1935); also Yusuf Malek, *The British Betrayal of the Assyrians* (Annemasse, Switzerland, 1934). In the introduction to the article "The Assyrians: a Debt of Honour," by Brigadier-General J.G.Browne, published in *The Geographical Magazine*, April 1937, pp. 431-448, the editor writes: "The story of the Assyrians is not one of which the British can be proud. Had we not afforded them protection and help, their situation might, it is true, be worse than it is today. But everyone who reads General Brown's moving account must feel that here indeed is a debt of honour which it would be shameful to leave unpaid. No two men have done more to redress the balance than General Browne, who commanded the Assyrian Levies in Iraq for eight years and was chosen by the League of Nations to investigate the possibilities of Assyrian settlement overseas; and Captain Gracey, Organizing Secretary of the Assyrian Settlement National Appeal."

²⁰ Of value for background material are George David Malek, *History of the Syrian [Assyrian] Nation and the Old Evangelical-Apostolic Church of the East, From Remote Antiquity to the Present Time* (Minneapolis, Minn, 1910); Chauncey William Emhardt and George Lamsa, *The Oldest Christian People: A Brief Account of the History and Traditions of the Assyrian People and the Fateful History of the Nestorian Church* (New York, 1926).

The new movement carried the refugees to France and America to which Assyrians looked as countries of unique opportunities and as the homes of freedom, both political and religious. Year after year from roughly 1914 to 1925, the stream of emigration continued to these countries. Relatives and friends in the United States often provided the financial means for the passage of these refugees. They tended to congregate in France where the Red Cross and YMCA helped them during their stay. The temporary settlers gradually got education, skills and savings. Nevertheless, the destination of which the vast majority of the refugees dreamed was America. Reports of America's blessings had filtered back to France, and the enthusiastic letters received from those in the United States sharpened their awareness of opportunity in America.²¹

Assyrians came in thousands past the shadow of the Statue of Liberty and settled into the existing Assyrian communities that American influence had not yet permeated. While the bulk concentrated in Chicago, Illinois, New Britain, Connecticut, Flint, Michigan, and Gary, Indiana, the rest, attracted by California's ideal climate, settled in Turlock and San Francisco.²² When the newcomers arrived, the old settlers, most of whom had prospered by this time, welcomed them and provided for them.

Stating precisely what the size of the Assyrian population in Chicago was then is not possible. According to the estimate provided by an Assyrian newspaper that was published in Chicago, about ten thousand Assyrians entered the United States from 1914 to 1940.²³ Almost seven thousand of these immigrants settled in Chicago, swelling the total Assyrian population to more than eight thousand.²⁴ The total Assyrian population in Chicago did not increase much until 1933 when the Assyrian uprising in Iraq ended in a crushing disaster, causing more people to seek refuge in the United States and in other lands. Between 1935 and 1945 occasional groups did arrive from Iraq and Iran, but this trickle of immigrants only slightly affected the community.

Problems of housing, language, and employment were less serious among those arriving in the second wave than among those arriving before 1914. The old settlers arranged housing for the newcomers in the same residential area

²¹ Information provided by Robert Koshaba, a long-time resident of the Assyrian community in Chicago, who had spent a few years in France with his family before finally coming to Chicago.

²² Edith Stein, p. 95.

²³ "Sparzona", September, 1935 and January 1939. Quoted from Daniel Wolk, *History of Chicago Assyrian Community*, p.6.

²⁴ According to Edith Stein, a special census taken under the direction of the Rev. Ablahat of the Assyrian Presbyterian Church in Chicago, showed that there were 1,422 Assyrians living in Chicago, in 1920. "The lowest estimate for these people [in Chicago] at the present time [1922] according to the various pastors and leaders among them is 3,000." p. 97.

in which they had concentrated since the days of their own arrival.²⁵ This was an older section of the neighborhood in the near-north part of Chicago, close to downtown.²⁶ Assyrian families, often large in size, lived near one another in multi storied apartment buildings among Irish, German, American, Greek and Armenian neighbors.²⁷ The neighborhood included many fruit and grocery stores, restaurants, coffeehouses, bakeries, barbershops, clinics, some of which were run by Assyrians. Later, in the mid-1940s, the neighborhood began to lose its Assyrian population to better residential areas in West Rogers Park and other districts of north Chicago.

One of the most important changes in the community during the period between the two world wars was an expansion in the number of occupations. The recent arrivals were engaged in several distinct occupations, skilled and commercial in character.²⁸ Many took advantage of new commercial opportunities engendered by the growth of the Assyrian neighborhood. Those who had gained a modicum of education or learned merchandising skills in France did not face the same challenges that the unskilled agricultural workers had confronted. Also, several of these immigrants had accumulated capital in that country. A small core of them started their own retail businesses, such as small grocery stores, liquor shops, coffee houses, and restaurants. Those who had found formal education in the missionary schools of Urmia or in France searched for employment commensurate with their education. Some worked as clerks, sales agents, and insurance agents. However, the pressing need for immediate earnings drove a significant number to work as unskilled laborers in

²⁵ In many cases where there were married women, many families took in lodgers, who were sometimes relatives. Sometimes the families gave the lodgers board also". *Monograph*, p. 24.

²⁶ "The Assyrian colony was found mainly between Illinois and Chestnut streets, Clark and Wells streets, although there are some families just outside of this district, a number further north, and a few scattered through various other parts of the city and its outlying regions. (These last are mainly the ones who have been here a number of years, and who own their homes). The 'lower north' district in which the Assyrians are settled lies just west of the streets bordering on the Lake, which are known as the most fashionable in Chicago. This neighborhood is surrounded by business blocks, and is dotted here and there with a few industrial plants. In its very midst lies the Moody Bible Institute with its numerous buildings." Edith Stein, pp. 104-5.

²⁷ Edith Stein visited thirty-five Assyrian families during this investigation, twenty-eight of whom were living in the district she described above. Altogether 259 persons were living in these families, 50 of whom were children under 12 years of age, making an average of seven adults in each family. The total number of rooms occupied by these people was 194. Ms. Stein also says that the Assyrian homes were on the whole very comfortably furnished and were very neat and clean. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

²⁸ Of 85 Assyrians whose occupations were known to Edith Stein, 20 worked in hotels or restaurants and 17 were janitors, 8 were factory laborers, 6 shop keepers, 5 garage men, 4 painters, 3 employees of the Telephone Company, 3 tailors, 2 bakers, 1 brick-layer, 1 carpenter, 1 watchmaker, 1 fireman, 1 printer, 1 clerk, 1 minister, and 1 rug cleaner. *Ibid.*, pp. 101-2, 105.

factories, but most could improve their condition.²⁹ There were, too, relatively few Assyrians in medicine and education.³⁰

Many Assyrian wives who were skilled artisans found ways to contribute to the family economy besides fulfilling their household responsibilities. They worked at home sewing garments or worked alongside their husbands in the family store to help contribute to their family's livelihood.

The newcomers did not, of course, abandon their ethnic traditions when they settled in Chicago. They felt that there was a need for developing communal activities to promote the cultural, social, philanthropic, and spiritual welfare of the Assyrian community. So the community leaders became active in establishing churches, founding clubs and organizations, publishing newspapers and magazines, and in providing educational programs.

The community made steady progress in organizing several social clubs during these years. Assyrians frequently gathered in them to engage in civic affairs, debates, and recreation.³¹ Their meetings and social gatherings encouraged the members to become more active in the internal life of the community. Community members held celebrations concerning Assyrian festivals and religious feasts. One first undertaking of these organizations was to conduct fund-raising campaigns. The immigrants raised money for the relief of the needy Assyrians in Iran and Iraq.³² The clubs also arranged picnics at which Assyrians enjoyed music and dancing.³³

As these organizations grew in number, it became evident that a federation to include all the Assyrian societies throughout America would better serve the Assyrian communities. Therefore, on November 4, 1933, a convention of these institutions, and those of other Assyrian colonies in the United States, met in Yonkers, New York, and the Assyrian National Federation resulted.³⁴

²⁹ Personal communication with Robert Koshaba.

³⁰ According to Edith Stein, there were three Assyrian physicians, two dentists and several ministers in the city. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

³¹ Many of the young men athletically inclined, joined the Y.M.C.A. clubs and shared their great advantages in every way. *Monograph*, p. 25.

³² Assyrian women succeeded in raising a good deal of money by forming sewing societies and giving parties to alleviate the suffering of the people in the home country. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³³ Recreation in the parks was quite a feature, where one park in Chicago was popularly known among the Assyrian people as the "Assyrian Park." *Monograph*, p. 25.

³⁴ At this Convention, Captain Alex Ameer of Yonkers was elected as the first president of the Federation, and upon his premature death, David B. Perley, the then vice-president, succeeded Captain Ameer as the second president (1934-5). At the 1935 annual Convention in Yonkers, New York, Joseph Durna, was elected as the third president. See the *Constitution and By-laws of the Assyrian National Federation* (Chicago, 1943). At present, more than thirty Assyrian organizations across the country are affiliated with the Federation. The purpose of this Federation, as it claims, is to promote the cultural,

Still another concern of the immigrants was the formation of churches, and these were the first institutions established by the founders of the community. There were, however, only a few churches established in Chicago before the second wave of Assyrian immigration. The Presbyterians were the first to organize themselves into a congregation. Before long, they established other churches for congregations of the same denomination. Those who followed the Nestorian tradition established their house of worship in 1906.

At the beginning, people remodeled small houses into church buildings to provide a place for religious services. Often these churches were in the heart of the community. They were more than places for worship; they looked after all the needs of the community and played an important role in its life. Churches had classes for the children, charitable activities, and they served as centers for meetings of acquaintances.

After settling in Chicago, the Assyrians became concerned about the perpetuation of the modern Assyrian language to preserve the ethnic identity of Assyrian children. Usually, the children gathered in the afternoons in the basement of a church, or classrooms provided by community organizations, to study the mother tongue.

The community published several newspapers, literary magazines, and books in Assyrian during this period of the community's history.³⁵ As time went on, sections in English appeared in the newspapers and magazines to meet the needs of the new English-speaking generation. An outstanding newspaper in Chicago was the weekly Assyrian American Herald (*Mashkhedana*) which appeared in 1915. The immigrants widely read this paper. It carried general and Assyrian news, news about community activities, poems, articles and other reading matter.

Also the community established in the 1920s an Assyrian publishing house to print and distribute books and pamphlets in the modern language. After that, enough dictionaries, poetry books, history books, and educational texts were produced.³⁶

social, philanthropic, and national welfare of the Assyrian people. It aims to bring about the utmost cooperation between the various clubs and organizations. The Federation also raises money for Assyrian needs in this country and abroad. The best branch of activity of this institution is its annual convention, sponsored each year by one of its affiliates.

³⁵ Newspapers and magazines had a slow and sporadic beginning. It began with the "Assyrian Herald of Chicago", *Mashkhedana*, a weekly newspaper published in Surit (Assyrian) by the Rev. Paul S. Newey (Qasha Paulos Enwiya). It was the best-edited publication in the Assyrian language and claimed the distinction of being "*The First Weekly Assyrian Paper in the World*," and "*The First Assyrian Paper Published in America*." This newspaper started in the summer of 1915 and lasted till 1924; it consisted of four pages, but some numbers were of eight pages. *Ktawoona* "The Assyrian Chronicle", and *Sparzawna* were two monthly magazines published in English and Surit in the 1930s. *Light from the East*, published by the Church of the East, started in the late 1940s and lasted till mid-1950s.

³⁶ Soon after settling, Assyrians designed refined Assyrian type-faces and founded a printing establishment in 1915 to publish books and pamphlets that were of direct concern to the new settler. An

Assyrian immigrants tended to congregate with their own kind and to preserve their customary way of life. Yet it was not until much later that this cultural isolation broke down when the youth of the second generation became absorbed with the way of life of the mainstream society.³⁷ They considered themselves American rather than Assyrian; they did not care about the old culture in any of its forms. That meant abandonment of their mother tongue, change of names, and change of ideals of the land of their parents' birth. Many were married to non-Assyrian women who had little appreciation of Assyrian culture. Though parents objected to the Americanization of their offspring, they were unable to prevent it.

The third and latest migration

World War II temporarily halted the immigration of Assyrians from their countries of origin in the Middle East. However, in the aftermath of the Second World War, Moslem campaigns of anti-Christian terror in Iran and government-sponsored pogroms against defenseless Assyrian communities in Urmia uprooted hundreds of inhabitants from their homes. Many who were subjected to such persecution escaped and sought refuge in other lands. Mussadaq's revolutionary movement of 1952 provided a further impetus to Assyrian emigration from Iran, especially for young activists and intellectuals.

For about twenty years after World War II the number of immigrants from Iraq did not increase much. However, the mid-1960s ushered in a new era in the immigration of Iraqi Assyrians. When the 1958 junta under the leadership of Qassim overthrew the monarchy and seized the reins of the government, Qassim reaffirmed his want to set up a democratic regime for Iraq.³⁸ The Assyrian people thought that they would be able to lead free and normal lives. However the government quickly changed its position, and in the month that followed the *coup d'état*, the country drifted into anarchy. With life becoming increasingly more difficult for the Assyrians in Iraq, hundreds were eager to escape. It was about this time that the Assyrian emigration from Iraq that grew to a veritable flood in the following years gathered momentum.

English-Assyrian and an Assyrian-English dictionary were compiled and published by Rev. Samuel David in 1924.

³⁷ Many of those reared in America joined the armed forces of the United States as proof of their loyalty and love for their country. Like other American soldiers, they fought and died heroically during the Second World War, the Korean War and in Vietnam. John Yonan, p. 3. The Assyrian veterans in Chicago intend to raise \$30,000 to erect a monument in Elmwood Park cemetery, Chicago, in honor of the fallen Assyrian heroes. See *The Quest*, November, 1996, Vol. 10, No. 4.

³⁸ For a detailed analysis, see Majid Khaddurie, *Republican Iraq: A Study in Iraqi Politics Since 1958* (London, 1969). Also, Robert A. Fernea and William Roger Louis, *The Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited*, (London, 1991).

When the right wing faction of the Arab Ba'ath Party came to power in 1968,³⁹ the Assyrians in Iraq again wondered what the change of a regime augured for the future. Their main concern at the time was for the civil and religious liberties of the Assyrian minority. Unfortunately their hope for a brighter future was not realized. On the contrary, the Iraqi Ba'ath regime brutally trampled upon their basic human rights, and Assyrians were subject to an intense system of social control and discriminatory practices.⁴⁰ Unquestionably, the political goal of assimilation lay behind those practices.

Faced now with a hostile regime and the prejudiced attitude of its leadership, the Assyrians found themselves in a helpless and hopeless position. In consequence, tens of thousands tried to flee the country by clandestine means. The departure of Assyrian refugees assumed even greater proportions because of the Iraq-Iran war of the 1980s and the Gulf War in 1990, both of which dealt a hard blow to the national economy. Many Assyrians had a desire to get away from Iraq and begin life in other lands, whether in America, Australia, Canada or Europe.⁴¹

A similar phenomenon occurred in northern Iraq where Assyrian settlements were caught up in the whirlwind of the war that broke out between the Iraqi army and the Kurds in the mid-1970s through 1990. Armed violence and repeated attacks on the Assyrian villages claimed the lives of hundreds of unfortunate Assyrians, forcing the survivors to vacate their villages. Likewise, repressive Iraqi measures following the insurgency of the Kurds and Assyrians in 1990, drove away thousands of panic-stricken people from their communities which were left in shambles. Many of these people joined Assyrian communities in the cities of Baghdad, Mosul, and Kirkuk. However, the uncertainties of life in these unfamiliar communities intensified the desire of the refugees to seek a new haven and to join the movement of Assyrians that was now at its height.

While pull factors had principally attracted the earlier Assyrian immigrants to the United States, strong push factors forced the vast majority of the recent immigrants to leave their countries of origin. However, we have to keep in mind that the bonds of kinship also provided a basis for migration. Farther, some Assyrians were only indirectly affected by the push factors. Both

³⁹ On this subject in general, see Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Bolder, Colorado, 1985).

⁴⁰ Three Assyrian community leaders were executed in Baghdad, in 1984. Many Assyrian men with their families were deported. Consult Mordechai Nisan, *Minorities in the Middle East* (Jefferson, North Carolina, 1991) p. 166. For more information on this section, see Yoab Benjamin, "Thou Shall Not Tread on History", *Assyrian Star* (Chicago, 1991) pp. 9-10.

⁴¹ According to John Yonan, p. 1, the number of Assyrians (Assyrian Chaldeans, Jacobites, Church of the East, and others) in the U.S. is 306,500; in Canada, 19,500; in Australia, 39,000; in Europe (Former Soviet Union, Sweden, Germany, United Kingdom, Holland, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Greece, and Italy) 254,300. John Yonan, p. 1.

the affluent and the impoverished were similarly drawn into this tide of immigration. All had but one desire -- to escape Iraq and the Ba'ath rule as quickly as possible.

The large-scale exodus from Iraq, probably 150,000 people, which began in the mid-1960s, continued well into the 1990s. This figure included a sizable portion of Assyrians who call themselves Chaldeans. They came to the United States, settling in Detroit, Michigan, where earlier "Chaldean" immigrants had put down roots. Many Assyrians from Syria followed them,⁴² and after 1980 at the outbreak of hostility that accompanied the rule of the clergy in Iran, by more Assyrians from Teheran and Urmia. The allure of America was overpowering to all these dissenters. There were, of course, many in this category who decided to settle in Chicago.

Because of the huge, continuous exodus of the Assyrians from Iraq, the sizes of the Assyrian communities in Baghdad and in many other Iraqi towns and cities were diminishing perceptibly. In Iraq, to prevent emigration which the government regarded as an unpatriotic act, the authorities imposed restrictions on leaving the country, particularly on those who had not fulfilled their military service obligations. Yet, despite all these limitations, the Assyrians continued to leave.

Most of the Iraqi refugees looked to America for asylum, eager to make a living in it. Some refugees came to the United States directly from their country of origin. Many others came by way of Greece, Rome and other European cities, and still others by way of Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon. Often, the restrictive immigration policy of the countries of destination, including the United States, stranded the poor derelicts in the "way-station" cities and countries. Yet the hardships of their lives did not depress them; their determination to change their condition urged them on.

The leadership of the Assyrian Universal Alliance (AUA) in America was aware of the potential political and national problems linked to the mass movement of Assyrians from Iraq. However, unable to prevent the influx of these victims of persecution, the AUA established an agency to sponsor the admission of Assyrian refugees to the United States.⁴³

Of the approximately 100,000 to 120,000 Assyrians who arrived in America from 1965 throughout 1995, around 50,000 settled in Chicago which

⁴² Those who came from Syria included a small number of Assyrians of the Syrian Orthodox origin. There are today about three hundred of them living in Chicago.

⁴³ The Assyrian Universal Alliance began refugee processing in 1975. By 1995, AUA had assisted in processing and resettling of over 17,000 refugees, 6,000 asylum applicants and about 10,000 new immigrants. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

already had a well-established Assyrian community.⁴⁴ The new settlers found this community as ideal as could be imagined. These new settlers of whom the majority were refugees from Iraq considerably augmented the existing community. In fact, the Iraqi group completely submerged the other Assyrian elements of the community and profoundly changed its character.

The old settlers were concentrated for many years in the neighborhoods of Rogers Park, Albany Park, Edgewater, Ravenswood, Peterson Park, Hollywood Park, in the near-north of Chicago.⁴⁵ Assyrians living there mainly had Jews, Russians, Greeks, Koreans, East Indians, Pakistanis, Arabs, Mexicans, and Vietnamese as their neighbors. After the newcomers arrived, some blocks within these neighborhoods turned completely Assyrian. However, in most areas, Assyrian and non-Assyrian families were interspersed. In fact, often, Assyrians and members of other ethnic groups lived in the same apartment buildings.

A Profile of the Present Assyrian Community

a. Occupational Distribution

Like the first generations of Assyrian settlers, the new immigrants who continued to arrive in Chicago every month had to adapt themselves to the difficulties of their new existence. The circumstances that brought them to this country compelled them to struggle on as best they could. Highly skilled workers or those engaged in trade had little difficulty in adjusting to the economic conditions of the new environment since they worked in jobs for which they were prepared by work experience in the old country. However, the need of some immigrants for immediate earnings forced them to take any available job regardless of prior work experience.

Currently, many Assyrians in Chicago are retail merchants or are engaged in other fields of business. Some of those who prefer working for themselves have established corner grocery shops and liquor stores in Assyrian neighborhoods where many of their customers are their compatriots. Many more have made a place for themselves in the city's economic life by opening restaurants, coffee shops, bakeries, or taverns. A few more own and manage print shops, insurance and real estate agencies, video-rental stores, photography studios or other small businesses.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ By the end of 1960, the population of Assyrian Community in Chicago had grown to approximately 20,000. Ibid.

⁴⁵ Daniel Wolk, *Assyrians*, p. 1.

⁴⁶ There are several signs marking Assyrian businesses along the main streets in Assyrian neighborhoods.

Most of the recent immigrants had been artisans or business men of some kind in the home country. Some of those who arrived with few resources twenty years earlier have now become well-to-do business people. The more enterprising of them have become affluent by establishing independent commercial enterprises.⁴⁷

There are also large groups of new immigrants who are proficient in English and are highly educated. All aspire to skilled positions, and their education enables them to find fine opportunities for their talents. Immigrants who were professional in the Middle East have distinguished themselves in Chicago as physicians, accountants, computer experts, dentists, engineers, educators, and to a lesser extent, as lawyers and architects, but chances of practicing the medical profession are better than most.⁴⁸ Today these highly qualified individuals do their share as American citizens and as good members of the Assyrian community, living with dignity and self-respect.⁴⁹

Assyrians have made little mark in politics. The first major Assyrian American political figure was Adam Benjamin who was elected to the Congress of the United States and served several terms. The other outstanding personality is John Nimrod who became active in the political affairs of the local government. He was elected to the State Senate in 1968.⁵⁰ Probably the most important politico among Assyrians is Victor Kamber, a Democratic party operative (consultant). There are also some officials who hold important posts in the City of Chicago.

Like those before them, unskilled refugees who were not trained by work experience in the old country faced the customary, early struggles. They primarily got their start as semi-skilled factory workers, cab drivers, and the like. Those who make their living in industry are largely engaged in the food-products industry, machine shops, or other basic industries.

⁴⁷ Jonathan Yokanna was born in Iraq and migrated to the United States at the age of seventeen. He began life as a wage-earner. Within ten years, he was able to become employer and to gain a virtual monopoly in parking-garage business. In 1991, he organized a relief committee which distributed close to \$200,000 among the Assyrian refugees in northern Iraq.

⁴⁸ The large number of physicians and dentists testifies to their success in these professions. There are said to be more than twenty Assyrian dentists in Chicago and around sixty practicing physicians. The rate of those engaged in teaching and education is yet higher, and so is the number of engineers and computer consultants and programmers. The number of lawyers exceeds twenty.

⁴⁹ A fairly large number of the post-1960 young immigrants and refugees from Iraq and Iran, have completed regular high school, and many have had a college or university and other post-high school education. Compared to these immigrants, young immigrants from Syria and Lebanon are less highly educated.

⁵⁰ John Nimrod was elected few years ago as Secretary General to the Assyrian Universal Alliance. He is also the Vice President of the Assyrian Universal Alliance Foundation. Another political figure who rose to distinguished leadership in Assyrian life is Homer Asshurian, a former member (1975-1979) of the Iranian Mejlis.

While Assyrian women in Chicago are represented in practically every vocation, they predominate in such occupations as sales agents in large retail establishments, secretaries, nurses, beauticians, insurance and real estate agents, teachers, dentists and other jobs. Also many of them are engaged in the manufacturing and selling of wearing apparel and food products, and in a few other trades.

Not all the newcomers were able to find work immediately. Recent immigrants who were without any regular occupation and income received personal attention from the community welfare council, a benevolent Assyrian agency in Chicago.⁵¹ If the refugees were without income or shelter, they were temporarily supported and helped to find the kind of work for which they were best suited. Families, the disabled, and the elderly who qualified for assistance from the state, were provided relief by government welfare agencies.

b. The Church

All Assyrians living in Chicago regardless of their religious denomination are considered part of the Assyrian community. Parishes of different Christian denominations were organized in Chicago and have coexisted within the Assyrian neighborhoods since the early days of settlement.⁵²

Normally, Assyrian families live close to their churches; although there are Assyrian families which have dispersed throughout the suburbs of Chicago. The devotion that the parishioners have for religion is evidenced by the many churches that the community has built or renovated with common funds. Most church members, even those who have moved to the suburbs, attend the church Sunday and on the holidays. Overall, the members are instructed in the elements of their faith and are strict in their observance. They are also zealous in observing church holidays and saints' days.

Presently, four parishes of the Assyrian Church of the East exist in Chicago--Mar Gewarguis, Mar Sarguis, Mart Mariam, and St. John. Mar Abdisho is the only parish of the Ancient Church of the East in Chicago. The membership of these two churches outnumbers that of the rest.⁵³ The Syrian Orthodox Church also has one parish--St. John. Mart Mariam and Mar Aprem are parishes of the Catholic Church. Besides these, the Assyrian Evangelical Covenant Church, the Assyrian Evangelical United Church of Christ, the Carter Westminster Presbyterian Church, and the Pentecostal Church, are parishes of other denominations that operate in the community.

⁵¹ Assyrian Welfare Council of Chicago.

⁵² *Monograph*, pp. 39-48. Edith Stein, pp. 109-110.

⁵³ The difference that divided the Church of the East into Assyrian Church of the East and the Ancient Church of the East is fundamentally that which applies to the former's adoption of the new Roman calendar in 1964. The Ancient Church of the East still clings to the old style, the Julian calendar. Its Patriarchal See is in Baghdad, but the See of the Assyrian Church of the East is in Chicago.

c. Social Service

The Chicago Assyrian community continued developing its philanthropic and social organizations after the arrival of the newer settlers. These institutions are a feature of community life and a reflection of the Assyrians' consciousness of group identity.

The Assyrian community in Chicago has several lay organizations for social activities. Recreation clubs for families and young people exist side by side with centers for lectures and teaching modern Assyrian (Surit). Likewise, the Assyrian community has agencies to provide material assistance and other necessary social services for the unemployed and the needy families.

The number of social institutions has multiplied since the recent influx of immigrants, and the community has more than fifteen clubs, associations, and societies in Chicago.⁵⁴ Most of them focus primarily on recreational activities; though others, like the Assyrian Academic Society, Assyrian Universal Alliance Foundation, the Assyrian Language and Culture Classes, and Northbrook Institute for Syriac Studies, stress Assyrian education and culture. Clubs that provide entertainment have affiliated themselves with the Assyrian American National Federation which was established in 1933. However, these clubs have failed to attract the support of the community and particularly of its better educated members; for many Assyrians do not view the strong emphasis on entertainment with favor.

The Assyrian American Association of Chicago, founded by the earlier settlers in 1917, was the first club formed in Chicago. Opened in 1964, the Assyrian Social Club was the second organization to be formed in the community.⁵⁵ The Assyrian Welfare Council of Chicago also was founded in 1964. Its purpose was to improve the economic and physical conditions of Assyrian senior citizens. The humanitarian effort and the social service of this important agency have been on the increase within recent years. As emigration increased, the benevolent society established a welfare fund based on donations to look after the needs of the fresh wave of Assyrian refugees. With the influx of more immigrants and refugees, the Assyrian Welfare Council of Chicago assumed the responsibility, in cooperation with local social service agencies, of helping the Assyrian refugees solve their adjustment problems. It has also taken an active part in helping the unemployed find work so that they do not become a charge on the public.⁵⁶ As time passed, another benevolent agency, the Assyrian

⁵⁴ Assyrian women play a role alongside the men in the organized life of the community. There are about three or four women's organizations, branches of Assyrian clubs.

⁵⁵ The Assyrian American Association, Assyrian Social Club, and Mar Zaia Assyrian Organization have spacious buildings for recreation and for meetings.

⁵⁶ Information provided by Robert Koshaba, the first president of this institution.

Aid Society, was established. Its objectives included the provision of aid and work for the unemployed, but it failed to survive. In 1985, the community established the Assyrian National Council of Illinois and one of its first undertakings was to open a day-care center for young children. Few years ago, a new organization, the Assyrian National Aid Society, was established to conduct communal fund-raising campaigns for the relief and welfare of the impoverished Assyrians in northern Iraq.

d. Cultural Activity

A variety of Assyrian cultural activities has developed during the last twenty years. Soon after the arrival of the newer immigrants, writers again took up their creative work, and this period became a productive one in Assyrian literary culture, particularly in poetry. Though the reading public among the less better-educated is still small today, magazines and books--poetry, history, education, and translations from other languages--are printed and distributed in modern Syriac and English.⁵⁷ The community has a small Assyrian bookstore, Al Ittikal, that stocks newspapers, magazines, books, and other reading matter in various languages, including modern and ancient Syriac.

A monthly newspaper, *Assyrian Guardian*, is published in Chicago, in English, Surit, and Arabic. It carries local notices, news, and many advertisements for the commercial establishments of Chicago. The Assyrian National Council of Illinois publishes a small newsletter, also in English and Surit. *Voice from the East* is the magazine of the Assyrian Church of the East. *The Quest*, a monthly newspaper, is the press forum of the Bet Nahreen Democratic Party. *Nabu*, a quarterly published in English under the editorship of Robert de Kelaita, began its existence in 1995. It is a community magazine that emphasizes on Assyrian themes, including events in various Assyrian communities. Of longer life is the *Assyrian Star*, a magazine published in English and Surit. It serves as the official organ of the Assyrian American National Federation. Yet the crowning glory of the Chicago community is the attractive immigrant journal of this period, published by the Assyrian Academic Society. This important Assyrian magazine offers, in English and Syriac, scholarly essays and articles relating to Assyrian literature and culture, political commentaries, modern prose and poetry, and book-reviews. It is edited with great care, displaying an unusual regard for taste and accuracy. This community journal has made a profound impression not only on Assyrians but on non-Assyrian readers as well.⁵⁸ Other magazines and newsletters of different organizations started but faded rapidly.

⁵⁷ There are six Assyrian print shops in Chicago.

⁵⁸ The chief editor today is Dr. Robert Paulissian, who is both a physician and a scholar of ancient Assyria. The Assyrian-language editor, Daniel Benyamin, has had extensive experience in previous publishing ventures. His section devotes many pages to selected essays, stories and the poetry of prominent Assyrians. The English section, under the editorship of Francis Sarguis, offers intellectual pieces on Assyrian topics, by Assyrians and non-Assyrians alike. See Yoab Benjamin, "Assyrian

Eight Assyrian radio programs came into operation years ago. Their range is limited to the city and its vicinity. These programs are tailored to less educated audiences. Overall, most broadcast time is given over to Assyrian music, a small amount to news, and a larger share to commercials. An Assyrian TV program shown for one hour a week offers similar programming.

Given the recent demographic changes in the community, the perpetuation of the modern language has become a prime concern, and vigorous efforts are being made to preserve it. There has been great progress in its teaching, and now more evening courses are offered for the young people of both sexes. As time goes on, more and more parents are willing to give their children a solid foundation in their Assyrian heritage.

The community saw the establishment of several cultural organizations during the last two decades, which have played a lively part in all this development. Their aim was to improve the cultural status of the community. The first institution to be mentioned is the Assyrian Language and Culture Classes whose immediate goal is the revival of the modern language. Therefore, this institution organized evening courses for the study of modern Syriac in which many Assyrians took part. Soon after, this institution began to support the reprinting of out of print Syriac books.⁵⁹

In the early period of its formation, the Assyrian Universal Alliance Foundation emphasized cultural and social activities. Shortly thereafter, the interest of this organization and the nature of its activities changed, and, the cultural ones virtually ceased over time. Even its newsletter finally ceased publication. Nevertheless, the community is proud of the library that this foundation established some ten years ago. It was built up by several energetic and educated youth who showed an interest in Assyrian learning.⁶⁰ This outstanding Assyrian library stocks excellent collections of Assyrian literature and hundreds of books on Assyrian culture, in English and Syriac.

The Assyrian Academic Society was founded in the mid-1980s. For years after its establishment it was inactive, but now this organization of intellectuals is flourishing. Its membership, steadily increasing in number, is today very involved in activities which have social and cultural significance. Presently, the Assyrian Academic Society plays an important role in the

Journalism: A 140-Year Experience", *Journal of the Assyrian Academic Society*, Vol. VII, No. 2, 1993. pp. 17-8.

⁵⁹ Toma Oudo's *Syriac Dictionary and Modern Assyrian Grammar*, Youkhanna Moshe's *Assyrian Grammar*, and Joel E. Warda's *The Flickering Light of Asia*. The institution intends now to reprint Toma Oudo's *Syriac Dictionary* and to publish a new grammar by Nimrod Simono.

⁶⁰ Wilson Marogil, Aprim Pethyu, Robert de Kelaita, Peter Jassim, Robert Karoukian, Hanna Najjar, and David Malik.

community. It has attracted a large portion of the enlightened youth to its new activities that include scholarly discussions and lectures on cultural, historical, and contemporary issues, not to mention ceremonies to commemorate important events in the history of Assyrians. Frequently, it conducts activities in combined effort with Northbrook Institute for Syriac Studies, another Assyrian cultural organization. The Assyrian Academic Society also conducts language classes, but perhaps foremost in significance is the present task of organizing a library and of preparing an English-Surit dictionary.⁶¹

Assyrian Special Events

a. Christmas - *Mawladad Maran* “The Birth of the Lord.”

Of the many occasions celebrated by the Assyrian people, none is more impressive than the Christmas celebration.⁶² A series of observances characterizes this holiday season. After the worship service on Christmas Day, Assyrians devote the rest of the day to festive visitation. They carry on Christmas customs dating from the time of early Christianity, brought over from their home country. Yet many features and traditions of the new country enrich these customs.⁶³ Of the Assyrian population in Chicago, the majority, including the Assyrians who acknowledge spiritual allegiance to the Church of the East See in Chicago, celebrate Christmas on December 25. The group that gives its allegiance to the Patriarch of Baghdad clings to the original tradition of dating Christmas to January 7, according to the Julian calendar.

The Christmas spirit starts twenty-five days before the actual day of the Christmas season. All, including children, fast by not eating animal food “Zahma”, and some, on the last day eat no food at all.⁶⁴ No weddings or other festive affairs are scheduled during the fasting period. On the first day of the fast, the custom is for the children to dress up like the legendary patron saint of the Assyrian children, *Somikka*. The children, masked and clad in motley gowns, go from door to door chanting ditties and demanding a blessing wherever they go. People give them such trifles as coins and candies. In some way or

⁶¹ Presently, Dr. Mark Mkrdichian, who devotes himself energetically to the interests of the Society and the Assyrian community, serves as president of the A.A.S. He has gained and maintained the admiration, esteem and affection of the members and his colleagues.

⁶² Let it be noted that this analysis pertains to the Assyrians in the West. However, Easter is of far greater importance than any holiday, including Christmas. That is why it is called *Eada Gura*, the Great Feast.

⁶³ Bringing of cut trees indoors at Christmas time, sending of Christmas cards, new Christmas recipes, window displays, Christmas gifts, the idea of Santa Claus and other manifestations of the season, are influences of the western culture.

⁶⁴ The tradition behavior in this respect continues to this day among the very observant Assyrians; however, there are some Assyrians who do not consider fasting as necessary.

another, the tradition corresponds to Halloween. The curious custom of *Somikka* prevailed in the old country; few Assyrians in America and in West do not observe this quaint, ancient custom.

At midnight elaborate church services are held and the people (followers of the Church of the East) hasten to attend. After taking communion they return to their homes, and the homemaker immediately fumigates the house with frankincense. When all the members of the family have distributed the presents among themselves, they break their fast. They partake of tea, Kulaicheh, and Kadeh.⁶⁵ The principal feature of the Christmas Day in thousands of Assyrian homes in the United States is the holiday dinner. Assyrians serve such delicacies as *Bushalad Gillaleh* "Yogurt Soup" and stuffed turkey, *Alisheesh Mahshee*. The latter graces the dinner table. Stuffing is of rice spiced with many condiments and almonds and raisins.

People visiting, greet each other with *Mawladad Maran haweh breekha alokhon*, "Happy Christmas." The proper answer is *Menokhun mudalle*, "together with you." The priest throughout the week after Christmas visits and blesses the homes of his parish.

b. New Year's Day - *Reeshat Sheata*

Assyrians call The New Year the beginning of the year, *Reeshat Sheata*. It is a great occasion for celebrating, feasting, and the exchange of greetings.⁶⁶ Music and dance are the accompanying features of the New Year's Eve. Masquerade parties, and other entertainment hold sway in the social organizations, and many persons stay up the best part of the evening. When the clock strikes midnight, each person wishes his neighbor a *Sheeta brikhta*, a Blessed New Year.

Communal centers celebrate the Assyrian New Year, or the popular Assyrian spring festival, on the first day of April--a reminder of the celebration in ancient Assyria of "the anniversary of Creation". They observe this civic celebration, customarily attended by a vast concourse of people, with a parade and speeches. Observation of the Assyrian New Year was tabooed in the home countries; today only Assyrians in the free world observe its celebration.

c. Easter Sunday - *Eadad Qeyamta*

⁶⁵ From earliest times it was the custom to bake Kadeh and Kulaicheh for Christmas. Kadeh are round and thick cakes marked with a cross on the top. They are stuffed with "martukha", a kind of Assyrian sweetmeat. Kulaicheh are small cakes stuffed with coarsely ground walnuts, or shredded coconut, mixed with sugar. Kadeh and Kulaicheh are one of the main attractions on the table of Assyrian families in Christmas. For their recipes and those of other Assyrian pastries, see Norma Sayad George, *Assyrian Mothers' Cookbook*, (Bensonville, Illinois, 1995), pp. 143-4.

⁶⁶ The holiday season offers some individuals an excuse to test their luck at the gambling table.

The Assyrian Easter tradition is a colorful event on the holiday calendar. It is a very important holiday, celebrated in the parish church. Everyone dresses well and goes to Mass. A characteristic feature that represents an age-old tradition of this holiday is the Easter egg, or “beeta smuqta” as Assyrians call it. Children play a special game called “Maplashtat Beyeh”--each child trying to knock his egg against that of his opponent. Easter Sunday is a great day of happiness for them.

The Easter dinner is a special meal and it is none other than the traditional *Reeshaw Aqle* (tripe).⁶⁷ Another specialty for this holiday is *Dolmad Rangeh* (Mixed Vegetable Dolma).⁶⁸

d. Martyrs’ Day - *Yumad Sahdeh*

Recently, the 7th of August has been designated as a Memorial Day for Assyrian Martyrs. The tragedy of Simmel (1933) has converted this day into one of mourning for all Assyrians. Assyrians solemnize Yumad Sahdeh as the anniversary of the fallen victims at Simmel, Iraq, in an atmosphere of reverence. Commemorative speeches and some special programs remind the Assyrian public of those who bravely and selfishly defended their people’s existence.⁶⁹

e. Virgin Mary’s Day - *Eadam Mart Maryam*

Dokhranat Mart Maryam is a summer feast celebrated on the fifteenth of August. Assyrians hold celebration of this feast at churches named after the Virgin. Ordinarily, many Assyrian-American families in Chicago flock to a prominent Dominican church in Holy Hill, Wisconsin, in search of blessing. After church service, families arrange themselves around the edges of the surrounding green hillsides. There, all families would rejoice together in a common repast, called *Dokhrana* (blessed memory). Then all join in dancing the folk dances, and singers provide the music.

f. *The Shahrā*

Shahrās are dedicated to the glorification of certain saints, and they hold a vastly important place in the faith of the Assyrian people. Observance of these festivities is marked in the religious calendar of the Church of the East, and every saint has his own special day in the calendar. Assyrians have converted the anniversaries of some particularly reputed patron saints in occasion for great

⁶⁷ For the recipe of this specialty, see Norma Sayad George, p. 120.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 131.

⁶⁹ Assyrians perpetuate their memory because the brutal manner of their death evokes feelings that time does not heal.

festivity, known as *Shahrās* (noctrines).⁷⁰ They are of widespread popularity, and the days of such celebrations are some of the gayest ones of the year. According to the conviction of the Assyrian people, celebrating the rites of the *Shahrās* is a way of appealing to the saints for favor and protection. They believe, too, that the performance of the ritual would confer spiritual benefits.

By the custom of the people, animals (usually sheep) are slaughtered as offerings to the patron saint, in obedience to some vow.⁷¹ Many Assyrians consider the *Shahrās*, in the manner they celebrate them, a religious obligation. Feasting is one of the most conspicuous features of the sacrifices, in which they partake of flesh and drinks, and where joy abounds. Therein, the congregation listens to the reciting of the legendary stories, virtues, and the tragic sufferings of the guardian saint whose feast they are honoring. They customarily call on a priest to dispense an invocation and blessing, and the feast seems almost like a sacrament.

Next comes the feasting. All those who are present must participate in a common repast of boiled mutton stew and bread, called the *Dokhrana* (lit. blessed memory) or *Nidra* (a vow). Finally, to increase the mirth of the feast, all join immediately afterwards in dancing the traditional *Khigga* and *Shaikhani*. Toward the close of the feast, the congregation comes to congratulate the patrons who sponsored the feast saying, *Alaha emqabilleh dokhranokhun wembarikhleh*, May God accept and bless your feast.

Customs and Attitudes

Of the most remarkable characteristics of the Assyrian people are their hospitality in which they take pride. They are very social people, warm and emotional, and very civil and polite both toward friends and strangers. Visiting back and forth between relatives and friends is frequent. No appointment is necessary for casual visits and the guest is always welcome in the home. Assyrians receive the visitors with hugging and greeting kisses, and greetings are warm and friendly. They greet each other with *Shlamalokhon* (peace be upon you). In their manners the Assyrian people are frank and open, in their discourse they are modest and reserved. They do not make any gestures with their hands, nor talk aloud.

Family links among Assyrians show their strength in customs observed with sickness, marriage, funerals, and other social affairs. Children are well behaved, polite, and quiet. They are obedient and respectful to elders and to

⁷⁰ Like those celebrated in commemoration of these saints: *Mar Bhisu*, *Mar Gewarguis*, *Mar Abdishu*, *Mar Pithyon*, *Mar Sarguis*, *Mar Toama*, *Mar Zayya*, and many more guardian saints.

⁷¹ See Emhardt and Lamsa, p. 21. The writers say that “*some of the blood of the victim is smeared on the forehead of the person for whom the animal is sacrificed.*” Also, Surma Bait Mar Shimun, *Assyrian Church Customs and the Murder of Mar Shimun* (New York, 1983), p. 31. This ritual is particularly observed by the Assyrian communities in the Middle East; however, some Assyrians in Chicago still preserve the custom.

their teachers. The birth of a child in a family is an important event. If it is a male one, joy is boundless.⁷²

Assyrian Cooking

Lunch is the main meal of the day and it is always accompanied by various vegetables, salads, and Assyrian-type pickles, *turshiyeh*. Bread is often used. Lamb is the principal meat, but fish and chicken are eaten a great deal. This is the recipe for Stuffed Baked Fish that Norma Sayad George advises:⁷³

1 medium size white fish
1 cup parsley, chopped
1 cup cilantro [coriander], chopped
1 cup green onion, chopped
1 cup dill, chopped
1/2 cup butter, melted
2 red peppers, chopped
1/2 cup celery heart, chopped
Salt (to taste)
Juice of four lemons

Clean fish and split in half.
 Prepare all the rest of ingredients as listed and place in a bowl. Mix. Stuff the fish with the vegetables and tie or secure with long toothpicks.
 Bake covered for 20 minutes at 350 F.
 Remove the cover and bake for another 15 minutes. Serve with rice.

Perhaps the best known and favorite folk dishes are *Rizzab Alisheesh* (Stuffed turkey), *Rizzab ktaita* (Stuffed chicken), *Dolmad Rangeh* (Mixed Vegetable Dolma), *Dalmad Kalama* (Stuffed Cabbage Leaves). Other popular foods include *Dolmad Tarped Gipta* (Stuffed Grape Leaves), *Nunap perna* (Baked fish), and many other characteristic foods. Assyrian famous pastries are Nazoogi, Baklava, Kadeh, Kulaicheh, and the like.⁷⁴

Folk Music and Dancing

Assyrians express their joy in life with singing and dancing. Assyrian folk dances are extremely varied, *Khigga* and *Shaikhani* considered pre-eminent among them. Most dances are done by groups, but sword dancing is a solo display. The traditional dances are associated with the historic traditions of the Assyrian people. Assyrians have retained the fundamental character of these dances and their basic purity of technique and style are comparatively immune from influences of the surrounding cultures.

⁷² For a discussion of customs and rituals related with the life cycle (mainly to birth, marriage, and death), see Yoab Benjamin, "Assyrian Rituals of Life-Cycle Events", *Journal of the Academic Society*, Vol. IX, No. 2, 1995, p. 65.

⁷³ The recipe is from Norma Sayad George, p. 126.

⁷⁴ For recipes of these Assyrian foods and pastries, consult Norma Sayad George.

In the traditional dancing of *Khigga* and *Shaikhani*, men and women join hands, arms linked with the left elbows over the right ones, and then move around in arcs to the tunes of *zurna* and *dawula*. Ordinarily, the leader of the group stands at the right end, swaying a sword, or a dagger, or a colorful scarf. Short jumping, skipping or hopping, done repeatedly without variation, are some typical steps of these two dances.

Dancing requires a musical accompaniment, and the instruments used for this purpose are: *dawula*, *zurna*, *dappa*, and *dembuka*. The *dawula* is a cylindrical drum hung from the neck in a vertical position. Its body is made of wood; the sides are covered with sheep skin. It is beaten in slow time with a curved stick in the right hand, punctuated at intervals by a blow with the palm of the left hand. It produces an extraordinary range of powerful rhythms and are capable, in expert hands, of a wide variety of subtle and complicated effects. The *zurna* is made of two canes of bamboo that have several finger holes. It is played by blowing across the upper ends of the canes. The *dappa*, tambourine, is a round skin drum with cymbals or jingling disks set around the wooden frame. The *Dembuka* is made from clay with a skin stretched across its flared end.

Myth and Superstitions

In every age, though much more in older days, the Assyrian people believed in many superstitious ideas and practices and in some popular beliefs and legends.⁷⁵ Speaking of these practices as Assyrian would not be correct, for

⁷⁵ The following are some of these superstitions (some of them have faded and died):

- *You should not whistle at night for the devils will gather.*
- *Sweeping the house immediately after someone has just left on a journey brings a bad omen.*
- *Sprinkling water after a man leaving his home insures him a safe journey.*
- *Spilling a cup of coffee or breaking a glass breaks an evil spell and foretells good luck.*
- *Hanging a wooden spoon on the door-post will protect the stray sheep from wolves.*
- *Bad luck will follow if you see a funeral first thing in the morning.*
- *If your left palm itches, you are about to receive money; when your right palm itches, you are about to pay out money.*
- *Quivering of the right eyelid signifies a serious misfortune; if of the left, the omen is favorable.*
- *Sneezing once is regarded as a bad omen; sneezing twice is favorable and it indicates the*

many of them are observed by the surrounding cultures as well. They were borrowed and incorporated with the basic Assyrian ones.

The Assyrian people have also adopted some notions of foretelling the future, *petakhtad pala*, and peering into the unknown.⁷⁶ Not to be overlooked is the faith in efficacy of talismans (*talismeh* or *khirsheh*), and in the influence of the evil eye (*ayna bishta*). The charms prescribed for these purposes are supposed to protect an individual from diseases and accidents, the evil thoughts of a covetous eye and the bad influence of those who admire. The Assyrians are as well attracted to some traditional remedies for common illnesses and diseases.⁷⁷

Finally, there are those deep-rooted beliefs in the existence and attacks of the ghosts, spirits, and demons. People believe that the demoniac possession can cause misery and wickedness. They also believe that the demons enter into living men or women, and can cause them to behave in strange ways.

With the exception of “faith-cure”, belief in these practices that have lasted through a length of generations is rapidly diminishing in the present time, as Assyrians are receiving more formal education. More diffuse today is the strong faith in the protective power of the saints (*qadisheh*). Many Assyrians who have great faith in written prayers often choose to call for the advocacy of a

expulsion of evil spirits.

- *The death of a snake within a house is an evil omen.*

- *Hooting of an owl or a crow foretells a bad omen.*

- *Howling of a dog is a bad augury.*

- *Ringing in the ear means someone is speaking well of you.*

- *Turning a broom upside down indicates that the return of an undesirable visitor is not wanted.*

⁷⁶ Consult Wallis Budge in his annotated edition of the Assyrian book Spar Sammaneh “The Book of Medicines” (Oxford, 1913). There is a complete section in this book that deals with divination, forecasts, omens, the influence of the planets and the Signs of the Zodiac on the characters and dispositions of men, and on human affairs in general. pp. cix-cxxix. It is worth mentioning here that there is an old Assyrian book called *Ktava Dantoryeh* (Book of Protection) which is in manuscript and written in Syriac. It is in common use among the priests who write incantations that have healing attributes. The book also includes a variety of verses to bring good fortune and to avert evil. These are prescribed in the form of amulets by those who claim are “healers”.

⁷⁷ In case of infectious illness, such as measles and whooping cough, mothers tend to treat these cases in a very traditional manner. Customs advises the mother to cover her child with a crimson sash as a necessary precaution against further complications if the child is infected with measles. The specific manner, she believes, will hasten the recovery of her child. Also, fright that leaves one pale is cured by drinking water.

priest who combines the practice of dispensing invocations with his ministry, to free their patients from the invisible spirits. The priest on such occasion prescribes a written prayer, folded neatly and put in a cloth case, to be suspended from the neck or carried about with the patient.⁷⁸

Assyrian Language and literature

The Assyrian language (Syriac) belongs to the Semitic family of languages. There is a correlation between the ethnic name of the Assyrians and the language spoken by them. The modern Assyrian language has been known under various designations, such as: *Modern Syriac*, *Surayaya*, or *Surit*, all of which are adaptations of the original word *Ashuraya* or *Aturaya* (Assyrian). They are appellations that have been of constant use among the Assyrian people though the original term is indeed more appropriate and more desirable for the Assyrian people.

Until about the middle of the nineteenth century the classical Syriac language had remained the only proper medium of literary endeavors. At about this time, the vernacular language (Ishana Suwadaya) developed its own form, which in spite of its resemblance to Classical Syriac stands distinct from it. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the modern has been gaining ground in becoming the appropriate literary medium. The classical language still persists as the liturgical language of the three Assyrian Churches--Church of the East, Orthodox Church, and the Catholic Church.

The modern Assyrian literature flourished and came into prominence in the last fifty years. Poetry, lyrics, essays, short stories and other creative literary genres took giant strides in the hands of talented writers in Iran, Iraq and western segments of the Assyrian population.

Conclusion

Many changes have taken place in the Assyrian community of Chicago since its founding. They primarily involve economics, the work force, education, social organization, religion, and the attitudes of the people. These changes were the result of economic pressures and the influence of American culture. Most changes were gradual; however, some changes were abrupt, especially among the young and among women. The young, partially or completely educated in America, became imbued with new customs and ideas and rejected the traditional way of life as did women who were more in conflict with traditional ways than men. Despite these changes, the Assyrian community has largely retained its traditional social structure, and its members, particularly the post-1960 immigrants, have generally preserved their cultural heritage. Most

⁷⁸ The prayer is often copied from the manuscript of the *Book of Protection* which contains a series of prayers for necessary protection against sickness that attacks people, and for driving out the evil spirits which rampage in their bodies.

Assyrians have a strong ethnic identity and have been unwilling to surrender their distinctiveness, feeling a deeply rooted emotional attachment to traditional ideals and practices.