

**Mikhael K. Pius, Assyrian Tales and Confessions,
Rapid Productions Printing, Modesto, Ca 1999 108 pp. [\$7.50]**

Reviewed by Francis Sarguis and Gladys Warda

This collection of short stories is bound to please the author's most likely audience -- Assyrian readers. Pius' enthusiasm for story-telling is engaging. Much of his focus is on a bygone era which lingers in the memory of many of his fellow countrymen. Taken as a whole, the stories comprise a vivid narrative of daily life in the refugee camps in Iraq. Dating back to the waning period of World War I, and continuing well into the 1950's, thousands of Assyrians were consigned to compounds named, among others, *Hinaidi*, *Gailani*, *Mandan*, and especially "the *Civil Cantonment at the Habbaniya R.A.F. Base*". It might be said that this population was in a state of "protective custody". As such, it was in a position to serve (and to be exploited by) the British in more ways than one (both as civilian workers and, in the case of the Levies, in a military capacity). Pius explores these themes in essays such as *A Slice of Hot Pie*, *Shopping With Dayi*, and *Elated to Humiliation*.

Understandably, most who experienced it will not dwell on the positive aspects of this quasi-internment, but the experience was not without its pluses. Given the vulnerability and desperation which brought them to the camps, there were some obvious *quid pro quo*. This is what comes to mind: There was the renewed possibility of educating one's children; jobs became available, offering a measure of dignity denied in the ordeal of flight and exodus; and, certainly of great import, there was now physical security. While rudimentary in several ways, life in the camps was bound to be a welcome respite from the conditions of hardship and deprivation they had suffered in their flight from the Hakkari mountains, or from Urmia and Hamadan. Having said this, clearly the positive attributes of living in these "havens" could not mask lingering angst over the traumatic cultural displacement, and what would soon become an irreversible deracination of a people from their ancestral home.

The author arrived in America as an adult, and he touches on his odyssey as an immigrant to the new culture in *Why is Baabi Sad?* But this is merely *en passant*, and the story is more about family love and filial solidarity, themes touched upon in other essays: *Missing Christmas Present*, *Shopping with Dayi*, and *Cry Baby*. A prevalent tendency is to hark back to a boy's reveries and the travails of his growing up. With Huck Finn impishness, we read about youthful fascination with cigarettes

(*Gilyana's Pressing Secret*, *Smoking on the Sly*, and *Caught Smoky Handed*), and the camp celebration of holidays and special events (*Trial by Nasardy* and *Ladies and Gentlemen!*). We are equally entertained by a youngster's schoolday tribulations (*Standoff Against Raabi Espanaya*, *Put-Shot Shut Me Out*, *Forbidden Fruit*, and *Tumbleweed Bus Ride*), and his impatience for the first shave of his life (*Virgin Crop*). Parables illustrating the devotion of pets to their master (*Pota* and also *Dickie*), raise the question often in a child's mind: "Does our loving dog have a soul?" Shades of Steinbeck's **Charlie!**

Pius writes about two of his longtime interests -- writing and films (*Elated to Humiliation*, *Vintage Movie Junkie*, and *Daydreaming in Sa'adun Park*), as well as one of his pet peeves -- bullfighting (*Gored in the Night*). Thankfully, Pius generally steers clear of the preachiness all too often present in Assyrian essayists

There is a refreshing willingness by the author to lay himself open as he delves on his foibles and indiscretions. We can sense his exhilaration and personal grief. The result is half-bitter, half-sweet which, after all, is a reflection of our own lives. These ingredients combine into good storytelling.

The author's perspective cannot be labeled unbiased; we are, after all, reading the private musings of a dedicated Assyrian? But all too often, Assyrian authors voice their unabashed ardor to the point of giving passionate rhetoric a bad name. Pius is temperate; he does not bombard the reader with endless platitudes.

Beyond its dividend of warm feelings, this compendium can also be viewed as an interesting source of information about an important period of our modern history. This is a valuable bonus. In his personal voice, Pius sheds light on a period when for all practical purposes our people changed from being settled inhabitants to nomads. This experience fixed (or fortified) in the DNA code of Assyrians a singular philosophy of life, larded heavily with pessimism, and not unlike that of other harried groups such as the Armenians and the Jews, and often characterized as the cult of victimology.

One might pose a number of questions at the level of craftsmanship. Isn't the word "*Desire*" missing at the end of the title *Gilyaanna's Pressing Secret*? In that same story, a reasonable reading would have the protagonist crushing a cigarette with his bare foot! Surely not the author's intent. In *Pota*, the loyal dog lies down on his master's grave. While this is a touching image, it is a trite and oft-repeated tale in literature and lore. In

Mysterious Blushing Rose, the author has “a few dead leaves clinging on to the leafless trees,” a seeming contradiction in terms. As for *A Slice of Hot Pie*, the choice of the title puzzles the reviewers. In this same essay, the protagonist describes noises so disruptive as to give him a splitting headache yet, improbably, he still hears the frogs and crickets.

Happily, typographical errors are relatively few. Grammatical quality is well above that which is found in most English-language Assyrian publications, although the final product would have decidedly benefited from fewer exclamation points.

Speaking generally, an egregious failing of modern Assyrian “history” is its casual approach to what the West generally considers norms of scholarship. Unfortunately, emotion, innuendo, and hyperbole are often confused for careful research. The traumatization *en masse* of a people can help explain a pell-mell rush to vindication, but in the long term only a responsible written history has value potential. To this end, Pius is helpful by providing dates and details. However, it is somewhat irritating that Pius indulges in unnecessary repetition from one story to the other. How many times does the reader have to revisit the description of the Habbaniya Camp? Wouldn’t a general explanation in the Foreword have solved this issue?

This book is by no means “*literature for the ages*,” but it will stir the memory of many, and it is sure to bring considerable satisfaction. One can hardly ask for more, especially when the collection is modestly priced and well within the reach of all. We warmly recommend *Assyrian Tales and Confessions*, and hope to see more of Pius’ writings in the years to come.

Note: Copies of the book may be purchased directly from the author (\$7.50 US per copy): Mikhael K. Pius, 3504 Setrok Drive, Modesto, CA 95356.