

Settling Into Diaspora: A History of Urmia Assyrians in the United States

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Editorial Note:

This is third in a series of articles written by Arianne Ishaya printed in the various issues of JAAS. The present article is a follow-up study of “*From Contributions to Diaspora: Assyrians in the History of Urmia, Iran*” (JAAS 16, no.1, 2002: 55-76). That article was a sketch of the Assyrian Community in Urmia in the decades prior to WWI and its subsequent uprooting during the War. The present article follows the uprooted refugees to the United States and describes the major immigrant colonies they established in this country.

There is considerable overlap between the present article and the one titled “*Assyrian-Americans: A Study in Ethnic Reconstruction and Dissolution in Diaspora*” (JAAS 17, no.2, 2003: 19-38). They both deal with Assyrian-Americans, and follow the same format of presentation. The difference is in focus. The previous article is political in approach, and therefore broader in scope in the sense that it includes in addition to Assyrians from Iran, refugees from Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. It traces the formation of political, religious, and civic organizations some of which attempted to unite the Assyrian Diaspora on a national scale while others reconstituted the traditional boundaries along denominational and regional divisions.

The present article encapsulates in a close-up study of refugees from Urmia, the saga of a nation whose communities were shattered after they lost three fourths of their population in the WWI holocaust, and arrived in the United States as lone individuals or part-families still grieving over the lost relatives and homes. Through sheer determination and self-help community organizations, they built viable immigrant communities in Diaspora and salvaged what they could of their cultural heritage.

The Assyrians of Urmia: Background Information

The presence of Assyrians in Persia (Iran) dates back to the first century AD,¹ or possibly earlier, to the Sargonite era in the seventh century BC, at the time of the establishment of Assyrian colonies in Median (present-day Iranian) territory.² In the nineteenth century, the Assyrians of Iran were concentrated on the Plains of Urmia and Salamas and the uplands of Tergavar, Mergavar, and Baradost in the province of Azerbaijan, in Northwest Persia. As early converts to

¹ Iran Almanac *Assyrians* (Echo of Iran. 16th ed. 1971), 394-395.

² P. Sarmas, *Akhnan ManiVakh? (Who Are We?)* (Teheran: Assyrian Youth Cultural Society, 1965), 50-51.

Christianity, they all belonged to the ancient Church of the East, also known as the Nestorian Church. This would change, from the mid-nineteenth century onward, when various foreign missions opened stations in Urmia and the Church of the East lost a good number of its adherents to Catholic, Protestant and Russian Orthodox denominations. The Assyrian population on the Salamas plain had been converted earlier (in the seventeenth century) when the Catholic missionaries of the Carmelite order succeeded in bringing its entire Nestorian population into the Church of Rome. In 1900, the total population of the province of Azerbaijan was estimated at 300,000 of which 45% were Christians. Among the Christian population, the total Assyrian population (different denominations combined) was 76,000, the Armenians numbered 50,000 and the Jews 1,000.³ While the Assyrians constituted the largest non-Muslim minority in the Urmia plain, this was not the case in the Salamas region. In 1885, the Christian population of Salamas was composed of 20 Armenian and three Assyrian (Uniate Chaldean) villages. The Muslim villages in Salamas outnumbered those of the Christians.⁴

Up until 1918, at which time they were uprooted from the region,⁵ the Assyrians of Urmia lived in compact villages along the three rivers of Nazlu, Shahar, and Baranduz. These rivers flowed eastward toward the lake of Urmia from their headquarters in the Zagros Mountains bordering Turkey. Of a total of 300 villages in this region, 60 had an exclusively Assyrian population, and 60 had a mixed Assyrian, Azari Turkish,⁶ and/or Armenian population.⁷ The Assyrian population of the town of Urmia itself was only 600 people, or about 100 families. They lived in the designated Christian quarter of the town. The Kurds, being essentially pastoralists, were found in the surrounding upland areas, and not in the compact farming villages of the Urmia plain.⁸

In the villages, most of the Assyrians lived as sharecropper tenants subject to Muslim landlords. Few of them desired to move to the towns, as work opportunities were limited. Many occupations, particularly those that required the handling of foodstuff, were forbidden to the Christian minority since, according

³ Minorsky, V. "Urmiya: A District & Town in the Persian Province of Adharbaijan" in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (1st ed. 1934), 1038.

⁴ Coan, F.G. *Yesterdays in Persia and Kurdistan*, (Claremont, Calif: Saunders Studio Press, 1939), 46.

⁵ A remnant returned to a few of the former villages after the war.

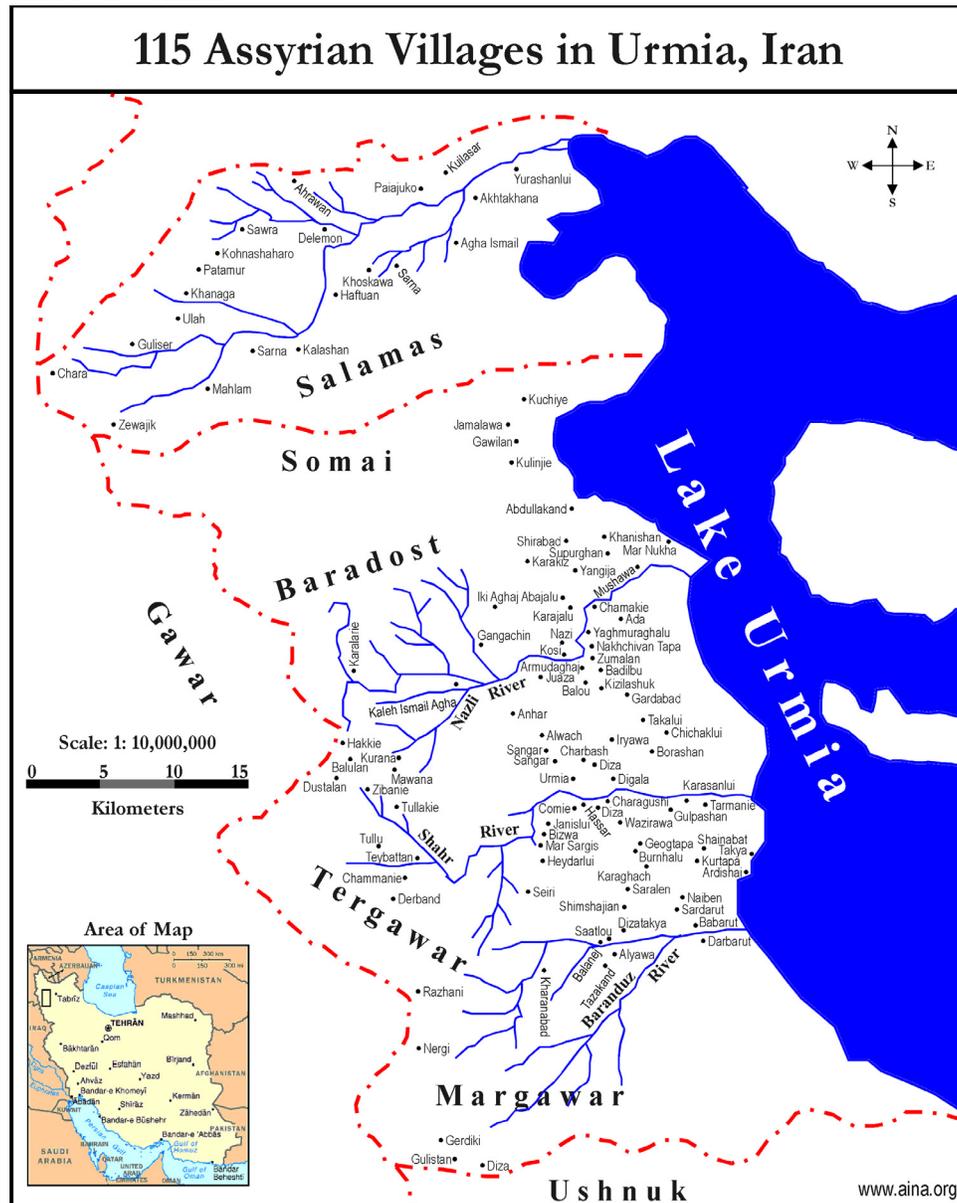
⁶ Azari Turks consist of indigenous Iranians who have mixed with, and adopted the Azari dialect of the Afshar Turks. They are Shii Muslims. Afshar Turks have moved there from the interior regions of Iran.

A. Ishaya (trans.) B. Nikitine, "Family Life Among the Assyro-Chaldeans of the Plain of Urmia," *JAAS*, Vol. 7, no. 1 (1993): 53.

⁷ Minorsky, V. "Urmiya: A District & Town in the Persian Province of Adharbaijan" in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (1st ed. 1934), 1032-1038.

⁸ J. Perkins, *A Residence of eight Years Among Nestorian Christians* (New York: M.W. Dodd, 1843), 9-10.

to Islamic law, Christians were “unclean.” Thus, as early as 1828, when Russia separated Georgia, Armenia, and part of Azerbaijan from Persia, the Assyrians began to cross the border into Russia in search of employment. In fact, the railroad connecting Alexandropol to Julfa was built mainly with an Assyro-Chaldean workforce.⁹



The impetus for migrant work increased with the establishment of foreign missions in Urmia in the mid-nineteenth century. These establishments opened

⁹ A. Ishaya (trans.). B. Nikitine, “Family Life Among the Assyro-Chaldeans,” 55.

up schools and brought literacy to the region. The first of which was the American Congregational Mission, which opened a school in 1836 under the direction of Rev. Justin Perkins. In subsequent years, Catholic Lazarists, Anglicans, Lutherans and the Russian Orthodox missions also established schools in the area. By 1906, there were a total of 201 schools and 5,084 Assyrian students in Urmia and the surrounding villages.¹⁰

Literacy, and the presence of foreigners, exposed the Assyrians to the world beyond what they had known as oppressed peasants. But, the various mission establishments could not offer employment to the large number of Assyrian men who were receiving schooling. However, there was the possibility of engaging in migrant work in Russia, Europe and even in the US. Men who were literate in the English language benefited, as the possibility of traveling to the US was tangible. It was learned that an individual in the US could earn \$2.00 a day. This revelation encouraged groups to leave for the US either to further their education or make fast money, and return home to invest in farmland or business. It had almost become a vocation for every young man to spend a few years in America before he “settled down.”¹¹

The Call to Migrant Work: 1880’s – 1914

The first Assyrian to visit the US from Urmia was most likely Mar Yohannan, Bishop of Urmia, at the invitation of Dr. Justin Perkins. He arrived in 1841 and remained in the US for a year. Among the pioneer generation were young men who came to further their education such as Dr. Isaac Adams and Dr. Jesse Yonan. The former arrived in 1888 and the latter in 1892. In addition, other individuals like Rev. Paul Newy, from the village of Titrush, Rev. Andrew D. Urshan, and Alexander Joseph Oraham arrived in the years 1906, 1911 and 1913 respectively.¹²

The American-educated Assyrians such as Dr. Isaac Adams, Mooshie G. Daniel, Rev. N. Malech and Joseph Knanishu, assumed the role of cultural broker by introducing the English reading public, via their publications, to the culture, literature, and socio-political institutions of their country, Persia.¹³

¹⁰ *Kokhva*, 1, no.2 (1906): 85-86.

¹¹ For more on the condition of Assyrians in Urmia during this period see A. Ishaya “From Contributions to Diaspora: Assyrians in the History of Urmia, Iran” *JAAS* Vol. 16, no.1 (2002): 55-76.

¹² V. Shoumanov, *Assyrians in Chicago* (Chicago: Arcadia Publishers, 2001), 10,15,27.

¹³ I. Adams, *Persia by A Persian* (Washington, D.C.: Author, 1900); G. M. Daniel, *Modern Persia* (Wheaton, Illinois: Author, 1897); Prof. Malech, G. & Rev. N. Malech, *History of the Syrian nation and the Old Evangelical-Apostolic Church of the East* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Author, 1910); J. Knanishu, *About Persia and Its People* (Chicago: Lutheran Augustana Book Concern, 1899; reprint, Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press LLC, 2001).

Through these pioneers, the Assyrians back home learned about work opportunities in North America, which propelled a wave of migrant laborers to travel to the industrial cities of the Eastern US to seek employment in factories.

The Condition of Migrant Workers in the US

At the onset, a symbiotic relationship was established between the migrant workers in the US and the communities they left behind in the “old country.” The former sustained the latter financially through regular remittances. Although many Assyrians regularly crossed the border into Russia to work or learn trades, overseas migration was regarded as the best way to make “quick money.”

Assyrian migrant workers arrived in America with high hopes, but the conditions there were not what they had anticipated. Among those who left Urmia, a few returned home and brought back enough money to invest in land and property. Some were never heard from again, and others could not even accumulate enough to pay for their passage back home. A great deal of detailed information on the condition of migrant workers in the US is available because of *Kokhva* (Star), a weekly newspaper published in Urmia between 1906-1918 which held a regular column on the migrant workers abroad.¹⁴ The migrant workers did not have an easy entry in the US. Several times, Assyrian men were turned back at the US port of entry. For example, in 1906, a group of Assyrians entered New York but 6 returned because they had failed the physical examination that screened for Trachoma. The US government fined the Hamburg ships for not screening the passengers, in addition to obligating them to return the unwanted passengers back to the point of boarding.¹⁵

Newy Baba of Sheerabad (see map), who had been residing in Yonkers, NY, submitted a letter to *Kokhva* illustrating the plight of migrant workers:¹⁶

The young Assyrians in the USA have been very unlucky in using their talents and the skills they had in the old country, or developing them in America. A large number of trained teachers and priests are here today, but they have abandoned their profession. They are instead working in

¹⁴ The first staff director and chief editor of *Kokhva*, (The Star) was Kasha (Rev.) Baba-d-bar Kasha Nwia-d-Wazirava, a graduate of Urmia college in 1891. He had lived in the U.S. for nine years. He had graduated from Carlton University in Indiana in the sciences and had later gone to Hartford Seminary where he obtained his degree in theology. He coined the newspaper title *Kokhva* (A small Star, alone in the horizon). It was the first Assyrian independent newspaper published in Urmia. He passed away shortly after the publication of the first few issues, and John Mooshie took over as the editor. *Kokhva* was published by the Star Publishing Co. Urmia, Persia.

¹⁵ *Kokhva*, 1, no.2 (1906): 13.

¹⁶ Quotes from the Assyrian publication *Kokhva* (Star) are translations from Assyrian into English by the author of this article.

*factories as low-grade laborers. From there you are advising us to focus on work and not on preaching or teaching. It is true that work is a man's honor and a commandment of God, but it is not necessary that we should all be laborers in factories. There are two reasons for this problem: first, our people themselves seek lowly jobs. They do not want to endure the hardship of going to school and learning new skills. Second, we do not receive any aid from abroad or from other organizations as other migrant workers do.*¹⁷

In response to these submissions, *Kokhva* began to run a column titled, "The Rueful Emigrant" where the lamentable conditions of migrant workers were described and overseas migration was criticized. The condition of migrant workers in Chicago in 1907 is exposed in the following excerpt:

*There are 400 Assyrians in Chicago. Most men are employed. Some are doing well. Others are unfortunate and idle. For some this city has been good; for others a stumbling block and a road to vice. All live in the oldest part of town in the inner city. This section is inhabited by new immigrants from Europe and is full of bars and centers of vice. Men are not getting an education or learning [the] language because they spend their life in this area, and as they live together, they do not speak English much. Not more than 225 attend church services. Others could care less, and some even speak out against religion and God. Some are the pride of the nation; others an embarrassment.*¹⁸

Furthermore, *Kokhva* reveals that "men leave Iran with a healthy complexion and return pale and weak." The reason is that idleness and vice lead to deterioration. "At this cost buying land and a luxury home in Iran is a national misfortune." The editorial urges men to take night classes in order to improve their lot. "Men who want to leave must consider if it is worth working hard, being away from the family, and eating little, getting weak, and succumbing to Tuberculosis."¹⁹ *Kokhva's* audience also encompassed readers in the US. In response to the "Rueful Emigrant" column, a migrant worker in America had this to say:

The whole world is on the move, not just Assyrian men. It is preferable to seek [a] better life than to sit idly by the Tanura (village heating and cooking well) all winter long hoping one's daily bread will fall into one's lap miraculously. No one likes to leave one's hometown and live among strangers. On the other hand, the successful men abroad have sent

¹⁷ *Kokhva*, 1, no.8 (1906): 61.

¹⁸ *Kokhva*, 2, no.9 (1907): 98-101.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

*thousands of dollars back home. Had they stayed home, they would not have earned a penny....We're tired of reading about the ills of emigration. What is a college graduate in Urmia to do if he does not want to be a priest or a teacher? Why are local opportunities for work not created for the college graduates there?*²⁰

From Sojourners to Settlers

By 1906, there were over 1,000 Assyrians in the US from Urmia alone. Most of the Assyrians lived in Chicago due to better employment opportunities; but there were small communities in New Britain and Hartford, Connecticut, New York City and Yonkers, New York, Elizabeth and Union City, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Gary, Indiana. As an example, in 1906 there were 250 Assyrians in Chicago and 50 in New York and by 1907, 60 in Philadelphia. A new chapter in the history of Assyrian-Americans opened with sojourners becoming settlers. The following is a typical story of a migrant worker:

*I left [Urmia] in 1913. I was barely sixteen. We were a large youth group. There were four or five from my village [of] Shamsa Jiyān; and more were added to the group from other villages as we went along until there were 78. So many young men were leaving because we wanted to live in comfort and security....My father was a painter; had learnt it in Tiflis [Russia]. In Chicago, he had a hotel in his care. He was a foreman. He took in many Assyrian boys and taught them the craft [after he settled in Chicago]. My uncle had come to America earlier. He was a bricklayer. He had returned to the old country; and in 1913 when I was leaving for the US, he was coming for a second time. The Group was traveling under his care because he knew a few words of English.*²¹

Following the outbreak of WWI, news came from Iran and Turkey that the Assyrians of those regions were being massacred, their homes looted, their women and girls carried away, and they were being uprooted from their homes. The single men who had come to America preceding WWI, with the intention of returning home, decided to stay and establish families in the US after they heard that their homes and villages were in ruin. They asked their relatives for pictures of brides from the old country. They raised funds to sponsor their relatives who had survived the WWI holocaust and bring them to the US. In the following excerpt, a bride recounts her experiences and travels in this enlightening exposé of the routes the refugees took to arrive in the US:

We were living in Hamadan. [This is in 1918 after the Assyrians were uprooted from Urmia, and had fled to Hamadan as refugees]. My in-

²⁰ *Kokhva* 2, no.23 (1908): 274.

²¹ A. Ishaya, "Class and Ethnicity in Central California Valley" (Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, U.C.L.A., 1985), respondent no. 53, Nov. 14, 1981.

laws asked for my hand from America. Our families were related. My husband and I were third cousins. The niece of my father-in-law and her husband took me to America. There was a large Assyrian band that came along too; but got dispersed along the way. I was 14 when I left; I was 17 when I reached the American border. In those days it was not like now—pack up and go. There was a quota system and the Assyrian or Iranian quota was already filled up. So we could not get a visa. So we were going from one country to another until we got a visa. We stayed six months in Bombay. In Italy we stayed one and a half years. From Naples we came to Paris; but we did not stay there. My chaperons took me to Mexico. There we stayed 10 months. Finally we went to Cuba and stayed 10 months in Havana. A law was passed by the American authorities that whoever had a fiancé or a wife to bring across the border, had to do so in person. So my husband-to-be came to Cuba and we all went to Chicago where he lived then. During the long waiting periods people in transit lived on the remittances that relatives in America sent them. I cost my in-laws \$3,500 until I got to the US. There were about six brides when we started off. But we were separated when we reached Bombay. They took the Japan route. Another group stayed behind in France. Finally, we were left on our own. A problem had developed in the case of brides. Upon arrival to their destination, some of the girls found out that the men they were engaged to in absentia were much older than their pictures indicated. These men belonged to the generation of bachelors who had come to America before the war and had not been able to return in time to get married. The pictures they had sent the girls were of the time when they were young. The girls were very disappointed. Sometimes the relatives of the girls in America intervened in time and married her off to somebody else. Since the original suitor had spent a fortune to bring his prospective bride over to America, his relatives speeded up the marriage ceremony to prevent this from happening.²²

The settlement pattern of Assyrian colonies indicates regional or even village clustering. For example, the Assyrians from the villages of Gogtapa and Taka-Ardishay made New Britain and Hartford, Connecticut their home. As a major industrial city in the Midwest, Chicago became the locus of Assyrian migrant workers from both Iran and Iraq. The Assyrian colony of Turlock, California is unique in the sense that it was not comprised of migrant workers. Rather, it was founded in 1910 by Rev. Dr. Isaac Adams and was designed for permanent settlement. Very early in the history of the Assyrian Diaspora, a variety of organizations ranging from religious, civic, political, charitable, and youth groups proliferated. Their major goal was invariably to help war-ravaged

²² Ibid, 81-82.

Assyrians in the Middle East, to obtain Assyrian national rights in the homeland, and to help sustain the identity and heritage of the Assyrian Diaspora in the US.

Almost every church or civic organization had a “Ladies Auxiliary.” The major function of women’s organizations was fund-raising or charity work. There were also “Sewing Societies” which were a legacy from the “old country.” Women sewed or knitted clothing or home decorating articles and sold them during special occasions to raise money for the needy. The Ladies Auxiliaries sponsored dinners or picnics to raise funds for the church or the organization with which they were affiliated.

The following section will be devoted to a brief history of selected Assyrian American settlements from Urmia. Given the fact that these communities are subject to movement, especially from the East coast to the West coast, and over the past decade or more, a movement toward the Southwest (Phoenix and Las Vegas), there is certainly some fluidity in institutions. Moreover, the intermittent but persistent influx of new immigrants, especially following periods of danger in the Middle East, changes the overall character of the ethnic organizations. For example, there is a steady growth in immigration of professionals trained in the Middle East. Among these are men and women with transportable professions, such as medicine and engineering. In some cases, the new immigrants are better educated than the old. In other locations, the professional second generation classes no longer function within the community. Thus, the Assyrian communities are subject to change, mainly social, but sometimes also in terms of Christian denominational affiliation. An examination of several of the major locations illustrates these shifts.

The Connecticut Assyrian Community

The majority of Assyrians in Connecticut live (as of 2006) in the towns of Hartford and New Britain. Since these towns are only 12 miles apart, a unified community was constituted at the time of settlement. Initially, mostly men emigrated to Hartford and New Britain. They were drawn to this area because of the availability of industrial jobs. Many of them were employed at the Stanley hardware factory in New Britain, while others worked as painters and plasterers. New Britain was the site of one of the earliest Assyrian permanent settlements. As early as 1907, a small community had emerged. By 1910, there were at least 700 Assyrians in Hartford-New Britain.²³

The following news item provides insight into the working conditions of factory workers in New Britain:

Baba Yonan of Degala in New Britain has purchased an apartment building with 20 rooms at the cost of \$4,300.00 in a good section of town. He intends to have Assyrian renters. Men work in the factories

²³ G. Smith, “From Urmia to the Stanislaus. A Cultural-Historical Geography of Assyrian Christians in the middle East and America” (Unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation U. of C. Davis, 1982), 241.

*from 7:00 AM to 12:00 PM, 1:00 PM to 6:00 PM. 40 Assyrian men attend night school free of charge.*²⁴

The Assyrians of New Britain were also active in establishing communities with a common cause. For example, the Assyrian Brotherhood Association was founded in 1907 by mostly men and a few women of the community.²⁵ Its purpose was to provide mutual assistance to one another. In a letter to the editor of *Kokhva*, a subscriber from New Britain reported that a group of Assyrians, among whom were Baba Yonan, Yacu Morad of Babarood, and Yossip Yohannan, had become active in the American Association of Christian Men. They attended weekly meetings in the Presbyterian Church in Bristol and listened to Christian messages given by Mrs. Labaret and others. In order to expose the local community to the Assyrian culture, these members participated in various activities of the association, including a parade in which they wore traditional costumes and carried the Assyrian flag.²⁶ These men laid the foundation for the establishment of the Assyrian Presbyterian Church.

As the population grew and women joined the colony, other religious and civic organizations were established. In 1916, the Assyrian women in New Britain organized the Sewing Society. By 1917, its membership was over 40. The goal of the society was to raise money for the widows and orphans in Urmia. The president of the society was Gozal Adams, the wife of Kasha (Rev.) Elisha Adams.²⁷

Village societies were also created like the Taka-Ardisahay Society of New Britain established in 1918. One of the first organizations to join the Assyrian American Federation as an affiliate was The Assyrian National Association of Connecticut. Actually, the constitution and by-laws of the AAF (later to be named the Assyrian American National Federation) were prepared and adopted in New Britain in 1933. The community grew in size through the process of chain migration or the influx of refugees fleeing political upheavals in the Middle East. In 1944, Patriarch Mar Shimun estimated the Assyrian population of Connecticut, primarily concentrated in Hartford and New Britain, to be 1,200. By that time, other organizations had evolved such as the Ashur Assyrian American Association of Connecticut, the Assyrian American Ladies' Association of Connecticut, the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Assyrian National Association of New Britain, the International Assyrian Relief Fund, Connecticut Chapter, and the Assyrian Youth Organization of Connecticut. The majority of Assyrians in Connecticut were members of the St. Thomas Church of the East. Its ladies' auxiliary was called the Daughters of St. Thomas Church of the East. Those who followed the Catholic rite could attend St. Mary's Assyrian Church, which also

²⁴ *Kokhva* 2, no. 10 (1907): 101-102.

²⁵ *Kokhva* 2, no. 4 (1907): 42.

²⁶ *Kokhva* 5, no. 2 (1910): 17-18.

²⁷ *Kokhva*, 10, no. 8 (1917): 59.

had a ladies' auxiliary. It was called St. Mary's Assyrian Women. Up to the early 1980's, Connecticut had an Assyrian community with an estimated population of 3,500. But, the colony was losing members through both assimilation and relocation. Moreover, new immigrants were not joining the community to revitalize it socially and culturally. This was due to a decrease in employment opportunities in the state as a result of industrial decline.²⁸

By 2004, there was only one Assyrian church in New Britain, and that was the St. Thomas Church of the East. The number of Assyrian families affiliated with the church in all of Connecticut was estimated at 155. As to the civic clubs, the first three organizations mentioned above were still active in the community along with the Taka-Ardishay Village Association. Dating back to 1918, this was one of the oldest continuous organizations of its kind in the entire American Diaspora of Assyrians.²⁹

The Chicago Assyrian Community

The first Assyrians to arrive in Chicago were graduates of the American Mission College in Urmia who came to the US to pursue their studies in the 1890's. Among the pioneer generation was Dr. Shlemon Warda, from the village of Supurghan who arrived in 1899 to study medicine; Daniel Sayad from the village of Geogtapa, who arrived in 1896 to attend college but ended up as a Persian rug dealer, and Pera Odishoo who came from the village of Digala in 1906. Others settled in the nearby city of Gary, Indiana where they found employment in the steel mills of the city.

In a 1907 issue, *Kokhva* reported that five Bible study groups met every Sunday in Chicago. The Persian Bible class, which may have been the first, was established in 1902 under the direction of Usta (title for a craftsman) Baaba of Gulpatalikhan. In this early Assyrian emigration from Iran, Assyrians often identified themselves as Persian in their associations with Americans. In fact, some wrote and taught about Persia.³⁰ The Assyrian Christian Men's Welfare Association was under the leadership of Kasha (Rev.) Nesturus of Delgoshah. The goal of the association was "to help the members in work related affairs as well as leisure activities; to raise awareness; to shepherd those fallen into the vices of drinking and gambling; and to prevent litigation in the Assyrian community."³¹ Andrius of Shimshajian led the Young Christian-Surayi Association. At this time, since the Assyrians did not have their own church building, they met in various churches, rented or donated, often after the regular

²⁸ Smith, G. *From Urmia to Stanislaus* (U. of C., Davis Unpublished PhD Dissertation 1982): 241-243.

²⁹ *The Assyrian Star*, 33, no.2 (2001): 20.

³⁰ Presumably this is because the Americans gave them recognition on the basis of their nationality, rather than ethnicity.

³¹ *Kokhva*, 2, no.10 (1907): 101.

worship service of the American community, who owned the building. There were three denominational congregations, but the first and the largest was the Presbyterian Church. Kasha Haidow Ablahat founded the church in 1907. After five years of meeting in a room in the “Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago,” in 1913, the Assyrians built the first Assyrian Diaspora church in the US, and probably the entire western hemisphere, calling it the Carter Memorial Presbyterian Church.³² In the period just before WWI, the Assyrian population of Chicago had increased to 1500.³³ Some estimates run as high as 2,000.³⁴

The early organizations held their meetings in private homes. The earliest association that went on to acquire its own quarters in 1918 was The Assyrian National Association in Chicago. In 1966, ANA was still active as it is today. It began to produce the Voice of Assyria radio program. The Assyrian Red Cross Society of Chicago, established during WWI, became a model for other Assyrian Red Cross Societies, namely in Paterson and West Hoboken, New Jersey and in cities in New York. One of the first village associations to be organized in Chicago was the Relief Society of Geogtapa, established in 1918 to help uprooted Assyrians in Iran, especially those who came from the village after which it was named. Over the years, other village associations were established such as the Society of Charbash, the Society of Gulpashan, Alwach, and the Society of Taka Ardishai.³⁵ The chief purpose of all these organizations was to sustain the villages back home such as sending funds to repair the old sanctuaries (churches, shrines and cemeteries) and to help the needy widows and orphans they left behind. In addition, they also served as venues for social gathering and group cohesion.

The first Assyrian newspaper published in Chicago was the *Assyrian American Herald*. From 1915-1919, the publisher and chief editor was Rev. Paul Newey, who had graduated from the Chicago Theological Seminary in 1913. Rev. Newey is also credited with the creation of the Assyrian Press with its own eastern Assyrian fonts, which were used by many Assyrian authors and publishers.³⁶

In 1941, Patriarch Catholicos, Mar Eshai Shimun, moved his patriarchal See from Iraq to Chicago. Thus, Chicago became the seat of the Holy Apostolic Church of the East, one of the major Christian denominations among Assyrians. The patriarchal See of the Assyrian Church of the East had been displaced several times over the past 100 years. After being driven from Kochanis, present day Turkey, to Northwest Iran, the Patriarchal family settled in Iraq. But, in 1933, the patriarch was exiled, settled temporarily in Cyprus and eventually moved to the US. Mar Sargis, built in the early 1930's, became the parish seat of

³² Sarah Paz Interview. 1982.

³³ *Kokhva*, .8, no.3, (1913): 42.

³⁴ V. Shoumanov *Assyrians in Chicago*, 11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*: 27.

the Holy Apostolic Church of the East. This church, along with the Carter Memorial Presbyterian Church, held Assyrian language classes for school age children.

Many of the American born, or American raised Assyrians grew up around Clark Street where Assyrian homes, businesses and in particular, Kasha Haidow's renowned church were located. It appears that the Clark Street community was close-knit and a very lively immigrant outpost. It satisfied most of the new immigrants' needs and insulated them from the unfamiliar world that surrounded them in the new country. Kasha Haidow's Carter Memorial Presbyterian Church was not only a church, but also an ethnic civic center and post office as well. An elder member of the community remarked: "we were all working people and changed our address frequently. All letters came to 54, West Huron St. and were distributed on Wednesdays after a sermon."³⁷

The new immigrants preferred to go to Assyrian physicians and dentists because they could communicate their problems to them in their own language. The Clark Street community had an abundant assortment of Assyrian professionals. The best remembered are the David brothers. There were four of them. Dr. Eshaq David and Dr. Ropus David were both physicians, one brother was a dentist, and another one a clergyman. The community would taunt them by saying that "one of you should have been an undertaker; then you could take care of a person from the cradle to the grave."³⁸ In sum, the Clark Street community was a relatively self-sufficient social unit and most of its members did not have contact with mainstream America beyond confines of the workplace and the marketplace.

In terms of living standards, the American born generation grew up in working class families. As stated earlier, the original immigrants had not found in America the opportunities they had hoped for. Most did not know English well and were certainly unfamiliar with the American world of business. Although they were literate in several Middle Eastern languages, and were skilled craftsmen and artisans, in America they started off as unskilled laborers in the hotel, restaurant and construction businesses. Some found jobs in their own vocation and worked as carpenters, tailors, painters, and masons. Often times, women had to find work outside the home as well to supplement the family income—a situation that was unprecedented in the old country. In spite of the hardships of the twenties and the Depression of the thirties, these immigrants made a valiant effort to work hard, save every penny, educate their children, and improve their standard of living. As early as 1910, there were successful Assyrian developers in Chicago. One was Usta Sarguis Baaba from the village of Golpatalikhan who became so successful that he incorporated his business under the title of "Sargis E Baaba and Brother." As the president of his company, he appointed his brother Jesus as treasurer and over the years, developed a

³⁷ A. Ishaya, *Class & Ethnicity in Central California Valley*, 86.

³⁸ *Ibid*: 87.

reputation for high quality construction projects.³⁹ Another developer, or contract builder, by the name of Avshalim Peera Alkeen, established his business in 1913 together with his brother and a cousin. He had in his employ six Assyrians and eight non-Assyrians, and he needed more workers. So, he advertised in *Kokhva* requesting painters, plasterers, and wallpaper installers from Urmia to join his company. Another successful residential developer was Jeremiah Sargis James who started out as a painting contractor and later became a builder of high-rises in the Edgewater neighborhood of Chicago. During the Depression, he had a working crew of 240 painters most of whom were Assyrians.⁴⁰

The Assyrian Business and Professional Directory from 1996-97, lists scores of Assyrian physicians, dentists, lawyers, and accountants in the Chicago area. The business section reveals specializations in small businesses such as restaurants, beauty salons, and computer stores to name a few. There were at least two anodizing plants, three manufacturing plants and two major parking lot chains owned by Chicago Assyrians.⁴¹ Gradually, most of the families in the community moved to more affluent areas of Chicago, particularly towards the suburbs north of the city.

Over the years, the Assyrian Diaspora in Chicago has increased numerically and become revitalized culturally through chain migration or by the influx of refugees from the Middle East, due to continuous political upheavals in the region. Refugees from Iran arrived in 1948 after the collapse of the anti-government movement in Azerbaijan, and again after the Islamic revolution in 1979. Others came in consecutive waves from Iraq as a result of the Kurdo-Iraqi war between 1971 and 1975, the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980's and the Gulf War in 1991. Assyrians from Lebanon arrived during the Lebanese civil war between 1975 and 1992. Some of the Assyrian refugees from Turkey, of the Syrian Orthodox denomination, also chose Chicago as their home. Thus, the Assyrian Diaspora in Chicago became increasingly diversified and complex in terms of its denominational, occupational, sub-cultural, and regional composition. Some individuals came from urbanized centers of the Middle East as professionals, business people, or university students, while others were displaced peasants from the villages of Northern Iraq or Turkey who had to make the rural-urban transition almost overnight. In general, estimates on the size of the Assyrian Diaspora communities lack precision due to inadequate means of census taking. The Chicago colony is estimated to have grown from 400 in 1907 to 5,000 in 1944, to 80,000 in 2003.⁴² This growth was accompanied by a proliferation of civic, religious, political and educational organizations in the community. In the 1970's, there were about 30,000 Assyrians in Chicago. They had four radio programs in the Assyrian language every Saturday and two programs on

³⁹ *Kokhva*, .4, no.18, (1910): 210.

⁴⁰ V. Shoumanov, *Assyrians in Chicago*, 64.

⁴¹ <http://www.aina.org/aol/ethnic.htm> "Assyrians of Chicago."

⁴² D. Horan "Assyrians Keeping Their Culture Alive," Chicago Tribune (March 9, 2003).

Sundays. There were six churches, and four major magazines: the *Assyrian Star*, the *Quest*, the *Assyrian Sentinel*, and the *Voice from the East*. These were published in both Assyrian and English or in Assyrian, English and Arabic.

In 2004, all Assyrian denominations had congregations in Chicago. The Holy Apostolic Church of the East had three churches: Mar Sargis, Mar Gewargis and St. John. Adherents of the rites of the church according to the old Syriac and not the Julian calendar attended Mar Odisho Church of the East. There were also two Chaldean rite (Catholic) churches: Mart Maryam and St. Ephraim. The Assyrians from Turkey who ascribed to the Syrian Orthodox tradition (also known as Jacobites), held services at St. John the Baptist Church. Of the Protestant denominations, there was the Assyrian Evangelical Church, the Assyrian Covenant Church and the Assyrian Pentecostal Church. In the 1980's Carter Memorial Church joined with Westminster Presbyterian Church and changed its name to Carter-Westminster Presbyterian Church. In 2004, this was no longer exclusively an Assyrian church, and although many in the congregation were second or third generation Assyrians, the pastor was American and services were rendered in English. This church is located in Skokie, a suburb of Chicago, where many Assyrians have resettled.

As to civic organizations, the Assyrian National Federation (ANF) has 15 affiliates in Chicago representing athletic, business, academic, educational, welfare and student group interests. This is in addition to various independent political and social organizations.⁴²

In general, although membership in Assyrian-American national and civic organizations is open to all Assyrians, sub-cultural differences and political divisions tend to segregate the Assyrians of Iran and Iraq in their own respective associations.

The Flint, Michigan Assyrian Community

The Assyrian colony in Flint was formed between 1914 and 1918. Home of the General Motors Corporation, Flint attracted Assyrians in search of jobs. Their basic occupation in the early years was production work in the Buick Motor Division of the General Motors Corporation. Assyrians worked as press operators, machine operators, grinders, or autoworkers at Buick. Among the pioneers were Isaac Baba, a cabinetmaker from Urmia, John Israel from Khusrava, Salamas, and Nick Jacob from the village of Gavelan. The Assyrian men who came to work in the automotive plants found room and board with resident Assyrians. Some of these men married Hungarian, Polish and Slovak women and were quickly assimilated into the American mainstream. In 1918, more Assyrians arrived from the refugee camp in Baquba. Most were uprooted families from Drenaye, Tergawar and Urmia. Others relocated from Chicago to Flint when they received draft cards, since they had the option to work in war plants instead of joining the army. Men worked in the various General Motors

plants (Chevrolet, Buick and AC Spark Plugs Plant) all of which were converted into war plants where bombs and other military equipment were manufactured. After WWI, Assyrians from the settlements on the Khabur River joined the Assyrian colony in Flint. Because of periodic layoffs in the General Motors plants, the Assyrians engaged in alternative occupations and trades they had learned back home, such as plastering, painting and carpentry. Some purchased small homes while others bought farms in the outskirts of town. A lady from the Flint pioneer generation remarked that those who lived on farms would bring dairy products such as milk, cheese and butter, and sell it door to door to the Assyrian families. Those who lived on farms had no running water or electricity until 1936.⁴³ Their offspring inherited and ran these farms and later invested in small markets and stores. Both men and women were hard working and self-sufficient. For example, there is an anecdote about a robust Assyrian farmer's wife who was pregnant. Being a midwife, she gave birth to her baby herself. After the delivery, she got up and completed her daily chores. When her husband returned home from work and saw her up and about, he had no idea what had transpired. His wife had to ask him, "Don't you notice something different?" Susan Carey, a long time resident of Flint provided this outlook on the Flint residents:

*"Their homes were modest....The women could be seen every morning sweeping their front porches, the walks, the driveways....their homes were graced with their talents....embroidered table linens, dresser scarves, window boxes with flowers of the season. They all shared the products of their gardens, women helping women during childbirths, sewing clothing from bolts of cloths they shared. Women participated in English classes offered at the Women's Christian Temperance Union later renamed The International Institute. Children grew up not knowing there was a Depression because they had nice clothes, neat and comfortable homes, and were dressed nicely for school and church..."*⁴⁴

Between 1914 and 1941, most Assyrians living in Flint were within walking distance from each other on McClellan Street and Blvd. Drive, in a predominantly Eastern European neighborhood composed of Poles, Hungarians, Slovaks and Italians. According to June Isaac Elia, who was born and raised there, the Assyrian community of Flint was close-knit since everyone knew one another. Children called the adults "aunt" and "uncle," and the adults treated them accordingly. Although they were members of separate congregations, during Christmas, Easter, Assyrian New Year, Martyr's Day, and other national holidays, they would all congregate in the Mar Shimun Bar Sabaye Church of the East sanctuary and celebrate together. If there was a community function such as a picnic or funeral, no one was left out. Those with cars picked up the elderly and the widows and drove them to the site of the community function. Weddings

⁴³ Ishaya, A. Interview with June Isaac Elia (Sept. 27, 2004).

⁴⁴ Ishaya, A. Email Interview with Susan Carey (Sept. 27, 2004).

were held in the Assyrian Club in the old-fashioned way. Women catered all the food for the occasion and guests arrived with cash in their pockets, as this was the customary wedding gift. The cash gift, or “sabakhta,” was collected from each guest after dinner and the collector would announce the amount of each gift publicly. Usually, the total amount was between \$3,000 and \$5,000, which was significant enough to help the newly wed couple get established.

The Assyrians of Flint received a resident clergy in 1924 by the name of Rev. Father Yaroo M. Neesan. He was born in the village of Katoona in northwest Iran. His family moved to Margawar where he attended a Presbyterian school. In 1882, he arrived in the US in order to complete his education and return home. He attended St. Stephan’s College at Annandale-on-the-Hudson, later to become part of Columbia University. Following his attendance there, he enrolled at the General Theological Seminary in New York. He was ordained in 1888 at which time he applied to become a member of the Canterbury Mission to Urmia. With the help of Bishop Potter, the diocese of New York released him to the Canterbury Mission. From 1889-1918, Father Neesan worked as a missionary in his home country, but retained his American citizenship. After WWI, he relocated to the US and ministered to the Assyrians in Flint. Paul Isaac, a carpenter and builder by trade, together with other Assyrian craftsmen, began building the sanctuary of Mar Shimun Bar Sabaye Church of the East in 1918 and completed it in 1924. The church was named after the ninth Patriarch of the Church of the East who was martyred in 341.⁴⁵ In addition, the Assyrians of Flint also had a small congregation of Presbyterians and Evangelicals ranging between 35-40 members each. The pastor of the Parkland Presbyterian Church was Kasha Wasil Sarmast. The Evangelical congregation did not own a church building.

Father Solomon Elia, an Assyrian Russian Orthodox priest, inspired a group of men to start a club and eventually they purchased a building with a large hall in 1937. The club raised funds from parties, theatrical performances, and wedding rentals for the purpose of purchasing a plot of land to be used as the Flint Assyrian cemetery. The Assyrians of Flint established various other organizations that helped to keep them abreast of events in the larger Assyrian Diaspora, and connected them to the colonies across the US. The Assyrian American National Union of Flint was an affiliate of the AANF. It raised funds in order to provide Assyrian university-bound students with scholarships. The Assyrian-American Club and Ladies’ Auxiliary was very active in the 1970’s. Distinguished men and women of the community were honored with Man and Woman of the Year Awards. The club also sponsored Nar-Takhta, or backgammon, tournaments. A few other organizations were the Ladies’ Club of the Church of the East and the Mar Bishu Club of Flint. Mar Bishu, for which this club was named, is a large and prosperous village, whose inhabitants fled during World War I. Consequently; Flint became a locus for their migration. Unlike their brethren residing in Philadelphia and New Jersey, the Assyrians of Flint were the only colony with their own cemetery in the East Coast and the

⁴⁵ Ishaya, A. Interview with June Isaac Elia (Sept. 27, 2004).

Midwest. The Assyrian Cemetery Association at each location administered and sold plots and maintained the upkeep of the designated Assyrian area.

The Flint Assyrian Diaspora had modest beginnings. In just a short time, hardworking people became homeowners and some of their children attended schools of higher education. Among the pioneer generation were Benjamin Joseph and his wife Batishwa. The couple opened up a small factory where they employed women to sew women's fashions ranging from dresses to aprons. Batishwa worked side by side her husband to run the factory. The garments were carried and sold to retail stores in various towns across Michigan and as far as Chicago. Another pioneer was Paul Isaac of the village of Garaghaj, Urmia, who married Bato Sayad of Ada. He joined the Assyrians of Flint in 1918. His wife worked as a voluntary social worker. Literate in both Assyrian and English, she would read aloud to the elderly the letters they had received from their relatives back home and write letters in Assyrian for those who could not do so. She also helped the new refugees and the elderly with their legal papers by assisting in the completion and submission of their citizenship and social security forms. Paul worked at the Buick Company. During the "off season," Paul built houses. His legacy resides in his children and grandchildren who became physicians, engineers and physicists. As for the Carey family, in 1987, Susan Carey was the recipient of the Golden Door Award which is given by the International Institute of Flint, Michigan in recognition and honor of a foreign born person who has made a major impact on the quality of life in the Flint community. She was appointed by Governor John Engler to be a commissioner for the Michigan Employment Agency and is the first and only woman to hold that position.

In 1944, there were 115 Assyrian families in Flint (600 persons). Deacon Zaia of the Mar Sabaye Church prepared a survey of 86 of these families. The results indicated that a large proportion of Assyrians were from Urmia compared to other regions. The breakdown is as follows: Urmia, 61; Drenyae, 16; Tergawar, 4; Tkhuma (Iraq), Gawar and Salamas, 1 each.⁴⁶

By the mid 1940's, the Buick Company had expanded its plant and began to move closer to the Assyrian neighborhoods. Moreover, poor immigrants from the Deep South began to move into the neighborhood. As property values plummeted, the Assyrians moved to the suburbs of Flint or relocated to other states. By the 1980's, a distinct change was visible in the demographics of the Flint Assyrian community. The proportion of the Urmia Assyrians had decreased significantly while that of the Assyrians from Iraq had increased. There had been a higher rate of assimilation in the older community.

In 2004, the Assyrian American Club of Flint, the Mar Shimun Bar Sabaye Church of the East, and the Assyrian Cemetery Association were still active. The pastor of the church, Rev. Joseph Peera, led a congregation of about 60.⁴⁷ The

⁴⁶ E. D. Beynon. "The Near East in Flint, Michigan" in *The Geographical Review* (Vol. 34, 1944): 267.

⁴⁷ Jaks, George *Flint Home of Nation's Original Aramaic-speaking Church* (Flint Journal) July 2004: A1.

church held Assyrian language classes for the youth. The Assyrian Club had 36 members. Its greatest function was the annual picnic at which time it awarded scholarships to eligible college bound youth. The Warda family, in recognition of their father, who had been an original club member, established a scholarship fund that was given every year for 35 years. The club also raised money by sponsoring picnics, dances, banquets and an annual Heritage Day celebration to aid new Assyrian immigrants who were newcomers to the area.⁴⁸

The Turlock, California Assyrian Community

The Turlock community is unique in three ways. First, it was the only farming community established by Assyrians in the US. Second, it was colonized by settlers and not sojourners. Third, it was the only planned group project intended for resettlement abroad. The founder of the colony was Dr. Isaac Adams, an Assyrian medical missionary, who had led a colony of 36 men and women out of Urmia to North Battleford, Canada in 1902. This colony eventually became the foundation for the Assyrian community in Turlock. In 1888, at only 16 years of age, Isaac Adams left the village of Sangar in Urmia bound for the US. With the help of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, he began his studies first as a minister and later as a medical doctor. Adams traveled throughout North America on lecture tours dressed in his picturesque native costumes and spoke on the culture of the Middle East. He established the Turlock colony in 1910 with 45 people who were members of his own family and relatives from Canada, in addition to some settlers he had recruited from Chicago and points to the East. The early settlers from Canada were the Adams, Backus and Lazar families. One of the earliest families that accompanied Isaac Adams from Chicago was that of Sargis Hoobyar. These Assyrian pioneers fell victim to the fraudulent schemes of land speculators, and having lost their money, returned to their former homes with the exception of the Adams brothers and the Hoobyar family. Thus, the nucleus of the Assyrian settlement in Turlock was established by these three families. George Peters was one of the earliest settlers who came to Turlock on his own. He left Urmia to study at Augustans College, a Swedish Lutheran school in Rock Island, Illinois. But, due to health reasons, he relocated to Los Angeles, and from there he settled in Turlock in 1911. His first rooming quarters were at Mrs. William Fulkerth's home. His rent at the time was \$1.25 a week. Regarding prices in those days, it is interesting to note that Mrs. Fulkerth, or "Aunt Abby" as she was known to everyone in Turlock, had bought the property on both sides of Center Street from Olive Street to Geer Road for one mule!⁴⁹ In the ensuing years, more Assyrians joined the Turlock settlement from

⁴⁸ Ishaya, A. Mail Interview with Susan Carey (October 4, 2004).

⁴⁹ George Peters, "Assyrian Settlement in Turlock" Unpublished paper (1960).

Canada, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.⁵⁰ When the Assyrians arrived in the areas, good farmland was already taken up by earlier settlers, and what was left of developed land was beyond their means. So, the majority invested in undeveloped land, which required years of hard work to become productive. Since the new farms were not viable, men commuted to San Francisco, where jobs were more available, and worked as bricklayers, painters and plasterers.

In 1915, the total population of Turlock's community was 1,500. Of this number, ten families were Assyrian. The colony grew after the holocaust of WWI. Poor as they were, the Turlock Assyrians sent passage money to bring over their relatives who had survived the massacre. Beginning in 1920, refugees began to arrive in the Turlock region. In 1919, a group of 32 families from Urmia, who had left the Baquba refugee camp under the leadership of Rev. Lazar Nweeya, were held at the Immigration Station at Angel Island in San Francisco Bay. The Bureau of Immigration wanted to send them back. The Turlock Assyrians were notified of their plight. Three Assyrians, Dr. Isaac Adams, Rev. Oshalim George and George Peters, went to Angel Island to help these individuals. But, the Bureau of Immigration was still determined to send them back. As they were three of the most affluent citizens of Turlock, and financially secure to boot, they willingly provided their assistance. When the Persian consulate was unable to help the refugees either, these three Assyrians had all of their possessions bonded and used the money to fight for the Assyrian immigrants so that they would not be returned. It took six months, but they were finally released from Angel Island. Some of the immigrants stayed in San Francisco, and others came to Turlock and bought land.⁵¹

The pioneer generation of Assyrians in Turlock grew orchards and specialized in grapes, peaches and almonds. But, the following generations abandoned farming and opened small businesses or engaged in urban occupations. By the 1980's, there were no more than 100 Assyrians in farming. In 1985, there were some 91 Assyrian owned businesses in the Turlock-Modesto area ranging from restaurants, auto dealerships, repair shops, grocery stores, gas stations, real estate agencies, beauty shops, jewelers, tailors and many others. The first Assyrian businessman in Turlock was Bob Abraham who started a hamburger and hot dog stand on Main Street in the early 1920's. It grew to become a hamburger restaurant and as he prospered, he began to invest in real estate. His heirs owned a block of business property on Main Street in the 1980's. The first industrialist was Bob Lazar who owned and operated a raisin dehydrating plant in Turlock. The Lazar family had accompanied Isaac Adams from Urmia to Canada in 1902, and had later relocated to Turlock. Another Assyrian industrialist in the 1980's was George Yonano, owner of Chemland, a chemical producing plant. The largest Assyrian farmer and reputed millionaire in the 1980's was Sam Warda.

⁵⁰ Victoria Y. Nevils, "*A History of the Assyrian People in the Turlock Community*" (Stanislaus State College unpublished Masters Thesis, 1962): 40-42.

⁵¹ George Peters, "Assyrian Settlement in Turlock."

By the 1930's, 20% of the population of Turlock was Assyrian.⁵² Since the 1940's, Turlock has gradually become a retirement community for many Assyrians from the East Coast and Chicago. In the 1950's, 8% of the total town population was Assyrian.⁵³ In 1965, as American immigration policy changed by removing quota restrictions, those Assyrians who had relatives in the US or were professionals, began to immigrate to this country in larger numbers. Between 1970 and 1991, Assyrian refugees from the war-torn regions of Iraq and from post Islamic Iran settled in Turlock in large numbers. The old Assyrian Civic Club of Turlock, built in 1949, became too small for the community. In 1979, Assyrians built the largest civic club in the Turlock-Modesto area. With a membership of 350 families in the 1980's, the club served not only the Assyrians themselves, but brought considerable revenue as the non-Assyrian community rented it year round. The civic club provided employment for 30 Assyrians in town, helped the needy families with their finances, and had a budget of \$20,000 to provide scholarships for Assyrian college students in Stanislaus County. In addition, and so as to continue the permanence of the Assyrian language, as well as foster a smooth transition in their host country, the club offered both English and Assyrian language classes at the local high school.⁵⁴ In 1977, the Assyrian Youth Center was built adjacent to the Assyrian American Civic Club to cater to the athletic and educational needs of the youth. Most Assyrians of Iraqi origin participated in activities sponsored by the Bet Nahrain Assyrian-American Club, also known as the Assyrian Cultural Center of Bet Nahrain, located in Ceres, about 6 miles north of Turlock. Both clubs have sponsored radio and television programs. To integrate the Assyrian community within the larger Central Valley community, both clubs have donated funds to the cities of Turlock, Ceres and Modesto. Likewise, the non-Assyrian community in Central Valley is introduced to the Assyrian culture through the celebration of Kha b'Neesan. The Bet Nahrain Club provides parades and floats to mark the occasion. Lastly, as Green Card holders become law abiding citizens, the Assyrians become more involved in community politics. In 2004, John Lazar served as a City Councilman in Turlock. Civic responsibility within the community prompted a group of Assyrians in 1983 to establish the Assyrian National Council of Stanislaus. This organization provides classes for the youth and services to immigrants and elderly Assyrians.

On a religious scale, Turlock has seen the establishment of four churches:

1. Assyrian Evangelical Church: The first non-denominational church in Turlock founded in 1924
2. St. John's Assyrian Presbyterian Church, formerly known as the Assyrian Presbyterian Church, was established in 1927
3. Mar Addi Church of the East (established in 1950)

⁵² G. Smith, *From Urmia to Stanislaus*, 115, 125.

⁵³ A. Ishaya, *Class & Ethnicity in Central California Valley*, 154.

⁵⁴ *Assyrian Star*, 34, no.4, 1985): 12.

4. St. Thomas Chaldean Rite Church (established in 1964)

As the Assyrian population of the nearby city of Modesto grew, new organizations began to be established there. In 1989, the Assyrian Club of Urhai was organized. By 2004, its membership had increased to 200. In 1991, the Urhai Club of Modesto became affiliated with the Assyrian American National Federation. The goal of this organization has been to promote culture, athletics and education among Assyrians. One of the accomplishments of the club was the opening of the Urhai Library in 2003.⁵⁵

By 2004, other social organizations appeared in Modesto such as the Assyrian American Association of Modesto and the Assyrian Athletic Club of Modesto. As for religious organizations, the Mar Zaia Parish of the Assyrian Apostolic Catholic Church of the East was consecrated in 1991 with a congregation of approximately 100 families. Two more churches were built in the 1990's in the nearby towns of Hughson and Ceres. One was St. Mary's Church, with a congregation of approximately 200 families, and the other was Mar Giwargis (St. George) Parish of the Assyrian Apostolic Catholic Church of the East with a membership of over 400 families.⁵⁶ Thus, in 2004, the San Joaquin Valley (Turlock, Modesto, Ceres, Manteca and the neighboring towns), with an estimated population of 15,000 Assyrians, was a bustling Assyrian community with seven churches, five clubs, several political organizations, as well as educational, youth and athletic clubs.

The San Francisco, California Assyrian Community

The earliest information about the Bay area comes from *Kokhva*. The presence of Assyrians in California dates back to 1906. Although the city is not mentioned as San Francisco, all indications are that there were a few Assyrian men or families residing in San Francisco at the time. The evidence rests on an individual, a doctor by trade, by the name of Yossip-d-Garajalou (village in Urmia), who was a subscriber to *Kokhva* and sent letters to the editor in 1906.⁵⁷ An article appeared in *Kokhva* detailing the events of the San Francisco earthquake in 1907. It can be postulated that he was responsible for the report. *Kokhva* also cites the names of other Assyrian residents of California. Some of the individuals named are Kasha David-d-Garajalou, Shamasha (Deacon) Elia-d-Charbaash and Kasha Ushana Yohanan. George Peters reported that in 1919, when he, Dr. Adams and Rev. George released a group of Assyrians detained at the Port of Entry at Angel Island, some chose to live in San Francisco. Other Assyrians from Chicago and other cities in the East coast established themselves in San Francisco. There was also a transient community in San Francisco composed of Assyrians whose primary residences were in Turlock but due to

⁵⁵ *Assyrian Star*, 35, no.1, 27

⁵⁶ Fred Aprim, "The Assyrians of San Joaquin Valley" <http://www.atour.com> 2003.

⁵⁷ *Kokhva*, 11, no.2, (1906): 91.

financial burdens, elected to work for a while in San Francisco to boost their income and then return home. In the 1940's, there were about 500 Assyrians in San Francisco. Some lived around Fillmore Street where there were Assyrian restaurants. Others congregated in the neighborhoods of Buchanan, O'Farrell and Eddy. In the 1940's, the community had established an Assyrian Society and a Ladies' Sewing group. Once or twice a year the Ladies' Society performed a play in Assyrian. Among the Assyrians with artistic talents was Joe Daniels who played the tar, an ancient musical instrument that was in use in the old civilizations of Assyria and Persia. He not only played the tar, but also made the instrument, including the beautifully inlaid handle. The Assyrians of San Francisco also attended the annual picnic held in Turlock on the Fourth of July holiday. Most worked as painters, plumbers, rug dealers and small business owners. The Chaldean Catholic denomination had a resident clergy by the name of Father Bifara, who officiated at weddings, funerals and christenings but did not have a church building.⁵⁸ The adherents of the Church of the East attended the Episcopal churches in their neighborhood before they built the Holy Apostolic and Catholic Church of the East, Mar Narsai Parish in 1958. The Assyrian Presbyterian Church was adjoined to the American Presbyterian Mission Church, which had a congregation of 80 to 90 persons. The Presbyterians did not have their own sanctuary, but used the facilities of the American Presbyterian Church. Until 2004, the Mar Narsai Parish, with a congregation boasting 110 persons, was the only Assyrian-owned church in San Francisco.

The American-Assyrian Association of San Francisco, which is affiliated with the Assyrian American National Federation, helps to connect the West Coast Assyrians with other Assyrian colonies in the US. The Assyrian Aid Society of America, founded in Berkeley in 1981, has implemented economic, educational and health care programs for the Assyrians in northern Iraq and continues to do so under the direction of Narsai David.

Despite the fact that the San Francisco Assyrian community has remained small in size and has been dispersed in several neighborhoods across the North Bay such as Berkeley, Oakland, Richmond, Piedmont, and others, it has nevertheless been of particular historical and educational interest to the Assyrian Diaspora in the US. In 1945, San Francisco was the site of the World Security Conference where Mar Eshai Shimun, the former Assyrian Patriarch of the Church of the East, discussed the Assyrian question and pleaded for the national rights of the Assyrians in Iraq. The Assyrian communities in San Francisco and Berkeley have been aided in their pursuit of higher learning by the proximity of educational institutions like UC Berkeley, Stanford University, and UC San Francisco. At these centers of learning, Assyrians have been trained in professions such as physicians, engineers and educators.

⁵⁸ Leonard Austin, *Around the World in San Francisco* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1940): 22,23.

The Assyrian Foundation of America in Berkeley, established in 1964, has regularly sponsored educational lectures by Assyrian academics and experts on various Assyrian topics. It has provided scholarship funds for Assyrian college students and held Assyrian language classes. Its quarterly publication, *Nineveh*, in both English and Assyrian, provides informative articles on the history, literature and arts of the Assyrians both past and present. In 1998, the Foundation established a Book Endowment Fund at the University of California, Berkeley, in order to purchase books and other materials about Assyrians dating as far back as 1500 AD. Under the direction of its president, Narsai David, the Assyrian Foundation for the Arts, with its headquarters in Berkeley, commissioned the Assyrian artist, Fred Parhad, to create a 15-foot statue of King Ashurbanipal who is credited with building the first and largest library in Nineveh that held 25,000 clay tablets. In 1999, the Foundation donated this statue to the Vasche Library of California State University, Stanislaus, in an effort to establish closer ties between the Assyrian Diaspora and the American public.

Conclusion:

A noticeable common trend in comparing the older Diaspora communities is that over time, they became heterogeneous in their composition. Assyrians from Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries joined the Urmia Assyrians in Connecticut, Chicago, Flint, San Francisco, San Jose, and Turlock. The new refugees came from both urban and rural centers and from different countries with diverse cultural backgrounds. The older residents and the new arrivals experienced a sub-cultural gap between them. These differences hindered the growth of a common national identity despite the best efforts of the Assyrian civic organizations. This is partly due to the sectarian divisions, which plague the national organizations such as the Assyrian American National Federation.

Another noticeable fact is that economic fluctuations in the US have led to the dispersion, and consequently, the weakening of the older enclaves. The Diaspora communities in Connecticut, Yonkers, New York, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Gary, Indiana, lost members through assimilation and were not replenished by new immigrants due to the paucity of job opportunities. In California, newer colonies emerged in Los Angeles, San Jose, and other cities in the Bay area as Silicon Valley became the locus of microelectronic technology and stimulated the growth of the service sector as well. Since the 1980's, increasing numbers of Assyrians have relocated from Chicago and the East Coast to Phoenix, Arizona, Las Vegas, Nevada, and Houston, Texas since housing and the cost of living is less expensive than in California. They have built churches and established new Assyrian organizations there.

The most vital issue for the community leaders as well as individual Assyrian families in the twenty-first century is the viability of the Assyrian Diaspora communities in the US. While assimilation has continuously robbed the community of its members, in the past this has been compensated by an equally continuous process of replacement and replenishment with the arrival of new

Assyrian immigrants from the Middle East. But, in the case of the Assyrians of Iran, that prospect is no longer there as the “well is almost dry,” so to speak. In 2004, the rural Assyrian community in Urmia had all but disappeared. There were less than 20 families in total, composed primarily of the elderly that lived year-round in the villages of Saatlooi, Ada, Mooshava, Dizataka, and Khosrawa. The rest of the hundred or more villages were inhabited by Kurds or local Turks. The majority of the Assyrians of the area lived in the city of Urmia or in Teheran. According to the 1976 census of Iran, there were 32,000 Assyrians in that country; in 2004, after the Islamic Revolution, there were probably less than 10,000. Moreover, the US Bureau of Immigration has not granted preferential status to Assyrian refugees as Christians. This is because it does not consider Christians as a persecuted minority in Islamic states. Therefore, in the post Islamic era, the Assyrians of Iran who were denied entry to the US have been dispersed in Europe and Australia.

To keep the tide of assimilation at bay, the Assyrian-American Diaspora recognizes that it must rely on its own resources. Some Assyrians see part of the solution in the establishment of ethnic schools in communities with sizeable Assyrian populations where there will be special programs for youth camps, student exchange programs, and scholarships for college students to pursue Assyrian Studies, in addition to a curriculum that includes the Assyrian language, history and culture.

The globalization of the Assyrian Diaspora in the twenty-first century is a new historical experience. The younger generation of Assyrians has welcomed the New Age by networking across the Internet on a global scale. However, it is doubtful that a nation can persist in virtual reality, despite the fact that the Internet raises national awareness among those Assyrians who use it as a media of communication as well as informing outsiders about the Assyrians.