

Peter Talia

Assyrians in the West

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Printed by Nineveh Printing, Chicago,
Illinois USA

This book is dedicated to

Suzanah
Kaldea
Hanah

*When a man is earnest, and knows what
he is about, his work is half done.*

Honora Gabriel

*Assyrians
in the West*

Peter H. Talia

Foreward

This book concludes many nights and days of laborious efforts. The writer wished to accomplish in this volume what he perhaps did not do in his last two publications.

It is my hope that this small book will make our Assyrian people more aware of themselves and of their western environs. It may, in some measure, contribute to a better understanding of their search, struggles and agony for a better life.

I record my gratitude to all who in diverse manners have assisted me toward the completion of this book.

Acknowledgement is gratefully expressed to the authors and publishers whose ideas and quotations I have used.

My thanks go to Michael Hemmer and Yoab Benjamin for formatting and typesetting and to Nineveh Printing for publishing this small book.

Peter Talia

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Chapter One

The Grandfather Speaks

Time: Midnight

Place: California, USA

Year: 1990

It was a boisterous night; winds roared vehemently and shook mercilessly almost everything in sight. Torrents of rain descended as if Noah's flood was revisiting our world a second time. In one home, an old man could not sleep, partly because of nature's turmoil and partly because of what was going on in his own nature. Heavily he got out of his bed and slowly walked to the living room and threw his bulky frame in an old couch. His coughing and groaning woke up his teenage granddaughter who was living with him. She came to her grandfather and sat beside him. She asked: "Grandpa, what are you doing here alone? It is past midnight; can't you sleep? What is bothering you? I hear you groaning." The old man replied: "I wish someday someone

will find some cure for this ailment called arthritis. As I grow older, weaker and weaker, it gets stronger and stronger into my joints."

Granddaughter: "Grandpa, you never told me you had arthritis. When and where did you get it?"

Grandfather: "No my dear, I never told you because I did not want to throw my old grief and burden on your young body and spirit. You are young, beautiful and vivacious; you are my sole solace in this sorrowful world, and I do not intend to grieve you for one moment."

Granddaughter: "Grandpa, you will not grieve me; you know very well that I love you and I want very much to share your happiness as well as your sorrow. Now tell me, please, how did you get your arthritis?"

Grandfather: "That is a long story, my child, I think it started when I was in Russia, many years ago."

Granddaughter: "In Russia? You were not born in Russia. If I remember correctly, you once told me that you were born somewhere else, in some mountains. Is that right?"

Grandfather: "That is right, my dear. Those mountains are surpassing in splendor. They are in Turkey. I was born there. I still remember every inch of that land; and if I were to go back there, I would precisely locate where I was born."

Granddaughter: "Then how was it that you ended up in Russia?"

Grandfather: "Again, that is a long and very unpleasant story. I do not think you will be interested in hearing it. It is a sad, sad story."

Granddaughter: "Please Grandpa, let me hear it. Since it is part of your life, I love to hear it."

The old man sighed deeply, folded his strong arms and began to tell his granddaughter his tragic life's story and the story of a people.

Grandfather: "It was a bad year; it may never happen again. It was the year 1914, the year when the First World War began. At the beginning it was not that cruel or oppressive, but when Turkey entered the fray, things began to go from bad to worse for us Christians. Turkey was not making any military progress at all. Its economic

conditions were appalling. Socially and politically Turkey was corrupt, to say the least. Hence it began to harass, molest and heavily tax us, the Christian minorities. First, the Turks began their assaults on the Armenians, then on us Assyrians. They butchered the Armenians of Turkey without mercy and without compunction. Then they started their attacks on us Assyrians. When we resisted, they instigated religious fanatic groups against us, such as Kurds, Turks and Iranians. We tried to protect ourselves - a Christian minority against a vast sea of Moslem majority. We were poorly armed. So we had to attack Turkish soldiers and Kurdish warriors with daggers and with old-fashioned rifles called *Shashkhan* in order to arm ourselves and fight better. On most occasions we fought gallantly and fearlessly, and defeated Turkish soldiers and Kurdish tribes.

"The Turks could not defeat the Assyrians who were fortified in the mountains. So they turned against the loyal Assyrians who were dwelling in the plains. The Turkish Sultan issued an official pogrom to kill all Christians without

clemency. They killed the Assyrians of poor and helpless villages who had no weapons to defend themselves, and who were the most loyal to the government. These villages included *Gawar* and all its surroundings, *Albaq* and all its dwellers, and *Nodis*. And what is more horrifying, my dear, is that the Turkish authorities took the young men of these villages and led them in cold winter and snow, bare-footed, and almost without clothes to certain areas and shot them. Some of these young men escaped and made their way to the Assyrians of the mountains and told their heartbreaking story.

"When the Assyrians of the mountains heard of this incident, they sent one hundred volunteers to go and protect those defenseless Assyrians of the plains. On January 30, 1915, these volunteers came to the Assyrian Christian village of *Tirqonise*. When they came closer, they saw a frightful sight. The women, girls and children of that village came out to meet these Assyrian volunteers, crying hysterically and saying: 'Please kill us, please kill us. It is better for us to die than to live under the Turkish

terror. The Turkish soldiers took away our men. They beat us, dragged us in the streets and raped women and girls."

The old man bowed his grey head and sobbed for a few minutes. His granddaughter saw his tears run down his cheeks.

Granddaughter: "Grandpa, this is not only a sad story, but a very tragic one indeed. I am glad I was not born at that time, in that awful region, under that terrifying rule."

After wiping away his tears, the grandfather continued: "My dear, I am sorry if I upset you. I should not be telling you these depressing things. I shall not tell you anything more because the rest of the story is equally unpleasant if not more."

Granddaughter: "Grandpa, please go on. This is, as it seems, a part of our tragic life, part of our unhappy history. Am I not entitled to know it?"

Grandfather: "Maybe you are right. Perhaps one day you will relate it to your children, and they to their children."

Granddaughter: "I will, Grandpa. Maybe I will even put it in a book, who knows."

Grandfather: "So far so bad. But events began to change a little bit; circumstances began to brighten up for a short while. One day we heard that Russian troops had arrived in the region. We rejoiced over the news; our spirits were boosted and our morale uplifted. Some of our leaders went to the Russian general and asked him to equip us with better weapons in order to fight better against more than one enemy. The Russian general was delighted to do so, and he did it. He armed us with guns and machine guns.

"One day the Turkish troops gathered together in a valley called *Masiro* and attacked us. The fight began in the early morning and lasted through the afternoon. Our warriors fought gallantly; they fought so well and so bravely on every mountain peak and in every valley that our enemy, wholly confounded, fled leaving behind many dead.

"One week later, the Turks reorganized their forces, called upon the Kurdish tribes in the region and attacked us. Again our men, old and young, some of them only seventeen years old, fought fearlessly and

valiantly that it astonished the Russian and British personnel. It was an admirable sight to watch our young warriors dart like gazelles from rock to rock, roam peak to peak and from grove to grove, with an enthusiasm of their ancient forefathers, and with a sense of survival or extinction. We defeated the enemy and killed fifty two men.

"On another occasion, the Turkish army attacked us near the *Black Mountain*. The fight was intense. Bullets were spattering from everywhere to everywhere. It felt as if the mountain were shaking. Our chivalrous men surrounded the enemy from three sides and fired without stopping. We killed thirty six men from the enemy and took two prisoners. It was very unfortunate in this fight that we lost three of our bravest men.

"Under these circumstances, with the Turkish fanaticism and animosity on one hand, and with the blood-thirsty Kurds on the other, now we realized that we no longer could live under the shaky and immoral Turkish regime. It was impossible to coexist with these people who hated everyone who was not of their race and

persecuted everyone who is not of their faith. So we decided to cross to *Urmia*, which is now called *Rizayeh*, in Iran.

"On June 10, I still remember the day. Do you know why I remember it?"

Granddaughter: "Of course, that is your birthday. What happened on your birthday, June 10?"

Grandfather: "*Haider Beg*, *Wali* (governor) of *Mosul*, ordered a huge Turkish army and attacked us. The Turkish troops began shelling us with machine guns and artillery. We responded. The battle continued for two days. We were not making any progress. Then finally, one hundred of our doughty warriors volunteered to attack the Turkish strongholds and destroy the artillery. I was one of those volunteers. With the help of our troops from behind, we stormed the Turkish positions and destroyed their cannons. The Turkish soldiers fled. We pursued them for a distance of two miles. The enemy lost two hundred and seventy men; we lost sixty of our brave fighters. Do you want to see something?"

Granddaughter: "Yes, I do. What is it,

Grandpa?"

The old warrior bent forward and pulled up his pajama leg. "Do you see this mark here, on the back of my leg?"

Granddaughter: "Grandpa, that looks like an old wound."

Grandfather: "That is a scar made by a bullet. I was wounded in that fight on that day on my 18th birthday."

Granddaughter: "Grandpa, I am glad you were not killed. Now I see how much you must have suffered. Now I feel that I know nothing of life, of its felicity or duplicity compared with what you have tasted of it."

Grandfather: "My sweet child, this is only half of my life's story, and only half of the hardships and exhausting wanderings of my people. May be at some other time I shall tell you the rest of the story. Now it is late and you must go to bed. In the meantime I will wait for awhile, perhaps this pain will go away."

Granddaughter: "Grandpa, if you are not tired, I like to hear the rest of this sad and interesting story. And perhaps by telling me this story, you will forget your pain in

the process."

Grandfather: "Very well. We were not destined to stay very long in *Urmia*. One day the British authorities informed us that we were going to move to *Hamadan*, another city in Iran. So one day, about one hundred thousand people, men, old and young; women, young and old and some pregnant; children of all ages, weak and sick, took that ill-fated, tiresome and unlucky journey for nineteen days and nineteen nights on foot. The line of human beings stretched twenty miles. It was the most disastrous journey we ever made. Every day and every night we were being attacked from all sides by Turks, Kurds and Iranians; attacks by day and ambushes by night. Thousands of us died of starvation, illness and dehydration. We literally fought for a cup of water and for a morsel of bread. Many times I saw old women and barefooted children squeeze and suck mud in order to get some drops of water, if possible. Our people were dying by dozens every day. We could not even bury them.

"The most awful sight of all, the one that took my heart, was when I saw mothers

leave their children to die by the roadside. Some of these children were born on this march, and their parents wished that they had not been born.

"Sometimes we the young men had to travel ten miles to get any kind of sustenance: herbs, vegetables, grain, corn, rabbits, bears, just anything in order to survive. Sometimes lusty Kurds would kidnap our beautiful daughters and wives who lagged behind. How degrading and humiliating!

"Today, my dear, when I reflect on those days and their bitterness, especially on the bitterness of one particular day, I wish I had not seen the light of this life."

Granddaughter: "What was it, Grandpa? What happened on that day?"

Grandfather: "One day, early in the morning, I took with me ten young men and went in search of food. When we came back in the afternoon, my dear mother was laid on an old blanket on the ground. Two hours later she was dead. I bent over her crying bitterly; and with the zeal of a young man, I was trying to pour my life into her as she had poured hers into mine nineteen

years before. We took her to a field nearby and buried her there. If I were to go back to that region now, I could easily identify that spot where I buried my mother with these hands."

Here the granddaughter bowed her head for a few moments. Then the old man said: "Do not cry, my dear. I see tears in your beautiful hazel eyes. I should not be burdening your young body and soul with old anguish."

Granddaughter: "Grandpa, I hope someday someone will put this gloomy story of this sorrowful and dismantled people in a serious book. Then what, Grandpa? What happened after that?"

Grandfather: "We arrived in Hamadan; but that was not to be our last resting place. A few months later, again we were told by the British authorities that we were to move to a place in Iraq called *Baqoba*. So we were moved to that location - another journey of eighteen days and eighteen nights. But that journey was not as bad as the previous one. We were placed as refugees in tents in a wide plain. The British personnel put up more than sixty

tent camps. Each camp included fifty two tents. A railway ran from one end of the camp to the other to unload food and other necessities for the refugees. Water machines distributed water to all the camps. There were bathrooms and washrooms to every camp. Near the camp, a tent hospital was erected and operated by the British and Indian physicians. Each camp had one British captain and two sergeants in charge. All those who were ill, and there were many due to the long and hazardous journey, were taken to the hospital and treated there. In *Baqoba*, fifty to sixty people died every day. It is said that the physicians there used to poison the sick people in order to get rid of the plague that had struck our people. The dead were buried in ditches four meters deep. How many ditches I dug; and how many corpses I threw in them! That land, my child, is fraught with the flesh and bones of our fathers, and it is soaked with the blood of our martyrs."

Granddaughter: "You were right, Grandpa, your story grows from bad to worse, and from sad to sadder."

Grandfather: "Yet the worst and the

sadder was yet to come, my dear."

Granddaughter: "The worst and the saddest? Do you mean that you had to suffer more than you have already told me?"

Grandfather: "Yes. I know it is unbelievable, yet it is true."

Granddaughter: "Go on, Grandpa. I am ready to listen to the rest of this sad story."

Grandfather: "You are very inquisitive, my dear child. We stayed in *Baqoba* for some years, trying to forget our trials and tribulations and heal our deep wounds. Many of us enlisted in the British military ranks. We were being trained with modern weapons. Later, we were settled in different villages.

"But our presence in Iraq did not please the Iraqi authorities. Here we were, a people with different traditions, customs, language, culture, heritage, and above all, of different faith. This state of affairs did not please the Iraqi government. The Iraqi authorities began to embarrass us at every corner and on every occasion by instigating Iraqi populace, Kurdish tribes and Arab bedouins against us. From time to time,

these people began to attack us wherever opportunity presented itself.

"The Iraqi government began to think very seriously, and escalated its embarrassment against our people. Some of our men were jailed; others exiled. Then our leaders suggested that we leave Iraq peacefully and cross over to Syria, which at the time was under the French mandate. Two of our leaders with one hundred and fifty men crossed the Iraqi border into Syria. At the same time, the Iraqi government sent a huge force of troops after our men. They stationed themselves along a river, waiting for our men in case they return.

"When our leaders asked the French authorities for admission into the land, their request was rejected. They pleaded in the name of human dignity, in the name of a suffering and displaced minority, in the name of charity, but it was fruitless. So our men began to return in deep sorrow. On their way back, the Iraqi soldiers, who had been waiting for them on the other side of the river, opened fire on them. Our men responded with fire. A hot battle occurred

at a small and unknown place, but ever since it has become a well-known and historic spot in our Assyrian annals. That site is called *Dairaboun*. Our gallant warriors shattered the Iraqi forces in utter disgrace although we were outnumbered by three to one. What was left of the Iraqi soldiers fled at night through some rice fields to some Iraqi military posts. But they were killed by the Iraqi soldiers at these military posts, thinking they were Assyrians coming to attack them.

"The terribly defeated Iraqi soldiers returned to a town named *Simel*. The news of the *Dairaboun* battle soon hit Baghdad, the capital of Iraq. The chief of the police in *Simel* named, *Napt Chawish*, in collusion with the Iraqi authorities, ordered all the Assyrians in the villages around the town to gather in *Simel* in order to be 'protected', as he put it, from the angry Iraqi mob and bedouin tribes. The Assyrians, as good citizens, and in good faith, believed him. When they arrived in *Simel*, *Napt Chawish* said to them: 'Today the Iraqi army, under the command of *Bakr Sidqi* and *Hajji Ramadan*, will arrive here. So I ask you to

surrender all your weapons as a good gesture and as a token of your loyalty to the Iraqi government. When the army is gone, then you will get your weapons back. I give you my word that I will be responsible for your safety.'

"With these words and tricks, the Assyrians surrendered their weapons to the chief of the police in *Simel*. The chief of the police called the commander of the Iraqi troops to come to *Simel*. They came and surrounded the town. The chief, *Napt Chawish*, went out to them and said: 'Now you can go into the town. The Assyrians have put all their arms in my custody.' Then the Iraqi troops, which were organized in groups, entered the town. One part was armed with bayonets, another with machine guns. These barbarous soldiers entered the town and unleashed their weapons against unarmed men and innocent women and children.

"At that time a number of women and children were at the police station assumed to be 'protected' by the government officials. The policemen went in, dragged them out and began killing them, while

children of all ages screamed and cleaved to their mothers, while mothers were falling at soldiers' feet, kissing them and begging for mercy.

"An Assyrian named *Slivo Shinko*, said to *Napt Chawish*, the chief of the police in *Simel*: 'Is this your word of honor you gave us that you will protect us provided we surrender our weapons? These weapons are made to be used in battlefields and not against defenseless men and innocent women and children. I do not say this to save myself; we are proud to die in this way; but your government will be blamed forever as uncivilized among civilized nations of the world. This is an unforgettable shame that will be attached to your government forever.' When *Slivo* had finished his speech, he was shot on the spot.

"Some Assyrians had returned to Iraq prior to the *Dairaboun* battle. These people, among them women and children, were taken by the Iraqi officials and killed. There were two priests among them, each eighty years old. After beating them, pulling their beards and torturing them in barbarous ways, they dragged them in

trucks, took them into the streets and shot them.

"What was most repulsive and pathetic in this horrible incident was that many women and children were massacred. A woman named *Khamm*, after she was shot, gave birth to a pair of twins.

"Those who escaped suffered as well due to the awful smell of dead bodies that were left unburied for five days. Worst of all and more humiliating, adding wound to wound and insult to injury was, that Iraqis had thrown many of the Assyrian bodies in the spring of water from which the Iraqi soldiers were drawing water and giving to the Assyrian prisoners to drink - to drink water mixed with the blood of husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, daughters and children. If this is not barbarism, my dear, then what is it?"

In a sobbing and choking voice, the granddaughter speaks: "It is more than barbarism; it is more than savagery."

Grandfather: "That was a black day in our annals and a shameful day in the Iraqi history. We shall never forget it. Every year we commemorate that day as, *The*

Martyr's Day, August 7, 1933.

"The Iraqi government invited Kurdish tribes and Arab nomads to attack our villages. Thirty six villages were plundered and ravaged. The thirty seventh was amazingly saved by four men - a father and three sons. The Iraqi soldiers, Kurds and Arab nomads could not take it. The four brave men fought for six days and six nights without ceasing even for one hour. But the most astonishing event was what *Golyat*, one of the sons did at this time. During the fighting, the four men ran out of ammunition. *Golyat* rode his horse and got out in the midst of severe fire from all sides, went to *Alqosh* town, bought ammunition and came back the same way he had gone out, while the enemy - Iraqi soldiers, Kurds and Arabs were fusillading from all directions. He arrived safely with ammunition. This father and his sons continued fighting and saved their town *Mawana* until the royal pardon was issued."

Granddaughter: "What a story, Grandpa! What courage! It is a pity that people do not know about this great suffering of this small minority."

Grandfather: "I hope one day an Assyrian writer will put all this in a book to be preserved for our posterity. Although this is only a bit of our bitter history, yet it should be deemed worthy to be recorded and repeated to our coming generations."

Granddaughter: "Grandpa, I hope one day I will do just that, to let the world know who we are, what we are and where we are. I hope I will be able to tell others how much we have suffered in this world and how little we have received."

Grandfather: "I hope so, my dear. You can do it if you determine to do so."

Granddaughter: "But Grandpa, you mentioned Russia earlier; how did you end up there? Is that another tragic incident in your life?"

Grandfather: "Not so tragic, although unpleasant. While we were in Iraq, I met a very beautiful girl, a brunette with big eyes and slender body. She had borne the same difficulties as I had; she had experienced a great deal of this bitter life, and had known what it meant to be in extreme need. Like me, she had been more in need than in plenty, and had seen more evil in this world

than good."

Granddaughter: "Grandpa, did you love her, and did she love you?"

Grandfather: "Yes. We loved each other very much although we never wrote a love letter to each other. Our love was deep, unselfish and sincere. I felt so happy when I saw her and much happier when I was with her."

Granddaughter: "I am so glad to hear something different in your tone and your life, something pleasant, an exciting experience you had not before. You see, Grandpa, life is not altogether black; there are some white spots in it, and it is these white spots of happy incidents, love, gestures, the introduction of someone in your life that make us love life; and loving it, generates a kind of hope without which we would rather be dead. But now go on with your story, Grandpa."

Grandfather: "We were married; but my father, who was a rustic but wise man, was not satisfied with our stay in the land. Looking over our past and present, examining our trials, troubles and tribulations, weighing the horrid *Simel*

incident, he sadly decided that we should leave the country, at least for the time being and migrate to Russia. Some of our Assyrian people had already gone to that land, among them some of our relatives.

"After seven months of going here and there, to this office and that, corresponding with relatives and friends, finally we arrived in Russia on a cold November day. It was a totally new environment, new people and new and different climate. It was hard to find a decent job since we were strangers and the language was alien to us. I began to shine shoes in order to make a living. That did not require a great deal of language knowledge, or experience. Your grandmother did odd jobs.

"In the midst of this sort of life, our first son was born. We were greatly delighted at his coming into our life. He shone brightly in our home; he became our new hope, and gave fresh meaning to our life in that strange and cold land. At that moment I never dreamt he would have a beautiful daughter like you. We named him *Emmanuel*, that is, 'God with us', because he was born around Christmas. We still

believed that in spite of all bristling odds, in spite of all injustices, God was still with us, and that all these trials and hardships were merely temporary temptations."

Granddaughter: "Grandpa, I am happy that you rejoiced over my father's birth. That, somehow, gives me a sense of pride."

Grandfather: "Yes, my dear. But after he was born, I often thought of what he was going to be or to do. Is he going to follow my footsteps? Is he going to inherit my trade? I did not want him to do that.

"However, years passed by; we were making a living but hardly much progress. Our second child was born, a daughter. We called her *Nineveh*, still thinking of our ancient capital after 2500 years of dispersion. Gradually our family was growing larger. Our second son was born. We named him *Sargon*, still remembering our great kings of the past.

"We were not happy in Russia. We did not like the cold weather. It was there that arthritis hit me. So we began to think of going back to the land of our ancestors. After nine years of our stay in Russia, we returned to Iraq to join our kinsfolk. Our

relatives and friends were very happy to see us back, particularly my wife's parents. Four years later, my father died. How much I wanted to bury him beside my mother! But that was impossible."

Granddaughter: "Grandpa, were you better off this time? Were you happier?"

Grandfather: "Yes we were, especially your grandmother. Now she was near her parents. Besides, I found a good job and was making a fairly good salary and having a good life. Moreover, our children were growing up and going to school.

"Our older son, *Emmanuel*, fell in love with a beautiful girl. They were madly in love. They were both intelligent and good looking. After his graduation, they were married. We gave them a big wedding reception. Everyone was very happy."

Granddaughter: "I am so delighted to hear that finally you were all happy and enjoying life."

Grandfather: "Yes, we were happy, particularly when you came into our life. Your coming into our world and into our home, a new world was born within us. Your birth brought a new birth to us,

poured new joy into our hearts and strengthened our love to one another. You were always in your father's arms. He loved you very much and boasted greatly about your beauty. But that world soon collapsed, and that joy soon turned into unforgettable sorrow."

Granddaughter: "I think I understand what you mean, Grandpa."

Grandfather: "Do you?"

Granddaughter: "Yes. Grandpa, it seems to me as if you were destined to sorrow."

Grandfather: "Not only I, not only our family, but all our Assyrian people, my dear, have been destined to sorrow and dispersion ever since our great empire fell in 612 BC. Few nations have suffered like our nation, few people have been used, misused and abused in the course of this world's bloody history like our people."

Granddaughter: "But now, Grandpa, continue with your story after I was born."

Grandfather: "Very well, my dear. As I said earlier, our joy was suddenly disrupted. One day, my dear, you will learn that this is not a stable world, and that man

in it is never satisfied, neither with himself nor with his neighbor.

"One early morning we heard that Iraq and Iran were at war with each other - a war wanted only by a few and detested by every one else. Our young men were drafted. Your father was among the first to be taken to war. *Nineveh* and *Sargon* had already left the country prior to the war.

One Sunday morning in 1982, while we were ready to go to church, our home was struck with unspeakable grief, when we were informed that *Emmanuel*, your father was killed in action. We never saw his body. For months we kept it a secret from you. We could not tell you, especially your mother. How could we? In your presence we pretended that nothing had happened, yet inside it was tearing us apart. When we sat at the table to eat, we could hardly swallow our food; and if we did, we did it for your sake so that you could eat. In your absence, we burst into tears.

"What broke our hearts severely was during the bedtime. Every night I carried you in my arms to your bed. And every night before you went into your bed, you

knelt by your bedside and prayed in your simple and innocent childlike words, saying: 'O Lord, please be with my father wherever he is, and bring him home safely.' Those words of yours, my dear, deprived me of manly strength. I have fought many fights, have faced many deadly enemies and been in many hazardous situations, but I have never wept. But your words made me tremble. And when I went back to my bedroom, I tossed myself on my bed and cried like a child, unable to sleep. Every night I thought of my little granddaughter, who, in her innocence and love, is thinking of her father who is in a war due to the fault of a mad world and the ignorance of a lusty world; and who is praying for his safety and expecting him back safely while he is dead somewhere we do not know and probably not even buried. Then in my agony, I knelt by my bedside and prayed my prayer in abundant tears:

Our Lord and our Father. You who are the Father of the fatherless, now I humbly ask that you be the father to this

fatherless child. You comfort her when she comes to know the truth about her earthly father. I am only a mere human being and can do so much. The rest and her I commit to you. Amen.

"The next day your mother and I agreed to tell you the truth. Your mother suggested that I should because she could not do it.

"In the evening we tried to have a pleasant time together. Then as usual, I took you in my arms to carry you to your bedroom. And while I was carrying you, you looked to my face and asked: 'Grandpa, when is my father coming home?' I almost dropped you to the floor. I could not speak for a few moments. Then you said, 'Grandpa, I see tears in your eyes. You are weeping. What is wrong?' Your words, my dear, stripped me of every nerve. I put you on your bed, then gently and lovingly, but with a broken heart, I said: 'My dear, your father is no longer in war; now he is in a much better and happier place, and someday we all will join him.' Then in a soft tone, slightly not believing me, you asked: 'Where, Grandpa?' I answered: 'In heaven.'

You bowed your head silently and I saw tears fall on the pillow that was on your lap. Do you remember that tragic moment?"

Granddaughter (in a choking voice): "No, I do not. But I wish I had because it would not have hurt then so much as it hurts now."

Grandfather: "You see, my dear, I have been to many places, learned a lot by experience, tasted more bitterness of this life than its sweetness, adopted many customs and known good and bad. Now I am an old man in a strange land whose language I do not understand, whose ways of life and even the climate are alien to me. What am I doing here?"

"Very soon, my dear, you will find a young man of your choice, you will marry him by choice and live at a place of your choice. I wish for you every good luck. I do not know what will happen to me. May be I will be put in a nursing home."

Granddaughter: "Do not talk like that, Grandpa. Our hearts are already terribly broken, and perhaps yours more than mine."

The granddaughter threw her arms around the old man's neck and put her head on his

chest. There was a moment of silence. Neither spoke a word, although both spoke much with their tears, emotions and throbs of their hearts.

Grandfather: "Let us go to bed and try to forgive what we cannot forget; and forget what we cannot forgive. We are tired. I have spoken much and you have listened patiently. I have told you my life story, partly the story of your life and partly the story of our Assyrian people. Good night, my dear."

CHAPTER TWO

Mr. Chairman Speaks

Place: Chicago, U. S. A.
Year: 1992

The news was promulgated on radio; it was spread via leaflets in different Assyrian churches, clubs and organizations, that a meeting was to be held in order to plan for the next Assyrian Annual Convention to take place in Chicago. Everyone was excited, especially those who had nothing else to do.

This annual National Convention is an exciting event to many Assyrians. They patiently wait for it and save what they can to fritter it madly during one week of the convention.

This event is an opportunity to meet relatives and friends, drink copiously, dissipate money lavishly, babble endlessly and foolishly, dance hysterically, roam

around aimlessly; and when all is over, these people go back to their homes and speak about it gloriously as if they had offered their nation a sacred and everlasting service.

The appointed time came for the meeting. The delegates came from all over the land and abroad. Some of them had come from as far as Australia, Russia and Sweden.

One Monday afternoon, these men and women assembled at a luxurious hotel. Mr. Sargon, the Chairman for the occasion, mounted the podium. He was welcomed with enthusiastic plaudits. He addressed the assembly: "Ladies and gentlemen, in the name of our Assyrian people, I welcome you to this historic and patriotic meeting. I want to inform you that it is our desired purpose to make this coming Annual Convention the best, the most exciting and the most profitable. With your help and cooperation we can, most certainly, make this Convention the most impressive. Hence I need the assistance of each of you, in this civil and national matter, if we are going to make this convention an ultimate success and a

memorable event. Our clubs and organizations have put their trust in us and depend on us to make this event a historic one. Therefore, I ask you to do your part and your best. We need as many volunteers as we can get; we are in need of those who can sacrifice and contribute. Thank you very much for your patience." There was another enthusiastic round of applause. At this juncture, Mr. Chairman asked, "I like to answer questions from the audience, if there are any, about what I have just said."

A senior citizen and a devout Assyrian named Mr. Khoshaba, raised his hand. He had, in the past, been to these meetings many times, heard a lot of this rigmarole and had seen absolutely nothing accomplished. He had been active in some organizations and even headed one of them himself. Mr. Khoshaba asked: "Mr. Chairman, may I ask a question?"

Chairman: "By all means, Mr. Khoshaba."

Mr. Khoshaba: "How much money do we

Assyrians spend each year at these conventions?"

Chairman: "It costs us a lot each year, over one million dollars. Last year we spent one million and two hundred thousand dollars. This year we expect it would cost us more."

Mr. Khoshaba: "HMMMMMM. That is very illuminating as well as humiliating. And for how long Mr. Chairman, if I may ask, have we been having these annual conventions? If my memory serves me right, I think we have been conducting these conventions for the last fifty-nine years. Is that right?"

Mr. Chairman: "That is right, Mr. Khoshaba. And as you know, the attendance has been on the increase each year."

Mr. Khoshaba: "For fifty-nine years, My God! What a shame!"

Chairman: "Why, Mr. Khoshaba? I am indeed surprised to hear you say that."

Mr. Khoshaba: "That is absolutely shocking. Do you know that we Assyrians in the West have spent over sixty million dollars during these fifty-nine years on drinking, dancing, prattling, and gossiping? This is truly shocking. Many of our people are on fixed incomes, public aid and social security benefits. Imagine, a minority in the West, in a strange land, has spent over sixty million dollars on entertainment and dancing. It was Cicero, the Roman orator and philosopher who once said, 'Only a lunatic would dance when sober.' We have made music and dancing for our people not only a fashion but a passion. Ladies and gentlemen, it is our national obligation, it is our moral duty, it is our social responsibility, it is time (if not too late), to offer our people something abiding, something worthwhile to do and live for instead of providing them with what Shakespeare said, 'Much ado about nothing.'"

There was complete silence over the audience. No one said anything or asked any questions.

Mr. Khoshaba continued: "For the last fifty nine years this deadly opium of drinking, dancing and gossiping has got into our national fabric that has diverted our national attention away from the things that are of central relevance to our suffering people. Many of our people have been addicted to this particular mode of life. They cannot live unless they drink; some cannot live unless they dance; others cannot exist unless they trifle with life; and still others cannot live unless they drink, dance and trifle with life. Is this an escape mentality? Are we majoring on minors? How true are the words of an observant American lady: 'Assyrians do not know their priorities.'

"Ladies and gentlemen, let us put our house in order. Someone has said that there are fifty ways to put out a fire, but denying its existence is not one of them. Today our house is on fire; and it is no time to ignore its danger or foolishly dance around it. Let us put it out or it will put us out."

Mr. Khoshaba sat down. No one said anything until Mr. Chairman made his

remarks.

Chairman: "But, Mr. Khoshaba, our people need this kind of social conventions. Through these gatherings we keep in touch with each other; maintain our cultural ties, retain our old traditions, customs, and above all, we preserve our Assyrian language. Besides, you know that sometimes our young men and women find their mates in these gatherings."

A group of attendants raised their voices in support of the Chairman's statement by shouting: "Yes, we need these conventions. In them we show the rest of the world who we are and what we are; we want to show the world that we are the descendants of the ancient Assyrian empire; we want the world to know that we are not extinct, and we think that these conventions serve this purpose. Besides, it is a great comfort and fun at the same time to meet thousands of Assyrians in one place."

Mr. Khoshaba: "What a pity! Yes indeed, what a pity! My friends, we can

never preserve our cultural ties, traditions, customs and language by meeting together only once a year. These essential moorings can only be maintained by institutions of learning and cultural centers, which we do not have. You, I and everyone here know with definite assurance that the sole purpose of these conventions is absolutely nothing but entertainment. It has no national tone, no civic spirit, no social thrust and no religious breath. What a grotesque parody! May God pity our poor Assyrian people! We have money to squander on drinking, dancing and entertainment but not for a small school of any kind where we can teach our children and adults our language, culture, customs, traditions and history. We spend our money madly on personal pleasure at these mad gatherings but cannot build a small cultural center for the benefit of us all. We spend more than one million dollars annually to meet other Assyrian folks, yet we cannot buy a small burial spot where we can bury our dead. Our dead are scattered at different locations. We spend more than one million dollars each year on rooms and suites in a hotel, yet we cannot build a hotel of our own

where our meetings, gatherings, conventions and conferences could be held. We spend more than one million dollars each year to have a 'good' time for five days, but we cannot build a nursing home for our elderly. Like the Prodigal Son, we dissipate our substance in riotous living here in the West, while our Assyrian brothers and sisters are starving in the East. Ladies and gentlemen, if this is sanity then what is insanity? If this is nationalism, what is betrayal? If this is wisdom, what is folly? If this is success, what is failure?

"Friends, may be I took more time than I should. Forgive my prolixity. Let it be known that when a nation's only goal is eating, drinking and dancing, when a people's only care is to jump at the din of every drum, remember it is that nation's last hour; that people is breathing its last breath.

"My fellow Assyrians, I want to ask you a fair question: What other minority group in this land, or in any land, does this sort of foolish thing? The Jewish people? Spanish? The Italian community? The Irish? The

German? The Swedish? Not a single one. That is why they have hospitals, nursing homes, camps, cultural centers, schools, colleges and churches. There is no moral justification, my friends, for these useless and senseless acts of ours.

"Our Assyrian brothers and sisters are perishing in dispersion in Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Jordan and Syria, due to the Gulf War aftermath. Because of the economic necessities and the unfavorable social conditions in these lands, our Assyrian daughters are forced to work jobs that are degrading. Our Assyrian children walk barefoot in Turkish mountains and fight for morsels of bread. A whole family of seven people is living in one room in Jordan. We raised funds for these desperate scattered Assyrian fellows, and how much did we raise? Seventy thousands dollars from all the Assyrians in the United States: one dollar a person; two dollars for every Assyrian refugee. What a caricature! Yet we spend more than one million dollars each year for mere entertainment. I hope one day our thoughtful Assyrian people will wake up and

realize the stupidity of all this idiotic activity. May God have mercy on us. For my part, I can only ask forgiveness."

There was a deep hush, a long silence after Mr. Khoshaba's speech. He had thrown an ethical bomb that none had even attempted to toss. He had raised a moral national question to ponder upon. Then someone named David stood up and spoke to the assembly.

Mr. David: "Ladies and gentlemen, I think Mr. Khoshaba has made his point very lucidly. In principle, I agree with his statement. But the majority of our people like to have these conventions; and if we discontinue them after fifty nine years of their existence, our people would think we have failed them or betrayed them. They have become a part and parcel of our Assyrian activities. Furthermore, we make a small profit each year which goes to the Assyrian organization that sponsors the Convention that year."

Mr. Khoshaba stood up for the last time.

He knew that he would not win this useless battle. Yet he made his final attempt.

Mr. Khoshaba: "My friends, two words in particular struck me in Mr. David's speech - 'failed' and 'betrayed'. For fifty nine years we have failed our young people by offering them wild music instead of wise moral judgment. For fifty nine years we have betrayed our young and old in the realm of leadership. My Assyrian friends, we ought to be ashamed of our roles. We have failed and betrayed our poor people for fifty nine years. We go to these conventions not to honor a nation, once strong but now moribund; not to remember a people once a giant among pygmies, but to worship music in its wildest form, to bow the knee to the god of pleasure, to hail Bacchus, the god of wine and applaud the masters of serenades. We have lost our vision, ladies and gentlemen. We have promised our people nothing and have offered them nothing. We have talked elaborately and failed miserably. We have squandered lavishly and achieved absolutely nothing. I hope one day our sensible Assyrian people will realize how

deeply and how sadly we have failed them.

"For the last fifty nine years we have been busily doing wrong things, deciding on wrong issues and expensively carrying them out in the wrong way with the wrong result.

"As for me, my friends, this is my last stand I make in this assembly. Keep spending abundantly on entertainment, make a small profit, fail and betray our people collectively. May God forgive us and have mercy on our poor Assyrian nation. Good-bye."

AN APPRAISAL

I vote with Mr. Khoshaba. I agree with his line of argument, his nationalistic concern and his sound analysis of the subject in question.

A nation that at this moment is scattered in fourteen countries of the world as refugees, must plan, must do something more than entertainment for entertainment's sake. Most assuredly, we are a fun-loving people. There is nothing sinful about that. We ought to love fun. Every people has its own way of having fun and rightly so. But that is not our main concern here.

At this hour we have thousands of our Assyrian people displaced in Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Jordan and Syria. We ought to think

seriously that this is not a time for toe-tapping, finger-snapping, hand-clapping and hip-wiggling. Our people are not only in a crisis; they are in a serious crisis, and what is more critical than being in a crisis is that we do not know that we are in a serious crisis. Many sober Assyrians will corroborate with me when I say that we are in a process of degeneration; and many earnest Assyrians will confirm when I say that what we need right now is not hilarious fun, obstreperous music and exuberant conventions, but a moral and national regeneration. We ought to determine that we do not want in any way a handful of selfish individuals who strive after personal profit on the account of the rest of us. We are in need of a certain few who will make, or sincerely try to make, a decent people, a great people out of this small one.

A nation that has suffered so much during its unhappy history from so many adversaries in so many lands, and at this moment it has no fixed land of its own after 2600 years of its dispersion, must gather its wits together, plan, plead, pray, probe, here and there,

everywhere to see what is going to happen to this helpless nation as we usher into the twenty-first century.

In this crucial moment in the history of the world in general and of the Middle East in particular, Assyrians, Assyrian spokesmen, ought to turn their minds and efforts toward the world capitals and plead the cause of this shattered nation that had its roots in an ancient land but now deprived of it, a nation that spearheaded world civilizations, fought side by side with the Allies in the two World Wars and won many victories.

In the light of recent political alterations and altercations in Europe in general and in the Communist world in particular, we Assyrians, or Assyrian representatives, must learn from these political, social and even geographical changes, and what unbelieving changes indeed! Small and obscure nations are suddenly emerging onto the world scene, casting off the oppressive yoke of many decades. Kingdoms are tottering and others are rising with shouts of freedom resounding across this planet. What an opportunity to

study and watch closely these current changes. Whether in Russia, Ukraine, Bosnia, Serbia or the Palestine Liberation Organization, all these peoples and nations ought to serve for us as a handwriting on the wall. In this unpredictable world, unpredictable events could occur at any time. I speak in the same vein as Mr. Khoshaba spoke: this is no time to waste on meaningless meetings and useless gatherings just for the fun of it.

In the light of our past tragic life and present desperate political, social and religious situation, thoughtful Assyrians ought to acquaint themselves with the political activities and historical developments of other minority groups, either past or present, to see and learn what they did, in what manner they did it, and how they prevailed against all odds and got their independence and a homeland.

In the light of our vacillating situation in the West, most of us Assyrians do not realize that we ought to be in a serious struggle and not in a social entertainment club; we ought

to be in a marathon race if we are to save our race. We ought to agonize if we are to save our people from its present agony.

I am writing these lines at a time when athletes from 180 nations of the world are competing, struggling and sweating to win fame, gold, silver and bronze medals for their nations at Olympic Games in Barcelona, Spain. I can see on the television screen the joy and "ecstasy of victory and agony of defeat" on the face of everyone of them. I can see tears of joy as well as tears of sorrow and failure.

Our national duty, in both East and West, and perhaps today more in the West than in the East, is to work day and night, run, struggle along our weary race track and compete to win for the sake of our people - a people with the most tragic soap opera ever played in modern history. Everyone of us is obligated before God and our people to be an unflinching athlete par excellence, and run the long hideous race that is set before us; and with unflinching determination and unwavering faith and hope, we shall cross the finish line

and win the race for the sake of a nation once born in freedom, now dying in exile; once the mistress of the ancient East, now scattered in the modern West. We anticipate, hope and pray that all the Assyrians in East and West, North and South, will see the great day when they join the community of nations and do their part and sacred duty in this new world as their forefathers did in the old. May it be so.

In the light of our fluctuating conditions in the West, politically, socially and religiously, our leaders, our representatives must embody a worthy cause and work for it, and if necessary die for it. I am always enchanted by Mahatma Gandhi whom people of all climes respect and revere regardless of race, color or creed. I do respect him not because he was a vegetarian or a learned man or a saint; but because he embodied a national cause far greater than his own cause - the cause of India's independence. When Gandhi spoke, all India listened attentively; when he cried, a whole nation cried with him; and when he fasted, all India trembled. You cannot separate that man from that

nation; they are identical. He denied himself for the sake of a far greater self. He actually entered into the agony and sufferings of his own people. Therefore, he is always great and always living in the hearts of millions of people.

We Assyrians, wherever we are, regardless of climate or geographical hindrances or tribal trivialities, ought to choose leaders who would embody a national cause and identify themselves with that cause. We must be very cautious in this matter. With keen perception, we ought to choose our overseers, those who are willing to deny themselves for the sake of a far greater self if anything of significance is to be accomplished. Let us come to our senses and unite our disunited ranks if anything worthwhile is to be achieved.

..May be this following incident will help us here. In 490 BC, Darius I of Persia wanted to attack Greece and add it to his vast domain. He marshalled 600 ships and over 200,000 men. The Persians pitched their camp near a place called Marathon. When

the Greeks heard of this huge armada and this innumerable host, they became hysterical. The Persian army had never yet been defeated. How could a small nation such as Greece, so weak, so scattered and so disunited hold back, let alone defeat, such an enormous human mass. When the two rival and unequal armies met, the Greeks could muster only 20,000 men. They had ten generals - something that confused them. They soon realized that it was impossible to prevail with their small army divided into ten pieces with ten generals in command. Finally all these ten generals abdicated their office and chose one man as their only general to lead them in battle. His name was Miltiades. Under his leadership, with his military strategy and clairvoyance, this small Greek force routed the Persian cohorts in what was not only one of the decisive battles of history, but also one of the most incredible victories of all history - Marathon. About 7,000 Persians perished in Marathon, but only 190 Greeks.

Dear fellow Assyrians, today our greatest need is for a competent, honest leadership in

which we could unreservedly repose all our trust. It is a sad story to know that every Assyrian is a potential leader; and he thinks that he is so competent of his leadership that he alone can take us to the promised land. No wonder we are so feeble, so disenchanted and so disunited.

CHAPTER THREE

The Shaking of the Foundations: Sunset in the West

Scene: The West

Time: 1990's

"**T**he East is East, and the West is West, and never the twain shall meet." Thus wrote Rudyard Kipling, the British poet, almost one hundred years ago. Yet ironically these two antipodes cannot live without each other. What is the West without the East, or what is the East without the West? The two cannot be divorced no matter how far they may be in either degree or in distance. There is a part of each in the other.

Each has its own cultures, languages, manners, speeches, rituals, philosophies, ways of thinking, living and acting, customs, traditions and modes of thought, and a host of other agencies, some congenital others made.

There is so much good in each, and so much evil in both. There is so much to learn in both, and so much to fear in each. There is so much social darkness in the East, and so much moral smugness and pollution in the West. There is so much insanity in the East, and so much insanity in the West. One feels ashamed to belong to either.

What shall we do? What shall we Assyrians do, who, willingly or unwillingly have abandoned the old East and are now struggling in the modern West? Shall we abandon all hope? Is our sun setting in the West? Can our race and our values be redeemed in the conglomerate West? Let us examine the fact and let them speak for themselves.

Our language, which has always been a unifying force among us and a distinguishing mark of our ethnicity is falling into oblivion in the West; and all concerned Assyrians either in high or humble places realize that, whether we admit it or not, we seem to be unable to do anything to redeem it or revive it. This sacred trust, this ancient heritage

which our Lord Jesus Christ chose to use above all other languages, and through which He promulgated His message of salvation, is slipping away before our own eyes in a multitude of ways. It seems that we do not know that with the slipping away, with the disappearance of this sacred heirloom, the future of a whole people is in jeopardy. Many of us do not care, do not even give it a cursory thought whether it should be learned or not. I personally bow to some westerners here and abroad who are studying it, using it and spreading it through some of their publications. These people have erected special centers for the sole purpose of studying the Assyrian language. They have shown a real interest in our language. We ought to be very grateful to these people who are doing something that we ought to be doing. We hope that one day we shall unite our efforts with theirs. It is rather a humiliating experience to know, to see, that these foreigners are more concerned about our mother tongue than we are.

Therefore, as far as our language is concerned, there is no positive or

encouraging sign. If it is not disappearing, then the best we can say about it is that it is static. But this static status quo is not satisfactory at all. Hence the conclusion we can draw is: this national pillar is tumbling gradually before our own eyes, and I am not quite sure if we can vivify it.

But this is only one of our challenging problems, one of the stark facts staring right into our eyes in the West. The other more disturbing problem is the problem of our youth. Our sons and daughters, at least some of them, who are our future hope, are frantically dancing to a thousand new tunes, in a thousand new ways in the West in the heat of the night. They want somehow to be westerners, but they do not know how. They cannot. They only imitate the western smile, the western song and self. Since they have abandoned the East with all its paraphernalia, and cannot fully adopt the western style as their own, they belong to neither. They have, so to speak, one foot in the East and another in the West, and they feel they are aliens to both. They act like westerners; but think and talk like easterners. Who has betrayed whom

or what? Have we betrayed the East and its traditions and sense of values, or has the East disowned us? Have we betrayed the West with all its allurements, or has the West rejected us?

It seems to me that the meaning of life has disappeared to some of our young men and women, and a sense of reality is just not there. They may not know what they actually want; but they are agreed on what they do not want. They may not know that they have lost a great deal; but certainly they agree that they have not gained anything. They may not know that a whole generation is dependent on them; but certainly they know that their generation depends on no one and is responsible to no one and for no one.

The problem our youth cannot be exclusively attributed to the spirit of the age, but to the youth themselves in particular and to our homes in general.

There is a prevailing notion of the denial of the sense and essence of life; there is

vapidity of values, emptiness in the heart and the betrayal of the spirit. In the last few years we have lost some of our young men due to unnecessary or rash accidents. Some of them became victims due to bad associations. Some mothers, and I know them very well, have been bereft of their only sons. This certainly breaks not only a mother's heart, but every Assyrian heart.

It is a sad experience to see some of our young men and women imitate the life style of the western youth from chewing gum to high-pitch music. I am not casting aspersion on imitation, provided we imitate the best and the highest. We all exchange ideas, share experiences and eat diverse kinds of ethnic delicacies and we should be greatly delighted for having the freedom and opportunity to do so. But that is an entirely different story.

Materially our young people are faring far better in the West than in the East. They have plenty; but have lost quality. They have easy access to all sorts of pleasures; yet have not discovered the real sense of happiness.

Once values revered and considered fixed and abiding for all time are being pushed aside in the name of a new morality. The quiet past, the sacred traditions are being ignored on the claim that this is the Age of Aquarius. Parental authority, religious authority, social authority are constantly being challenged on every hand in the name of freedom. Our fathers bequeathed to us moral principles, ethical standards in the old land; now their children are seriously challenging and often repudiating these principles and standards in the new land. Our salt has lost its savour; with what then shall it be salted? The oldest known bit of writing in the world is a piece of papyrus in a Constantinople Museum. On it is written: "Alas, times are not what they used to be. Children no longer obey their parents and everyone wants to write a book." Were this father living in our generation, he would be surprised a thousand times more.

It seems to me and to many others of similar conviction, that another important national foundation in our life is slowly but surely tottering before our own eyes in the

West. Can we do anything about it? Can we save our youth?

Our homes are no longer a place of comfort, but shrines for occasion visits. Instead of saying, "My home is my castle", we brazenly assert, "My car is my home." We have no friends; we have business associates. Friendship is gradually fading because we have no time for friends. Conversation is annoying; watching television substitutes for friendly conversation, for expression of ideas and intelligent discourse.

We rush after the "almighty dollar" and measure people according to their paychecks. We emphasize quantity in material gain and forget that the sanctity of life is in its quality.

What is more frightening and agonizing among us Assyrians in the West is the divorce rate that has been escalating in recent decades. The sacred bond of marriage which our forefathers highly revered and held in awesome sanctity, is being broken without

mercy and without compunction. Some years ago the evil of divorce was intolerable among us, and it is still intolerable among most Assyrian communities in the East. But it is quite different in the land of our sojourn. We have been inoculated with this evil virus of this disease here in the West. In the last ten years, the divorce rate has doubled among us Assyrian people. Our homes are being broken by the viciousness of divorce; children are being distraught, and families and relatives on both sides store resentment toward each other. The only ones who make a profit out of this are the lawyers.

Once we stated a fact when we proudly said, "Our homes are in good order". That is hardly true anymore, and I certainly say it with deep regret. Once we believed and proudly said, "No human being, no judge and no law can put asunder what God has joined together from the beginning of history." That too, is no longer true anymore. We have forfeited the sacred trust of marriage and, hence divorce has made its fearful shrine in our homes. We ignorantly forget that what goes on in our homes has a profound effect

upon our national scene as a whole. We often hear, and may well be true, that no civilization can possibly survive if homes collapse and families disintegrate. No more incisive words were ever spoken concerning home relationships, both in individual and in social phases than these words: "A home divided against itself cannot stand." Physically, mentally, spiritually, sociologically, economically and politically, this statement is an axiomatic truth and as universally a fact as I am holding this pen in my hand. Yet in all these realms, but particularly in the marriage realm, we are trying to disprove it. And the result? A divided house. Could hopelessness become more hopeless?

To us Assyrians, the most sacred institutions have always been our faith and our home family. And let it be noted that there is no substitute for faith and no surrogate for home.

The spirit of the age in conjunction with our spirit are dissolving our faith, and the profligate tornadoes of divorce are

dismantling our homes to pieces. The anchors of our home life, family solidarity are being shaken to the very foundations in the West before our very eyes. One day we shall wake up, if we wake up, and find out that what once we considered the most precious and sacred, is beyond repair. A Babylonian proverb has summarized such a status quo in these words: "The life of the day before yesterday, has departed today."

What Then?

The above is a succinct question, but it implies deep meditation and awesome prognostication.

I said earlier that materially we are far better in the West than in the East. That is true but not satisfactory. Yet it is this deluding phenomenon that has diverted our collective attention from that which is far more essential. Obviously, materially we have attained a higher standard of living; now we must attain a higher standard of thinking, at a time when thinking is most needed. Let us think for a moment of the abundant resources at hand.

In this vast land of America, wherever you are living, you can walk to school and

obtain your desired education. Yet it transfixes me to the heart to see many drop-outs among our Assyrian young people. I suggest that we declare an unprecedented war against this evil. There is no valid reason whatsoever for this malefic spirit to invade the mind and spirit of our youth.

However, we should be grateful for the tireless endeavor of some of our young men and women demonstrated in the educational field. These young people have, by every twitch or itch, struggled to get a decent education in order to make a decent living and, at the same time, give a decent picture of us all. I am not a pessimist; and have learned by experience of many years that pessimism has never edified one single individual. But what I crave to see is that the most, if not the bulk, of our Assyrian young people were like this pursuant searching group. The resources are available, and there is no excuse for resignation.

There are abundant professional resources for the professional careers in this ample land of opportunities regardless of color, creed, or

gender.

Undoubtedly, there is a difference between profession and education as most professionals and educators know. However, we Assyrians, need each and every one of them.

To educate is not to fill the mind with accumulated data; rather to cultivate the mind and the soul, to refine the whole man and make him a decorous individual in and for the society to which he belongs.

Almost every Assyrian can have a career should he or she desire to do so. On a college bulletin board I saw these words: "Our doors are open; open yours." This is one invitation among many, at least in words; and I believe that the college authorities meant it.

Let us open our doors, hearts and minds to the manifold blessings and pleasures of education, and I assure you that our people and even people outside our domain will respect us and even receive us. If we desire

to rebuild our shattered people into an active unified mass, then we ought first to rebuild the mind of our young people. We have many people of good-will; we need them; they are indispensable. But we are in desperate need of good-thinking people, people of education.

Let us not only take pride in but imitate the spirit and the zeal of our forefathers who produced the first Aramaic Bible in the second century AD, translated the works of Greek philosophers into Arabic for the Arab rulers during Arab domination in the Middle East, and presented matchless works in both prose and poetry.

On the other hand, I am thankful for those professional Assyrians who for many years have sacrificed their time and substance to be what they are and to do what they are doing. We have competent physicians, many Ph.D.'s in diverse fields, and I am proud to have many of them as my friends. I wish we had more of them. I admire some of them for stepping outside their profession and getting involved in patriotic, civic and religious

affairs. What a noble deed, indeed! The young generation ought to look to these individuals as an example if they are going to serve their God and their people.

Perhaps I strayed a bit from the original question. What shall we do - we who are living in the plethoric West? What is the solution to the problem of a dying people in a foreign land? Can we save our prodigals, our language, our culture, our heritage?

To answer these questions by saying, "Yes and no", is a fallacy in the system of logic, and this is no time to waste on logic here.

In this "Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave", there is opportunity to grasp and time for sober reflection on our part. For the older generation, it is the responsibility of the parents to inculcate in their children the significance of moral purity, of ethical principles, of national dignity, of religious obligations and cultural moorings. During my sojourn in Chicago for the last fifteen years, and my intermixture with the people of

my race, I have heard only once a father talk heart to heart and face to face with his teenage son in these words: "Look here, my son, we are still refugees; we are considered foreigners in this land. So far, you have been a good son and I am proud of you. But remember, we have no time to waste on idleness and no money to squander on drugs. If you ever take drugs or are imprisoned, first I want you to shoot me. I would rather die than be humiliated in the sight of my people and kin, and disgraced in the sight of God."

Those were incisive words by a simple father who was not educated by the standard of this world. Yet his words cut me and his son deeply in a gentlemanly deportment.

Personally I came to this land with one purpose only; that is, to study, learn and get the best possible education. Now I stay to teach and learn more. I say this with all humility that now after learning and teaching, I am a better person for having come into contact with many gentle hearts and better souls in the West. The conditions and circumstances were not always auspicious,

particularly to a foreigner who was an alien to many circumstances, customs and traditions of this new land. But we must learn to survive in spite of diverse conditions and circumstances. It would be suicidal to live by the maxim that unless conditions and circumstances favor my way of thinking, they have to be discarded. If you wait until then, I assure you the gravedigger will get you unconditionally and before you are half way through. I advise you that you create favorable conditions and circumstances.

Let me emphasize my point once more. The problem of our youth will not be solved by implanting in them "a sense of belonging", or "self-respect" or "self-expression." The American psychologists and psychiatrists and a host of other professionals have been trying to do just that for the last forty years and have failed miserably. We have more criminals roaming our streets; we have more crimes and robberies to a frightening degree. We must go deeper than that. We need to instill in our youth a sense of significant being, a sense of attachment to permanent values and

detachment from what is valueless and transitory. Who among us has ever said to his son or daughter: "you are made in the image of God; do not distort that image. Your body is the temple of the living God; do not ruin it. You are a human being with dignity; do not plunge yourself into bestiality." These are abiding values that cannot be replaced or displaced by this world's transient code of ethics. These are elements of faith as well as of practice, and we Assyrians have always cherished that faith and practiced it to the best of our knowledge and ability. It is precisely this faith, the faith of our fathers, but now ours that has kept our national identity. It was George Washington, that great father of this great land who made this great statement: "Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can be maintained without faith."

CHAPTER FOUR

Final Thoughts

We have come to the end of this small work, and now it is appropriate to complete it by furnishing a few personal thoughts, hoping to accent the aforementioned ideas in the body of this book.

Before there can be a remedy, there must be a diagnosis, and before the diagnosis there must be a case history.

Our Assyrian case history in the foregoing pages was revealed to be that of a people with a long history of homelessness, dispersion, persecution and suffering. This was somehow made known in the interlocution between the old man and his granddaughter.

In Chapter Two, the pith of the dialogue was mainly concentrated on some of our rather useless activities here in the West. There, Mr. Khoshaba questioned the method and the motives behind these so-called national conventions. After that debate, the present writer sided with Mr. Khoshaba in the appraisal for his first-time challenge to this extravagance.

Then in Chapter Three we came closer to home, so to speak. We touched on education slightly; we grazed the problem of our youth; weighed our marriage status and found it wanting; and finally exposed the evil of divorce. I desire to direct the following brief words to the young and old alike. Young men, young women, whoever you are wherever you are: in America, Canada, Australia, Sweden, Italy, Germany or Greece, I want you to look to your part of the world and say: "look here, what has been preserved for more than 6700 years was not saved that I should overthrow it overnight by a snap of my finger or by a tap of my foot. My race has survived the Mongolian persecutions, horrible Turkish massacres,

religious persecutions of all sorts, and it will survive your indifferantism and crass materialism." And I address these words to the older generation. You who are reading these simple words, whoever you are, doctor, professor, teacher, minister, student, husband, wife, parent, you who are living in the West, turn to the West and say: "The Assyrian way of life, though simple, possesses ancient sources of beauty, meaning and decorum that must not be permitted to die."

My dear fellow Assyrian, for you and me today, a race is not yet run because its work is not yet done. It is not enough to maintain the Assyrian identity through a body of men and women known as Assyrians. What is however, more important is meaningful survival. Our community can derive meaning and purpose for its survival only if it is attached to its vital traditions, and if it strives to expound and adhere to its values and standards. Personally I do not fear disintegration or absorption of our people, as some do. I believe we can have integration without assimilation; acculturation without

absorption.

My dear reader, with these words I rest my pen. I submit this work to the equanimity of your judgment. Restore me, I pray, where I have floundered; correct me where I have erred, and reprehend me where I have offended you.

Thank you.