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# Natasha Brakhya

An artist's journey

**The Team**

*Sennacherib Daniel*

sdaniel70@yahoo.com

*David Chibo*

davidchibo@hotmail.com

*Sakhi Warda*

Sanharib@hotmail.com

*Fraydon Heskell*

samerheskel@hotmail.com

*Haitham Patrous*

c/o Nakosha@hotmail.com

*Nineveh Daniel*

m.daniel@mei.unimelb.edu.au

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***Nakosha* was established in 1997 with the view of advocating free speech and establishing a social link among our Australian and worldwide communities, especially those in our homeland.**

***Nakosha* is growing with a contemporary generation of Assyrians who are aware of their identity, with an understanding and appreciation of our culture, language and heritage.**

***Nakosha* is a non-profit publication. Holding a neutral stand within the community, its views are not religiously or politically motivated – they are based on human values not sectarian beliefs.**

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Victoria, Australia 3058.  
www.atour.com/aygv**

# editorial

The majority of this little magazine is devoted to all things Assyrian. This page, the editorial, is one place where *Nakosha* can reflect upon itself and discuss its direction and position on matters.

Take the "non-religious" stance of *Nakosha* for example. Now, while I don't want to belabour this point – it's the third time running we've brought it up – I think it's sufficiently important to clarify it just a little further. Over the years *Nakosha* has been asked if non-religious means "against religion". Of course it doesn't.

Non-religious simply means *areligious*, or the *absence* of religion – it does *not* equal *irreligious*, *antireligious* or *sacrilegious*. We avoid not just Christian denominational differences, but particularly inter-religious conflicts, namely those between Christians and Moslems.

Above all, we steer well clear of parochial politics. Cowboy politician Ronald Reagan said it best when he waxed lyrical about politics: "Politics is the second oldest profession in the world...and it bears a striking resemblance to the first". (And this was well before the Clinton administration!)■

I am distressed to realize that for most Assyrians, the murder of an Assyrian by a Moslem in the past has become almost a cause for celebration. I say such an awful sounding thing because I hear no words of condemnation for the Christians of the U.S. and Britain who have been killing thousands of Assyrians, both Christian and Moslem, in Iraq for the last 12 years. The only thing that seems to matter is the religious affiliation of the murderer and not the tragedy of the victim. I see no other way to explain that in the U.S., at least, you would think August 7th was "Hate Moslems Day".

On that day I saw not a word of protest anywhere about all the Assyrian victims of Christian aggression, on the very day we were supposedly shedding tears for Assyrian victims of 1915, 1815 and 1715. There was not a single mention of the victims of 1989 or any other year since Christians took over the killing of Assyrians business.

I think we are mindful, again, of not disturbing the *Sahib*, who happens to be Christian, like us. This Western Christian is intent on making Islam the next scourge and Evil Empire he made of Communism and any poor batch of squatting peasants anywhere in the world whose resources he also wanted to steal. It is Islam today that will be the "reason" for Missile Defence and all the military contracts these corporations can convince us we need through their Corporate Media Divisions. I fear we are playing into their hands, and they are once again using us to beat the drums of hatred towards the very Moslems who far outnumber the few of us left in Iraq and other Islamic countries.

The State Department, under the malignant leadership of Madeline Albright could not have scripted the posts I've seen any better, if her intention was still to inflame popular sentiment against the oil-bearing Middle East, than our own people have in their "concern" over only those Assyrians killed by Moslems. No one has killed more Assyrians

*Cont. p8*

## letter to the Editor

Editor,

I was impressed and most pleased to hear that *Nakosha* is NOT a religious magazine. It was refreshing and startling to read that you condemn all violence done in the name of any religion. The sooner we start seeing all children as just that, children - and not repositories for our age-old conflicts - the sooner we might create adults who don't feel murderously self-righteous.

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## KDP ARRESTS AND TORTURES ASSYRIAN FARMER

(Z N D A :  
Chicago)  
Last week,  
the *Assyrian  
Information  
News  
Agency*  
reported that  
Mr. Youkhana



Yalda Khaie, 32, a farmer in North Iraq was apprehended by the KDP forces and according to the United Nations (UN) personnel held in solitary confinement in a KDP political office. *AINA* reports that Mr. Khaie was moved to Femandy Prison in Duhok. His fiancé, during two visits on April 20 and May 20, discovered that Mr. Khaie had been “severely

attacks by KDP thugs the following day... The underlying motivation of this KDP policy is to heighten fear and intimidation of Assyrians so that they abandon Assyrian lands.”

*Zinda's* sources in North Iraq indicate that smuggling of food and provisions to the PKK-dominated areas in northern Bet-Nahrain has become a lucrative enterprise for inhabitants of North Iraq, most of them having no political or social ties to this separatist Kurdish organizations. According to one such report Mr. Khaie, under intense torture, may have admitted to smuggling cigarettes to the PKK areas.

While KDP has arrested many of its own sympathizers in an effort to curb the smuggle of provisions to PKK, *Zinda* sources in the North explain that none have been tortured in prison to the extent that Mr. Youkhana Yalda Khaie has

(ZNDA: Prague) The city of Ashur, the ancient sacred capital of the Assyrian Empire, may be flooded as a result of waters rising behind a new dam near the city, according to *Iraq Press*, reported on 23 July. The head of Iraq's *Antiquities Department*, Dr. Jabir Khalil, has issued an appeal to save the city and the surrounding archaeological sites. Khalil has already mobilized his department's resources for a salvage project. He said his people will resort to underwater excavation, a technique that is little-known to Iraqi archaeologists.

## ASSYRIAN SPORTS GAMES IN TEHRAN

(ZNDA: Yerevan) According to the *AZG Armenian Daily*, several Assyrian sports teams from Germany, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Australia, Sweden, Belgium, Holland,

# Assyrian W

whipped in the face and legs with a wire cable by two KDP agents...badly scarred and unable to stand or walk.” The *AINA* reports that the “extent of his beatings was so profound and disfiguring that Youkhana was removed from the prison for four days during an inspection by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) so that the extent of his torture would not be discovered.”

Mr. Khaie and his family have denied any ties to the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) a Marxist Kurdish group and a rival to Mr. Massoud Barazani's KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party). In a brief analysis of the circumstances surrounding Mr. Khaie's arrest, *AINA* explains that “the predominantly Behdanani tribes of the KDP have conveniently used their blood feud with the Kurmanji tribes of the PKK to target Assyrian civilians literally caught in the crossfire. For its part, the PKK as it had similarly systematically done in southern Turkey, often enters an Assyrian village under cover of night and demands assistance by threat of arms. Fearing violent reprisals, unarmed Assyrian villagers are unable to refuse. Those villagers acquiescing to PKK demands then find themselves suffering violent

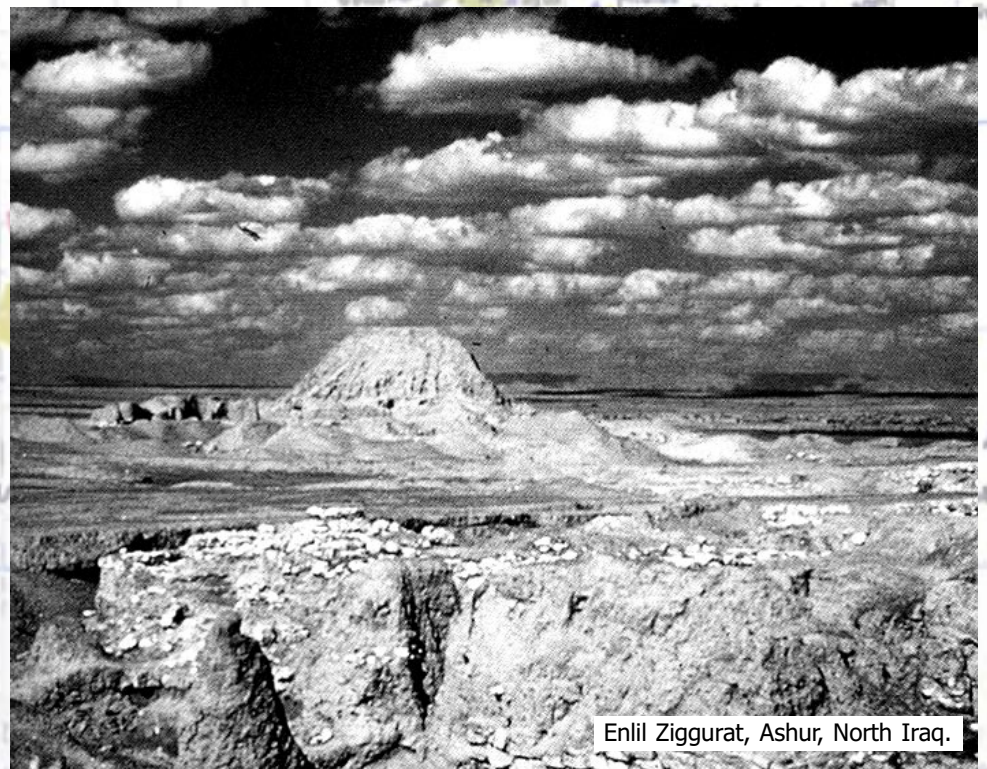
suffered. Mr. Khaie was to be married two weeks after his arrest.

## DAM THREATENS ANCIENT ASSYRIAN CITY OF ASHUR

Courtesy of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; written by David Nissman

France and Armenia will gather in Tehran, Iran for the first such Assyrian Games. The games will take place between July 28 and August 4.

Mr. Tamrazov Vasilevich, as the head of Armenia's *Assyrian 'Atur' Union*, explained that the Assyrian Women



Enlil Ziggurat, Ashur, North Iraq.

Basketball team from Arzni village and the Men Soccer Team from Verin Dvin's will be participating at these Assyrian games.

According to Tamrazov Vasilevich, about 7,000 Assyrians now live in Armenia.

## ZINDA & BETH MARDUTHO COLLABORATE ON SYRIAC DIGITAL LIBRARY

(ZINDA: New Jersey) On July 15, *Zinda Magazine* and *Beth Mardutho* [www.bethmardutho.org] launched a joint fundraising campaign for project *eBethArké: The Syriac Digital Library*. The project brings to the Internet around 3,000 out-of-copyright books, journal



not only to scholars working in this and the many related academic fields, but also to the wider public and above all, to people belonging to the different Churches of Syriac tradition."

Mr. Wilfred Alkhas, editor of *Zinda Magazine*, said during a recent interview, "Zinda Magazine will commence a large campaign during and after the Assyrian National Convention in San Jose to promote this important project to preserve the literary heritage of the Assyrian people. I urge all *Zinda* readers to support this collaboration in the future."

It is estimated that each book will cost \$U.S.250 to produce. This covers the cost of digitising, converting and processing files, turning the images into an

attention to the various states that had signed the Lausanne Treaty. The meeting, which ended at 4:00pm, was also attended by a number of Kurds living in Lausanne, who showed up to demonstrate their support.

"Historical injustice must be removed" Fikri Aygul, told the *Kurdish Observer* on behalf of the Planning Committee. He said, "The Lausanne Treaty had denied a number of people living in Mesopotamia and that the people must not accept a set of agreements reached in a chateau, as with this treaty."

Aygul also commented on the goals of the four-day march. "While our action was protesting the historical injustice of the Lausanne treaty, it was also pointing out that the articles concerning minorities, 37 through 45 of the Lausanne Treaty, have not been implemented. While opposing the Lausanne Treaty, we

# World News

articles, pictures, maps and audio recordings in what will be the largest electronic library in this field. *Beth Mardutho* has partnered with leading university libraries to get access to the material, including Brigham Young University, Brown University, Princeton Theological Seminary, The Catholic University of America, Harvard's Dumbarton Oaks, and others.

Using the latest in eBook and compression technology initially developed at AT&T Research Labs, *eBethArké* allows readers to access large volumes (such as Touma Oudo's 1,128-page *Simta d-Leshana Suryaya / Simto d-Leshono Suryoyo* dictionary, or the 3-volume 3,700-page colour *Hudra*) in a fraction of a second. Features include searching the texts of books (in the case of Latin-based texts), links from tables of contents and indices to pages, the ability to add readers' annotations, and zooming into and out of the text and pictures.

"To have all this material that is out of copyright collected together and made available in this way," commented Dr. Sebastian Brock, reader of Syriac and Aramaic at the University of Oxford, "would be an immensely valuable service,

eBook, performing OCR that allows searching the text, adding links from contents and indices to pages, and producing a web downloadable version of the eBook. To learn more about the project and how to contribute visit *Bethmardutho* at www.bethmardutho.org/eBethArke/Zinda/

## ASSYRIAN PROTESTERS DENOUNCE LAUSANNE

Reprinted from the *Kurdish Observer*; July 26

(ZINDA: Bern) 150 Assyrian-Syriacs who had been marching for four days to protest the Lausanne Treaty on its 78th anniversary ended their rally with a meeting at which they denounced the agreement.

The protesters who began their march from the Swiss capital of Bern, arrived in Lausanne last Tuesday. They met in front of the chateau in which the treaty was signed at 1:30 in the afternoon and held a protest meeting drawing attention to the suffering the treaty had brought the Assyrians.

The public and media showed great interest in the meeting, which called

also wanted to let it be known that we were opposed to every type of agreement from now on made in our name but without giving the people a voice and without paying attention to their rights. The fact that the Lausanne Treaty could be a reason for war and our people struggling even 78 years later shows the injustice of the Lausanne Treaty. That's why we are saying that this historical injustice must be removed."

Meanwhile, Fikri Aygul, who is also the chairman of the *Assyrian-Syriac Diplomacy Group*, said he had visited the embassies of the countries which signed the Lausanne Treaty and presented dossiers to them pointing out the tragedy which had been experienced by the Assyrian-Syriac people.

For *AINA's* full report visit www.aina.org/torture.htm

Courtesy of

**Zinda**  
magazine  
"Think Assyrian"

www.zindamagazine.com

# Natasha Brakhya

## an artist's



### ***The Hidden Prejudice***

resin and marble, 1993  
This abstract piece depicts a struggle between a married couple, the struggle against the hidden prejudices present in the Assyrian community as mixed-marriage couples fight not only to be accepted by Assyrians but also to remain connected to their community, language and culture.



### ***The Tree of Life and Death***

earthenware, 1995  
An artist's job is to get people to pause and think about the art and life. Here, a familiar ancient Assyrian theme depicts the state of today's environment. This modern tree of life and death shows a sickly and stunted tree half alive and half dying - one half is coloured brown, the other green. "This is my favourite piece," Mrs. Brakhya commented.



### ***Woman in Exile***

stoneware, 1996  
The clipped wings of the woman in this piece are an analogy of the artist's life itself. The woman is depicted in a helpless and powerless posture, having no way to change the situation. The only thing left for her to do is scream. An analogy of the plight of Assyrian women in general, it can also be read as a metaphor for the Assyrian people's situation in the world today.

T

he story of international artist Natasha Brakhya could rightly be called the story of the Assyrian people during the 20th century. In fact Natasha and her family were present during some of the most turbulent periods of our modern history.

Born in Lebanon, Mrs. Brakhya describes her childhood with a positive glow. "I was the daughter of a blessed family," she says. Her father, also a sculptor, was to have a profound influence on her life and career. "I inherited this gift from my father, my hero." Her father was also very open in allowing her the freedom to pursue her talents, when not influenced by local community pressure. This was in stark contrast to community attitudes that frowned upon a female artist, much less a female sculptor!

"In Lebanon I always felt as though I was doing something wrong," she explained. So she decided to keep her talent a secret and spent many hours working day and night on pieces that inspired her.

Openness was also evident in her other family members as her brother noticed her talent and decided to pay her way through an expensive foreign owned Art school in Lebanon. She was elated and spent a year discovering and refining her hidden talents.

When the Lebanese civil war broke out in 1975 she was forced to give up on art school and become a volunteer for the Red Cross, where she spent many long hours working to ship in medicines to sick and isolated Assyrian communities. It was during this time that her hidden talents were noticed by the Red Cross. Thirty-five of her pieces of artwork were requested by the Red Cross, which they were to later sell in France in order to raise funds for relief work. It was then, at the height of the Lebanese civil war, that tragedy struck Mrs. Brakhya's family, yet again. "My father, the last survivor of his family [that was killed during the Assyrian Genocide of WW1] was killed on 3rd August, 1989. During the civil war

he remained stateless till the day he was killed."

*Since losing our homeland, my family has been made refugees four times and lost family members:* these are the words introducing Mrs. Brakhya's painting of what appears to be herself in Lebanon. The oil on paper piece is titled *Escaping from Hell* and depicts a young female fleeing into a night while a destroyed church is evident in the background.

She fled Lebanon and arrived in Australia in 1983. "My family's experience is typical of the experience of all Assyrian refugees, stateless and wandering around the world seeking refuge."

Having arrived in Australia she was overwhelmed by an acute sense of loss and isolation. "I felt very, very lonely," she explained softly. After successfully taking part in an art exhibition in which she sold three pieces, she enrolled in the *Victorian College of Arts*, where she studied further and developed her talent for another five years.

According to Mrs. Brakhya, "art is comparable to having something in you that you can't get rid of." As for her medium of art, "sculpting is a combination of enjoyment and struggle."

Also influenced by our ancient sculptors Mrs. Brakhya proudly states, "If it weren't for our ancient sculptures no-one would know who we are today. They show how advanced our level of civilization had become."

In 1998 she was elected president of the Lebanese Art exchange group, from where she went on to organise the highly successful *Awakenings* exhibition (see *Nakosha* 8, 1998). The Lebanese community successfully conducted this exhibition, along with another fourteen.

They say that human tragedy and suffering have been catalysts for some of the most inspiring and famous works of art ever produced. It is with this thought that some of the most memorable pieces of Mrs. Brakhya's career are highlighted on this page, *below*. These works, far from possessing just aesthetic beauty, are also the turbulent pages of Mrs. Brakhya's life. ■

David Chibo

# s journey



**Bust of Khalil Gibran**

life-sized bronze bust, 1998  
Although she had never met him before, Mrs. Brakhya has always been a great admirer of the famous Lebanese born Assyrian poet. The work is based on a photo, and she has managed to capture the inner nature of Gibran after extensive reading of his works and poetry.



**Bust of Louis Fleyful**

life-sized bronze bust, 2000  
The former Lebanese ambassador, currently living in Australia, personally commissioned this bust of himself. Based on pictures and after conducting numerous meetings with the ambassador, she managed to capture his essence, portraying him in a generous and dignified pose.



**Unity and the Superpower**

stoneware, 2000  
Those who appear to be working for unity and peace in the world may actually have hidden agendas, and are the same people responsible for the world's numerous wars. The key symbolises those who are "pulling the strings."

# Advertising with Nakosha

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# 1000

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# 2000

Readership:

# 6,500

Worldwide



*Nakosha* is one of the longest running Assyrian publications. It is a monthly magazine that has been produced consistently for almost four years. Its main readership is Assyrians, aged between 13 and 35; *Nakosha's* success at reaching this wide audience lies in its fresh approach to issues affecting Assyrians – issues as diverse as contemporary Assyrians themselves and the societies they live in.

For an advertising information pack, contact *Nakosha* on 0409 144 877, or via email [Nakosha@hotmail.com](mailto:Nakosha@hotmail.com).

## letter to the Editor

*From p2*

in the last 100 years than the Christian West, which has shown in that time a propensity for using our "common" religion against us when it suits their purposes, then dumping us when it no longer needs us.

The irony in all this is that in our eagerness to dredge up all the atrocities of the last 1000 years, we stand a good chance of so antagonizing the Moslem world today, especially as we act the part of apologists for all Christian atrocities committed in that time against Moslems...when they weren't busy eating each other alive...we will succeed only in making life even more precarious for the few of our Christian Assyrians hoping desperately that we'll go away and leave them to try to get along with their neighbours and possibly find a new way to exist in peace. When more stability comes to that region, the Moslems may just

vent their frustration against the Christians of Iraq, as they can't hope to get at anyone else.

Can it be that all the violent and tear-jerking rhetoric has as its unstated purpose the ruin for any chance of peace in Iraq and of a more friendly and accommodating existence between Christians and Muslims? Do they seek to sow discord and doubt and suspicion and hatred between Moslem and Christian, and among those of us trying to send aid...do they see in that the chance that the Christian West might finally make good on that "promise" it never made...to protect its co-religionists? How many of our super patriots say that it was always better that we died rather than becoming Moslem, for in that way the few who managed to survive to die another day, kept the "Assyrian" identity alive, meaning of course the Christian Assyrian identity alive for they accept no other religion as valid for any Assyrian. If their feelings in this matter are so strong as to approve of the murder of countless Assyrians who had the misfortune of being born Christian...often by those who had the equal misfortune to be born Islamic...then are these "fanatics" content to see Iraq destroyed to "protect" the Christian Assyrian

Heritage? If Christianity is to "lose" the MidEast, as it has been ever since the Moslems first threw the Crusaders out, would these types of "dedicated" Assyrian Christians just as soon see the entire identity, country and ALL the people, destroyed? And to that end, if they sense our people there are in desperate need, would they rather see them driven completely under, transformed into martyrs one day, fit to weep over, rather than accept any accommodation which would allow a fraction of them to survive? This is the impression I get at least, when I see no mention of Assyrians tragically killed by Christians, see those same murderous Christians exonerated and even applauded by us, because for every one of "us" they kill, they get 200 of "them". It is a depressing thought, therefore I was so pleased to see you take a more even-handed approach, one which hopefully will not add to the difficulties our people face in Iraq and everywhere else in the Mideast where they are far outnumbered by Moslems, and will, I am afraid, be abandoned once more when the West has no need of them.... again.

Sincerely,  
Fred Parhad  
California





# Have you ever given up on something you believed in?

**A** **M/47/U.S.A., California, Pasadena** - This is a tough question to answer. If you mean morals and ethics definitely no. But lately I've been disappointed in our religious leaders and our churches who preach one thing do the exact opposite and rationalize it as a "mystery". Therefore I've stopped financial support of our religious institutions until such time that they can prove themselves worthy of my trust. When our people realize that "we the people" are the church and not the clergy, then we can work together toward real unity. When our people realize that we must hold them responsible for their mistakes, then we can rid our nation of its problems.

**M/32/Australia, Sydney (Fairfield)** - Not yet...No!

**M/23/U.S.A, Los Angeles** - I believe in Assyrianism, and I will never give up on my Assyrian heritage and culture. Aturaya hal abad.

**M/37/U.S.A. San Jose** - Yes, but only when I stopped believing in it.

**M/28/Modesto, CA** - No.

**M/52/Nicosia/Cyprus** - Never, whatever the cost may be!

**M/26/Södertälje/Sweden** - Well, I am sorry but this wasn't a good question. The answers can't be easy to read; no I will never give up my love to my nation.

**F/32/Toronto/Canada** - Yes, and No....you have to be more specific...! I think there are different kinds of beliefs. One is when you believe in certain people...and then end up changing your mind. Second are other beliefs that you don't, no matter what...!!

**M/33/England, London** - Not yet!

**M/30/Australia** - Lots of times... life is all about compromises, if we didn't give up on things we believed in SOMETIMES, we'd be too exhausted to get anything done!

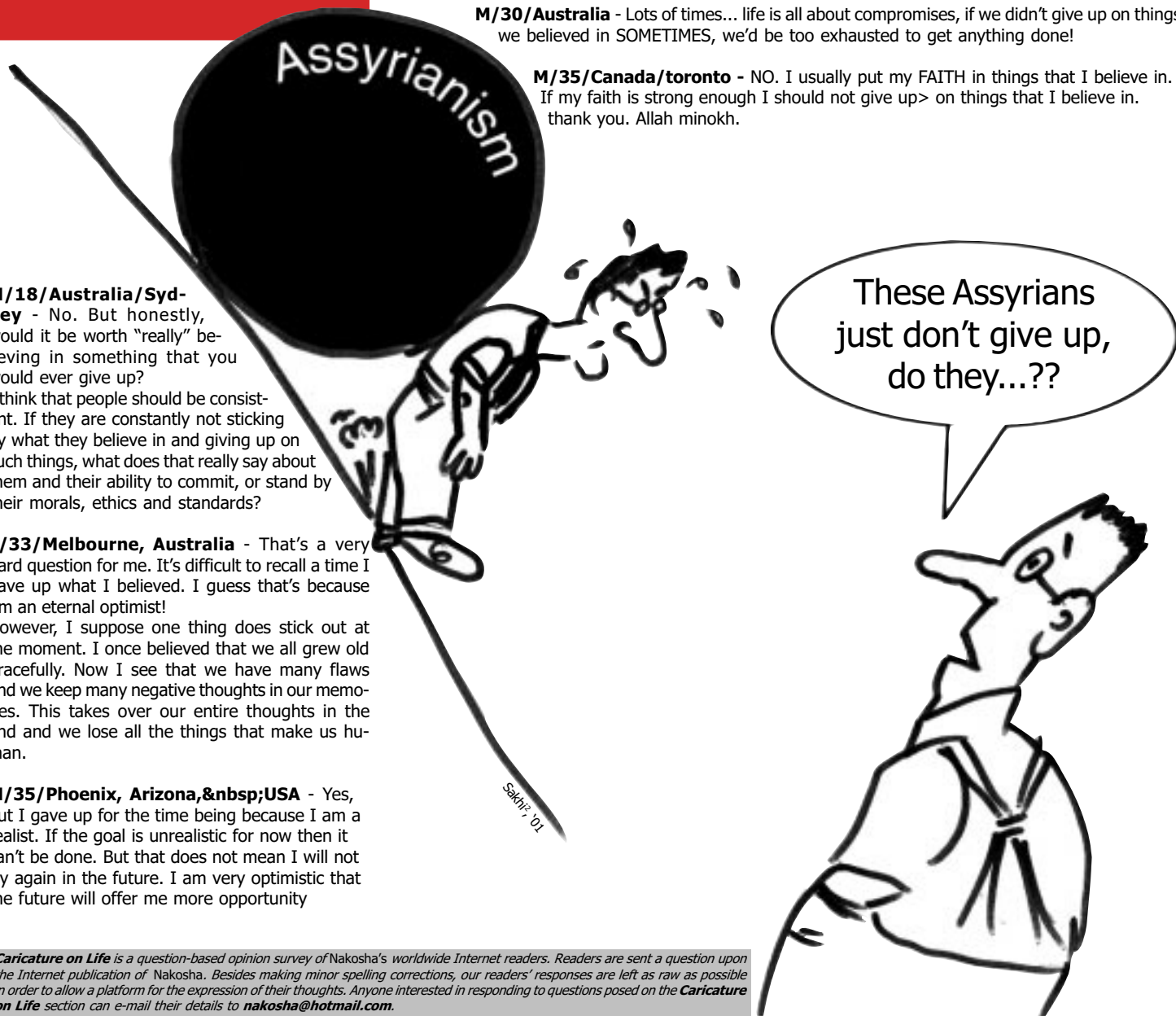
**M/35/Canada/toronto** - NO. I usually put my FAITH in things that I believe in. If my faith is strong enough I should not give up> on things that I believe in. thank you. Allah minokh.

**M/18/Australia/Sydney** - No. But honestly, would it be worth "really" believing in something that you would ever give up?  
I think that people should be consistent. If they are constantly not sticking by what they believe in and giving up on such things, what does that really say about them and their ability to commit, or stand by their morals, ethics and standards?

**F/33/Melbourne, Australia** - That's a very hard question for me. It's difficult to recall a time I gave up what I believed. I guess that's because I'm an eternal optimist!  
However, I suppose one thing does stick out at the moment. I once believed that we all grew old gracefully. Now I see that we have many flaws and we keep many negative thoughts in our memories. This takes over our entire thoughts in the end and we lose all the things that make us human.

**M/35/Phoenix, Arizona, & USA** - Yes, but I gave up for the time being because I am a realist. If the goal is unrealistic for now then it can't be done. But that does not mean I will not try again in the future. I am very optimistic that the future will offer me more opportunity

*Caricature on Life is a question-based opinion survey of Nakosha's worldwide Internet readers. Readers are sent a question upon the Internet publication of Nakosha. Besides making minor spelling corrections, our readers' responses are left as raw as possible in order to allow a platform for the expression of their thoughts. Anyone interested in responding to questions posed on the Caricature on Life section can e-mail their details to [nakosha@hotmail.com](mailto:nakosha@hotmail.com).*



**"Almost every single Assyrian is thinking of leaving Baghdad to find a better life in the West."**

Baghdadi Assyrian, 2001.



*1. Camp al'Arman – literally "Armenian (i.e. Christian) camp": between the '50s and '70s, the area was exclusively Assyrian; large numbers have left, selling their properties to Arabs.*

**Where did the Baghdadi Chaldo-Assyrians come from?**

While Chaldo-Assyrians have been present in Baghdad for many years, during the '50s and '60s, groups of Chaldo-Assyrians migrated to Baghdad from Habanea (1) and the North of Iraq (2) and began to settle in large numbers there, where they were recognised as second class citizens.

- (1)- The Assyrian Levies were part of the British Army during the period 1914-1954, a time when Iraq was under a British mandate; Habanea was one of the main camp sites.
- (2)- In 1961, the Kurdish Revolution caused large numbers of Assyrians to flee from the North of Iraq to Baghdad, in order to avoid being caught in the cross-fire of Kurdish-Iraqi hostilities.



*After leaving Habanea, Dawrah was the main area where Assyrians settled. Even today, thousands of Assyrians still remain there.*

*Space has not permitted the inclusion of many suburbs in Baghdad that also have a high proportion of Assyrians.*

# Assyrians In The East

The series is opened by perhaps the most challenging city of all – Baghdad. Once a “city of peace”, Baghdad has now sadly become synonymous with war and the destructive economic sanctions. Effectively cut-out from the rest of the world – contact by mail, electronic or otherwise, is virtually impossible – stories about life there come through to us piecemeal. Here *Fraydon Heskeli* gives a semi-personal account of life in this troubled Assyrian neighbourhood.

# BAGHDAD

**I**n 762, Arabs founded a new capital on the West bank of the Tigris, calling it *Madinat as-Salam* – “the City of Peace.” That such a name was once given to modern-day Baghdad now appears ironic. Baghdad changed drastically from that city of peace when Saddam Hussein came to power in 1979, bringing with him plans to make Iraqis tools for his “City of Wars,” wars spanning two decades – beginning with the Iraq-Iran war in 1980 and plunging Iraq back into the darkness of over a decade of economic sanctions with the Gulf War in 1990.

While the people of Baghdad, no matter what their ethnicity, are suffering from the hardship of these wars, Chaldo-Assyrians in particular are suffering the most, politically, economically and from human rights abuses. The depth of the problem becomes obvious when talking to those recently arrived from Baghdad. The first thing you’d notice if you were to visit Baghdad, we are told, is the obvious sadness and depression on the faces of the city’s people. Just last month, a friend visited Melbourne from Baghdad, saying, “That Assyrian people are so happy here in Melbourne... it’s something I’m not used to, it’s something you just wouldn’t see in Baghdad.”

I was born in 1976 – I was only four when the Iraq-Iran war broke out, and remembering back to my childhood, I can think of no period

when there was no war; my earliest memories are those of war. At school, instead of child-like songs about flowers or stories about fairies, we were taught war songs. In August 1988 the Iraq-Iran war ended, with almost every Assyrian family having lost one of their sons; I personally lost my maternal uncle, my 22-year-old first cousin and a neighbour, who practically grew up in the same house with me: he was only twenty.

These losses were repeated thousands of times over – Assyrians lost 40,000 of their young

people during these devastating eight years. When the war eventually ended in 1988, we had peace at last – it was like coming up for air, we just couldn’t believe it, and for the younger generation who had been born to the war, it strangely felt even more special. But this feeling was to last for only a very short time – Iraq was thrust into war again when Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990.

The 16<sup>th</sup> of February is a day I remember well – I was awoken at 2:30 am by the sounds of the first bombs dropping on Baghdad by the U.S. and their allies. For 40 days this went on, until the city’s infrastructure was completely flattened.

Today, the effect of these sanctions is felt everywhere. There are disturbing stories of Assyrians begging in the streets of Baghdad,

families who have sold everything in their house just to be able to buy food. These depressing stories go on and on.

“Almost every single Assyrian is thinking of leaving Baghdad to find a better life in the West,” an Assyrian friend recently arrived from Baghdad told me. This, along with the fact that proportionately more males than females are departing from Baghdad – leaving Assyrian girls little choice but to inter-marry amongst Muslim Arabs – is enough to guarantee that unless things change, there will

no longer be an Assyrian presence in Baghdad within 50 years. This is a

result of the “civilised”, invisible genocide by the U.S.-led U.N. sanctions against the Chaldo-Assyrians, a people literally caught in the middle of America’s military might and Hussein’s hallucinations.

For Assyrians in Baghdad, the Gulf War was a turning point – more than one-third of the Chaldo-Assyrian population has left Baghdad as a direct result of the suffocating effects of the sanctions. Prior to 1990, church statistics estimated a Chaldo-Assyrian population of one million – today, that figure is less than half a million. The future of those who remain – and therefore the future of a continuing Assyrian presence – lies in a delicate balance, at the mercy of the U.S. and Hussein’s regime. ■

*Fraydon Heskeli, with Sennacherib Daniel*

# reach for the sky

So they say you can't keep a good man down. Well in that case 23-year old Assyrian tennis champ Johnny Safaro must be a very good man indeed. If a serious sporting injury and a subsequent eight months away from the courts weren't enough to keep this guy down, then nothing ever will. It's now only three months since returning to the tennis court, and Johnny is leaner and hungrier than before - if that were possible!

And to think that this Pennant-level player's earliest tennis experiences were "bashing tennis balls" around with friends at eight years of age. Still, you've got to start somewhere. The game caught his fancy so much, he had to be around tennis all the time. He took any chance to do just that: at around the age of ten he was ball-boy for the tennis elite at the *Melbourne Tennis Centre (MTC)*, retrieving balls for the likes of Gabriella Sabatini (his photo album reminds you of a who's who of tennis fame). But all this wasn't just about fetching balls - these early days were where Johnny could analyse at close range the top tennis players' moves, later using them to shape his own game.

At thirteen, he was training at the *National Tennis Centre*, went on to the *Royal Park Tennis Club*, and has now been with the *Coburg Tennis Club* for the last three years, at a training and competition level. In his early teens Johnny was at the highest level a junior can play - Grade A. He is now at Pennant level, Grade 2. "My ambition

over the next year," Johnny told *Nakosha*, "is to be in the world's top 500...." For Johnny, tennis is as much a mind game as a physical one - his strategy is carefully planned out, from how and where he'll play, to where he wants to be in the future. There is no wishful thinking or bragging.

And on the tennis court, Johnny was no talk and all action! "I love volleys and playing at the net," he enthused. Watching him play, it was not hard to believe.

Standing around six feet tall, with piercing green eyes and dashing good looks, he gives the phrase "*gabara Atourayd'*" a new meaning. I felt sorry for his opponent, who at times had to jump to avoid the 100 mile-an-hour ball to save himself from getting hurt. His game was consistently strong at the net, and his serves were scary - lightning fast, he must have aces about seven serves in the two set match I watched.

The mental side of tennis is something Johnny has sharpened over the years - staying focussed during the most stressful and difficult times of the game is a learned skill, he tells us. It sounded almost like martial arts - it doesn't matter how big or strong you are, he argues, the mind has to be strengthened first. This becomes especially true when falling behind in a game - staying mentally focussed at this stage can be the most difficult, and is what separates an amateur from a pro. He models his game on the Sampras and Aghassis of the tennis world - staying

focussed, blocking everything out and showing no emotions. "If you lose a point, don't worry, move on and work on the next point. You've got to play tennis in your mind first," Johnny reveals. "I think to myself I'm going to hit the ball down the line... and it happens."

Currently in his second year of a three-year degree in web design

at the *Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology*, the mental focus learned in tennis applies well to Johnny's life outside the sport. Apart from working in this computer field, Johnny also hopes to one day run tennis tournaments.

For up-and-coming players, Johnny suggests, coaching is needed early on, but not in a group setting - personal lessons may be more expensive, but are definitely worthwhile. Who knows, maybe one day these budding Assyrian tennis champs will be fetching tennis balls for Johnny when he represents us at the *MTC*! ■

*Sennacherib Daniel*

