



# NINEVEH

CULTURAL | EDUCATIONAL | SOCIAL



# CONTENTS

December 2021

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Assyrian Foundation of America  
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**“The joy that you give to others is the joy that comes back to you.”**

*- John Greenleaf Whittier, American Poet and Abolitionist*

As 2021 nears its end, and the new year hides around the corner, we look back with gratitude, knowing now more than ever that each new year of life is a gift which should be cherished. This feeling of gratefulness, in turn, reminds us of just how precious a gift is to those who are in need.

Year in and year out, the Assyrian Foundation of America (AFA) uses your generous donations to bring joy and assistance to Assyrians in need and those working to preserve our unique heritage. The details of the projects and individuals sponsored this year will appear in an upcoming article in our publication Nineveh Magazine. However, a brief summary of the many worthy projects is provided below:

- Funds to help repair lighting destroyed in the bombing of northern Assyrian villages
- Classroom renovation for an Assyrian sewing school in Armenia
- Four scholarships for students in Turkey, Canada, and the U.S. working toward advanced degrees
- Funds to digitize & preserve Assyrian letters written during the turn of the last century
- Purchase of a new multi-function printer for the Assyrian Children’s School of Language & Culture in Tbilisi
- Funds for the publication of a book of Assyrian poetry in Sweden.
- Sponsorship of a PhD project on the Assyrian genocide at the University of Texas
- Grant to Shamiram Media for promoting Assyrian culture and education
- Grant to the non-profit organization Etuti for English language and computer training for youth in Iraq
- Financial contribution for the recording of the winning song of an Assyrian singing competition
- Purchase of fifty copies of the new book, “*The Betrayal of the Powerless*”

Since 1964, the Assyrian Foundation of America has remained steadfast in its commitment to preserving Assyrian language, culture, heritage and history through educational endowment, humanitarian contributions, and cultural promotion. Yet, none of these endeavors would be possible without the support of our cherished members and friends. We ask for your continued support this year so that, together, we can continue to preserve our beautiful Assyrian culture, language, and heritage.

You can donate online [www.assyrianfoundation.org](http://www.assyrianfoundation.org) OR use the enclosed envelope!

***Wishing you and your families a Merry Christmas and a Happy and Healthy New Year!***

*- Assyrian Foundation of America*

“The Assyrian Foundation of America is tax exempt, non-profit organization under section 501c (3)”

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Articles submitted for publication will be selected by the editorial staff on the basis of their relative merit to Assyrian literature, history, and current events.

Opinions expressed in NINEVEH are those of the respective authors and not necessarily those of NINEVEH or the Assyrian Foundation of America.

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Front Cover: His Holiness Mar Awa Royel III on his first visit back in USA October 2021



## a conversation with Narsai David

### Part II

by Elizabeth Mickaily-Huber, Ph.D.

*On the morning of June 15, 2021, I had the pleasure and honor of interviewing Mr. Narsai David, an old family friend who also happens to be a world-renowned businessman, radio and television personality, and food connoisseur long before fashionable cable food channels were a thing. In fact, when I was a kid, I remember Narsai and his cousin Sam coming to visit my family after Sunday church service in San Francisco. They were particularly close to my grandmother Elishua. Indeed, the David cousins shared the cultural bond with my grandmother of having origins in Mar Bishu, a small village in the Hakkiari mountains of Turkey.*

*Upon speaking with Narsai, I was immediately struck by his cheerful demeanor and his youthful nature. Although 84 years young, Narsai doesn't look a day over 65. He is full of life, is sharp as a nail, and charmingly young at heart. He was sporting his signature bowtie on a crisp white shirt. Talking with him was like being transported back in time to the America of the 1950's. Americana at its best! His love of cooking was obvious in how his eyes would light up when he spoke of his renowned restaurant and the delicious recipes served therein. Although we started our discussion in interview format, it became quickly clear to me that Narsai didn't need me to prompt him with questions. He was happy to share his rich and interesting life experiences with me. What follows is the second portion of the many interesting things that Narsai told me. Paragraphs italicized below correspond to my thoughts, clarifications, and interjections.*

My wife and I also have a vineyard in the Napa Valley. We make a small amount of wine and sell grapes. Then there's the non-profit world and that could take another couple of hours, if you're interested. *"Of course, I'm interested!" I responded, completely taken in by his fascinating life stories. He continued...* The Assyrian Aid Society (AAS) was started by Lincoln Malik in 1991, I believe, and Youel Baaba was named as the first President. That didn't quite work out so Lincoln approached me, along with a couple of other people, and asked if I would help them. I became president in 1992, and served until... gosh, I can't really remember what year I retired because you never really retire from the AAS. I pay my monthly contributions and provide the AAS with an office alongside mine in Berkeley.

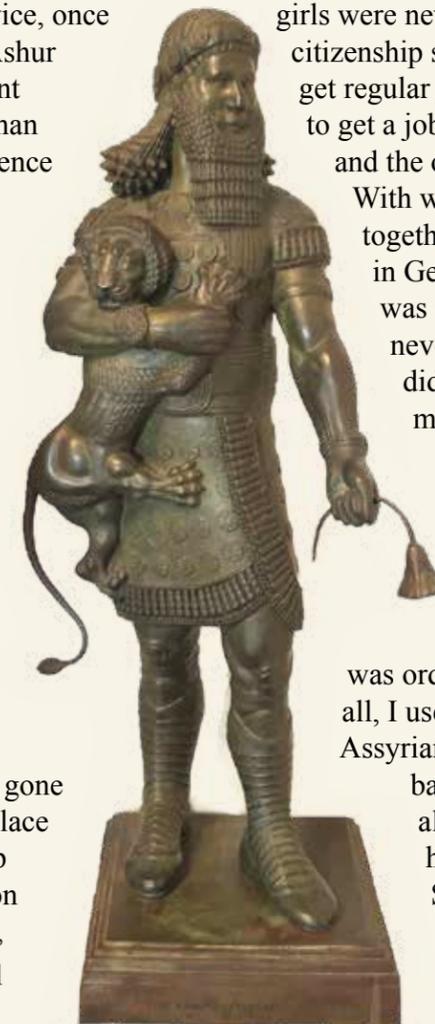
I've been to the Middle East twice, once as President of the AAS. I went with Ashur Yoseph, who succeeded me as President when I did retire, and I became Chairman of the Board. That was quite an experience for me. I will never forget sitting in a classroom in Garbia and seeing these young kids who were studying physics, chemistry and mathematics, all in Assyrian! I mean, it was an emotional thing for me to see. I could show you a soccer ball they sent to me. They started a football (*soccer*) event, named the Narsai David Conference, and each person in the winning team signed his name on the soccer ball. It's encased in a plastic box. I have it mounted [on the wall] along with some statues and other wonderful pieces.

Many years before that, in 1974, I had gone on my own to find my mother's birth place – Ada in Urmia (Iran). I wanted to stop in Baghdad because we had relatives on my father's side who were living there, but I couldn't get a visa to get into Iraq because some American writer had

written some disparaging comments about Saddam and nothing could move that. So, I landed in Beirut (Lebanon). That Sunday I went to the Assyrian church there and after the church service, as I was standing outside talking to a group of men, I asked if any one of them could tell me where I could find Shawil *broona d'Leshkiri*. The group suddenly went silent. One guy looked up and said, "Where are you from? Are you from Baghdad?" I said, "No, I'm from America." And he said "Narsai?" Gosh this is emotional for me again... *I could see he was moved, as the tears welled up in his usually warm and smiling face.* I was just blown out of my mind. Shawil *broona d'Leshkiri*, who I had never met, was standing in front of me. Although I had never met him before, as a 12 year old kid, I used to hand write letters to him on behalf of my father. He had two daughters and a son. The

girls were never able to get any kind of normal citizenship so they couldn't go to school or get regular jobs. The one daughter was able to get a job working for a Catholic church and the other one worked as a maid. With whatever money they could put together, he had sent his son to school in Germany. Shawil's father, Leshkiri, was my father's first cousin. So I never got to Iraq on that trip, but I did go on to Urmia and found my mother's little village of Ada.

Long before the Assyrian Aid Society, I had been active in the Church of the East. Gosh, I couldn't have been more than 14 or 15 when I was ordained as *Qarouya*. Well, first of all, I used to read the Bible in church in Assyrian on Sundays. My father, dating back to my childhood in Chicago, always took me to church with him on Holy Days. For regular Sundays, my brothers and I went to the Chicago Gospel Tabernacle for Sunday school, which was just a couple of blocks away





from our home. But if it was a Holy Day, he would take me with him. He taught me how to read Assyrian. He insisted we speak Assyrian at home. He said, "You're going to learn English outside better than you'll ever learn it from me, but at home, it's Assyrian!" So by the time we got to Turlock, I was ordained as *Qarouya*, which is like an altar boy. I would read the Old Testament in Assyrian. Then I became *Hopa d'Yaqna*, which is a subdeacon.

Both times I was ordained by Mar [Eshai] Shimun. I was finally ordained a *Shamasha* (deacon), but interestingly enough, not by Mar Shimun because he was consecrating Mar Toma to be the Metropolitan of India. Once he consecrated Mar Toma, then Mar Toma ordained a group of several deacons, *Shamashe*, of which I was one.

In the San Francisco Church of the East, Mar Narsai Parish, Mar Shimun had given dispensation to the senior Deacon, who was from the old country and read the Bible fluently, of course, to read the epistles. Then, he would give the sermon one week in Assyrian, and I would give it the following week in English. I used go to the Pacific School of Religion up on Holy Hill in Berkeley and used their library for materials.

Back in the days when I was working as a Soda Jerk at Hy's Drive-In, there were these guys who would stop in, but later in the day, it was always women who came in to have a late lunch. They got the biggest kick out of watching us. We were just having fun, tossing a scoop of ice cream up in the air and catching it in the can: one, two, three! It was like we were putting on a show and we had fun with it. But in the earlier hours, before lunch, there was a man who would come in from Judson Pacific Murphy Steel Company. It was a company in Emeryville that made reinforcing rod out of melted down car bodies. It was a huge foundry.

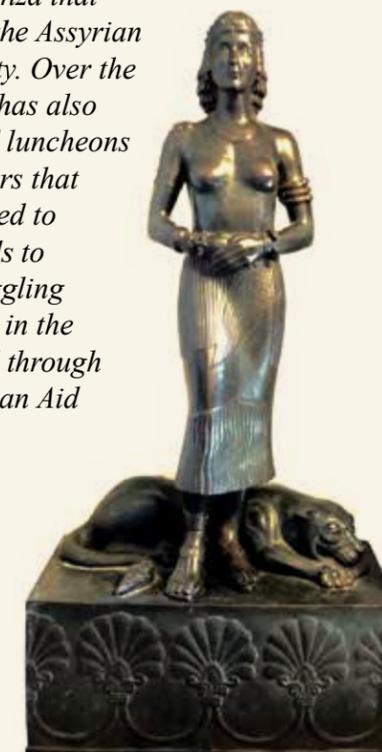


The church group had just bought this property out in the Sunset District of San Francisco, a home, to convert into a church upstairs and a social hall downstairs. That meant it was necessary to pour a concrete slab. This man donated the rebar for that job, and he introduced us to a concrete contractor who made a special arrangement for us on the concrete as well. So to that degree, I was involved with the church just as a college kid who happened to connect with these people and I went on to become more involved with the church quite deeply. *(The church of which Narsai spoke is a little Assyrian church still in existence in the Sunset district of San Francisco called Mar Narsai Parish. It's a church that I hold near and dear to my heart, as it was in that little church where I was baptized, later married, and where my two sons were baptized.)*

Another story about those days... my cousin Sam, he knew your family quite well. I'll never forget how we'd often go out for a Sunday drive after church. *Narsai chuckled and I could see him drift, once again, into his sweet memories of the past.* Sam, myself, and as many of the [d'Mar Shimun] sisters as we could pile into the back seat, would go out for Sunday drives following church. One time, we were down near Half Moon Bay, which is the artichoke capital of the world. We stopped and bought some artichokes, and the girls taught me how they used to eat them raw back in Cyprus. I was dumbfounded. Here we are driving

down the road, peeling off the leaves, putting them between our teeth and pulling off the flesh of the artichokes, as they used to do back in Cyprus. Even though it's not cooked, that tender part snaps right off. We threw the leaves out the window, but I guess it was ok because they are biodegradable, so we didn't feel too guilty. It's funny how little flashes of memories come back sometimes. Afterward, we'd come back to their house and have Sunday lunch.

*Narsai continued by telling me about how much he appreciates art. Over the years, he collected both statues and paintings created by Assyrian artists, such as Fred Parhad whose statue of King Ashurbanipal overlooks San Francisco's Main Library at Civic Center: the first Assyrian public monument anywhere in the world in the last 2500 years! The art work that you see interspersed within this article is all attributed to Parhad ([www.fredparhad.com](http://www.fredparhad.com)). Moreover, Narsai's philanthropy is well known. Every year, he contributes to the organization of Mesopotamian Night, a music-filled Assyrian extravaganza that supports the Assyrian Aid Society. Over the years, he has also organized luncheons and dinners that have helped to raise funds to help struggling Assyrians in the homeland through the Assyrian Aid Society.*





Room of Reliefs  
Photo Credit: John Bentham Courtesy of the artist and Wellin Museum of Art

## THE ART OF MICHAEL RAKOWITZ

By Annie Elias

Perhaps it was kismet that brought Chicago artist Michael Rakowitz and Nineveh Magazine together. At the same moment that AFA President Sargon Shabbas was lamenting the vast collection of old Nineveh Magazines overtaking the storage unit in Berkeley, California and wondering what to do with them all, Michael Rakowitz had reached out to the Ashurbanipal Library in Chicago asking if they had any Assyrian language publications to spare. He needed them, he said, for his paper mache sculptures. Librarian Esther Lang connected with the Nineveh Magazine editors. Within a few months, a group of AFA members had lovingly sifted through piles of magazines dating back decades, mailing out 36 boxes containing thousands of old Nineveh Magazines, to artist Michael Rakowitz in Chicago.

Rakowitz, of Iraqi-Jewish descent, had been engaged, since 2006, in an art project entitled, “The invisible enemy should not exist.” The project, which Michael describes as a lifelong endeavor, takes its name from “the processional that ran through the ancient Ishtar Gate.” His goal is to reconstruct, or “reappear,” to use

his word, the “seven thousand artefacts looted from the National Museum of Iraq in April 2003 during the Iraq War...and its aftermath, mostly by ISIS.” These looted and destroyed ancient objects that had been “disappeared” would be made visible, reconstructed, or “reappeared” as sculptures created by Michael and a group of assistants, by way of painstaking research based on documents and photographs from the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago. The materials for these sculptures? The discarded objects from the diaspora that hold the memories, culture, language, even smells and tastes of home, such as “the wrappers of date cookies and cans of date syrup...local Arabic newspapers--moments of cultural visibility found in cities across the U.S.”

Perhaps the most prominent of Michael’s reconstructions is the towering, massive Assyrian Lamassu that was installed on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, London, in 2018. Sharing the Square with Admiral Nelson’s statue, the commissioned, monumental sculpture was based on the ancient Assyrian figure that once guarded the gates of Nineveh and was destroyed by ISIS in 2015. The sculpture



The invisible enemy should not exist Room H, Northwest Palace of Nimrud  
Photo Credit: Robert Chase Heishman, Courtesy of the Artist

is clad with over 10,000 empty cans of Iraqi date syrup.

As Michael writes in the introduction to his cookbook, *A House with a Date Palm will Never Starve*, “the cycle of materials” he uses in his art pieces, “their provenance and their aura is important. While the bronze elements of Nelson’s Column are made from [salvaged] cannons... the salvage of date syrup cans makes present the human, economic, and ecological disasters” caused by wars. Michael calls his Lamassu an “apparition” that “haunts” Trafalgar Square “at a time when we are witnessing a massive migration of peoples fleeing Iraq and Syria.” The work is a “placeholder for the human lives that cannot be reconstructed, that are still seeking sanctuary.” The Lamassu made of date syrup cans stands guard over “Iraq’s past and present, hoping to return in the future.”

In the first iteration of the project to reconstruct the lost art of the National Museum of Iraq, Michael worked closely with Dr. Donny George Youkhanna, an Assyrian and the former General Director of the Museum. Michael, like most people who have met Dr. George, adored him. “He was a wonderful, wonderful person. He was like Elvis! I went to see him give a talk at Northwestern for this Assyrian lecture that Northwestern does every year. And every Assyrian in Chicago was packed into this building in Evanston, listening to him speak.”

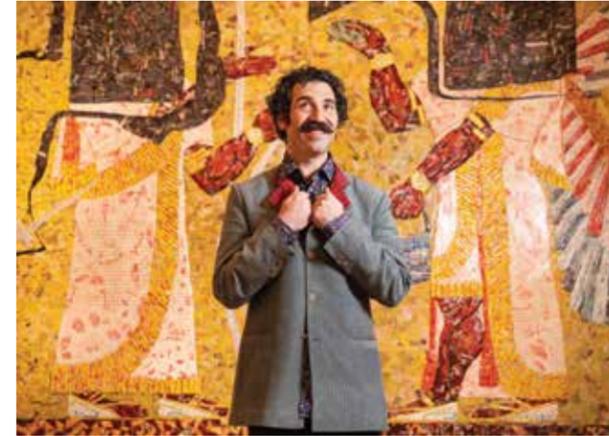
Dr. George came to the U.S., escaping threats from insurgents to himself and his family, just after Michael’s exhibit in New York opened, displaying sculptures of the lost works from the museum Dr. George had to leave behind. More than anyone, Dr. George had the most intimate knowledge and experience of those specific,

ancient pieces and their curation in the Iraq Museum. As Michael describes, “He went to see the exhibition in New York. I was living in Chicago. And my gallerist sent me these pictures of him and said, ‘he’s coming in every day! And he’s rearranged all the objects on the table according to how they should be. And he’s staying and giving tours of the objects to people coming into the gallery,’ in the same way that he would have given a tour in his museum in Baghdad. And I spoke with him about it on the phone and he said, ‘you know, it really moved me.’ He said, ‘you’ve made these things out of a material that is not the material they are made out of at all, you know, and you’ve used color. And it’s true that they were painted in the past, in antiquity. But,’ he said, ‘what you did was you got the size right.’ He said, ‘you’ve made the aura appear. It felt like they were in the room with me again.’ And he said something that ended up being incredibly sad, he said, ‘this is as close as I’m ever getting to these objects again.’ And, of course, he never made it back to Iraq. So, since I started that project, every iteration has been dedicated to Dr. George.”

Like all of Michael’s artistic choices, his use of color is thoughtfully considered. “I always try to make sure I’m leaving space for the joy as well [as the nostalgia]. That’s where the color comes in. I work with a studio team that’s comprised of young artists here in Chicago and they’re amazing when it comes to working with me on the color. We talk about these objects [that were originally] polychrome. And by the time they come out of the ground in the mid-19th century and 20th century they’re monochrome. When I reappear these pieces it’s almost like someone whose color is returning to their face, like the blood is running through the veins again.”



4th Plinth Michael Rakowitz 2018  
 Photo credit: Caroline Teo and Gautier DeBlonde  
 Courtesy of the Mayor of London



Michael Rakowitz and his art  
 Courtesy of the Artist and Whitechapel Gallery  
 Photo Credit: John Nguyen/PA Wire



Dr. Donny George with Michael Rakowitz at art opening  
 Courtesy of the Artist



Dr. Donny George with art objects  
 Courtesy of the Artist

Michael explains further about the dual reaction of nostalgia in the face of separation and loss and joy in coming together over the artwork. In 2019 Michael and his team were commissioned to reappear room G, a banquet hall, from the northwest Nimrud Palace and install the entire room in Malmö Kontshall, Sweden. "And when we reappear the room we're reappearing all the reliefs that ISIS destroyed but we're also reappearing all the gaps in between to show which ones were taken by the excavators and sent to the West. And so it puts the viewer into the position of someone who might have been in the palace before ISIS destroyed it. All those people who grew up living beside those sites along the Nineveh Plains, whether they were Assyrian or whatever else, they also had to look at the gaps that were left behind in their history. It was already fragmented.

When I agreed to do the piece in Malmö, Sweden I didn't realize there was a considerable Iraqi population, an Assyrian population there. And when I opened the show the Iraqi Cultural Association took over. And suddenly these people who were guests in this country became the hosts of the exhibition. The head of the Association made a greeting to everybody then all of a sudden these Iraqi musicians showed up...there must have been at least two hundred Iraqis in that space. So all of a sudden this banquet hall from antiquity became this banquet hall in the contemporary. And there were these Iraqis with their fellow non-Iraqi Swedes, and they're dancing with them and it was this really beautiful thing that I never expected to happen. But the music that bounced off those panels that night forever changed them for me. And I met quite a few Assyrians that night who had a kind of joyous reaction

to it. So there is the nostalgia but nostalgia is interesting because it means that you're longing for home. And I don't think that's such a bad thing. Some people try to place nostalgia like it's almost designated as a mental illness but to long for home is important. It's a self-awareness of where you're from. If you've gone somewhere else. So for people to sort of make that place their living room that night...it was so beautiful."

Michael is grateful for the "collage" of people who have collaborated in large and small ways around his projects. As Michael describes, "when my studio and I get those materials for the work, we're going into these groceries, many of which are run by Assyrians who are coming from...Iraq. So there's this circular ecology of the material net, the very thing that's being used to make the work is coming from the descendants of the people who made these panels. So it has this really beautiful thing for me, it continues, it survives, we're in the diaspora but we continue, we teach our recipes to our subsequent generations, we teach the language."

What more fitting and poetic repository for Nineveh Magazine--a publication that seeks to give voice to Assyrian lives, stories, memories, and language and to bring the far-flung community, living in diaspora, together--than Michael Rakowitz's reconstructed antiquities and banquet halls, spaces for both nostalgia and joyous celebration. There, co-mingled with the date syrup cans, and torn newspapers from multiple languages, are our torn covers of Dr. Donny George and a thousand other Assyrian faces made whole by an artist's hands.

Michael Rakowitz is a professor of Art Theory and Practice at Northwestern University. His art has been exhibited all over the world, including The Tate Modern in London, MassMOCA, and MOMA, among countless other prestigious venues. He is the recipient of the 2020 Nasher Prize; the 2018 Herb Alpert Award in the Arts; a 2012 Tiffany Foundation Award; a 2008 Creative Capital Grant; a Sharjah Biennial Jury Award; a 2006 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship Grant in Architecture and Environmental Structures; the 2003 Dena Foundation Award, and the 2002 Design 21 Grand Prix from UNESCO. He was awarded the Fourth Plinth commission (2018-2020) in London's Trafalgar Square.

This article quotes from:  
*A House With a Date Palm Will Never Starve: Cooking with Date Syrup* By Michael Rakowitz. Art Books Publishing, Ltd. 2019.  
 Michael Rakowitz Interview with Annie Elias, September, 2021.



Michael Rakowitz with boxes of Nineveh Magazines  
 Courtesy of the Artist



Michael Rakowitz with Nineveh Magazines  
 Courtesy of the Artist

Further reading:  
 "Michael Rakowitz's Art of Return," by Raffi Khatchadourian. "Profiles," *The New Yorker Magazine*, August 24, 2020.  
 "Sculptor Michael Rakowitz: Strange Connections, Fascinating Exhibitions" by Lisa Stein. *Northwestern Weinberg Magazine*, Spring/Summer, 2011.  
 "Michael Rakowitz Recreates a Sculpture Destroyed by ISIS for London's Trafalgar Square," by Olivia McEwan. *Hyperallergic*, April 5, 2018.



**HH Mar Awa III Royel:**  
*A New and Bright Future for the Assyrian Church  
of the East and the Larger Assyrian Community*

*by Qasha Youkhannan Badal Piro, Pharm.D; M.Th.  
in Applied Orthodox Theology*

The Holy Synod of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East convened on September 6, 2021 in Ankawa, Erbil (KRG), Iraq, due to the demission of the Patriarch-Emeritus His Holiness Mar Gewargis III Sliwa. On Wednesday, September 8, 2021, the Holy Synod elected His Grace Mar Awa Royel, Bishop of the Diocese of California, as the 122<sup>nd</sup> Catholicos-Patriarch to the apostolic see of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (ancient Babylon). His Grace was consecrated on September 13, 2021 (the Feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross), at the patriarchal cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Ankawa, Erbil.

For many years, His Holiness Mar Awa III served as the Secretary of the Holy Synod and represented the Assyrian Church of the East as a member of the Forum Syriacum (Pro Oriente Foundation, Vienna). Furthermore, he was a member of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East, as well as co-chair of the Bilateral Dialogue Between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East. In addition, His Holiness served as President of the Assyrian Church of the East's Commission on Inter-Church Relations and Education Development (CIRED).

In his first 2 months as the Patriarch, His Holiness Mar Awa III Royel has met with several ecclesiastical, political, and educational organizations regarding the situation of Assyrians



both in our homeland of Iraq, in the diaspora, as well as the overall situation of Christian faithful in the Middle East. His Holiness has made it a point to meet with various groups within and outside the Assyrian community in order to strengthen ties for the future of the Assyrian people and the faithful of the Assyrian Church of the East. Furthermore, His Holiness firmly believes in strengthening the fraternal relations the Church has with other Christian churches and denominations, as well as developing new ones in the spirit of Christ for the greater good of our Assyrian people.

Both in Erbil, (KRG), Iraq, where His Holiness now resides permanently, and here in the United States of America, His Holiness has been meeting with both Assyrian and non-Assyrian religious and secular parties, in order to further strengthen the bonds of unity. His Holiness has significant experience in these endeavors, as his previous appointments during his episcopate were concerned with dialogue between the Assyrian Church of the East and other Eastern churches, in addition to educational development.

Prior to his first pastoral visit to the United States as Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church, Mar Awa III had been in several meetings and received various delegations at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Ankawa, Erbil. As mentioned previously, these delegations were both religious and socio-political. As always, His Holiness asked them to always work amongst eachother in Christian brotherly love for the future generations of the Assyrian people, particularly those who remain in our ancestral homeland. Of note, His Holiness called a meeting with the heads of the Assyrian political parties in Iraq. The delegates presented an update as to the current situation of our



nation in Iraq. His Holiness stressed the importance of all Assyrian parties to work together as one for the benefit of our people. Additionally, His Holiness prayed and asked the Lord to bless them in their virtuous work for our nation, committing his support for them to work in fraternal unity.

His Holiness was received by the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Iraq, Mr. Masrour Barzani. The prime minister warmly welcomed His Holiness, and the patriarch thanked the prime minister for his warm reception and sincere sentiments. The patriarch outlined the Assyrian Church's programs to promote both cultural and religious visits of Assyrian faithful to their ancestral homeland. The two heads also discussed several important matters, such as the needs of the Assyrians in the villages and parishes of the Church in the provinces of Erbil and Dohuk. The prime minister reiterated his government's firm resolve to safeguard the freedoms and rights of the Assyrian people. His Holiness also echoed the Church's commitment to being an important and necessary partner for promoting the peaceful coexistence of the ethnic





constituents of the region.

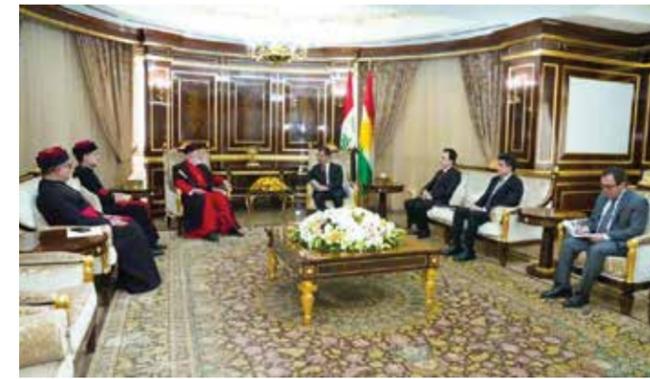
Furthermore, while in Erbil, His Holiness received visitations from several delegates of the Eastern churches. His Holiness received His Eminence Louis Cardinal Sako, patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church and their graces Mar Shlemon Warduni, Mar Basil Yaldo, Mar Habib Nawfail, and Mar Robert Jerges to the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Ankwa, Erbil. As well, His Holiness received in audience His Grace Mar Shimun Daniel, Bishop of the Ancient Church of the East, diocese of Iraq. As has been His Holiness' position, he reiterated his previous messages for both Churches to work together as sister Churches in love and unity to fulfill the commandment of our Lord. His Holiness also welcomed His Eminence Avak Asadourian, Primate of the Armenian Archdiocese of Iraq. His Eminence is currently the secretary of Council of Churches in Iraq. As he has stressed and discussed previously during his episcopal tenure as a Bishop of the Church, and following the tradition of his venerable predecessors, His Holiness spoke of the historical relationship between the Assyrians and Armenians, and touched upon the recent sacrifices the Assyrians of Armenia made during the current war. His Holiness reiterated his desire to further strengthen



the relationship between the two sister churches.

Since education has been an important part of His Holiness' life, a pursuit he stresses for all our Assyrian youth in the diaspora, not to mention for the clergy of the Church, His Holiness met with the staff of Arba-Ello Primary School and Ur Secondary School in the Patriarchal Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. His Holiness thanked the staff for their work and offered his prayers and blessings to them all. Additionally, Hadyab Society for competencies visited His Holiness in Ankawa, Erbil. Furthermore, His Holiness addressed the students of the Assyrian Church of the East's St. Narsai Assyrian Christian College (Australia) class of 2021 and congratulated them on their completion of the program. His Holiness has always been a strong advocate of education for the Assyrian youth and has stressed its importance for the future of our nation. His Holiness emphasized that for our children to be successful in their future endeavors, education must be a top priority for them, especially in that with education, they can be active members in the Assyrian Church and strive to maintain our ancient Assyrian language, culture, and history.

His Holiness is currently visiting the United States on his first Apostolic and Pastoral mission. His Holiness arrived in California, his previous Episcopal See, on October 25, 2021, and will remain in the U.S. until the end of November 2021. In addition to visiting the three dioceses of the Assyrian Church of the East in America (California, Western U.S., and Eastern U.S.), His Holiness, in his capacity as Patriarch, has met with prelates from sister Eastern churches. Moreover, as a guiding beacon for the Assyrian nation and historically the father of our Assyrian people, His Holiness has also met with various political parties and organizations. As discussed previously, the goal of these meetings is to strengthen the fraternal



bonds of love between the Assyrian Church of the East and other Apostolic Churches, for the benefit of the Christian faithful living in the West, as well as to emphasize the need for Assyrian political parties to work together for a brighter future for our children here in America, with the hope of one day realizing our dream of an Assyrian homeland.

During his patriarchal sojourn to Los Angeles, CA (Western Diocese of the U.S.), His Holiness was formally received at the Iraqi consulate by Dr. Salwan Sinjari, Consul General of the Republic of Iraq. Many congratulations were given to His Holiness by the Iraqi Consulate for his consecration, as well as the return of the Patriarchal See to its traditional home of Iraq. His Holiness asked that the Lord bless the country of Iraq so that peace and stability may reign in the homeland for the future progress of all Iraqi people, regardless of race or religion.

While visiting the Eastern Diocese of the Assyrian Church of the East in Chicago, His Holiness Mar Awa III visited the shrine of his predecessor, the late Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV of blessed memory. A short memorial service was presided by His Holiness, with the presence of their Graces Mar Afram Athniel (Bishop of Syria) and Mar Paulus Benjamin (Bishop of Eastern U.S.), as well as reverend priests and deacons from the local parishes.

In conclusion, His Holiness has "hit the ground running" as he has begun his ecclesiastical tenure meeting with various ecclesiastical bodies and political parties. His Holiness' goals, even as a priest and bishop, always have been to bring the Assyrian people closer to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for the salvation of our souls, as well as to emphasize the need for all Assyrians to work together in the Christian bonds of love and respect for the future of our



people, especially that of our children. His Holiness has always encouraged and stressed maintaining our Assyrian heritage and culture, whether in our homeland or in the diaspora. He is a firm advocate and ardent believer in the education of our people, especially of our youth, as His Holiness has played an integral part over the years in the development of the youth of the Assyrian Church of the East. We pray for the well-being and health of His Holiness, and ask God Almighty to help him in his mission as Supreme Head and Primate of the Assyrian Church of the East. We also wish him success in uniting the bonds of our Assyrian people regardless of denomination and political affiliation.

A word about the author:

Rev. Fr. Youkhannan Badal Piro is the son of the late Reverend Chorbishop Badal S. Piro, long time priest of the Mar Addai Parish of Turlock. Fr. Youkhannan is the administrator of St. Mary's Mission Sacramento, Assyrian Church of the East. He holds a Master of Theology (M.Th.) Degree in Applied Orthodox Theology from the Antiochian House of Studies, and is also a practicing pharmacist (Doctorate of Pharmacy; UCSF School of Pharmacy) in the community he resides.



# THE GENOCIDE CHRONICLES

By Professor Arianne Ishaya

*This column commemorates the survivors of the WWI Assyrian genocide who came to America, worked hard, and made many contributions to their adopted country.*

*The family histories of the Assyrian old-timers were collected by Arianne Ishaya, professor of anthropology, in Turlock in 1981-1982.*

**Yonatan Paul**  
**Date of Interview: 4/12/82**

*Yonatan (Jonathan) was 81 at the time he shared his experience. He was one of the refugees who managed to migrate to USA in the early 20's. He had lived in Chicago the greater part of his life. In 1960 he married and made Turlock his permanent home.*

I was born in the village of Degala, Urmia in 1901. My father was a carpenter. He had been to America and back. He had lived in Yonkers for seven years. I was 13 when World War I started. I remember everything. When I was a child I always dreamt of going to America. I did not want to stay in Iran because I had seen so much meanness. On our farm we had a Muslim caretaker who looked after it when pa was out of the country. He used to plough, irrigate, and harvest it. Once when I was thirsty I drank some water from a jug. The caretaker said I had desecrated the jug, and it had to be thrown away. So we had to pay for it. I asked my mother "We take baths, and we are clean, he never does. Why am I dirty?" She said "Son, this is how their religion is." From that day on, I decided I would not live in a place like this.

When the war started the Russians had a contingent

in Urmia. As long as they were there we were safe. The local Turks did not dare to molest us. But in 1915 when they retreated, then the Muslims descended upon our villages and pillaged them. In our village many were killed. But from my family no one was killed; only the house was stripped of all its furnishings. We had a well-furnished home with Persian carpets and all. We just saved our lives and ran to town. We had a Turkish landlord. He gave us shelter until the Russians returned to Urmi. But they retreated again in the summer of 1917. It then became necessary to vacate the town. We walked the distance to Hamadan and Kermanshah under very difficult circumstances. I stayed without any food for more than three days. When we reached the British contingent they took us to Hamadan. My father had died three months earlier. I had a mother, a sister, and a brother who was younger than I. The Assyrian mountaineers and the plains men who were armed to protect us, were not very close. The former were courageous and they fell ahead instead of staying behind to protect the back of the procession. So wherever they reached, they pillaged the villages and when we got there, almost nothing was left to eat. They only helped themselves. When we reached Sain Qala, Agha Petros tried to convince the armed men to stay behind the line; but no one listened. "Each for his own" was the spirit. As we reached Hamadan, I was walking in the bazaar when British soldiers apprehended me and said that I had to enlist in the army. I was 16 then. They took a bunch of us to a village. It was very cold and we were without food or clothing. There were about 2000-3000 of us aged from 16-25. After a few weeks I deserted and ran away. The British were not able to get provisions. They were giving us a kind of bread that looked like manure. It was inedible. During

daytime-this was late August-when it was sunny, it was warm. But Hamadan is situated on the foothills of the Zagros Mountains. During the night the temperature dropped and it was very cold. When they caught me it was daytime and I was in a light shirt. We were so cold and so hungry that whenever we made a fire, I used to take the warm rocks and press them on my chest at night. They drilled us every day. One day two boys from my village and I held a meeting and the three of us decided to ask the guards who were highland Assyrians, to let us go. We told them we were hungry and wanted to get to a close-by vineyard and pick some grapes. We said we would return. The guard knew we were hungry. He felt sorry for us and let us go. I came to Hamadan. My mother had rented a room there. She would not let me out of her sight from then on. After a few weeks word came that whoever wanted to leave Hamadan, could go to Kermanshah, and the British would care for them. Since we had spent all the money we had, we decided to go. Some stayed permanently in Hamadan. They received no relief; but there was an American Mission there that helped them. On the way the British were taking men of my age to the army camp. My mother heard and dressed me like a woman until we reached the Iraqi border. There the British put the women in these big trucks called Lorries. But the men had to walk up to the railroad. There we boarded freight trains until we got to Baqubah.

*Yonatan Paul, whose story we read above, was a very knowledgeable person with excellent memory. He was in a supervisory position in the camps, and later in Assyrian organizations in the Diaspora.*

Yonatan Paul: The British had a very good system. They divided us into sections; each consisting of 1200-1300 families. There was an Armenian section, a highlander section, and a section for the Urmia people. Ours was section 22. In every section there

were 3-4 British enlisted men and one commissioned officer in charge of the administration of that section. They had an office there. After some time when General Austin was recalled and replaced by Colonel Owen [Cunliffe-Owen], the instructions were to reduce the cost of operation. This was in 1919. These officers had men like me working for them. I was the bellman and the interpreter. I had learned a little English in Degala. The British officers liked me because they saw that I was eager to learn. They taught me. They gave me newspapers and a dictionary. Every week they had to write a report indicating demographical changes: arrivals, deaths, army recruits, etc. They sent it to the headquarters.

When the British were removed from administrative tasks, we replaced them. We stayed in Baquba until the British decided to move us to Mindan. We reached Baquba in August 1918 and left on March 1920. If it was not for the British my family would have starved. People complained as if the British owed us something; but I had no ill feelings and obeyed what they said. As I was the interpreter, sometimes I was put in a difficult position. The refugee men would complain

that they were put to work. The work was for 10-15 men to push carts on the railroad track up to the headquarters, fill them up with provisions, bring them back to the camps, and divide them among the sections. Now, that was free food, carried on rails; even that they did not want to do. They would hide away. So they faced stiff punishment. They were sent away for two weeks to carry dirt filled bags on their back. Another problem: the tents were very large; there were 30-40 people living in each. The British asked us to lift the edges every morning to refresh the air in the tent. They would not do that. Yet another problem: it was not allowed to cook near tents to prevent fire hazards. There was a special place for cooking. But some would not listen. There were two kinds of water. One kind was pumped by machines from the Diyla River. That was reserved in tanks. It

**“WHEN I WAS A CHILD  
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was treated water for drinking. But for washing, there was the river water. They would use water indiscriminately. The British were exasperated. I had to come up with excuses to pacify them.

One way to cut costs was to replace the British with the Assyrians. I became section supervisor. Only one British officer was left to oversee the whole area. They began to replace imported food with local food. They even tried to persuade us to grow some produce. But Baquba was a desert area and lacked sufficient water. So they did not succeed. People did not want to try hard either. So when World War I ended Kernel Owen asked me to instruct the people that the British could not care for us forever. Now it was time that we became self-sufficient. The British said they would take us to Mosul from where we could return to our own country. They said that they had made arrangements with the Persian government and the Turks would not pose a threat. Nevertheless they armed men like me to protect ourselves. We were to front the procession back to Urmi. The highlanders did not want to go to Iran, they wanted to return back to their own homes in the Hakkari Mountains. But at the time their homes were under Turkish possession and the Turks would not consent to their return. There was a British officer; his name was Gibson. He thought he was responsible for them. But they did not listen to him. They began to sell their ammunitions each acting individually. Gibson became so desperate that he committed suicide and Aga Petros' expedition to retake the Highlanders' homes back from Turkey failed.

In Mindan food was not good. Also men of fighting age were separated from the rest. When we were in Baquba the Arabs did not dare to attack us. We had two battalions numbering 2000 armed men in

Baquba. The men were trained by the British. But when the British moved us in groups to Mindan, those who were left behind came under Arab attack. I left Mindan and went to Baghdad. I worked for the British Civil Service as a storekeeper for the supply center for 8 months before I got a visa for America. But my mother and sister stayed in Mindan. My brother was in the army; but he had almost starved and had fever. So he deserted and joined me in Baghdad. I had a khaloo (uncle) in Chicago; he sponsored me. The documents for sponsorship required a letter from the place of employment, one from the bank, and one from the church. Before leaving Baghdad I went to Dr. McDowell, the American Missionary. He gave me a letter to take to the president of the YMCA in Bombay, whose name was Dr. Monroe. He would see to it that we got our tickets and send us on our way. We stayed 5-6 months in Bombay. There were a lot of Assyrians stranded there. Ocean liners were in short supply. The war had just ended and soldiers were given priority to travel back to their homes. When we left Bombay there were 23 Assyrians on board. In

Italy we were sent to the city of Trieste, on the Adriatic because overseas transportation was not available in Naples. Other Assyrians arrived in the meantime. The numbers swelled to 83. The Italians called us Persi. For breakfast, lunch, and dinner we were served macaroni and wine over and over. It was in our contract that the liner had to pay for our expenses until we reached N.Y. In Naples they tried to avoid paying for our hotel. But I was instructed by Dr. Monroe of my rights and he told me to see the American Consul if they try to abrogate the terms of the contract. So they conceded. From Trieste we came to New York. It took 23 days. The route was from the Adriatic to the Mediterranean Sea, to Gibraltar, to the Atlantic Ocean, and then to New York.

**“WE STAYED 5-6 MONTHS IN BOMBAY. THERE WERE A LOT OF ASSYRIANS STRANDED THERE. OCEAN LINERS WERE IN SHORT SUPPLY.”**

## List of Assyrian Foundation of America Donors

The below list includes donations received from 09/01/2021 through 12/31/2021 only! Any donations received after 12/31/2021 will be included in the next issue of the Nineveh Magazine.

*Thank you for your generosity and support.*

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*\*The amounts listed are charitable donations only and exclude subscription fees and membership dues.*







## AFA Sponsored Projects for 2021

by  
*Elizabeth Mickaily-Huber, Ph.D.*

Since its inception in 1964, the Assyrian Foundation of America (AFA) has been committed to Assyrian cultural, educational, and humanitarian endeavors. Each year, through generous donations from our members and supporters, the AFA funds projects that promote our unique heritage and help our needy Assyrians around the world. Indeed, this year, the AFA contributed financially to numerous worthy enterprises, thanks to your kind donations. The various projects are listed below.

### Humanitarian/Welfare

- A grant was provided to the **Assyrian Aid Society** to help repair lighting destroyed by bombing in the northern Assyrian villages in the regions of Nahla and Barwar.
- Along with Assyrians for Education, the AFA contributed necessary funds for the renovation of two classrooms to teach sewing to the general public in Assyrian villages in Armenia thanks to **Lola's Sewing School**. The students make Assyrian-themed items and clothing that are sold at the church store or online to help the villagers.

### Scholarships

- A scholarship was provided to **Ms. Nahrin Betgas** of Mardin, Turkey. An aspiring diplomat, Nahrin is studying International Relations.
- A scholarship was provided to **Ms. Talita Betgas** of Mardin, Turkey. Talita is working toward her Master's degree and ultimately hopes to obtain a degree in Dentistry.
- Continued scholarship assistance was provided to **Mr. Joseph Hermiz**, a PhD student focusing on Late Ottoman/Modern Middle Eastern History in the Department of Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations at the University of Chicago. Joseph has professional working and research knowledge in Modern Assyrian/Aramaic, Modern Standard Arabic, Modern Turkish, Ottoman Turkish and French.
- A scholarship was awarded to **Mr. Samuel Yousifi**, an Assyrian student from Iran, who is completing his Ph.D. in Canada. Samuel's research focuses on fuzzy logic, a mathematical approach used in artificial intelligence and engineering applications.

### Educational Grants

- The AFA provided a significant financial contribution for the **Qarajaloo Project**, a U.C. Berkeley enterprise that aims to digitize and journalize a collection of letters written in the Modern Assyrian vernacular. This anthology will be made available to students globally who are doing research in the field of Modern Assyrian Studies. These letters follow the life of a family from about 1896 to 1923.
- The **Assyrian Children's School of Language and Culture** in Tbilisi, Georgia teaches our mother-tongue and traditional dances to our youth in the region. The school was in need of a multi-function printer. AFA helped to fulfill that need by providing the necessary funds. The school is run by Ekaterina Bitkash who holds a Master's Degree in Assyrian Studies from the University of Tbilisi. Ekaterina and her mother Ludmila are very active in the Assyrian Organization in Tbilisi.
- A grant was provided to **Mr. Tomas Isik** to be used to fund the publication of his poetry book, *Abdisho Bar Brikha*, in Sweden.
- A grant was provided to **Sabri Atman** of the Seyfo Center, an organization that educates the world about the plight of the Assyrian people. The funds will help support his Ph.D. thesis on the Assyrian Genocide, 1914-1924, at the University of Texas. The focus will be on the impact of the Islamic Jihad on the Assyrian genocide and the motivation of the Kurds who participated in the extermination that took place in the regions of Diyarbekir (Turkey) and Urmia (Iran).
- A grant was awarded to **Shamiram Media** for promoting Assyrian culture and education by interviewing multiple Assyrian scholars. Shamiram Media also promotes Assyrian Foundation activities and functions.
- A grant was awarded to the non-profit **Etuti** to fund two projects in Iraq. The first is the Khayota Technical Development Platform in which a website developer will train 30 youth in Nineveh, hiring 6 at the end of the training period. The second will provide English language and computer skill training to 30-40 Assyrian youth in the region of Sapna which includes the villages of Bebedeh, Komaneh, Dereh, Baleejaneh, Hamzyeh, Eneshki, Araden, Dawoodya, Deheh, Sarsing, and Badarsh for 30-40 Assyrian youth.
- The **Muraya d-Zemra** singing competition is dedicated to discovering and promoting new musical talents among our Assyrian young people. AFA's monetary contribution helped one of the winners of this year's competition, **Sonia Oshana**, to pay for the recording of her winning song "Donyeh D'Asheeqeh" in Chicago through Assyrian National Broadcasting (ANB sat).  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxzpKdEltGk>
- Fifty copies were purchased of **Mr. Fred Aprim's** fourth and newest book entitled, "The Betrayal of the Powerless." His book provides a new look into how the Assyrians were betrayed by the very individuals who they believed to be their allies.

# “More of a coexistence than a togetherness” of Assyrians and Kurds in Northeastern Syria: An Interview with Dr. Thomas Schmidinger

By Abdulmesih BarAbraham



The 24<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the Initiative Christian Orient (ICO) was held on September 20-21, 2021 in Salzburg under the title “Dis-ORIENTation - Life worlds between Orient and Diaspora.” The first day focused on the massive migration of Christians from the countries of Middle East. In addition to expert presentations, representatives of the oriental diaspora churches were provided the opportunity to talk on their personal story of migration, life in the diaspora, and on the relations to their original countries of origin. I has the privilege to be on that panel. The second day of the conference was dedicated to the question whether there is a persecution of Christians in the Middle East or not? Dr. Thomas Schmidinger, a political scientist and cultural anthropologist was one of the key speakers to talk on the issue with focus on Syria.

Dr. Schmidinger reported that the Syrian regime utilizes the fear of most Christians from Islamist and/or Jihadists to gain them as loyal citizens, and that Church hierarchy (especially Syriac Orthodox, Greek Orthodox Armenian Apostolic Church) is being very loyal to regime. As generally “Christians tend to be urban middle and upper class, they afford to flee and have been able to get asylum in Europe more easily,” he continued. He confirmed that there is an increased Christian migration but affirmed that there is “no religious persecution of Christians” in Syria.

Following the conference I had the opportunity to speak to Dr. Schmidinger about the situation of the

Assyrians, also known as Syriac-Aramaic speaking Christians belonging to different denominations (Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Church of the East, and Chaldean Catholic Churches). The interview was conducted in German language and translated; few addition in [] are for clarification and reference.

Dr. Thomas Schmidinger is political scientist, and social and cultural anthropologist. He lectures at the Department of Political Science at the University of Vienna and at the University of Applied Sciences at Upper Austria. Among others, he is also co-founder and Secretary General of the Austrian Society for the Promotion of Kurdology / European Center for Kurdish Studies, editorial board member of the Vienna Yearbook of Kurdish Studies, and on the editorial review board of the international peer-reviewed journal Kurdish Studies.

Dr. Thomas Schmidinger speaking at the ICO annual Conference on September 21, 2021 held in Salzburg, Austria. *Source: ICO - Initiative Christian Orient Abdulmesih BarAbraham (AB): First of all, thank you for your willingness to accept this interview. You have just returned from Qamishly, northeastern Syria. What is your assessment of the security situation and the situation of Christians in the northeast of the country right now?*

**Dr. Thomas Schmidinger (TS):** Things are quiet in Qamishly, but this is not true for all parts of the Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria. In the province of Deir az-Zour, the activities of the “Islamic State” have increased significantly

again in recent months. Minor clashes continue to occur along the cease-fire line with Turkish-occupied territory, which also affects the Christian-majority of Tal Tamr, as it lies directly on this cease-fire line. But the relative security in Qamishly and Derik, where there are relatively large numbers of Aramaic-speaking and Armenian-speaking Christians, is also precarious in that people fear a renewed Turkish invasion. It is very questionable whether U.S. troops will be able to remain in the region after the planned withdrawal from Iraq, and such a withdrawal would then be associated with corresponding fears of a renewed Turkish invasion.

**AB: According to your observations, what visible impact has the Corona pandemic and the international embargo had on the living conditions of the people in the region?**

**TS:** The economic situation is actually worse than ever. Food prices have risen sharply, and in some cases there are shortages of certain foods. On top of that, there is also a massive shortage of water, which on the one hand is due to the climate catastrophe, but on the other hand is also due to Turkey, which is making water scarce with the large dams on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers; in October 2019 Turkey got its hands on the water supply for al-Hasakah and the surrounding area with the Allouk water station. For al-Hasakah and the Assyrian villages on the Khabur river, this is currently one of the most pressing problems. The Khabur river is currently completely dried-out. As a result, everyday conflicts over water are also on the rise.

**AB: During your presentation at the ICO annual conference in Salzburg on September 21, you spoke about the general situation of Christians in Syria and emphasized that there is no persecution of Christians in either regime-controlled or Kurdish-controlled areas. I would agree with that, however, specifically in the northeast, there is ethnically-motivated expulsion pressure against Christians as an indigenous ethnic group. Ultimately, the Kurds are trying to secure this region for themselves at the expense of the Assyrians. How else do you explain the disproportionate rate of emigration of Christians from the country?**

**TS:** I strongly disagree with you. I do not see any ethnically motivated expulsion pressure against the Christians as an indigenous ethnic group, and certainly not against the Assyrians you mention here. First of all, the actual Assyrians in this [Khabur] area are not an “indigenous” people group, but fled Iraq after the 1933 Semele massacre and then settled along the Khabur river between al-Hasakah and Tal Tamr. “Indigenous” were these in the Turkish-Iranian border region between Hakkari and Urmia, but there they became victims of genocide in 1915. Their villages on the Khabur river were captured by the “Islamic State” in February 2015.[1] More than 200 Christians were kidnapped at that time and could only be freed again at the end of 2016 with high ransom payments. The others fled and did not return even after the liberation of the region [from IS] in May 2015.



Billboard and license plate depicting three languages. Source: Dr. Thomas Schmidinger

I also visited these villages this time and many of the villages, such as Tel Hurmuz, remain completely empty and uninhabited to this day. Many of these Assyrians have unfortunately fled abroad and now live in Germany, Sweden or the United States. If the Kurds wanted to take over this area, they would not even have to expel anyone. Nevertheless, they do not do this, but have housed their displaced people from Sere Kaniye / Ras al-Ain in tent camps, because they still hope that the rightful owners will eventually return.

The second [Assyrian-]Aramaic-speaking group, the *Suryoye* [2] could indeed be called “indigenous,” since they have lived in their present settlement area on both sides of the present Turkish-Syrian border long before the Islamic conquest of the region. There is no pressure for expulsion against them either. One of their most important parties, the Syriac Unity Party (SUP), is part of the self-

administration. Their language is the third official language in the Jezira Canton of the Autonomous Administration, along with Kurdish and Arabic. All public inscriptions are trilingual, and the Autonomous Administration is proud of the region’s ethnic and linguistic diversity. Those who are less well integrated are the Armenian Christians, whose language has a much worse status, probably due to the fact that these are two smaller communities in Qamishly and Derik, which date back to survivors of the 1915 genocide and are thus of lesser importance in purely quantitative terms. But even they are not displaced.

**AB:** *In your detailed presentation at the mentioned conference, you described Christians - you explicitly pointed to the leadership of the Syriac Orthodox Church - as generally too loyal to the Syrian regime in the context of the crisis, without addressing what their alternative*

*would have been or is. This view ignores the fact that at the beginning of the crisis Christians, and Assyrians in particular, demonstrated for reforms throughout the country. Is the accusation of loyalty therefore not a superficial one? Moreover, is the position of Christian Churches not understandable in light of the experience of Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood came to power for a short time and quickly wanted to transform Egypt into an Islamic state?*

**TS:** During my presentation, I clearly stated that the support of the church hierarchy for the Syrian regime is not due to any enthusiasm for Assad or Baathism, but due to fear of the alternatives, especially from Islamist forces. This is not an accusation, but a statement of a fact that can hardly be disputed if one looks at the behavior of the leadership of the Syriac Orthodox Church over the past decade. No one disputes that there are also Christians in the self-government of northern and eastern Syria and in the ranks *Etilaf* [3]. But these are mostly political activists and groups rather than the clergy. I do not want to judge the behavior of the church leadership morally, as this is an internal matter of the faithful. However, your comparison with Egypt makes the dilemma clear, because the support of many Coptic Christians for al-Sisi’s military coup has in turn made them more vulnerable to the Muslim Brotherhood.

**AB:** *You also referred to the Sutooro in Qamishly as a regime militia in your lecture in the same context, although it has never been involved in fighting and only guards the central city core, which is inhabited by Christians. True, this guard force has not allowed itself to be integrated into the PYD-affiliated militia. Doesn't this give the impression that the position-based assignments happen across the board and out of sympathy for the Kurdish cause?*

**TS:** I pointed out in my presentation that the Sutooro has split and that the group in Derik operates within the framework of the Autonomous Administration, while the group in Qamishly operates within the framework of the regime. What is wrong with that?

**AB:** *I don't mind at all that you sympathize with the Kurdish cause. I noticed, that you have written several scholarly books and reports on the so-called PYD-led self-administration. It is correct that two Assyrian groups, the SUP (Syriac*

*Union Party) and the ADP (Assyrian Democratic Party), are involved in it. But their supporters form a minority within our ethnic group. To the best of my knowledge, you have hardly mentioned in your reports the oldest Assyrian political party, namely the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO), which was part of the Syrian Opposition from the beginning and co-founder of the Syrian National Council.*

**TS:** I don’t know how you arrived at this impression and it seems to me that you haven’t read all my texts. In my 2020 anthology titled *“The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria: Between A Rock and A Hard Place,”* in which I wrote the only longer scholarly text on the situation of Christians in northeastern Syria, I also discuss all parties, including of course the ADO, its membership in the Syrian National Council [3], and its problems with the Autonomous Administration. Who represents a minority and a majority here is simply impossible to say scientifically. You would then also have to mention those Christians who support the Baath Party ruling in Damascus. The latter still has supporters in northeastern Syria too.

**AB:** *Thanks for the tip on that particular book; I'll certainly read and comment on it. What do you think of the opposition groups involved in the UN-coordinated process to negotiate a new constitution for Syria in Geneva with regime representatives and civilian delegates from the country?*

**TS:** I do not believe that it is my task as a political scientist to formulate my personal sympathies for certain groups. The opposition groups represented in the *Etilaf* are also too diverse to be lumped together and range from liberal and secular groups to very militant Islamists. What is certainly a problem is the massive Turkish influence on the *Etilaf*. But these groups obviously have to be part of a peace process, since they also control territory in northwestern Syria under Turkish protection and have a base in parts of Syria’s population. The problem with the negotiations in Geneva is rather that important forces that control over a quarter of the country are not involved.

**AB:** *As you certainly know, due to Turkey’s resistance, the PYD is not part of the country’s political opposition and therefore is not present*

*at the constitutional meetings in Geneva. Instead, the Kurdish National Council is represented there as an umbrella organization of several Kurdish groups. The National Council is in opposition to the PYD. How do you assess the chances of a rapprochement between the two groups?*

**TS:** Yes, it was precisely the exclusion of the PYD, but also of the other members of the Syrian Democratic Council, from the negotiations in Geneva that I criticized earlier. As you know, there have long been negotiations between the PYD and the Kurdish National Council, mediated by the United States. Unfortunately, there has been little progress here. The parties of the National Council were allowed to reopen their offices in the Autonomous Administration, but there is still no agreement and there are always setbacks. Most recently, the attacks by a PKK-affiliated youth organization on a Kurdish National Council rally last week dealt a massive setback to the reconciliation process. As long as the conflict between Barzani and Qandil does not ease, it will be difficult in Syria because both sides will have to keep checking with their supporters.

*Q: How would you assess the future of the Kurdish-led self-administration, which is very dependent on the support of the Americans?*

**TS:** This dependence on the U.S. is certainly a massive problem. Ultimately, the U.S. presence in Syria is certainly limited in time, and for the future of self-government, it will be crucial to find a negotiated solution with the Syrian government until the U.S. withdrawal, which will at least help them preserve some political and cultural rights. There are direct talks, but Damascus has so far rejected any autonomy or federalism.

**AB:** *Again and again, people are arbitrarily arrested by the police of the self-administration (e.g., [here](#) and [here](#)), and opposition party members are prevented from traveling. Only on September 21, the militia of the self-administration arrested the Assyrians George Yousef Safar and Samer Danho Kouriyeh, members of the Syrian Orthodox Church Council. How do you view the PYD's repeated authoritarian behavior and human rights violations as a non-state militant actor with respect to opposition and specifically against Assyrians in the region?*

**TS:** While the self-government of northern and eastern Syria is less authoritarian than the Regime, the jihadists of Hayat Tahrir ash-Sham, or the pro-Turkish Islamists, that does not mean that there is a functioning rule of law and a thriving democracy here. It is just less bad than in the other parts of Syria, and the abolition of the death penalty is certainly a milestone for the region. But that doesn't mean there aren't human rights abuses by the self-government police. Repression, however, is not directed specifically against the Assyrians, but more generally against political opposition that cooperates with Turkey and Barzani or with Damascus. I would even say that the biggest problems there are more for the members of the parties of the Kurdish National Council, ENKS. So this repression is directed more against rival Kurdish parties than specifically against the Assyrians. In any case, it is about politics and not about ethnicity or religion.

**AB:** *How do you see the future of Kurdish-Assyrian relations in the northeast of the country?*

**TS:** On a day-to-day basis, these relations are good, even if there is more of a coexistence than a togetherness. For all religious minorities, however, the question is what the future holds for the region in general. The worst thing would certainly be a Turkish occupation. Then the Christians and Yezidi would probably flee from this region just as they fled from Afrin or Sere Kaniye / Ras al-Ayn.

**AB:** *Dr. Schmidinger, I thank you for your frank answers.*

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[1] See: Anne Barnard, "More Assyrian Christians Captured As ISIS Attacks Villages in Syria," *New York Times*, February 26, 2016, <http://aina.org/news/20150226171440.htm>, and "ISIS Attacks Assyrian Villages in Syria, 4 Killed, Dozens Captured, Churches Burned," *Assyrian International News Agency*, <http://www.aina.org/news/20150223174904.htm>

[2] Suryoye/Suryaya is a self-designation, aka. Syriac

[3] Abdelahad Astepho, a representative of the Assyrian Democratic Organisation, is Vice President the Syrian Opposition groups, see: <https://en.etilaf.org/general-body/abdul-ahad-steifo>

IN LOVING MEMORY OF  
**KATHRYN "KITTY" ELISSA BENJAMIN**  
MAY 24, 1940 – JULY 30, 2021



Kathryn "Kitty" Elissa Benjamin, was born to Elsie and Saul Benjamin on May 24, 1940. She was the oldest of her brothers Robert "Bobbie" and Richard "Dickie" who were all born and raised in San Francisco, CA.

During that time, there was a robust Assyrian community in San Francisco. Kitty's parents loved bringing Assyrians together and hosted many gatherings at their home. Kitty and her mother cooked delicious Assyrian and American meals together to share with family and friends. This sparked Kitty's passion for family and inspired her involvement among the local and national Assyrian organizations.

She became active in the local Assyrian-American Association of San Francisco and became a delegate representing the local branch when attending meetings at the Federation. During her time she built many alliances with other branches strengthening the representation of her fellow Assyrians.

After spending years in San Francisco, Kitty retired to Turlock, California in 2014. She quickly became an active member of Bet-Nahrain Assyrian Cultural Center in Ceres, CA. As a member she continued her long standing tradition of helping underrepresented Assyrians file paperwork for their American citizenship. She was a big personality during the annual telethon fundraising campaign garnering donations from all around the world. People loved hearing her ringing of the "zega" (bell) for every donation that was made. She worked tirelessly to recruit entertainers from all over California to perform at the annual Assyrian Food Festival. The performers were always a highlight, always drawing crowds to enjoy the weekend festivities. She also hosted a tv program that profiled famous Assyrians new and old.

Kitty passed away unexpectedly July 30, 2021. As a proud San Francisco native, Kitty is survived by her brothers and their spouses. She also leaves behind two nieces and two nephews, their spouses, two great nieces and four great nephews, one great-great niece and many close friends and family.

Kitty will be remembered for her deep love of family, her dedicated work ethic, her passion for keeping her Assyrian heritage alive, and her strong spirit for over 81 years. Kitty will always be remembered as a fighter for the underdog and a great example of how to use your voice to make a change.

*A life celebration will be held in the near future. If you have a special memory you would like to share please email it to [KittyBenjaminSF2021@gmail.com](mailto:KittyBenjaminSF2021@gmail.com)*



IN LOVING MEMORY OF  
**BASELIUS KHAMO PIUS**

NOVEMBER 22, 1932-SEPTEMBER 20, 2021

Baselious Khamo Pius, (“*Basil*” or “*Wiska*”) passed away peacefully September 20, 2021 at Holy Rosary Hospital in Miles City, Mt, from health complications caused by Covid-19. He was 88 years old.

Basil was born in Baghdad, Iraq, the fourth of eight children of Khamo and Sooriya “Yemma” Pius. When he immigrated to the United States he did not know the exact day of his birth so he chose Thanksgiving of that year, November 22, 1932, as his birth date.

As a child, Basil and his family lived in Habbaniya, an English military base several miles west of Baghdad where he excelled in academics and soccer and developed lifelong friendships. After high school, Basil attended the University of Baghdad, earning a B.A. in English with a minor in Art. While attending University, Basil worked at the Coronet Bookstore, a business owned by his brother, Aprim. The publications he encountered exposed Basil to the promise and culture of the West. It was there that he also had a chance meeting with the English writer, Agatha Christie. In that pivotal meeting Basil expressed to Christie his self-doubt about his academic commitment. Christie reassured him about his promise and ability. Years later, Basil published an account of the meeting in his autobiographical book entitled Agatha Christie, The Unknown Assyrian and Baklava, in which he wrote, “whether it was her soft whispering words or her intuitive grasp of reality...something heavenly clicked inside me that evening.” He approached his studies with renewed dedication

In the summer of 1958, during Basil’s final year at University, Iraq began to experience the tensions of a political revolution and Basil set his sights on furthering his studies in the United States. Fortunately, Basil received an acceptance letter from the University of Portland, where he eagerly joined the English Literature graduate program in 1960. He helped found a soccer team, the University of Portland Pilots, and became captain.

In 1962 he completed his M.A. in English and re-enrolled in order to study education. He also met Beatrice “Babs” Bolton at that time and they were married in 1964 in Oakland where sons Ben and Daniel were born. Basil then accepted a teaching position at Miles Community College (MCC) in Montana where the family moved, and where Shumon, Sarah, and Samson were born.



Basil taught English and Middle Eastern culture at MCC for over forty years. He was a beloved teacher and friend who often enhanced his students’ learning by sharing traditional Middle Eastern food and dancing. He was gregarious and involved in the local community. Basil co-owned Tri-C Printing from 1984-1993. With access to quality card stock, Basil began making handmade, watercolor greeting cards. Basil loved to paint and enjoyed celebrating life’s special moments through his cards. His beautiful cards became known among his countless friends, lovingly made from the heart.

In 1999 Basil’s compassionate nature took him on an arduous journey to Amman, Jordan to retrieve a disabled younger brother, “Kooya,” and bring him back to Miles City where Basil and Babs cared for him full-time.

In his last years, Basil was diagnosed with dementia. Though the condition slowed him down, a few things kept him going. Those things were his faith in God, his family, and his relationships with the many people whose friendships he cherished.

Basil is survived by Beatrice “Babs” Pius, his wife of 57 years, sons Daniel, Shumon, and Samson, and daughter Sarah and their families. He is also survived by Mishael “Kooya” Pius and sister Nina Lazar, and many cousins, in-laws, nieces and nephews, six granddaughters and two great-grandchildren. He was preceded in death by his eldest son Ben Pius, his parents and five siblings: Mikhael “Minashi” Pius, Christina George, Aprim Pius, Raphael Pius, and Melina Oshana.

IN LOVING MEMORY OF  
**LILA ESHAGHZADEH SAYAD**

SEPTEMBER 2, 1929 – OCTOBER 20, 2021



Lila Sayad, was born on September 2, 1929, in Rostov-Russia to Baba Farhad of Qarajaloo and Maral Ishaya of Gavilan. Lila was the youngest of three children, her sister Vera and brother Vanya have predeceased her. Lila was raised in a traditional Assyrian and devout Christian family. Lila and her family migrated from Russia to Hamadan, Iran in 1938 and spent most of their time in Abadan and Tehran. At age 19 Lila met her other half, Shavol Sayad, and they married in 1950. Four years later Lila and Shavol were blessed with their daughter Caroline. In 1978, Lila and Shavol moved to the United States and resided in Modesto, CA. In 2002, Lila's husband, Shavol passed away in Modesto, and soon after Lila along with her daughter Caroline and her family moved to Las Vegas, NV. Sadly, in or around 2014, Lila's health started to decline, and eventually she became disabled. After many years of struggling with her illness, Lila peacefully passed away in Las Vegas on Wednesday, October 20, 2021, at 12:40 a.m., surrounded by her family and loved ones. On November 5, 2021, Lila was laid to rest next to her husband Shavol at Turlock Memorial Park in Turlock. The funeral service was presided over by Rev. Yoshia Oraha of Mar Zaia Assyrian Church of the East.

Lila is survived by her Daughter, Caroline Ganja, her Son-in-Law Edwin Ganja, Grandchildren Patricia, Patrick and, Sharokina, five Nieces, two Nephews, a number of Great Nieces and Nephews, and Cousins.

Lila is gone but her beautiful memory will always live with those who knew her. She was a genuine, caring, loving woman, wife, mother, nana, aunt, and great-aunt. She touched and enriched the lives of all those who knew her. Her family will always remember her loving devotion, remarkable strength, wisdom, goodness, quiet character, and consideration for others. Her friends will remember her kindness, meekness, honesty, loyalty, and generosity.



*We love you and we'll always miss your beautiful face and soul but you will always live in our hearts. Thank you for the beautiful memories you left us, we'll treasure them. May God grant you His eternal love and rest in peace.*

*- Caroline Sayad Ganja*

IN LOVING MEMORY OF  
**SARGON A. ODISHOO**

JULY 17, 1924 – OCTOBER 5, 2021



Sargon A. Odishoo, age 97, passed away peacefully surrounded by his family on Tuesday, October 5, 2021 at Summerlin Hospital in Las Vegas. He was born on July 17, 1924 in Baghdad, Iraq as one of five boys and made his way to Chicago as a young man. He attended DePaul University and the Chicago School of Optometry. He and his wife, Wilma had three children and lived in the Chicago suburbs for many years. Sargon Odishoo was involved with the development of an Assyrian School in Tehran in the 1960s. While he lived in Chicago, from the 1960s-late 1990s, he and his brothers Ninos and Sam Andrews were very proud activists with the Assyrian Universal Alliance and Dr Odishoo was one of the founding members of the Assyrian American Civic Club of Chicago. His identity as an Assyrian was paramount in his life.

He was also an avid tennis player and fan.

Sargon spent his later years living in Las Vegas, enjoying slot machines and jacuzzis. He was beloved by most everyone who met him and thought of as a kind and fun loving man. He is survived by his wife Wilma, his daughter Arbella (David) Parrot, sons Ashur and Ninus Odishoo, and grandchildren Andrew and Liam.

## Interview with Andrei Mikhailov, Tenor singer

*Translated from Russian by: Nina Georgizova*

*Please tell us about yourself and when did you start showing interest in music?*

I was born in 1987 in Moscow to Assyrian parents. My Mom was born in the Assyrian village of Verin Dvin in Armenia and my father in Yekaterinburg, Russia. My paternal grandfather was from the city of Kars, Turkey. My maternal ancestors are from Urmia, Iran. My parents moved a lot and at some point they lived in the Crimea and later settled in Moscow. Music has fascinated me since I was a child. I have always loved to sing. My grandmother's sister noticed this interest in me early on. When I was about to start the first grade she decided to take me to an audition at an art school. It was the beginning of September so the enrollment was already closed. Noticing this longing for music in me, my grandmother's sister convinced the instructors to give me a chance because I loved music and singing so much.



Immediately after the audition I was enrolled in that art school. But a month later, my parents told me to choose between my regular (ordinary) school or the art school, because they did not want me to be distracted. So I had to leave the art school. I did not stop loving music though, and continued to sing. After finishing high school, in university I majored in computer sciences. In my second year of college, I started listening to a lot of good music which I was able to find on the Internet. First it was Feodor Chaliapin, the old Russian romantic songs, and old records. In 2006 I met a vocal teacher, Olga Kolyadenko. She was a student of Stanislavsky in his opera studio where he produced operatic performances. At one time she sang with the famous Soviet singers including Ivan Kozlovsky, Sergei

Lemeshev, Panteleimon Nortsov. She was also a soloist in the Bolshoi Theater. She performed for the Russian soldiers fighting in the front. She became my first vocal teacher.

*How many years did you devote to voice training?*

About 3 years of regular training. I decided not to give up my studies in college and at the same time took vocal classes. Many opera singers graduated from law school, some studied business. In 2009 I graduated from college and decided to enroll in a preparatory course at the Ippolitova-Ivanov Academy of Music, named after Ippolitova-Ivanov in Moscow. I successfully passed the audition and was accepted. After completing the preparatory course I was admitted to the Academy of Music. I started visiting my vocal teacher less often, just to update her on my progress. She lived to be 105 and passed away in 2015. In 2014 I graduated from college and had to take a short break from music, but continued vocal training in order to prepare myself for further studies. In 2016 I became a student of the Department of Academic Vocals at the College of Contemporary Arts and graduated in June of this year. My graduation project had two stages: the vocal performance of arias from operas and songs and the defense of my research project. I did very well in both and I am happy with my results. My plan is to continue growing in this field.



*By Pavel Bukreev, Moscow*

*When did you first sing on stage?*

When I was studying under Olga Kolyadenko, I got into an amateur opera studio at the community center. I made my debut as the Young Gypsy from Sergei Rachmaninoff opera "Aleko". I also had the part in Ruggiero Leoncavallo's "Pagliacci", in "Carmen" by Georges Bizet and Tchaikovsky's "Iolanta". My first stage appearance was nerve-wracking. I was so anxious that my leg started cramping and I came out on stage limping. In 2017 I had my first solo concert in Moscow.

*When was the first time you sang outside of Russia?*

In 2017 a group of us traveled to Wiesbaden in Germany to attend the Assyrian New Year celebration. The trip made a tremendous impression on me. It was very interesting. I performed several songs in the Assyrian language at the party.

*Do you speak Assyrian well?*

I understand the language well and gradually continue to improve my speaking skills. After all, you need to practice and improve in everything. My family spoke mostly in Russian. As a child, I heard a lot of different words and expressions in Assyrian, and I still remember them. I am also planning to learn a few Assyrian songs for future concerts. In the spring of 2019 the Assyrian Aid Society invited me to Sydney, Australia to perform at the Mesopotamian Night event at the theater of the Australian actor, Brian Brown. I performed songs by William Daniel and Paulus Khofri, accompanied by a piano. It was my first solo concert outside of Russia. Then in December of 2019, at the invitation of the Assyrian Art Institute, I was on tour in the state of California, USA. I performed at three Christmas concerts. I had two duets with the Assyrian female singers: "Ave Maria" by Austrian composer Franz Schubert (in Assyrian) and Ukrainian Christmas carols. I have participated in the Mesopotamian Night in Sydney, Australia twice. The second time was on the 15th of March 2020. The next day everything was closed due to the coronavirus pandemic. There was supposed to be a big celebration of Kha b'Neesan in April, where I was planning to perform, but everything was canceled.

*What is music to you?*

I really love classical music. Music is part of my inner state, my view of the world. Music gives me strength and energy which helps me grow as a singer.

*Do you know other Assyrian musicians?*

Yes, for the first time in Sydney I met Assyrian musician, Rabbi Shura Michaelian. He is a musician, violinist, and composer. The Mesopotamian Night organizers - Assyrian

Aid Society in Sydney - introduced me to him. The meeting took place at his house. We spoke in Russian, as he speaks Russian. Then we sang a duet the Soviet song "Podmoskovnye

Vechera" ("Moscow Nights") by Vasily Solovyov-Sedoi. Rabbi Shura accompanied on accordion. In Sydney I also met the wonderful pianist, Lolita Emmanuel. She accompanied me at the Mesopotamian Night the second time in 2020. She comes from a great family. Her mother speaks Russian, and we keep in touch. During my visit to the US I met other Assyrian singers, some were from London and some from the USA. In Russia I also met with professional singer, tenor Sergei Givargizov.

*Can you name musicians who have influenced you?*

I really like the Swedish tenor, Nikolai Gedda. He was half Swede and half Russian, and had an interesting life. He sang in many languages and never had an accent. His sense of music, his sense of performance is very close to mine. I also like Mario del Monaco, Franco Corelli, Luciano Pavarotti, Placido Domingo and others. As for the Assyrian pop singers, I really like Linda George. She visited Moscow and St. Petersburg several times. I also like Juliana Jendo, and attended her concert in 2019 in Moscow.











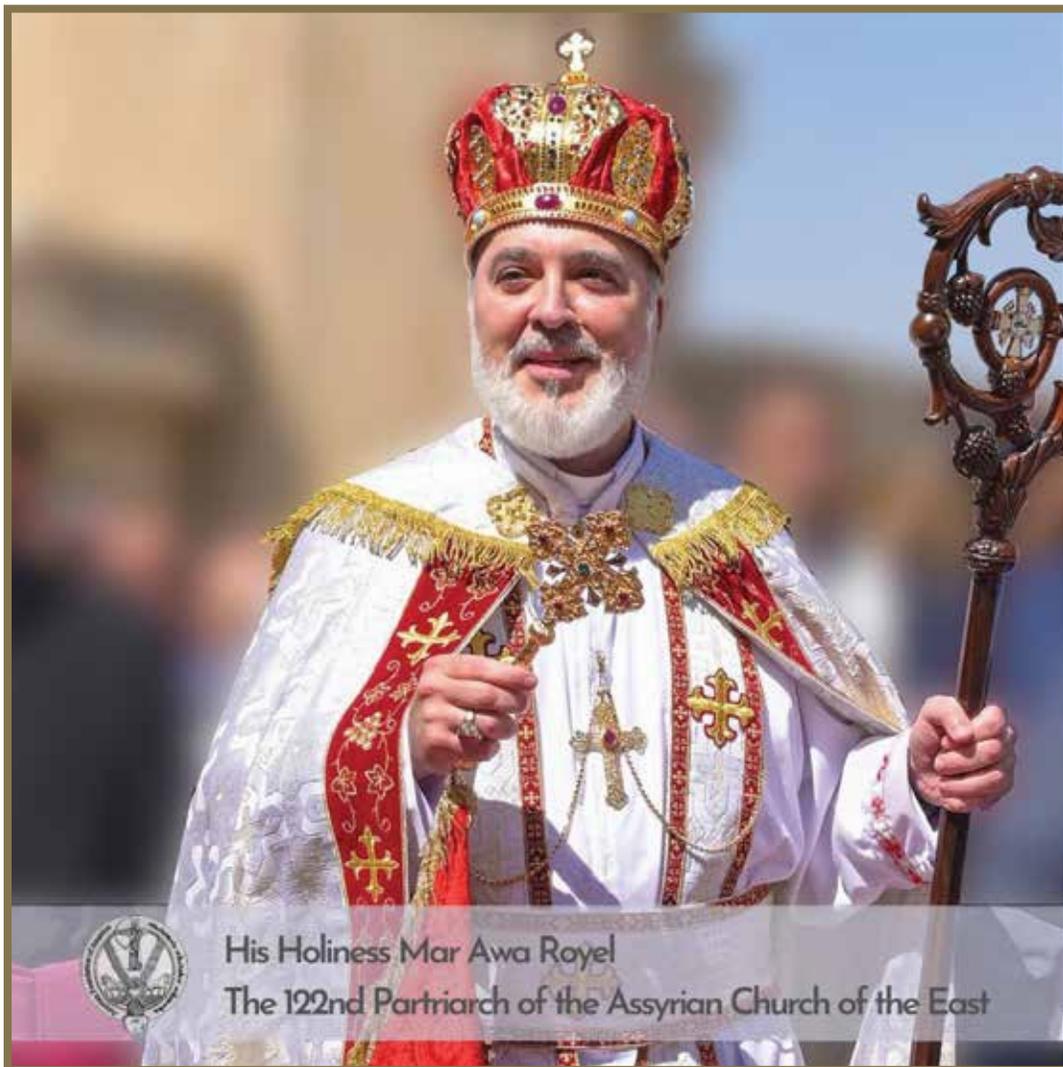






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His Holiness Mar Awa Royel  
The 122nd Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East

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