

Workshop: The Assyrian Woman

As far as I know we Assyrians have not been present in any international events or been represented at any international conferences after the second world war. Even less we Assyrian women have been represented at any world-wide gatherings. In spite of the fact that we Assyrians today are spread all over the world and exist as an ethnic minority in most countries of the world – few people are even aware of the existence of the Assyrian people – there are even Assyrians here in China, who arrived here many decades ago. It is tragic to notice that you have had to travel so far as to China to hear about us Assyrians for the first time.

Therefore this workshop is a unique opportunity for us to tell you about the existence of our people, its historical background and its present living conditions in the home countries Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria as well as the background to and causes of emigration from these countries, which has shattered us all over the world.

We will also bring up the new living conditions of the Assyrians in exile, concentrating on the Assyrians living in Sweden and specially Assyrian women in Sweden.

I, Sonya Aho, and Edibe Younan through the Assyrian women's league represent the Assyrian women in Sweden. I will start by telling you a little about our organization and the Assyrian people.

The Assyrian Women's league is a nationwide organization belonging to the Assyrian National league of Sweden. The organization has 27 member unions spread all over the country .

The main for an increased political, cultural and social consciousness among Assyrian women in Sweden and internationally.

Today Assyrian organizations exist in most countries in Europe, USA and Latin America, But in the home countries Turkey, Syria, Iran and partly Iraq the Assyrian organizations are prohibited, as in these countries we are not recognized as an ethnic minority.

The first group of Assyrians came in Sweden through the medium of the World Council of Churches to receive a group of about 200 stateless Assyrian refugees from Lebanon.

After that an accelerating emigration started, from Lebanon and Turkey to Sweden. Today there are almost 45 000 Assyrians in Sweden.

All together there are about 3 million Assyrians spread out over the world, but the main part still live back in the home countries Iraq, Iran, Syrian, Turkey and Lebanon. Just in Iraq there are more than 1,2 million Assyrians and they are second largest minority in the country after the Kurds.

The Assyrians have lived in the area, which the Greeks called Mesopotamia – meaning “the country between two rivers” – for almost 6000 years.

In the land between the two rivers Euphrates and Tigris, which run from the highlands of southeastern Turkey, through the highlands in Syrian and Iraq and discharge their water in the Persian Gulf, a highly developed civilization evolved, which is regarded to be the first in history of mankind.

The rich agricultural plains around the rivers Tigris and Euphrates gave an abundance of food, like wheat, barley, meat and fish and exactly this fact changed peoples life.

About 10 000 years ago they began to realize that they themselves could produce their foodstuffs instead of living the insecure life of collectors and hunters, as man had done un year thousands during the stone age.

Already in 3500 BC the Sumerians built city states with highly developed systems of agriculture and irrigation in Mesopotamia.

The population increased, villages turned into small towns and small towns turned into cities: already around 4000 BC a town like Eridu must have had several thousands of inhabitants. In a society of that size people gathered to produce the necessities of life, like clothes, tools and houses.

The artisans started to work full-time, the tradesmen specialized in bringing in the new raw materials from abroad and the civil servant supervised the distribution of food.

To protect themselves against the wrath of gods people paid taxes to a mighty clergy.

The temples turned into institutions, which in themselves combined adoration with functions like state administration, university and court, and in them developed not only man's relation to universe and gods, but also problems on how to administer and manage human societies ~~were solved~~. As the material result of this intellectual and spiritual development we see how simple buildings grow into monumental architecture and artisans start to produce some of the earliest conscious pieces of art.

Still today the architecture of the region bears witness about the Assyrians' skilful craft and architecture.

Who can hear the name Babylon without recalling dreams of grandeur and splendor, of hanging gardens shadowed by palms, or of temples devoted to Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, or of Babylon's king Hammurabi and his laws – the first written law in history, and of the tower of Babel?

The hanging gardens of the Assyrian queen Shamiram in Babylon on the banks of Euphrates, are considered to be one of the world's seven miracles.

The hanging gardens were situated inside the Ishtar gate, the greatest and most splendid of the eight that led to Babylon.

This gate is named after Ishtar, goddess of love and war. In the Assyrian genesis there is a myth about the love goddess Ishtar travelling to the infernal regions to look for and give life to the god of nature and love, Tammuz.

Once a year the god Tammuz is resuscitated with renewed joy and fertility and with him nature too is born.

The trees become green, flowers blossom and the fruits ripen. Nature, man and animals are filled with joy, life and love. In old times this was celebrated with cultural festivals. Still in our times the Assyrian new year is celebrated around the 1st of april, when all life begins, when the winter dark has been replaced by long, light days, when birds sing their first freedom song, flowers open and trees burst into leaf. According to the Assyrian calendar we are now in the year of 6 745.

The name Babylon means "Gate of God". In the Bible the tower of Babel is mentioned. It is said that the jews in their babylonian captivity participated in the construction of the tower, which rose 90 meters above the ground and was built with sundried bricks. The tower dominated the whole city with its seven high floors. There are different theories about how the tower of Babylon was used.

Some believe that it was used as an observatory by famous Assyrian astrologists. According to the Genesis of the Bible the descendants of Noah had built the high temple to try to reach to heaven and God.

We remember the story of the tower of Babel from the Bible, where God in wrath against the construction twisted the tongues of the people so that they began to speak different languages, According to the Old Testament it was exactly at this moment that the language of the world were born.

Man easily forgets and his memory is too easily affected to be apt to more comprehensive trading, registering of immovable property, timecounting or measurement of materials. These more complicated relations and the disputes evoked by a more complicated social structure prompted man to cut marks in stone or squeeze them in on clay, which was burned and hardened. In doing this, the forefathers of the Assyrians, had invented the first written language in human civilization, the cuneiform, characters, around 3 500 BC.

Also the first technical means of assistance like the wheel and wheeled vehicles and the first musical instruments like the harp and lyre, were invented in Mesopotamia. In the area one has also found clay tablets with the first literary production in history, the Epic of Gilgamesh. The epic is about the demigod Gilgamesh of Uruk, who mourns his friend Enkidu's death. Gilgamesh decides to descend to the infernal kingdom of death to seek for eternal life.

In Mesopotamia different dialects were spoken, of which all originated from the Semite language Akkadian.

From about 2 000 BC up to the birth of Christ Aramaic was the official language in the whole Middle East. The Assyrians spoke an Akkadian dialect, but around 1 100 BC the official language in Assyria became Aramaic.

Aramaic also was the language which Jesus spoke.

The language the Assyrians speak today – the Syriac – has its origin in Aramaic.

The Golden Age of the Assyrians came to an end when the capital Nineveh was conquered by the Persians in 612 BC. After the fall of Nineveh the Assyrians were spread all over the Near East where they founded small empires.

Of these Palmyra in Syria, Edessa (Urfa) in Turkey and Hama in Iraq are the most famous. Many Assyrians also took refuge in the distant mountains of the Hakkari province in southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq.

Now the Assyrians have lived in these regions of Mesopotamia for thousands of years, as an ethnic minority side by side with other ethnic groups with widely different languages and cultures.

In spite of the bad times, in war and famine and under persecutions and oppression, during the year thousands that have gone by, we have succeeded to safeguard our culture, our religion and our language.

The First Christian Church

The Assyrians were the first to confess to Christianity as their state religion. Shortly after the crucifixion of Jesus his pupils St. Petrus and St. Thomas started to missionize among the Assyrians in northern Mesopotamia. In Edessa, today's Urfa in southern Turkey, the first Christian church was founded and here the Syria language was developed into a comprehensive Christian literary language. Since then the Syrian language has been and is the church language of the Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) church and for the Eastern (Nestorian) church.

The first more large-scale persecutions of Christians in modern history occurred in eastern Turkey in the beginning of the 20th century. During a battle at Urmia in eastern Turkey the Turks were conquered by Russia. The Muslims, who were mainly Turks and Kurds, now declared the war to be a holy war against all Christians in the area.

They were banished from their home regions in thousands and in Tur Abdin, which means "Mountain of God's Servant" in Syriac, and in Hakkari region, many villages were devastated while men, women and children were massacred.

More than a quarter of a million of Assyrians were killed in the massacre of Christians in the area between 1914 and 1916 and approximately as many fled to Syria, Lebanon, Russia and North and South America. In Assyrian history the tragic years of 1914 to 1916 are named "Years of the Sword".

However, in the eyes of the world this massacre on Christian Assyrians has been overshadowed by the massacre on Armenians, who also lived in the area.

The father of the Turkish people, Kemal Atatürk, carried through a series of reforms of great importance to Turkey and he had a modern constitution written, where religion and state were separated. However his policy of “turcifying” became a threat to the vital nerve of the minorities.

Certainly the conquering powers in the Lausanne peace treaty of 1923 succeeded to force through a few clauses on “protection for minorities”, which exactly were aimed at the non-moslems minorities. Turkey accordingly awarded Armenians, greek and jews cultural and religious rights in their capacity of national minorities, but the Assyrians on the other hand were only regarded as a Christian minority of “Turkish origin” and enjoyed a somewhat restricted religious freedom.

During the time that followed all assyrian-aramaic language teaching was forbidden and in 1939-1930 existing schools together with several monasteries were closed. The term Assyrian was forbidden. Step by step cultural organizations, Assyrian book and journals were also prohibited. The Assyrians even had to accept Turkish family names were replaced by Turkish. The epoch of the reformer Atatürk accordingly opened the cultural oppression of the Assyrians.

It was not only in Turkey that the Assyrians were persecuted. But it also happened in the other parts of Mesopotamia, in today's Mideast. In 1933 a further massacre on Assyrians took place, now in Simel in northern Iraq. More than 2 000 assyrians were killed in the massacre of Simel. This tragic event in the Assyrian history also led to mass flight and deportations.

Many fled across the river Tigris to the northeastern parts of Syria,

Called Khabour region after the tributary of Tigris Khabour, where still today large concentrations of Assyrians are found.

After the second world war the situation of the Assyrians in Turkey has been strongly dependent on foreign political events. Thus the different crisis on Cyprus (1955, 1964 and 1974) have had negative after-effects for the Assyrians as well as for other Christian minorities. Also in connection with the civil war in Lebanon in the middle of the 70ies several assaults on the Assyrians, like plunder, murder and abduction of young girls and women, occurred.

The development of events in northern Iraq after the Gulf war has led to another human tragedy, where hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to escape. Among these refugees there were about 100 000 christian Assyrians, of whom the main part took refuge in the neighbouring countries Iran, Turkey, Syria and Jordan. Some succeeded to take refuge in Europe and the US:

The latest reports from the area in northern Iraq bears witness of a desperation and a human tragedy in which thousands of Assyrian villages have been levelled with the ground, old historically valuable churches, monasteries and archeologically important sites have been destroyed.

And like in all national conflicts it is the people, above all woman and children, who suffer most.

The Assyrians in the area are oppressed from two directions, on one hand from the majority population which is moslem and on the other hand from the Saddam regim, which does not recognize them as an ethnic minority.

The intentional embargo against Iraq also hits hardest against the weak and defenseless assyrians. The mortality in the area has fivedoubled since the outbreak of the war.

Thousands of Christians in Iraq, mostly Assyrians, leave their homes and possessions and flee in despair. Recently it was reported that right now there are more than 40 000 Assyrian refugees in Jordan, who are waiting for a chance to continue to the west.

In Jordan they are living under terrible economical and social conditions.

An Assyrian family that recently succeeded to flee from the area has testified to an unbearably existence, that just grows worse every day. Lately, the assaults on Assyrians have increased, and the economical situation in Iraq, which already was bad has worsened to devastation.

Besides economical deterioration the Iraqis also experience a total change in cultural and social values.

Earlier prostitution was very rare in Iraq, and didn't exist among the Assyrians. Unfortunately priests lately have had to preach from their pulpits against the growing prostitution among Assyrians in Iraq and Jordan. "It isn't unusual that a family father asks his daughter or son to get medicine for his sick mother at any price", an Assyrian clergyman in Iraq relates. Theft, rapes and other violent crimes have taken enormous proportions in Iraq.

The Iraqis have suffered and still today suffer beyond all reasonable limits. The western world seems untouched by the fact that more than 500 000 children in Iraq have died from want of medicals and care.

The Assyrian minority can no longer live in Iraq and its existence in the Middle East is irrevocably threatened.

The Assyrians are finally driven away from the settlement they inherited from their forefathers. Today the Assyrians are spread out all over the world. But in their country of origin, Mesopotamia, only fragments remain of the once so mighty civilization. These fragments of Assyrians are living under constant threat to be finally exterminated from the region.

The Assyrian Woman

The participation of the assyrian woman in public debate has in all times been most outstanding when political, economical or social condition are severe.

Like other woman exposed to severe hardships, assyrian women show their physical and mental strength the most during difficult experiences like war, persecutions, oppression, grief etc.

During “the Years of the Sword” 1914-1916, when an intensive ethnical purge was carried out against the Christians in southeastern Turkey, without any observing presence from the outside world, the assyrian woman fought side by side with their husbands.

While most assyrian men were at the front in the Turkish army, where the Christians marching in the first rows were used as cannon-fodder, woman, children and injured men stayed behind in the villages.

1913, when the curdish tribes started an eager pursuit on Christians in Turkey, it was exactly the womans efforts that saved many human lives and many villages from devastation.

More than a quarter of a million of assyrians were killed during the years of the sword. Tens of thousands of woman were abducted, raped, tortured and forced to convert to islam or were murdered an cold blood.

A genocide took place, and it is still going on, with the innoficial consent of the Turkish regime and the absolute silence and ignorance of the outside world.

From the year of the sword up to todays civil war in Turkey as well as during the assaults in Iraq and the present war in Yugoslavia, woman and children are the first war victims. Brutal murders, rapes and abductions of woman have in all time been tactic and effective elements in the ethnic purges.

Why does the outside world stand blind and nonplussed in face of the ongoing systematic purge of undesirable minorities in Turkey, in Iraq and former Yugoslavia?

_ Why don't we react any more on the pictures that reach us in our living-rooms, pictures of bombed and devastated villages, hardened and despairing people and pictures of childrens bodies, mutilated by forgotten shells and mines?

One of the worlds oldest cultures is threatened by destruction. In Turkey villages are burnt down and assyrians are murdered and driven away from their homes. In the recent conflict between the curdish guerilla and the turkish army Christian assyrians are badly squeezed between both sides demands for declarations of loyaty. Squeezed between the warring parties the remaining fragment of assyrians is subject to systematic assaults. During the last two years more than 30 people have been killed.

Severe harrassments, beatings, blackmailing, abductions, hold-ups and assaults, devastation of vineyards, burnings of cornfields and harvests, vandalizing of churches and profanation of churchyards...

The list of the evil deeds committed against assyrians in southeastern Turkey can be made very long.

These very severe encroachments on human rights are taking place without any reactions in numbers for every year and villages levelled with the ground a part of mankinds ancient history goes with them in the grave.

We assyrians who succeeded to escape from the area and now live in the "security" of Sweden have unfortunately repressed from our minds what happens in south east Turkey.

Now and then we are reached by news of murder, assaults and other atrocities committed towards assyrians in Turkey, Syria and Iraq, without any noticeable reaction from our side.

In the new homeland we are faced with new energy and attention.

The Reverse Side of Immigration

Many things cause people to leave their homeland and find their way to foreign and unknown soils. However, war, persecutions and oppression and an unsafe existence are the main reasons for people to be uprooted, leave their homes, give up their childhood environment and leave family and friends in search of freedom and safety in some foreign country.

One can ask oneself what thoughts worried the first assyrian refugees that came to Sweden from Lebanon in the middle of the 60-ies.

What did they think of their new homeland way up in the North, so far away from their original home countries?

Which expectations did they have on Sweden, their new country, where their children and grandchildren would grow up?

Just like the reasons for immigration are many, the consequences of immigrations are.

In the home countries of the Middle East, the assyrians live under constant threat of oppression, persecution and poverty.

It is an uncomplicated existence where the differences between good and bad, wrong and right, foes and friends are clear and evident.

In middle of the 70-ies the flight of the assyrians from Middle East to Sweden, made good progress.

Tens of thousands of assyrians left the certainty of the difficult but uncomplicated life in their home country to an unknown existence in Sweden.

Most of the 45 000 assyrians in Sweden today came from the Mardin province in southeastern Turkey and from Hasseke district in northeastern Syria, but some also came from Lebanon and northern Iraq.

In these areas there are other minorities too, like curds, armenians and arabs.

Work

The living conditions of the assyrians differ, depending on what country they lived in before and the possibilities as a group in that country.

The Assyrians that lived in Turkey come from a medium developed capitalist country with big social and cultural inequalities.

There most people work in agriculture and small trade. Among the Assyrians an artisan tradition goes way back in time. Both men and women are skilled farmers and artisans.

The Assyrian woman like many other women, all over the world, are double working.

On the one hand they side by side with their husbands in agriculture and on the other they manage the household work and take care of the children. At night, when the children have gone to bed, they occupy themselves with different kinds of handicraft like embroidery, needlework and preparations of food stores for the winter.

In their new home country Sweden too, Assyrian women are double working, on the one hand on the labour market and on the other they carry the main responsibility for the household and the children.

The only difference is that in Sweden the children in daytime are taken care of by a public institution, so called child care, when the parents are working.

Another difference is that in Sweden our future old age is guaranteed by our paying taxes to cover our pensions. In the home country however the same safety was achieved by getting many children to guarantee the maintenance and the future.

In the beginning the adaptation to the new life in Sweden was relatively smooth.

The Assyrians arrived in Sweden in the 60-ies and the 70-ies, when the country experienced a great lack of work force.

Shortly after the arrival the Assyrians were offered flats and work.

During the 70-ies and also in the beginning of the 80-ies approximately 80 per cent of the Assyrian women in Sweden were wage-earners. They were mainly recruited to unqualified works, that were not attractive to the Swedes. Mostly Assyrian women like other immigrant women got work in sectors with low or non-existing demand for knowledge in Swedish,

like charwomen, in restaurants and less valued industrial work. No doubt the invisibility of women in public debate combined with a heavy work burden and an imperfect education has been decisive in the process that has led to their marginalization and continued placing in the margin of worklife.

Today, when depression is prevailing and unemployment is higher than ever before in Sweden, immigrants and especially the immigrant women are hardest hit.

Unemployment among non-nordic citizens in April 1995 was almost 30 per cent, as the corresponding figure for Swedish citizens was 7 per cent, according to work force survey of the Swedish Bureau of Statistics (SCB). Among some immigrant groups and especially among women the figures are still more catastrophic. 60-70 per cent unemployment among some immigrant groups is not at all unusual in Sweden.

The Assyrians, who have lived in Sweden for almost 30 years, had works in industry, that have been replaced by modern technology in connection with budget cuts and the structural changes in industry by which simple works have disappeared. Developments on the Swedish labour market has made the Assyrians take up old traditional handicrafts from the home country, like tailor, shoemaker, carpenter, gold- and silversmith, restaurant work etc.

The small enterprising, which mainly consists of family enterprises, and more widespread among Assyrians today than ever before in Sweden.

The spread of small enterprising also has its reverse side. One of the drawbacks is that the children don't bother to get an education and join the family enterprise instead. The adults with high education, who could have become examples to the young, have themselves become enterprisers, since they have been unable to find a work corresponding to their education in Sweden.

Education

“Education” is a word with a very positive sound in Sweden. The reforms that have been carried out in education field have been extensive and expensive. The percentage of Swedes going through secondary education is very high, about 85. In short, the education level is steadily on the rise in Sweden.

With this as a background we can picture the education situation of Assyrian women.

We come from countries with a high illiteracy among middle-aged and elderly women is 70-80 per cent.

In spite of the fact that Turkey has five years compulsory school-attendance, younger Assyrian women and girls often have a very poor education, if any. It is not considered as important for the girls to go to school as for the boys. Many small villages in southeastern Turkey have no school at all. The civil war that has been going on for 15 years in southeastern Turkey, between curdish guerilla and Turkish military, has resulted in a situation where no civil servants, like teachers, dare to stay in the disturbed areas.

Every year several teachers in Mardin province are threatened, beaten up and killed.

The Assyrians are Christians and lives as a minority in a moslem environment.

Many Christians simply don't dare to send their daughters to moslem schools in feat of their being harassed, profanated and abducted.

The education possibilities for Assyrians living in Iraq and Syria differ a lot from the conditions prevailing in southeastern Turkey. This is largely dependant on the fact that the Assyrians in Iraq and Syria come from larger cities where the minority position is larger cities where the minority position is less exposed, and partly it depends on that Iraq and Syria were a british respectively a French mandate up to the end of the first world war.

The colonial powers laid the foundations to the present education system in these countries.

In the 60-ies and 70-ies immigrants immediately after their arrival got jobs in Sweden.

Through their work they were integrated in the Swedish society and in the work communion they learnt the Swedish language.

To master Swedish is today a prerequisite to have any chance to get a work in a high technological labour market, especially in times of high unemployment.

Many immigrants and above all low-educated immigrant women have very small chances to get into the labour market as it looks today. Some groups, among them low-educated women above 30, are threatened to be eradicated from society for ever.

An ethnically and socially segregated society is now emerging in Sweden. An alienation that especially hits some ethnic groups in society causes tensions, prejudice and a new kind of threats against Swedens future. Like in the rest of Europe rasism and hostility against foreigners is on the rise in Sweden.

The welfare country Sweden now stands at a turn of the road, where the former social structure doesn't hold out any more and a new road must be chosen.

A part of Swedens future is the European Union, but so far none of us knows what that future looks like.

Finally a few words about the young generation of Assyrians in Sweden. How many parents haven't said that it was much better before? Some immigrant parents have the habit of expressing a wish to turn time backwards and go back to where they came from and let the children grow up there.

"I could endure hunger, poverty and oppression, but I can't stand to see my family being split up and my children being lost in a foreign country", an Assyrian mother told me the other day.

With immigration from the home countries the social roles within the family were changed. Before it was the father or both parents that together led the family and managed the household.

But with immigration children have had to take a bigger responsibility for the common administration of the family. Among other things this depended on the fact that many parents were mentally and physically ill a long time after the escape and the breaking up from the home country.

Also, many adults hadn't got any substantial education in the home country. The children were the ones to learn the new language quickest, and therefore children became interpreters to their adult parents. Suddenly tables was turned. Parents lost their authority within the family and children got a too heavy responsibility for the establishment of the family in Sweden. The new roles have made some children masters in their homes and given them power to manipulate reality, when they wish to do so.

The expectations of the parents and of school/society on the children substantially differ from each other. The result is that many Assyrian and other immigrant youngsters often live in two separated worlds, one at home with family, relatives and the cultural traditions of the home country and one at school and together with Swedish mates and Swedish values.

The youngsters grow up with several widely differing cultures, languages and values. Sometimes they identify themselves as Swedes and sometimes as Assyrians or something in between. At other times they regard themselves as having no identity or they create an identity for themselves, that doesn't exist.

This confusion of identity results in frequent clashes of cultures. Often these youngsters have difficulties in holding ones own in society. Many are half-literate, that is they have poor command of both their mother tongue and the swedish language. As a result of the alienation, the lack of identity and the half-literacy these youngster try to call attention to themselves by other means. Some alcohol and drug abuse and some criminality unfortunately is beginning to be seen among these youngsters. Of course not all of our youngsters have

difficulties in holding their own in the Swedish society. Today there are more Assyrian youngsters studying at university than ever before. They educate themselves in a different fields as medicine, law, economics, management etc. However small enterprising is the most frequent choice also among the young generation. Many youngsters inherit their craft and carry on with the enterprise after their parents.

To sum up, the Assyrian people has experienced very hard times, marked by great and violent changes, all through their history.

We have experienced war, massacre, famine, mass exodus and other human catastrophes.

We have fled from one country to another. But in spite of all the misery our people has experienced they have always taken fresh courage and hope. We hope to live in freedom and peace.

We hope to freely practice our culture and our religion and teach and speak our language.

A right that ought to be a matter of course for any human being and any people of the world.

If this right really had been respected for all nobody would have experienced war, oppression, persecutions and exile.

Not soon can we expect to achieve this fundamental right in our countries of origin, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria and Lebanon.

That is why we Assyrians today are spread out over most parts of the world.