

The Voice of the Syriacs

Information bulletin about the social position of the Syriacs in and outside the Middle East.

It appears periodically, published by the European Syriac Union (ESU) in Brussels-Belgium.

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The 90th Commemoration of the Genocide: 1915-2005

On April 24th the European Syriac Union has organized a conference over the genocide, which took place in South East Turkey in 1915. 270 people from Turkish and Syriac origin have attended the conference in the Basilique of Brussels.

With 5 speakers, the conference has started with a prayer for the martyrs and victims spoken by a Syriac Priest. While Prof. Herman Teule, Director of Institute of Eastern Christian Studies of Radboud University, spoke about the history of the Sayfo (Genocide), the French Historian, Author and Orient specialist Mr. Sebastien de Courtois presented official documents and information about the Sayfo.

During the break one had the opportunity to see a documentary named "The Unheard Cry". The film showed the deportation and the death of the Armenians, Assyrians, Syriacs, after issuing the Ferman of the Sultan Mehmet Reshad to cleanse South East Turkey from non Muslim population. After the break, Prof. Paul de Waart, Prof. emeritus of International Law from Netherland, has started with the theme of Definition of the Genocide. Mr. Ayad Mossad gave a lecture about of Ferman (the Sultan's decision) and its consequences. The last speaker of the con-



ference was Mrs. Neriman Küçükaşlan, a member of the ESU with the theme of the Aftermath of the Genocide and the actions/activities done up until now about the Sayfo.

There was also a panel discussion between the speakers and the attendants.

It was clear, that there were painful experiences with the Ottoman's during that time. Many people have lost their forefathers and with the feeling of being executed and deported from their homeland, the next generation has to live with this fact. Politics have to wake up and demand for the recognition of this terrible tragedy well known as the Armenian massacre of 1915. Turkey is denying, Germany is silent and USA

together with Europe are demanding for the recognition, especially because of the membership of Turkey in the EU, and the changing politics of the USA after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Syriacs are living between fear and hope after the decision of the Prime Minister of Turkey who set up a committee to deal with this issue and to open up the archives of the Ottomans. After 90 years of suffering and pain, the issue became a political one and that is exactly what the Syriacs are waiting for after a long time of silence from the Western side and the denial from the Turkish side.



European Syriac Union



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Newsletter

The Voice of the Syriacs

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The Establishment of the European Syriac Union

242 delegates representing 11 institutions participated in a Congress held in Brussels between 14 and 15 May. On the first day of the Congress the draft of the constitution was presented to the delegates and was accepted through democratic elections. According to the constitution, the name of the new organization is the "European Syriac Union (ESU)".

Then the president and the executive council of the union were elected. The president was elected first and then 18 members of the board as well as 12 deputy members of the board, altogether 31 members of the board, were elected as the Board Council of the ESU in separate ballots. Later, the Managing Board Committee selected six members of the Board as the Executive Committee of this organization.

Numerous guests and representatives of the press joined the delegates for the second day of the Congress. Mr. Iskender Alptekin, the chairman of the European Syriac Union, started the second day with an inaugural address. After explaining the goals of the ESU he presented the Managing Board to all participants.

The following speakers then presented their views to the auditors:

- Professor Dr. Herman Teule, Director of the Institute of Christian Orient from the University of Nijmegen (Netherlands)
- Mr. Ayad Mossad, Chairman of the Union of the Christians from the Middle East (Netherlands)
- Mrs. Brigitte Grouwels, Flemish-Christian Democratic member of the European Parliament
- Mr. Walter Van Den Bosche
- John Nimrod, Senator ret. and Secretary-General of the

Assyrian Universal Alliance (AUA)
 - Mr. Eshaya Isho, Secretary-General of the Assyrian National Organization (ANO)
 - Rev. Daniel Chammoun, Deputy of Mar Odisho Avraham, Archbishop of the Assyrian Church of the East in Europe.

Who are the Syriacs:

The Syriacs are one of the oldest people of the Middle East. They appeared in the year 4000 B.C. with different names and at different times. Starting from 2350 B.C. they formed political states, empires and kingdoms under the names of Akkad, Assyria, Babylon, Aram and Osrohene (dynasty of Abgarits). The Syriacs are one of the first people who converted to Christianity. Because of their particular civilization and Christian characteristics they spread their culture in the entire Middle East.

For more than 1600 years the Syriacs have been persecuted due to their Christian faith. Although they had no political power they could retain their existence. The events of the First World War, which took place within the borders of the Ottoman Empire, took a great toll on the progress of this people. At that time hundreds of thousands of Syriacs were massacred and forced out from their homes. Afterwards they were excluded from the political reorganization in the Middle East. In the period between the First World War and the end of the Cold War, the Syriac people confronted complete extermination. The policy of the great forces, directed and determined in the Cold War, was driven by oil and led to the non-consideration and isolation of the Syriac people. While in the region the rulers were determined, there were no democratic conditions for the Syriacs in the whole



Middle East, which could ensure their future existence. Due to the unstable and uncertain situation and the constant suppression they had to leave their homeland into all four directions.

In the last 40 years active emigration of the Syriacs to the Western European countries has taken place. In Europe the Syriac people could develop and become active in social and cultural fields, and found numerous associations and federations. Due to these political and social movements, that took place for 10 years, the consciousness search for an ethnic identity was once again conceived and promoted. Furthermore innumerable demonstrations, hunger strikes, political, cultural and social events and actions were organized, in order to refer to the persistent suppression for hundreds of years of the Syriac people and to terminate the current discrimination and persecution. Therefore, the demands for democratic rights could develop within the Syriac people.

On the other hand the demands of our people were published on the agenda of the European parliaments and other platforms. Therefore a necessity became apparent. Because the legitimately entitled rights of our people

had to be transmitted more professionally to the responsible international authorities. Due to this challenge and due to the global change process taking place now, and their requirements of the Syriac people, the European Syriac Union (ESU) was founded. The scope of the ESU will be in the context of the European right terms.

Conclusion

We believe that the Syriacs could play an important role in the democratization of the Middle East because the Syriacs are an integral component of the Middle East and Europe. The Syriacs living in Europe for the last 40 years are integrated in the European society and could therefore act as a bridge between the cultures of the East and the West. This point of view and confidence rely on the historical experiences and values, which could be won in the last years of our movement. Additionally the Syriacs could participate due to their peaceful and friendly relations to all denominations in the Middle East in the construction of a democratic environment. Therefore we are convinced that in this way the understanding of friendship, brotherliness and the mutual confidence between the Orient and Occident could grow and could be spread widely.

Midyat – A Syriac Town in South-eastern Turkey

Midyat is the “chief” town of Turabdin in south-eastern Turkey and has been an Episcopal because the Syrian Orthodox church was founded here in 1478 and since then Midyat has been the metropolitan diocese.

It lies at an altitude of about 1000 m above sea level in an undulating landscape with fields and vineyards. Turabdin means Mountain of the Servants of God, in reference to the monks who have lived in the nearly eighty monasteries found in this region in the 4th century.

The town used to be the only settlement in Turkey big enough to be called a town which had a majority of Christian inhabitants, with eight churches and two mosques. Then it was connected with the nearby town of Estel, which increased its Muslim population.

Today there are about a hundred Christian families there, some of them having moved in from the villages. Midyat has the city of Mardin to the west, Hasankeyk to the north, Ciske to the east and Nusaybin to the south. Seven kilometres east of Mardin is the Syriac Monastery of Deyrulzafaran, which is a religious community in which monks still worship.

Five church towers and two minarets give the town a distinctive silhouette.

The bishops church, Mor Shmuni, attained its present appearance at the end of the nineteenth century. A yard around the church also gives access to the church school and the offices of the bishop.

Nearest to the center is the highly decorated Church of Mor Barsawmo, which was rebuilt, on its ancient foundations and to a traditional design, in 1943.

At the edge of the town, to the southeast, stands the oldest Church, Mor Akhsnoyo (the Syriac for Philoxenos). This church, was completely ruined, too. It was reconstructed in the 1960s.

Mor Sharbel, a building of huge proportions, is the southernmost of the two prominent churches on the hill. At the highest point of the town rises the largest church of all, the Protestant Church, built in 1900.

The name *Matiat* dates back to the ninth century B.C as an “cave settlement” in an Assyrian inscription.

Midyat had been attacked and destroyed, the last attack was during the First World War, when a third of the inhabitants was killed and many houses were destroyed. The town had to wait until the 1930s for a recovery: houses and churches were reconstructed and the Christian population began to grow again. Most Families belonged to the Syrian Orthodox Church but some of them were Syrian Catholics or Protestants.

Midyat is known for its silversmiths, whose objects are called “telkari”, not only for the trade, but also for the fabrication of filigree silver.”

Stone carving, filigree work, weaving, woodwork and the art of the goldsmith are also still carried out, but Midyat is popular for the stone carving and decoration of the houses and public buildings in particular.

The ancient houses there are cool in summer and warm in winter, but none of their windows ever come face-to-face with those of a neighbour house.

Midyat is also a melting pot of religions, languages and traditions, where Muslims and Christians are able to live next door to each other in a tolerance.

The Syriacs New Year 1st April celebrated in Turabdin

The European Syriac Union celebrated the traditional Syriac New Year Spring Festival on 1st April in Midyat, in order to re-enliven the Syriac culture in Turabdin (South East of Turkey).

Until a few years ago it was impossible to accomplish such an event in Turabdin, because the Syriac Culture was not officially recognized in Turkey. The changes brought about by the exertion of Turkey to join the EU now tolerate the accomplishment of cultural activities.

On this basis, ESU went ahead with the preparations to undertake a remarkable celebration of 1st April New Year Spring Festival, which is traditionally a significant day for the Syriac people who live in the town of Midyat in their homeland Mesopotamia.

The preparations of the festival were carried out by a large organization that included the Local Church Committee and the St. Gabriel Monastery representatives. The festival that was situated on a spacious area nearby the Monastery of Mor Abrohom and Mor Hobel, on 1st April 2005 between 10:00-19:00 local time, with the joining of thousands of people, turned into a massive celebration.

With their performances the leading Syriac singers and folklore dance groups who came from Europe, Syria, Iran and Turkey overjoyed Turabdin with their songs in Syriac language. While the local Syriacs, Muhalmies and Kurds joined the festival in big numbers also, about two thousand Syriacs joined from Europe, Syria and Iraq.



In addition, from the officials of the Turkish Republic the Governor of Mardin District, many Chief Town Officers (Kaymakam) and many Mayors, the representative to the EU, Member of Parliament, NGO representatives as well as many scientists attended the festival celebrations.



Also, the Prime Minister of the Turkish Republic, the Minister of Culture and the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch as well as many institutions send congratulating messages.



The representative of the European Syriac Union, Mr Fikri Aygur in his speech during the festival, emphasized that such events will help Turkey who is on the path of the EU to be regarded among the developed countries of the world and conveyed his congratulations to the various peoples who were present in Syriac, Arabic, Kurdish and Turkish

languages. While the festival was broadcasted live from Suroyo TV the leading television channels and newspapers of Turkey showed interest by being present.

In ancient times the New Year Celebrations in Mesopotamia used to be celebrated by holding big ceremonies that would continue for 12 days from the beginning of the spring until 1st April. The New Year festivals were led by Religious and Governmental leaders and the King would promise the crowds that he would serve the people adequately. The New Year Festival was the symbol of peace, freedom and brotherhood.

The tradition of holding New Year Celebrations had vanished especially in Turabdin very long time ago. This year, with this celebration that took place in Midyat town, which is a Syriac centre, a base was laid in Turabdin, in order for this tradition to be celebrated henceforth in a suitable manner for its historical significance.

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The Syriac TV Channel “Suroyo” started broadcasting from Sweden over 82 countries!

On Sunday evening, 2004 July 4, at 19.00 CET the satellite TV channel Suroyo started broadcasting its first programs. Since the official opening live gala, on Oct. 10th 2004, the TV airs daily, between 19.00 – 21.00 CET, from Monday to Friday two hours and on Sunday and Saturday each 4 hours, between 19.00 – 23.00 CET.

The history of Syriac Journalism

The journalism of the Syriac people began with the publication of the newspaper “Zahrir d’Bahra” about 155 years ago. Zahrir d’Bahra, which in Syriac-Aramaic common language means “Rays of Light”, was published between 1849 and 1917 and enlightened the path of the Syriac people. The Syriac people is rising once again after the last centuries of persecution and banishments. To name a few specific incidents; the Sayfo massacre of 1915, known as “The Year of The Sword” and the 1933 massacre at Simele in Iraq. These and similar traumatic events have undeniably left their mark on our peoples culture, literature and identity, and been an obstacle desire to develop in many areas. Now within the Diaspora, thanks to the hospitality of Europe, the work of development has begun and as a result the TV channel Suroyo is being launched.

The satellite channel Suroyo TV is established in Södertälje. Suroyo TV will be broadcast within Europe, the entire Middle East, in North Africa and the Caucasus area; it can be received in 82 countries. The Babylon Media Association that owns Suroyo TV is supported by the Suroyo Media Foundation, Sirius Media, Bethnahrin Media Association and Bahro Production which provides solid experience of producing television programs in the Aramaic language.

The continuous thread in the stated goals is to give the Syriac a real possibility of integrating into the societies in which he live and work.

Summery: Suroyo TV is programming designed with a multicultural and multi-ethnic perspective on entertainment, information, news, lifestyles, community issues, and public affairs. It broadcasts besides the two Syriac dialects also programs in a few languages spoken in Europe and the Middle East. But its primary focus is to enlighten the Syriac people from an international and democratic perspective.

Pioneering journalists of the Syiac people

In spite of the lack of resources among the Syriac people a number of journals have been published over the years. To name but a few; „Zahrir d’Bahra”, “Quarterly Paper”, “Qala d’Shrara” and “Urmia Ortodexeta”. Since these publications were supported by European and Russian missionaries they mainly contained religious themes, but the most important aspect of their existence was that they were designed specifically for our people and written in their own mother language. Great writers such as Naum Faik (1868-1930), Professor Asur Yusuf (1858-1915), Bishop Yohanon Dolabani (1885-1969) and Mor Yahkub Augin Manna (1867-1928) have enriched our journalism. We should not forget the magazines that are published today and that are distributed by our organizations and national associations like “Bahro Suryoyo”, “Hujâdâ”, “Renyro Hiro”, “Heto”, “Qenneshrin” and many others that have enriched life of the Syriacs in the past and continue to do so today.

The aims of Suroyo TV:

To make no discrimination between the various titles (Assyrian, Aramean, Chaldean, Syriac) that the Syriac people are united by. To treat the different deno-

minations that the Syriac people share - Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Maronite and Melkite - alike. To not treat unfairly in the reporting any of the regions and countries where the Syriac people live or have his roots. To serve democratization and to present the Syriac culture and civilization to the world and to the younger generation so that they can integrate into the society where they live. To raise the level of knowledge amongst the Syriacs younger generation and those with little education. To act as a bridge between the Eastern and Western Worlds and to thereby play a role in spreading western democratic values to the Middle East. To respect and strengthen the integrity of the individual. To achieve equality in society.

The TV Journalism and the Syriacs

Since more than 10 years the Syriac people made experiences with the TV journalism and production by broadcasting programs in the Aramaic language. There are currently a number of local channels including, “Assyria Sat”, “Betnahrin TV”, “Sharukin TV” and “Ashur TV” and other Television stations in the Homelands and in the Diaspora, which are broadcasting.

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Syriac Towns in the Niniveh Plains: Bakhdida (Baghdede)

Bakhdida is also known as “Qara Qosh”, a name given to her by the Ottoman Turks. Bakhdida is located less than 18 miles east of Mossul. Most of its inhabitants follow the Syriac Catholic denomination. Currently, it’s the center of the al-Hamdaniya Municipality which also include Bartilla and Karamlis.

The name Bakhdida is of Aramaic origin “Beth Khdiy” meaning “House of Youth”. Some also think that Bakhdida is from the Aramaic “Beth Deta” meaning “House of the Kite”, which made the Ottoman Turks call it “Qara Qosh” which means “The Black Bird” in Turkish. Saying that, however according to Mr. Hanna Hajjar’s research in Ancient Assyrian (Akkadian Cuneiform), the “Kara Qosh” name is much older. In fact in ancient Assyrian (Akkadian “Qushu” means “Bird” too (Reference: Assyrian Dictionary of Chicago, The Oriental Institute). So this could not be a mere coincidence, but rather the Turkish name is based on the original Ancient Assyrian name. On the other hand “Kar” in Ancient Assyrian means “Castle” or “Fortress” or “Citadel”. Based on this it’s believed that “Kara Qosh” (the older name of “Bakhdida”) was originally “Kar Qushu” meaning “Castle of Birds”. The archeologist Obert, believes Bakhdida is where the Assyrian city, Resen, used to be, however, H.G. Rawlinson on the other side disagrees.

In 1261, Bakhdida was attacked by the Kurds who occupied the Nuns’ monastery and massacred its occupants and kidnapped many children and women. It was also attacked by the Mongols in 1324 when 4 churches were burned and many of its inhabitants massacred.

In 1580, certain Jacobites of Baghdeda began to build relations with Rome through the Monastery of Mar Bihnam, but it was not until the 18th century that these Jacobites began to join the Vatican and became known as Syrian Catholics (Suryan Catholic).

As was the case with other villages in the plain of Nineveh, Bakhdida was not saved from the massacres and destruction of Nader Shah’s campaign in 1743. Bakhdida was also subject to a great famine in 1828 which killed many of its people.

In 1837, the properties (churches and monasteries), manuscripts, and furniture were divided in a special manner between the two Assyrian denominations.

The Syriacs of Baghdeda became Christians during early Christianity. There are 8 churches in Bakhdida divided between Syriac Catholics and Syriac Orthodox: 1. Church of the Immaculate: or the Church of Virgin Mary;

2. Church of Mar Zyna; 3. Church of Sarkis and Bakos: The oldest church in Bakhdida; 4. Church of Mart Shmony; 5. Church of John the Baptist; Church of Mar Jacob; 7. Church of Martyr Mar Gewargis; 8. The New Church of Immaculate.

The population of Baghdeda is around 30,000. Syriac Christians make about 96% of the population. They mainly belong to the Syrian Catholic Church with a small percentage of Syrian Orthodox Church followers. The people in Baghdeda speak the Syriac language (Neo-Aramaic). Among linguists, it is known as the Neo-Aramaic dialect of Qara Qosh.