

# Silencing the Past

by [Joe David](#) (September 2015)



Massacre at Macedonian Wedding by Turks, from Le Petit Journal, 15 February 1903

**Exactly one hundred years ago** several million Christians were brutally murdered. Among those were about 250,000 to 300,000 Assyrians. According to a statement by the Earl of Listow in

1933, the Ottoman Turks, while cleansing Turkey of religious impurities, wiped out almost two-thirds of the Assyrian Christian population.<sup>1</sup> No one knows how many Christians were totally martyred during World War I – and no one probably ever will. Many of the official documents have been sealed or destroyed by the Turkish government in order to silence the past. Yet despite their efforts, the memory of those brutal murders still lives on. They are kept alive today for future generations by the children and the children's children of the survivors.

My mother was one of the survivors of the massacre. Although she rarely discussed it, she never forgot it. It always echoed in her silence.

## **Elsie David**

Like my father, she was Assyrian. She was born in Persia on the edge of the Fertile Crescent in an area often identified as the Cradle of Civilization. When she left the Middle East after World War I, first for France and later for America, she left behind buried in the ruins of ancient civilization many family members. For her, looking back was not easy. To avoid it, she silenced the past with iron determination.

What I will always remember about her was her bullet wound below her left breast. It was an ugly scar, a cruel reminder of what she had experienced. To hide the scar and to escape the memories it evoked, she would cover herself with layers of clothes, even during the hot summers.

When I first saw the scar as a child, I was horrified by it. To avoid thinking about it, I would lose myself in mindless and childish activities. When I saw the scar again 25 years ago, while visiting her in a nursing home, I was immediately overcome by emotion. It came with a rush that required all my

adult strength to control.

My mother was in her early twenties when she arrived in America to marry my father. She arrived with enough gold to start a new life and enough raw memories for several lifetimes. My parents were married in Mexico, and they settled in Chicago. It was a pre-arranged marriage, planned by surviving family members, an arrangement which my mother never fully appreciated. As a result, the marriage was loveless in the beginning, but it slowly grew into something quite special over the years. I believe this was because of their similar backgrounds.

Although my mother found safety in America, where she and my father lived most of their adult lives, she never completely escaped her war memories. Sometimes the buried demons from her past would surface, and she would find herself struggling with them, remembering. It often happened suddenly, unexpectedly. One moment she would be calmly knitting or reading; the next moment she would be in tears, sorrowfully talking to herself in Syriac. What might have triggered her mood change was never clear to me; it could've been something she read, something I said, or some familiar object taking on a new and significant meaning.

I never made many inquiries about it during my earlier years. I was too busy running from her past. As a result, I knew very little about the war years, and even less about the family. I knew most of my family members were Christians and one or two had even become Muslims to survive, but that's about all. Even if I were told more, I doubted if I would have ever understood. What she and her family had experienced was beyond anything I could have ever imagined. Like so many boys growing up in comfortable surroundings in Chicago, my life revolved around school and my innocent, boyish adventures with my classmates.

Still, no matter how hard I tried, I could never fully forget

how much she suffered. The memory of it would often return for fleeting moments and leave me unsettled without my ever understanding why. Then on 9/11 everything changed. To my surprise, the broken pieces from her past came together, dramatically with clarity.

## **World War I**

World War I began with two shots, one aimed at Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Hapsburg throne, and the other aimed at his wife Sophie. At the time of the assassinations, all the essential elements for war were in place in Europe (*i.e.*, military and naval readiness, extreme nationalism, an imperialistic greed for more land and colonies, secret treaties, and international unrest). Yet everyone was surprised when the murder of the royal couple by a Serbian Nationalist became, not another Balkan squabble, but a major world war.<sup>2</sup>

In Turkey, the Ottoman Empire was falling apart. It was seriously weakened by its abusive treatment of the Christians in the Balkan countries, which it had ruled with unyielding power. Here's how one history book recorded it:

*The Christians who made up most of the population (of the Balkans) were regarded as "cattle" by their Moslem rulers. They had to pay extra taxes and were cruelly punished if they failed to do so. On occasion, their property was seized by dishonest officers. Their children were carried off for the Army or harem. If they dared to rebel, their villages were burned down and the inhabitants were put to the sword. Force and fear were the mainstays of Turkish rule.*<sup>3</sup>

Two Balkan wars with Turkey followed, one in 1912, the other in 1913. These two uprisings, along with a war with Italy over Libya, left the Ottoman Empire seriously exhausted and by 1914 bankrupt.

In Constantinople, the Young Turks who were in power saw the war in Europe as an opportunity to save their crumbling empire. They believed if they joined forces with the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary) against the Allies (England, France and Russia), they could gain from the alliance the support needed to rebuild their empire and defeat their long-time enemies, the Russians and the non-Muslims.<sup>4</sup>

Their plan for defeating the enemy was simple. They would unite the Muslims world-wide by declaring a *jihad*. Both the Turks and their cohorts, the Germans, believed a Holy War could be an effective way to turn the Muslims living in European colonies around the world against the Allies. If successful, the uprisings would seriously weaken the Allies by forcing them to fight a war on several fronts (in their colonies and in Europe), and by so doing, make them easier to conquer.<sup>5</sup>

Fortunately, the plot didn't play out as the Central Powers had hoped; many Muslims in the colonies joined the war, but not on the side of the Ottoman Turks. The failure of the Turks to gain world support of Muslims didn't discourage them. In an attempt to strengthen their empire and to eliminate religious diversity in Turkey, they systematically and savagely began to kill the Christians. They justified their madness by blaming them for the disintegration of their empire.<sup>6</sup>

## Persia

My mother, Asly Moorhathz (David), was born in 1905 in a village called Dizatakya. It was one of the 115 Assyrian Christian villages in Northwest Persia clustered in The Urmia Plain in West Azerbaijan,<sup>7</sup> a short distance from the ancient, walled city of Urmia. Her family's history in the area stretched back to about 1650, maybe even earlier with a little research.<sup>8</sup> Many members of her family prospered and attended school in America and Europe. A few eventually settled in America in the early 19th Century, while others remained in Persia where they maintained their position. From my mother's report, her grandfather had a title (earned by deed or marriage).

Separated from the Ottoman Empire by the Zagros Mountains in the West and protected from foreign invaders by the Russians in the North, the Muslims and the Christians in The Plain lived together comfortably in harmony. Three rivers irrigated the land and provided needed water to raise crops. As a result, the area prospered and became known to travelers as the "Paradise of Persia."<sup>9</sup>

A large mix of missionary groups from Russia, Europe and America ran schools and missions in the area, and exposed the residents to other cultures. Unlike the Sultan of Turkey, the Shah of Persia and his government tolerated this as long as the Christians never attempted to move to other areas of the country to convert the Muslims (or, as they were often called in Persia, the Mohammedans) to Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

As a result, the Assyrians enjoyed a lifestyle that was envied by their less fortunate neighbors – the Kurds (who lived in the Zagros Mountains) and the Turks (who lived in the Ottoman Empire). This envy – mixed with a commitment to radical Islamic ideas – released itself during World War I with horrible acts of atrocity.

What followed became a replay with only slight variation of what had occurred many times before in history – and what is even occurring today in the Middle East. Since my mother's family were prominent, they were immediately targeted.

The war against the Christians, which began in Turkey in 1914, expanded into Persia in 1915. This occurred suddenly when the Russian troops for strategic reasons had to relocate temporarily further north, leaving The Plain unprotected for five months (from January to May 1915). Almost overnight the area swelled with enemy forces, specifically the Turks, Kurds and other predatory Muslims, driven by an obsession to slaughter the Christians and to strip them of their wealth. Thousands of Assyrians sought shelter at the American Mission in Urmia. To protect many of them, the mission had to exceed its capacity. This led to the spread of filth, disease, and, because of the shortage of food, even famine.<sup>11</sup>

Much of what we know about the "race murders" (which genocide was called then) comes to us from random documents and reports and from the writings of missionaries and other reliable survivors who were eyewitness to these crimes.

One of my relatives, Rev Jacob David (whom I always called Kasha Yacob) taught at the Marafat School (1904-1920) where during the war he protected and fed distressed Christians. In a published article, he wrote the following about his experiences:

*In 1914 the Russian Army stationed in Rezaieh (the Persian name for Urmia) suddenly withdrew, then the Turkish Army took possession of our community, and as soon as it came, it began killing the Christians and looting and burning their homes. During this holocaust, many Christians fled to our American Mission grounds where they found refuge for five months, while the Turks were attacking us. I put an*

*American flag on the top of the school gate and sheltered about 900 persons. I became their physician, nurse, and pastor, besides providing food for them.*

*On May 15, 1915, the Turks withdrew and the Russians took their place. The surviving Christians left the mission grounds and went to their home towns. Our school work, which had been suspended, started again in the fall 1915. Now we all thought that our troubles were over. All of us began cultivating our farms and vineyards, rebuilding our ruined homes. Sadly enough, we were mistaken – our future became worse than our past had ever been!*

*In 1917 the Russians became Bolsheviks. The great army of the czar just melted away. Every soldier left for Russia. The Turks again appeared on our borders to attack the surviving Christians. Our untrained young men in order to defend their homes and families for six months fought the Turks desperately. Finally, they lost courage and spirit. On July 31, 1918, about 80,000 Christians were evacuated, marching southward like sheep without a shepherd.<sup>12</sup>*

Many years ago a family member gave me a 38-page diary written by an American missionary named Reverend Hugo A. Mueller. In his diary, the reverend faithfully recorded day-to-day stories of what was happening to Christians during the Turks' occupation of Urmia. In his diary, he recorded with some detail what Kasha Yacob didn't. Here are two entries from his diary:

*February 23, 1915 – The street was quiet, not a soul to be seen anywhere, not even the guards who had been posted on the street last night. The sun soon began to shine and the birds to chirp ... What we (saw) and (heard) was ... the sun*



*was shining on the bodies of five persons hanging from the gallows, just outside the Kordishar gate; and the birds were chirping over 40 or 50 bullet-pierced bodies that had been murdered in the night.*

*February 24, 1915 – A group of workmen go to bury the dead ... Forty bodies are counted heaped in a pit with a little dirt thrown over them. Some have broken skulls and some have been stabbed after being shot. All but two or three of these were identified and buried. Some distance away another body was found on the road, butchered ... Two men, one wounded in the arm, the other wounded in the thigh, find their way to our yard, aided, as I understand by a Moslem. One of them related how they were all marched out to the hill and told they were being taken as prisoners. Reaching the hill they were ordered to sit down and rest by the side of a pit. Here they were shot in a bunch...The bodies were rolled over with the butt of the soldiers' guns and any seen to be alive were dispatched by bayonet and rolled into the pit.<sup>13</sup>*

One missionary in his diary summed up his tragedy more personally:

*All about me, amidst the snow and the piercing cold, were hundreds of refugees, thinly clad or only half-clad, suffering from the winds and the cold, from wounds and the keenest torment of every kind.*

*Surrounded by the most fiendish and heartless of enemies, whose very creed is cruelty, whose religion teaches that paradise awaits the destroyer of the unbeliever, there I was in the center of this great mass of humanity herded like sheep, unprotected by the slightest barrier, wailing,*

*shrieking, moaning, in an agony of utmost despair.*<sup>14</sup>

The stories recorded of the savage brutality against the Christians seemed limitless. It wasn't beyond the Muslims to soak Christians in oil and burn them alive, saw off their legs and arms, gouge their eyes with knives, chop babies into pieces, and cut open the stomachs of pregnant women to remove their fetus.<sup>15</sup>

Although I may never know exactly what my mother had seen or experienced, I do know from recorded history that it had to be terrifying.

## **My Mother's Story**

My mother's published story in September 1949, is a little different than my fictional account in my novel, *The Infidels*. I took a few liberties with her experience to provide drama, simply because I didn't have enough information at my disposal to tell her story. Many details from her past beyond the fragments that she had shared with me and my sister have been buried with her. Nevertheless, my story, though recorded as fiction, is an honest, researched story of what had occurred during the war years. Here is an abbreviation of what my mother had published:

*In 1918, out of much sorrow, we became refugees from our country. My grandfather with many of my mother's relatives was martyred. We didn't know where to go, until (thank God) Great Britain opened her door, took us in and cared for us.*

*(When it was safe to leave British protection), we began to travel from place to place. With a 175 passengers, we took*

*a steamboat to Baghdad on the Tigris River. All of us had plenty of money. Although the Arab government had promised us safety, we were held up by Arab bandits. One man was killed, and three more were wounded.*

*I was shot twice, and my arm paralyzed. Later I was lost in the desert for 48 hours... I was fifteen years old. My bed and pillow were sand; I rested under a small tree. In the dark, alone, fear took hold of me. I called and called the names of the servants (there were about 10 to 15 servants in my father's house), but no one answered.*

*On the morning of the second day, the British soldiers came, searching for me. So I was found.<sup>16</sup>*

Although my mother never publicly revealed the true depth of her despair, she did allude to it in this article. Like many survivors, she had to pay a high price for what she had seen and knew. Up to nearly the end of her life in the early 1990s, she was haunted by the demons from her past. They broke through her defenses while asleep and came alive in her nightmares. To ease her through the troubled times, especially in the beginning while her psychological wounds were healing, she found comfort in Christianity.

One of the most terrifying experiences that anyone could ever know is being helplessly trapped, surrounded by an evil enemy, determined to destroy you. This was what my mother once knew as a young Christian girl growing up in Persia; this is also what many Christians and non-Muslims living in the Middle East know today. I oftentimes wonder how my mother would react to the current events in the Middle East, if she were alive. Would she still be silent about her past?

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[1] Schwarten, Helen N.J., *My Story: Persia to America*,

Assyrian Universal Alliance Foundation, Chicago, page 35.

[2] Zebel, Sydney H. and Schwartz, Sidney, *Past to Present, A World History*, pages 541-542.

[3] *Ibid*, page 472.

[4] *Genocide in the Middle East: The Ottoman Empire, Iraq, and Sudan*, by Hannibal Travis, Carolina Academic Press, Durham, 2010, manuscript, pp 2-12.

[5] *Ibid*.

[6] *Ibid*.

[7] <http://aina.org/maps/urmiamap.htm>.

[8] The Moorhatch Family Tree, which was passed from father to son, and was last recorded by Samuel Moorhatch during his lifetime.

[9] Shahbaz, Yonah H., *The Rage of Islam*, Philadelphia, The Roger William Press, 1918, page 3.

[10] Ishaya, Arianne, "From Contributions to Diaspora: Assyrians in the History of Urmia, Iran" <http://www.nineveh.com/Assyrians%20in%20the%20History%20of%20Urmia,%20Iran.html>

[11] Miller, Reverend Hugo A., a typed copy of his diary written in 1915 of his experiences in Persia during the war.

[12] David, Reverend Jacob, "My Twenty Years in Persia," Chicago Tract Society, Chicago, undated.

[13] Miller, Reverend Hugo A., a typed copy of his diary, pages 19-20.

[14] Shahbaz, Yonah, *The Rage of Islam*, Philadelphia, page 89.

[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 87-99.

[16] David, Elsie, "Call Unto Me", *A Gospel Courier*, World-Wide Courier Publications, Milwaukee, September 1949.

Editors: Written permission from the author to publish this article is required. The article is based on a recent talk at the Woman's National Democratic Club, Washington, DC, please contact the author for pictures. A print copy has been published this summer by *Nineveh* magazine (2015) which is produced by the Assyrian Foundation of America, and another copy is online and in print in a commemorative copy of a

special magazine published by Assyrian Universal Alliance  
(Australia)

<http://aua.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Commemorations-of-100-years-of-the-Assyrian-genocide-.pdf> (page 16).

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**Joe David** is the author of six books and numerous articles. His latest book, *The Infidels*, is a disturbing novel about the Assyrian massacre in 1915. For more information about his books and writings, visit [www.bfat.com](http://www.bfat.com).