



BIOGRAPHY OF HIS HOLINESS MARAN MAR ESHAI SHIMUN XXIII CATHOLICOS PATRIARCH OF THE EAST

HEAD OF THE CHURCH

His Holiness Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII is the present Catholicos Patriarch of the Church of the East. As such, he is the Supreme Head of the Church and its Universal Pastor. The official name of the Church of the East is the Holy Apostolic and Catholic Church of the East. It was founded by the Apostles, St. Peter, St. Thomas, St. Thadeus, St. Bartholomew and St. Mari of the Seventy. In the early centuries of Christianity, there was only one Church. The affairs of the Church were managed by Bishops in their respective areas. There were also chief Bishops known as Patriarchs. Writes Mar Yacob Manna, a Uniat Bishop of the Roman Church, in his book "Margy Peghyany," "Places where Patriarchates were organized by the holy apostles are the following mothers of all cities: the first, Babylon. It is the metropolis, yea, the mother of all cities and therefore was the Head of the Assyrian Kingdom. Then Alexandria, Antioch, Rome and Constantinople". Of these, only Babylon was at that time outside the Roman Empire of the West. So the Babylon Patriarch soon came to be known as Patriarch of the East. In the words of the Rev. Enoch Jones of the American Episcopal Church,

"The Patriarchate of the East can claim to be the oldest Patriarchate." His Holiness, Mar Eshai Shimun is the 119th Patriarch in this glorious line. It may also be noted that the Church of the East is called different names by various historians. Some of the Popular appellations are Assyrian Church, Nestorian Church, Chaldean Syrian Church, etc.

HEAD OF THE ASSYRIANS ALSO

The Catholicos Patriarch of the Church of the East is the spiritual head of the Church and also the temporal head of the Assyrian People. The Assyrian People had a glorious history in the past. For a thousand years from about 1600 B. C. to 600 B. C., the Assyrian Empire was the most powerful in the Middle East. Assyrian emperors like Tiglath Pileser II were renowned rulers whose overlordship embraced all the lands from the Mediterranean to the Caspian. Assurbanipal was another Assyrian prince noted for his literary taste, scientific knowledge and a vast library of clay tablets. In the 7th Century B. C., Assyrian supremacy declined and then, for a time, a kindred Semitic race, the Chaldeans, rose to political power in Mesopotamia, fused with the Assyrian and produced the famous Assyrio-Chaldean

civilization of Nebuchadnezzar of Hanging Gardens fame. In the 6th Century B. C., the Persians became masters of Mesopotamia and the Assyrians came under Persian imperial rule. After the fall of the Persians, the Arabs and then the Turks held sway over the Assyrians. The Assyrians were one of the earliest peoples to receive Christianity and they were the early members of the Church of the East. As the imperial authorities in the region were non-Christians, it was no wonder that the spiritual father of the Assyrian people was looked upon as their temporal head also. The successive imperial heads in the Middle East also found it expedient to deal with the Assyrians through their own national head. The Patriarch was recognized by the Persian Emperors, the Arab Khalifs, the Mongol Khan and the Ottoman Sultans as both temporal and spiritual head of the Christians within the empire. Till the outbreak of the First World War, this system endured. In the First World War, the Assyrian Christians were encouraged to revolt against the Turkish empire and aid the Allied cause. The British, who negotiated with the Assyrians and organized the Assyrian Levies during the war held out great hopes to them. The Rab Khaila David d'Mar Shimun, the father of the present Patriarch, commanded the Assyrian armies during the War. When the War ended the Turkish empire collapsed. But the Assyrians did not succeed in setting up a Free Assyria. They found themselves mainly under the rulers of Iraq and Iran. Disturbances broke out here and there and then the Patriarchal family was deported to Cyprus in 1933. This was a serious blow to the Assyrian people who were now leaderless. As a result, they began to languish. At last, in 1948, the present Patriarch outlined a new policy seeking peace, justice and freedom and advised the Assyrians of the Middle East to live as loyal citizens of the different states where they happened to reside.

PATRIARCHAL SEAT

Originally, the headquarters of the Patriarch was Babylon on the river Tigris

Afterwards, Babylon came to be called Seleucia-Ctesiphon and it was the capital of the Persian empire for a time. Later on, when Baghdad was made the capital of the Arab empire and the seat of the Khalifate, the Patriarchal seat was also moved to Baghdad, where it remained till the invasion of the Mongols. In the period of confusion and disorder that followed, the Patriarchate had to be shifted from place to place till it was set up at Mosul. Still later, it was moved to Qudchanis in Kurdistan. The unhappy events of the First World War again necessitated a transfer of the Patriarchal Seat. In 1940, the Patriarch went to the United States of America and finally established his headquarters there at San Francisco.

BIRTH AND PARENTAGE

His Holiness was born on the 26th of February 1908 at Qudchanis in Kurdistan of the Turkish Empire.

Kurdistan is a highly mountainous region in the borderland where modern Turkey, Iraq and Iran meet. The Rab Khaila David d'Mar Shimun is the father of His Holiness. Rab Khaila means commanding general. As he was the commander of the Assyrian armies during the First World War, he came to be popularly known among the Assyrians as the Rab Khaila. He is the brother of two former Patriarchs, Mar Benyamin and Mar Paulos. At the time of the disturbances in 1933 in Iraq, the Patriarch's father, the Rab Khaila, mother, Lady Esther d'Beth Matran, aunt, Lady Surma and the rest of the Patriarchal family were taken to Cyprus. They had to remain there for a long time. At last, in 1949, the Rab Khaila and Lady Helen, the Patriarch's sister, came to the United States of America. Honorable Theodoros d'Mar Shimun and Honorable Captain Sargon d'Mar Shimun are brothers of the Patriarch. The members of the Patriarchal family have now settled in the United States; thanks to a private bill passed by Congress permitting their entrance into this country on a non-quota basis.

EDUCATION

From his infancy, His Holiness was brought up with care. The necessary theological and liturgical training was given by the late Archdeacon of the Patriarch, Very Rev. Thoma Ashita and by the Metropolitan of Rustaqa, His Grace, Mar Yosip Khnanishoo. His education was not completed when, at the age of twelve, he became Patriarch in 1920. Four years later for further education, the Patriarch went to England and was enrolled at St. Augustine's College, Canterbury. After completing his preparatory schooling there, he went to Westcott House, Cambridge University, where he specialized in History and Statecraft. His formal schooling under formal teachers ended in 1927 but, in the next two decades, his education in the harder school of adversity has mellowed his wisdom and matured his personality. Experience is always a great teacher, and what a life of rich and varied experience His Holiness spent, especially during the two decades from 1927 to 1947. Always on the move in Iraq, in Cyprus, in England, in Switzerland and in the United States; often in danger of life during the days of the disturbances in Iraq, meeting foreign diplomats and heads of states; making representations to the League of Nations, making appeals to the United Nations; contacting world leaders and discussing with them the Assyrian Questions; His Holiness did everything possible to save the helpless Assyrians and the beloved Church of the East from utter destruction and disintegration. And, the sober serenity visible on his radiant face today is the accumulated result of these myriad experiences. In 1953 when His Holiness visited England, the Manchester Guardian reported, "The Patriarch—an imposing man with the coal black hair, handsome profile, and piercing black eyes of his race, wore black robes and a cross . . . The Church of the East traces its origin directly back to the original apostles. One of its chapels founded by the Three Wise Men on their return from Bethlehem, is still in use today in the town of Rezaieh, in Northern Iran. The Patriarch attended that chapel as a boy.

CONSECRATION

In the year 1920 began the term of office of the present Patriarch. For the past 600 years, by virtue of a law passed by the Church, the Patriarchate has been hereditary in Mar Shimun's family. This is



the only hereditary Patriarchate in Christendom. As the Patriarch remains celibate, the succession goes from uncle to nephew. On the death of the Patriarch, the Bishops, along with the Chief Metropolitan, meet in council and elect the successor to the Patriarchal See. The years preceding the consecration of Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII were full of tragedy for the Assyrian people. Patriarch Mar Benyamin of hallowed memory was treacherously slaughtered along with several Assyrian national leaders in the fateful year of 1918 by the Kurdish Chieftain Simko Agha. This

conference the Patriarch attended much against his better judgment, at the urging of Captain Gracey of the British political Mission in the Caucasus, accompanied by Mr. Robert MacDowell, son of Dr. MacDowell, a Presbyterian American Missionary who had spent many, many years among the Assyrians of Iran as a member of the Presbyterian mission, and who had told the Patriarch that unless he was to meet in conference with Simko, the Assyrian nation would not be considered an ally at the conclusion of the conflict then clearly predicting an allied victory. This advice, whatever its intention, proved fatal not only for the Patriarch, but

for the Assyrian nation as a whole. Mar Paulos, the brother of Mar Benjamin, was raised to the Patriarchate then. He, too, died of illness on the terrible flight following the murder of Assyrians in Kurdistan. At that time, in the Patriarchal family, there were only two eligible candidates for the post—Theodoros and Eshai, then a lad of only 12. The choice fell upon Eshai. So, Eshai was raised through all the minor grades of the hierarchy and, on June 20, 1920, at the Church of Marth Mariam, in the Baquba camps near Baghdad, he was consecrated as the Catholicos Patriarch of the Church of the East, the 119th Patriarch in unbroken Apostolic succession beginning with Mar Shimun Kepa (St. Peter) who first established the Church at Babylon.

FIFTY YEARS A PATRIARCH

The present Patriarch has been in this exalted office for 50 years; thus, with the exception of two former Patriarchs, viz, Papa Bar Gaggi, who sat upon the Patriarchal See from the year 247-326 and Elia Shimun XII (also from the present line of Patriarchal house) who sat from the year 1600-1653, His Holiness, the present Patriarch, is the third in this long line of apostolic succession of nearly two thousand years history to have ruled the longest on this Holy See.

The first stage from 1920 to 1927 witnesses the minority of the Patriarch and his education abroad. Though the Patriarch was consecrated at the early age of 12, the young Patriarch received all the honors due to his rank. Each diocese led by its Bishop paid him homage. The boy Patriarch was given intensive theological training and general education befitting his rank. These days were days of stress and strain for the Assyrians who had been drawn into the World conflict by the Western allied powers, namely, Great Britain, Russia, the United States and France in a decision reached by the representatives of those powers during a conference held in Tiflis, Russia in 1914.

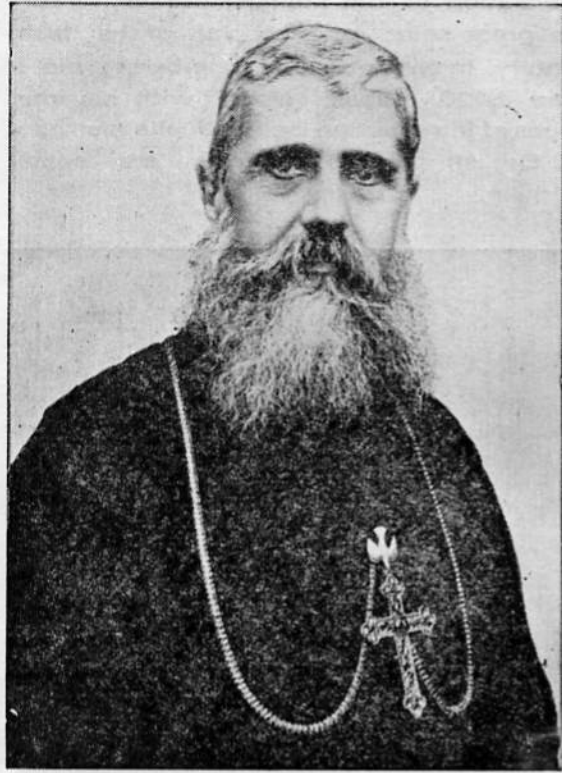
The victory, having been achieved by the allies, and in which the small Assyrian first Christian nation had played such a prominent part in the Middle East theatre of war, as witnessed by the allied in general and the British in Particular (whom the Assyrians served with distinction in the years succeeding the First World War and during the Second World War) now conveniently forgot all their promises and sacrificed the Assyrians "on the altar of Oil." These were the years of intrigues and murders—of rebellions and flights.



Mar Yosip Khnanishoo Metropolitan

The affairs of the Assyrian people and their mother Church were managed by Mar Yosip Khnanishoo, as metropolitan of Rustaqa, consecrator of the Patriarch, according to the Canon Law, and for a period, assisted by the late Mar Temotheus, metropolitan of India. In secular affairs, these two metropolitans were assisted by Lady Surma d'Mar Shimun, and her brother, Rab Khaila (General) David d'Mar Shimun, father of the Patriarch. The second

stage began with the return of the Patriarch to his headquarters in Iraq in 1927, and it lasted for two decades. They were hectic days of feverish activity for obtaining a national home for the Assyrians. After the first World War, the Turkish empire



Late Mar Themotheus Metropolitan

broke up. Syria (afterwards divided into Syria and Lebanon), Palestine (afterwards Israel and part of Jordan), Iraq (old Mesopotamia) and Arabia were lost by the Turkish Sultan. In Turkey itself there was a revolution under the leadership of Kamal Pasha who abolished the Sultanate and Khalifate in Turkey. The Western Powers were obliged to recognize the Republic of Turkey and make peace with Kamal Pasha. Syria became mandatory territory under the French; Palestine and Iraq, under the British; Arabia split into a number of independent or semi-independent kingdoms and sheikdoms under the British sphere of influence. In the settlement that followed the First world war, the Assyrians were nowhere in the picture. They found

themselves at the mercy of the newly formed Governments of the Middle East. There were persecutions and rebellions and suppressions and flights. The Patriarch and his family were deported from Iraq to Cyprus in 1933 under the control of the British Foreign Office. The Patriarch was not allowed to meet with the Assyrian leaders and bishops. So, it was a period of hard days for the Assyrians and the Church of the East. However, the Patriarch was permitted to visit England and to go to Geneva to place the Assyrian case before the League of Nations. Those attempts were not successful since the League of Nations, as is well known, was only an instrument to safeguard the interests of the big powers and the British Government which was determined to keep the Assyrians in Iraq for its own interests and had the ability to nullify any plan aimed at the betterment of the situation of Assyrians in Iraq or their immigration to some outside country.

In 1940, His Holiness came to the United States of America to supervise the affairs of the Church of the East in this country. He was then able to present the Assyrian question before the World Security Conference held in San Francisco in 1945 and before the United Nations Organization in 1947.

From 1948 begins the third stage of the present Patriarch's term of office. In this year, His Holiness made epoch making announcements of a new policy for the Assyrian people and the Church of the East. He directly contacted the embassies of the Middle East countries in Washington and at the United Nations Headquarters and broke down the wall of suspicion and misunderstanding. He advised the Assyrians and members of the Church of the East all over the world to remain as loyal and faithful citizens of the states in which they lived. The result was electric. There was friendly response from Syria, Lebanon, and Iran and cordial relations were established with these governments. Ever since his arrival in the United States, His Holiness

has been active in establishing parishes, building churches, editing and translating literature from Aramaic into English for the use of the Church in this and other countries. During this period, the Patriarch has consecrated several bishops, ordained many priests and deacons and three years ago, established the first non-Assyrian American English speaking parish in Seattle, Washington.

Perhaps the most important of His Holiness' activities has been the Apostolic pastoral visits which he has paid to the Churches in India and the Middle East and which have resulted in the strengthening of the spirit of the clergy and the faithful. The erection of many edifices, building of schools and, finally the establishment of a Seminary in Tehran, Iran, and the actual construction of a handsome building for that purpose. In 1954, for reasons of health, the See was removed from Chicago, Illinois to San Francisco, California. The Cathedral Church of the Patriarchal See is the Church of Mar Narsai in San Francisco, California,

SCHOLAR AND WRITER

His Holiness is a profound scholar, a good writer and a fine speaker. As early as 1926, the Patriarch attended the Nicean Council Commemoration held at Westminster Abbey, London. The Church and State Conference held in Oxford and the Faith and Order Conference held in Edinburgh were both attended by His Holiness in 1937. The distinguished Athenaeum Club of London has honoured His Holiness by conferring on him its honorary membership. He is also a member of the American Historical Society and other organizations; and represents the Church of the East on the World Council of Churches. Many appeals and publications concerning the Assyrian Question, written by the Patriarch and presented to the British Government and various international bodies, mark him out as a writer of reputation. Many Syriac books have been translated into English by the Patriarch. Portions of the Aramaic Liturgy; the Book

of Hymns and Praises; Synodical Rules of the Church of the East; the Book of Marganitha, a standard theological work of the Church of the East; several outstanding sermons on the history of doctrines of the Church of the East; the publication of the homilies of Mar Narsai, the great saint and scholar of the fifth century, in two volumes, numbering more than 1400 pages; along with seventy pages of introduction and critical apparatus in English by His Holiness are some of them.



His Holiness is well versed in Ecclesiastical History and an authority on History of Christianity in the Middle East and Far East. His scholarly discourses on Church History at international Ecclesiastical conferences at various Universities have attracted world wide attention.

CONCLUSION

Thus, this banquet which is being given on this most historic occasion in this great city of Chicago, though sponsored by all the parishes in this Country, in reality represents the Church of the East throughout the world. It is therefore a reminder to us not only of the Fiftieth Anniversary of His Holiness' consecration in this unbroken line of Apostolic succession, but also of all the aspects of the glorious history of the unparalleled missionary enterprise; of the martyrs and confessors; of saints and scholars; indeed of the first Christian nation, to whom every Assyrian, irrespective of his present Church or denominational adherence, owes his history and only through which he is known to the civilized world.

It is with a sense of profound humility that we stand today before this glorious history in which His Holiness, the present Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, has played such an important part and we pray that the Triune God, who was revealed to us in His fullness by the dispensation of His only Son, Our Lord Saviour Maran Eshoo M'Shikha, the Lord and Master of the Church, be with and guide this, His Apostle, to administer and lead His Holy Church for many years to come, unto the glory of His Holy Name, Amen.

By courtesy of
The Committee of the 50th Anniversary of
The Patriarchate of Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII.
Chicago, Illinois JUNE 27, 1970.



“And this Holy Church was founded by our Lord and God himself in his lifetime, when He sent His seventy to preach in Mesopotamia to the sheep who are lost from the house of Israel, and likewise all the other Apostles worked among us and left for us their teaching and their holy traditions”.

His Holiness in his Sermon
delivered during the Holy Qurbana
in the Marth Mariam Church, Trichur,
on Sunday, December 10, 1961.

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