



## 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

