

# THE ASSYRIAN COLONY IN THE CANADIAN PRAIRIES

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\* There is a small town in the province of Saskatchewan in the heart of the Canadian prairies known as North Battleford. ( See map). Its very first settlers were 36 Assyrian men, women and children from Urmia region in northwest Persia(Iran), who immigrated to Canada in 1902. The person who masterminded this immigration project was an Assyrian medical missionary by the name of Issac Adams. Today this town is home to about 15 Assyrian families, which is all that is left of that settlement after three generations.

The Assyrian migration to Canada is unique in two ways. First, it was the sole planned group settlement effort. Second, it took place before World War I Diaspora at a time when Assyrian rarely migrated overseas with their families, and with the intention of permanent resettlement abroad.

The question that comes to mind is that what motivated these people to leave their relatives and friends, their ancestral shrines, and their beautiful plain of Urmia, to settle in a far and forbiddingly cold land? This paper documents the history of this migration, the social forces that led to it, and the experience of this immigrant colony overseas.

## Historical Precedents:

In the pre-World war I era the Nestorian Assyrians, who are the subject of the present paper, occupied a triangular territory between lake Van, Lake Urmia, and the town of Mosul. This was a border region between Ottoman Turkey and Persia at the time. The Assyrians were mainly a pastoral and peasant people composed of nucleus of seven independent clans that held blocks of mountain territory in the Hakklari Highlands, and satellite peasant communities in the surrounding plains of Mosul, Van, Salmas, and Urmia. The Assyrians lived under Persian and Ottoman rule as a Christian minority governed through their own ecclesiastical representatives ( millet system )\*\*. The Middle Eastern state and legal institutions, together with householding economy of pastoral and peasant people, contributed to the

self-sufficiency and the social isolation of minorities. The Assyrian were a more or less homogeneous community economically, religiously, and socially. This was soon to change with imperial expansion of Great Britain and Russia into the Middle East in the 19th century which drew Ottoman Turkey and Persia into the orbit of the European market economy.

By the middle of 19th century the Assyrian men had been transformed into migrant workers. In 1828, when Russia separated Georgia from Persia, the Assyrian villagers found themselves closer to the Russian border. Large numbers of men regularly crossed the border into Russian towns where they engaged in wage work or learned trades. By the end of the 19th century, the massive introduction of foreign industrial goods had already ruined the native handicraft industries and growing dependence on cash drew the native peasantry to towns. The inclusion of the Assyrians into cash economy was speeded up by the presence of various mission establishments amongst them.

#### The Politics of Religion:

During the course of the 19th century various foreign missions established stations among Assyrians and Armenians in both Persian and Ottoman territory. The Russian Orthodox, the Presbyterian, and the Roman Catholic missions adopted the policy of conversion and the destruction of the indigenous churches. The missionaries used both force and temptation in the conversion of the natives (Gibb & Bowen 1975, pp. 246-248; Joseph 1983, pp. 31-55). In the Urmia region they offered considerable material well-being to those who joined their fold. For the first time the Assyrians were given the opportunity to attend schools and receive health care in hospitals, which could now engage in the more remunerative tasks such as work in foreign projects or engage in foreign trade (Nikitine 1925, p. 359). Soon the Assyrian community in Urmia was dissected among the various Russian Orthodox, Catholic (Chaldean), and Presbyterian denominations. Those who attached themselves to the various mission establishments experienced considerable upward mobility. Now the community was divided not only denominationally, but also along class lines. Besides the older tenant farmers, there were now freehold peasants, the city dwelling artisans, and the well-educated professionals. Even a nascent bourgeoisie could be distinguished among the Chaldean Assyrians who were engaged in the European trade and banking as middlemen. The converts to foreign denominations became alienated from their Nestorian brethren, and the ancestral traditions. In the words of one missionary, they began to "ape the Europeans" (Maclean and Brown 1892, p. 179).

The privileged position of the Christian minority angered the dispossessed sections of the Muslim population. Towards the end of the 19th century as the central government in Persia weakened, and the economy deteriorated under foreign domination, prosperous Assyrian villages in the Urmia region became increasingly a target of Turkish and Kurdish armed bands who carried away cattle, farm produce, and tools. Under the circumstances, the Assyrians became enthusiastic when they heard stories about fabulous opportunities that existed for work and prosperity in the "Christian" countries of North America. An Assyrian scholar who settled in the United States early in this century, describes the impression Assyrian had of America:

They are told that this great country is but a little island, inhabited by five thousand Christian missionaries, whose entire time is given to prayer, fasting and preaching; that the country is ruled by a Christian government, free from all evils and abuses; and that nobody plays golf, drinks whiskey, or smokes (Ehhardt & Lamsa 1926, p. 83).

During the second half of the 19th century the Canadian government, in its attempt to develop the economy of its western provinces, adopted an open door policy to immigration (Hall 1975). Settlers were needed to develop the virgin prairie land as a major wheat and cereal producing region. Workers were needed in the construction of railways which were to connect the western hinterland with the metropolitan centers of Eastern Canada. A huge propaganda machinery was put into operation to attract immigrants, particularly from the European countries. Literature in the form of circulars was distributed among teachers, preachers, and public officials. Promotional trips and testimonial letters from successful settlers were some of the other features of this advertising campaign.

Thus political instabilities in the old country, and the liberal immigration policies abroad, were the "push and pull" factors in this migration.

#### The Assyrian Pioneers:

Issac Adams and those who followed him to Canada in 1902, belonged to the generation of the Assyrians who had become deculturated and alienated not only from their own community, but also from the larger Persian society where the Christian minority no longer felt safe. Adams himself represents well the type of the missionized and westernized youth of his times, who was sold on the American dreams. He writes in his autobiography that he was born

in 1872 in the village of Sangar, near the town of Urmia. At the age of six he lost his father who had gone to Russia as a migrant worker. He came under the influence of the Presbyterian mission where he attended school. Upon reading the passage from the Bible that says "Cut thee out of thy country the promised land—America, with less than six dollars in his pocket (Adams 1900, p. 24). He entered the United States border at the age of 16 and with the help of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Mission, he studied to become first a minister and later a medical doctor. he returned to Persia in 1894 and opened mission schools in various Assyrian villages, and succeeded in converting not only his village to the Presbyterian denomination, but several others as well.

As early as 1902 Issac Adams had planned to settle a large group of Assyrians in California where the climate is suitable to the growing of orchards and vineyards, the traditional activities of the Urmian peasantry. But when he inquired about the possibilities for homesteading, the immigration officer in Sacramento enlightened him to the fact that public lands sufficiently large for a colony were no longer available in the region. Since the Canadian immigration laws were more favorable at the time, Adams decided to settle his colony in Canada.

It was in the Fall of 1902 that six "arabanas" ( one horse carts) carrying 36 Assyrian men, women and children left the village of Sangar towards an unknown land. The names of those who accompanied Adams make familiar reading in the northwest part of Saskatchewan. There was Joseph Adams and his wife; and Abraham Adams and his wife and family. (These were Issac's brothers). There was E. Shabaz with his wife and family; and Solomon Backus, a cousin of Adams'. Aushani was picked up in Gavilan, and at Tabriz a few days later, Michel George and Peter George, Samuel Baba, and Absalom George and his wife and family. An orphan girl named Banosha also joined the group (Wetton, n.d.). They passed robber-infested regions before they reached the Russian border. From there they took a train to Hamburg, Germany. There they boarded the ship "Assyria", and landed on the Canadian soil on New Year's Day, 1903. (one of the mothers gave birth to a baby girl aboard the ship. She was named "Assyria".)

They had to wait in Winnipeg until winter was over. With the Spring break-up, they resumed their trek. In Saskatoon they assembled such equipment as they could afford, and following the old Battleford trail, they reached the North Saskatchewan River which they ferried to the North Bank. This was the final destination, and they set up their tents. Homesteads were

immediately filed on. Land was cheap. It was possible to acquire a quarter section for \$10, and preempt another for \$3.00. Dr. Adams secured a quarter section of land on the site where the provincial Hospital now stands. The colonists attempted to select adjacent plots in order to be near one another. As soon as homesteads were acquired, the settlers began to build their first home. They gathered stones from the hillside and built for themselves a solid, one-story house, 30 feet by 50 feet. Its walls were two feet through (Wetteon, n.d.). This was where all the thirty seven colonists spent their first winter. But until it was completed, they abandoned the tents because of the cold and took shelter in a dug-out on the side of the hill.

### Making A Living:

In 1903 there were very few farmers in the area. The closest town, Battleford, was some miles away from the Assyrian encampment. The town had prospered during a boom period a decade earlier, but in 1903 it was experiencing a setback as the railway had bypassed it in favor of other cities. Movement of cargo constituted a problem and imported goods were very expensive due to the high freight rates. Therefore farmers were not attracted to the area because they could not market their produce if they settled there. The Assyrian pioneers engaged in subsistence farming and to acquire cash, they went to town and looked for any available job. The colony prospered in the first few years. The land was virgin and it produced much more than they had ever had in one season back home. Even work in town was much more remunerative compared to the old country. In the meantime, the Canadian Northern Railway (CNR) officials bought large tracts of land around the Assyrian homesteads and, to the utter dismay of the inhabitants of Battleford, decided to divert a line which was supposed to go through the town, to this area. In a short time a settlement arose around the Assyrian homesteads which in a year developed into the prosperous town of North Battleford. New business and people, mostly from England, or British settlers from Eastern Canada poured in. This gave the Assyrians plenty of opportunity to find work. However, since they were not literate in English, they were given only unskilled work. Some hauled bricks with a team of oxen, others laid water and sewer lines or found other types of work in the booming construction market and on the railway. E. Shabaz who had saved some money, invested in a candy store. Some of the Assyrians invested in land because to own land had a high value in their traditional mode of life.

## A Second Colony:

In 1906 those pioneers who had left their families back in Persia gave Adams passage money to bring them over. Adams went to Persia and returned in 1907 with 40 new Assyrian settlers. Not all of those were members of the families of the first colonists. Other Assyrians had decided to join the settlement in North Battleford. The new settlers experienced considerable hardship on their way to Canada. They had sailed in cargo boats carrying livestock, and had slept in train depots instead of hotels. To make matters worse, it seems that due to travel mixups, the band was delayed for a month in the Port of Hull in England where whatever money they had, was used up. Adams had attempted to raise funds for the band from charity organizations in England, apparently with little success. Their relatives in Canada had to mortgage their homesteads to send additional money to England in order to get the travellers to Canada. These incidents left the colony not only in difficult financial conditions, but also in tense social relations. Some of the families had grown suspicious and resentful towards Adams.

After World War I more Assyrians joined the colony in North Battleford either on their own, or through the help of their relatives already there.

## Survival Strategies:

The pioneers transplanted the extended type of family organization and the patterns of mutual help and obligations that go with it to Canada. At first, this proved very adaptive in view of their economic situation in a frontier environment. It helped the settlers to pull their resources together and minimize costs. It was mentioned earlier that during the first year, the whole colony lived under one roof. The later settlers were able to reach Canada because their relatives paid for their passage money. The common pattern for the newly arrived was, without exception, to stay with their relatives for a year or two until they could procure a house and become economically self-sufficient. Those who had no relatives in town, mostly men, were given temporary accommodation for a year or two at Shabaz's who was a relatively well-to-do farmer and businessman. All these men had shacks on their land; but the shacks had no heating facilities or water supply. So during the winter months the men stayed at the Shabaz's. There were only two women in the house to feed the large crowd. Men helped with the heavier housework. As soon as these men were able to bring their families to Canada, they moved out and in turn helped other relatives to get established. The pioneer generation of settlers managed to find Assyrian

mates even though there were not enough women in this small and isolated colony. Some asked their relatives to bring them a wife from the old country. Others had to select a spouse which would be considered very "improper" in the old country. Some married widows much older than themselves; others married their first cousins which is considered "too close".

The Assyrian farming venture was not too successful. After the first few years, the crops began to fail. The farmers' worst enemy was frost which killed the crops before they had had a chance to mature. At that time seeds which were resistant to cold were not developed yet. Altogether farming on the Canadian prairie was a very difficult proposition at the turn of this century. With the agricultural technology limited to human and animal power, it was easy to break sufficient amount of undeveloped land for cultivation, particularly if the unit of labor was the family. Quarter-section farms were inadequate for dry farming, which was the only form of cultivation then. A half-section would be viable, but then it needed more labor than one family could afford. So fertile land was not a sufficient factor for successful farming in those days. The government expected to develop western Canada into a farming region, yet it was not prepared to subsidize the farmers. Consequently, approximately 57% (six out of ten) farmers failed and moved out to towns (McGinnis, 1975). The Assyrians were no exception. Like most farmers, they were part-time laborers and, as farmers, they practiced mixed farming and livestock raising for subsistence. There were some years which were so lean that Adams had to obtain clothing and essential utensils from the Salvation Army for the hard-hit Assyrian families.

By 1914 the majority of Assyrians had moved from farms into the town where they occupied a quarter called "Chism Town". Some kept their farms, and commuted back and forth. These lived on their farms during summer, and moved to town in winter bringing their livestock along (a few heads of cattle), which they kept in their backyards. The more successful ones opened small businesses such as a tannery, a tailor shop, a poolroom, two grocery stores, and a candy store. One man worked as a painter, another as a buggy driver, and another as a train conductor. The poolroom business prospered and was still run by Assyrians at the time of research in 1973.

The depression of the 1930's hit the Assyrian families to different extents. One farmer said that the farmers did not suffer from hunger as there was enough to eat—the only problem was lack of cash. The provincial government paid the farmers \$7.50 a month when the crops failed; this they

paid back in later years. Those who lived on a monthly salary were particularly hard hit. Unemployment prevailed. In some cases the depression changed the course of a man's or a woman's life altogether:

My dad was a train conductor. He passed away during the depression. I was in grade eight then. One day my mother came home crying. She had gone to collect relief money; but the official had told her that they would not give us relief unless I worked. So I quit school and started cutting grass for the city. That is how I never finished school.

The most destitute of the Assyrian families lived off the land, and hauled cut wood to town and sold it door to door.

#### The Assyrian Community in the 1970's:

At the time of research in 1973, the Assyrian population of North Battleford consisted of 59 men, women, and children, including the non-Assyrian wives or husbands who numbered 13 in all. None of the 1902 settlers remained in the city. They had either outmigrated or were dead. From the 1097 colony, a 75 year old woman was still living in North Battleford.

There were 13 Assyrians who were first generation immigrants that is, they were not born in North Battleford. These were all full Assyrians. The number of first generation Assyrian born in North Battleford was 14. All except one were full Assyrians. This indicates that the pioneer generation of settlers had married Assyrians. The number of second generation Assyrians born in Canada was 19. These were predominantly either preschoolers or school-age children. They were all half-Assyrians which indicates that the Canadian born generation had all married non-Assyrians. Inter-marriage was well tolerated in the community as long as the marriage partner was Christian (excepting native Indians towards whom the Assyrians had learned to take the "white man's" attitude).

The low rate of population increase indicates a considerable rate of outmigration. But note that there is a difference for the reasons behind the outmigration of the pioneers on the one hand, and the subsequent generations on the other. The pioneers moved out of Canada to join other Assyrian communities in the United States—particularly in California.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> But the



emigration of the following generations illustrates the general Canadian pattern of migration from the rural areas or small towns to larger industrial cities within Canada itself. In other words, what motivated the pioneers to move was primarily maintaining closer kinship or ethnic ties; what motivated the following generations was primarily job opportunities in the larger cities.

At the time of research in 1973, the majority of the Assyrians of North Battleford belonged to the "middle class". There were three farmers; four individuals who owned businesses (two poolrooms, a wholesaler, and a beauty salon owner and operator); and seven individuals who had specialized occupations and worked either for the government or private enterprises (road surveyor, hockey scout, railroad conductor, cook, small store manager, professional secretary and sales clerk). Most of the retired individuals lived on the proceeds they received on rental houses they owned—the modest scale of such rentier incomes ranged from the proceeds of only one house to that of two or three.

The community social structure was remarkably enough a miniature replica of the village social structure in the old country. The community consisted of seven "lineages", or parts thereof<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> (people who carry the same family name). These "lineages" were divided into twenty-one households (nuclear families or remnants thereof living in separate dwellings). All these households were related to at least one other family in the community either through lineal (blood relations) or affinal (marriage) ties. The difference from the old country village structure was that in this case the extended family did not live under one roof, and it was no longer the property-holding and decision-making unit.

#### The Place of Assyrian Settlers in A Frontier Town:

Even though the Assyrians were among the first settlers of North Battleford, they had remained marginal to the economy and politics of the town up to the time of research in the 1970's. Not one Assyrian name appears in the list of local government representatives or prominent businessmen. The Assyrians were essentially uninvolved members of the petty bourgeoisie or the working class. There had been some in the professional category; but they had moved out of North Battleford.

To understand the position of the Assyrians, we must acquaint ourselves with the general structure of the Canadian society of which North Battleford

is a replica.

The Canadian society is socially divided into unequal classes and various ethnic groups. Often class and ethnicity overlap. Broadly speaking, the elite is composed of Anglo-Canadian settlers who act as gate-keepers to the positions of wealth and power (Clement 1975). Ethnic groups from Western European countries such as the French and the Germans, occupy a higher position compared to the Eastern European immigrants or settlers from the Asian continent such as the Chinese, Japanese, or the Assyrians. The original inhabitant of Canada—the native Indians and the Eskimos, are reduced to the position of an underclass (Porter 1965).

When the railroad reached North Battleford in 1905, settlers of Anglo-Saxon origin from England or cities of Eastern Canada flowed into the settlement. They were government agents or members of the Northwest Mounted Police who, after the termination of their service, decided to settle in the area. Later some of these held the municipal level of government posts. Others were prospectors or businessmen who took advantage of the opportunities offered by the increasing population of a boom town. (North Battleford had a population close to 6,000 in 1913.) Still others were farmers who settled in the area after the railroad had reached it and, by homesteading large tracts, took control of the surrounding farmland. Later immigrants were mainly Ukrainian peasant farmers from Eastern Europe (McPherson 1967). But by far, the city's most prominent investors, who can be characterized as "absentee landlords and businessmen", were the high officialdom of the Canadian Northern Railway Company.

The Assyrian settlers were handicapped at first because they were illiterate in English and some hardly spoke the language. And they had no contacts. They had to start nearly at the bottom of the economic scale and had no access to upper middle class levels except through technical or professional education in Canadian institutions. Later they were to face a different kind of obstacle of upward mobility. The "peasant" immigrants from Persia or Eastern European countries were brought to Canada for the purpose of producing grain for the British market and their production was to be controlled by the railroad interests (via transportation to market). Those who failed as farmers were not given access to the types of positions which would allow them to share the wealth and power of dominant groups.

Racism was the ideological mechanism which justified discriminatory behavior on the part of the dominant groups. Certain "ethnics" were branded

as an "inferior" type of human beings. J. Woodsworth attempted to "prove" that Syrians, Armenians, and settlers from Persia (with specific reference to Assyrians), were the most "undesirable" of all the immigrants by quoting "authorities" on the subject (Woodsworth 1911, pp. 167-169).

The Assyrian settlers soon became aware that their ethnic identity was a stigma in the new environment, as it was in the old. Some of the respondents said that when they were school-age children, they were often teased and referred to as "black Persians" by their classmates. To escape the stigma, the Assyrian settlers tried to wipe out all the overt signs of their ethnicity. Names were Anglicized. When a European neighbor knocked at their door, they hid the native food away so as not to offend the Western sensitivities. Some Assyrian school children ate their lunches prepared at home away from other children because the lunches were "different", and this was embarrassing. English was preferred to the Assyrian language. The fact that the Assyrian settlers had to articulate with the larger society in terms of the institutions of the dominant group, made their cultural tradition irrelevant. These were relegated to the occasions when one Assyrian confronted another Assyrian. Thus, the first generation of Assyrians who were born in North Battleford found themselves in a rather difficult position as they grew up. They could neither identify with the traditions of their parents (because they were irrelevant and a handicap), nor were they accepted as full-fledged members of the dominant society. A young Assyrian woman was born and raised in North Battleford gives us an inside view of the "in-between generation".

It isn't easy to be an Assyrian. It isn't easy at all. It's even more difficult growing up part Anglo-Saxon, part Assyrian in a small Canadian town. You listen to the Oriental music your aunt plays on an ancient records player...the music brings a tear to your father's eye...your father, his brother and sisters often sit and drink tea out of tall glasses, while they listen to this music and cry. It must be the words of songs; perhaps they are lonesome for their homeland...Who are these people? Why did they come here? To a small town in the Canadian prairies. They look different than the townspeople. Their skin is bit darker, their eyes are various shades of brown, ranging on black almost; their hair is the same. The pain of knowing that you look different and are different than the people in town; the pain of having someone tells you that you are different...The teacher at school that tells you that your skin is "tan all year round"...You try not to hate them...but you do...

(excerpt from Jean Okkerse's article, "It isn't Easy to Be An Assyrian"; Ishaya, 1976, pp. 123-124).

At the time of research in 1973 the Assyrians of North Battleford did not publicize their identity to outsiders. Several Canadians in the city expressed total ignorance of the existence of an Assyrian community in town. The names of the Assyrians were Anglicized beyond recognition. Everyone preferred to use English at all times. Almost all of the first generation Assyrians understood Assyrian but spoke English. Remaining incognito seemed to be deliberate. One informant believed that if a person wanted to get a job in line with his competence, he should not reveal his ethnic identity. Thus the Assyrians were fully assimilated into the Canadian culture; yet they were not fully integrated into the Canadian social structure.

### Conclusion:

As the experience of the Assyrians of North Battleford indicates, their migration from pre-industrial Middle Eastern states to a Western Capitalist state did not change their status as a marginal ethnic group. The colonists travelled thousands of miles and crossed the oceans in the hope of transcending their minority status and becoming fully accepted members of a "Christian" society. Little did they know that as far as their class position was concerned, they were not going very far. The subsistence economy of a peasant adaptation in the Middle East kept the village community as a social isolate and helped, or forced, the maintenance of ethnic identity. But in capitalist North America self-sufficiency was impossible. The ethnic family or community was fully dependent upon the language as well as legal, economic, and administrative institutions of the dominant society. In fact its ethnic peculiarities were a handicap in the way of survival. They had to be shed. The Assyrians of North Battleford did their part to become quickly Canadianized; but Canada had yet to do its share in making them its own.

\* This article is based on field research completed in 1973. For a more detailed account see Ishaya's *The Role of Minorities...* (1976).

\*\* The millet organization was one by which minorities were given legal recognition as "inferior" subjects, and were ruled through their own representatives. These were, without exception, the ecclesiastical leaders of each minority: Christian, Judaic, etc. The term, millet, is that used in

standard English references on the Middle East; the Persian word means "people" (millat).

\*\*\* Isaac Adams moved to California in 1910. He is the founder of the Assyrian settlement in Turlock, California.

\*\*\* The word "lineage" does not imply a corporate unit here. It only refers to people who carry the same surnames. The form of a lineage was present, but the function was not.

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