

**Elizabeth Yoel (Yoseph) Campbell, *Yesterday's Children: Growing Up in Persia.* (Traralgon, Australia: LV Printers, 1996) 112 pp. Paper.**

***Reviewed by Carol Karam Barkley***

Elizabeth Yoel Campbell began writing *Yesterday's Children* in her late 70's as a series of exercises for a creative writing course she was attending. She so compelled her classmates with her accounts of early 20<sup>th</sup> century life in Azerbaijan, Iran that they demanded more and more stories. Just as Scheherazade had done before her, Campbell says, once the stories began pouring out "*I knew, for me there would be no turning back.*" (i) The outpouring of her personal memories comes as a gift, not only to her family, but to all Assyrians who want a direct chronicle of their history as experienced by one of their own people. *Yesterday's Children* is a bittersweet narrative, told mostly from the perspective of a young child that will fascinate the reader with its political intrigue, exotic settings and the interesting day-to-day activities and customs of an educated and affluent Assyrian family.

Dr. Yoel Yoseph, Papa, was born in Baz (meaning hawk), in the Hakkari Mountains of Turkey in 1878. At age nine he was sent to an American missionary boarding school in Constantinople to continue his education, as his brothers had done before him. Yoel had always wanted to become a doctor. As there were no medical schools in Turkey he would have to travel away from his family to realize his dream. Against the wishes of his parents, he diligently saved his allowance money until, by age fifteen, he had enough to make his escape to Urmia, Iran, to complete his high school education. Christians breaking away from their ethnic enclaves did so at great risk in those days. It was no small matter to expose oneself to Christian-hating Turks and Kurds while crossing mountains and borders. After completing his studies in Iran Yoel, with the aid of the Presbyterian Mission, went to America to attend Wooster College in Cincinnati. Graduating from Wooster with valedictory honors, he went on to the University of Cincinnati Medical School, graduating from there in 1905. In addition to earning his medical degree, he acquired United States citizenship along the way.

Anxious to see his family after years of absence, and eager to serve his people with his medical skills, Dr. Yoseph booked passage to Turkey after two years of internship. With an American passport and a medical degree, it was fairly easy to re-enter Turkey. Once in Constantinople he hired a horse and headed to his homeland where the five Assyrian clans (the Baz, Gavoor, Jiloo, Tkhum, and Tiaree) had lived without fanfare for many centuries. When he arrived, Dr. Yoseph discovered that his hometown of Baz was in complete ruins. The Turks and Kurds had destroyed the town and surrounding orchards and farmlands. The murder of the entire population was evident when he discovered a mass of thousands of human bones, including, undoubtedly, those of his parents and some of his siblings. It is bad enough that the Turkish government still

refuses to acknowledge the Armenian Holocaust of 1915, but it is equally tragic that no one ever mentions the many thousands of Assyrians who were similarly slaughtered in the process. There is an incongruity in the date proposed by the author when she recounts her father's discovery of the annihilation of Baz (pp. 58-59). Of course, when powerful events of this type are passed down from one generation to another, their exact chronology does not always rise in memory to the trauma of the event itself. Certainly, there is no question that the town and its people were wiped out, though this very likely occurred in 1915, some eight years after Dr. Yoseph's return.

Shushan Moorhaj, Mama, was born in Urmia, Iran, in 1886. Her parents were Qasha Mooshie Moorhaj and Rakhie Tamraz. As his name implies, Qasha Mooshie was a minister and Rakhie studied nursing at the hospital in Urmia. Rakhie was so resourceful that after reading about the smallpox vaccine, she developed her own strain and used it with success in her hometown and surrounding villages. Shushan attended boarding school in Tabriz whose Christian population was mainly Armenian at that time. Her friends dubbed her Tsovinar, the name of a water nymph in an Armenian myth whose part Shushan read in a class play. The name stuck, but her future husband refused to call her by that name preferring, instead, her given name, which in Assyrian means Lily. After graduating from the American Girl's College, she taught at the school for two years until she met then married Dr. Yoseph. Campbell says of her mother, "*After Papa and us, her ruling passion was books, books, and more books, and with her mother, our Grandma Ghozal (Rakhie's nickname), running the house smoothly and efficiently, she had plenty of time to indulge in her love of reading.*" (76) She loved all of the European classical literature and shared her passion with her six children all of whom were given western names: They were Homer, Elizabeth, William, Agnes, Angel and Robert. In contrast, "*Mama and Grandma regularly read to us the Nestorian Bible and relevant daily lesson in Aramaic every evening at family prayers. We children then joined in The Lords Prayer in Aramaic, the language in which Christ taught his disciples.*" (32) Of the six Yoseph children, Agnes is the only one who married an Assyrian. Agnes' husband Malcolm, was a member of the Dr. Luther Karam family, and a prominent figure in Chicago's Assyrian community.

The immediate family consisted of nine people, including Grandma Ghozal. It was her responsibility to manage the large household which, in addition to family members, included servants and other employees who performed daily, weekly or seasonal tasks. Oftentimes, Ghozal also had Assyrian refugees in her care. Water was kept in an anbar, or cistern, deep underground in the basement. Delivered four times a year via underground channels, it stayed quite cold and could be used for all household purposes including chilling foods and drinks. The tanoor-khana, or bakehouse, served the dual function of bakehouse and meeting place for staff and servants to gather and gossip, or drink the traditional sweet, hot tea. (96) In the fall, professional bakers were hired to make enough lavash (flat bread) to last the winter. Fruits from the family orchard were carefully stored in the root cellar in sawdust, and grape clusters were hung

from the cellar beams. Washerwomen came once a week to spend the whole day washing and ironing clothing and bedding. Milk used for drinking and yogurt or butter making came from the two cows in their dairy.

Holidays peppered life with special preparations and socializing. Tradition and religion were a strong factor in the lives of Assyrians who were a cultural and religious minority. Easter with its spiritual significance as a new beginning meant, from a child's view, new clothes, coloring of eggs and egg contests. The family attended the Presbyterian Church sunrise service, after which a formal breakfast was served, then later they would go to the Armenian church for further socializing and the egg contest. Children competed to see whose egg could roll farthest down the hill, the winner taking the competitor's egg. Similarly, Christmas gift giving was done on a much smaller scale than is the western standard, as the religious meaning of the holiday was the main focus. Open house socializing was traditional on holidays. At Christmastime it was expected that people of greater means would give to the poor. Gifts of food and money were given to these visitors. Of course, each holiday had its special foods and sweets prepared for family and guests. Campbell also mentions an annual half-day holiday in August where water is stealthily thrown at unsuspecting victims. This reviewer has learned from other sources that the festival is called "Noosardil," and that it dates back to the time of the Assyrian Empire. In one particular recollection, the author recalls the sneaky children getting bombarded by equally sneaky parents, Dr. and Mrs. Yoseph.

During WWI, the Doctor and scores of other Assyrians risked their lives in aiding the Allies – Britain, U.S., Russia, France and Italy – in their battle against the Ottoman Empire and other Central Powers. Dr. Yoseph's brother Daniel was killed in combat serving the Allies. Daniel's son, Patroos, stayed with his uncle's family for 2 years until he was old enough to go to medical school. He eventually became Dr. Patroos DeBaz and his son Dr. Baz DeBaz. For their valuable service to the Allied cause, Assyrians were promised a land to call their own in an area now known as northern Iraq. But when the Ottoman Empire was carved up into its present configuration after the War, Britain did not keep its promise to its "smallest ally." Thus, tension between the Iraqi government and the Assyrians culminated in further ill treatment of the latter.

Because Doctor Khan, Mr. Doctor, as the Persians and Kurds called him, was the only doctor in the Maragha region, he ministered to anyone who needed his aid. In fact, the Kurds paid handsomely for his medical services. That is, until the Americans entered the war in 1917; at that point, he was considered an enemy (as a U.S. citizen). His services were still used; however, they now demanded them. Dr. Yoseph would be taken to Kurd camps to treat their wounded. Sometimes he was gone for weeks at a time. The local Ayatollah and Governor, personal friends of the Yosephs, used their influence to protect them and some of the other Christian families from the Turks, even offering shelter in their own homes. This is how Shushan and the children came to stay in a harem for ten days. The day Shushan heard a commotion out on the street and looked to find 50 to 60 Assyrian men, women and children chained and ragged plodding

down the street ready to be sold as slaves, she refused to stay in the Islamic harem any longer. Grandma Ghozal had rejected the idea of leaving home from the start, feeling a strong responsibility for care of the family servants and Assyrian refugees Dr. Yoseph had bought and freed from the slave market.

*Yesterday's Children* ends rather sadly. At age forty-five, Dr. Yoseph is mortally wounded by the malfunction of his own rifle. At a family picnic a coral snake threatened to harm one of his children and when he struck the snake with the butt end of his rifle, it backfired into his abdomen. The entire family witnessed this tragic incident.

This book has obvious appeal for the Yoseph clan and all their friends, but all Assyrians will enjoy reading *Yesterday's Children*, as it will provide them a better understanding of what their own families may have experienced. This book has something for everyone to enjoy. It is the story of a family and of a people. A letter from the late Helen Khoobyar, a friend of the Yosephs, said, "*Your family has made great contributions to the Christian community. Many will not forget it. I am sure they will remember your family with gratitude and happy memories.*"

Mrs. Yoel Campbell self-published *Yesterday's Children* and, as a result, there are few copies available. It is possible that an expanded and edited version may be available in the future.