

**Pages from the History of the
Assyrian Agriculture in Al-Jazīra, Syria
(1940's to 1970's)**

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Al-Jazīra¹ is probably Syria's least explored region in terms of its archeological and historical heritage. At the same time it is the region most ethnically diverse and the least known area of the country. Every now and then the media report the discovery of some new settlement dated back to the times of the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia (most often to the Assyrian times) or ruins of a church built in the early ages of Christianity, made by some team of European archeologists. As a former resident of the region I may say it could be a perfect area for study and research, a virtual archeologist's, ethnologist's and linguist's paradise. Here one can hear different dialects of Arabic, Assyrian, Armenian and Kurdish languages. In Qāmishli, the region's largest city, up to the time of my departure in 1971, there was also a Jewish quarter.² Among the most interesting and mysterious features of the rural landscape were numerous hills and hillocks situated along the Khabur river with a cluster of clay houses on the other side. Each of the two villages I lived in had its own hillock, hence their Arabic names: Tel °Alo (*tal* = hill) and Qal°at al-Hādi (al-Hādi's Castle). I remember that after heavy rains various things could be found in the water flowing down the hillock. They were picked by children and exchanged for goods such as ice cream with a "traveling vendor." Were these single hillocks products of nature or were they strongholds, castles, inns, monasteries, schools built by people in the Mesopotamian-Christian period, which, neglected throughout centuries, had undergone erosion? Such was the fate of hundreds of Assyrian towns in Mesopotamia and Christian buildings across the entire Middle East.

In a 20-page report *Mazāri° al-Jazīra* (The Farms of Al-Jazīra) submitted to the Syrian authorities in 1955, the patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church, Ignatiyyos Afrem I Barsōm (†1958), wrote that the decline of Al-Jazīra had been a result of the early Arab Caliphs' policy towards the local Christian population.

¹ Al-Jazīra (Assyr. Gōzarto; Gzorto "island." A colloquial name of a part of Syria between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers). It is a completely flat plain, sloping from 500 Meters above sea level at the foot of Ṭūr °Abdīn to 200 Meters above sea level in the south, cut with a dense network of streams and rivulets, flowing down to Khābūr. A stretch of land over 150 km long and 30 km wide is a cultivated land yielding excellent crops of cereals, cotton and rice, the latter only due to irrigation. The south steppe, less abundant in water, gives shelter to nomadic tribes. It is a track of fertile land perfectly suitable for settlement—wrote S. Przeworski, 'Western Asia', Warsaw, ca. 1934, 179 [in Polish].

² The Jews of Qāmishli spoke Hebrew, in 1974 entire community emigrated to Israel.

This involved imposition of all sorts of restrictive taxes exceeding the population's paying abilities. Later the conquest by the Tamerlane's hordes (13th c.) left many Middle Eastern regions, including Al-Jazīra, depopulated. Christians lived in constant fear, afraid of traveling beyond the perimeter of their villages. According to oral accounts, nobody could feel safe at that time. From time to time the settled population was raided and looted in the course of almost regular warfare waged by Bedouin tribes against one another. The right of vengeance and physical liquidation of resisting opponents and infidels was considered an act of honor and dignity, a religious duty. The Ottoman Turks ruling these lands from the 16th century till the 1920's, in general simply ignored such acts. Turkish gendarmes, who rarely received any money for their service to the Empire, were only too willing to get a share of the loot. Sometimes they themselves participated in or even organized plunder. For a very long time large tracks of land in Al-Jazīra lay fallow, and were used only by the Bedouins herding their sheep and camels across these vast areas. According to old people's accounts the region was ravaged by bears, wolves, and jackals. However, till the end of the 1930s locusts were the greatest threat to farming in the area. Specialists and equipment as well as insecticides had to be brought from abroad. Insect control campaigns were organized for a number of subsequent years. Finally, in 1959 the region was entirely cleared of these noxious insects.

For the Assyrian farmers, wheat, of all agricultural crops, had the status of the most fundamental and strategic source of nutrition, ensuring sustenance and physical survival of their families. No other raw material could match wheat in this respect. Wheat was the only cereal used both for making bread and groats. The quantity of wheat possessed by an individual was a measure of his wealth; it played the same role for the Assyrian farmers as sheep for the nomads and other pastoralists. For a long time the Assyrians have been a settled people gaining their sustenance from farming. Lack of sufficient stock of wheat in the household was a reason for understandable concern, even panic, as it could result in hunger and death in the family, experienced many a time throughout the latest history of this community. In fact, plunder by the Ottoman gendarmerie or deliberate burning of crops by the neighbors, though not necessarily those leading nomadic or semi-nomadic life, were actually more frequent causes of such tragedies than crop failure or natural disasters.³ All work connected with the preservation and storage

³ An account of a witness to the tragedy of the Assyrians in Urmia, Iran in 1915 reads: "The refugees who found shelter within the American mission compound (some 15 to 20 thousand people) purchased around 6 tons of bread every day. The bread was baked by local Muslims and delivered by carriers. Some 20 to 30 people, mainly children, died every day. The reason for this high death rate was discovered by an American physician. He found out that the bread delivered to the compound contained an addition of chalk." (J.K. Shlēmūn, *Assyrians between World Wars I and II*, Nineveh Press, Chicago, 1995, 28 [in Arabic]). Other examples of hostile acts

of the harvested crops was carried out in the summer. Every single ear of grain mattered. “Him who sleeps in summer shall suffer starvation in winter” is an Assyrian popular saying.

The traditional method of wheat cultivation as known by the author in the 1950s and 1960s following the example of his native village of Tel °Alo in north-east Syria, in principle was not different from the methods used in other villages inhabited by the Assyrian population in the Syrian Al-Jazīra. The village where he was born and spent his early childhood had about a hundred farms. Sadly, all of them suffered a decline as a result of migration of its population to various countries of the world.

Wheat was sown at the break of September and October, and the ripe crop was harvested at the beginning of June. This was a typical winter crop. All work connected with the preparation of the soil and harvesting of crops was carried out using primitive methods, probably hardly different than the methods used in that region in ancient times. Plots designed for wheat were cultivated according to the biennial system, as it was believed that the soil should rest between crops. There was a common conviction among the farmers that properly cultivated soil was able to regenerate itself in the course of one year. The only method of cultivation was plowing (*dwōro*). Extensive rather than intensive land use system practiced in the region was not only due to the fact that farmers did not practice artificial fertilization of soil or had no access to artificial fertilizers,⁴ but also due to their

perpetrated by the Kurds and Turks against the Christian population at the Turkish-Iranian borderland, including destruction of agricultural crops, contamination of flour with kerosene are mentioned in letters of European missionaries written at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. From the accounts of old people it transpires that in the times of persecutions against the Assyrians in south-east Turkey (continuing till mid 19th century) wheat was the first loot grabbed by the robbers. The aim was to deprive Christian neighbors of the principal source of sustenance. Crops were frequently burnt before the harvest. For fear of losing the harvested cereals, farmers often hid them in camouflaged pits dug in the floor of dwelling rooms. (J. Naayem, *Shall this Nation Die? Chaldean Rescue*, New York, 1920, 118-119.) The author’s grandfather’s brother at his deathbed (at the beginning of the 20th century) wished to have a piece of bread. At that time no Assyrian farmer had even a pinch of flour, so grandfather put on a Kurdish outfit and went to a nearby Assyrian village to find some bread. He found a woman baking wheat loaves in a bread oven. She was not Assyrian but Kurdish. When she leaned to take another loaf out of the oven, the author’s grandfather managed to grab a bread roll. He dashed out as fast as he could but an iron rod thrown after him knocked him down and brought his hopes to fulfill his brother’s last wish to an end. In the 1940s, in the area which nowadays belongs to Iraq, Assyrian farmers had to give one tenth of their wheat and barley crop to the state for free. They were also obliged to sell to the state the entire surplus of cereal in excess of a seven and half ton limit.

⁴ Manure left behind in the stubble fields by grazing animals added fertility to the soil. Twice a year, at the turn of spring and summer and in autumn (after the harvest and processing of

specific attitude to land, characterized by a huge dose of humanism. Land was treated as a living entity. By no means could it be overtired or exploited or taken advantage of. The purpose of its existence was to provide sustenance to the family cultivating the land, which was treated as satisfaction for the effort put into the work. Land was not treated as an instrument to gain wealth exceeding the family's needs. If an Assyrian farmer by necessity had to sell a surplus of grain, he did it only after the next harvest, when he made sure that the newly harvested quantity would be sufficient to feed his family for the entire year—until the next harvest time. He felt only comfortable when the provisions were sufficient for the next two years.

Traditional cultivation methods:

Plowing

Plowing preceded ridding the fields of mice. They were driven with smoke out of a network of burrows often stretching under a large area of land. After examination of the terrain all but two entrances to the network were plugged; the smoke was injected into one entrance, and the mice trying to escape through the only unplugged exit were killed by a person standing next to it.

grapes) farmers of Tūr ʿAbdīn organized night quarters, pens for animals (*māḡal*, *rābbā*). Following a set program every day farmers herded their sheep and goats to a different field. The animal droppings left there during the night fertilized the soil. In this way all fields designed for cultivation obtained more or less the same quantity of manure. The duties of each field owner included provision of protection for animals and food for the shepherds and accompanying persons. In the villages where this was not practiced farmers sometimes paid an agreed amount of money to herd owners. Manure had its price. This system of cooperation functioned in areas larger than a single village. It was practiced, in a smaller scale, also in Syrian Al-Jazīra among the Bedouins and Assyrians. The author recalls that when at dawn shepherds were separating and leading individual flocks out of the field, some sheep refused to go. They preferred to join a different flock; that is why frequently family members had to intervene. During this huge operation of gathering thousands of animals, emotional scenes almost typical to humans were observed. The flock was rounded up only in the evening, on return from the pasture; each animal in the flock was marked with a farmer's mark, known to everybody in the village. *Māḡal* was organized also when there was no more grass in village pastures and it was available in other places. Grazing conditions had to be defined in detail. (J. Bethawoce, *Mesopotamia is a pot and I am a ladle*, vol. 2; Bēt Froso Nsibin, (Södertälje, Sweden, 1997), 91-92 [in Assyrian]). For this purpose for a number of years in my early childhood my father would move the family to the nearby Bedouin village of As-ufa. The 'visitor' herds did not mix with the host herds. In times other than *māḡal* the droppings were collected, formed and dried in the sun; they were used as fuel in winter. Some organic fertilizer was produced as a result of the decay of green parts of the gourd family plants (sometimes also sunflowers) grown in the fields in early spring. "Sheep penning" with the purpose of soil fertilization in north India is described by P. Hinca, *Herding tradition and the present day of the Gaddi people from the state of Himachal Pradesh (India)*, "Lud," vol. 82, 1998, 253-277 [in Polish].

Fire was started using a flint and steel (*kēfo d-nūro*). Sparks were produced by hitting metal against flint. Then dry wool was applied to the place of contact and it came alight from the heat generated during friction. Chaff placed next to the smoldering wool in a shallow depression easily caught fire generating smoke, which was blown into the burrows with leather bellows (*nāfū o*), resembling smith's bellows. Less often a blade of reed was used with which the smoke was blown underground by mouth. For the smoke to be used more efficiently, the smoldering chaff was placed in a metal container with two pipes protruding at opposite sides. The air blown into the box through one pipe left it through the other one inserted into the burrow carrying the smoke trapped inside the box.

Field mice control was not a problem of single farmers. The operation was carried out collectively by the owners of a number of neighboring plots, sometimes by the entire population of a village.

Plowing was performed at three different times; the first (deep) plowing was done one or two months after the harvest. Allowing shepherds and their herds access to the stubble field was the proper thing to do and the manure remaining in the field after such a visit greatly improved the quality of the soil. The second (shallow) plowing—to keep moisture in the soil—followed in spring time, while the third and the last (shallow) plowing was performed in the autumn of the following year together with the sowing of the grain.

Plots were plowed using a butting plow with a single wooden handle (*abzōro*) and a sharply pointed metal plowshare (*saktho*) mounted on an appropriately shaped wooden runner in the form of a cone. Wet soil sticking to the plowshare during plowing was removed with a long spade (*māsōso*). The archaic built of the butting plow made it impossible for the plowman who had to hold the handle of the plow under a certain angle to change the depth and width of the furrow without a great effort. In Assyrian villages almost till the mid 20th century butting plow was driven by two oxen or by an ox and a donkey. Horses were used rarely, by better-off farmers. In the course of time the ox became almost universally replaced by the horse. In the 1960s drought oxen or cows were no longer used for field works in Tel °Alo and the neighboring villages, also those inhabited by the Arabs. It is not clear however whether this in a sense historical breakthrough in agriculture took place as late as in the period under discussion (we cannot exclude that it could be a result of closer neighborhood with the Arab populations, usually breeding many horses), or whether—as an indicator of certain living conditions—the use of draught oxen was abandoned already in some periods of the preceding centuries. In ancient Mesopotamia oxen were indispensable for irrigation and land reclamation work, they were used for plowing, transportation and threshing of grain. Oxen and cows are still used as working animals in many countries, especially in Asia and Africa. Statements that Semitic peoples do not usually use edible animals for field works, are incorrect. In Yemen, a country known as the cradle of Arabs, fields, especially in the country's mountain areas,

are still plowed using donkeys, cows, buffalos and even camels.⁵ Especially in Egypt water buffalos are nowadays commonly used for this purpose.

In the period between the harvest of the crops and the sowing of grain the Assyrians performed no major work except plowing and occasional minor land reclamation works. The plowed land is referred to in Assyrian as *ful ōno*.⁶ In order to properly scarify the entire plot of land, plowing was done by the double crosswise technique. The field was initially plowed in one direction, and the plowing was repeated across the existing furrows. The plowmen's skills were judged by the straightness of the course of the last furrow, which depended on the straightness of the preceding ones. This was also conditional on the depth of the plowshare immersion into the soil and the stability of the imposed plowing pace. The best plowman competition was a common village pastime and was treated as a form of popular sport. Winners of this prestigious title were commonly respected even in their old age.

In the time of plowing, plowmen (*dāwōre*, sing. *dāwōro*) would leave their homes very early in the morning, around two o'clock a.m., waking up one another. An average output of a plowman was almost 4800 sq. m. of plowed land per day, and the quantity of the sown grain equaled the capacity of four *tanakāyat* (sing. *tanakāye*), i.e. 1/2 *čawāle* (*čwāle*).⁷ Experienced farmers though were able to plow twice as much, around one hectare of land within a day and to sow the double quantity of grain. The grain from each *tanakāye* was sown onto the plot of land

⁵ Varisco D.M., *The Ard in Highland Yemeni Agriculture*, "Tools and Tillage," vol. 4, no. 3, 1982, 158-172.

⁶ *Ful ōno* means 'work', 'occupation'. It can be presumed this meaning of the word is a proof of a deeply rooted agricultural tradition in Mesopotamia. Some people believe that only working the land is true and authentic work. The Kurds used this word to refer to Christians in general. The term *fellah* may also suggest that people referred to by this name were settled people who the pastoralist Kurds encountered on their migratory routes. Even if we assume that also part of the Arabs that were not involved in further conquests, took to farming after taking over Mesopotamia, we are still left with the question why the Kurds do not use the word *fellah* to refer to Arabs. This line of reasoning is supported by the fact that the early Arab tribes, even before the emergence of Islam who settled in southern Iraq in the towns of Kufa (Āqūla) and Al-Hīra were almost completely Christianized.

⁷ *Tanakāye*, a tin container with the capacity of 15-18 kg of wheat grain (some 20 l of water), was used as a conventional unit of measure. The term is of European origin (from English *tank*). It derives from the imported tin cans of oil probably from Japan, extensively used in the Middle East nowadays. *čwāle* means a hemp sack with a capacity of 120-140 kg of wheat (= 8 *tanakāyat*), very common in Syria. During harvest time pyramid-shaped piles of grain-filled sacks can be seen all over Syria.

with the size of approximately 100 m per 12 m (the distance was measured in paces).⁸

The sowing material contained in one *tanakāye* was poured into a strong bag (*qur^o*) made of sheep's or goat's wool. The bag was hung on the sower's left shoulder, so that he could comfortably scoop the grain with his right hand and scatter it across the field. After making a movement to the right and to the left, every time the sower put his hand back into the bag trying to spread the grain more or less evenly on the ground.

Two different sowing techniques were in use. One of them involved two stages: grain was first sown onto the dry soil that was subsequently plowed to cover it with a thin layer of humid soil. The other method involved putting the grain into the furrow formed in the course of plowing in one direction and then covering the grain with the soil loosened during plowing in the opposite direction. The second plowing resulted in forming another furrow, parallel to the initial one. The size of the cultivated stretches of land was usually only a few hectares. They were as large as needed by a given family. Vineyards and gardens occupied larger areas.

During the field work period, sowers had two meals a day: breakfast (usually brought to the field by their wives around eight o'clock in the morning) consisting of bread, yogurt and buttermilk and lunch (eaten around one o'clock in the afternoon) of burgul, bread and yogurt. Supper was eaten around six o'clock on return home (*labaniyye*—wheat grits cooked in butter milk).

Harvest

Harvest (*šōdo*) time came roughly in mid May and started with the reaping of barley. Wheat became mature almost a month later. At this time of the year rain was a rarity. The only danger to the crops came from fire. In fear of fire, farmers tried to collect their crops from the fields as fast as possible. When mechanical harvesting started to replace manual crop collection, the field to be first served by the harvesting machine was decided by drawing of lots. Usually this was an extreme plot, situated next to a busy road and thus most endangered with fire, or, being a part of a larger common acreage, lying at an agreed side of the village or defined by some natural boundaries such as a road, river, etc. In this way, each farmer knew more or less accurately when and at what time of the day the combine harvester would reach his plot.

Men from the entire village set off for the fields in groups with the break of dawn. They carried water in water bags made of canvas or skin (*qarbo*). For the water to remain cool as long as possible the *qarbo* were filled in the evening and left by the well for the night. During work they were kept in small pits in the

⁸ Details concerning cultivation are based on the notes taken by the author during his father's stay in Poland in 1989. A great deal of information on the country life has been tape-recorded.

ground, covered with a thick layer of straw. During chilly summer nights, soil gives off a lot of heat. The neck opening of the water bag was plugged with a wooden plug tied to the neck with a piece of string. Before setting off for the fields reapers always had a meal of warm lentil soup or *gābūla* (hulled cooked wheat grain topped with liquid obtained from dissolving rock-hard sun-dried buttermilk lumps in water).

Crops were reaped using a sickle (*magzūno*). Its grip was made of wood and the smooth blade of metal. On the fingers of the left hand the reapers wore a sort of leather hood cover called *qīnāḡe*, pierced with a metal rod ending with two hooks turned in opposite directions. The internal hooks formed what looked like prolongation of the fingers, making it easier to hold a bundle of cereal and protecting the palm of the hand from injury. The hooks placed on the other side of the hood were pointing outside, which protected the back of the hand from brushing against the straw and abrading the skin. The leather used to make the hoods was fairly thick and became rather rigid in the heat of the day. For this reason, before the start of the harvest the hoods were soaked in olive oil for a few days and then kneaded by hand. The operation was repeated almost every night throughout the entire harvest time.

It should be mentioned that scythes were unknown to the Assyrian farmers of Al-Jazīra. The author witnessed this implement being used during the summer 1970 in the village of Tel Khātūn inhabited by the Yazidis. (The village is situated to the east of the town of Qāmišlī, by the Turkish border). It is difficult to determine what was the actual scale of its use in the region. One could assume that a scythe could be seen as a utensil too comfortable to use, something that would not become an experienced reaper. The work on the land was treated as a kind of a race, during which tens of farmers competed against one another. Making the work easier was not in the nature of a tough farmer having a lot of time to do his work.

Also the practical aspects were of great importance. The scythe cuts cereal close to the ground leaving little in the stubble field to be eaten by the grazing cattle. Also the straw leftovers fertilize soil after plowing over. Furthermore, it should be added that gripping a bundle of wheat with the hand enables a reaper to determine the force needed to reap with a sickle, depending on the thickness and hardness of the blades, as well as the sharpness of the sickle so as to avoid loss of grain. This was probably impossible to do when using the scythe, which could have resulted in shaking some quantity of grain out of the ears.⁹

⁹ I extend my thanks to the late Prof. Leszek Dziegiel from the Institute of Ethnology of the Jagiellonian University in Cracow for drawing my attention to the prevailing conviction in Europe that during the use of scythe part of the grain is shaken out of the ears. Newly obtained information indicates that in Syrian Al-Jazīra scythe has become a popular farming utensil only in recent years and is known there under a foreign sounding name of *tarpan* or *terpan*. Its use supposedly gained in popularity due to the change of crop structure as increasingly greater areas of land are currently

The reapers formed a single long row, with one man standing next to another. Usually reaping started at the furthest field, irrespective of who was its owner. In order to increase the pace they worked together, cheering one another up and shouting. However, most often they progressed at the same pace, in semi-sitting position, trying not to waste even a single blade of precious straw. Prior to starting reaping each harvester sharpened his sickle using a stone, butter and goat's wool. For the start the blade was thoroughly wiped with wool saturated with grease, then it was rubbed on a smooth stone resembling marble. Around eight o'clock (after two hours of reaping) elder daughters of harvesters came to the fields bringing the men the awaited meal of bread, yogurt and fresh buttermilk.

While the men were resting, eating and sharpening the sickles, their daughters were tying the reaped wheat first into *qufle* (big bundles), and then into *gdīše* (sheaves). The girls remained with their fathers till the end of work in the evening. More or less every two hours the work was stopped for some half-hour, for the reapers to rest and sharpen the sickles again. At noon more people came to the fields; at this time the harvesters' wives would bring the lunch (of *burgul* with addition of a large quantity of warmed milk fat or *burgul* with meat) and drinking water. The food was eaten after an almost half an hour's exposure to strong sunlight, for it to acquire a more intense nutty flavor. After the meal the women went back home, and in the evening the women from impoverished families possessing no land were allowed to the fields. They collected the ears of grain left behind by the reapers. Since harvesting was teamwork, sometimes farmers hired a worker with a horse, called *fu'lo*, *šālkīši*. He was a sort of a liaison between them and their families.

After the harvest shepherds were allowed to graze sheep on stubble fields (*frēzo*). This was a rule in the rural relations. A view of a flock of sheep, sometimes counting hundreds of animals, waiting at the edges of the field and guarded by a shepherd, mobilized harvesters to more intensive work.

Afternoon work was particularly hard due to high air temperature. The final group of villagers that would come to the field was harvesters' sons. They arrived on horseback to help their fathers and sisters put the ready sheaves into large sacks (*šāle*) and load and transport them to the village. The threshing floor (*adro*, pl. *adrō o*) was a perfectly trodden area at the edges of the village (usually at the eastern side of the village buildings). Throughout other seasons of the year it was a venue for the village weddings and all sorts of games and competitions.¹⁰

sown with lentils. In order to prevent the aforementioned shaking of seeds from the pods, lentils are reaped before ripening. Threshing is done only after the stacks piled in yards are dry. Eastern Assyrians have known the scythe since a long time and have called it *magla*. Smaller scythes are called *māgelta* or *magzūna* (i.e. sickle).

¹⁰ The elders of Tel °Alo frequently organized competitions and contests for the best plowman and the best harvester. Elderly members of the author's family still remember the spectacular shows given by the grandfather and father while working

Threshing

The purpose of threshing was to extract grain from the ears and to remove husk from it at the same time crushing the straw. These tasks were referred to by the Assyrians as *gēra*. A stack of straw was flattened till it was some 2 to 8 meters high and had a diameter of 5 to 15 meters. A long, strong pole was driven into the center of this structure, and the surrounding area was cleared of any objects. At the perimeter of the stack, in the distance of some 2 to 3 meters from its external boundary, a threshing floor with a 30 to 50 cm thick layer of straw was prepared. This is where a cutting and threshing machine (*ğarğar*) resembling a low cart was placed. The threshing machine had two wooden shafts with large and sharp blades (*narge*): part of them parallel to the long axis of the cylinder, the rest perpendicular to it. This device is of ancient provenance in the Middle East. Its different versions, known also in the Roman times as *tribulum*, can be seen in almost all of Asia.¹¹ In the 1960s in northeast Syria specialized joinery workshops operated in which threshing elements were manufactured, assembled and repaired.

In order to stabilize the cutter during operation, one of the younger family members sat on it or alternatively it was filled up with stones. The machine was driven by one or two horses tied to the central hill. The animals were tied with a long string to a pole driven into the center of the stack. At the first stage, when straw was still soft and airy, rather than on the threshing floor belt (*dafo*) the horses trod along its side, on the dry earth, moving clockwise. Only after a few cycles were they able to tread on now beaten layer of straw. When a horse had a need to evacuate its bowels it slowed down or stopped for a while. Then the person sitting on the cutter put a shovel under its rear in order to intercept the excrement and throw it away to the side. If it happened that the manure fell down on the straw, nobody at that time cared too much about the contamination of wheat with horse manure; it was considered foul only to a certain extent. While the machine rotated on the threshing floor, a farmer turned, tossed and mixed the straw. To thresh the threshing floor once lasted almost an entire day and night, and at that point successive batches of straw from the stack were added. The resulting large quantity of chaff was regularly removed beyond the threshing floor and then a new threshing floor was formed from the remaining straw. This was done with

on the land. The virtual mountains of straw left after the harvest were perfect playground for children, like hiding and seeking. That was also a place where girls went in the evenings. They collected the strongest and nicest looking straws to make all sorts of trays, baskets (with and without handles) of different shape and function needed in the household. Girls enjoyed this work. The straw produced a pleasant smell, detectable especially by people living in close vicinity to the stacks.

¹¹ A description of a device of identical design, name and function can be found in a work by an Assyrian lexicographer from the end of the 10th century, Bār Bahlūl. R. Duval, *Hassano Bar Bahlul Lexicon Syriacum*, Philo Press, Amsterdam, 1970, 514-515.

pitchforks (*mal ōye*, pl. *mal ōyo*).

A number of pitchfork types were in use, with 4, 5, 6 and 7 teeth (in Assyrian ‘fingers’; from *aw^o* – finger), made of horn, wood or metal. Bone and wooden forks were made by farmers on their own. Their teeth (fingers) had a larger diameter at their base (the place of joint with the stick) and were tied with heat-bonded leather and sewn with twine. The metal pitchforks were purchased.

Threshing was usually done by two people. One of them would sit on the threshing machine and when needed, urged the horse on and prevented the cutter from going off the track in the initial stages of threshing or from getting blocked (*me neq* – ‘to choke’). The other person had less to do; from time to time he threw the straw accumulating on the edges of the threshing floor to its center, he mixed and turned the bottom layers of straw that could not be reached by the threshing blades.

Chaff (*tawno*) was moved to the side, forming a separate belt on the perimeter. This was the case when large quantities of wheat were threshed. Adding new layers of straw to the already thick layer of chaff made it increasingly higher, which in turn carried a risk of the cutter not working properly.

When the entire quantity of wheat was threshed, chaff was formed into a stack and then thrown up for preliminary separation of the grain. For this purpose farmers most often used pitchforks in which the spaces at the bases of the fingers were covered with leather bonded with wax or asphalt. Sometimes they used a shovel (*rawšo*). Complete separation of the grain was achieved by blowing the chaff off in the air (*dērōyo*). A shovel or pitchfork was filled with chaff, lifted up and its content was thrown a few meters up against the westerly wind (the stacks of chaff were usually situated at the east side of the village). The blowing operation was carried out quickly with participation of many people, not always close family members. The grain fell almost straight down on the canvas, while the chaff was carried away by the wind and depending on the degree of crushing fell down at different distances from the stack.

Every fraction of chaff was collected separately. The finest one (*ēūro*), resembling meal, served as an additive to clay used for plastering internal walls of residential buildings and for the construction of bread ovens. The coarsest chaff was used as a component of fodder for the livestock. It was also used for the preparation of clay for the construction of low walls fencing the farm. Chaff was also a component of sun-dried (unfired) clay bricks. Each type of chaff was stored separately in a special room called *lawḏo*. On the whole, chaff was a very important material with a wide range of applications in the farmstead.

The threshed grain contained stones, blades of straw, husks and weed. Often it was mixed with grain of other cereals. Some ears of grain were only partly crushed and the grain it contained only partly husked. The laborious operation of clearing the grain of impurities before storage took housewives a lot of time. In the morning and evening hours they would work in the shade of the house, and around noon they moved inside the house. The only tool used for the clearing were screens

(*arbōle*, pl. *arbōlo*). Interestingly, the operation of grain purification, involving sifting and sorting out was referred to by a single verbal noun: *erōwo*, i.e. sifting. Skilful use of sieves, consisting in shaking, helped obtain pure grain, sometimes even more pure than grain cleared with a pneumatic separator. An experienced housewife was able to purify approximately half a ton of grain per day without neglecting other household duties. Some women were employed for this job by wheat tycoons.

Immediately after threshing, part of grain assigned for quick sale was subject to purification, while the rest was processed as soon as possible, in the spare time. Grain free of impurities better tolerates storage, stays fresh longer and does not lose its value. Any post-threshing waste was used mainly as animal feed.¹²

From the mass of purified grain farmers separated the sowing material and some quantity needed for current production of bread and grouts (calculated with a surplus for all year requirements, from harvest to harvest). These two quantities were stored separately in bulk or in jute or hemp sacks, in aboveground clay chambers inside a dwelling room (*kōro*, *esro*). Fresh grain was used to pay the farmer's fixed liabilities to the village administrator and priest (usually voluntary offerings), as well as to the employees such as the sheep shepherd (*ru^cyo*) and cow herder (*bāqōro*). Often the farmer paid with grain for the use of land that was not his property. Rational management of the harvested crops required serious calculations taking into consideration existing and potential situations and family plans. A prudent farmer treated part of the crop as strategic provision sufficient for the production of bread and grouts for the incoming two years, in case of some unforeseen calamity. This part of the grain was stored in bulk, usually in a pit dug in the ground (*gūbo*) with dimensions of up to 5 m in depth and 2 to 4 m in diameter, located permanently outside the farm's perimeter. Owing to harsh summer sunlight the inside of the pit was almost completely dry. Its leveled bottom was paved with bricks and covered with a thick layer of straw and chaff. In the process of filling the pit with grain the grain was separated from the wall of the mound with an insulation layer of chaff, and when filled up, it was trodden with feet. In order to compact the mass of wheat inside the pit, a wide plank of wood was placed on the top of the layers and was subsequently hit with a big hammer. As a result the grain settled, forming a compact block without pockets of air. The

¹² At this time of the year villages were a place where one could meet many deprived and poor people, beggars looking for help. Usually farmers would give them up to one *tanakāye* of wheat in volume. Rainless weather and a possibility to spend the night at a yard next to the village was conducive to wandering from one village to another, either on foot or riding a donkey. It happened that among those in need who turned for support to farmers, were also their jobless relatives or friends living in the city. Also traveling vendors offering "city" goods were cruising the villages at that time. The farmers bought willingly such goods and paid for them with grain. For some of them this was the way to get rid of last year's provisions.

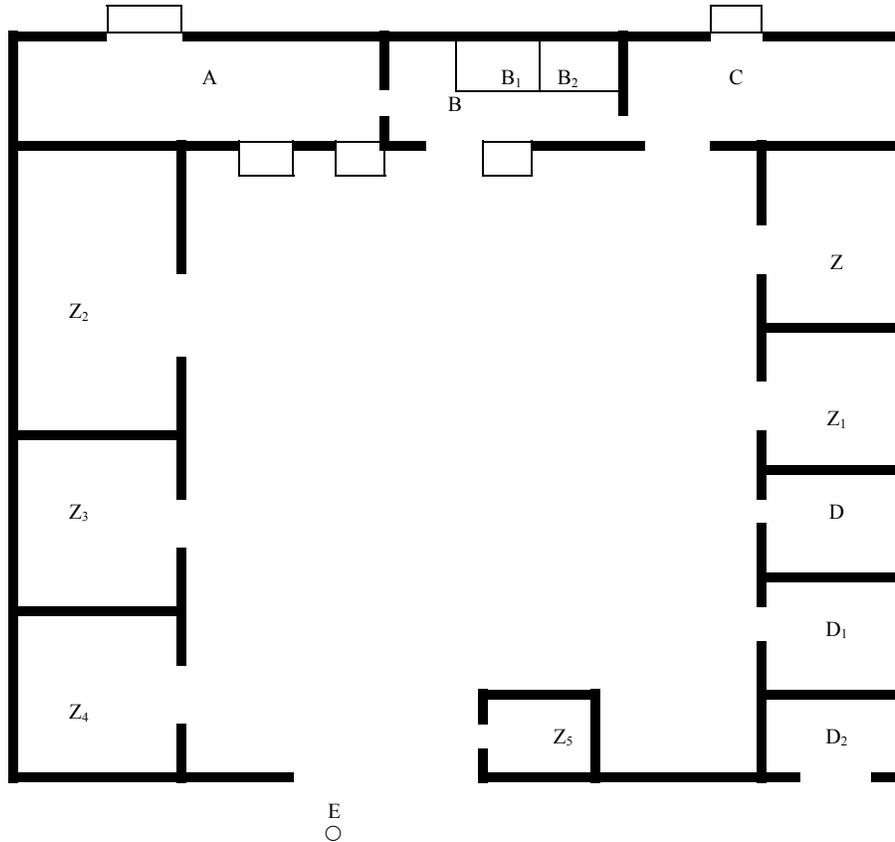
top level of the grain was around 30 cm below the pit's verge. The surface of the grain was covered in succession: with mattresses, a layer of bricks, chaff and finally a thick layer of soil, forming a kind of a mound. For the rain water to flow down its surface the whole structure was covered with thick plaster. The top part of the *gūbo* protruding above the ground level was some half a meter high and was well visible, for instance for drivers arriving in the village. Still it happened that buses or some other vehicles driving into the village, during some maneuver would not only damage the mound but also get stuck in it.

In the dry climate of the rainless summer the grain stored under the ground had low humidity of 8-9%, which, to a certain degree protected it from, for instance, excessive heat emission, which is the result of the breathing process. The greater the water content of the grain, the more intense is the breathing process. The author has no knowledge of the cases where wheat kept in the storage pit would undergo any undesirable processes such as auto heating. This phenomenon in fact does not occur in dry and clean wheat. However, after a year of storage in the mound, due to the absence of air, the grain loses its specific fresh smell, and acquires a "warehouse" smell, detectable also in bread. Flour (*qamho*) obtained from the grain stored in this manner was used for baking bread only in critical situations. This grain was used mainly as sowing material, even after two or three years of storage. Alternatively, it could be sold.

Up to the author's final year of stay in the country (1970) barter trade was a common practice. Wheat grain and, more seldom, barley grain was a means of payment. Wheat was used to buy various goods offered by traveling vendors (*‘ā ōre*, pl. *‘ā ōro*) such as household utensils, clothes, ready-made food products, even ice cream. The most frequently purchased products were fresh fruit and vegetables absent in most of villages, whose onset of ripening coincided with the wheat processing period. Especially the Bedouins constantly suffered from the lack of vegetables, and even the more so of fruit. Horticulture was not their domain. Most of the traveling vendors came from other regions of Syria. Some of them traveled along fixed routes and had steady customers at whose houses they could stop over and refresh themselves before setting off for the next village. Every visitor who had no relatives in a village could count on free accommodation for a night in the sojourn room, staying under the care of the village head. Also traveling vendors could use such accommodation. Some local Kurds also engaged in this form of trade. However, though it is not clear why, the Assyrians treated this occupation with contempt, as something shameful. Owing to barter trading some Assyrian villages had small shops offering a modest range of goods operating all year round.

When the collected quantity of wheat grain was insufficient to satisfy the needs of the family, farmers looked for substitutes, suitable for obtaining a product similar to bread. In the most recent history of the Assyrians it happened that they used potatoes, barley, maize, sorghum, legumes such as lentils, broad beans,

chickpeas, beans and even chestnut or acorn meal for this purpose.¹³ These additives, like dark wheat bread, are to this day associated with distress and poverty, they tend to bring back memories of the tragic times of famine.



¹³ In his chronicle (As)Syrian Mōr Mikhōyel Rābo (†1199), *Tārī az-zamān* (Universal History), vol. 3, Dār ar-Raha, Aleppo, 1996, 43, indicates that the year 1144 was a year of great famine in Mesopotamia. People milled wheat straw, palm tree branches and date pits together with a small amount of grain. Old people's accounts usually mention *lahmo da-s'ōre* ('barley bread') and *lahmo dū bālū o* ('acorn bread'). An Anglican pastor, delegated by the Archbishop of Canterbury to go to the Assyrians in 1909, praised the bread he was offered in the village of Erdel (the Hakkari region, south east Turkey). The bread was made with half of acorn and half of barley flour. According to the pastor those acorns were a delicacy and had the size of a small English chestnut. A.W. Wigram, A.T.E. Wigram, *The Cradle of Mankind*, 2nd ed., Zahrira, Chicago-Stockholm (in Arabic translation), 1997, 145. Acorns and chestnuts smuggled from ūr °Abdīn in 1960s were a favorite addition to New Year's dishes in the Assyrian families in Qāmišlī. They were eaten after roasting them slightly on the oven plate. During World War I people in ūr °Abdīn made bread from wheat and potato flour mixture.

The plan of a homestead with buildings made of clay in the village of Tel °Alo where the author lived with his grandfather, parents and three siblings (7 people) till 1958. The village was built from scratch in the mid 1940s, and had 100 homesteads. A decade later first villagers began to move to Qāmišlī from where they set off for other countries, never to return to Tel °Alo.

A – guest room; B – anteroom, including: B₁ and B₂ – *esre*, clay chambers for storage of wheat and barley in bulk; C – dwelling room; Z – stable (3 draught horses + an Arabian mare “sesto”); Z₁ – cowshed (5 cows *qanyōne*); Z₂ – barn (130 sheep °*wōne* and 35 goats °*ēze*); Z₃ – barn (lambs *fāre*, *qarqūre*, *arwōne*); Z₄ – barn for calves; Z₅ – hencote; D – fuel storage; D₁ – *lawdo*, chaff storage; D₂ – carthouse; E – *gūbo*, grain storage pit (ca. 12 tons).

The author remembers that in the 1950s and 60s querns (*gōresto*) were not anymore used for milling wheat grain in the village. They were present in almost every home but they were used only for crushing wheat for grits and lentils for the meal used in soups. Mortars (*hāwen*) on the other hand, were used for grinding roast coffee beans and some spices. In rural areas there were a few establishments specializing in milling of wheat grain. These were equipped with one or two grain mills of plain construction. In my opinion, in the 1950s and 1960s one industrial mill could serve some 20-30 villages. In some villages watermills were operating. Being a miller (*qārōšo*) was a rare and fairly prestigious profession. The flour (its extract could have amounted to 80%) and bran obtained were stored in separate jute sacks.¹⁴ Until not long ago in the Assyrian village of °ūr °Abdīn¹⁵ grain was milled with a small quantity of dry fruit growing on trees called *ma lab* (*Cerasus*

¹⁴ At that time it was not technically possible to polish the grain in village mills. Adjustment of the size of the clearance between the milling cylinders resulted only in decreasing or increasing the flour output. In order to obtain white flour, some rich people from Qāmišlī had the grain polished. Grain was transported to the mill by local carriers who had carts with four wood and metal wheels and were drawn by a single horse. They carried the grain-filled sacks (weighing some 120-140 kg) from the house to the cart and took them to the flourmill where they unloaded the grain to the milling machine.

¹⁵ °ūr °Abdīn (in Assyrian: ‘God worshippers’ mountain’) – a region in south-east Turkey bordering Syria, stretched from the town of Mārdīn in the west to Cizre (Assyr. Gzīro) in the east. It is a plateau with an average height of 1000m asl, with high and steep edges, sloping to the south, and enclosed from the east by a volcanic mountain range. The interior of the plateau is made of limestone from the older Tertiary period, easily permeable for the precipitation that forms a snow coat covering the land till March. At places there are formations with fertile black-earth accumulated only in depressions. These are mostly the places where settled life is concentrated in numerous villages where farmers grow wheat and barley, tobacco, grapes and vegetables, and plant castor-oil plants, fig and mulberry trees. Vast oak tree forests, often with arable fields inside, supply timber and oak apples. Przeworski, op. cit., 178.

mahaleb Mill.). (One handful was added to approximately 100 kg of grain.) The seeds of this fruit were supposed to render a specific flavor to bread made of the flour.¹⁶

Modernization of crop cultivation methods

Technical and technological base of agriculture

The development of the almost totally neglected plain of the northeast Syria did not come until the beginning of the 1920s. Assyrian emigrants moved here from the neighboring region of ʾūr ʿAbdīn at that time. The political situation after the collapse of the 400-year rule of the Ottoman Empire and withdrawal of the Turks from the Al-Jazīra region (in 1922) was favorable for these persecuted inhabitants of ʾūr ʿAbdīn. The arrival of the French, who took over Syria as mandated by the League of Nations, resulted in 1928 in an official division of the so far contentious northeastern borderland between Syria and Turkey. Consequently, Assyrian newcomers began to view Al-Jazīra as the Promised Land, and the terminal station of their journey in the search of a place offering real prospects for development within the historical Mesopotamia. Al-Jazīra seemed to be such a place also due to its direct vicinity to the abandoned homeland still inhabited by thousands of relatives and countrymen. For two thousand and five hundred years no authority was capable of making the Assyrian natives abandon the thought and conviction that this is the land where their roots are, though it is fair to say that their efforts for upholding their identity and culture has varied in intensity throughout the past centuries.¹⁷ The Church undoubtedly played an important role in this respect.

With active involvement and considerable technical assistance of the French

¹⁶ Dry fruit are very light, egg-like shape and about 1 cm. long. When crushed, e.g. with teeth, their thin brown shell easily comes off the light colored seed. The seed has an almond-like, slightly bitter taste. Even though they are available in the shops of Midyāt (August 1999), nowadays hardly any housewife uses them as an additive to bread. The shopkeeper who sold them to me (0.5 kg) did not even know their application. A pinch of ground seeds is probably added also to boiled milk. There are said to induce hallucinations when used in excess.

¹⁷ Of course not all Assyrian refugees from ʾūr ʿAbdīn went to Al-Jazīra. Part of them immigrated to America. At a cemetery in New Jersey the author came across (1989) tombstones with inscriptions in Assyrian dating back to the late 1890s. Large groups settled in Lebanon and other Middle Eastern countries. The Assyrian Diaspora has been studied only in part: M. Abdalla, ‘*Assyrian diaspora*’, “prawy narodowościowe. Seria nowa,” 1994, t. III, z. 1, 55-75 [in Polish]; M. Abdalla, ‘*Assyrian emigrants in Sweden between tradition and present*’, in: *Dylematy tożsamości europejskich pod koniec drugiego tysiąclecia*, conference proceedings, Mucha J., Olszewski W. (eds.), M. Kopernik University, Toruń, 1997, 197-218 [in Polish].

the newcomers built a modern city named Qāmišlī.¹⁸ Almost two thirds of its initial inhabitants were said to have come from the border town of Nusaybin.¹⁹ The construction started in 1925 and progressed in accordance with the general long-term land development plan prepared by the French. It is said that the chief architect was a Greek serving in the French army²⁰ or in the German headquarters of the local line section of the “Orient Express” railway construction in 1915-1918.²¹ His name, surely severely mispronounced in the local dialect, was something like Chara Lambos. Soon the town became the administrative and urban center of northeast Syria as well as the center of lively trade and agricultural production and broadly understood cultural activity.²² A tractor, the first in the region, was brought here from America in 1932, to be followed two years later by the first sheaf-binder and a horse-drawn combine harvester. The most modern

¹⁸ Different phonetic versions of the name exist: Qāmišlī, al-QāmEšlī, QāmEšlo, GāmEšlī, QāmEšlōke, al-QāmEšliyye. Majority of authors agree that the name QāmEšlī derives from Turkish and means ‘the place of the reed’. The banks and marshy lakes of the river *Jaqjaq* were profusely overgrown with reeds. It is a very likely version. However, there are also opinions according to which the name could be a combination of two Assyrian words: *qōm* and *šlī* translating as ‘to settle after a period of wandering’, which is to explain the reasons of emigration from Tūr °Abdīn and relatively good conditions found in the new place of settlement. However, one cannot exclude that Qāmišlī is a three-segment word: *qōm*, *šēm* and *īl*, meaning ‘God’s name has been reborn,’ since the barren land has been repopulated. G. Salība, ‘*The prairie of Nusaybin in the biography of parish-priest Malke*’, Beirut, 1984, 21 [in Arabic]. According to another hypothesis the name is supposedly derived from the word *gōmūše* (‘buffalos’). It is said that large herds of these animals roamed this region. J. Asmar, ‘*From Nu aybin to Zālīn/Qāmišlī*’, Dār al-‘Ilm, Damascus, 1995, 29 [in Arabic].

¹⁹ Writh E., *Syrien. Eine geografische Landeskunde*, Darmstadt, 1971, s. 428. This is how it could be only in the early stages of settlement. In the following years people native to different villages of Tūr °Abdīn became a dominant group. Nusaybin (Sōba, N īwEn, Nisibis) was the home town of St. Efreim, which he had to leave in 363 at the age of 60. He often called it Akad. One tradition derives the name of the city from the verb *nsāb* (‘cultivate or build’) G. Ayküz, *Nusaybin’daki Mor Yakup Kilisesive Nusaybin Okulu*, Mardin Kırklar Kilisesi, Turkey, 1998, 9. From 301 to 1902 this was the city of a bishop’s see; but currently only one Christian family lives there. One of its most important historical buildings is the cathedral of St. James of Nisibin (4th/5th c.) and the monastery of St. Eugene the Great. The former building is currently under the care of a Christian family and is open for sightseeing, the latter one is dilapidated.

²⁰ Lahdo A., *A Description of the QāmEšlī Dialect*, Department of Afro-Asiatic Languages, University of Uppsala, Sweden, Master Thesis, 1997, 7.

²¹ Asmar, op. cit., s. 40.

²² Jastrow O., *The Judaeo-Arabic Dialect of Nusaybin/QāmEšlī*, “*Studia Linguistica et Orientalia Memoriae Haim Blanc-Dedicata*,” Wexler P., Borge A., Somekh S. (eds.), Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1989, 156-159.

universal high capacity wheat-winnowing machine was purchased in Italy. Its design allowed for full purification of grain and its segregation into three sorts. It was equipped with a separate chamber for mixing the sowing material with pesticides. Soon other American tractors of different makes such as “International,” “John Deere,” “Caterpillar” (on caterpillars) and “Minneapolis” appeared in the region. There were also British “Massey Harris,” Italian “Fiat” and German “Hanomag” machines. A lot of agricultural equipment was brought from Sweden. The fertility of the Assyrian soil known to ancient peoples was rediscovered at the time when new cultivation methods came into existence. The combination of the 20th century European farming machines and the dormant Al-Jazīra soil resulted in the propagation of agriculture and put an end to the long lasting Arab nomadic domination in the region. “Restoration of settlement and culture to the previous scale depends on permanent stabilization of relations,” wrote Przeworski in the early 1930s.²³ The table below illustrates an increase in the number of wheat combines and tractors in Al-Jazīra between 1946-1949.²⁴

The pace of mechanization of agriculture in Al-Jazīra in the years 1946-1949

Machines	Year		
	1946	1948	1949
Combines	114	270	350
Tractors	115	320	450

Of course, not all of the new arrivals were willing to live in the city, some of them preferred to live in the country. Conditions were favorable for making choices. The city was a usual choice of people who had lived in a city before, majority of whom were craftsmen, while former farmers tended to settle in villages. In the search of the right place to live, some farmers moved a number of times choosing already existing villages or villages still under construction. Their stay in each new place lasted from only a year to up to a few years. Existing villages were declining while new ones were being established. This process is still underway, but with a smaller participation of Assyrians now that their population is on decline in the rural areas of Al-Jazīra.

Another phenomenon observed in Syria of that time was the transplantation of former settlers to specific towns. For instance Dērīk (today called Al-Mālikiyye) used to be a destination for Assyrian emigrants from the Āza ; while asake was

²³ Przeworski, op. cit., 185.

²⁴ Gibert A., Wevret M., *La Djézireh Syrienne et son réveil économique*, Revue de géographie de Lyon, Allix A. (ed.), Publiée a l'Université de Lyon, 1953, 83-99. The authors quote after the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development: in 1952 there were only 750 tractors more in the whole of Iraq than in Al-Jazīra, out of those half were working in the region of Baghdad and Mōsul.

populated mainly by former inhabitants of Mārdīn. In Qāmišlī there is currently a settlement called (unofficially) *dan-nabōye*, populated by people originating from the village of Arbō in ūr ʿAbdīn. A considerable proportion of the first inhabitants of this city were emigrants from Midyāt (Assyrian Midyad). Despite the fact that today the Assyrians are no longer a majority in the city, successive mayors have always been Assyrian; of course, they are always appointed by the central authorities.

Unfortunately, just a few years after the Syrian state had gained independence Damascus started to issue restrictive regulations regarding agriculture, thus severely limiting the possibility of expanding the very modest efforts in mechanization. From that time on new farming machines could only be imported in the form of spare parts by middlemen residing in Lebanon and Jordan, and that, not entirely in legal ways.²⁵

Although the majority of newcomers settled in Qāmišlī and in a few newly built little towns, it should be stressed that their activity in the area of agriculture and mechanization of farming affected a considerable part of the territory of Al-Jazīra. The scale of the region's development at that time is illustrated in the dynamic growth of cereal cultivation together with a fast increase in population. In 1940 the area of land sown with cereals amounted to 86.000 hectares,²⁶ over the next 23 years it increased to 549.000 hectares,²⁷ to reach 919.000 hectares in 1983.²⁸ The news of the success of starter colonies, implementation of attractive and effective projects, and most importantly stabilization and safe living environment attracted new waves of emigrants, including Turkish Kurds. Settling on the outskirts of the newly built towns, they increased the rural Kurdish population that had arrived here sometime earlier. Immediately after the end of World War II, the total population of the province increased to some 40.000. Successive censuses reflected the development of the region and its two principal cities: Qāmišlī and ḥasake (see table). Currently (2005) the population of Al-Jazīra is nearly 22% of the total population of Syria. A great majority of the inhabitants subsist on farming. In 1970, 67% of the population at productive age²⁹ worked in this sector. Despite changes in the administrative division of the country, Al-Jazīra remains Syria's largest district, called *Muhāfazat al- ḥasake* (with the provincial

²⁵ Dāwūd I., 'The Syrian Al-Jazīra between the past and the present', Damascus, 1959, 309 [in Arabic].

²⁶ Gībert i Fevert, op. cit. 1953.

²⁷ Al- āǧī Ḍ., 'Wheat and barley in Syria', Cereals and Mills Board in Syria (occasional edition), 1966, 6 [in Arabic].

²⁸ *Syrian Statistical Yearbook* 1984, 127.

²⁹ Mārdīnī A. Š., 'Al-Hasake province', Damascus, 1986, 98, 100, 105-106 [in Arabic].

city of al-Hasake).³⁰

Demographic growth in Al-Jazīra in 1960-2000

Year	Region as a whole			Average no of persons in family	Qāmišlī	Hasake
	Total	Rural	Urban			
1960	353.000	295.000	58.000	5.5	34.198	18.870
1970	468.000	372.000	96.000	6.1	47.714	32.746
1980	670.000	476.000	238.000	6.6	92.990	73.426
1990	932.000	-	-	-	-	-
2000	1.251.000	-	-	-	-	-

* *Syrian Statistical Yearbook, p. 71*

The data in the table show that the population of Al-Jazīra doubles on average every 20 years. A similar growth is observed currently also in other Arab and Muslim countries. Al-Jazīra is the most ethnically diverse province of Syria.

After settling the region the Assyrian entrepreneurs turned vast areas of formerly unproductive land into cultivated land. This includes not only the land they owned but also the land in possession of other native or foreign groups such as Arabs and Kurds, whose land was leased, usually in return for one third of crops.³¹ Within a short time Al-Jazīra has become a virtual ‘bread basket’ of the Middle East, the largest supplier of wheat, the most important of raw materials, but also of barley, rice, lentil, cotton and sesame. Witnesses and participants of these transformations emphasize that these agricultural products meet the strictest of technological and consumer quality standards. The neglected Al-Jazīra has ceased to be a ‘no-go’ land. The unjust view of the ‘savagery’ of its inhabitants, at times overtly expressed in Damascus or Aleppo, is forgotten and people from these cities

³⁰ Up to 1936 the east part of Syria was a single administrative district covering the area from the Tigris to the Euphrates, hence the Arabic name of Al-Jazīra. Dēr Az-Zōr was the most important city of the region at that time. Division of the province into two separate districts was effected under the French mandate. One of the reasons was the development of Qāmišlī and Hasake. Qāmišlī is the largest city in terms of population, but Hasake is the provincial capital, probably due to the fact that the former is situated directly across the Turkish border. The district has the total area of 23.330 km², which is approximately 1/8 of the Syrian territory.

³¹ Also the author’s father for some time belonged to the group of people signing the contracts. In the years 1958-1962 he established together with my uncles, a partnership having at its disposal a combine harvester. Then in 1962-1967 together with his partners, they bought an American “Caterpillar” crawler tractor. They harvested crops or performed plowing only in Bedouin and Kurdish villages employing mostly Assyrians, countrymen from the village of ʿAbdīn who came to Al-Jazīra illegally in summer to earn some additional money. Like other boys of my age I often accompanied my father, taking part in some fieldwork. At these times we lived for over a month in a tent or in an unoccupied mud house, sometimes even outdoors.

have started to get involved in various projects in the region without prejudice and apprehension.

In the past at harvest time thousands of laborers came to Qāmišlī from Dēr az-Zōr and Aleppo in search of work. They usually worked as carriers (*āmōle* from Arabic verb *amala* ‘to carry’), and were hired for a few hours or days. They were paid by the number of grain sacks they carried. Some carriers were in a way attached to a specific truck garage run by people who were not native to Qāmišlī, but came from other parts of Syria. To transport cereal from the country to the city, a farmer would hire a truck together with the carriers. These seasonal laborers would wait for their employers on the walkways in the city center where they virtually lived for 2-3 months every summer.

Wheat was the prevailing crop cultivated in the region, and it was its most important resource except for oil. In the 1950s an average yield was 20 quintals from one hectare and it was higher than the yield harvested in other parts of Syria. Harvest time lasted for the whole summer and ensured employment for both the majority of Al-Jazīra’s population and also for people coming to the region from other Syrian provinces, and even from neighboring Turkey. At that time the region turned into a huge workshop where everybody could find the right occupation for himself. Since there were no railway lines,³² sandy roads connecting individual villages and the asphalt roads of Qāmišlī were constantly carrying huge trucks with high capacity trailers. Wheat grain packed into sacks was transported to big cities and seaports of Syria and Lebanon, from where it was exported mostly to France. Syrian wheat is hard and vitreous; it is suitable for the production of pasta and couscous. The demand for the wheat and its market price was only reduced by the lack of parietal purity.

³² A great German project “Bagdad Bahn” was implemented in sections under different governments and was finally completed in 1940. An “Orient Express” branch linked Aleppo, Syria with Nusaybin, Turkey. Except for a short section from Aleppo to the Turkish border, the rest of the route runs along the border through the Turkish area. The construction of the Nusaybin-Mōsul section commenced in 1932 and became operational in 1952. The single-track line was served by one train per day, from Qāmišlī to Tal Kōčak (currently Al-Yaʿrubīyye by the Iraqī border). Both villages in which I lived for a number of years, Tel ʿAlo and Qalʿat Al-Hādī were located in the vicinity of this railway line, the only one in the area. The train stopped in a place marked with a bulletin board with the name of the village written on it. There was no railway station building. Railway transport, though less expensive than road transport, was unable to accommodate the whole of the crop. There were not enough wagons and silos in the vicinity of large stations, and apart from that, production regions were located far away from railway lines and thus could not use them. Also, it needs to be said that transport in the Iraqī direction was very limited. The length of the railway system in Syria amounted to 1154 km in 1957; 1447 km in 1970; 2027 km in 1983 (after connecting Qāmišlī with the port of Latakia). These numbers include also narrow-gauge lines, the length of which is: 301 km, 307 km and 341 km, respectively.

Wheat was reaped with combines of Western make, mostly American “John Deere.” Once in the combine, the grain was poured directly into strong, ca. 100 cm long hemp sacks with the capacity of 110-140 kg. Individual sacks sown up with special hemp string with side handles at the top were slid down a chute. When there were 4-6 sacks in the chute they were dropped down directly to the stubble field.

As it has already been said harvesters worked three shifts. Sometimes they took a break during the 2-3 hottest midday hours.³³ After every shift a tractor with a trailer and three carriers set off for the field. Two carriers would catch the ends of a sack lying on the ground and put it up and then, holding hands, they lifted and tossed it on the back of the third carrier standing bent down next to them. The carrier protected with a properly shaped cushion made from leather and thick felt tied to his back, held the sack pressed against the protruding edge of the cushion. For better protection he helped himself with hands stretching them back and supporting the bottom of the sack (the top protruded over his head). When supporting of the sack with hands from the bottom up was becoming too tiring, the carrier caught it by the handles, lifting the hands above the head. In this position he climbed up a strong ladder and tossed the sack on board of the trailer. The sacks gradually formed a pyramid.³⁴

Outfits of the carriers were usually different from the clothes worn by the local population of Qāmišlī. They wore leather sandals of specific shape. Such sandals were made by Assyrian shoemakers in Qāmišlī. Despite the fact that they were comfortable and strong, nevertheless they were rather unpopular among the locals as they were called *dah- āmōle*—carrier sandals³⁵.

³³ Sometimes it happened that a combine caught fire and, which carried a risk of burning of vast areas of wheat crops.

³⁴ Physical fitness of some carriers was really surprising. Carrying a 120-140 kg sack on their backs, they were able to quickly climb up a ladder without helping themselves with hands. Some of them could determine the weight of the load within one-kilogram accuracy. At that time there were no provisions of the law to protect carriers. I am not aware of any trade union that would represent this large occupational group. As late as 1970's, in the bus station of large cities in Syria you would find young carriers approaching travelers offering their help in carrying luggage on their back or shoulders. Sometimes they behaved like beggars, being rather importunate in their attempts to earn a living. I have never seen such scenes in Qāmišlī. As early as 1960's there were three-wheel motorcycle-goods carriers riding in the city streets. Poor travelers treated them as budget taxis.

³⁵ An Assyrian postgraduate student studying in Poland, accompanying the author during his trip to Syria in the summer of 1975 wore Polish sandals resembling the sandals worn by carriers in Qāmišlī. His father ordered him to take them off, as he thought it was a disgrace to wear them.

Every day during the harvest time, the plantation owner received the part of grain which was due to him, while the remaining quantity was unloaded in a place to which the contractor arrived with his team of workers. The team always included a cook and a calculator. They were usually accommodated in tents. In time the grain-filled sacks formed virtual pyramids rising around these stations, colloquially called the 'stocks'. When the station moved to the next contracted village, the former place was left under the care of a guard who watched the 'stock' until the grain accumulated there was sold.³⁶

Next to the above forms of wheat grain collection organization there were also large permanent field stations with repair workshops and spare parts for the machines, stocks of fuel and foodstuffs. They were in operation almost year round and had their own bakery, accommodation for the workers and offices. These stations were usually owned by wealthy contractors sometimes having at their disposal tens of combines and plows as well as other farming equipment.

Since wheat silos were unavailable at that time, the 'slopes' of grain-filled sacks were stored outdoors: in fields and yards, in front of houses, on walkways and in courtyards. The grain was exposed to harsh sunlight for almost fifteen hours per day, after that a chilly night came. There was also considerable damage due to strong winds and clouds of dust generated by passing trucks. Some sacks were stored in such conditions for two or three summer months, or even till the first autumn rainfalls. Contact with even a small amount of water was sufficient for the grain in the sacks to sprout, which happened even in the Syrian port of Latakia. Sprouted grain was not fit for sale. Having very limited means to protect the grain, some farmers happened to lose the entire harvested crop in this way. At this point one should say that the cost of transport from Qāmišlī to Aleppo for instance, often constituted half of the market price of the grain. First silos were erected in Qāmišlī as late as in 1976. However, the Syrian press still reports serious losses of precious grain due to insufficient storage capacity of the silos built in Al-Jazīra and other provinces of the country. Rodents also cause considerable losses of grain.

Widespread use of combines meant almost complete abandoning of the traditional method of grain harvesting. In order not to waste valuable straw (*pūš*, Arabic *qišš*, *qišš*), without ears, a fairly original method of its collection was developed. A large piece of metal sheet with three protruding sides was attached to the rear outlet of the combine harvester. It was dragged by the machine sliding on

³⁶ Most of the grain buyers came from Aleppo. For the time of the harvest they opened their offices in Qāmišlī. The sellers invited them to the place where the 'stock' was located or transported the grain to the city by their own means, sometimes after prior delivery of samples. The grain sampled from a number of places in a sack was inspected visually. At that time the chemical analysis of grain quality determinants was probably unknown. I have never heard of any registration of transactions involving the sale of grain. Also, I am not sure whether any tax was paid to the state for these transactions.

the stubble field. A person had to walk very fast, almost run to keep pace with the combine which was next to the metal sheet. Using pitchforks, this worker tossed the straw ejected by the machine straight to the sheet of metal. The straw was removed only when the sheet was completely full. The speed of transport had to be synchronized with the output of the combine. For fear of fire the straw was quickly transported to the village.

In order to improve transportation in the city, workshops specializing in manufacture and repair of four-wheel carts driven by two horses were opened in Qāmišlī. The carts had a metal frame and wooden body and were 1.8 m high, approximately 2.5 m long, and 1 m wide. In the center of each wheel there was a metal hub from which strengthening beams were running centrically to the outer wheel. The wheels were covered with a steel hoop. During the harvest time poles of some 4 m in length strengthened with beams were fastened to both sides of the cart thus increasing its capacity considerably. In the stubble field, the cart was loaded with straw by at least two people. One lifted the straw with pitchfork and the other person, standing on the cart, took it over and placed it on the board. The work was hard and dangerous, especially for the person standing on the cart on an increasingly higher stack of straw. The straw load was sometimes up to 4-5 m high. The cart shuttled between the stubble field and the village without a break until the evening. Some farmers provided this service for a charge.

The purpose of traditional threshing was to husk the grain and to crush the straw at the same time. The next step was to replace this archaic method of threshing with a slightly modified technique to double the speed of turning the straw into chaff.

Craftsmen from Qāmišlī developed such a high capacity machine for cutting straw. Its main part was a large cylinder with rotating blades inside, driven by a gear connected with a string with a gear in the tractor's engine. The rotations were very fast. In order to start the cutter a tractor with constantly running engine was kept nearby. Straw was loaded into the cylinder through the top-charging hopper. Despite the fact that the machine generated a lot of noise, farmers were very proud of it and treated the noise as a proof that mechanization was inaugurated, and the next step on the way to development was made. Chaff obtained in this way was not good as an additive to fodder since sharp straw sections often hurt animals' palates and some of them refused to eat it. Also in the process of treading (mixing) clay with chaff and salt these sharp fragments tended to prick the treader's feet. Chaff obtained in this way was also less useful due to insufficient quantity of the finest fraction used for making clay mixture from which bread ovens were built. Moreover, it was used also (after mixing with salt) for the plastering of internal walls of dwelling rooms. Owing to the addition of this fine chaff only a thin layer of plaster could be applied. The coat was also smooth and more resistant to rain.

The role of Asfar and Najjār's farming complex in the development of agriculture

The rapid mechanization of agriculture in Al-Jazīra was promoted by a company established by two cousins: Asfar and Najjār of Diyārbakīr. They were members of the Arabic speaking Assyrian population that, as I have already mentioned, had been forced to leave their historical native land granted to Turkey after World War I and had settled in Syria which was under the French control at that time. The settlers started building a new homeland not only for their families but also for many countrymen who were arriving to settle in the region. The emigrants received moral and spiritual support from the Church, while the economic support and help came from the company owned by Asfar and Najjār and from other smaller production cooperatives. The companies were not only seriously competing in acquiring new terrains and contractors, but also cooperating and exchanging experiences with one another. Their operation was perfectly complementary owing to almost natural territorial division of economic zones between them. This included almost the entire area east of the Euphrates, and, most of all, the over one hundred kilometers-wide belt of land stretching along the west bank of the river Khābūr (from the Turkish-Syrian border in the north to the Syrian-Iraqi border in the south), and the land to the south-west of Qāmišlī, of which 12.000 hectares were irrigated by the river Jaqjaq and its tributaries. The operation of other companies in the region was conspicuous in the area enclosed between the river Khābūr in the west and the Tigris in the east with the exclusion of the terrains situated southwest of Qāmišlī that were cultivated almost exclusively by Asfar and Najjār.

In the fledgling Syrian state, and hence in Al-Jazīra too, there was no registration of businesses, no legal and administrative provisions regulating this sphere of human activity. This is one of the reasons why today it is difficult to reconstruct a picture of the economic past of this region and to analyze in detail the full scale of achievements of the companies active at that time. Even such aspects of life as education of children were organized by people themselves. The role of the state authorities was at that time purely symbolic.³⁷

³⁷ The first Wheat Agency was established by the French in 1939. Later, in 1941-1945, it was transformed into the Office for Bread Cereals (Office des Cereales Panifiables). Its task was to purchase grain for the French and allied armies as well as for the needs of the Syrian population, including also population of the present Lebanon. The office signed sale contracts with farmers and paid them advance money, for instance, for the purchase of selected variety sowing material. Prices were going up fast. Upon Syria's becoming a fully independent state the office was renamed MIRA, to be liquidated four years later. From that time on farmers had to sell crops to private grain merchants at speculative prices, which resulted in a serious regress. The prices dropped by half. After a two year's crisis, the central authorities issued a decree about market

During the 35 years of consistent, hard work the agricultural complex created by Asfar and Najjār turned huge tracks of encrusted and dry land into rich, crop-yielding, cultivated fields. The agricultural complex was a common topic of discussion everywhere: in homes and clubs, in churches and in the streets. In the beginning, the company employed almost exclusively Assyrians and Armenians. Each permanent employee could recommend a new candidate, including a Kurd or an Arab. Honest and impartial historians, not in service of the changing rulers, express their overt admiration for laboriousness and ingenuity of these highlanders who had come there from the west corner of ʿūr ʿAbdīn. Al-Jazīra's prosperity, with its unexpected scale, was referred to as a 'genuine revolution' and an 'economic boom'. The regenerated land was referred to as the 'California or Ukraine of the Middle East'.³⁸ In fact it was wheat that became the actual catalyst of this unprecedented development.

The cousins became famous in the whole region for their success. They were considered true pioneers of the authentic agricultural revolution unfolding with a great momentum, free from exploitation and planned to continue for many years to come. The scope of their interest and the scale of their success both surprised and fascinated people. In the opinion of three American experts expressed in May 1958, "If the present government wanted to achieve only a tenth of what has been accomplished owing to the Asfar and Najjār agricultural complex, it would have to mobilize and employ its entire army."³⁹

The process of developing the land of Al-Jazīra initiated in the early 1930s started to yield results only in 1943 in the form of large projects, including the construction of grain stores so much needed in the region. It took almost twenty years to convince Arab and Kurdish tribal chiefs to grant their consent to put on lease the useless land in their possession. They were not aware of the land's real value. The agricultural complex's income, accumulated during the following thirteen years, was enough to buy half of the contracted area previously owned by Arab Bedouins. Almost all available documents from that time stress an important impact of historic and revolutionary proportions this company had on Arab nomadism: owing to long-lasting persuasions and efforts of the Assyrian entrepreneurs or their authorized representatives, many nomadic tribes of Al-Jazīra agreed to abandon their previous life and to settle down. Through negotiations it was agreed that in return for their co-operation in agriculture, consisting only in putting their land on lease, the company would build for them

supervision and regulation and protection of wheat prices. They introduced mandatory buy outs, free transactions, export licenses in return for the sale of one third of crops in 1951, and a half of the harvested yield in 1952. Gibert and Fevret, op. cit.

³⁸ Dāwūd, op. cit., 213.

³⁹ Dāwūd, op. cit., 325.

from scratch rural settlements with complete infrastructure, even with electrical power which at that time was unavailable even in many Syrian cities.⁴⁰

After many years of experimentation, it was only in 1948 that part of the land leased in this way from the Bedouins was used for growing rice and cotton. Irrigation of the fields with river water (from the Khābūr river) required the completion of many projects, including bridges, tunnels, concrete canals,⁴¹ pumping stations and asphalt roads. According to the preserved documents, by the end of the 1950's almost 90% of the rice produced in Syria came from the fields cultivated by the Asfar and Najjār Agricultural Complex.⁴² Cotton, also introduced for the first time in the Complex's fields, soon turned into a mass production crop. As early as in 1951 the company had followers not only in Al-Jazīra but also in many other regions. This particular period in the history of the world production of this raw material was dubbed the "cotton craze." The high demand was conducive to the development of cotton cultivation in the Middle Eastern countries. The area of cotton plantations in Al-Jazīra began to grow in a very fast pace: from mere 140 hectares in 1948; to 1300 hectares in 1949; to 3300

⁴⁰ Qāmišlī was provided with electricity in 1929; but the provincial city of Al- asake enjoyed electricity only 19 years later. Implementation of this electrification project is ascribed to an Assyrian engineer from Qāmišlī, Quryo Lole (Mārdīnī, op. cit., 354). In 1947 the power plant in Qāmišlī was turned into a joint stock company. Nine years later it was nationalized. A. Barsōm, 'The Assyrians in Qāmāšlī', Beirut, 1982, 21 [in Arabic]. It should be added that the consumption of electrical power per one inhabitant in the 1950s in Qāmišlī was the highest among all towns in Syria. Dāwūd, op. cit., 369.

⁴¹ It is said that in this area the Agricultural Complex experts discovered remains of irrigation canals from the times of ancient Mesopotamia and included them with success into a new irrigation system. The existence of these canals indicates that Al-Jazīra was a farming region with scarce water resources. Along the section from the river Khābūr estuary up to the place where it joins the Euphrates, Gibert and Wewret found 8 dams from ancient Assyrian times. They are located in places where the terrain has different levels. South of Al- asake they came across the remains of neatly built cement-lined underground channels for collection of water in order to prevent evaporation.

⁴² The author has learned a lot about the cultivation of rice in the village of Qānaq in ūr °Abdīn at the beginning of the 20th century from his grandfather, who lived in this village (destroyed and populated by the Kurds in 1918). The former natives of Qānaq (Qānāqōye), some 40 families, who settled in Qāmišlī held regular monthly meetings. They established a family fund for the poor and the deprived. However, rice had been grown in Mesopotamia much earlier. Bār °Ebrōyo, 'The Universal History', Dār al-Mašriq, Beirut, 1986, 21 [in Arabic], writes: "In 814 Mesopotamia suffered a great famine and people had to eat bread made of the mixture of rice and broad beans." Cultivation of rice by Assyrian peasants in the first half of the 19th century is mentioned by A. Grant, *The Nestorians or the Lost Tribes*, London (reprint: Philo Press, Amsterdam 1973), 1841, 59.

hectares in 1950; to 34.000 hectares in 1951. Unfortunately, only a few farmers managed to achieve encouraging yields.⁴³ The remaining part of the land gained by the Complex was used to grow wheat and barley. In order to meet the welfare needs of the growing number of employees and to ensure better performance, a small town with complete infrastructure was built in the center of the complex's area. It was named 'Mabrūka' (in Arabic 'the Blessed'). The town was "baptized" and given the name by Patriarch Iḡnatiyyōs Afrem I Barsōm. Mabrūka was situated 190 km to the west of Qāmišlī. The employees were offered accommodation and monthly vouchers for meals. Cooked meals and dry rations were available in canteens and shops were open round the clock. Wheat warehouses were the town's most prominent structures.

In order to achieve increasingly better effects the complex employed foreign experts, mainly Russians and Americans. In operation were testing stations assessing usefulness of local wheat varieties that needed to be professionally selected. Results of experimental crops were registered with great accuracy. Pure, high-yielding grain varieties were brought from France, Italy, Mexico and other countries. Adequate maps were drawn and the local staff was given training. As a result, the yield of wheat was higher every year. It is said never to have fallen below 0.15 m tons.⁴⁴ Assuming that the realistic yield from one hectare was at the level of 30 quintal, it is easy to calculate that the size of the area used for wheat crops could have amounted to almost 0.05 m hectares, which was almost every fiftieth hectare of Al-Jazīra's present area.

Extensive charitable activity of Asfār and Najjār cousins certainly deserves separate mention. It is, however, a topic beyond the scope of this work. Nevertheless, I will take the liberty of presenting yet another secret of their success. It involves the rare phenomenon in the Middle East of establishing small employee partnerships. Such partnerships were organized in Al-Jazīra and operated with success already in 1940s. This was a form of farmwork organization completely unknown at that time and certainly pioneered in the Middle East. Its purpose was to enable participation in the implementation of increasingly ambitious tasks and plans of the entire agricultural complex of not only the permanent employees, but also people so far unrelated with it in any way. The benefits were mutual. Owing to the scheme many bold people achieved unquestionable success and satisfaction, many smaller companies and enterprises were saved from certain bankruptcy.

⁴³ One of the reasons for the great demand for cotton was the war in Korea. The Syrian state paid farmers 0.6 pound for one kilogram, and exported it for 1.75 pound per kilogram. Huge profits generated during a single season in 1950 were used for the construction of a modern and fully automated factory near Aleppo by Americans, with the output capacity of some 100 000 tons per year. Gibert and Fevret, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ The informant, the author's father, lived in Qabre ēwōre (Qbōr Al-Bīd, currently Al-Qahyāniyye) in north-east Syria and in three other villages: Šalhūmiyye, Mizgafte and Tel °Alo, till 1958; and from 1958 in the city of Qāmišlī. He died in Sweden in 1991.

The complex offered genuine support to the partnerships; it provided them with necessary means in the form of credit in kind for a period of five years. It provided the personnel with permanent social services and a monthly pay calculated on the basis of generated income. The credit included fixed assets and services such as purchase of agricultural machines (a tractor, set of plows, combine, jeep and trucks) complete with spare parts, fuel, and professional repair service. It guaranteed good quality sowing material and advisory services, as well as food, accommodation, health care and protective clothing for the workers. The costs of lease rent and operation of machines were deducted from the total profit only after the harvest. Partnership teams, usually composed of some 20 people (manager, mechanic, 4 drivers, cook, carriers, caretaker) could be joined by any worker who made a certain contribution treated as security for which he received interest. As the profits put aside every year increased by the accrued interest, the partnership team could eventually buy out the machines leased from the agricultural complex. In 1950 there were 30 such partnerships in operation.

The range of the services offered by partnership teams extended not only over the areas within the agricultural complex's boundaries, but also over distant regions of Syria such as Homs, Hama, Aleppo or even Damascus. It is worth noting that owing to the efforts of the people active in these partnerships many a local armed conflict was avoided, although this aspect of their activity was not envisaged at the time of the teams' formation. Here is one example of such activity. In 1952 a serious dispute arose between the representatives of two largest local Bedouin tribes at odds with each other: Šammar and ʿayy. The dispute pertained to the rights to the uncultivated sub region called Ar-Radd (situated to the south of Qāmišlī, by the Iraqī border), comprising an area of nearly 200.000 hectares. With considerable involvement of the state authorities, the partnerships leased the entire area for the period of three years. After receiving equal payments for the lease, the disputing parties arrived at an agreement and stopped claiming rights to the land they had not cultivated, especially since it became a source of sizable annual income. In 1957 the agricultural complex signed a contract with the management boards of nine small co-operatives, out of which after a year of operation only seven were successful enough to purchase the entire equipment leased from the parent company.⁴⁵ The employee integration system, developed and perfected over the years, enhanced the level of common responsibility for the work and attachment to the assets that could be used by everybody to the same degree. The management board of the agricultural complex treated the partnerships, formed on a voluntary basis, as a testing ground for the skills of the workers in decision making and accomplishing tasks on their own. This was also useful in the process

⁴⁵ Dāwūd, *op. cit.*, 28-329.

of creation and verification of would-be directors and managers.⁴⁶

With time, the complex had become one of the largest financial powers in the region, a challenger and serious competitor for the four largest banks operating at that time in Qāmišlī: the Bank of Syria and Lebanon (the oldest one, established probably in 1946), the Tunisia Bank, the Arab Bank and finally the Agricultural Bank. The banks readily provided loans to farmers at low interest rates. However, the farmers needed the equipment and skilled workers and the advice at site provided to them by the Asfar and Najjār Agricultural Complex rather than just investment funds. If a loan was not repaid on time the banks had the right under the loan contract to demand the equivalent quantity of grain from the debtor. This form of crediting gave rise to much controversy and undermined the confidence of the farmers.

Manifestations of the progress in agriculture and farming techniques: trade fairs and exhibitions

Along with the growing area of land under cultivation by the Asfar and Najjār agricultural complex, the technical infrastructure of agriculture was undergoing dynamic development in Qāmišlī. In the north central part of the city an industrial district was built up with foundries, huge milling machine halls and hundreds of workshops specializing initially in repairs, and later on also in the production of specific farming equipment or its parts. It should be stressed that these establishments were set up exclusively by the Assyrians and Armenians, and they employed up to dozens of people at various work stands. In summer, in the peak season, these workshops were very popular among the youth. At that time, they offered about the only form of pastime in the city, not only useful but also combined with an opportunity to earn some money and to learn some skills under the eye of specialists. Also the educational role of the technical staff cannot be underestimated as the educational authorities of the province were unable to organize any activities for the youth in the summer.

Soon, the developing local industry was able to offer farmers equipment of any type and function. The most popular piece of locally made equipment was a universal plow manufactured in Qāmišlī. Its length, and thus the number of shares

⁴⁶ One should also mention pastimes organized under the aegis of the agricultural complex. People could participate in sport competitions (mainly football). In Mabrukā there was a movie theater where people could watch films free of charge. Workers collected rare birds they found while working in the fields. The birds were kept in special enclosures, and with time a small zoo was organized under the care of the agricultural complex employees. This project, just like the idea of saving treasures from flooding, deserves to be remembered. The birds belonged to the worker who caught them. It was up to him how long they stayed in the community. Any time he could take them home or sell them.

could be adjusted depending on the type of tractor and engine power used. In the opinion of specialists that plow was an improvement even on those which were, not without difficulty, imported from abroad. Soon the local plow became very popular and was used not only in almost entire Syria but also in Iraq.⁴⁷ As I have already mentioned, since the farmers of Al-Jazīra worked on the fields of many provinces, they could advertise the new product of their masters. Confident of their skills and technical achievements, Al-Jazīra's entrepreneurs organized in Qāmišlī the annual Cereals and Cotton Trade Fair, the first trade event of this kind in Syria. The trade fair was held on the grounds of the newly established park in the city center and despite being only a domestic event it attracted many foreign manufacturers who displayed and offered their equipment through representatives based in Qāmišlī. To advertise their products these companies used an innovative method in the form of detailed drawings and photograph books depicting the offered equipment. Every single, even the smallest, element of the engine or other part of the complex machine was marked with a number. The local specialists employed in the outlets selling spare parts in Qāmišlī were able to quickly furnish a customer with a needed part of a previously purchased machine. Some shops specialized in the sale of specific spare parts.

Agricultural reform and its effects

In 1963 two years after the collapse of the union of Egypt and Syria, the Baas party (*Ba'ath*, the Socialist Party of Arab Rebirth) took over power in Syria. One of the first moves of the new administration was the initiation of agricultural reform. In Al-Jazīra land previously owned by numerous big farmers was subdivided among peasants under perpetual lease. Each peasant, depending on the size of his family, was given from five to thirty hectares, for which he was obliged to pay a considerable annual fee to the state.

The agricultural reform was at the same time an opportunity to force in the region a government policy involving, among other things, displacement of whole populations, with disregard for emotional, family or other ties of people rooted in a given locality and for the fruits of the work of many generations of people. The purpose of these actions was to more effectively carry on with the Arabization of the population. For this almost compulsory change of place of residence the state paid no compensation to the people. People from villages with larger populations and smaller area of land fit for cultivation were moved to villages with relatively small population but large land resources, sometimes with and sometimes without consent of the local farmers. The decisions taken by the central authorities had to be obeyed, and the displaced received no assistance from the state. Some villages,

⁴⁷ Sarāy ad-Dīn W., '*Local industry in the Al-Hasake province*', "Al-^cUmrān," No. 41-42, The Ministry of Local Administration, Damascus, 1972, 192-203 [in Arabic].

classified by the authorities as strategically located, were nationalized and granted the status of experimental farms (*mazari^c dawla*). Their population was distributed within almost the entire province, excepting its southern part that was populated solely by the Bedouins.

One could probably find some positive points in this agricultural reform, though it is hard to determine its scale and significance for the economic future of the region.⁴⁸

The onset of this reform coincided with the time of the greatest prosperity for the Asfar and Najjār's agricultural complex. Fearing that the company's considerable assets could be confiscated by the state, the Management Board decided to preempt the expected steps of the authorities, and actually to do the job for the officials. It divided the entire land owned by the agricultural complex among experienced employees with long years of service in the company. The move was to be beneficial also for the company's numerous agencies.

Despite the fact that a great majority of workers who received the land under this scheme had no other land plots, the authorities did not allow them to further use their long farming experience. Political reasons took precedence over rational economic calculations. The authorities invalidated all deeds of gift, prepared by the agricultural complex strictly in accordance with the currently applicable provisions of the law. Thousands of the enterprise's employees lost their jobs. For

⁴⁸ One of the examples I am aware of is the return of majority of Tel ^cAlo's farmers to their village. Persecuted at the turn of 1950's and 60's, some of them were even tortured by an Arab landowner. They had to leave their village and move to the city of Qāmišlī. Unfortunately, the author still does not know why his father preferred to be a leaseholder in Qal^cat al-Hādī, situated some 20 km further in the direction of the Iraqi border, and not in Tel ^cAlo. The village belonged to one of this landowner's younger sons. His name was ^cAlī. There were some 25 Assyrian families living in the village, including also the family of the author's brother-in-law. As a self-taught mechanic he worked at the village owner's farm, taking care of the pump station irrigating a large area of land sown with cotton. In order to weed his cotton fields, in the summer season ^cAlī employed almost 50 workers, among them happened to be the author of these words. His pay for almost three months' work was four sacks of wheat (ca. 530 kg). ^cAlī probably did not charge the village peasants any lease for the cultivation of his land. He lived in a separate complex of buildings with his big family and servants. In the summer of 1975 the author noted with deep regret that ^cAlī lived in poverty. At that time the duties of the village head were fulfilled by an Assyrian, Mūsa Malke. It was an honorary function bestowed to one of the villagers by the local community on the basis of his decent, good character, intelligence and length of his residence in the village. Once a year after the harvest, the village head received a sack of grain from each family, which was a symbolic remuneration for his duty. In 1968 approximately 50 Kurdish families were moved from a village called ulwa lying close to the Syrian-Turkish border, to this village which had a mixed Assyrian and Arab population. Also in that village the Kurds lived together with the Assyrians. Some of them even spoke the Assyrian language.

many of them the complex was the only source of sustenance. Some of them found employment elsewhere in the province, others remained jobless, and part of them emigrated.

The land belonging to Asfar and Najjār was treated by the authorities as nobody's land. It was divided among people brought from other regions of Syria. By some unfortunate coincidence the majority of the newcomers had led a nomadic life and knew nothing about farming and were unable to take care of the facilities they found on arrival to the new place. The effects were soon to be seen. Irrigation systems turned into ruin; sheep were allowed to graze in orchards, gardens, and vineyards spreading over tens of kilometers. The sheep stripped them all of their leaves. The devastation lasted till 1978, when a state-owned Syrian and Libyan company was established with the initial capital of 100 million dollars. It was formed under an inter-Arab fund for agriculture. Its task was to make the destroyed irrigation system operational again. The site reconnaissance carried out by foreign experts confirmed the perfection of the projects and works implemented there 35 years earlier.⁴⁹

One, if not the only, visible effect of the State-owned company's plans was the diversion of the Khābūr river in 1997 away from the section crossing Assyrian villages. The water was directed through a canal to deliver water to Arab villages. This was yet another tragedy for the Assyrian population that caused justified concerns and triggered a new wave of emigration from this land.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to note that in mid 1990's, during my visit to Södertälje (Sweden), when watching a football match played by an Assyrian team "Assyriska" I met Sa'īd Asfar at the stadium. (In 2004 the team qualified for the Swedish super league.) Aware of my interest in the development of agriculture in northeast Syria, he introduced me to a man who was accompanying him at the match. He was one of his uncles and one of the prominent members of the Asfar and Najjār family I have described in this work. In the course of a short conversation I realized I was talking to an extraordinary man.

The successes of the Asfar and Najjār family in the field of agriculture as well as the history of the compulsory exodus from the native town of Diyārbakīr deserves a serious study. At the same time I hope that this topic will be picked up and further elaborated on by authentic witnesses of this "agricultural revolution."

⁴⁹ A relative of Asfar and Najjār, Sa'īd Asfar, who at the beginning of 1990s was a postgraduate student in Wrocław, told the author that the Saudi Arabian authorities had signed a long-term contract with one of his uncles and appointed him the government's chief advisor for agriculture. This information has been confirmed by many other informants. It is being heard from many quarters that this desert country has a chance to become self sufficient in terms of production of cereals.