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Guest Editorial

Children of Assyria Rosie Malek-Yonan

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The quotes we believe in, say a lot about who we are. His favorite quote is: "A musician must have the heart of a gypsy and the discipline of a soldier."

His name is Elden and he's a soldier at heart. He is a young man who lives in the epicenter of the Assyrian homeland. He can hear the steady heartbeat of Assyria pounding in the ancient tombs of his ancestors. He can feel the pulse of his nation pumping life into his veins. He knows the history of the Assyrians who have walked the land he treads on. His cradle rocked where civilization was once born. A common ancestry links him to me, but our realities are a world apart.

"I finished my high school in Assyrian language. The dream is still going on here," explains Elden. "Our mother tongue, our language is preserved. There are schools that teach in Assyrian language. All subjects are translated to Assyrian. Can you believe that?"

I envy Elden's excitement for having graduated from an Assyrian school though I realize the hefty price tag attached to that privilege.

"I believe in unity. I hate discrimination. I am Assyrian," says Elden in no uncertain terms.

He is one of the children of Assyria. He was only a boy when the war in Iraq started. But growing up in a war-zone, childhood is short lived. Now at twenty-one, he has seen more than his Assyrian brothers and sisters outside of Iraq will ever witness.

The Internet is his connection to the outside world. From his home in Iraq, he sends me an urgent message: "Our fellow brothers in Mosul are in danger... Someone has to do something or they are eliminated."

Elden is acutely aware that Assyrians living in Iraq are powerless. He knows that his life is balancing on the grotesque edge of devastation. He pins his hope on his nation living outside of Iraq to do right by him and those like him who remain loyal to the motherland at any cost.

How do I respond to Elden's plea? Can I promise him that my nation is doing everything in its power to safeguard its own people? Can I give Elden my word that help is on its way? Can I tell him that we have a National Plan? Can I assure him that the wellbeing of our nation in Atrah, our homeland, is the priority of every Assyrian around the globe and that every Assyrian community and church has set aside its internal conflicts to devise a mutual plan that will ensure his future and the future of all the children of Assyria? How do I respond to the appeals of a young man who has a limited future in the only country he will know as home?

I become paralyzed when Elden and other young Assyrians from Iraq write to me. I wonder how to reply truthfully without stripping away hope because without hope to nourish the soul, the children of Assyria will wither and die.

Elden writes to me: "You are free but you should come and see what's going on here...Any how thanks..."

I reply, "Stay strong."

"You're not here. You just don't know!" He reiterates.

He is right. I don't know. I write back to him meaningless words of encouragement, "We haven't abandoned you. Our thought and prayers are with you..."

"You just don't know..."

Elden stops writing for a while. I read his frustration when he stops communicating. He finally breaks his silence: "Our votes will be stolen. Our people will be intimidated to not vote Assyrian. Thank you and I wish you a good day."

"Elden, our greatest challenge will be to find optimism in a time when the world is spinning out of control in confusion and chaos," I reply. "Please don't give up hope"

In reality what I was saying is that his greatest challenge would be to find optimism. After all, it is he and those living in Iraq who face overwhelming challenges in search of survival while the rest of us sit comfortably in the west dispensing advice from a safe distance and most of us go on about our daily lives unscathed by the violence that is furiously writing our present history in blood.

A student from Iraq writes to me: "It's very bad...The U.S. did this to us. Now the Arabs and Kurds won't leave us alone."

No...I guess I will never fully know. I am not there. But what I do understand is living as an Assyrian in Iraq, is to perpetually wear a badge of condemnation.

It's Sunday, October 12, 2008. It's a somber morning in the village of Nahla, in Northern Iraq. A slow procession makes its way down an unpaved road. Young Assyrian children carrying flowers walk ahead of a coffin weighing upon the shoulders of pallbearers who have carried Assyrian coffins more times than they should ever have to in a life span.

The remains of fifteen-year-old Ivan Erwia Younadam are laid to rest in the gaping mouth of the earth that swallows him whole. An Assyrian flag covers the mound of dirt and rocks that mark his grave.

Ivan should be kicking around a soccer ball and chasing dreams of seeing the world one day. Yet here I am, thousands of miles away, sounding an elegy for a boy whose absence from my nation, I sharply feel and mourn. A boy I have never met but he is a son of my nation and my brother. He matters to me. He was another one of the children of Assyria.



Just eight days earlier, Ivan was standing in front of his home in Mosul, a stone's throw from the Alzhara mosque. Three gunmen approached him and in a flash, his life was snatched from him so violently...so senselessly only because he was an Assyrian. He was shot at point blank range and killed instantly.

What went through Ivan's mind in that split second as he gazed down a barrel of a gun?

Who now but a few will remember him in a year? In five? In a decade?

I want every Assyrian to remember Ivan. I want the world to remember Ivan.

Despite the constant threats of "leave or die" posted at Assyrians doors testing their will and endurance, Elden declares, "I am not afraid of anything."

"You have the soul of an old Assyrian warrior," I tell him.

"Thank you," he replies and remains quiet a beat or two. I can sense a rare smile crossing his otherwise solemn young face. "I really want to help from all my heart. But a single person cannot do anything here."

His future like the future of the Assyrian nation is uncertain at the moment. Remaining in Iraq keeps our roots in place. But today, Iraq is a deadly prospect for the indigenous people of that land who have just as much right if not more, to choose to remain there.

I would like to write to Elden and say: We've been planning demonstrations around the globe and we're coming out in droves to support you. We are making a difference! We are trying our very best!

But that wouldn't be entirely true. Though many decent and hard working Assyrians continue to organize rallies globally, they must contend with opposition from their own kind who still ridiculously argue which flag to waive at an Assyrian rally! One flag. One nation. Perhaps that idea is too simplistic. So while we squabble, Assyrian lands and property are confiscated leaving our nation displaced and in exile.

"Innocent souls are more important than land...Nobody can ignore our identity, says Elden. "Our written history is not going to change. Our mother tongue, our language is preserved."

Yes, indeed, our mother tongue is preserved in the homeland. But can the same be said for Assyrians who have migrated to the west, raising a new generation of Assyrians who do not speak their mother tongue?

Iraq is being emptied of its minorities. A campaign to exterminate Assyrians has been underway since the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States and its Coalition Forces. Shrouded in silence, the maltreatment of the Assyrian nation for its ethnicity and faith continues with renewed determination and effort.

The latest surge of attacks arrived on the heels of a single event that put into motion the murder of thirty-two Assyrians in Mosul while 15,000 fled to the Nineveh Plain. On September 24, 2008, the Iraqi Parliament's removal of Article 50, a key clause that would have reserved seats on Provincial Councils for Christians, triumphantly resulted in Mosul being cleansed of its Assyrian population. Assyrian lives are gutted. A nation is uprooted and stripped of its liberties and human rights. Once again Assyrians embark on an exodus to destinations unknown.

We blame religious extremists for much of the violence against Assyrians and other minorities in Iraq. Is this meant to infer that it is only a small group that is anti Assyrian, anti Christian, anti all minorities? Or are we masking the truth as to not offend the true criminals? Who are these religious extremists? If they are an isolated group, then it stands to reason that the majorities who must not be religious extremists will stand with the minorities to defend their rights. How many are standing with the Assyrians?

The term genocide is defined as the deliberate killing of a large group of people, especially those of a particular ethnic group or nation.

How many deliberately killed constitutes genocide?

This is a violent time for the children of Assyria who are living life on the run. For nearly 2,000 days, the Assyrians in Iraq have been under unprovoked attacks. It's not about which particular group is targeting and killing the Assyrians. It's about an ethnic cleansing to rid Iraq of Assyrians. Much like the Ottoman Turks did during World War One.

Today democracy has its own interpretation in Iraq. The new Iraqi constitution that was meant to protect the rights of all its citizens has failed its minorities since its inception.

I wonder if all hope and talk of establishing an autonomous region with legislative and executive authorities where Assyrian would be the official language is nothing more than nonsensical and fanciful wishing while our nation on ground zero takes flight. Or will someone in the not so distant future remark, "The children of Assyria did not die in vain. This is how it all began. These were the sacrifices our nation made to resurrect Assyria."

Though we are thousands of miles apart, the stars that blanket Elden's night sky are the same as mine. I bid him goodnight and light a candle for all the Children of Assyria. Stay safe my young Assyrian warrior.

Rosie Malek-Yonan is an Assyrian actor, director and author of [The Crimson Field](#). She is an outspoken advocate of issues concerning Assyrians, in particular bringing attention to the Assyrian Genocide and the plight of today's Assyrians in Iraq since the U.S. lead invasion of Iraq in 2003. On June 30, 2006, she was invited to [testify](#) on Capitol Hill regarding the genocide and persecution of Assyrians in Iraq by Kurds and Islamists. She is on the Board of Advisors at Seyfo Center in Europe that exclusively deals with the Assyrian Genocide issue. She has acted opposite many of Hollywood's leading actors and has received rave reviews both as an actor and director. Most recently, she played the role of Nuru II-Ebrahimi, opposite Reese Witherspoon in New Line Cinema's "Rendition," directed by Oscar winning director Gavin Hood. To schedule an interview with Rosie Malek-Yonan, please send your request to contact@thecrimsonfield.com.

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