

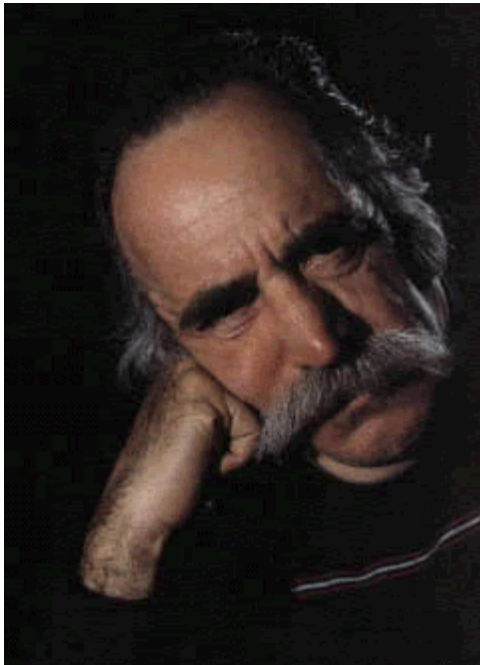
## **Saroyan's Seventy Thousand Assyrians**

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William Saroyan was an award winning American writer and play-write whose books and plays have been translated in nearly every major language. Most recently, a group of Armenian publishers, (Ohannes Kilicdagi, Aziz Gokdemir, and Arman Artuc, "Aras Publishing") in Istanbul Turkey, published one of his most famous short stories, Seventy Thousand Assyrians, in Turkish, called Yetmish Bin Suryani. This is one of the most important achievements in the 21 st century for Saroyan's legacy and the Assyrian and the Armenian people. For this important story to be read in the Turkish language, (the language of Assyria and Armenia's oppressors) is quite a nail in the coffin of Kamal Attaturk and his "Young Turks." To think nearly one hundred years ago, the Turks were massacring the Assyrians and the Armenians to rid the land of indigenous people struggling for the survival of their ethnic identity, and now a few generations later, the Turks are reading the story of the same massacred people, in TURKISH. Saroyan must be finally resting in peace.



Saroyan is one of the most celebrated American authors of Armenian descent. His mother, Takoohi and her three children leave Bitlis to Marseilles, France in 1906. After a few months of waiting, Takoohi and her three children board a ship and head to Ellis Island, New York, to join her husband who was a Presbyterian minister living in Worcester, Massachusetts. It was during her voyage to America that Takoohi gets seasick and an Assyrian woman cares for her children.

A few years later, the family moves to San Francisco and from there to Fresno. William Saroyan was born in Fresno, California in 1908. Ironically enough the same year

the “Young Turks” movement was being established in Turkey to begin the process of ethnically cleansing Turkey from its Christian minority, (i.e. the Assyrians, the Armenians, and the Pontic Greeks.)

When William Saroyan is three years old, his father, Armenak, dies and William is placed at Fred Finch orphanage in Oakland, which is why he spends the rest of his life writing about death, destruction, displacement, disconnection, and loss. His early years were spent in Fresno, where there is a large Armenian community, many of whom are his aunts, uncles, and cousins. He writes about his relatives later on, and no doubt, his knowledge about Asia Minor, the Armenians, and the Assyrians begins with these relatives.

At the age of 25 years, William Saroyan publishes his first book, *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze*, and the public begins to call him “William, the Daring Young Man.” This book was the most significant, for it announced his entry into the great American literary scene, and it was the beginning of the Saroyan phenomenon for the next twenty years. His writing style was fresh, unique and free-flowing, which is why it was called JAZZ. His works are known as Saroyanesque epics.

*The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze* is a collection of 26 short stories, one of which is *Seventy Thousand Assyrians*, in which Saroyan is a young writer who moves to San Francisco and settles in an apartment at 348 Carl Street. I have had the privilege of entering this apartment, to see the space in which Saroyan wrote about my people. I have also stayed at his San Francisco’s “House on the Hill” many times, through the generous invitations of his niece, Jacqueline Kazarian of New Port Beach, California.

[Click here to read "Seventy Thousand Assyrians" \(PDF\)](#)

Saroyan writes *Seventy Thousand Assyrians* to develop his writer’s identity and says, “The story is a simple one, no complicated plot, nor fancy characters .” It is all about a young writer who goes to the Barber College on Third Street in San Francisco, where he meets an Assyrian Barber’s apprentice, Theodore Badal, to get a fifteen-cent haircut, and writes, “This would certainly not make a TV series for the coming decade.”

The story opens with the following lines:

“I hadn't had a haircut in forty days and forty nights, and I was beginning to look like several violinists out of work. You know the look: genius gone to pot, and ready to join the Communist Party. We barbarians from Asia Minor are hairy people: when we need a haircut, we need a haircut. It was so bad, I had outgrown my only hat. (I am writing a very serious story, perhaps one of the most serious I shall ever write. That is why I am being flippant. Readers of Sherwood Anderson will begin to understand what I am saying after a while; they will know that my laughter is rather sad.) I was a young man in need of a haircut, so I went down to Third Street ( San Francisco), to the Barber College, for a fifteen-cent haircut.”

Dr Hagop Papazian of Paris, in his PHD dissertation writes, “This short paragraph in

and of itself consists of a remarkable relationship to time and space, in a very oriental sense of the term. Any attentive reader would instantly realize that “forty days and forty nights” refers to the legends and allegories of Asia Minor, to the Thousand and One Arabian Nights, where the duration of stories, fasting, mourning, requiems, and celebrations last forty days and forty nights. Moses was said to have stayed on Mount Sinai forty days and forty nights, Jesus was said to have fasted forty days and forty nights in the desert, before being tempted by the “devil.” Therefore, the figure forty may be taken as synonymous with a particular moment of reflection, in the process of making an important decision, as is the case with the writer who meditates about his BE-ing.....the writer of the present short story as it is on the point of BE-ing written.”

The opening paragraph of this short story alludes to allegorical themes, for which Saroyan was so famous. He once wrote, “Everything I write, everything I have ever written is allegorical.” Therefore, the theme and content of *Seventy Thousand Assyrians* entirely presented in allegorical terms.

Saroyan continues to narrate:

“ I want you to know that I am deeply interested in what people remember. A young writer goes out to places and talks to people. He tries to find out what they remember. I am not using great material for a short story. Nothing is going to happen in this work. I am not fabricating a fancy plot. I am not creating memorable characters. I am not using a slick style of writing. I am not building up a fine atmosphere. I have no desire to sell this story or any story to *The Saturday Evening Post* or to *Cosmopolitan* or to *Harper's*. I am not trying to compete with the great writers of short stories, men like Sinclair Lewis and Joseph Hergesheimer and Zane Grey, men who really know how to write, how to make up stories that will sell. Rich men, men who understand all the rules about plot and character and style and atmosphere and all that stuff. I have no desire for fame. I am not out to win the Pulitzer Prize or the Nobel Prize or any other prize”

In spite of these words, Saroyan went on to win many prestigious awards. In 1939, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his outstanding play *The Time of Your Life*, which he did not accept, sending the Pulitzer Committee the following note: “Art must be democratic, but at the same time it must be both proud and aloof. It must not be taken in by either praise or criticism. Wealth, I am sure, cannot patronize art and the strange impulse of wealth to seek to do so, is, I believe, a curious example of noble bad taste. A poverty-stricken nation with great art is a greater nation than a wealthy nation with a poverty-stricken art.” The following year, in 1940, he won the “Critic’s Prize” which he accepted graciously as a “great distinction.” Saroyan won an Academy Award in 1943 for the screenplay adaptation of his book, *The Human Comedy*.

He continues:

“ I am out here in the far West, in San Francisco, in a small room on Carl Street, writing a letter to common people, telling them in simple language things they already know. I am merely making a record, so if I wander around a little, it is because I am in no hurry and because I do not know the rules.”

Saroyan was anti-establishment, and an advocate for the underdog, which is why he uses words like “simple language” and “common people” to the extent he is about to discuss world events that affected ordinary people in extraordinary ways. Hence Saroyan wants to record these events in history which is why he says, “ I am merely making a record ” alluding to events taking shape in the year, 1933, in which he writes this story.

He gives us a hint of the helplessness and sadness he feels, and wants to do something to help humanity, and this becomes even more evident when he says in the next line, “If I have any desire at all, it is to show the brotherhood of man. This is a big statement and it sounds a little precious. Generally a man is ashamed to make such a statement. He is afraid sophisticated people will laugh at him. But I don't mind. I'm asking sophisticated people to laugh. That is what sophistication is for. I do not believe in races. I do not believe in governments. I see life as one life at one time, so many millions simultaneously, all over the earth. Babies who have not yet been taught to speak any language are the only race of the earth, the race of man: all the rest is pretense, what we call civilization, hatred, fear, desire for strength . . . . But a baby is a baby. And the way they cry, there you have the brotherhood of man, babies crying.”

Saroyan was mocking the rich and the sophisticated, commenting on the madness with which they were choking the world. The stock market had just crashed due to rich men's manipulation of currency rates and the implementation of the Military-Industrial-Intelligence Complex, and people all over the world had lost their jobs, their homes, and most Americans were standing in soup lines, asking passersby, “brother, can you spare a dime.” Hitler was rounding up all the Jews in Europe, and was setting-up his “Thousand Year Empire.” America and Germany were racing to develop the Atomic bomb. Racial prejudice, hatred, fear and loathing being instilled in millions of people around the world, who were concerned with their own survival, babies crying from hunger, and men like Iowa, (the boy in this story) losing their dignity and becoming homeless tramps, moving from place to place looking for work, or becoming refugees like Badal, through massacres and genocides. To Saroyan, the only ones who were not engaged in this madness, and were crying out against injustice were babies, who had not yet developed the language of hatred and fear. This is evident in Saroyan's next lines, “ We grow up and we learn the words of a language and we see the universe through the language we know, we do not see it through all languages or through no language at all, through silence, for example, and we isolate ourselves in the language we know. Over here we isolate ourselves in English, or American as Mencken calls it. All the eternal things, in our words. If I want to do anything, I want to speak a more universal language. The heart of man, the unwritten part of man, that which is eternal and common to all races.”

“Let me try again: I hadn't had a haircut in a long time and I was beginning to look seedy, so I went down to the Barber College on Third Street, and I sat in a chair. I said, "Leave it full in the back. I have a narrow head and if you do not leave it full in the back, I will go out of this place looking like a horse. Take as much as you like off the top. No lotion, no water, comb it dry." Reading makes a full man, writing a precise one, as

you see. This is what happened. It doesn't make much of a story, and the reason is that I have left out the barber, the young man who gave me the haircut. He was tall, he had a dark serious face, thick lips, on the verge of smiling but melancholy, thick lashes, sad eyes, a large nose. I saw his name on the card that was pasted on the mirror, Theodore Badal. A good name, genuine, a good young man, genuine. Theodore Badal began to work on my head. A good barber never speaks until he has been spoken to, no matter how full his heart may be."

The reference to Barbarians will soon become evident, but the "hairy people" can be associated with Samson's hair and the outstanding physical strength that those legendary old tales of Asia Minor told. In this manner, the reader is transported on a magic carpet ride, through time and space to the world of legends and myths that characterize Assyria.

Saroyan, no doubt had heard many stories about Assyria and Armenia and the relationship between the two. Of course, the most famous one was the story of the Assyrian queen Shamiram and the Armenian king Ara, a myth told by the Armenians to explain the death of their famous king. The story is about queen Shamiram of Assyria, who meets and falls in love with the Armenian king Ara. When he refuses the queen's affection and attention on the moral grounds of the sanctity of his marriage, the Assyrian queen kills him in revenge. The second myth is about the battle between the Armenian Haig and the Assyrian Pell (also known as Pelus, Belus, Bel, Baal) who established Babylon, and who supposedly was later killed by the Armenian Haig. In this story, Haig kills Pell and establishes Hayestan, and this is how he earned the nickname, "fatherland." Even in the oldest Assyrian story ever written, Gilgamesh, an Armenia king is mentioned, which is an indication of how far back in history these two ancient people can be traced.

These legends were transmitted to us orally from the 10 th century B.C., and were later reported by the historian Moses of Khoren, in the fifth century A.D. These were of course, literary expressions, depicting the conflicting relationship between old Assyria and Armenia. They explain the cultural and political connections between the two people.

Of course, these legends and myths would have been told differently by the Assyrians, but the important thing is that the Armenians and Assyrians have had a long history together. These legends and myths are kept alive in both communities. Armenians and Assyrians, being both of the same faith, have lived in the same geographical locations, and together they have developed Christian communities throughout modern history. Most Armenians and Assyrians of Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Lebanon, speak each other's language. For example, my father, Rabi Youab Yonan and his sister Aglenteen Warda, who grew-up in Camp Al Gailany, in Baghdad, although attended Assyrian primary school, both speak fluent Armenian due to the relationship they had with the neighbor, the famous Armenian singer Ohannes Badalian, who died a few years ago in Hyestan. These neighbors became virtually one family until Ohannes's family moved to Hyestan. When Ohannes Badalian's mother became ill, my grandmother, Anna Yonan, nursed both my father and Ohannes at the same time. Until the day he died, Ohannes

called my grandmother “mayreek” (mother) and my dad “yekhpar,” (brother) and my aunt “kooyreek” (sister). The Armenians and Assyrians have inter-married for centuries, and have even shared the same church services on special occasions.

According to some Historians, ancient Armenians lived in Assyria and the two people were one. At one point in time, Armenians left Assyria proper to move northward and established Urartu, (ancient name of Armenia.). According to historical records, the ancient kingdom of Urartu was located in the mountainous plateau between Asia Minor, (Mesopotamia) and the Caucasus mountains, which later became known as the Armenian Highland, centered around Lake Van. The kingdom existed from ca. 860 B.C., emerging from the Late Bronze Age, until 585 B.C. Some Armenian Historians suggest that the name corresponds to the Biblical Ararat. Wikipedia sources taken from Armenian writers, state the following, “ The name Urartu comes from Assyrian (a dialect of Akkadian) sources, and was given to the kingdom by its chief rivals to the south. The kingdom's native name was Biainili. Scholars believe that "Urartu" is an Akkadian variation of Ararat of the Old Testament.” In Assyrian, Ur stands for “cradle,” as in URMIA, (cradle of water).

Dr. Papazian writes, “Linguists and scholars agree that up until the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the Armenians used the Assyrian alphabet and wrote and spoke Assyrian.” The two people were one, and Saroyan, being a history fanatic knew this, which is why he uses Biblical allegory, to write about this unity, to analyze their ancient origins, and to establish his own identity as an Armenian and as a writer. Papazian continues, “It is enough to look at the sculptures, statuettes, drawings, and inscriptions of daily objects of Urartu to see the immense influence of Assyrian art on the Armenian culture. These legends are part of the collective consciousness of Armenians, to the extent they are taught in every primary Armenian school, as part of history courses, or transmitted orally through grandparents or uncles who were supposed to be great story-tellers.”

When Saroyan was not writing books, he was in the public library, researching every aspect of his being, tracing his identity and his ethnic roots, and exploring his connection to Assyria. Saroyan had certainly heard these legends, moreover, had met many Assyrian immigrants who had close daily contacts with the Armenians and had settled in Turlock, the name of the town mentioned in *Seventy Thousand Assyrians*.

The storyteller of *Seventy Thousand Assyrians* has no name. His status in the structure of the short story is characterized as the young writer. The space where the events take place in the story is the Barber’s Shop. This is not a modern hairdressers’ shop in the writer’s mind. This shop is part of the Middle Eastern culture, and therefore it is a place where people discuss political or daily problems, a place where coffee and tea are served, along with the latest gossip, news, and exchange of information. In the old days, one could even have his tooth extracted and consult for medical advice. Furthermore, there are many expressions in the Armenian as well as the Assyrian culture and language where a barber’s shop is associated with wisdom. A man who has a beard is a wise man! Wisdom and the beard are associated, hence the Assyrian expression of “khwār diqna.” Consequently, the barbershop is a place where people meet, discuss and exchange ideas, tell stories and philosophize, which is why it is a

place that characterizes wisdom, and therefore Saroyan puts it in the context of an educational institution, and identifies it as a Barber's "college." As we shall see shortly, this college has a deeper meaning for Saroyan.

Among other characters present at the barber's shop, the writer tenaciously makes his protagonist an Assyrian barber's apprentice, who is the subject of the young writer's observation.

Saroyan's narration "we barbarians out of Asia Minor are a hairy people" is an allegorical expression, and the meaning of the phrase manifests itself in astonishing ways. Saroyan is allegorically expressing a Western sentiment, where more often than not, defines and categorizes Middle Eastern people in "barbaric" terms, (uncivilized, uncultured, backward people.) Additionally, by making the "barber's" apprentice an Assyrian, (an ancient race of people whose country was known as the Cradle of civilization) Saroyan relates the concept of "Barbarism" as being established in the West, more specifically the "Barber's College" as an institutional structure. This will be the most profound statement Saroyan will make about East/West relations, and the concept of genocide, destruction, displacement, and loss. He sets the action of this story at a Barber's "College," where Badal, (change) will take place, and this young Assyrian will learn how to cut "hair," (physical strength) of his own identity and learn to shave "beards," (his own ancient wisdom.)

Saroyan chooses the name of the protagonist of this story very carefully. He writes, "Theodore Badal, "a good name, genuine. A good young man, genuine. Theodore Badal began working on my head ." Of course, he means it allegorically, as a shrink works on people's head to find out what is inside. Saroyan not only uses the name Badal in this story to mean "transformation," but Theodorus, in Greek means "God granted." Saroyan has at this point made a remarkable connection between the Assyrians, God, and God granting wisdom, culture, and knowledge to become the "Cradle of Civilization." However, as we shall see, all of that is about to change, at the "Barber's" College" where the Assyrians, their culture, and even the concept of God and God-granted wisdom will be transformed, which is why Saroyan says of Theodore Badal's name, "a good name. Genuine. A good young man, genuine," meaning Theodore Badal has been defined as a "good" human being, belonging to the oldest and most genuine, (indigenous) people on earth, who gave the concept of "God" to the world, but now this concept itself is about to change with the transformation of the Assyrians.

Getting back to the story, what does Assyria have to do with writing and style? Why Badal, an Assyrian, is the subject of a young writer's short story and what is significant in this choice? We have discussed the relationship of Assyria and Armenia through legends and history. On the other hand, let us see what Dr. Papazian has to say, "Assyria is associated with Babel, (the Gate of God) which in antiquity was considered the "Center of the Universe" and its legendary Tower of Babel was considered the center of knowledge and wisdom, as all the roads of the world lead to Assyria. The first reference then, leads us directly to the Book of Genesis, and two famous quotations. Then we are going to underline certain expressions and establish parallels between the biblical text and that of Saroyan's."

"First: 'And the whole world was one language and one speech...and the Lord said the people is one and they all have one language.....Go let us go down, and therefore confound their language.'"

"Second: 'Therefore is the name of it called Babel...because the Lord did there confound their language of the earth and from thence did the Lord scatter thus abroad the face of the earth.'"

"Astonishingly enough, as the above quotations will demonstrate, the young writer is very much taken by the problematic nature of language itself in order to find out his own language and consequently his own identity as a writer. Saroyan, in this story writes, " We grow-up and we learn the words of a language and we see the universe through all the languages.....I want to speak a more universal language-the heart of man." Saroyan takes into consideration the specificity of each language: The English, the Armenian, and the Assyrian languages. Yet, he wants to speak a more "universal language.

The young writer is confronted by different languages, the universal and the particular. He has in mind different writers and the particular of each. The parallel between Saroyan and Assyria's myths, is the confounding of languages in the universal dimension of both the writer, Assyria, and the Assyrians, whose language was universal and is the root of all languages of the universe. This constant movement from the particular to the universal and vice-versa, is quite significant in terms of the "minorities" dimension of his work, especially when the young writer says, " I want to speak a universal language."

Dr. Papazian maintains, "In Saroyan terms, it means that he keeps his own minority's identity yet at the same time he has a universal outlook at the world." Hence, Saroyan wants to define the Assyrian language as UNIVERSAL, still spoken by Assyrians, the oldest people still alive, who formed the first civilization, and built the first city after the flood, (BAB EL-the Gate of God) out of which the first language and people scattered abroad, making the Assyrian identity and language universal and the "heart of man."

While Badal cuts Saroyan's hair he is expected to chit-chat with him. When Badal does not say anything, Saroyan begins to narrate again, as follows:

"A good barber never speaks, until he is spoken to, no matter how full his heart may be. So I asked Badal, are you Armenian? I am Armenian, we Armenians are a small people, and whenever we meet, it is an event!. "We are always looking around for someone to talk to in our language. Our most ambitious political party estimates that there are nearly two million of us living on the earth, but most of us don't think so. Most of us sit down and take a pencil and a piece of paper and we take one section of the world at a time and imagine how many Armenians at the most are likely to be living in that section and we put the highest number on the paper and then we go on to another section: India, Russia, Soviet Armenia, Egypt, Italy, Germany, France, America, South America, Australia, and so on, and after we add up our most hopeful figures, the total



comes to something a little less than a million. Then we start to think how big our families are, how high our birthrate and how low our death rate (except in times of war when massacres increase the death rate), and we begin to imagine how rapidly we will increase if we are left alone a quarter of a century, and we feel pretty happy."

Saroyan directly intervenes in the course of the story to introduce the subject of massacre and death. He makes personal observations from an Armenian perspective, to elaborate on the way in which genocide affects the lives of ordinary people, and groups of people, whom, as a result of massacres, become minorities, scattered about the whole world, and this ties into the Biblical theme of "scattered abroad."

He continues by writing:

"We always leave out earthquakes, wars, massacres, famines, etc., and it is a mistake. I remember the Near East Relief drives in my home-town, ( Fresno). My uncle used to be our orator and he used to make a whole auditorium full of Armenians weep. He was an attorney and he was a great orator. Well, at first the trouble was war. Our people were being destroyed by the enemy. Those who hadn't been killed were homeless and they were starving, our own flesh and blood, my uncle said, and we all wept. And we gathered money and sent it to our people in the old country. Then after the war, when I was a bigger boy, we had another Near East Relief drive and my uncle stood on the stage of the Civic Auditorium of my home town, ( Fresno) and he said, "Thank God this time it is not the enemy, but an earthquake. God has made us suffer. We have worshipped Him through trial and tribulation, through suffering and disease and torture and horror and (my uncle began to weep, began to sob) through the madness of despair, and now he has done this thing, and still we praise him, still we worship Him. We do not understand the ways of God." And after the drive I went to my uncle and I said, "Did you mean what you said about God?" And he said, "that was oratory. We've got to raise money. What God? It is nonsense." "And when you cried?" I asked, and my uncle said, "That was real. I could not help it. I had to cry. Why, for God's sake, why must we go through all this Goddamn hell? What have we done to deserve all this torture? Man won't leave us alone. God won't leave us alone. Have we done something? Aren't we supposed to be pious people? What is our sin? I am disgusted with God. I am sick of man. The only reason I am willing to get up and talk is that I don't dare keep my mouth shut. I can't bear the thought of more of our people dying. Jesus Christ, have we done something?"

Saroyan, in this narration, is not only addressing the issue of genocide to the English-speaking world, but in his own way is asking the questions every "pious" person would ask when being massacred. "WHY"? By using the name Theodor, (God granted) he establishes a connection between God and the oldest people still alive, (i. e. Assyrians and Armenians) and at the same time reveals his disgust for a higher power that would grant monstrous rights to powerful individuals by "authorizing" them to become lynch mobs, going on a rampage to destroy "God's people." In other words, why would God grant such horrific notions to human beings, when the idea of "God" is to grant wisdom, knowledge, and creativity with which to build and civilize the world?

Saroyan is also searching for answers for his own father's death at a young age,

especially since his father was a minister, who is supposed to be “pious” when doing God’s work, and preaching God’s “word,” (another reference to language of God, and Assyria.) The obsession of Saroyan with language will be a recurring theme in his later works.

When he is finally finished narrating, Saroyan asks Badal again, “Are you an Armenian?”

Badal replies;

“ No, I am an Assyrian .” Saroyan writes, “ well, that’s something. Of course, it was not as pleasing as if Badal was an Armenian, but it was something! They, the Assyrians are old too. They have noses like our noses, eyes like our eyes, and hearts like our hearts,” describing the physical and geographical similarities. Of all the minorities established in the United States in the beginning of the 20 th century, the Assyrians were the closest to the Armenians. This is going back to historical relationships and the common heritage between the two people, in their collective consciousness, which made them “one.”

"I am an Armenian ," Saroyan says, 'I used to know some Assyrian boys in my home town, Joseph Sargis, Nito Elia, Tony Saleh. Do you know any of them?"

"Joseph Sargis, I know him," said Badal. "The others I do not know. We lived in New York until five years ago, then we came out west to Turlock. Then we moved up to San Francisco."

"Nito Elia," I said, "is a Captain in the Salvation Army." (I don't want anyone to imagine that I am making anything up, or that I am trying to be funny.) "Tony Saleh," I said, "was killed eight years ago. He was riding a horse and he was thrown and the horse began to run. Tony couldn't get himself free, he was caught by a leg, and the horse ran around and around for a half-hour and then stopped, and when they went up to Tony he was dead. He was fourteen at the time. I used to go to school with him. Tony was a very clever boy, very good at arithmetic."

The names of the Assyrian characters chosen in this story, as well as the description of their life, their occupation, their interests, and their death are significant. The Assyrian reader will especially understand that these names are not mere coincidences, when we know Elia comes from the ancient Assyrian word for God, (EL). Therefore, Nito Elia is an Assyrian, whose name, means “God,” and he is the son of the first people on earth to give civilization and “the word of God” to the world, thus giving humanity “salvation.” He makes Nito Elia a captain of the Salvation Army, because the Assyrians established the first armies and conquered most of the world, but gave it all up to become the first group of people to accept Christianity, and it is their Christianity that causes their death and martyrdom, only to give the world “salvation.”

Tony Saleh’s name is also allegorical to the extent that Saleh is “to solve,” which is why Saroyan describes Tony as a “clever boy, very good in arithmetic” referring to the Assyrian contributions of inventing mathematical knowledge and solving the universal

issue of time and space. Saleh was also an Islamic preacher born nine generations after Noah. Saroyan has Tony Saleh die by a horse, a sacred animal for the Assyrians and the Arabs. These allegorical names and descriptions refer to ancient Assyrian inventions of horsemanship and mathematics, which the Islamic dynasties succeeding the Assyrians, carried forth and perfected, and Saroyan uses these inventions to document the contributions Assyrians made to civilization, to juxtapose the “Barbaric” notions with which the West characterizes the Middle East. This is Saroyan’s spontaneous reflection on the way in which these ancient inventors and mathematical geniuses of Assyria being systematically destroyed by the very civilization to which they give life.

The name Joseph Sargis also has Biblical connotations, as Joseph is supposedly the father of Jesus, and Sargis is a commonly shared saint between the Armenians and Assyrians. Naush Boghosian writes, “ St. Sargis Day is celebrated 63 days before Easter, on a Saturday falling sometime between January 18 and February 23. Popular and widely anticipated in Armenia and Middle Eastern countries, the Armenians celebrate the feast day of St. Sargis, the patron saint of young love, so that unmarried Armenian women will eat a piece of salty bread this night, ideally after fasting all day, in the hope of dreaming about their future husband. Tradition says the man who brings them water in the dream will be the man they marry. These types of marriage traditions are prevalent in other cultures in different forms. Assyrians, for example, celebrate a variation of St. Sargis, where the dreams of unmarried women are believed to be prophetic.”

Saroyan uses these names to reflect on lost civilizations, relationships, friendships, loss of childhood and childhood friends, as well as the loss of growth, love, marriage and children; and all the other elements which make up humanity’s hopes and dreams, which are lost in death and destruction.

Saroyan writes, “We began to talk about the Assyrian language and the Armenian language, about the old world, conditions over there, and so on. I was getting a fifteen-cent haircut and I was doing my best to learn something at the same time to acquire some new truth, some new appreciation of the wonder of life, the dignity of man. (Man has great dignity, do not imagine that he has not.)

Saroyan’s remarks about dignity of man is a moral comment on Badal’s dignity as a “good” Assyrian whose ancestors gave so much to the world but now homeless and nation-less, reduced to being the “barbarian’s” apprentice in the West.

Badal says to Saroyan, "I cannot read Assyrian. I was born in the old country, but I want to get over it." Saroyan writes, “He sounded tired, not physically but spiritually.” Saroyan attempts to link this spiritual tiredness to something much more sinister when he asks Badal, “Why?” I said. "Why do you want to get over it?"

"Well," he laughed , (meaning Badal) "simply because everything is washed up over there." Saroyan writes, “I am repeating his words precisely, putting in nothing of my own. ” Badal continues, "We were a great people once, but that was yesterday, the day before yesterday. Now we are a topic in ancient history. We had a great civilization.

They're still admiring it. Now I am in America learning to cut hair. We're washed up as a race, we're through, it's all over, why should I learn to read the language? We have no writers, we have no news--well, there is a little news: once in a while the English encourage the Arabs to massacre us, that is all. It is an old story, we know all about it. The news comes to us through the Associated Press, anyway."

Dr. Papazian writes, "Thus the Assyrian language, as the essential element for the preservation of the Assyrian identity, and all of humanity, is discarded by Badal, and he retreats and wants to get over it. In other words, what's worth learning the language if Assyria does not exist as a real state, or that the world is trying to wipe its own heritage"?

Saroyan writes, "These remarks were painful to me as an Armenian. I had always felt badly about my own people being destroyed. I had never heard an Assyrian speaking in English about such things. I felt great love for this young fellow. Don't get me wrong. There is a tendency these days to think in terms of pansies whenever a man says that he has affection for man. I think now that I have affection for all people, even for the enemies of Armenia, whom I have so tactfully not named. Everyone knows who they are. I have nothing against any of them because I think of them as one man living one life at a time, and I know, I am positive, that one man at a time is incapable of the monstrosities performed by mobs. My objection is to mobs only."

Saroyan continues, "Well, " I said, "it is much the same with us. We, too, are old. We still have our church. We still have a few writers, Aharonian, Isahakian, a few others, but it is much the same."

"Yes," said the barber, "I know. We went in for the wrong things. We went in for the simple things, peace and quiet and families. We didn't go in for machinery and conquest and militarism. We didn't go in for diplomacy and deceit and the invention of machine guns and poison gases. Well, there is no use being disappointed. We had our day, I suppose."

Saroyan says to Badal, "We are hopeful. There is no Armenian living who does not still dream of an independent Armenia."

"Dream?" said Badal. "Well, that is something. Assyrians cannot even dream any more. Why, do you know how many of us are left on earth?"

"Two or three million," I suggested.

"Seventy thousand," said Badal. "That is all. Seventy thousand Assyrians in the world, and the Arabs are still killing us. They killed seventy of us in a little uprising last month. There was a small paragraph in the paper. Seventy more of us destroyed. We'll be wiped out before long. My brother is married to an American girl and he has a son. There is no more hope. We are trying to forget Assyria. My father still reads a paper that comes from New York, but he is an old man. He will be dead soon."

Then his voice changed, he ceased speaking as an Assyrian and began to speak as a barber. "Have I taken enough off the top?" he asked.

At first reading, this exchange between Badal and Saroyan seems to be all about death and destruction of the human spirit, of the dignity of man, of the hopes and dreams of Mankind, of the ways, means, and methods of peoples and their cultures being attacked and destroyed systematically by weapons of mass-destruction, by the powerful nations. However, the astute reader will realize that Saroyan was actually attempting to document the second Assyrian Genocide, which is known as the Simele Massacre in August of 1933, where thousands of Assyrians were killed in their own homeland. This is Saroyan's tribute to all the Assyrians who were slaughtered by the Iraqi army, under the watchful eye of the British government, marching into Simele and six other Assyrian villages in northern Iraq, and using a Kurdish general, (Bakir Siddqi) proceeded to massacre thousands of innocent Assyrian men, women, and children. This was the straw that broke the Assyrian back. Shortly after that massacre, the Assyrian leader, Mar Shimmon was exiled from Iraq to Cypress, and this is how England neutralized the last Assyrian resistance and attempted to stamp out the eternal Assyrian dream of establishing an independent Assyrian state. When Saroyan makes Badal to say, "we have no news. Well, there is some news, once in a while the English encourage the Arabs to massacre us " he is referring to the news blackout by the Iraqi government, where the Iraqi newspapers were forbidden to write about the Simele massacre. If that young Lebanese journalist had not escaped out of Iraq and called the story to his editor in Beirut, the world would have never known about the Assyrian genocide in Simele, in August of 1933.

Today, the Assyrians are still being massacred and displaced, their lands confiscated, their homeland turned into Kurdistan (with the help of the ENGLISH, once more). The KRG, as we write this, is attempting to ban the Assyrian language in the Kurdish-controlled regions of Assyria, our artifacts looted by the powerful nations, in the hopes of destroying the identity of the last Assyrians remaining in Assyria. Assyria is once more up for grabs. Our churches bombed, Assyrian neighborhoods once more surrounded by Islamic extremists who are trying to impose a fatwa, where the Assyrians would have to pay taxation in exchange for their life. It is still the same story as it was in 1933. The English are back in Iraq dividing our homeland to conquer it, encouraging Iraq's Muslim extremists to massacre us, except today, while threatening the Christian population, the Iraqis are fighting their occupation with their own lives, as the world watches it on television, hears it on radio, reads it on the internet and newspapers, and still NO ONE cares!

Saroyan describes Badal as tired, "spiritually," not "physically" because Badal can no longer fight for his life, his homeland, his rights, his existence, as he is now in exile. He is disconnected from all that he once was, and is now in America changing and learning to cut hair, (cutting himself off from his own ancient wisdom and heritage) and cut-off from his own homeland, his identity, his culture, his language, which is why he says, "I cannot read the Assyrian language," and wants to "get over Assyria." Those that are massacred and displaced cannot possibly care about their language if their first priority

is safety and survival.

Today, Assyrians have fled to the West by the millions, where we now have writers, newspapers, magazines and books, but no Assyrian schools. One may wonder why that is after nearly one hundred years of living in the Diaspora? The answer is simple: Genocide and displacement cause change, (Badal). This change is overwhelming to massacred and exiled people, to the extent that it would take decades to get “over it.” In the West, Assyrian survivors of genocide and destruction are forced to not only learn a new morality and philosophy, but a new language, as well, by which they can survive. This is why Saroyan writes, “These remarks were painful to me as an Armenian. I had always felt badly about my own people being destroyed. I had never heard an Assyrian speaking in “English” about such things.” Who can speak of such things in “English” unless they know how to speak English FIRST? The irony of these remarks is that by the time we learn to speak ENGLISH, we forget Assyria! Moreover, if Assyrians are in the exclusive business of being captains in the “Salvation Army,” we will have no time to build schools and learn the language.

Saroyan uses the word English twice purposely to identify Assyria’s enemy, and thus establish the masters of yesterday’s and today’s Assyria.

Dr. Papazian writes, “This threat of assimilation and loss of national identity as Badal says, “we’ll be wiped out before long.....We are trying to forget Assyria” is not a strange feeling for every Armenian alive. This feeling of “loss” has a close relationship to the author. This tragic sentiment of “loss” is not independent of the loss of language itself. Badal, although was born in the old country, doesn’t read and is not willing any more to learn the Assyrian language, “simply because everything is washed-up over there.....Now we are a topic in ancient history.”

Saroyan ends the story by the following lines, “I am thinking of Theodore Badal, himself seventy thousand Assyrians and seventy million Assyrians, himself Assyria and Man, standing in a barber shop, in San Francisco, in 1933 and being still himself, the whole race.”

Dr. Papazian writes, “We have a good number of figures here, yet there is one that is constant, and it is the number SEVEN. The title of the story is Seventy Thousand Assyrians, after a real event where genocide was wiping out seven Assyrian villages at one time . Saroyan makes Badal himself stand for seventy million Assyrians. It is appropriate to observe that the number SEVEN is a Biblical number. God, after accomplishing his work of creating heaven and earth, rests on the seventh day. In Biblical terms, seven and creation are synonymous.”

The Assyrians, like any people, are God’s creation, and it is the creation of God that is fragile, susceptible to genocides, and therefore on the brink of extinction. In Genesis we read, “And the ark rested in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month upon the mountains of Ararat.” Saroyan takes us back to our beginnings, through God’s design of the “arc,” where mankind is delivered to earth, after a wave of extinction. We have already mentioned that Theodor means “God granted.” We are thus in the realm

of myths, where God and men interchange roles; and the limit between the real and allegorical is but subtle. Dr. Papazian writes, "We are in history, past and present, interweaved, all concentrated in one single magical word: ASSYRIA, seen through Badal's deep suffering, "a young man lamenting bitterly the course of history ." It is to be noted that Badal is not conceived outside of history. In the past, ancient Assyria participated as an acting force in history itself, but now only a topic in ancient history. Furthermore, that a member of this nation of great past, simply trying to be a barber, in America, is a contrast between historical destiny and the individual."

"Saroyan transcends reality. He goes from a particular language to a universal one, "the heart of man" and from one particular Assyrian, (Badal) Saroyan creates seventy million Assyrians. Dr. Papazian continues, "By multiplying, Badal becomes the concept of MAN himself. The idea here, is that Assyrians have no national territory, but through Badal, Saroyan gives them a universal dimension. "The race of man, the part of man, of Assyria as much as of England, that cannot be destroyed, that part that massacres cannot destroy." That is why Badal stands for seventy million Assyrians, and man himself."

"Assyria is the meeting point between God, the confounding of languages and different races, and since Theodorus means God-granted, then God is eternal, so is Badal, and consequently so is Assyria, as the concept of man."

In this short story, in spite of Badal's personal disappointment and surely in reaction to that, Saroyan makes him stand for the indestructibility of the Assyrians and Man; "that which neither massacres, nor famine, nor earthquakes cannot destroy. " This theme recurs in all of Saroyan's work, as he writes in another short story, "I should like to see any power of the world destroy this race."

Dr. Papazian notes, "In Seventy thousand Assyrians, the narration has an intuitive sense of history. In the text, the writer tells a story within a story." Therefore, the story of Theodor Badal is the story of MAN.

Saroyan has made his point, thus ending his story by writing, "The rest of the story is pointless. I said so long to the young Assyrian and left the shop. I walked across town, four miles, to my room on Carl Street. I thought about the whole business of Assyria and this Assyrian, Theodore Badal, learning to be a barber, the sadness of his voice, the hopelessness of his attitude. This was months ago, in August, but ever since I have been thinking about Assyria, and I have been wanting to say something about Theodore Badal, a son of an ancient race, himself youthful and alert, yet hopeless. Seventy thousand Assyrians, a mere seventy thousand of that great people, and all the others quiet in death and all the greatness crumbled and ignored, and a young man in America learning to be a barber, and a young man lamenting bitterly the course of history. "Why don't I make up plots and write beautiful love stories that can be made into motion pictures? Why don't I let these unimportant and boring matters go hang? Why don't I try to please the American reading public? "Well, I am an Armenian. Michael Arlen is an Armenian, too. He is pleasing the public I have great admiration for him and I think he has perfected a very fine style of writing and all that, but I don't want to write about the people he likes to write about. Those people were dead to begin with. You take Iowa, (the

young boy in this story) and the Japanese boy, (also in this story) and Theodore Badal, the Assyrian; well, they may go down physically, like Iowa, to death, or spiritually, like Badal, to death, but they are of the stuff that is eternal in man and it is this stuff that interests me. You don't find them in bright places, making witty remarks about sex and trivial remarks about art. You find them where I found them, and they will be there forever, the race of man, the part of man, of Assyria as much as of England, that cannot be destroyed, the part that earthquake and war and famine and madness and everything else cannot destroy. This work is in tribute to Iowa, to Japan, to Assyria, to Armenia, to the race of man everywhere, to the dignity of that race, the brotherhood of things alive. I am not expecting Paramount Pictures to film this work. I am thinking of seventy thousand Assyrians, one at a time, alive, a great race. I am thinking of Theodore Badal, himself seventy thousand Assyrians and seventy million Assyrians, himself Assyria, and man, standing in a barber's shop, in San Francisco, in 1933, and being, still, himself, the whole race.”

The story of Assyria being the story of man should give us pause. What has MAN become? The race of man is now the nuclear race, a race towards the destruction of history, civilization, dignity, the death and starvation of children everywhere. Nothing much has changed since Saroyan wrote this story. The ENGLISH are still at the helm, plotting and planning man's destiny through the relentless power of the multinational corporations and their multinational forces, strangling humanity into submission, using terror, poison gases, chemical weapons and other weapons of mass-destruction to secure their “interests.” We must ask the million-dollar question: WHAT are their interests and how are they different than the interests of the rest of the world? These powerful forces have no interest in democracy, only in siphoning our oil, looting our treasures, installing new dictators, such as the Kurds to replace Saddam, and creating death squads and mass-graves in our homeland. “It's an old story. We know all about it.”

Assyrians, in the meantime have not learned a thing from history. They are still being used by the English, (to fight, to translate, to run agencies and arms deals for the Power Elite) and still doing the Imperialist bidding. Since their last massacre in 1933, the Assyrian population in Iraq had increased to nearly 2 million in the last 7 decades. However, with the recent war on Iraq and attack on Islam, the Assyrians are once again, caught in the middle of a war waged by the ENGLISH, and Kamal Attaturk has been replaced with Donald Rumsfeld and his cohorts, Cheney, Bush, and Wolfowitz.

Today, once again, less than 70,000 Assyrians remain in Iraq, and more than one million of them have left the country to become refugees in Jordan and Syria, starving and homeless, while their brethrens in the Diaspora argue over which of their religious leaders is more of a Theodorus, “God-Granted.” Most Assyrians are still in the Salvation Army business, trying to save souls, instead of Assyria. Today, Assyria's own sons are the top commanders of the most powerful Salvation Army in the world, the Vatican, waging its war of TERROR on Assyria, and Man.

Today, as I write this, on May 1, 2007, Assyrians are racing to build bigger, more lavish churches, but not ONE Assyrian school on their agenda, so why should Theodor Badal



learn the Assyrian language?

Saroyan's *Seventy Thousand Assyrians* is not only poignant and profound, but still fresh, still relevant to the state that Assyria is in today.

William Saroyan was criticized by the Armenian community for calling this story by the title he gave it, instead of *Seventy Thousand Armenians*. Saroyan answers them by writing, "I suppose I goofed by calling us Assyrians, but not really, because in a sense, everyone in the world is an Assyrian, once a great race, now all but extinct."

It is interesting that Saroyan, an Armenian, would make "everyone in the world" an Assyrian, but some of Assyria's own sons, in particular, some so-called "educated" Assyrians, trained by the CIA, maintain, "The modern Assyrians are not the descendants of the ancient Assyrians." Perhaps that is why Assyria's enemies, the "English" just rewarded one of these "learned" men with a "college" of his own.

Saroyan, in his book, *Obituaries*, wrote, "My work is writing, but my real work is being." Will Assyrians learn the business of being, and get out of the Salvation Army business?

#### Notes

Dr. Hagop Papazian PHD, is a philosopher in Paris, France. He is an Armenian from Boorj Hamoud, Lebanon, where he earned his Bachelors of Arts and Masters degree in comparative Literature from the American University in Beirut. He wrote his PHD dissertation on William Saroyan's *Seventy Thousand Assyrians* at Sorbonne University in Paris, France, in 1984. He is one of the two world experts on William Saroyan.

I first introduced Dr. Hagop Papazian to Assyria in 1999, when I presented his doctorate thesis on AssyriaSat... I am happy to see that since then, the internet is full of Assyrian websites that have posted the story of *Seventy Thousand Assyrians*.

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