

BOOK REVIEW:

STRANGERS IN THE WEST

BY BISHOP NICHOLAS J. SAMRA

The last 35 years or more have seen a renewed effort to document the history of the emigration from the Middle East that took place mainly in the late 1800s because of the economic problems of the collapsing Ottoman Empire that had ruled the area for centuries. In my research and archival work about our Melkite presence in the USA, which I began in the 1980s, I read practically every book published on the Arab-American immigrants and the communities they established across our country. Many of these histories contained information about the Christian presence, since in the early days the majority of Middle Eastern newcomers to America were Christian, mainly from the Orthodox, Melkite and Maronite Churches.

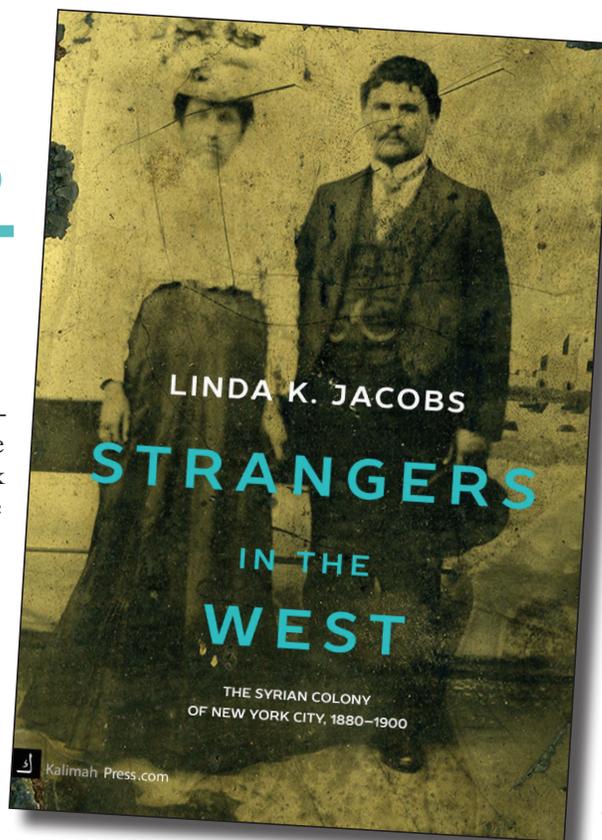
At the end of 2015 a new, expertly-researched book appeared, by another Arab-American historian, Linda K. Jacobs. She documents the arrival and early growth of the New York City community, sometimes called the Mother Community of the Syrians in the USA because the main port of entry was Ellis Island, preceded by Castle Gardens in the Battery neighborhood of New York City. Although other cities had entry ports (Boston, MA; New London, CT; New Orleans, LA; and others) Ellis Island processed the majority of immigrants entering America.

Linda Jacobs researched all the references to the Syrian immigrants in every newspaper across America as well as all the early Arab-American press. She used the many interviews of Alixa Naff, another Arab-American historian who wrote extensively on the peddling experience of the Syrians. She provides a great bibliography, taken from other historians, church archives in New York, and Presbyterian resources, as well as US Census records and Ellis Island documents.

It is necessary to note that she uses the term “Syrian,” because the immigrants arrived from the Ottoman province of Syria, which after World War I became the modern-day countries of Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, parts of Jordan and Iraq, as well as southern Turkey, which was part of northern Syria. We can also include the State of Israel.

Strangers in the West—The Syrian Colony of New York City, 1880–1900 tells the stories of the arrivals, lives, and struggles of our early ancestors who traveled across the seas to find a new home in which to live and raise their families, providing them with a better economic life and education that was not afforded them under the Ottoman Empire.

After an introduction telling why the Syrian Emigration began in the late 1800s, Jacobs outlines in great detail in 14 chapters how the Syrians scouted to find work and homes upon arrival, and the growth and development on Washington Street of



what we call “Little Syria.” Washington Street and surrounding area was the center of Syrian life—it was just a boat ride from Ellis Island and a major tenement area for immigrants.

A new life began for the new Syrian immigrants; ideally at first they lived in a limited neighborhood, as Jacobs describes in great detail. Since most were Christian, they attempted within ten years after 1880 to develop their religious communities for worship, requesting priests from the Melkite, Maronite and

Orthodox leaders in Syria. The Melkite community was the leader, with a full-time priest sent to serve the people in 1889 (see the chapter on Fr Abraham Bechwate in my book *Standing on Their Shoulders*).

The author explains where the first immigrants came from—naming cities and villages, estimating the numbers of men and women and their children, and looking at what education they had before arrival.

The role of two World’s Fairs changed the focus of many immigrants from being peddlers to becoming capitalists. They came to work the fairs and most remained instead of returning home. The Centennial Exposition took place in Philadelphia from May to November 1876 and the Columbian Exposition in Chicago from May to November 1893.

The peddler experience of the early immigrants is discussed—it involved both men and women walking across our great nation to sell household items—but the main focus of this book is New York City. Jacobs gives details of those who developed their own businesses, at first small shops and then importers, wholesalers, and manufacturers. Many who were less educated worked as employees in such businesses, which dealt in Oriental and Holy Land goods, textiles, groceries, and tobacco, as well as cutlery, real estate, antiques, and carpets.

Service professions even developed at an early date: Jacobs documents bankers, doctors, pharmacists, lawyers, boarding house operators, entertainers, and even smoking parlor owners.

The Arabic press began soon after the first arrivals. The two main newspapers were *Kawkab America* and *Al Hoda*, both religiously aligned.

Jacobs devotes an entire chapter to women in the workplace, a necessity for survival, but most likely not something they did at home in the Middle East at that time. They too were peddlers

and traders, and worked in textile factories as well as at home doing piece-work. They worked in restaurants, as dancers, entertainers, and lecturers, but mainly as nurturers of families.

Maps show in detail where the Syrians lived and had their businesses. The book also touches on internal struggles, fights, and violence, which was very minimal among them as compared to other ethnic immigrants. Some even developed societies for political issues.

The last chapter of Jacob's book looks at the successes and failures of the early Syrians—wealth, hardships, poverty and its effects, and even their despairs, in a new world so different from their place of origin. Mixed marriages, weddings, and divorce

are described, as is the greater topic of assimilation into American society, at first with much resistance, but later a normal reality as with any other ethnic group.

I recommend this book to all our faithful for a better understanding of the early roots of our life and growth in the USA. It certainly helps us understand where we came from, who we are, and what we have to offer our great nation, a nation of immigrants from all parts of the world. †

Strangers in the West—The Syrian Colony of New York City 1880-1900 is published by Kalimah Press, NY, and can be obtained from www.kalimahpress.com or even Amazon Books. ISBN 978-0-9835392-5-4.

Vatican Erects New Dioceses for Syro-Malankar and Syriac Catholics

ADAPTED FROM A REPORT BY JOHN BURGER, NEWS EDITOR FOR THE ENGLISH EDITION OF ALETEIA.COM.

Two groups of Catholic immigrants to North America are growing fast enough that Pope Francis recently established new dioceses for them.

On 3 January 2016, the Holy Father erected the Eparchy of St Mary, Queen of Peace, of the United States of America and Canada, for faithful of the Syro-Malankara Church, and appointed India-born Bishop Thomas Mar Eusebios Naickamparambil as its eparch. The new eparchy, equivalent to a Western-Church diocese, was previously an exarchate, a sort of vicariate attached to a more established diocese.

Just four days later, Pope Francis erected the apostolic exarchate for Syriac Catholics in Canada with territory taken from the Eparchy of Our Lady of Deliverance of Newark, NJ. The Holy Father appointed a Lebanese priest, Father Antoine Nassif, as exarch.

In both cases, Francis is seeking to provide better pastoral care for Eastern Catholics, but the two groups come from very different backgrounds.

In the case of the Syro-Malankars, immigration from India to the US began in the 1970s in response to job opportunities, particularly in health care. On the other hand, most Syriac Catholics coming to North America today are escaping war and persecution in Syria and Iraq, as did many in the 1980s, escaping the civil war in Lebanon, Fr Antoine said in an interview.

He will be known as Mar Boulos, or Bishop Paul, when he takes the reins of the new exarchate, based in Montreal. Born in Beirut in 1969 and ordained in 1992, he served most recently as rector of the Patriarchal Major Seminary of Charfet, Lebanon.

According to Michael J.L. LaCivita, communications director for the Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA), the Syriac Catholic Church, of West Syriac tradition, is small, with no more than 200,000 members worldwide.

“Nearly half of these Catholics once made up two eparchies now largely shattered by [*Daesh*—the Islamic State group]: Mosul in Iraq and Hassake in northeastern Syria,” he said. “In 2010, the eparchy based in Newark numbered fewer than 13,000 members. Today, some 25,000 Syriac Catholics live in North America. The fact that its size doubled in five years speaks of the growing need for pastoral oversight.”

In Canada, Bishop-elect Boulos said, there are almost 3,000 families, or 20,000 faithful, belonging to the Syriac Catholic Church.

The Syro-Malankara Church, also in the West Syriac tradition, is also relatively small, with no more than 500,000 faithful worldwide, said Atonement Father Elias D. Mallon, external affairs officer at CNEWA. The Church is one of two Eastern Catholic Churches based in the southern Indian state of Kerala. (The other is the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, which is of the East Syriac tradition).

“Our first mission started in the US in the early 1980s,” Mar Eusebios said in an interview. “In 2001, St John Paul II appointed an apostolic visitor, and in 2010 Pope Benedict established an apostolic exarchate, which is preliminary to an eparchy. Now the Holy See believes we can function as a diocese.”

Mar Eusebios has served as exarch since 2010. He will continue to be based in Elmont, Long Island, NY. The biggest concentration of Syro-Malankars is in the New York Tri-State area.

“The faithful are really enthusiastic about this,” Mar Eusebios said. “We’ve gone from having a Syro-Malankara Mass once in a while to having our own eparchy.”

About 11,000 people belong to 16 parishes in the diocese, served by 18 priests. Now seeing its third generation in the US, the Church recently ordained its first US-born priest. Two other US-born seminarians are in formation. They study at the local Roman Catholic diocesan seminary but receive additional formation in Syro-Malankar spirituality, liturgy, and Eastern canon law. An American-born woman is also entering a convent of Syro-Malankar sisters.

The two officials with CNEWA agreed that in addition to a desire to provide better pastoral care for these two Churches, Pope Francis has an affinity with Eastern Christianity because of its emphasis on “synodality.”

“Under Francis, the Synod of Bishops has become an important organ of the Catholic Church,” LaCivita said. “Synodality is something very familiar to Christians of the East—both Orthodox and Catholic. Francis might also be strengthening the synodal structure of Eastern Catholic Churches to vitalize them and to provide examples of synodality to Latin Catholics.”

He said that while a pope typically erects church jurisdiction outside the areas of the world where they come from, the recommendations and suggestions to do so come from the synods of those churches. †