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Guide to the Joel de Mirza Letters 1933-1934



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Descriptive Summary

Identifier	ICU.SPCL.DEMIRZAJ
Title	De Mirza, Joel. Letters
Date	1933-1934
Size	0.25 linear feet (1 box)
Repository	Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center University of Chicago Library 1100 East 57th Street Chicago, Illinois 60637 U.S.A.
Abstract	The Joel de Mirza Letters represent an extant fraction of the correspondence between Mirza and his adjutant Captain Constatin Tarmanov. In the early 1930s, Mirza petitioned the League of Nations for recognition of his title as Prince of the Assyro-Chaldeans and a country for his people. Native to Upper Mesopotamia, the Assyro-Chaldeans had become a displaced, fragmented community following repeated massacres and forced relocations in the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish Republic and Iraq between 1915 and 1932.

Acknowledgments

The letters are a gift of the Sibbes Family of Eindhoven, the Netherlands.

Information on Use

Access

The collection is open for research.

Citation

When quoting material from this collection, the preferred citation is: de Mirza, Joel. Letters, [Box #, Folder #], Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

Historical Note

Apart from the letters contained in this collection, very little is known about Joel de Mirza, the man who went by the title, Prince of the Assyro-Chaldeans. In present-day Iraq, the designation Assyro-Chaldean refers to two communities within the country's Christian minority that have a shared heritage but align with separate churches. Both communities claim to be the descendants of Iraq's indigenous peoples who inhabited the region known as Assyria in Upper Mesopotamia, which is currently divided among the modern-day nations of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The historic seat of Assyria was the city Assur, or what is today Mosul in northern Iraq.

Sometime in the second century BCE, the Assyrians, who were then living under Persian rule, adopted Syriac Christianity and organized the Church of the East. The Assyrian Christians had their own ecclesiastical structure and intellectual tradition, which they maintained after the Muslim conquest. In the mid-sixteenth century, the Church of the East split into factions over the question whether to affiliate with the Roman Church. The Assyrian Church of the East continued the succession of patriarchs from antiquity, and a new patriarch recognized by Rome presided over what was called the Chaldean Catholic Church. Even though both religious groups were of common ethnic descent, by the early 20th century, the European powers tended to use “Assyrian” to refer to communities aligned with the Assyrian Church of the East and “Assyro-Chaldean” to refer to those aligned with the Chaldean Catholic Church.

Between 1915 and 1917, during the First World War, both the Assyrian and Assyro-Chaldean communities endured multiple massacres that severely reduced their numbers. On two occasions, Russian forces invaded and occupied territory within the Ottoman Empire but were then forced to withdraw. After both withdrawals, Ottoman forces committed mass killings of Assyrian and Assyro-Chaldeans, whom they accused of being traitors. When the British took over the fighting on the Ottoman Front in the final year of the War, the Assyrians and Assyro-Chaldeans again assisted in offensives against the Ottomans, albeit now in exchange for British promises to support their claim to an autonomous homeland. British support did not materialize after the War, and in 1928, the League of Nations expanded its refugee resettlement program--originally created for Russian refugees--to include the Assyrians and Assyro-Chaldeans. Many were settled in Iraq and Syria, but several communities in the Hakkari region fell within the borders of the new Turkish Republic.

In 1931, Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII organized a conference in Baghdad that gathered all leaders of communities aligned with the Assyrian Church of the East. The leaders drafted a petition to the League of Nations requesting that a homeland be found for the Assyrian people. Primarily concerned with assuring its influence in an independent Iraq, British authorities dismissed the Assyrian request. Over the next two years, more Assyrian petitions would be made, but unlike in 1931, the Assyrians had become divided into patriarchal and non-patriarchal factions. When Iraq formally became independent in 1932, Mar Eshai Shimun refused to cede his authority as the temporal head of the Assyrian community, prompting the new Arab nationalist government to regard the Assyrians as a rival nation within the nation. Officials in Baghdad burned villages and ordered executions of Assyrians, including a group in August 1933 that was attempting to flee to Syria. A large number of Assyrians did find asylum in Syria, which was under French rule, but many, including the Patriarch, ultimately migrated to the United States.

Unlike the Patriarch of the Assyrian Church, the leaders of the Assyro-Chaldean communities in Iraq were more receptive to renouncing their temporal authority and Arabizing under the new Iraqi regime. It is not known when Joel de Mirza immigrated to United States, but a diplomatic reception was held for him at the Astor Hotel in New York as early as 1930. Three years later, in

one of his letters, Mirza acknowledged that there were multiple persons who could claim to be the head of the Assyro-Chaldeans.

Scope Note

The Joel de Mirza Letters pertain to the petition for recognition that Mirza sent to the League of Nations in the early 1930s and the various actions that he undertook to build support for his cause. The majority of the letters are Mirza's correspondence with his adjutant in Chicago, Captain Constatin Tarmanov. Mirza was living in New York at the time. There are, in addition, two facsimiles of letters to League of Nations officials that were written by Tarmanov on behalf of Mirza, and there is a letter by Mirza's sister to Tarmanov. The letters concern media requests that Mirza had received, updates on the favorable publicity that he was attempting to generate, and inquiries made to League officials about any actions that were being considered in response to Mirza's request for recognition. One letter is addressed to the Secretary of the League of Nations, Sir Eric Drummond.

The letters were discovered in a family desk in the Netherlands and donated to the University of Chicago Library. It is not known how the letters originally reached the Netherlands or found their way into the family's possession.

Related Resources

League of Nations Association, Midwest Branch. Records

Subject Headings

- Drummond, Eric, Sir, 1876-1951
- League of Nations
- Assyrians

INVENTORY

Box 1

Folder 1

Correspondence, 1933-1934