



Holidays

Nostalgia mixes with joy as Iraqi Christians celebrate Christmas in Canada

HADANI DITMARS

SURREY— From Saturday's Globe and Mail

Published Friday, Dec. 17, 2010 9:25PM EST

Last updated Saturday, Dec. 18, 2010 3:21PM EST

Amira Gorgoes is serving *kelaicha*, an Iraqi Christmas sweet made with dates, and a brightly decorated tree takes up much of her living room.

Her nephew, 23-year-old Roni Khoshaba – who's spending his first Christmas in Canada after fleeing Baghdad last year – is visiting the compact suburban apartment Ms. Gorgoes shares with her husband and two teenage daughters. His aunt worries he will be corrupted by a new-world life of drugs and discos, and is heartened by the fact he attends mass every Sunday. But Mr. Khoshaba is looking forward to the Christmas party at the recycling plant he works at in Delta – his first “Canadian” party.

Some oranges are offered with sweet Iraqi tea and for a moment the cozy domestic scene shifts dramatically as Ms. Gorgoes's husband, Zuhair, drifts into a terrible memory. He recounts witnessing a random act of tit-for-tat revenge killing, typical of the sectarian violence that has plagued his homeland since the 2003 invasion, leaving some 2.5 million Iraqi refugees in its wake.

“A few years ago,” says Mr. Gorgoes, staring absently at a box of mandarins from Costco, “I went to buy some oranges from a street vendor across from my old apartment in Baghdad. A man just ahead of me in the line asked what the price per kilo was. The vendor told him ‘750 dinars’ and then suddenly the man pulled out a pistol, shot him in the head and ran away. I remember the blood spilling over the oranges.”

The ghosts of war often visit this unassuming corner of central Surrey, not far from the sprawling Guildford Shopping Mall, where a community of some 2,000 Iraqi Christians has found refuge. But when they do, they are met by a stubborn sense of faith. “The life of the spirit is very important,” says Mr. Gorgoes, “It gives us strength to carry on.”

The community's spiritual and geographical centre is Our Lady of Good Counsel Church, where Father Samrad Biloues performs mass every Sunday in Arabic and Chaldean, the ancient language of a people who can trace their roots back to Babylon.

His deep baritone resonates with a sense of gravitas. “*Shlama ilalkh Maryam mleetha na'ame,*” he intones as young altar boys look on – “Hail Mary Full of Grace.”

Today, the church is full. Fashionable young girls in leopard-print blouses stand next to elderly women in delicate black lace headscarves. Young boys fidget as their fathers solemnly make the sign of the cross and say the Lord's Prayer in Arabic. The thoughts of many are with their family members in Iraq, where violence against Christians has escalated dramatically. The attack on Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad six weeks ago (when armed gunmen killed 56 worshippers) brought the plight of Iraqi Christians – victims of their country's shift from secular to sectarian – into sharp relief.

But the exodus began in the wake of the 2003 invasion, when a post-police-state power vacuum emboldened Islamist militias and the unprecedented bombing of churches and Christian businesses began in earnest.

Father Samrad, Mr. Gorgoes's nephew, arrived here in 2005 to attend his father's funeral and was then sponsored by a group of 3,000 Iraqis in desperate need of a priest. Since then, the congregation has sponsored some 200 Iraqi families, and as sectarian violence continues, their numbers are growing.

The church, which assists with English classes and employment training, remains the centre point of their new life in Canada, but slowly they are making a mark on their community. Florens Haircuts on 150th Street is owned by two recently arrived Iraqi Christians, and a makeshift café run out of the rec room of a nearby apartment building offers a place for tea, coffee and card games. Today, Father Samrad announces that a new family has just arrived from Damascus – a place of limbo for hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees – who long for a safe place to call home.

After mass, a small group gathers to tell their stories.

“It started with threatening letters,” says Karim Tobiyah, a father of four who worked as a mechanic in a state-owned beer factory and lived in an area called New Baghdad, “and then they [an unknown terrorist group] started fire-bombing the factory.”

Finding himself unemployed and threatened by newly empowered death squads, Mr. Tobiyah sold everything and fled with his family to Syria in 2009, where he waited for a year before being granted refugee status in Canada.

All of this information is being relayed by Mr. Gorgoes, a former English teacher and now an enthusiastic volunteer translator. Mr. Gorgoes has only been here for 18 months but his English skills have made him the de facto fixer for newly arrived countrymen.

“I must help translate for the doctor,” explains the affable, middle-aged man dressed in a neat grey suit, “but the real difficulty is the driver’s licence.” In a suburb where the car is king, not speaking English means not being able to pass a driver’s test, posing a double hindrance to gainful employment. While Surrey is a far cry from Baghdad, where military checkpoints separate neighbourhoods, Iraqi refugees face more subtle barriers once they arrive. Gaining Canadian professional accreditation is often difficult for immigrants, and Iraqis are already familiar with the added challenge of obtaining official papers from a corrupt bureaucracy in a war zone.

But Iraqis are nothing if not survivors. A whole community network has developed here in a few short years. Those with driver’s licences give lifts to those without. Men used to providing for their families share contacts for casual labour jobs: working on construction sites or picking blueberries. And advice and comfort are offered over shared meals in rented flats.

“If you feel lonely,” says Mr. Gorgoes, “all you have to do is walk to the mall and you run into a friend or a neighbour.”

Mr. Gorgoes’s cousin, Samir Korke, arrived here last summer with his family after five years of waiting in Damascus. “It was very beautiful when we arrived here,” he says. “But while I felt happy to be in a place where my children had a future, I felt sad to be leaving my land, my culture.”

There were some initial shocks – such as going to a supermarket and seeing an entire section dedicated to dog food. (In Iraq, dogs are not usually kept as pets, only as guard dogs for the wealthy, and they are not fed any special food, just raw meat.) But Mr. Korke rose to the many new challenges – using sign language to communicate an urgent need for toothache medication to a pharmacist – and taking a job picking fruit to feed his family.

There were also some oddly familiar moments. A rare outing to the Arthur Erickson-designed Robson Square for a recent rally to protest violence against Iraqi Christians, says Mr. Korke, “reminded me of Abu Nawas neighbourhood in the eighties,” He was referring to a district in central Baghdad with resonant modernist architecture and open plazas.

It’s 8 p.m. now and time for Mr. Gorgoes to drive to his job as a night guard at the nearby 24-hour Superstore. In the car, an evangelical radio host speaks of giving your life over to Christ. He quickly changes the audio to a love song in Chaldean.

“We Chaldeans, we are the inheritors of Babylon you know. But there is nothing left now,” he says wistfully, just as he drives down a strip mall, past a glaring Elvis Pizza sign that illuminates the dark suburban night, oblivious to any ancient nostalgic ache. “Only a few bricks ... a few stones.”

- Iraq is steeped in Biblical history. It was the birthplace of Abraham and St. Thomas visited Basra while travelling from Jerusalem to India in the 1st century AD.
- Iraq’s once-million-strong Christian community was relatively protected by Iraq’s old secular constitution and Christians such as Tariq Aziz, a close adviser of former president Saddam Hussein, enjoyed a prominent place in society.
- Mass emigration began after the 2003 invasion, when newly empowered Islamist gangs targeted churches and Christian businesses.
- Of Iraq’s 2.5 million refugees, the UNHCR, the United Nations’ Refugee Agency, estimates that 30 per cent originate from minorities including Faili (or Shia Kurds), Jews, Mandaean, Palestinians, Turkomans, Yazidi and Christians.
- The majority of Iraqi Christians are Chaldean, members of the ancient Nestorian church who pledged their allegiance to Rome in the 16th century. The church has its own patriarch and retains its own distinctive traditions. Some rituals, like the chalice of fire carried by the priest, have roots in Babylonian culture.
- The Three Magi, or wise men, who brought gifts to the baby Jesus, were Chaldeans from Babylon.
- There are an estimated 5,000 Iraqi Christians in the Lower Mainland and at least 10,000 in B.C. The biggest population nationally is in Toronto where there are at least 30,000.

Special to The Globe and Mail