

Ablahad Lahdo
A Traitor among us

Semitica Viva

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A Traitor among us The Story of Father Yusuf Akbulut

A Text in the Ṭuroyo Dialect
of 'Iwardo

2017

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*To father Yusuf Akbulut for his courageous stand
To the memory of the Syriac people who fell victim
to the genocide one hundred years ago*

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Preface

In November 2004, during a visit to Tur Abdin, I visited the Syriac Orthodox Church of St. Mary's in Diyarbakir. Some years earlier I had closely followed the events taking place at this very site, in this same city. What was eye-catching for me, when entering the gate to the church's courtyard, was that the main street was narrow and the quarter was crowded. The church was totally surrounded by houses that were of the same height or higher, a fact that made me wonder how such a small community of few Syriac families could live entirely surrounded by Kurds. My apprehension was unfortunately confirmed later on in the evening. While sitting in the church's courtyard drinking tea, a thump made me almost jump up from my chair. I looked around and noticed that I was the only one that reacted, as if the others did not hear the noise. I asked father Yusuf Akbulut if he heard anything and he answered that he heard and that this was nothing to worry about. It was probably just some people passing the gate and either kicked it or tossed a stone at it. This has become part of our daily life here, the priest explained miserably. This incident kept me awake all that night wondering how a normal everyday life looked like for these underprivileged people in this part of the world. I further wondered: how many people out there know about this?

On October 5, 2000, father Akbulut was apprehended and questioned by police in Diyarbakir for 18 hours. The day before, a report in the daily newspaper *Hurriyet* had accused him of making statements that supported labeling the death of Armenians during World War I as genocide. Syrian Orthodox Christians also experienced genocide, not only the Armenians, the priest had added.

Father Akbulut was put on trial, and three hearings later he was proclaimed not guilty. Almost four years later, he and his family were still suffering from harassment. When I next interviewed father Akbulut, in April 2014, it was obvious that life was still very unpleasant for the priest and for his family.

Thus, one hundred years after the genocide that nearly erased all Christians in general and the Syrian Orthodox community in particular, the descendants of the few that survived the slaughter are still facing harassment in today's Turkey, a Turkey that has otherwise made enormous efforts to be part of the European community.

With this book I would like to honor all the Syriac people all over the world in general and those who still live in Turkey and Tur Abdin in particular. Father Yusuf Akbulut was called a traitor in the Turkish media but for the Syriac people he is a hero because at risk for his own and his families' lives he dared tell the truth. I owe father Akbulut my deepest gratitude for being open concerning what he went through and for granting me these interviews which comprise the core this book.

Ablahad Lahdo

Uppsala March 2017