



### Malula Journal

## Passing On History by Word of Mouth

By DOUGLAS JEHL

**MALULA, Syria** — These days, Damascus lies just 45 minutes away, on improved roads that mean that the journey between this isolated village and the capital no longer strikes anyone as forbidding.

But linguistically, Malula is still a place unto itself.

Here in the barren Qalamun Mountains the people do not speak Arabic, at least among themselves. That language has been the lingua franca in this part of the world for more than 2,000 years, but theirs is even older, going back nearly 3,000 years to 500 B.C.

The language is Aramaic, the one spoken by Jesus. Everywhere else, it died out centuries ago, but here, somehow, it has endured, insulated by isolation and nurtured by pride. Only in Malula, with a population of about 5,000, and in two nearby villages does Aramaic survive.

"Even in Damascus, people look at us funny, and they ask what language are you speaking," said Assad Barkeel, 24. Like nearly everyone else here, Mr. Barkeel learned Aramaic from the cradle, and also like nearly everyone else, he says he is determined to pass on the gift to another generation.

As home to several Christian holy sites, including the fourth-century St. Sergius Church, which was built to honor soldiers slain by a Roman emperor because of their beliefs, Malula has long been a haven for Christians. They make up about half the population, a far larger proportion than the 13 percent in Syria as a whole.

But even if the link to Jesus makes some Christians more passionate about preserving the language, there is no divide when it comes to Aramaic in Malula. Muslims and Christians alike chatter in a language that is incomprehensible to most other Syrians and to almost everyone else.

In what are now Syria, Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian territories, Aramaic was for centuries the language of daily life, and it was thriving at the time of Jesus. (Hebrew was reserved for religious worship.) Parts of the Bible were written in Aramaic, scholars say, as were parts of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Yet even as a spoken language, it was overtaken in the seventh century, giving way to others, including Syriac and Arabic. It has disappeared entirely as a written language, with parts of its alphabet utterly lost to memory.

But though it no longer survives as a written language, scholars and clerics sometimes adopt a rough system of transcription to render the spoken sounds in a recognizable script, usually Hebrew or Arabic. This allows an Aramaic liturgy to be used in some Syrian churches.

In Malula, spoken Aramaic has lived on, unmolested by successive conquerors who never bothered to force conformity on such a remote place, a redoubt that lies at an altitude of 5,000 feet.

For centuries, its residents have lived simply, and mostly in isolation, perched in houses dug into the steep hillside and drawing their livelihoods from the spring-fed land below. To venture to Damascus was long an arduous journey, across land that was scorched in the summer and covered by snow in the winter.

The 20th century has brought the capital closer, and with it, Arabic in the schools.

But not even new jobs in Damascus and the demands of modern life have quenched the habit of speaking Aramaic at home. People say they have become ever more determined to keep the language alive.

"When we saw outsiders come and pay so much attention to our language, we thought it was our responsibility to learn more," said Subelman Wakim, 31, the owner of a tiny sandwich shop that specializes in neatly browned falafel.

Because of a local legend dating from World War II, when Syria was



At St. Sergius Church, the Rev. Fayed Frejat recites the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus. Malula is the home of several Christian holy sites, and the church attracts many pilgrims.



Mikhail Halal, 75, spoke Aramaic for Kuwaiti tourists recently, but some foreigners have come and learned to speak the language even better.



The Aramaic language survives in Malula and two nearby villages.

still a French protectorate, some people here still look with suspicion at those who turn up in Malula and claim to marvel at what has endured. As the story has it, a visiting scholar who proclaimed his passion for Aramaic turned out instead to be a German spy.

But recent years have brought not only a fresh batch of scholars, but

also the early taste of tourist dollars, in a tide that sometimes makes for an eclectic mix.

One recent resident widely described with much affection was Werner Arnold, a German linguist who asked to be known as Abu Ibrahim during the several years he spent trying to master the region's most obscure tongue. Some of his students have taken up residence in his place, and old men like Mikhail Halal, 75, say they still cannot believe that the foreigners have learned to speak better Aramaic than he does.

By contrast, in the hilltop St. Sergius Church, which attracts many pilgrims, the Rev. Fayed Frejat, a pudgy-faced 58-year-old Greek Catholic priest, delights visitors by reciting the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic even though he cannot speak the language, having been assigned to Malula just a few years ago.

Altogether, experts say, some 18,000 Syrians speak Aramaic, including those who live in the nearby villages, Bakha and Jubadin.

Of that total, though, perhaps half have left the villages for better opportunities in the capital. Most return to the mountains in the summer, and most still speak Aramaic at home to their children, but it is that exodus that worries some residents.

"If I were the Interior Minister, I'd pass a law that said no one from Malula could marry outside these villages," Father Frejat said. "Unless they hear the language at home, the children will grow up without it."

For now, though, extraordinary measures are being taken. Orphans, in many cases, are brought up by Aramaic-speaking nuns. With the picturesque heart of the village and its narrow, steep alleyways already chockablock with houses, permission from the government has been sought and won to allow new construction on the outskirts, to make room for newlyweds and their growing families.

"Everyone is becoming more interested in preserving Aramaic," said Ali Maqdash, 31. "It's our language, after all."

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