

Iraq Memories

Every Building in Baghdad that Falls, Crushed and Broken to the Ground....

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I wrote this article as the bombs fell on Baghdad on the 20th of March 2003, with tears streaming down my face.

I had come back from Iraq just days before. In another sparkling pink and azure dawn on the day I left Baghdad, (dubbed “the Paris of the ninth century” by 19th century traveller, Sir Richard Burton) I photographed the panoramic views of this great, vibrant city. I would, I felt certain, never see it like this again. I never will. Felicity Arbuthnot, March 17, 2013

In 1998, beloved, gentle, intellectual friend Mustafa, spoke to me from Baghdad, his voice cracking as he described the damage of the four day Christmas and Eid blitz on his country — damage to Munstansarya University, thought to be the world’s oldest; the 9th century Abbasid Palace with its great arches, which recreate themselves — reflections in shadows, created by the inspiration of the inspired nearly a thousand years ago. The list went on and on.

Barely a month later, Mustafa was dead. He died on 17 January, anniversary of the start of the First Gulf War. All who knew him said he died of a broken heart, destroyed by his inability to any longer protect his family and the city he loved so much.

My pain could never be that of those who are losing their loved ones, limbs, homes, history and all that is familiar to them in Mesopotamia, the “cradle of civilisation” ; “land between two rivers” — the great biblical Tigris and Euphrates — it must be only really a second best pain, but it surely feels like the real thing.

The Palestine Hotel in central Baghdad has not fallen yet, it is described as swaying, shaking and shuddering as the bombs fall. A BBC correspondent broadcasting from there, rather than the Ministry of Information — formerly home to all correspondent’s offices which has been hit twice — described the hotel as a “bit of a dump”.

“Welcome home, welcome home”, the Palestine staff said to me repeatedly less than a month ago, beaming their generous welcome on imminent eve of disaster. Jemilla, one of the employees, ran home in her lunch hour to pick me flowers from her garden for my room.

Mohamed, gentle historian, who now works there to earn hard currency from foreign visitors, brought me another of his precious books on the Middle East — from a dwindling collection he sells for ridiculously little, to a few selected guests. He needs the money desperately, but his lifetime’s collection must go to a loving home.

Susan, who runs the small shop in the lobby is a survivor of the Ameriyah Shelter bombing

of the 1991 Gulf War, which killed at least four hundred and five people, leaving just eight survivors. Beautiful, poised, generous to a fault, dispensing sweets and sweetmeats far in excess of what one spends, she suffers terrible physical scars under her jeans and silk shirt.

And worse mental ones — she lost her parents, brothers and sisters in the inferno at five years old — and still greets, hugs and feeds visitors from the countries who decimated her young life and incinerated her family.

The Palestine's Orient Express restaurant was the last stopping point before Istanbul on that Rome to Istanbul train. It has a 1920's model of the Express, lovingly restored by Mohamed. A short time ago the proud hotel which the Palestine is, was reduced to sheets sewn side to middle, and so thin that a wrong move could rip them.

This visit boasted new sheets, fluffy towels — and both flowers and a large basket of fruit in my room. A small, but huge triumph, a phoenix from the ashes of the most draconian UN embargo in history. The "bit of a dump" which is the Palestine deserves a book, not an article.

Next door is the Al-Fanar Hotel, long host to peace activists. Just before I left Baghdad they had a structural survey to assess whether it would withstand vibrations from bombings. Probably not, was the verdict. The welcome equals the Palestine. Making a local phone call from the lobby, I asked how much I owed. "Nothing, it is on the house," said the owner.

"Everything is on the house here," I replied, referring to the fact that breakfast, dinner and much else, seems to be complimentary. "Yes, of course, unless, unless ...," he replied, pointing skywards "... unless the house falls down."

Five minutes drive away, along the Tigris, past evocative Ottoman buildings, riverside restaurants which sell Iraq's most famous dish, *masgouf* — freshly caught fish, embalmed in herbs and slowly cooked over open wood fires, is the Ministry of Information.

Correspondents in Iraq have a love-hate relationship with the ministry; the world's media had their offices there. Permits to travel are issued — or refused there, "minders" allotted and many hours consumed often wheedling, pleading. Usually it all works out — and after all one reminds oneself during moments of exasperation, it is a country which has been on a war footing for 20 years, with or without the regime, any nation would be paranoid.

The ministry too has poignant memories — the elegant, educated official who hesitantly attempted to sell me his wife's mink coat for 50 dollars — then broke down, tears streaming down his face: "Oh, what this embargo is doing to us."

A "minder" known as "little Mohamed" — there are two Mohameds and the other of course, "big Mohamed". The little one, is quiet, wistful, can fix anything — and adores children. On one visit I went in search of him and found him more wistful than ever. No greeting, no smile, utter withdrawal.

Perhaps I had offended him in some way I thought. In desperation I asked the question one seldom asks now in Iraq — tragedy invariably lurks in the answer: "How is your family Mohamed?"

"My wife, she is fine and my little daughter — but my son, he died 40 days ago." When I had

left months before, they had been celebrating the safe arrival of a healthy baby. Forty days is the mourning period and he was working on that last, agonising, poignant day because he too needed the money so desperately for his remaining small family.

The ministry, like the waiting hours, is no more.

Not far away, near Rashid Street (named after Baghdad's seventh century founder) with its ancient, evocative, bustling, now battered, balconied buildings is the first of the telephone exchanges to be hit. I remembered a competition with an Italian photographer to find the most unusual picture of Iraq's president which abound everywhere. I won the first round: Panama hat and Hawaiian shirt. He bought dinner.

Next day: "Come with me, I have won..." It was a building high portrait of the president in full military dress on a bright pink telephone. I bought two dinners.

Tragedy struck a couple of years later when the telephone was repainted black. Now it has struck again, the building is no more, terrified families unable to check on those they love — and did those irreplaceable antique buildings in Rashid street survive the blast, or was it a vibration too far?

As the coalition boasts of bombing palaces — and the Olympic stadium — to erase symbols of the regime, they are also erasing a culture, for which they will not be thanked. Is it incumbent upon leaders from the time of the caliphs, to leave something more magnificent than their predecessor.

Whatever about this — or many other leaders, in a most ancient of civilisations this will be seen as a cultural assault. And whilst there is little love for Udayy, they were proud of their stadium.

Down what has become known as "sniper's alley" (in fact the highway of death resultant from the slaughter of fleeing military and civilians after the cease-fire of 1991, by the US) is beautiful, battered Basra, formerly the "Venice of the Middle East". Sinbad left for his magical journeys from here and the Tigris and Euphrates meet at the Shatt Al-Arab waterway now "secured" by the invaders.

Front line in the Iran- Iraq war, the Gulf war and now this assault, this ancient city displays tragedy everywhere. After the 1998 bombing, empty hotels refused rooms to British or Americans at any price. Hearts and minds are going to be hard won here.

The general hospital which has received numerous casualties from the ongoing, unsanctioned bombings of the region by the US and UK over the last 11 years, was built by General Maude in the 1920s in another British adventure. He is buried in the war graves in Baghdad. "Let them come, there are plenty of plots next to him," was an example of the tone of response to questions about the welcome the liberators would receive.

Another hotel which will unlikely be welcoming for a while is the Sheraton, "damaged" last week. Overlooking the Shatt Al- Arab, its rooms are pure Arabian nights, with their rich hangings, richer carpets and slatted wooden balconies, where the birds inhabiting the Shatt weal and swirl past, as the sun falls into the water and the sky turns peach.

The birds swirl in great joyous swathes at dusk and dawn over the corniche in the northern town of Mosul too, where the Prophet Jonah is believed to be buried in the great, ancient

mosque named for him. Christian monasteries include the Lourdes of the Middle East, where Saint Matthew is believed to be buried and where people of all denominations bring their sick believing in his healing powers.

This is the region which has inspired poets: “Quinquine of Nineveh, from distant Ophir” wrote John Masefield in “Cargoes”. This is Nineveh province. When the cargo returned with “sandalwood, cedarwood and sweet white wine”, the wine was from Mosul grapes, watered by an irrigation system developed twelve thousand years ago. “At one with Nineveh and Tyre” wrote Kipling. The great walls of Nineveh still stood, a fortnight ago with their winged bulls, guardians for millennia, testament to living history. Are they there now?

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