

Baghdad Dreams in Michigan

“History is never finished” means, among other things, that time can change our view of the past and that stories within that history may emerge to become the stuff of legend – in spite of all the odds, even wars, against them. Such has been the case for the alumni/ae of the American Jesuit schools in Iraq, Baghdad College (a high school founded in 1932) and Al-Hikma University (founded in 1956). Founded and then staffed by American Jesuits until their expulsion from Iraq in 1969, these institutions have been recalled, invoked and celebrated in alumni/ae reunions held regularly in the United States and Canada since 1977. The most recent of these, the 16th reunion held in Novi, Michigan (16-19 July), brought together 400 Iraqi alumni/ae with a variety of international passports to give voice to their memories, praise to their education and support to their country.

In 2005 the New York Times gave prominence to Baghdad College by reporting that three of the candidates for the Iraqi government, all three Sunnis, were former students of Baghdad College with fond memories of their years spent under the rigors of a Jesuit education. None of the three - Ahmad Chalabi, Adel Abdul Mahdi or Ayad Allawy - had completed their studies at Baghdad College, however, due to the revolt which substituted the monarchy with a republic and brought the Ba’ath party to political prominence in Iraq.

After many years, and the intervening devastation of Iraq, it might seem improbable that Iraqi students of American led educational institutions would not only remember the schools fondly, but would wish to meet and discuss together the future of their country along side the surviving members of that very same American Jesuit faculty. For this reunion, in fact, 7 Jesuit Fathers arrived from Lebanon, Jordan and the United States while the alumni/ae came principally from the United States, Canada and England with a sprinkling of other nationalities mixed in. The program for the three day event, organized by its Director Mr. Ramzi Hermiz, featured meetings, conferences and, of course, two marvelous evenings of Iraqi food, music and dance.

Certainly the most moving moment on the schedule was a fund raising event, “Adopt-a-Refugee-Family”, (www.adoptarefugeefamily.org), sponsored by The Chaldean Federation of America “*to provide financial support, through donations and charitable contributions, to Iraqi refugees who were forced to leave their homeland due to the ongoing turmoil within their homeland and who cannot otherwise provide for themselves...*” Accompanied by a video presentation graphically documenting the plight of the approximately 700,000 Iraqis who have been driven from their home and their country, the event brought home once again the ongoing misery which has beset the population of Iraq over the past years. Two other lectures also discussed the present state of Iraq – its problems, needs and hopes.

An earlier lecture, instead, discussed the pre-history of Baghdad College and the initial founding of the school by Edmund Aloysius Walsh, S.J., the priest who had founded Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service in 1919. Sent to Baghdad in 1931 as a representative of the Sacred Congregation of the Oriental Churches on a papal mission to ascertain the housing needs of young Catholic students in Baghdad, Father Walsh would, after securing the support of King Faisal I, return to the United States with a vision - plans for a new high school of excellence to be staffed by American Jesuits and open to Iraqi students of all faiths. His vision, Baghdad College, opened the very next year and Walsh, in his position as Vice President of Georgetown University and Regent of Georgetown’s School of Foreign Service, saw to it that, throughout the following years, a number of

gifted Iraqi students would continue their studies at Georgetown University.

A direct link to this original source was supplied by the testimony of Mr. Edmond J. Nouri, Baghdad College, Class of 1936. Following the lecture, in fact, Mr. Nouri took the floor to say that he had begun his education at Baghdad College in the Fall of 1932 – during, in fact, the very first year of the school's activity. He was, consequently, one of its first graduates in 1936. In January of 1937, after the Rector of Baghdad College had written a letter of recommendation to Father Walsh, Nouri went to Georgetown University on scholarship to study Economics and Political Science. He was to become a protégé of Father Walsh and would remain friends with him until the latter's death in 1956. Mr. Nouri's appreciative testimony provided a unique, first-person confirmation of the ongoing interest which Edmund Walsh displayed in Baghdad College.

These are only a few of the opportunities for fellowship and exchanges of opinions that were provided by the reunion. This mix of past and present, of memories and actuality, is, of course, fundamental to any reunion. But the 16th reunion of Baghdad College and Al Hikma University alumni/ae was not about nostalgia, it was about hope for the future of Iraq, about the concrete desire that the reunion association could, as Ramzi Y. Hermiz explained: *“become the new foundation (financial and otherwise) of a ReBorn Baghdad College so that it might quickly regain its prior recognition as the ‘Standard of Excellence’ around the world.”* And this was, most certainly, the fervent wish of each and every one of the alumni/ae at the reunion – to play his or her part in nurturing the future of their homeland.

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