

MIDDLE EAST

In Baghdad Ruins, Remains of a Cultural Bridge

By ANTHONY SHADID MAY 21, 2010

BAGHDAD — Report No. 25, dated April 4 and written by Col. Qais Hussein, was clinical, the anonymous survey of an explosion in a city where explosions are ordinary.

“Material damage: significant,” it declared of the car bomb that was detonated last month near the Egyptian Embassy, killing 17 people. “The burning of 10 cars + the burning of a house, which was in front of the embassy, with moderate damage to 10 surrounding houses.”

Colonel Hussein’s report didn’t mention the hundreds of books, from plays of Chekhov to novels of the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani, stored in bags, boxes and a stairwell. It didn’t speak of the paintings there of Shaker Hassan, one of Iraq’s greatest, or the sculptures of his compatriot, Mohammed Ghani Hikmat. There was no note of the stone brought from an exile’s birthplace in Bethlehem that helped build the house as a cosmopolitan refuge bridging West and East.

Nor did Colonel Hussein’s report mention that the home belonged to Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, a renowned Arab novelist, poet, painter, critic and translator who built it along the date palms and mulberry trees of Princesses’ Street nearly a half-century ago and lived there until his death in 1994.

here have seen too much.”

But in the whispers of friends and colleagues, who recalled Mr. Jabra’s listening to Bach as he wrote, the smoke of his pipe wafting through the room, the house represented something far greater that has been lost. To some of them, its destruction serves as an epitaph of sorts, the end of eras in Iraq and the Arab world and the eclipse, in war and strife, of the ideal he represented.

Jabra’s Treasures

Rarely have a house and a man seemed to intersect so seamlessly.

Born in 1919 to a Christian family, Mr. Jabra settled in Baghdad after the 1948 war that his fellow Palestinians call the nakba, or catastrophe. He had already earned a degree from Cambridge, would soon study at Harvard, and in his ensuing years here he joined the sculptor Jawad Salim and a remarkable generation of other artists who made Iraq a pioneer in Arab culture.

Mr. Jabra was among the most prominent, as a writer whose acclaimed work modernized the Arabic novel and a linguist who translated everything from Shakespeare’s sonnets to Faulkner’s “The Sound and the Fury.”

“He was a living example of the process of translation, of taking one culture and literally carrying it across a cultural divide and placing it in another culture,” said Roger Allen, a professor of Arabic language and literature at the University of Pennsylvania who was a friend of Mr. Jabra’s and helped translate two of his better-known novels.

His simple two-story house, bordered by orange trees redolent of Palestine, reflected his tastes. Mr. Hikmat recalled that Mr. Jabra had one of his wood sculptures over his fireplace and others in the entry and dining room. Majed al-Samarrai, a critic and friend, remembers paintings by Iraqi artists like Rakan Dabdoub, Souad al-Attar and Nouri al-Rawi.

“How do I describe it?” Mr. Samarrai asked. “The house was a gallery of Iraqi art.”

Often it was filled with music, what Mr. Jabra considered the only pure art.

“Any music you bring along will make me happy — esp. 18th c and earlier,” Mr. Jabra once wrote to Mr. Allen. “When you come to us you’ll see I’ve got quite a bit of it (from 15th to 18th centuries). It is, literally, my daily bread. It sustains my mind and my writing.”

The house’s doors were always open, as well. Friends say he persuaded Abdelrahman Mounif to write his monumental novel “Cities of Salt” there. Issa J. Boullata, a retired professor of Arabic literature at McGill University in Canada and a longtime friend of Mr. Jabra’s, recalled a salon for poets, artists and thinkers inhabited with “an intellectual quality that stemmed from his mind, ever open to others.”

When Mr. Jabra died in 1994, a relative, Raqiya Ibrahim, moved to the house.

“Jabra’s treasures are in your hands,” Mr. Samarrai remembered telling her.

A Legacy in the Dust

The blood of Mrs. Ibrahim still smears the wall, near where her body, decapitated by the bomb, was buried in rubble for a day before civil defense workers managed to remove it. A black banner hangs outside, offering condolences for her and her son, Jaafar, who was also killed. “From God we come and to him we return,” it reads.

Mr. Samarrai believes a collection of 10,000 letters was mostly burned. A pile of record albums by Chopin, Vivaldi and Bach blocks a doorway, and an old record player gathers dust. There is a black-and-white class picture from Baghdad University, in which the female students wear miniskirts. In the stairwell is a copy of The Times of London’s Literary Supplement from April 16, 1993.

Only a few paintings remain, one of them a portrait of Mr. Jabra in a blue jacket and red scarf, a pipe in his hand. Mr. Samarrai and neighbors said looters had plundered the house of other valuables, including Mrs. Ibrahim’s jewelry, after the attack.

“None of them probably knew,” he said, with a hint of forgiveness.

They left the books in Arabic and English, from the famous (“Portrait of a Lady” by Henry James and “The Arab Awakening” by George Antonius) to the

obscure. A copy of “Bulfinch’s Mythology” lay open to a line of poetry by Scott: “O, think how, to his latest day, when death just hovering claimed his prey.”

“No one remembers him around here anymore,” said Mehdi Mohammed, a neighbor who lost his granddaughter in the attack. “Everyone he knew has gone.”

Nor do they really remember him on Mutanabi Street, the refuge of intellectuals here that Mr. Jabra once frequented, its bookstores unfurling down a boulevard rebuilt after another attack. Only one store had any of his novels (“The Sun King”). With a squint of recognition, many of the booksellers recalled the name, but not his work.

“He was living in Mansour, if I remember right,” said Mohammed Ridha, who gave away Mr. Jabra’s novel. “I think he married an Iraqi. I think, I think. I can’t tell you for sure.”

He shook his head, then put on his reading glasses, and ruffled through his cluttered shelves stacked eight levels high until he found a worn, 15-year-old encyclopedia of Iraqi intellectuals. Mr. Ridha slapped its cover twice, sending plumes of dust through his darkened shop. He hurried through the alphabetical entries until he arrived at Mr. Jabra’s name. Smiling at his discovery, he jabbed his finger at the page.

Novelist, critic, poet and painter, the entry read.

Then it quoted Mr. Jabra’s ambitions in his own words. “From the uninterrupted bitterness, I wanted to extract two drops of sweetness. ... I hoped to nourish a tree sustained on the hope that humanity and love of people will prevail.”

‘Totally Cosmopolitan’

There is a line of ancient poetry that every educated Arab can recite. “Stop and let us weep,” it famously begins, “for the beloved and the home.” What is left behind are the atlatl, Arabic for the ruins. To the poet, they become a symbol to lament the places of memory.

Friends say Mr. Jabra incarnated the ideal of his house — a dissident who drew determination from the dispossession of his people, a Christian who celebrated his identity as an Arab, a secular artist who was inspired to link the

societies of his birth and his education, and a thinker who found strength to be open to the world through faith in his own culture.

“Totally cosmopolitan,” Mr. Allen, the professor, noted.

“Jabra represented a particular period in the meeting of different cultures,” he said.

More wars have followed his death, though. So have occupations. His secular notion of identity has withered before the ascent of sectarian and religious forces. In an asymmetric conflict, at times cartoonish, an aggressive West faces a seething East.

“We’re in an era when cultures habitually and even deliberately misunderstand each other,” Mr. Allen said.

Someone like Mr. Jabra, he said, echoing others, “may not be possible anymore.”

To Mr. Boullata, his friend, the tragedy was the aftermath. “Not only was it destroyed,” he said, “it was made to be forgotten.”

But he disagreed with the notion that the house was the atlatl, the ruins, of a bygone era. “Too pessimistic,” he said, adding that Mr. Jabra was never pessimistic.

Mr. Samarrai agreed. For a moment, he thought of the right image. He wondered if a museum could still somehow be fashioned from the rubble. Maybe recognition was what mattered most, sustaining his ideal and nourishing the same tree that Mr. Jabra once mentioned.

“The memories remain our cornerstone,” he said finally. “I might sound too romantic when I talk like this,” he added, smiling, “but it’s true. A half-century of culture may have been lost in that house, but he still lives with us, and his spirit is still with us.”

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