



Dar El Salam Hospital

Photo courtesy of Anita Taylor.

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BASIM FARGO, AND MELANIE RICHES WIXWAT

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The Dar El Salam Hospital was an 85-bed medical facility in Baghdad, Iraq, sponsored by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. It operated from 1946 to June 1959.

Early Beginnings

In the early 1900s, the Iraq field was under the administration of the Central European Division. They began to set aside funds to begin medical work there and in 1929 sent a nurse from central Europe to begin a private nursing and midwifery practice. W. K. Ising, who was director of the Iraq Field, expressed his desire to send a physician who would join the nurse in establishing a mission clinic. However, due to various circumstances, the plans were not carried out and the nurse returned home in 1932.¹

A short time later, Iraq became affiliated directly with the General Conference and the plans to establish medical work in Iraq were revisited under the direction of Elder George Keough, president of the Middle East Union Mission (MEUM). However, due to the many difficulties and the seriousness of the international situation, the project once again was put on hold and Keough was called to teach Arabic at the Theological Seminary in Washington D.C.²

In 1942, E. L. Branson took over as president of MEUM. Despite the difficulties caused by World War II, he worked tirelessly to implement his ambitions to establish a hospital in Baghdad. In 1945 he sent a delegation to Baghdad to study the general conditions and present their findings to the General Conference. Due to the extraordinary conditions of the war and the extreme increase in the price of construction materials, the delegation thought it wise to wait for more stable conditions.³ Edwin G. Essery, M.D., Medical Secretary of MEUM, wrote in the *Adventist Review*, "It seemed as though hope was again deferred, but the Lord was working for us in other ways."⁴

Realization of Hopes

In Baghdad at that time were two Adventist brothers, Basheer and Naseef Hasso, who owned a company called the Hasso Brothers Company. They owned a small hotel on Al Rashid Street, the main street of Baghdad. The brothers proposed that the mission could use their hotel building for two years until the mission could build a new hospital.⁵ The MEUM at once accepted this offer and voted a sum of money to meet the expenses of all the renovations.⁶

Renovations and alterations began immediately. By April 1946, and thanks to Dr. Edwin G. Essery and Stanley Johnson, superintendent of the Iraq Mission, as well as the valuable assistance offered by the Hasso Brothers, the hotel building was turned into a modern hospital that was designed in oriental style with central courtyard and fountain. On the ground floor were located an office, reception, examination rooms, dispensary, pathology laboratory, hydrotherapy and physiotherapy rooms, outpatient and casualty departments, etc. Above there was an operating theater, X-ray room, a small maternity department with delivery and newborn rooms, living quarters for the resident doctor and nurses, and 12 private rooms, each with attached bathrooms.⁷

Towards the end of 1946, this little hospital began to accept patients under the care of competent physicians Dr. Youssef Ibrahim Saaty and Dr. Chukri Karmi, and the Henderson sisters, who were nurses.⁸

Essery, who was from England, was still not able to get government permission to practice. He wrote:

The chief port health officer had been taken suddenly ill and was obliged to return to England, and I was approached by the medical adviser to the Iraq Government, who requested that I help them by taking the health officer's place at Basra for a short while.⁹

As a result of this new position, many contacts were made among the officials of the Iraqi government and many came to the hospital for medical treatment. Because of their influence, the hospital became more widely known.¹⁰

A few months later, on March 20, 1947, M. F. Seitz, superintendent of the mission work in Mesopotamia, wrote in *The Review and Herald*:

We are much encouraged with the things that are happening over here. The hospital is filled to capacity and the latest addition is a medical boat, which we shall use on the Tigris River. There are many villages along the Tigris and we want to get into these villages to treat the people, teaching them healthful living, and eventually take them the message.¹¹

The hospital also owned a plane which they used to transport emergency cases to the hospital from the outlying areas in Iraq. M. F. Seitz wrote, "It will not be long before the name Dar El Salam Hospital will be known throughout all Iraq. We have already had patients flown in from Mosul."¹²

Patients began to publicly express their gratitude. An article appeared in Baghdad's *Iraq Times* on September 16, 1949, in which a staff reporter described in detail the up-to-date facilities, complete with operating rooms, laboratory, pharmacy, and X-ray facilities. The exceptionally trained medical staff of 40 included locals as well as people from the United States and Europe.¹³ Around the same time a Baghdad newspaper, *Al Akhbar*, printed a letter from Kamel Ne'metallah Nazo who expressed thanks for the service his sister, Regina, received there while undergoing a serious operation.¹⁴

Recently I took my sister, Regina, to this hospital to undergo a serious operation. This was performed by the expert Dr. Joseph Saaty assisted by his wife who is a surgery nurse and the nurses Miss Voth and Miss Ruth and the probationary nurses Miss Stella and Miss Bana and Miss Camille and others. Now that the operation has proved completely successful, I feel compelled in justice and equity to praise the able surgeon, Dr. Saaty, and the nurses mentioned above, and to thank them all for their outstanding skill and special care. May God give them success in their service for humanity.¹⁵

Expansion

Towards the end of 1949, the time had arrived to make a final decision regarding a permanent location for the hospital. F. Brennwald, one of the auditors of the General Conference, met with the members of the hospital board and together they visited several plots of land. They decided upon a plot of about 35,000 square meters which was located in the suburbs of New Baghdad. This site was in a premium location and on the main highway toward Khanakin and Tehran.¹⁶

An agreement was signed with the Iraq government for a 90-year lease of this land, with the understanding that a hospital would be built there within three years from the date of the signing of the contract.¹⁷

Plans were immediately drawn up for a 50-bed, two-story, modern structure with the ability to add a third story if needed. Space was also allotted to include a large hydrotherapy department and a call was placed for a couple who was trained in physical therapy to join the staff.¹⁸ Other doctors from America were soon to follow: Dr. Paul Yingling, an eye, ear, nose, and throat doctor, and Dr. Milena Simeckova, an OBGYN with advanced training.¹⁹

In addition to the hospital, a School of Nursing had been established in 1946. In 1951 five girls graduated from the first class and all were employed at the hospital. Patients were attracted to the hospital because of the excellent care they received from these well-trained Christian nurses. K. H. Phil wrote in *The Middle East Messenger*: "The local government officials look with favor upon this branch of our work, and they are willing to assist us in every way possible to enlarge the enrollment of the nurses' training school."²⁰

A local Iraqi nurse, Suhaila Naboud, remembers being a nurse in both the old and new hospitals. She said in an interview, "There was a total of 4 or 5 American nurses, 4 Iraqi nurses, 1 Egyptian nurse and 1 Lebanese nurse during the beginning stages of the hospital opening."²¹

Move to the New Location

After many delays, by June 1954, most of the construction for the new hospital building had finally been completed, along with several homes for the workers and a nurses' dormitory.²² M. V. Jacobson, business manager of the newly named Dar El Salam Hospital, reported that the hospital had a bed capacity of about 85 patients.²³

Our medical work in Baghdad is proving a most effective means of contact with people of all classes, including members of the royal family. All have received treatment at the hands of our hospital workers.²⁴

The dedication of the hospital took place on November 27, 1954. Doctor T. R. Flaiz, the medical secretary of the General Conference, gave the dedicatory sermon. Reinforcing Jacobson's words regarding the hospital as the most effective means of contact with the people, he challenged the administration and staff to ponder also upon the purpose of the dedication that day. "Was it to high class surgery or the practise of good medicine or to take care of the poor? Or like the temple that was dedicated during the time of Solomon so that the people of the earth might know the Lord God, was the purpose to be how will the people know the Lord God in our

hospital?"²⁵

Flaiz emphasized that the people would come to know the Lord God by watching our doctors and nurses work, and by seeing how sympathetic our hospital personnel are when these people come here and meet the workers in the different departments of the hospital.²⁶

Progress

Over the next three years the medical program of the hospital continued its progress. New equipment was added and a well-trained radiologist was brought in to help in the diagnosis and treatment of patients. Furniture was also added for the comfort of patients in their rooms and staff in their work.²⁷

The School of Nursing, under the leadership of Miss Evangeline Voth, also continued to make progress. By the middle of 1957, there were twelve young ladies in the nursing school. One is a senior and the rest are first year students. There are three students from Jordan, two from Iraq, two from Lebanon, two from Syria, one from Egypt and one from Persia, all loyally united in Christian Medical Ministry. We know that the entire Middle East field will benefit from the service these young ladies will be rendering to our medical missionary program.²⁸

For many of the Iraqi citizens, the hospital was the first contact they had with Christians and with the work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.²⁹ By December 1957, they had a full-time chaplain and a young female Iraqi Bible worker who were actively involved with the patients, leading to many enjoyable and profitable visits with the families.³⁰

Elder Wayne Olson held evangelistic meetings on Sunday nights during the winter of 1957-1958, and all staff members were involved. People from many different faiths, backgrounds, and nationalities attended, with some sessions having more than 100 people in attendance.³¹

Personnel from Europe and the U.S. working for their governments as well as in the oil industry or other industries had become well acquainted with the Dar El Salam Hospital.

After treatment, we invite them to our chapel, which is only across the street. This is done by personal contact and attractive posters in the hospital lobby. Most of the ambulatory patients attend our services in the chapel on Friday evening, Sabbath and nights.³²

New Government Leads to Close of Hospital

The hospital soon earned a reputation for providing the best medical service in the country. The influence of Dar El Salam hospital was felt throughout Iraq and surrounding countries. These "golden days" did not last long, however, because, under the new Iraqi government, by early 1959 there was a movement to nationalize all medical services and to rid the country of western influence.³³

Over the first few months of 1959 it became clear that the hospital would not be allowed to continue. All other Christian institutions in the country had been closed, and pressure on Dar El Salam finally led to its closing the first week of June.³⁴ Although the government recognized the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Iraq, all international staff were asked to exit.³⁵ Deportation orders came for all American personnel and one family from a neighboring country. The staff was given just a few days to pack their belongings and leave.³⁶ Some of the personnel were reassigned to the hospital in Benghazi, Libya, some to other divisions, and a few returned to their homelands. Robert E Osborn writes in the *Review and Herald* that

*"All departed from Iraq with the feeling that the Dar El Salam Hospital has left a tremendous influence on the thousands of persons who have come through the open gate to the hospital proper, through the entrance to the clinic established to help the poor and needy, or into the chapel which was used regularly for church and evangelistic services."*³⁷

Negotiations with the General Conference took about two months and a sizeable portion of the net denominational capital investment was recovered.³⁸ The hospital was reopened near the end of July 1959 under government management and with doctors from Eastern Europe. It was affiliated with the presidential hospital and operated for many years under the name "Al Salam Hospital."

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