

A Tale Of Two Cities

From Baghdad to Seattle

By JOHN KINMONTH



Aida Kouyoumjian often refers to herself as “triple A”—Armenian by birth, Arabic by education and American by choice.

B

orn and raised in Baghdad before the Iraqi capital became a fixture on the nightly news, this energetic Bellevue Club member recalls an idyllic childhood as an Armenian Christian under the constitutional monarchy in the Islamic kingdom of Iraq.

“My best friends were Sunni and Shiite Muslims, Jewish, Armenian, Chaldean and Assyrian,” she says. “Socially, we went dancing together, played sports together.” She rode a bicycle, wore shorts, played tennis, swam in the pool and went to the movies—a lot.

“American influence was huge when I was growing up—my favorite movie was Tyrone Power in ‘Blood and Sand,’” she says. “I just loved Betty Grable, Gregory Peck, Clark Gable, Vivien Leigh, all the actors.

“Of course, that’s why I wanted to come to America,” she says. “My dad couldn’t afford to send me, so I applied for a Fulbright scholarship.

“Twice, the time came and went and I didn’t get it,” she says. “The third time I heard other people got it, including a classmate who wasn’t as smart as me, so I went to the director. He looked at the application and said, ‘aha, you’ve applied to become an architect.’

“I said, ‘so what?’ He leaned forward and asked ‘how many Iraqis do you think will trust a woman architect?’ I asked him what would the Iraqis trust. He crossed off architect and wrote English teacher.”

In 1952, Aida came to the United States to study English literature at the University of Washington. As part of the Fulbright program, she lived at the Delta Zeta sorority house. Unlike many, the cultural adjustment from Baghdad to Seattle was a relatively smooth one for Aida.

“It wasn’t that hard, surprisingly, maybe because I was so enamored with it,” she says. Adjusting her sweet tooth was a different story.

“We hardly ate dessert in Iraq. It’s all fruit except on very special occasions, but here every meal had a dessert,” she says. “In one year, I put on 20 pounds.”

LOVER OF FOREIGNERS

“While I was at the University of Washington there was a coup d’état



in Iraq,” she says. “The regime changed and my dad said don’t come back.”

Aida married her boyfriend at the time, who was the brother of one of her sorority sisters. They raised three boys and she started teaching in the Mercer Island School District when her children were old enough to attend school. Later, she worked as an administrator with the Issaquah School District as the coordinator for their English as a Second Language (ESL) programs.

“We got our first Vietnamese student in 1978,” she says proudly. “I learned about the world through my students.”

Now retired from public schools, Aida is anything but bored. She is a frequent guest lecturer at Bellevue College on issues ranging from the Armenian genocide to growing up in Baghdad. In the fall, she will be teaching an eight-week class at the college about Iraq. She is also a writer, recently receiving a first place award from the Washington Press Association for an article published in the Seattle Times about her mother’s survival of the Armenian genocide by Turkey’s Ottoman government during World War I.

Out of their entire extended family, only her mother and aunt survived the systematic killings and three-year forced march into the Mesopotamian desert. If it wasn’t for a caravan of kindly Bedouin Arabs that rescued her and eventually took her to an orphanage in Iraq, her mother would have shared the same fate as the rest of her family and countless other Armenians.

“MY NICKNAME GROWING UP WAS O’DAAR-A-MOLE—LOVER OF FOREIGNERS.”

“Every Armenian has been scarred by the genocide, you can’t find one who hasn’t,” she says. “I heard about my mom’s and dad’s experience as a little girl. These stories were part of our lullabies.” Aida has finished a 300-page manuscript on her mother’s journey, for which she’s currently courting publishers.

After retiring from Issaquah, Aida fulfilled a lifelong dream to visit her ethnic homeland for the first time. In 1997, the United States Department of Agriculture sent her to Armenia for a year to teach English to Armenians as part of the Armenia Development Project, an effort to help ease the transition of the former Soviet republic to a free market economy.

“It was the best career experience of my life. The people there were so eager to learn,” she says.

Aida’s travels have been no surprise to those she grew up with in Baghdad.

“My nickname growing up was o’daar-a-mole—lover of foreigners,” she says.

5 Reflections

FAVORITE BOOK:

“Gone with the Wind”—I read the book after I saw the movie, and I saw the movie about 10 times.

FAVORITE FOOD:

Eggplant, sizzling, fried, stewed, stuffed—there are so many ways of preparing it. Unfortunately, none of my children like it.

BEST ADVICE:

Respect the elderly—they have sacrificed so much for the sake of the youth.

HERO/GREATEST INFLUENCE:

Jesus

FAVORITE ACTIVITY AT THE CLUB:

Swimming