

April 21, 2003

Iraqis Confront Grim Memories

By DEXTER FILKINS

BAGHDAD, Iraq, April 20 — Mr. al-Masawi, a 43-year-old jeweler, came back to the place of his torture.

He drove into the parking lot of Al Hakemiya, an Iraqi interrogation center in the capital here, stepped from his car and ran his hands along its walls. He went to the room where his arms had been nearly wrenched from their sockets. To the place where he had been hung from the ceiling. To the basement where his body had jolted and jumped to currents of electricity.

"Here it is," Mr. Masawi said, standing before a small darkened room with a heavy metal door. "My cell. No. 36."

Mr. Masawi, who declined to give his first name, is one among thousands of Iraqis who suffered the most medieval punishments at the hands of Saddam Hussein's henchmen, and Al Hakemiya is but one of the many places where the suffering took place.

Across the country, the collapse of the Hussein government and the unmasking of intelligence service centers like Al Hakemiya is bringing out scores of people like Mr. Masawi, who have returned in freedom to the places of their captivity. They are engaging in a great national catharsis, confronting the black heart of Mr. Hussein's rule and proclaiming its depravity for everyone to see.

The spectacle is both ghoulish and affirming, men reliving the moments of their degradation and quieting storms within themselves.

"They did humiliating things to me," said Mr. Masawi after viewing his cell during the visit on Saturday. "I needed to come and see the place."

By all accounts, Al Hakemiya was a way station, a place where suspects were worked over and squeezed for information, and sometimes for cash, and then moved to more permanent quarters. Mr. Masawi, for instance, spent five months here after being arrested on what he says were trumped-up smuggling charges. He was then shipped off to another Baghdad prison, where he spent five years before being released last fall.

Yet for all the grim business that was conducted here, Al Hakemiya exudes an aura of bureaucracy. From the outside, it is squat and brown, indistinguishable from the buildings nearby. Inside, its individual offices seem as benign as those of an insurance adjuster.

One must look closer. Scattered about the floor is official stationery that says Iraqi Intelligence Service with its signature logo, a large, black-winged eagle. In one room, there is a small photograph of an unhappy-looking man, with a white beard and striped shirt, and a large placard bearing his prisoner number: 792.

Upstairs, accessible by a back stairway only, are about 100 individual cells, dark and windowless, stinking of urine. In one sits a plate of half-eaten food, biscuits and rice, still resting on a green plastic tray. At the end of a hallway lies a pile of bindings and blindfolds.

An elevator, the only one in the place, leads to the basement and more cells. There are shackles in one room, long cables in another. On another floor there is a small operating room, where some former prisoners said doctors harvested the organs of those who did not survive.

Finally, out back, stand three portable morgues, metal buildings the size of tool sheds, with freezer units attached. Inside one are six aluminum trays, each the length of a body.

In the looted chaos of the building, with desks overturned and windows smashed, it seemed impossible to piece together a history here. What clarity remained was provided by the memories.

Mr. Masawi's seemed a typical case, a convoluted tale that mixed extortion and brutality, with much unexplained. Mr. Masawi spoke in a jittery voice, like many of those who visited here, and gave a simple explanation for declining to provide his first name.

"I have enemies," he said.

In the summer of 1997, Mr. Masawi said, he was arrested for illegally shipping gold out of the country. It was a false charge, he said, based on an accusation made by an old rival.

On the night of his arrest, Mr. Masawi said, he was brought here, blindfolded and then repeatedly beaten. He spent three months in solitary confinement, in a room, he said, that was painted red. Men on the other side of his blindfold interrogated him about his business practices, tortured him with electricity and asked him to sign a confession.

"I did not see their faces, but I will never forget the sound of their voices," he said.

Until the end, there had been no accusation of political activity; indeed, given the charge, Mr. Masawi wondered why he had been brought to an intelligence center at all. When he refused to sign the confession, he said, things began to change.

"They told me that if I did not confess to smuggling, then they would accuse me of organizing an antigovernment group," he said. "That charge would be more severe. So I signed."

Mr. Masawi, like many of the former prisoners who have returned here, talked little about his moments of most excruciating pain.

But others spoke through their expressions. One man put his hands behind his back and lifted them upward — hung from the ceiling, he suggested, in an especially painful way. Another man took his fingers, meant to stand for electrical wires, and placed them on his genitals.

"Being here gives me a doomed feeling," Mr. Masawi said.

At one point along the way, Mr. Masawi said, his predicament took another unexpected turn. His interrogators asked him for money.

"They told me if I paid them a bribe, they would let me go," he said.

Mr. Masawi's claim was echoed many times by other returnees here, and by some of the documents left behind. The picture that emerged of the intelligence service here was of a kind of sadistic shakedown operation, where agents took prisoners to satisfy their masters but extracted money to satisfy themselves.

Other men returning here said the interrogators had gone even further, demanding sex with female relatives when no money could be paid. In most cases, the prisoners said, bribes were paid, women were offered, but the prisoner remained in jail.

"My family paid them everything we had, \$25,000, and still they did not release me," Mr. Masawi said.

Documents left behind suggest that the interrogation center was a money-making enterprise. One stack of documents, for instance, included receipts for Iraqi dinars received from a man named Majed Jawad. One of them read, "Receipt of amounts collected for the government." Another document detailed the stocks issued in the name of an Iraqi petroleum company owned by the same man.

Mr. Masawi said he finally left prison for good last October, during an amnesty declared by Mr. Hussein. Mr. Masawi returned not only to look at Al Hakemiya as a free man, but also as one seeking revenge. He said he had a good idea of the identity of the person who made the accusation to the police, but he wanted to sift through the files to make sure. So far, he said, he had found nothing.

Others returning here came looking for answers of another sort. One man, a veterinarian named Ahmed Jabbar, came seeking information that might reveal the fate of seven of his cousins, all disappeared.

"One of them is Hassan, on my mother's side," Dr. Jabbar said. "One of them is Jaffar."

Another man, who called himself Abu Abbas, came looking for the man who tortured him.

"When I see him, I'll know what to do with him," he said.

So strong is the pull of Al Hakemiya that it has drawn not only the jailed back to its corridors, but also the jailers.

Standing amid the ransacked ruins of the place, Imad Muhammad, a prison guard supervisor in the 1990's, approached a visitor and offered his help.

"Would you like to see where the prisoners were tortured?"