

Members of the Kurdistan Medical and Scientific Federation (KMSF)

Good afternoon and thank you for your kind invitation to this meeting to speak about my brother Dr Rafid Subhi Adib Baban who died on 22nd December 2010.

I will start with a brief history of our family:

My father Adib Arif, my mother Bahya Fathulla are both Kurdish from Sulaimania. My brothers are Hamid, who died in Baghdad in 1989, and Rafid. My sister is Samira Baban who graduated to become a doctor. I, myself, am a graduate of the College of Commerce and Economics in Baghdad and then worked at the Central Bank of Iraq.

My brother Rafid was always first in his studies. When he graduated from secondary school, he was ranked fifth in Iraq. He was genuinely multi-talented. He was an accomplished painter, horseback rider and had a keen interest in and knowledge of classical music. Our family's limited resources meant that he had to rely on a bursary from the Iraqi Ministry of Defence. This allowed him to study medicine which also provided him with accommodation and a small salary.

In January 1948 during the uprising (Al Wathba) to overturn the British/Iraqi Portsmouth Treaty (in which students played a major part), Rafid was in his fourth year of medical college and represented his class in the Student's Union. He wrote a letter, jointly with his friend Farooq Perto, to the Dean of the College condemning the use of live ammunition by the police against the student demonstrators which caused the death of one student. Their punishment was to be dismissed from College for one year in 1949.

He was awarded both the surgery and gynaecology prizes when he returned, then graduated from the Medical College. This meant he was eligible for a grant to further his studies in the UK. He was granted Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons (FRCS) in 1956. In the same year he married his wife Christel and returned to Iraq. Their first child, Layla, was born in 1957. In 1960, their son Delair was born. He was soon made Senior Surgeon at the Rashid Military Hospital.

After the fascist Baathist regime came to power on the 8th February 1963, he was arrested and subjected to severe torture including the deliberate breaking of his arms to prevent him from practicing further. It took my late father four months to ascertain where he was detained (Prison 1). His fellow detainees were the ministers in Abdul Karim Kassim's cabinet, many high-ranking officers in the army, doctors, engineers and lawyers.

Once released, Rafid gave us harrowing accounts of his detention, describing a small room in prison which housed fifty seven prisoners. They all had to sleep standing upright. Their rations were no more than dry bread twice a day. He also told us how, just a few days short of Abdul Salam Arif's coup-d'etat of 18 November 1963 to overthrow the Baath Party, the Prison Governor Hazem Al Ahmar sent for him. Rafid expected further maltreatment. To his surprise, he was wrong. The Governor greeted Rafid with great welcome and respect and after a short while, presented him his own X-rays which showed that stones were present in his kidneys that required surgery. My brother diagnosed this and informed the Governor that surgery was needed. The Governor replied: "I know that. But I want you to do the operation!" My brother was surprised: "How? I am a prisoner and there are many other

surgeons who can operate.” The Governor’s answer was that he would trust his life with no one else. “You are the best.” He promised my brother to use his influence to release him from prison. A few days later, however, the Governor committed suicide, afraid of being captured, as he faced the tanks.

Early on the morning of the 3rd July 1963 the Martyr Hassan Alsaree and some brave comrades tried to free the detainees from prison without success because one of his comrades lost his nerve. They were captured and executed immediately. Later that evening, the prisoners, perhaps one thousand in number, were called up and forced together, with their hands tied behind their backs. They were taken to a Baghdad railway station and pushed into a cargo train. The decks of windowless carriages were asphalted. The doors were then locked. The journey of The Train of Death had begun.

The driver of the train had no knowledge of his human cargo. His instructions were to drive slowly and to stop in as many stations as possible. When he realised that his cargo were the prisoners he started to drive at maximum speed. He stopped and opened the doors in Simawa. The prisoners had mostly fainted in their enclosures in the 50° July heat. They were all dehydrated. The news of the cargo of the train had already reached the people of Simawa who rushed with food, fruits and blocks of ice to the station. My brother and other doctors started shouting “We want salt! Don’t drink water before taking salt!” Then they doused the prisoners’ heads with water. Many lives were saved, but sadly the prisoner Yahya Nadir died later in hospital. My brother, much later, was persuaded to write an article about the Train of Death in Al Majrasha newspaper in London in July 1993.

Several doctors were on the train, and they included:

Dr Abdul Salam Balata

Dr Abdul Samad Noaman

Dr Kutaiba AlSheikh Nouri (our brother in law)

Dr Said Aziz

Dr Mohammad Hassan Smaisim

The dentist Fadhil Al Tai.

Rafid was subsequently sentenced to two years in prison but he served more than that. Prisoners were habitually not released even if they had served their time. But the authorities were then forced to release the prisoners after an international outcry. In 1966 he was released from Al Hilla Prison. He had lost 18 kilograms in weight. It was a further eight months until he was granted a licence to practice and he then opened his private clinic. His daughter Tania was born in 1967. She is now a practicing consultant doctor.

In early 1973, his daughter Layla was diagnosed with cancer. Rafid and Christel left for the UK to oversee her treatment. This meant that he had to leave everything behind in Baghdad and re-start a professional life in the UK. Sadly, Layla died in 1978. Layla’s death affected my brother gravely. He went into depression and his health deteriorated. He had two major open heart surgeries, but he kept working hard. He became a consultant surgeon in Urology in Yorkshire. He gained great respect in the community and his retirement ceremony was attended by very senior fellow professionals as well as close friends and family.

But his suffering did not end. His wife Christel developed cancer. He supported her magnificently for seven years but she, too, sadly passed away in 2003.

Rafid's life was a tragic one. He lost friends and comrades; his professional life (excellent though he was) was disrupted repeatedly; he was forced to leave his beloved country to care for his daughter whom he then lost, and he finally saw his life partner lose her battle, thus spending the last seven year of his life a lonely man with sad memories.

When his death was announced in December 2010, the family were overwhelmed with expressions of sympathy, support and appreciation. Many articles were written about him remembering his humanity and professionalism.

The family is planning a celebration of his life on 2nd July 2011. The venue is:

Ramada London Hotel
Ealing Common
London W5 3HN
6pm-9pm.
All are welcome!

The family wish to record their immense gratitude to his friends and colleagues in Yorkshire who were with him until the end.

Mubejel Baban
12th March 2011