

Former inmates recall horror of Iraqi prisons

By John Daniszewski=(c) 1998, Los Angeles Times

AMMAN, Jordan -- Ammar Shehab Dein shudders at the memory of the "meals" served up at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad.

A "meal" is what guards there called the prison's periodic mass executions. "We have a meal tomorrow," they would taunt the terrified inmates.

During the last 20 days in December, said Shehab Dein, there were at least three "meals" in his section alone. Each time, an officer would stand in front of the two-story cell-block and read off the names of those who were to die.

The doomed men then would have their hands tied behind their backs and be led away -- crying, shouting "Allahu Akbar" ("God is great") and, in some cases, cursing the name of Saddam Hussein.

Later, other inmates would be ordered into the execution chamber to clean up.

As it was described to Shehab Dein, the chamber was "primitive," ropes suspended over 12 wells. Bound prisoners would be put into a noose and then pushed to their deaths, he said. Doctors were present mainly to determine if the prisoners were dead.

Shehab Dein, a 27-year-old Jordanian trader who was imprisoned last year, is not only a rare survivor of the Iraqi leader's Death Row. In interviews with the Los Angeles Times, he is also the first released inmate of Abu Ghraib prison to publicly corroborate and add detail to accounts that emerged at the end of 1997 of a series of executions carried out against hundreds or even thousands of political prisoners and common criminals in Iraq.

At the time, U.S. State Department spokesman James Foley called the mass execution reports "horrific" and said they would constitute "a gross violation of human rights" if true.

Shehab Dein's statements were supported by a second released in-

mate, a 31-year-old Jordanian businessman who said he was tortured shortly after his 1995 arrest and fears being identified by name.

"The last weeks before Ramadan, we heard (that) about 500 people were killed.... We used to hear them (executions) every day," the businessman said.

Both men were interviewed in Amman days after their Jan. 21 release in a surprise amnesty, announced by Hussein, for all Jordanian prisoners. (Hussein declared a further amnesty Feb. 5 for all nationals of Arab countries, apparently a goodwill gesture hours after meeting with the secretary-general of the Arab League.)

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According to Iraqi opposition sources in Jordan, Britain and the United States, Hussein's regime executed 800 to 1,200 inmates at the Abu Ghraib and the Radwaniyah prisons, both near Baghdad, beginning Nov. 20 and lasting into December.

After the State Department raised the issue Jan. 1, the Iraqi Information Ministry angrily denied the accusations, calling them another example of the "hostile propaganda" of Iraq's opponents.

With the world focused on Iraq's standoff with the United States and the United Nations over access to disputed sites by arms inspectors, the allegations have elicited relatively little attention.

But the experiences of the two Jordanians, who went to Iraq voluntarily for business and say they once were sympathetic to Hussein, nevertheless are a reminder of the unpredictable

Lithuania has ties to the midwest -- its President-Elect

By Judy Pasternak=(c) 1998, Los Angeles Times

HINSDALE, Ill. -- Valdas V. Adamkus soon will be an American president.

His home stands on an oak-studded hill, at the end of a private drive, in the midsection of the United States.

Across the street, a neighbor flies a huge Stars and Stripes.

He retired last year from a high-ranking post in the federal government, which provides him with a pension worth roughly two times the salary of his new job.

And he holds a U.S. passport.

Adamkus plans to retain dual citizenship even as he takes the helm of a country that abuts the Baltic Sea: Lithuania, a former piece of the now-broken Soviet Union. It is his native land-- the land he fled more than 50 years ago, when the Soviets invaded at the end of World War II.

In October, he successfully challenged Lithuania's residency requirement for presidential candidates. Then, with the help of votes from other Lithuanians abroad, he narrowly edged a reformed communist

brutality taking place inside Iraq.

"If I had a choice between dying and going back to Iraq, I would prefer to die," said the businessman, who declined to discuss details of his torture except to say: "Execution was something I wanted."

Since mid-December, opposition groups have been circulating accounts of the executions, which they said were ordered Nov. 19 by Hussein's powerful younger son, Qusai, and underscore his pre-eminent role in the spheres of "security and repression," in the words of one opposition newsletter.

The Iraqi National Congress, a U.S.-backed anti-Hussein group, has compiled lists naming 160 of the victims.

It said one brother of an executed Iraqi Kurd had to comb through 12 cold-storage rooms containing 30 bodies apiece before he was able to find his sibling and claim the remains. The opposition Iraqi Communist Party, meanwhile, said that apparently 109 of its followers were killed in one

in the contest for a five-year term as head of state. "I still can't believe it," he said.

After his inauguration later this month, the 71-year-old Adamkus will begin work in a 14th century palace in Vilnius, the capital. Previous tenants include Czar Alexander I and Napoleon.

Adamkus left for Lithuania late last month after an 11-day trip home that became a frenzied series of activities. He met with Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley and Illinois Gov. Jim Edgar, attended a reception in his honor given by fellow members of Chicago's Union League Club, made a farewell visit to the Midwest office of the Environmental Protection Agency (where he was regional administrator) and finally -- on the very last evening -- began "packing my suits and shirts."

He plans to keep his wood-and-brick contemporary house here. Two nephews and his 94-year-old mother-in-law will live in it. His wife, Alma, Lithuania's new first lady, "will be coming back three or four times a year," Adamkus said.

Holding citizenship in both coun-

tries is permitted constitutionally. Still, Adamkus doesn't anticipate exercising his right to vote for his U.S. counterpart in Washington. His heart and mind are rooted now in Lithuania, he said, and always have been.

"I am not a newcomer," he said in English that remains accented despite 50 years of residency here. "I am not a carpetbagger."

He published an anti-German newspaper as a youth during the Nazi occupation of Lithuania and was incarcerated in a camp for displaced persons. He stayed active in the emigre community here.

He regained his Lithuanian citizenship in 1992, one year after the Soviet Union was formally dissolved. He traveled there often on vacation.

Yet he realizes that the seeds of his victory lie in his American identity and Lithuania's desire to move closer to the West.

"I am the product of a Western society and a Western culture. I believe strongly in democratic principles," he said. "This is what gives me the strength and the confidence that after five years, I will have at least put the country in the right direction."

Dein's assets as a reward from the Iraqi regime.

From Dec. 10 until Dec. 30, when executions were stopped in observance of the start of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month, Shehab Dein said, he saw or heard a total of 56 men dragged away.

None ever returned to his section, which housed more than 1,000 people who had been sentenced to death for various crimes ranging from corruption to theft to murder.

Prisoners from other sections, including political prisoners and those containing people sentenced to long prison terms but not death, were being executed daily, he said he believes. Among those killed was a friend that Shehab Dein had made earlier at the Public Security Department cells, a likable would-be counterfeiter whom he knew as "Eyad the Palestinian."

Eyad had been sentenced because he and some others were planning to counterfeit money, a scheme that never even got off the ground.

His first order of business is to attack deep-rooted corruption, "to restore the confidence of the people and get their respect so that we can be trusted among free nations." He wants to help Lithuania move closer to NATO and European Union membership -- the country is now on the back burner as far as those groups are concerned.

Adamkus gained a measure of fame when he testified to Congress in 1983 that top EPA officials in Washington changed a report that accused Dow Chemical Co. of polluting Michigan streams with the toxic chemical dioxin. EPA administrator Anne Burford was later forced to resign.

Two years later, at the White House, President Reagan presented him with the government's highest award for a civil servant, the Distinguished Executive Presidential Rank.

But the closest he got to elective office was a failed run for the Metropolitan Sanitary District Commission in Chicago.

He will miss, he said, his friends, his former co-workers, golf and the Chicago Bulls. And he will miss his low-key life.

"It was not a crime worthy of death," his friend said.

Shehab Dein said he was in a 5-foot-square cell with three other condemned men. They took turns sleeping. But that was "paradise" compared to other cells of the same dimensions packed with seven or eight prisoners.

He said he was sentenced to die based on a confession he never made and upon the written testimony of two "witnesses" whom he had never met and who were not even at his trial.

Iraq executed four Jordanian students Dec. 9 for smuggling, despite repeated entreaties from Jordan's King Hussein that they be spared.

Shehab Dein, who had been condemned Dec. 7, said he believed that he surely would be the next to die. But he got a reprieve when Saddam Hussein suddenly ordered all Jordanians in his prison let go, apparently to mollify Jordanian anger.

"I thought I was dead," Shehab Dein murmured, recalling the moment he learned that he would escape the noose. "But I was reborn."

Rifts wide as Israel turns 50

By Lee Hockstader=(c) 1998, The Washington Post

JERUSALEM -- Although the circumstances -- and threats -- today are drastically different from those at Israel's perilous birth 50 years ago, the current storm clouds recall the remark of David Ben-Gurion, the state's founding prime minister, who said upon leading Israel to statehood in 1948, "I feel no gaiety in me, only deep anxiety."

Take the case of Ornan Yekutieli. He has no particular plans to celebrate the anniversary this spring. He'll be too busy fighting what he considers a war for the nation's soul.

Or take Avner Shem-Tov. He won't be attending the carnivals, parades and other festivities planned for the anniversary. He'd prefer the government mark the date by cutting taxes.

In other respects, the two men -- both of them native Israelis in early middle-age -- have little in common. Each has a vision of how society should work that seems to exclude the other's.

Unusual for this nation of mostly recent immigrants, Yekutieli is that rare Israeli whose European Jewish forebears have been here for six generations. He is also secular to the point of atheism and fed up with what he sees as the encroachments of ultra-Orthodox Judaism in Israeli life.

Having spent his twenties and early thirties working with Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, Yekutieli, now a Jerusalem city council member in his early forties, has lately switched causes. Last year, he founded a movement called Free Nation to resist the inroads that ultra-Orthodox Jews, who now control a

fraction of the seats in parliament, are making among Israel's large -- and in many places dominant -- community of secular Jews.

It is a battle that touches commonplace aspects of daily life, such as whether some shops and malls may open on the Sabbath. And it also raises questions of national identity, such as who is considered a Jew in Israel and whether any strand of Judaism but the ultra-Orthodox may perform conversions in the country. The latter question in particular has sparked nasty and highly personal attacks between ultra-Orthodox Jews and those who practice less restrictive forms of worship.

"When Israel had its 20th birthday when I was just a kid, it had all the best reasons in the world to celebrate," Yekutieli said. "It had achieved such industrial and economic and artistic development. It had become a full-grown country, absorbing probably five times as many people as there were at the time of the war of independence (in 1948), and it did an incredible job ..."

"Now, when we're reaching 50, Israel is in so many bad turning points that the reason for its liberation is actually fading. I'd say now we've taken a huge step backward, becoming more and more medieval in our ways, anti-cultural, racist, chauvinist. In Jerusalem, we've taken a big step toward (becoming like) Tehran."

Yekutieli's view that Israel is faced with the threat of religious coercion is common among secular Jews. But his vision of a live-and-let-live Israel is radically at odds with the view of Israeli Jews like Shem-Tov, a member of Shas, the powerful ultra-Orthodox party in Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu's coalition government.

Shem-Tov, whose family came to Israel from Central Asia, joined Shas as a party worker at its founding a decade ago. Like many Israeli Jews of non-European roots, he had felt like an outsider and second-class citizen, firmly barred from the country's corridors of power.

In Shas, he found a party for have-nots that has used the language of racial grievance to challenge the status quo and advance its agenda. Last week, Shas lashed out at Israel's High Court of Justice, accusing it of elitism and racism against Jews of non-European origin.

Shem-Tov also was attracted by the Shas party's vision of what Israel would become -- strictly observant of the Torah and Jewish law governing the preparation of food, the Sabbath, relations between men and women and the procedures on conversion to Judaism.

"If we'd all go back to what we were two or three generations ago, we'd solve these problems in society," said Shem-Tov, who is in his thirties. "We should look at how our grandfathers all observed the Sabbath. There are certain red lines you cannot cross."

To Shem-Tov, many of Israel's Jews are hardly Jews at all, particularly residents of insidiously secular Tel Aviv and the nearly 1 million recent immigrants from the former Soviet states, most of whom are largely ignorant of Judaism. "With God's help, I hope my daughter will not marry one," he said. "I hope they'll open their eyes and realize they've arrived in the land of Israel, not in Uganda."

Army Sergeant Tells of Years of Rebuffing McKinney's Sexual Demands

By Bill McAllister=(c) 1998, The Washington Post

One of the first women to serve in the Army's elite Old Guard testified Monday that the service's top enlisted man repeatedly demanded sex from her, assaulting her in his locked Pentagon office on a Sunday afternoon and later on a public path near the Lincoln Memorial.

Staff Sgt. Christine Fetrow said she resisted the embraces of Sgt. Maj. Gene C. McKinney but feared the sergeant major of the Army would "ruin my career" in retaliation. McKinney pursued her for four years, Fetrow said, once cautioning her: "I'm a very powerful man that makes things happen -- good and bad."

Fetrow was the first of an expected 50 witnesses to testify against McKinney in a court-martial. If convicted, he could face 55 years in prison and be stripped of his rank and retirement benefits. The trial, expected to last four to five weeks at Fort Belvoir in Fairfax County, Va., could provide a window on what some studies have said is widespread sexual harassment of women in the military.

McKinney, 47, who was removed from his Pentagon job in October, is charged with 19 counts of harassing and assaulting six different military women. Defense lawyers have said that none of the witnesses is more important than Fetrow, a military police officer who was placed in a clas-

sified witness protection program after she agreed to testify.

The prosecutors are expected to introduce Tuesday a tape recording of a telephone conversation between McKinney and Fetrow. In the tape, played before the presiding judge Monday, McKinney is heard telling Fetrow to tell investigators their conversations were about her military career. "That's all they need to know," McKinney told Fetrow.

Ten of the 19 counts deal with Fetrow, who said McKinney began to pursue her in 1994 when she was assigned to the ceremonial Old Guard unit at Fort Myer, Va., and met him at an Army convention in Washington. He was stationed in Europe at the time, but continued his pursuit after he assumed the top enlisted job at the Pentagon in July 1995, she said.

Earlier, defense and prosecution attorneys painted starkly different portraits of the man who rose from recruit to the Army's top enlisted job in 29 years. Military prosecutor Capt. Brian O. Dolan called McKinney "a Jekyll and Hyde," a charmer in public who was devoted to his military duty but in private would turn on women and demand sex.

Defense lawyer Lt. Col. James Gerstenlauer portrayed McKinney as a man wrongly accused by women who were unable to meet his high standards of military conduct and were eager to manipulate the military for favors. Picking through the 19 charges against the sergeant major, the

lawyer repeatedly told the jury -- four officers and four enlisted members -- that "the bottom line is that this didn't happen. The sergeant major is not guilty."

McKinney is a devoted soldier who has spent "29 years caring about the Army -- our Army," Gerstenlauer said. "He could be a hard man if he had to be," he said, but McKinney always lived by the credo of the Army's noncommissioned officers: that his soldiers came first.

The Army's case against McKinney amounts to six separate trials Gerstenlauer said, singling out each of the women who will testify against the sergeant major. They're coming forward with motives of "revenge, reward and deceit," all determined "to bring down a leader," he said.

Other witnesses came forward only under grants of immunity when they should in fact be subject to prosecution for their actions, Gerstenlauer said. The defense lawyer offered some of his harshest criticism for retired Army Sgt. Maj. Brenda Hoster, McKinney's former public affairs aide, who triggered the investigation with her complaints to the news media about McKinney. Gerstenlauer called Hoster a publicity seeker who hoped to become "the spokeswoman for the women in the military," a star witness on Capitol Hill who was attempting to hide some of her shortcomings as a speech writer.