

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

NAS-17  
The American School

3 Yishay St.  
Abu Tor  
Jerusalem, Israel  
August 10, 1986

Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
4 West Wheelock St.  
Hanover, New Hampshire, USA

Dear Peter,

It was a perfect night for a party. For weeks, almost everyone in the Israeli archaeological community had been looking forward to the Albright Institute's summer reception, one of the social highlights of the archaeological year. Several hundred invitations had been sent out to the major Israeli universities, to the other foreign archaeological institutions, and to the two dozen or so excavation camps scattered across the country. The few regrets received indicated that there would be a large turnout. And that fact in itself confirmed the Americans' standing as by far the most important of the foreign archaeological schools.

Within the open, wrought-iron gates facing Salah ed-Din Street, a line of low, candle-lit lanterns illuminated a path down the driveway toward the entrance of the stone mansion that has been the American School's headquarters since 1924. And inside, past the high-ceilinged corridor of offices, mailboxes, and library, the open doors to the inner courtyard revealed more candles and strings of bright, colored lights. The dignitaries of the American School stood there in a loose cluster, drinks in hand, ready to greet their professional colleagues.

The American School receptions are quite rightfully famous for their abundance in a city that is usually more concerned with religion and politics than with gracious hospitality. The 1986 party would be no exception; a full bar stocked with the best vodka, gin, bourbon, and scotch was set up in the courtyard and staffed with white-coated bartenders-- a lavish contrast to the customary paper cups of orange and grapefruit juice served at most of Jerusalem's professional and social gatherings.

The bar, though, was not the main attraction. The current director of the American School, Professor Sy Gitin, and his assistant director, Dr. Tom Levy, were determined to make this year's party especially memorable. A standard buffet seemed to them drably unimaginative, and earlier in the summer they had come up with several alternatives. Mexican food was rejected as being too complicated. Chinese food brought in from a local restaurant would probably be too expensive. But the idea they finally settled on had a true All-American flavor:

huge cartons of chocolate, vanilla, chocolate chip, and pistachio ice cream, and a selection of home-made hot fudge, butterscotch, strawberry, and plum sauces-- the ingredients for some of the most elaborate do-it-yourself sundaes that Jerusalem had ever seen.

\* \* \*

The W.F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research is not only the center of American archaeological activity in Israel, it is also a part of this country's archaeological history. Established in 1900 as "The American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem," it was initially just one of several competing institutions dedicated to staking a national claim on the Holy Land's antiquities in the waning days of Ottoman rule. But slowly, it gained ascendancy over the others. In the 1920's, its first long-term director, William Foxwell Albright of Johns Hopkins University (in whose memory the school is now officially named), transformed the school from a modest hostel for visiting American scholars to an international archaeological landmark.

The building itself, its enclosed courtyard, and surrounding gardens are vivid reminders of that earlier period of the American School's history. It was there in the shade of the cypresses and pine trees that the great British explorer W.M.F. Petrie-- who is regarded by many as the "father" of modern Middle Eastern archaeology-- found quiet refuge in the years before his death in 1942. And it was up the front steps of the school, in 1948, that the first of the Dead Sea Scrolls were brought by Father Butros Sowmy of the Syrian Orthodox Church soon after they had been obtained from the Ta'amireh bedouin.

These are just highlights of a long and distinguished existence at the forefront of archaeological research. The American School established its reputation during the turbulent period of the British Mandate by being a comfortable and open meeting place for scholars of all nationalities. Unburdened by the semi-official status of the British School of Archaeology (many of whose members filled governmental positions with the Mandatory Department of Antiquities), the American School was able to remain aloof from the academic jealousies and controversies that a privileged position can sometimes bring.

Today, the American School has little competition among the other foreign archaeological institutions that have maintained a presence in Jerusalem over the last half-century. The Centre de Recherches Française is just a small establishment. The Pontifical Biblical Institute, the Deutsches Evangelisches Institut, the Dominican École Biblique et Archeologique, the Franciscan Studium Biblicum, and the Swedish Theological Institute are now primarily centers for sectarian religious training rather than archaeology. And even the staff and the students of the British School, once so dominant in the archaeology of Palestine, now keep largely to themselves.

The present, high standing of the American School can, of course, be seen from a geo-political perspective. Among the first guests to enter the courtyard on the evening of the reception were Thomas Picker-

ing, the American ambassador to Israel, and Morris Draper, the American consul in Jerusalem. The next day, the two diplomats would join the entourage of visiting Vice President George Bush in a whirlwind of high-level meetings with Israeli leaders in an attempt to breathe some life into the moribund "peace process." Throughout the city, American flags had been hung along the main streets and public places. American diplomats-- and American archaeologists-- enjoy unprecedented prestige in Jerusalem these days.

\* \* \*

The guest list of the American School's annual reception was symptomatic of another social development, for there have been changes in the make-up of Jerusalem's archaeological community that transcend the shifting tides of international diplomacy. Gone are the days when foreign scholars-- Americans like all the rest-- restricted their contact with the natives to their need for manual labor or domestic help. Here in Israel, as in Jordan, Cyprus, Syria, and Egypt, the distribution of archaeological personnel, if not the money, has been altered. Every American expedition now includes a significant number of locally-trained specialists and field supervisors, many of whom were present to share the latest gossip, greet their American colleagues, and enjoy the ice cream sundaes.

The former lines of national origin and allegiance were visibly maintained only by the older, more established scholars who kept their distance and maintained their social caution, remembering the days when this courtyard, this institution, and archaeology in the Middle East in general had a different, colonial character. But the younger generation-- American, British, French, German, and Israeli, have no such burden of personal memories. For them (and for me), the American School has always been a reassuring rather than forbidding presence: a student/faculty club from some quiet American campus transplanted to the heart of the Middle East.

And that is perhaps why they all flocked there from the scattered excavation camps, from the more modest foreign institutions, and from the characterless archaeology departments of Israel's universities. An invitation to the American School's annual reception is a membership card to a club with a venerable tradition that can now be shared by a constantly widening archaeological community.

The American School does provide a center for scholars that is unconnected with specific religious or national claims. It does still stand apart from governmental authority and the sometimes coercive power that antiquities departments-- Ottoman, Jordanian, or Israeli-- are free to exercise. The stone mansion and the legends that cling to it like ivy may be part of archaeological history, but in its present incarnation, the American School is still one of Jerusalem's most vibrant centers of archaeological activity.

But the American School, like America itself in the Middle East, sometimes disappoints only because its reputation often leads too many

NAS-17

to expect too much. Trying to be all things to all people isn't easy, especially when expectations are so high.

"This party is great," one of the younger archaeologists remarked to me as he scooped into an enormous sundae, "but to tell you the truth, I would have preferred Chinese food."

Best Regards,

Neil

Received in Hanover 8/21/86