

YOAB BENJAMIN
(January 25, 1931 – May 26, 2000)
A Personal Remembrance

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I met Yoab Benjamin on a couple of brief occasions only; we lived a great distance apart. Therefore, I cannot call upon recollections personal to our lives. On the other hand, in my former capacity as JAAS English-language editor, I had the opportunity over the years to review a variety of his writings. I realize that mine was a limited exposure, because above all Yoab was a scholar, writer and teacher in his own mother tongue: he was also skilled in English. Yet my experience working with him from time to time enabled me to draw certain conclusions about the man.

Yoab belongs to what I consider a most select group of modern Assyrians. In and of itself, his attachment to his roots was not unique. But he had a dogged dedication to ferreting out his cultural heritage and to having it exposed to the rest of us. What's more, he had an impressive background for the task.

Modern Assyrian devotés, especially if they are immigrants from the Middle East, have generally received their training in a non-literary field. But Yoab's education was unique; he held a B.A. with Honors in English Language and Literature (University of Baghdad). In addition, in the 22 ensuing years when he taught English in Iraq, he continued to broaden his education, earning additional diplomas for his studies in phonetics and linguistics. When Yoab migrated to North America in his middle years, he continued to teach English to Assyrians (he was also a consultant to the Chicago Board of Education on the teaching of Assyrian in that city's public schools), and perhaps more importantly, to teach young Assyrians about their language and culture. In the 1980's, Yoab also worked as a Wycliffe Bible translator, further enriching his hold on Aramaic.

Like his brother Daniel Benjamin, the JAAS Assyrian-language editor of long-standing, Yoab had an unbound enthusiasm for the culture and history of his people, and through his work he amply demonstrated his readiness to exert efforts and to produce work that matched this loyalty. In my own dealings with Rabi Benjamin, I found him to be mild-mannered, courteous and, most notably, an indefatigable worker. I feel privileged to have been of slight assistance as editor in the publication of four of his articles in our Journal: "Assyrian Journalism: A 140-year experience" [VII:2]; "Abdisho and al-Hariri: A comparative study" [VIII;1]; "Assyrian rituals of life-cycle events" [IX:2]; and "Assyrians in Middle America" [X-2].

The demands of being an editor can sometimes dull the senses, but Yoab's submissions to JAAS always challenged our curiosity. I have no doubt he was similarly successful in what he published elsewhere, and I know for a fact how he was held in high esteem by his students. The circle of modern Assyrians who have devoted substantial efforts to scholarly reflection on their culture is a small one. Yoab was an important member of the scholarly circle in the Assyrian community, and his passing in May diminishes all of us. The JAAS family extends its heartfelt sympathy to the family of this most dedicated scholar.