

Transcript: Preserving Cultural Heritage in a War Zone: A Conversation with Rene Teiggeler Part 3

Mehiyar 0:03

He was working weeks, perhaps even months prior to the invasion to protect the museum.

Rene Teiggeler 0:11

Yes in one of the articles I wrote and I think it's the article that comes out in the German publication later this year on the legacies of the libraries. Many people took precautions, without or with the permission of the then Minister of Culture the head of the SPAH. And that works very well. And actually, they got the experience from the first Iraq war if you want, and especially the Iran Iraq war in the 90s, when, especially in the south, many museums were looted. And they knew that if the Americans would come and everybody was convinced that they would, their collections would be threatened. So for example, the house of manuscripts hid their collections. And it actually was, at that time, an institution that took on a lot of manuscripts, and actually there was a program going on to safeguard the manuscripts, which they took out of other museums from the country. So the concentrating too many manuscripts in that particular library to digitize them, etc. So they had a big program going on. So they took very well be cautions, they had a bomb shelter, somewhere in the city, and 1000s of manuscripts, were put in a aluminum boxes and put in this bunker. Now, that bunker was guarded, and especially with the help of the community, at one time, a military country went out and stopped at the bunker and wanted to see what was going in. And people protected it. And they said, You cannot come in and they forced their way in and then what happened then there was sort of a riot you know, people assembling, assembling, assembling and scolded that the US military, because they already put up a quite a few aluminum, aluminum trunks with the manuscripts in their pickup truck. So they felt so threatened that they returned it back to the, to the bunker and left. So that was a very good action.

Mehiyar 2:54 In terms of looting, I mean, you worked in a period where there was illicit looting of cultural archaeological sites. Were there any measures regarding the protection of those sites?

Rene Teiggeler 3:14 John Russell organized via a un program, I think, in cooperation with the Japanese authorities. I think they're 25 or 24 pickup trucks. Toyota, of course, when they arrived the day they arrived already when I came to Baghdad, but they were held up at the airport. So the police people from the Ministry of Culture, they had their own sort of police force. Actually the general the commander of that particular police force was corrupt. We knew afterwards. Anyway, they went to the airport to pick up the tracks with all the drivers like the inspectors came from the, from the provinces to pick up the tracks. And the Americans didn't allow them. So I got a call. And I said, Okay. And again, I sent out a patrol, an American patrol, and I told them to get into the airport and to facilitate the people from the ministry, to pick up the tricks the trucks, which they have a right to the desk, and that happened. So, the role of a cultural adviser was much more than just protection of cultural heritage, or culture in general. It was more facilitating the Ministry of Culture, the SBAH, antiquities department, etc, etc. So this worked. Then again, the story didn't end because they were not 24 pickup trucks at the airport, two or three were stolen, and some of them didn't have their ignition keys. Anyway, the patrol went back. We If in the slipstream the recovered pickup trucks and on their way actually they were robbed that one man inspector was forced, I think he went to the bathroom somewhere near a gas station. And then he was forced to

to give his keys to some hoodlums. And they went off with the truck. Service. Yeah. But you know, that's war zone that though things happen. But the story didn't end there. So about 20 trucks were parked at the at the National Museum. And inspectors were called to pick up their trucks. Then after a couple of weeks, one truck, not quite, from what province was returned with the inspector saying, I don't want this truck because it's too new. And everybody will see that I'm cooperating with the Americans. So then I got angry. And I went over there. And I told the particular inspector, be creative. Do you want me to take a sledgehammer and to put some bumps in the car and scrape after paint? What is this? Then everybody started to laugh. I think this inspector went back with a sort of a crooked new truck. These things happen, I mean, you have to be creative. It's a war zone. But that inspector was right. Because when I first arrived at the National Library, the general director Assad got angry, because I came with the US military patrol. And he said, Damn, come back here. Not with the US military control, everybody will see that I'm cooperating with the Americans said, I was shocked and naive, apparently to. And I knew he was right. So the next time I went, they sent out a patrol to pick me up. The patrol was with Kurdish fighters that protected the National Library as well. Now, I fully trusted the Kurdish guards, because they had the best intelligence ever in Baghdad. And they were good fighters. So but at one time, I think returning from the museum to the green zone to the embassy. There was this policeman sort of regulating the traffic. And he looked at me. And I was always close in civilian. So I never wore or hardly ever wore my military uniform, which is to be discussed. But that's another story, which can be discussed. But I also Oh, you know, I had a gun, a pistol. And I've just put it in my jacket. And this policeman looked at me. And I thought, this is going wrong. Because there were always snipers on the top of the roofs. That will take you out. So I took out my gun. I looked at him and pointed my gun to him. And he looked at me. And actually he was was trying to make a phone call it he pulled out his telephone. And I didn't do anything I just looked at him, stare them in the eyes. And then he put his telephone away. At the Americans told me to shoot through the window of the car. So I would have because it was to me, very simple. And I'm glad I didn't because I probably would never forgive myself to have killed a person, whoever that might be. But it was at that time it was he or me. Then I told the driver to continue and not speed up especially not speed up and take the first left, which he did. And that's how I got out of it. This is part of the deal. Another sort of similar story is, like I told you earlier, there was a price on my head. And at one time I was going to the Ministry of Culture and the gotcha South Africa. I think they were from Dynacor They didn't know that I was Dutch and that I could understand them because the South African language has its origins in Dutch. And they told each other by I heard them over the over the walkie talkies over the communication lines that we were followed. And that was sort of scary. But it wasn't helicopter for us to say they were following us from the air. And then we suddenly took a left turn. And then apparently, we will not follow it anymore. But that was scary. Because there could be some people waiting for you, which actually happened to a colleague of mine, I shared my room with a senior advisor for the Ministry of Higher Education. And he was killed in the streets, he did not. Well, as we would say, in anthropology, he went native. He thought he was invincible, that he wasn't very good, very good, good relations with the minister and the staff. But he was betrayed, and they just executed thing. But he never went out with patrol. And I told him, You know, it's very dangerous. It's a war zone out there. The insurgents are getting more powerful and powerful. He didn't listen and got killed.

Mehiyar 11:10 I mean, you say it's a war zone. And it was it was on but there were, as you said, there were targeted assassinations and attacks. So they knew who people were, as in they, as in the insurgents, generally speaking, how do you know there was a price? A price on your head or a price?

Rene Teiggeler The military told me?

Mehiyar And how did they know? I mean, they did this with their lists that will

Rene Teiggeler 11:37 You know that the entrance to the Green Zone? Or the exits? Would you whatever you want. were guided by spies, if you want. Yeah. Another story is just to show the listeners that it's not only about protection heritage is that I got off it to two tigers at one time, this was before Christmas, buy in US Colonel. And I thought what on earth am I going to do with two tigers? So you know, as a military, you were taught that everything that is normal in a peaceful society is abnormal in a war zone. And what is normal in a war zone is abnormal in a peaceful society. So you get, you get the craziest things. So people were aggressive. The staff, for example, and especially the private security guards, they felt themselves like they were gods on Earth. Very dangerous, very dangerous. But anyway, I got two tigers in, I was in a sort of funny mood. Because you know, you were, let's say 18 hours a day very stressful. And so I said, you know, are you going home for Christmas? He said, Yeah. I said that you got any children? He said, Yeah, I got two boys. And I said, Well, I got the perfect Christmas presents for you, you know, you got two tigers. He didn't like that, and left the room insulted. Then I went over to the minister and told him the story. And he said, Rene, you can't do that. I agree with you that we could not accept the Tigers for the Baghdad Zoo. But you have to be a little bit more careful and polite, which of course he was right. But I figured already, you know, if he would accept the Tigers, every Tiger takes about I think I remember correctly. 24 kilos of meat a day. And there were people starving out there. So you know how you're going to do it. There was another point, somebody else told me that maybe I was wrong, too. Because it was very important to re-establish normal life, to repair playgrounds for the children and maybe to open museums and libraries, etc. Then I thought yes, that's a good point. Next time I encounter as a similar situation, I have to consider that. And actually that is also what we discussed with Eskandar. The point to stay and restore and repair the museum was because it was the location recognizable for all people they knew if they wanted to go to the National Library where it was. So what he did with his staff, after we established that we would stay at the library would stay in that location. They started scraping off the suit of the magazine room. So that's the first thing the staff of the library did with their own hand. And to scrapers, because Assad decided that the first thing to open in the library anyway, is to open the magazine room so that people could come back and read the magazines. And it was a perfect decision. I think I fully supported that.

Mehiyar 15:19 What happened to the Tigers?

Rene Teiggeler 15:21 They never arrived. They probably still in the zoo in Texas. Yeah.

Mehiyar 15:27 So they were they were taken away, they were

Rene Teiggeler 15:31 not transported. It was an offer.

Mehiyar 15:35 So okay, they were an offer

Rene Teiggeler 15:36 for another thing, which just, you know, the, I call them Indian stories in the sense of, you know, it's wild west stories. At one time, I was in a military convoy going somewhere. And especially the military behaved very badly, you probably have seen footage of Humvees bumping into cars, if they were in the way. They didn't care, they just went through like

crazy, even against traffic, I was in one Humvee in the country. And they went against the traffic and everybody was scared as hell. So it's crazy. I mean, that's why I didn't like to have a military convoy, because the soldiers were crazy. But at one point, we had to stop for a traffic light, which the driver didn't like, because you don't stop while driving inside Baghdad. At least that was the mood. And there was a young boy, we probably was selling newspapers, I think. And he came too close to the Humvee. And the guard got out of the car and threatened at point blank, the boy. And I got so upset that I went out of the car, too. And I said, Get into the car. And if you don't get in and leave the boy alone, I will not get into the car. Which means that they could not protect me, which they are, by definition that they had to do because I was a VIP. And that was what happened. So the guard went back into the car and we drove on. And I went back into the car. This is all crazy stories.

Mehiyar 17:29 You were threatened by a drunken bodyguard at some point.

Rene Teijgeler 17:34 Yeah, that's true. You couldn't trust the private guards either. Especially the ones from Blackwater. Which is another crazy story, which I'll tell you later of which was attached to one of the ministers of Cheney. Yeah, you would sleep on the outskirts of the embassy, let's say the guidance. Everybody thinks there was only the beautiful swimming pool because that was published very often. But little if that was true, we all were in a container. And I shared the container with an Iraqi American, which I hadn't, yet no communication whatsoever. Besides, your only went to your container to sleep. And that's it. And at bed, there were two containers, below parallel and in between, they were connected by in the so called Wet unit, a shower, and washing room and the bathroom. So you have to share that the bathroom in the shower. And of course, if you make use of that, you lock the door. And at one point, I think it was at night, I'm not quite sure. It was a knock on the door and I said occupied. And they kept banging on the door. When I was finished. I came out and there is this guard. Private security guard.

Probably Well, definitely it was he was on drugs. He was high and drunk. I could hear they were fooling around with girls. And he threatened me and I just didn't understand what's going on. And these are big guys. And I'm I'm sort of a tiny guy well not tiny but I'm definitely not big. And then I thought oh my god, he's going dead but I knew I did some martial arts. So I knew that don't enter a fight try to avoid the fight. Because if you start a fight, both parties will get damaged whatsoever went here. And so I tried to control myself which was which went on very well actually. And I lived in America for a while so my you know my collection of scolding words, were pretty much at my availability, well, that's a screw good English. But you know what I mean, I could, then became came at a point that I just didn't understand what he wanted from me. And I went back to my, to my part of the container. And he kept following me. And at one point, he pushed me. And I flew back into the container. And I started well, I was taught never to, first of all, never to lose your temper. And second of all, you know, try to avoid the fight. But this is the time that I have to fight back. And I was just about to do that. When I thought I'll give him one more chance. So I pulled out my best Americans calling instruments, which I will not repeat here in public. But I told him that he got fired, and that he was fooling around with the two star general, and that he should start packing his stuff, because he will be put on the plane tomorrow. That seemed to have worked. And he returned to his container. Then I went to the military police. And these things happened often stressful situations, people got into fights, etc. And they sort of well, but they believed me that they were not about to take any action. So I told them, If you don't do anything, I'll go to the ambassador. We'll see. Because I'm not gonna stand for this. I'm here to do my work. And I don't

want to be threatened by any security personnel is in trouble outside the green zone. And then I got my own container in a different place. All by myself, easy. So that's what happened. Yeah. So they're all these crazy stories. I mean, if you went out at night, Thursday night was our night out. I befriended an American officer, well, actually was a civilian at that time. So we went out for drinks sometimes the Thursday night. But at one point, we were held up by an American patrol. And it's just like in a cowboy movie, or just like in, you know, an American movie. We were treated as criminals. And they shouted to me, too. Well, I was Yeah, I was driving to cut the lights, which I did. And apparently, you were not supposed to drive around with who lights in the within the green zone. I didn't know. And I was scared. These guys they don't talk they shoot. Anyway, yeah, so a crazy story. Very funny. So you will not be threatened by insurgents or whatsoever or by incoming fire, which happened to actually, at one point, I was in the bathroom, and a grenade hit the palace, and right in front of my room exploded and all the glass was all over the place, etc. And I was lucky I wasn't there. At another instant, two people got killed in another part of the palace by incoming fire by a grenade. So that's the situation you live in.

Mehiyar 23:58 Just going back to the issue, the topic of Babel or Babylon.

Rene Teijgeler 24:04 Yeah. What I forgot yeah, there's another thing which made Babylon extreme, extremely vulnerable. And not only because it was a Regional Command office, but also it was a regional office for the KBR and I tried to find out who gave that permission. And I couldn't. Nobody knew why the KBR was there at the Babylon site.

Mehiyar 24:36 So KBR is the company, the Kellogg what are they called? The Kellogg Brown and Roots.

Rene Teijgeler 24:48 Well, Rumsfeld took the decision to outsource many tasks of the US military. A very liberal approach. And a very bad idea actually, because, you know they have their own command structures cost a lot of money anyway. Security guards got up to \$1,000 a day. Anyway, KPR was then for the logistics and providing the meals, etc, etc. And they build the regional headquarters on in the middle of the side of Babylon. The first day I went to Babylon, I saw a machine, bulldozer flattening a piece of land, in order to make it to prepare it for construction. And I went over to them I said, What are you doing? Big bulldozers moving earth, on the middle of the site, and about up into Babylon. So, you know, the antiquities, if you put your hand in the sand and you know, it's 90%, you have a chance so that you pick up some kind of piece of antiquities out of a stone or whatever, a brick, I looked at it and I said, Well, you got to stop. Who are you to tell me bla bla bla bla bla. So I looked at the political advisor of the military commander said he has to stop, otherwise you get into trouble. So they stopped. I mean, they flattened huge pieces of land on in the middle of on the side of Babylon. A couple of weeks later, I got threatened, actually, I got a threatening email from somebody at the staff of KBR that I could count my days, that it was not up to me to decide bla bla bla bla bla. But in that case, I didn't feel threatened, didn't have any follow up. So it was not only the military command, but also the KBR. That perhaps, if you look at it even more damaged the site than the military themselves.

Mehiyar 27:09 They were a military contractor. So a military contractor. So in a way they are part of the military. I mean, they act on behalf military

Rene Teijgeler 27:20 Yeah, but you could very, very difficult to control them. You got to be here where they try troubles with the dual command structure. On one side, the State Department and the other side, the Ministry of Defense, the Pentagon, and now you got another one, it's KBR so that, yeah, it was difficult. After we picked up the tracks and divided them or gave them to the

provincial inspectors. I went back to US command post in Hila, new Babylon, to find out how we were going to support the local inspectors because they inspect the lead, the guards at the sites were threatened by heavy machinery and with heavy guns. So the point was to arm the guards, that was a hard issue all over Iraq, because the military didn't trust the Iraqis with guns, which was funny because everybody had a gun anyway. And so I made sure that the inspectors, at least the people on the ground, the guards put have, could get guns. And they were trained by and I made sure that they were trained by the Americans to connect the archaeological site to a military US unit, that in case they were troubled, they could rely on the support of the US military. Another thing what we did to make that happen to facilitate that is we gave them radio communication. So somehow, we're whatever I got hold of money and manage to get every provincial inspector and people on the site connected to the military units in their neighborhood, in the vicinity with the radio. So that was radio communication. So we trained that too, so we went to the units and to the military units and made sure that they trusted the Iraqi guards with the guns and showed them that the sides were very mixed threatened by people who were very well armed and came into the sites with bulldozers.

Mehiyar 29:41 And that's you. I mean, inspectors, we are speaking about the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage. Did you offer are we able to offer any other support to them in Hilla or you know, the, provincial SBAH the provincial State Board of Antiquities and heritage office?

Rene Teijgeler 29:58 Yeah, there's another story I mean, for the seven month Yeah, I'm full of stories. Sometimes, like I said wildest stories. Sometimes they're appropriate stories on protection of heritage, just to show or just to share with the listeners how work as a cultural adviser worked at least 15 years ago when I talked to the political advisor, the Polish commander in Babylon, at one point, because I was negotiating with him, for the whole group of people, I've represented the Iraqi SBAH, a local inspector, the staff of the embassy and the military. He was, he was a sneaky guy. He was a very good diplomat. But he was sneaky, too. And that's part of the trade. But I could stand that. Don't ask me why. But it just happened. And at one point, during the negotiations, we had to stay over on the side, there was a sandstorm and also the minister had to stay. So we were put in some kind of container house. And then he invited me to his place on the side of Babylon, and he said, I got this beautiful bottle of Ukrainian vodka and let's, let's have a drink. And I thought, oh, so I shared one drink with him. And I said, Okay, we can finish the bottle later. But now let's start negotiating. Because I suspect that he wanted to get me drunk. And so then, during the negotiations, he was trying to push me in a corner, and said, Well, you know, if you if the Iraqis and if you don't want to do what we and the Polish site, suggest, in the handover at the site, I can always go to the provincial governor, and the head of police in Hilla, because they want to control with the site. And I said, Oh, yeah, no problem, do that. And I will send in the military, to return the site, to the SBAH. I'm gonna see what happens. So there was there was a fight. And that continued for years afterwards, who had the control over the side of Babylon, whether it was the provincial authorities, with backup of the local police, or it was the SBAH. So you were confronted with that competition as well. In the end, the negotiations went very well. And the site was returned by the military, actually, on December 28, or something like that, to the SBAH.

Mehiyar 33:22 What did the military relocate to

Rene Teijgeler 33:27 Diwaniya

Mehiyar 33:28 Oh, and they just set up the same thing in the one year, they just did everything there.

Rene Teiggeler 33:33 But you were asking me before, but I couldn't have could have done more. Of course, in every respect, I could have done more. And I have to say, sometimes I took the wrong decisions. Of course. I'm not the Pope. But you learn a lot by experience. Now, did I go to Iraq, to Baghdad, to get nice experiences, of course, not. My main motivation of us to go and support the Iraqis, not the Americans, the Iraqis. And I was convinced that with my knowledge and experience, I could support the protection of Iraqi heritage and support my colleagues that were in great need, because everybody felt left out by the International heritage community. There were many articles. There was a lot of statements from UNESCO ecom, but nobody was actually doing something. And that was my main point. Go there and see what you can do in a very practical approach, and actually, I still find that and still in my work with heritage for peace. We try to be very practical and get away from our desks, in our beautiful countries, wherever we reside outside the conflict zone. Of course, you need technical knowledge, you need theoretical knowledge. But to put it into practice is a different story. For example, recently, I was invited for the third or fourth time to go to the UAE, to the United Arab Emirates for an evaluation. And I decided already that I will not go back to the United Arab Emirates, because it's, I don't agree with the regime and with the human rights, especially for the 80% non Emiratis living in that country, and that are being abused. But this was going to be a digital evaluation. So I returned to a meal and I told them, I will never do that. Because the paper reality does not reflect that reality on the ground. And that's what I've always done. You have to go over there. One point and an architect bureau of architect an officer invited me to, to tender with them on a new museum . And I thought, okay, I said, When are we going over there? We're not. I said, well, thank you very much, goodbye. So for me, the, the foot on the ground, to be there to see what's going on to ask the people what they want. That's another important thing. I mean, what I want this, you know, it's not important, really. But I can do tell them I cannot fulfill their demands or their needs. Transparency is very, very important in this kind of work. So if they want them to see this, I will tell them, No, I will not do that. But maybe you can find somewhere else. And I will tell them why I think it's not necessary, first of all, and then secondly, I will tell them, why I will not support that. For example, I got contacted while in Baghdad, by an Italian professor. She wanted to digitize her collections. So I had to be in Rome. Anyway. So on my way to the Netherlands. For my Christmas leave. I made a stopover in Rome, I met her for lunch. And I asked her what she wanted. And she said, Well, you know, I'm a professor in archaeology and actually, actually, the Middle East and cuneiform, and blah, blah, blah. And I went to digitize my collection. I said, why? Well, it's important, etc. I said, Well, why do you think it's important for whome? And she said, Well, you know, I have 30-40 years of work there. And it's important for research and stuff like that. Okay, well, why should I pay for it? I think the priorities are different in Iraq than just digitizing your collection. And then my next question was how you're going to do? How are you going to digitize your collection? And she said, Well, you know, that's why I need you, you know, for conservators, or for digitizing for people who know how to digitize the collections, and said, Are you going to invite any Iraqis for it, you know, no no they're too stupid. I say thank you very much for lunch, goodbye. That happens often. There were many projects also in the United States, for example, digitizing cuneiform collections at Stanford University, if I remember correctly, had nothing to do with the problems our colleagues in Iraq were facing. So, but he should call these kinds of things

as taking an opportunity, making use of it or abuse. I'll leave that up to the listener. In my opinion, I think it would be very close to abuse.

Mehiyar 39:14 I guess you were powerless and mean people feeling powerless.

Rene Teijgeler 39:18 Yeah, true. But you shouldn't forget that there was a lot of infighting in between the people in power in Iraq. And we have seen that in later government and actually still today. That didn't make it very easy. For example, the minister of culture had a background as a Kurdish fighter. He was not Kurdish he was actually Shia. No, he was a member of the Communist Party. So that marks already his position within the government and Uh, so I had to deal with all these kinds of sections if you want, which I was not that very much aware of at the time only later, really. But that's, you know, the way the situation was, and to some extent still is actually. For example, some other story, there was a program, EU program to fill up the libraries with new books. And we know that universities, Library, University libraries all over the country suffered very much, a lot was stolen and lost was lost in fires, etc. So it was very important to reorganize, or at least to, to reorganize the libraries to put back the libraries on their feet. So higher education, but also school libraries for lower education could continue in the country. And go back to normalcy, whatever that is. So I went over to the Minister, I said, Look, I think I could pull off to get you \$1 million to fill up the libraries again, with an EU project. And he said, Oh, that's a great idea. And I said, Well, you know, because some friends in Egypt, and I'm sure I can get a good deal. And I said, look, and I experienced that earlier. This is the West. And if you want to make use of this program, you have to do with the Western way, whether you like it or not. So I need bills. And I also need somebody who could run the program. And he said, No, no, no, you know, it goes, it goes differently here in the Middle East. Rene said, Yeah, I know. But that's not good enough for me. I have to be sure that I get bills. So I can, you know, respond to financially. I can be responsible for the finances for this project to the EU. They're very strict. They said no, no, no, no, no, that's not gonna happen. I said, Well, finished. Next project. Yep. These are the things you encounter. So to go from one problem to the other, from one situation to the other, you know, 14, 16, 18 hours a day, you get a call from a helicopter you as military? Or you're a cultural adviser? Yes, sir. I am. I'm flying here in the vicinity of the Ministry of Culture, and there's a riot going on. But I'm not quite sure where it's a riot or not. And we are about to break up the riot. I heard already shoot the hell out of them. Which happened before, you know, I actually have footage on that. And said, Hold your horses. Hold your horses. Call me back in 15 minutes. Can you do that? Yes, sir. We can. So I asked my secretary, what's going on that? Call the ministry and find out what's going on? And go ask around. She was a Christian that she was Christian, my secretary, wherever it's a Sunni or Shiite holiday or whatever national holiday, I need to know within 10 minutes. So she ran around the embassy came up with a Shiite holiday. And that's what they're celebrating. The people at the Ministry didn't know. So I called back to the commander with the helicopter and I said, Hold your horses. This is a Shiite holiday, leave them alone. This is just a religious expression. Thank you very much, sir. We'll fly on.

Mehiyar 43:40 Did you have a remit over the Kurdistan region of Iraq? Was it just the rest of the country?

Rene Teijgeler 43:49 No, later on, I went to a bill to be the only foreigner were to cultural festival. But that was after my tour in Baghdad was a funny meeting. Actually, I was the only foreigner. And I met the the advisor of the ministry forgot his name. I'm ashamed that I forgot his name. The one who got killed was very good friends with him. And the funny thing was that there were a lot of

expats there. Now Iraqi artists living in the Netherlands, the UK, friends, etc. And also people are local artists. And you saw the split. In it, there was a discussion between them because the experts were criticizing the people, their colleagues as being conservative, etc, etc. There was a very strange discussion, I thought, but that's what you often encounter. The people that leave the country have a certain a certain look a certain belief of what the or a certain look of the country they left to a better country they left years ago, of course, it's not the same country where they returned to it. This is the problem of immigrants. So you had this discussion, and I didn't like the discussion it one particular time when even ugly. So I asked around a little bit and talk to the experts, especially the one living in Paris, London and Amsterdam. And I told them that this was my observation. The last thing I wanted to say is that, to have power, so much power, that you even were part of setting up the summertime in Iraq, that together with then the Deputy Minister, you decided on a Women's Day supported by the German Embassy. That power corrupts. And I'm not Iraqi, I'm from a totally different world. And even when doing discussions about the US archives, and other matters, such as Canada wanted me to go to the United States to represent Iraq. And I'm not going to do that. I do not represent Iraq. I'm a Dutch guy. I'm here to facilitate. And I'm not representing Iraq, and the minister fully agreed he got angry too. And besides that, I think as the Director General of the National Library and Archives, it's your task to represent Iraq, to the in the sense of libraries and not me. So I made clear to everybody that I was there to facilitate and to help them out. Whatever I could do. And sometimes it was shocking to see that how much power you have. So it was good to leave Iraq after seven months. Like I said, there was close to PTS, post trauma syndrome, and I was struggling with all the power I had. I got offered an extension actually. Which I was not quite sure to accept it or not. And I must admit, there was a lot of money involved. I discuss it with my wife. And, you know, we decided I'm not going to continue besides that the offer was withdrawn anyway. So it was time to go home and to leave my friends and colleagues. And still a deplorable situation, which hurts. But for me, it was the end. And an experience like that never leaves you. People get killed, people, you know, got killed. In the media, you're very fun, pointed, very favorite subjects, which I didn't like certain points anymore. It's up to the Iraqis. The media should be talking to you and not me. But the danger, the bad and the good, the positive and the negative. It will never leave you anybody who has been in a war zone, it will leave scratches on your heart and your mind.

Mehiyar 48:31 In terms of post trauma, post traumatic stress I mean, how have you been able to address that over the past few years.

Rene Teijgeler 48:43 I cried. A week, when I returned from Baghdad to the Netherlands. We were moved before I went to Iraq, and I left my wife with a house full of nothing. It was restored for about half a year and everything was there. And there were Christmas I was so hyper that my friends who are going out to dinner for me, didn't recognize me. And then I thought I have to take it easy, which I did actually after I returned to Baghdad, I made sure that I got more sleep and tried not to be so hyperactive. And I had to come down from the position of a powerful position and everybody was asking me and give me all the full attention to become a normal citizen again, that takes a while. We had some heavy talks with my wife to come down from, you know the position that not everything in the world. is turning is about me. But that didn't last that long. There were possibilities of getting a psychological support from the army. But I thought I never really needed that. And it did. I didn't sort of faded away. But especially when it's good friend of mine, the

adviser of the minister got killed two or three years later. I started crying again all day. So still now, in this podcast, some emotions come up. And tears to my eyes. It never leaves you.

Mehiyar 51:00 of course, you weren't alone. I mean, this is many ways a common experience for a lot of people who go to Iraq or are from Iraq who suffer or are still suffering. For the fact that there's been so much instability in so many dreadful detrimental effects of the US occupation and instability in general and the legacies of dictatorship. I mean, it's there's a lot to deal with.

Rene Teijgeler 51:32 Yeah, definitely.

Mehiyar 51:34 yeah, I mean, I guess, when you were there, or anyone who's actually in Iraq, Iraq proper, is actually suffering significantly from, you know, from legacy of events.

Rene Teijgeler 51:52 No, true. And I don't want to get into a competition of who got the most grief.

I told you the story, the way I experienced it, it does have some certain advantages. on the international stage, people believe me, I'm one of the few people who went into a war zone to protect cultural heritage. So it definitely adds to my credibility. On the other hand, for myself, I learned, of course, a lot. Although my experiences are confined to a seven month Iraq, in six months, Afghanistan, being in a war zone, I perhaps have a little bit more feeling than others on how it is to work. And to judge projects that I found sometimes totally ridiculous and totally not in place. Because it's very, not very practical, it's designed behind the desk has nothing to do with the real situation on the ground. I mean, so many people do not know how difficult it is to send goods, for example, to Iraq, or Syria or Yemen, or to transfer money. No, the recent projects, with a lot of problems sending the money. We found the solution, and it did work. So, you know, even if you have money. It's still difficult. And a lot of people don't realize it a lot of people especially the funding agencies, want to have total control over the projects and the trust of people on the ground and do not give them enough responsibilities. This has to change. And there's a big discussion on that issue within the military and an emergency aid and also for the relevant for the heritage projects. Helping our colleagues in war zones or other fragile states. So you learn and you use that experience hopefully for the better and I think I do for other projects to be in it even even one project we did in for Syrians you know, I gave a secure security class for a Syrian archaeologist. I said you know, how are you going to decide to make a damage assessment. I said well you know, we you know, pick out the you know, we go into the car or pick up the motorbike and go in exactly cannot do that so dangerous. How am I? Who am I to tell you that it is a dangerous so I told them, you know, always go by two persons, check out the route, check out what kind of militias are underway. And perhaps avoid them and checking out another route. Have somebody constantly on the phone in in the main office if they have an office at least, and phone in every 15 to 30 minutes? And then if the if the site that there's military presents on the site or around it, and you feel in danger, yeah, get out. And they were laughing. And they said, Well, we never thought about it that way. But this is all practice. It was funny, actually, to tell the Syrian archaeologists that they were busy much too, you know, which are dangerous, and men minding their own security and me telling them that they should? Yeah, well, thinking of that experience of my work in Baghdad, in hindsight, it was an important point in my life, both personally and professionally. To work in a conflict zone is an experience, like I said earlier, which will never leave you that it makes you a little bit closer, or gives you a little bit insight into the suffering and the mechanisms of people living in a war conflict in a violent conflict and what the possibilities are set protecting heritage during a violent conflict. so working on Syria now with heritage for peace, since I don't know eight years, yet in other countries again. That actually came about

because I went there as a military. So afterwards, there was a lot of discussion, whether you would I should have done that to be what I called in one article to be an embedded archaeologist. And I came up with that term because of embedded journalism. We had a lot of discussion, especially with the World Archaeological Congress in Dublin. I was attacked in public and private. Then I started reflecting on that experience. Is this the only way to support our colleagues who are living in a conflict and try to protect their own heritage? Meaning the only way they're being through the military? And then I came up with? Well, the answer is no, it is not. You've seen a lot of humanitarian aid workers there you see civil servants. Those are the most positive ones. Actually, there are, of course, a lot of crooks and crooked NGOs working in conflict zones too so you have to watch out here. Then I thought, Edward archeological Congress in Jordan, and I met this young Syrian guy, and a PhD student, or an MA student in archaeology, living in Barcelona, and he came up with the idea now what can we do with what can we do for our colleagues in Syria? So at that point, just a few months later, we came together in Barcelona where we lived. And we said, there are other ways of supporting our colleagues and we started our NGO, Heritage for Peace. very idealistic in the beginning, of course, I mean, you know, it wasn't easy to start, we didn't have any money, but we paid everything ourselves in the beginning. First of all, the point was to after my experience, and also looking more closer to the humanitarian emergency aid, in conflict zones. They have their standards, put down in the handbook of the sphere project, that the code of conduct and we put them be copied that actually into the statutes of Heritage for Peace. And so the idea came that if you start working during a conflict, as you know, people from an NGO, is there anything else we can do? The idea came that if we started supporting the people ask him to Questions, what do you need? What do you want? Meanwhile, people approach us and we don't really have to go out to the people from de gras and Myanmar, they come to us for help. And the idea was to bring the different groups together, because in the end, the best protection of cultural heritage in a conflict zone is ending the conflict, which is peace. Because, you know, that's the ultimate solution. So to strive for peace, also as heritage workers and also as humanitarian workers. Just makes make sense, logical. And we did it. We started it. For example, we worked for the opposition groups in Syria, we work with the government in Syria, that is the DGIM, Director General of Antiquities, and monuments. We put them together in a room during a conference in Spain. So we left the room and said start talking. We drew up sort of a kind of a charter in the sense of UNESCO for the peace talks in Geneva. For the opposition groups, that was the peace talks between the different groups in Syria that came together in Geneva, we did the same thing for Libya. So there are different levels. Now we work on different levels, just to be on the side, like the projects we have in Iraq now, which is track one, but they're also track two and track three. And we work on all levels now. So in this debt is actually all I learned from, from my experiences in Iraq, and later a little bit from my experience working in conflict in Afghanistan, first of all, is because of my personal experience, as compassion, and empathy with the people suffering during a conflict. Don't see them as victims, which, which is actually if you consider them as victims, you silence them. But there are very few people actually the first responders, if you look at all conflicts, who are the first people who protect their heritage, the people in the surroundings, the people in situ, first, people who started protecting their heritage sites, during the largest revolution were the local population around archaeological sites in, in Egypt. So they're not silent victims. You can activate them and try to search in contact, etc. And then second of all, is the most important, but it's a big discussion now in how to put that in

humanitarian actions. Now, emergency programs is the give to people on the ground more power. So, you know, don't go there with a suitcase full of ideas and say, well, you should do this or you should do that. You know, if people approach us, we said, what do you want, and we tried to figure out how we can help you and support you. And sometimes you cannot. Then you say, you know, you have to be transparent and open and very, very honest. Because trust, which is a main quality in specially in conflict zones. As we say, in Dutch, the trust comes by the horse and now comes by piecemeal, you know, step by step, and it goes by horse goes very quickly. So, trust, trust is very important, and the only thing to be trustworthy is to be transparent and open. And I experienced those kinds of things. If I wouldn't have been open and honest with the Minister, I wouldn't have gotten that far in Iraq. You know, certain things you couldn't do that I told you the story about the EU project and the books. He didn't want it the way according to the rules of the EU has (khalas) finished. So yeah, I learned a lot and I used it in the rest of my work today.

Mehiyar 1:04:58 And that's It's important for you because it means that you continue to engage with archaeologists and with people working in heritage. You know, after this experience in Iraq, Afghanistan is continuing engagement is important, you

Rene Teijgeler 1:05:16 know, what keeps me alive, literally and figuratively now? Yes, I think I can contribute something. Now, during the pandemic, it is difficult to travel. And actually, you invited me to go to Iraq, which I would have loved to do that, but especially now during the pandemic, it is next to impossible. But I would have gone to other places, certainly to meet people from Syria, the Syrians, at least in in, in Turkey, etc. Yes, the importance, I think in my work and our work is, you have to be there on the spot, to talk to the people to ask for their needs, to ask what they want, and if that is possible, and not to picture them from my side, at least a clear, clear situation, what you can offer. And what you cannot offer is, this is, for example, what we do now in Myanmar, first to find out what the situation is, what do people want from us what they need, and then see how we can support them or not. And you have to give it to be transparent, you have to give them a clear picture. We cannot do this for you, we cannot do that for you. But we can do this, but there is always the risk, etc, etc. And it's definitely not always money. Certainly not. People think it's always about money, it's not get the people in the Middle East, help them to organize themselves, either at a regional level or a national level, tried to support the formation of unions, for conservationists, for museum staff, for library staff within Iraq, for example, it has been very difficult so far, try to convince people at the top of whatever are supporting from buttoned up to get them to get organized and share. Which is very important because in my view, the Middle East has been an our colleagues in the Middle East have been very much underestimated. By the post-colonial Western world. The problem is that they are the main funding agencies. And many, many projects are post-colonial. They don't trust the people, they don't trust the our colleagues in the Middle East. And also, I think that the people enter in the Middle East, our colleagues are underestimating themselves. You know, my first question was when somebody in the group asked our colleagues in Myanmar, do you need any training? This is postcolonial? That is a wrong question. Because if you ask somebody, if they need training, then you then you suppose that people do need training, and that they are not well trained. So this is, you know, this, the things and it's, it's not respectful either. And I think that the people in our colleagues in the Middle East is definitely underestimate themselves as a very good conservation lab in Tehran, for example. But then, of course, if political difficult, especially Iraq, was the main port for cultural heritage in the Middle East up until years ago. ECOM had their office, UNESCO

had their office, nothing has become a fit, it's all gone on to the docks. But the people are strong, and they should not be underestimated. And of course, if they think that their education system lacked or was lacking in the past, which it was in the 90s, and the 80s libraries were neglected and museums were neglected, it was difficult to get contact abroad. And actually another thing that I did was to support the DG, the general director of inland to connect to the outside world. And actually, we went to Paris, and I introduced them to oh, well, he was introduced to the National Library in Paris we introduce him to UNESCO to and to econ. That is another thing that we can facilitate connections between the countries and the international community. And it's not me who should really call UNESCO and tell them, you know, you have to go to Iraq and people are suffering, blah, blah, blah. It is facilitating the connection. It's facilitating the context between the people on the ground, their own organizations, and the International heritage community. That I think is important. But one point is people underestimate themselves. And they definitely should try in spite of all the different the differences they have, ethnic, religious or otherwise have to work together. Because cultural heritage is a concern for all the people in the country. And they should say, step over their own shadows get organized.

Mehiyar 1:11:12 On that note, Rene, thank you for taking the time to speak with me and speak about your experiences and recent history working in Iraq. And of course, the weight of that in terms of distress and reflection. I think all those things have been quite important when it comes to looking back, you know, at what is now 18 years since the Iraq War. So thank you again, and I wish you the best of luck. And I hope to hear from you very soon. Thank you very much.

Rene Teiggeler 1:11:51 Thank you very much. Shukran shukran