

ESCAPE FROM KUWAIT

Shivabalayogi & Sadaam Hussein's Invasion of Kuwait

When Sadaam Hussein's Iraqi army invaded Kuwait in August of 1990, Shivabalayogi was there. He was one of the passengers on the British Airways flight from London to India that landed in Kuwait City for refueling just as Iraqi soldiers were capturing the airfield. The Iraqis held him and the other passengers as captive hostages in various Kuwait hotels. One wonders about the coincidence of this great yogi being present at the beginning of such a dangerous international incident.

The story of how Swamiji left Kuwait makes interesting reading and is a wonderful example of Swamiji's wit, courage and resourcefulness. Swamiji was traveling with D. Jagadish Kumar, a devotee who took care of Swamiji personally and translated for American devotees. This is Jagadish's account.

There were a few prior indications that something was going to happen, small things that only made sense afterwards.

At the very beginning of the 1990 tour, when we were flying from Madras to London, the plane stopped at Kuwait to refuel, just like it did on the way back. It was some time very early in the morning and I was deep asleep, but Swamiji wouldn't let me sleep. When we landed in Kuwait, he nudged me and asked me to get up, go into the airport and look at the displays there. He told me that this was the Gulf so there should be a lot of gold and gold ornaments. ***“Go and look at them.”*** I was not interested at all, but he wouldn't leave me. He pushed me and then finally I had to go. I think I looked at some watches and cameras, things like that, and then I came back to the airplane.

In my own mind, I think he was trying to indicate to me that we would have to stay there for a long time. He wanted me to look around and then come back. That was all. I wouldn't have taken that as an indication, but then on the way back, we ended up being stuck there.

Normally when Swamiji was collecting money in the U.S.A., he would have me wire it back to India. He made me do this with the donations given on the West Coast, then more donations were given at programs on the East Coast. We were in Boston and ready to leave to return to India via London. I think he had about five thousand dollars. He asked me not to send it but take it with me. It was unusual. That money became very important.

We were returning to India, on British Airways flight from London to Madras. There was a fuel stop at Kuwait for about an hour. The flight was delayed almost one hour leaving London. When we landed at Kuwait, everything was quite normal. The passengers who were meant to get out at Kuwait got off the plane. There was an announcement that the transit passengers who wanted to get off the plane could do so, but they

should get back within a half an hour or whatever it was.

I was half asleep, so I knew what was happening. We remained in our seats, our shoes off, dozing.

After about a half an hour, the transit passengers returned to the airplane. I think we were ready to leave, some time around five in the morning, Kuwait local time, when we heard thud sounds in the distance. We all started wondering what was happening. I was still half asleep but I could make out that there was a little anxiety. We didn't know exactly what it was. After a few minutes we realized the flight was not taking off. Then another few minutes and one of the air hostesses came into the cabin and announced that we should all leave the plane immediately. She warned us not to wear shoes or take our carry-on bags with us, but just rush out of the plane without getting panicky.

I just stood up and told Swamiji that we were being asked to leave the plane without shoes or handbags. I asked whether I should take his handbag. He was angry with me for having asked that question. He told me I had to take it. I said, “She is ordering me not to.” He said he was angry at me and he insisted that I take the handbag. When I put my hand up to take the hand baggage from the overhead bin, the air hostess was again angry at me. But Swamiji wouldn't leave me. I took his handbag, but I couldn't take my shoes, and we came out of the plane into the terminal.

That was the bag that had all the cash in it. It had everything in it: some fresh *kaupinams* (loincloths) and a shawl for Swamiji, his drinking water, and a very little amount of his medicines; things like that.

In the terminal I started asking fellow passengers what was happening, why the plane hadn't take off, and why we had been asked to get into the terminal. I got the news that the airport was being bombed. I didn't understand anything because I had no background as to what had been happening in the Gulf. All during the tour in the United States I had not been reading any

newspapers at all on this tour, so I had no background about trouble between Iraq and Kuwait.

I learned that Iraq had invaded Kuwait and had just captured the airport and the city was being taken over while we were at the airport. We heard the distant sounds of bombing. We could hear them as thuds from inside the terminal. We stayed there for a long time, an hour, two hours. Swamiji was mostly silent, smiling at devotees, having a little chat with somebody here and there. I could see that all the other passengers were worried. We expected to be told to go back into the aircraft and fly out. Then slowly the news spread that the airport was closed for both take-offs and landings, so our flight would not leave. Had not the flight been delayed in London, we would have landed at Kuwait and taken off before the Iraqis arrived. We would have been gone.

Then the passengers were told to go to the airport hotel in the adjacent building where we would be given rooms until we got permission to take off. We were shown a door where we could leave the terminal building and board busses to take us to the hotel. As we were leaving the terminal, there were Iraqi soldiers pointing guns at us.

As usual, Swamiji just chuckled at them. That annoyed one of the soldiers. He said something and pointed his gun at us. I thought he might understand some Hindi, but what I said didn't make any sense to him. He was getting more annoyed, and that only made Swamiji laugh more.

The Iraqis made all the passengers stand on the tarmac. They demanded passport and papers from each passenger and confiscated all currency. The Iraqis demanded to see what was inside my briefcase and one soldier took it from me. Swamiji grabbed the briefcase from the soldier and would not let him have it. They backed down. The Iraqis stole a lot from the passengers, even though some of the Iraqi officers tried to make their soldiers return what they had stolen. The Iraqis tried to make Swamiji and me declare whether we had any currency, but Swamiji responded "**No.**" He said to me that the Iraqis had no right to ask such questions. We had no Kuwaiti currency, only U.S. dollars, and we had them legally.

We walked out in a line, got into the busses, and went to the other building. The Iraqis asked all the passengers for passports. I had instructions from Swamiji not to give our passports to anybody, so I kept our passports with me. We checked into a room and took some rest. I gave a bath to Swamiji and changed

his clothes. We had a good buffet breakfast, then later we were all called for lunch.

Some time that afternoon I heard rumors that we had been given permission to leave. All passengers were asked to stand in queues in the hotel lobby and we were told that the aircraft would take off in a short while. While we waited, they separated the British, American and French passport holders from the others. They were taken out and got into busses. The rest of us could see this, but we were not told clearly what was happening. We assumed that they were asking the British, Americans and French to get into the plane first and then the rest of us could board. But nothing like that happened. The rest of us were left waiting in the lobby for a couple of hours. The aircraft crew was left behind with us, although probably most of them were British passport holders.

That was when Swamiji talked with some of the other passengers. Swamiji always insisted that I speak to the captain or the other crew members, and not with the fellow passengers, regarding any inquiry or whatever help we might need. The captain of the aircraft told me he had talked with some military officers and the hotel manager, but he couldn't say whether they were Iraqi or Kuwaiti military.

After some two or three hours, we were asked to return to our rooms. Slowly we got news that the American, British, German and French passengers had not been taken to the aircraft. Their passports were taken by the Iraqi army, and they were boarded onto busses and taken away. The captain and the crew were allowed to stay with us, but we were imprisoned in the airport hotel. No one was allowed to go in or out of the hotel. Feeling that the airport hotel was not safe for us to stay, the captain tried hard to get the army's permission to take us to other hotels in the city. One of the officers gave him permission within hours. Before we could pack up and leave, another officer intervened and stopped the busses.

I was traveling with a tape recorder which had been given to me in North Carolina to record bhajans. Swamiji insisted that I carry it with me into the terminal, against the instructions of the air hostess. It had a radio, so Swamiji asked me to tune in to some station and get some news about what was happening. All I could get were short sentences that confirmed what we had already heard: that Kuwait had been invaded by Iraq, there had been a lot of bombing in the city, and the airport had been taken over. There was no news about the British Airways airplane.

Days passed. Three of the crew members, I think, were taken to the aircraft by Iraq soldiers saying that they could take the handbags, shoes, and whatever else was left in the cabin and bring them to the hotel. I checked through the belongings that were collected, but neither my bags nor my shoes were there. Even by then some things had been stolen. The checked-in baggage remained in the aircraft. None of the passengers got any of it.

Every day we expected to be able to fly out, but nothing happened. The waiting just continued. Then we came to know that our aircraft was no longer at the airport.

The first day, plenty of food was served to the passengers. You could choose whatever you wanted, food, tea or coffee, whatever it was. Each room had a refrigerator stocked with some snack food and some soft drinks. We were being treated like guests in a five-star hotel. I thought I would enjoy myself, except that we were not being allowed to go home.

We were told that we could make one phone call home free of charge. Probably British Airways paid for it. On Swamiji's instruction, I called the Bangalore ashram and gave the news. I spoke to Shiladitya Singh and told him that we were stuck in Kuwait and staying at the airport hotel. I gave him the room number. The call was cut off. There were so many passengers waiting in queue to call their homes that I was not allowed to speak for a long time.

Shiladitya called me back and I again spoke with him, but the connection was not clear and the call got cut. After that the telephone lines were cut.

The next morning I expected a sumptuous breakfast. When I went down, to my surprise I found that there was very little food on the table and we were being cautioned to eat as little as possible. There were indications that there might be rationing of food. The manager was complaining about too many guests and too little food. When I inquired, I found out that the Iraqi army had cut the power cables to the hotel, mainly the ones that were used in the cellar to keep the food cold and preserve it. That power was cut, so the food was rotting. The hotel manager was not allowed to get any supplies from outside. I could see that the manager was very disturbed and he was arguing with those Iraqi army fellows, making some frantic phone calls. It was of no use. They ended up having to take out the rotten food and throw it out.

Food started being rationed. We would get a small plate of rice with a little curry or some *sambhar* (vegetable broth) to go with that, whenever there was

some Indian food prepared. Otherwise we would have just a few slices of bread. The milk was gone, so we were given powdered milk for one or two days until even that stopped. We were given tea or coffee without milk. There was plenty of sugar, so I used to force myself to drink a lot of sugar because I knew that would give me strength as I was starving. I was trying to do the same with Swamiji also.

There is some peculiar type of bread which I think the Gulf people eat — very dry and something like tortillas, but thicker and a little softer. Pieces of that were also given to us. I assumed that the rice would be vegetarian, but once when I took the rice I found that it was mixed with shrimp. I realized that they mix meat with rice, so I had to be careful even with the rice.

The quality of the food was very bad and the quantity was also very small. I was always angry, but I had to tell myself that it was nobody's fault. There wasn't anyone to blame except the Iraqi army. There were plenty of times I was angry at the manager for not giving us proper food, but I had to tell myself that it was not his fault.

Right from the second or third day onwards, the manager was trying to get us into other hotels in Kuwait City. The passengers were split up into three groups and two groups were shifted on the first or second day because there were not enough rooms at the airport to accommodate all the passengers. Swamiji and I were left at the airport hotel. Later on we had the problem of food. We used to get news that there was no problem with food at the other hotels, so the manager sought permission from the army to shift all the passengers out of the airport hotel, but he was never given permission.

The first day Swamiji was fine, but from the second day onwards I knew he was starving. I thought we would have the food in the refrigerator to ourselves, but quickly the manager issued orders to collect all the food that was left in the refrigerators in the rooms and put it in one place so he could ration it out. So we lost that food, even the soft drinks that we had there.

Swamiji would eat food only if he liked it. I used to force myself to eat some rice and curry, but he wouldn't do even that. He couldn't. Only if the curry was cooked properly was he able to eat it. Otherwise he wouldn't.

I had saved a couple of insulin shots that I could give him after he had some food on the flight. I had only that with me. All the rest was in the checked-in baggage. After I gave him those two shots, I had no insulin to give him. Probably that's another reason he

thought he shouldn't be eating much because he would be in danger. There was no insulin.

Inside the room it was quite comfortable. The temperature was not something to complain about. It was when we left the hotel that it was very difficult. Swamiji's foot got bad, I think, because the insulin was not being given to him, so the sugar was not under control.

Swamiji was almost the only passenger who was having food upstairs. All the others were supposed to assemble downstairs at a given time and stand in queues. If you were the last one, there was a chance you wouldn't get your food. We used to wait for the food every morning and night. As soon as they announced the food was ready, we rushed into the queue. Swamiji later said that some Iraqi soldiers came into our room and were surprised to see Swamiji there. Probably they took that opportunity because they knew that all the passengers would be downstairs near the restaurant. Swamiji said they were looking to steal things.

Swamiji watched television continuously. He wouldn't let me rest when there was news on the television. Constantly he was making me change channels to find news broadcasts. He would listen to the news. We got the news only in English, so he asked me to keep notes of what was being said, then translate it to him after the news broadcast was over. This continued for almost all those thirty days we were in Kuwait. Every time there was a news bulletin, I was asked to write it down and then relate it to him.

He was looking at the developments, what was happening regarding Kuwait and what was happening regarding Iraq. Time and again he told us, "***If Russia takes the side of Iraq, that would result in the third world war.***" The U.S. and the allies were trying to force Iraq to retreat and give back Kuwait, but Sadaam Hussein was not doing it. People all over the world were watching tensely to see what Russia would do. Russia didn't take a position for a long, long time. I think it was much later, after we left Kuwait, that Russia finally declared that it would not take sides. In Kuwait and also when we returned back to Bangalore, Swamiji told us that if Russia had taken Iraq's side, it would have ended up in a third world war.

On the 16th of August, the captain and crew were taken away from the airport hotel. Again, we don't know where. We stayed at the airport hotel for fifteen days. It was a few days later that the hotel manager got permission to shift us into the city. They got some busses, but it was not very well organized. We got

down at one hotel and spoke with a British Airways official who told us that there was no accommodation there for us but there were rooms reserved at another hotel. Again we were made to get into the bus and were driven through the city. Everywhere we could see destroyed houses, bombed offices and bombed hotels. There was smoke coming up from the debris all over.

We were taken to another hotel. They were all heavily guarded by Iraqi soldiers carrying machine guns and all. They couldn't understand our language. They couldn't understand a word of English. It was very difficult to communicate with them. The same thing happened. We were told the accommodation was not available there but at the first hotel. They were forcing people to share rooms, and that was not possible with us. Swamiji could not have shared a room with anyone other than me. We needed a room to ourselves. That was probably giving them a problem to fix a room for us. We had to spend a lot of time standing in the lobby or even outside the hotel. We couldn't ask for directions. We didn't know where to go or how to go.

We were again put into the bus to be brought back to the first hotel. I could notice that Swamiji was very tense. At one time, we were left standing on the road with nobody to take care of us. We couldn't talk or communicate with anybody. The heat was intense.

Over the years I served Swamiji, there were two or three occasions when he told me about a danger he foresaw after the event was over. I would only see that he was getting unnecessarily excited, angry and anxious about something when there wasn't anything to worry about. I wouldn't understand, and I would complain to him. "What are you worrying about? Just wait and everything will be fine." But he wouldn't listen to me. And only after everything was set right, then he would tell me that he had had a vision of something that would have happened otherwise, and how we had to correct it. This was one of those examples.

When we were left alone in the lobby, and when we were left on the road, he was always be pushing me, "***Come on. Come on. Get some accommodations. Speak to him. Tell him that this is a guru. You ask him for accommodation. You tell him that we cannot share a room. Come on, get a room first. Go in the queue first.***"

I didn't understand. I thought that British Airways would take care of us. They had been taking care of us and they would take care of us this time, too. But Swamiji kept pushing me to take action. He told me

that we had to find our way back to the first hotel and speak to the British Airways official and nobody else. We should sit in front of his desk and not leave until we got some accommodation.

They took us in the bus some where, opened the door, and signed to us, "Get off." We got out and the vehicle left and we had no idea what to do or where to go. I would approach an officer, greet him and ask for directions, but then I realized he didn't understand English. So what do I do then? How do I explain to them that we were British Airways passengers? How do I explain to them to get us to the British Airways crew members?

Finally we were picked up and taken to the first hotel. We sat down with one of the British Airways officers. This was an old gentleman and he was very nice to us. Somehow he found accommodation and we were checked in the room. That's when Swamiji disclosed to me that he had a vision of us being left on the road without any assistance. ***"All the time I was afraid that that's what was going to happen. It almost happened."***

Only after all that problem was resolved, only after we were given accommodation, he told me that he had a vision that we were left on the road. That was all he said, that he had that vision and he was afraid that that was going to happen, and it almost happened.

The other example was much later, after Kuwait, when Swamiji was sick and the *kaya kalpa* was going on. Inside the darkened room we had to fix Swamiji's mosquito net for him. We were not allowed to hammer nails into the wall, so we had to find some other means. I was putting a big stone on one of the window ledges to hold the string of the mosquito net. He was shouting at me, ***"Don't do that! Don't do that! Find some other method."***

I wouldn't listen because I was thinking that it was safe. I found a bigger stone that would remain stable on the ledge. Again he shouted at me. Finally, I removed the stone to obey him, not for any logical reason, and found some other method of fastening that string. Then he slowly disclosed, ***"I had a vision that a stone had fallen on my head. Then I find you putting that stone on the ledge."***

Then I told him, "Swamiji, why didn't you tell me you had a vision? I would have removed it without arguing with you." He wouldn't do that. He wouldn't tell me about the vision beforehand.

We stayed in the second hotel for about ten days. That hotel was more comfortable. There was a swimming

pool and there was no shortage of food for me, but for Swamiji it was again the problem of the insulin. Although food was available, he was afraid to take it because the increased sugar levels would create more problems for him. I was having different kinds of bread and butter and jam, things like that. That was not the kind of food that he generally had.

I could see that Swamiji was getting weaker and weaker from the lack of food and medicines, especially insulin.

The entire time the passengers were talking about making some attempt to get out by road or flight. These were all attempts that passengers were making in desperation. It was not possible, but we were sitting idle and holding meetings. Swamiji never approved of that. I thought the passengers should sit together, think and find a way out, but he wouldn't allow me to do that. He wouldn't encourage me to attend any of those meetings, and I couldn't understand why. Finally, when the break came, it was not through the passengers' ideas. Probably that was the reason.

Most of the time Swamiji remained awake, unusually. We watched television a lot to get news. The last few days, two or three days, there was a look of anxiety on his face.

I. K. Gujeral, who later became prime minister, was the Indian foreign affairs minister then. It seems that General Hanut approached him through his brother who was also a government minister by then. Other devotees also approached him, saying that Swamiji was stuck at the hotel in Kuwait and he should make arrangements to bring Swamiji out from there. He promised that he would do something about it.

We got some little news in Kuwait that I. K. Gujeral had arrived with a plane to take Indian nationals out with him. I was expecting that he would come and see Swamiji, pranam, and take Swamiji out by the private aircraft that he had brought, or whatever it was. All the time I was thinking that would happen.

We came to know that he went to the other hotel, and not to the hotel where Swamiji was staying. I received a phone call saying that he was looking for Jagadish and Shivabalayogi and he wanted to talk to me. When I talked to him he said that I and Swamiji should go to that other hotel to see him.

I didn't like that, but I knew it was a question of saving our lives. I went to Swamiji and informed him, "Swamiji, this minister has come. He is in the other hotel and he wants us to go and see him. So shall I go there?"

Swamiji said, ***“No. Don’t go there . If he is willing to come here and see me, that’s fine. But if he wants me to go and see him there, or if he wants you on my behalf to go and beg him to take us out of here, no. Don’t do that.”***

That was a dilemma for me. The way I saw it at the time was that my prestige and Swamiji’s prestige was being weighed against a good chance to save our lives. Internally I was perturbed but I knew I had to obey Swamiji. I did not go to the other hotel. I told the minister that he had to come here to see the swamiji and that we were not going there. Nothing happened afterwards. We knew that he returned to India with three British Airways hostesses who were Indian passport holders, some ailing patients, and people like that.

Much later on, only after we reached India, Swamiji explained that it was not just his prestige but the prestige of millions of devotees of Shivabalayogi all over the world. Had Swamiji begged that politician to save him, he would have made all the devotees believe that they owe their guru’s life to him. That wouldn’t have done very good for the prestige of all the devotees.

It was after we learned that the minister had left that we got really discouraged. We thought that was the way out and it was closed when he left without even coming and talking to Swamiji.

I was always afraid that there would be a food shortage in the second hotel like we had at the airport, and that if we had to make our own way out through the desert, we would need food. Whenever we got bread and butter or jam or things that could be preserved, I saved them. There were lots of small packages of honey, dried fruit, nuts and other things that I collected and I saved in Swamiji’s room.

One day, Swamiji asked me to offer some of that food to Ganesha. I must have brought a bowl from the restaurant. We mixed what I had collected in that bowl, then he said, ***“Think of Ganesha. Pray to him. Ask him to get us released.”***

The way he told me that, somehow it brought tears into my eyes that day. I had been confident because I was with my guru. How did it matter what happened? Either he was going to take care of me or even if something happened to me, I didn’t care. I was with my guru. I was with him all the time. But that day when he asked me to pray to Ganesha to get us released, the way he said it brought tears to my eyes.

I prayed to Ganesha and I offered the food to Ganesha. We didn’t have a picture of Ganesha, so in my mind I was offering the food to Swamiji and nobody else. All the events happened very quickly immediately after we did that puja to Ganesha.

Within an hour or so, I got news that flights were being arranged and arrangements were being made to buy tickets for passengers to take them out. It was the evening of the 23rd and they put up a notice saying that passengers could travel to Baghdad on their own and that accommodations have been arranged at Baghdad. The Iraqi government considered Kuwait as one of their cities, so they started domestic flights between Kuwait and other cities in Iraq, mainly Baghdad. That was the time the British Airways passengers were allowed to take these flights. British Airways, I think, was not allowed to pay for that. They were not allowed to pay in English money. The Iraqis considered Kuwait an internal part of Iraq and they refused to accept foreign money for a domestic flight.

We were asked to find own money and buy our own tickets to reach Baghdad. That was when the passengers had a meeting. There was one doctor who had been very active in the other meetings. He would represent the passengers with the hotel management and with British Airways staff and all that. He was asked to prepare a list of people who should be taken out on the first trips. He avoided putting Swamiji’s name on the first list, or even the second list. I realized the first batch was going out, the second batch was getting ready to go, and our names were not on the list.

I came and told Swamiji and he suspected that we were being deliberately left off because the doctor had argued with Swamiji on the first or second day we were in Kuwait. Swamiji had accused Sadaam of sins or something, saying that the Iraqis would be the cause of the third world war or something like that. That annoyed the doctor very much. He wouldn’t show it, but he tried to take revenge on us. The excuse he gave was Swamiji was sick and unable to fly.

Swamiji very quickly understood and told me, ***“Don’t depend on them. Try to talk to the airport manager. Ring up the airport manager. Ask him to arrange us the tickets.”***

I called the manager of the airport hotel. I told him that I was so-and-so who was with Swamiji, and I asked him to get airline tickets from Kuwait to Baghdad. He agreed. He asked me how many tickets. I told him that I would call again to let him know.

There was another meeting scheduled for the passengers to discuss these matters. I got instructions

from Swamiji. ***“Go there. You sit quiet in the meeting. Let the meeting come to an end. Then you go up in front of all the passengers. Make an announcement that we have made arrangements with the manager of the airport hotel and he was preparing to book us air tickets and we could go. Just check who all were willing to come with us.”***

I went to the meeting and waited until the end when I made the announcement that I had made alternative arrangements for us to leave Kuwait and go to Baghdad. I asked who all was willing to join us. Out of probably sixty or seventy that were left there, eight people said that they were willing to join us and they would pay for their tickets.

So those eight, plus the two of us, made ten. I called the airport manager and I told him we wanted ten tickets. He told us to be ready, and that he would deliver the tickets and bring vehicles to take us to the airport. He booked the tickets to leave on the 25th, paid for them, and made the arrangements, all for no selfish reason. He was simply trying to help us. Incidentally, had we not had the cash with us to pay for the tickets, we would not have been able to leave Kuwait for Baghdad because British Airways couldn't have bought us tickets.

By the time the manager arrived at our hotel we were all ready and waiting in the lobby with the money and our bags. We got into the vehicles that he had hired for us and drove to the airport. That was where Swamiji asked me to give the manager some extra money over and above what the tickets had cost. He refused to take it, but Swamiji insisted that it was a gift from the passengers, not a bribe or anything like that, but in appreciation of his help, both during our stay and that hotel and now, to have saved our lives. Swamiji said, ***“It is a gift, so you should accept it.”*** We forced him to accept that gift.

When we were trying to pass through the security to go to the aircraft, Iraqi soldiers with rifles were asking passengers to open all their bags. I told Swamiji, “We have this money in the bag now. These guys are going to find it.”

Swamiji said, ***“Give it to me.”*** He showed that bag to one of the soldiers. The guy opened the zipper and looked at all the five thousand dollars inside. If he picked up the money and kept it for himself, there was nothing we could have done about it. But he opened it, looked at it, and then Swamiji said something to him in Telugu which the soldier would not have understood at all. He listened to what Swamiji said, then just closed

the bag and handed it back to us. We walked into the aircraft.

The British Airways staff in Kuwait reserved rooms for us at a hotel in Baghdad. When we arrived at that hotel, we thought that we were again in the hands of British Airways and it was safe. They were trying to book tickets for us on Iraq airlines flights from Baghdad to Amman. We learned that some of the passengers who had arrived before us, whom the doctor had sent earlier, had already flown out of Baghdad to Amman.

But within a day, they told us that they were unable to book us any tickets. There was some kind of a ban on purchasing tickets for British Airways passengers. They said that the chances of us flying out of Baghdad were getting more and more remote.

Swamiji had been telling me that if people came to know that a yogi with a lot of followers in India was stuck in Kuwait, there was a good chance that the Iraqis would use him as a hostage. He was always trying to keep himself in the room and not letting people know who he was. So he wondered why before he arrived, passengers were given tickets to fly out of Baghdad. How come they were stopping it? Probably they knew that Shivabalayogi was in Baghdad trying to fly out to Amman.

British Airways offered to take us by car. The distance was about a thousand kilometers from Baghdad to Amman. I was afraid. I knew that Swamiji would not be able to take that journey, sitting in the car through the hot desert. I was also afraid that if something happened, then we would be left in the desert without any help at all.

They told us it would be a journey of something like ten or eight hours or something like that. In our minds we thought that we were just going to get into cars, be given some food and water, and the cars would take us to the hotel in Amman where British Airways will take care of us again. That was the picture we were given.

I worried about Swamiji's comfort because his swollen right foot would have to be kept raised over the long drive, but Swamiji was ready to leave. The ten of us got into two Mercedes taxis and soon we were driving through desert over long stretches of very straight roads: no bends, no curves, nothing at all. The road surface was very good, so the cars could travel at very high-speed, speeds like a hundred and forty kilometers an hour, about ninety miles an hour. I am a strong man, but it turned out that it was I and the other passengers who could not tolerate the intense heat and thirst from the Iraqi desert. Swamiji was smiling

throughout, and his cheerfulness and encouragement was of great support to the others.

There was a car coming towards us in the opposite direction when our driver was over taking a truck. The other car flashed its lights to get us to yield, but our driver maintained his speed, overtook the truck, and just got back in our lane when the other car passed us. Just at that the moment, one of the other passengers traveling with us suddenly jumped up and started shouting at the driver, "Oh, oh, oh!"

Swamiji grabbed him by the hand, pulled him down on the seat, and said "**Shut up.**" He said, "**When we are moving, you should not try to do that to the driver. He loses control.**"

Afterwards our driver also told us, "You should not do that to me. When I am driving you should not try to disturb me like that. I know how to take care of ourselves. I know how to drive here. So don't panic like that."

The British Airways people told us that we would get air-conditioned cars so the heat should not be any trouble. But the drivers kept the windows open while we drove through the desert. When I asked them to close the window, they said, "If I closed the window completely I would go to sleep." So the window had to be kept open. Those were the times we had to face the heat, all along the journey. We started at around ten in the morning and by the time we reached the border it was around sunset, so we were exposed to the heat.

I kept a bottle of water with me and I was continuously sipping from it to keep my mouth from getting parched. Swamiji would not drink much water at all. He drank very little. I was surprised. He told me, "**You have to control yourself. You should not drink too much water in the desert like this. It's bad for you.**"

Another lesson I got was when the drivers stopped to have some tea. My mouth was getting parched, so I accepted, but when I checked with Swamiji, he said, "**No.**"

They were drinking out of clay cups. One of the drivers drank out of the cup, put some more tea into the same cup, and offered it to me. I refused. Swamiji pushed me and said, "**Come on. Accept it. You said yes. You said you would take it. Take it now.**"

"Swamiji, but he used the same cup."

He said, "**Those are not the things to bother about now. If you refuse now, you would annoy him. In their culture, it's not wrong to offer the cup from which you have drunk for somebody else to drink. So**

when you are with them, you have to follow their culture." But I couldn't do it, so I refused it.

While we were traveling on the highway, drivers coming from the opposite direction were making some signs with their headlights. Our drivers responded in some way. They talked to each other in this way and then they swerved to the left, taking a road that was off the highway. Our driver particularly could manage a little English. For some reason he had a very high regard for Swamiji. So Swamiji asked me to ask him what was happening. When I checked with him, he told us that somewhere along the highway the Iraqi army was checking all cars for any foreign passengers. He received this information from the drivers coming the other way. That's why he used the small, narrow roads to pass the checkpoints. Then again we returned to the highway and we went to the border.

When we reached the Iraqi side of the border with Jordan, the driver stopped and explained to us that that was where we got off. We asked him, "What next?"

He said, "You will have to get your passports stamped by the Iraqi authorities." There was a huge crowd of people trying to do the same thing. If he had tried to get something done on our own, it would have been standing there for hours without having even any place to sit. That was when the driver offered to help. He said, "Give me your passports. I will go and get it done."

I was little afraid to hand him the passports, but Swamiji said, "**No. Give it to him. Go along with him.**" So we collected the passports of all the passengers and went along with the driver to the office where they were stamping passports. He went in and got it done within a very few minutes, maybe five minutes or so.

The next problem was to find transportation in Jordan because the taxis from Baghdad were not allowed to go into another country. We had to find a vehicle to take us from the border to Amman, a long distance. Swamiji told me to ask our driver to find us a vehicle. He asked us to wait at the cars while he left to talk with some other people. Soon he returned with news that he had found a van that could take all ten of us. He told us, "You don't need to pay him. Just go in this vehicle. Go to the hotel. Tell the British Airways. They will pay this man."

Swamiji blessed our Iraqi drivers. I think he gave him some food or something like that. He also asked all the passengers to collect some money to give to the drivers over and above what British Airways paid them. Swamiji asked the others to give whatever money they

wanted to give, and he made me give some American dollars. We collected all that money and gave it to the leader of the drivers' group and asked him to distribute it among themselves. Swamiji later said that the taxi driver who drove them from Baghdad to Amman became a devotee of Swamiji. When we tried to pay the driver, he refused to accept anything. He had recognized Swamiji as a great soul and refused any payment. "You are my Allah. How can I accept money?"

We crossed the border at 11 P.M. on the 25th of August. Our new vehicle was an old, rickety van. As we were about to leave, we were so happy to be leaving Iraq that we were almost celebrating, shouting with joy. That was when Swamiji said, "**Take out the remaining food.**" We still had some food that was given to us for the drive. Swamiji told all the passengers, "**Take the food out, whatever is left.**" We collected the food and he said, "**Give it to the people here. They are all starving. They don't have any food.**"

There were many people on the border trying to get their passports stamped. They didn't have any food for their journey. They didn't have any cars or vehicles. I don't know how they managed to get there or what they would do next. We had the vehicle because British Airways had made arrangements and was paying for it, but for others, there wasn't anyone providing them with food or transportation.

In my own mind, I was afraid that we would not have food for the rest of our journey, but I was afraid to speak. I just collected all the food and distributed it among the people who were there. Then we drove to the Jordanian side of the border and again it was the driver, this time the Jordanian, who helped us. Swamiji made me collect all ten passports and go with the driver to the window where we spoke to a Jordanian officer. He stamped all the passports, and within a few minutes we were off for Amman.

It was only after we left the border that we realized that we had to travel another 350 kilometers. We

calculated that it would take all night. I was dozing off. I could see that all the other passengers were dozing off. The seats were not comfortable. They were benches without anything to rest on. The whole night we traveled. It was very uncomfortable, but Swamiji stayed awake throughout. He would crack jokes with the other passengers and the driver, and he would talk to them and keep them all happy throughout the drive.

At one point it looked like the driver also dozed off. It was still in the desert when we hit a car coming in the opposite direction. The rear view mirrors of each vehicle hit each other. Both drivers pulled over and I was afraid that they would start fighting over who was in the wrong and all that. They greeted each other, looked at each vehicle, then shook hands and both drove away.

It was almost dawn when we reached Amman. We had no sleep that night, but immediately after reaching there, British Airways staff wanted to speak to us. They came to our room about an hour after we checked in. Swamiji had told me, "**Come on, give me a bath.**" So I gave him a shower, scrubbed him nicely and then brought him back to the bedroom. He was sitting on the bed when we heard a knock on the door. It was the British Airways staff again asking to interview Swamiji.

That was a long interview. They had been sent to interview the passengers and get some feedback from them as to what all happened in Iraq, how we were treated there, how the army was disregarding our requests for medicine, food and water and didn't take care of us at all. It was in that interview that Swamiji said that Sadaam Hussein was to be blamed. One of those British girls said, "I would like to go and kill him now."

Swamiji replied, "**Yes, you have my blessings. Go and do it.**"