

MASONRY IN SYRIA.

ADDRESS AT "MINBA."

An address of some importance was delivered at a recent meeting of "Minba" (Masons in New Britain Areal. the subject being The Re-establishment of Freemasonry in Syria in 1941."

The address was delivered by a Padre, whose name was unfortunately omitted.

"For many years Syria-American Lodge, No. 1. has functioned successfully under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of the State of New York. Many of the members were of the American University at Beyrout. In addition there were brethren of many other nationalities—Arabic, Syrian, French, etc. With the coming of the Vichi-Nazi regime Masonry had to be abandoned until such time as it could be re-established.

"I was not at this time a member of the Craft. I was attached to an Australian unit serving on Syria. It was not long before I realised that among my friends were two who were 'conspicuous,' and that they were in constant touch with Dr. Albert of Beyrout, Worshipful Master of the Lodge there. There were 'comings and goings.' and I was soon aware of certain happenings and realised what lay behind it all. Later I had the great pleasure of meeting Dr. Albert and subsequently submitted my name for admission to the Craft, my two friends being my sponsors. After my initiation. I was able to learn something of the difficulties and. indeed, dangers which Freemasonry had recently encountered."

The story is briefly as follows:— "It seems that the Vichy-French had marked for attention certain members of the Craft, especially the Worshipful Master, who was known to be strongly pro-British, and also of Jewish nationality.

"In addition, Dr. Albert was the British Pharmacist in Beyrout, and his home was known as a meeting place for visiting brethren from overseas. Most of the members of the Lodge, being American citizens, had been recalled to the United States when the political horizon looked black. The remainder disbanded, records were either destroyed or secreted, and the furnishings of the Temple were hidden in the Lebanese mountains.

"As the pro-Nazi influence increased, the dangers of the Craft multiplied. Fears were justified when, without warning, the W.M. was arrested at his home by the Vichy authorities, taken away and kept in solitary confinement. No charge was laid against him and he was denied all opportunity of communicating with his family or anybody outside the gaol. His wife and family were given no indication of his whereabouts or his fate. Attempts were made to communicate with him, but without avail. The anxiety felt on his behalf can readily be imagined, and the W.M, himself was most distracted at being unable to communicate with his family and friends. After a term of solitary confinement in the gaol in Beyrout, Dr. Albert was transferred to the gaol at Aleppo, where he was again subjected to a like confinement.

"About this time the A.I.F. and British Forces had commenced the offensive and were making some headway against strong opposition,

"All British officers who had been taken prisoners of war by the Vichy-French, together with any civilian officials who had previously been arrested. were being flown out of Syria for transportation to Germany, there to be handed to the appropriate officials. This meant, of course, that some were destined to be handed over to the Gestapo. An Arabic brother, a member of the gaol staff, managed to get a message to the W.M. that he was to be taken to Germany.

The outlook was indeed grim for a Freemason who held high office, a member of the Jewish community, known to be strongly pro-British, and a well-known identity in the life of Beyrout.

"The story takes a happier turn. The day before he was to be emplaned for Germany, British Forces occupied Aleppo and he was released, Now that Beyrout was in our hands, it was possible for him to return to his family. It was not long before the brethren gathered together and discussed plans for the future of Masonry. It appeared that little could be done. The majority of the members had left the country, no premises were

available, much had been destroyed for security reasons. Finances were very low and the future looked desperate. It was then that one of my friends in my Unit contacted Dr. Albert and offered all the help the A.I.F. could give. This was readily and gratefully accepted. Contacts were made in Units throughout the area. Generous financial help was forthcoming, in addition to labour and material. Temporary premises were rented, and the Lodge was ready to commence work. And here I should like to record that the prime mover in organising the preparation as far as the A.I.F. was concerned was Bro. H. R. Overett, of Fortitude, 439. New South Wales. He was appointed Secretary, and it was largely due to his devotion and labours that so many of the A.I.F. found a welcome at the Lodge, and some who were not able to be present owing to duties and a temporary stay in the area, always found a most cordial welcome at the home of the W.M.

"I was initiated to the First Degree in the presence of some 60 members of the A.I.F., in addition to many other brethren. This was the first initiation under the re-established Lodge, and I subsequently was passed, raised, and became Chaplain of the Lodge.

The Volume of the Sacred Law used on that occasion, at the suggestion of the W.M.. was sent to the Governor-General of Australia, Lord Gowrie, as a token of appreciation from Syrio-American Lodge, No. 1, for the part the A.I.F. had played in the re-establishment of Masonry in Syria, and for the liberation from the forces of Vichy and Nazi. Lord Gowrie subsequently acknowledged the receipt of the V.S.L.

"Sufficient to say that all was well established and soon the Lodge became a meeting place, not only for the few remaining members, but for the A.I.F. and many members of all branches of H.M. Forces. It is of interest that Dr. Albert is a fluent linguist, and there were few visitors he could not welcome in their own language. I recall that on one occasion members of 20 countries were present. These included brethren from Australia, New Zealand. South Africa, Canada, U.S.A., England, Scotland. Egypt. Armenia, Poland (these were officers and men who had made their way to Palestine after the fall of their country). Greece, Lebanon. Syria, Trans-Jordania, and Iraq, and of the Jewish community (some of whom were refugees from the Nazis).

"Dr. Albert's son. Dr. Solomon Naphthali Albert. B.A., M.D. succeeded his father as W.M., but soon after taking office left with the Hadfield Spiers Medical Mission for work in the desert.

"Dr. Albert, sen., is now Acting-W.M.. and under his wise guidance and inspiration the Lodge continues its work in harmony."
—"N.S.W. Freemason."