

INTRODUCTION

I AM THE KEEPER of my family's stories. I am the guardian of its honor. I am the defender of its traditions. As the first-born son of a Kurdish father, these, they tell me, are my duties. And yet even before my birth I resisted.

Our first clash — really more of a proxy battle — was over my name. My father wanted to call me Aram, after the swath of ancient Syria where the first Aramaic-speaking tribes dwelt in the second millennium B.C. A son named Aram would be a thread through three thousand years of history, uncoiling through Israel and Kurdistan back to a patch of land between the Habur and Euphrates rivers where my father's native language first graced the lips of man. A son named Aram would pass this awesome birthright to his own son, and that son to his, on and on down the line, like princes in a fairy tale.

This may have been my father's reasoning. But it was not my mother's. She seemed to understand me even before I was born, because she didn't much care for Aram. As an American she knew the cruelty of children to kids with weird names. Aram, she told my father, was a nonstarter.

And so even before I drew a breath, I had landed my first blow.

OURS WAS A CLASH of civilizations, writ small. He was ancient Kurdistan. I was 1980s L.A.

He grew up in a dusty town in northern Iraq, in a crowded mud-brick shack without electricity or plumbing. I grew up in a white stucco ranch house in West Los Angeles, on a leafy street guarded by private police cruisers marked BEL-AIR PATROL.

Our move to Los Angeles in 1972, when I was a year old and he was hired as a professor at UCLA, did not discernibly increase my father's awareness of modernity. He bought suits off the bargain rack at J. C. Penney, in pastel plaids that designers had intended for the golf course, then wore them cluelessly to campus faculty meetings. I bought bermudas and T-shirts at Santa Monica surf shops and wore them like a uniform, even on winter visits to my mother's family in Connecticut.

His hair was a froth of curls that he cut himself with a 50-cent razor comb. I had my mom take me to Beverly Hills salons and sculpted my hair with gobs of KMS gel. My father listened to Kurdish dirges on an off-brand tape recorder whose batteries he lashed in place with rubber bands. I got behind my rock drum set and kept time with bootleg recordings of the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

My father spent the day in his home office in a threadbare bathrobe, inscribing index cards with cryptic notations in Aramaic. I spent the day in the backyard with my skateboarder friends, hammering together a quarter-pipe. His accented English was a five-car pileup of malapropisms and mispronunciations. Mine, a smooth California vernacular, tinkling with grace notes like "rad," "lame," and "mellow." ("Mellow," the verb, as in, "Mellow, dude.")

When we collided, it wasn't pretty. I threw tantrums and unleashed hailstorms of four-letter words. He stewed privately over how any son could behave that way toward his father, then consoled himself with the hypothesis that this was how children were in America.

Mostly, though, I kept my distance. He lived in his world, I in mine.

I can't remember the timing exactly, but at some point, as a teenager, I even stopped calling him *Abba* or Dad. He was just "Yona." He was the odd-looking, funny-talking man with strange grooming habits who lived with us and who may or may not have been my father, depending on who was asking.

Soon enough it didn't matter. I went away to New England for college and got a job with a daily newspaper. I lived for the big story — nerve-jangling, caffeine-fueled pieces about cops shot in the streets, lawmakers caught with their hands in the till, factories spewing illegal waste into rivers.

My father holed up in his home office and, with his sons off to college, burrowed deeper into his studies of the language and folklore of his own obscure tribe: the Jews of Kurdistan. There were days when I wondered whether there had been a mix-up in the hospital's delivery room. Maybe a real Aram, one worthy of the name, anyway, was out there somewhere, being raised by a Porsche-driving Hollywood-agent dad who wished he could get through to his quiet son, if only he could pry the boy from that dog-eared copy of *Linguistic Peculiarities in Aramaic Magic Bowl Texts*.

The sense that I might have gotten my father wrong — and that I might actually be his son — came slowly. A turning point was a chilly night in December 2002, when my wife gave birth to our first child, a boy with fine dark hair and eyes like softly burning lanterns. Would Seth break with me as I had with my own father? Would he, too, think he had nothing to learn and his father, nothing to teach?

“Who are you?” Seth, with those eyes, seemed to be asking, as his mother deposited him into my arms that cold night.

I was thirty-one years old, but I had no answer.

Making things right with my father, and my son, would take work. I lacked the big-heartedness of, say, Barney the Dinosaur or even Dr. Phil. I was defensive. I didn't have it in me to just go home, ask my father's forgiveness, and then embrace through tears as some studio audience burst into applause.

So I did the thing that felt most natural: I reached for a reporter's notepad. If I dug far enough, asked enough questions, I thought I might find the girders that linked his world to mine.

My father had staked his life on the notion that the past mattered more than anything. His people, the Jews of Kurdistan, were the world's oldest Jewish diaspora. Earthy, hardworking, and deeply superstitious, they had lived in isolated mountain villages alongside Muslim Kurds for nearly 2,700 years but never abandoned their ancient tongue: Aramaic. Aramaic had been the lingua franca, or common language, of the Near East for two thousand years. Jesus spoke it. Parts of the Bible were inked in it. Three Mesopotamian empires used it as their official language. But by the time of my father's birth, in 1938, it was all but dead. After Islamic armies conquered the region in the seventh century, Middle Eastern Jews

switched to the Arabic of their Muslim neighbors. Aramaic clung to life in just one place: on the lips of Jews, and some Christians, in Kurdistan.

And so the past lived in and through my father's people. Language was their lifeline to a time and place that no longer was.

My father believed that his past anchored him. Without a tether to our ancestors, we were lost, particularly there in L.A.'s suburban desert. That belief helped vault him to the top of his field as a professor of Neo-Aramaic, the fancy name for his language's terminal phase, its death rattle. His efforts to save his mother tongue won him promotions into the highest tier of professors at UCLA, a level reserved for those with international reputations for major advances in their field. His life's work was a Jewish Neo-Aramaic-to-English dictionary, published in 2002, the first of its kind, a gilded graveyard for dying words.

The journal *Mediterranean Language Review* called the dictionary "the culminating point of more than three decades of uninterrupted linguistic activity. . . . Considering that the Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialects are on the verge of extinction, as a result of massive emigration of the Kurdistan Jews to Israel at the beginning of the 1950s, the author's activity becomes crucial for recording a linguistic and cultural reality which will soon disappear from the face of the earth," the reviewer wrote. "How wonderful it would be if all the endangered languages of the world could boast such a devoted and so highly qualified native to preserve them from oblivion." Over the years, Harvard, Yale, Cambridge, and the Sorbonne, among other elite universities the world over, invited him to lecture.

Academics weren't his only admirers. Because we lived near Hollywood, film and television producers sometimes dropped a line. They were looking, they often said, for a man who spoke the language of Jesus. My father tried to help. When the makers of the movie *The Celestine Prophecy* asked him to translate "nuclear fusion" into Aramaic, my father responded, a little apologetically, that Aramaic's linguistic development preceded nuclear science.

"Make something up," the producer nudged.

So my father approximated. "How about 'seed mix'?" he said. *Seed*, like nucleus, he explained. *Mix*, for fusion.

“That’s a take,” the producer said.

For the 1977 movie *Oh, God!* he inked the Aramaic quiz with which George Burns, in the title role, proves His bona fides to a panel of skeptical clergy. More recently, for an episode of the HBO comedy series *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, he helped an actor learn the Aramaic for “My foot! My foot!”

“Recite it slowly,” the producer coached. “Like you’ve stepped on, say, a nail and are in pain.”

The Hollywood callers never offered my father much money, and in his innocent way, he never bargained for more. He was mostly just happy that here, in Los Angeles, light years from his hometown in Kurdistan, someone — anyone — wanted to speak his language.

WHO IS MY FATHER? How did he wind up so far from home? I wrote this book in part to answer those questions. I wanted to conjure the gulfs of geography and language he crossed on his way from the hills of Kurdistan to the highways of Los Angeles. But I also had other, bigger questions: What is the value of our past? When we carry our languages and stories from one generation to the next, from one country to another, what exactly do we gain?

For many Jewish Kurds of my father’s generation, the answer was little. Stigmatized in Israel as back-country rubes, many lost touch with their culture, seeing no use in passing it to their children. Who could blame them? Israel was forging a new national identity on European ideals, and the old country was a millstone best left behind. For complicated reasons, however, my father couldn’t let go. For him, the past felt safe, like a hiding place. He found that if handled carefully, if studied in the right angle of light, the past could carry you to new worlds.

Shunning my father and his strange looks and funny accent seemed smart when I was a boy. But what if I had been wrong? What if the past could remake you? What if it could redeem?

In my father’s obsession with his mother tongue, I had already glimpsed this: If you knew which levers to pull, you could stop time just long enough to save the things you loved most.

ZAKHO

MIDDLE EAST CENTRE ARCHIVE, ST. ANTONY'S COLLEGE, OXFORD.
FREYA STARK COLLECTION. ALBUM IRAQ NORTH NO. 119, "ZAKHO 1957."



Road above Zakho, 1957.

1 ♦ What's in a Name

Which are you, Ariel Sabar or Ariel Sabagha?" the fat man asked, sizing me up with his one good eye. "Which?"

It was a crisp February evening in 2005 in Jerusalem's gritty Katamonim neighborhood. The Katamonim is the heart of Kurdish Jerusalem, rows of tumbledown Soviet-style apartment blocks where Israel had deposited its poorest immigrants in the 1950s and where most stayed until their bodies were carted off by the bearded undertakers of the Kurdish Burial Society. Floral-print house dresses dangled from balcony laundry lines, and courtyard grapevines withered in the unusually cold air. I had come here to learn more about my family. I was particularly keen on stories about my great-grandfather. Ephraim Beh Sabagha had been the only fabric dyer in Zakho, a dusty northern Iraqi town just south of the Turkish border. But he was famous less for the vats of dye in his market stall than for the strange cries that pierced the stone walls of Zakho's synagogue during his nightly prayer vigils. "He spoke," people told me, usually in hushed tones, "to angels."

A few days earlier I had found his only surviving photograph, fastened with rusting staples to a water-stained ID booklet from the Israeli Interior Ministry. The picture was from 1951, the year he came from Iraq. His face has a beatific animation: the mirthful eyes, drooping a little at the corners, as if in rapture at the world's wonders; the faint smile on his lips, as though he possesses some private knowledge he burns to share; the ears pressed out at odd angles by the *poshiya* turban around his head; the unkempt beard, a black tangle made striking by the shock of silver that flares under his chin like a flame. The face is so arresting that it wasn't until much later that I noticed his body, which is pictured only from the chest up. It is a pixie's, with sloping shoulders and a sunken chest. It seemed altogether too small to carry around that extravagant head.

All the Kurds I had spoken to in Israel said that if I wanted to know more about my great-grandfather, I should talk to Zaki Levi. A Zakho native who had helped organize the Jewish exodus from that town, he became a Kurdish *macher* in Israel, a swaggering operator with a roly-poly frame, who liked to drop the names of the Israeli generals and politicians he had dined with over the years. More important, he was said to have an encyclopedic memory of the Jews' last days in Zakho.

So one chilly February evening I walked up the dimly lit steps of Levi's Katamonim apartment.

"Which are you, Sabar or Sabagha?" he repeated, with a dubious glance. He wouldn't let me through the door until I answered. I saw now what he was asking: Are you the great-grandson of Ephraim Beh Sabagha, Ephraim the Dyer of Zakho, or a son of America whose father had seen fit to clean up the family name?

"Sabar," I said.

Levi looked away, and I felt suddenly ashamed.

"Well, okay," he said. "Come in. I'll tell you about *me*."

He led me on a tour of his apartment, pointing out photographs of himself with Moshe Dayan, Chaim Weizmann, and other Israeli dignitaries. When he saw me staring at his clouded-over left eye, he explained that he was getting ready to give a speech at a Socialist rally in one of Israel's immigrant camps in the 1950s when angry Communists began hurling rocks. "Ben-Gurion was speaking first," Levi said gravely. "I stepped between him and the rock."

There was a knock at the door, and in came a parade of prominent Israeli Kurds — a businessman, a poet, a lawyer, the chairman of the National Organization of Kurdish Jews in Israel. Levi bid us sit at a long table his wife had covered with delicacies: golden fried *kubeh*, spiced *ur-jeh* kabobs, a pile of pita, garlic-eggplant dip, chopped beets, shredded lemon peels dusted with curry. "This feast is like the sultan of Baghdad's!" Levi declared, slapping the table so hard the dishes rattled. "A thousand and one nights!"

I wanted to start in on a long list of questions, but this man with the barrel chest, small nose, and pencil-thin mustache seemed to have other priorities. He sank into a high-backed chair at the head of the ta-

ble and clicked the TV to the KurdSat satellite channel, broadcast from Sulaymānīyah in the heart of Kurdish Iraq. The screen flashed with Kurdish music videos: a woman in a shimmering dress swaying in the tall grass of a lush mountainside. The words *Kurd Live*, in English, scrolled across the screen.

The photographs, the food, the Kurdish machers, the music. Was this some kind of crash course on my heritage, on the side of me that was Sabagha? All I had come for were a few family stories.

It was two hours later, after we had stuffed ourselves and listened to dozens of Levi's jokes, that he finally leveled his good eye at me.

"Ephraim, your great-grandfather, was a genius," he began suddenly.

I pulled out my notebook.

"He went to Zakho's big synagogue every night. It was big, six *dunams*. It had a courtyard with a *mikveh*. The ark took up an entire room, with the Torah and a place for holy water."

Levi tore a piece of paper from my notebook. He sketched a diagram of the synagogue's layout, drew a square representing a fine Persian rug, and put an X on the spot where my great-grandfather sat. Ephraim whiled away the night there, by turns reading books, napping, and conversing aloud with spirits only he could see. "He'd come at two A.M. and stay until morning," Levi told me. "When people started filtering in for prayer at five A.M., they'd hear him all of a sudden start screaming, '*Elohim, baruch, baruch, shmo!*'" Oh, God! How Blessed His Name!

"Did people think he was pious or off his rocker?"

"No!" Levi said. "Pious! He carried himself like a holy man. But he was also a simple man, a working man."

Everyone, it seemed, knew which prayer book was his: The margins were dappled with smudges, from fingers that had spent the day soaking in dyes.

"Please, Mr. Levi," I said, at the edge of my seat now. "What else do you remember?"

But Levi pulled away. He patted the air in front of him in slow motion, as though applying brakes. His point was clear: It was Zaki Levi, and Zaki Levi alone, who would decide when stories about Zakho would begin and when stories about Zakho would end.

“Leaht, leaht,” he counseled. Slowly, slowly.

Later that evening he leaned over his ample stomach toward a tray of decanters filled with brightly hued liquids.

“What you like?” he said, turning to me. “Wine? Cocktail? Arak?” I had never tried the anise-flavored liqueur, but I remembered reading that it was a favorite after-dinner drink among the Kurds, some of whom also drank it during and before dinner.

“Arak,” I replied.

Levi smiled at me for the first time. Then he poured the liquid into a row of hourglass-shaped snifters, dropping in ice cubes and a splash of water, which turned the drink a cloudy pear color.

The liquor burned my throat and I winced.

Levi was beaming. “Hah!” he said. “Now, you are Sabagha.”

If only it were that easy.