

THE INSIDE VIEW

Ariel Sabar

Ariel Sabar, 37, grew up in Los Angeles, the skateboarding son of a Kurdish immigrant who is among the last native speakers of ancient Aramaic, the language of Jesus' time. In 2005, Sabar left his job as a D.C.-based journalist and traveled to Iraq with his father in search of his heritage. The fruit of his journey is the recently published book "My Father's Paradise: A Son's Search for his Jewish Past in Kurdish Iraq."



ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Do you consider yourself to be of a specific faith?

I'm a Jew. I'm not particularly observant, but I draw pride — and a sense of identity — from the often inspiring and sometimes wrenching stories of Jewish survival in exile. I'm also grateful for Larry David and Jon Stewart.

During your time in Zakho, your father's hometown in northern Iraq, did you gain any unexpected insights into life as an American?

One day, at the house of our Kurdish guide in Zakho, I realized I needed to check something in my American passport. When I pulled it from my pocket, I noticed our guide's twentysomething son, a star student with a promising future, studying it as if it were a kind of magic object.

"You don't realize how powerful that passport is," the son told me.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Everyone recognizes it," he said. "You can go anywhere."

He said he longed to see more of the world, but that his Iraqi passport could get him no farther than Turkey. I realized that day just how many freedoms Americans take for granted, and how many the Iraqi people — even the Kurds — have yet to achieve.

Many people reach an age when capturing their heritage becomes especially important. Is any amount of trying enough?

If you want to capture your past — in the sense of trapping it in amber — no amount of trying is enough. It will almost always elude you. Where I wanted flesh and blood, I often found only shadows and footprints. But I think the search is what matters. It will teach you something about who you are and how you got here.

What is one way in which your relationship with your father was altered or enriched by the experience of researching and writing the book?

My father and I are still different people: he, tentative and cautious, I, strong-willed and risk-taking. We still don't always see eye to eye. But the book gave us something precious: a common vocabulary. When we're on the phone and small talk gives way to awkward silence, I have a way now to get us talking again. And it's by asking him to tell me more stories about life as a Jewish boy in northern Iraq, about his mother tongue of Aramaic, about his improbable journey from a mud shack in Kurdistan to a professor's office at UCLA. I feel like the book has given us another chance.

At your core, what is one of your defining beliefs?

I believe that we are where we come from as much as what we make of ourselves.