

A conversation with ARIEL SABAR

Q: You had a good job at a good newspaper, your career was growing, and then all of a sudden, you quit your job and holed up in a Maine farmhouse for a couple years to try to reconstruct your family's history. As I understand it, you didn't even have a book contract when you quit your job. That's a pretty risky move. Why did you feel so strongly that you had to tell this story now?

A: My father was in his late sixties, and the Kurdish Jews of his generation—the last ones with vivid memories of life in Iraq—were getting older. I worried that if I didn't act, they would take their precious memories to the grave. Most children and grandchildren of the Kurdish-born Jews I met had little interest in or knowledge of their roots. As I grew more curious about my father's past, I began to feel a kind of a duty—both as a son and a journalist—to record some of their remarkable stories before it was too late. My only regret is that I didn't start sooner. I have so many questions I wish I could have asked my father's mother and father, but they had passed away before I got started.

Q: You were something of a brat as a boy, nearly getting kicked out of Jewish camp and earning more than your share of detentions at your Hebrew day school in West Los Angeles. You blame a lot of your misbehavior on the embarrassment you felt about having an immigrant father with a Middle Eastern accent and a, well, unusual fashion sense. But don't all kids think their parents are weird? Isn't this just ordinary teenage rebellion?

A: On one level, absolutely. I mean, I did think my mom, who was born in America, was embarrassing, too. But trying to grow up cool in 1980s Los Angeles, an image conscious place in any decade, I felt a particular resentment toward my father. He was a bad dresser in a fashionable city—his pastel plaid suits looked like they belonged on a 1960s-era golf course, except that he didn't play golf or any other sport. He drove a beat-up Toyota Tercel in a land of Audis and BMWs. When his car's radio broke, he bought a handheld transistor radio from Radio Shack and hung it over the turn signal. And he came from a part of the world that frightened many people, particularly after the late-1970s Iranian hostage crisis. If it was teenage rebellion, it was directed very specifically against my father—and institutions like Jewish schools and camps that I saw as proxies for him.

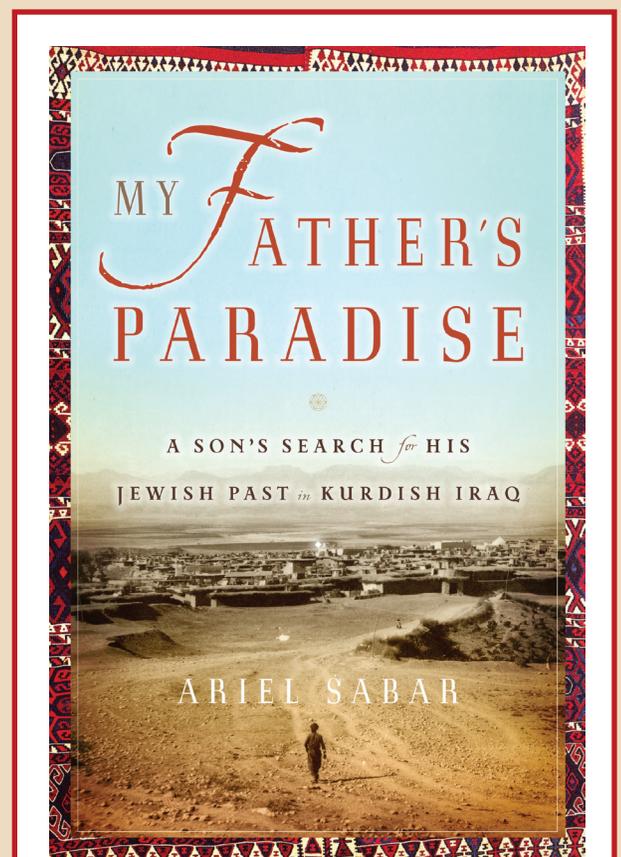
Q: So when you grew up and finally had the courage to tell people about your heritage, what kind of reaction did you get?

A: I can't tell you how many times I have had well-educated Jews tell me, with eyes wide, "You mean there were Jewish Kurds? I had no idea. I didn't even know there were Jews in Iraq." It still surprises me how little known the story of Iraqi Jewry is, particularly given how central its role was in the history of Judaism. They were part of the first group of Jews exiled from ancient Israel, and they considered themselves direct descendants of the Lost Tribes. The Jews of Iraq were the largest diaspora in the Middle East at the time of their return to Israel in the early 1950s. It's a little hard to believe now, but before World War II, fully one-third of Baghdad's population was Jewish.

Q: So did the Jews of Baghdad or central Iraq—the so-called Babylonian Jews—have much in common with the Kurdish Jews up north?

A: They were very different. The Babylonian Jews wrote the Talmud, built big yeshivas, ran major businesses, held high government offices and spoke Arabic. The Kurdish Jews, by contrast, lived as tiny minorities in far-flung mountain towns, largely cut off from the centers of Jewish life and even from other Kurdish Jews. They were so isolated that they still spoke Aramaic, the ancient language of Jesus. What makes their story so compelling to me is that they managed to keep their faith, their language, and their culture alive over nearly three thousand years despite the greatest of odds.

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My Father's Paradise

BY ARIEL SABAR

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Q: There is a heartbreaking story in the book about your father's older sister, Rifqa, who was kidnapped as an infant and never found. When you journeyed to Iraq in 2005 you tried to find her, wondering if perhaps she was still alive. Asking questions in post-war Iraq about a Jewish girl kidnapped by Arabs some seventy years ago seems like a pretty dangerous proposition. At times during your search, you seem to come a little unhinged, even detached from reality. Why did this quest to find her become such an obsession?

A: In retrospect, yes, it really did become more of a mania than was healthy, as my father, who was with me, would be happy to attest. During my search, I think that bratty boy was still somewhere inside me. I thought that one simple act of derring-do—finding my long-lost aunt in war-torn Iraq—would be enough to redeem my many shortcomings, as a son and as a Jew. The more this ghost of our family's past slipped through my fingers, the more desperately I grasped for her.

Q: Your father seems like a fairly humble man—not the sort of person who seeks the limelight. How did he feel when you told him you wanted to write a book about him?

A: I'm not sure he thought I was serious at first. I hadn't showed much interest in my roots before, and I suspect he thought that it was just a passing idea. But when I quit my job and started talking about dragging him back to his hometown in Iraq, he realized this wasn't going away. It's true that my father is very much allergic to the spotlight. He has been teaching college for more than thirty years, but he still gets stage fright on the first day of class each quarter. In many ways, it's cultural for him. Jews survived in Kurdistan for nearly three thousand years because they kept their heads down, kept quiet, and got ahead by self-reliance, not self-promotion. So in some respects, I think he was a little uncomfortable about being the subject of a book. But I also think there is pride. He devoted his career to preserving the language and culture of his forgotten people. And to have his American-born son pick up the reins, however belatedly, I get the sense there is some pride in that.

Q: Paradise is a leitmotif of the book, and at first glance, a reader might think it refers only to Zakho, your father's hometown in Kurdish Iraq. But it's more complicated than that, isn't it?

A: It is. In fact, each of the principal settings of the book represents a kind of paradise: Zakho, where Jews and Christians lived in harmony with the Muslim majority; Israel, the long-sought promised land of the Jewish people; and Los Angeles, a dream factory at the edge of the new world where people come to conjure their own Edens. The thing about our ideas of paradise is that some are not all that they seem. That was certainly true for my grandparents and great-grandparents in Israel, where Kurds, and other Sephardic Jews, struggled against poverty and bigotry and suffered great disappointments. At the same time, some paradises are of our own making. And I think that is true of Los Angeles—and America—for my father. My father and I were in the food court of a fancy outdoor mall in West Los Angeles a while ago, and there, drinking his iced coffee, clutching some book on ancient languages, and feeling the warm breeze against his face, he said, "Ariel, I feel like we're in some little Zakho." I didn't understand him at the time, but I think I do now.

Q: When people look at the headlines about Iraq today, they see sectarian hatred, violence, and chaos. Is there anything your book can teach us about today's Iraq?

A: The main thing, I hope, is that there was a time not all that long ago when Iraq was a model of religious tolerance and multi-cultural coexistence. It was a place where for thousands of years Jews and Christians and Muslims practiced their own faiths and lived and worked together as neighbors, business partners, and friends. If the history of Iraq teaches us anything, it's that there is nothing inevitable about the state of affairs there now.

Q: Are there any bright spots you'd point to in Iraq right now?

A: The Kurdish north. The Kurds are Muslim, of course, but their schools are actually teaching children in an open-minded way about Christianity and Judaism. When my father and I visited, the Kurds welcomed us with open arms. Many fondly recalled their friendships and business dealings with long-departed Jews. And to my amazement, the Muslim Kurds of Zakho still call the district where my father lived The Jewish Neighborhood. Saddam Hussein had tried to rename it the Liberated Quarter, but everyone in Zakho still calls it by its old name, even though Jews haven't lived there for more than fifty years. So I think there is cause for hope.

Q: So if searching for your aunt didn't provide the kind of redemption you were hoping for, where did you wind up finding it?

A: I'm not sure I'm there yet, but I feel like I'm on firmer ground now. For me, it's with my son, Seth, who just turned five. I am very far from a perfect Jew. I married outside the faith, I don't go to temple every Saturday, I don't always keep Kosher. But I try in small ways to teach Seth where he came from, to connect him with his roots. I show him photos of my trip to Zakho. We listen to Kurdish music on my laptop. I taught him the Shabbat prayers, which he recites over the candles and bread on Friday nights. I take him to temple. I'm showing him the letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and he's learned some basic words. The point, for me, is that passing our culture to the next generation isn't always easy. It can't be achieved in one brilliant master stroke. America makes it possible to be who you want to be. That is its genius. But a consequence of that freedom and acceptance is that it's easy to forget where you came from. Striking the right balance is a daily struggle, a daily negotiation, and one that I am still very much working on. We can't stop the clock. We can't pretend that traditions are unending, or that each generation will invariably pick up where the last left off. But if I learned anything from my father's quest to preserve his vanishing language and culture, it's that we have the power to hold on to the parts of our past we value most.