

THE ALGONKIAN



*“My father and me. Ours was a clash of civilizations.
He was ancient Kurdistan. I was 1980s L.A.”*

(See page 4.)



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EDITOR: *Andra Olenik*

MY FATHER, THE LINGUIST OF KURDISTAN

by Ariel Sabar

EDITOR'S NOTE: *In order to explore the Jewish community of Kurdish Iraq for My Father's Paradise, Ariel Sabar first had to come to terms with his own com-*



Ariel Sabar,
author of
My Father's Paradise



The first thing I heard was a gasp somewhere above me. I looked up, bleary from the transatlantic flight to London, and noticed two young couples staring down from the top of the long escalator that lifts riders from the Underground to the city's Mayfair district. They weren't looking at me, I saw now, but past me. I spun around and saw the reason: my father was knotted in a fetal position and tumbling noiselessly down the moving steps. I watched his body wedge between the guardrails and stop, his left cheek flush with the step's metal claw.

My thoughts pinballed as I raced toward him. Was he hurt? Was there a hospital nearby? Would we have to call off our trip to Iraq? He had complained before we left of a sore back and bad knees. I had brushed it aside as just his latest round of excuses. I had assured him that he would survive Iraq. But now, it seemed, he could

pllicated relationship to a Kurdish Jew—his own father. Here he gives a glimpse of his maiden journey to Iraq via London with his father.

scarcely navigate London.

My father and I had been at war over my plan to travel to his hometown in Iraq. I had quit my job as a reporter at the *Baltimore Sun* to write my father's story—how a Jewish boy born to an illiterate mother in the mountains of Kurdish Iraq wound up at UCLA as a professor of Aramaic, his ancient mother tongue. But I wanted the book to be something more: a way to repair a relationship with a man I had always kept at arm's length.

Trying to grow up cool in 1980s Los Angeles, I wanted nothing to do with him. His hair, a froth of curls combed over to one side, embarrassed me as a kid, even though some of my friends compared it to Einstein's. His pastel-plaid JCPenney suits would have won more style points on the back nine than at the faculty club, except that he didn't play golf or any other sport. As for his books, they would never make *Oprah*.

MY FATHER'S PARADISE
by Ariel Sabar
ISBN-13: 978-1-56512-490-5
Hardcover
Publication: September 2008

His latest is a Neo-Aramaic–English dictionary, a life’s work devoted to a three-thousand-year-old language that almost no one speaks.

I was a son of suburban Los Angeles, a skateboarder in Bermuda shorts and sunglasses. He was a son of Zakho, Iraq, raised in a mud shack in an ancient enclave of Jewish peasants and peddlers.

I knew I had to see my father’s birthplace to understand him. But this was July 2005—war-torn Iraq—and my father came to see me as frighteningly detached from reality. The height of the insurgency, he pointed out, wasn’t necessarily the ideal time for a sentimental journey by two American Jews, one whose name sounded a good deal like Ariel Sharon, then the prime minister of Israel.

I was aware of the risks. But with my father’s advancing age, I worried that if we didn’t go that summer, we never would.

I knew my father saw Zakho as a paradise of religious tolerance, a fairyland where Muslims and Jews had coexisted in peace for hundreds of years. So what did we have to fear? I asked, playing to his nostalgia. He resisted. But I pressed, and after a few months, he broke down. If I came with him to a linguistics conference outside London, he said, we could fly from there to southeastern Turkey, then hire a taxi to the Iraqi border.

“I can’t let you go alone,” he said. “God forbid anything should happen to you.”

On the escalator that night in London, I kneeled beside my father’s crumpled body. His suitcase and an overstuffed nylon tote were flipping in place on the bottom steps.

His eyeglasses had skidded to the floor a few feet away. I dug my hands under his armpits, straining at first, but then the load lightened. He was helping me. There was no blood. He was conscious.

I felt something inside my chest unclench.

“I think I must have lost my balance,” he said, dabbing sweat from his temples.

As the escalator churned higher, I asked myself what I was doing dragging this elderly man halfway across the world, to the edge of a war zone. If he wanted to pull out now, I would have to honor his wishes.

But not for the first time, I had underestimated him.

A worried-looking station attendant who had apparently been alerted was waiting at the top of the escalator. He led us to a small office and poured my father a cup of water. “Sir, please have a drink,” he said. I saw it as an act of kindness, the sort the British are famous for.

But my father, already lost in faraway thoughts of Zakho, saw something else. “In Kurdish tradition,” he told me, “you give people water to take the fear away.”

As a boy, I blamed his Kurdishness—his odd looks and off-kilter English—for my struggle to belong in America. Now, in this most unlikely place, I was starting to see how my father’s roots anchored him. In a strange land, when the world felt like it was giving way beneath his feet, he turned to the folklore of the Jewish Kurds for courage.

As he drank, I could hear his breathing grow steady, then strong. ■

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—ARIEL SABAR

