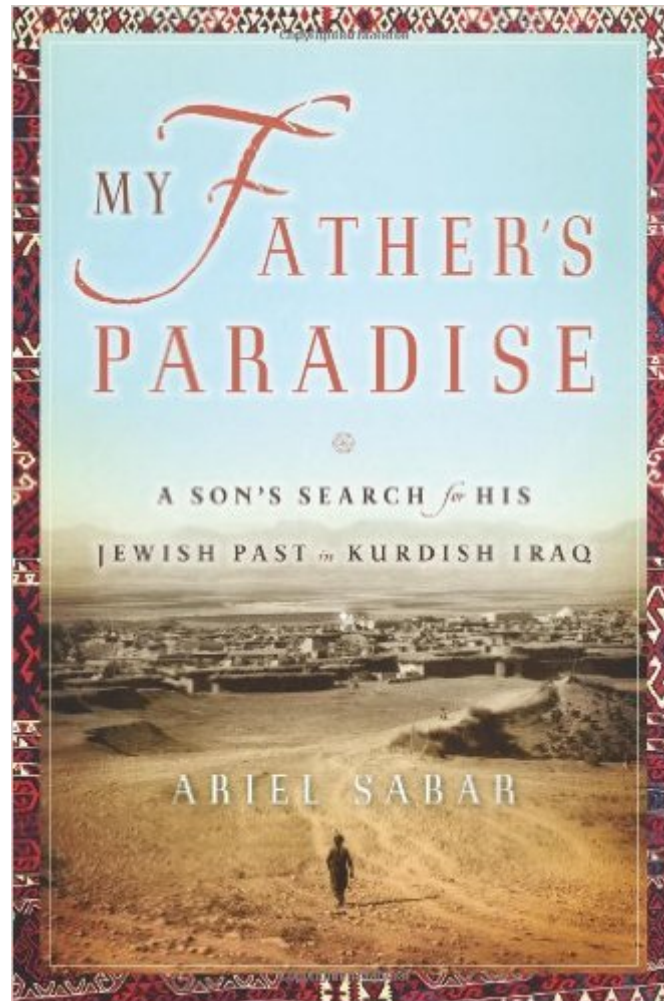


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My Father's Paradise: A Son's Search For His Jewish Past In Kurdish Iraq



Synopsis

In a remote corner of the world, forgotten for nearly three thousand years, lived an enclave of Kurdish Jews so isolated that they still spoke Aramaic, the language of Jesus. Mostly illiterate, they were self-made mystics and gifted storytellers and humble peddlers who dwelt in harmony with their Muslim and Christian neighbors in the mountains of northern Iraq. To these descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel, Yona Sabar was born. Yona's son Ariel grew up in Los Angeles, where Yona had become an esteemed professor, dedicating his career to preserving his people's traditions. Ariel wanted nothing to do with his father's strange immigrant heritage until he had a son of his own. Ariel Sabar brings to life the ancient town of Zakho, discovering his family's place in the sweeping saga of Middle-Eastern history. This powerful book is an improbable story of tolerance and hope set in what today is the very center of the world's attention.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

At heart this is about a Jewish man, born and raised in America, trying as a grown-up to find a connection to the immigrant father by whom he was baffled and embarrassed as a child. Ariel Sabar knows how to tell a story, however, and it's his writing and organization even more than the story itself that makes this book such a treasure. But the story is wonderful, too. The book starts in the village of Zakho, in Kurdish Iraq, with the tale of its people, including the author's great-grandfather, Ephraim, the dyer, whom the locals believe talks to angels. Sabar makes the village and its inhabitants come alive and while I at times wished there were more photos included in the book, Sabar's writing is usually picture enough. Sabar's parents are married (arranged, of course),

Sabar's father, Yona, and his siblings are born, and too many of them die. One goes tragically missing. Throughout the personal saga, Sabar presents a global context -- World Wars I & II, the relationship of his family's native language in Zakho (Aramaic) to the rest of Iraq, to the multi-culturalism and religious harmony of Kurdistan and how the area was divided in the wake of the first World War, to the changing attitudes toward Jews in Iraq and the Middle East and the foundation of Israel. In the '50's Sabar's family relocates, not entirely willingly, to Israel, where they find not the holy land of their dreams, but a huge and unwelcoming city in which they are the lowest of the low. Most of the middle of the book follows Yona's tale as he works to make something of himself in this hostile environment, eventually earning a scholarship to Yale and becoming a respected professor of Neo-Aramaic at UCLA.

The events of the Middle East that assault us each day from CNN and other sources seem to be motivated by an understanding of the world that is completely removed from what is taken for granted by the West. It is a world where one's religion is not only their faith but their tribal identification; where everything is conducted in the context of cultural assumptions more rooted in the world of medieval nomadic traders than the egalitarian ideas of modern nation-states. "Why do they act this way?" we often wonder as we witness their stubborn refusal to act like us. Although not written for that purpose, Ariel Sabar's *My Father's Paradise* gives keen insight into this world that is at once both lost but still with us in today's headlines. Sabar's family line traces back to a time when the Jews of the Middle East were not centered in Israel but spread throughout the region. Most of these communities are now gone - leaving because of their dream of a Jewish state or their fear of remaining behind what is now enemy lines. Like the now firm divide between the Greece and Turkey, the current situation tells us nothing about the past - and everything. Sabar was motivated to trace his roots and this led to an small area in what is now Kurdish Iraq. There his family was part of a small Jewish community that was so isolated they still spoke Aramaic - a language that once was the lingua franca of the Middle East but was thought to have died centuries earlier. In retracing his family's steps, Sabar's eyes were opened to a world we barely know existed, one where the strange mix of ethnic and religious identities worked with and often around the authorities to preserve some semblance of their traditions.

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