
Memories of My Father:

A Life in the Whirlwind of History

by Persis Karim

September 1, 2015 marks the centennial of my father's birth. I have thought long and hard about what kind of person he would have become and what he would of thought as a centenarian, but I can only imagine that he might have thought the world had lost its way and that he'd be disappointed with the events and politics that now dominate the news headlines. When I did approach him once to interview him for an essay - my graduate advisor suggested I submit to a collection she was editing on biographies of people who grew up on the Middle East - I found it difficult to get him to speak of actual events and dates. He wanted to talk about philosophy, politics, about his vision of democracy and society that had been informed by watching two centuries unfold. He was much more concerned with the grand ideas that had shaped him than the record of his own life. He was ambitious enough to want to live to be a hundred years, because he said, he wanted to see what would happen to his body and mind, and to see what happened to the world. Unfortunately, Baba only made it to 89 years, and when he died of a massive stroke in February 2005, I realized not only that I was losing my mentor, friend, my Baba, but someone whose outlook and history had directly shaped my perspective. Even though my father lived more than fifty years in the United States, he was a man for whom no country, no culture was enough. He was a man of the West and the East. My father was a man of circumstance and history, but also a man who remade himself again and again to suit those circumstances.

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Photograph #1 (circa 1917, Paris, France)

In the earliest photograph of my father, in which he is probably two years old, he stands at a gate holding his father's hands. His older brother Georges, stands on the right side of their father holding a hand too. My father could easily be mistaken for a girl. His hair is long and thick, and the short bangs make him seem effeminate. He is wearing what I imagine to be a red overcoat that has white (fake fur?) around the collar and the sleeves. He is wearing shorts and is wearing boots. Perhaps his mother wanted a girl? In stark contrast, his brother is dressed like a child soldier, with a heavy long wool overcoat, and a hat that looks like that of an army soldier. This picture reminds of the two brothers who chose very different paths in life. My father, with the disposition of an artist and philosopher chose to leave Iran as a young man to seek out his life and his passions in other lands. He became an immigrant to the United States. His brother, Georges, would grow up to become a soldier who would not only defend the Iranian nation, but also vehemently argue for its national independence. He never left Iran.



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What we don't know about our parents, we make up. What we imagine about them, particularly after their deaths, we embellish. I have tried to resist fictionalizing my father's long and rich life, but as the years have passed since his death, and as my own awareness of my aging has increased, my longing to speak to him, to listen to his voice and his overly-generous advice, have made me want to seek out and tell his story with much greater intensity. I am left with the painful reality that I did not press him for answers to the many questions I had when he was alive and I am left to both imagine and embellish the facts of his life. Baba (the Iranian term for "Dad") was an incredibly intelligent, resourceful, and passionate man whose life spanned the grand narratives of history. He was born in a Catholic hospital in Paris in 1915 on the eve of the First World War to his Iranian immigrant parents; both he and his brother were required to take Christian names (rather than the "Mohammedan" names they were inclined to choose based on their heritage). His name on his birth certificate reads, "Alexandre Abdul Karimi" but his father dropped the

Abdul and shortened Karimi to Karim some time while he was in France. My father told me that both he and his dad hated the Abdul, Arabic for "slave of" and that they simplified their name for French speakers. My father and his brother Georges underwent a kind of Westernization of their names, I suppose. I don't know if my grandparents selected their sons' names or if it was suggested to them, but both Alexander and Georges, had Greek origins and had a connection to Iran. While Alexandre, translated into Persian would be "Eskendar" and might not have been a popular name in Iran because Alexander the Great signified the decline of the Persian Empire, I imagine my grandfather thought it might be an ominous start for his second son, who would set out to "conquer the world" in his own way. My uncle's name, Georges would later revert to a Persian name, Ramin, which in old Persian means "joy". My father, however, never changed his name, and by the end of his life, went simply by "Alex".

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My father and his brother spent their formative years in the bustling metropolis of Paris. They spoke French, went to French schools, but spoke a mix of Persian and French at home. Paris was his first childhood home, and then Tehran became his second home. But Paris left an indelible mark on my father, and I think for him, that early life in Paris would always make him feel he could never quite belong to a single nation or culture. According to my father, my grandfather, Mumtaz Abdul Karimi, was a resourceful man who had been orphaned in a village just north of Tehran at age 13 and took up tailoring as a trade once he moved to Tehran. Mumtaz and his young wife Maryam (née Asadollah), who had essentially been a child bride and was illiterate, had already given birth to two children in Iran, but died of early childhood diseases in Iran. Some time in the first decade of the twentieth century, Mumtaz, a restless and curious young man, became acquainted with a Scotsman named Monsieur Boucher who had traveled between Iran and France importing textiles (silk and wool, as well as carpets). Monsieur Boucher must have seen in my grandfather an ambitious and creative business partner and invited Mumtaz to come to Paris to embark on a textile-importing business. The actual details of how Maryam and Mumtaz traveled from Iran to France is not clear to me, but by the time they arrived there, Paris was a rich international metropolis, teeming with people who had a taste for Persian textiles, carpets, and luxury goods. My father and his older brother lived in a small, second-

story apartment on Rue Taitbout in the 9th arrondissement of Paris not too far from Les Galleries Lafayette (now a famous shopping district) and my grandfather's business took off.

Mumtaz loved Paris. He loved its cosmopolitan feel, its people's penchant for finer things like good wine, beautiful textiles and good food. My father said he loved the women too. For my grandmother, Maryam, I imagine that Paris must have felt isolating and lonely. While her husband established a business and brought Persian textiles to Parisians, she was likely left at home to care for her sons and to navigate her way in a culture where she had no connections other than the kindness of strangers and a few of her husband's business acquaintances. According to my father, she was illiterate, religiously devout, and quite a bit younger than her husband. I imagine that for her Paris was overwhelming and strange and raising her two children there might have seemed alienating. The food she was accustomed to preparing in Iran was not available, and beyond the Persian poetry and the Persian national epic, The Shahnameh, which they acted out in the battle scenes of Sohrab and Rostam in the basement of their apartment, my father and his brother were quite cut off from Persian culture.

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