
Memories of My Father:

A Life in the Whirlwind of History

(continued)

by Persis Karim

Baba and his brother roamed the streets of Paris even while German planes flew overhead, and in one incident he recounted to me, he and his mother and brother were herded into a local bomb shelter when the Germans began their Zeppelin bombing raids. The incident frightened my father and he recounted it with so much vivid detail, telling me how fast his heart raced, and how long they had to spend in a dark, hot bunker below ground with countless other children and families. He told me that among the others waiting for hours in the underground shelter was a small African boy, most likely the child of a diplomat or governor from one of France's overseas colonies, perhaps Senegal or Cote d'Ivoire. My father remembered staring at the boy and recounted the blackness of his skin that made the whiteness of his eyes stand out in the darkness. He told me the two did not speak, but that they locked eyes on each other, and for my father it was a moment of realization that he was living in a time of tremendous turmoil in which the world was thrown together by war. Beyond the mere spectacle of seeing someone from a place he only knew remotely from his geography lessons, he might have felt that there was someone other than him who was different, foreign, perhaps feeling then that though he was of Iranian origin, he lived on the cusp of cultures like this boy. When he recounted the story he told me, "I had never seen a black person before and I could not believe it".

Photograph #2 (circa 1922, Tehran, Iran)

In this family photograph, my father poses with some of the other relatives in the family (his siblings are not yet born), along with his uncle and cousins, and a young woman, who I believe is his aunt. My father sits next to his brother, (second from the right) with his younger cousin, Iran, perched against his knees. He is wearing an outfit that almost looks navy-like with a wide collar.



He is wearing a tall hat with a brim that sticks out in front like the hats of his uncle and older cousin. My father looks happy, maybe he's even up to a little mischief; he looks far more masculine than he did in the picture in Paris. Perhaps he has already been circumcised? Perhaps his entry into the large family of cousins has made him feel he can belong, in a way?

...my father and his brother returned to a city in the throes of change...

After the war ended, and the economies of Europe were in shambles, Baba and his family returned to Tehran. They had done well enough in Paris to move back to Tehran and live in the old part of the city in a three-story house that would later be filled with more children—three more who were born several years after their homecoming. There, my father and his brother returned to a city in the throes of change, and among the first things my father and his brother faced was circumcision. My father was seven and a half when they announced that there would be a ceremony in which they'd cut the foreskin of and that there would be a big celebration to mark the occasion. Baba told me he and his brother were traumatized by the event, not only because they were awake and experienced the pain, but because among their first experiences of claiming their Iranian culture, they were none too happy about this particular cultural ritual. "I remember thinking how barbaric these people were," Baba told me. "I wanted to go back to Paris, and resume my boyhood there, but it was now only a distant memory".

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