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Daniel Lowder
College of DuPage

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by Daniel Lowder

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What *My Father's Rifle* shows about the life of a Kurd in the second half of the twentieth century is that it was an extremely difficult existence wrought with constant amounts of peril and hardships. The plight of the Kurds and their constant struggle for a sovereign nation-state is not something which is commonly discussed in America; but what makes this book even more unique is that it is written from the memory of experiences which took place during the author's early childhood. This perspective lends a certain offensive and shocking tone to the memoir, as acts of suppression and human rights violations are more difficult to stomach when we witness them happening to children (see also: Anne Frank, Emmitt Till). *My Father's Rifle* is very powerful in that there is a unique juxtaposition of childhood innocence laid atop cruel, grotesque exhibitions of discriminatory and oppressive governmental control - with the caveat that all of these atrocities are being exacted over a population who nobody in the outside world seems to care too much about.

The opening scene sets the tone of oppression and powerlessness which lingers throughout the book. It drives home the point that this young boy, Azad, is in no way going to experience a "normal" childhood by our standards. As he plays, Azad is jarred by the sight of his mother being struck in the face with a militiaman's rifle butt. On the same day, Azad's older cousin engages in a shootout, is captured, and is dragged through town behind a car until he is little more than pulp. Seven male relatives are lost; all of this takes place within the first four pages of the book. Is that really surprising? As far as conveying the amount of tragedy, violence, and suffering which Kurds at this time experienced, there is no gentle way to initiate the reader. The fact of the matter is that the proverbial "silver lining" does not exist in reference to Kurdish life. Kurds are the "lesser" society, and are afforded little to no sympathy from whatever group happens to rule over them.

The fundamental flaw with Kurdistan is that it does not exist in terms that the international community can work with. This lack of establishment is in no way the fault of the Kurdish people, but it certainly leads to a lack of communication as well as a lack of understanding and respect for the situation from most of the outside world. Getting people to care about places which actually exist seems to be a tough task; making people take interest and care about a place which does not technically qualify as a country is next to impossible. To complicate matters of international sympathy, Kurds are Muslim. The West has always experienced difficulty relating to and engaging with Islamic cultures, going all the way back to the Crusades (interestingly, Saladin- the man who led the Muslims against Richard I during the Third Crusade, and who captured Jerusalem again for Islam- was a Kurd). In addition to this fundamental lack of communication and understanding, Kurdistan has very little to offer the world in terms of natural resources or anything to draw much capital interest. They have a limited oil supply there, which is being tapped in the present day (Williams). However, at the time period in which this book takes place, Kurdistan's oil infrastructure had yet to be established and exploited by the outside world. With little to offer at the time (outside of some pretty scenic terrain), the Kurds suffered. Clearly, the Kurds seem to have felt differently. "But my father wasn't worried. America and Henry Kissinger were on our side" (Saleem, 45).

The Kurds seem to carry on and get themselves through the trials which they suffer by means of rhetorical promises encouraging their own cause. It is as if the words themselves can will down guardian angels in the defense of Kurdistan. Azad's father, and other Kurds, repeatedly say "in a year, our country will be liberated" (Saleem, 21). There are also references made to Kurdish jets, which

will inevitably come to save the day by fighting off the Iraqi air force. Of course, there are no Kurdish jets, and the Iraqi planes go on strafing and bombing the Kurdish villages against air defenses mainly consisting of antiquated single-shot rifles. Another "guardian angel" reference found in the book involves quotations which cite opinions from other countries' media outlets. Radio Moscow, Radio Baghdad, and Voice of America are the three "outside force" media channels which are largely referenced.

One thing which is apparent is that the Kurds' plight seems to get moment-to-moment attention in the outside world. At times, the outside media will reference the Kurds in their news releases. At other times, the Kurdish situation is roundly ignored. Furthermore, it seems that the media perspective with regards to the Kurds often vacillates, almost at random. At one point, Radio Moscow refers to General Barzani as "liberator of the Kurdish people" while putting down the Ba'athist leadership (Saleem, 16). At another point, Radio Moscow attacks the Kurdish revolutionaries (Saleem, 40). On these same respective pages, Voice of America refers to the Kurdish fighters as "rebels and bandits", then "heroes and freedom-fighters". It seems that the outside world's perspective with regards to the Kurdish people was constantly in flux depending on the status of relationships with the nations who encompassed "Kurdistan". If things between Moscow and Baghdad were going swimmingly, one could probably expect to hear much ill-will being brought forth in reference to the Kurds. If Moscow and Baghdad were disagreeing, the Kurds were heroes. The Kurds lacked sovereignty and thus the view of them from abroad was tied to the parties who had enough power to speak on the matter; namely, the United States, the Soviets, and the Iraqis. The Kurds are essentially powerless.

That fact has stood true since the end of World War I, when France and Great Britain shut Kurdish representatives out of peace settlements, and continues to ring true to this very day: the Kurdish people have always lacked, and continue to be denied, their right to an international voice. This is because the international community struggles to see why the Kurdish people should be granted their own homeland. In addition, it seems that the countries in which Kurdish people live would prefer to be rid of them entirely, and are in no way interested in granting them any measure of power or freedom. The exception to this has occurred in Iraq since Saddam Hussein was ousted by the United States, and the Kurds there have gained a measure of "self-determination" and can reasonably self-govern within the borders of the new Iraq. Turkey still takes a very aggressive stance against their Kurdish population to present day; they detest their Kurdish population and would simply love to obliterate them entirely from the face of the Earth. Normally, this kind of activity would in all likelihood draw the ire of the United States, but the fact that Turkey allows us to use their air space to patrol the Middle East virtually assures the fact that we will never put our foot down and force self-determinism to realize itself for Kurdistan. Ah, democracy.

The Iranian government clearly has problems with the Kurdish people: "out of fear of Savak, the Iranian secret police, we couldn't cry out against the Iranians' betrayal of us." Azad goes on: "we were forbidden to go out without a Savak safe-conduct" (Saleem, 50). Later on, Azad gives the impression that although the Kurds were across a border and in a new land, the same fear and suppression was looming over them. "Everyone spoke Kurdish in Mahabad, but no one ever discussed politics; fear reigned" (Saleem, 52).

The Kurds have never received recognition from the international community, but they also are subjected to the added insult of being treated as non-citizens by the countries which they live in. In *My Father's Rifle*, the Kurds are for the most part harassed, badgered, and abused by the Iraqi Ba'athists. Abuses range from the banning of Kurdish textbooks in school to torture in the local police stations, and even death at the hand of Iraqi police, soldiers, or militiamen. There is a feeling which Azad describes as if he is constantly being watched- constantly under the threat of arrest or harassment. From the frequent descriptions of discrimination within the book, it seems that being an Iraqi Kurd in the 1960's and 1970's had a similar feel to being Jewish and living in Germany in the

late 1930s. Kurds were not forced to sew stars on their garments, but they might as well have. Saddam Hussein's government seemed to do everything short of sending them away en masse to concentration camps. He banned many Kurdish things, he reprogrammed the school systems, he made Arab the official state language, he attempted to assassinate the Kurdish leadership in a failed bomb attempt, he bombed the Kurdish villages and forced their populations to hide in hillside caves, he strafed those hiding cave dwellers with his jet airplanes.

Total obedience and alignment to the cause of the state is a requirement if one is to assimilate into Iraqi culture; however, even when that is the case, a Kurd is still just a Kurd... which is decidedly *less than Iraqi* in the opinion of the ruling party. Any attempt to promote Kurdish culture is seen as a direct threat to authority and is dealt with in an immediate and severe manner. The story regarding Sami the artist, whom Azad looked up to as he grew, reflects this. At the Ba'ath rally celebrating the anniversary of Hussein's ascension into power over Iraq, Sami shouts out "Long live General Barzani! Long live Kurdistan!" and is swarmed by security officials, never to be seen again (Saleem, 73). Intimidation is also used. At one point, an investigator within the Ba'athist security force lays down the threat to Azad: "Don't forget we know who your brother is" (Saleem, 69). If you are a Kurd, and in Ba'athist Iraq, big brother is watching you... and he probably has a gigantic mustache.

In conclusion, *My Father's Rifle* reviews a tragic chapter in human history which may never come to a satisfactory end. The Kurdish people have no rights, are constantly abused, and have not garnered much sympathy abroad. But so long as people are people, and self-determination is something which the Kurds seek, then the jets might some day come. If the international community has established the precedent that societies who undergo horrific acts of violence are eligible to receive their own homelands, then why is there no Kurdistan?
"If you will it, it is no dream." - Theodore Herzl

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