

"Jews are no longer safe in Iraq. When are you going to get it through your thick head?"

It's 1951. Twelve-year-old Salman Shasha and his family have to leave their comfortable home in Baghdad to resettle in Israel. The "Promised Land" turns out not to be what they dreamed of, though, and from a refugee camp the uprooted family have to work together to rebuild their lives.

Trying to find his feet in the unwelcoming new country, Salman misses swimming, his great passion, most of all, but even swimming is more difficult in this new life. Will he have to give up on his ambition to be a champion?



PJ OUR
WAY®

www.pjourway.org

Cover design Anna Morrison

A Boy from Baghdad

Miriam Halahmy





First published in 2023 by Green Bean Books,
c/o Pen & Sword Books Limited,
George House, Unit 12 & 13, Beevor Street,
Off Pontefract Road, Barnsley, South Yorkshire S71 1HN
www.greenbeanbooks.com

© Miriam Halahmy, 2023

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

Harold Grinspoon Foundation edition 978-1-78-438994-9
Green Bean Books edition 978-1-78-438990-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in Publication Data available

Typeset in 11/14pt Garamond by JCS Publishing Services Ltd,
www.jcs-publishing.co.uk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CRO 4YY

Contents

Foreword	ix
1 The River	1
2 Underground	10
3 Building a Homeland	22
4 Underpants	28
5 To the Promised Land	39
6 Bread and Herring	48
7 Organizing	57
8 Naima	65
9 Another Escapade	73
10 The Moadon	82
11 The Mediterranean Sea	93
12 Boy from Baghdad	101
13 The Eggman	110
14 The Sea of Galilee	122
15 Snake!	132
16 A New Home	142
17 The Salty Sea	150
18 The Picnic	159
19 A Thousand Blessings	167
Author's Note	176
Glossary	177
Recipe for Date Biscuits	179

Foreword

I was born in London into an Ashkenazi Jewish family. Our roots are in Poland. However, my husband is an Iraqi Jew, born in Baghdad in 1950, the youngest of eight children. The Iraqi Jewish community dates back two and a half thousand years to Babylonian times.

The Iraqi Jewish community was a contented, wealthy, educated community, holding good positions in Iraqi society such as lawyers, doctors, goldsmiths, and government ministers.

However, things changed in the 1930s as Nazi influences came into the country. In 1941 there was a terrible pogrom against the Jewish community called the *Farhud*. Many Jews were killed and injured. Thousands left the country as a result.

Then in 1948, after the creation of the State of Israel, the Iraqi government turned against the Jewish community. They announced that if the Jews wanted to emigrate, they had one year to leave the country. They would not be allowed to take anything with them, including money or jewelry, and they would never be allowed to return. Between 1951 and 1952, Israel organized an airlift called Operation Ezra and Nehemiah. One hundred and twenty thousand Iraqi Jews, almost the entire community, left Iraq.

The Iraqi Jews were encouraged to immigrate to Israel by Zionist activists. These activists believed that all Jews in danger around the world should make their way to Israel and help build the Zionist dream. They talked about a land flowing with milk and honey, but this was a long way from the truth.

Life for everyone in Israel was a struggle after 1948. Food was rationed and few homes had been built. The Iraqi Jews were put

A Boy from Baghdad

in tents in immigrant camps called *ma'abarot*. In winter the tents blew away. In summer there was nowhere to keep cool and there was no work. The Iraqi Jews had come from a life of plenty to great poverty and they were very unhappy.

Even worse, the dominant group in the country were the Ashkenazi Jews, who looked down on Jews from the Arab countries, which included Iraq, Egypt, and Yemen. They were suspicious of 'Arab Jews' because Israel was at war with the surrounding Arab countries. They treated these Arab Jews as second-class citizens and hurtful racist comments were made against them. The Arab Jews were very unfairly treated.

Slowly Israeli society began to accept the Jews from Arab lands and recognize their important contribution to the State of Israel. Arab Jews have now entered political life and all the professions, including teaching, law, and medicine. The culture of the Arab Jews is very popular in modern Israel, especially their Arabic food and music.

However, some more recent immigrant groups, such as those from Ethiopia, have experienced similar racism to the Arab Jews, whereas Jews from America and Russia have not had the same problems.

Jewish history is a complicated one but in order to understand who we are, we need to know where we come from. I hope my book opens a door into the fascinating world of the Jews of Iraq and the difficulties they faced when they went into exile to Israel.

Miriam Halahmy,
London.

1

The River

April 1951

Salman sprinted through the Shorja market, dodging shoppers and loaded carts pushed by small boys yelling, “*Yalla, yalla,*” to warn people to give way.

Swerving left into the butchers’ alley, he held his breath as the stale, meaty smell of hanging carcasses filled the air. Old blood and bits of slimy entrails snaked down the middle gutter and he had to make sure he didn’t skid as he ran on.

He could let out his breath as he reached the spice sellers, their huge mounds of brightly colored wares—crimson red, deep orange, dark browns—filled the air with a heady perfume of cinnamon, cardamom, and chilies. Large bunches of fresh green mint, coriander, and parsley were draped on the herb stalls. His mother bought fresh herbs in the market every day and often sent Salman running to the spice sellers for one more packet of turmeric or cardamom.

Salman knew the market like the back of his hand but today there was no time to linger. The afternoon was getting late and he had to be home before dinner. School was out for the day and he’d managed to slip away. Now all he had to do was avoid meeting any of the family in the market.

He could smell the river before he saw it: that joyous mix of mud, weeds, and a breeze which carried moisture from bank to bank in the warm spring air. The water would still be cool but Salman didn’t care. A real swimmer never worried about cold

A Boy from Baghdad

water. That was for city softies who just waded in the shallows when the river heated up in summer and Baghdad hit fifty degrees centigrade.

Salman never waded. He swam; mile after mile, perfecting his strokes.



He arrived at the top of the stone steps which led down to the water. A quick glance around to make sure none of the uncles—Salman had six, plus many aunts and twenty-three cousins—were anywhere in sight. But the alleyway behind him was shrouded in shadow and empty.

Turning back, he leaped the steps two at a time and arrived on the bank, pushing his way through reeds until he could feel water flow over his sandals.

His cousin Latif was already there and called out, “Hi.”

Salman gave a swift nod back. “You got it?”

“Course,” said Latif with his wide grin. He held up his arm.

Salman grabbed it and inspected the watch strapped onto Latif’s skinny arm.

“Second hand, keeps perfect time, clear face,” Latif rattled off like a stallholder in the market. “For you, two dinars.”

Salman gave a snort. “Ha ha,” he said in a mocking tone.



Salman had learned not to ask his cousin and absolute best and trusted friend where he ‘organized’ things from. That was Latif’s word. He could organize pretty much anything.

Latif was a whole head shorter than Salman, and so skinny his ribs stuck out like the skeleton of a rat they once found on the riverbank. Both boys were twelve, born within five minutes of each other at the time of the High Holydays in autumn, and they

The River

were inseparable. But it was Salman with his long arms and legs and strong muscles who could skim through the water at speed. Latif didn't even like wading. Salman lived to swim.

If he had a choice, he would spend all day practicing his freestyle in the River Tigris, dreaming of becoming the best swimmer in the world, like his hero, Johnny Weissmuller. He dragged Latif to the movie theater on Rashid Street every time a new Tarzan film appeared. Johnny Weissmuller, five times Olympic gold medalist, now played Tarzan, swimming the jungle rivers.

"Look at him," Salman would whisper in an awed voice. "First person in the world to break the one-minute barrier for the 100-meter freestyle."

Latif would just nod back, plotting his next scheme to make some money.

But at least he understood that Salman was compelled to swim like other people needed to eat.

There was only one problem.

Salman was forbidden to even walk by the river without his parents.



Now Salman pulled off his clothes, his saggy old bathing suit, held up with a ragged belt, already on under his shorts.

No one in his family ever went in the water and Salman had to make do with these bathers which an older cousin had tossed over to him one day, saying, "Swimming's a useless sport, but I suppose kids like to go wading."

What Salman really wanted was a pair of black swim shorts with an elasticated waist and a white stripe down the side of each leg, like professional swimmers wore.

One day, he promised himself, as he pushed back his curly hair, which had an annoying way of falling over his face.

A Boy from Baghdad

“Get ready,” he told Latif.

His cousin nodded. “I’ll count every second.” He stared at the watch face and went on in a thoughtful voice, “What I really wanted was a watch with a timer button—you know, like sportsmen use—but I couldn’t organize it this time.”

Salman shot him a glance and Latif’s face broke into his blazing grin.

“Depends what you mean by organize,” muttered Salman.

Latif’s hands shot up, palms open in front of him. “You just need to know how, *habibi*.” The last word was said in a mocking tone, imitating his father, Salman’s Uncle Mordechai.



Uncle Mordechai was a highly skilled shoemaker. He made all the shoes for the family and was always in demand. He had a workshop in one of the narrow alleys behind the market. Salman loved to visit the workshop, the rich smell of good leather and the rows of tools lined up on the walls. Uncle Mordechai made their highly polished leather shoes for school, lace-ups with a half-inch heel for the boys, and rounder shoes with a single bar for the girls. He made higher-heeled shoes for his mother to wear to synagogue on Shabbat morning and the latest fashions for his father. He should have been a rich man, Salman’s father would mutter to his mother.

But Uncle Mordechai drank all his profits. The family lived in a cramped apartment in the poorest quarter of Baghdad and there was a constant struggle to pay the rent. It fell to Latif to provide food for his mother and six little brothers. By the time he was eight years old, Latif was a hustler supreme on the streets of Baghdad.

“Watch and learn,” he would say to Salman, his famous grin on his face.

The River

That grin was Latif's greatest asset. People trusted the skinny boy with pale skin and bright red hair. When Latif smiled, he seemed to glow like the evening sun before it set.

"Here he comes, our little carrot top," the *shesh besh* players in the cafés on Rashid Street would call out when Latif appeared. "What are you selling today?"

With his face shining, Latif would pull strings of worry beads or packets of coffee out of his haversack like a magic trick, his sales patter persuading grown men to part with their dinars.

Latif could switch into standard Arabic without blinking an eye. None of his customers would ever guess he was a Jewish boy. At home they spoke Judeo-Arabic, the ancient language of the Iraqi Jews. But not on the streets anymore.

"Iraq has changed for the Jews," Salman's father warned them constantly. "Keep a low profile. Stick to standard Arabic outside the house."

Salman's big sister would lean in to show she was listening, but Salman had better things on his mind, lost in daydreams of the river.



Shaking his head now, Salman waded into the river and dived under the surface; he emerged, his face dripping, ready to swim. The river was five hundred yards wide and he would have to keep an eye out for fishing boats returning to the city with their catch.

Latif held up his hand, eyes focused on the watch and then dropped his arm in one swift move.

Salman plunged forward, arms and legs pumping, face in the water, turning to one side for a breath after every third stroke, just as he'd seen Johnny Weissmuller do.

The water felt cool at first but as he cut through the gray-green river, yard after yard, he soon warmed up.

A Boy from Baghdad

When he swam Salman thought of nothing but the strokes: pacing himself, ready to turn just at the right point before the water near the opposite bank became too shallow. On a turn of his head upstream he noted a fishing boat swaying toward him at a steady speed. But it would pass behind him at this rate.

A dozen more strokes and the moment for the turn was upon him. As if he was touching the solid side of an Olympic pool, he reached out his arm, extending his fingers and whipped his body round.

Done it! he told himself, certain that he'd increased his speed. I'll know this time, he thought with satisfaction, now that Latif has the watch.

He couldn't see Latif yet. He'd have to reach the middle of the river before his cousin's slight figure would waft into view.

Salman plowed on, sprinting forward as he reached the home stretch.

Strange, he thought as he entered the last fifty yards. Where is Latif?

There was no sign as he plunged his face back in the water.

Two strokes. Surface for the third. Look up.

Still no Latif.

Where is he? Has he got bored and wandered off?

But Latif wouldn't do that.

A cold claw pinched Salman's heart and, sacrificing the entire swim, he stopped and raised his head and shoulders, treading water as he scanned the bank.

To his horror he saw the water churning and a small hand suddenly thrust above the surface.

"Latif!" screamed Salman. "Come up!"

But the hand fell away again out of sight.

Throwing his body into the water, Salman swam as he'd never swum before.

The River

Latif drowning! thundered through his head.

He reached the shallows, which he knew were deceptive, with holes that the unsuspecting could drop into without warning.

Taking a huge breath Salman dived under the water. The river was so murky he couldn't see anything. His lungs were ready to burst as he flailed around.

Where is he? What will Latif's mother say? rolled around his mind.

Then he had to surface, gasping for breath.

Giving himself only a second to recover, he dragged as much air as possible into his lungs and dived down again. Out of the corner of his eye something moved. A large object: a chunk of wood, perhaps a box dumped from the market.

He swam forward and the lifeless shape of his cousin drifted into view.

For a second Salman was swept with panic and had to stop himself from screaming out the last precious seconds of air from his lungs. Then he grabbed Latif's arm and dragged them both back up to the surface.

Gasping for air, tugging Latif's limp body, Salman pulled them both to the bank and laid out the smaller boy.

Latif lay in a muddy heap, not moving, his pale skin leached of any color, his lips tinged with blue.

What do I do? Salman thought in terror. Not even an old fisherman was in sight as he cast his eyes up and down the deserted riverbank.

He rolled Latif onto his side and began rubbing his back, moaning over and over, "Come on, breathe, please breathe."

But Latif lay silent as a rock.

He's going to die, swept through Salman's mind. What will Uncle Mordechai and Auntie Daisy say, and all Latif's brothers?

A Boy from Baghdad

The entire Shasha family paraded through his mind: uncles, aunties, and cousins; his parents, his older sister Naima, and his little twin brothers, Nabil and Yacoub, only seven. He could almost hear the wailing of the mourners at the funeral.

Then with a sudden retching sound, Latif opened his mouth and out poured a stream of river water.

Salman thought his heart would leap from his chest, it was pounding so hard with relief.

"Latif!" He shouted over and over, rubbing the boy's back as he retched and spluttered.

Just when Salman began to worry that the retching alone could kill his cousin, it started to die down and he decided he could risk propping the boy up against a rock. Latif still felt quite limp but the blue had retreated from his lips.

Dropping to the ground too, Salman hugged his drawn-up knees. He felt quite cold now but his clothes were out of reach.

Latif was breathing more regularly next to him.

"Thought I was going to lose you," he muttered.

Latif wiped a hand across his mouth.

"What happened?" said Salman.

Latif drew in a lungful of air and then he stuttered, "I was trying to ... to ... see you reach the other bank and I kept walking ... forward and then ... whoosh."

"But I told you so many times about the holes."

"I guess I forgot."

"Zmal," growled Salman, their favorite word for idiot. "Time you learned to swim."

There was a pause and then Latif's face broke into his wonderful smile and Salman was so relieved to see that glow return he almost hugged his cousin.

"Maybe," said Latif in a more normal voice. "Only first we have to clean you up a bit."

The River

Salman stared down at his body. It was covered in mud and, reaching up, he could feel clumps in his hair too. He was going to be in so much trouble.

He cast an anxious look toward Latif and for a second they held each other's gaze and then both boys burst into roaring laughter, holding their sides and shaking.

Who cared about mud?

They were alive; they were boys from Baghdad; the River Tigris belonged to them and no one would ever know about the day Latif nearly drowned and his cousin, his absolute best friend, the soon-to-be-famous swimmer, Salman Shasha, came to his rescue.