

INTRODUCTION

NEW YORK CITY, 2007

My search for the history of the Tehran Children began the day I met Salar Abdoh. Not exactly met. We had eyed each other many times before, not without curiosity, in the mailroom, in department meetings, along the corridors of the North Academic Center, the windowless, drab transplant in the grand old Gothic campus of the City College of New York, where we both taught in the English department. We might have even exchanged a few words. But the last day of the 2007 academic year was our first real conversation, the first of hundreds.

The few years that preceded my meeting with Salar were the hardest of my life. I had an infant who turned toddler but never slept, a shapeless doctoral dissertation, and many classes to teach. I had little paid help and no extended family in New York. Three afternoons a week I would drift into the North Academic Center to teach my classes and drift right back home to my son. At night I wrote my dissertation between feedings.

But one academic year passed, then another. My dissertation somehow came together. Climbing the stairs of Columbia University's Kent Hall on my way to the defense, I ran into my mentor, the late literary theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who nodded at me with approval. I felt an unbelievable lightness. At the end of May, I would be marching in doctoral robe and cap at Columbia; in September, my position at City College would change from Instructor to Assistant Professor, which meant I would teach less and earn more. The April spring was gorgeous, with clear blue skies

and crisp air. I taught the last class of the semester outdoors, sitting with my students on the freshly mown lawn of Shepard Hall, talking with them quietly about Melville and Freud. On the way back from class I ran into Salar, who invited me and a few others to toast the end of the school year in his office.

Salar's office was lovely, with floor rugs, lamps, and kilims that covered the walls and diffused the blandness of the institutional building, and a sort of sitting area, where a few of us lounged drinking red wine and trading bits of college gossip. I remember noting Salar's old-world mannerisms, a cordiality and decorum that I knew in my father and grandfather but in no one of our generation. I noted that among our colleagues, he was the most curious about Israel, where I grew up, and the least moralistic. When our conversation turned to our love of Middle Eastern seashores—Salar's family had owned a house on the Caspian before the Islamic Revolution—I told him I believed my father had crossed the Caspian on his way to Iran during World War II. I knew my father had also spent time in Tehran then, that he and his sister had been among a group of refugees known as the "Tehran Children," but I didn't know much more.

Salar got up, typed a few words on his keyboard, and called me to his computer screen. On the display was a February 23, 2006, issue of *The Iranian*, an online magazine of Iranian affairs and culture, and on its front page was an op-ed titled "Revealing Errors—Iran, Jews and the Holocaust: An Answer to Mr. Black" by Abbas Milani. I read the words on the screen:

In early January of this year, a prominent American journalist published a strangely inaccurate attack on Iran, making the country complicit in the crimes of the Holocaust. . . . He claims that if we look at Iran's "Hitler-era past" we will discover "that Iran and Iranians were strongly connected to the Holocaust and the Hitler regime." The facts of history are just the opposite of what Mr. Black has claimed. As early signs of the murderous Final Solution became visible, the Iranian government of the time convinced the Nazi race experts in

Germany that Iranian Jews had lived in Iran for over twenty-five hundred years and were fully assimilated citizens of Iran and must be afforded all the rights of such citizens. The Nazis accepted this argument and the lives of all Iranian Jews living under the Nazi yoke were saved. . . . Moreover . . . when the Nazi killing machines began their slaughter of innocent Polish Jews, 1388 Jews, including 871 children were moved to Tehran where they lived in relative safety till they moved to Israel. . . . *History of Contemporary Iranian Jews* has provided an account of what are called the “Tehran Children.”¹

I stared at the screen for a long time, then back at Salar, then sat down and read the piece more carefully. The Tehran Children, including my father Hannan (Hannania), his sister Rivka (Regina), and their cousin Noemi (Emma) were Polish-born child refugees who in 1943 came to Palestine via Iran. But until that moment I had never thought of the *Tehran* in that phrase as an actual place. That my father was a Tehran Child, I had always taken for granted as simply a fact about who he was, like the fact that he had straight, slightly coarse black hair that he combed back, and small, slanted blue eyes; or that he died on October 10, 1993, a year after he retired from the Israeli Air Force, where he had served for forty-eight years.

And though I am a scholar of comparative literature and trained to read across national boundaries, until that moment I could not imagine the story of the Tehran Children in any other context than the one I had internalized while growing up in Israel: as a successful rescue mission of Jewish children by the World Zionist Organization. My father’s story was an Israeli story, a part of the country’s mythology, and therefore it could not figure in the historical narrative of any other nation—not least one that had become, more recently, a political antagonist. I didn’t even think of my father as a Holocaust survivor. Survivors had a muted aura of shame and anxiety in the Israel of my youth, but Tehran Children were Israelis: kibbutzniks, army generals, media personalities, industrialists. They were not Europe’s rejected but Israel’s desired, the “lucky ones” who

had been rescued by the burgeoning Jewish state. Growing up, whenever I was asked if my father was a survivor, I would answer, “No, he was not. He was a Tehran Child.”

The leading scholars in my field of comparative literature—René Wellek, Erich Auerbach, and others—had been refugees. Wellek was born in Vienna and escaped to the United States in 1939; the German born Auerbach was a refugee in Turkey and later the United States. They did not write about the refugee experience but composed, as refugees, odes to national literatures and to a unified, stable European canon. The two foremost twentieth-century historians of the nation, Eric Hobsbawm and Ernest Gellner, were also refugees. Hobsbawm was born in Alexandria, Egypt, to Jewish parents from Poland and Austria, spent his early childhood in Vienna and Berlin, fled to London in 1933, and served during the war in the British Royal Engineers and Royal Army Corps. Gellner was born in Paris, raised in Prague and escaped to St. Albans, England, in 1939. It was from the position of the “mobile and the rootless,” as Gellner had called it, that Auerbach wrote *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* while in exile in Istanbul and that Gellner began to study nations. “When I first saw Berber villages of the central Atlas, each building clinging to the next, the style wholly homogeneous, the totality crying out that it was *Gemeinschaft* I knew at once that I wanted desperately to know, as far as an outsider ever could, what it was like *inside*,” Gellner explained.²

I was born into the *Gemeinschaft*. I knew what it was like inside. But my inside wasn't a centuries-old Berber village—it was a two-decade-old nation-state with unsettled borders, perpetual conflict, and a population full of citizens who like my father were born elsewhere. That elsewhere—the Diaspora—had no place in my childhood. It was “negated,” as the early-twentieth-century Zionist writer Yosef Hayyim Brenner had declared. On account of this negation, Israel became my only home. Part of Israel's *raison d'être* was to give rise to a child who was a *tabula rasa*, a child without a painful Jewish past. I was that child. I had no framework

for thinking about my father's relationship to Iran or to any of the other places he had lived in or passed through before becoming an Israeli. I didn't even have a framework for understanding his life in prewar Poland, where, as I would later discover, his family had lived for eight generations, a life that had been erased so completely that it seemed not even to have existed in *his* memory. In nearly every sparse apartment in the quiet neighborhoods of the Mount Carmel of my youth was a life that had been lived elsewhere before the war, a complex story of survival, and an entire other family—parents, siblings, sometimes former children and former spouses—who had existed before the war. Nobody talked. Everything was negated.

“You should write your father's story,” Salar said. “No,” I laughed, “but *you* could write it. You were born in Iran. You're not implicated by the Holocaust. You are heir neither to the victims nor to the perpetrators. And you know more about refugees than I do.” Salar and his teenage brothers, as he told me, had fled to the United States after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Soon I noted similarities between him and my father, microscopic traits and habits, detectable only to one trained by a lifelong cohabitation with a refugee: the way he cut a paper towel sheet in half and saved the second half for later; the way he ate everything off his plate; his slightly anxious relationship to food and to the cold, the caution, the aloneness.

“My father has no story,” I told Salar. “‘His portrait I essay, but shall never hit it,’” I used to say to people, quoting Melville, when they asked about him. He was a quiet, ordinary man from a sleepy northern Israeli town, and in 2007, fourteen years after his death, the image I had of him was blurry and impersonal: a cordial, reserved man, a bit severe, prone to occasional bouts of anger. I knew nothing of his family history; nor did I think it could reveal much about him. Words like *trauma*, *displacement*, and *forced migration*—even, strangely, the word *refugee* itself—did not come to mind in relation to him either. I thought of him mostly as a workingman, a man who lived in a kind of grueling present tense and who fulfilled responsibilities, day in and day out. He showed little emotion

and cried only once in my presence, while watching Christopher Walken being pawned by the Vietcong in a game of Russian roulette in *The Deer Hunter*. We watched the film at home on television, my father, my brother, and I, and I remember looking at him—if I recall correctly, it was winter and, as always, slightly chilly in our Haifa apartment—and seeing that his blue eyes were red and tears were rolling down his cheeks.

We had been six at home: my parents, my siblings, and my paternal grandmother Rachel (Ruchela), whom we used to call Achel; a petite, thin woman with pale, wrinkly skin and sharp, slanted blue eyes, like my father's. Hannan had been separated from his mother during the war, and when she arrived in Israel years later, she moved in with him, then with my mother and him, then with all of us. For as long as I could remember, until her death in 1981, she lived in a little room off the kitchen in our quiet apartment atop Mount Carmel in Haifa. We did not speak much to her, and she spoke little either to us or in general, spending most of her days reading in her room or listening to the radio. My mother, who cooked and cleaned for her and washed her clothes, resented her. My father, who would often lash out at my mother and sometimes at us without apparent reason, treated her always with kindness and care. At times, Achel would stay in her room all day, venturing out only when he came home. I recall no fights between my father and his mother, no tension, nothing except a deep, delicate harmony. There were always two teams: him and her, my mother and us children.

When I was six or seven and had just learned to write, I composed a letter to my father, asking why he loved his mother more than us. I tucked it under his pillow in my parents' bed and waited anxiously. When Hannan found the letter, he was furious, scolding me that he would never have dared to write such a letter to *his* father. I remember well the guilt, the shame, the desperate wish that I could take my words back, feelings that plagued me for years. My father did not speak a word to me for a long time after that, and though a lifetime of shared moments, many of them happy, followed, we were never completely at ease together again.

In New York, where I moved in 1992, life became lighter. I married a lighter man, set up a brighter home, began to study literature. My father sent me letters—lovely, well written, surprisingly warm—in which he talked about a possible visit to New York and other plans for his retirement. But that year, after returning from a trip to his hometown in Poland, where he had not been in fifty-three years, he fell ill. He died the next year, at sixty-six, suddenly and shockingly, from the degenerative brain disease Creutzfeldt-Jakob.

I flew in to see him before his death. He could still drive then, though much more recklessly than usual, and we drove down the steep curves of Haifa's Derekh Ha'Yam to Carmel Beach, where we had been together years earlier. Unlike the beach excursions of my childhood—a big, tense, potentially explosive production of towels, tents, coolers, sandwiches, and five bodies crammed into a tiny, un-air-conditioned military-owned Renault 4—it was just the two of us now, each with a small towel, in something like intimacy, even leisure, but not without the tinge of estrangement that had settled between us since I was six or seven. When we got very near the water, he stripped down to his swimwear, folded his clothes meticulously, and placed them and his polished brown sandals neatly on his small towel. He floated in the Mediterranean for a long time, his eyes shut, looking peaceful. *Eize yam*, What a sea, he said, as he used to always say when the water was a blue plateau without a ripple. My father was a man of few words, and now he had even fewer. On our drive home he said, without being prompted, that he was having a few memory problems lately.

When I flew to Israel again a month later, he was speaking Polish—a language I had never before heard him speak—smiling sweetly and calling my mother *siostra*. “Is she your sister?” I asked him. “Of course,” he said, perplexed by the question, casually digging into the omelet my mother had just served him on the same small, cluttered, sticky kitchen table where we had taken our meals since I was born. He looked mild and soft, as if the tension and intensity that had been etched into his features for an entire lifetime had simply melted away, revealing the sweet, calm, slightly vacuous face of a Polish-speaking child. Six weeks later he was lying comatose

in the neurology unit at Carmel Hospital, his body convulsing and twitching, his mouth agape as if in pain, and a month later he died.

During the week of the shiva, we flipped through old photos of him: a chubby boy in a cap, jacket, and long socks, walking ahead of his sister Rivka, whose name then was Regina, and their parents Zindel and Ruchela on a cobblestone street in their hometown of Ostrów Mazowiecka, Poland; a tanned, slimmed-down adolescent riding a pony in Kibbutz Ein Harod. He was chubby again as a mustached Israeli Air Force cadet; he beamed at his wedding to my pretty young mother—he was thirty-four, she was twenty-three—as he cut their wedding cake; he appeared on the beach with a toddler me, and in photos from our trips to American national parks, taken in the years 1977 to 1980, when Hannan was in charge of Israeli F-15 technical staff training at McDonnell Douglas, the defense contractor, in St. Louis. Hannan smiling elusively, the enigma of Hannan.

“Had he always been like this?” I asked his cousin Noemi, whose original Polish name had been Emma. Like this: cordial, distant, aloof. “Or did the war make him that way?” “Always, he was always like this,” she said. “It has nothing to do with the war.” Noemi-Emma, five years my father’s junior, had traveled from the Soviet Union to Iran and from Iran to Palestine with my father and nearly one thousand other child refugees. I was relieved by her answer, proud, in a way, of my father’s resilience, still unaware that her response was simply generic: like nearly all Tehran Children, Noemi—who was seven when the war in which she would lose her mother, father, and only brother broke out—dismissed the notion that the past had marked her or her cousins. “We overcame the war,” she said. “We became Israelis.”

I recounted the conversation with Noemi to Salar when he asked about my father. “I can’t think of what she said without a measure of skepticism,” I said, “about ‘overcoming,’ about becoming Israeli completely.” In the liberal academic circles in which we both moved, Israel was increasingly questioned, shunned even, and often I found myself defending, halfheartedly, what I called home and what many of my friends called “the Zionist project.”

And the longer I lived in New York, the more I found myself missing life in Israel—its smells, its blue skies, its beaches at sunset—while increasingly troubled by its politicians and its policies and worried for its future. It wasn't just Israel but the whole notion of national belonging and national identity that I was no longer able to take at face value, having adapted, like other students trained at American universities during the 1990s, the political scientist Benedict Anderson's insight that nations were not historic, ancient entities but "imagined communities" bound together by shared texts, images, and dates on the calendar. Like many doctoral students, I had spent years identifying how such communities were "constructed," "imagined," and "manipulated." That model suddenly seemed inadequate for understanding my father's refugee experience or even for making sense of how my own life had turned out.

"Nations can be beautiful things," Salar said. "And so are national rituals and national belonging, especially when you lose or never had them."

"It's not that simple," I replied, but I was also grateful for his comment. I wondered if my father had shared his life with friends, with strangers, with people other than us. Dori Laub, a survivor-psychiatrist, writes that the absence of empathy in bystanders and fellow victims during the war shaped many Jewish survivors' postwar lives of isolation and friendlessness. I began to wonder whether something like that had also shaped my father's life and in turn my own, which had been influenced so profoundly by his detachment. I still did not know how Salar's investment in my father's history, my investment in his history, and subsequent investments, of me in others' histories and of others in mine—as I began to research my family's past and discovered the interconnected complexity of the pasts it touched—would shape the book that I did not yet know I would write. I still did not know it would be the source of that book's hope, as well as its heartbreak.

But the mention of the Tehran Children in *The Iranian* piqued my curiosity. It was the first time it occurred to me that Tehran was not only the place from where my father was delivered but also the place where he had actually lived during the war. Which immediately raised other questions: How had he

ended up in Iran? Had Iran really welcomed the Tehran Children, as Abbas Milani claimed, or was their arrival there arbitrary? The name *Iran* is derived from “Aryan,” the Aryans of the East. Did these Persian Aryans have something to do with my father’s survival?

And so I began, very gradually, to trace my father’s journey from Poland to Iran. I read, and I made plans to travel to my father’s hometown of Ostrów Mazowiecka, and from there to some of the other places where he found himself after fleeing across the Soviet border at the onset of the war. I traced his path through the Soviet border towns, to his deportation to a Siberian “special settlement,” and to Uzbekistan, from where, as I discovered, he sailed to Iran, then to India and finally journeyed to Mandatory Palestine, where he arrived with his sister and cousin on February 19, 1943. They had crossed thirteen thousand miles from Poland to Palestine, half the earth’s circumference. I began to follow that odyssey slowly, carefully, without a theory, a model, a road map, “following the actors”—as the sociologist Rogers Brubaker would put it—rather than presupposing anything. I followed the Tehran Children not on a journey from the “wretched diaspora” to “salvation,” not from point A to point B, but on a path in which every point of transit could also have been, and often was for others, a point of arrival. I tried to retrace their route as they lived it, looking at each place they had been, teasing out also the *could* and *would have beens*.

It wasn’t, of course, possible to simply reach back into the well of my father’s past and retrieve it whole across the bar of seven decades of silence, across the bar of the erasure caused by the Holocaust, across half a century of Communist revisionism, across present-day politics in Israel, Iran, Russia, Poland, Uzbekistan, and the United States—politics that were consequences of the past, but that also shaped its retelling. It also wasn’t easy to uncover a history of refugees, who leave little trace and fall outside the memory and memorialization work of nations. And it wasn’t only my father’s history.

Nearly all European Jews who were not murdered during the war became refugees. “Contemporary history has created a new kind of human beings,” the political philosopher Hannah Arendt, herself a refugee, wrote

in an essay that she published in New York on the same month and year my father arrived in Jerusalem: “the kind that are put in concentration camps by their foes and internment camps by their friends.” “A refugee used to be a person driven to seek refuge because of some act committed or some political opinion held . . . but we committed no acts and most of us never dreamt of having any radical opinion. With us the meaning of the term ‘refugee’ has changed. Now ‘refugees’ are those of us who have been so unfortunate as to arrive in a new country without means and have to be helped by Refugee Committees.”³ She was right, of course, but as I would soon discover, there were also different types of refugees, and different routes of refuge: shorter or longer, brutal or a little friendlier.

Most of the Polish Jews who eluded Nazi extermination—roughly 250,000 out of the roughly 350,000 who remained alive after the war—survived, like my father, through deportations in the Soviet Union and then as exiles and refugees in Central Asia, Iran, India, and Palestine. Hundreds of thousands of Catholic Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and displaced Russians traveled the same roads as they did. Residents of the places where he and other refugees arrived—Russians, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, and Persians, Jews and non-Jews—were affected as well by contact with the refugees, as were rescuers and local and foreign aid groups. The history of the Holocaust refugees was not just their own; it was the history of Poland, Russia, Uzbekistan, Iran, Israel, and to an extent even the United States, which supplied refugee aid. Their fate became entangled with dynamics still playing out today: relations between Poles and Jews; between Iran, Jews, and Israel; between “Eastern” and European Jews; between refugees and citizens; between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Little had been written on this history, in part because until recently, archives in Russia, Poland, and Central Asia were unavailable; in part because for a long time, and despite decades of Holocaust research and a boom of Holocaust stories in popular culture, the history of those who fled the Nazis into the Soviet Union and the Middle East still did not fall under the category of “Holocaust history.” And so I began to write it.