The golden era?

Tamara Chalabi’s family memoir evokes the day-to-day experiences of 20th-century Iraqis, but her take on history is filtered through her own relative’s views

• GLENN C. ALTSCHULER

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, the Chalabis were major players in the political and economic life of Iraq. Abdul Hussein Chalabi was a member of parliament and minister of education. His son, Abdul Hadi Chalabi, who established strong ties with the British during World War II, amassed a fortune equivalent to $1 billion.

In 1958, following a coup that deposed Faisal II, the Hashemite king of Iraq, the Chalabis suffered a reversal of fortune. Forced into exile, they never stopped hoping – and planning – to return home.

In 2003, officials in the Defense Department and the office of vice president Dick Cheney hoped to put Abdul Hadi’s son, Ahmed (the creator, with CIA help, of an Iraqi National Congress in exile), in charge of post-Saddam Hussein Iraq. American-educated (with a PhD in mathematics from the University of Chicago), Chalabi is ambitious, well-connected and, some say, manipulative and corrupt. Accused of passing classified information to Iran, he fell out of favor in 2004. Nonetheless, as former CIA director George Tenet has written, “nothing is ever final with Chalabi” – and he remains active in Iraqi politics.

In Late for Tea at the Deer Palace, Tamar Chalabi, Ahmed’s daughter, who has a PhD in history from Harvard University, provides a beautifully written, evocative portrait of her family, set against the backdrop of Iraq’s turbulent past.

Chalabi acknowledges that her narrative is “almost entirely defined and filtered” through conversations with relatives and friends. Informed by the view that the “expired epoch” (the decades before 1958) was “the best period the country has known since it was created” (and that the magnificent Chalabi estate, located midway between Baghdad and Kazimiyah, where Abdul Hussein hosted an official reception for King Faisal I, was “in many respects a microcosm for the entire country”), Late for Tea at the Deer Palace is less than reliable on matters related to Iraqi politics and social class.

At its best, however, the memoir captures the day-to-day experiences of 20th-century Iraqis. “Amidst the smoke and the slurring of over-sugared tea, and the rhythmic sound of dominos being slapped on tables,” Chalabi writes, Baghdad’s street cafes were the best places to gauge feelings about the nation’s future following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

To induce pregnancy, she reveals, her grandmother was encouraged to bury in the house a cryptic formula (hijab), written by a sheikh who dabbled in alchemy and magic – or make a knot in the hem of her nightdress, fill it with crystal salts, sleep with it overnight, then toss it in the river the next morning, accompanied by the appropriate incantation.

Chalabi also captures, albeit impressionistically, some of the complexities of the relationship between Iraqi Muslims and Jews. During the 1930s, she implies, Jews flourished in Iraqi society. Hadi’s office manager, for example, was “a talented and loyal Jew. In an entertainment industry dominated by Christians and Jews, Salima Murad became ‘the voice of Iraq,’” a great favorite of the masses, “a leading figure in society and a darling of the political elite.”

But in June 1941, anti-British sentiments resulted in a “shameful act,” the Farhud (great loot), in which hundreds of Jewish households were ransacked. Despite “considerable risk” to his family, she indicates, Hadi opened his home to a Jewish friend during the riots, and catered to his guest’s kosher diet.

Although the government provided some financial assistance to the victims – and expelled some pro-Nazi sympathizers – many Jewish families decided to leave the country.

With the creation of the State of Israel, Chalabi claims, many Iraqi Jews “were divided in their loyalties,” welcoming some reparation for the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis, while “being appalled” by the plight of Palestinians “who were driven from their homes.” The conflict in Palestine, she adds, “drove a wedge between” Iraqi Jews and the rest of the population, some of whom believed that Zionists themselves had committed the crimes against Baghdad Jews to convince them to migrate.

When the Arab League left Palestine in 1949, hostility to Jews increased. The Iraqi government decreed that Jews who wished to stay could do so, but emigrants had to surrender their citizenship and dispose of all their assets in Iraq. About 130,000 Jews departed. “While they lost their ancestral homeland,” Chalabi laments, “Iraq lost an entire community.”

A sense of loss, in fact, permeates Late for Tea at the Deer Palace. Not all Iraqis shared the Chalabis’ view that before 1958 their country provided “safety, warmth and plenty.” Nonetheless, it is clear that for a half century Iraq has had a long and hard fall, “amidst broken lives and continuing pain.”

Although she is influenced by an understandable, but not entirely warranted, pride in her family, Tamara Chalabi is right to be disappointed as well in “the wasted possibilities,” the sectarian strife and the cycle of violence in post-Saddam Iraq. To insist, as should we all, that plans for a transition to a truly representative government should not be abandoned.

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