

# Covenant

THE MAKING OF AN ARAB JEW: A REVIEW OF SASSON SOMEKH'S *BAGHDAD, YESTERDAY*  
Judith Roumani \*

---

**Abstract:**

Sasson Somekh's *Baghdad, Yesterday: The making of an Arab Jew* was originally published in Hebrew in 2003 by Hakibbutz Hameuchad, Tel Aviv. The English edition was published in 2007 by Ibis Editions of Jerusalem. Somekh, the well known literary critic and scholar of Arabic literature, reveals to us in his new book the makings of an Arab Jew and of an Israeli scholar of Arabic. The autobiography of his early years growing up in Baghdad is a masterly portrayal not only of his own formation, in both the French sense of education and the English sense of the acquiring of an identity, but of the fascinating environment of Baghdad in the 1940s, where a new Arab state (that would eventually exclude the Jewish Somekh) was in formation at the same time.

---

Sasson Somekh is not the only Jewish writer born in the Middle East to find himself uprooted in those and subsequent years, set adrift on the currents of Middle East history, and washed ashore in Israel, America, or one of several European countries. While the number of Jews exiled from Middle Eastern countries is roughly equivalent to that of the Palestinian refugees, if one goes beyond mere numbers one finds on both sides talented writers who have chronicled, through fiction and autobiography, the anguish of these upheavals. This autobiography can be put in the same category as Naim Kattan's *Farewell Babylon* (Iraq), Albert Memmi's *The Pillar of Salt* (Tunisia) Ami Bouganim's, *Le Cri de l'arbre* [The cry of the tree] (Morocco), Andre Aciman's *Out of Egypt* and, recently, Lucette Lagnado's *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit* (Egypt), to name but a few. Such works range between a sense of injustice, humor (from burlesque to a subtle form), irony, nostalgia, and the measured, restrained tones of Somekh's evocation of his youth and lost roots in Iraq.

This understated tone turns out to be exactly the right one for describing, in short

vignettes, details of the life of a middle-class Jewish child growing in Baghdad. Somekh's family lived in relative ease, in a suburb outside the center, far from the old Jewish neighborhood, newly built "among the lettuce fields." It was a mixed neighborhood of Muslims, Christians and Jews, with the latter group predominating. His elementary school was likewise mixed; as he describes it Somekh's narrative technique already emerges. He brings a character to life, say, a young Muslim girl who was his classmate, the daughter of a prominent official. Something about her, perhaps her clothes, her immaculately shining shoes, interests the fifth-grader Sasson. He prepares complimentary notes but never dares slip them to her, then she disappears from his life at the end of the school year. Several years later, now in Jewish high school, he reads a story he has composed aloud to his high school class, and a Jewish girl he admires, likewise a daughter of an important person, compliments him on it: conversations go no further. True to his principles as well as his memories, Somekh largely sticks to describing externalities. Such remembered impressions are the charm of this book. The school year ends and he sees the

girl only fleetingly, once, as her limousine speeds past him on the street. He imagines he sees a smile of victory, as she came out first in the class, and he was almost the last. He writes a poem in Arabic (reproduced in translation in the book) entitles it "Victorious" and sends it along to an Iraqi literary magazine. Here is Somekh's poem, written as a sixteen year old:

Good God! Has my heart been so humiliated  
That even your victorious smile  
Rekindles the fire of love within it?  
The blood in my cheeks blazed,  
Their deep red concealing  
My pale complexion.  
O! What a mighty smile was yours, all-  
encompassing:  
Your sweet cunning, your haughty pride,  
And your radiance.  
O! What a smile it was  
That infused my innermost depths with  
Love mingled with defeat!

Somekh describes his poem as being in a traditional Arabic form, but with a strong Romantic bent, and with meter and rhyme. Though it probably did not occur to him, Somekh was continuing the tradition of the great Jewish poets of Spain who wrote in Hebrew. The poem is rejected not because of its quality but because the Arab editors imagine he is talking about the victory of the Jewish state (it was 1950). Thus, in the most economical way possible, Somekh shows how motives can be doubly misunderstood: while he probably misunderstood the motive of her smile, the Arab editors misunderstood the meaning of his poem. Now, across the gulf of years, wars, religion and ethnicity, he wonders what has happened to his peers and where they may be. The tone of mild, understated curiosity, as to the fate of the people he knew in Baghdad so long ago, is maintained throughout the book. Even nostalgia is understated, merely implied, secondary to the act of remembering.

Born in 1933, Sasson Somekh was eight when the terrible *Farhood* erupted in Baghdad, resulting in the deaths of over a

hundred Jews. It did not affect his own neighborhood, but the child was aware of it through the looters he saw carrying off Jewish goods, and the stories he heard for months afterward of the butchery. If it was a warning for the suburban Jewish middle class, it was a warning that they chose to ignore for the time being. Life continued on as usual, with picnics on the islands in the river, an intense social life based not on religious events but on a European model, and overseas business connections. Somekh's own father worked in a British bank and so the family had a higher status in society that those who worked for Iraqi businesses. In his family, Arabic was not the preferred language for reading, except for Sasson. Though he attended a Jewish high school, one of his teachers was an Arab intellectual who opened the world of Arabic literature before his eyes. The teacher's name was Muhammed Sharara and, though he was probably a Marxist, through his teaching and critical writing he opened Somekh's eyes "to what Russian Formalists call the 'literariness' of the work" (p. 89). Somekh started reading Arabic literature at the public library of Baghdad, began translating and writing Arabic poetry, and soon he was attending the informal meetings of literati and writers in the Baghdad cafes. He also published poetry in newspapers and magazines. It was quite unusual for a seventeen year old, especially a Jewish boy, to be accepted in these circles, but he formed lifelong connections. He never forgot these early mentors and the encouragement they gave him.

This kind man [Sharara] also did other good things for me: He took me to one of his meetings with the poet al-Jawahiri and with other poets he knew, who—as an extension of their respect for Muhammad Sharara—accepted me despite my young age. My memory of these writers and poets, all or most of whom were Muslim, remains at the center of my consciousness to this day (p. 91).

It was not until much later, by the 1980s and 1990s, when Israel began to receive some grudging and fitful acceptance, that Somekh

was occasionally in touch with those early Arab mentors.

Though it does not really emerge from this book, Sasson Somekh became one of the best known critics of Arabic literature. He is the doyen of Arabic literary studies in Israel, having been one of the founders of the Arabic Department at Tel Aviv University, where he is now professor emeritus. He has published books and articles on the 1989 Nobel Prize-winning Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz and was also his close friend (Mahfouz passed away in 2006). An early work, *The Changing Rhythm: A Study of Naguib Mahfuz's Novels* (1973) helped to establish Mahfouz's reputation internationally, though there was later criticism of Mahfouz among the elite in Egypt for his unwavering support of Sadat's 1978 peace agreement.

Around 1949, during the evenings he spent with Arabic-speaking intellectuals in cafes along the river, Somekh was introduced by an Iraqi writer he admired called Buland to the exiled Palestinian writer, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, who fled to Baghdad in 1948 from Jerusalem. Jabra translated Shakespeare into Arabic, authored several novels in Arabic and English, and integrated into the Baghdad aristocracy. Somekh recounts how in 1968, when he was a doctoral student at Oxford, his adviser re-introduced him to Jabra. Being told Somekh was from Israel, Jabra was taken aback and maintained a "stony silence" but when Somekh reminded him in his Baghdadi accent of their mutual friends in Baghdad, he exclaimed, "Aha...I remember a skinny Jewish boy who was one of Buland's groupies. Could that have been you?" So the icy barrier between us melted" (p. 41). Pursuing the subject of the role of the Tigris River in his life, Somekh goes on to tell us about his feelings of horror as he watched on television the bridges of Baghdad being bombed in the Gulf War of 1991. Ironically, it was Ramat Gan, home to a large number of Jews who had fled Iraq, that received several of Saddam Hussein's Scud missiles.

Sasson Somekh immigrated to Israel on his own at the age of seventeen, less out of Zionism than out of the conviction that as a Jew he would not be allowed to attend university in Iraq. He and his family were shaken by the arrests and sometimes executions of Jews for Communist or Zionist connections and in particular the arrest of his uncle. Somekh himself was only slightly interested in politics, and devoted all his energy, right up to his departure, to becoming an Arabic-language poet. Though it does not emerge clearly in this book, Somekh has stated elsewhere that he left Baghdad out of fear for his life. Although he was apolitical, many of the intellectuals he frequented were active Communists, and it was enough to associate with them to be in danger (Interview, Lee Smith, "City of Dreams," <http://nextbook.org/cultural/feature.html>). His family followed shortly thereafter.

Somekh describes himself in several places as an 'Arab Jew' and this term is worth looking at. What, exactly, is an 'Arab Jew'? Others in similar situations might identify themselves as Sephardim, or *mizrachim*, but these terms do not appear in the book, perhaps because Somekh grew up in a resolutely secular environment. 'Arab Jew' is obviously a cultural term rather than an ethnic one, and refers in Somekh's case to his immersion in the Arabic language and literature as well as, perhaps, his sympathy with a certain Iraqi Arab sensibility evident at a particular time: the sensibility of secular poets and intellectuals. He was in fact the only person in his family to read and write in literary Arabic, as his parents preferred Western languages. Hebrew was also absent from their home in Iraq. One can compare Somekh's use of the term with that of Albert Memmi, a Jewish writer from Tunisia. Memmi claims that he originated the term, and applies it to his own background. In this case Memmi spoke Tunisian Judeo-Arabic in his home and milieu of working class Jews in Tunis, and French at school. He felt himself split between three civilizations, the Jewish, Arab and French. In his book-length essay *Juifs et Arabes* (1974)

containing a chapter entitled “What is an Arab Jew?” Memmi defined himself as a “Juif-Arabe” who not only sympathizes with but has experienced the conditions of life of both peoples, and hopes for better understanding between them. Memmi, though, unlike Somekh, wrote only in French, never in Arabic in any form. Memmi also extended his theory of decolonization to the Jewish people as well, justifying the existence of Israel as a national solution to a situation of oppression. Another Tunisian writer, Guy Sitbon, in his novel *Gagou* (1980), has a character declare that he is both totally Jewish and totally Arab. In the case of war, he says, he is on the side of the Wailing Wall meaning, presumably, that he feels split in his essence. For Memmi the term Arab Jew had political connotations, theoretically placing such individuals –and Zionism--within the fold of Middle Eastern and Third World movements of national liberation. It is significant, though, that Tunisia has not produced Jewish imaginative writers who express themselves in literary Arabic rather than French (though there are writers in Tunisian Judeo-Arabic). Somekh, for his part, implies identification with the culture of Iraq and the Arab world through his use of the Arabic language.

This chosen identity is one of the main threads running through Somekh's autobiography which, like life itself, is not neatly organized but follows the threads of memory as they weave backward in time and connect with a distant past, a Jewish microcosm that produced many highly creative individuals, creative not only in their survival tactics in dangerous times but also in their ability—in Somekh's case-- to rework an adverse reality so many years later for our pleasure and instruction.

#### **About the Author**

Sasson Somekh, born in Baghdad, immigrated to Israel in 1951. Already an established poet in Arabic while in Iraq, he attended university in Israel and was one of the founders of the Arabic Department at Tel Aviv University. He became one of the world's leading authorities

on Arabic literature and among modern Hebrew's most respected translators from contemporary Arabic poetry.