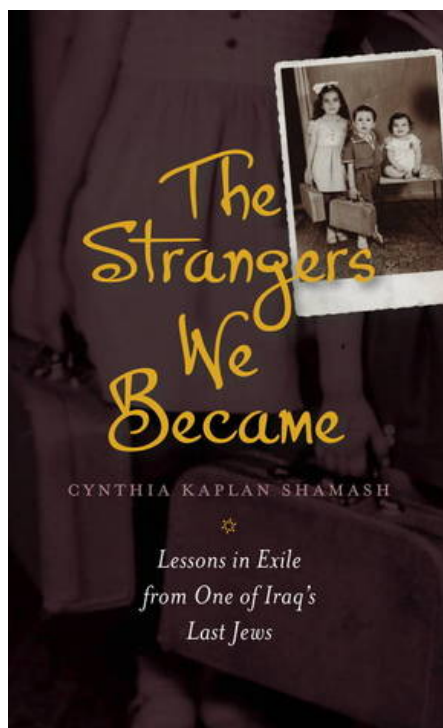




The Strangers We Became: Lessons in Exile from One of Iraq's Last Jews

Cynthia Kaplan Shamash

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The Strangers We Became: Lessons in Exile from One of Iraq's Last Jews Cynthia Kaplan Shamash

This riveting and utterly unique memoir chronicles the coming of age of Cynthia Shamash, an Iraqi Jew born in Baghdad in 1963. When she was eight, her family tried to escape Iraq over the Iranian border, but they were captured and jailed for five weeks. Upon release, they were returned to their home in Baghdad, where most of their belongings had been confiscated and the door of their home sealed with wax. They moved in with friends and applied for passports to spend a ten-day vacation in Istanbul, although they never intended to return.

From Turkey, the family fled to Tel Aviv and then to Amsterdam, where Cynthia's father soon died of a heart attack. At the age of twelve, Sanuti (as her mother called her) was sent to London for schooling, where she lived in an Orthodox Jewish enclave with the chief rabbi and his family. At the end of the school year, she returned to Holland to navigate her teen years in a culture that was much more sexually liberal than the one she had been born into, or indeed the one she was experiencing among Orthodox Jews in London. Shortly after finishing her schooling as a dentist, Cynthia moved to the United States in an attempt to start over.

This vivid, beautiful, and very funny memoir will appeal to readers intrigued by spirituality, tolerance, the personal ramifications of statelessness and exile, the clashes of cultures, and the future of Iraq and its Jews.

The Strangers We Became: Lessons in Exile from One of Iraq's Last Jews Details

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From Reader Review The Strangers We Became: Lessons in Exile from One of Iraq's Last Jews for online ebook

Jamie Barringer (Ravenmount) says

I enjoyed this book, and found it quite informative. In this memoir, the author, Shamash tells of her family's ordeals in Iraq in the 1960's, and of their escape, first to Israel and then to Holland, where they settled and gradually built a new life as exiles. Shamash struggles with the concept of exile, especially since as a Jew her traditional identity is caught up inextricably with the idea of the Jews as a people in exile from Jerusalem, a city her family could have settled in after their escape. Instead they chose to leave Jerusalem and settle as refugees in a place where no one speaks Arabic, to live as outsiders in a place where most people are not Jewish, devout or otherwise.

This story offers a lot of insight into what it means to belong (or to not fit in), what place religion has in modern life, and how children can assimilate into new cultures without completely losing their identities. I liked, as well, how Shamash calls out the sexism of the traditional culture she was raised in, though by the end of the book she is still struggling to work out a stable compromise that she won't feel guilty about, to raise her daughter without the sexism, but with more of her family's cultural heritage than Shamash's fragmented childhood offered.

The last chapters of this book are weak, like they were just tacked on after the rest of the book was polished and ready to print. The transition from dental college and root canals to married life in New York is abrupt, and Shamash's storytelling before and after this point seems markedly different, as if the story up to this point is well rehearsed and polished, while everything after this point is a chaotic muddle. No doubt this is in part because while the majority of the book covers her earlier life, which she has had years to think about and come to terms with, she has yet to develop much perspective on her present state, so it is harder for her to tell the story of what her life looks like now. As a literary work, I'd prefer if this last part was as polished as the rest of the story, but as a memoir by a woman who is not dead yet and who is still developing the rest of her life-story, it works.

Susan Grodsky says

I wish I could give a more laudatory review. I have a great deal of sympathy for Cynthia, someone who (as she points out) lived in five countries in 12 years. And Cynthia can turn a good phrase, even in her third language, English: she describes her pink refugee passport as one that meant "you belonged not to a specific country but to the entire UN. It was as if you had many citizenships yet not a single one that you could really call your own."

But despite those astute, well-worded phrases, this is not a very good book. It starts well, with a short history of the Jews in Iraq and a suspenseful description of the Shamash family's surreptitious departure. The story of an Iraqi army officer destroying an eight year old's doll while searching for a hidden microphone tells you a lot about the psychosis of the colonized.

But the narrative bogs down in the Netherlands, where the Shamashes eventually take refuge. There are many stories of Cynthia's painful school days and adolescence. She suffers daily cultural whiplash, traveling between the liberal Dutch culture of her school and the traditional Arabic culture of her home. You can't help but feel sympathy for her.

But what you can't quite do -- because she doesn't help you -- is understand what really makes her go. For example:

--She tells of taking horseback riding lessons because she wants to "fit in" with her school mates. It's clear she hates horses and hates riding, but likes feeling a part of the horse crowd. How long before she drops the lessons? How does she explain that to her one-time riding buddies? Does she feel better or worse? What does she conclude about horseback riding, social cliques, crossing cultures?

--She decides while quite young that she wants to be a dentist. Why dentistry? She presents herself as a poor student so how does she handle the academic requirements?

--In the mile-a-minute final pages, we learn that she moves to New York, marries an orthodox man, and has five children. How did she decide to move to New York? Why was the man she married the right one? Again, we learn *what* happened but now why or how.

An attitude of cynicism, low-level anger and fear of scarcity pervades the entire narrative. While I can certainly understand the reasons why, understanding doesn't make her bitterness easier to listen to.

Nor do you hear a single word of gratitude. For example: Although the Dutch offered the Shamashes housing, schooling, work permits, and a social worker to ease their transition, what you hear is that the liberal Dutch culture grated on their Arabic sensibilities. She doesn't see that the liberal, accepting attitude is what made the Dutch willing to accept refugees.

It's tough to be a refugee: You are always a stranger, always uncomfortable, always trying desperately to fit in. And I get it, I get it.

But then what? I ask. Cynthia Shamash doesn't have an answer.

Cindie Harp says

I enjoyed this book, but the end confused me. In the last 20 pages, there is a time leap of 25-ish years. The book ends abruptly, akin to the last episode of The Sopranos. I feel like half this book, the second half, is missing. I would love to hear more about the author's adult life, choices and most of all, where she went, existentially speaking, from the book's end? However, her last philosophical argument, internal but also aimed at the religious leaders of her children's schools, was a plea for privacy of thought, dreams, and choice. Perhaps this opacity in her adult development is her exercising this right she feels denied.

The Jewish Book Council says

Review by Rachel Sara Rosenthal for the Jewish Book Council.

Philip Mann says

This book moves quickly. It starts off with the author's family being questioned at a police station for the crime of trying to leave Iraq. They are intercepted and are held in jail for five weeks. We understand that it could have been much worse. Jews are barely tolerated in that country, and the police hold tremendous power.

We follow the author, Cynthia Kaplan Shamash as her family eventually leaves Iraq, albeit with barely a suitcase per person and a handful of cash, and land in Istanbul. From there almost immediately, they leave for Tel Aviv, courtesy of the Israeli government. But that city is too western for their very Mid East roots,

and they leave once again, this time for Amsterdam.

One by one, the connections the Shamash family has to their roots are severed. The father soon dies of a heart attack, deprived of a common language , a livelihood and any common ground with his new home. Then the author herself is sent to London, there to board with the chief rabbi. The clash of cultures between the flamboyant Iraqi-Jewish Shamash and her Ashkenazi English hosts is well told. Yet she holds on, and even learns from her experience.

Eventually Shamash rebuilds her Jewish identity, holding on to her Judeo-Arab roots yet becoming a member of western society. She settles in New York, marries an orthodox Jewish man, and manages to maintain the Sephardi approach to Judaism. All in all, a very well told story.
