WE CONTINUE OUR SERIES, BASED ON INTERVIEWS AND IMAGES FROM THE ARCHIVE OF SEPHARDI VOICES UK, THAT UNCOVERS THE STORIES OF SEPHARDIM FROM AROUND THE WORLD

THIS ISSUE:

The man who rode horses and sold Lincolns

David Khalastchi, who died in 2018, left Baghdad in 1967 and settled in London. **Rebecca Taylor** speaks to his daughters about his life, and we feature **Bea Lewkowicz**'s interview with David before he died

"Our father loved to talk about the past," says Lisette Keats as she pours me a cup of spiced black tea at her Swiss Cottage home. She is referring to the businessman and philanthropist David Khalastchi, who died, aged 91, in 2018. Lisette, an architect, and her sister Linda Yentob, who works in the family's property business, are meeting me to talk about their father's life in Baghdad in the first half of the 20th century.

Lisette's living room is filled with art, including striking sculptures created by her mother, Eve Zilkha. Only a row of ornate silver coffee jugs hints at life before the family settled in the UK in 1967.

"For my father, life in Baghdad was a paradise," says Lisette. "He was so rooted in Arab culture, the land, the music – we always had Arabic music playing in the car. He brought his past life into his new life," she says, adding that he filled the grounds of his Ascot house with dogs, peacocks, ostriches and – his great love – horses.

David Khalastchi was born in 1926 in Shamiyah, a rural settlement in the middle of Iraq. He grew up on the family farm until he was four years old. Then the family moved to Baghdad, where he went to school. David spent every summer at the farm. "He loved riding. When he was ten years old, he jumped onto the back of a horse – without a saddle – and learned to ride by himself," says Linda.

Shamiyah was home to various Shiite tribes and the family partnered with four of them as part of the farming business. "The head of the tribes and our uncle Eliyahu, who ran the farm, were in and out of each other's houses. The tribesmen would bring any local disputes to be sorted out in our family office," she says. "Deals were based on trust. You shook hands and that was it."

Despite this relationship, it was a local tribesman who murdered David's father, Menashe. In spring 1941, with the war raging, Iraq's Jews faced a dangerous time. The pro-Nazi prime minister Rashid Ali al-Gailani overthrew Iraq's royal family and started broadcasting Nazi propaganda. But, when an attack on a British Air Force base ended in failure, Gailani was forced to flee.

In the countryside, the head of the tribes who were partners with the Khalastchis had recently left the area due to the takeover of Rashid Ali. As tensions mounted, one tribesman decided to stake his tribe's claim to power by attacking the Khalastchis. "The family heard a shot outside the house," says Linda. "My father describes running onto the roof, and seeing his father on the ground surrounded by a pool of blood." A week later Baghdad erupted in the violent 1 June Farhoud, in which the Jews were killed and their homes looted in a frenzy of pro-Nazi sympathy.

"What was later important for us was that he never held any resentment towards the tribes. In London he had many Iraqi Arab friends. That attitude allowed us to be open to the world, too."

David worked in the farm's administrative office in Baghdad but in 1948, he got into the tyre import business. "He was always passionate about cars," says Lisette: "When he was 90 he bought a Tesla and went up and down the motorway loving it." In 1954 he was approached by a sheik who was looking for someone to run his car company. That someone was David.

Although the country was thriving, Jews were increasingly targeted following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. There was a series of public hangings of Jews and in 1951, 120,000 Jews left for Israel. "Jews had lived in Iraq for 2,500 years. They felt Babylonian. To suddenly be called traitors was unbelievable." The situation grew more uncertain. In 1959, when Linda was 9, she was sent to boarding school in Switzerland. Then in 1963, the Ba'ath Party took control of Iraq – and David and his family had their passports confiscated.

Eventually they got passports and left Iraq, settling in London on Regent's Park. David set up a property business and bought a house in Ascot. He and his brothers built a synagogue in Beer Sheva in memory of his uncle Eliyahu. And in the Babylonian Centre in Or Yehuda, there is a model of the Great Synagogue of Baghdad, dedicated to the memory of his father.

"The house in Ascot brought a bit of Iraq into our everyday lives," says Lisette. "It was an open house with friends and family staying. It reminded my father of how it was in Shamiyah. We often had parties (called chalghi) with musicians playing Iraqi songs." ■

IN CONVERSATION:

David Khalastchi

At his home in Ascot in 2012, David Khalastchi remembered his early life, in conversation with **Bea Lewkowicz**

BEA LEWKOWICZ: Tell me about your family background

DAVID KHALASTCHI: My great-grandfather was from an area 20 miles from Babylon called Al-Kefl, where the Prophet Ezekiel is buried. It is a sacred place even for Muslims today. The family was dealing in seeds, rice, barley and dates. While transporting them on the river, they came to the village of Shamiyah. The village had a Jewish community, so my grandfather decided to settle there. That was where I was born.

BL: What was life like in Shamiyah?

DK: At that time, my grandfather was trading with the Ottoman rulers. My eldest uncle enlarged the agriculture business in 1920, planting orchards and rice. We had good relations with the head of the tribes of the area. When the British occupied Iraq, the head of the tribes in our area asked my father, who spoke English, to negotiate with the British. My father travelled on horseback all night for about 30 miles to the British headquarters in Najaf and got the tribes the terms they wanted. Then the British decided to give land to anyone who could invest in agriculture, and plant and irrigate it. But you needed expensive pumping machines for irrigation.

The British gave us 10-15,000 acres. It was not easy to farm because there was no mechanisation, so we started importing pumping machinery. The workers from the tribes planted the land and we supplied and maintained the irrigation and sold the produce. At the end of the year, the head of the tribes came to our office and we submitted an account for them. There was no question of a receipt, trust was the number one.

BL: What are your earliest memories of growing up in Shamiyah?

DK: My favourite memory was about Shamiyah. I loved it. We used to have three months' holiday from school and my family sent me to the farm.

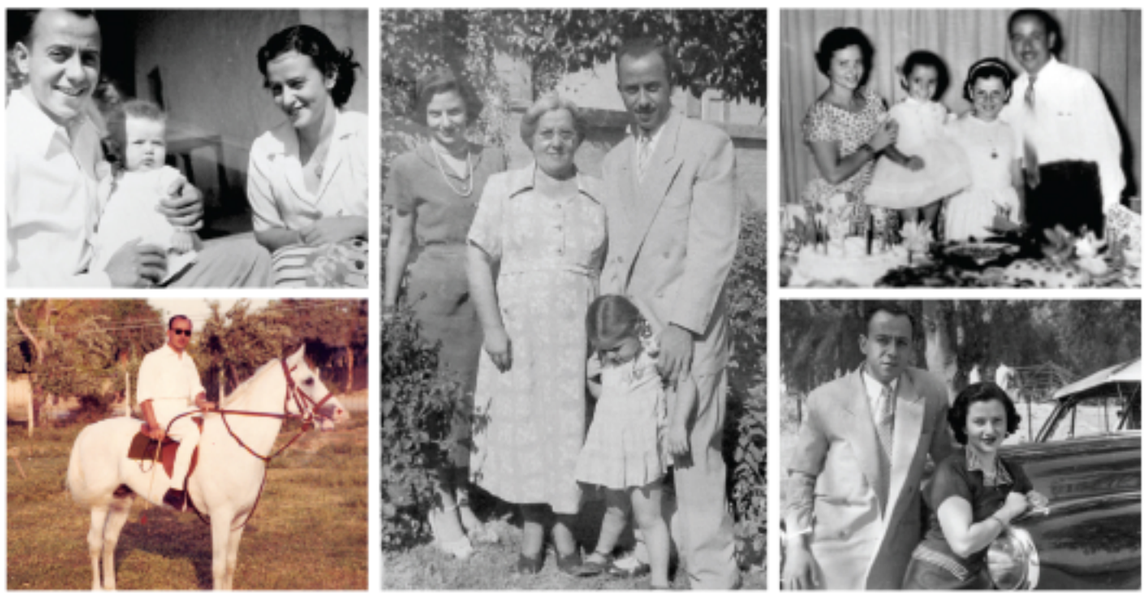
We had a big house. Sometimes the family from Baghdad visited us for a holiday. We had a big family but we could fit them in. There was a kitchen, a place for the chickens, an office area and another area for guests.

My family gave me a horse from the farm to ride. I had everything I could want. The area was so beautiful! We were not far from the river. We had a driver, who lived in our house. He loved animals. He used to keep a gazelle, sheep, partridges and pigeons. I loved that!

BL: Who lived in that house?

DK: My uncle Eliyahu. He was married, but had no children. So we – my brothers Maurice and Frank and sisters Margot and Violette and I – were just like his children. My father used to spend most of the time in Shamiyah, and part of the year in Baghdad. My other uncle, Nissim, ran the office in Baghdad.

My mother's family lived in the city of Hillah, which was about two hours from



COURTESY OF DAVID KHALASTCHI'S PERSONAL ARCHIVE

Far left: David, left, at his tyre import business, Baghdad; Clockwise: David, Linda and Eve; the Khalastchis; Eve, Lisette, Linda and David; David, Eve – and car; David on one of his beloved horses

our place, halfway to Baghdad. Her brother ran the electricity supply there. There were no tarmac roads, just sand tracks.

BL: How do you remember Baghdad?

DK: The first house I remember was at the age of three. I went to the Alliance School. We learnt Hebrew, English, French and Arabic. But in the mid-1930s the government stopped the Hebrew teaching. Every class had about 60 children; I was naughty at the back!

On Shabbat, everything became white. It was so beautiful. It would distract you from any other activities.

I married Eve in 1949. She was from Basra but most of her family had moved to Geneva. We were often in Geneva as later we sent our daughter Linda to school there for health reasons. Our second daughter Lisette was born in Geneva.

In Baghdad they had beautiful clubs. And the social life! I'm talking before 1948. Anything you wanted to do in the club you could do: if you wanted to play bridge, if you wanted to play cards, if you wanted to have dinner, if you wanted to socialise. Everything was in the evenings – it's beautiful, cooler then.

BL: How did life for the Jews change?

DK: In 1941, my father was killed in our farming area. He thought it was safer there than in Baghdad. It was the worst thing. It was a very, very difficult time. This is part of our lives there. The problem is, when you have a mob they are incited by the radio and by the government [saying]: "Kill the Jews". These people are poor people. They are illiterate. We lived in harmony. But the problem is coming from the rulers. Nobody could imagine that one day we would leave. A few families left in 1941 but after that, life returned to normal.

But 1948 was stage two – the worst part, which lasted for three or four years. In the first stage, before 1948, we thought, "This is our home". In the second stage, either you emigrated or you stayed in Baghdad because there was no security outside the capital. The bulk of people left to go to Israel in 1950-51. The people who stayed, of which I was one, numbered 10-15,000.

After the 1952 rebellion in Iran everything changed. The British were the most influential power in the area. The British opened the oil tap in Iraq. So Iraq started having more money, creating prosperity. Road-building, dams – you name it. Everything started to go up and move. But all this activity didn't touch the man in the street.

There was another revolution in 1958. We thought we would become communist. Russia, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and China opened embassies in Iraq.

We [David's car business] had a lot of big cars such as Lincolns and Mercurys. Before 1958, the roads had been expanded for them. But after the revolution, if you had a medium-sized car, you drove a mini-sized one instead because you were frightened the revolutionaries would catch you on the road – and then they might kill you.

> **"In our business with the tribes there was no question of a receipt. Trust was the number one"**

So at first we couldn't sell the cars. But within three months, we sold every car – at full price. How did we do it? We sold them to the Russian ambassador, the Chinese ambassador and other officials.

Then Abd al-Karim Qasim [the brigadier who seized power in the 1958 revolution] took over. His motto was that there was no difference between people, religions, and poor and rich. He wanted to increase the assets of the poor. But after six months of the revolution we were frightened. We didn't know what was going to happen.

One of our tyre dealers told me, "David, if you need any help, my brother-in-law is the head of the intelligence service." I couldn't believe my ears. I told him I needed a passport, and he got my application approved in one hour. I was able to travel every year for four or five months and return to Baghdad. My family stayed in Iraq and we expanded the business from 1958 until 1963. Then in 1964 Qasim was killed.

As Jews, we weren't given passports and it took us three years to get one. We left with just our suitcases and came to England in March 1967. Then came the Six Day War, which brought the third and final stage, the most miserable time for the remaining Jews in Iraq.

BL: What did you take when you left Baghdad?

DK: Only our clothes. I got a passport and I couldn't risk losing it. We didn't even bring photos.

BL: How would you define yourself in terms of your identity today?

DK: If I say I'm British, people laugh at me. If I say I'm Iraqi, people say, "Iraq? It's a shame." I love England. And I am happy. But I'm not English. My memory is all about Iraq. In Iraq we had a good life." ■

Interview edited by Judith Mirzoeff and Janet Levin. See sephardivoices.org.uk