

Transcript: The Wolf of Baghdad - A conversation with Carol Isaacs and Daniel Jonas

Mehiyar 0:16 Welcome to Nahrein Network podcast series. Today we're joined by Carol Isaacs and Daniel Jonas, creators of The Wolf of Baghdad: A Memoir of a Lost Homeland. Hello, welcome to the Nahrein Network.

Carol Isaacs 0:29 Thank you for having us.

Daniel Jonas 0:30 Hi.

Mehiyar 0:31 You've created a wonderful audio visual graphic memoir of your work. Could you tell us about it?

Carol Isaacs 0:36 I started life as a musician, I still am a musician. But I also do some cartoons. And the last few years, I've just been thinking more about my background, my heritage. It's always been there. I mean, obviously, my parents are both from Iraq, and Baghdad. The family were there for more than 2000 years. They left and they came to England where I was born, I had never been, and I was thinking, how can I bring the two aspects of my life together, the music and the drawing into something that is more personal. And I realized that perhaps this is a way to tell the story of my family, and then basically to recount their memories as a as a graphic memoir, as a visual work that will be accompanied by the music of the time and music of the era, music of the place. I interviewed my family. I've got the reminiscences both good and bad of their life in Baghdad, made it into like a slideshow, digital. If you think of it as a silent movie: so you have something running on the screen, and underneath, you have musicians playing live. So we'll be playing live to the action that's happening on the screen. The wolf is a mythical creature that I read about in a book that was published 100 years ago, about the Jews of Baghdad. And it said that they believe that keeping a wolf in your house would keep away the evil spirits, that it would protect the children, it would protect the household. And then my mother, my mother died, I found a little Amulet of a wolf tooth that she had obviously pinned to my sister and I, the cradle. I asked some Bedouin in Jordan, actually, and they do the same thing. So the wolf in the Middle East is a, is a positive influence. It's a, it's a good thing. In the West, we tend to regard the wolf as something not nice. So I thought I could weave the two things into this, so the wolf is accompanying me through this journey that I'm taking, this imagined journey to my family's memories of their lost homeland. I mean, they talked so much about how life used to be, how wonderful it was in- and it depends actually on which generation you asked, my grandparents' generation would have said,

"Yes, we lived happily everything was fine." But maybe people of my mother's generation and younger would say, "Well, we experienced harassment, and we had to leave. And you know, we left without, we had to renounce our citizenship in order to leave safely, which is the last of them basically did that." So there were mixed memories. So I thought, I just imagined this journey that I take back there and show that to other communities in, in Arab land, especially in Iraq, that we have so much more in common than divides us. Our culture is so much the same. You walk into my family's home, you'll hear Arabic being spoken. The food on the table is Iraqi, it's Arabic food. When we talk about holidays and festivals, we say "eid" we don't say- we don't call it in Hebrew, we call it in Arabic. We say Inshallah, there's a lot of things that we have in common. We come from the same place. And I noticed a lot of people didn't know that there were Jews that lived in Arab lands. They assume being Jewish meant you all spoke Yiddish, you all eat smoked salmon, you eat bagels, you know, you say "Oy vey". I never had any of this in my house. It was all about kibbeh, bamia, and Iraqi dates and sweets. And you know, we talked Arabic, it was very much an Arabic household. One of the reasons for doing this project was that I lived essentially in two worlds all my life: the world in our home, which was an Iraqi Jewish home, and then the world outside, which is you know, London in my case. So at home, we speak one thing, we'd have a culture and then you go outside to talk to your friends and, and it will be very English and very British and I went to a very public school, very kind of, you know, uptight, academic, terribly British school. So it was like, Well, where is my home? Where do I belong? One foot here, one foot there. And I find that with other people who, whose parents have emigrated here, they like have one world at home, whether it's Bengali or Pakistani or Somali or whatever. And then another world outside and they're essentially two people and it's, well, where do I belong? What is my home? I was born here. I have a British passport, for which I'm very grateful, but my culture says I'm from somewhere else. So it's trying to reconcile those two things. And having done this project, I'm still neither. I'm not, I still don't know where I'm from. You know, maybe there's a bunch of us that are just this hybrid of two cultures, and we always will be, and that's what makes this country amazing, you know, we have all this cultural diversity.

Mehiyar 5:23 Daniel, so how are you involved in this project?

Daniel Jonas 5:25 I've been involved in various types of Jewish music for a while now, initially in Judeo Spanish music, which is, I guess, originally from Al-Andalus and North Africa. And now I'm also exploring my family's heritage on my mother's side, which is also Iraqi, from Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk. Although my family went to India in the 19th century, my grandfather was born in Karachi, my grandmother in Mumbai. Again, my family came to England in, in the 1950s. But again, we're another one of those families. We, we're not Eastern European Jews, we're Jews from the Middle East, from North Africa, from the Balkans- but where I live now, I live in the Iraqi Jewish community in North London. That's the rhythm of my life. Those are the people I interact with. That's, that's the sounds that I hear.

Mehiyar 6:26 And you founded Al 3YIN, which is a music group.

Daniel Jonas 6:29 That's right, 3YIN was set up to explore the music, the Judeo-Arabic traditions. But to me personally, the sort of lead in that is about the Iraqi tradition, about both the sacred and secular traditions, both of which are very distinctly Arabic, in terms of their modalities, their sounds, their language, but also, they are also quite distinctive. So for example, in the secular songs, there's a lot of crossover with the, with the popular music, that would have been listened to and is still listened to. In Iraq, there's no distinction between Jewish and Arab music. In fact, some of the great Iraqi composers, musicians, performers, were Jewish. That- it would not have been the same tradition without the Jewish musicians, particularly the famous Al-Kuwaiti brothers, whose music is undergoing quite a renaissance now. This is also music that we're very interested in, it's part of it, it's part of our repertoire. But equally, we're also looking at the repertoire of Iraqi-Jewish sacred songs. So these would be songs that are sung in the synagogue, in the home, lifecycle events at parties, sometimes in Judeo-Arabic, sometimes also in Hebrew.

Mehiyar 7:50 And this is a process of documenting and archiving music heritage that you know.

Daniel Jonas 7:54 Well, in many cases, the hard yards in terms of documenting and finding things, that's work that's been done in the ethnomusicological field by people like Eskal Kojiman and Salman Assay, great specialists in this area, who are people that have mentored us and helped us. And we've, we've worked with them, without whom, these- this project would not look across the breadth. What we do, which has been a theme in my music, has been about taking a an old repertoire, a non contemporary, sometimes very old repertoire, which is in the sort of common unconscious or just in old recordings, and being able to bring that to life for new generations for people to discover it a ew with either the traditional instruments that would have been used or with new instruments, because it was very contemporary at the time. If you hear the old recordings from discs from the 30s and 40s, they're using the contemporary sounds, the contemporary textures, the contemporary instruments, both European and Middle Eastern. What we're continuing to do is to reinvent that but still retain that distinctively Judeo-Iraqi feel, I suppose.

Mehiyar 9:06 That has become part of the everyday fabric of Iraqi music.

Daniel Jonas 9:10 Very much so, yes. Some of the songs that will be, that we'll be performing since. I mean, there'll be things like that Nazem al-Ghazali's Fog al-Nakhal. I mean, everyone knows that. I mean, Jews know that, Muslims know that, Christians know that. Everybody knows that and no matter where they come from, because it's- it's an Iraqi song. There are songs like Tadini by the Kuwaiti brothers. Again, people know that, it's a distinctively Iraqi rhythm, that 10/16, the Georgina, no one else plays that, not in that way.

Mehiyar 9:43 And it's been a personal journey also.

Carol Isaacs 9:45 Very much

Mehiyar 9:46 You've had to revisit memories and your family's experience.

Carol Isaacs 9:50 That's right. It's, it's been quite emotional because for some of them, it's, it's going back to places maybe they don't want to talk about but they- my family have been amazing. I mean, they are incredible, very resilient people. They came with nothing. And you know, they made new lives for themselves here. The music angle has been fascinating for me because I played Western music all my life, we didn't have this in my house. I think my family probably didn't want to hear, it reminded them of home. What was their home?

Mehiyar 10:20 And that was quite painful.

Carol Isaacs 10:21 Yes. And so to all intents and purposes, my parents wanted to be English and British. And so we had opera and classical music, Beethoven and Bach, on the record player, you know. So since meeting Daniel, the last two or three years, and also before I worked with Ahmed Mukhtar, the-

Mehiyar 10:42 the oud player.

Carol Isaacs 10:43 I learnt from him as well, but him and Daniel and also Keith, our oud player, learning the repertoire has been eye opening for me, an ear opening, it's like a whole new world. It's absolutely what it's like learning a new language and trying to be able to speak in it. And, and all the Maqam have been quite emotional as well I don't know why. But they are for me, something inside is really quite moved when I'm hearing them or playing them. I don't know why that is. So trying to make it into a immersive experience that you're looking at images of Baghdad, or what used to be. You're looking at ghosts, essentially, passing through the city, ghosts of my family, someone in my family said if we could go back to Iraq, it would be as Jewish ghosts. I've kind of taken that quote and used that. But I'm also hoping part of me hopes that, you know, maybe we can go back in our human form as well. I don't know how, I don't know when, I don't know, in what capacity but we can only hope.

Mehiyar 11:41 It is this conversation amongst the Iraqi Jewish community. But have you also been able to reach out to non Jewish Iraqis?

Carol Isaacs 11:49 That has been amazing since I started this project, part of my Arts Council funding was that I had to make a blog and blog about it regularly: about making of the project and the progress and everything. And I've got followers, in- in Iraq itself, in Lebanon in somewhere else as well, the United Arab Emirates. But there's a young 18 year

old guy, I presume he's Muslim, his name is. And he's been so sweet. He's been sending me pictures of I asked him, can you send me some pictures of the old city, of the alleyways in the market, he's been sending them to me! I met through my blog, another Iraqi emigree, who's living here now, we've been in dialogue. And through him and through others, I've been meeting the wider Iraqi diaspora and they're interested too. They say so much, so much of what I write is resonating with them. So that gives me hope.

Mehiyar 12:34 Of course it resonates with a lot of the pain of the past few decades in Iraq.

Carol Isaacs 12:40 And what's been happening in recent history as well. There's a scene in the book that addresses the pain of not just the Jews, but everybody is like. And I'm dedicating that the whole thing to the people of Iraq, it's not just about us Jews, but it's about the Iraqi people as a whole. In fact, the Jews at one point said, we are Iraqi first, before we are Jewish, they were so part of the fabric.

Daniel Jonas 13:01 So for me, it's very important that Jews are not just constructed as people from Europe, people who are politically white people, who are politically Western. As like Carol says, there was a period where it was very much in vogue, particularly during the early 20th century, to describe oneself as an Arab Jew. And this construction of identity was very decisively refuted during the sort of, I suppose, the age of the dictators. It was seen that one could not be a Jew, and to be an Arab at the same time, these things were politically separated. And we were not to be allowed to be a part of the community, the Middle East. And I think that's been a very sad thing, because I think it's, it's continued to make it harder to, to move past the conflicts of the past, and to heal. Part of what needs to happen now is for people to, for there to be a process of- I know that- maybe truth, I think [that] needs, needs to be happened. We need to, we need to talk about things. We need to talk about the Jews being there and why the Jews left and about what's happened, and why Jews don't feel comfortable going back. Whether Jews can be invited back, whether it's safe for Jews to go back. And whether, whether we're welcome. And about the sort of the cultural side of it, the heritage side of it, there's still massive discussions at the moment about, about the Iraqi Jewish Archive, which was very much maltreated during the time of Saddam Hussein. And I think it's important for us to talk about these things explicitly. It's not about creating a you did this, you did that, blame culture. It's about saying, Well, look, here we are. We're not, we're not here to have a big fight about things. Let's just be together. Let's listen to music, let's play music. Let's get together and experience something which we can all enjoy, and start to build some kind of social capital on which a dialogue can take place. And that's still very difficult in the musical world. We're still having conversations. In 3YIN, we have a collective about maybe 30, 40 musicians, mostly Jewish, many Arabs. Many people aren't Jewish. And it's sometimes very difficult to have that conversation because people want to know, oh, is it going to be political? Is it going to be this, you know, are we going to, are we going to mention this thing, are we going to mention that organization. And we're not here about that. We would like to play music. It would be nice if people didn't keep bringing the politics into it. But we're not going to run away from it

either. Nor are we going to hide, you know, who we are, where we come from, and where we are now and where we went to. Again, part of, part of this is very much dependent on music, music requires funding. And funding requires funding organizations and funding organizations have their own, have their own sort of stipulations. And I think people understand that. But at the same time, we are still here to play music and to sing and to- You know, we're not running a museum here. But we are still, you know, we're drawing upon the things that are partly museum-ish, in order to tell a story of something that's still very much alive. It's transformed. It's not what it was. We're not going to have, like suddenly going to be, it'd be having like Jewish childhood nights in Baghdad, as a result of this. Jews are going to be talking about, about Iraq, Jews are going to be talking about it's so much more present than it was a few years ago in public discourse. And I think that's right, it needs to be.

Mehiyar 16:59 Public discourse in Iraq?

Carol Isaacs 17:01 Yeah. Just to tell this story and let people make of it what they will. And to put, just to put our names on the map and say, This is where we came from. This is who we are. This is what we've been through. And telling it through a family story, basically, with music that, you know, people, people like to listen to music I think. Ideally, it would be great to be able to work with some Iraqi musicians at some point in the future on this repertoire. We could learn so much from each other. So we're putting on a performance of The Wolf of Baghdad, which will involve the slideshow on the screen that will be accompanied by live musicians. That's the first half of the evening. The second half will be concert by 3YIN of other music, music of Judeo-Arabic origin, we're doing Iraqi music, we're doing- it's mostly Iraqi, isn't it? Daniel Jonas 17:53 It's mostly Iraqi music. So there are a few sort of things which you might call sort of classic standards, which demonstrate in fact, this kind of shared heritage, you have a lot of repertoire where some very defiantly secular songs about you know, love and wine and whatnot, being transformed and moving from Arabic lyrics to Hebrew lyrics, which are more about God and the divine beloved, and using more sort of biblical and religious things.

Carol Isaacs 18:22 This will be performed at JW3, which is northwest London, on the Finchley road. I think you can find tickets. www.JW3.org.uk

Mehiyar 18:34 That's a Jewish Community Center and Art Center in London that's in NW3 6ET?

Carol Isaacs 18:41 Correct. It's on the Thursday, the 22nd of November. And we'd love to see people. We'd love the whole crew, everyone to come and enjoy and just enjoy the music. Enjoy the visuals.

Daniel Jonas 18:52 That's a great space.

Carol Isaacs 18:53 It's a wonderful space.

Daniel Jonas 18:54 There's a wonderful, wonderful restaurant.

Carol Isaacs 18:56 Yes, there's a Middle Eastern restaurant that's attached to the venue.

Mehiyar 18:59 And of course you both would like to go to, back to Iraq, to visit at least?

Carol Isaacs 19:04 You say that but there's nothing left of our family. The places where I'd go to honor my family, the cemeteries, they've all gone. I think Saddam built a highway over where my grandfather is buried in our family there.

Mehiyar 19:15 Do you know where that is in your, in Baghdad?

Carol Isaacs 19:16 Yeah, there's a name for it, the big highway is gone it just bulldozed it. But to meet Iraqis and to exchange ideas would be a wonderful opportunity. And to play music together would be the best, would be incredible just as I'm a student of this, of Maqam. And to go and study and to go and learn from people that know would be amazing.

Mehiyar 19:42 And of course the Jewish music history that SOAS plays a big role in that.

Carol Isaacs 19:46 They've been very supportive for this project actually. They want to promote, because music, Jewish music has been a lot about European style and not so much about other, the other kind, the Oriental kind or the, what Daniel has been working with, the Spanish and Portuguese, Ladino. So yes, they are interested in promoting and disseminating this music to the, to a wider public.

Daniel Jonas 20:15 There's a far more rounded appreciation of, of Jewish musical culture then there was when I started getting involved in it like a long time ago. And [there was a] time was when people go, "Oh, you mean klezmer?" And we're gonna say, "Well, no, there is more to, there is more to Jewish music than klezmer." And then they say, "Oh, you're playing in weddings and Bar Mitzvahs" saying "No, there is a Jewish music tradition" they say "What do you mean, hava nagila?" and we're saying "No" and- but that was, that was then. I mean, nowadays, people are getting used to hearing great singers coming out of the indigenous Jewish traditions coming out of the Middle East. There are people working in the field, the ethnomusicologists have done so much work to surface the repertoire to transcribe. I mean, we've had to do some ourselves. I mean, don't get me wrong. It's not all just necessarily waiting there. But things like the sort of al-Kuwaity brothers' things we've been- One of the most wonderful things for us has been YouTube. People have just been, from all over the world, just uploading old performances from like old 78s or from TV shows. And you can go and watch old performances from like Iraqi TV, or hear them from Iraqi radio or people's old records that you would never find in a million years. You wouldn't

find it in a library, you'd, you wouldn't find it anywhere. But somehow now because we have the internet, you can actually find these old performances and hear them and encountered them yourselves. And you can sort of like you know, get them onto your own devices and, and listen to them and can hear the people upload lyrics, people transcribe lyrics, the tech has really made this easy. And the wonderful thing also is that sometimes where you have recordings online, the social functionality on the websites involves dialogue. You see people dialoguing-

Carol Isaacs 22:17 Comments, in Arabic, in Hebrew, in English, and you read that and you can see people talking to each other.

Mehiyar 22:24 And on that note, thank you, Carol and Daniel for coming into the Nahrein Network office at UCL and the song at the beginning of this podcast was by Daoud and Saleh al Kuwaiti, Iraqi Kuwaiti Jewish musicians. And the song is called 'Walla Ajabni Jamalak'.

Carol Isaacs 22:41 Goodbye.

Daniel Jonas 22:42 Thank you. It's been really great. Thanks for having us. Bye.