

III. Review

BOOK REVIEW

A Window into the Histories of Refugees

by Susan Ulanowsky

What We Remember Will Be Saved: A Story of Refugees and the Things They Carry

by Stephanie Saldaña

Minneapolis, Broadleaf Books, 2023

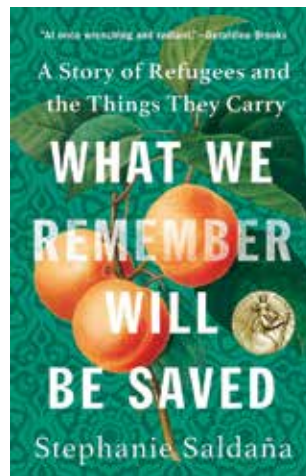
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Dec. 5—A city embroidered on a dress. A violin wrapped in cellophane and carried across the sea. A recipe for eggplant jam. An entire Classical orchestra of Syrian exiles in Germany. Stories of Muslim-Christian friendship. The history of a Yazidi family and the story of its decimation.

Stephanie Saldaña's *What We Remember Will Be Saved: A Story of Refugees and the Things They Carry* follows the stories of six men and women from Syria and Iraq and what they carried with them as they were forced from their homes and became refugees in the wake of the regime-change war in Syria that began in 2011, and still continues to this day. As the author states in the Prologue: "By their very being, these individuals were articulating a version of history in which they were not victims but agents, the small things they salvaged not mere fragments but windows into the histories they were now entrusted with remembering and transmitting to future generations. I felt that if I spent more time listening to stories like these, I might begin to understand not only what was being lost in war but also what was being rescued."

By the time Saldaña finishes writing this book, six years have passed. Hana, one of the six refugees featured in the book, now lives with her family in Australia. Others live in England, Holland, and Germany, and one is still stuck in Greece, having been turned back from mainland Europe, but no longer forced to live in a refugee camp. In the course of researching

this book, the author spoke to many refugees. What she discovered is the amazing resilience of these people, some of whom were turned back from Europe six or more times before they finally arrived, only to be herded into overcrowded refugee camps in terrible conditions.



Some went first to Amman, Jordan, where there were 1,250 Syriac Catholic families, many from Qaraqosh, Iraq—the largest Christian city in Iraq and one of the most ancient Christian cities in the world, which had a population of 50,000 before the city was taken over by ISIS in 2014. In Amman, the writer met a small church choir of former residents of Qaraqosh who had sung in several different choirs in Qaraqosh, but joined together in Amman. As one of the singers said, "We thought that we had lost everything. But then we understood that we could at least still save

a church choir." They sang using their cell phones as hymnals, as all the liturgical books had been lost back in Iraq. They sang in Aramaic, an ancient language the priest is afraid will be lost in the diaspora of resettlement.

Qaraqosh is actually the Turkish name for the city its residents call Baghdeda. The embroidered dress, called a *shal*, depicted churches in the city before it was bombed by ISIS, as well as scenes of dancing, and a wedding. Hana embroidered it in Erbil in Iraq's Kurdistan region and Amman, Jordan so as not to forget her city and former life. Other refugees in the group showed the writer pictures of themselves or women relatives, all wearing *shals*.

Hana and her family spent two years in Erbil before moving to Amman. They lived in an apartment on the top level of a shopping mall, surrounded by people who spoke Kurdish, which she neither spoke



EPA/Balazs Mohai

Syrian refugees near Budapest, Hungary.

nor understood. This is where she started working on her *shal*.

Writes the author: “I learned that objects could speak or elicit a memory. And I learned that when the places you love begin to disappear, you begin to live in them all the time. You live in those places from a distance—not out of nostalgia but out of necessity so that they will not also disappear from you.”

Three months later in Paris, Saldaña attended church at a Syriac Catholic Church. There she met a young woman who was also from Qaraqosh. Her husband had been a deacon at the Church of al-Tahira, the largest church in Iraq. When they escaped Qaraqosh in a hurry they were able to bring little with them, but the husband did bring his cell phone, on which he had spent years photographing life in Qaraqosh. It was a precious archive of life in the city before all the inhabitants fled and became refugees. More importantly, it showed how precisely Hana had embroidered her life on the *shal*. “Hana was an artist, a seamstress and an embroiderer. But she was also a historian. She had sewn into her dress a faithful account of what had been loved, and now lost, in Qaraqosh.”

In May 2017, Saldaña felt it was safe enough to go to Qaraqosh to see the place so important to many of the refugees she had encountered. She noted:

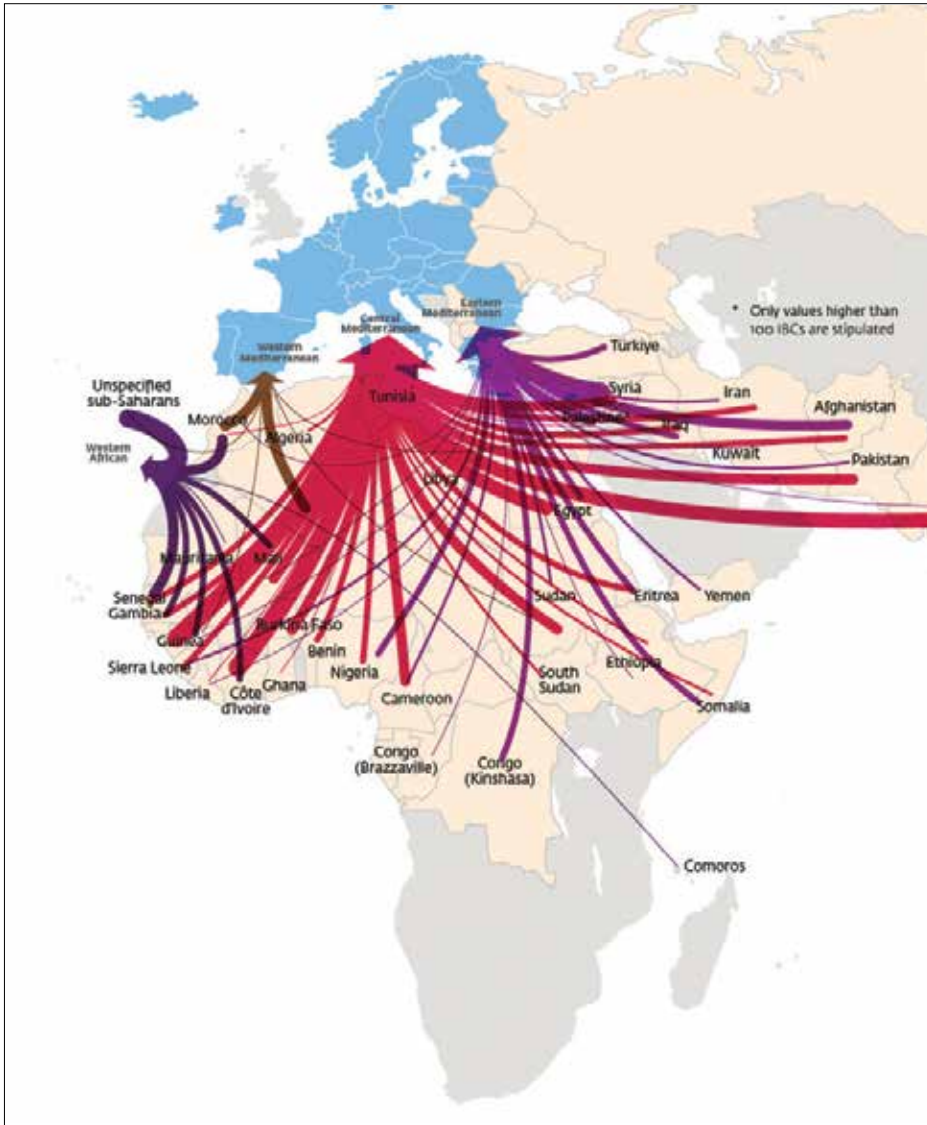
There is something surreal in discovering that

the place described to you as a paradise ... had become a ghost town.

In the center of town, there was only a single open shop, where a man was selling brooms, windows, cleaning supplies for those with the courage to return to their ransacked houses and make sense of them. I remembered what one of my friends in Homs, Syria, had once said to me of her own experience of war: “The first one back is always the man selling the windows.”

She stepped into the house Hana and her husband Amer had built, where Hana had “folded stuffed grape leaves, and baked biryani ...” The Church of al-Tahiri, so lovingly rendered on Hana’s *shal*, was a burned shell. “Hana had managed to show me more of Qaraqosh with her dress than I had seen with my own eyes.... A town without its people is no longer alive.” As the writer noted after travelling around Iraqi Kurdistan for another week, seeing many refugees displaced by ISIS, “I remembered the colors on Hana’s dress. It felt like so much was fading and ... I had entered this story just in time to watch the vanishing.”

Visiting once more in Amman, the author met Qaraqosh’s most well-known artist Sami Lalu, whose painting, inspired by Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper*,



Frontex

Flows of migrants into the European Union, 2022.

but set in Qaraqosh, had been in a monastery. That and his stone works on the outside of the monastery were all destroyed by ISIS. Also in Amman, Saldaña spent an afternoon with a violinist from Qaraqosh. He played and sang a folk song that Nasir, a famous singer from Qaraqosh, had also sung for her. On Aug. 6, 2014, when thousands of people fled the city, the young violinist had fled to Kurdistan. When he arrived, a film crew saw him and asked him to play something. “And in the darkness of the collapsing world, he played the violin. He sang the song that he had saved, the song that was saved so that it might be sung, again and again, every time the world ends.”

Eventually, Hana and her family, the choir singers, the violinist, and the artist—all the people Saldaña had met in Amman—were all resettled in Australia. She had met them partway through their journey: “I had witnessed briefly a world between worlds until it, too, was gone.... Still, after I met Hana, I stayed faithful to my plans: traveling from country to country, speaking to Syrians and Iraqis who had escaped war, trying to learn from them of what had been lost and saved.”

These six people’s stories, while personal, are hardly unique. There are many thousands of refugees who have been forced from their homes as a result of the endless wars being waged by the West on populations of the Global South. In thinking of the ongoing genocide in Gaza, one must be reminded that the Palestinians did not even get the chance to escape. They were already refugees from their ancestral homes in what is now called Israel. They have lived in the same conditions as refugees for generations. Their

homes were more permanent, but otherwise it was like a refugee camp; everything controlled by outside forces.

Yet all the refugees in this book somehow are not defeated. They most of all just wish to go back to their homelands and rebuild their cities and their lives. It is our responsibility in the West to help them, because we are responsible for what happened to them. That is what Lyndon LaRouche’s [Oasis Plan](#) represents for Southwest Asia, and what Helga Zepp-LaRouche’s [“Ten Principles of a New International Security and Development Architecture”](#) represents for the whole world.