Slender Roots

The way his two children saw it, a vacation in Iraqi Kurdistan would only take them away from their friends. But for Rashid Karadaghi, who spent a lifetime protecting the Kurdish language, you must go home again.

By KEVIN MCKIERNAN

THE LAST TIME RASHID KARADAGHI AND HIS WIFE, Bayan, took their children "home" to Iraqi Kurdistan was in 1997, when 13-year-old Diyari—the name means "gift" in Kurdish—was a little boy of 4 and 11-year-old Lanja ("spirited walk") was just a toddler.

A lot has changed since then—both in Iraq as well as at home for the Karadaghis. Now the California-born youngsters are immersed in a culture of cellphones, rap music and PlayStations—"bombarded," as their father puts it, "by everything not Kurdish." The very notion of a vacation in Iraq—even in the relatively stable Kurdish region—seems exactly what Bayan's employer calls it: crazy.


The Azadi

But Rashid has a dream: He wants his children to know their Kurdish roots. "I want the kids to see the donkeys and sheep where I grew up and to see the pile of rubble where Saddam's soldiers destroyed our house," he says. "I want them to see where we baked bread, hauled water from the well and where I napped under a mulberry tree."

Karadaghi, who holds a doctorate in English from UC Santa Barbara and is now a teacher, set out in 1971 to write the first comprehensive English-Kurdish dictionary, translating tens of thousands of words and making painstaking entries with his Parker fountain pen. The project culminated in 1999, when an Iraq-bound friend succeeded in smuggling his manuscript through Turkey—where the Kurdish language is still a source of controversy—in a crate of satellite parts. From there, the manuscript made its way to Iran, where last summer 10,000 copies of the 1,256-page hard-bound book, each weighing more than 5½ pounds, finally rolled off the press.

Those stats, though, aren't the ones that interest Diyari, the sports fanatic in the Kurdish American household. Inside the Karadaghis' home in Salinas, ESPN is blaring. Diyari's hero, Barry Bonds, has just hit his 715th home run, surpassing Babe Ruth's former record, and Dwyane Wade, the NBA star whose jersey hangs in the boy's room, is shooting 59% for the Miami Heat in Game 4 of the NBA playoffs. Lanja, Diyari's precocious sister, thinks her big brother is acting "ridiculous"—again—and, for the umpteenth time this weekend, she needles him as a "couch potato."

Rashid is having a hard time selling the upcoming trip to his kids. They are too young to know that today's Iraqi Kurds have their lands mostly under control; that the semiautonomous enclave established as a no-fly zone in 1991 to protect them from Iraqi forces has advanced—though not yet brought about—the age-old Kurdish dream of independence; that the bloody chaos in the rest of the country is largely outside the checkpoints manned by Kurdish fighters called *peshmerga* ("those who face death"); and that not a single American soldier has been killed in the region they are about to visit.

Lanja is worried, in particular, about creature comforts. "There are supposed to be normal toilets in the houses on my mom's side," she explains, "but on my dad's side I think there are just holes in the ground." Diyari thinks a full month is too long to be missing Pony League baseball at Jack's Park, where he plays left field for the Monterey Cardinals. "Why can't we just take a short trip to Hawaii like the other kids in my class," he complains.

'I don't want them to live in a Kurdish bubble. But if they end up owning big houses in Beverly Hills but have forgotten Kurdistan, I will have failed.'

I MET RASHID KARADAGHI IN SANTA BARBARA in 1991, when he briefed me before my visit to the Kurdish area of Iran, where I was going to do some relief work. That was a year before Bayan came from Iraqi Kurdistan to marry Rashid and a dozen years before the U.S.-led invasion would topple Saddam Hussein. Rashid lived in Isla Vista, the student ghetto near UCSB, in a two-room cottage carpeted with scraps of paper, scrolls of words, old texts and would-be dictionary entries, which he stored in an Igloo ice chest. (After moving to Salinas, he would secure them in a heavy safe in his bedroom closet). Karadaghi called his dictionary Azadi ("Freedom")—"the most precious word" in the Kurdish language, he said.

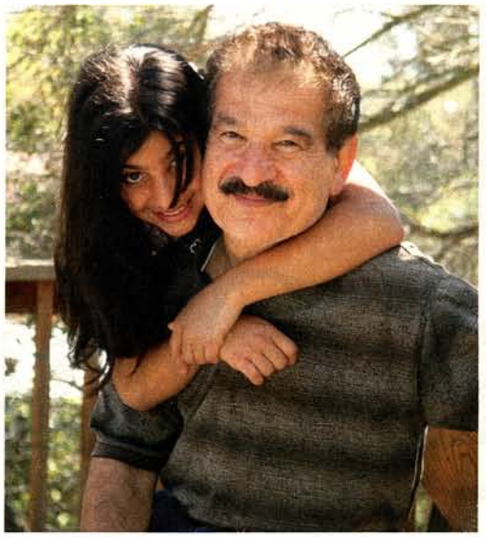
"They can confiscate your land and they can take your cattle away too," he explained, "but as long as you have your language, you are a people." After 20 years, he had reached page 4,112 in the giant manuscript, having just added "domino effect," a term he had heard on a talk show on his car radio. He had recorded a staggering 44,000 entries by hand, and he told me proudly, "You know, Samuel Johnson's dictionary only had 42,000 entries!"

When he landed in California in 1964 as a scholarship student from the University of Baghdad, Karadaghi knew nothing of Isla Vista's storied counterculture. His naiveté came to an end during a campus discussion about hallucinogens, when a UCSB instructor asked students to recount their favorite "trip." Karadaghi laughs now when he recalls how he almost blurted out the details of the flight from the Middle East, his first experience on an airplane.

Karadaghi adapted quickly to the '60s. He grew his hair longer; protested the Vietnam War; served lamb, organic rice and pita bread at cookouts in the backyard of his tiny cottage; and watched the notorious burning of the Bank of America.

One day he saw some classmates running on a Goleta beach, and he asked them what they were doing. "We're jogging," one said. "Why don't you join us?" He did, and before long he was running marathons. He was partying too, like much of the UCSB campus, turning up the volume on favorites like the Jefferson Airplane and Santana and marveling at the spontaneity of the opposite sex. "Middle East women are more complicated than Americans," he said. "Over there, if you ask to go for a walk, a woman will analyze it awhile before answering."

When it came to preparing me for that visit to the Kurdish region of Iran, Karadaghi had his work cut out for him, and I found myself quickly overwhelmed by the blitz of information on Kurdish history, politics and



CLOSE-KNIT: Daughter Lanja, wife Bayan and son Diyari share in Rashid's joy at the publication of Azadi, the only comprehensive Kurdish-English dictionary, which he started in 1971. Far left: While their father maintains strong connections to his culture, his children are very much American. Diyari, whose hero is Barry Bonds, plays left field for the Monterey Cardinals.

culture. Halfway through the compressed tutorial, I tried to recite some of what I'd just learned about Turks, Kurds, Syrian Kurdistan, Iranian Kurdistan, the Turkish language and so on. I was confused. "So you people," I stammered foolishly, "do you all speak Turdish?"

SALINAS IS KNOWN AS "THE SALAD BOWL OF THE WORLD." The area supplies 70% of America's lettuce and produces more vegetables than anywhere in the nation. Salinas itself has a population of 152,000, two-thirds of whom are Latino, and many of the local stores have signs in Spanish. The Karadaghis are the only Kurdish family in town and the children, who are olive-skinned, say it's not uncommon for strangers to greet them with *Buenos días* or *¿Cómo estas*?

When I visited a few months ago, Karadaghi drove me to Monterey, some 20 miles away, where we watched Diyari's baseball team get shellacked by the Seaside Giants. Bayan and Lanja joined us in the stands, but left early for a Monterey mall to shop for gifts for relatives they would soon visit in Kurdistan. After the game, Rashid suggested that we stop for lamb kebab before going home to Salinas. Despite his good showing at bat, Diyari was brooding about the loss—and promptly announced his refusal to eat Middle Eastern.

"The food is gross," he said. Instead, he persuaded his adult companions to visit a Subway shop near Monterey's gentrified Cannery Row, where we settled for cold cuts on a bun. By then, the teenager's mood had shifted and Diyari was leaning across the red plastic booth, playfully poking his father—a big-framed boy in a baseball uniform tickling an older man, kissing his cheek and smothering him with *baba gians*, the Kurdish term of endearment for "dear one."

The next morning we went out to eat in Salinas. Diyari pretended to be in a funk, complaining about the upcoming trip, making comments like "Kurdish is borr-ring" and "Kurdish girls are ugly" to try to get a rise out of anyone who would listen. He had confided the day before that his Kurdish was better than Lanja's—it was his first language until he was 5, when Bayan went back to work as a bookkeeper—and it was clear that his sister was the intended target of the wisecracks. He said he didn't want Mexican food, but no one really believed him, and we ended up downtown at La Perla, a breakfast joint on Main Street.

Main Street is undergoing a face-lift these days, but some buildings are still run-down and a number of stores, having lost customers to outlying strip malls, are boarded up. Local merchants are banking that the lure of John Steinbeck, Salinas' famous son, will help to rescue downtown. The National Steinbeck Center at the end of Main Street, across from La Perla, offers first-class exhibits. And the nearby restored Queen Anne Victorian, Steinbeck's birthplace and boyhood home where he wrote parts of "Tortilla Flat" and "The Red Pony," is now a restaurant with docent tours and a *prix fixe* menu. La Perla, which is decorated with hanging piñatas, a Mexican flag, a painting of Emiliano Zapata, a statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe and a Negra Modelo beer sign, was named for the author's 1947 novel "The Pearl." According to a sign in the window, "Steinbeck would have eaten here."

Lanja dives into a plate of huevos rancheros, agrees to "take a chance" on the homemade tamarindo juice and readily answers questions about being a first-generation American.

"We are proud to be Kurds," she says. "It's just that we don't like speaking Kurdish with our parents when our friends are around." At school she has given reports on Kurdish geography and food, gamely fielding questions from other fifth graders on the Iraq war and why Kurdish script reads from right to left. ("Frankly, I don't know.")

A classmate recently teased her about being "Spanish," and the next day he called her "Turkish" when they passed in the hallway. On the third day Lanja was prepared. "No! I am Kurdish—with a K!" she countered. Her nemesis was prepared. "Well," he observed, correctly, "Kurdistan is not on a map." That flummoxed Lanja, but only for a moment. "OK, OK," she recalled telling him, "but I'm still from there!"

One of the reasons for the upcoming trip, Rashid says, is for his children to improve their Kurdish, "the language that connects them to their parents and grandparents." Rashid emphasizes that Diyari has helped him with dictionary entries ("He put in the primary stress in each phonetic entry"), but the boy isn't listening. Sitting in the high-backed booth at La Perla, he is picking at his burrito, one arm draped around his mom, his thoughts somewhere else. Bayan manages to get his attention by talking about basketball, which has become her favorite spectator sport ("I love the screaming!"), and she dwells on the close games when Diyari's three-pointers have saved the day.

Rashid brings up the fact that Diyari received straight As on his last report card. Lanja points out that she also got As. Yes, there was that one B, she acknowledges, carefully folding beans into a corn tortilla, but that was only because there wasn't enough time to recopy some work. "Therefore," she argues with a straight face, "it's technically an A." Rashid cracks up, smothering Lanja with kisses. "Listen to her—'technically!' " he exclaims. "My little girl is going to be a lawyer."

SHOES COME OFF AT THE FRONT DOOR of the Karadaghis' tidy home, which is decorated with Kurdish carpets, American and Kurdish flags and a picture of yellow nergis, the Kurdish national flower. A satellite dish on the side of the house provides the family with 24-hour Kurdish programming from Kurdsat and Kurdistan TV in northern Iraq, and visitors [CONTINUED ON PAGE 34]

Kurdish Roots

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21] are offered medjool dates, pistachios, figs and birma, the sweet Kurdish dessert. Bayan is on the phone talking in Kurdish to her sister in Kurdistan about the trip.

Rashid is in the kitchen, making hummus from scratch. Diyari and Lanja claim that the hummus at Trader Joe's is better, but that's just part of the endless teasing to which they subject their father. After all, just because they love him and his crazy dictionary dream, and just because he translated thousands of words into Kurdish—even ones like "double whammy," "holy smokes" and "gee whiz"—that doesn't mean he knows everything. They howl when they trip him up with sports slang; he didn't know what "southpaw" meant, and he called a left-handed pitcher a "leftist." And once, in segueing from a conversation about hand baggage for the upcoming trip to the subject of getting burritos for dinner, he suggested they stop for "carry-on" food. He was ribbed a lot for that slip-up, but the time they really got him was when he talked about the Founding Fathers. "To you, they may be the Founding Fathers," the American-born children gleefully declared as they tickled their immigrant father and kissed his cheeks. "To us, they are *our* Founding Fathers!"

The family computer station sits in a loft at the top of the stairs. That is where Bayan downloaded and printed Rashid's dictionary corrections from the publishing assistant in Kurdistan, and where Diyari uploaded All-Star Baseball 2004 and NBA 2k6 and other video games. It is here that Rashid composes his late-night Internet blogs about independence for the Kurds ("It is the food we eat, the air we breathe"), and where he expresses his hope that the much-anticipated trip will offset his children's craving for popular culture.

"I don't want them to live in a Kurdish bubble—that's not my ideal," he insists. "But if they end up owning big houses in Beverly Hills or Pebble Beach but have forgotten Kurdistan, I will have failed."

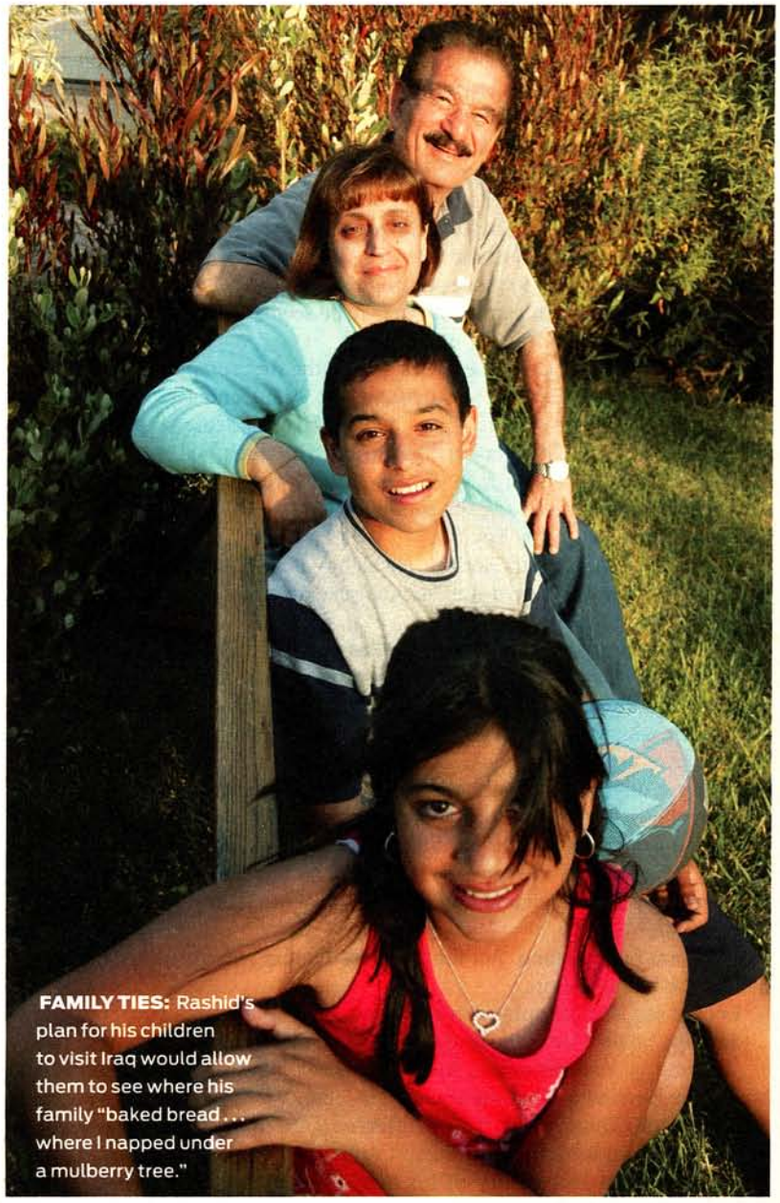
Lanja leads the way to her room, where she shows off the eye-catching sash she earned for Kurdish dancing at Newroz, the Kurdish New Year festivities the family attends each year in San Jose or San Diego. The sash is red, yellow and green—a forbidden display of colors in parts of Turkey and Iran—and Lanja has hung it proudly on her wall. Diyari, always the contrarian, tries to convince her that the Newroz celebrations in San Diego, some of the largest in North America, were "borr-ring," but somehow I don't believe he thinks so.

We go across the hall, where he shows me his sports trophies, the ticket stubs from a San Francisco Giants game, the posters of Barry Bonds above his bed and the Dwyane Wade and Lebron James jerseys on the wall. When I press him on the prospect of meeting kids his own age in Kurdistan, where he's heard that community vigilance affords teenagers more freedom from parental supervision than in America, a smile creeps across his face. And then we go outside to play catch.

A FEW MONTHS AFTER THE KARADAGHIS' TRIP TO KURDISTAN, a group of Rashid's UCSB grad school colleagues from the '60s met the family at Goleta Beach to celebrate the new dictionary. It was Sunday afternoon, and the beach was crowded with squawking seagulls fighting over the remnants of someone's tri-tip. Thirty miles offshore, the powder-blue outline of the Channel Islands shimmered above a flat Pacific Ocean.

The one-time literature students found a picnic table near the water, which they spread with barbecued chicken and enough health-conscious salads to last a weekend. A copy of the Azadi dictionary, hot off the press and thicker than an L.A. Yellow Pages, was triumphantly displayed next to the chocolate cake. The alumni were older and grayer now, but clearly still fond of the smiling Kurd who had landed in their lives, straight from Baghdad to Isla Vista, some 40 years before.

Diyari and Lanja were on hand, polite recruits at an adult reunion. They seemed more interested in fingering excess frosting from the cake than in fielding a visitor's questions, but I pressed them to report on the trip. Had they gotten used to all the guns and checkpoints, the intense security that makes Kurdistan a stable island—so far—in an otherwise shattered Iraq? How did Lanja's aunts like the hand lotion the family had brought them from Victoria's Secret? Had the youngsters learned to read Kurdish street signs and soda pop labels? Did Diyari get over his aversion to kebab and Lanja overcome her trepidation about latrines? Did Diyari's cousins succeed in converting him to soccer? The last inquiry elicited a grin, but most of the others got me friendly shrugs of teen-like indifference.



FAMILY TIES: Rashid's plan for his children to visit Iraq would allow them to see where his family "baked bread . . . where I napped under a mulberry tree."

By then the once-dreaded trip to the "old country" was two months in the past—a lifetime ago at their ages—and the ex-travelers were already in the swing of a new school year, reunited with friends and back in their California groove. More than likely, they were still processing the four-week immersion in Iraqi Kurdistan, a heady experience of language, culture and connecting to scores—literally—of doting relatives. In any case, it was a happy-go-lucky day on the beach and they were having too much fun for a protracted exploration of Kurdish roots. I let it go after a while, recalling the gist of something my own father used to say: "What is bred in the bone will out."

Diyari had a football and was looking for someone—anyone—to throw him a pass, and he spent much of the picnic trying to pry the guests away from their spirited conversation with his parents. When that failed, he would turn his attention to his sister, a pursuit that largely consisted of slide-tackling her in the sand. Then Lanja would half-heartedly complain to her father, and Rashid would smother her with kisses and *baba gians*. But just for a moment, and then she'd break loose to bait Diyari again.

And so it went, until the autumn shadows fell and a chill drifted in from the sea: old friends reminiscing about Santana, student protests and one immigrant's dream about the power of words—and two Kurdish American kids at arm's-length, chasing sunbeams. **w**

Kevin McKiernan produced and directed the PBS film "Good Kurds, Bad Kurds" and is the author of the recent book "The Kurds: A People in Search of Their Homeland."