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Review

Army built on fear remembered by former soldier

Mitch Meador

Book REVIEW With his first sentence, Mahir Ibrahimov hurls his reader into a war-torn world, where 291805 recruits from the wrong region merits a double helping of brutality from officers of the Soviet Army. He paints vivid word-pictures of the torments he and other young soldiers had to endure in a military built not on camaraderie but fear. Although his autobiography opens in Russia, the initial chapter heading is I am an American. Today, this native of Azerbaijan is a citizen of the United States. But the path here was not an easy one, as he tells us in his new book, Invitation to Rain: A Story of the Road Taken Towards Freedom (\$15, Global Scholarly Publications). The first half, shuttling back and forth between Azerbaijan and Moscow, explodes with haunting, dreamlike images that invite comparison with another writer who yearned to immigrate to America. Franz Kafka died of tuberculosis in 1924, at age 40, without either reaching America or finishing any of his three novels. The ethnic tensions that Ibrahimov describes in the former Soviet Union and Iraq call to mind the anti-Semitic riots that Kafka experienced in Prague in 1897 and 1920. The resemblance to Kafka ends when Ibrahimov fulfills what Kafka only dreamed about. By actually going to America, he changes the whole nature of the story, and his job as author is to tell what happens next. The more practical business of advancing the budding Republic of Azerbaijan intervenes.... to get Congress to repeal a pernicious section of law that is hindering progress in his homeland. It wasn't Section 907 that ultimately led Ibrahimov to seek his family's future in the U.S., but the failure of Azerbaijan to provide its youth an adequate livelihood and opportunities for advancement. The revenues from foreign investments in (oil and gas) were not reaching the ordinary people. There was a huge gap between the incredibly wealthy and the incredibly poor.... he writes. Ibrahimov is honest and up front about the problems of graft, nepotism and corruption that plague the entire region. He is not blind to the fact that bribery occurs elsewhere in the world, but he feels disgust when the offering and acceptance of bribes are interwoven into the fabric of society at all levels, and when having a relative in government carries more weight than professional ability. I know graft and corruption exist in all societies, but in the West and in the United States, it is not the glue that holds the economy together, he declares. It is this system that is holding back the diversification of Azerbaijan's

economy and retarding progress in Iraq, he states.

The final section of Invitation to Rain details Ibrahimov s deployment to Iraq in 2004-05 as a multi-lingual interpreter and cultural adviser. These chapters constitute the book s real reason for being, as Ibrahimov initially set out to write about his time in Iraq and nothing else; it was his agent who convinced him to tell the story of his life instead.

His insights and observations on how the U.S. is perceived in the Middle East deserve the attention of American readers because they come from a near neighbor of Iraq who has a better understanding of the local culture and the regional and ethnic conflicts that have shaped it. He tells us a lot about a corner of the world where death is preferable to dishonor and honor is defined in a quite different way than in Western society.

The book concludes with a photo of Ibrahimov taken with U.S. Sen. Jim Inhofe, R-Okla., and an afterword written by retired Col. Nathan Slate of Medicine Park.

Mitch Meador is a military reporter for The Lawton Constitution. --The Lawton Constitution
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