

TIES TO DETROIT KIN, T-SHIRTS LINK VILLAGE WITH MOTOWN

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TEL KAIF, Iraq -- About 200 miles from Baghdad, the epicenter of the Persian Gulf crisis, is a little slice of Detroit.

In Tel Kaif, a village more than 500 years old nestled amid golden wheat and sunflower fields, children wear Detroit Tigers or Detroit Pistons T-shirts and 90-year-old women can tell you a little about the Motor City.

Almost every family among 12,000 residents has ties to Detroit through a daughter, son, uncle, cousin, friend or neighbor who has migrated there, some of the thousands who have left for Detroit since the early 1920s. Tel Kaif and surrounding villages are the ancestral home for most of Detroit's 75,000 Chaldeans, Iraqi Christians.

From the owner of the Ali Baba restaurant at the edge of the village to the local priest or market owner, the word Detroit rings a bell and brings a grin of recognition.

Nearly everyone seemed eager to invite a Free Press reporter and photographer into their homes and offer tea, lunch and a place to rest. While this is traditional Middle Eastern hospitality, it seemed enhanced by the link to a faraway place so many of their kin folk call home.

Most of the residents who initially immigrated to Detroit from northern Iraq wanted to escape depressed rural conditions -- and many found work in the city's auto plants. Once word of their good fortune reached the village, others followed.

Many of those who left return to their homeland to marry or for their children's first communion in the spring, said Father Lucien Djamil, pastor at the Sacred Heart Church in the center of the old village.

"I perform about four or five weddings a year for people who come back to marry," said Djamil, who said his cousin, Jalal Djamil, teaches English to Iraqis in Detroit.

Staunch defenders of Iraq's government could be found in the village.

Johnny Aoraha, 30, who said he's studying to be an English interpreter at the university in Mosul, the district capital to the south, seemed unconcerned about the conflict with the United States -- despite the fact that he has a brother in Detroit.

"The embargo is not going to amount to anything, because we are used to this," he said, referring to the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq. Aoraha said that while he did not think there was going to be a war, if there is one, "I am going to worry about my people here, my friends and my life."

Relatives of Melody Farms Dairy owner Michael George -- widely considered the patriarch of Detroit's Chaldean community -- and Birmingham attorney Salman Sesi live in the village.

"Most of the people there, they are athletes. They love football -- soccer here -- and basketball," Sesi said. "If some fellow traveled here, he'd take home dozens of Pistons T-shirts and give them to relatives. So many have family here, they all know about Detroit."

Even the story of reputed Detroit drug kingpin **Harry Kalasho** and his family's troubles with the law have reached Tel Kaif, where some relatives live.

"I heard he was involved in drugs and was killed," said Abbou Shamo Jarbo, 62.

A distant cousin, Faraj Dawood **Kalasho**, said she had heard of the family's troubles, but quickly added that they don't maintain any contact.

Dawood Yako said his 10 nephews run markets in Detroit and Ohio; Abbou Shamo Jarbo, 62, said he has seven cousins in Detroit; and Johnny Aoraha's brother Tohnnny is in Detroit.

In Tel Kaif, the tension that has gripped the Middle East since Iraq's invasion of Kuwait is not apparent.

True, when approached by a Free Press reporter accompanied by a government guide, every resident proclaims devotion to their president, Saddam Hussein, and his portrait hangs in many homes. Many young men serve in the army.

But there are no lines of people waiting to buy bread and there isn't a sense of siege.

Residents say they have enough food to survive more than two years.

"Tell Bush that five of our farmers can feed the whole country," said Jarbo, who is related to lawyer Sesi.

With their crops harvested for the year, many of the farmers enjoy quiet, lazy days. Activity comes to a standstill between 2 p.m. and 5 p.m., when everyone stays indoors to avoid the furnace-like heat.

The village is a charming mixture of rustic brown adobe- style homes linked together. In the center are markets, a convent and a cemetery said to be 1,000 years old.

On the outskirts are new villas, the hospital, police station and schools.

In the old village, steel doors painted blue, green and yellow provide an artist's palette of entrances. Inside, open air courtyards, hung with grapevines, offer respite from the hot sun.

The living quarters are simply furnished rooms with no doors.

The younger people dress in Western style clothing, including Adray Appliance, Michael Jackson and Powerhouse Gym T-shirts sent by relatives in Detroit.

The older generations, especially women, wear traditional Iraqi garb.

Many of the residents interviewed said they hope their counterparts in Detroit support the Iraqi invasion and have been vocal about it.

Dawood Yako, a beer distributor from the nearby village of Alkosh, said he spent a year in Detroit in 1980 with his brother, nephews and nieces.

His memory is of an inhospitable city torn by racial tension.

"Here, I work two days and I'm set for the month," he said. "Over there you work 10 or 12 hours a day and pay taxes and insurance."

Sabih Farris, Tel Kaif's mayor, has a daughter, Ghada Sabih, in Detroit.

His wife, Souad, recently returned from a four-month visit to Detroit. Two of his three sons are soldiers at the front in Kuwait. Farris, who owns a tool shop and is a construction worker, has joined the People's Volunteer Army.

"I hear Iraqis are OK among themselves over there but there are a lot of problems with the local people," said Farris, 50. "I heard the Iraqis don't mix much with the Americans over there.

"Ask them about me in Detroit," he said. "Tell them Soubhi the builder; they would know who I am."

Free Press Staff Writer Lori Mathews contributed.

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