The New York Times

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ghting nterns liberty

Stephens

N

n, 7,400 miles apart, each re- behind bars. One is a longtime nt. The other is — or was — an al man, who happened to be a ent target for a regime that take hostages.

er knows of the other. They are ubly linked.

irst man, José Daniel Ferrer, is of the Patriotic Union of Cuba, est dissident organization on nd. In 2003 he was sentenced to s in prison for demanding acy, civil liberties and amnesty.

He served eight years in conditions he described, when I met him a few years ago, as a series of "constant terrors."

Unbowed, he returned to his political work. On Oct. 1, he and several other activists were arrested by Cuban security agents. For weeks his whereabouts were unknown. After his wife ally allowed a five-minute visit, ported signs of torture.

ans rn vo ked the y ands.

month, Granma, the Commu- rty's official newspaper, accused Embassy in Havana of "orient- financing the conduct of José Ferrer, in a clear demonstration rference in Cuba's internal af- nd open instigation to violence." ociate of Ferrer tells me he has d a dramatic physical deteriora- d that there are fears for his mentor, Oswaldo Payá, is believed to have been assassi- y state agents in a staged acci- 2012.

second man is a Tehran-based designer named Ali Alinejad. pt. 24, about seven agents from elligence unit of the Revolution- ards stormed his home and took ay in blindfold and handcuffs nfiscated his mobile phone and " his sister, Masih Alinejad, told ently. "This was done in front of ear old daughter."

s now being held without s in Ward 2A of Evin Prison, the Islamic Republic isolates,

BRYAN DENTON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The ruined hunting lodge in a forest in the middle of Delhi that was home to a reclusive family. Their history fascinated journalists and residents of the city for 40 years.

The jungle prince of Delhi

NEW DELHI

An eccentric royal family in an isolated Indian ruin. What was their true story?

BY ELLEN BARRY

On a spring afternoon in 2016, when I was working in India, I received a telephone message from a recluse who lived in a forest in the middle of Delhi.

The message was passed on by our office manager through Gchat, and it thrilled me so much that I preserved it.

Office manager: Ellen have you been trying to get in touch with the royal family of Oudh?

Ellen: this has to be the best telephone message ever

From left: Polaroid photographs of Wilayat, the "begum of Oudh," her son Cyrus and daughter Sakina.

China's hand feels heavier to wary Australians

NEWS ANALYSIS
CANBERRA, AUSTRALIA

Concerns grow that source of economic growth is gaining political influence

BY DAMIEN CAVE
AND JAMIE TARABAY

A Chinese defector to Australia who detailed political interference by Beijing. A businessman found dead after telling the authorities about a Chinese plot to install him in Parliament. Suspicious men following critics of Beijing in major Australian cities.

For a country that just wants calm commerce with China — the propellant behind 28 years of steady growth — the recent revelations have delivered a jolt.

Fears of Chinese interference once seemed to hover indistinctly over Australia. Now, Beijing's political ambitions and the espionage operations that further them suddenly feel local, concrete and ever-present.

"It's become the inescapable issue," said Hugh White, a former intelligence official who teaches strategic studies at the Australian National University. "We've underestimated how quickly China's power has grown along with its ambition to use that power."

American officials often describe Australia as a test case, the ally close enough to Beijing to see what could be coming for others.

In public and in private, they've pushed Australia's leaders to confront China more directly — pressure that may only grow after President Trump signed legislation to impose sanctions on Chinese and Hong Kong officials over human rights abuses in Hong Kong.

Even as it confronts the specter of brazen espionage, Australia's government has yet to draw clear boundaries for an autocratic giant that is both an economic partner and a threat to freedom, a conundrum faced by many countries, but more acutely by Australia.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison continues to insist that Australia need not choose between China and the United States. A new foreign interference law has barely been enforced, and secrecy is so ingrained that even lawmakers and experts lack the in-depth information they need.

As a result, the country's intelligence agencies have raised alarms about China in ways that most Australian politicians avoid. The agencies have never been flush with expertise on China, including Chinese speakers, yet they are

The jungle prince of Delhi

DELHI, FROM PAGE 1

dogs. The perimeter was marked with menacing signs. INTRUDERS SHALL BE GUNDOWN, said one.

Every few years, the family agreed to admit a journalist, always a foreigner, to tell of their grievances against the state. The journalists emerged with deliciously macabre stories, which I had studied admiringly. In 1997, the prince and the princess told The Times of London that their mother, in a final gesture of protest against the treachery of Britain and India, had killed herself by drinking a poison mixed with crushed diamonds and pearls.

I could see why these stories resonated so. The country was imprinted with trauma, by the epic deceit of the British conquest and then the blood bath of the British departure, known as Partition, which carved out Pakistan from India and set off convulsions of Hindu-Muslim violence. This family, displaying its own ruin, was a physical representation of all that India had suffered.

A few grainy photographs of the siblings had been published: They were beautiful, pale and high-cheekboned, but also somehow ravaged, harrowed.

Nearly every day, dropping my children at school, I drove past the narrow road that led into the middle of the forest, which was surrounded by an ornate wrought-iron fence. The woods were so thick that it was impossible to see much, and inhabited by gangs of monkeys. At night, you could hear jackals howling.

The day after I got the message, I dialed the phone number. After a few rings, someone picked up, and I heard a high-pitched, quavering voice on the other end.

BARRY BEARAK/THE NEW YORK TIMES

ASSOCIATED PRESS

UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

After Partition in 1947, many Muslims tried to flee India, left. Wilayat, the self-styled begum of Oudh, followed them but later returned. She lived in the New Delhi train station, above, for years. Top, her children Cyrus and Sakina on the roof of their home, the Malcha Mahal, in 1998. Below, Cyrus in 2016.

Malcha Mahal. They left the train station roughly a decade after they first appeared there. Wilayat never appeared in public again.

ADRIFT IN A LIFEBOAT

When my conversations with Cyrus had gone on for about nine months, I traveled to Lucknow, a large city in northern India that was the cradle of the Oudh dy-

The question of his future nagged at her. "ABOUT PRINCE CYRUS RIZA MY BROTHER WHAT STEP SHALL HE FOLLOW?" it says. "MY SILENT SINCEREST SILENCE HAS A WISH THAT PRINCE SHOULD BE BLESSED WITH HAPPINESS."

One night Cyrus called me, howling unintelligibly, to tell me that his sister had in fact died seven months earlier. He had told no one, burying her body himself. He had lied to me about it for months, and seemed a bit ashamed by it. He said that I should never visit again, and also that he was so lonely.

I waited a few days, and then showed up with a Filet O' Fish from McDonald's. Our relationship seemed to knit itself back together. He asked me to procure him a gun and a girlfriend, which I did not; and a tarpaulin and a recording of "Fiddler on the Roof," which I did. He was solicitous and a little corny, with pop culture references that seemed to date from the 1960s.

Once, he asked me to kiss him on the cheek — his skin felt fragile, like tissue paper — and he told me that it was the first time he had been kissed in 10 years. "When you are over here, my heart goes doopity doo, Sophia Loren," he said.

He even said I could write something about him, as long as I didn't go into much detail.

"I have to tell the truth," I told him.

"O.K., you have to tell the truth," he said. "Then again, there is a hole in the bucket, Harry Belafonte."

We had been debating this for 15 months, and I was due to leave India soon and take up a new assignment in London. This sort of exchange made up the balance of our final conversations: I was trying to get him to reveal something about his origins — anything, really — and he was twisting away from me.

"You are just a very mysterious person, because I don't know who you are," I said once. His response was coy.

"Oh really," he said, in a singsong voice. "Well, anyway. Oh, really? If you have said me mysterious, I am just sitting before you."

In our last conversation, a few hours before I boarded a flight for London, he asked me how someone could get word to me, should he die. I asked if he planned to commit suicide.

"So far, I am going to preserve myself," he said.

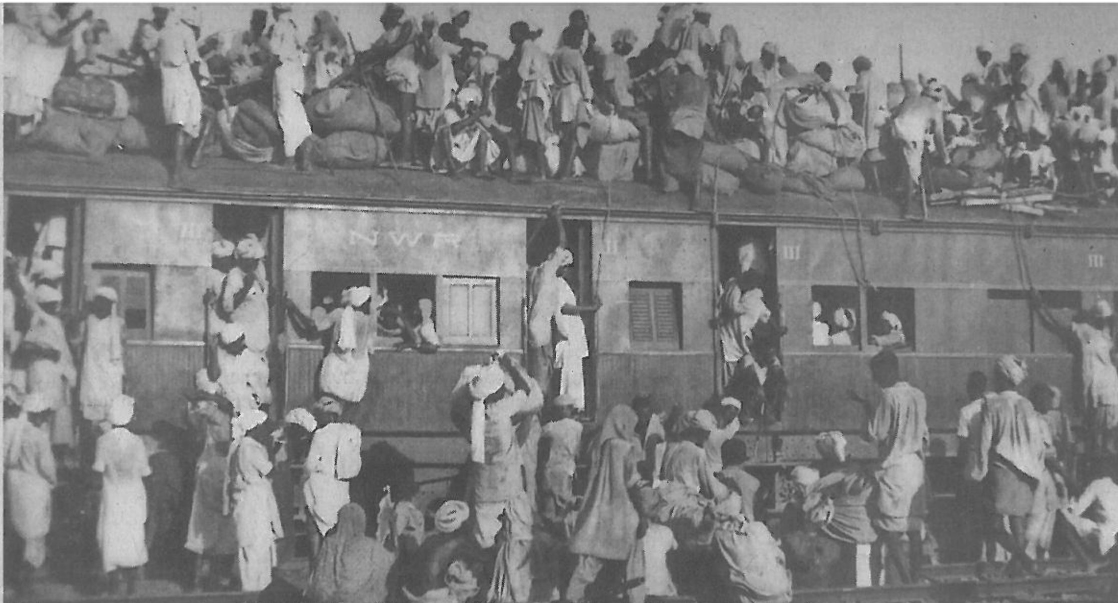
"Good. Well, then, I'll see you again," I said.

I think I hugged him goodbye. The last I saw of him, he was replacing the clanking iron bars that protected him from intruders.

DEATH OF A RAJAH

Three months later, I was in an airport, on my way home from interviewing the Swedish foreign minister, when I learned Cyrus had died. I got the news on Facebook messenger, from a friend at the BBC.

It was the guards at the military facility next door — they called him "rajah,"



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After Partition in 1947, many Muslims tried to flee India, left. Wilayat, the self-styled begum of Oudh, followed them but later returned. She lived in the New Delhi train station, above, for years. Top, her children Cyrus and Sakina on the roof of their home, the Malcha Mahal, in 1998. Below, Cyrus in 2016.

THE WOODS

On the following Monday, I asked our driver to take me into the woods at 5:30 in the afternoon, as instructed.

The woods themselves were a bit magical, a thicket in the middle of a city of 20 million. British colonial officers had introduced mesquite trees in the 19th century, and they spread rapidly, swallowing pastures and roads and villages — everything that had been there before. Biologists would later describe it as a "massive invasion" by an "alien species."

We drove farther, until the tree canopy was tormented, thick enough to block out the light.

The person on the phone had told me to leave the car at the end of the road, beside the high wall of an Indian military compound, and to come alone. This did not surprise me: The Oudh family refused, famously, to meet with Indians. I asked the driver to wait at a distance and stood in the woods, somewhat awkwardly, holding my notebook and wondering what came next.

Then the bushes rustled, and a man appeared.

He was elfin and wore high-waisted mom jeans. He had high cheekbones with hollows beneath them and wild gray hair that stood up in tufts.

"I am Cyrus," the prince said. It was the high-pitched voice I had heard on the phone. He spoke in bursts, like a person who spent most of his time alone.

Then he turned and led me into the woods. I tried to keep up, stepping over a tangle of roots and thorns, and climbed a flight of massive stone stairs leading to the old hunting lodge. It was half-ruined, open to the air, and surrounded by metal gratings; one steel bar was loose, and the prince moved it aside with a great clank so that we could enter.

I stepped into spare, medieval grandeur, a bare stone antechamber lined with palm trees in brass pots and faded, once-elegant carpets. On the wall hung an oil painting of the prince's mother swathed in voluminous, dark robes, her eyes closed as if in a trance.

The prince led me up to the roof to show me the view. We stopped at the edge of the building, gazing across green treetops to the dusty city, shimmering in the heat.

Other great cities may be built on top of ruins, but Delhi is built of them. It is almost impossible to go from one point to another without stumbling over a 700-year-old tomb or a 500-year-old fort.

Seven successive Muslim dynasties built their capitals here, each swept aside when its time had passed. The ruins are a reminder that the present dispensation — democracy, Starbucks, Hindu nationalism — is only the blink of an eye in India. *We were here,* they seem to breathe. *This was ours.*

My idea was to interview the prince and write the story. When I asked about his family, he launched into an animated speech about the perfidy of the British and Indian governments.

I recognized quotes from articles I had read, written by colleagues from The Washington Post, The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune, The Los Angeles Times. He ranted a little, complaining of persecution by a criminal gang. He was flinging his hands wide, declaiming and then dropping to a dramatic whisper, as he spoke of the decline of the house of Oudh.

"I am shrinking," he said. "We are shrinking. The princess is shrinking. We are shrinking."

When I asked if I could publish our interview, he balked. For this, he said, I would need the permission of his sister, Princess Sakina, who was not in Delhi. I would have to come back.

HOW IT BEGAN

The story began with his mother. She appeared, on the platform of New Delhi's train station in the early 1970s, seemingly from nowhere, announcing herself as Wilayat, begum of Oudh.

Oudh (pronounced Uh-vud) was a kingdom that no longer existed. The British annexed it in 1856, a trauma from which its capital, Lucknow, never recovered. The core of the city is still made of Oudh's vaulted shrines and palaces.

The begum declared that she would stay in the station until these properties had been restored to her. She settled in the V.I.P. waiting room and unloaded a whole household there: carpets, potted palms, a silver tea set, Nepali servants in livery, glossy Great Danes. She also had two grown children, Prince Ali Raza and Princess Sakina, a son and a daughter who appeared to be in their 20s. They addressed her as "Your Highness."

The begum was an arresting-looking woman, tall and broad-shouldered, with a face as craggy and immobile as an Easter Island statue. She wore a sari of dark, heavy silk and kept a pistol in its folds. She and her children settled on red plastic chairs, and waited. For years.

"Sitting, sitting like yogis," recalled Father John, a Catholic charity worker who distributed food in the train station. The children were strangely submissive, he said, reluctant even to accept a banana without their mother's permission.

"They were more obedient than the dogs," he said. "They were absolutely under her control."

The begum's behavior was imperious and dramatic. She refused direct conversation, demanding that queries be written on embossed stationery, placed on a silver platter and carried to her by a servant, who read them aloud. If the station master gave her any trouble, she threatened to kill herself by drinking snake venom.

"The Nepali servants, they would walk on their knees," said Saleem Kidwai, a historian who sought them out at the time.

Government officials scrambled to find her somewhere to live. She was attracting attention from the media, and officials feared the Shiite population in Lucknow could explode into civil unrest if they believed she was being abused.

"It was such a romantic image," Mr. Kidwai said. "She is out of the castle, now living in the railway station."

Ammar Rizvi, an aide to the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, was sent to New Delhi as a liaison. He recalled handing Wilayat an envelope with 10,000 rupees, or about $1,200 at the exchange rate at the time, so that they could set up a household in Lucknow.

"In 1975, that was a big sum," he recalled. "But she got angry and threw the envelope. The notes were flying everywhere, and my public relations officer

The begum settled in the V.I.P. waiting room and unloaded a whole household there. She and her children waited. For years.

had to catch this note here, that note there. She said no, she would not go, the amount was very little."

Around this time, Wilayat identified a far more effective way to make her case: foreign correspondents.

"India Princess Reigns in Rail Station," a Times correspondent wrote in 1981, describing her "genuine commitment to redeem the ancestors, to right wrongs suffered over centuries and to obtain justice."

In 1984, her efforts paid off. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi accepted the family's claim, granting them use of a 14th century hunting lodge known as Malcha Mahal. They left the train station roughly a decade after they first appeared there. Wilayat never appeared in public again.

ADRIFT IN A LIFEBOAT

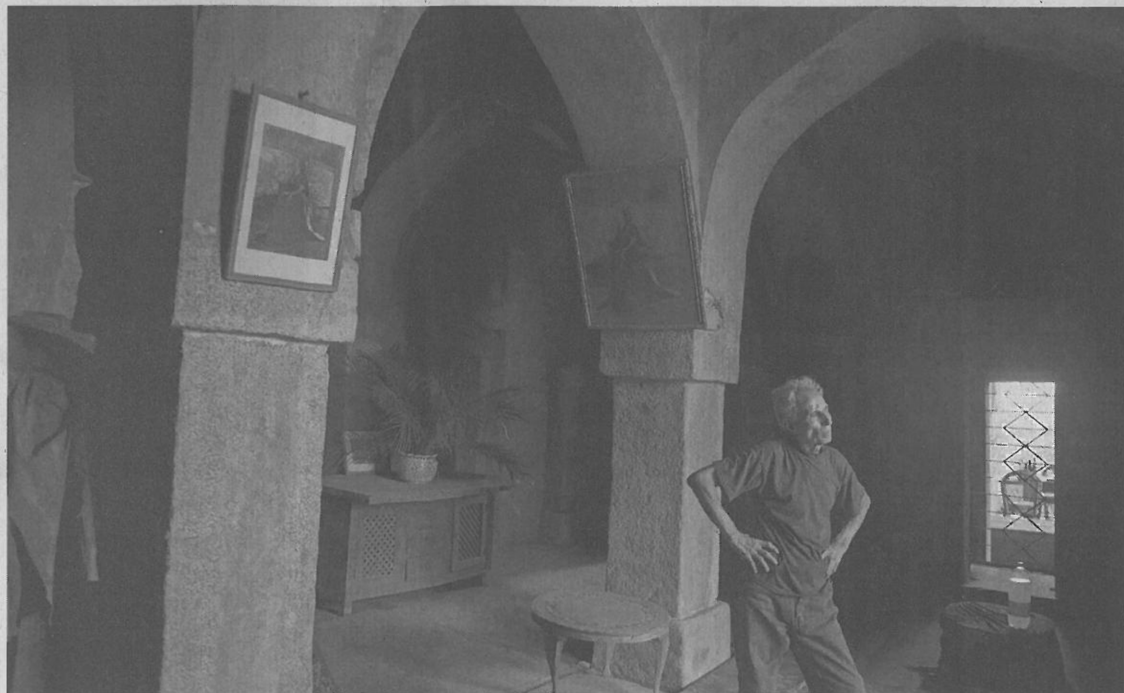
When my conversations with Cyrus had gone on for about nine months, I traveled to Lucknow, a large city in northern India that was the cradle of the Oudh dynasty. I was there to interview detectives for an unrelated story, but I knew that Cyrus had lived there with his mother and sister in the 1970s, so I went to the neighborhood where I had heard that Oudh descendants lived.

There, to my surprise, the old-timers remembered Cyrus and his family. But they told me, almost as an aside, that they had been dismissed as impostors. The Oudh descendants in Kolkata, where the nawab died in exile, had also rejected their claim. And there were questions Cyrus himself seemed unable to answer. Where was he born? Who was his father? How *do* you crush diamonds, anyway?

His sister, Princess Sakina, had not turned up but he gave me a book that she had written, documenting their lives. The book was almost unreadable, haphazardly capitalized, lacking punctuation and written in florid, apocalyptic prose.

But sprinkled in the rambling text were flashes of genuine tenderness between the siblings, as if they were two small children, adrift together in a lifeboat.

Sakina wrote that she had intended to follow her mother into suicide, but for her brother.



ANDREA BRUCE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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Three months later, I was in an airport, on my way home from interviewing the Swedish foreign minister, when I learned Cyrus had died. I got the news on Facebook messenger, from a friend at the BBC.

It was the guards at the military facility next door — they called him "rajah," or king — who later recounted how he had died.

Three weeks after we said goodbye, he was seen trying to wheel his bicycle down the road, shaking violently. An electrician from the military facility helped him to his feet, and he staggered back to the hunting lodge. He asked for a bottle of lemonade and an ice cream.

Rajinder Kumar, one of the guards, said it seemed to be dengue fever.

I've had dengue. It's like being wiped off the face of the earth. For me, it began with a penetrating ache in my shoulder, and then, as I sweated through the hotel sheets, hallucinations. My senses were altered. When I drank water from the tap, it tasted like a mouthful of tin.

I don't know what Cyrus hallucinated. His illness may have progressed into hemorrhagic fever, with bleeding from the gums and nose, and under the skin. Patients dying of hemorrhagic fever sometimes have such low blood pressure that no pulse can be detected. Rajinder said Cyrus had refused to be taken to the hospital.

"Madam, I really tried very hard," he said. "I said we would call the police, we would take you to the hospital, but no, no, no. We are outsiders, third-party people, we can't apply that kind of pressure. Had we been family we could have just taken his hand and taken him."

Rajinder thought it came down to pride.

"He used to have the attitude that he was the king," he said. "That is why he did not want to go to the hospital, that he did not want to be a normal person."

His illness lasted eight days. A boy, sent up to check on his welfare, saw him stalking the property half-clothed, naked from the waist down, or shivering under a mosquito net.

Then, after a day or so, no one saw him, and the boy found him dead, curled on the rock floor.

THEY HAD THE STORY

I climbed the stone stairs to Malcha Mahal several months later with a kind of curiosity that was in some ways like greed.

I had returned to India for a few days, to see what I could find among his possessions.

I leafed through the letters, looking for a birth certificate, a passport, something that anchored this family in the factual world.

What I found instead was a chronicle of 30 years of interactions with journalists. This, it seemed, was the family busi-

ness. There were dozens of requests from reporters. Some were written in elaborate, courtly language. Others offered money.

Sitting there on the carpet, I laughed out loud. Cyrus and his family would string them along — as he had strung me along — and then, when the mood struck them, disdainfully refuse the interview. The Oudhs were the ones with the story. They had the upper hand.

Among the family papers was a column from The Statesman, published in 1993, with the headline "When History Is Based on Errors." Two paragraphs had been marked.

"Have you noticed that a factual error appearing in respected printed form tends to be copied by other researchers in the same field, until, inevitably, it competes with the truth for credibility?" it read. "The writers who perpetuate these mistakes rarely do so from evil motive: They have no axe to grind, they simply do not have time to check and double-check each fact, so they rely on the scholarship of their predecessors."

Two things genuinely surprised me.

The first was a stack of receipts for regular, small transfers of cash through Western Union from a city in the industrial north of England. The sender identified himself as a "half brother."

The other thing was a letter. It was handwritten on fragile, blue airmail stationery and sent in 2006. It was cranky yet intimate, conveying both annoyance and concern, a letter that could only have been written by a relative.

"I am in so much pain that I cannot go to the toilet even," the writer began, and, after an extensive catalog of physical ailments, went on to complain about the burden of providing continuous financial support for Wilayat and her children. He was obviously not a rich man.

"For God's sake, try to sort yourselves out financially, in case anything goes wrong with me," the writer told them, appending information for the latest Western Union transfer. "May God help us all."

The letter was signed "Shahid," and it was sent from an address in Bradford, Yorkshire.

THE LAST NAWAB

Let us pause, for a moment, to consider the tragedy of the house of Oudh.

In the mid-19th century, the British East India Company had accelerated its consumption of Indian kingdoms. Having guzzled Punjab and Sindh, it set its ambitions on Oudh, a territory roughly the size of South Carolina.

Oudh was ruled at the time by a nawab, or provincial governor, named Wajid Ali Shah, a dreamy aesthete who spent his time orchestrating lavish en-

Before me stood a man in tiger-print pajamas. He looked in his mid-80s, and he did not look well. But he had Cyrus's face.

BRYAN DENTON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Lucknow, above, is studded with shrines and palaces of Oudh nawabs, whose kingdom was annexed by the British in 1956. The loyalty of the city's population was a factor in the government's response to the family. After Cyrus's death, thrill seekers tramped through Malcha Mahal, below, and papers were strewn across the entry hall.

was coming to see her, and was going crazy," he said.

"People would cry to see her in this condition."

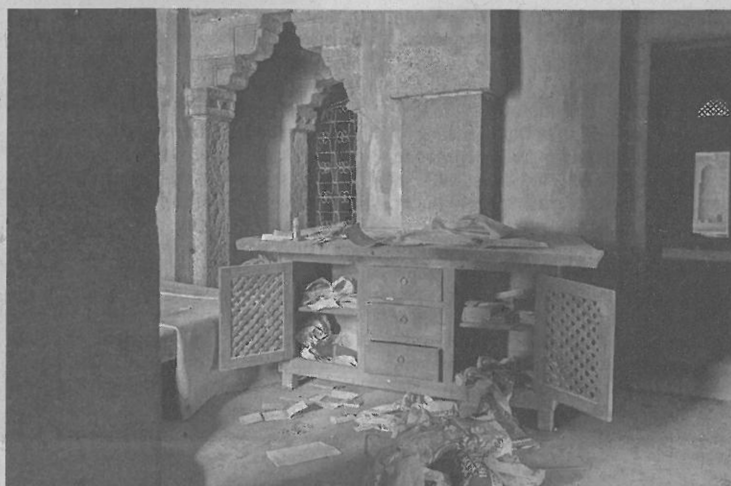
But the older men who presided over the neighborhood, mostly descendants of members of the nawab's court, said they were impostors. Sayyed Suleiman Naqvi, a former code-breaker for the Indian Army, said he had posed as a journalist to check Wilayat's credentials.

"She said, 'We have got documentary evidence.' I said, 'Get it.' She said, 'I will give it only to those persons who are in authority.' She showed us certain pieces of crockery and all that, which were of course antiques," recalled Mr. Naqvi, now in his late 70s. "But she did not show us any documents."

The family left Lucknow abruptly, he said. Something had happened: An elderly aunt said she recognized Wilayat from before Partition. The aunt said Wilayat was an ordinary woman then, the young wife of a civil servant.

Mr. Naqvi, who considers himself a keen student of human nature, said he believed they were frauds, but that they were not motivated by greed.

"To my mind, this lady was a megalomaniac," he said finally. "She should



LEONIE BROEKSTRA PAUW

But he had Cyrus's face, the same jutting cheekbones and hawk nose.

He led me inside, showed me to a chair and then lay down on a cot. His movements were laborious. He glanced without expression at the photographs I had brought with me. When I offered to play him a recording of Cyrus's voice, he

weight boxer; in those days, she said, dreamily, he could fight four men at once.

She never met her husband's mother, but had corresponded with her for years. She thought the story about Oudh was, as she put it, "a bloody big act."

"What was wrong with this woman?"

eerily quiet and green, with rosebushes in bloom.

The cousins were hunched, birdlike women in their 70s.

Wahida had worked for many years as a teacher, and barely spoke. She seemed to communicate by slapping people, hard, across the face. She wandered from one of us to the other, looking for someone to slap. Once, it was me. Mostly it was my interpreter, whose face hardened into a permanent wince. Khalida did most of the talking.

She remembered Wilayat as a tempestuous young woman, but said they hadn't seen her since the late 1960s, when she suddenly left Pakistan and returned to India. They seemed unwilling to say anything further. After listening to them discuss other subjects for an hour, I pressed the issue, conscious of the passage of time.

"Ask her, did you ever hear that your family was related to the royal nawabs of Oudh?" I relayed to my interpreter.

"I have no idea," Khalida answered.

"Wilayat said she was the queen of Oudh," I told them. "She told the Indian government that for many, many years."

"She was lying," Khalida said.

I prodded them for hours, until I was

overseeing the new country's civil aviation agency. He was right to worry; over the months that followed, the city of his youth, Lahore, would be bathed in blood.

"We were children," recalled Salma, Wilayat's daughter-in-law. "Riots were on, and we couldn't go out at all. Weeks and weeks, the dead bodies were lying around, and when we went to the bazaar to get our food there was so much rioting and robbing, people were robbing. At night it would be very frightening, you could hear people crying and shooting and stabbing. We would be sitting next to the window and watching."

Wilayat followed her husband, Shahid told me, but she never accepted his decision to leave India. She was obsessed with what she had left behind. In her mind, the grudge sprouted and germinated, and her behavior became volatile. Then her husband suddenly died. With all restraining influence on her gone, furious over the expropriation of her property, she accosted Pakistan's prime minister at a public appearance, Shahid said, and slapped him.

This changed things for Wilayat. She was no longer a well-connected widow, but something shadier.

She was confined to a mental hospital in Lahore for six months after that — the only way, Shahid said, to avoid a long prison sentence. Shahid remembers visiting her there, among the wails and curses of the patients. "It was horrible," he said. "Women tied up with chains. One poor girl was chained up to a wall. It was four chains. And she was swinging. And spitting at everybody who went past."

Salma said that Wilayat was given electroshock therapy. "They said she was mental," she said. "They gave her all these injections."

When she was free, Wilayat gathered up her youngest children without warning, packed trunks with carpets and jewelry, and smuggled it all back into India, with the goal of reclaiming her property. Shahid set out with them but eventually walked away. He could not put into words why he left. His story flickers out here.

Last month, Shahid died in the front room of his house, holding Camellia's hand.

I am unraveling the story that was their lives' central work.

It was Partition that ruined his mother, set her on the course toward the ruined palace, Shahid had told me. "We had to start all over again," he said.

In the early 1970s, still empty-handed, increasingly bizarre in her behavior, Wilayat announced to the world that she was the queen of Oudh, demanding the vast properties of a kingdom that no longer existed.

An ordinary grievance, unaddressed, had metastasized to become an epic one.

The children took on new identities: the daughter Farhad became Princess

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Oudh was ruled at the time by a nawab, or provincial governor, named Wajid Ali Shah, a dreamy aesthete who spent his time orchestrating lavish entertainments in a harem that he called the Parikhana, or "abode of fairies." He thought the British were his allies, because his great-uncle had extended them vast loans.

Before me stood a man in tiger-print pajamas. He looked in his mid-80s, and he did not look well. But he had Cyrus's face.

The British thought otherwise. They stripped the nawab of his kingdom on the grounds of mismanagement, thrusting into his hands a treaty declaring that "the territories of Oude shall be henceforth vested for ever, in the Honorable East India Company."

The nawab wept, solemnly removed his turban and placed it in the envoy's hands.

Soon thereafter, he set off for exile in Calcutta, and Lucknow was cast into mourning, the historian Rosie Llewellyn-Jones recalls in her biography of Wajid Ali Shah.

The nawab's mother, in seclusion, sailed to Britain in a desperate attempt to plead her case with Queen Victoria.

Oudh was finished. The vanished kingdom would hang over Lucknow like a pall.

HAUNTED CITY

I returned to Lucknow, and took a cab to a warren of residential streets tucked behind the grand shrines and palaces of the old city.

This is where I had encountered witnesses who could remember Cyrus and his family. Horses pulled carts through the narrow lanes, and I could hear tinny music playing on a radio. Nostalgia for Oudh was a cottage industry here. Everywhere I went, I saw the image of the last nawab, Wajid Ali Shah, his expression dreamy, one nipple poking out of his shirt.

Then there were the descendants. Because Wajid Ali Shah had hundreds of wives and concubines, people identifying themselves as descendants are all over the place in Lucknow, fighting like polecats over the veracity of one another's claims.

When I asked about the family, I encountered instant recognition: Yes, three of them had moved into this complex for a few months in the 1970s.

Abrar Hussain, who had worked for Wilayat as a servant, said the family had caused a sensation, especially among Shiites. Ordinary people were moved to tears at the sight of them, and some were so awed by the begum — so convinced that she was their returning queen — that they refused to turn their backs to her, walking backward, out of respect.

"It wasn't just me — the whole public "People would cry to see her in this condition."

But the older men who presided over the neighborhood, mostly descendants of members of the nawab's court, said they were impostors. Sayyed Suleiman Naqvi, a former code-breaker for the Indian Army, said he had posed as a journalist to check Wilayat's credentials.

"She said, 'We have got documentary evidence.' I said, 'Get it.' She said, 'I will give it only to those persons who are in authority.' She showed us certain pieces of crockery and all that, which were of course antiques," recalled Mr. Naqvi, now in his late 70s. "But she did not show us any documents."

The family left Lucknow abruptly, he said. Something had happened: An elderly aunt said she recognized Wilayat from before Partition. The aunt said Wilayat was an ordinary woman then, the young wife of a civil servant.

Mr. Naqvi, who considers himself a keen student of human nature, said he believed they were frauds, but that they were not motivated by greed.

"To my mind, this lady was a megalomaniac," he said finally. "She should have been psychologically tested."

His assessment of her children, however, was quite different. "They believed their mother," he said, "because she was their mother."

GNOMES

I returned to London with three real leads. The airmail letter from Yorkshire. That name, Shahid. The Western Union receipts, testament that someone had been caring for Cyrus and his family in secret all these years.

I took a train to Bradford, and walked to the address on the envelope. It was a gray, windblown day, and the walk took me past pawnshops, cheap Chinese takeout joints and dinky rowhouses of yellow brick, nearly all of them occupied by immigrants from India and Pakistan.

I arrived, finally, at a small, neat brick house that was surrounded by a large collection of ceramic garden gnomes, teddy bears, Yorkies, mermaids and fairies.

I was so nervous that I paced in front of the house for a while before ringing the bell.

The door swung open, and before me stood a man in tiger-print pajamas. He was barrel-chested and broad-shouldered, and looked to be in his mid-80s. He did not look well: His eyes were rheumy, his chest sunken.

LEONIE BROEKSTRA PAUW

But he had Cyrus's face, the same jutting cheekbones and hawk nose.

He led me inside, showed me to a chair and then lay down on a cot. His movements were laborious. He glanced without expression at the photographs I had brought with me. When I offered to play him a recording of Cyrus's voice, he shook his head in refusal, saying it would be too painful.

Beside his sickbed were two framed pictures of Wilayat.

This was Shahid. He was Cyrus's older brother.

And now, finally, there were some facts.

They were, or had been, an ordinary family.

Their father had been the registrar of Lucknow University, Inayatullah Butt.

My friend's name was not Prince Cyrus, or Prince Ali Raza, or Prince anything.

He was plain old Mickey Butt.

Here, in this brick house in West Yorkshire, I had found it: The identity that Cyrus and his family had worked so hard to keep secret. Shahid, who spent his adult life working in an iron foundry, could remember a life before Oudh, when they had housemaids and school uniforms. When their mother was not a rebel queen, but a housewife.

Before long, Shahid's wife, Camellia, came home. She was a friendly, plain-spoken Lancashire woman, animated on the subject of the Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, (whom she despised) and her husband (whom she adored). The two of them met in 1968, when she wore her hair in a blond beehive and Shahid was built like a heavyweight boxer; in those days, she said, dreamily, he could fight four men at once.

ANDREW TESTA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Shahid and his wife, Camellia, outside their home in Bradford, England.

She never met her husband's mother, but had corresponded with her for years. She thought the story about Oudh was, as she put it, "a bloody big act."

"What was wrong with this woman?" she said of Wilayat. "I believed every word of it at the beginning, but now I doubt all of it. It's very hard to get Shahid to talk about it. I think it's painful. I think he was led to believe it was true. Then, as he got older, he realized it was all built on sand."

LEONIE BROEKSTRA PAUW

After Wilayat died in 1993, her children continued to set her place at the table.

Shahid ran away when he was about 14, then emigrated to Britain and rarely mentioned his mother's claim to the royal house of Oudh. When I asked him about that story, he was evasive. He said he wasn't even sure whether he was Indian or Pakistani.

"I'm so confused, I don't know who I am," he said. "I am like a bird, a long lost bird, a lost lamb."

"IT WAS A LIE"

Now, all of a sudden, the field of witnesses had expanded. There were other relatives, respectable people, scattered across Pakistan, Britain and the United States.

Cyrus's oldest brother, Salahuddin Zahid Butt, was a pilot in the Pakistani Air Force, a war hero who bombed Indian positions in the 1965 war. He died in 2017, but his wife, Salma, lived in Texas. I called her.

She said her mother-in-law's claim to royal descent was false.

"She thought she was the princess of Oudh, but this was never, ever," she said of Wilayat. "We never heard this history about the princess of this, the princess of that. She obviously had some mental disorder."

Two of Cyrus's older cousins, Wahida and Khalida, were still in Lahore, so I flew to Pakistan to see them. I parked beside an open sewer full of black, seething water, and walked down a trash-choked alleyway and knocked on a wooden door.

It opened into a spacious compound, The cousins were hunched, birdlike women in their 70s.

Wahida had worked for many years as a teacher, and barely spoke. She seemed to communicate by slapping people, hard, across the face. She wandered from one of us to the other, looking for someone to slap. Once, it was me. Mostly it was my interpreter, whose face hardened into a permanent wince. Khalida did most of the talking.

She remembered Wilayat as a tempestuous young woman, but said they hadn't seen her since the late 1960s, when she suddenly left Pakistan and returned to India. They seemed unwilling to say anything further. After listening to them discuss other subjects for an hour, I pressed the issue, conscious of the passage of time.

"Ask her, did you ever hear that your family was related to the royal nawabs of Oudh?" I relayed to my interpreter.

"I have no idea," Khalida answered.

"Wilayat said she was the queen of Oudh," I told them. "She told the Indian government that for many, many years."

"She was lying," Khalida said.

I prodded them for hours, until I was tired and frustrated.

"Wilayat is dead," I said. "Her children are dead. There is no secret anymore."

"Everything is a lie," Khalida said. "They are dead. Just leave them. God forgives them, so we should also forgive them."

A FAMILY DESTROYED

Trying to get Shahid to speak about his mother and siblings was painful.

He would get stuck at a particular moment in the story, when his mother sent him out to buy bananas and he fled the family. Camellia said that, to this day, he would not eat bananas. She thought it was guilt.

Besides, he was becoming sicker and sicker. It wasn't a chest infection, but lung cancer that had metastasized to his lymph nodes. Camellia would not think of allowing him to be admitted to the hospital, but nursed him in the front room until there was nothing to do but give him painkillers.

On my fourth visit to Bradford, the last time I saw him, his voice was raspy, but he told me more than he ever had before. The story, as he told it, began at Partition.

On June 3, 1947, the British viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, announced that the withdrawal of the British Empire would create two independent nations, with Pakistan carved out for Muslims. Lucknow's educated Muslims began slipping away overnight, headed for Pakistan's new capital, where they would make up the DNA of a new elite. There were letters promising juicy promotions. And there were, on the other hand, rumors of violence if they stayed.

Shahid's parents had to make an immediate decision between India or Pakistan. His mother, Wilayat Butt, had never been so happy as she was in Lucknow.

She was fiery and strong. Shahid has an image of her, striding out onto her balcony in Lucknow in jodhpurs and riding boots, slapping her thigh with a crop. She simply refused to leave.

But then came one afternoon in the crumbling elegance of the nawab's city. Shahid's father — a man in distinguished middle age, wearing wire-rimmed glasses — was riding his bicycle home when he was surrounded by Hindu youths, who began beating him with hockey sticks.

He soon decided to move the whole family to Pakistan, where, in the great reshuffling, he had been offered a job elry, and smuggled it all back into India, with the goal of reclaiming her property. Shahid set out with them but eventually walked away. He could not put into words why he left. His story flickers out here.

Last month, Shahid died in the front room of his house, holding Camellia's hand.

I am unraveling the story that was their lives' central work.

It was Partition that ruined his mother, set her on the course toward the ruined palace, Shahid had told me. "We had to start all over again," he said.

In the early 1970s, still empty-handed, increasingly bizarre in her behavior, Wilayat announced to the world that she was the queen of Oudh, demanding the vast properties of a kingdom that no longer existed.

An ordinary grievance, unaddressed, had metastasized to become an epic one.

The children took on new identities: the daughter Farhad became Princess Sakina, occasionally Princess Alexandrina; Mickey became Prince Ali Raza, and later called himself Prince Cyrus. They no longer made any mention of their Pakistani relatives, or the spacious family house in Lahore that was waiting for them, should they return. Maybe they forgot it existed. They seemed to shed their past entirely, to come from nowhere.

The rest of the story you already know.

They were so convincing, and so insistent, that for 40 years people believed them.

THE CITY OF THE DEAD

So there it is: I have plundered their secret. Cyrus would have hated it. He refused to answer questions about his past; it was one of the essential themes of our friendship.

I try to imagine how he would react to all this. His father on his bicycle, being beaten with hockey sticks. His mother in a mental hospital where women were chained to the wall. His older brother running away, abandoning him. Mickey Butt, the name he had left behind.

There is no nice way to put this. I am unraveling the story that was the central work of their lives. It is impossible to know, now that he and his sister are dead, whether they even knew it wasn't all true. Either way, this article would have crushed him.

And yet, why do you invite a journalist into your life, if you do not expect this to happen? That is like asking a dog not to bark. I must admit, it offends me a little when people think they can lie to reporters.

But even today there are plenty of autorickshaw drivers in Old Delhi who will tell you about the prince who lived in the jungle. And they will be telling that story long after mine has come and gone.

I was reminded of this on my last trip to Delhi. I visited the cemetery where Cyrus is buried. I had an idea of placing a stone there, something that said Prince Cyrus of Oudh.

But he had been buried as an unclaimed body, assigned the number DD33B. Unclaimed bodies are marked only with chips of stone, and small mounds extend in all directions, to the vanishing point. After wandering the cemetery for what seemed like hours, I sat down, sweaty and miserable.

"He is lost in a city of the dead," I wrote in my notebook.

Suhasini Raj contributed reporting.