

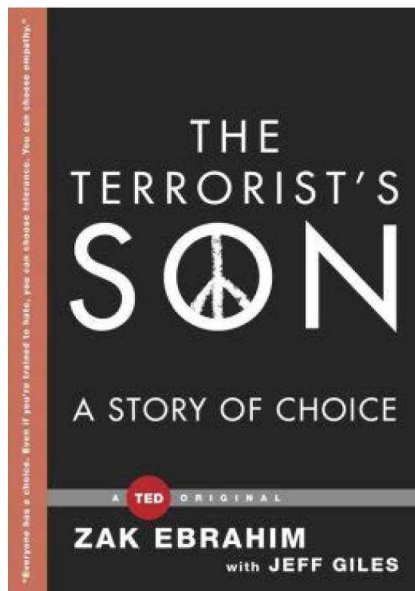
THE TERRORIST'S SON

by Zak Ebrahim (with Jeff Giles)
Simon and Schuster/TED. 2014
Review by Kyrstie Lane

“All our lives have themes, and the theme of mine so far is this: Everyone has a choice. Even if you’re trained to hate, you can choose tolerance. You can choose empathy.” – Zak Ebrahim

Zak Ebrahim’s father, El Sayyid Nosair, is an Islamic extremist who murdered a rabbi and helped to plan the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. But in his book “The Terrorist’s Son,” Ebrahim aims to tell a story that goes deeper than the tale of his father’s crimes. The focus of Ebrahim’s book is on the way his father’s choices wrought his own path, though in a way very different than we might have expected. From his child’s point of view (he was only seven years old when his father assassinated Rabbi Kahane), he recounts his father’s turn to extremism, his initial arrest and trial, and the later discovery that his father was involved with the WTC bombing. He tells of the hardships his family faced, as his mother struggled to support them on her own, and as they were lauded by some as the family of a hero and persecuted by others for their association and faith. But most importantly, he describes how, despite his fears and expectations that he might be destined to follow in his father’s footsteps, he came to reject the hatred and bigotry that his father had embraced and instead turn to a life of nonviolence and inclusion.

By documenting the struggles of his family and telling the story of an eight-year-old boy who understood little of religious extremism and just wanted his father to come home, Ebrahim humanizes something we have been trained to consider as irrevocably evil. In recounting obstacles and injustices his father faced before his turn to violence as well as the later struggles of his family, Ebrahim does not argue for any justification of the actions of his father – or others – nor does he imply any measure of excuse. Rather, he aims to broaden the reader’s horizons, to tell a story that many haven’t heard before. As he says, “Bigotry cannot survive experience.” In his own experience, he solidified his values and truly rejected the hatred of his father when, at 18, his summer job at a theme park exposed him to a larger portion of the world, to people of all religions, ethnicities and backgrounds. Likewise, there are none of us who could not benefit from hearing his story, from considering this perspective and allowing our circle of experience to grow.



Given continuing events in the country today, one of the striking points of the story was the discrimination Ebrahim's family faced. After Nosair was arrested for the murder of Rabbi Kahane and increasingly so after the bombing of the WTC, his family was forced to move around constantly: every time they put roots down, someone would make the connection with their names – they were related to THAT Nosair – and the persecution would start. They were tormented too by some who did not make the connection, but did not accept their Muslim faith – or more frequently, its outward signs, like his mother's headscarf. Twelve years after the WTC bombing, in a year when three bright, promising young Muslims were gunned down over what some say was simply a "parking dispute," that discrimination still hits home.

It is worth noting that Ebrahim is no longer in contact with his father, who remains in jail and, as the author describes, continued to proclaim his innocence and rail against the Zionists. For Ebrahim, breaking with his father's past (especially after his difficult childhood) is crucial, and cutting contact may be essential for his own wellbeing. However, as conflict resolvers, we must question the implications. What does this example say to those trying to engage with combatants and ex-combatants in various conflicts? Breaking communication is not a viable option for those working in many of these situations, and unfortunately it already happens too frequently. At the end of the book, the question remains – if hatred and bigotry is a choice, is Ebrahim's father simply beyond reach? Where does this leave us, as conflict resolvers? What could have been, and still could be, done differently in his story?

"The Terrorist's Son" is a valuable read for anyone studying conflict and terrorism, anyone working on policies and programs that aim to make a difference in conflict situations, and anyone who simply wants a broader, fuller perspective on the world. Ebrahim reminds us that everyone is human, everyone has a story, and that without telling these stories we will never be able to move toward a more peaceful world.

Kyrstie Lane received a BA in International Affairs from the University of Puget Sound and an MA in International Policy (focus on Conflict Resolution) from MIIS. She currently works at CSU Monterey Bay in TRiO Student Support Services, and hopes to continue working on issues and policy at the intersection of education and conflict.