

Jews in Arab Countries

JEWISH LIFE in the Arab countries of the Middle East virtually came to an end in the period under review (1972–1976), though remnant Jewish communities continued to exist in Iraq, Egypt, and Lebanon. There were some 330,000 Jews in Arab Middle East lands before 1948, about 20,000 in May 1967, less than 8,000 at the end of 1976. The once-flourishing Egyptian Jewish community has been reduced to about 300–400 members, most of them elderly and many needing financial aid. About as many were left in the once largest Middle East Jewish community, that of Iraq. When civil war began in Lebanon in the spring of 1974, about 1,800 Jews still lived there. All but some 400 fled in the 19 months of fighting. Libya, like Aden before it, no longer had any Jews, except for 15 in Tripoli. The Arab Republic of Yemen, once thought to have been emptied of Jews by Operation Magic Carpet that airlifted nearly 50,000 to Israel between December 1949 and March 1950, may still have, according to one recent report, as many as 1,500 scattered among tribes throughout that country. In short, the only “sizable” community was that of Syria, whose 4,500–5,000 Jews were still forbidden to emigrate.

Iraq

Following the 1968–70 period of terror for Iraqi Jews, during which the Ba'ath Socialist regime of General Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr hanged 11 and tortured at least 18 more to death (AJYB, 1971 [Vol. 72], p.444), there was a period of respite. In response to international protest, the government set free Jews still in jail, began issuing some emigration visas in mid-1971, and apparently closed its eyes to a small movement of Jews out of the country through border mountain passes. However, a new wave of persecution began in September 1972, when security police arrested a prominent Jewish lawyer, Yaacov Abdul Azis, three days before Yom Kippur, and another well-known Jew, Abraham el-Sayegh, was slain in his home a few days later. Sayegh's property was seized by the authorities within the week.

By the end of the month, plainclothesmen and security forces had suddenly and without warning picked up eight more Jews in their homes and businesses. Three others, arrested and briefly held in the notorious Baghdad Kasr el-Nihaya prison (The Palace of No Return) in December, could give no information about the eight. A statement, issued on January 7, 1973, by the European office of the American Jewish Committee on the basis of information leaking out of Iraq, questioned

whether they were still alive; and Israeli government senior officials asserted in February that they had been executed in prison. A wave of protest brought replies from the Iraqi government, such as one issued in London, March 6, 1973, that such "Zionist propaganda" reports were "preposterous rumors and fabrications;" that there had been "absolutely no execution or arrest of any Jew in Iraq," and that "most Jews whose names were allegedly reported or mentioned in those rumors have left Iraq illegally." Another nine Jewish men and women were arrested in Baghdad in February, March, and April.

Concern for the arrested Jews mounted steadily, as notices began to appear in Baghdad papers listing them as having "escaped justice" (a phrase used by the authorities only when referring to persons known to have perished in jail); packages and funds left for prisoners by friends and relatives were returned, and their properties were sequestered. To this day, nothing has been seen of, or heard from, the 18 since their arrest, and they must be presumed dead. Besides Azis, the following were arrested: in September 1972, Azouri Shamash, Saul and Yaacov Rejwan, Ezra Azam, Ezra Abu Daoud, Saul Shamash, Naji Sitiati, Selim Sadka; in February 1973, Naji and Suad Kashkush; in March, Ezra and Selim Nahtan; in April, Naim Fattal, Shua Azis (Uzeir), and Yehuda, Rahma, and Aliza Twegg. The closest the government has ever come to acknowledging that they were dead was when President al-Bakr, describing the activities of former security chief Nazem Kazzar, who was killed in an attempted coup in July, told French correspondent Eric Rouleau (*Le Monde*, July 20, 1973): "We now know that Kazzar is responsible for the assassination of innocent Jews. . . ." Among Kazzar's methods of torture, Rouleau reported to have learned from other Iraqi leaders, were cigarette burns, injection of boiling water into the intestines, electric shock, crushing of genitals, and acid baths.

Fear among Baghdad Jews reached new heights in April 1973, when Reuven Kashkush, his wife, two sons, and a daughter were machine-gunned to death in their house at mid-day. This, too, Rouleau said, prominent Iraqis later attributed to Kazzar and his police, as an act of "vengeance in his fashion" for the death of three PLO leaders in an Israeli commando raid on Beirut that month. The Kashkushs were murdered only two days before they were scheduled to leave Iraq.

The ensuing international clamor again brought some relief to the Iraqi Jews. While ill-treatment stopped, most of them were still without occupation and barred from selling property or freely disposing of their possessions. Several required assistance from the Administrative Committee for Iraqi Jews, the community organization. That summer a score or so were able to leave in one way or another. Emigration ceased when the Yom Kippur war broke out, but resumed in May 1974. Some months later the head of the Jewish community, Meir Basri, declared in a guarded interview with *Droit et Liberté* (Paris, October 1974) that the community, reduced to about 500, still had two synagogues where services were being held and two rabbis, as well as a secondary school. Basri and his family left Iraq early in 1975. At the end of 1976 there were an estimated 300 Jews in Baghdad, another 20 or so in the port town of Basra, and about the same number in Hit, on the Euphrates.

March 1975 brought the arrest of Leender Aronson, a Dutch Jew who was a medic and a volunteer with the Kurds fighting the Iraqi government. Insisting that Aronson was an Israeli, the Iraqis refused him Dutch consular aid. Reports of his execution, in November 1975, prompted official Dutch protest, a request for his body, and a denial by the Iraqis. On March 15, 1976, Aronson's family was notified by phone that he had been executed three months earlier. The Dutch, never officially notified, recalled their *chargé d'affaires* for consultation, but did not break diplomatic relations. Some months later the family was permitted to recover the body.

In December 1975 the Iraqi government took the lead in an Arab propaganda campaign inviting Jews who had left the Arab countries to return to their homelands. In full-page advertisements in a number of Western newspapers, the Revolutionary Command Council announced its adoption, on November 26, 1975, of a resolution declaring that "Iraqi Jews who left Iraq since 1948 are hereby entitled to return home," and that the government "shall guarantee, to [them] full constitutional rights enjoyed by Iraqi citizens," including "equality and secure living without any discrimination." Some newspapers rejected a part of the copy that read: "The Zionists sinned against the very essence of Judaism, they excluded themselves through the erroneous belief that they belong to some mythical 'Superior Race.' This racist claim has rightly earned them universal condemnation." Other sections of the advertisement printed by all papers described the Zionists as "propagating the myth of a 'Chosen People,' " and turning the Jewish "religion into a nationality" with "the expulsion of the Arab Palestinians from their homeland" as its "first outcome."

The advertisement brought many letters from Iraqi Jewish refugee groups and others—and counter-advertisements like that published in the *New York Times* by the American Sephardi Federation and the American Committee for Rescue and Resettlement of Iraqi Jews—pointing to Iraq's record of discriminatory legislation against Jews, sequestration of Jewish property, hangings, and terror. Insofar as is known, only two Jews, Daniel Eliahu Salman, who was wanted by Israel for treason, and an unsuccessful businessman, Yusef Salah Navi, with wife and two children, returned to Iraq. The Iraqi government gave much publicity to the matter, and in January 1976 Jews in Iraq were required to express their gratitude for the law of return in a special government advertisement. In August the government announced that an international conference would be held in Baghdad in mid-November to "reveal the theoretical aspects of the Zionist, racist movement." This was countered by a conference in Paris, sponsored by the International League against Anti-Semitism, which denounced Iraq's treatment of its minorities, such as the Kurds, Arameans, and the Jews.

Syria

In 1976, after years of active official persecution and discrimination, President Hafez al-Assad's government gradually eased the plight of Syrian Jews. Up to that point the Syrian authorities strictly applied restrictions, which required Jews to

carry special identity cards; barred them from traveling more than two-and-a-half miles from their homes without special permit; imposed regular curfews on them; limited them in employment and profession; kept them under constant surveillance, and often confiscated their estates after death. Jews were harassed in other ways as well, not only by the Syrians but also by Palestine refugees living near the Jewish quarters.

During the second half of 1971 more than a score of Syrian Jews, including women and a four-year-old child, were arrested and jailed without trial for trying to leave the country. Following public protest abroad, six women and the child were released in November. Another 14 were released on May 11, 1972, by direct order of Assad. The secret police kept two Jews, Nissim Katri and Joseph Swed, in solitary confinement without trial for more than two years, and then transferred them to the Damascus al-Maze prison, where they remained another year. They were released in summer 1974 with the warning not to talk about the tortures they had suffered. Believed to have perished in a Syrian prison was 68-year-old Albert Elia, secretary of the Lebanon Jewish community, who had been abducted in Beirut in September 1971.

Over the years, quite a few Jews tried to make their way out of Syria. This was not only dangerous for the escapees, but also for the relatives they left behind, who were severely interrogated and beaten by the police. Some of the successful escapes became known, when refugees, with their identity carefully guarded to protect their families in Syria, described the plight of Syrian Jews to the press or to Jewish communal gatherings in Europe (as in Geneva in February 1972); or when, on July 1, 1974, the London *Daily Telegraph* reported that 92 Syrian Jews reached Lebanon and were hidden until they could flee to other countries. The murder, in late 1973 and early 1974, of several Jews who fled in this way (see below) and the war in Lebanon made such escapes virtually impossible by the end of 1974.

When, in an attempted rejoinder to widespread protest over Syrian treatment of Jews, the authorities in August 1972 wanted Jewish communal leaders to participate in a telecast attempting to show that the community was well treated, young Jewish women and men in the Damascus ghetto held an amazing impromptu demonstration which made the filming impossible.

Throughout 1973 the situation of Syrian Jewry remained basically unchanged. Word came in March that a 35-year-old Aleppo Jew named Zeki Kassab was shot down in cold blood by four armed men who came to his home. The Jewish community expressed its outrage by covering his coffin with his bloodstained clothes. The killers were never found. During the Yom Kippur war, there was considerable concern for the Jews in Syria. But although they lived in fear, scarcely venturing out of their homes for weeks, they were not molested.

March 1974 saw a second Jewish protest demonstration in the ghetto as well as in the streets of Damascus that was even more astounding in that it was joined by Moslems and Christians. It was triggered by the tragic fate of four young Jewish girls (Eva Saad, 18, Toni Zebah, 22, and her sisters Laura, 23, and Farah, 24), who

had attempted to flee the country with guides used by others before them. Their bodies were delivered to their mothers in early March. They had been raped, robbed, and murdered. Two weeks later the police, without explanation, delivered to the Damascus Jewish community the bodies of two young men, Hatan Hsaya, 18, and Kassam Abadi, 20, who had also tried to escape and had been missing for six months.

The Syrian Minister of the Interior later announced that a band of four murderers and smugglers—two Jews, Yussef Shaluah (the brother-in-law of one victim) and Azur Zalta, and two Moslems, Mohammed Moustapha Leila and Hicham Ezzedine—had “confessed” to the murder of the four young women. From the outset, Jewish sources in Damascus scoffed at this official attempt to involve Jews. In a trial on July 21, lawyers for the Moslems asked for psychiatric examination of their clients; no subsequent court proceedings ever took place. The two accused Jews, after having been tortured, were released on bail in September, and murder charges against them were eventually dropped.

It was in March 1974, too, according to the statement of three Syrian Jewish escapees to the London *Observer* on April 21, that Syrian security police arrested 11 Jewish women in Aleppo, brought them to Damascus, and tortured them in prison until they revealed who had helped smuggle their children out of the country.

The desperate position of Syrian Jewry was the focal point of a major gathering of the International Conference for the Liberation of Jews in the Middle East, held in Paris, July 3, 1974, and attended by delegates from over 30 lands. This meeting, chaired by Alain Poher, president of the French Senate, was the second of its kind. Founded after the Baghdad hangings in 1970, the International Conference has been active on behalf of Middle East Jews, as were the Committee of Concern, headed by General Lucius Clay in the United States, and a similar Israeli group, headed by Justice Hayyim Cohen.

Partly because of such efforts, partly no doubt also because of greater Syrian concern with its image in post-Yom-Kippur war negotiations, torture of Jews ceased in the latter part of 1974. For a brief period some Jews were even permitted to leave the country for medical reasons if they left hostages assuring their return. Therefore, while all other restrictions on Jews continued, tension was reduced and persecution made less obvious. This was an impression actively fostered by the Syrians, who were careful to provide an escort for foreign journalists on all visits to the ghetto and to arrange meetings with two or three prosperous Jewish shopkeepers, who had always had good relations with the police. American Jewish organizations, aware of the real situation, entered into a controversy both with CBS's Mike Wallace for his February 1975 “Sixty Minutes” program (e.g., the American Jewish Congress lodged a complaint with the National News Council) and, in April 1975, with *National Geographic*, charging they had given a too favorable account of Jewish life in Syria. Wallace did a more balanced show in March 1976, and the magazine subsequently published a retraction.

In 1975 there were continued efforts and agitation to ease repression. On February

25, at a time when the United States Congress was considering foreign assistance to Syria, 82 members of the House of Representatives wrote to Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, urging the administration to "prevail upon the Syrian government" to reciprocate the United States "expression of good faith" by giving Syrian Jews the right to emigrate (AJYB, 1976 [Vol. 76], pp. 150-51). Circulator of the letter was Representative Stephen J. Solarz, member of the House Foreign Relations Committee, whose Brooklyn, N.Y., district has the largest concentration of Syrian Jews in the United States. He had raised the issue some weeks earlier in a two-hour meeting with Syrian President Assad, which he attended as a member of a Middle East fact-finding mission. According to Solarz, Assad had made it clear that he would not allow any Syrian Jews to leave, not even some 30 Jewish families with close relatives in the United States.

In June Rabbi Chaim Beboliel of the Committee for Rescue of Syrian Jewry and American Jewish Committee Middle-East Affairs director George E. Gruen testified on Syrian Jewry's plight before a House sub-committee. In July the issue was raised before the Human Rights Commission by Homer Jack representing the nongovernmental World Conference on Religion and Peace. Behind-the-scenes approaches to the Syrians were made through international bodies in Geneva and embassies in Damascus. Throughout, the Syrians remained intransigent.

Little by little, however, the basic situation began to improve. October 1975 reports claimed that the Syrians were cracking down on the Palestinians who had been harassing Jews in the ghetto. In early 1976 it became apparent that permits for Jews to travel inside Syria were being granted more readily. Visiting United States congressmen reported Assad as having said that Jews could enter Syria to visit relatives (and one or two later were to take advantage of this). Syrian concentration on events in Lebanon, the changes brought about in Damascus by the influx of Lebanese refugees, and the later switch in Syrian attitudes toward the Palestinians, all seem to have contributed to easing the situation of Jews.

At the end of the 1976 came word that internal travel restrictions for Jews had been lifted; that it was easier for Jews to do business and go about their occupations, and that the inscription "Mussawi" (of Mosaic faith) on identity papers of Jews no longer was in red print, but now resembled the entry denoting the faith of other Syrians. According to certain unconfirmed reports, one Syrian official, in a meeting with community leaders in November 1976, intimated that Jews might eventually be permitted to emigrate. The community was particularly anxious, and was pressing, for at least the emigration of a few hundred Jewish girls of marriageable age, since there were not enough young Jewish men left in Syria to assure that they would be married.

The largest Syrian Jewish community was in Damascus, nearly 2,900 strong; 1,300 were in Aleppo and the remainder in Qamishli, a town near the Turkish border. Families tended to be large, and births exceeded deaths. Jewish life was regulated by the High Committee on Jewish Affairs, headed by a Ministry of the Interior official. Selim Totah directed the seven-man Jewish Community Council in

Damascus. Synagogues were open in all three communities. The Jewish community school al-Ittihad al-Ahlieh in Damascus, subventioned by the Alliance Israélite Universelle, had over 550 students, of whom 70 per cent were girls. Boys predominated at the more Orthodox community-supported Ben Maimon primary and secondary school, which had some 600 students. In Aleppo, some 350 children attended *Talmud Torah*. Admission of Jews to Syrian schools of higher learning has vacillated with Syrian policy over the years; current university enrollment was about 35.

Most Jews were artisans skilled in copper and brass work, or merchants; about 30 were in the medical or paramedical professions, and three practiced law in Damascus. For all practical purposes, government employment (with the one known exception of an agricultural engineer) was closed to Jews. They still suffered various economic restrictions, though the community benefited somewhat from the economic boom in Syria in the last two years. Still, about one-third of Jewish families in both Damascus and Aleppo barely eked out a living and needed assistance. Qamishli Jews were even poorer. Fortunately, even in the worst years the Syrian government permitted friends and relatives abroad to send money for the needy.

Lebanon

Nineteen months of intense civil warfare (May 1974 to December 1976) between local Moslems and Christians, involving PLO forces and outside Moslem armies, which ended with a Syrian-imposed truce, may well have put an end to organized Jewish life in the country. The approximately 400 Jews in the country and Jewish refugees returning to Beirut "to look things over" were considering whether meaningful reestablishment was, indeed, possible.

The community, some 6,000 strong in 1967 and reduced to half that number in 1970, had remained relatively stable at about 1,800–2,000 after the Yom Kippur war. True, there had been the kidnapping of Albert Elia, assassination threats against other communal leaders, and tensions arising from incidents between the PLO and Israeli forces, either in Lebanon itself or just across the Israel border. On the whole, however, Jews were free to come and go as they pleased, to engage in any business or commerce, and to enjoy Jewish religious and cultural activity without interference. And they had relatively good relations with non-Jewish neighbors in a city where life was acknowledged to be quite pleasant.

One deep concern of the Beirut community was the fate of Elia. There had been patient efforts over the years to find out what became of him and to bring about his release. Quiet intervention by top Lebanese authorities at the request of Jewish community president Dr. Joseph Attie, diplomatic demarches, press conferences held by his children, like that of his daughter Mrs. Gabriel Tewfik, in Paris in 1974, sponsored by the International Conference for Liberation of Middle East Jews, all were to no avail. Hope flared briefly when the Beirut *Al Jaryda*, on January 4, 1973,

reported him alive, although he was known to have been a sick man when kidnapped. There was, in fact, reason to believe that he had been kidnapped by the Syrian Saiqa forces and later died in a Syrian prison. According to one rumor, the Syrians gave him burial along with dead Israeli soldiers at the end of the Yom Kippur war. Yet the Syrians persisted in denying knowledge of his fate.

In the early months of the conflict, the Jews were not molested and did not feel threatened. They were given assurances by Lebanese government leaders that they would be protected. Indeed, in some respects theirs became a privileged position. They always had had good rapport with the Christian Phalangist leader, Pierre Gemayel; and the Moslems and Palestinians, too, were anxious that Jews should not be attacked in order to demonstrate the PLO theory that Jews would be secure in any Palestinian-controlled state. In October 1974, however, when the fighting became more widespread and less controlled, and entire sections of Beirut including Jewish shops and homes were destroyed, more and more Jews began to leave. In subsequent months, perhaps a dozen Jews died, not because they were Jews (except, perhaps, in one instance), but as a result of the senseless, indiscriminate shelling and fighting in the city. Although Jews lived in all parts of Beirut, the Jewish quarter, Wadi Abu Jamil, where the major synagogue, the Jewish community building, and the Alliance Israélite Universelle school are located, was just along the hotly contested boundary line between the conflicting forces. That these structures escaped with but little damage was a minor miracle.

On several occasions, residents in the area took refuge in the synagogue building and twice, reportedly on orders from Yasir Arafat, PLO forces protected and even brought food and supplies to these refugees, making sure the event was well photographed and publicized for propaganda purposes. Several Jews were to credit Moslem friends with coming to their aid in difficult circumstances. This became increasingly necessary when non-Lebanese Moslem forces pouring into Beirut confused the word "Israelite" on identity cards of Jews with Israeli. Many took refuge in the mountain villages of Bhamdoun and Aley, long-time popular Jewish summer resorts close to Beirut. It was to the synagogue in Bhamdoun that *Sefer Torahs* and other religious objects were brought for safekeeping. These towns were to become the center of what remained of organized Jewish life, largely around the person of Chief Rabbi Shahoued Shreim, who managed to see that Jews in Beirut could find kosher meat even at the height of the conflict and distributed funds to those in need or wanting to leave.

Departing Lebanese Jews, most of whom had relatives or friends in numerous countries throughout the world, including France, the United States, Canada, and South America, had little difficulty finding a haven, particularly since certain countries like France were ready to give visas to those making their way to the airport or, later, by sea to Cyprus from the Christian-controlled port of Junieh. The difficulties began when the Beirut airport was shut down (Dr. Attie, who had gone to Paris with the intention of returning, was unable to do so and died there before the end

of the conflict, at the age of 82) and getting to the port soon became the major problem. A few Jews managed to go via Damascus as Lebanese refugees, crossing the Syrian frontier adjacent to Christian-controlled territory.

When peace was restored, a few Jewish businessmen were returning to Beirut to see what could be salvaged and to assess future prospects. According to reports, many Jewish community officials knew Elias Sarkis, the new head of the Lebanese government, and thought well of him. On the other hand, Jews were aware of the greater Syrian role in running Lebanon and, since many had relatives or friends in Syria, had full knowledge of Syrian persecution of Jews.

Egypt

When, in July 1970, the Egyptian government freed and expelled the last 81 of the Jewish men it summarily had arrested during the six-day war, their families were quick to depart. Within a few months the number of Jews in Cairo and Alexandria had decreased to some 500 in all; and since most were elderly, this number has gradually been falling off. A handful of Jews have left the country to finish their days in old-age homes in Switzerland and elsewhere.

The Cairo Jewish Community Council, whose president was 75-year-old Felix Iskaki, continued to administer communal buildings and assets under government supervision. The same was true in the Alexandria community. There was no interference with Jewish religious or communal life, such as it was; but the synagogues were in a dilapidated state and Bassantine Jewish cemetery desecrated and plundered. Egypt's Jews reported no popular feeling against them or government discrimination of any kind. The government apparently has also relaxed enforcement of a decree forbidding reentry of Jews. (Those who were expelled or left the country had to sign a statement that they would not return.) Some have been permitted to come back for visits.

Yemen

The Arab Republic of Yemen was one of the Moslem countries, which, in April 1975, invited its Jews who had gone to "occupied Palestine"—practically all left for Israel in 1948–51—to return, and promised them equal treatment with all other citizens. Even the publication of Arab supporters in Paris, *France-Pays Arabes*, July 1976, doubted that this offer would be accepted by anyone. Describing Jewish life in North Yemen today, the publication declared there were three Jewish families consisting of 13 persons in Saada, less than 500 in the province, and between 1,500 and 2,000 living with Yemenite Moslem tribes throughout the country. Israeli estimates were a little lower. According to *France-Pays Arabes* writer Joseph Chel-hod, Jews were free to live as they liked, suffered only occasional minor annoyances, were relatively not badly off, but strongly felt their isolation. Other reports indicated that while there was no active repression, traditional Yemenite attitudes relegated

Jews to an inferior status by restricting occupations open to them and in other respects.

Tunisia

Jewish life in Tunisia was maintained on an even keel in 1976. The estimated population was some 7,000, of whom about 4,500 lived in Tunis, another 1,000 or so in the two Djerban towns of Hara al-Saghira and Hara al-Kabhira, and the rest in Sfax, Sousse, Zarzis, and in the interior. The community was an aging one, with a substantial part of the Jews at least 55 years of age. The exception was Djerba, where the demographic balance was somewhat better. Of the 900 youngsters receiving a Jewish education in Tunisia—primarily in Lubavitcher *yeshivot* and the Glatigny community center in Tunis—some 300 were in Djerba. Apart from the age factor, a small emigration was slowly diminishing the community which once numbered 90,000. Some 350 Jews were known to have left for various destinations in 1976, about twice the number in 1975.

What to do about communal properties in towns and cities where there were no Jews, or practically none, was a problem, but one that was generally ignored. Often they seem to have been neglected, or, like the Gabes synagogue and cemetery, simply taken over for general local use, sometimes with the acquiescence of Jewish leaders and sometimes without permission. There was no central institution of Tunisian Jews. The local council in Tunis, "temporarily" established in 1958 and coopting members since, was headed by Edward Fitoussi. Franji Uzzan was elected Grand Rabbi of Tunisia after the death, on May 27, 1974, of 90-year-old Grand Rabbi Meiss Cohen, whose funeral was attended by several government representatives.

Tunisia's President and Supreme Commander Habib Bourguiba, by far the outstanding personality in the country, was increasingly relinquishing management of government because of ill health. Premier Hedi Nouira, like Bourguiba a man of Western and pragmatic outlook, has been quietly taking over, and fears of what might happen in the event of Bourguiba's death were diminishing. The idea that Tunisia and Libya might merge into one Arab Islamic Republic—Bourguiba and Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi signed an agreement to this effect January 1974—sent a wave of shock and apprehension through Jews in Tunisia, and equally strong relief when Nouira and others succeeded in annulling this agreement several days later.

The proposed merger, moreover, came after Bourguiba had taken a more pan-Arab position than in the past. Shortly before the Yom Kippur war, he called for Israel's retreat to its UN-drawn 1948 boundaries. When he visited Pope Paul VI on December 14, 1973, he urged Christian-Jewish-Moslem control over Jerusalem. At about the same time he declared in Tunis that once, when he had organized a Tunisian pre-independence demonstration, "the Jews spat on me." However when the Yom Kippur war broke out, Bourguiba immediately told his countrymen that "not a hair on a Jewish head must be touched," and stationed guards around Jewish installations and synagogues.

While the Nouria government has since then supported general Arab positions in UN forums and elsewhere, it has not been particularly prominent or aggressive in this regard. Queried in May 1976 by a Kuwait newspaper about Tunisia's failure to issue an invitation to Jews to return, as did other Arab lands, Nouria replied that it was thought such an invitation would have no real effect. However, many of its former Jewish inhabitants in France and elsewhere have been returning to Tunisia for vacations for two reasons: to be able to spend assets left behind when they quit the country and to enjoy what they still felt was a pleasant land. Actually, the younger Tunisian generation, affected by Radio Cairo, Radio Libya, and Middle East events, appears to have a harsher attitude toward Jews than their elders, as indicated by an occasional display of hostility.

The economic situation of the Jews, essentially a middle- and lower-middle-class group with a fair proportion of poor and needy aged, has been reasonably good considering that Tunisia has been going through some expansion, inflation, and not a little land speculation. Over one-third of the Jewish population has been receiving American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee assistance of one form or another through local agencies. Though sales of olive oil, petrol, and phosphates—mainstays of Tunisian commerce along with tourism—did not have a good year in 1976, textiles and clothing manufacturing did well. In contrast to Moslem merchants, Jewish merchants from time to time seemed to find it more difficult to get import licenses or overcome administrative difficulties. In March 1974 when a number of Tunisian businessmen, including several Jews, were charged with currency smuggling along with certain foreign embassies, a leading journal, *La Presse*, sought to give the impression that only Jews were involved. Within a short time, however, all charges were dropped or settled.

Maintained despite the departure of the overwhelming majority of Djerban Jews, and encouraged by the Tunisian government as a tourist attraction, was the annual Lag Ba-'Omer pilgrimage and celebration at the Ghariba synagogue in al-Saghira, which was reputed to have a stone from the Temple of Solomon. The Djerban towns of al-Kabhira and al-Saghira have steadily been losing their once purely Jewish character, as Moslems moved into houses and quarters formerly inhabited by Jews; but Jewish life there still was much more traditional than elsewhere.

Morocco

The last of several attempts to assassinate King Moulay Hassan II of Morocco by shooting down the plane in which he was returning from France on August 16, 1972, was unsuccessful. The presumed author of the plot, Minister of Defense and Armed Forces General Mohammed Oufkir, died violently in the Rabat palace under mysterious circumstances later that day. This attempt produced less immediate reaction in the country than that of Skhirat the year before (AJYB, 1972 [Vol. 73], p. 590), but had more long-range repercussions. Jews were understandably concerned, since Oufkir had played a key role in the implementation of the royal policy

protecting them and permitting emigration. The King acted almost immediately to calm Jewish fears. At an August 21 press conference he said, "I can only tell Jews to be reassured," for he had never thought "Oufkir was their protector since the Alaouite throne already had done this on several occasions," and that therefore Jews "would not have to deplore the death of the General."

While the situation of the then 30,000 Moroccan Jews did not, in fact, change much in the following months, Jewish malaise, fed by general Moroccan malaise, was substantial. However, emigration continued to be permitted as before, and Jews were now feeling increasingly secure. After dropping at a rate of about 15 per cent annually between 1972 and 1974 through emigration, the Jewish population remained stable at an estimated 18,000. Departures for Israel in 1975-1976 totaling just under 400, in addition to 500 who left for countries like France and Canada, were almost balanced by the birthrate. But Jewish psychological and demographic stability admittedly was tenuous, depending largely, Jews in Morocco felt, on the stability of Moulay Hassan's regime.

Several factors combined to strengthen the King's hand in 1975-76. In 1972 the opposition parties refused to enter a coalition government. The Army and police, still shaken by the assassination aftermath, were not considered too secure. From Algeria, reportedly with the support of Libyan President Muammar al-Qaddafi, Moroccan dissidents raided Army posts in the so-called March 3, 1973, plot. Unemployment was high as always, the population growth staggering, agricultural and economic plans askew, and corruption visible. By 1976 all political parties had agreed to participate in the November municipal elections; the Army and police apparently were well under control; the five-year plan of Premier Ahmed Osman showed certain successes; the King enjoyed unusual popularity.

Much of the improvement could be traced to Moulay Hassan's very adept diplomatic and other maneuvering that brought Morocco the most substantial and phosphate-wealthy part of the Spanish Sahara in a division of that territory between Morocco and Mauritania. To assure the takeover, he called for a peaceful "Green March" by the Moroccan people into the Spanish Sahara early in November 1975, a move that enthusiastically rallied the entire nation behind him. The Jewish community, for its part, joined Hassan's efforts to convince the Western world of the rightness of Moroccan claims to the Sahara: Georges Berdugo, secretary-general of the Council of Jewish Communities of Morocco, led a Jewish delegation to the United States, Canada, and Mexico to seek public support for the action.

Phosphates were critical to Moroccan economic strategy, and with the Sahara lands it now controlled three-quarters of the world's known reserves. Morocco also followed the OPEC oil example by quadrupling prices after the Yom Kippur war, and using this income to finance a broad expansion program. By the end of 1976, however, the enthusiasm appeared to be wearing off. The Sahara became a serious drain when the local Polisario Front movement, seeking independence with Algerian support, fought Moroccan forces in the desert. At the same time, the world price of phosphates fell. Still, there was no doubt that over-all the King's position was much more solid than in 1972.

A number of events caused concern among Moroccan Jews. In 1973, for example, when phrases like "the Jewish enemy" were bandied about in Moroccan publications and rumors circulated that Qaddafi (then considered the archenemy of Morocco) had "a Jewish mother," some Jewish institutions asked for police protection. The king, abandoning restraint in his Middle East policy, announced that Moroccan troops would be sent to Syria to help the Palestinians fight Israel. In the Yom Kippur war, Moroccan troops indeed fought on the Golan Heights. The end of the year, too, saw Moroccan Jews, and only Jews, wanting to go abroad on business or vacation turned back at airports on grounds that they could not leave without first producing tax receipts.

Yet, the Jewish community was given police protection upon request; the government firmly maintained its policy that, regardless of its policy toward Israel, Moroccan Jews were not to be molested, and there were virtually no incidents, even when there were reports of Moroccan soldiers killed in the Yom Kippur war. The demand for tax receipts was immediately dropped when Dr. Leon Benzaquen, quondam Moroccan minister and Jewish communal leader, protested to the authorities. By 1974, which was a kind of transition year, most of the Jews who remained in Morocco did so because they were fairly well off economically and rather reluctant to give up comfortable apartments and good businesses to emigrate. Postwar depression in Israel and the worsening economic situation in the Western world strengthened their resolve to stay. It was, moreover, a calm and uneventful time for the community.

The one issue significantly marring relations was the take-over by the Fez municipal government of three buildings belonging to the Jewish community and their conversion into a youth center. Fez authorities claimed that the Jewish council had made a "gift" of the buildings when, in fact, it had simply indicated that it was willing to sell them if agreement could be reached on the price. The issue thus far remained unresolved despite quiet intervention by Rabat government officials with the governor of Fez.

Early in 1975 there were reports that the Moroccan government had instructed its consulates in different countries to welcome the return of Jews, a position actually stated by the King several years earlier, though without result. The matter attracted international attention when Premier Osman, in a reply to a question posed by a Jordanian journalist in March 1976, openly declared that Jews could return to Morocco. The Moroccan public welcomed this position as a decision of the King. Hassan was warmly congratulated for this initiative by PLO representatives then visiting Morocco, who described it as "a great step toward the liberation of Palestine and the reestablishment of Palestinians in their rights." The same PLO representatives sought, in informal conversations with Jewish leaders acting in their individual capacities, to persuade them that North African Jews could be an important link in an understanding between Jews and Arabs in the kind of Middle East state the PLO was projecting.

Early in May the Moroccan government made considerable fuss, including an audience with the King, over four American Jews—Rabbi Israel Moshowitz,

Harold Gordon, Edward Girshfield, and Baruch Helman—who came to the country at the invitation of the Moroccan tourist office. At the same time, headlines began to appear in the press, as for example, “The New Moroccan Judaism: A Presence and A Future,” in the Marrakesh *Le Matin* of June 7, 1976. A moving spirit behind this new approach to the Jews and the need for a “fraternal coexistence and fruitful cooperation between the descendants of Abraham” was Ahmed Alaoui, leading Moroccan editor and a former minister known often to reflect royal views. Well received in Morocco, too, was a group of former Moroccan Jews now living in France, who had established an organization known as Dialogue and Identity. They were, they said, seeking to maintain both their Moroccan identity and positive attitudes on support for Israel.

The invitation to Jews to return to Morocco and the activities of Dialogue and Identity members created some fuss in Israel, where rumors, which later proved to be false, quickly spread that many Jews there intended to respond to the Moroccan initiative. Later, on November 12, the Associated Press reported from Rabat that the invitation had resulted in the return of some 1,000 Jews. Actually, by the end of 1976, perhaps about 40 in all had returned, and some of these did not remain in Morocco. It was true, however, that a growing number of Jews of Moroccan origin living in different countries, who would have become stateless without Moroccan passports, were finding it easy to get such documents and were applying for them. In the summer of 1976 Moroccan authorities privately indicated that this policy would continue, despite a revision then being planned of Morocco’s system of issuing passports that would have made acquisition more difficult for people outside the country.

The one major community was in Casablanca, with 14,000 Jews; Tangiers, Agadir, and Marrakesh had about 1,000 each, Fez 800, and Rabat, the capital, 500. Some isolated families were scattered throughout the country. Jewish religious and communal work continued freely. Jewish schools had a total enrollment of 6,000: some 2,300 in the Ittihad schools connected with the Alliance Israélite Universelle; 1,800 in Ozer Hatorah institutions; 600 in Lubavitcher *yeshivot*, and 450 in ORT schools under the leadership of David Amar, former secretary-general of the Council of Communities. Local Jewish communal activity was limited mostly to the administration of properties and welfare, the latter with the assistance of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee whose aid, it was estimated, reached over 9,000 Jews.

Two Jews were elected to the municipal council in November 1976: Professor Simon Levy and Armand Amzallag, an architect. In a press conference in Paris in November 1976 King Hassan commented on this and on his invitation to Jews to return to Morocco as follows: “I wish this [return of Jews] all the more, since I have never asked Jews to leave Morocco, but quite the contrary. At a certain time, Moroccan Jews left clandestinely, and I always have done everything to make them return. That is why, in my Constitution, I always included my Jewish subjects together with Moslem Moroccan subjects. The proof is that two won in the last

municipal elections." King Hassan went on to characterize Jews as "an intelligent, working element an economic, profitable, and very interesting element," with which, he stated, he had always had strong rapport.

Algeria

There were approximately 900 to 1,000 Jews in Algeria, of whom about two hundred were Frenchmen who had come to the country to work on various joint projects. Most of the others were also French nationals, and some were Tunisian or Moroccan. The largest number lived in Algiers, with a few hundred in Oran and several families in Constantine and Blida. The community was largely made up of elderly persons; there very few young people or children.

The Houari Boumedienne regime, vigorously anti-Israel, has always made a sharp distinction between its anti-Israel policy and its treatment of Jews within the country. When Shalom Lebar, the last functioning synagogue in Algiers, was broken into and pillaged in January 1977, the Algerian president's office and the Ministry for Religious Affairs contacted the president of the Jewish community, Maître Roger Said, and some weeks later the culprits, a band of youngsters, were brought to justice.

While occasional problems did arise between the community and the authorities, these were usually settled amicably. Thus, after protest, a home for the aged, which had been taken over by the government, was returned to the community. Also, when the Jewish cemetery in Medea was requisitioned, in accordance with that city's urban renewal plan, the community was given another tract to which to transfer the graves.

Algerian Jews maintained contact with the Consistoire in France, and some Jewish welfare aid was received from abroad to assist needy individuals. All in all, however, Jewish communal life was minimal.

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